Boston Congregationalist ministers Charles Chauncy (1705–1787) and Jonathan Mayhew (1720–1766) were significant political as well as religious leaders in colonial and revolutionary New England. Scholars have often stressed their influence on major shifts in New England theology, from traditional Calvinism to Arminianism and, ultimately, to universalism and Unitarianism. They have also portrayed Mayhew as an influential preacher, whose works helped shape American revolutionary ideology, and Chauncy as an active leader of the patriot cause.

Through a deeply contextualized re-examination of the two ministers as “men of their times,” John S. Oakes offers a fresh, comparative interpretation of how their religious and political views changed and interacted over decades. The result is a thoroughly revised reading of Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s most innovative ideas. Conservative Revolutionaries also unearth strongly traditionalist elements in their belief systems, centering on their shared commitment to a dissenting worldview based on the ideals of their Protestant New England and British heritage.

Oakes concludes with a provocative exploration of how the shifting theological and political positions of these two “conservative revolutionaries” may have helped redefine prevailing notions of human identity, capability, and destiny.

John S. Oakes is an adjunct professor in the department of history at Simon Fraser University. He recently held a Postdoctoral Fellowship at Harvard Divinity School and a Visiting Fellowship at Yale Divinity School. He has also taught courses in church history and spiritual theology at Regent College, Vancouver. He was educated at Oxford University (MA), Regent College (MDiv and MCS), the University of British Columbia (MA), and Simon Fraser University, where he earned his PhD in history.

318 PP. | $37 | PAPER

Orders: Contact your favorite bookseller or order directly from the publisher via phone (541) 344-1528, fax (541) 344-1506 or e-mail us at orders@wipfandstock.com

Contact: James Stock
(541) 344-1528, ext 103 or James@wipfandstock.com

Media, Examination, and Review Copies:
Contact: James Stock
(541) 344-1528, ext 103 or James@wipfandstock.com
Conservative Revolutionaries
Conservative Revolutionaries

Transformation and Tradition in the Religious and Political Thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew

John S. Oakes

FOREWORD BY
David D. Hall

PICKWICK Publications • Eugene, Oregon
CONSERVATIVE REVOLUTIONARIES
Transformation and Tradition in the Religious and Political Thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew

Copyright © 2016 John S. Oakes. All rights reserved. Except for brief quotations in critical publications or reviews, no part of this book may be reproduced in any manner without prior written permission from the publisher. Write: Permissions, Wipf and Stock Publishers, 199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3, Eugene, OR 97401.

Pickwick Publications
An Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W. 8th Ave., Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

www.wipfandstock.com

EBOOK ISBN: 978-1-5326-0217-7

Cataloging-in-Publication data:

Names: Oakes, John S. | Hall, David D., foreword.
Title: Conservative revolutionaries: transformation and tradition in the religious and political thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew / John S. Oakes.
Description: Eugene, OR : Pickwick Publications, 2016 | Includes bibliographical references and index(es).

Manufactured in the U.S.A. 10/17/16
For my family, who have given so much to make it possible for me to pursue my research, and especially, with love and gratitude,

for Kirsten, Nathalie, and Stephanie
“Now is the Time, when we are particularly called to stand up for the good old Way, and bear faithful Testimony against every Thing, that may tend to cast a Blemish on true primitive Christianity.”

CHARLES CHAUNCY (1743)

“Having, earlier still learnt from the holy scriptures, that wise, brave and vertuous men were always friends to liberty . . . that the Son of God came down from heaven, to make us ‘free indeed’; and that ‘where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty’; this made me conclude, that freedom was a great blessing.”

JONATHAN MAYHEW (1766)
Contents

List of Illustrations | viii
Foreword by David D. Hall | ix
Acknowledgments | xiii
Introduction | 1

Part 1—Transformation and Tradition
1. Earlier Lives | 15
2. Reshaping the Calvinist Heritage: The Shift to Arminianism | 38
3. Challenging the Boundaries of Orthodoxy: Unitarianism and Universalism | 72
4. Maintaining Tradition: Consistent Puritan Themes | 110

Part 2—Conservative Revolutionaries
5. Engaging the Public Square: Ministers in Politics | 145
6. Fighting the Cause: Languages of Liberty | 185
7. Resolving the Big Issue: Submission or Revolution | 210
8. Mayhew, Chauncy, and Revolutionary Change | 238

Bibliography | 257
Index | 287
Illustrations

Charles Chauncy (1705–1787), by MacKay | 14
Reproduced by permission of Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum, Harvard University Portrait Collection, H5 (Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College)

Jonathan Mayhew (1720–1766), by John Greenwood | 144
Published courtesy of the Congregational Library, Boston, Massachusetts
Introduction

When Charles Chauncy (1705–1787) wrote to his friend and fellow-minister Ezra Stiles on May 23, 1768, his main purpose was to enclose a brief and largely encomiastic memoir of his great-grandfather. This renowned English Puritan, also Charles Chauncy, had fled persecution to settle in New England in 1638, and had gone on to achieve prominence as the second President of Harvard College from 1654 until his death. Keenly aware of his status as the eldest son of the eldest son of the eldest son of his namesake, the minister of Boston’s prestigious First Church informed Stiles that some forty years previously he had taken “considerable pains” to exercise a right of primogeniture and to locate the papers of his illustrious ancestor. Chauncy’s efforts had been frustrated when he discovered from one of the president’s grand-nephews that his great-grandfather’s literary remains had met a tragic end. Because none of his sons had reached the age of maturity, the senior Chauncy’s widow had reportedly remained in possession of his papers and she had subsequently married a pie-maker. “Behold now the fate of all the good President’s writings of every kind!” his great-grandson told Stiles. “They were put to the bottom of the pies, and in this way brought to utter destruction.”

But the news of that loss did not lead Chauncy to formulate plans for the preservation of his own personal archives. On the contrary:

1. Chauncy, “Life of the Rev. President Chauncy,” 179. Stiles, who was eventually to become President of Yale, was then pastor of the Second Congregationalist Church in Newport, Rhode Island. For a detailed biography, see Morgan, Gentle Puritan. Except for occasional stylistic modernizations, including the capitalization of book titles, which has been standardized, primary sources are cited almost entirely unedited. Because of the sheer quantity of Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s writings over a fifty-four-year period, their publication dates are often cited. Biographical references are given only for a limited number of prominent figures. Readers are otherwise referred to Weis, Colonial Clergy; SHG; ANB Online; ODNB Online.
I was greatly moved to hear this account of them [his great-grandfather's papers]; and it has rivetted in my mind a determination to order all my papers, upon my decease, to be burnt, excepting such as I might mention by name for deliverance from the catastrophe; though I have not as yet excepted any, nor do I know I shall.

Judging from what remains of Chauncy’s prodigious output, he was apparently true to this rather mysterious commitment. Except for a limited number of scattered papers, scholars have been left to grapple with more than fifty published works and what they have made of this collection has varied widely. Although his publications were much fewer and his unpublished papers more extensive, the same could be said of Chauncy’s colleague at Boston’s West Church, Jonathan Mayhew (1720–1766). J. Patrick Mullins (2005) has bemoaned Mayhew’s “unwarranted obscurity” and academic “neglect . . . in general.” Yet Chauncy and Mayhew have consistently, if sporadically, attracted scholarly attention and John Corrigan (1987) has helpfully outlined three major “schools of interpretation” of their life and work.\(^2\)

The first interpretative paradigm has largely concentrated on one or both of the pastors’ political writings, arguing that “certain sermons” were “major contributions toward the formation of the rhetoric of the American Revolution.” The second, first advanced by Alan Heimert (1966), has mainly seen Chauncy and Mayhew as social reactionaries, who were ultimately “more interested in preserving the status quo than in fomenting rebellion.” The third has primarily focused on their theological ideas, generally viewing the eighteenth-century ministers as “leaders in the move toward ‘rational religion’ in America.” Corrigan’s three “schools” can also usefully be supplemented, and to some extent qualified, by a fourth, which is really a combination of the first and third. Thus many scholars have stressed both Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s political activism and religious heretodoxy.

\(^2\) Chauncy, “Life of the Rev. President Chauncy,” 179; Mullins, “Father of Liberty,” 3, 4; Corrigan, Hidden Balance, x, 126; Akers, Called unto Liberty; Griffin, Old Brick; Lippy, Seasonable Revolutionary. Corrigan cited, in chronological order, among contributors to his first “school of interpretation”: Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution; Moore, Patriot Preachers; Van Tyne, “Influence of the Clergy”; Baldwin, New England Clergy; Savelle, Seeds of Liberty; Bailyn, Ideological Origins; “Religion and Revolution.” In addition to Heimert, Religion and the American Mind, Corrigan cited Miller, “Religion, Finance, and Democracy”; Wright, Unitarianism in America and Jones, Shattered Synthesis as representative of his second “school of interpretation” of Chauncy and Mayhew. Among representatives of the third, he listed: Bradford, Memoir; Allen and Eddy, History of the Unitarians; Cooke, Unitarianism In America; Haroutunian, Piety Versus Moralism; Morais, Deism; Akers, Called unto Liberty; Griffin, Old Brick. For a much more detailed account of the relevant historiography as of 2008, see Oakes, “Conservative Revolutionaries,” 115–26, 221–34.
including a few who have highlighted the ministers’ inherent social, even
sociopolitical traditionalism.3

Most of the scholarship on Chauncy and Mayhew has been in the form
of academic articles or summaries in larger works. Despite their obvious
importance, they have been the subjects of just three modern biographies,
all of which focused on familiar themes in developing traditional narra-
tive accounts of their lives. Charles Akers’s overall portrayal of Mayhew in
Called unto Liberty (1964) was that of a thorough-going subversive. While
continuing to emphasize his theological heterodoxy and political Whiggery,
the two major biographers of Chauncy, Edward Griffin (1980) and Charles
Lippy (1981), also sought to foreground more conventional motivations,
if not content, in his works. Only Corrigan addressed the two Boston pas-
tors concurrently in a significant monograph, which adopted a somewhat
broader perspective.4

In doctrinal terms, Akers characterized Mayhew as one who “brazenly
proclaimed his abandonment of Puritan theology in favor of a ‘pure and un-
defiled’ version of Christianity” and a rational “gospel of the Enlightenment.”

3. In addition to Akers, Called unto Liberty, recent scholars to offer interpreta-
tions of Mayhew as both theological innovator and political militant have included, in
chronological order: Stout, New England Soul, 240–44, 262–63, 268; Clark, Language
of Liberty, 336, 366–68; Noll, America’s God, 79–80, 138–49; Byrd, Sacred Scripture,
29–30, 123–26, 140–41. As well as by Griffin, Old Brick and Lippy, Seasonable Revo-
lutionary, which Corrigan, Hidden Balance, x, 126–27, misleadingly categorized pri-
marily in theological terms, Chauncy’s political activism has been latterly highlighted
by Noll, America’s God, 130–33. Jones, Shattered Synthesis, while occasionally noting
Mayhew’s social traditionalism, e.g., 151, 162–63, as Corrigan, Hidden Balance, x,
suggested, was primarily concerned with the development of Mayhew’s theological
heterodoxy, rather than with his sociopolitical ideas. Noll also addressed Chauncy’s
“theological liberalism,” but acknowledged his “self-conscious reliance on British
authorities and . . . marriage to the ideal of a stratified, elite-dominated, mercantile
Boston” (America’s God, 138–43, esp. 143). Other significant recent works to focus on
Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s theology include: Gibbs and Gibbs, “Charles Chauncy” and
“In Our Nature”; Holifield, Theology in America, 131–35. Among studies with a more
political focus, especially on Mayhew, are: Beneke, “The Critical Turn”; Mullins, “A
Kind of War”; Lubert, “Jonathan Mayhew.”

4. Akers, Called unto Liberty; Griffin, Old Brick; Lippy, Seasonable Revolutionary;
Corrigan, Hidden Balance. In 2017, the University Press of Kansas is scheduled to pub-
lish a new work by Mullins, Father of Liberty: Jonathan Mayhew and the Principles of
the American Revolution. According to the author, this will argue that “through the
popularization of Real Whig ‘revolution principles’ within New England’s political cul-
ture from 1749 to 1766, Mayhew did more than any other individual to prepare New
Englanders intellectually for resistance to British authority. Though little remembered
today, he was the most politically influential clergyman of colonial British America
and a seminal thinker in the intellectual origins of the American Revolution” (Mullins,
“Research”). Because of lack of access to this new work, it has unfortunately not been
possible to incorporate or address Mullins’s findings here.
He highlighted the anti-Trinitarian views expressed by Mayhew from the mid-1750s. Akers also argued that historians of Unitarianism had been “right in hailing [the Arminian] Mayhew as a pioneer of their movement,” although “wrong in confusing his theology with their own.” Echoing the judgments of “the Revolutionary generation,” Akers characterized Mayhew’s political views as equally militant. Mayhew was not only “the boldest and most articulate of those colonial preachers who taught that resistance to tyrannical rulers was a Christian duty as well as a human right.” He “remained the first commander of the ‘black Regiment’ of Congregational preachers who incessantly sounded ‘the yell of rebellion in the ears of an ignorant and deluded people.’”

By contrast, Griffin sought to portray Chauncy in more nuanced terms in Old Brick. This was “a Representative Man” in eighteenth-century America—a “supernatural rationalist” who occupied “the middle ground” between “[Jonathan] Edwards’s evangelicalism and [Benjamin] Franklin’s Deism.” Because Chauncy “considered himself simply a good Congregationalist, true to his own heritage of dissent and free enquiry,” Griffin also highlighted themes of continuity, despite the major changes in his theology that were evident from the 1750s. However innovative the results, Griffin argued, as Chauncy reworked his doctrinal understandings of “the nature of God, the creation and destiny of humans, original sin, salvation, ethics, eschatology, and ecclesiology,” the Boston minister was attempting “to reconstruct New England theology by applying to his basic Puritan principles the lessons he had learned from the [Great] Awakening.” Griffin found similarly traditional influences at work in some of Chauncy’s political views and activities. But he ultimately characterized his subject as a willing and active revolutionary, who became “politically radicalized” in the 1770s and was recognized “by the people of Boston as a pugnacious champion of political liberty.” Chauncy endorsed rebellion against British rule, Griffin contended, and he “had a part in most of the important crises that jolted New England from 1771 to 1775.”

5. Akers, Called unto Liberty, 2, 115–22, 227, 232, citing Oliver, Origin and Progress, 29. The much older biography of Mayhew by Bradford, Memoir, is a rambling chronicle which contains little by way of original analysis or insight, but some otherwise unpublished source materials. Cf. Griffin, “A Biography,” on which his published biography was based.

6. Griffin, Old Brick, 8, 4, 110, 144, 151. Rossiter also emphasized both Mayhew’s and Chauncy’s “Christian rationalism” as “sons of latitudinarian Harvard” and key representatives of one side of a split in “the apparent monolith of Puritanism” that took place in the aftermath of the Great Awakening (Seedtime of the Republic, 136). But Rossiter’s main focus was on the political arena, where he highlighted their role in promoting both Stamp Act and revolutionary resistance. Norman Gibbs was really the first to
According to Lippy in his intellectual biography, Chauncy was both a creative theological innovator and an inherent traditionalist, as well as the “seasonable revolutionary” that his title made clear. This was “first and foremost a traditional Puritan cleric” who was “propelled by a passion for order and a fear of disorder.” But Chauncy acted in ways that were “seasonable” by adopting “a line of thinking or a course of action . . . particularly appropriate to a given situation.” Even in the comprehensive reformulations of theological doctrine that he released toward the end of his life, Lippy thus discerned an essentially “conservative passion to preserve the essential structures and categories of Puritan religious thought.” As he shifted the very “cornerstone . . . from a theocentric anthropology to an anthropocentric theology,” Chauncy “had not intended to undercut the heart of orthodox theology, although that was the effect of his works. As far as he was concerned,” Lippy contended, “he was . . . preserving what he saw as vital to the New England Way by providing a rational and logical defense of present practice and experience.” Similar concerns were apparent politically during the 1760s, when Chauncy’s “opposition to the Stamp Act represented an effort to maintain intact the structures of political authority which he believed had been operative prior to its passage.” Even during the revolutionary period, Chauncy was not driven by any creative vision of a newly independent nation, but by concerns for “the transmission of those social and political patterns which he perceived as integral to a developing American identity and self-awareness.” In that sense, “Chauncy’s reluctant, but relentless, advocacy of the patriot cause” from 1774 onwards was based on his pursuit of “what he saw as a lost ideal—the ideal of human liberty.”

Corrigan’s comparative study of the broad outlines of Mayhew’s and Chauncy’s Enlightenment worldview was much more general in focus. In
Hidden Balance (1987), he sought to show how his two subjects countered “tensions” in religion, government, and society by presenting “an understanding of the cosmos” that was “based on two key principles: wholeness and balance.” This was rooted in the conceptions of the “Moderate Enlightenment,” of which Chauncy and Mayhew were key figures. Their views could be seen as constituting “one of the very few examples among eighteenth-century American writers of the attempt to integrate ideas in all of these areas into a coherent [Geertzian] ideology, a symbolic map of reality.” Even Chauncy’s later theological heterodoxy could be understood in terms of his quest for “balance,” Corrigan contended. Although “ideas contained in these [later] treatises were a departure from previous Puritan theology,” they should be seen “not as amendments to or a revision of Chauncy’s theology in the 1740s to 1760s but rather as an integral part of his thinking in those years, as a balance or complement to more conservative arguments in his published work.” The First Church minister’s theories of government and society were influenced by similar considerations. Thus “‘mutual dependency’ was the key to [his] vision of government,” which “could require deference to superiors, but . . . must balance this with respect for the good of society as a whole, and the recognition of individual liberties and property.”8

Notwithstanding Corrigan’s bold attempt at synthesis, differing interpretations of Mayhew and Chauncy in the works of Akers, Griffin, Lippy and other scholars thus continue to raise major questions. The first and most obvious concerns the extent to which either can be identified as truly heterodox in his theology. If both ministers embraced Arminianism, how far did they travel beyond that point? Were they really Arian and/or Unitarian, as some have claimed, or both, and if so, how? Did they personally pioneer the Unitarian universalism that eventually became such an important feature of nineteenth-century Congregationalism, or pave the way for it? Secondly, and quite closely related to the issue of their overall heterodoxy, what were their major influences? How much did their religious views reflect the Enlightenment rationalism and moralism to which they were exposed? Whatever their final positions, did their theology continue to be shaped by more traditionalist factors in their Puritan New England heritage? More specifically, to what extent did Chauncy’s avowed universalism of the 1780s, for example, or Mayhew’s critical questioning of the doctrine of the Trinity in the 1750s and 1760s represent radical disjunctions from their earlier views? Last but not least, what, if any, were the most significant connections between Mayhew’s and Chauncy’s theological positions and

their politics? Did their revolutionary sentiments and attitudes, such as they were, flow from theological or political willingness to break with the status quo, or from other influences, and how did they connect with their socio-political views in general? This is the first work to compare and contrast the thought of Chauncy and Mayhew in sufficient detail to allow a thorough re-examination of such issues.

The value of a comparative study of Chauncy and Mayhew, which focuses on their religious and political thought, goes well beyond the fact that they have often been linked by other scholars, most notably by Corrigan. Although Chauncy was fifteen years older and lived twenty-one years longer than Mayhew, the two Boston ministers were friends and colleagues for more than two decades during a crucial period, from the mid-1740s through the mid-1760s, when New England’s established structures faced major challenges in both church and state. Theologically, the fresh currents of more rationalist thought that were eventually to contribute to quite a widespread reorientation away from traditional Congregationalist Calvinism towards universalism and Unitarianism were already raising serious questions and beginning to make serious intellectual inroads among the ministerial elite. Politically, the social disruptions arising from mid-eighteenth-century economic and demographic change, as well as from the centrifugal force of religious revivalism, increasingly threatened existing hierarchies. From the 1760s onward, resulting tensions were considerably aggravated by the renewed efforts of British colonial authorities to assert stronger fiscal and governmental control over the American colonies and by

9. More recent scholarship on Chauncy and Mayhew will be reviewed in greater depth, where appropriate, in subsequent chapters. Both ministers have been linked with the major historical debate over the nature of New England Congregationalist political militance and causal connections between religious thought and activism and the origins of the American Revolution. Except briefly in the concluding chapter, that debate will not feature in this study. For a helpful overview of the massive historiography of religion and the American Revolution, see esp. Wood, “Religion and the American Revolution.” See, further, and more recently, Oakes, “Conservative Revolutionaries,” 2–30. Yenter and Vailati defined an “Arian” Christology, together with related “Socinian” and “Sabellian” positions, in the following terms: “Although they were commonly used as abusive terms for anyone holding non-traditional or anti-trinitarian views, they also have more precise meanings. An Arian holds that the Son (the second person of the Trinity) is divine but not eternal; he was created by God the Father out of nothing before the beginning of the world. A Socinian holds that the Son is merely human and was created at or after the conception of Jesus. A Sabellian holds that the Son is a mode of God” (“Samuel Clarke (Revised)). “Rationalism” is defined in general terms throughout this study. As in OED Online, a “rationalist” is understood as “one who emphasizes the role of reason in knowledge,” including theological knowledge. “Moralism” is defined, again following OED Online, as a “preoccupation with moral teaching or morality” that can result in “religion . . . reduced to moral practice.”
growing colonial attempts, fueled by Whig ideologies of resistance, to resist metropolitan interference. As ministers of two of Boston's more prominent and wealthier churches, whose congregations included influential local leaders, Chauncy and Mayhew found themselves right at the heart of such tumultuous developments. They emerged as leading thinkers and actors in different movements for religious and political change, and although their responses sometimes varied, they engaged very similar issues. They both addressed the theological challenges of Arminianism, for example, which they embraced, and of Unitarian and universalist ideas, over which they differed. They also grappled, over different time-frames, with some of the most crucial political questions of their era—not least, the right of resistance against unjust rulers, the continuing validity of traditional social structures, and the role of New England in protecting a heritage, which they both valued, of Protestant, British constitutional liberties.

This book not only makes sense strategically, therefore. It facilitates direct engagement with important issues in the religious and political history of eighteenth-century colonial and revolutionary America. In addressing them through the thought and lived experience of two such influential Boston ministers, Conservative Revolutionaries also engages two other key problems connected with histories of intellectual change, which are germane, although by no means identical. The first arguably has as much to do with an oft-critiqued "Whig" interpretation of history which has fostered and facilitated it, as with its main gravamen, which concerns polarizing and potentially misleading historical labeling. The second relates to the challenge of attempting to account for how and why individuals shift positions on key issues without assuming a "narrative of progress" that impedes proper contextualization of various gradations in their thinking.10

In a recent study of reforming and "democratizing" elements in seventeenth-century New England Puritanism, Harvard historian David Hall (2011) helpfully highlighted the general dangers in such a context of

10. On the "Whig" interpretation of history, see esp. the useful summary critique by Cronon, “Two Cheers.” For the original source, see Butterfield, who described it as "the tendency in many historians to write on the side of Protestants and Whigs, to praise revolutions provided they have been successful, to emphasise certain principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the ratification if not the glorification of the present" (Whig Interpretation, v). As Cronon noted, "Butterfield's chief concern was with oversimplified narratives—he called them 'abridgements'—that achieve drama and apparent moral clarity by interpreting past events in light of present politics. Thanks in part to Butterfield, we now recognize such narratives as teleological, and we rightly suspect them of doing violence to the past by understanding and judging it with reference to anachronistic values in the present, however dear those values may be to our own hearts" (“Two Cheers”).
“substituting modern usage” of political terminology for more historically authentic “nuances of meaning and practice.” In so doing, Hall credited earlier British scholars for showing particular sensitivity to the issue. A striking example of immediate relevance to this study is Jonathan Clark (2000), who rejected usage of terms like “liberalism, radicalism and conservativism” in a pre-nineteenth century English political setting, because, he argued, they were not used to denote anything approaching their modern meanings until the 1820s or 1830s and were, therefore, anachronisms. In light of the persuasive analysis of Hall, Clark and others, an obvious problem with major scholarship on Chauncy and Mayhew is that usage of such terms has been quite widespread. Moreover, inasmuch as their theological journeys have often been portrayed as progressing out of retrograde and irrational positions into more enlightened and reasonable ones, the frequent use of labels like “conservative” and “liberal” has only served to entrench an unbalanced, teleological, “Whig” history of their religious thought which does little justice to the complexities of its immediate contexts. Similar issues emerge in the political arena, where the frequently applied category “radical,” for example, which has often, like “liberal” in theological terms, been counterpoised against a “conservative” labeling of more traditionalist positions, has sometimes led to virtual caricatures of the two ministers as either extremist firebrands or social reactionaries, but little in between.11

Despite its deliberately provocative title, Conservative Revolutionaries will seek to avoid such simplistic labels and offer a more nuanced account of Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s intellectual histories, both religious and political. It will do so by highlighting areas of continuity, as well as discontinuity over time. In exploring Mayhew’s and Chauncy’s theological development in Part 1, it will show how they were pioneers of transformation, while remaining, to a hitherto neglected degree, pillars of tradition. Part 2 will then consider how their political and even revolutionary ideas reflected similar trends and tensions. An important theme throughout will be the much discussed, but not always well understood, topics of how religion interacted with “Enlightenment” and related philosophical influences, including political Whiggery, in eighteenth-century New England. Because it focuses so single-mindedly on the intellectual journeys of two individuals, Conservative Revolutionaries will address these subjects en passant in the course of the first seven chapters. This work makes no claim to offer definitive “case studies”; nor does it assume any inherent narrative of progress. But it does serve to highlight some of the resulting complexities when two intellectual leaders sought to

11. Hall, A Reforming People, 14–16, esp. 16, citing, among key British historians, Condren, Language of Politics and Hurstfield, Freedom, Corruption and Government; Clark, English Society, 6–9, esp. 6.
reconcile the demands of faith and reason, as they understood them, in turbulent times. Some of the wider implications of their conclusions will then be considered in the final chapter.12

Four major findings emerge from Conservative Revolutionaries. The first is that Chauncy and Mayhew were more traditionalist figures than scholars have often portrayed, even when they have sought to identify ongoing connections with Puritan tradition. There is clear evidence that both subscribed to New England orthodoxy in their earliest years and that Chauncy did so publicly until the mid-1760s. However much their ideas changed over time and however innovative they eventually became, the two ministers also continued to share a dissenting worldview that was marked not only by such traditionalist theological distinctives, but by striking commitments to the defence of Congregationalist polity in face of the perceived threats of Catholicism and expansionist Anglicanism, and to a vision of New England that retained what they saw as the best of their Protestant and British heritage. To some extent, Chauncy and Mayhew were clearly figures of Henry May's "moderate [American] Enlightenment"—increasingly influenced, in their religious and political positions, by recent theological and philosophical trends, including Anglican Latitudinarianism and Whig or "Real Whig" ideology. But they remained grounded in intellectual traditions that they shared with earlier figures. Their understandings of liberty, which were foundationally spiritual in origin, were significant to this weltanschauung. Even the ministers' more revolutionary ideas and inclinations, such as they were, were stimulated and informed by an overarching concern to preserve New England's "Protestant interest," with all that that had traditionally entailed. Although they have often been listed and sometimes hailed together as eighteenth-century New England pioneers of theological change, the second major conclusion is that there were important differences in their thought. Thus while both Chauncy and Mayhew moved from Calvinist to Arminian positions, Mayhew did so much earlier and more decisively. Although both traveled further into the realm of theological heterodoxy, Mayhew went beyond Arminianism to a "subordinationist" Christology that foreshadowed full-blown Unitarianism, while Chauncy's

12. *Contra* Clark, who has argued that the "Enlightenment"—a word which dates, in a "reified" descriptive sense, from the mid-nineteenth century—represents a "fiction of a unified project," which "can no longer be used as a reliable and agreed term of historical explanation," its usage is retained here. So is use of "radical" in an apolitical sense. The main reason, again quoting Clark, is that "Enlightenment" still represents a sufficiently helpful "shorthand signifier of an accepted body of authors and ideas" (*English Society*, 9). The term "enlightened" is also sometimes used to describe those influenced by Enlightenment ideas. Those authors and ideas will be identified in more specific contexts, as necessary.
radical universalism betrayed little sign of a parallel departure from orthodox Trinitarianism.13

Thirdly, Conservative Revolutionaries will conclude that such differences reflected not only the two ministers’ individual intellectual journeys at Harvard and elsewhere, but also their contrasting personalities, life circumstances, and professional situations at different Congregationalist churches. Secure in his position as sole pastor of Boston’s recently established West Church with its Arminian tradition, the younger, bolder and more combative Mayhew felt willing and able to declare the most heterodox of his views within just eight of the nineteen years of his relatively short-lived ministerial career. By contrast, the older and much more cautious Chauncy spent forty-two of his sixty-two years at First Church, not only in a prestigious position at a prominent congregation that was historically considered the *fons et origo* of New England orthodoxy, but with a senior colleague, whose favor he valued and whose Calvinism he long shared. Chauncy thus faced major personal and professional constraints in expressing the Arminian and universalist positions that he seems to have reached by 1760 and fully defined by 1768 at the latest. Although he declared his moderate Arminianism much earlier, it was not until the mid-1780s, by which time the elderly Chauncy was Boston’s longest-serving minister in a revolutionary milieu teeming with new ideas, that he finally felt able to release his four most radical works. Even then, he did so carefully.

Finally, as well as summarizing key arguments, chapter 8 will further explore the possible significance of Chauncy and Mayhew as contributors to New England intellectual and political development during a crucial period of colonial and revolutionary history. Locating the findings of this study within the broader framework of recent historiography of the Enlightenment and its connections with the evangelical movement in particular, the chapter will show how such contextualization strengthens a more authentic understanding of the two Boston ministers as men of their times, whose religious and political thought was shaped by multiple intellectual influences, traditionalist as well as contemporary. Such an approach not only avoids the false dichotomy that has previously distorted some previous scholarship—between their alleged “radicalism” on the one hand and their

13. For the “moderate [American] Enlightenment,” see May, *Enlightenment in America*, 1–101. The term “Protestant interest” is primarily drawn from Kidd, *Protestant Interest*. Mayhew, *Sermon Preached at Boston*, 29, also used the expression himself. “New England orthodoxy”—or elsewhere, “Calvinist,” “Puritan,” or “reformed” orthodoxy—is here defined in terms of the key doctrines that were central to the belief-system of Calvinist Congregationalists for more than one hundred years after their first settlement in New England.
“conservativism” on the other—it negates Whiggish historical interpretations of Mayhew and Chauncy as progressive, transitional figures on the inevitable march of progress from the dark ages of American Puritanism to intellectual enlightenment, religious liberalism and political revolution. At the same time, because their thought clearly does raise broader issues about changing ideas of personal and communal autonomy and potential under God in a significant period of change, both theologically and politically, chapter 8 will include some suggestive, but inevitably inconclusive exploration of questions surrounding their wider influence.
PART 1

Transformation and Tradition
On June 2, 1748, Jonathan Mayhew began a series of seven Thursday lectures at West Church. By the time they ended on August 25, they had established him as one of the leading critics of the Calvinist orthodoxy of his day. Just under a year after a controversial ordination on June 17, 1747, Mayhew had already been effectively ostracized by most fellow Boston clergy. According to a letter to his father of October 1, 1747, he could rarely get preaching assistance although “The People of my Parish seem to be well united—none having left us since my ordination. As to the Ministers of the Town, I have no correspondence save with one or two of them.” The practical implications were considerable. Not only was Mayhew’s workload increased because he could not participate in the usual round of pulpit exchanges, he was excluded from a Boston clergy association and from participation in the town’s regular Thursday Lecture. In his 1766 “Memoir of Dr. Jonathan Mayhew,” prominent parishioner and Massachusetts official Harrison Gray reported that the Boston clergy generally “treated him with great coolness and indifference for some Time,” and that neither the First nor Brattle Street churches subsequently “invited him to preach,” despite his strong connections with Chauncy at First. The ever-confident and energetic Mayhew assured his father that “thro’ God’s Goodness to me, I live very happily and contented” without such collegial support. He compensated for his lack of opportunities elsewhere by starting his own lecture series.¹

Gray may have somewhat exaggerated the immediate popularity of Mayhew’s presentations when he reported that they were “attended by Gentlemen of the first Character in Town and Country: And by the generality of the Clergy of the Town of Boston and of the Neighbouring Towns. His Audience was always crowded.” The West Church member’s subsequent

¹ Mayhew to Experience Mayhew, October 1, 1747, MP 23; Gray, “Memoir of Dr. Jonathan Mayhew,” 33, an edited reprint of MP 137, which includes a brief biography of Gray.
judgment that Mayhew's sermons "upon these occasions gave universal satisfaction" was certainly misleading. Mayhew's Seven Sermons were soon published in Boston (1749) and an edition was released in London in 1750. They went on to attract such acclaim overseas that they were instrumental, if not decisive, in the decision by the University of Aberdeen to award Mayhew an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree the same year. But the response in more orthodox Bostonian circles was much cooler. Akers noted that "with the exception of Chauncy and [Samuel] Cooper [of Brattle Street Church] and later Andrew Eliot [of New North], the Boston clergy treated him with a cold, stony silence." More populist reaction to Mayhew's ministry was much more forthright. An anonymous letter addressed to "The Rev. Mr. J——n M——w," which was published in the Boston Evening-Post of April 17, 1749 under the sobriquet "Philanthropos," entreated him rather disingenuously

```
  to pursue your Design with Modesty, sound Sense and good
  Reasoning; the two last I'm convinc'd by the Share I have heard
  of your Sermons you will not be much at a Loss for, and the first
  you might attain by a good deal of Self-denial, and a little Attention
  to the Conduct of your Superiors in like Cases.2
```

What was Mayhew's main offense in his West Church lectures and elsewhere? According to "Philanthropos" and others who were less polemical in their criticisms, he had "lately assum'd the Dictator's Chair, and taken upon you to impeach of Weakness and Impie-[ty] the . . . religious Principles of your Country, and seem to think they stand in great need of Correction and Reformation, and that you are bound by virtue of your Office, and by your superiour Abilities qualified to undertake that Province." Mayhew had principally challenged Massachusetts orthodoxy in Seven Sermons by openly espousing Arminian teaching. This included an explicit denial of the classic reformed doctrine of the total depravity of humankind, as well as open advocacy of a more cooperative understanding of salvation, which required active human participation, rather than depending solely on sovereign and irresistible divine grace.3

2. Gray, "Memoir of Dr. Jonathan Mayhew," 34; Mayhew, Seven Sermons; Akers, Called unto Liberty, 75; Philanthropos, "To the Reverend Mr. J——n M——w," 1. As Akers has argued, the award of such an honorary degree from a Scottish university generally depended on the recommendations and financial contributions of interested friends—in Mayhew's case, "a circle of [British] Dissenters" who were impressed by Seven Sermons, some of whose correspondence on this topic is to be found in MP 25–30 (Called unto Liberty, 77). On Eliot, see esp. Oakes, "Conservative Revolutionaries," 163–206.

The West Church minister was just twenty-six years old when he delivered his controversial Thursday lectures and began to establish his longstanding historical reputation as one of New England’s most prominent and outspoken Arminians. But historians have often neglected to point out that he did not always hold such views. Both he and Chauncy have been so strongly identified in progressive theological terms that they have tended to become divorced, even in the most recent scholarship, from the traditionalist doctrines of their earliest years, which continued to shape elements of their thinking long after they had formally renounced the rigors of conventional Calvinism. But there is strong evidence that both were not only nurtured in New England orthodoxy, as might have been expected. Chauncy publicly maintained its major tenets for nearly four decades after his entry into ordained ministry in 1727. It was only in the course of the Great Awakening that the Boston ministers distanced themselves from more “enthusiastic” tendencies to adopt a more rationalist outlook, and it was not until the late 1740s and the publication of Mayhew’s controversial lectures that either could be clearly identified with Arminianism.

Mayhew’s Early Calvinism

Mayhew’s Calvinist heritage has been well documented, although the lack of historical detail about his education is one of the most striking features of his early biography. Born at Chilmark, Martha's Vineyard, on October 8, 1720, he was the seventh child of Experience Mayhew by his second wife, Remember Bourne. Experience was the great-grandson of the early settler Thomas Mayhew, who had ruled the Vineyard as “Lord of the Manor,” as well as acting as missionary to the local indigenous population for some forty years. Soon after his father’s death in 1689, Experience assumed control of the mission that was to be his life’s work for the next sixty-five years. Although lacking any university education, he became a pioneer linguist and translator, as well as a published author and prominent missionary, who enjoyed the support of leading figures in the Boston Congregationalist establishment, through the Company for the Propagation of the Gospel in New England and other connections. In 1726 Experience sent Jonathan’s older brother Nathan to school in Cambridge to prepare him for admission

Edwards, 138, defined Arminianism in the following general terms: “For Edwards and his ministerial friends, ‘Arminianism’ usually referred both to the specific anti-Calvinist teachings attributed to Arminius and to broader trends to affirm the ability of humans to contribute to their own salvation.” For a more detailed discussion and definition of eighteenth-century New England Arminianism, see chapter 2.
to Harvard. But there is no evidence that Jonathan enjoyed such an educa-
tional opportunity there or anywhere else, prior to his arrival at the college
at the relatively advanced age of nearly twenty in 1740. All that can be safely
assumed is that he had the benefit of his father’s instruction and personal
library, such as they were. What is known of Experience’s theological posi-
tion is that it was generally orthodox, albeit somewhat idiosyncratically and
critically so.4

Contra Clinton Rossiter’s exaggerated claim that Mayhew Sr. imparted
to his son “a profound mistrust of religious and political Calvinism,” Ex-
perience’s writings indicate that his theology was consistent with Puritan
tradition until the 1740s, by which time Jonathan was already at Harvard.
His late departures from New England orthodoxy were significant, although
they centered on a couple of fine points of doctrine, which he addressed in
Grace Defended (1744), one of the two longest, if not the bestselling, of his
six published works. Experience had been asking questions for some time
and he had been engaged in an ongoing dispute in 1743–4 with Jonathan
Dickinson, the future President of Princeton, over the narrow definition
of human liberty in Dickinson’s Calvinist treatise, True Scripture-Doctrine
(1741). But the main purpose of Grace Defended was not to overturn re-
formed theology. It was “to remove some Things out of the Way,” which
Experience thought might “be dismissed from their Hypothesis, being no
Ways necessary in order to the Support of the principle Articles in that [Cal-
vinist] scheme,” which he generally upheld.5

The major points on which he insisted were “that the Offer of Salvation
made to Sinners in the Gospel, does comprise in it an Offer, or conditional
Promise, of the Grace given in Regeneration” and that this “conditional

4. On Mayhew’s family background and early education and upbringing, see Ak-
ers, Called unto Liberty, 5–21. In addition to his published works, the major manuscript
sources are MP and Mayhew, Collection of Sermons.

5. Rossiter, “Life and Mind,” 533; Experience Mayhew, Grace Defended, iii; Dickinson,
True Scripture-Doctrine. See MP 17–19 for 1743–44 correspondence relating
to disagreements between Experience Mayhew and Dickinson. Experience’s other
published works included Discourse Shewing, which attracted attention because of his
account of Indian missions on Martha’s Vineyard; All Mankind; Letter to a Gentleman,
a response to a question raised by Grace Defended, and Right to the Lord’s Supper. His
most famous work, also related to Indian missions, was Indian Converts, reissued in
2008 as Experience Mayhew’s Indian Converts. While maintaining that Experience May-
hew “formally acknowledged the truth of the federalist view of man’s native predica-
ment,” Smith also drew attention to Mayhew Sr’s struggles with the traditional Calvinist
doctrine of total depravity, and especially to his opposition to “the idea that the best
actions of the unregenerate are sinful” (Changing Conceptions, 20–22, esp. 21). See, fur-
ther, Experience Mayhew’s Indian Converts, 1–76, esp. 1–16, where Liebman provides
some helpful theological and biographical information.
Offer” was just as real as that of “Pardon of Sin, Justification, &c.” Experience thus asserted that spiritual regeneration, although still a sovereign gift of grace, effectively followed the exercise of faith with repentance that led to Christian conversion, rather than coming prior to it in order to facilitate it. He was well aware that in expressing that view, as well as his parallel contention that people’s inability to come to faith, which resulted from human “Corruption, Ignorance, Temptations,” and bad habits, could be overcome by suitable Christian “Instructions, Exhortations, and convincing Arguments,” he was differing from “most that are in the Calvinian Scheme.” But Experience did not see the difference as fundamental. He continued to assert his general allegiance to the Westminster Shorter Catechism of 1647 and his agreement with “the Writings of Calvinists,” as opposed to “the Principles of those who embrace or incline to the Arminian Hypothesis.” Mayhew Sr. also took pains to insist that “for many Years,” he himself was “otherwise minded” on the main point of argument in Grace Defended, which he only published in his seventies.6

This supports the view that while Jonathan Mayhew may have been encouraged by his father’s questioning of received orthodoxy, he was not schooled in overtly anti-Calvinist doctrine or sentiment at his home on Martha’s Vineyard before he left for Harvard in 1740. The first clear indications of more decisive liberalizing influences emerge from what is known of his time at the college, but they are matched by parallel indications of a profound spiritual awakening during the Great Awakening. Samuel Eliot Morison somewhat minimized the extent of what he termed “Harvard liberalism of the eighteenth century,” arguing that “there was just enough notion of academic freedom to give Harvard a name among strict Calvinists.” But his concise history of developments during the presidencies of John Leverett (1708–1724) and Edward Holyoke (1737–1769) provides significant evidence of intellectual transformation.7

Norman Fiering’s analysis of the tutorial influence of Leverett and William Brattle in the late seventeenth century, when they helped shift the emphasis “in nearly every discipline” of Harvard’s curriculum away from its “Aristotelian-Scholastic inheritance,” adds to Morison’s account. Although Leverett may have made “no important changes” to the substance of what was taught as president, Fiering also stressed the less tangible, but no less significant impact on students of the more “catholic” attitudes that he shared with a “moderate group” on the Harvard Corporation and with

other influential figures, including long-serving tutor, Henry Flynt. The Latitudinarianism or "philosophical Anglicanism" of John Tillotson and like-minded Church of England clerics to which such leaders looked for "inspiration" may not have undermined their basic commitment to Calvinist doctrine, Fiering contended, but it left them more open-minded. It also facilitated "new forms of integration of reason and religion." The works of Latitudinarians thus joined those of Isaac Newton and John Locke in moving Harvard in more critically minded, rationally and empirically questioning directions. After Holyoke became president in 1737, the college administration became more systematically proactive, introducing so much modernization, especially in the teaching of the natural sciences and related subjects, according to Morison, that "the undergraduate course at the end of Holyoke's regime had little in common with that of Leverett's day."  

The Mayhew family's financial resources were stretched and experience had to secure government support before Jonathan could begin college in August 1740, shortly after being received into Communion at Chilmark Church. Placed eighth in his class in 1741, he was hardly a model student. Mayhew was fined for a number of disciplinary breaches and "degraded" for drinking just over a year into his Harvard studies. His financial needs remained pressing and his ultimate career plans undecided. In terms of Mayhew's intellectual development, what emerges from the earliest of his unpublished papers is that although he was still immersed in traditional Puritan sources that remained part of the Harvard curriculum of the early 1740s, it was the work of more critical thinkers, including Anglican Latitudinarians, that most interested him. An "Alphabetical List of Books" and a "Book of Extracts," both dating from 1741, show that alongside the writings of theological traditionalists like Cotton Mather, Mayhew possessed volumes by Enlightenment rationalists and natural scientists like the Church of England cleric William Wollaston. Among passages that the young Mayhew chose to write out in his commonplace book, extracts from a translation of Blaise Pascal's Pensées and from English clergyman Thomas Burnet's Sacred Theory of the Earth feature prominently. There is a suggestive citation from the works of Tillotson, together with other indications of what Akers described as Mayhew's "interest . . . in the popular 'physico-theology' of the day."  


9. On Mayhew's Harvard career and the financial arrangements that were made
Around the same time that Mayhew recorded such influences, however, other sources supply further evidence that the religious revival associated with the Great Awakening was making a similarly profound impression on him as on other Harvard contemporaries. It was soon after Mayhew’s arrival that itinerant English evangelist George Whitefield first enraptured the college, preaching to an estimated seven thousand people in Harvard Yard. His brief visit was followed to similar effect by that of the fiery Pennsylvania Presbyterian, Gilbert Tennent. The impact was apparently such that contemporary observers enthusiastically reported a spiritually transformed student body. "The College is a new Creature," wrote Benjamin Colman of Brattle Street Church rather breathlessly to Whitefield in the spring of 1741,

the Students full of God, and hope to come out Blessings in their Generations, and how to be so now to each other. Many of them are now we think truly born again, and several of them happy Instruments of Conversion to their Fellows. The Voice of Prayer and Praise fills their Chamber; and the Sincerity, Fervency, and Joy, the Seriousness of their Heart sits visibly on their Faces. I was told Yesterday that not Seven of a Hundred remain unaffected.

On June 8, 1741, Colman, who later became more critical of the Awakening, wrote with the news that "the overseers of our Colleges have appointed a Day of Prayer and Humiliation with thanksgiving, for the Effusion of the Spirit of God on the Students who are seriously disposed to attend; and are bright Examples to their Instructors." In his diary a few months earlier, Flynt commented on the general spiritual revival in his students and named Mayhew among a group of thirty who "prayed together, sung Psalms, and read good books." Two of Mayhew’s letters to his brother Zechariah from the same period indicate the deep impression that the Great Awakening initially made on him.10

---

10. Colman, "Extract of a Letter," undated, but clearly from 1741, 197–8, esp. 198; Colman to Whitefield [?], June 8, 1741, 202–3; Akers, Called unto Liberty, 30–32, esp. 32, citing Flynt, Diary.
On December 26, 1741, Mayhew described the revival as a powerful spiritual visitation. He also told how his recent delivery from illness had apparently resolved any questions about his future vocational direction. He would now pursue ordained ministry. "But what shall I render to the Lord for all his Benefits?" Mayhew asked. "He would write a Law of Gratitude on my Heart and encline me to devote my Spared Life, yea all the Powers and Faculties of my Soul, to his Service." Exactly three months later, Mayhew sent his brother a four-page account of a seventy-mile trip "to the Eastward," where he was "induced to go by an earnest Desire . . . to see and get a right Understanding of Affairs there with Respect to Religion." His conclusions were overwhelmingly positive. "The Spirit seems to set the Word home in a very extraordinary Manner," he noted, with remarkable effects, both physical and spiritual, on those who had previously paid little attention to religion. He described a deep conviction of sin and its consequences among those affected, especially "young Persons," followed by joyful release, conversion and commitment. "Nor is it strange that they should rejoice with Joy unspeakable and full of Glory," Mayhew commented,

when they are enabled to see the Sufficiency there is in Christ, and his Willingness to receive them, when they are enabled to set open the everlasting Doors of their Hearts for this King of Glory to enter, and when the Spirit witnesseth with their Spirits that they are the Children of God, when they see themselves rescued from Destruction . . . ; when they have a glimmering Prospect of those Mansions above, and some Prelibations and Foretastes of the Joys of the New Jerusalem.

Mayhew expected his letter to come "like good News from a far country and cold Water to a thirsty Soul" to his younger brother, as he read "of the Conquests and Triumphs of the Redeemer's Grace." He also took the opportunity to make a series of personal exhortations, urging Zechariah to be comforted and encouraged and to look forward to the afterlife. "Surely there are Joys in Religion which neither the Sensual & carnal World, nor the self righteous Pharisee know any Thing of," Mayhew wrote. So he exhorted Zechariah to "beware of Hypocrisy" and to join him in being "over jealous over ourselves & each other with a godly Jealousy."

Although he was far from unusual in doing so, one of the most interesting questions about Mayhew’s early years is how he moved from such positive views of the Great Awakening to aggressive criticism not only of its first leader, but eventually of what he came to decry as religious
“enthusiasm” generally. Sadly, there is no relevant personal testimony from the crucial five-year period before Mayhew wrote to his father in a very different tone on October 1, 1747. “As to Mr. Whitefield, when he was in Town,” he observed very dismissively after a visit to Copp’s Hill in Boston to hear Whitefield deliver a farewell sermon,

there were many Persons that attended his preaching; but chiefly of the meanest sort, excepting those that heard him from a Principle of Curiosity—I heard the last Sermon he preached, which was a very low, confused, puerile, conceited, ill-natur’d, enthusiastick, &c. Performance as ever I heard in my Life.

In seeking to explain such a dramatic change of mind, Akers cited the instrumentality of Mayhew’s father and the authorities of Harvard, where he remained in residence for another three years following his graduation in 1744. Initially hopeful that Martha’s Vineyard might also benefit from religious revivals, Experience was so provoked by reading Whitefield’s early autobiography of 1740 that he composed his own critical, albeit unpublished, “Letter to a Minister of the Gospel.” Meanwhile at Harvard, those who had so warmly welcomed the evangelist in 1740 had grown so cold in their opinions of him just four years later that the whole faculty endorsed a devastatingly critical document published as The Testimony of the President, Professors, Tutors and Hebrew Instructor of Harvard College in Cambridge, against the Reverend Mr. George Whitefield, and his Conduct.

To what extent Mayhew was actually moved by such influences remains unclear. Experience’s objections obviously did not hinder his son’s early enthusiasm for Whitefield. But it would seem reasonable to assume that Mayhew’s change of position on the Great Awakening was affected by the shift in opinion at Harvard and his aversion to the perceived excesses of revivals only seems to have grown.12

For example, in the first of two unpublished sermons on Matthew 3:8–9 on the theme of repentance written in December 1762, Mayhew had strong words for preachers in his “Remembrance” who had denied the converted status of life-long church members lacking testimony of a textbook evangelical conversion process. “The preachers of such doctrine as this,” he contended, who included both Whitefield and Tennent, “were the men that kept the whole country in an alarm for many months, if not years together,

12. Mayhew to Experience Mayhew, October 1, 1747, MP 23; Akers, Called unto Liberty, 35–39; Experience Mayhew, “A Letter to a Minister of the Gospel Containing Some Queries on Several Ministers in the Rev’d Mr. George Whitefield’s Account of his Own Life, Published in the Year 1740,” MP 8, critiquing Whitefield, Brief and General Account; Holyoke et al., Testimony.
coming in a sad succession one after another, like Messengers with evil tidings; which people yet, delighted to hear, even to distraction.” But what he found even more disconcerting was that

many persons of age & experience, and before accounted both good & wise, were the encouragers and upholders of such preachers; and not only taught the common people, by their own example, to run after and almost to adore them; but had strange ambition to ape them in all their follies, their crude & extravagant conceits—wonderful instruction indeed!

Unlike his teachers in the Harvard Testimony, whom Akers perhaps too readily identified among “regular lights’ who understood both the power and danger of revivalism,” Mayhew was not prepared to “presume to say, that some” of those preachers “did not mean well . . .; or that they might not, in particular cases, do some real good.” His main burden was to stress “the more direct tendency, and the far more common [negative] effects, of such irrational, and anti-scriptural preaching.”

Mayhew delivered this verdict at least fifteen years after he had originally changed his mind about the religious revival. In the summer of 1748, when the recently ordained West Church minister gave the Seven Sermons, there is clear evidence that his thinking, which now embraced elements of Arminian doctrine, had also changed significantly in other ways. But although his theological journey may have been relatively short in duration, there is no reason to believe that it was any less significant than the progression from Calvinism to Arminianism that was to take many years longer for his friend and colleague, Charles Chauncy.

Chauncy’s Defense of Tradition

Chauncy was born fifteen years before Mayhew, on January 1, 1705, and in rather more comfortable circumstances. His father Charles was a Boston merchant and his mother Sarah the daughter of Judge John Walley of the Massachusetts Supreme Court. Despite his father’s death when he was just six years old, a significant inheritance in 1712 seems to have enabled the family to continue their previous lifestyle. Chauncy apparently entered the Boston Public Latin School that same year in preparation for Harvard, where he matriculated in 1717. He graduated from college four years later

14. Mayhew, Seven Sermons.
and spent a further three years in residence, in the course of which he took his AM in 1724. Although Clifford Shipton and Griffin have unearthed various biographical details, little is known of Chauncy’s time at Harvard. But a clear personal influence to emerge from his student years was Edward Wigglesworth, who was installed as Hollis Professor of Divinity in 1722. Chauncy would later cite one of Wigglesworth’s works, a 1724 defense of Congregationalist polity against the claims of the Anglican John Checkley, in two of his own writings. Wigglesworth also featured prominently among eminent New Englanders whom Chauncy commended to Stiles in 1768, and in very glowing terms.15

How much Wigglesworth’s independent, but irenic, spirit of mind had already shaped Chauncy’s thought by the time he entered ordained ministry in 1727 remains unclear. But despite competition for the prestigious position, his progress from Harvard to assistant minister of Boston’s traditionalist First Church under Thomas Foxcroft was relatively smooth. According to the church’s records for June 12, 1727, Chauncy was selected to assist Foxcroft by a congregational vote of sixty-four to forty-three over his nearest rival, his acceptance was announced publicly a couple of months later, and he was officially ordained on October 25 of that year. As he steadily established himself at First Church, Chauncy engaged in a four-year period of private study in the 1730s that would eventually lead to his extensive publications on episcopacy. But he remained relatively free from the public controversy that was to be such a feature of his later ministerial career. In 1728 he married the well-connected Elizabeth Hirst, granddaughter of Judge Samuel Sewall, and they began to build a family before her premature

15. Griffin, Old Brick, 13–23; Wigglesworth, Sober Remarks, was a response to Checkley, Modest Proof. Chauncy cited it in Validity of Presbyterian Ordination, 45–46, 86–87; Appeal to the Public Answered, 8, 42–43. Chauncy assessed Wigglesworth as follows: “he was one of my best friends and longest acquaintance[s], and had courage to speak honourably of me in the new-light time, when it was dangerous to do so . . . He lived at college some years before there was an opportunity for his being chosen into the Professorship; all which time I had the pleasure of being many times a week in company with him, and since that time I familiarly corresponded with him by speech or writing till he died. He is highly deserving of being remembered with honour, not only on account of his character as a man of learning, piety, usefulness in his day, strength of mind, largeness of understanding, and an extraordinary talent at reasoning with clearness and the most nervous cogency, but on account also of his catholic spirit and conduct, notwithstanding great temptations to the contrary. He was one of the most candid men you ever saw; far removed from bigotry, no ways rigid in his attachment to any scheme, yet steady to his own principles, but at the same time charitable to others, though they widely differed from him. He was, in one word, a truly great and excellent man” (“Sketch of Eminent Men,” 160). Older biographical accounts of Chauncy include Ellis, History of the First Church, 187–208, passim; Johnson and Malone, Dictionary, 2:42–3; SHG, 6:439–67; Sprague, Annals, 8:8–13.
death in 1737. As early as 1731, Chauncy’s sermons were attracting enough attention to warrant publication. Six of them were published in the 1730s, including four fairly traditional funeral homilies, an Artillery Election sermon and a general Sunday sermon advocating the need to partake in Communion. Following a near-fatal stroke in 1737, Foxcroft’s incapacitation temporarily left Chauncy as sole minister of First Church. Despite the inevitable burden of such responsibilities, he also found time to court his second wife, Elizabeth Phillips Townsend, whom he married in 1739.16

Although he subsequently moved in different directions, there is every reason to believe that when Chauncy was first ordained and Cotton Mather, perhaps the most vigorous contemporary defender of Puritan tradition, gave him the customary “right hand of fellowship,” the twenty-two-year-old assistant minister was as orthodox in his Calvinist theology as his senior colleague Foxcroft was to remain throughout his career. There is also evidence from his works that Chauncy maintained that position publicly at least until the publication of Twelve Sermons in 1765, although the seven years of intensive private studies that led to his eventual departure from it began as early as 1752. The most compelling way to demonstrate the extent of Chauncy’s early orthodoxy is to show how he publicly upheld, for nearly the first forty years of his ordained ministry, the doctrines traditionally associated with “five-point Calvinism.” In other words, he more or less explicitly affirmed the key Calvinist tenets defined by the 1618–19 Synod of Dort and championed by the vast majority of New England Congregationalists in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries as definitive of reformed orthodoxy: total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace and the perseverance of the saints.17

16. Pierce, “Records,” 39:149–50; Griffin, Old Brick, 26–35; Chauncy, Man’s Life, Early Piety Recommended; Nathanael’s Character; Character and Overthrow; Prayer for Help; Only Compulsion Proper. Chauncy was married three times altogether. Following his second wife’s death in 1757, he wed Mary Stoddard in 1760. See Griffin, Old Brick, 107–8.

17. Pierce, “Records,” 39:152. On Cotton Mather’s participation in Chauncy’s ordination service, see Griffin, Old Brick, 9–10. In the 1740s, Foxcroft publicly defended (also against Chauncy) the Calvinist Great Awakening evangelist George Whitefield, for example, and in two published sermons from the 1750s he upheld the doctrine of “imputed righteousness.” See Foxcroft, Some Seasonable Thoughts; An Apology, Humilis Confessio; Like Precious Faith. Possible tensions between Chauncy and Foxcroft, especially after the advent of the Great Awakening, on which they took opposing views, have not been explored by historians. On Chauncy’s early Calvinism, see, further, Wright, Unitarianism in America, 56–57. McNeill provided a helpful definition of “five-point Calvinism,” as upheld by the Synod of Dort: “The canons of the synod assert: (1) that election is founded on God’s purpose ‘before the foundation of the world’ [unconditional election]; (2) that the efficacy of Christ’s atonement extends to the elect