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# ***Review of *Conservative Revolutionaries: Transformation and Tradition in the Religious and Political Thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew****

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Friends in life and fellow "liberals" in public memory, Jonathan Mayhew (1720-1766) and Charles Chauncy (1705-1787) have long divided scholars of eighteenth-century New England Congregationalism and its transformation from Puritanism to Brahminism. While many twentieth-century historians such as Bernard Bailyn and Charles Akers viewed Mayhew and Chauncy as clerical promoters of radical Whig politics on the road to the American Revolution, Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Revolution* (1966) depicted both pastors as elitist reactionaries. In *The Hidden Balance* (1991), John Corrigan treated both men as theological and political moderates in the tradition of Henry F. May's "moderate Enlightenment."

John S. Oakes's *Conservative Revolutionaries*, in contrast, sets out to take Chauncy and Mayhew on their own terms, as men of their time and place. He does not interpret Chauncy and Mayhew as progenitors or adversaries of a more democratic, egalitarian, heterodox, and pluralistic American Republic. The narrative of *Conservative Revolutionaries* is instead framed by the "intellectual journeys of two individuals" and marked by "areas of continuity, as well as discontinuity over time." In Oakes's

well-balanced account, Chauncy and Mayhew were "pioneers of transformation" as well as "pillars of tradition" (9).

Displaying mastery of the full body of sermon literature left behind by Chauncy and Mayhew, Oakes adopts the close textual analysis of their sermons as his method and analyzes these documents mainly in the context of their theological and political sources. He finds neither clergyman to be an Enlightenment rationalist nor an orthodox Calvinist. Both Chauncy and Mayhew were "traditionalist" in their early subscription to orthodox Calvinism, aggressive defense of Congregationalism against Episcopalianism and Catholicism, and commitment to "a vision of New England that retained what they saw as the best of their Protestant and British heritage." (10)

Not until the 1760s did Chauncy break decisively with Calvinism and fully embrace an Arminian theology of justification through both faith and works. He held off publishing his arguments in favor of universal salvation until the 1780s, not least in deference to the senior pastor of Boston's First Church, "catholic" Calvinist Thomas Foxcroft. Chauncy rejected the Calvinist doctrines of total depravity and divine election as incompatible with God's benevolence, but he was unable to resolve the conflict between universal salvation and human free agency. Based upon God's sovereignty and Christ's blood atonement, Chauncy's universalism was fundamentally different from that of its nineteenth-century proponents (101, 108).

Unlike "the more diplomatic Chauncy," Mayhew was overt in his heterodoxy early on, in part because he was secure in the position of pastor at Boston's West Church. He "felt no compunction in transgressing traditional, reformed, credal, or confessional boundaries," rejecting Calvinism in favor of Arminianism in 1748 and criticizing the Athanasian Creed in 1755 (86). Like the nineteenth-century Unitarians who claimed him, Mayhew upheld the unity of God's nature and Christ's subordination to God the Father. On the other hand, he did affirm "the divinity of the Son of God" and never explicitly denied (as Arians do) that the Son is co-eternal with the Father. Challenging the assertions of Bernard Bailyn, Jonathan Clark, and other historians, Oakes concludes that Mayhew's theology of Christ was "subordinationist" but not decisively Arian (87).

Oakes styles Chauncy and Mayhew as proponents of what Nathan Hatch has called "rational biblicism," a theological persuasion advocating both *sola scriptura* and "the right of private judgment" in reading scripture. Rational biblicism is the key to Oakes's interpretation of the two divines as both "conservative" and "revolutionary" in their religion (101, 109, 120). Accordingly, Mayhew and Chauncy opposed the introduction of an episcopate to New England as a danger to the right of private judgment as well as the old New England way. Criticizing Bailyn's interpretation of Mayhew's politics mainly in terms of Real Whig ideology, Oakes emphasizes the prominence in Mayhew's political writings of such "traditionalist" values as a hierarchical social order, anti-Catholicism, monarchism (of the Hanoverian, anti-Stuart brand), British constitutionalism, and the "Protestant interest." One might observe, however, that these traditionalist themes could also be found in the writings of Real Whigs on both sides of the Atlantic, from Thomas Gordon and Benjamin Hoadly to John Adams and William Livingston (165, 173).

One of the book's major contributions to our understanding of Chauncy and Mayhew's political philosophy is its extended and nuanced analysis of their conception of liberty. Oakes contends that, for both clergymen, all forms of liberty are grounded in spiritual liberty: the liberation from sin by grace to serve God and others. It is one of the most powerful and original arguments in the book. He overreaches, though, in using Chauncy and Mayhew as the basis to challenge other historians'

contention that eighteenth-century Americans in general conceived liberty as "personal freedom" or "an individual right" (204, 207).

Eager to advance his thesis that Chauncy and Mayhew understood liberty fundamentally in a "traditional, Puritan sense as freedom in Christ to serve God and others," he also minimizes the deep strain of individualism within Mayhew's moral and political philosophy, most evident in *Seven Sermons* (1749). Oakes's robust affirmation of a theologically based view of liberty is nonetheless a welcome corrective to the long-standing emphasis on secular political ideas within the historiography of eighteenth-century American political thought.

Although Chauncy was less vested in Real Whig ideology than Mayhew, both clergymen were Whigs who supported the right of resistance in principle and criticized Britain's infringements on colonial rights. Mayhew, however, regretted his sermon against the Stamp Act when it was followed by the mobbing of Thomas Hutchinson's house. And Chauncy did not endorse armed resistance to Britain until after the Revolutionary War began. Due to misreading one of Mayhew's letters which expressed the fear that "a forceable, violent opposition" by the colonists to the Stamp Act would amount to a proclamation of "war against Britain," Oakes interprets Mayhew as more contradictory in his views on resistance than he was (222, 225). While Oakes shows that the revolutionary inclinations of Chauncy and Mayhew were checked by "traditionalist" commitment to "an elite social order" and the British constitutional system, such restraints on resistance were actually integral to Real Whig ideology itself, as Pauline Maier demonstrated in *From Resistance to Revolution*.

Oakes does not address how the public received the religious and political ideas of Chauncy and Mayhew. He also declines to wade into the long scholarly debate about the role of religion and the New England Congregational clergy in particular in the origins of the American Revolution. But he concludes *Conservative Revolutionaries* with the hypothesis that Chauncy and Mayhew were more effective in eighteenth-century New England as agents of change precisely because they bundled transformation with tradition.

Going well beyond Corrigan's study in length and depth of analysis, *Conservative Revolutionaries* is the first detailed comparative analysis of the religious and political thought of Chauncy and Mayhew. Oakes's argument for the prominence of "traditionalist" theology, social values, and political ideas in Chauncy and Mayhew's thinking is strained at some points. But *Conservative Revolutionaries* provides original and provocative insights into the politics of these two great Yankee divines, and it now serves as the benchmark for scholarship on the theology of both Chauncy and Mayhew.

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