
Pro Rege

Volume 4 | Number 4

Article 2

June 1976

Institutional Religion and the American Revolution: Churches, Clergy, and Religious Issues in the American Revolution

William Nawyn
Dordt College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), [Higher Education Commons](#), and the [History of Christianity Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Nawyn, William (1976) "Institutional Religion and the American Revolution: Churches, Clergy, and Religious Issues in the American Revolution," *Pro Rege*: Vol. 4: No. 4, 2 - 16.

Available at: https://digitalcollections.dordt.edu/pro_rege/vol4/iss4/2

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the University Publications at Digital Collections @ Dordt. It has been accepted for inclusion in Pro Rege by an authorized administrator of Digital Collections @ Dordt. For more information, please contact ingrid.mulder@dordt.edu.

Institutional Religion and the American Revolution

by William Nawyn
Associate Professor of History

Churches, Clergy, and Religious Issues in the American Revolution



Mr. Nawyn has been on the faculty at Dordt since 1970. He holds an A.B. degree from Calvin College and an M.A. degree in history from the University of Michigan. He has studied at the University of Iowa and is presently working on a doctorate from that institution, being currently engaged in research for his dissertation.*

This paper was originally presented as a lecture in the special bicentennial history course, America in the Eighteenth Century.

In order to reach a full understanding of the Revolutionary era, it is necessary to be acquainted with both the religious factors in the background of the Revolution and the role of institutional religion during the Revolution. Vital aspects that perhaps have been overlooked too often, they will be briefly examined in this paper.

First, however, it would be well to observe the general institutional situation at the time of the Revolution. It has often been pointed out that church membership was very low at the time—perhaps as low as five to ten percent of the population by the end of the Revolution. While undoubtedly this general contention is

correct, it should not be forgotten that the church and religion in general played a much more significant role in the life and culture of the times than membership statistics might suggest. This was not the highly secularized society of the 20th century.

William Warren Sweet has estimated the number of churches in the colonies at the time of the Revolution at 3,105, about evenly divided between the three sections: New England, the Middle Colonies, and the South.¹ Already by this time, America was pluralistic in terms of religious institutions, although it was to become far more so in the 19th century. By 1775 there were present on American soil thirteen religious bodies that can be referred to as "denominations," plus a few other small groups.

The largest of these bodies was the Congregational (with perhaps 658 churches). Following in second, third, and fourth places respectively were the Presbyterian (543 churches), Baptist (498 churches), and Anglican or Episcopalian (480 churches) denominations.² Lutheran, German Reformed, Dutch Reformed, and Quakers were also fairly numerous. Relatively small groups of Mennonites, Moravians, Roman Catholics, German Baptists (Dunkers), and Methodists complete the list of thirteen.³ Two of the larger bodies were officially established churches in a number of colonies: the Anglican Church in Georgia, South and North Carolina, Virginia, Maryland, and New York (partially); the Congregational Church in New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and Connecticut.

The Anglican Church was the major church body in the Southern colonies. First appearing on these shores with the founding of Virginia in 1607, it was nominally established in all of the Southern colonies. However, only in Virginia and South Carolina did it enjoy real strength. Anglicans were actually in a minority in the other Southern colonies. Subject to a great deal of secular control because of its establishment and its ties with the English government, and lacking effective spiritual

supervision from England, in general the Anglican churches were not spiritually vigorous.

The Southern colonies were also the home of the relatively small group of Roman Catholics and of the recent offshoot of the Anglican Church, the Methodists. The former were found primarily in Maryland; the latter—at the beginning of the Revolution, at least—were located mostly in Virginia.

Congregationalism was supreme in New England. Coming to America with the Pilgrims and Puritans in 1620 and 1628 respectively, Congregationalism was still confined almost exclusively to New England. Most of the religious zeal and vision and the Calvinistic orthodoxy with which it had been established in Massachusetts Bay had long since been dissipated. It had suffered great inroads of liberalism, rationalism, and Arminianism. But it was still the established church in all the New England colonies except Rhode Island, and the establishment was real and vigorous.

The Middle Colonies were notable for their religious diversity. Every one of the thirteen religious groups was represented here. The oldest church in the section was the Dutch Reformed. It had been first established in New York (New Amsterdam) in 1628, and its membership was still found almost entirely in New York and neighboring New Jersey.

Pennsylvania, in addition to containing large numbers of Baptists and Presbyterians, was also the home of several small religious groups. The colony had originally been founded in 1681 as a refuge for Quakers; by the time of the Revolution they were still a very important element in the colony. However, they had been joined by several German religious groups: the Mennonites in 1683; German Reformed, German Baptists (commonly known as Dunkers), and German Lutherans around 1720; and the Moravians shortly before mid-century. The Quakers, Mennonites, German Baptists, and Moravians were all pacifists. The German Reformed, German Baptists, German Lutherans, and

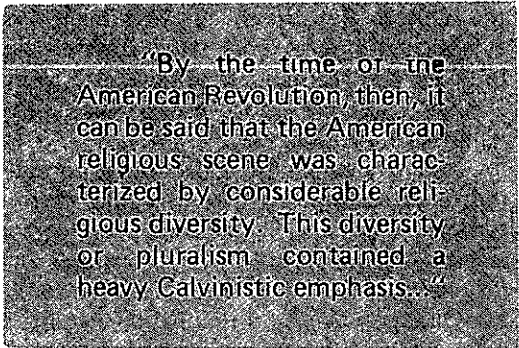
Moravians had strong roots in and had been greatly influenced by the German pietistic movement. These groups and their views gave Pennsylvania a very distinctive religious coloration.

Both the Baptist and the Presbyterian Churches were inter-sectional in character. The first Baptist church had been founded in Rhode Island in 1638, but by 1775 there were Baptist churches in every colony. However, Baptists were most numerous in the Middle Colonies of Pennsylvania and New Jersey, while showing much growth in Virginia. They had always stood for religious freedom and separation of church and state. Originally Arminian in their emphasis, they had swung in a Calvinistic direction by 1750. Presbyterian tendencies had appeared in New England almost from the beginning, but the actual appearance of the Presbyterian Church did not occur until around the beginning of the 18th century. During the 18th century, thousands of Presbyterians—mostly Scotch-Irish—settled in the American colonies, a large proportion of them in the frontier

considerable religious diversity. This diversity or pluralism contained a heavy Calvinistic emphasis—past or present, pure or diluted—as embodied in the Congregational, Presbyterian, Baptist, German Reformed, and Dutch Reformed Churches. It included a large church rather perfunctorily established in several colonies and generally marked by a lack of spiritual vigor—the Anglican, and another large church characterized by a strong tradition of independent-mindedness in reference to any interference in its affairs from England, as well as by an anti-royal attitude—the Congregational. It embraced still another sizable church, having influence in almost all of the colonies, that contained a very strong anti-English orientation among its membership—the Presbyterian. It included also a church dedicated to religious freedom and the separation of church and state—the Baptist, and a considerable group of people committed to pacifism—the Quakers, Mennonites, Dunkers, and Moravians.

The religious factors that lie in the background of the American Revolution are extremely important. Ignoring them will lead to an incomplete understanding of how and why the Revolution came about. They can be, rather arbitrarily, divided into "indirect" and "direct" factors. The indirect factors are rather general, somewhat removed in point of time, and more of an "influence," than an immediate contributory cause. The direct factors are specific issues of a religious nature and a particular activity within the churches in the fifteen years immediately prior to the outbreak of war.

The first of the indirect factors is the contribution made by Puritan political theory. Sydney Ahlstrom remarks, "It was no accident...that Boston became the chief thorn in the side of English authority."⁴ Boston was the center of New England Congregationalism, and Congregationalism was the institutional embodiment of New England Puritanism. For years—indeed, ever since the founding of Massachusetts Bay—the Puritan (Congregational) clergy had been preaching and



"By the time of the American Revolution, then, it can be said that the American religious scene was characterized by considerable religious diversity. This diversity or pluralism contained a heavy Calvinistic emphasis..."

areas from New York to South Carolina, but particularly in those of Pennsylvania and Virginia. Confessionally very similar to the Congregationalists, that is, Calvinistic, they differed considerably from them in church government.

By the time of the American Revolution, then, it can be said that the American religious scene was characterized by con-

teaching political theory. The election sermon had become an institution in New England. This was a sermon delivered at the time of a public election, such as that of the colonial legislature, by a minister appointed for the occasion. It dealt with such subjects as the origin and end of government, the nature of lawful government, the responsibilities of the magistrates, and the rights of Englishmen. It was often printed up at public expense and widely distributed.⁵

Ministers also often delivered sermons to their own congregations upon these themes, perhaps at a weekly lecture. They also contributed articles to newspapers or occasionally wrote pamphlets on political theories. In one way or another, for a hundred years or more, these political theories were driven into the minds of New Englanders until, as Alice Baldwin observes, they "became part of the warp and woof of New England thought."⁶

In the election sermons and on the other occasions, the Congregational clergy taught that government originated with God, but that it was formed by men through a "civil covenant." Rulers derived their power from God—but only indirectly. They derived it directly from the people. Further, the power of rulers was limited by law—divine law first of all, but more immediately by the limitations of the "constitution." They contended that government was for the good of the people—the apostle Paul had stated in Romans 13 that government was "a minister to thee for good." If government did not serve the good of the people, it was not sanctioned by God. Whatever "good" meant, it certainly included the promotion and protection of their basic rights. Therefore, it became one of the major duties of the ruler to protect the liberties of the people. If he did not do so, he became an unlawful ruler for he acted in opposition to God's law. Thus, rights of life, liberty, and property came under the protection of divine law.⁷

It follows that if the authority of the ruler became unlawful authority, the

people were no longer under the obligation of submission (as they normally were to lawful authority). "There is nothing in Scripture which supports this scheme of political principles" that asserts the doctrine of unlimited submission, argued Jonathan Mayhew, a prominent liberal clergyman, in 1750. He went on to contend that "no civil rulers are to be obeyed when they enjoin things that are inconsistent with the commands of God. All such disobedience is lawful and glorious..."⁸

Although much more could be said and many other examples given, the above is perhaps sufficient to illustrate the nature of Puritan political theories and emphases and to bear out the contention of Bernard Bailyn that "the Revolutionary ideology could be found intact—completely formed—as far back as the 1730's; in partial form it could be found even farther back, at the turn of the seventeenth century."⁹

The role of the Great Awakening as an indirect factor in the Revolution is perhaps harder to isolate and to define. It is certainly difficult to measure. Nevertheless, it was real as a factor contributing to the climate, spirit, and conditions crucial to the success of the Revolution.

The Great Awakening cannot be detailed to any great extent here. In brief, it was a great religious revival that to a greater or lesser extent affected all the colonies. Having its beginnings with the preaching of the Dutch Reformed minister Theodore Frelinghuysen in New Jersey as early as 1725, it was at its peak in New England around 1740, but in the Southern colonies, especially Virginia, not until the 1750's. It was carried from colony to colony by the eloquent itinerant Anglican evangelist, George Whitefield, and by lesser inter-colonial revivalists such as the Presbyterian minister, Gilbert Tennent. In New England, the brilliant Congregational preacher and theologian, Jonathan Edwards, played a powerful role.

The effects of the Great Awakening were broad and deep. Its theological effects were profound. Institutionally,

although adding many new members to the churches, it also caused much dissension and even schism as members lined up for or against it and the preaching and techniques of its leaders—e.g., New Lights and Old Lights in the Congregational churches, New Sides and Old Sides in the Presbyterian Church. Baptist membership was considerably augmented, especially by the influx of former Congregationalists who had separated from that body as a result of controversy over the Great Awakening.¹⁰

However, the effects of the Great Awakening as an indirect factor in the Revolution are of primary concern here. The Great Awakening served to promote inter-colonial unity. It was an inter-colonial phenomenon, it provided a common interest, and it caught up all the colonies. The inter-relationships or "lines of connection" here were from colony to colony, not from a particular colony to England as had been the case heretofore. The Great Awakening stimulated greater inter-denominational contact and cooperation—it "led...American evangelicals to discover each other," as Ahlstrom puts it.¹¹ Here for the first time, inter-colonial public figures emerged: George Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, Jonathan Edwards. It also at least helped to stimulate a greater sense of colonial self-consciousness. Indeed, William S. McLoughlin argues that "the Great Awakening...was really the beginning of American's identity as a nation--the starting point of the Revolution...the Awakening constituted a watershed in the self-image and conceptualization of what it meant to be an American."¹²

In addition, the Great Awakening also contributed to tendencies such as the easier acceptance of controversy, a greater questioning of authority—ecclesiastical, but also political, a closer examination of church establishments and the premises upon which they were based, and a greater emphasis upon religious freedom. To the extent that the Great Awakening contributed to the growth of the Baptist churches, it also stimulated

the movement toward complete religious freedom and separation of church and state. All in all, the Great Awakening served as a powerful, although a very indirect, factor in the coming of the American Revolution.

At this point another very powerful, indeed crucial, factor and influence in the revolutionary climate in the colonies must be mentioned. This is the influence of the European Enlightenment. However, as significant as it is, it cannot be treated at any length here. It is not an influence emanating directly from the American religious scene. Nor is it, strictly speaking, a "religious" factor. It is rather an imported European intellectual movement. The Enlightenment with its rationalism, however, its emphasis on "natural religion," "natural law," and "natural rights" deeply penetrated the existing colonial churches and profoundly affected the thinking of many religious and intellectual leaders in the colonies.

With increasing ease and frequency, the colonial clergy—especially the New England Congregationalists—incorporated into their theology and their political beliefs and theories, ideas and categories derived from Enlightenment sources. This was particularly true of the liberal clergy, such as Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew, but unfortunately it is also applicable, to a degree, to the more orthodox, evangelical clergymen such as Jonathan Edwards. The result was an amalgam of traditional Puritan political ideas and Enlightenment thought.

It should be emphasized that the Enlightenment did not completely sweep the field and overcome the older Puritan and evangelical beliefs which had recently been reinvigorated by the Great Awakening. The Enlightenment provided a strong—even pervading—influence in American religious life, but a large portion of American Christianity remained more informed by the vigorous evangelicalism and pietism fostered by the Great Awakening than by the liberalism and rationalism of the Enlightenment.¹³

The more direct, immediate, and specific religious factors leading to the American Revolution were at least three in number. The first of these was the storm created by the passage of the Quebec Act by the British Parliament in 1774. Under the terms of this act, not only were the boundaries of Quebec extended to include the area east of the Mississippi River and north of the Ohio River, but the Roman Catholics of the province were given the right of free exercise of their religion, and their church was given the right to collect tithes in the province. To the colonials, this seemed like a direct provocation, coming as it did in the immediate context of the harshly repressive parliamentary acts known as the Intolerable Acts. The Protestants in the American colonies reacted emotionally—almost irrationally. The act seems to have aroused ancient fears of papal domination and Catholic persecution. It seemed to them that the British government was selling out to the Catholic Church at the expense of their Protestant American subjects. It was a British action, as Edwin Gaustad points out, that “managed—however difficult the task surely was—to fuse anti-Catholic and anti-English sentiments.”¹⁴ Arousing protest in all sections of the colonies, it was also officially condemned by the First Continental Congress in October of 1774.¹⁵

A second factor, probably more important and certainly of an earlier and more longstanding nature, was the issue of an Anglican episcopate for the American colonies. The controversy, here, centered on the possibility that the Church of England might appoint a resident bishop for the Anglican Church in the American colonies. The Anglican churches in the colonies had always been under the supervision of the Bishop of London. From the Anglican perspective, it would make for more effective organizational control and better spiritual supervision to have an American bishop. However, most American Protestants were vehemently opposed to the idea. The issue was not a new one. It dated back at least to the early years of

the 18th century, but it became particularly acute in the 1760's and early 1770's. It is an issue easily overlooked as a major contributing factor to the Revolution, but it must be considered as such. John Adams, certainly an astute and penetrating observer of the Revolution, declared much later—after he had had time to reflect on the Revolution—that “the apprehension of episcopacy contributed...as much as any other cause to arouse the attention not only of the inquiring mind but the common people and urge them to close thinking on the constitutional authority of parliament over the colonies.”¹⁶

To the colonials it seemed that because of the close relationship between the Anglican Church and the government of England, the appointment of such a bishop would greatly expand the control of the English government over the colonies. To the Protestants of the colonies, most of whom were of Dissenter heritage, bishops were a symbol of tyranny. The strengthening of the Anglican structure in the colonies seemed merely to be the first step to further Anglican establishment, to possible taxes for the support of Anglican churches and clergy, and possibly to special political privileges for Anglicans.

The issue of the episcopate easily broadened into one of concern over general Anglican aggressiveness in the colonies. The opposition to the episcopate was fanned by what appeared to be a concerted Anglican effort to expand its position and extend its control in the colonies. The proselyting work of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, a highly successful agency of the Anglican Church in the colonies, was particularly irritating and evoked a strong response. The S.P.G. had many missionaries at work in the northern colonies, particularly New England, attempting to expand Anglicanism. These missionaries were not reticent in suggesting that the creation of an Anglican episcopate would bind the colonies more closely to England and that if the Anglican Church were established in these colonies, the people would soon become

more obedient. Furthermore, they made clear that, in their estimation, the existing churches—e.g., the Congregational—were not representative of true religion. Jonathan Edwards complained that the S.P.G. men contended that “our ministry is no ministry” and that the Congregational “churches are no churches.”¹⁷

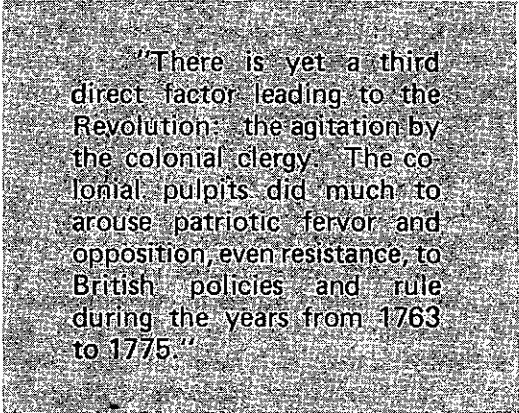
The most violent opposition to the episcopate came from the Congregationalists of New England, but the Presbyterians of the Middle Colonies were not far behind. In New England the opposition was led by Jonathan Mayhew, who declared, “People have no security against being unmercifully priest-ridden but by keeping all imperious bishops, and other clergymen...from getting their feet into the stirrup at all.”¹⁸ The depth of the concern felt in the Congregational and Presbyterian churches is illustrated by the fact that from 1766 to 1775 these churches held a series of joint conferences, the primary purpose of which was to register protest against the idea of an American episcopate and the primary effect of which, perhaps, was to further promote intercolonial cooperation.¹⁹

While Congregationalists and Presbyterians might be vehemently opposed to an episcopate, Anglicans themselves were often less than enthusiastic. Indeed, some actually opposed the idea. Many Anglican laymen were content with the existing organizational arrangement, particularly the situation in which there existed a “practical congregationalism” in many local parishes. Many Anglican clergy recognized that the presence of a bishop would merely serve further to weaken relations with the other churches in the colonies, even as agitation for such a bishop was already doing. In this connection it is worth noting that in Virginia, the state where the Anglican Church was probably most firmly established, the House of Burgesses unanimously went on record in 1771 as being opposed to an American episcopate.²⁰

There is yet a third direct factor leading to the Revolution: the agitation by the colonial clergy. The colonial

pulpits did much to arouse patriotic fervor and opposition, even resistance, to British policies and rule during the years from 1763 to 1775. The Congregational ministers of New England again led the way. Time and time again they reiterated their beliefs on the responsibilities of magistrates and the rights of resistance. But they did more; they reacted to specific British measures and actions.

The Stamp Act of 1765 provided the occasion for particularly strong outbursts. Boston ministers such as Jonathan Mayhew,



“There is yet a third direct factor leading to the Revolution: the agitation by the colonial clergy. The colonial pulpits did much to arouse patriotic fervor and opposition, even resistance, to British policies and rule during the years from 1763 to 1775.”

Charles Chauncy, and Samuel Cooper led in the condemnation of the act.²¹ But opposition to the Stamp Act was not confined to the Boston clergy. Ministers in the countryside of Massachusetts and Connecticut also railed against it. For instance, Stephen Johnson of Lyme, Connecticut, referred to the act as “high and aggravated injustice” and the “enslaving of a free people.” He went on in his sermon to pointedly call the attention of the British government to the example of Rehoboam.²² Upon the repeal of the Stamp Act in the following year, Charles Chauncy preached a sermon on the text, “As cold waters to a thirsty soul, so is good news from a far country.”²³

Not only the Stamp Act, but other laws and events provoked sermons castigating the British. The Boston Massacre moved John Lathrop of Boston to preach a sermon under the title of “Innocent

Blood Crying to God from the Streets of Boston" on the text from Genesis 4, "The voice of thy brother's blood cryeth unto me from the ground." The sermon was printed not only in Boston, but also in London.²⁴ The Gaspee affair and the Boston Port Bill also elicited inflammatory sermons, and not only from Congregational ministers. The former occasion, for instance, led Isaac Skillman, pastor of the Second Baptist Church of Boston, to warn King George that one of his predecessors, Charles I, had lost his head and that if he "should tread in the same steps, what can he expect?" He went on to plead with his listeners, "Stand up as one man for your liberty. Stand alarm'd, O ye Americans."²⁵

Not only did the clergy exert their influence from the pulpit, but also through friendships and correspondence with many prominent patriots such as Samuel Adams, John Adams, and John Hancock. Often these leaders met in the homes of clergymen to discuss the issues of the day. Samuel Cooper maintained a regular correspondence with Benjamin Franklin.²⁶

Although the New England Congregationalists may have led the way, opposition to British policies came also from other churches. Perhaps closest behind the Congregationalists were the Presbyterians. Many of the Presbyterians were relatively recent Scotch-Irish immigrants already filled with resentment against the British for their restrictive economic and religious measures in their former home in northern Ireland. Somewhat later, the prominent Loyalist, Joseph Galloway of Pennsylvania, testified before the British Parliament that the Presbyterians had principal responsibility for the revolt of the colonies. This judgment was undoubtedly biased because of the large number of Presbyterians in Pennsylvania, but, nevertheless, it suggests the role that they played.

It should be pointed out that there were also expressions of loyalty to England emanating from the pulpits, but these were a minority voice and came primarily from the Anglican clergy. Samuel Seabury of

New York, for instance, in a series of pamphlets written in 1774, maintained that freedom would not be achieved by opposition to Britain, but in obedience and through peaceful and orderly means.²⁷

If the churches directly or indirectly contributed to the Revolutionary climate prior to the outbreak of war, during the war their support for the American cause was overwhelming. There were, of course, Tories in all the churches. There were also many who were apathetic. But the general picture is one of strong support.

The clergy contributed to the building up of this support through their preaching and by actively enlisting men and material for the American cause. Interestingly, the clergy often depicted the war as an affliction visited upon the colonies by God as a result of their infidelity. The way to God's blessing and assistance, and therefore to victory, they contended, was for the people to confess their sins and repent. Perhaps as a result of this emphasis, the Continental Congress on several occasions called the people to "public humiliation, fasting, and prayer."²⁸

Whereas some ministers served as chaplains in the army, others acted as recruiters for the Continental army, sometimes themselves joining the men they enlisted. A typical example is Samuel Eels of Bradford, Connecticut, who, when news arrived that General Washington was in need of help, adjourned the service then in progress to the green in front of the church and proceeded to form a company of volunteers from his congregation. He then left at its head as captain.²⁹ Probably the most famous example of this type of incident was that involving John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg, who, after pronouncing the benediction in his Lutheran church in Virginia, dramatically removed his preaching robe to reveal a uniform. "In the language of Holy Writ," he explained to his congregation, "there is a time for all things. There is a time to preach and a time to fight; and now is the time to fight." Thereupon he removed himself to the church door where he

undertook to enlist members of his parish. This accomplished, he left to join Washington's army. He later became a major general in the Continental Army.³⁰

It comes as no surprise that the Congregationalists, in view of their pre-war record and the preaching and activities of their clergy already alluded to, were virtually unanimous in their devotion to the patriot cause. If not typical, the expressions of John Cleaveland of Ipswich, Massachusetts, are certainly among the strongest statements to come from the Congregational clergy. In April, 1775, immediately following upon Lexington and Concord, he addressed his fellow New Englanders as follows in a letter to the Essex Gazette:

Is the time come, the fatal era commenced, for you to be deemed rebels by the Parliament of Great Britain? Rebels! Wherein? Why, for asserting that the rights of men, the rights of Englishmen belong to us.... Great Britain, adieu! No longer shall we honor you as our mother; you are become cruel; you have not so much bowels as the sea monsters toward their young ones....

King George the Third, adieu! No more shall we cry to you for protection.... Your breach of covenant; your violation of faith;...have dissolved your allegiance to your Crown and Government.... O George! see thou to thine own house....

O my dear New England, hear thou the alarm of war! The call of heaven is to arms! to arms!...

We are, my brethren, in a good cause; and if God be for us, we need not fear what man can do....

O thou righteous Judge of all the earth, awake for our help. Amen and Amen.

This same clergyman delivered himself

of a particularly vitriolic diatribe against General Gage on the day of the Battle of Bunker Hill:

Thou profane, wicked monster of falsehood and perfidy,... your late infamous proclamation is as full of notorious lies, as a toad or rattlesnake of deadly poison—you are an abandoned wretch...Without speedy repentance, you will have an aggravated damnation in hell...you are not only a robber, a murderer, and usurper, but a wicked Rebel: A rebel against the authority of truth, law, equity, the English constitution of government, these colony states, and humanity itself.³²

Later, Cleaveland is reputed to have preached his whole parish into the army and then marched off with them, at their head.³³

An interesting episode occurred in Litchfield, Massachusetts, where Judah Champion read from the pulpit, news from the American army, then engaged in the invasion of Canada and in immediate need of warm clothing to endure the bitter cold. Thereupon he released the women of the congregation from the afternoon service on that Sabbath Day and set them to spinning to begin the process of providing clothing.³⁴ It is probably to this incident and others like it that Judge Peter Oliver, a prominent Bostonian Tory, had reference when he complained that the clergy were encouraging women and children to "set their Spinning Wheel a whirling in Defiance of Great Britain" and that there was "a new Species of Enthusiasm" abroad, "the Enthusiasm of the Spinning Wheel."³⁵

The Presbyterians were not far behind the Congregationalists in their approval and support of the Revolution. The Hanover Presbytery of Virginia, one profoundly affected by the Great Awakening, was the first church body officially to take cognizance of the Declaration of Independence and indicate its support for it.³⁶

Abigail Adams reported in a letter to her husband, John Adams, that

the Presbyterian clergy are particularly active in supporting the measures of Congress from the rostrum, gaining proselytes, persecuting the unbelievers, preaching up the righteousness of their cause, and persuading the unthinking populace of the infallibility of success.³⁷

The enthusiasm of one Presbyterian clergyman—James Caldwell of Elizabethtown, New Jersey—for the cause, is illustrated by the story of an incident that occurred near his church. In the process of a skirmish between American and British troops, the Americans ran low in wadding for their muskets. This prompted the pastor to run to his church and return with an armful of Isaac Watts' Psalm Books. Handing them over to the Americans, he yelled, "Now boys, give them Watts!"³⁸

Undoubtedly the most important Presbyterian leader in the Revolutionary period was John Witherspoon, clergyman and the president of Princeton College (then the College of New Jersey). An immigrant from Scotland in 1768, where he had been a leader of the popular party fighting aspects of the establishment system there, he almost immediately lent himself to the colonial cause in opposition to Britain. Chosen as a New Jersey delegate to the Continental Congress, he remained in that body until the end of the Revolution, serving on several important committees, particularly the finance committee, during that time. In the process he also became the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. Something of his influence—or at least potential influence—in the post-revolutionary era is indicated by the fact that among his students at Princeton were one president (James Madison), one vice president, ten cabinet members, twelve governors, sixty Congressmen, and three Supreme Court justices. Unfortunately, the influence of Witherspoon was not as fully Calvinistic as it might have

been, inasmuch as he had been deeply influenced by the rationalistic Scottish philosophy before coming to America.

Witherspoon's fervent and unswerving commitment to the American cause elicited a satirical poem from his neighbor, the Tory Anglican minister, Jonathan Odell:

Meanwhile unhappy Jersey
mourns her thrall, / Ordained by
the vilest of the vile to fall; /
To fall by Witherspoon! -O
name the curse / Of sound
religion, and disgrace of verse. /
Member of Congress, we must
hail him next: / 'Come out
of Babylon, ' was now his text. /
Fierce of the fiercest, foremost
of the first, / He'd rail at Kings,
with venom well-nigh burst; / Not
uniformly grand for some by-
end, / To dirtiest tricks of treason
he'd descend; / I've known him
seek the dungeon, dark as
night, / Imprison'ed Tories
to convert or fright; / While to
myself I've hummed in Dismal
tune, / I'd rather be a dog than
Witherspoon.³⁹

The Baptists, too, gave strong support to the American cause. Isaac Backus, the leading New England Baptist, attributed Baptist support to several reasons: among them were the fact that the Baptists had suffered much from the Episcopalians, that they believed in the compact theory of government, that the principles upon which the Revolution was based were also Baptist principles, and that victory for the American cause promised to gain for the Baptists' rights which they claimed.⁴⁰ Backus also pointed with pride to the fact that when the Massachusetts General Court in 1778 published a list of 311 Tories who should not be permitted to return to Massachusetts, it did not include a single Baptist. Baptists in the South also espoused the American cause. In August of 1775, the Virginia Baptists issued an "Address" in which they defended the lawfulness of the war and counseled resistance to Britain because of her tyranny and unjust actions

against the colonies.⁴¹

However, Baptists coupled their expressions of commitment to the American cause with repeated appeals for full religious freedom in the new nation. Already in 1774, Backus had been sent by the Warren Association in New England to petition the Continental Congress for complete religious liberty. The Virginia Baptists flooded the Virginia legislature with petitions for religious freedom.⁴² The Baptists argued that religious liberty was an integral part of the liberties that the Americans were demanding from the British. To them, religious and political liberty went hand in hand—and part of religious liberty was disestablishment.

The Dutch Reformed Church also backed the Revolution with virtual unanimity. Because most of the Dutch Reformed churches were located in an area occupied by the British during much of the war, the church perhaps suffered more, proportionately, than any other denomination. Many of their churches were used, damaged, or destroyed by the British; many congregations, therefore, were disrupted, and many ministers were forced to flee. It was in this context that the synod meeting at New Paltz, New York, in October of 1778, while setting a day of fasting and prayer, lamented:

Some of our cities were desolated, our villages and boroughs subverted, many of our houses of worship and their furniture burned, desecrated, plundered and cast to the ground while many dear pledges of the loving Jesus, together with the faithful ambassadors of His Cross, driven from their peaceful homes and compelled to roam through the land, so that, with respect to those once flourishing congregations, we may, even weeping, take up the lamentations of the Church of old and say: "The ways of Zion do mourn because none come to the solemn feasts; all her gates are desolate; her

priests sigh, her virgins are afflicted, and she is in bitterness."⁴³

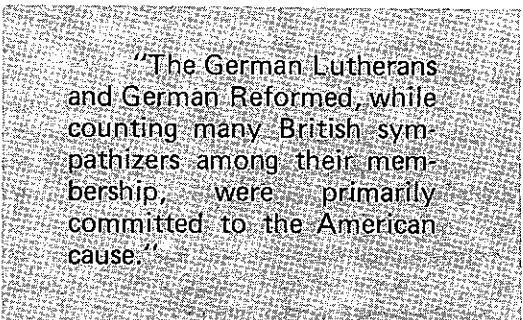
The small body of Roman Catholics in the colonies also gave strong support to the Revolution. Particularly influential in this development was the staunchly patriotic Carroll family of Maryland, and especially Charles Carroll of Carrollton, who became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Charles Carroll, as well as a cousin, Father John Carroll, served on the delegation sent by the Continental Congress to Canada to try to persuade the French Catholic Canadians to join the American cause, after military conquest had failed. The patriotic activities and loyal support of the Catholics did a great deal to improve the image of the Catholics in the country—not so much Catholicism as a religion, but Catholics as individuals. The French alliance also helped to bring about a more favorable attitude toward the Catholics.⁴⁴

The German Lutherans and German Reformed, while counting many British sympathizers among their membership, were primarily committed to the American cause. *The two churches even joined on occasion in appealing to German citizens to support the Continental Congress.⁴⁵ The role of John Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg has already been referred to. His brother, Frederick Augustus Conrad, was also a staunch patriot who became a member of the Continental Congress. The activities of the brothers, however, were looked upon with sorrow by their elderly father and the founder of American Lutheranism, Henry Melchoir Muhlenberg, who remained true to his pacifistic convictions and adopted a neutral stance towards the Revolution. The elder Muhlenberg took the position that Christ's Kingdom was not of this world and, therefore, ministers were not to become involved in the affairs of this world. There were other Lutheran clergymen who felt much the same.⁴⁶

Such was not the attitude of the typical German Reformed clergyman, however. Many expressed strong anti-British

convictions. Upon one occasion, the German-Reformed minister at Lancaster, Pennsylvania, while admonishing the German Hessian prisoners held there, preached to them from the text: "Ye have sold yourself for naught; and ye shall be redeemed without money."⁴⁷

The record of the Anglicans is a contradictory one. No church contained



"The German Lutherans and German Reformed, while counting many British sympathizers among their membership, were primarily committed to the American cause."

a greater proportion of Loyalists, yet, on the other hand, many of the leading political figures in the Revolutionary movement were Anglicans. Two-thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglicans; George Washington himself was a member of the Anglican church, as also were Patrick Henry, James Madison, John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and other leaders. A much greater percentage of the laymen than the clergy were in support of the Revolution. In Virginia, the great majority of laymen were patriots. On the other hand, almost all Anglicans in New England were Tories. In general, the proportion of Tories in the Anglican Church varied inversely to their numbers in a particular colony: relatively small in the Southern colonies, much greater in the Middle Colonies, and practically one hundred percent in the New England colonies.⁴⁸

The Anglican Church, therefore, was divided in its allegiance. But from the Anglican clergy opposed to the Revolution came the strongest and most outspoken

voice of Toryism emanating from the American churches. As a result, many of the Anglican clergymen were molested, sometimes imprisoned. It was out of fear for his life, that Jonathan Boucher of Virginia, known for his strong denunciation of the American cause and leaders, regularly carried with him into the pulpit two loaded pistols. Jonathan Odell and Samuel Seabury, both of whom have been referred to above, became pamphleteers for the British cause.⁴⁹ Both were employed by General Howe in New York to turn out Tory propaganda.

Already in 1774, before the war had actually begun, Seabury had asked in a pamphlet that he wrote, "Will you submit... to the high and mighty delegates, in Grand Continental Congress assembled!"; and then he vehemently declared, "Do as you will, but by Him who made me, I will not! No, if I must be enslaved, let it be by a King at least, and not by a parcel of up-starts, lawless committeemen."⁵⁰ Odell wrote a series of satirical attacks on various revolutionary leaders. His poetic attack on John Witherspoon has already been quoted. George Washington himself suffered a similar assault:

Hear thy indictment, Washington,
at large; / Attend and listen to
the solemn charge; / Thou has
supported an atrocious cause /
Against the King, the country,
and the laws; / Committed per-
jury, encouraged lies, / Forced
conscience, broken the most
sacred ties; / Myriads of wives
and fathers at thy hand / Their
slaughtered husbands, slaughtered
sons, demand.⁵¹

But not all of the Anglican clergy were Tories. William White of Philadelphia, for instance, became one of the chaplains of the Continental Congress.⁵²

At the beginning of the Revolution, Methodism was new, very small, and not yet separated from the Anglican Church, neither organizationally nor in the minds of the American people. Therefore, any disapprobation or reputation for Toryism

that fell on the Anglicans, also fell on the Methodists. The negative image of the Methodists was not enhanced by the attitudes and actions of John and Charles Wesley in England nor by the Methodist preachers in America. John Wesley wrote several pamphlets that condemned the American cause, and in 1776 he called upon the colonials to lay down their arms. Charles Wesley composed a number of hymns containing anti-American views. These activities promoted hostility to the Methodists. So, too, did the Tory views of the Methodist preachers in the colonies. Several of the preachers were tarred and feathered, beaten by mobs, or jailed. All the English preachers except Francis Asbury soon returned to England. However, if the Methodists were less than patriotic at the outset, during the war they underwent a "conversion," and by the end most had become supporters of the patriot cause.⁵³

As pacifists opposed to all war, the Quakers did not greatly assist either the Americans or the British; nor were they, as a result, very popular with either side. In attitude, perhaps a majority of Quakers were pro-American. Their failure to take up arms on behalf of the American cause resulted in some mistreatment at the hands of their fellow Americans, particularly after the departure of the British from Philadelphia and its subsequent re-occupation by American forces in the spring of 1778. Homes were ransacked and some property was seized. There was, however, a small minority of Quakers who actively participated in the American war effort in one way or another, and who as a result of their activities, were expelled from the main body. Among those expelled was Nathaniel Greene, one of Washington's leading generals.⁵⁴

The Mennonites were not only pacifistic, but they also held a negative attitude toward government itself, considering all governments to be un-Christian. On the whole, the Mennonites did not arouse much antagonism from their patriot neighbors, however, perhaps because they were con-

sidered to be patriots "at heart," a judgment that probably was correct. The Mennonites, like the Quakers, experienced a schism during the war as a result of some members moving too far in the direction of supporting the war. A group under the leadership of Christian Funk were expelled after Funk had contended that they should pay taxes to support the war, arguing that "Were Christ here he would say, give to Congress that which belongs to Congress and to God that which belongs to God."⁵⁵

The German Baptists or Dunkers were very similar to the Mennonites in their attitude toward war and government, and also, like the Mennonites, were probably basically sympathetic to the American cause. The outstanding linguist, John Peter Miller, who was employed by the Continental Congress to translate the Declaration of Independence into several foreign languages, was, as head of the Ephrata Community, closely related to this group.⁵⁶

Of all the pacifistic groups, the Moravians perhaps suffered the most, being badly treated by both the British and Americans. They also probably rendered greater service to the American cause than the others, however not so much out of a deliberate desire to help the patriots as out of general humanitarian principles. Their buildings at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, were offered as hospitals for the American army and were so used during much of the war. Their home industries helped to supply the American army with necessary materials. In addition, their mission work among the Indians proved to be of great value to the Americans. The missionary David Zeisberger, for instance, dissuaded the Delaware Indians from making war on the American settlers. On other occasions, the Indian converts of the Moravians, converted to pacifistic principles as well as to Christianity, successfully persuaded other Indians from going on the warpath or warned settlers of impending attacks.

It is therefore doubly tragic that a number of these Christian Indians became the victims of one of the most lamentable

episodes of the Revolutionary War. A group of the Indian converts, after welcoming a party of American militiamen to their village on the Tuscaroras River in Ohio, were murdered in cold blood by their supposed friends. Only two boys out of a total of ninety-six Indians escaped.⁵⁷ William Warren Sweet concludes a brief account of this incident with the sad comment, "Thus were they rewarded for their loyalty to what they had been taught was the teaching and will of Christ."⁵⁸

This relatively brief survey of the role and attitude of the American churches during the Revolution indicates that by and large their members were enthusiastic supporters of the American cause. The Anglicans were, of course, the major exception. The pacifistic churches, although several in number, were but small in total membership.

The war, however, was not good for the churches. They suffered both spiritually and institutionally as a result of it. Church life was disrupted when pastors marched off to war as chaplains or active participants, and as many members left for extended periods of service in the army. The intense concentration on political and military matters led to a decline in spiritual vigor. Lessening spiritual vigor led to a decline in church membership. Indeed, the two decades following the Revolution saw church membership (as a percentage of the total population) reaching its nadir. The supply of new ministers dried up as the colleges established to train ministers were forced to close because of lack of students. Organizationally, the churches found their broader fellowship hampered by the difficulty or even impossibility of meeting as associations or synods. Physically, many churches were damaged or destroyed, some were lost temporarily as they were requisitioned for hospitals or barracks.

At the beginning of this paper the

contention was made that in order fully to understand the American Revolution and the Revolutionary era, it is necessary to have an understanding of the role played by religious factors in encouraging and precipitating the Revolution and by the American churches during the Revolution. In conclusion, this point can well be reiterated. Carl Bridenbaugh has accurately observed, "...the epoch-making mental change that we call the American Revolution occurred in a religious atmosphere. It is indeed high time that we repossess the important historical truth that religion was a fundamental cause of the American Revolution."⁵⁹ To that can be added the further observation that the role of institutional religion was a highly significant one in the Revolution itself.

Footnotes

1. William Warren Sweet, The Story of Religion in America, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1950, p. 172.

2. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, pp. 172-173.

3. Technically, the Methodists in 1775 were not yet a separate body from the Anglican Church. This did not come about until 1784.

4. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, A Religious History of the American People, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972, p. 349.

5. Alice M. Baldwin, The New England Clergy and the American Revolution, New York: Frederick Ungar, 1958, pp. 5-6.

6. Baldwin, p. 6.

7. Baldwin, pp. 23-24, 32-46.

8. Jonathan Mayhew, "A Discourse concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers: With some Reflections on the Resistance made to King Charles I," included in Edmund S. Morgan, ed., Puritan Political Ideas, Indianapolis and New York: Bobbs-Merrill,

1965, pp. 311, 315.

9. Bernard Bailyn, The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967, p. xi.

10. See Ahlstrom, pp. 290-293, 318-320.

11. Ahlstrom, p. 293

12. William G. McLoughlin, "The Role of Religion in the Revolution: Liberty of Conscience and Cultural Cohesion in the New Nation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., Essays on the American Revolution, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1973, pp. 198-199.

13. See, for instance, Ahlstrom, pp. 350-359.

14. Edwin S. Gaustad, A Religious History of America, New York: Harper and Row, 1966, p. 117.

15. The text of this resolution is quoted in Gaustad, p. 118.

16. Quoted in Winthrop S. Hudson, Religion in America, 2nd ed., New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973, p. 92.

17. Hudson, pp. 88-89.

18. Quoted in Hudson, p. 90.

19. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 174, and Clifton E. Olmstead, History of Religion in the United States, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1960, p. 193.

20. Gaustad, p. 113, and Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 175.

21. Baldwin, pp. 90-91.

22. Baldwin, p. 101.

23. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 177.

24. Baldwin, pp. 112-113.

25. Baldwin, pp. 117-119.

26. William Warren Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, 1765-1840, Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1963, p. 10.

27. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, p. 21.

28. Hudson, pp. 97-98.

29. Baldwin, p. 164.

30. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 182.

31. Quoted in Baldwin, pp. 178-179.

32. Quoted in Baldwin, p. 157.

33. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 178.

34. Baldwin, p. 155.

35. Baldwin, p. 155.

36. Olmstead, p. 200.

37. Olmstead, p. 200.

38. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 180.

39. Quoted in Olmstead, p. 201.

40. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 183.

41. Olmstead, p. 205.

42. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, pp. 34-36.

43. Quoted in Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, p. 40.

44. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, pp. 47-50.

45. Olmstead, p. 203.

46. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, p. 38

47. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 181.

48. Olmstead, p. 197, and Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 176.

49. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, p. 19.

50. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, pp. 21-22.

51. Quoted in Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, p. 20.

52. Olmstead, pp. 198-199.

53. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, pp. 26-32.

54. Olmstead, pp. 206-207.

55. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 187.

56. Sweet, Religion in the Development of American Culture, pp. 44-45.

57. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, pp. 187-188, and Olmstead, pp. 207-208.

58. Sweet, Story of Religion in America, p. 188.

59. Carl Bridenbaugh, Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689-1775, New York: Oxford University Press, 1962, p. xiv.