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and Jonathan Mayhew

John Corrigan

Excerpt

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## *Introduction*

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In the middle of the eighteenth century, Americans reinvented the porch. Sometime between 1745 and 1755, they focused their attention on the doorways of their homes and businesses and began to ornament and enlarge them.<sup>1</sup> Doorways were framed with delicate woodworking and elaborate, time-consuming carpentry. Doorway facades became works of art. Low-relief columns, pilasters, moldings, festoons, and richly ornamented transoms appeared over and around the threshold. Classical columns, extended roofs, wooden railings of every sort, and smooth stone steps were added to building entrances. Colonial builders, in fact, spent a disproportionate amount of time crafting the doorway. Architecture critic Joseph Jackson, commenting on the sudden and intense interest in doorways in New England, wrote: “Here again, proportion seems to have been forgotten, for many of the doorways and doors are excellent in themselves, but they are appended to houses that are unfitted for them by design and general character.”<sup>2</sup>

Colonists were suddenly fascinated with the threshold of a building. The porch that drew attention to this threshold was not inside the house, nor could it properly be said to stand outside the house. It was, in a sense, “in-between.”<sup>3</sup> Moreover, it may have been precisely the expression of this in-betweenness that appealed to colonial builders of this period, for the world in which they lived at mid century was itself a world in between. In religious, political, and socioeconomic aspects of colonial life, new ideas and events were challenging the old ways and traditions. For many Americans, traditional ways of understanding their place in the cosmos were no longer satisfying. Moreover, new understandings that were emerging were sometimes too radical a replacement.

Gordon Wood has described America at mid century as “a society in conflict with itself.”<sup>4</sup> Michael Kammen has stressed “the bifarious nature

Cambridge University Press

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John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

of colonial society” and pointed to the many “contradictory tendencies” in colonial America.<sup>5</sup> In this society, which was “so contradictory in its nature that it left contemporaries puzzled and later historians divided,” some persons were caught in the middle, trying both to retain the old and to accept the new.<sup>6</sup> Like the porch that is neither inside nor outside the house, these persons were neither strict traditionalists nor bold prophets. They were, simply, in between.

In religion, the Great Awakening suddenly burst over the lives of Americans and demonstrated the power of religious enthusiasm. Beginning in the middle colonies under the leadership of Theodore Frelinghuysen in the 1720s, the revival arrived in earnest with the preaching of George Whitefield and the theology of Jonathan Edwards in the late 1730s and early 1740s. In place of the carefully developed Puritan sermon that moved from a text to its explanation to an application, revivalist preachers addressed their crowds in desperately emotional language. In place of the Puritan “lesson,” evangelists such as Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and James Davenport stressed, in clear and simple terms, the sinful condition of humanity and the necessity for regeneration and, especially, the importance of a person’s “inner experience.”

With the new emphasis on a sudden conversion experience as the primary point of reference for one’s salvation, the concepts of a holy commonwealth and covenantal community were diminished in importance.<sup>7</sup> But these concepts were not entirely overthrown by the new emphasis on the individual. Indeed, in many ways the revival was intensely communitarian. Jonathan Edwards, the most articulate spokesman for the revival, wrote at length about the new order that would blossom as more people were converted.

It will be a time of excellent order in the church of Christ. The true government and discipline of the church will then be settled and put into practice. All the world shall then be as one church, one orderly, regular, beautiful society. And as the body shall be one, so the members shall be in beautiful proportion to each other.<sup>8</sup>

But neither Edwards nor his revivalist brethren were able to explain the practical manner in which the new order of the regenerate was to function. They instead proposed that Christian virtue, faithfully practiced by converted individuals, would almost mystically lead to a social order that was family-like in character. In short, supporters of the revival, in their thinking about the relationship between the individual and the Christian society, found themselves stressing both the essential primacy of individual experience and the indistinguishability of the individual from the social body.

Like the revivalists, the opponents of the Awakening were caught

Cambridge University Press

0521327776 - The Hidden Balance: Religion and the Social Theories of Charles Chauncy  
and Jonathan Mayhew

John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

3

between two seemingly irreconcilable understandings about the place of the individual in society. But they differed considerably from the revivalists in that they adopted reason as a key component of their religion. Works of Enlightenment writers had been standard fare at Harvard from the early eighteenth century, and some colonial ministers had been leaning toward “rational religion” for almost as long. In the years leading up to the Awakening the notion of the perfectibility of the individual – through the cultivation of implanted faculties (chiefly reason) – began to make its way into colonial theological discourse. By the 1740–50s some of the nonrevivalist clergy were consequently stressing the legitimacy and authority of personal experience, though, obviously, for somewhat different reasons than their revivalist opponents.

But it became clear during the Great Awakening that the opponents of the revival were also the effective heirs of what remained of the seventeenth-century Puritan vision of the holy commonwealth. In particular, they held to the idea that an elite, educated clergy was responsible for presenting to church congregations a clear understanding of the gospel, and for explaining how the moral individual ought to conduct himself or herself in social life. They were particularly concerned with the moral action of the individual in society as a key ingredient for salvation. Liberals such as Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew, then, were left to explain, first, how reason was related to the affections, and, secondly, how “private judgment” was to coexist with a society guided by elite authority.

In mid-eighteenth-century political ideology, a body of ideas that had developed around the concepts of liberty and authority evidenced antagonisms similar to those found in religion between personal piety and morality. Even before the Awakening, colonists were beginning to perceive in English radical Whig theories of government an appropriate commentary on their own predicament in America. Especially in the wake of Locke’s treatises on social contract and natural rights, a keen critical interest arose about the nature of the relationship between the ruler and the ruled. In their own letters and essays, Americans cited Shaftesbury and Locke, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu, and Beccaria. And perhaps most widely read of all were the libertarian, less dense, more readable writings of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, who together edited the *Independent Whig*, a London weekly in the early eighteenth century, and later penned *Cato’s Letters*, a work deeply critical of English politics and society.

Broadly considered, the political commentary to which colonists were attracted belonged to the Opposition tradition, or English country ideology.<sup>9</sup> At its center was a loyalty to and trust in the English constitution, but this was offset by a deep pessimism about the possibilities for trans-

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John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

lating English constitutional principles into actual social policies. The “country” intellectuals – those persons alienated from the center of English political power – believed that the system of checks and balances in parliament between Crown, peers, and Commons had been corrupted by propertied interests and that parliament no longer functioned homeostatically to guard against tyranny. Generally speaking, Whigs believed that the Crown – by devious plottings, bargainings and conspiracies – had undermined the free and open debate that was considered essential to the spirit of the constitution.

Influenced by Opposition writers who stressed the importance of individual liberty, but still conditioned in their thinking to a deferential response to status and power, colonists faced difficult decisions in the face of tax and trade controversies with England.<sup>10</sup> From the late 1750s through the early 1770s, Americans found themselves stuck between two horns of a political dilemma, between the perceived necessity for social authority and the desire for individual liberty. More specifically, Americans proclaimed their allegiance to the principles of the English constitution, but rejected certain of the policies of an English government that claimed to be founded on constitutional principles.<sup>11</sup>

Ultimately, ideological as well as socioeconomic concerns would provide logic and spark for the American Revolution. But in the 1760s a clear sense of direction, and even a solid grasp of the problem, was lacking for most Americans. Indeed, John Shy has suggested that a majority of the colonial population remained confused and indecisive about governmental powers and limits until the war actually entered their towns, or their homes.<sup>12</sup>

Conflicts that complicated thinking about liberty and authority, and about the individual and society, emerged in connection with socioeconomic aspects of colonial life as well. One issue that proved particularly problematic was the matter of the nature of the relation between social status and vertical mobility. Social status in the colonies was established on a variety of contributing factors, but public officeholding and property ownership were especially important considerations. The link between status and property brought with it a set of problems that were not easily settled.

Jackson Turner Main has written: “Among all the factors which created social distinctions, property was the most important.”<sup>13</sup> Since there were times between 1750 and 1770 when economic conditions in the colonies provided opportunity for making a quick profit and acquiring valuable property, many persons in the mid eighteenth century did, indeed, raise their status considerably. Main points out that of the sixty richest men on the 1771 Massachusetts tax roll, between 40 and 50 per-

Cambridge University Press

0521327776 - The Hidden Balance: Religion and the Social Theories of Charles Chauncy  
and Jonathan Mayhew

John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

5

cent were *nouveaux riches* and one-third were self-made men.<sup>14</sup> It is clear, however, that in a system that correlated wealth with high social status, this high rate of entry into the elite tended to bring into question the legitimacy and substantiality of the status order of society. Most historians point out that Americans at mid century had internalized a deferential attitude toward property.<sup>15</sup> But deference was based on the assumption of a static social order, whereas mobility, of course, demonstrated motion in the system. The latter fact was impressed upon Bostonians, in particular, in the turbulent years between 1750 and 1770, when fortunes were made and lost often in a matter of only a few years.

Edward Pessen has commented: "Social mobility involves two elements: motion and position. Werner Heisenberg suggested in studying the electron that perfect knowledge of one is irreconcilable with exact knowledge of the other."<sup>16</sup> In colonial Boston, rich and poor alike were faced with the problem of conceptualizing how persons could be of a certain fixed status level (position), but nevertheless be moving from level to level at the same time (motion). That is, they believed that there was an established social order made up of distinct superiors and inferiors, but that there was a general equality of opportunity for advancement as well, and that persons *were* advancing (or, in some cases, plummeting). Reconciling these beliefs was tricky business, especially for the *nouveaux riches*. It was hard to justify one's social superiority and at the same time affirm that a kind of general equality had made that superiority possible in the first place.

These tensions in three areas of colonial life in this period – in religion, political ideology, and the socioeconomic order – were, generally, quite similar in nature, and can be organized by theme into three categories. First, the period is characterized by the challenge of new ideas to traditional ways of life. The most important traditions were (1) in religion, the role and authority of an elite clergy; (2) in politics, the practice of deference; and (3) in the social order, acceptance of a fixed hierarchy of classes. New ideas and forces took the forms of rationalism/affectual religion, egalitarianism, and mobility, respectively. Secondly, the nature of the conflicts in all cases began with an upgraded view of the place and function of the individual in relation to society. Private judgment, self-government, and personal economic advancement challenged the social institutions of church and government and the socioeconomic order as a whole. Thirdly, in all three areas, concern for virtue or "merit" formed a predominant theme. Outside of the Awakening, a major concern of the religious literature centered on the theme of the ability or inability of persons to reach perfection by virtue faithfully practiced. Political discussion was organized around the matter of the connection of merit with

Cambridge University Press

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John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

political office. In the economy of colonial America, hard work and perseverance were explicitly connected with movement into the higher ranks of society.

In summary, colonial life at this time might be pictured in general as a contest between (1) new ideas about and evidences of personal virtue and effort and (2) traditional social institutions grounded in an essentially elitist view of society, skeptical of human capability. In the years between the Awakening and the Revolution, Chauncy and Mayhew struggled to fashion elements drawn from each side of the conflict into coherent statements about God, man, and the world. Such statements were often imaginative and bold.

Though conservative in many of their ideas, neither Chauncy nor Mayhew was a narrowminded conformist. Events of their personal lives, as well as their writings, suggest a streak of experimentalism mixed in with their generally more sober casts of character. Chauncy, for example, was fined and demoted in rank at Harvard for card playing and other offenses, and later, at the ripe age of eighty-one, he proposed marriage to a widow of forty, to whom he had been “paying his addresses.”<sup>17</sup> Chauncy’s friends were amused and delighted, but the woman refused him.

Though from a family “respectable in all its stages,” Mayhew likewise ran aground in college: As an undergraduate, he was regularly fined for a variety of offenses, including illegal drinking. In 1744 he was degraded in class rank for the tone of disrespect he took in defending the actions of some of his fellow seniors: “In a very imprudent manner [he] made an impertinent recrimination upon some of the immediate Governors of the House they all being present.”<sup>18</sup>

Of course, by the 1750s both Chauncy and Mayhew had earned themselves reputations as theological heretics in England and America. Mayhew preached supernatural rationalism and individualism, and to these Chauncy added universalism. Both men were accused of Arminianism, Arianism, blasphemy, and a host of other offenses, both real and imagined. In addition to their theological boldness, the two pastors emerged as political figures in Boston in the years leading up to the American Revolution. Robert Treat Paine, a signer of the Declaration of Independence, called Mayhew “the father of civil and religious liberty in Massachusetts and America.”<sup>19</sup> John Adams, who wrote that twelve volumes could be written on Mayhew’s “transcendent genius,” gave the following advice: “If the orators on the fourth of July really wish to investigate the principles and feelings which produced the Revolution, they ought to study . . . Dr. Mayhew’s sermon on passive obedience and non-resistance.”<sup>20</sup>

Charles Chauncy was equally well known in Boston as a “fomenter of

Cambridge University Press

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John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## INTRODUCTION

7

prejudice” against the Crown. Adams considered him, along with Mayhew, to be one of the “illustrious agents” of the Revolution.<sup>21</sup> An advertisement in the *Boston Evening Post* (September 19, 1774) addressed to “The Officers and Soldiers of His Majesty’s Troops in Boston” included Chauncy in the company of prominent Boston rebels.

It being more than probable that the King’s standard will soon be erected, from rebellion breaking out in this province, it is proper that you soldiers should be acquainted with the authors’ thereof and of all the Misfortunes brought upon the province, the following is a list of them, viz. Mess Samuel Adams, James Bowdoin, Dr. Thomas Young, Dr. Benjamin Church, Capt. John Bradford, Josiah Quincy, Major Nathaniel Barber, William Mollineaux, John Hancock, Wm. Cooper, Dr. Chauncy, Dr. Cooper, Thomas Cushing, Joseph Greenleaf, and William Downing – the friends of your King and Country, and of America, hope and expect it from you soldiers, the instant rebellion happens, that you will put the above persons immediately to the sword, destroy their houses, plunder their effects; it is just that they should be the first victims to the mischiefs they have br’t upon us.

A letter to Gr. Brit. & America

N.B. Don’t forget those trumpeters of sedition, the printers Edes and Gill, and Thomas.

Chauncy and Mayhew were neither radically progressive nor strictly conservative. Like the society around them that was in between, so also was their thinking in between. Their understanding of the cosmos was based on two key principles: wholeness and balance. Such an understanding was drawn in part from their experience of the forces that made mid-eighteenth-century America a society in transition. But such an understanding was rooted as well in the fact that Chauncy and Mayhew were religious thinkers and pastors, actively engaged in the project of articulating to their congregations a coherent religious vision of the cosmos. Their writings accord an important place to human intuition, to that part of a person’s makeup that, as Henri Bergson claimed, “may enable us to grasp what it is that intelligence fails to give us, and indicate the means for supplementing it.”<sup>22</sup> A fundamental component of the religious worldview, intuition plays a key role in the integration of ideas.<sup>23</sup>

Chauncy and Mayhew endeavored to provide to their congregations a coherent picture of the cosmos, to present, as clearly as possible, an understanding of the divine creation, of the nature and function of society as part of that creation, and of the role of the individual as a spiritual



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Excerpt

[More information](#)

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and social creature. Their thinking about society did not exist apart from their thinking about the cosmos as a whole. Their social theory was not simply an expression of the desire to protect class interests, nor was it strictly devotion to abstract Enlightenment principles of government and social order. It was but one aspect of a religious standpoint which they were busy fashioning in the aftermath of the Great Awakening, and which they shaped by drawing on the theories of their Puritan forebears, on Enlightenment ideas, and on their own social experiences in colonial Boston.



Cambridge University Press

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

## Chapter 1

### *The hidden whole*

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In spite of the fact that life at mid century was filled with divisions and dichotomies, Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew believed that the harmony of all reality was the enduring plan of God, and they preached this message continuously from their pulpits. In a discourse occasioned by the earthquakes of 1755, Mayhew thus offered to his congregation the following dictum: “There is a harmony and uniformity of design visible in the works of nature and providence, which shows that all originally proceeds from, and is governed by, ONE.”<sup>1</sup> In *Two Sermons on the Nature, Extent and Perfection of Divine Goodness* (1763), he likewise applauded “the structure, the admirable order and adjustment of the various parts, nothing superfluous, nothing wanting, from whence results the harmony and beauty of the whole.”<sup>2</sup> In another sermon, taking up the matter of the destruction of the world as predicted in *The Revelation to John*, Mayhew held that the interdependencies among all that exists dictated that the destruction of the earth would be accompanied by the destruction of all else: “It appears to me most probable that the apostle intends this whole system, inclusive of the sun and the planetary regions, as well as this habitable world, with all its furniture,” to be destroyed.<sup>3</sup>

In many sermons written in the 1750s and 1760s, Mayhew expressed himself on the coherence and uniformity of nature. All creation was under “the Law of Nature, which cannot be repealed by God himself.”<sup>4</sup> There were no “accidents” in nature: God had created the cosmos according to definite rules of order and design.<sup>5</sup> In this design, wrote Mayhew, “there is a subordination one thing to another; and a vast apparent variety among them; but there is also a connection and dependence of one with and upon, another; and all tend to the same point at last.”<sup>6</sup>

Events occurred in the world for a reason, in accordance with natural

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John Corrigan

Excerpt

[More information](#)

laws: “Things come to pass according to the established course of nature, and the settled order of things.”<sup>7</sup> Even “storms, tempests, drought, pestilence, earthquakes, and some other phenomena in the natural world” are actually for the good. They “proceed from such general laws of nature, as are upon the whole most wise, good, excellent, and which could not, probably, be broken in upon, or suspended in their operations, without great detriment, perhaps destruction of the world.”<sup>8</sup>

Human apprehension of this great harmonious design (alongside revelation) points to the presence of a wise governing spirit behind it: “The light of nature shows the world to be under a moral government and Governor.”<sup>9</sup> This “supreme governor of the world” is the first cause behind all the “secondary causes” that are observable in nature.<sup>10</sup> Mayhew held that humans, animals, the earth, the stars, “all of these subordinate agents, in all their operations, are under the controul and dominion of the Almighty.”<sup>11</sup> The universe is a cohesive whole, but only one force can move the natural world:

There are no powers in what we call natural, secondary causes, but what one, to say the least, originally derived from the first; and no real agency in any that are wholly material. Activity or agency, properly speaking, belongs only to the mind or spirit; and all those powers and operations which in common language are ascribed to natural bodies, are really effects and operations of the supreme original cause.<sup>12</sup>

Mayhew thus asks this rhetorical question about the sun and the moon: “Who makes them know their proper places and distances, so as not to jostle and wrack world on world? Whose hand constantly maintains their order?”<sup>13</sup> Of course it is God who has made the heavenly bodies “know their proper places.” What is important for Mayhew is that God, as first cause behind the operations of the natural world, has arranged all things so that they do not come into conflict with each other, so that planets do not “wrack world on world” and the lives of men and women are not left to chance. Mayhew told a Thanksgiving Day meeting that “this world is under the government, not of blind chance, or fate, or men, or good, or evil spirits; but that of the eternal, infinite, and omnipresent Spirit, to whom it owes its existence.”<sup>14</sup>

All that happens in this world is according to the plan of God, and for his pleasure:

It is God’s world; He upholds, he rules, he controuls it, and in some way or another, perhaps inconceivable by us, actually orders and determines the events of it; and that with such precision that neither a “sparrow falls to the ground, nor a lot is cast into the lap” without him. All subordinate beings and agents, who are con-