

A Preliminary Time Series Analysis of Church Activity in Colonial Woodbury, Connecticut*

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In this research, we examined a small part of the substantial detailed data on church activity for colonial Woodbury, Connecticut. Time series regression analysis suggested that religious activity in Woodbury, as reflected in new church members and baptisms, was influenced by wars and economic activity but not influenced by particular ministers. Regional population trends influenced church activity as long as the church was established. Deviations from trend occurred because of periodic revivals. The Great Awakening, however, was a continuation of an underlying trend.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

When analyzing religious trends in colonial America, historians have followed several lines of inquiry. The first, represented by Perry Miller (1953) and Edwin Gaustad (1962), is rooted in the New Light critique of the colonial church and emphasizes the role of charismatic leaders in guiding and shaping the colonial religious experience. Thus, it is said that George Whitefield, the renowned evangelist of the Great Awakening, saved colonial religion from "utter extinction." It is the presence and preaching of such individuals that determines the success or failure of a given church or denomination.

The second approach focuses on revivals as dramatic events, the result of a crisis in society or in the religious community. Since the advent of the "new" social history in the 1960s, historians have tended to view revivals as manifestations of social crisis. Thus, William McLoughlin (1978) linked the Great Awakening to a shift from *Gemeinschaft* to *Gesellschaft*, resulting in blocked psycho-social mazeways which the great revival cleared. Richard Bushman (1967) portrayed the Awakening as an event ushering in a new social order.

A third line of inquiry compiles and provides some analysis of actual church activity over time. This approach views revivals as events that are not extraordinary and external to the community but rather are part and parcel of the regular life and growth of the parish. Writers like Donald Mathews (1978) have argued that revivals cannot take place without some meaningful ideational and institutional context. These writers analyze

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religious activity (especially church membership) within the framework of parish history, incorporating critical events like the colonial wars. Notable among this work is Gerald Moran's (1974) comprehensive compilation of church data for colonial Connecticut.

The most impressive time series analysis of pre-modern church activity is unfortunately not of British North America. Robert Currie, Alan Gilbert, and Lee Horsley (1970) compiled and analyzed church membership data in the British Isles from 1700 through the modern era. Their comprehensive effort examined a number of hypotheses about church activity, but focused mainly on periodic revivals during the life cycle of a church. In their view, churches experience a growth phase, largely powered by regular revivals, a period of decline, and an eventual extinction. The authors also emphasized the importance to the church of external factors like population growth.

The existing body of research on American religion in the colonial period is extensive and important (McGiffert 1970; Hall 1987; Butler 1985; Bonomi 1986; Richard 1982). Unfortunately, researchers have often focused on a single issue in an era when a number of important factors were operating simultaneously to influence church activity. Thus, we know much about the ministry (Hall 1972; Youngs 1976; Stout 1986), but little about the laity (Lucas 1976; Selement 1984; Hall 1984). Writers like Currie *et al.*, who have addressed several issues, have not integrated them into a single model. In addition, even when it has explicitly availed itself of the data, existing research has not exploited current sophisticated statistical techniques, an exception being the work of Harry Stout (1974).

Another unexploited opportunity in research on colonial religion is to incorporate material from outside the history discipline, despite Jon Butler's (1985) summons to scholars to adopt an interdisciplinary approach. (The nature of the data we will examine here allows us to incorporate hypotheses from economics and from sociology.)

In examining religious behavior, economists argue that individuals make choices based on internal preferences and external factors like opportunity costs and income. In this view, religious activity is produced with endowments of money and time and influenced by individual productivity, preferences, and income. This model has been used to explain choice of denominations (Redman 1980), time spent in religious activity (Azzi & Ehrenberg 1975; Ehrenberg 1977; Long & Settle 1977; Ulbrich & Wallace 1984; Neuman 1986), and financial contributions (Sullivan 1985). An important implication of this work is that increases in opportunity costs of temporal products cause an increase in consumption of religious activity, other things being equal.

In addition, economists have used the theory of the firm to analyze church behavior. Individuals or groups form churches to provide valuable products. Churches are faced with competition in some temporal markets and with potential or actual competition from other churches. Churches are thus under pressure to behave in an efficient manner, a manner that makes church behavior predictable using economic theory. Adam Smith (1799) first applied the theory of the firm to the church: "The clergy of every established church constitute a great incorporation" (p. 207). Rick Bold and Brooks Hull (1985) used the theory to explain aspects as diverse as characteristics of priesthoods, church architecture, and the invention of hell (see also Hull, forthcoming).

One branch of sociology shares significant elements with economics. In an important contribution, Rodney Stark and William Bainbridge (1985) employed sociology's exchange theory to model individual and church behavior. Churches produce "general com-

pensators" unavailable elsewhere. The relative appeal of these general compensators depends on the degree to which other compensators are available in society. Cults offer alternative novel general compensators and evolve and interact with one another, often becoming churches. Churches in turn evolve, mature, and decline as their constituencies and the nature of their products change.

In this research, our intention was to evaluate several hypotheses from history, economics, and sociology about factors influencing church activity. Some of these hypotheses are uncontroversial. Some are complementary. A few are both controversial and competing. Importantly, none have been combined into a single statistical analysis; also, never before has so long a period been analyzed with time series statistical techniques, nor has such a model ever been applied to the colonial period.

We hope with this research to return historians and others to an important but impoverished tradition of American religious studies. As David Hall (1987: 49) recently argued, "It is instructive, and disturbing, to reflect upon the respective fates of *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (Miller 1939), and H. Richard Niebuhr's *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1957) — the first a generative book, the second without heirs." The time has come for the imbalance to be corrected, and it is in this spirit that we offer the following examination of the social and economic sources of religious activity in one parish of New England, that of Woodbury, Connecticut.

The available data allowed us to address five questions related to the theories above. How important were individual ministers to Woodbury church activity? What role did periodic revivals in general and the Great Awakening in particular play in enhancing the strength of the Woodbury church? How much influence did external factors like regional population have on the Woodbury church? How did church activity respond to external crises like war and economic recession? How useful is a theory of the firm or a life cycle theory in describing Woodbury church behavior?

METHODS

Woodbury, Connecticut

In 1673, dissident members of the Stratford church founded both the town and the church of Woodbury, 15 miles north of Stratford and 10 miles from the border of the Colony of New York. The founders of Woodbury broke from the Stratford church in 1670 largely over the question of whether individuals should be able to elect "half-way" membership, the dissidents favoring the notion. Half-way members were barred from the Lord's Supper but could have their children baptized.

Zechariah Walker ministered the church from its founding until 1700. Anthony Stoddard, son of one of New England's most celebrated ministers, Solomon Stoddard, served from 1702 until 1760. Noah Benedict served from 1760 until 1813 (*Contributions to the Ecclesiastical History of Connecticut*: 515-516; Weis 1977).

Woodbury is an important subject for study first because complete and extensive records are available for so many years. The Woodbury church's first three ministers and its administrators maintained records of church activities including baptisms, new members, and "half-way" members (Cothren 1854). (The church stopped recording

baptisms in 1813.) At the same time, the town maintained comprehensive tax lists, and kept complete and accurate lists of vital events like births, marriages, and deaths. Few New England towns and churches can match Woodbury for its quality and quantity of local records.

Woodbury is also an important subject for study because the community and its church were typical of New England communities and churches in the eighteenth century. Like many other churches, Woodbury had adopted half-way membership (Pope 1969) and was moving in the direction of relaxed requirements for admission to full membership (Lucas 1976). Woodbury participated fully and enthusiastically in the Great Awakening (Walsh 1971). In addition, the town was typically prone to subdivision along parish lines, and like New England in general, was participating increasingly in the market economy (Cook 1976). Woodbury was distinct perhaps only because it was one of the Colony's largest and most populous towns (Daniels 1979).

As another example of Woodbury's similarity to other communities, recruitment rates of new members in Woodbury and in Lebanon, Connecticut, were highly correlated ($r = .560$). Unfortunately, Lebanon and other communities lacked Woodbury's extensive records of other activity. In addition, the number of new members was small, as in most communities, meaning that the year-to-year random variations in membership overwhelmed those with identifiable cause. The records of other communities also cover shorter spans and contain significant gaps when compared to Woodbury's records. Membership data for Lebanon, for example, were available only for the period 1700-1775.

Church Activity in Woodbury

The measure of church activity (the variable ACTIVITY) employed here is the sum of baptisms, new full members, and new half-way members. To be sure, serious charges have been levelled against the use of church membership records to analyze religious experience. Such records, it has been argued, measure neither genuine religiosity nor church adherence (Currie *et al.* 1970), nor do they account for the fact that some church members are not particularly religious while some intensely religious people are not church members. Although these and other charges are serious, they should not deter historians or others from using such data to study religion. No other records shed as much light on the actual religious activities of as many people.

Statistical results using only baptisms or only new full members are substantially the same as those using the summed variable. The correlation between baptisms and new full members is high (0.438) and statistically significant ($t = 5.8$). However, the summed variable reduces the year-to-year random variation in the individual measures caused by the relatively small available population.

New half-way members were not studied separately because the church allowed them for only 51 years (1708-1759) and because their numbers were small, usually only a fraction of the number of new full members in any year.

Figure 1 shows the annual sum of baptisms, new full members, and new half-way members (the variable ACTIVITY) for the years 1670-1758. Figure 2 shows the same data for the years 1759-1813.

FIGURE 1

CHURCH ACTIVITY, 1670-1758

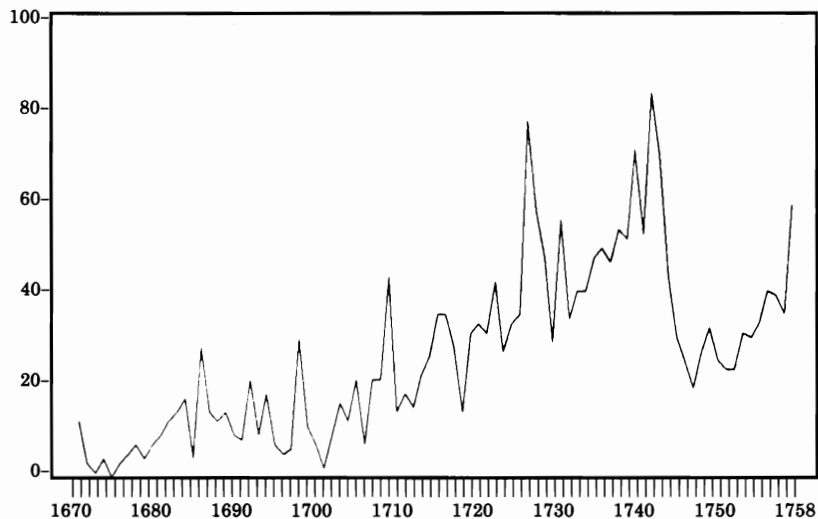
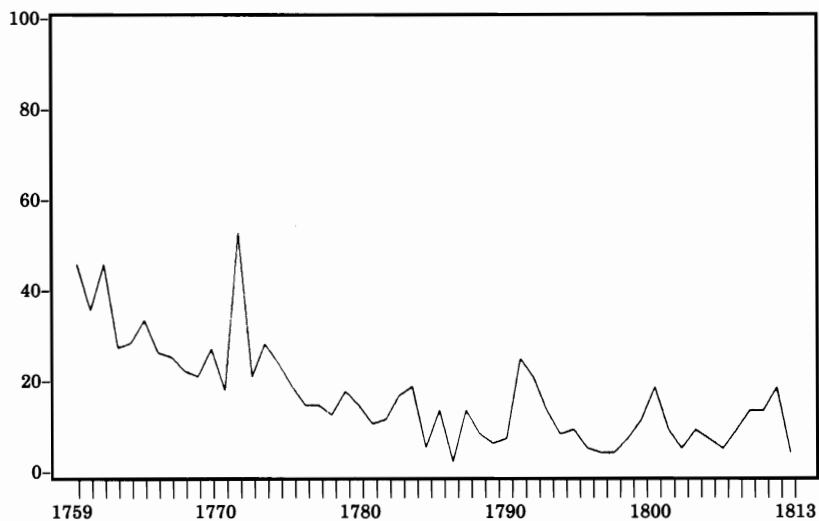


FIGURE 2

CHURCH ACTIVITY, 1759-1813

*Regression Analysis*

We employed multiple regression analysis to integrate the various hypotheses about religious activity, the dependent variable. Multiple regression analysis isolates the effects

on a data series of individual factors and determines the degree and statistical significance of that relationship.

As some historians propose, the personality and/or theology of a minister is a local factor that may affect church activity. In colonial Connecticut, as throughout colonial New England, preachers often came to loggerheads with parishioners over theology and ecclesiology. In fact, the period 1700 to 1740 saw a marked rise in church conflicts over doctrine, some of which resulted in the dismissal of ministers (Schmötter 1979; Bushman 1967; Lucas 1976). Conversely, the fervent preaching style of a minister often proved a prod to church admissions (Moran 1974).

To assess minister influence, the dummy variable WALKER was set to one for the years of Zechariah Walker's ministry, and the dummy variable STODDARD was set to one for the years of Anthony Stoddard's ministry. If either of these individuals influenced church activity, the variable coefficients would be significantly negative or positive.

Several writers have emphasized the importance of revivals. If they were extraordinary events, these revivals, including the Great Awakening, should be reflected as significant deviations from values predicted using the included independent variables.

Another sensible assertion is that changes in regional population mean changes in the pool of potential church members, a relationship Maurice Halbwachs (1960) and Currie *et al.* (1970), among others, argue is crucial in determining the flow of church membership. As Currie *et al.* have written, "A church recruits from its constituency; and since that constituency responds to demographic forces at work in the population as a whole, each church is influenced by those forces almost as much as if its membership were coterminous with the total population" (p. 54). In the present study, the variable POPULATION is the annual population for Connecticut derived by exponential extrapolation from decadal estimates (U.S. Bureau of Census 1975).

In the 1730s and early 1740s, four new communities and associated churches formed in some of the territory included in Woodbury: Southbury, 1731; Bethlehem, 1739; Judea, 1741; and Roxbury, 1743 (Cothren 1854, vol. 1). Formed at a time of rapid internal and external population growth, these parishes were settled by people from both within and without Woodbury and reflected a desire for autonomy among outliers who could get to First Church only with a struggle. To account for the possible influence of the formation of these churches on religious activity, we defined the dummy variable SPLIT, which was set to one for the years beginning 1743, when the last new parish formed.

Crisis is another potential external factor influencing church activity, a notion recognized by Currie *et al.* (1970), who define crisis as "some political event," some traumatic event "such as an epidemic, an economic upturn or, at the local level, some vicissitude in the lives of an individual or individuals within the congregation . . ." (p. 44). As the local records of Woodbury make clear, the major crisis in the early history of the town was the epidemic of 1727, during which seven times the usual number of people died. To incorporate this crisis, we defined the dummy variable PLAGUE, which was set to one for 1727.

Other important crises in the history of Woodbury were those associated with war. No sooner was the town settled than it was exposed to the ravages of war, so much so that it had to be abandoned for the year 1676. While King Philip's War (1675-1676) was Woodbury's as well as New England's most traumatic war, other wars were nearly as

devastating. To incorporate the effect of war, we set the dummy variable WAR to one for the years of King Philip's War (1675-1676), King William's War (1689-1697), Queen Anne's War (1701-1713), the Seven Years' War (1754-1763), the American Revolution (1775-1783), and the War of 1812 (1812-1815).

Economic theory suggests that recessions and depressions increase church activity. These periods are characterized by lower real incomes, greater economic uncertainty, and lower real interest rates. Lower real incomes cause individuals to make substitutions for more expensive secular activities (Pickering 1985). Greater economic uncertainty increases individual incentive to invest in the long-term insurance offered by the church in this and the next life. Lower real interest rates increase the present value of heaven and cost of hell, making investments in church-provided heaven more attractive. In Stark and Bainbridge (1985) terms, individuals substitute more general compensators when compensators provided by the market are in short supply.

By contrast, Currie *et al.* (1970) postulated that economic boom times cause increases in church membership (p. 44). The authors unfortunately do not explain the reason for such an effect, nor do they rigorously test their hypothesis. The data used here can assess these competing hypotheses.

The dummy variable ECONOMY was set to one for the years spanning the upswing side of each economic cycle in the colonies, and to zero for the years spanning the downswing side. These economic data were provided by John McCusker and Russell Menard (1985) and conform to less specific information by Jackson Main (1985). The average length of a cycle is five years and the cycles are distributed fairly evenly over the period. However, scholars have yet to mine this rich vein of data for relationships between the economy and religion.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the regression results. The first two equations include dummy variables for the two ministers. The third excludes both ministers.

The first result of the regression analysis was that the personalities of Woodbury's ministers did not differ in their effect on church activity. The coefficients on the WALKER and STODDARD variables were insignificant. This of course does not imply that the ministers were unimportant, but only that they were not significantly different from one another in their ability to generate new church activity. Indeed, Woodbury was blessed by having ministers who were remarkable for their ability to maintain parish harmony, even in the face of a generally disruptive Great Awakening.

The next striking characteristic of the regression results was the influence of regional population on church activity. Growth in church activity was closely matched by population growth — both at an average annual rate just above 4%. Figure 3 illustrates this relationship by plotting the regression estimates of church activity using as the dependent variable only the population for the period 1670-1742.

The close relationship between population and church activity during the early years is not surprising. First Church, like all Connecticut churches, was an established church and thus enjoyed a monopoly in town, where religion and culture were in close alignment. Even after 1708, when under pressure from England the Connecticut Assembly voted

TABLE 1
REGRESSION ANALYSIS OF CHURCH ACTIVITY, 1670-1758

	Equation One	Equation Two	Equation Three
CONSTANT	5.40 (1.34)	7.12 (2.89)**	7.05 (2.85)**
WALKER	1.76 (0.52)	-.-	-.-
STODDARD	-.-	4.02 (1.18)	-.-
POPULATION	0.001 (9.95)**	0.001 (8.42)**	0.001 (14.32)**
SPLIT	-52.39 (-9.04)**	-46.87 (-8.06)**	-50.73 (-10.51)**
ECONOMY	-5.60 (-2.76)**	-5.87 (-2.91)**	-5.69 (-2.82)**
WAR	-5.86 (-2.71)**	-6.01 (-2.79)**	-5.84 (-2.71)**
PLAGUE	16.37 (1.72)	15.27 (1.61)	16.09 (1.70)
R-Square	0.759	0.762	0.758
R-BAR-Square	0.741	0.745	0.744

** = $p < 0.01$.

Dependent variable is ACTIVITY; t statistics in parentheses; sample size = 89.

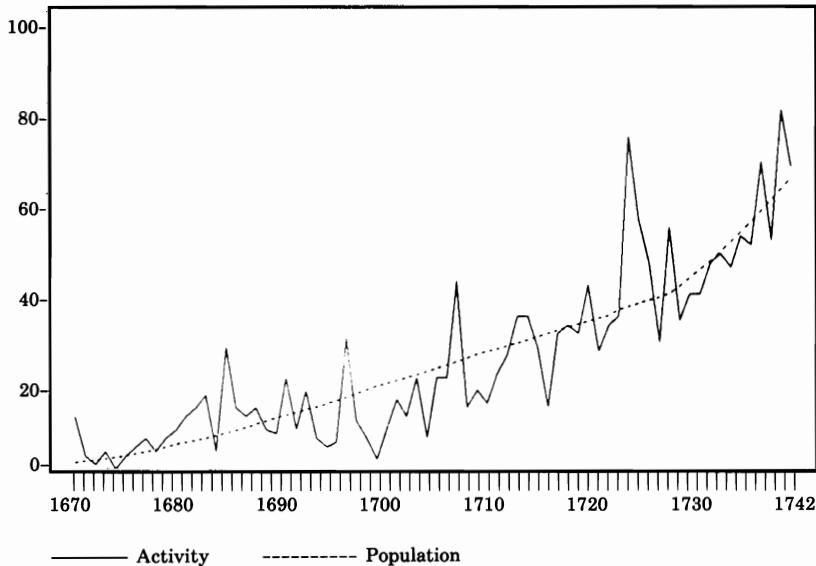
to allow sober dissenters to worship separately, the privilege was rarely granted (Bushman 1967). As the only church in town for many years, and with a monopoly over the sacrament of baptism, First Church reaped the harvests of souls produced by the high birth rates of the period (McCusker & Menard 1985), which in Woodbury, for example, meant increases of 86%, 13%, 63%, 15%, and 41% in births for successive decades during the years 1710-1760 (Cothren 1854, vol. 3).

Since church membership was closely synchronized with marriage (women especially tended to join the church soon after marriage), First Church also benefitted from rapidly rising marital rates, which doubled during the 1730s (Cothren 1854, vol. 3). The collaboration between family and church in Woodbury, as throughout New England, classified by historians as "Puritan Tribalism" (Morgan 1988; Moran 1979; Moran & Vinovskis 1982), found vivid expression in generational flurries of religious activity.

Referring again to Figure 1, we see that the break in the data beginning in 1742 was not a deviation from this population-based trend. The new churches organized by the early 1740s occupied distinct regions. They reduced the territory from which the Woodbury

FIGURE 3

CHURCH ACTIVITY AND POPULATION



church drew members but did not alter Woodbury's monopoly position within its own territory.

In addition, the pool of potential church members arising from Woodbury's demographically dynamic constituency continued to expand, since First Church, along with other New England churches, intensified its efforts to convert youth during 1730-1750, and with some success. From the 1740s at least until the 1750s, the growth of the Woodbury church continued to match regional population growth, albeit from a lower base.

Returning to the next variable in the regression analysis, we see that the positive coefficient for the PLAGUE variable suggests that the calamity of 1727 increased church activity. Although not shown separately, baptisms were somewhat higher because some children were baptized after death in the plague year (Cothren 1854). In addition, the number of new members was relatively high that year. However, the coefficient for PLAGUE was not statistically significant. Apparently other factors better explain changes in church activity that year.

The years in which wars occurred were also years in which church activity was relatively weak, other things being equal. The coefficient for the WAR dummy variable was significantly negative in all three equations. At first this appears to be a curious result. The increased uncertainty during war might be expected to increase church activity rather than reduce it, a hypothesis proposed by Robert Pope (1969) in his analysis of the relationship between King Philip's War and the upsurge in half-way covenant membership in four Massachusetts churches. The result seems less curious when we consider the fact that colonial wars drew men of fighting age away from their communities, reducing the pool of potential church members (Anderson 1984).

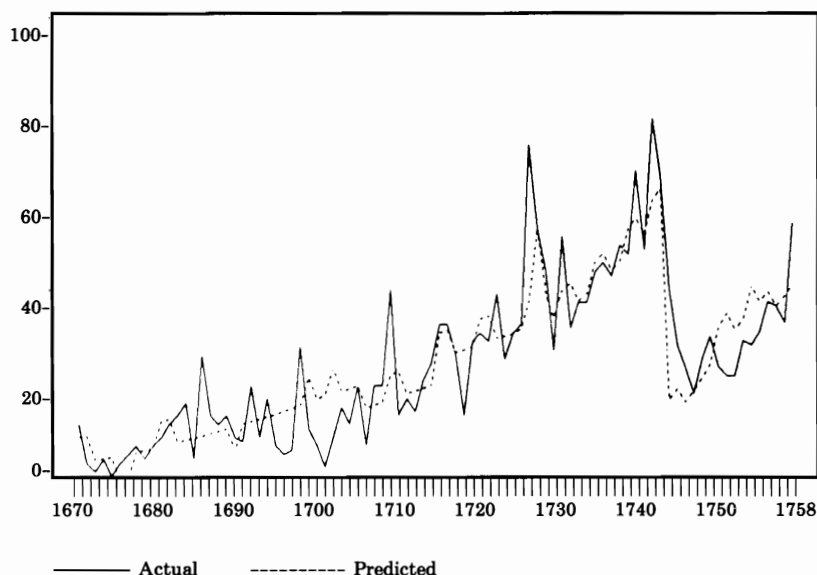
The state of the economy influenced Woodbury church activity in a manner consistent with economic and sociological theories. The sign of the coefficient for the ECONOMY dummy variable was statistically significant in all three equations and indicated that activity was relatively weak during years of economic growth and relatively strong during years of economic decline, other things being equal, a finding consistent with analyses of the relationship between Puritanism and capitalism. Even into the eighteenth century, the Puritans remained ambiguous about the market, believing on the one hand that improvement of property through the accumulation of wealth was the essence of civility, but holding, on the other, that wealth in excess could undermine the moral fabric of the organic community. Especially at times of economic downturn, it would seem that the church's position as the caretaker of local morality would be strengthened, and church membership would prove more meaningful in moral terms. Thus, in the 1690s, Salem villagers aligned with the church in the face of increasing economic hardship (Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974). Similarly, in the 1740s, New England youth flocked to the church in the face of declining economic opportunities (Bumsted 1971).

Figure 4 shows the actual values of church activity plotted against those predicted by the full regression model.

Figure 4 illustrates the implications of the regression results already mentioned. Church activity grew with the trend in population, even after the split in the 1740s. Much of the other variation in church activity was explained by colonial wars (WAR) and economic cycles (ECONOMY). As true in all time-series regression analyses, the independent variables did not explain all of the yearly variation in the data. Some of this variation probably occurred because variables that influenced the data were not measured.

FIGURE 4

ACTUAL AND PREDICTED ACTIVITY, 1670-1758



Data on actual income or on actual immigration, for example, were not available. The remaining unpredicted variation was a result of natural random variation in fertility, weather, and other factors, or was due to measurement error.

Significantly, some important variations from predicted values still appeared. Apparently, important revivals occurred in 1685, 1697, 1708, and 1726; however, these revivals were deviations from an underlying growth trend in church activity, rather than the sole source of new members. In addition, only the first and last were statistically different from the predicted values at a 95% level of confidence (one-tail). Periodic revivals were not vital to the Woodbury church.

This is a crucial finding, for it directs our attention again to the church as the prime vehicle for colonial religious growth and vitality, and as the primary context of revivals. As Mathews (1978) argues, "one cannot have a revival without churches," and the religious history of Woodbury provides a dramatic case in point. This religious history also points out the weakness of the theory of declension in explaining the advent of revivals and their aftermath. Even when revivals appear significant, church activity precedes revivals and then simply returns to trend after revivals, rather than falling significantly.

It is important to note that the Great Awakening, roughly the period from 1726-56, represented a continuation of a trend established much earlier. The regression results suggest that in Woodbury this trend was largely powered by increases in regional population, a finding indicative of the close relationship in the established parish between demographic factors and religious factors. Not only did demographic changes in the internal constituency of the church, especially among its church families, have a marked impact on church membership, but also changes in the church's perception of that constituency, especially its youth, affected admissions significantly.

Church Activity After 1758

A distinct break in the Woodbury church activity data occurs in the late 1750s. Instead of rising at a rate that matched the growth in regional population, church activity declined gradually and then levelled off beginning roughly in 1780. Since population no longer played a vital role, what explains this change?

Certainly revivals appear to have been less important in this period. This tends to support the Currie *et al.* life cycle hypothesis. One important revival occurred in 1771, but subsequent increases in activity were small and tended to decline in importance over time.

Perhaps the decline in activity can be explained by a change in the impact of independent variables in the regression analysis. Although not shown here, regression coefficients derived from the full period 1670-1813 remained the same for all of the variables except population. Population no longer helped predict church activity. It appears, then, that individual attitudes toward religion remained stable in many ways despite the eventual decline in Woodbury church activity.

The 1750s did mark important changes in the church, however. It was in this period that the Woodbury church began to lose its unique monopoly position. The government reduced enforcement of restrictions on members of other denominations. Churches representing new denominations, particularly the Anglicans, opened in the community and competed directly with the Woodbury church. The growth trend in this and other

denominations rose dramatically in the period 1740-1760 (Gaustad 1962). Not surprisingly, Woodbury church activity moved toward a lower level in the face of these changes.

If the theory of the firm and competitive markets provides any insight, this pattern of growth and apparent decline is predictable. According to firm theory, the common pattern of market development occurs when an entrepreneur (in this case, a minister or congregation) organizes a firm (church) which offers some unique product (half-way membership, unique doctrine) valuable to consumers (members) and unavailable elsewhere. The potential for an entrepreneur to create a sect is also explained by Stark and Bainbridge (1985). The entrepreneur obtains some monopoly power by being first, by obtaining patents, or by lobbying for government protection (established church).

The firm may not be able to protect its position, however. The absence of economies of scale and the value of product variety mean that the firm becomes less able to provide for its growing number of customers, especially in the face of a growing population. If new firms manage to enter the market, the existing firm shrinks. Smith (1799) even points out the effect of competition on church behavior. Eventually a competitive equilibrium obtains where a number of relatively small firms provide somewhat different products. As an important implication, in the competitive equilibrium *more* consumers are served by a wider variety of producers, even though the quantity produced by an *individual* firm may be smaller than at its earlier peak output (Posner 1987).

In his recent analysis of the rise of popular sovereignty, Edmund Morgan (1988) recognizes the role of competitive forces in changing the character of the church market. After the repeal in the 1750s of tax laws giving support only to the Congregational Church "a crucial economic advantage not previously available accrued to a church whose minister's preaching attracted members; and the evangelical orientation of the ministry, whatever its denomination or theological persuasion, gained an economic incentive. The outcome of these developments was an unacknowledged popularity contest among ministers and a profound change in the character of religious leadership" (p. 297).

The above does imply a life cycle very similar to that proposed by Currie *et al.* In fact, we wish only to append the possibility that the Woodbury church's life cycle reached its peak in part because of its monopoly position and did not in the end die so much as it moved to a stable long-run competitive equilibrium.

CONCLUSION

At the outset, we claimed that existing research on colonial church activity is limited because it focuses on narrow issues. Our preliminary inquiry was limited as well, albeit for different reasons. The available data covered an impressive length of time and an important period in history, but they included only one church in one colony. Current data restrictions also prevented us from considering other factors that surely influenced colonial church membership, such as age, sex, and marital status. These are subjects for future research.

Nevertheless, this work was an important first step in exploiting data on church activity and interpreting those data in the light of models from other disciplines. While we would be presumptuous to claim that the insights gained here apply universally, we would be remiss, given the Woodbury church's comparability with other colonial churches,

to shun speculation on some of the possible applications of our study. That the Woodbury church was not alone in possessing a religiously active constituency is a statement supported by general studies of other New England churches and of the Great Awakening (Gaustad 1962; Moran 1974). In Stoddardean and non-Stoddardean churches alike, the flow of church membership was regularly rapid and sometimes swift, sweeping many churches along in religious currents that converged in the Great Awakening. In addition, since rapid population growth and commercial expansion were widespread phenomena, affecting New England and indeed all of America, many churches, caught up in the same religious currents as was Woodbury, were likewise vulnerable to those more impersonal demographic and economic forces.

While a number of studies have argued that the Puritan system was maladaptive, resisting and even denying the onset of commercialization and modernization (Miller 1939; Boyer & Nissenbaum 1974), our study suggests otherwise. To an increasingly competitive religious market (a condition that affected many other colonial churches besides Woodbury First), the Woodbury religious community responded creatively and surprisingly easily, in a way predicted by firm and competitive market theory, forming numerous churches in the mid- to late-eighteenth century where none had existed before. In our analysis of the development of an increasingly product-oriented and competitive ecclesiastical environment is revealed a powerful but hitherto unexamined source of America's unique religious situation: its amazing grace amidst dramatic diversity. The extent to which this theory can be firmly and generally applied is a question whose answer can come only with further study.

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