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The Philosophy of Loyalism Among The Ministers of Western Massachusetts

Thomas S. Martin

The existence of a strong Loyalist element in western Massachusetts during the Revolutionary period has long been recognized by historians, but only recently have attempts been made to explain it. The influence of the great conservative families such as the Stoddards and Williamses have been demonstrated, and so has the fact that many westerners had recently held military and civil offices under the Crown. Studies published in the 1950s suggested that the westerners distrusted and rejected the leadership of Bostonians in the colony's affairs, and a recent writer on Loyalism in Deerfield postulates that the farmers may have been Patriots and that the mechanics and townspeople, regardless of social class, tended to be Loyalists. Certainly the individualism fostered by life near the frontier must also have been a factor.¹ But there has never been any satisfactory explanation for the many Congregational clergymen who remained loyal to King and Parliament up to or even after the outbreak of war.

Except in town histories and in Lorenzo Sabine's pioneer study these Loyalist clergymen were ignored by nineteenth century scholars. In *The New England Clergy and The American Revolution* (1928), Alice M. Baldwin identified many of them, but did not offer an analysis of the problem. The more recent studies have provided valuable insights into the social and economic aspects of Loyalism in western Massachusetts, but their conclusions do not shed light on the problem of the ministers. The scarcity of sources is perhaps one reason for the lack of an adequate explanation—few of these ministers left any extant writings, and fewer still were ever published. But a study of the accusations recorded by town meetings and of the content of sermons suggests that the Loyalist ministers found themselves impaled on the horns of an intellectual dilemma. They were unable to reconcile two profoundly antagonistic philosophies which were inherent in Calvinism and perhaps in the Whig ideology as well.

In his *Religion and the American Mind*, Alan Heimert emphasized the "precarious balance" of "reason" and "piety" in eighteenth-century Congregationalism. At the root of all Calvinist philosophy was a belief in the utter helplessness of man and the absolute sovereignty of God. The suggestions that human beings might play some limited role in their own salvation was branded "Arminianism;" but the development and influence of liberalism and rationalism during this period made it inevitable that Calvinism should ac-

commodate itself to such an idea. For example, the covenant theory and the doctrine of preparation permitted the individual an active part of sorts, and reason was always accorded nearly as high a place as revelation in the understanding of God's will. Heimert demonstrated that the Great Awakening challenged such rationalistic assumptions and drew a strict line between liberal pietistic religion. In the decades before the Revolution the liberal or Arminian clergy came to be identified with political elitism and conservatism, while evangelical Calvinism, because of its "enthusiasm" and individualism, "embodied a radical and even democratic challenge to the standing order of colonial America."²

This theory is still no help in explaining the Loyalist ministers of western Massachusetts, although it does identify the problem. The explanation lies deeper than theology. The sermons of these clergymen indicate a belief in the theory of order, continuity, and social hierarchy which characterized western political thought from Plotinus to Filmer. The idea of a "great chain of being," with its ramifications in ethics and politics, can be traced to the neo-Platonists. It was adapted to Christianity by Augustine and Pseudo-Dionysius, rejected, at least in part, by Aquinas and later the nominalists, and was submerged by Locke and the Whig philosophers in England. The theory was rediscovered more or less independently by the Calvinists and by Filmer and other political conservatives.

Briefly, the philosophy of order declares that the universe is a static hierarchy, emanating from the mind of God and descending to the smallest and simplest forms of matter, and then to nothingness. Similarly, society is a hierarchy, ruled from above by a sovereign who receives his authority from God and concedes certain rights and privileges to his subjects. Each person has his proper station, and to attempt to rise is to rebel against the sovereign and against God. There is an analogy between the family and society: the sovereign is the father of his people. A further analogy was frequently drawn between society and the human body: the head must rule the body and limbs if there is to be harmony and order. Philosophers in this tradition debated where the locus of sovereignty should be, but they never doubted that all authority and law descended from God to rulers. These ideas receded before the growing humanism of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but they continued to influence Englishmen and Americans of a conservative turn of mind.³

As heirs of the Enlightenment and of the Puritan Commonwealthmen the Congregational ministers of western Massachusetts believed in the social compact theory of government. They accepted the ideas of natural law and the mutual obligations of ruler and ruled. As good Christians they insisted that men must render obedience to the law, and that the best society was a society of peace and order. During the Great Awakening they were often more concerned with the danger of popular "enthusiasm" to the fabric of society than with points of doctrine. The exaggerated fears evinced by the Loyalist ministers as the Revolution approached cannot be ascribed to any theological differences between them and their colleagues. Rather, it was derived from their half-conscious belief in the theory of order, in the political "great chain of being"

that the radicals seemed about to break. The reaction of these conservatives to the Revolution, and earlier to the "enthusiasm" of the Awakening, was thus based on a philosophy at the root of, but antecedent to, their Calvinism.

The Reverend Timothy Harrington of Lancaster, a 1737 graduate of Harvard, was one of the most widely published of the Loyalist ministers. His sermons reveal an awareness of the implications of the theory of order, though it was slow in developing. His "Century-Sermon" of 1753, preached to commemorate the town's anniversary, extolled in standard fashion the virtues of the Puritan founders. The early settlers had considered the "Hardship and Dangers" of the wilderness "infinitely preferable" to oppression in England, he said, and he even quoted that favorite scriptural passage of the Patriot clergy, "Stand fast therefore in the liberty where with Christ hath made you free."⁴

"Behold how good, and how pleasant it is for Brethren to dwell together in Unity!" he told the congregation at Princetown a few days before Christmas, 1759. He reminded his listeners that man had been intended by God to live in civil society, and must resist all temptation to support civil disobedience and strife. Harrington used the hoary argument from correspondence to show that

the Welfare of the Body natural in a great measure depends on the Harmony and Agreement of its Members; so doth the Welfare of Society depend, greatly depend on an analogous Harmony and Agreement among the Individuals of which it consists; on a peaceable Spirit, and a peaceable conduct,

as required by St. Paul in I Corinthians 12. The argument from correspondence was used by many other ministers of the revolutionary period, but only a believer in the philosophy of order could have gone on to say, "the Man of a truly peaceable spirit will be solicitous to do righteously—to behave towards Superiors, with Respect and Honour—towards Equals, with Courtesy and Affability—towards Inferiors, with condescension and Humanity—" and towards everyone according to the Golden Rule. To Harrington peace and order were more important than the irresponsible pursuit of equality. "A peaceable Conduct includes a hearty Endeavour for the Restoration of Peace, when it hath been broken." Society was constituted for the good of all and was "inevitably defeated by Quarrels and Contentions. . . ." He concluded that strife in the world was due to "the want of Religion," and instructed his listeners to "govern yourselves according to the Laws and Constitution of the State, and be subject to every ordinance of Man for the Lord's Sake"⁵

Three years earlier, at a time when the war with France was going badly and an invasion of New England seemed imminent, Harrington foresaw ruin in the British losses and in the moral decay of the people. Failure to keep the ordinances of God and man—that is, stepping outside one's place in the chain of being—was bound to cause perturbations in the ordered hierarchy of society. The result, Harrington promised, would be the loss of civil and religious

liberty, and possibly subjection to Rome. Here was an interesting blend of the theory of order and standard Whig shibboleths. When God "visits [us] with Correction and Distress, 'tis not from any Pleasure he takes in the unhappiness of his Creatures (as such), but to reduce the Rebellious to their Allegiance" and restore order.⁶

Timothy Harrington weathered the Revolution more successfully than many of his Loyalist colleagues, perhaps because of his obviously genuine love for his country. Sabine concedes that Harrington opposed separation from Great Britain, but his worst crime seems to have been "sometimes yielding too much for the sake of peace." One Sunday during the war he absent-mindedly intoned the traditional prayer for George III, but "recollecting himself, he immediately added—'*O Lord, I mean George Washington.*'" Nevertheless he was named as one of the local "internal enemies of the state." When asked to explain himself, he reportedly opened his shirt, crying, "Strike, Strike here, with your daggers. I am a true friend to my country." Harrington was no hypocrite. He did love America, but he believed that the disruption of peace and order would benefit no one.⁷

Jonathan Ashley, the most venerable of the Connecticut Valley preachers, had seen the troubles during King George's War as evidence that "we are incorrigable [sic] & ripe for destruction." The "sins of the nation" reminded him of those of Jerusalem in the time of Jeremiah.⁸ The words of the Hebrew prophet were a frequent text for New England sermons in wartime, and Ashley's theme was a common one among Christian philosophers such as Hooker and Bodin. In spite of his long tenure at Deerfield, Jonathan Ashley was not generally liked. In the 1770s there were disputes not only over politics but over salary and the minister's right to be supplied with firewood. He narrowly escaped dismissal in 1777 because he continued to pray publicly for the King, as he had done throughout his career. Soon after, an unrelated disagreement over the excommunication of a church member split the congregation and Ashley lost nearly half his flock.⁹

All of the ministers whose patriotism was challenged reacted in a manner indicative of their adherence to the philosophy of order, of their belief that there had been no abuses great enough to justify upsetting the natural descent of authority. The outcomes, however, varied widely. Some recanted under pressure or resigned; others defied their accusers. Samuel Dana of Groton preached a sermon in March of 1775 which offended his congregation so much that he was asked to resign. Like his conservative colleagues elsewhere Dana feared that resistance to Parliament "would lead to greater evils, than were then endured," and urged obedience. After losing his pulpit he remained in Groton, sometimes preaching to the Presbyterians, who may have been more receptive to his "Arminian" ideas.¹⁰

Ebenezer Morse of Shrewsbury, like Harrington and several other Loyalist ministers, was a 1737 graduate of Harvard. He was examined in 1775 by the local Patriot committee on suspicion of Toryism. According to the town records he had "in sundry instances, appeared not to be so friendly to the

common cause, as we could wish; but rather, in some instances, unfriendly." His weapons were taken from him and he was forbidden to leave the town, but he remained as minister until 1779. In two letters to the *Massachusetts Spy* at the of 1775 he protested his loyalty to the Patriot cause. When finally ousted from his church he began to practice medicine, and tutored local boys who hoped to enter college.¹¹

Aaron Whitney of Petersham, yet another 1737 graduate of Harvard, "preached and prayed submission to the King, and at last, his parishioners could bear his instruction no longer." He lost his church in 1774, but continued to preach at his own house until his death in 1779. Baldwin seems to have confused Aaron Whitney with his son Peter, an outspoken Patriot. In 1776 the younger Whitney preached a sermon defending the Declaration of Independence, in which he likened George III to the foolish King Rehoboam who threatened to chastise Israel with Scorpions (I Kings 12:14). But, interestingly, Whitney also compared the colonists to King Jeroboam, whom the Israelites set up against Rehoboam, and who later turned to idolatry and was abandoned by God.¹²

In 1777 David Parsons of Amherst was accused by the town meeting of giving "offense to the Whigs, by his course in politics."¹³ Abraham Hill of Shutesbury (Harvard, 1737) was evidently a Loyalist, though little is recorded about his politics; Sabine says that "his Toryism was most offensive."¹⁴ Roger Newton of Greenfield "was not an enthusiastic believer in the policy of the Whigs," and was "altogether too much under the influence of Reverend Mr. Ashley of Deerfield," his mentor. Newton was known to his congregation as a "man of peace," but was branded a tory after allowing Ashley to preach at Greenfield.¹⁵

Finally, an anonymous "Congregational Clergyman" wrote to the *Boston News-Letter* in March 1775 to deny Massachusetts' statement that all the clergy of his denomination were rebels. The writer agreed with the Bishop of St. Asaph that the best patriot was a conciliator. He believed that ministers should not support parties or factions, but

can the man of warm benevolence, the true lover of his country, look round on its present state, and see the toleration that is given to falsehood and detraction, the prevalence of anger, malice and revenge, those sure destroyers of the peace and happiness of mankind, without feeling in his breast strong emotions of grief or melancholy? Why do our patriots continually wish and urge us to feed these unfriendly and malignant vices?¹⁶

The evidence indicates that the loyalism of these ministers sprang in part from their self-righteousness and zeal, and from their location in the west. However it was principally a psychological proclivity which induced them to interpret Calvinist theology along the lines followed by neo-Platonic philosophers of past centuries. A study of men like Ashley and Harrington reveals more similarities than differences between them and the Patriot ministers, but it is clear that the two groups emphasized very disparate aspects of the eclectic religion which they shared.

Why did some ministers choose one path, and some the other? The question cannot be answered with any finality. All New England ministers received roughly the same training (though the preponderance of 1737 Harvard graduates may be more than coincidental), and all must have had similar psychological natures to have followed such an exacting and often thankless calling. Many, though not all of the Loyalists, were educated at Harvard during the Great Awakening, when that college was considered by the revivalists to be a hotbed of Arminianism. It would not be surprising if most ministers, of both the old and new "sides," had been men of peace who naturally recoiled from the disruption of orderly society as the Revolution approached. Thus it is not so remarkable that a few of these men were branded as Tories in the 1770s. It is more remarkable that their numbers were not greater. The fact that most Loyalists were in the west might be ascribed to the lessening of social pressure from the Patriots as the distance from Boston increased. Many ministers on the seaboard may have been subscribers to the theory of order, and may have been as unhappy as Ashley about the troubles of the 1770s, but chose to hide their true feelings. A re-evaluation of the writings of all the New England clergy in light of this theory would be instructive.

Considering that eighteenth-century America was a profoundly religious land, and given the close correlation between the social and political ideology of Calvinism and Whiggism, a glimpse of the psychological dilemma of the American Revolution emerges from a study of these ministers. In all ages it has been recognized by students of philosophy that human nature is fundamentally dichotomous. The human mind wishes simultaneously to operate in two directions, described as analysis and synthesis, or as arguing from the universal to the particular and vice-versa. The dichotomy existed below the surface of eighteenth-century thought, and was brought to light in a particularly painful manner by the Revolution.

In short, it would be a mistake to assume that the loyalism of these Congregational preachers was entirely or even primarily due to either secular or religious influence. They were by nature and temperament adherents to the philosophy of order. Such a psychological predisposition goes deeper than religious or political affiliation, though being clergymen, the Loyalist ministers cast their philosophy into a religious mold, and it affected and was expressed in their interpretation of Scripture. Their loyalty to Great Britain, though disguised by the exigencies and the standard language of the day, was essentially simple, and for them best expressed by St. Paul's admonition that "the powers that be are ordained of God."¹⁷

Notes

1. See Robert J. Taylor, *Western Massachusetts in the Revolution* (Providence, 1954), 177; Lee N. Newcomer, *The Embattled Farmers* (New York, 1953), 58-78 passim; and Bruce G. Merritt, "Loyalism and Social conflict in Revolutionary Deerfield, Massachusetts," *Journal of American History*, LVII, 2 (September, 1970), 277-289.
2. Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1966), 3, 4, 12.
3. For a more thorough exposition see W. H. Greenleaf, *Order, Empiricism and Politics: Two Traditions of English Political Thought, 1500-1700* (London, 1964); and Arthur O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being: A Study of the History of an Idea* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936). Medieval philosophers derived the idea that the sovereign derived his authority from God and granted rights to the subjects (principle of concession) from John 19:11.
4. Timothy Harrington, *A Century-Sermon Preached at the First-Parish in Lancaster* (Boston, 1753), 29. Harrington "did not desire the presence or aid of the celebrated Whitefield" in 1739: see the Rev. Abijah P. Marvin, *History of the Town of Lancaster, Massachusetts* (Lancaster, 1879), 392.
5. Idem, *A Peaceable Temper and Conduct Divinely Enjoined. . . .* (Boston, 1760), 6-7, 11, 13, 17, 20, 21.
6. Idem, *Prevailing Wickedness, and Distressing Judgements, Ill-Boding Symptoms of a Stupid People. . . .* (Boston, 1756), 6, 28-29. The text was Hosea 7:9.
7. Lorenzo Sabine, *Biographical Sketches of Loyalists of the American Revolution, with an Historical Essay*, 2 vol. (Boston, 1864), I:518-519; Marvin, *Lancaster*, 304-305.
8. George Sheldon, *History of Deerfield, Massachusetts* (Deerfield, 1895), I:536.
9. *Ibid.*, I:538-539, II:710-711, 719; Sabine, *Loyalists*, I:184-185. In 1741 Ashley preached a thoughtful sermon on some of the shortcomings of the revival, and it was wrongly interpreted by William Cooper as a general condemnation; another of his sermons in 1753 defended Jonathan Edwards. See Edwin S. Gaustad, *The Great Awakening in New England* (Gloucester, Mass., 1965), 73; and Jonathan Ashley, *An Humble Attempt to Give a Clear Account from Scripture, how the Jewish and Christian Churches were Constituted. . . .* (Boston, 1753).
10. Caleb Butler, *History of the Town of Groton. . . .* (Boston, 1848), 178-182.

11. Andrew H. Ward, *History of the Town of Sbrewsbury, Massachusetts. . . .* (Boston, 1847), 39; Sabine, *Loyalists*, II:108-109; *Massachusetts Spy*, November 24, December 15, 1775.
12. Sabine, *Loyalists*, II:424-425; Alice M. Baldwin, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* (New York, 1958, first published 1928), 159n. The sermon referred to is Peter Whitney, *A Sermon. . . at a Lecture Appointed for the Publishing of the Declaration of Independence* (Boston, 1777).
13. Sabine, *Loyalists*, II:150.
14. *Ibid.*, I:535.
15. Francis M. Thompson, *History of Greenfield. . . .* (Greenfield, 1904), I:255, 256.
16. *Boston News-Letter*, March 17, 1775.
17. Romans 13:1-2.