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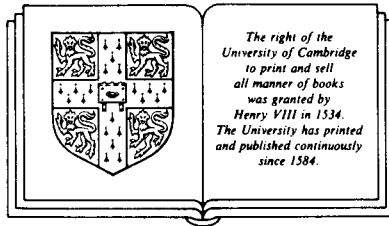
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The hidden balance
Religion and the social theories
of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew

JOHN CORRIGAN
University of Virginia



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For My Father and My Mother

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Preface

In 1781, the Tory Peter Oliver indicted the clergy of Massachusetts on the charge of bad manners:

The clergy of this Province were, in general, a Set of very weak Men; & it could not be expected that they should be otherwise, as many of them were just relieved, many from the Burthen of the Satchel; and others from hard Labor; & by a Transition from those Occupations to mounting a Desk, from whence they could overlook a principal Part of their Congregations, they, by that mean acquired a supreme Self Importance; which was too apparent in their manners.¹

Oliver named Charles Chauncy (1705–87), pastor of First Church in Boston, and Jonathan Mayhew (1720–66), former pastor of Boston’s West Church, as two of the worst offenders. Chauncy “was of a very resentfull, unforgiving Temper; & when he was in the Excess of his Passion, a Bystander would naturally judge that he had been educated in the Purlieu of Bedlam.” Mayhew “had too great a Share of Pride for an humble Disciple of so divine a Master, & looked with too contemptuous an Eye on all around him.” Such impropriety, claimed Oliver, spilled over into matters of religion: Chauncy made statements that “bordered too near upon Blasphemy,” and Mayhew, “in his extempore Pulpit Effusions,” proposed ideas “so unharmonious and discordant, that they always grated upon the Ears of his Auditors.”²

But even more serious than the charge of bad manners, or of theological incompetence, and most disconcerting to Oliver, was the perception that the two ministers “distinguished themselves in encouraging Seditions and Riots, until those lesser Offences were absorbed in Rebellion.”³

Pride, blasphemy and sedition, the three bones of Oliver’s criticism of

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Chauncy and Mayhew, are the themes that have guided subsequent investigations into the lives of the two men. In the nearly century and a half of scholarly interest in Chauncy and Mayhew, three main schools of interpretation have evolved. One group of scholars has focused primarily on the political writings of Chauncy and Mayhew, and has argued that certain sermons of the two men were major contributions toward the formation of the rhetoric of the American Revolution. As Alice Baldwin argued, Chauncy and Mayhew took the ideas of English Whig writers “out of the field of abstraction” and connected them with “the protection of home, church and country.”⁴

Other scholars have opposed this interpretation, claiming that Chauncy and Mayhew were more interested in preserving the status quo than in fomenting rebellion. The most ambitious statement of this position has come from Alan Heimert, who argues that Chauncy and Mayhew were essentially “individualists” who adhered to “a profoundly elitist and conservative ideology” and were committed to a social system based on inequality. According to Heimert, Chauncy and Mayhew preached a political theory “deliberately contrived as justification for restraining the people.”⁵

A third group of scholars has been concerned with the theological ideas of Chauncy and Mayhew, pointing out that the two ministers were leaders in the move toward “rational religion” in America in the eighteenth century. Most scholars in this group agree with Joseph Haroutunian that Chauncy and Mayhew were not pietists but were moralists, who emphasized the “head” rather than the “heart” in religion.⁶

Work from all three of these groups has suffered from a shortcoming: Scholars have concentrated either on the sociopolitical theories of the two men or on their theological ideas. No serious effort has been made to consider both aspects of the thinking of Chauncy and Mayhew as interrelated parts of a single vision. Moreover, historians and biographers have made little effort to relate the overall thinking of Chauncy and Mayhew to the complexities of social and political life in Boston in the mid eighteenth century. Surely, scholars have pointed to biographical details as well as to specific historical events as crucial influences in the shaping of Chauncy’s and Mayhew’s ideas. However, no attempt has been made to analyze the sociopolitical context in such a way as to shed light on the character and direction of each man’s thinking *as a whole*.⁷

Finally, it seems to me that the best approach to studying Chauncy and Mayhew is to consider the intellectual achievements of these men side by side. Historians traditionally have linked Chauncy and Mayhew because of the agreement in the thinking of the two men on specific points of theology or politics or social theory. Such agreement, however, itself

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bespeaks a shared intellectual and social background that in a more profound way connected the lives of these two men.

Chauncy wrote that he and Mayhew were “intimate companions.”⁸ Such companionship began as a shared interest in the ideas of Newton and his interpreters. In their studies at Harvard, Chauncy (B.A. 1721, M.A. 1724) and Mayhew (B.A. 1744, M.A. 1747) encountered the philosophical and scientific empiricisms of the emergent Enlightenment, and became hooked, not upon strict empiricism, but upon the project of reconciling the theories of Enlightenment writers with the Puritan world of ideas. Chauncy studied with Thomas Robie, a scientifically minded tutor who was elected a fellow of the Royal Society in 1725. Perry Miller remarked that it was Robie who began in the colonies “the study of modern science, in anything like the professional sense.” Having made use of a telescope that Harvard had recently acquired, Robie in 1719 published a scientific report on astronomical phenomena that played down the theological significance of astronomical events and emphasized instead natural explanations.⁹

Over the years, as Chauncy’s theological writing grew more precise and subtle, this scientific perspective ripened in his mind. The marriage of Chauncy’s stepdaughter Rebecca Townsend to Hollis Professor John Winthrop in 1746 created for Chauncy further opportunity to cultivate his scientific learning. One direct result of Winthrop’s influence upon Chauncy was *Earthquakes a Token of the Righteous Anger of God* (1755), a sermon that essentially upheld Winthrop’s argument for the natural causes of earthquakes while still connecting such causes to the hand of God.

Mayhew also was influenced by Winthrop, both as a student at Harvard and through a lifelong friendship with the professor. Though Mayhew was familiar with Locke and Newton, he was particularly interested in works that blended arguments for Newtonian order with the perspective of religious faith. Such works included Samuel Parker’s *A Demonstration of the Divine Authority of the Law of Nature*, John Ray’s *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of Creation*, and John Woodward’s *Natural History of the Earth*. In one of Mayhew’s commonplace books are long passages copied from Thomas Burnet’s *Sacred Theory of the Earth*, as well as excerpts from Boyle and from the dean of English “supernatural rationalism,” Archbishop John Tillotson.¹⁰

Reading of this sort was no doubt encouraged by Edward Wigglesworth, a Harvard professor with heretical leanings, from whom Mayhew and Chauncy acquired their graduate training. Wigglesworth, who, above all, had a reputation for intellectual honesty and fairness, was drawn to the religious rationalism of Tillotson, Samuel Clarke, and Daniel Whitby, and his influence upon the direction of both Chauncy’s

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and Mayhew's thought is apparent. Long after Wigglesworth's passing Chauncy remembered "the extraordinary talent of reasoning" possessed by this "truly great and excellent man," who 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."¹¹

The connections between Chauncy and Mayhew, which began as a similarity of educational background and theological outlook, developed rapidly after Mayhew's graduation from Harvard and his call to West Church in 1747. It is likely that Chauncy engineered his friend's candidacy for the prestigious post, which paid a salary higher than that of any other Boston church. Since Chauncy's own First Church congregation included many of the wealthiest members of Boston society, Mayhew's appointment to West Church ensured that the two men would now move together in the social circles of the Boston elite. Such common experience no doubt contributed substantially to the similarities in their developing views on religion and society. It also apparently helped to connect them in the minds of their eventual detractors and supporters. When one was accused of heresy, the other was usually named a coconspirator, and when one was honored, it was usually not long before the other was given similar recognition. Such was the case not only in Boston, but in England as well: Chauncy was awarded an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree by the faculty of Edinburgh University in 1742, and Mayhew, though he had only just begun to publish his theological views, was awarded the same degree by Aberdeen in 1750. The only other Congregational ministers in the Boston area who held such degrees were Joseph Sewall and, not surprisingly, Edward Wigglesworth.

All of these factors that connect Chauncy and Mayhew – education, professional status, public perception, and their personal friendship – do not of themselves justify the plan for this study. However, when Chauncy's and Mayhew's ideas are examined and seen to be so much alike in points of detail as well as in overall character, then such factors become significant, linking the two men together in ways that are more than merely coincidental.

Chauncy and Mayhew were neither strict conservatives, as Heimert has claimed, nor as radical thinkers in politics and religion as Baldwin and Haroutunian have claimed. Chauncy and Mayhew occupy a pivotal place in American intellectual life not because they proposed a sterile rationalism born of reaction to the Great Awakening, but because they affirmed the mystery and sacrality of the cosmos in new ways. They emphasized the complexity of social life and the necessity for both head and heart in religion, at a time when most of their contemporaries had all but abandoned the responsibility for such an endeavor.¹²

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Reader beware! I have not aimed in this book at uncovering the “origins” – social or intellectual – of the American Revolution. This is a book about religion in its broadest sense, about the expression of a perceived “order of things” that referenced eighteenth-century colonial thinking about God, the cosmos, sin, society, government, and, ironically, the unexplainable.

If I have been at all successful in opening a window into the thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew, it is in part because I have drawn considerable benefit and advantage from the written works of numerous other historians, and from the criticisms of teachers and friends. Among previous studies of Chauncy and Mayhew, three books that have been of particular help are the biographies by Charles W. Akers (Mayhew), Edward M. Griffin (Chauncy), and Charles H. Lippy (Chauncy). To my “doctor-father,” Jerald C. Brauer, I am indebted for his encouragement at the beginning of this project, his guidance throughout, and his keen editor’s eye at the end, and for the continuing support and prodding that only an unusually gifted teacher can provide. I thank Martin E. Marty, Edward M. Cook, Jr., John M. Kloos, and James F. Childress for their reading of the manuscript and for the thoughtful suggestions they made. Myrtis Meyer and the late Victor W. Turner, who helped me to clarify my thinking on several points of analysis, have saved me from some of my more obvious and embarrassing mistakes.

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JC

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