

**Reason and Revelation:  
American Presbyterian Ministers and the Case for the American  
Revolution**

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*For my parents*

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## INTRODUCTION

What do we mean by the Revolution? The war? That was no part of the Revolution; it was only an effect and consequence of it. The Revolution was...from 1760 to 1775, in the course of fifteen years before a drop of blood was shed at Lexington...The Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their religious sentiments of their duties and obligations. This radical change in the principles, opinions, sentiments, and affections of the people, was the real American Revolution.

- John Adams

These were the words of John Adams in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1815. According to Adams, something happened in the minds of the American people, something that forever changed America's history. The beliefs and attitudes of the American people changed, in a way that inspired – and in Adams' mind was – the American Revolution. American society had changed a great deal over the course of the previous decades. America's relationship with Great Britain became strained and American colonists increasingly desired independence from Britain. The Americans believed that it was not only in their interest to break free, but that it was their right to do so, as granted by God and supported by human reason. This transformation, however, did not just occur among the elites, but among the commoners as well. Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Hamilton, Washington – these monumental figures of American history – needed men to follow them; they needed supporters. So while it is important to determine the intellectual influences of these great framers of the American republic, as so many historians have already attempted, it is equally important to determine the influences on the American people. From where did the fisherman in Massachusetts, the farmer in Pennsylvania, and the merchant in South Carolina get their notions about society and government? If the true revolution was in the minds of the people, what changed in the minds of the people and from where did it derive? The

question must be addressed if we are truly to understand the ideological origins of American democracy. But equally important, as Adams points out, was the change in the hearts of the American people. It was not merely a transformation in the ideas about proper government that gave force to the Revolution, but also a transformation in the sentiments that pushed the American colonists to break free from Great Britain, for intellectual arguments alone are not likely to incite a Revolution on the scale witnessed in the colonies. The Americans needed the intellectual rationale for independence, but they needed the emotional zeal to revolt as well, and the source of this emotional force must also be determined if we are to understand more fully the American Revolution.

The average American may not have been directly familiar with the leading intellectual figures in Europe at the time of the Revolution. While Jefferson and Madison surely read Locke, Rousseau, Hume, Montesquieu and others, that fisherman in Boston or the farmer in Pennsylvania were far less likely to know these thinkers. Much of what common Americans understood about the world came from more local sources, and if the ideas of leading European thinkers reached the American people, they did so primarily through indirect means or secondary sources. Much has been written about the role of pamphlets in educating the American people and the ways in which the ideas of Locke and Montesquieu were transmitted to the more urban, literate, and socially active Americans through this literary form. It is also well documented that many privileged Americans were heavily influenced by Europe's leading intellectuals while studying at one of the growing number of colonial colleges. But for many regular Americans, without access to higher education or urban discourse, the primary source of personal ideology came through religion. The local minister was often the most educated member of the community, and he played an important role in disseminating ideas – religious and political –

throughout his congregation. Some historians have even argued that “the pulpit was the most powerful single force in America for the creation and control of public opinion.”<sup>1</sup> Early Americans were, in general, devoted Christians and attended church on a regular basis. While the Great Awakening had died down by the time of the Revolution, American religion continued to benefit from the religious enthusiasm generated by the revivals, and few institutions were as strong in colonial America as Protestant churches. The supremacy of religion in American life manifested itself in the years leading up to 1776: “Religious voices speak first in the Revolution. At one level, this primacy merely restates the dominance of religious expression in early American culture....[R]eligious writings...remain the single largest category of publication throughout the revolutionary era.”<sup>2</sup> Colonial American churches disseminated various ideologies and arguments throughout American society and were perhaps the most important institution in shaping American attitudes. In the buildup to the American Revolution, colonial ministers helped push the case for war through an enormous outpouring of sermons, both published and unpublished. American clergymen played such an important role in the years before the Revolution that “there is no chance of understanding the early American scene, either of the colonies or of the early Republic, without assessing the interplay between religion and politics as a source of liberty.”<sup>3</sup> And among the Protestant branches, few denominations had a more significant influence on American culture than the Presbyterians.

American Presbyterianism was one of the most significant sources of revolutionary sentiment. Nearly the entire Presbyterian community, from the clergy to the American laypeople to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterian immigrants, supported the revolutionary cause, both in the lead up to the war and in the war itself. The activities of American Presbyterians led many British

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Humphrey, *Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789* (New York, 1965), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Robert Ferguson, *The American Enlightenment, 1750-1820* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 44.

<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 45.

officials to conclude that the difficulties between Britain and the colonies were largely a result of the Presbyterians: “Presbyterianism is really at the Bottom of this whole Conspiracy, has supplied it with Vigor, and will never rest, till something is decided upon it.”<sup>4</sup> A German mercenary soldier, fighting on behalf of the British in the Revolution, concurred: “Call this war...by whatsoever name you may,...only call it not an American Rebellion. It is nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian rebellion.”<sup>5</sup> After the outbreak of war in 1775, Presbyterian churches were often the targets of the most severe British pillaging. Some were damaged, others destroyed. One of the most prominent ministerial leaders of the American Presbyterian community, John Witherspoon, who migrated from Scotland in 1768, was himself singled out for attacks from the British. Witherspoon was president of the College of New Jersey, one of the centers of colonial Presbyterianism, and under his direction the college became a center of revolutionary sentiment. Witherspoon was so important to the American cause in the eyes of the British that, when British soldiers took Princeton during the war, they hung in effigy two men: Witherspoon and George Washington. But Witherspoon was not alone in fomenting rebellion, as the above remarks from British officials indicate. American Presbyterian ministers were, as a group, strong proponents of the American Revolution, and therefore particular attention should be paid to the ways in which they advocated independence.

Entry requirements into the Presbyterian ministry were quite high throughout the colonies, so high in fact that there were often not enough qualified ministers to fill the increasing number of Presbyterian congregations. “A learned ministry was the cornerstone of

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Sher, “Witherspoon’s Dominion of Providence and the Scottish Jeremiad Tradition,” in Richard Sher and Jeffrey Smitten, eds., *Scotland and America in the Age of the Enlightenment* (Edinburgh, 1990), p. 58.

<sup>5</sup> James Smylie, “Presbyterians and the American Revolution: A Documentary Account,” *Journal of Presbyterian History*, vol. 52 (Winter 1974), p. 303.



Presbyterianism,”<sup>6</sup> and American Presbyterian ministers – having graduated from Harvard, Yale, or Princeton – were often some of the most well-educated members of American society. The curricula at the leading colonial colleges illustrates that these future ministers were introduced to the political philosophy of the European Enlightenment during their undergraduate years. American Presbyterian ministers were familiar with the political theories that so influenced America’s political leaders, and they were among the most vocal supporters of the American Revolution, so it would seem logical that they would espouse this powerful political philosophy from the pulpit and thus serve as conduits linking European political theory with the American common people. Perhaps it was Presbyterian ministers, then, who helped provide the commoners in Massachusetts and Pennsylvania with ideas about society and government.

An examination of Presbyterian sermons in the years just before and after the Declaration of Independence certainly reveals the use of political philosophy by these ministers. The most significant influences on American Presbyterian ministers were the social contract theorists – Locke, Hobbes, and Hutcheson – and notions of the consent of the governed and the right of resistance are found throughout Presbyterian sermons. The ministers justified the fight for independence on the grounds that the British had violated the natural rights of the American colonists, in particular the right to property, in their attempts to gain absolute power over the colonies. When men entered into civil society, they did so to protect their lives and their property against the envy and aggression of other men. The primary goal of government was, therefore, the protection of life and property, and men retained inalienable rights to these principles. Any violation of these principles rendered government tyrannical and illegitimate. By taxing the colonists against their consent, King George III and Parliament broke the contract

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<sup>6</sup> Francis Broderick, “Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1794,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 6, no.1 (January 1948), p. 43.

between rulers and ruled, and because such consent was the only source of political legitimacy, the American people no longer owed their obedience to the British government. The bonds of loyalty were dissolved and America was free to recover its natural liberty and establish a new government. This was pure social contract theory as established by Locke and Hutcheson, and American Presbyterian ministers repeated it quite accurately. The ministers also borrowed theories on political-economy, principally from Adam Smith and David Hume, to defend their fight for independence. Both Britain and America would benefit from American independence, according to those ministers who included discussions of political-economy, because greater civil liberty would fuel greater economic vitality throughout American society, leading to increased trade between the two nations. And with a wealthier trading partner, Britain would be able to sell more of its goods and British manufacturing would prosper.

Through these arguments, the philosophy of the European Enlightenment certainly filtered down to common Americans throughout the colonies. Those parishioners who filled the pews before ministers like Nathaniel Whitaker and John Carmichael listened to thorough discussions of political philosophy and so were exposed to ideas that certainly had the force to alter the minds of the American common people. To some extent, the American Presbyterian ministers ought to be credited with providing the intellectual arguments that helped change the minds of the American people so that they would actively support the Revolution. The use of powerful theories of government allowed the colonists to conceptualize their struggle and place it in a framework that seemed reasonable and that justified independence.

Yet there was a limit to the dissemination of such secular political theories through the sermons of American Presbyterian ministers. While “most forms of the Enlightenment developed among the middle and upper classes of European cities, [and] spread mainly among

similar groups in America,...[they] failed to reach the agrarian majority.”<sup>7</sup> The number of ministers who included thorough discussions of political theory in their sermons was actually quite small, as the majority of ministers merely provided brief references to natural rights or the right of resistance. Most sermons that contained references to political philosophy typically contained only cursory references and so would not have motivated the Americans to rebel based on intellectual, philosophical grounds. That set of arguments and type of justification was most effectively conveyed by the numerous politicians and pamphleteers who produced thousands of essays that relied on Enlightenment political philosophy for the defense of the Revolution. Overall, American Presbyterianism was not a principal source of intellectual justifications for war; the “various forms of Protestant Christianity served the emotional needs of most Americans better.”<sup>8</sup>

It was in the provision of emotional and religious arguments for independence that the American Presbyterian ministers were most influential. They knew the political theories that would have justified the war, but they did not preach them as entirely as would have been possible, given the extent to which secular figures used such theories to defend the Revolution. They knew the political philosophy and they could have used it, but they did not, and the reason was that it was not their primary purpose to provide the intellectual justifications for independence. Religion served a purpose in American society that was fundamentally different from that of the politicians and pamphleteers. While American ministers certainly used theoretical arguments to strengthen their cases for war, they relied most significantly on emotional and religious arguments for war. They relied not on arguments derived from human reason and intellect but from human emotion and, most importantly, Christian scripture. Their

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<sup>7</sup> Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976), p. xviii.

<sup>8</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, p. xviii.

role in fomenting rebellion was not the supply of reasoned, intellectual arguments through which to conceptualize and ultimately justify the American Revolution, but of the emotional enthusiasm and popular passion that would drive the Revolution and ensure the participation of the common people.

The distinction between intellectual and emotional arguments is at times slight, but it is important to recognize that there existed such a difference in the colonial Presbyterian sermons. Intellectual arguments appealed to calm, rational theories about proper government and applied universal principles to the relationship between America and Great Britain. They provided a conceptual framework through which to understand and justify the American attempt at independence. The emotional arguments, on the other hand, were grounded less on reasoned principles of proper government and more on human nature and instinct. They appealed to the basic human desire to be free from the control of others and to determine one's own future. Ministers used horrible images of slavery and oppression to stir up the emotions of the Americans, and they claimed that if the colonists failed to break free from Britain then their children would spend their entire lives as slaves to the British government. Many of these emotional appeals aimed at basic human desires and were not particular to the American colonies. But the arguments that relied on Christian scripture and religious principles, on the other hand, were particular. Presbyterian ministers, perhaps borrowing from the emotional fireworks of the Great Awakening, claimed that the Americans were God's chosen people, that the agents of Heaven were actively supporting them in the fight against the evil and corrupt British. They claimed it was America's God-given destiny to be free and great, and that the only way the Americans could fail to fulfill their privileged future was if they did not unite against Great Britain. They claimed that the cause of America was the cause of God, and that failure to

support the Revolution would amount to treason against God. These are not notions that are based on human reason. They do not represent the heights to which the human intellect can climb. Rather they are ideas about men and their relationship to a higher power that comes from revelation. And as the Protestant sects in America were better at serving the emotional needs of the American commoners, they also provided the emotional arguments to support the American Revolution. The American people needed to believe that their cause was just and that they were right to go to war with Britain in order to secure their freedom. Political philosophy might provide the intellectual framework to support such claims, but it does not necessarily provide the necessary conviction that such claims are true. The Americans needed to believe, and not just know, that the American Revolution was right, that they were right, and – for a society that was so deeply religious – that God approved. It was not enough to say that human reason justified the rebellion, for on the Day of Judgment human reason would save no one. For many Americans, only God's approval could provide the necessary certainty that the Revolution was right. And it was the American Presbyterian ministers, preaching from pulpits throughout the colonies, who sought to provide this emotional and religious certainty.

Given the extent to which such emotional arguments were fundamental in fomenting American resistance, it is surprising that historians have thus far failed to appreciate their place in the American Revolution. Much of the recent literature on the Revolution has analyzed the intellectual arguments utilized by American elites to promote the cause of independence, and from this literature it seems at times as if the Revolution occurred almost entirely in the minds of a few members of American society. Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin were certainly influential figures in the fight for independence, and without them the American Revolution may never have succeeded, but focusing so heavily on their personal ideologies presents a skewed

understanding of how and why America broke free from Great Britain. The historical literature has been insufficient in this regard, and its analysis of the constitutional arguments against the Townshend Duties or the Declaratory Act, as presented by the more distinguished American colonists, is not sufficient for a complete understanding of the Revolution.

The previous analysis on the role of American ministers in the Revolution has been insufficient as well, and it has focused around two general sets of arguments. In the first, some historians have sought to illustrate how ministers used arguments grounded in political philosophy to promote the Revolution. They cite a paragraph in which a minister mentioned natural rights once as evidence that he preached political philosophy from his pulpit. But one mention of such a broad and complicated idea does not constitute effective use of political theory, and thus these analyses often give too much credit to the ministers. The second set of arguments that historians have analyzed regards religious freedom. American ministers, particularly Presbyterian and Congregational, sounded the alarm over British attempts to establish an Anglican bishop in the colonies, and they argued that such an action would inevitably lead to the establishment of Anglicanism as the official religion in America at the expense of all other denominations. Historians have focused on how American ministers used this tension between Christian denominations to oppose British authority and claim that religious freedom could only be secured through independence. While this is certainly an important contribution of American ministers to the revolutionary cause, it ignores an equally important appeal made by American ministers.

What has been missing from the historical literature on the contribution of American Protestantism to the Revolution is an analysis of the role played by American ministers in providing emotional arguments for independence. In fact, much of the literature on the

Revolution fails to distinguish between intellectual and emotional arguments, instead combining them into one set of arguments. Distinctly emotional appeals have thus largely been ignored in the literature on the American Revolution, and as a result the historical understanding of the Revolution is incomplete. A thorough analysis of the role of emotion in stirring revolutionary sentiment is necessary. Americans needed the intellectual framework within which to understand and justify their fight against Great Britain, but, without being emotionally convinced that the cause was just, the American people may not have supported their political leaders. American Presbyterian ministers, in particular, played a pivotal role in providing the American people with the emotional and religious conviction necessary for the Revolution, and an analysis of their importance to the revolutionary cause is thus an important addition to the historical literature.

One of the principal ways in which Presbyterian ministers succeeded in providing this conviction was in the simplification of the conflict between Britain and America. The Americans were God's chosen people fighting for justice and liberty against the cruel and tyrannical British. Some ministers even went so far as to declare the British, and their Tory allies in America, to be the agents of Satan. One could hardly be confronted with a clearer choice: fight for God or fight for Satan. It was this simplicity that added so much power to the sermons of the Presbyterian ministers, for no parishioner who believed his minister (and if he did not believe his minister at least to some degree then he likely would not be attending his sermons) could possibly choose to fight for the devil against God. All arguments for or against the Revolution were meaningless in the face of the claim that failure to support the Revolution would amount to failure to support God. There was no other bottom line more significant, and there was no other decision more simple. That was the ingenuity of the Presbyterian clergy.

Yet, while the principal contribution of the American Presbyterian ministers to the revolutionary cause was the arguments based on emotion and revealed scripture, the arguments that relied on reasoned political philosophy should not be discounted, for it was the combination of the two sets of arguments that ultimately made the Presbyterian ministers such a powerful voice for independence. This group of men strengthened “the cause of civil opposition by joining Enlightenment conceptions of law to a religious frame of reference.”<sup>9</sup> The combination of the most influential and sophisticated arguments based on reason with the most simple and powerful arguments based on revelation was extremely potent, and it may have been the reason why American Presbyterians as a group supported the Revolution with such commitment. If the war seemed right on intellectual and emotional grounds, then there was little room to question it. Many Presbyterian ministers asked in their sermons, “If God is for us, who can be against us?” Armed with the full set of arguments for independence, many Americans could have asked, “If reason and revelation are for us, what can be against us?”

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<sup>9</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 55.



## CHAPTER ONE THE POLITICAL EDUCATION OF COLONIAL AMERICAN MINISTERS

The earliest voices of European philosophy in the American colonies were, not surprisingly, European immigrants. These were men educated in the ideas circulating throughout Europe at the time, some of them at leading universities like Oxford, some of them at growing universities like Edinburgh, and some from small and relatively unknown universities throughout Europe. They contributed to the development of a more complex and sophisticated colonial political, economic, and social landscape, but, as time progressed, it became clear that the colonies needed to produce their own learned men in order to continue to progress. This was especially true for American religion. In Protestant Christianity, learning was deeply tied to religion, for it was believed that men must be able to read and understand Scripture and other religious texts in order to be pious Christians; in order to follow God's commands, one needed to be able to understand them fully. As Elisha Williams, the prominent Congregationalist minister and future president of Yale, argued, "Every one is under an indispensable obligation to search the scripture for himself...and to make the best use of it he can for his own information in the will of GOD, the nature and duties of Christianity."<sup>1</sup> More importantly, ministers had to be particularly well educated to ensure that their parishioners followed God properly, for a poorly educated minister who could not understand God's teachings would risk not only his own salvation but also that of his followers: "Learned ministers were necessary for the interpretation of the Bible. Without them error would creep in and soon the pure religion would cease to exist."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Elisha Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants* (Boston, 1744), pp. 7-8.

<sup>2</sup> Brooks Mather Kelley, *Yale: A History* (New Haven, 1974), p. 3.

Many universities were therefore dedicated to training ministers for service, and this objective was transferred to the American colonies. One need only look at the founding documents of America's earliest colleges to recognize the importance of religion. Harvard College, the first such institution in English America, was established in 1636 and granted an official charter in 1650. The charter, signed by the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, stated that the colony was fortunate to have individuals with sufficient resources and commitment to support the education of the colonial youth "in knowledge and godliness."<sup>3</sup> The founding documents of Yale College, originally known as the Collegiate School of Connecticut, illustrate more clearly the role of religion in the creation of the institution. When a group of ministers met in 1701 to establish the college, they did so in the tradition of "several well disposed & publick [sic] spirited persons of their sincere regard to, & zeal for upholding & propogating [sic] of the Christian Protestant Religion by a succession of learned, & orthodox men," and their aim was that "youth may be instructed in the Arts & Sciences...for publick employment [sic], both in Church and Civil State."<sup>4</sup> Many of the successive colonial colleges were founded with similar motives, sometimes more explicitly, sometimes less. But supplying learned ministers to American congregations remained an important function of colonial colleges.

These early centers of learning, in line with their religious roots, taught Christian theology as one of the central pillars of the curriculum. Yet as Yale's founders made clear, early American colleges were founded with an eye towards training men for civil functions as well.

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<sup>3</sup> The Charter of the President and Fellows of Harvard College, under the Seal of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, and bearing date May 31<sup>st</sup>, A.D. 1650, printed in "Constitutional Articles and Legislative Enactments Relative to the Board of Overseers and the Corporation of Harvard University" (Cambridge, 1835), p. 4.

<sup>4</sup> An Act for Liberty to Erect a Collegiate School, in Yale College Records, vol. 1, 1701-Feb. 22, 1904, Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, pp. 1-2.

Colonial college students were not merely given theological training for the ministry, they were provided a liberal education for service in various positions throughout colonial society, from business to law to politics. The entry requirements hint at the education students were to receive upon matriculation, as prospective students at Yale, Princeton, and elsewhere were required to possess a knowledge of the classical languages, Greek and Latin, and arithmetic.<sup>5</sup> While entrance requirements often seem quite strict, like the demand by the Princeton Trustees that all students be able to translate any part of the Greek Evangelists into either Latin or English,<sup>6</sup> they were not upheld on a consistent basis and many students were admitted to the colleges without fully meeting the admission standards. Upon beginning their studies, however, most students in American colleges underwent a rigorous course of instruction, which typically included political philosophy in one form or another.

The specific curricula at Yale and Princeton will be addressed below, but it is worthwhile to understand the overall academic environment that existed in the colonies, at schools like Harvard, the College of William and Mary, the College of Philadelphia (later the University of Pennsylvania), and elsewhere. It was this educational landscape, after all, that produced men like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and James Madison. The notebook of a student from the College of Philadelphia records that moral philosophy, taught in most colonial colleges, “comprehends Ethics, the Rights of Man in a State of Natural Liberty, Politicks or the different Plans of Government,”<sup>7</sup> while the records of King’s College (later Columbia University) indicate

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<sup>5</sup> The Minutes of the Proceedings of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, Agreeable to the Charter Obtain’d of his Excellency Governour Belcher Esqr; 1748, Board of Trustees Minutes and Records, vol. 1, University Archives, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Library; The Laws of Yale-College in New-Haven, in Connecticut Enacted by the President and Fellows (New Haven, 1774), Manuscripts and Archives, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University Library.

<sup>6</sup> The Minutes of the Proceedings of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, 1748.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas Mifflin, “Notes on Metaphysics,” quoted in Anna Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities, 1636-1900* (New York, 1939), p. 18.

that Francis Hutcheson's *A Short Introduction to Moral Philosophy* was used as a textbook in the 1760s.<sup>8</sup> Students were introduced to arguments in political theory both through philosophical texts like Hutcheson's, but also through courses in history and the classics. Every colonial college placed heavy emphasis on a thorough education in the classics, from Homer to Socrates to Cicero. Much of this Classical education included ideas about the proper forms and actions of governments, and,

it was the classics that made Harvard men of that day effective in politics and statesmanship. In Plutarch's *Lives*, the orations of Cicero and Demosthenes, and ancient history, young men saw a mirror of their times....American revolutionary leaders...could never have rendered their distinguished services to the young republic without that classical learning.<sup>9</sup>

Many colonial American students were thus introduced to both ancient and modern theories of government, theories that proved quite influential on the minds of the Founding Fathers. But many of the men at these schools were not destined to become statesmen; many were to become ministers in American pulpits throughout the colonies, and they too shared in this political education. Those ministers who eventually became champions of the American cause were introduced to the most influential political philosophy of the day alongside the future leaders of the American Revolution and Republic.

This is not to argue that all such ministers agreed with these theories or were entirely influenced by them. That is not only difficult to prove but it is also not necessarily the point. The point is that American ministers were introduced to ideas about government and political philosophy that could have been used in the case for independence. Their peers who later led the Revolution used these arguments in support of the Revolution, and the ministers could have too. Many ministers did use them, in varying degrees, but some did not. What is important,

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<sup>8</sup> Anna Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities*, p. 25.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard, 1636-1936* (Cambridge, 1936), p. 136.

therefore, is not concrete proof that the future ministers were shaped by these arguments, but that they had them at their disposal if they had wanted to use them.

It was not only through their college education that American colonists were introduced to ideas on politics and government. Many students were taught John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, and Thomas Hobbes in their classes, but others were not. And those that were may not have been provided a very thorough education on these thinkers. But graduates from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, and the other colonial colleges were the most learned and well-educated men in colonial America, and they could not have avoided the use of these political theories in the buildup to the Revolution. Arguments based on the social contract and the right of the people to rebel against oppressive governments proliferated in both oral and printed form throughout the colonies in the years before the war. “The newspapers...were crowded with columns of arguments and counter-arguments....Broad­sides...appeared everywhere....Above all, there were pamphlets,”<sup>10</sup> whose numbers reached in the hundreds at the start of the war and thousands by its conclusion.<sup>11</sup> The most literate, well-educated men in the colonies, whether they participated in business, politics, or religion, would have been well aware of these arguments and the ideas upon which they were based. And those who supported the Revolution had ample opportunity to use such rational, philosophical arguments if they chose to do so. What is important, therefore, is that American ministers were either taught these ideas in college or were aware of these ideas as they circulated throughout the colonies in the years before the war.

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<sup>10</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, 1967), pp. 1-2.

<sup>11</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 8.

## Yale College

Looking at those ministers who played a prominent role in arguing for the Revolution reveals that a significant number of them graduated from Yale. Since Yale was founded in 1701, it had time to develop a tradition of strong education and preparation for the ministry, and the supplying of qualified ministers was an important goal of the founders of Yale College: “a large part of the impetus [for founding Yale] came from the need for a learned ministry to supply the pulpits of the Colony.”<sup>12</sup> Yale’s earliest founding documents, including *An Act of Liberty to Erect a Collegiate School*, revealed this motivation. The early leaders of Yale maintained this focus and ensured that their students were provided a strong course of religious study. Yale’s early religious orthodoxy is highlighted by an episode of great controversy at the time: in 1722 the president (then known as rector), Timothy Cutler, and two tutors decided to leave the Congregational Church, go to England, and enter the Anglican Church. In the American colonies, and especially in Congregational and Presbyterian circles, Anglicans were viewed with great suspicion, and Cutler’s betrayal forced the Trustees of Yale to put in place a religious test for all officials of the college. After 1722, “all such Persons as shall hereafter be elected to the Office of Rector or Tutor in this College, shall, before they are accepted therein,...declare their Assent to the Confession of Faith,”<sup>13</sup> meaning the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1646, the principal doctrinal statement of British Calvinists. Declaring the Westminster Confession, and also the Catechism of the General Assembly of Connecticut, was deemed to be a sign of true piety and orthodoxy, and officials of Yale were, at least nominally, good orthodox Calvinists.

The emphasis on piety and religious orthodoxy continued throughout the early history of Yale. The college rules under Elisha Williams, who served as president from 1726 to 1739,

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<sup>12</sup> Reuben Holden, *Profiles and Portraits of Yale University Presidents* (Freeport, 1968), p. 9.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Clap, *The Annals or History of Yale-College, In New-Haven, In the Colony of Connecticut, from The First Founding thereof, in the Year 1700, to the Year 1766* (New Haven, 1766), p. 32.

declared, “Every student shall consider the main end of his study to wit to know God in Jesus Christ and answerably to lead a Godly sober life.”<sup>14</sup> The Laws of Yale College illustrate the emphasis on religious education all the way up to the American Revolution. In 1774, the Laws stated that “every Saturday shall be devoted to the Study of Divinity” for all four classes of students, and that “each Class thro’ the whole Time of their Pupilage shall recite either the Assembly’s Catechism, the Confession of Faith received and approved by the Churches in this Colony.”<sup>15</sup> Throughout their four years, Yale students were required to attend lectures on divinity during the week and sermons delivered by the president on the weekend, and were repeatedly called upon to assert their orthodoxy through various declarations. All in all, “Religion and orthodoxy occupied a large share of an undergraduate’s time”<sup>16</sup> at colonial Yale.

Yet the course of study at Yale included much more than religious instruction, for the founders of Yale made it clear that they wanted to prepare their students for “Civil State” careers with instruction in “the Arts & Sciences.”<sup>17</sup> Yale’s founders wanted to teach their students the arts and sciences so that they would be able to fill the variety of positions in colonial society, whether in business, politics, or law. They believed that “education was the necessary foundation for useful men. To be leaders of their community, men...[must] be ‘capable of penetrating into the secrets of nature & have made successful Enquiries into the several Arts and Sciences.’”<sup>18</sup> Businessmen must understand contracts and account books, politicians must understand the rights of government and of the people and the impact of certain acts on the polity, and lawyers must understand notions of rights and legal precedent. Yale’s founders

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<sup>14</sup> Kelley, *Yale*, p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> Laws of Yale College, 1774.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Cowie, *Educational Problems at Yale College in the Eighteenth Century* (New Haven, 1936), p. 12.

<sup>17</sup> An Act for Liberty, 1701.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Warch, *School of the Prophets: Yale College, 1701-1740* (New Haven, 1973), pp. 186-187.

wanted to ensure that their graduates were qualified for such positions and that they would be valuable members of colonial society, and in this they sought to replicate the instruction of the European universities. The presidents and tutors worked hard to provide a sophisticated education that was as modern as possible, and they were relatively successful in this mission.<sup>19</sup> The presidents and tutors worked together in the instruction of students, but the president was particularly important, for “lectures were given by the president and the professor, and recitations were heard by the tutors. The president normally gave special attention to the senior class, and each of the tutors was assigned to one of the other classes.”<sup>20</sup> The president provided the education that was to cap the collegiate experience and provide students with the last remaining knowledge they would need to be valuable members of colonial society. While the presidents differed in their approach, and emphasized different elements of the curriculum, the curriculum at Yale was relatively consistent from its early days to the American Revolution.

Elisha Williams is one of the most important presidents in Yale’s early days, for it was under him that life at Yale finally settled down after some early upheavals. While John Locke was introduced to the curriculum before Williams’ term by the tutor Samuel Johnson,<sup>21</sup> it was under Williams that the students really came to understand more of Locke’s, and other leading thinkers’, ideas. He modernized the curriculum and used more recent material than previous presidents or tutors, with the end result being that “Yale scholars under Rector Williams were acquainted with these works of the new learning and were thus, in some sense, intellectually modern.”<sup>22</sup> It was often a struggle for colonial colleges to remain up to date with their material, but Williams succeeded in teaching his students some of the most recent European philosophy.

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<sup>19</sup> Warch, *School of the Prophets*, pp. 247-248.

<sup>20</sup> Cowie, *Educational Problems*, p. 4.

<sup>21</sup> Warch, *School of the Prophets*, p. 206.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.



In his logic course, Williams slowly replaced some of the previous thinkers with Locke, so that Locke's *Essay on Human Understanding* became one of the most influential books in the course: "By the 1730s...Locke had become a fixed and central figure in the logic course," and one student even argued in 1733 that Locke had become one of the most important figures in the college's curriculum.<sup>23</sup> While this use of Locke related to theories on human knowledge and perception, and not necessarily political philosophy, Williams was certainly a student of Locke's theories on government and may have transmitted them to his students.

In 1744, after Williams had left Yale, he delivered a sermon titled *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, in which he clearly elucidated Locke's political philosophy. Arguing that every individual has a right to choose his own faith, Williams summarized Locke's ideas on the social contract quite thoroughly. He began his discussion of the origins and ends of civil government by stating that "Reason teaches us that all men are naturally equal in respect of jurisdiction or dominion one over another,"<sup>24</sup> or more simply, that in his natural state each man is equal to every other man. In this state of nature, man is free "from any *superior power on earth*,"<sup>25</sup> and is thus able to act however he so chooses, though his actions may eventually lead him to conflict with other men. Such conflict principally occurs over property. Man has the right to obtain property through his work in transforming objects in their natural state to objects useful for human society: "since God has given these things for the use of men and given them reason also to make use thereof to the best advantage of life; there must of necessity be a means to appropriate them some way or other."<sup>26</sup> If man is to take something from its natural state, like a tree branch, and turn it into something useful, like a spear for hunting, he must be able to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 207.

<sup>24</sup> Williams, *Essential Rights and Liberties*, p. 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

ensure it remains his own, otherwise his work will have come to naught and he will be without the fruit of his labor. Therefore, whenever man has taken an object from nature and “mixed his labour with it and joined something to it that is his own, [he] thereby makes it his property,” and “no man can have a right to the person or property of another.”<sup>27</sup>

But conflicts over resources arise because men are biased in their own affairs. It is human nature to be influenced by self-interest, and self-interest makes men unable to judge fairly in all instances: “But because in *such a state of nature*, every man must be judge of the breach of the law of nature and executioner too...and the greater part being no strict observers of equity and justice; the enjoyment of property in this state is not very safe.”<sup>28</sup> Men therefore desire an authority to judge fairly in any disputes and enforce their right to property against any competing claims, or, as Williams puts it, man wants “a known and indifferent judge” with the “power to back and support the sentence when right, and give it due execution.”<sup>29</sup> To this end, men join into civil society and establish a central power that can regulate affairs between them: “reason teaches men to join in society, to unite together into a commonwealth under some form or other,...and institute one common power to see [a body of laws] observed.”<sup>30</sup> It is to protect their property that men join into society and give up some of their power to a government, for without such an authority there was no guarantee that one’s property would not be stolen or destroyed by another man. Thus, simply put, “*The great end of civil government, is the preservation of their persons, their liberties and estates, or their property.*”<sup>31</sup> But to these governments men do not give up everything, only that which is necessary for the common good. Men retain all those rights that they can and turn over to the government only what they must for

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., pp. 3-4.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

the sake of civil society. Williams argues that “The power that every one has in a state of nature *to do whatever he judgeth fit*...he gives up to be regulated by laws made by the society,” and that “The power of punishing he wholly gives up,...to assist the executive power of the society as the law thereof shall require.”<sup>32</sup> All the rest of his powers man retains. In the end, man turns over to the government only what is “necessary for the preservation of person and property,”<sup>33</sup> and the rest he retains against any counter efforts by the government or other citizens.

Anyone familiar with Locke will immediately recognize Williams’ reliance on Lockean political theory in this sermon, as Williams himself does when he references “the celebrated Mr. Lock in his *Treatise of Government*.”<sup>34</sup> While Williams offered a brief summary of Locke’s arguments, he was quite clear and accurate in his explanation, and he included most of Locke’s main points. He even directly borrowed (or rather stole) many of Locke’s particular phrases. Locke had stated, “being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be *a means to appropriate* [earth’s fruits] some way or other,”<sup>35</sup> long before Williams used almost exactly the same wording. Arguing that men turn natural objects into their personal property through their labor, Locke said that when man “hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.”<sup>36</sup> Again, this is nearly the exact wording Williams later used, and it is exactly the same idea. Locke had also used the notions about men not being strict observers of justice and equity, and so desiring a known and indifferent judge to decide disputes in his work.<sup>37</sup> Williams adopted these ideas and phrases directly from Locke. Williams even took his main point about the great end of civil government directly from Locke, who had

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>35</sup> John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, in David Wootton, ed., *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, 1996), p. 319.

<sup>36</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 320.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., pp. 349-350.

said, “The great and *chief end*, therefore, of men’s uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, *is the preservation of their property.*”<sup>38</sup> Williams was clearly influenced by Locke’s theories on government, particularly the notion of the social contract. There is a possibility, therefore, that in addition to teaching Locke in his course on logic, that Williams at least introduced Locke’s political theories to his students during his time as president of Yale. Because Williams was so reliant on Locke for his political ideas, any discussion of politics with his students would likely have brought up at least some of Locke’s notions on government, and as Yale’s founders aimed at providing their students with an education for civil office, and as Williams sought to provide his students with the most modern education possible, it is likely that Williams at least introduced his students to, if he did not wholly teach, Lockean political theories.

Under Williams, Yale also accumulated an extensive library that contained ancient and modern books on a wide variety of topics. The majority of books added to the collection under Williams arrived in New Haven through a donation from the Irish bishop and philosopher George Berkeley, one of the leading figures of the philosophical movement known as immaterialism. Berkeley “sent some nine hundred volumes for the Yale Library. These were reputed to be the finest collection of books yet brought to America.”<sup>39</sup> It is likely that a collection of books so highly regarded, and sent by one of the leading philosophers in Europe, would contain important philosophical texts circulating throughout Europe. Berkeley was certainly an opponent of many European philosophers, including Francis Hutcheson and the Scottish realists, but if his gift were entirely focused on supporting his personal beliefs, it is

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 349.

<sup>39</sup> Holden, *Profiles and Portraits of Yale University Presidents*, p. 27.

unlikely that it would have been so well respected by colonial Americans. These books were now at the disposal of the students at Yale.

The specific books in the Yale Library were eventually catalogued by Thomas Clap, the next president of the college. Clap ordered a full catalogue of the library in both 1743 and 1755, and the books were organized according to subject. The notes at the beginning of both catalogues, written by Clap and addressed to the students of Yale, indicated both Clap's purpose in cataloguing the books and Clap's ideals of a proper college education. He began his note by explaining to the students that "I Have here with considerable Labour and Pains, prepared a Catalogue of the Books in the Library under proper Heads that so you may Readily know and find any Book, upon any particular subject."<sup>40</sup> The goal of ordering the books was, according to Clap, to help the students in their studies. And the fields of study Clap encouraged his students to follow was as such: "I would advise you, my Pupils, to pursue a Regular Course of Academical Studies in some Measure according to the Order of this Catalogue. And in the First Year to Study principally the Tongues, Arithmetic and Algebra; the Second, Logic, Rhetoric and Geometry; the Third, Mathematics and Natural Philosophy; and, the Fourth, Ethics and Divinity."<sup>41</sup> While none of these subjects sounds like it would have necessarily included instruction in political philosophy, colonial colleges often taught politics in courses on ethics or moral philosophy,<sup>42</sup> and thus Clap's mention of ethics leaves open the possibility that seniors at Yale were introduced to theories of government. The Laws of Yale College verify that the actual course of instruction in this period was very similar to that suggested by Clap in his preface to the library catalogue. In 1744, according to the Scholastic Exercises section of the college laws, students "[i]n the first year...study the languages and logic....In the second year, they recite

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<sup>40</sup> A Catalogue of the Library of Yale-College in New-Haven (New London, 1743), p. A1.

<sup>41</sup> A Catalogue of the Library of Yale-College, 1743, p. A2.

<sup>42</sup> Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities*, p. 18.

rhetoric, geometry, and geography. In the third, natural philosophy, astronomy, and several parts of mathematics. In the fourth, metaphysics and ethics.”<sup>43</sup> Again, any instruction in politics likely would have occurred in the courses on ethics.

While the curriculum might not explicitly illustrate where the students would have learned political philosophy, there were plenty of books in the library to support a political education. The classics were well-covered with Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Virgil, Plutarch, Sallust, Livy and many others. Classical education was critical at all colonial colleges, so it is not surprising that Yale had a thorough collection of the classics. Moreover, the classics were replete with important notions of social and political relations, notions that were quite influential on European philosophers and the American Founding Fathers. Many of the leading proponents of independence used these Classical thinkers, for “the analogies to their own times were compelling”<sup>44</sup> for Americans arguing for independence. They saw themselves as “stoical Catos,...self-sacrificing Brutuses,...[and] terse, sardonic Tacituses eulogizing Teutonic freedom.”<sup>45</sup> Yale therefore had a strong collection of the Classical works that were later so widely used by American revolutionaries.

Yale also had many important modern works, in fields such as history, ethics, and politics. The most relevant histories were Pufendorf’s *History of Europe* and George Buchanan’s *History of Scotland*. Both authors were important political theorists, Pufendorf in the seventeenth century in Germany, Buchanan in the sixteenth in Scotland. These two works, however, were not the major contributions of either author to the field of political philosophy, yet they may have shed some light issues of government. Other texts in the library were more

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<sup>43</sup> The Laws of Yale-College in New-Haven, in Connecticut, Enacted by the President and Fellows (New Haven, 1744).

<sup>44</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 26.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

directly focused on politics. Pufendorf's most important political work, *On the Law of Nature and Nations*, was included in Yale's library in 1743, as was Machiavelli's *The Prince*, which was a very important work in European political theory. Under the miscellaneous and political essays section, the catalogue included Grotius' *On the Law of War and Peace*, Thomas Hobbes' *On the Citizen*, and three unspecified volumes by Locke.<sup>46</sup> Pufendorf, Grotius, Hobbes, and Locke were especially influential on early American political thinkers, in terms of natural laws, the social contract, and the rights of the citizens of a polity, and all were available to students at Yale.

The library catalogue of 1755 reveals only one addition of interest, and that is an unspecified book by an author named Hutcheson. It is likely that this refers to Francis Hutcheson, the Scottish philosopher who was extremely influential on American thinkers, as the book is listed under metaphysics and the spelling of the last name is accurate. A hint is contained in the 1791 Yale library catalogue, which notes a book, also under the subject of metaphysics, titled *Metaphysicae Synopsis* by an author with the last name Hutcheson.<sup>47</sup> This was indeed the work of Francis Hutcheson, and it was published in 1742. The publishing date makes it unlikely that it could have been included in the 1743 library catalogue, for the American colleges were always a bit delayed in receiving European books and ideas, but the 1755 catalogue certainly could have contained it. And as there is no additional work attributed to Hutcheson in the 1791 catalogue, it is likely that this 1755 edition was referring to Francis Hutcheson's *Metaphysicae Synopsis*. All these thinkers – Hutcheson, Locke, Pufendorf, Hobbes, Grotius, Machiavelli, Plato – were influential in secular political discourse in the colonies, and

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<sup>46</sup> A Catalogue of the Library of Yale-College, 1743.

<sup>47</sup> Catalogue of Books in the Library of Yale-College, New Haven (New Haven, 1791).

the fact that the Yale library contained their works strengthens the possibility that Yale students were at least aware of their ideas, if they were not entirely familiar with them.

More concretely, Clap lectured to the senior students during the evenings to supplement the official course of study. It was the responsibility of the president to prepare all his students for employment in a variety of careers, for not all graduates would become ministers. He states that he frequently lectured “upon every subject necessary to be understood, to qualify young Gentlemen for those Stations and Employment; such as the Nature of civil Government, the civil Constitution of Great-Britain,...the several Kinds of Laws by which the Kingdom is governed.”<sup>48</sup> Lectures on civil government, aimed at supplementing the official course of study, likely would have included some of the important political philosophy of the day, though little evidence survives to determine exactly what Clap was teaching his students. But if Williams was well acquainted with Locke in the 1720s, there is no reason to believe that Clap could not have been at least familiar with Locke and the ideas of the social contract in the 1740s. The point of these lectures, according to Clap, was “so that everyone educated here might have, at least, a general and superficial knowledge of every important Affair of Life; and be directed to those books which may give him a more complete knowledge of that particular Art and Science”<sup>49</sup> which might be of use in his future career. If Clap added a series of evening lectures to the existing course of instruction in order to arm his students with at least a superficial knowledge of the important ideas of politics, it is reasonable to believe that he introduced his students to some of the prominent political theorists of the day, including Locke, Hutcheson, Pufendorf, and others. It is also important to note that Clap was not intending to provide his students with all the knowledge they might ever need in their future careers, but only to make his students familiar

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<sup>48</sup> Quoted in Haddow, *Political Science in American Colleges and Universities*, p. 8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.



with the principal ideas that they might need to use at some point. He recognized that his students would not remember everything they learned, and that they would have need of different pieces of the studies later on in life, so he merely wanted to prepare them so that they could have at their disposal whatever ideas they might need. This is exactly the situation in which many ministers were to find themselves. It was not normal for ministers to preach on political topics, so those preparing for the ministry may not have paid close attention to their politically focused lectures. But when they did find themselves in a position to discuss political topics from the pulpit, as so many did in the 1760s and 1770s, they would have need for arguments to justify their support for independence. Their college studies had introduced them to exactly the kinds of arguments they would have needed in these situations, and thus Clap's goal of providing his students with at least a superficial knowledge of the types of knowledge they might need at a later time proved quite appropriate.

Near the end of his presidency, Clap published a book on ethics and moral philosophy, titled *An Essay on the Nature and Foundation of Moral Virtue and Obligation*. While he was working on the essay, he sent a copy to Samuel Johnson, the renowned English essayist, and received a letter from Johnson in return thanking him for sending the work and remarking, "You have begun a work of great Labour."<sup>50</sup> Johnson then goes on to lament, "It is a pity Hutcheson is so obscure a writer," by which it is likely he meant Francis Hutcheson. It was not at all uncommon for individuals in this day to spell Hutcheson's name as Johnson did, and many who were quite familiar with his work did so repeatedly. John Witherspoon, the Scottish minister and eventual president at Princeton, who was quite familiar with Hutcheson and engaged in debates with him while he was still in Scotland, spelled Hutcheson's name incorrectly throughout his

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<sup>50</sup> Samuel Johnson to Thomas Clap, 6 July 1765, Thomas Clap Papers, Box 1 Folder 4, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library.

works. Hutcheson was also one of the central authorities on moral philosophy and the origin of virtue, so Clap's essay almost certainly dealt with Hutcheson's ideas on some level. Hutcheson's ideas, therefore, were present at Yale during Clap's presidency, and there is a strong possibility that Clap would have at least introduced his students to Hutcheson's work either through his lectures on ethics and moral philosophy<sup>51</sup> or through his evening lectures on civil government.

The overall course of instruction begun under Clap was continued under Naphthali Daggett, his successor as president at Yale. From the 1740s to the 1770s, the curriculum remained fairly constant. The college laws of 1774 outline the course of instruction, and it is remarkably similar to the instruction outlined in the laws of 1744. According to the 1774 laws, "In the first Year, the students are principally to learn the Tongues and Logic....The Second Year they recite Rhetoric, Geometry and Geography; the third natural Philosophy, Astronomy, and the other Branches of Mathematics; in the fourth Metaphysics and Ethics."<sup>52</sup> Again, there is no mention of specifically political courses of instruction, but in these years just before the Revolution it is known that Yale's students were politically active. In 1769, in response to the Townshend Duties, which taxed common goods like tea and paper that were imported to the colonies, the senior class at Yale agreed to attend their commencement wearing clothing produced entirely in the colonies.<sup>53</sup> More significantly, in 1774, in response to the Intolerable Acts passed by Parliament, students receiving their master's degrees from Yale debated "The Rights of America and the Unconstitutional Measures of the British Parliament."<sup>54</sup> In one of the leading centers of learning in America, a debate on the rights of the colonists and the unconstitutional actions of the British very likely included a discussion of the social contract and

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<sup>51</sup> Kelley, *Yale*, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup> The Laws of Yale-College in New-Haven, in Connecticut, Enacted by the President and Fellows (New Haven, 1774).

<sup>53</sup> Kelley, *Yale*, p. 83.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

the rights retained by men under governments. They certainly had both use of these arguments and access to them, since by this time pamphleteers were making serious use of such arguments in political debates, and as some of the most well-educated men in America, there is a good chance they were both aware of the ideas and familiar with them.

While it is quite difficult to prove that students at Yale knew of the leading political theories circulating throughout Europe and the colonies, there is every reason to believe they did. The official course of instruction rarely mentions specifically the works and authors that proved most useful for the American revolutionaries, but it is known that John Locke was taught at Yale since the 1730s and that throughout the 1740s, 1750s, and 1760s Thomas Clap lectured to his students on ideas of civil government. Furthermore, the library contained many of the most influential works and thus made the arguments readily available to the students. Perhaps most importantly, while there was necessarily a delay in transmitting ideas across the Atlantic Ocean, “the faculty familiarized the students with a significant number of [the] new theories [coming out of Europe], indicating that the rectors and tutors were in touch with the intellectual currents in old England and were ready and willing to channel those currents to their pupils.”<sup>55</sup> Especially in the buildup to the Revolutionary War, when arguments based on political philosophy and in support of independence, were so omnipresent and influential throughout the colonies, it is perfectly reasonable to assume that some of the most learned and well-educated men in America were familiar with Locke, Hutcheson, and other social contract theorists. And when ministers began to argue for independence from the pulpits, they had need of influential arguments to justify the colonial cause.

Some of the ministers who graduated from Yale in these decades went on to great prominence in the Revolutionary period. Abraham Keteltas, Jonathan Parsons, Gilbert Tennent,

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<sup>55</sup> Warch, *School of the Prophets*, p. 245.

Ezra Stiles, and Elihu Spencer all graduated from Yale between 1725 and 1752, and all were vocal supporters of the American Revolution from Presbyterian pulpits throughout the colonies. Some of them used political philosophy in their arguments, some did not, but it is likely that they all were introduced to these theories in their time at Yale. Jonathan Parsons attended Yale during the presidency of Elisha Williams, and so could very well have been introduced to Locke, while Abraham Keteltas, Ezra Stiles, and Elihu Spencer all graduated under Thomas Clap, and so likely heard many of the philosophical arguments in regards to government.

### **The College of New Jersey (Princeton)**

The early history of Princeton is intricately tied to the history of Yale, for six of Princeton's founders and its first three presidents were all Yale graduates. Records of the early history of Princeton are as scarce as those for Yale, though after 1768 and the arrival of John Witherspoon as president the historical records clearly illustrate that the students were educated in the most influential political philosophy of the day. But it is important to understand the course of instruction at Princeton throughout its early history, and not just after the arrival of Witherspoon, for no college provided more Presbyterian ministers committed to independence to pulpits throughout the colonies. Not only was Princeton a center of Presbyterianism in the colonies, but it also became a center of revolutionary fervor, and the two combined to produce a number of ministers – Nathaniel Whitaker, George Duffield, Hugh Henry Brackenridge, Israel Evans, William Linn – who were to become leading proponents of the American cause.

In the 1720s and 1730s, a wave of Scotch-Irish immigrants came to America and spread throughout the Middle Colonies. The vast majority of these immigrants were Presbyterians, and while this supplied a large number of new followers to the American Presbyterian churches, it

also created a need for ministers. Far more parishioners migrated than ministers, and the Presbyterian bodies had difficulty supplying ministers for these worshippers. One of the issues that made the supply of ministers much more tight was the Presbyterian emphasis on an educated ministry, something not unique to Presbyterians but particularly strong with them. A “learned ministry was the cornerstone of Presbyterianism, and if the colonial church was to continue to grow as it had in the past, better provision was needed for the training of young clergymen.”<sup>56</sup>

The Protestant denominations in colonial America were in constant battle over parishioners, and the Presbyterians wanted to ensure that the recent immigrants, and all other possible converts, were supplied with properly trained ministers, but they also remained deeply committed to high educational standards for their ministers. While the issue is certainly complicated by the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s that swept throughout the colonies, what is important here is that both sides in the Awakening, New and Old, continued to demand educated clergymen. While the Old Lights are often considered to have been more focused on traditional education than the New Lights, “[f]or all their emphasis on emotion and personal conversion, the New Side Presbyterians remained firm believers in an educated ministry, one grounded in classical studies, natural and moral philosophy, and divinity,”<sup>57</sup> just like the Old Lights. There thus arose amongst many Presbyterian leaders a movement to found a college to educate candidates for the ministry. The Synod of Philadelphia, at the time the highest Presbyterian body in the colonies, launched plans to found a seminary of learned in 1739, but the Great Awakening and the British war with Spain interfered with their plans.

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<sup>56</sup> Francis Broderick, “Pulpit, Physics, and Politics: The Curriculum of the College of New Jersey, 1746-1794,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 6, no. 1 (Jan. 1949), p. 43.

<sup>57</sup> Thomas Frusciano, “To Cultivate Piety, Learning, and Liberty: The College of New Jersey and Queen’s College, 1746-1794,” *Journal of the Rutgers University Library*, vol. 55, no. 2 (1993), p. 3.

In 1746, a group of New Light Presbyterians established a new institution of learning in Elizabethtown, New Jersey. They had grown disillusioned with Harvard and Yale because those two institutions were hostile towards revival meetings of New Siders, and they believed the course of instruction at Log College, one of the first revivalist centers of education, to be inadequate.<sup>58</sup> They made it their mission to found a new school, and the institution they founded would soon become the College of New Jersey and later Princeton University. Jonathan Dickinson, Aaron Burr, William Tennent, and others petitioned the governor of New Jersey for a charter to found a college, and, after several attempts, finally obtained a charter in October 1746. Jonathan Dickinson was elected the first president and the College of New Jersey was ready to train and educate students.

It is clear from Dickinson's records that the founders had as one of their principal aims the preparation of qualified candidates for the ministry. In a letter to Theophilus Howell, Dickinson stated, "Our Aim in the Undertaking is to promote the interests of the Redeemors Kingdom; and to raise up qualified Persons for the Sacred Service to supply the very numerous vacancies in all those Provinces as far as Virginia, with qualified Candidates for the Ministry."<sup>59</sup> But in a later letter, Dickinson, revealing the more secular side of the mission, stated, "we are by our Charter obliged to admit without Distinction, those of any & of every religious Profession to the Priveleges of a liberal Education....This is a natural right that cant be justly denied to any."<sup>60</sup> So not only did the College of New Jersey have to admit any applicants regardless of their denomination, thus limiting the ability to train students to become Presbyterian ministers, but

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<sup>58</sup> Undesignated encyclopedia entry, Jonathan Dickinson Records, Box 1, Folder 1, Princeton University Archives.

<sup>59</sup> ALS to Theophilus Howell, 30 Jan. 1746/7, Jonathan Dickinson Collection, Box 1 Folder 8, Princeton University Library.

<sup>60</sup> Letter concerning the proposed College of New Jersey, 3 Mar. 1746/7, Jonathan Dickinson Collection, Box 1 Folder 9, Princeton University Library.

Dickinson revealed his belief that all are entitled to the privileges of a liberal education. It was such an important element of preparing young men for success later in life that the college could not deny any men an education simply because they were not Presbyterians. Moreover, “From the well-known ability and learning of the President,...there can be no doubt that [the founders] sought to establish a curriculum which would compare well with those of the older colleges,”<sup>61</sup> namely Harvard and Yale. They were competing against the New England colleges and so it is likely that they provided at least a comparable level of instruction, especially since many of the founders were themselves graduates of Yale. Unfortunately, Dickinson died a year after assuming the presidency. Aaron Burr Sr., a fellow Yale graduate, and the man who ultimately moved the college to its location in Princeton, replaced him as head of the college.

Burr’s first act as president was to preside over the commencement in 1748. An indication of Burr’s goals for the college can be witnessed in his commencement address, in which he exalted the values of a liberal education. Burr spoke on “the manifold advantages of the liberal Arts and Sciences, in exalting and dignifying the humane Nature, enlarging the Soul, improving its Faculties, civilizing Mankind, qualifying them for the important offices of Life, and rendering them useful Members of Church and State.”<sup>62</sup> It seems then that Burr absorbed Yale’s valuation of a liberal education and sought to establish the College of New Jersey as a similarly strong center of learning so as to prepare its students not only for the ministry but also for various positions throughout society. The entrance requirements in these early years are also quite similar to those of Burr’s alma mater, as they required applicants to be able “to render Virgil and Tully’s Orations into English; and to turn English into true and grammatical Latin; and to be so well acquainted with the Greek as to render any part of the four Evangelists in that

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<sup>61</sup> John Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey: From its Origin in 1746 to the Commencement of 1854* (Philadelphia, 1877), p. 116.

<sup>62</sup> Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, p. 130.

language into Latin or English.”<sup>63</sup> Burr thus ensured that his students entered the college with a solid grounding in both secular and religious learning.

The records of the course of instruction under Burr indicate that he followed through on his goal of providing his students with a strong liberal education. Most of what is known about the curriculum under Burr comes from a series of letters sent from one of his students, Joseph Shippen, to his father. As a freshman, Shippen recounts, “At *seven* in the morning we recite to the President lessons in the works of Xenophon, in Greek, and in Watts’ ‘Ontology.’ The rest of the morning...we study Cicero de Oratore and the Hebrew Grammar...and now and then we learn Geography.”<sup>64</sup> In subsequent letters he mentions a need for Tully’s *Orations*, Gordon’s *Geographical Grammar*, Watt’s *Astronomy*, and books on logic, as well as his study of Virgil, Horace, Rhetoric, and Algebra. In his sophomore year, Shippen tells his father that he was studying Rhetoric, Ontology, Mathematics, and Natural Philosophy, including Astronomy.<sup>65</sup> In his junior year, Shippen writes to his father, “I am beginning to read Ethics (or Moral Philosophy), and shall have occasion for Grove’s 2 vols. on that branch.”<sup>66</sup> Shippen does not give an account of the course of study in his senior year, but from his letters it appears as if the first three years of study were quite intense and sophisticated. Other historical sources indicate that seniors continued their studies in moral philosophy, though there are few specifics as to what they read.<sup>67</sup> Students under Burr were therefore provided with an education of the classics (Cicero, Tully, Virgil, Horace), natural philosophy (Astronomy, Electricity), and moral

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<sup>63</sup> The Minutes of the Proceedings of the Trustees of the College of New Jersey, 1748, Board of Trustees Minutes and Records, Princeton University Library.

<sup>64</sup> Joseph Shippen to Edward Shippen, 13 February 1750, quoted in Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, pp. 140-141.

<sup>65</sup> Joseph Shippen to Edward Shippen, 19 April 1750 and 12 May 1750, quoted in Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, p. 141.

<sup>66</sup> Joseph Shippen to Edward Shippen, 2 December 1751, quoted in Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, p. 142.

<sup>67</sup> Broderick, “Pulpit, Physics, and Politics,” p. 50.



philosophy (Grove). It is in this last subject, moral philosophy, and Grove's book in particular, that Burr's students would have come into contact with some of the leading political philosophy of the day.

Burr corroborates his use of Grove's *Moral Philosophy* in letters of his own. Writing to Philip Doddridge in 1750, Burr asks, "I should be glad of your Opinion of Groves Moral Philosophy....He appears a man of great Ingenuity & Seriousness, but there are some things in his principles which he seems to affect to show in all his Writings, which I don't so well like."<sup>68</sup> Clearly Burr was using Grove in his classes on moral philosophy, though his attitude towards Grove was ambivalent. While Burr may have been of two minds on Grove, his use of the work introduced his students to many of the leading thinkers of the time, including Locke, Grotius, Pufendorf, Spinoza, and Hobbes. Grove cites Locke at least fourteen times, and devotes an entire chapter to Locke's notion of liberty.<sup>69</sup> Though his analysis is not always supportive of Locke's ideas, Grove offers a fairly thorough and sophisticated discussion of Locke's main principles. Grove's use of Hobbes is similarly extensive, with at least thirteen citations, and his analysis is similarly critical.<sup>70</sup> Grotius and Pufendorf are used much more favorably, though, interestingly, not as frequently, with only two direct citations of Grotius and three of Pufendorf.<sup>71</sup> Grove's discussion of these thinkers and their views on man's natural state, liberty, morality, and other significant topics, would have provided Burr's students with a solid foundation in the political theories espoused by these four men. Burr's own knowledge would have supported this education, since, according to his friend Ezra Stiles, a fellow Yale graduate and Presbyterian minister, and later the president of Yale, Burr was "A good classical scholar in the 3 learned

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<sup>68</sup> Aaron Burr to Philip Doddridge, 31 May 1750, Aaron Burr (1716-1757) Collection, Box 1, Folder 9, Princeton University Archives.

<sup>69</sup> Henry Grove, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1749), pp. 41-259.

<sup>70</sup> Grove, *Moral Philosophy*, pp. 83-440.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71-522.

Tongues...well studied in Logic, Rhetoric, Natural and Moral Philosophy, the belles lettres, History, Divinity, and Politics.”<sup>72</sup> Stiles’ standards would have been relatively high for his day, so his commendation of Burr indicates that Burr was most likely a very well-educated man who would have been able to discuss the European philosophers with his students in a sophisticated manner. Thus Burr’s attitudes towards liberal education; the entry requirements, overall breadth of the curriculum, and use of Grove’s work in moral philosophy during his presidency; and Burr’s own intellectual erudition make it highly likely that his students were both introduced to the leading political theorists of the day as well as offered a refined education in their arguments.

Supplementing this course of instruction was a gift of books received by the College of New Jersey in 1755 from Governor Belcher. While the availability of certain books in a college library does not guarantee that the students read the books and became familiar with their ideas, it does at least increase the possibility that such intellectual diffusion occurred. Governor Belcher donated many books to the college, of which the political books are of most interest. Added to the College of New Jersey’s library were Locke’s *Two Treatises of Government*, Montaigne’s *Essays*, Algernon Sidney’s works on government, and multiple Classical authors, including Sallust, Cicero, Plutarch and Horace.<sup>73</sup> This is by no means a comprehensive reading list of political theory, but it is still a valuable tool for any teachers or students wishing to learn more about influential political ideas, and it could only have aided in the college’s political education under Burr.

After Burr’s death in 1757, the Presidency of the College of New Jersey entered a rather unstable ten-year period. Immediately following Burr was Jonathan Edwards, the famed

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<sup>72</sup> Undesignated encyclopedia entry, Aaron Burr, Sr. Records, Box 1, Folder 6, Princeton University Archives.

<sup>73</sup> List of books donated to the College of New Jersey, 7 May 1755, Board of Trustees Minutes and Records, Princeton University Library.

revivalist of the Great Awakening, but Edwards died only months after taking office, and thus his impact on the college was fairly insignificant. Samuel Davies was elected to succeed Edwards, but Davies was only in office from 1758 to 1761. The records on Davies' time in office are quite sparse, so it is difficult to tell what, if any, influence he had on the curriculum. It is most likely that Davies maintained the curriculum established by Burr, for there is no mention of a change in the curriculum, but that is impossible to prove. The most useful records of Davies' attitude towards liberal education and its purpose comes through his 1760 address to the graduating class, titled *Religion and the Public Spirit*. In this address, Davies argues that the "Union of these two Qualities ever composes the truly good and useful Man; a proper Member of human Society,"<sup>74</sup> and thus Davies is concerned with preparing men for positions in colonial society outside of the ministry. He also argues that without a public spirit, "your Lives will be of little Use to the Community; and all the valuable Ends of a liberal Education, will be lost upon you."<sup>75</sup> This does not say much about the type of liberal education students received under Davies, but it does point to his belief that a liberal education was important for producing useful members of society. In this he agreed with the previous presidents of Princeton, and it is likely that he maintained the same curriculum as they established. A final telling line in the address is "Serve your generation. Live not for yourselves, but the Publick. Be...the Servants of your Country,"<sup>76</sup> which, again, does not elucidate the course of instruction under Davies, but it does demonstrate that he valued public service and active participation in public affairs. It is reasonable to assume that he prepared his students for such a life by providing them with at least some instruction in politics and moral philosophy.

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<sup>74</sup> Samuel Davies, *Religion and Public Spirit, A Valedictory Address, Delivered in Nassau Hall* (Princeton, 1760), p. 4.

<sup>75</sup> Davies, *Religion and Public Spirit*, p. 6.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

A bit more is known of Davies' successor as president, Samuel Finley, and there is a brief record of the curriculum during his term. Finley was known to be a very learned man, for he was the first American Presbyterian to receive an honorary doctorate in divinity from the University of Glasgow, which he did in 1763.<sup>77</sup> Under Finley, the Trustees also reasserted their mission of providing the colonies with useful, well-educated graduates: "Our idea is to send into the World good Scholars and useful members of Society."<sup>78</sup> The curriculum under President Finley will give some indication as to what the Trustees believed good scholars ought to know. The record of the Princeton curriculum under Finley is found in Samuel Blair's *An Account of the College of New Jersey*, a brochure produced to help raise funds for the college. According to Blair's record,

The Freshman year is spent in the latin and greek languages, particularly in reading Horace, Cicero's Orations, the Greek Testament, Lucian's dialogues, and Xenophon's Cyropaedia. In the Sophomore year, they still prosecute the Study of the languages, particularly Homer, Longinus, &c; and enter upon the sciences, geography, rhetoric, logic, and the mathematics. They continue their mathematical studies throughout the Junior year; and also pass through a course of natural and moral philosophy, metaphysics, chronology, &c....[T]he Senior year is entirely employed in reviews and composition.<sup>79</sup>

This is quite similar to the course of instruction under Burr, and thus likely includes some moral philosophy in the senior year as well while the students were reviewing their previous studies. It's similarity to Burr's also implies that the curriculum remained relatively constant from Burr to Davies to Finley, and that the students therefore probably received a solid education in moral philosophy and politics, though this cannot be proven.

The best records of the curriculum at Princeton come from the presidency of John Witherspoon, who migrated from Scotland to America to lead the college from 1768 to 1794.

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<sup>77</sup> *Universities and Their Sons* encyclopedia entry, Samuel Finley Records; Box 2, Folder 9; Princeton University Library.

<sup>78</sup> Undesignated encyclopedia entry, Samuel Davies Records, Box 2, Folder 9, Princeton University Library.

<sup>79</sup> Samuel Blair, *An Account of the College of New Jersey, in which are described the methods of government, modes of instruction, manner and expenses of living* (Princeton, 1764), p. 24.

Before crossing the Atlantic, Witherspoon was a prominent Presbyterian minister in Scotland. He was a member of the Popular Party of the Church of Scotland and was widely regarded as one of its leaders. His intellectual background, as a graduate of the University of Edinburgh and an acquaintance of many leading Scottish intellectuals, was quite formidable. All this made Witherspoon an attractive option for the Trustees of the College of New Jersey as they sought to find a replacement for Samuel Finley. In 1768, they were finally able to convince Witherspoon to leave Scotland and begin anew in America, and their selection proved an excellent one. Witherspoon became a monumental figure in early American history, in terms of his influence on American education, American Presbyterianism, and American politics, and he was the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. His impact on American education was immense, and the historical literature on Witherspoon is full of lofty praise for the Scotsman turned American. Many writings concerning Witherspoon's influence on Princeton claim that he "made Princeton the American center for the Scottish version of the Enlightenment and, during the Revolution, made the college a seminary of sedition."<sup>80</sup> The union of those two arguments provides fruitful analysis for the education of Princeton's students in revolutionary political philosophy.

Given his Scottish intellectual background, "few teachers of moral philosophy in America could match Witherspoon's background in the subject. He had been reared in Scotland, a nation rich in the tradition of moral philosophy,"<sup>81</sup> and his students became well versed in the subject as a result. His *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, which have survived from notes taken by students in the course, include the ideas of almost all the major thinkers of the time. Scotland was one of the centers of moral philosophy, and many of the major figures in the field were

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<sup>80</sup> Broderick, "Pulpit, Physics, Politics," p. 59.

<sup>81</sup> Jack Scott, introduction to *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, by John Witherspoon (East Brunswick, 1982), p. 26.

members of the Church of Scotland, so Witherspoon was quite familiar with them and their ideas. He brought this personal experience with him to America. A letter he wrote in 1772 to prospective donors and students in the West Indies provides a general view of the curriculum during his tenure. This *Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, and other West-India Islands*, outlines the four-year course of study:

In the first year they read Latin and Greek, with the Roman and Grecian antiquities, and Rhetoric. In the second...they learn a compleat system of Geography, with the use of the globes, the first principles of Philosophy, and the elements of mathematical knowledge. The third...is chiefly employed in Mathematics and Natural Philosophy. And the senior year is employed in reading the higher classics, proceeding in the Mathematics and Natural Philosophy, and going through a course of Moral Philosophy.<sup>82</sup>

It is as seniors that students at Princeton became most familiar with moral philosophy through President Witherspoon's lectures. Every year the seniors heard these lectures, and as they were the ones closest to entering colonial society, his lectures were likely to have a greater impact on them and their lives after college.

Witherspoon relied on many sources for his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*. In his lectures focused on political theory, Witherspoon drew upon "Lockean republicanism, Scottish Whiggism, Grotius-Pufendorf thought on international law, and even on the ideas of thinkers such as Montesquieu and Burlamaqui."<sup>83</sup> Of the Scottish Whigs, it was Francis Hutcheson who bore the greatest influence on Witherspoon, and nearly every lecture in *Lectures on Moral Philosophy* shows some element of Hutchesonian thought. Witherspoon begins his political lectures with a discussion of the state of nature, in which he mentions the views of Hobbes and Hutcheson. He raises the question of whether the state of nature is a state of war or a state of society, though he fails to provide an answer beyond saying both are correct: "Hobbes, an author

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<sup>82</sup> John Witherspoon, *Address to the Inhabitants of Jamaica, and other West-India Islands, in Behalf of the College of New Jersey* (Philadelphia, 1772), pp. 15-16.

<sup>83</sup> Scott, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 27.

of considerable note,...is a strenuous advocate for a state of nature being a state of war. Hutcheson...plead[s] strongly, that a state of nature is a state of society.”<sup>84</sup> Regardless of whether the state of nature is one of war or society, Witherspoon argues that “men are originally and by nature equal, and consequently free.”<sup>85</sup> In this he agrees with many of the social contract theorists, but this statement is most directly Lockean, for Locke claimed that “Men [are]...by nature, all free, equal, and independent.”<sup>86</sup> This is an important fundamental point, as it establishes much of the later argument about the social contract, principally that men enter into the contract as equals and that no man has full power over any other except by his consent.

The next step in his argument is a discussion of the rights one has in this state of nature. He distinguishes between perfect natural rights and imperfect natural rights, a distinction not made by Locke but made by Hutcheson, and thus this portion of the lecture is influenced by the Scot. The perfect natural rights, according to Witherspoon, are almost exactly those listed by Hutcheson. Where Witherspoon says that men have “a right to life,”<sup>87</sup> Hutcheson uses the same line.<sup>88</sup> Witherspoon then claims that every man has “a right to things that are common and necessary,” where Hutcheson claims that each man “has a natural right to the use of such things as are in their nature fitted for the common use of all.” Witherspoon continues and argues that men have “a right to associate...with any person or persons,” and Hutcheson claims that men have a “right to society with others.” In all, Witherspoon lists eight perfect natural rights, all eight of which are listed almost verbatim in Hutcheson’s work.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> John Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Jack Scott, ed. (East Brunswick, 1982), p. 122.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>86</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 340.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

<sup>88</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1760), p. 293.

<sup>89</sup> Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 293-299.

After expounding on man's natural rights, Witherspoon defines society as "an association or compact of any number of persons, to deliver up or abridge some part of their natural rights, in order to have the strength of the united body, to protect the remaining, and to bestow others."<sup>90</sup> This is a very Lockean description of the social contract theory. Locke argued that men join civil society "by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community, for their comfortable, safe, and peaceable living one amongst another, in a secure enjoyment of their properties."<sup>91</sup> Both authors argue that men voluntarily join into a single body to protect themselves and their property against others, and thus Witherspoon presents Locke's view of the social contract to his students.

Witherspoon then proceeds to defend the notion of the state of nature against its detractors, the most likely of whom was David Hume, who Witherspoon knew and who was a strong critic of the social contract theory. Hume had argued that should supporters of the social contract theory "look abroad into the world, they would meet with nothing that, in the least, corresponds to their ideas."<sup>92</sup> He argued that, for all the arguments in favor of the principle, there was no historical evidence of it: "over the face of the whole earth, there scarcely remain any traces or memory of it."<sup>93</sup> In the forming of new societies, Hume argues that it is not a social contract that unites men but rather "fear and necessity." Witherspoon seems to be responding almost directly to Hume when he argues, "Some say there is no trace or record of any such contract in the beginning of any society. But this is no argument at all, for things inseparable from, and essential to any state, commonly take place so insensibly, that their beginning is not

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<sup>90</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 123.

<sup>91</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 340.

<sup>92</sup> David Hume, *Of the Original Contract*, in David Wootton, ed., *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, 1996), p. 388.

<sup>93</sup> Hume, *Of the Original Contract*, p. 389.



observed.”<sup>94</sup> While this is not a particularly convincing argument, it is a direct response to Hume’s point. Witherspoon also attempts to defend against Hume’s argument that in new societies men are obedient out of fear: “in migrations and planting of colonies, in all ages, we see evident traces of an original contract and consent taken to the principles of union.” He is arguing that, in human migration and the establishment of new societies, men unite on agreed principles, not out of fear. Witherspoon’s view is much more principled while Hume’s is much more practical. The particular merits of the two arguments aside, this element of Witherspoon’s lecture reveal a direct engagement with Hume’s criticisms, and thus open up the Princeton students to Hume’s ideas.

As to the purpose of civil society, Witherspoon agrees with both Hutcheson and Locke, though more directly with Hutcheson. Witherspoon argued that “the public good has always been the real aim of the people in general, in forming and entering into any society.”<sup>95</sup> In this he is in near total conformity with Hutcheson, who claimed, “The natural end and sole purpose of all civil power...is the general good of the whole body.”<sup>96</sup> While Locke also argued that the sole end of society is the public or common good, there was an emphasis on the protection of property in his writing that was lacking a bit in the arguments of the others. To Locke, one of the central elements of protecting the public good is the protection of private property, but that is not a point emphasized by Hutcheson or Witherspoon, and thus Witherspoon is closer to Hutcheson in this area, though it is likely that Hutcheson himself was influenced by Locke’s argument to some extent.

Even though Witherspoon does not emphasize the protection of private property as a principal purpose of civil society, on the fundamental issue of a man’s right to his property,

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<sup>94</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 124.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>96</sup> Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, p. 221.

Witherspoon is in close agreement with Locke. Witherspoon argues that men acquire property through their “own industry” and that men may retain property for the “conveniency of life.”<sup>97</sup> This is the same argument made by Locke, who argues that men acquire property through their labor and that they keep it for the “conveniences of life.”<sup>98</sup> More importantly, especially for the eventual arguments of the colonists, Witherspoon replicates Locke’s argument that one man’s property cannot be taken by another: “Property implies a right of exclusion. We may hinder others from any way intermeddling with what is our property.”<sup>99</sup> This became an important argument for the colonists, and it is taken from Locke. After arguing that man’s labor creates his right to property, Locke stated that one man’s right to property “excludes the common right of other men,”<sup>100</sup> and thus no other man may claim any part of that property. In this, Locke and Witherspoon are in agreement, and Witherspoon even used some of the same wording as Locke.

Witherspoon’s discussion of the rights and forms of governments similarly relies on Locke and Hutcheson. His enumeration of the essential rights of rulers is taken almost entirely from Hutcheson. Witherspoon divides the rights of rulers into the essential and accidental, a distinction borrowed from Hutcheson, and he lists the essential rights as “(1.) Legislation. (2.) Taxation...(3.) Jurisdiction, or the administration of justice. (4.) Representation, or appearing and acting in name of the whole...chiefly for the purpose of making war and peace.”<sup>101</sup> These are the exact four rights that Hutcheson laid out.<sup>102</sup> But in claiming that the populace retains the right to resist the government should it pass the bounds of its authority, Witherspoon relies more on Locke’s theory of just resistance. Locke had argued that whenever a government tries “to

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<sup>97</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 127.

<sup>98</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 322.

<sup>99</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 128.

<sup>100</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 320.

<sup>101</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 141.

<sup>102</sup> Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 234-236.

take away and destroy the property of the people, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any farther obedience.”<sup>103</sup> Witherspoon presents the same idea in his lectures: “if the supreme power wherever lodged, come to be exercised in a manifestly tyrannical manner, the subjects may certainly if in their power, resist and overthrow it.”<sup>104</sup> Both men believed that when a government oversteps its bounds and violates the trust of the people by arbitrary theft of property, the people have a right to resist and alter the government. This is the fundamental right of resistance posited by most social contract theorists, and it all derives from man’s decision to grant power to a body for the sake of protecting his property. If that power then attempts to take his property, to which he has no right but by the subject’s consent, then the governmental authority is acting arbitrarily and is not a legitimate government any longer. But both Witherspoon and Locke agreed that granting such a right to subjects would not lead to anarchy and constant rebellion, for they both argued that it was only after a long train of abuses on the part of the government that the people would be roused to action.<sup>105</sup>

Witherspoon, therefore, was clearly influenced by Locke and Hutcheson in his beliefs on the social contract and the purpose of civil government. There are many other details that illustrate this relationship, but they need not be elaborated on here. What is important is that these thinkers, along with Hume and Hobbes, influenced Witherspoon, and that he transmitted these ideas to his students.

Witherspoon was also influenced by Grotius and Pufendorf in his beliefs on the laws of nations, now known as international law. Not only is the title of Witherspoon’s lecture on the subject, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations*, borrowed directly from Pufendorf’s work of the same

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<sup>103</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 378.

<sup>104</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 145.

<sup>105</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 379; Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, pp. 145-146.

name, but many of the ideas within it derive from the two earlier thinkers. Witherspoon begins by arguing, “I am not able to recollect any perfect or imperfect right that can belong to one man...but what can belong to nations...If we read over the perfect rights, in a state of natural liberty, we shall see they all apply to nations.”<sup>106</sup> In this he agrees with Pufendorf and not Grotius. Pufendorf had argued that the laws of nature applied to nations just as they did to men, while Grotius viewed some rights of nations as customary practices adopted over time that do not apply to men.<sup>107</sup> His theory of just war is adopted from Grotius, Pufendorf, and Hutcheson, though most directly from Hutcheson himself. According to Witherspoon, a war is just when there occurs “the violation of any perfect right – as taking away property of the other state, or the lives of its subjects.”<sup>108</sup> This is exactly what Hutcheson argued when he said, “The ordinary just causes of war are some violations of perfect rights.”<sup>109</sup> And in the manner of conducting a war, Witherspoon agrees with Grotius, that it must be by force and open violence, though Hutcheson also agreed on this.<sup>110</sup> There are other instances in which Witherspoon was influenced by Grotius and Pufendorf, but what is important is that he transmitted these ideas to his students through his lectures.

The end result of the lectures is a theory of government heavily influenced by the leading European Enlightenment thinkers, including Locke, Hutcheson, Grotius, Pufendorf, Montesquieu, Hume, Hobbes and others. All these theories were taught to the students at Princeton in Witherspoon’s class on moral philosophy, which all students were forced to take as seniors. The reading list for the class, as recorded by James Madison, the future framer of the

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<sup>106</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 150.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 156.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>109</sup> Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, p. 350.

<sup>110</sup> Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, p. 152; Hugo Grotius, *Of the Rights of War and Peace* (London, 1715), pp. 617-618; Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy*, p. 352.

Constitution and President of the United States, and a student of Witherspoon's at Princeton in the 1760s and 1770s, includes all the major works by these authors. The students were supposed to read Grotius' *The Rights of War and Peace*, Pufendorf's *The Whole Duty of Man*, Hobbes' *Leviathan*, Machiavelli's *The Prince*, Burlamaqui's *The Principles of Natural Law*, Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, Algernon Sidney's *Discourses Concerning Government*, Montesquieu's *Spirit of the Laws*, Hume's *Essays, Moral and Political*, and Hutcheson's *A System of Moral Philosophy*.<sup>111</sup> Thus students at Princeton not only heard about these thinkers in Witherspoon's lectures but read (or were supposed to read) the thinkers themselves in their major works. Witherspoon was providing his students with a solid foundation in Enlightenment political theory, much of which was later used to support the Revolution by both ministers and statesmen alike.

This reflects Witherspoon's belief that "the duty of any college, and especially of this one, was to prepare its students to fill not only sacred but also secular positions of colonial leadership,"<sup>112</sup> and in this he continued the long-held belief of the previous presidents at Princeton. But Witherspoon's record of success in this mission is quite strong, as many of his students became activists in the revolutionary cause and officials in the American government. Six students who studied under Witherspoon were members of the Continental Congress, twenty became U.S. Senators, twenty three served in the House of Representatives, twelve served as state governors, three served as justices on the U.S. Supreme Court, one served as Vice-President of the United States and one served as President of the United States.<sup>113</sup> Few could rival Princeton's record of producing leaders of the American Revolution and later the American

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<sup>111</sup> Dennis Thompson, "Bibliography: The Education of a Founding Father: The Reading List of John Witherspoon's Course in Political Theory," *Political Theory*, vol. 4, no. 4 (Nov. 1976), pp. 523-529.

<sup>112</sup> John Witherspoon, *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, Varnum Lansing Collins, ed. (Princeton, 1912), p. xi.

<sup>113</sup> Maclean, *History of the College of New Jersey*, pp. 359-360.

Republic. These men benefited from Witherspoon's teaching of political philosophy, and it is likely that those graduates who went into the ministry received the same political education as those who became leaders of the American government.

Throughout its history, the College of New Jersey provided its students with a strong liberal education in preparation for a career in the ministry or the state. Though the founders of the college were originally motivated by a desire to provide learned ministers to Presbyterian congregations throughout the colonies, they remained committed to providing useful men for all areas of American society. Burr and Witherspoon were the two most influential presidents in terms of shaping the curriculum, and both men were well versed in the field of moral philosophy and political theory. This learning was passed on to their students.

### **Conclusion**

Beyond the confines of Yale and Princeton, the colonists engaged in a serious dialogue with each other over the proper authority of the British government and the rights of the colonists against Parliament. Thousands of pamphlets, newspaper articles, books and essays attest to the extent of the colonial discourse, and permeating these works are the ideas of both Classical and Enlightenment philosophers. It is possible to trace the ideological influences of these colonial thinkers because “[t]hey liked to display authorities for their arguments, citing and quoting from them freely; at times their writings become almost submerged in annotation.”<sup>114</sup> A close analysis of the many works reveals two primary groups of sources: the classics of Greece and Rome and the European rationalist philosophers, though the Europeans proved more influential in determining the colonists' views than in providing mere explanations for them.<sup>115</sup> “Knowledge

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<sup>114</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 23.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23-26.

of classical authors was universal among colonists with any degree of education, and references to them and their works abound in the literature,”<sup>116</sup> and as the graduates of Yale and Princeton were some of the most well-educated men in colonial America, and were certainly given a heavy dose of the classics in their college curricula, they were certainly familiar with the arguments based on Classical literature. More importantly, however, were the European political philosophers. It was not only the leading American intellectuals who were familiar with these thinkers and who cited them in their works, but the “ideas and writings of the leading secular thinkers of the European Enlightenment...were quoted everywhere in the colonies, by everyone who claimed a broad awareness.”<sup>117</sup> It is highly unlikely that the ministers, so involved in colonial affairs and in the revolutionary movement in particular, could have avoided such ubiquitous philosophies. If the students did not learn political philosophy during college, they certainly confronted them in the public discourse, but few of the students at Yale or Princeton emerged from their undergraduate years without at least some sort of introduction to the political theory of the European Enlightenment.

The point here is not to argue that students at Yale and Princeton were entirely shaped by their education in political philosophy, or that they remembered everything they were taught. Rather it is to display they had been introduced to the ideas. Both universities saw it as their mission to prepare their students for life in religious or secular positions, and both universities produced many men of significance in both fields. Many of these men grew committed to the revolutionary cause and fought for American independence, either through their actions or their arguments. Both universities, as a result, could count amongst the leaders of the American cause many of their own graduates, in the government and in the ministry. The future ministers

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., pp. 23-24.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

learned the theories of government alongside the future statesmen. But even if they did not receive a full education in these ideas, or if they forgot them after graduation, they would have had a hard time escaping them in the years leading up to the war by the mere fact that thousands of pamphlets and newspapers included arguments that relied on these ideas. If any members of society could be expected to follow such arguments, it is the most learned and well-educated, and Presbyterian clergymen who graduated from Yale and Princeton were truly among the most learned and well-educated men in the colonies. This is all to illustrate that this group of American Presbyterian ministers lived in environments, both at their colleges and in colonial society as a whole, in which these ideas were present. In the books, in the minds of the presidents and tutors, and in the courses of instruction, political theory was present and active at the colonial colleges, and in the thousands of pamphlets and newspaper essays the same theory was circulating throughout the colonies. The ministers lived in both worlds throughout their lives, and it is almost certain that they were aware of the theoretical arguments that could be used to justify independence. The question is to what extent they actually used them.



## CHAPTER TWO INTELLECTUAL ARGUMENTS FOR INDEPENDENCE

Many scholars have argued that American ministers, of various denominations, were effective voices of Enlightenment political theory, particularly Whig liberalism. While studying at Yale and Princeton, American Presbyterians were introduced to many theories of politics, from the Classical theories arising out of Greece and Rome to the more recent Enlightenment theories circulating throughout Europe. But it was Whig liberalism that was most influential in the American Revolution, both in the pulpits and in more secular politics. American politicians and pamphleteers relied primarily on this branch of Enlightenment theory, discussed at greater length below, which essentially argued that individuals are born with inherent rights that all civil societies are designed to protect. This category of political philosophy proved extremely influential in more secular political circles, and so it might seem logical that it was influential in more religious circles as well, and it certainly was. A glance through some of the most influential Presbyterian sermons of the period before the Revolution reveals that these political theories were espoused from pulpits all over the colonies. References to natural rights and property abound in these sermons, but simply because the ideas were utilized by Presbyterian ministers does not mean that the ministers were effective voices of political philosophy.

The theories of John Locke, Francis Hutcheson, and Thomas Hobbes are extremely complex and these brilliant thinkers wrote several books in an attempt to explain their ideas. Social contract theory and the laws of nations are not self-explanatory theories about government; they are complicated arguments about how societies operate and how governments and citizens should interact. While their main principles can be summarized in far fewer pages than Locke's *Second Treatise on Government* or Hutcheson's *System of Moral Philosophy*, they

cannot be thoroughly understood by mere reference to the main terms, and that is often the extent to which many American ministers used political philosophy in their sermons. In general, the sermons may be full of references to rights and freedoms, but they are rather short on detailed analyses of the theories in relation to the American situation with Britain.

Yet the political philosophy of the Enlightenment nevertheless is an important element of the arguments for independence presented by American Presbyterian ministers, and therefore it must be addressed in any attempt to understand the role played by these clergymen in the fight for independence. Although the historical evidence is not as full as one would like, it seems clear that most future ministers were introduced to the theories of the Enlightenment while they were students at colonial colleges. The most is known about students who studied at Princeton under John Witherspoon, for his lectures have survived and clearly illustrate a thorough discussion of political philosophy. Men like Hugh Henry Brackenridge and William Linn listened to Witherspoon's lectures at least once in their college careers, and this is reflected in their sermons. Others, like Witherspoon himself, were undeniably scholars of the Enlightenment, as evidenced by their other works, and so were well acquainted with its political philosophy. Still others, like Nathaniel Whitaker or John Joachim Zubly,<sup>1</sup> reveal a very thorough knowledge of Enlightenment political theory in their sermons. These men are responsible for some of the most detailed discussions of political theory found in the body of Presbyterian sermons.

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<sup>1</sup> Zubly is an interesting case in the discussion of Presbyterian ministers and their role in fomenting rebellion because, while he provided many powerful arguments in favor of colonial rights and liberty, he did not ultimately support independence. He supported the cause of the colonists against Great Britain up until the decision to break free. Yet while he personally did not support independence, he offered many powerful defenses of colonial rights and criticisms of Parliament that could have easily been used to support independence on philosophical grounds.

The strength of the political theories was in their ability to provide American colonists with a method by which to conceptualize their struggle against Great Britain. Hearing Locke's or Montesquieu's theories of government provided the colonists with context, for they were not merely fighting a solitary fight against their king, but rather they were participating in a struggle that had been fought for centuries between rulers and ruled. They were part of a larger historical framework that provided them with strong, rational arguments to support their cause. Armed with the most influential theories of the day, they could defend their cause as representing far more than their personal self-interest and instead being about the protection of inherent rights and freedoms given to all men by God. Moreover, since many British politicians relied on this political ideology themselves, the Americans could use shared, commonly understood principles to justify their claims.

In this regard, American Presbyterian ministers did not differ significantly from American politicians and pamphleteers. Both groups were powerful voices for independence, and both used the same general arguments for the same general purposes. But overall the ministers differed significantly from their more secular counterparts in the degree to which they used the philosophy. Ministers might have used the same ideas to argue the same claims, but they did so in a far more superficial manner. Very few ministers delved into the depths of Enlightenment political theory, and even those who did, like Witherspoon or Whitaker, left out many significant details. Most ministers were content to reference natural rights or the social contract as a means to bolster their arguments with commonly circulating notions of government. They left the detailed discussions of these ideas and their implications for the American situation to more secular revolutionaries. But they referenced them nonetheless, and thus they played an important role in Presbyterian arguments for independence.

A second major difference between the sermons and the pamphlets was that the sermons typically were written not in response to specific acts of Parliament but to the overall relationship between Britain and America. Most pamphlets were written within a year or so of an important event in the buildup to the Revolution, like the passage of the Stamp Act in 1765 or the Intolerable Acts of 1774, and they addressed the specific ways in which they believed that act was unjust and the influence of that act on the relationship between the colonies and Britain. But the most significant sermons were preached in the period from 1774 to 1778, in the years most immediately surrounding the outbreak of war and the Declaration of Independence, and conspicuously not in response to specific Parliamentary acts. One of the few explicit references to an act of Parliament was Zubly's *The Stamp Act Repealed*, which celebrated the decision to abolish the act. Other Presbyterian ministers typically only referenced the Declaratory Act and its claim that Parliament "had, hath, and of right ought to have, full power and authority to make laws and statutes of sufficient force and validity to bind the colonies and people of America...in all cases whatsoever."<sup>2</sup> Several ministers used this statement as a symbol of the tyranny and oppression of the British government. But few ministers cited other laws, which suggests that they may not have been attempting to illustrate the unconstitutionality of the British Parliament with reference to its true actions, but rather using arguments grounded in political philosophy to convey the overall injustice of Parliament. By removing their arguments from the reality of specific acts of Parliament the ministers had greater freedom to claim that Parliament was tyrannical, for they were not constrained by the reality of the situation to the same degree as were politicians and pamphleteers, and instead they were able to present more ominous and emotive visions of British oppression. Yet despite the fact that most of the sermons came at a later date

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<sup>2</sup> *Declaratory Act*, quoted in Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 202.

and were not directly aimed at specific incidents, they still included the same general theories as the secular literature.

### **Social Contract Theory**

The most common theory used by ministers to justify American independence was the social contract theory, initially articulated by Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* and later by philosophers like Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. It was Locke's version of the social contract theory, however, as outlined in his *Second Treatise of Government*, that proved most influential in colonial America,<sup>3</sup> and it is Locke who was most commonly referenced by American Presbyterian ministers. Locke's theory of the social contract is quite similar to that outlined by John Witherspoon in his *Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, but it is worth revisiting the principal tenets in order to recognize the extent to which ministers relied on Locke.

Locke began his theory by positing men in the state of nature, in which men existed before the creation of civil society. According to Locke, and nearly all social contract theorists, the state of nature is a "state of perfect freedom." It was a state in which the "natural liberty of man is to be free from any superior power on earth." The state of nature was a "state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another." Men were created free and equal in this state of nature, and they had the right to use their power and possessions as they thought most desirable. They were ruled by the law of nature, which Locke argued was human reason, but there was no authority to rule over men and punish them if they acted unfairly towards their fellow men. The only authority any man had over another to enforce the law of nature was his own power: "the execution of the law of nature is, in that state, put into every man's hands, whereby every one has a right to punish the transgressors of that law

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<sup>3</sup> Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 30.

to such a degree, as may hinder its violation.” Men had the right to punish one another if any injustice occurred, but inevitably there would arise a conflict between men that could not be settled without resort to violence and death, for “it is easy to be imagined, that he who was so unjust as to do his brother an injury, will scarce be so just as to condemn himself for it.” The primary matter over which such conflicts would occur was property, one of Locke’s most important principles.

According to Locke, God gave the earth and all its resources to men as means to support their lives. But in order for men to enjoy the resources of the earth, they had to be able to ensure control over certain objects. As Locke put it, the fruits of the earth “being given for the use of men, there must of necessity be a *means to appropriate* them some way or other, before they can be of any use, or at all beneficial to any particular man.” If any man was to reap the benefits of the earth’s resources, he had to be able to control those resources for his own use. This was achieved through the establishment of private property. Men used their labor to turn soil and seed into wheat, and their labor gave them a right to that wheat: “Whatsoever then he removes out of the state that nature hath provided...he hath mixed his labour with, and joined to it something that is his own, and thereby makes it his property.” And, “[f]or this labour being the unquestionable property of the labourer, no man but he can have a right to [it],” meaning that the fruits of a man’s labor become his exclusive property.

In the state of nature, however, because every man is free and equal and there exists no greater authority to rule over men, the enjoyment of property is precarious. If every man is free and equal, then any man may seek to kill another man and take his property, for there is no greater power to stop him: “For all being kings as much as he, every man his equal, and the greater part no strict observers of equity and justice, the enjoyment of the property he has in this

state of nature is very unsafe, very unsecure.” Because men are reasonable creatures, and because they can all recognize the tenuous situation in which they reside regarding their property, they agree to unite together for the mutual protection of each other’s lives and property, and the power of the group becomes the guarantor of every man’s life and property. The group establishes neutral laws and authorities to adjudicate all disputes and to rule in an unbiased manner. Because no man can be trusted to be his own judge, men want “an established, settled, known law” and “a known and indifferent judge” to settle disputes and guarantee their property, and as a result they create a government to rule over the group. The “great and *chief end*, therefore, of men’s uniting into commonwealths, and putting themselves under government, is *the preservation of their property*.” But because men have natural freedom and equality, no man can be ruled by the government without his consent, and thus the legitimacy of a government rests on the consent of the governed: “Men being, as has been said, by nature, all free, equal, and independent, no one can be put out of this estate, and subjected to the political power of another, without his own consent.” Moreover, governments cannot take the property of their subjects, primarily through taxation, without the consent of their subjects: “The *supreme power cannot take* from any man part of his property without his own consent.” Again, the authority of the government, and the right to tax the people, rests on the consent of the governed.

In the case of government acting against the interests of the people, and in a manner that violated their rights, men retained the right to overthrow the government. Whenever “the *legislators endeavor to take away and destroy the property of the people*, or to reduce them to slavery under arbitrary power, they put themselves into a state of war with the people, who are thereupon absolved from any further obedience,” and thus power “devolves to the people, who have a right to resume their original liberty” and establish a new government. This is the notion

that subjects maintain the right to resist the government when it oversteps its boundaries and encroaches on the rights of the people. The right of resistance was perhaps the most important argument put forth by the American colonists in support of independence, though it was certainly not the only one.

### **Social Contract Theory and American Resistance**

Most Presbyterian ministers based their arguments, just like Locke, on the notion that all men have natural rights upon which governments cannot encroach. Many ministers made mention of natural rights in a rather superficial manner, as when John Carmichael merely mentioned the “natural and legal rights” that all men ought to protect.<sup>4</sup> Nathaniel Whitaker presented the most thorough discussion of natural rights, and he explicitly based his discussion on the theories of Locke. Whitaker claimed that every man, in his natural state, “is not hindered by any external force from acting as he chooses or wills to act,” and that all men have a right to “freedom of action and conduct.”<sup>5</sup> He even quotes Locke’s assertion that all men are free to order their actions as they think fit, and argues that, in their natural state, “all men are equal, and no one hath a right to govern or control another.”<sup>6</sup> But just like Locke, Whitaker argued that the total freedom and equality of this natural state contained its own problems, for the nature of man led to conflict between men that were resolved through conflict.

According to Whitaker, “the lusts and passions of men so blind their minds, and harden their hearts,”<sup>7</sup> that the freedom of the state of nature is undermined, as men seek the property of

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<sup>4</sup> John Carmichael, *A Self-Defensive War Lawful, Proved in a Sermon, Preached at Lancaster* (Philadelphia, 1775), p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> Nathaniel Whitaker, *An Antidote Against Toryism, or the Curse of Meroz*, in Frank Moore, ed., *The Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* (New York, 1862), p. 198.

<sup>6</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 198.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 198.



others. This results in the state of nature being “a state of war, rapine and murder.”<sup>8</sup> John Joachim Zubly agreed with Whitaker on this point. He claimed that the principle of liberty is complicated, “for were all men to live without restraint, as they please, there would be no liberty at all; the strongest would be master, ... [and] right, justice, and property must give way to power, and instead of its being a blessing, a more unhappy situation could not easily be devised unto mankind.”<sup>9</sup> Inherent in nature’s freedom is the ability for other men to undermine that freedom and overpower others, leading to what Whitaker termed a state of war and murder. In this imagination of the state of nature as a state of war, Whitaker and Zubly actually follow Thomas Hobbes more than they do Locke, for it is Hobbes who argued that the state of nature was a state of war, while Locke argued for a more peaceful image of the state of nature. Hobbes asserted that “during the time when men live without a common power to keep them all in awe, they are in that condition which is called war; and such a war, as is of every man, against every man.”<sup>10</sup> Because men were free and equal, and because they were in competition with one another for the resources of the earth, and there was nothing to stop them from killing each other to obtain one another’s property. In this state, “there is no place for industry; because the fruit thereof is uncertain,”<sup>11</sup> and the result was “continual fear, and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short.”<sup>12</sup> The state of nature presented by Whitaker and Zubly is more in line with the state of war presented by Hobbes than the state of nature, ruled by reason, presented by Locke. But Hobbes and Locke agreed on the crucial point that property could not be guaranteed in the state of nature, and that the result was the creation of civil society

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 198.

<sup>9</sup> John Joachim Zubly, *The Law of Liberty*, in Frank Moore, ed., *The Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* (New York, 1862), p. 120.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, in David Wootton, ed., *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, 1996), pp. 170-171.

<sup>11</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, p. 171.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

by a group of reasonable men and the mutual agreement to protect the property of each man in that society.

Whitaker argued that, because of the precarious situation of property, it was “an absolute necessity that societies should form themselves into public bodies, in order to enact laws for the public safety, and appoint some to put them in execution.”<sup>13</sup> This is the same idea proposed by Locke. Men desired laws and executive authorities to support those laws in order to protect their lives and property, and so they joined together in a social contract to form civil and political society. John Carmichael used this notion as well, and presented a nuanced image of the creation of the social contract and civil society: “men are under a necessity to part with some of their natural rights, to secure the rest.”<sup>14</sup> Men gave power to government to rule over them and protect their lives and property, and in so doing abridged some of their liberty to secure their livelihood. It is important to note that, while Carmichael does concede that men give up certain rights when they create civil and political society, they do so to retain others, and so there are certain rights that men never give up and upon which governments cannot infringe. Carmichael then agrees with Locke’s notion of the purpose of government when he claims that the original design of government is “the protection of the lives and properties of the people.”<sup>15</sup> Zubly concurs with Locke also, saying, “all laws ought to be made for the good of man.”<sup>16</sup> These three ministers thus argue that government is created to protect the lives and property of the men who enter into the social contract and give up some of their rights for the guarantee of others, and that the laws of the civil society into which they enter must be directed towards the public good. These claims all find their origin in social contract theory as it was espoused by Hobbes, Locke,

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<sup>13</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 198.

<sup>14</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> Zubly, *Law of Liberty*, p. 117.

or other philosophers, though the most influential theorist, and the only one explicitly cited by these ministers, was Locke.

Some Presbyterian ministers argued that civil society had another purpose, one rather different from the protection of the lives and property of its members. Borrowing from another major social contract theorist, Francis Hutcheson, these ministers claimed that civil society had as one of its goals the promotion of the happiness of the men in the society. The notion that government was supposed to promote the happiness of its subjects is altogether different from the claim that government must protect certain rights of its subjects, for one is about a state of mind or emotion while the other is about the ownership of certain resources or materials. But the emphasis on happiness was an important part of Hutcheson's theory, for "[n]o one did more in the eighteenth century to encourage the measuring of public happiness than did Francis Hutcheson."<sup>17</sup> The notion of happiness was an important part of Hutcheson's theory of moral philosophy, for he argued that men were virtuous towards one another because they ultimately wanted to promote happiness. But the idea was relevant in his political philosophy as well, as he claimed, "all wise and just laws have some tendency to the general happiness."<sup>18</sup> One of the aims of government, according to Hutcheson, was the promotion of public happiness, and some Presbyterian ministers used this argument in their sermons. Specifically, Whitaker and Zubly were the most explicit proponents of the importance of happiness. Whitaker claimed that the law of nature "requires all to exert themselves to promote happiness among mankind,"<sup>19</sup> and Zubly argued that "those laws and that form of government are undoubtedly best which have the greatest tendency to make all those that live under them secure and happy."<sup>20</sup> They thus posited

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<sup>17</sup> Gary Wills, *Inventing America: Jefferson's Declaration of Independence* (New York, 2002), p. 250.

<sup>18</sup> Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1755), p. 272.

<sup>19</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 216.

<sup>20</sup> Zubly, *Law of Liberty*, p. 118.

happiness as another goal that must be pursued by governments, in addition to the protection of life and property and the promotion of the public good.

In its attempt to protect the rights and freedoms of its subjects, government was forced to infringe upon certain other rights, as Carmichael pointed out, for men entered into civil and political society by sacrificing some rights for the protection of others. But because men were born free in the state of nature, the only method by which governments could legitimately restrict certain rights was by the consent of their subjects. The consent of the governed was thus an extremely important element of the social contract theory espoused by American Presbyterian ministers, and it was through this theory that the specific details of America's relationship with Great Britain became significant. While several ministers made brief references to the importance of consent, very few actually elaborated on the necessity of consent for legitimate government. Those who merely mentioned the idea of consent did so in a way that revealed their displeasure with certain Parliamentary acts, as opposed to those few ministers who included adequate explications of the necessity of consent in terms of political theory. Once again, Nathaniel Whitaker offers the most thorough discussion of the importance of dissent, though Hugh Henry Brackenridge utilizes the theory as well. Brackenridge's use of the idea of the consent of the governed is rather brief, but he still makes the point. He claimed that the "consent of the governed, is that which gives to any one, a right to...authority"<sup>21</sup> in any state or society. Whitaker presented a more lengthy discussion of the need for consent, though his basic point was the same as Brackenridge's, and both relied on the social contract theorists like Locke or Hutcheson. According to Whitaker, God creates men with an inherent liberty that "no power on earth may lawfully abridge, but by their own consent."<sup>22</sup> With this he establishes the principle

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<sup>21</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses Founded on the Scripture* (Lancaster, 1778), p. 35.

<sup>22</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 200.

that the legitimacy of a government rests on the consent of those it governs. He later applies this principle to the situation between America and Britain and argues that the British oppressed the Americans once it overstepped its boundaries and lost the consent of the American people. Whitaker argued that that Americans had “been long oppressed by a power that never had any equitable right to our land, or to rule over us, but by our own consent....When they violated this, all their right ceased.”<sup>23</sup> The British were legitimate rulers over America only as long as they maintained the consent of the American colonists, but once they lost this consent their claim to authority over the colonies ceased. Because the British did not uphold the aims of government – most specifically the protection of the people’s property – it lost the consent of those it governed and ceased to exert legitimate authority over the Americans.

Britain lost legitimate authority because it violated the principles of just government, mainly Locke’s trinity of life, liberty, and property. Locke had argued that men united “for the mutual preservation of their lives, liberties, and estates,” which he also called property.<sup>24</sup> Once the government infringed upon these rights, it ceased to be legitimate. American Presbyterian ministers used Locke’s trinity in their sermons to outline the essential rights that governments must protect if they are to remain effective and legitimate, and they claimed that the British sought to violate these rights. Carmichael argued that the British government broke the contract between itself and the American people, and in its “lust for absolute dominion,” the British created a situation in which the Americans “have no security, for either life or property, but the mere sovereign pleasure of the absolute rulers.”<sup>25</sup> The pleasure of the ruler was not a sufficient guarantor of life and property, and without adequate security of those two essential rights, a government could not be trusted, and therefore was owed no loyalty. Hugh Henry Brackenridge

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., p. 204.

<sup>24</sup> Locke, *Second Treatise*, p. 349.

<sup>25</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 12.

used the same line of argument to condemn the British government. He asserted that King George made war upon the colonists “because they refuse to live precariously by his bounty, and to hold their property, liberty, and life, intirely [sic] at his disposal.”<sup>26</sup> Brackenridge referenced the idea that in the state of nature, man’s control over his property was precarious, and his use of the term in this statement might seem to imply that the Americans were no better under British rule than if they lived in the state of nature, for the King sought complete control over their lives, liberty, and property. These were the three natural rights that men retained in any political society, and a government that sought to violate them was unjust and corrupt. The two most serious violations of the British government against the rights of the Americans, according to the Presbyterian ministers, were against liberty and property.

Many Presbyterian ministers believed liberty was one of the most important principles in American society. John Witherspoon compared the British colonies in North America to the colonies of other European states and argued that the reason the British colonies were more prosperous and sophisticated was that they enjoyed greater liberty. The answer must be “resolved singly into the degree of British liberty which they brought from home.”<sup>27</sup> The British colonies were the most successful because they enjoyed the most free form of government. This is a relatively simple declaration of cause and effect, and Witherspoon does not support this claim with much evidence, but it does reveal that he believed liberty to be an essential component of the success of American colonial society. Abraham Keteltas provided a longer ode to liberty, though his main point was the same as Witherspoon’s. He argued, “Liberty is the parent of truth, justice, virtue, patriotism, benevolence, and every generous and noble purpose of the soul. Under the influence of liberty, the arts and sciences, trade, commerce, and husbandry

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<sup>26</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 6.

<sup>27</sup> John Witherspoon, *An Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America* (London, 1778), p. 8.

flourish.”<sup>28</sup> His claim that art, science, and commerce flourish under liberty was a common claim of most supporters of republican forms of government, and it can be found in some of the Classical writings of the Greeks and many of the treatises of the Enlightenment. David Hume provided one of the more articulate defenses of the importance of liberty for the flourishing of the arts. His analysis of history and the rise and fall of various civilizations led him to the conclusion that the arts were best fostered in free states, at least in their infancy. “[I]t is impossible for the arts and sciences to arise at first among any people unless that people enjoy the blessing of a free government,”<sup>29</sup> and because American society was still young, it needed to be free so that the arts and sciences could begin to develop. Thus freedom was important to the American Presbyterian ministers because they felt it would nurture a more sophisticated culture.

Liberty was also important because civil liberty was the only guarantee of religious liberty, and in the multi-denominational American colonies freedom of religion was extremely important. One of the causes that served to unite American Presbyterians was the threat posed by Anglicanism and the potential establishment of an Anglican bishop in America. In the eyes of many colonists, this would amount to the establishment of an official religion in America and would forever threaten the other Protestant sects, including the Presbyterians. These fears were not entirely unfounded, for Anglican power had often impeded the efforts of Presbyterians to found churches or expand into new regions. Presbyterians, and the Presbyterian clergymen in particular, recognized that the “refusal by colonial governments to grant charters to local Presbyterian congregations was usually traceable to the pressure of Anglican clergy.”<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Abraham Keteltas, *God Arising and Pleading His People's Cause*, in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, 1998), pp. 597-598.

<sup>29</sup> David Hume, *Of the Rise and Progress of the Arts and Sciences*, in Charles Hendel, ed., *David Hume's Political Essays* (New York, 1953), p. 112.

<sup>30</sup> Leonard Trinterud, *The Forming of an American Tradition: A Re-examination of Colonial Presbyterianism* (Philadelphia, 1949), p. 206.

Protestant sects competed for parishioners in colonial America, and because the Anglican Church was the official church of the British Crown, the Anglican clergy were able to use their connections to the British political authorities to gain certain privileges or undermine the efforts of other denominations. Competition between Anglicans and Presbyterians created strong tension between the two groups, and Anglican attempts to deny charters to the College of New Jersey and the Presbyterian Church in New York City helped fuel this hostility. When the Anglican clergy pushed for the creation of an American bishop in the 1760s, the Presbyterians put forth stiff resistance. To many American Presbyterians, an Anglican bishop represented a threat to the future of Presbyterianism in the colonies, and the ties between the Anglican Church and the British government made Americans suspicious that Parliament was seeking to infringe upon their religious liberties as well as their civil liberties. If the British government supported the creation of an American bishop, it could be part of an attempt to assert religious as well as political control over the colonies. Though the British government eventually decided against the creation of an American Anglican bishop, an “important result of the controversy over the episcopate was that the Presbyterian and Congregationalist Churches had become fully convinced that religious liberty for them stood or fell with the civil liberties of the colonies.”<sup>31</sup> This was reflected in the sermons of many American Presbyterian ministers.

John Witherspoon provided the most powerful defense of civil liberty as a means of protecting religious liberty. He argued that “[t]here is not a single instance in history in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.”<sup>32</sup> The two were intimately tied together, but religious liberty was the more significant liberty, for civil liberty only affected

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<sup>31</sup> Trinterud, *Forming of an American Tradition*, p. 241.

<sup>32</sup> John Witherspoon, *The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men*, in Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, vol. 1 (Indianapolis, 1998), p. 549.



one's life on earth while religious liberty affected one's eternal future in the afterlife. It was therefore of the utmost importance that Americans preserved their religious liberty, and the only way they could do so was to ensure their civil liberty. The cause of liberty was strengthened through its connection to freedom of religion, and Witherspoon ended the *Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men* with a powerful statement in support of both: "God grant that in America true religion and civil liberty may be inseparable, and that the unjust attempts to destroy the one, may in the issue tend to the support and establishment of both."<sup>33</sup> He hoped that British encroachments on either civil or religious liberty would awaken colonists to the connection between the two and lead Americans to resist British authority and ensure the survival of both forms of liberty.

American Presbyterian ministers not only condemned British encroachments upon colonial liberty, however, but also on colonial property, and the defense of property was the second, and perhaps most important, element of Locke's trinity in the sermons of Presbyterian ministers. Those ministers who argued that the British were violating the property rights of the Americans, and that they were doing so without the consent of the colonists, relied heavily on Locke's theory of property. In *Dominion of Providence*, Witherspoon stated, "Would any man who could prevent it, give up his estate, person, and family, to the disposal of his neighbour, although he had liberty to chuse the wisest and the best master? Surely not."<sup>34</sup> This was the root of the controversy between America and Great Britain, since the Americans were free in their person and property but the British sought to take the property of the colonists. Witherspoon established that the Americans had a right and responsibility to protect their inherent rights, and while he focused on property at various points in his sermon, other ministers made the point

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<sup>33</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 558.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 550.

more animatedly. Hugh Henry Brackenridge presented King George as trying to take the property of the Americans so he could spend it on his greedy supporters. Brackenridge argued that the King was trying to create a situation in which, “without restraint of law, he could take away the property of any, and spend it on his favourites.”<sup>35</sup> William Linn provided a more evocative depiction of the greed and corruption of the British. For his parishioners, he painted a simple image of the past and future under British rule: “your money, which you had earned by the sweat of your brow, wretched from you, you know not why nor for what.”<sup>36</sup> The hard labor of the Americans had provided them with property, and as this property accumulated into larger and larger sums, the British looked upon it with envy. The British attempted to acquire some of this wealth, in complete violation of the Americans’ right to property, and thus the consent of the governed was overstepped and the bonds of loyalty between America and Britain were dissolved. The Americans were then justified in resisting British authority and seeking independence.

While most American Presbyterian ministers argued that the Americans had a right to resist the British government, many of them first had to get over their loyalty to the king, and this difficulty in breaking allegiance to the king is likely an influence of political Calvinism. While John Calvin is best remembered as a religious figure, he was also a very important political figure, and many of his writings contain important principles of political theory. Some of Calvin’s arguments formed the basis for future theories on government, but his claims that men must be obedient to their rulers no matter how wicked they might seem was at odds with most social contract theorists. According to Calvin, God chose certain men to be political rulers, and thus every king was ordained a legitimate ruler by God. This was the basic notion of the divine right of kings, which had been used to support absolute monarchy in early modern European

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<sup>35</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 51.

<sup>36</sup> William Linn, *A Military Discourse, Delivered in Carlisle* (Philadelphia, 1776), p. 12.

history, but it had been discarded in British political discourse long before the American Revolution. Because God appointed the ruler, Calvin argued that “the magistrate cannot be resisted without God being resisted at the same time,”<sup>37</sup> and so subjects of a king did not have the right to resist him, no matter how oppressive he was as a ruler. Calvin admitted that many kings will seek power beyond what is in the interests of their people, but, speaking to the subjects of kings, he asserted, “it will not be your part to restrain [kings]; you will have only this left to you: to obey their commands and hearken to their word.”<sup>38</sup> Yet Calvin complicates this argument by claiming that, at certain times, God will grant His people the right to overthrow a ruler, as He did with Moses and the Israelites when they fled from the power of Pharaoh. These men, “sent by God’s lawful calling to carry out such acts, in taking up arms against kings, did not at all violate that majesty which is implanted in kings by God’s ordination; but, armed from heaven, they subdued the lesser power with the greater.”<sup>39</sup> There are times when, with God’s support and approval, men may resist the tyranny of their king and either overthrow him or seek independence, but without such approval men are not allowed to resist their king. Calvin’s notion of obedience to unjust kings is thus rather unclear, and the legitimacy of resistance to rulers is entirely dependent on whether men have the support of God in their fight against the king. This would become an important point in the emotional and religious arguments for independence, but in terms of political philosophy this unclear relationship between men and king is apparent in the sermons of several Presbyterian ministers.

Joseph Montgomery and John Carmichael illustrated this complicated relationship between unjust ruler and loyal subjects, and they often tried to transfer responsibility for laws

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<sup>37</sup> John Calvin, *On Civil Government*, in David Wootton, ed., *Modern Political Thought: Readings from Machiavelli to Nietzsche* (Indianapolis, 1996), p. 115.

<sup>38</sup> Calvin, *On Civil Government*, p. 117.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

that violated the rights of the colonists from the king to the parliament. Montgomery asked God “to bless our rightful Sovereign, King George the Third, and inspire him with wisdom to discern and pursue the true interest of all his subjects.”<sup>40</sup> He then claimed that “there never was a people more strongly attached to a King than the Americans were to the illustrious house of Hanover,”<sup>41</sup> of which George was a member. Montgomery was clearly not ready to propose outright resistance to King George a year before independence was declared, and his excessive displays of loyalty to the king may have their roots in Calvin’s demand that subjects remain obedient to their rulers, no matter how unjust their rule might seem. Carmichael was similarly loyal to King George, though his arguments reflected some of the uncertainty of Calvin’s theory. Carmichael told his parishioners, “You must still continue to revere royalty, and observe your allegiance to the King, on the true principles of the constitution. Your drawing the sword now must not be against the person of his Majesty, but the mal-administration of his government.”<sup>42</sup> Thus Carmichael advocated independence and resistance to the British, but not against the king specifically. It was a fine line he attempted to walk, and it may have had its roots in Calvin’s political theories as well, for he did not disavow all resistance to government, but he included certain qualifications that might validate that resistance.

Despite the hesitation of some ministers to encourage outright resistance to the British, the majority used the theory of the right of resistance, as espoused by Locke and other social contract theorists, to justify their attempts at independence. Once again, it was Nathaniel Whitaker who provided the most thorough and articulate defense of the Americans’ right to resist Great Britain. Because men joined into civil society and established government to protect their

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<sup>40</sup> Joseph Montgomery, *A Sermon, Preached at Christiana Bridge and Newcastle* (Philadelphia, 1775), p. 8.

<sup>41</sup> Montgomery, *Christiana Bridge and Newcastle*, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 30.

lives and property, Whitaker argued, “when those appointed to enact and execute laws, invade [civil] liberty, they violate their trust, and oppress their subjects, and their constituents may lawfully depose them by force of arms.”<sup>43</sup> The attempts of the British to tax the colonists and acquire their property unlawfully were invasions of the colonists’ civil liberty, and thus the Americans could lawfully depose them through armed resistance. It was the British who had acted unrightfully, for “usurpation or oppression, is offensive war, already levied,” and any rulers who, “by wanton use of their power, oppress their subjects, do thereby break the peace, and commence an offensive war. In such a case opposition is merely self-defence.”<sup>44</sup> The British had dissolved the bonds of loyalty from American subjects to British government, and the Americans were trying to defend themselves and their natural rights against an aggressive attack by the British. It was the British who had broken the contract between rulers and ruled, and so power devolved to the American people, who then had a right to resume their original liberty and establish a new legislative. This is exactly the theory presented by Locke in his discussion of the dissolution of government, and Whitaker, who had already cited Locke, followed it perfectly. Whitaker even claimed that it was not only the lawful right of the Americans to resist the British, but that it was their duty to do so: “any people may lawfully, and it is their duty to, levy war on those who rob them of their rights.”<sup>45</sup> Political theory thus not only allowed resistance on the part of the Americans, but it required it, for the basis of human nature and of civil society was the protection of natural rights, and when those rights were invaded it was the obligation of all men to defend them.

John Carmichael argued this same point. He said that, in the current conflict between America and Great Britain, the American people “are under a disagreeable, but pressing

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<sup>43</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 199.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 206.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 205.

necessity, rather than be crushed by an iron rod, to re-ascertain their own just rights; and stand forth all of them to oppose such tyranny.”<sup>46</sup> The resistance of the Americans was self-defense, and it was their responsibility to protect their just rights against the tyranny of the British government. It was thus that American Presbyterian ministers used social contract theory – and its notions of natural rights, the consent of the governed, and the right of resistance – to justify their opposition to the British and their attempts to acquire independence from Parliament and the crown. This line of argument proved to be quite powerful and was the most frequent philosophy used by American Presbyterian ministers to defend the American cause, just as it was the most common theoretical defense of the American cause in the secular literature of the politicians and pamphleteers. But it was not the only category of political philosophy used by Presbyterian ministers. There was a small, but significant and interesting, body of arguments that relied on economics, and principally on the theories of David Hume and Adam Smith.

### **Colonial Economic Theory**

David Hume was one of the most important moral and political philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment, and, while his moral philosophy was too skeptical for American tastes, his theories on economics proved quite influential. John Witherspoon even included an explicit reference to Hume’s essay *Of the Jealousy of Trade* in one of his addresses. Hume’s relevance to the relationship between America and Great Britain arose partially through his denunciation of the set of economic policies adopted by the British that determined the manner of trade between America and Great Britain. For decades, Britain had imposed a fairly restrictive set of economic policies on the American colonies and had limited their trade in an attempt to monopolize trade with their colonies. They recognized that British North America would eventually become quite

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<sup>46</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 12.

prosperous, due to its natural resources and the industry of its inhabitants, and they wanted to ensure that they, and not their European competitors, benefited from trade with the American colonies. British mercantilist policies ordered that Americans export certain goods to and import certain goods from Great Britain exclusively, and the British government put tariffs on many goods the Americans had to import from the mother country. While the Americans accepted these policies for the most part, there arose over time an increasing dissatisfaction with the limitations on their trade, and many Americans believed that these restrictions slowed the growth of the American economy. Hume agreed and argued against the “narrow and malignant” policies the British had practiced, claiming that “the encreases of riches and commerce in any one nation, instead of hurting, commonly promotes the riches and commerce of all its neighbors.”<sup>47</sup> The reason why states benefited from having wealthier neighbors was that, in order to trade goods, both states needed to have enough wealth to buy or trade objects of value. It would do Britain little good to repress American manufacturing in order to protect British manufacturing if the result of repressing American manufacturing was that the Americans could not accumulate enough wealth to buy the goods produced in Britain. Hume recognized how interconnected national economies were, and he presented a fairly simple image of what might happen if British mercantilism continued:

Were our narrow and malignant policies to meet with success, we should reduce all our neighbouring nations to the same state of sloth and ignorance that prevails in Morocco and the coast of Barbary. But what would be the consequence? They could send us no commodities: They could take none from us: Our domestic commerce itself would languish.<sup>48</sup>

Hume believed that free trade would benefit Britain as well as its trading partners. Mercantilism was a flawed policy that ultimately hurt all parties involved.

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<sup>47</sup> David Hume, *Of the Jealousy of Trade*, in Eugene Miller, ed., *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary* (Indianapolis, 1987), p. 328.

<sup>48</sup> Hume, *Jealousy of Trade*, p. 331.

Adam Smith agreed, and he argued against mercantilist policies in his work as well, perhaps most famously in the *Wealth of Nations*. According to Smith, mercantilism was flawed because it placed unjust restrictions on American trade and because it was not a sustainable policy over the long term. He argued, “In their present state of improvement, those prohibitions, perhaps, without cramping their industry, or restraining it from any employment to which it would have gone of its own accord, are only impertinent badges of slavery....In a more advanced state they might be really oppressive and insupportable.”<sup>49</sup> The policies were already detrimental to the Americans, according to Smith, and if they continued then they would be even more unjust and destructive. Yet while he criticized the British economic policies for their impact on America, he also warned against the negative impact they had on Great Britain itself, and in this he was in agreement with Hume.

Smith claimed that, while the British gained from their trade with the colonies, they could have gained more if they had adopted a different policy. British manufacturing would have grown faster without mercantilism, even though it still grew under mercantilist policies: “if the manufactures of Great Britain...have been advanced, as they certainly have, by the colony trade, it has not been by means of the monopoly of that trade, but in spite of the monopoly.”<sup>50</sup> Smith was a firm believer in the importance of competition for economic development, and the monopoly Britain had on trade with the American colonies allowed certain British merchants and manufacturers to escape the pressure of competition. This ultimately slowed British economic growth. A second consequence was that the British economy was less stable because it had grown to rely too much on one trading partner. The whole British system of “industry and commerce has thereby been rendered less secure; the whole state of her body politic less

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<sup>49</sup> Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (London, 1895), p. 239.

<sup>50</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, p. 252.



healthful, than it otherwise would have been.”<sup>51</sup> Smith believed that both Britain and America would benefit from more free trade.

The principal example of these notions of free trade being espoused by American Presbyterian ministers comes from John Witherspoon. His *Address to the Natives of Scotland Residing in America* most explicitly uses Hume’s theories, but Smith seems to have been influential as well. Using Hume’s argument that the wealth of a nation is tied to the wealth of its neighbors, Witherspoon argued, “The success and increase of one nation is, or may be, a benefit to every other.”<sup>52</sup> If America were more prosperous, then Britain would benefit and become more prosperous as well. And according to Witherspoon, the method by which America would become more prosperous was political freedom. He asserted, “nothing contributes so much to the prosperity of a people, as the state of society among them, and the form of their government. A free government overcomes every obstacle, makes a desert a fruitful field, and fills a bleak and barren country with all the conveniences of life.”<sup>53</sup> If America obtained its independence, it would prosper even more than it already had, and Britain would benefit as well. Witherspoon made this point by asking, “If the trade of America has hitherto been so great a benefit to England, how much more valuable may it be, when this country shall be still more highly improved?”<sup>54</sup> If America did not obtain its independence, then Witherspoon imagined its future much like Hume imagined Morocco in his essay: “the people...would sensibly decrease, their wealth would be speedily exhausted, and there would remain only a nominal authority over a desolate country.”<sup>55</sup> Both Britain and America would benefit from American independence,

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 249.

<sup>52</sup> Witherspoon, *Address to the Natives of Scotland*, p. 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

according the Witherspoon, as their domestic economies would grow and the trade between them would increase.

The only potential loss to Britain was the loss of exclusive trading rights with America, though even this Witherspoon did not consider a valid concern. He believed that American trade “will be as open to [the British] as ever. But it will be said, ‘They have now an exclusive trade; they will then but share it among other nations.’ I answer, an exclusive trade is not easily preserved; and when it is preserved, the restriction is commonly more hurtful than useful.”<sup>56</sup> In this claim Witherspoon seems to be following Smith’s arguments about the costs of British restrictions on American trade. Witherspoon alleged that it would be costly and difficult for Britain to maintain its exclusive trade with America, and that even if they maintained it they might actually undermine their efforts at economic growth. Free trade would benefit Britain more and it would be easier to open up trade than to fight to retain exclusive trading privileges.

One of the few explicit references to a specific act of Parliament, Zubly’s *The Stamp Act Repealed*, used arguments about the benefit of free trade to support the repeal of the act. The Stamp Act, imposed on the colonies in 1764 to raise revenue after the costly French and Indian War, was the first act of Parliament that placed a direct tax on the American colonists, and as a result it met with a great deal of colonial opposition. Americans resented the restriction of their economic activity, as the act required that many commercial items – such as permits, legal documents, or commercial contracts – carry a tax stamp. Zubly, reflecting the opinions of many American colonists, called the law “An unhappy ill-advised act of the British legislature,” and celebrated its abolition as “a just, noble, and generous repeal of that ill-concerted measure.”<sup>57</sup> It was unjust, according to Zubly, because it placed excessive burdens on the colonists that were

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 16.

<sup>57</sup> John Joachim Zubly, *The Stamp Act Repealed* (Savannah, 1766), p. 5.

designed to benefit the British. Parliament hoped it could extract greater resources from the colonies and so it began to tax them directly. As Zubly claimed, “unreasonable burdens are laid upon some to procure the ease of others.”<sup>58</sup> These burdens made it difficult to do business in America and so American industry and commerce suffered, according to Zubly. Direct taxes on fundamental elements of commerce, like permits or contracts, restricted trade and led to economic stagnation in America. After the repeal, however, “there is hire again for man and beast, . . . our ports are open, our trade unmolested.”<sup>59</sup> Such was the negative impact of restricting free commercial activity in the colonies, according to Zubly, and thus he used arguments about the benefit of free trade and unrestricted commerce, borrowed from philosophers like Hume and Smith, to criticize the Stamp Act.

But Zubly utilized another set of arguments, based on economic activity, which had its roots in the Enlightenment. One of the principal ideals of the Enlightenment was that humans and human society could progress and improve over time. If individuals became more virtuous and sophisticated, then society would follow. American Presbyterian ministers borrowed this line of thinking to advocate increased virtue in the colonies, but not always in a religious sense. Often times, ministers demanded individual virtue in order to improve American society overall, and one of the areas in which their preaching was relevant was economics. If America was to continue to progress and realize its potential, its citizens had to embrace hard work and frugality, and only then could American society become stronger and more prosperous. While some ministers focused on the responsibility of individual colonists for improving American society, Zubly focused on the impact of trade restrictions on the health of American society, and in so doing seemed to place the burden of social decay on policies like the Stamp Act. As he claimed,

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<sup>58</sup> Zubly, *Stamp Act Repealed*, p. 11.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

when the economy stagnated, it would affect the entire society: “if a remedy is not speedily found out and adhibited, it must affect every part of the whole, and the whole gradually fall into decay and consumption.”<sup>60</sup> Economic strength protected against social decay and a decrease in individual virtue, and the removal of trade restrictions, such as the Stamp Act, allowed for greater economic activity and development.

Other ministers seemed to reverse the causal relationship between social decay and economic vitality, arguing instead that the strength and prosperity of society depended on individual virtue. Joseph Montgomery and John Witherspoon provided the two best examples of such claims. Montgomery imagined a prosperous future for America, one in which, by “the exercise of industry, frugality, and public virtue, [America] soon grew to be the envy and admiration of the world.”<sup>61</sup> His vision of a glorious future for America relied on the industry and frugality of its citizens, and progress in the colonies depended on individual virtue. Witherspoon argued similarly that the hard work of American citizens would increase American wealth, but he also added that hard work would prevent the development of vices: “Habits of industry prevailing in a society, not only increase its wealth, as their immediate effect, but they prevent the introduction of many vices, and are intimately connected with sobriety and good morals.”<sup>62</sup> If Americans worked hard and were modest in their consumption, they would accumulate greater wealth and protect against social decay. Witherspoon also claimed that “the frugal and moderate person, who guides his affairs with discretion, is able to assist in public counsels by a free and unbiased judgment,...and sometimes, by his estate and substance to give important aid to a sinking country.”<sup>63</sup> Thus the virtue of individual Americans would help not only the American

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>61</sup> Montgomery, *Christiana Bridge and Newcastle*, p. 25.

<sup>62</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 556.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 557.

economy but also the American state, since it would receive greater advice from its counselors and economic assistance from its wealthier members. The benefits of virtue, frugality, and hard work were both public and private, and American society would progress and prosper only through the hard work of its citizens.

This line of argument was used to support independence because ministers argued that America would only be virtuous and modest if it broke free from the corrupting influence of the British. One of the most serious condemnations of British rule was the corruption that existed in Britain and that would spread throughout the British Empire. Many ministers even argued that such corruption and social decay had reached the American colonies. America, they argued, could only be virtuous if it broke away from the corrupting influence of Great Britain. The future of American society depended on hard work and modesty, and hard work and modesty depended on American independence. Independence became the only way to guarantee that American society would continue to progress and fulfill its potential.

### **Conclusion**

Enlightenment theories of political-economy, whether they promoted free trade or advocated the hard work and frugality of individual citizens, were read from American Presbyterian pulpits alongside theories of political philosophy, and both contributed to the arguments espoused by American Presbyterian ministers in favor of the American Revolution. But given the extent to which such theories, political and economic, filled more secular literature supporting the Revolution, there is a relative shortage of philosophical arguments in the sermons of Presbyterian ministers. Most of the examples above come from three ministers – John

Witherspoon, John Carmichael, and Nathaniel Whitaker – and many of those references from other ministers were cursory references to a very complicated idea.

Hugh Henry Brackenridge is one of the most interesting cases of a minister knowing, but not effectively utilizing, political theory. Brackenridge studied at Princeton under John Witherspoon, and so listened to Witherspoon's lectures on political philosophy at least once in his years in New Jersey. Brackenridge was also one of the student speakers at his graduation in 1771, and so it is likely that he was one of the more talented students at the college at that time, and because Witherspoon stressed achievements in both secular and religious studies, Brackenridge most likely proved himself adept in the more secular subjects like moral and political philosophy. But when it came to his sermons, Brackenridge was influential because of his emotional power, and there are only three noteworthy references to political philosophy in his most important sermons. His use of the theory of the consent of the governed in *Six Political Discourses* was rather brief, but he conveyed the idea in a sufficiently thorough manner. References to property rights in two other sermons raised ideas important to political philosophy, but even they relied more on emotion and evocative imagery than on intellectual arguments about natural rights. So of the three significant inclusions of political philosophy in Brackenridge's sermons, two are aimed at drawing emotional responses, and thus function at least as much as emotional arguments as intellectual. There were other references to rights and liberties in Brackenridge's sermons, but they were cursory and hardly represented thorough intellectual defenses of the American Revolution.

William Linn, another student of Witherspoon's at Princeton, exhibited similar reticence. His one noteworthy use of political philosophy addressed property rights, and it too was aimed more at drawing an emotional response from its audience than at providing a sound intellectual

defense of the American cause. The words chosen by Linn – in particular “sweat” and “wretched” – and the images they painted are highly evocative, and they point towards his inclusion of the discussion of property rights not as part of a rational argument in favor of resistance but as an attempt to elicit an emotional response in favor of revolution. His was not a calm, sound, rational defense of the American cause based on political philosophy; it was an emotional call for revolution that at times borrowed certain principles of political philosophy when they served his purpose.

Even the teacher himself, John Witherspoon, reflected this trend. Witherspoon clearly understood the theories of Enlightenment philosophy, and he taught them to his students in a fairly comprehensive manner. He even included some of these theories in his work. *An Address to the Natives of Scotland* is a solid philosophical piece that included political and economic theory, and in it Witherspoon even referenced Hume and Montesquieu. But *The Dominion of Providence* is not nearly as intellectually grounded and includes far more emotional and religious arguments for independence. The philosophical arguments for independence in *Dominion* are focused on religious liberty and so even they served religious goals.

This trend, of highly educated men who knew the most influential political philosophy of the day, but who only included bits of it in their sermons and instead focused on more emotional appeals, is reflective of most American Presbyterian ministers in the years leading up to the American Revolution. Joseph Montgomery, a graduate of Princeton before Witherspoon’s arrival, and Abraham Keteltas, a graduate of Yale, both relied more on emotional calls for independence.

It was Nathaniel Whitaker who used political philosophy most intensively to justify the American cause. His sermon, *Antidote Against Toryism*, provided a very thorough discussion

of social contract theory and can hardly be criticized for cursory references to complex ideas. Whitaker not only cited Locke in the sermon, but he did justice to Locke's theories on government, and so served as a conduit for transmitting the ideas of the Enlightenment to the American people. John Carmichael provided a similar level of analysis in *A Self Defensive War Lawful*, though his discussion was not quite as complete as Whitaker's.

Intellectual arguments grounded in political philosophy certainly played an important role in the case presented by American Presbyterian ministers for the American Revolution, but perhaps not as significant a role as one might have expected. These incredibly well educated men understood the relevance of these theories to the American situation, and they were certainly aware of the extent to which politicians and pamphleteers utilized the arguments to support the war, but they refrained from as enthusiastic a use of political theory as might have been anticipated. While it is important to appreciate the use of political philosophy in the sermons of the American Presbyterian ministers, it is equally important to understand why relatively little of it was preached from the pulpit.



### **CHAPTER THREE**

#### **EMOTIONAL ARGUMENTS FOR INDEPENDENCE**

It is clear that American Presbyterian ministers relied on the political theories of the European Enlightenment to support the American cause. Yet many of the sermons that used such political theory did so in rather cursory ways, and very few included thorough analyses of the American situation viewed through the lens of Enlightenment philosophy. The question therefore remains of why these ministers did not include more detailed discussions of political philosophy in their sermons, discussions that were central to the justifications for war presented in more secular literature. Why did these men, zealous in the cause of liberty and independence, and armed with the most sophisticated intellectual arguments of the day, not utilize political theory more frequently? In the cases exhibited, it cannot be from a lack of exposure, for they were certainly introduced to the material in their time at colonial colleges or through their participation in the American intellectual milieu. It is also not from a lack of force or relevance, for the political philosophy of the Enlightenment is ubiquitous in the political literature of the years leading up to the Revolution. Politicians and pamphleteers certainly found the arguments powerful in the colonial cause. The absence of more political philosophy in the Presbyterian sermons must therefore be from a lack of purpose, or, to put it differently, the American Presbyterian ministers were not looking for relatively secular, intellectual arguments in favor of independence. They did not want or need rational motivations for rebelling against the English. This was not their purpose. It was the job of politicians, intellectuals, and pamphleteers to provide the intellectual reasons for independence; it was the job of the ministers to provide the emotional. It was these emotional arguments that formed the most significant portion of the

Presbyterian arguments for war, and it was these arguments that made Presbyterian ministers such powerful proponents of revolution.

This is not to discount the calls for independence based on Enlightenment theory, for the ministers certainly utilized that area of thought to strengthen their calls for independence. It would be a mistake not to appreciate the extent to which secular political philosophy was incorporated into Presbyterian sermons, but it would be an even greater mistake to disregard the emphasis placed on emotional, religious arguments. And it was in this way that the ministers most greatly contributed to the revolutionary cause, as they made available “religious values, imagery, and emotional force to legitimate secular political ideals and institutions.”<sup>1</sup> It was this complementary role played by the ministers that made them so important to the Revolution. Colonists needed to rationalize and conceptualize their reasons for rebelling against the British, and political theory enabled them to do just that, but they also needed the emotional conviction and certainty to supplement these reasoned calls for independence. They needed to be pushed into action, and arguments based on reason are unlikely to stir up enough sentiment to incite a rebellion. “Popular passion is...necessary even to the most well-bred revolution,”<sup>2</sup> and it was in this role that the ministers were most effective in supporting the Revolution.

While some Presbyterian ministers included full and sophisticated discussions of Enlightenment political theory in their sermons, many mentioned the ideas only briefly. The frequency with which many ministers mentioned natural rights or the social contract without elaborating on what these notions are and what significance they held is further evidence of the complementary role played by ministers and their calls for independence rooted in emotion and religion. The main ideas of Enlightenment theory are not self-explanatory; they are very

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<sup>1</sup> Melvin B. Endy, “Just War, Holy War, and Millennialism in Revolutionary America,” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, vol. 42, no. 1 (Jan. 1985), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, p. 159.

complicated arguments that require lengthy explications. One need only look at John Locke's *Second Treatise of Government* or Thomas Hobbes' *Leviathan* for proof of this. So if the ministers were only going to mention these ideas without explaining them fully, the colonists must have had some familiarity with them already. They must have already been introduced to the ideas and understood their relevance. Many Americans were therefore already equipped with arguments for independence relying on reason, but they still required arguments grounded in emotion and religion to rouse them to action, for "faith, not logic, carries a rebellion."<sup>3</sup> Documents like the Declaration of Independence, brilliant as they are, will not launch a widespread rebellion; they are too calm and rational. Documents like Nathaniel Whitaker's *Antidote Against Toryism* or Hugh Henry Brackenridge's *Six Political Discourses Founded on the Scripture*, on the other hand, are so filled with emotional and religious calls for action that they certainly would have provided the popular passion necessary for rebellion.

These two sermons – along with those by John Witherspoon, Abraham Keteltas, John Carmichael, William Tennent, William Linn, and others – were replete with arguments for independence borrowed from Biblical themes. The ministers identified the American struggle against the British with the Israelite struggle against the Egyptians, and likened George Washington with heroic leaders like Moses or Joshua. They equated King George with Cain (though only in the most radical of sermons) and Loyalists with the cursed inhabitants of the Biblical town of Meroz, who had failed to aid the Israelites in the fight against attacking Canaanites. They argued that the American cause was just and that God was on their side, and with God's support victory was assured.

American Presbyterian ministers also relied on many less religious, but still equally emotive, arguments for rebellion. The ministers claimed that the American cause was the cause

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<sup>3</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 49.

of all humanity, and that the principles for which they were fighting were universal. They argued that the freedom and livelihood of future generations of Americans depended on their throwing off the yoke of British tyranny, and that the legacy of their ancestors who had fought successfully against tyranny would be betrayed if they failed to live up to their ancestors' example. They argued that their support for independence was motivated not by self-interest but public-interest, and that it was the British and the Tories who were acting out of selfish motives.

These arguments proved influential throughout the colonies. Ministers from Boston to Charleston, from communities of English, Scottish, Dutch, and German immigrants, tapped into the power of these ideas to incite their parishioners to resist the British. Much of the power of these arguments rested in their considerable simplification of the struggle, one that clearly pitted the forces of right (America) against the forces of wrong (Britain). Associating the Tories and the British with some of the most evil or cursed figures in the Bible and the Americans fighting for independence with some of the most revered establishes two distinct sides in the conflict and makes it clear to the American Presbyterian laymen which side good, pious Americans should support. In the sermons of most American Presbyterian ministers, there was no legitimate support for the British cause and no way any good American could justify continued loyalty to Crown and Parliament. Anyone who failed to support the American cause and maintain complete loyalty to the Continental Congress was a selfish, corrupt traitor who would be cursed by God and punished by his peers. Tories "have had it in their hearts to devour men of the same origin, language, and religion with themselves;"<sup>4</sup> as a reward for their figurative fratricide, they "shall not, without sincere repentance, escape the wrath of God in the world to come,"<sup>5</sup> for their failure to support the American cause was also a sin against God. The point here is clear: any

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<sup>4</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 27.

<sup>5</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 211.

colonist who failed to support the struggle for independence was immoral and would suffer greatly in the future. It was in this manner that the clergy urged – or, perhaps more accurately, demanded – their parishioners join the struggle against the British. Not only did they provide strong emotional arguments in favor of independence, but “the clergy effectively remove[d] middle ground by reminding the faithful that God will hold everyone to a strict accounting.”<sup>6</sup> It was a brave soul who did not heed these warnings and support the American cause.

In addition to promoting the Revolution, the ministers may have had another motive for using this emotional rhetoric that should not be ignored. Although colonial religion was relatively strong, particularly in the aftermath of the Great Awakening, ministers had a constant motivation to attract more followers and further strengthen the church. More than most other Christian and Calvinist sects, Presbyterianism emphasized the depravity of human nature, and Presbyterian clergy emphasized the improvement of the human condition through piety and proper worship of God. While the ministers were loyal revolutionaries and absolutely sincere in their promotion of the American cause, they also recognized the opportunity to promote the interests of the church by demanding increased piety and worship if the colonial struggle was to succeed. To their claims that God was on the side of the Americans, they consistently added the condition that the Americans must remain pious if they wanted God’s support: “the blessing of God is only to be looked for by those who are not wanting in the discharge of their own duty.”<sup>7</sup> If the Americans were to fulfill their duties, they must attend church, and the ministers were thus able to accomplish two goals with the same message.

The effect of these Presbyterian sermons, and in particular their use of arguments grounded in emotion and religion, was to increase the fervor of the revolutionary movement.

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<sup>6</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 553.

Armed not only with reasoned arguments for independence but also the emotional certainty that their cause was just, American revolutionaries were able to generate a particularly strong commitment to the cause of independence. While the philosophy of the Enlightenment may have provided colonists with the framework through which to conceptualize their struggle, Presbyterian sermons helped provide the emotional resolve necessary for sacrifices that struggle would entail, and it was in these sermons where “[t]he belief required for independence literally is born.”<sup>8</sup> An analysis of the emotional arguments for independence contained in these sermons is thus necessary for understanding the role played by American Presbyterian ministers in promoting the American Revolution.

### **Emotional Arguments**

One of the most common and important arguments proposed by the American clergy was that the British had abandoned their principles and were acting unjustly. In this the clergy shared much with the majority of the population that favored independence. In any dispute, it is common for both sides to blame the other for being the source of all conflict and tension in the relationship, and American Presbyterian ministers claimed that the British had undermined the relationship due to their own depraved character. The Presbyterian ministers were certainly used to these types of criticisms, as Presbyterians traditionally emphasized the depravity of man’s character as a reason why man needed God, and the ministers extended their usual line of argument to the British state and government in particular. One of the most common claims was that desire for greater power had turned the British government into a corrupt and extortionist body. William Linn, the Pennsylvanian Presbyterian and former student of John Witherspoon’s at Princeton, captured the sentiment that the British Parliament, unaccountable to the American

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<sup>8</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 66.

people because Americans had no representation in the legislature, had degenerated in its thirst for power: “Behold an omnipotent parliament, full of bribery and corruption, consisting of men abandoned and profligate, in whose choice we have no vote, declaring they have a right to bind us in all cases whatsoever.”<sup>9</sup> An omnipotent parliament, as Linn referred to the body, could not be resisted, and a corrupt omnipotent parliament could not be trusted. And because the Americans have no vote in Parliament, they would have no recourse by which to influence their affairs. With careful word choice and imagery, Linn depicted a fearful Parliament, one that colonial Americans could not trust to rule properly.

Much of the hostility to the British Parliament was over the issue of taxes, as Americans felt they were being overtaxed without having a say in the matter. The American colonists had long complained of a lack of accountability of the Parliament to the colonists, so when Parliament began adopting policies the colonists viewed as corrupt they had no avenue for influencing the body to act otherwise. Abraham Keteltas, one of the most fervent of the colonial preachers, and himself a graduate of Yale, expanded on Linn’s claim and outlined the ways in which corruption erodes the human character. Corruption, he claimed, “diverts the soul of pity, humanity, integrity, benevolence, and every generous feeling and sentiment -- It degrades human nature...estranges the mind from God and religion...destroys faith...and leads to the most shameful and inglorious conduct.”<sup>10</sup> Keteltas painted the image of Parliament so corrupt it could not properly follow God, and in a God-fearing society like colonial America this flaw clearly made it unfit to govern.

This belief in British corruption and impiety generated a great deal of fear amongst the colonists, and also a certain amount of nostalgia, at least rhetorically. In another sermon,

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<sup>9</sup> Linn, *Military Discourse*, p. 12.

<sup>10</sup> Abraham Keteltas, *Reflections on Extortion, Shewing the Nature, Malignity, and Fatal Tendency of that Sin to Individuals and Communities* (Newburyport, 1778), p. 16.

Keteltas raised an interesting argument that many ministers used, and that played into the idea that it was the British who had made the colonial relationship untenable. It was because they had lost sight of their values – the values that had made Britain great and which had become solidly ingrained in America – that the British were acting so improperly. His lamentation is not unique, though the rhetorical power of it is equaled by few other sermons: “O England! thou once beloved, happy, and glorious country! Thou land of freedom and delight! How is thy gold become dim, and thy fine gold changed! It was full of judgment; righteousness lodged in it, but now murderers. Thy rulers are companions of thieves.”<sup>11</sup> Keteltas imagines the earlier days when the British still abided by their own principles of justice, the protection of life and property, and selflessness. Whether or not these days ever truly existed is not particularly relevant, for Keteltas need only claim that they did in order to argue that Britain has become unfit to rule America, and so independence is not only justified but necessary.

The end result of this corruption and degeneration is the ruin of the British character and government, to the point where Hugh Henry Brackenridge equated King George III and the British with Cain. Brackenridge, a student of John Witherspoon’s at Princeton and the student speaker at his graduation, used one of the most reviled figures in the Old Testament as his Biblical parallel to the British government. After listing some of the most hated figures in both secular and religious history, including Pharaoh (the Egyptian ruler under whom the Israelites were oppressed before being led by Moses into the desert to freedom), the Huns, and the Goths, Brackenridge arrives at King George, who he says is “an object of greater wickedness...an object of such accomplished fraud, perfidy, and murder, that every one heretofore mentioned, is lost and disappears.”<sup>12</sup> To claim that George is worse than the Pharaoh or the Huns is critical

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<sup>11</sup> Keteltas, *God Arising*, p. 597.

<sup>12</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 5.



enough, but Brackenridge adds to the loathing of the King by claiming that “he hath gone in the way of Cain.”<sup>13</sup> Such a comparison is not drawn lightly, even by a minister as passionate in his hostility to the British as Brackenridge. No king who has treated his subjects the way Cain treated Abel could have any legitimate claim to authority. It would be the duty of all Americans to resist such a tyrant. As much as claims based on political theory might influence the colonists that they had a legitimate right to resist what they perceived as the tyranny of the British, the comparison of the British with Cain would have added an emotional and religious power that reason could not. An American farmer, content with his peaceful and relatively prosperous life in Massachusetts, might fail to be persuaded to risk his life and property and resist the English on the grounds of some abstract theory of political philosophy. He might not understand the social contract and the right of resistance, and, even if he did, they might not necessarily spur him into action. But the belief that he was resisting a modern-day Cain, with its immense moral and religious implications, would be far more tangible and powerful to many strong Presbyterian Americans and it might be enough to ensure their support in the Revolution. Ministers like Brackenridge had this type of rhetorical force in mind when they preached against the vice and corruption of the British government.

The result of British tyranny and corruption, according to the American clergymen, was the attempt on the part of the British to reduce the colonists to slaves. For a society as attached to the belief in individual liberty as America, an observation supported by the emphasis on the belief in intellectual arguments, the notion of slavery or complete submission to any state or authority was anathema. The imagery used by American clergymen in their sermons is powerful and terrifying, and forecasted an unbearably dark future should the colonists not resist the British. At stake was whether the American colonists should “continue to enjoy the Privileges of

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

Men and *Britons*, or whether we shall be reduced to a State of the most abject Slavery....The Cry of Oppression is already heard in one corner of our Land....A dark Cloud hovers over us. We are threatened with slavery.”<sup>14</sup> The reference to the privileges of Britons reveals much about the importance of liberty in the British political tradition, and the printing of “Britons” in italics illustrates that Tennent sought to emphasize that British political tradition. For centuries, since before the time of the Magna Carta in 1215, the British had experienced serious conflict over the power of the government and the rights of the people. The seventeenth century in particular was a time of significant strife over this issue, with the Puritan revolution of Oliver Cromwell in the 1640s, the Civil Wars between royalists and parliamentarians, and finally the Glorious Revolution of 1688 that firmly established the ascendancy of Parliament over the crown. At stake in all these conflicts were the rights of the British people and the power of the state, and the result was a victory for constitutional limits on the power of the crown in favor of the rights of the British people. There remained, in British political discourse, a firm commitment to individual liberty as a result of the violence the country endured, for Britons were loath to lose the rights for which their ancestors had fought and died.

Using the sacrifices of one’s parents or grandparents to induce resistance was a technique used often by the American ministers. Nathaniel Whitaker argued that submitting to the British would be “a sin against our forefathers,”<sup>15</sup> who had left Britain because of the oppression they experienced and worked hard to establish a prosperous life in America. They fought the king for their liberty and endured much to provide for their descendants, leaving Whitaker to ask,

[S]hall we resign this patrimony, so dearly bought by them, and entailed to us by their will, living and dying? Shall we, I say, resign it all to that tyrant power which drove them from their native land to this then howling wilderness? Shall

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<sup>14</sup> William Tennent, *An Address Occasioned by the Late Invasion of the Liberties of the American Colonies by the British Parliament* (Charleston, 1774), p. 6.

<sup>15</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 219.

we bow our neck to the yoke which they, though few in number, nobly cast off?  
Should our fathers rise from their graves they would disown such children, and  
repent their care and toil for such degenerate sons.<sup>16</sup>

The accusation that a man's parents – who had built the foundations of American society amidst the dangers of the “howling wilderness” – would be ashamed of him was powerful and would be deeply troubling to anyone who heard Whitaker's sermon. Early American colonists did indeed sacrifice a great deal to found a stable society in the New World, and many thousands died trying to secure a better life for themselves and their posterity. Failing to appreciate those sacrifices and giving up much of their hard-earned property to a tyrannical king would be a betrayal of the fathers and grandfathers of many of the colonists listening to Whitaker and other ministers who echoed his sentiment. Abraham Keteltas was one of those other ministers, and he used nearly the same argument as Whitaker: “Your renowned ancestors left Great-Britain and all their interest in it, brav'd the fury of the Atlantic, came to this once barren and howling wilderness and exposed themselves to Savage cruelty for the sake of Liberty, and yet their posterity sacrifice that invaluable Jewel”<sup>17</sup> because they are too complacent to resist the corrupt policies of the tyrannical British government. Keteltas used wording similar to Whitaker's, the use of “howling wilderness” and “Savage cruelty” emphasized the dangers of early settlement. Both ministers stressed – primarily through their word choice – the risks taken by earlier generations of Americans in order to elicit more guilt from their parishioners. In this they were similar to other Presbyterian ministers who fought the tendency of many American colonists to find too much comfort in their lives, and these ministers sought to guilt the colonists out of that complacency and into action.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 219.

<sup>17</sup> Keteltas, *Reflections on Extortion*, pp. 31-32.

But it was not only the forefathers of the colonists who would be betrayed by the failure to resist the British, it was the generations of Americans still to come, for while the actions of the current generation might betray the memory of previous generations, it would greatly – and perhaps gravely – influence the lives of successive generations. As Joseph Montgomery put it simply, “the happiness of thousands, yet unborn, may depend on your conduct.”<sup>18</sup> Suddenly the Americans were not only responsible for protecting against their own potential enslavement but also the enslavement of their children and grandchildren. If they failed to act, they would bear at least some responsibility for the suffering of their posterity. Other ministers presented far more gruesome depictions of the future if the Americans failed to obtain their independence. Perhaps the most powerful was Whitaker’s in *Antidote Against Toryism*, which was not only one of the most influential sermons intellectually but emotionally as well. Whitaker looked into the future and saw a time when the offspring of the current generation were shackled in the chains of slavery to Great Britain:

What meager visages do I see in yonder field, toiling and covered with sweat, to cultivate the soil? Who are those in rags, bearing burdens and drawing water for those haughty lords, and cringing to them for a morsel of bread? They are – O gracious God, support my spirits – they are my sons and daughters.<sup>19</sup>

Whitaker bemoaned this possibility and said that he would rather they had not been born than have to endure this kind of suffering. He included the wish in the sermon because it added force to the sadness of the future if America refused to act. Because the future generations would be born and would have to live with the consequences of the choices made by the current generation, it was up to the current generation to ensure that Whitaker’s image did not become reality. The brutal enslavement of posterity would be prevented only if the parishioners in Whitaker’s church, along with Americans throughout the colonies, rose up and secured their

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<sup>18</sup> Montgomery, *Christiana Bridge and Newcastle*, pp. 29-30.

<sup>19</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 218.

independence from Great Britain. If they did not want to see their children live as slaves to British lords, they had no choice but to act, and thus Whitaker used an ominous vision of the future to present his parishioners with a choice that seemed startlingly simple.

The Americans were fighting not only for themselves but for all the generations of Americans, both past and present. They could betray the memory of their forefathers and ensure the enslavement of their offspring, or they could live up to the example of their ancestors and guarantee freedom's survival in America. In this way, American Presbyterian ministers raised the stakes of the current conflict and placed even greater responsibility on the colonists. But some of the ministers refused to stop here and argued that the Americans were not only acting on behalf of all past and future generations of Americans, but that they were responsible for universal values that impact all of mankind. According to John Witherspoon, American colonists were fighting in the cause of "justice, of liberty, and of human nature,"<sup>20</sup> universal principles that are valued by all mankind. As such, Witherspoon claimed that the present conflict would be significant for all of history: "It has often been said, that the present is likely to be an important era to AMERICA; I think we may say much more: it is likely to be an important era in the history of MANKIND."<sup>21</sup> Now the colonists were fighting not only for themselves, their ancestors, and their posterity, but for all of mankind and for human history, because the conflict in which they were engaged was over universal principles that ought to be embraced throughout the world. The printing of "MANKIND" in capital letters indicates that Witherspoon emphasized this point in his sermon, thus placing more responsibility for defending universal values on American shoulders. And if the values were to be embraced by all mankind, then, according to Abraham Keteltas, the result would be a veritable heaven on earth: "If the principles

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<sup>20</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 549.

<sup>21</sup> Witherspoon, *Address to the Natives of Scotland*, p. 7.

on which the present civil war is carried on by the American colonies, against the British arms, were universally adopted and practiced upon by mankind, they would turn a vale of tears, into a paradise of God.”<sup>22</sup> This is the significance attached to the principles over which the two sides were fighting, according to Keteltas. His use of the phrase “a paradise of God” would have seemed to his parishioners a reference to the Garden of Eden, and such a potent reference would have reinforced the importance of America’s fight against the British. Presbyterian ministers thus presented the struggle as of the utmost severity for America and for the rest of the world.

The Americans were fighting not only for themselves but for others, and this sort of public spirit separated them from the British and the Tories, both of whom were occupied entirely with their own selfish interests. In a sermon to a group of American soldiers soon after the commencement of hostilities, William Linn claimed, “We fight not for conquest or fame, but in defence of ourselves and our brethren; in defence of our cities, devoted to the worship of God, who will certainly plead their cause.”<sup>23</sup> The colonists knew what they were fighting for, so the only reason why Linn would have needed to repeat the tenets of their cause was that the soldiers needed emotional reinforcement. They needed to be certain that their cause was honorable rather than selfish. Linn continued, “there can scarce remain a scruple in the breast of any American, who is not blinded by prejudice or self-interest,”<sup>24</sup> that the American cause is just and that the colonists must resist Britain. Linn’s use of public versus private interest is important, for he posited the Americans as the self-less ones motivated not out of a desire for personal gain, which would have been less morally defensible, but out of a desire to protect themselves and their fellow Americans, which is more easily justified. It was not out of self-interest that the revolutionaries resisted the British, according to the ministers, but out of a natural desire for self-

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<sup>22</sup> Keteltas, *God Arising*, p. 595.

<sup>23</sup> Linn, *Military Discourse*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

preservation. Theirs was a defensive war, meant to protect themselves and their fellow Americans from tyranny, not a war launched by the colonists for their own profit.

This was an argument included in nearly every sermon in the buildup to the Revolution, and it placed the responsibility for the war entirely on the British. It is common in war for each side to claim that it is right and to assign blame for the start of the war on the enemy, for if one side can convincingly argue both claims then it is harder for opponents to criticize its participation in the war. American Presbyterian ministers were no different in the American Revolution. The most thorough argument that the Americans were acting in self-defense came from John Carmichael, another graduate of Princeton. Carmichael began with the familiar claim that the British sought to reduce the Americans to slavery. Every American, he argued, was “reduced to the dreadful alternative, either to take up arms...or submit tamely to the galling yoke of *perpetual slavery*.”<sup>25</sup> Every rational person would inevitably choose to fight, according to Carmichael, because no man would accept slavery without resistance. Carmichael’s emphasis on “*perpetual slavery*” – as indicated by the printing of the phrase in italics – would have inflated the fears of his listeners, for they faced potential suffering from which they would never escape.

Confronted with such a dreadful fate, Carmichael argued that war was justified. While some Christians argued that war was wrong in the eyes of God, for the Scripture ordered men not to kill one another, Carmichael claimed that such statements in the Bible did not apply in all instances. He conceded that war was “a very great evil,” but he argued that it is, “at times, by reason of certain circumstances, so unavoidable, that it is our duty to enter into it.”<sup>26</sup> He thus established that there were times when war was unavoidable and therefore necessary, that there were instances in which men had to take up arms to resist other men. At stake at these instances,

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<sup>25</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

those when war was justified and necessary, was self-preservation: “the principle of self-love or self-preservation, or the desire of existence, is so deeply engraved on the nature of every creature. And when this great first principle is observed, [war] is, and must be agreeable to God.”<sup>27</sup> Men were not only allowed to go to war when their lives were at stake, but when evil threatened the world they had the duty to resist it. If men, “when smote on the one cheek, turn the other; there would soon be an end of their society – the evil would soon destroy the peaceable and good out of the world,”<sup>28</sup> including religion. Men were therefore responsible not only for protecting themselves but for ensuring that evil did not spread throughout the world at the expense of Christianity. It was the duty of the Americans to resist the British and the spread of their tyranny throughout America. If the colonists failed to act, not only would they betray their forefathers and consign themselves and their offspring to slavery, but they would fail in their role as a safeguard against the advance of evil throughout the world. It was a sort of early domino effect argument, based on the idea that if the Americans could not resist the destruction of their society and the spread of evil, then evil might be able to spread elsewhere with less difficulty and that one of the few remaining bastions of true Christianity would be lost.

Having made his case for the legality and necessity of war in certain instances, including the one in which the colonies found themselves, Carmichael then made a claim identical to many other ministers: that war was forced upon the Americans despite their best efforts to resist it. He asserted that the colonists “have tried every lawful, peaceable mean in our power – but all in vain!...[W]e would be peaceable, obedient, loving subjects if they would let us; but it would seem as if the present ministry were determined to cram disloyalty, and disobedience down our

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 12.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 18.



throats.”<sup>29</sup> This contention placed full responsibility for the war on the British, for it amounted to his saying that the colonists were being good, obedient subjects but the British government was just looking to cause trouble by seeking to enslave the Americans. While the reality of the relationship between the two bodies was far from this simple, Carmichael’s sermon seeks to make it so by presenting the Americans as the otherwise-loyal subjects being forced to fight for their lives and liberty from a despotic, oppressive government.

Many other ministers echoed this claim. John Witherspoon argued that independence “had become absolutely necessary. All reconciliation, but upon the footing of unconditional submission, had been positively refused by Great Britain.”<sup>30</sup> Hugh Henry Brackenridge agreed: “The present war was not by any means a thing of choice. We engaged in it with reluctance. We were dragged into it. Nothing but the strong law of self-preservation, could have persuaded men to leave the quiet scenes of agriculture, for the noise and danger of the camp.”<sup>31</sup> Brackenridge’s contrast between the tranquility of farm life and the chaos of the army camp is interesting, for he addressed only the negative elements of war. He ignored the honor and adventure often associated with war and focused instead on the chaos and danger of army life in order to make his point more clear. His word choice thus aptly reinforces his argument that the Americans were forced to war. According to Witherspoon and Brackenridge, as well as many other ministers, the colonists had peacefully and respectfully asked the British government to stop its oppressive measures, but the government refused. It was too desirous of absolute power and would not accept anything but total control over America.

While there is a certain amount of reasoned justification behind these claims, they do not ultimately rest on notions of constitutionality or proper government. They are not arguments that

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 31.

<sup>30</sup> Witherspoon, *Address to the Natives of Scotland*, p. 10.

<sup>31</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 43.

the British had overstepped the bounds of their authority as established by the social contract and the consent of the governed, and that as a result they were no longer a legitimate authority. These are claims that utilize the emotionally powerful imagery of slavery and oppression and seek to assuage the concerns of many colonists that they were responsible for the war. The ministers were placing the responsibility for the war on the insatiable British desire for power, and the only alternative to independence was complete subjugation. It was the terrifying prospect of slavery that ultimately makes these claims ones based on emotion rather than reason, as reason-based arguments rested less on troubling images of the future and more on arguments of proper government. And in the claims that the British were responsible for the war through their unjust oppression, and that the Americans were merely acting out of self-defense, many ministers drew a parallel between the American resistance to Britain and the Israelite resistance to the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh. The use of this metaphor elevated the emotional power of the minister's arguments by drawing upon explicitly religious claims, and many ministers proceeded to make the American resistance to Britain a holy cause in which God was actively involved.

### **Religious Arguments**

It is not easy to separate the emotional arguments from the religious ones, for the religious arguments certainly aimed to draw emotional responses from the Americans and many emotional arguments included references to God or religious themes. But there is a difference between those arguments that aimed at eliciting general emotional responses, like an objection to slavery or a fear of betraying the memory of one's ancestors, and arguments that draw on explicitly religious themes, such as having the active support of God in your cause or claiming

that your leaders are equivalent to Moses in their virtue. Arguments including explicit references to religion are not only more emotionally powerful, but they are harder to ignore, for if George Washington is a modern-day Moses or if God is actively supporting the Americans, then it becomes absolutely clear which side is right. If God will curse those colonists who do not participate in the Revolution, then there is simply no legitimate reason not to support the cause. The introduction of religious references and religious significance makes the choice absolutely clear, for no Christian would support the cause of Satan against God if that was how he viewed the situation between Britain and America. Presbyterian ministers therefore included explicit references to God and religion to make their arguments absolute, and it is important to understand the various religious references included in their sermons in order to appreciate how they conveyed the importance of their cause.

One of the most common and powerful references to scripture was the equating of the colonists with the Israelites fleeing from the oppression of the pharaoh. The similarities between the two situations are apparent, and the ministers used them effectively: a government led by one man – Pharaoh or King George III – ruling over a large polity with a portion of the population lacking a voice in the affairs of the state – Jews through slavery or American colonists through a lack of representation. Eventually that group rose up against the ruler and sought its independence – either through flight or war – in order to escape the oppression of the despotic ruler and secure its rights and freedoms. Joseph Montgomery connected the Israelite slavery under the Egyptians to the potential American slavery under the British and said, “This young Pharaoh, jealous of the increasing numbers, and frightened at the prospect of the future greatness of this Hebrew colony, thinks it the best policy to crush it in its infancy.”<sup>32</sup> Pharaoh proceeded to oppress the Israelites and, as slaves to the Egyptians, the Israelites “built for Pharaoh treasure

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<sup>32</sup> Montgomery, *Christiana Bridge and Newcastle*, p. 16.

cities, and the Egyptians made the children of Israel to serve with rigour, and they made their lives bitter with hard bondage.”<sup>33</sup> Montgomery’s references to this Biblical story is loaded, for, by positing the Americans as the Hebrews, he not only places responsibility for the war on the oppression of the British but he also argues that the reason the British government oppressed the colonies in the first place was the prosperity and future greatness of the colonies. He offered his listeners the opportunity not only to take pride in their future but also to blame the British for seeking to undermine that which would make them powerful and prosperous.

In the comparison of the two peoples, the role of Moses was filled either by George Washington, the leader of the Continental Army, or the Continental Congress, the leading legislature in America. Hugh Henry Brackenridge placed both Washington and the Congress in the role of Moses, first claiming that “the continental Congress takes the place of Moses”<sup>34</sup> and later asserting, “Moses, who was a very meek man, and much resembling our general Washington.”<sup>35</sup> Brackenridge posited two authorities in America in the role of Moses and therefore endowed each with a level of unquestionable authority. George Duffield, looking back on the war in late 1783, argued that Washington was “the Joshua of the day and admiration of the age,...inspired from above with every military endowment to command the American armies.”<sup>36</sup> Joshua was the successor to Moses as the leader of the Israelites and the commander who led the conquest of Canaan, or the land promised to the Israelites by God. If Washington was the “Joshua of the day,” then he was the legitimate leader of a privileged people. If he was “inspired from above,” then he was chosen by God to lead the American people to victory.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., p. 17.

<sup>34</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 35.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> George Duffield, *Declaration of Peace*, in Frank Moore, ed., *The Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution* (New York, 1862), p. 362.

This claim, that God was actively involved in the conflict and was supporting the colonists, was central to many Presbyterian sermons. Even the titles of some sermons, such as *God Arising and Pleading His People's Cause* or *The Agency of Heaven in the Cause of Liberty*, make the case that God was helping the colonists. There may have been no more powerful claim than this, for if God was supporting the American revolutionaries then there could be absolutely no questioning the legitimacy of their fight. If God was supporting them, then anyone who did not was in direct opposition to God. And if God was supporting them, moreover, then they were His chosen people and their victory was certain. But first the ministers had to demonstrate that God was actively involved in the contest on the side of the Americans.

John Witherspoon and Abraham Keteltas began by establishing that God intervenes to help His people, though Witherspoon claimed it was not always in the most obvious way. Sometimes, according to Witherspoon, God tested His people before helping them: “it often happens, that those for whom God hath designs of the greatest mercy, are first brought to the trial, that they may enjoy in due time the salutary effect of the unpalatable medicine.”<sup>37</sup> God’s favored people often must endure great suffering before they enjoy His mercy. The point would have been clear to Witherspoon’s parishioners that America was being tested by God before receiving His mercy, that the current troubles with Britain were merely part of God’s plan for America. The fact that America was enduring a time of trouble and suffering was not evidence that God did not support them, as some critics might have claimed, but instead that God was testing them before His intervention. But God would intervene and help the colonies, and Abraham Keteltas attempted to prove that.

Citing the Bible, Keteltas read God’s response to the capture of the Israelites by the Persian king Nebuchadnezzar: “Thus saith the Lord of Hosts, the children of Israel and the

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<sup>37</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 540.

children of Judah were oppressed together....Their Redeemer is strong, the Lord of Hosts is his name, he shall strongly plead their cause,” and, “behold I will plead thy cause, and take vengeance for thee.”<sup>38</sup> Keteltas’ use of this story shows that he agreed with Witherspoon that God’s chosen people could be tried before He intervened to help them, and Keteltas argued that God would eventually help his people obtain justice against their enemies. He would take vengeance for them against their oppressors and ensure their freedom. And in this Keteltas was clear: “[D]o not despond, my dear brethren, at the present gloomy prospects. The cause of God – his own cause, must prosper, in spite of earth and hell – God will eventually plead it; he will plead it by his almighty word, his all conquering spirit, and his over ruling providence.”<sup>39</sup> Keteltas’ use of “almighty,” “all conquering,” and “over ruling” reinforced the notion that God, when He chose to help His people, could not be defeated. His power was too great, and Keteltas’ word choice strengthened this belief. The Americans just needed to be patient until God chose to intervene.

According to Hugh Henry Brackenridge, by 1778 that time had already come, and God was already actively helping the Americans. He asserted simply, “Heaven hath taken an active part, and waged war for us.”<sup>40</sup> Just as Keteltas argued that God would plead the American cause with his almighty word, Brackenridge claimed that God inspired the writings of many of America’s leaders. At first, Brackenridge merely paid tribute to the men of the Continental Congress, “A more venerable body of men never sat upon the earth than the first congress. Their writings were truly worthy of so great a cause.”<sup>41</sup> But then he went on to claim that their writings were in fact the result of divine inspiration, much like the Bible itself: “The spirit of

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<sup>38</sup> Keteltas, *God Arising*, p. 588.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 604.

<sup>40</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 52.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

God, which brightly kindles, the clear spark of genius in the soul, and gives a fine degree of understanding, doubtless, aided them in these productions. The blessed God directed them to prudent words, and to wise and useful measures.”<sup>42</sup> Brackenridge was not simply claiming that the writings of the American leaders were brilliant or that they should be followed, he was claiming that they were the result of God’s inspiration. Whether or not he was placing them on the level of revelation is not clear, and it is not necessarily important, but he was certainly arguing that God supported them and that therefore there was no questioning their legitimacy. Anyone who refused to follow the words of the Continental Congress was acting against the work of God.

But God had not only intervened in the chamber of the Continental Congress to help America’s political leaders, He had intervened on the battlefield to help America’s armies. After enumerating a series of battles in which the Americans were victorious even though they were at an apparent disadvantage, or when they merely survived a British attack that could have been the demise of the American resistance, Brackenridge stated, “Thus in the manner of our success in general, and deliverance in some particular cases, the hand of God is visible. We have succeeded where we had not hope to succeed. We have been delivered when we looked not for deliverance....Are we not sensible that heaven is active for us?”<sup>43</sup> Success when failure seemed certain, survival when defeat seemed inevitable, those were clear signs of God’s help according to Brackenridge.

John Witherspoon seemed to agree. Using almost the same line of argument, Witherspoon preached, “What surprising success has attended our encounters in almost every instance? Has not the boasted discipline of regular and veteran soldiers been turned into

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p. 53.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., p. 57.

confusion and dismay, before the new and maiden courage of freemen, in defence of their property and right?”<sup>44</sup> The recently formed Continental Army had proven itself against a worthy foe of the far more renowned British army, at least in many battles, and this to Witherspoon was a sign that God was supporting the Americans. It is only through God’s assistance that the Americans could have stood up to the more experienced British, and only through God’s intervention that the British army could appear in such disarray.

Presbyterian ministers argued that God supported the Americans because their cause was just and righteous, and that therefore it was also the cause of God. After listing all the areas in which the Americans were deficient, including numbers of troops and supplies, Hugh Henry Brackenridge said simply, “we had not any thing, but the justice of our cause.”<sup>45</sup> That was enough to sustain the Americans, especially since the justice of the American cause brought “the goodness of almighty providence.”<sup>46</sup> Brackenridge thus drew the connection between the justice of the American cause and the assistance of God. Nathaniel Whitaker agreed, and he argued quite simply, “The cause we are engaged in is the cause of God.”<sup>47</sup> But it was Abraham Keteltas who provided the most thorough description of the American cause and the ensuing support of God. He argued,

It is the cause of truth, against error and falsehood; the cause of righteousness against iniquity; the cause of the oppressed against the oppressor....It is the cause of the reformation, against popery; of liberty, against arbitrary power; of benevolence, against barbarity, and of virtue against vice. It is the cause of justice and integrity, against bribery, venality, and corruption. In short, it is the cause of heaven against hell.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Witherspoon, *Dominion of Providence*, p. 547.

<sup>45</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 54.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 54.

<sup>47</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, pp. 228-229.

<sup>48</sup> Keteltas, *God Arising*, p. 603.



Keteltas was not only arguing that the Americans were fighting a just cause, but he elevated it to the level of a holy war. The Americans were not just struggling to banish injustice and oppression from their continent, they were soldiers in the battle between God and Satan. Keteltas' listeners must have been surprised by this claim.

A holy war is one between the forces of good and evil, of God and the Devil, for which the ramifications are of the greatest significance for human kind. One of the essential characteristics of a holy war is "the belligerents' conviction that they are playing an indispensable role in a struggle that must be won if the ultimate goal of history is to be achieved."<sup>49</sup> That seems to be the claim that Keteltas is making, for if the cause in which the Americans are engaged is that of heaven against hell then they are playing quite an important role in a struggle that can hardly have more serious consequences. And Keteltas was trying to provide his parishioners with the conviction that this was the case, that they were a part of something far larger than themselves, and that if they fought for the Revolution then they would also be fighting for God against evil. A more powerful motivation is hard to imagine for a society in which Christianity was so central. And here Keteltas is tying his religious argument back to the notion that the Americans were fighting for more than themselves. It was not their self-interest that was motivating the Revolution, but rather their belief that they were fighting for all of mankind and even for God. If "the future of liberty, the cause of God, depended entirely upon the war's outcome,...[the] Americans were not fighting for themselves, but for the well-being of the whole world."<sup>50</sup> Thus Keteltas, along with many other ministers, elevated the struggle to the level of the divine.

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<sup>49</sup> Endy, "Just War, Holy War," p. 11.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

The Americans were fighting for God, and so they could be absolutely convinced that their cause was just. John Carmichael summed up this belief when he congratulated the colonists “on the certainty we have, for the justice and goodness of our cause.”<sup>51</sup> Yet it would seem, from the emphasis that so many ministers placed on this claim, that many Americans were in fact not so certain that their cause was just. If they were, then their ministers need not constantly provide reinforcement, but the fact that ministers so commonly felt the need to assert the justice of their cause implies that many of them believed their parishioners were not sure, and they took it upon themselves to provide the conviction that may have been lacking. Ministers repeatedly emphasized the justice for which the Americans were fighting, and they did so with self-assertion aimed at instilling confidence amongst their parishioners. It was in this role specifically that the ministers were most important to the American Revolution. They were able to infuse in their listeners the conviction that the Americans were fighting a just war against an oppressive government, and the ministers did so most effectively by elevating the struggle to the level of God. They claimed that God was actively supporting them because they were engaged in a battle between good and evil, between the forces of heaven and hell, and the consequences of the war would effect not only them and their offspring, but the entire world and even the heavens.

If the Americans were supported by God in a battle between the forces of heaven and hell, then their opponents were evil and fought for the devil. At least this is the claim made by the more brazen Presbyterian ministers. And, interestingly, the enemies the ministers most consistently claimed were fighting against God were not the British, but the American Loyalists, or Tories. Those Americans who failed to provide active support to the revolutionary forces were the most cursed of all the opponents of the Revolution, for they were brothers of the

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<sup>51</sup> Carmichael, *Self-Defensive War Lawful*, p. 31.

Americans and lived and worked alongside them. They were betraying their own people for the hopes of profit from the oppressive British. The two most vociferous opponents of the Tories were Hugh Henry Brackenridge and Nathaniel Whitaker, both of whom preached sermons devoted to the damnation of those who failed to support the revolutionaries.

Brackenridge's *Six Political Discourses* is one of those sermons, and in it he compares the Tories to the Biblical figure of Balaam. Balaam was a prophet in the Book of Numbers who, knowing the Israelites were the chosen people of God, cursed them for reward from a king. When the Israelites emerged from the Sinai, they conquered several kingdoms in Canaan and the surrounding area, for this was the land granted to them by God. The king of Moab, whose kingdom was somewhere in the region near Canaan, though it is not known specifically where, began to fear the power of the Israelites and schemed on how he might destroy the Israelites before they defeated him. The king knew of Balaam and called upon him, hoping that Balaam, as a prophet of God, might be able to issue a curse upon the Israelites and weaken them. At first Balaam declined, for he knew the Israelites were the chosen people, but the Moab king offered Balaam more and more money until Balaam finally agreed, issued a curse, and told the king how he might defeat the Israelites. The story of Balaam is thus a story of betrayal for personal reward.

Brackenridge used this story to condemn the Tories. He said that the error of Balaam was "covetousness. It was the basest avarice. For the sake of a small increase of wealth, by the favour of a heathen prince, he was disposed in his heart, to pronounce a curse on the people whom God had peculiarly chosen...a people of the same origin, and of the same religion with himself."<sup>52</sup> Balaam betrayed God's chosen people, a people to whom he was related and with whom he shared a religion, for a small profit. This was the same crime of which the Tories were

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<sup>52</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 22.

guilty, according to Brackenridge: “They have ran, after the error of Balaam – They have ran greedily – They have ran with a certain voraciousness of appetite. They have had it in their hearts to devour men of the same origin, language, and religion with themselves.”<sup>53</sup>

Brackenridge said that the Tories were descended from the same men as the revolutionaries, that their ancestors had all come to America together to find their freedom and secure a more prosperous life. Their ancestors had worked together to establish a viable society, and the result was enjoyed by both Tories and revolutionaries alike, for they had lived side by side for generations. But the Tories ignored all of that for the same reason as Balaam:

[T]hese men have out-savaged the Indian, and out-tygered the fiercest beast that roams upon the mountain....They have thrown aside the tender name of country. They have rejected the idea of kinsmen and acquaintance. They have bid defiance to the laws of God, and to all that is held sacred amongst men. They have cursed the cause in which we are engaged....They have ran in the error of Balaam. They have ran, for the same hope of a base reward.<sup>54</sup>

The Tories were a dishonorable group of men who chose the possibility of a small profit instead of fighting alongside their countrymen against oppression. They betrayed their fellow Americans out of their own self-interest, and with this point Brackenridge was drawing a stark contrast between the self-interested Tories and the selfless, publicly-interested revolutionaries who fought not for themselves but for their brethren and for God. Brackenridge sought to make it clear which side was the side of honor and justice, and which was the side of greed and corruption. His goal was to magnify the differences between the two groups and present the choice between them as simple: if an American had any honor and respect for his brethren, he would fight for the Revolution; otherwise he was a selfish traitor.

In another part of the sermon, Brackenridge outlined the fate awaiting American Tories, and this served to make the choice even more clear and simple. He argued that America was

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

destined for greatness, and that it would prove too powerful for the British to subjugate. The British would be defeated in the war and would take nothing from America. This meant that the Tories, who were hoping for a reward from the king, would receive nothing, for the cause in which they were helping the king would fail. And as a result of their betrayal, the Tories would be banished from America and would enjoy no share of the future greatness of America. The days of America's future greatness "are not far off, though many a tory should not live to see it,"<sup>55</sup> for they were too greedy and too impatient. Because of their treason, the Tories would be forced to flee America for Britain, in the hopes of finding some reward in the service of the king. But, according to Brackenridge, this reward would not come: "There shall they wander and walk about with other hungry dependents, and shadows consequent on these, until [King George III] shall graciously be pleased to take notice of them. They shall wait long and at last be disappointed."<sup>56</sup> Their time in England would be a temporal purgatory, for they would wander about with nothing on which to survive but the hopes of a future reward. When that reward would prove illusory, they would have betrayed their country for the sake of an unquenched greed. Once deserted by the king, they would "walk about as pilgrims on the earth, ...buffeted by Satan, and contemned by every class of men."<sup>57</sup> This was the fate of the Tories. The starkness of this vision was part of Brackenridge's attempt to make the choice simple for his listeners. Choose to fight in the Revolution and they could enjoy the fruits of America's future greatness. Choose to fight for the king and they would be condemned to a miserable, inescapable suffering. The choice could hardly be clearer.

Yet Brackenridge succeeded in making it so. Seemingly unsatisfied with the damnation he had placed on the Tories, he fired one more shot. Brackenridge argued not only that God was

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., p. 47.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

fighting for the Americans, but that Satan was fighting for the British. He asked, “Can we doubt, but that Satan hath been busy with our enemies?”<sup>58</sup> The devil supported the British troops just as God supported the American troops, but if Satan was supporting the British that means he was also supporting the Tories, for the two fought together. Thus when Brackenridge claimed, “The troops of hell hath been against us,”<sup>59</sup> he was arguing that the Tories were troops from hell fighting with Satan against God. Indeed, even Brackenridge could not imagine a more damning accusation than this, and thus his illustration was complete: any man who failed to support the American cause was a soldier of Satan.

Whitaker aimed at condemning the Tories in a similar manner so as to encourage his parishioners to support the American cause. He told the story of Meroz, an Israelite town cursed by God for failing to come to the aid of the Israelite army when it sought to break free from the Canaanites. The Israelites had been engaged in war with the Canaanites over the land of Canaan. God had promised the Israelites the land, but they had to conquer the land before they could settle there. The Canaanites proved powerful foes, and at one point they succeeded in subjugating the Israelites. Twenty years of oppression followed, until the Israelites gathered an army to throw off the Canaanite yoke and obtain their freedom. But the Israelite town of Meroz decided not to send troops to help the Israelite army, so after the Israelite victory God cursed the inhabitants of Meroz: “Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof, because they came not to the help of the Lord against the mighty.”<sup>60</sup> The residents of Meroz were “contented that others should go forth and endure the hardships of war, [for] they preferred their present ease, or some court favor, with chains and slavery, to the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>60</sup> Whitaker, *Antidote Against Toryism*, p. 187.

glorious freedom they were born to enjoy.”<sup>61</sup> It was either out of complacency or greed that the inhabitants of Meroz failed to support the Israelite army, and God cursed them as a result. In the conflict between America and Great Britain, the Tories would receive the same punishment as Meroz, according to Whitaker: “whoever is guilty of the like conduct in our contest with Great Britain, incurs the same guilt.”<sup>62</sup> Thus Whitaker claimed that God would curse the Tories for failing to help the Americans throw off the chains of oppression and secure their freedom and independence. He presented a choice that was as simple as that presented by Brackenridge: support the Revolution and be free or support the British and be cursed by God. His parishioners almost certainly understood the message.

Americans had two possible choices according to these ministers. They could either join the American cause or they could not. But if the American cause was just, the British and their Tory allies were evil, and God was actively helping the Americans, then there was really only one choice the colonists could make. At least this is what many ministers hoped. But should their message not be persuasive enough, many ministers argued that because God was on their side the Americans could be assured of victory. They used the argument, “if God is for the Americans, then who can be against them?” Abraham Keteltas and Hugh Henry Brackenridge struck this chord almost exactly. Keteltas asserted, “No weapon formed against Zion, shall prosper,”<sup>63</sup> while Brackenridge reassured his parishioners, “Let us be confident that God is for us, and the armies of the universe, are not sufficient to resist his providence.”<sup>64</sup> God had always made that sure His people emerged victorious, despite whatever trials they had to endure first. No human army could possibly overcome the power of God, and so the American colonists

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 196.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 210.

<sup>63</sup> Keteltas, *God Arising*, p. 604.

<sup>64</sup> Brackenridge, *Six Political Discourses*, p. 60.

could be assured that they would defeat the British. If God was truly on their side, then they were sure to gain their independence. This removed the last possible scruple colonists could have with supporting the Revolution. The ministers argued that the Americans were fighting to escape slavery for themselves and their posterity, that the war was forced upon them by the greedy British, that the American cause was just, that the supporters of Britain were evil and would be cursed by God, that America was a new Zion favored and supported by God, and that God was actively fighting on behalf of the Americans. If that was not enough, then certain ministers guaranteed victory. Americans could hardly ask for a more favorable fortune, and there could be little objection to supporting the war if these were all true. But there emerged a qualification to this final promise of certain victory, one that served the interests of the Presbyterian ministers as much as it served the interests of the American Revolution.

### **Unity and Piety**

The ministers were certainly sincere in their support of the revolution, but their support of the revolution through emotional arguments helped serve a second goal, that of strengthening the Presbyterian churches in America. Only a couple decades prior to the revolution, the Great Awakening had shown the potential for emotional fervor to strengthen colonial religion. Many denominations were lacking in enthusiasm in the early 1700s, but the Great Awakening provided a dose of emotion that reinvigorated colonial Protestantism. Presbyterian ministers in the years leading up to the Revolution felt that colonial society was increasingly coming under the influence of secular philosophy, that Americans were cooling in their attitudes towards God. In their minds, “there seemed...little doubt that the present was a time of degeneration, and one



form of degeneration was religious lukewarmness.”<sup>65</sup> The spread of science and philosophy in America colleges often provided secular answers to the questions confronting Americans. Ministers certainly provided strong religious arguments for independence, but the debate in the halls of Congress and the most influential political documents of the day relied largely on secular political philosophy. They may have sensed a decline in the reliance on religion for answers, and that nearly always meant a decline in church strength. The Moderate Enlightenment was grabbing hold in America, and the Moderate Enlightenment “had been ranged against the forces of popular instinct and emotion ever since the Great Awakening.”<sup>66</sup> The Revolution therefore provided many ministers with the opportunity to rile up their parishioners once again and reconsolidate control over American society. If the ministers could provide sufficiently convincing arguments that filled the emotional needs of their parishioners, then they might be able to fortify their churches. “To some clergy, the Revolution was a heaven-sent opportunity to restore unity and arrest decline,”<sup>67</sup> and so they promised victory not only to encourage Americans to join the cause and support the Revolution, but also on the condition that the American people remained pious in order to strengthen Presbyterianism.

The notion that America would be saved by God if its people reformed their ways and returned to God was part of the jeremiad tradition. The jeremiad was a preaching device, common in Presbyterianism and other Protestant denominations, which held that a special connection existed between God and His chosen people, in this case the Americans. At times, the chosen people could stray from the path of God, and, as a result, they would be punished and forced to endure great hardship. But because they were God’s chosen people, if they reformed their ways and resumed proper worship of and obedience to God, then God would put an end to

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<sup>65</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, p. 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

their hardship. Many Presbyterian ministers applied the jeremiad tradition to the struggle between America and Great Britain and argued that if – and only if – the Americans improved their worship of God would they be granted independence by His Providence.

William Tennent was one of the most vocal proponents of piety as a means to attain independence. He argued that “the surest Way for any Nation to obtain or perpetuate public Blessings, is to acknowledge that GOD who alone can bestow them.”<sup>68</sup> If Americans recognized that God alone could provide them with safety and with prosperity, then they would be sure to maintain public piety and proper worship. But Tennent believed that America was not a pious place, that “if our Nation and Country were to be judged by the Conduct of GOD’s People alone, we should have Reason to forebode the most dreadful calamities.”<sup>69</sup> According to Tennent, the Americans better return to God to ensure that they are victorious in the war against Britain, for if impiety continued in America then the dreadful calamity of British oppression would remain. Tennent was reprimanding the Americans for drifting from God, and the only solution was to attend church and follow the guidance of the clergy.

Joseph Montgomery presented a slightly more optimistic vision of the relationship between America and God, but his point was the same as Tennent’s. If America was pious and worshipped God properly, it would receive many blessings from Heaven. During his claim that victory was certain, Montgomery said, “you have the promise and faithfulness of a God engaged, that if you keep the words of this covenant and do them, ye shall have victory over your enemies, and prosperity in all ye do.”<sup>70</sup> As long as Americans were faithful to God and upheld their side of the agreement with God, they would be victorious over the British and their country would enjoy great prosperity in the future. Again, the only way to keep the words of the covenant was

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<sup>68</sup> Tennent, *Late Invasion of the Liberties*, p. 8.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13.

<sup>70</sup> Montgomery, *Christiana Bridge and Newcastle*, p. 21.

to be pious and follow the teachings of Presbyterian clergy. Presbyterian ministers recognized that using religious arguments for independence could serve two of their goals. By providing emotional conviction that the American cause was just, the ministers could strengthen the fight for independence, and by stirring up popular emotion around religious themes the ministers could also reinforce colonial religion. They recognized that a cause they believed in – independence – needed the strength of emotional fervor and certainty and that that same emotion could support a second cause for which they were striving – religious unity and influence.

### **Conclusion**

The use of emotional and religious arguments in Presbyterian sermons served many purposes, the most important of which were convincing Americans that their cause was just and removing the middle ground between the British and American sides so as to simplify the choice facing the colonists. Ministers accomplished these two goals by exploiting the aversion to slavery or the desire to uphold the memory of one's ancestors. They did it by claiming the colonists had no choice but to defend themselves against the aggression of the British. They did it by raising the Revolution up to the level of God and by assigning religious significance to their struggle against the British. If a colonist was not convinced that he should fight for George Washington or Thomas Jefferson, then Presbyterian ministers hoped he might be persuaded to fight for God. The ministers removed the middle ground by aligning those who fought for the American cause with God and righteousness and those who remained neutral or who supported the British with Satan and evil. Arguing that the Americans were fighting for God and the British were fighting for Satan assured victory and rendered "all thought of compromise

impossible; one does not negotiate with the Antichrist.”<sup>71</sup> If God would ultimately punish those Americans who did not actively support the Revolution, then the Americans had relatively little to fear in terms of punishment from the British if they did support the Revolution but failed. It was far more important to ensure favor in the eyes of God than in the eyes of the British, for the British could only punish a man for the remainder of his life, while God could punish him for all eternity.

The use of emotional arguments for independence thus supplemented the use of reasoned arguments in a manner that made Presbyterian sermons extremely influential. It also revealed the rise of a new movement in American society, one that helped fortify the revolutionary cause. The reasoned, intellectual arguments that relied on political philosophy derived mostly from the Moderate Enlightenment, a movement that supported reason versus passion and the elites versus the masses. Up until the period of the American Revolution, “all varieties of Enlightenment had been ranged in sharp opposition to popular enthusiasm and especially popular religion.”<sup>72</sup> The philosophers feared the fickle and unsophisticated masses, and they did not want to rile the masses up. They feared uncontrollable passion and enthusiasm. But sometime in the 1760s and 1770s, a new form of the Enlightenment arose, one that the scholar Henry May calls the Revolutionary Enlightenment. According to May, “The Revolutionary Enlightenment was itself enthusiastic and religious in spirit,”<sup>73</sup> in near direct contrast to the Moderate Enlightenment. The Revolutionary Enlightenment provided the emotion that the Moderate Enlightenment so greatly feared. It allowed the common man to participate, and even posited ultimate virtue and authority in the commoners and not the elites.<sup>74</sup> The Revolutionary Enlightenment served as a contrast to

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<sup>71</sup> Ferguson, *American Enlightenment*, p. 49.

<sup>72</sup> May, *Enlightenment in America*, p. 154.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 154.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 160.

the Moderate Enlightenment but it also served as a complement, at least in the American Revolution, for American revolutionaries relied on both the political philosophy of the Moderate Enlightenment and the emotional zeal of the Revolutionary Enlightenment.

But American Presbyterian ministers specifically were more emblematic of the Revolutionary Enlightenment, as “the most important emotional reservoir for radicals was that provided by radical religion, and radical religion was as yet usually Calvinist.”<sup>75</sup> Presbyterian revolutionaries helped provide the emotion that otherwise would have been lacking in the American Revolution, but which was absolutely necessary for its success. The Moderate Enlightenment offered the theories through which Americans could conceptualize their struggle and justify it on intellectual grounds. But that was not enough, and Presbyterian ministers helped supplement those theories with popular passion and conviction. One of the most influential figures of the Revolutionary Enlightenment in America, according to May, was Thomas Paine, the author of *Common Sense* and one of the most vocal supporters of the American cause. May argues that one of the main reasons Paine was so influential was “his bringing together of political and religious radicalism,”<sup>76</sup> and in this there is a parallel to the American Presbyterian ministers. While the religion they espoused was sometimes traditional Presbyterianism and other times more liberal Presbyterianism, the purpose was the same, and that was the promotion of a radical cause: the American Revolution.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 173.

## CONCLUSION

Writing of the main political parties in Great Britain in the middle of the eighteenth century, the Whigs and the Tories, David Hume remarked, “As no party, in the present age, can well support itself, without a philosophical or speculative system of principles, annexed to its political or practical one; we accordingly find, that each of the factions, into which this nation is divided, has reared up a fabric of the former kind, in order to protect and cover that scheme of actions, which it pursues.”<sup>1</sup> Hume witnessed British politicians using philosophical principles to protect or defend those actions they were already taking, or in other words, philosophy was being used to justify action. It did not seem to him that philosophy was, at least in relation to British politics of his era, a determinative factor in the decisions made by politicians. Philosophical principles did not guide the actions of British political activists; they did not lead men to pursue certain measures against others. Political philosophy merely provided a defense or justification for the actions men were led to pursue by other motives. According to Hume, political philosophy did not guide men so much as it defended their actions and their ambitions.

While Hume’s claim was particular to a certain time and location in political history, perhaps it points to a larger, more general characteristic of political philosophy. Perhaps Hume was more accurate than he fully appreciated, and perhaps he was speaking for more than just the Whigs and Tories of his time. Men often generate elaborate theories of government to explain how and why our politics work the way they do, but they do not necessarily do so to determine what we will do in the future. Locke’s social contract theory might have influenced the actions of some Americans in a determinative way, but in his own time his arguments may have been merely a defense or justification for British rebellions against the king, most notably the Glorious

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<sup>1</sup> Hume, *Original Contract*, p. 387.

Revolution of 1688. Locke's "Treatise was...professedly written only to justify a particular constitutional revolution in late seventeenth-century England."<sup>2</sup> Locke was a committed Whig and he sought to support the Whig cause. He did this, in part, by providing a powerful philosophical defense of the goals and actions of the Whigs. He was a political activist, not just a political philosopher. But this very notion Hume rejects, for true philosophers cannot be activists or adherents to a particular cause: "philosophers, who have embraced a party (if that be not a contradiction in terms)."<sup>3</sup> The argument of whether Locke was a true political philosopher, in the pure sense advocated by Hume, is not directly relevant here, but it does raise the question of why Locke wrote what he wrote. It also raises the question of why so many Americans referenced his work. If Locke was writing to defend Whig activities and the Glorious Revolution, then his work was more explicative than determinative; it explained or justified the Whig actions rather than shaped them. For many Americans, caught in a period of turmoil and revolution of their own, Locke's words filled the same role. They offered acceptable explanations for the situation between America and Great Britain, and they seemed to provide justifications for the actions of the American revolutionaries. But whether or not they really determined the actions of those Americans is uncertain.

There is little question that Americans of all sorts were familiar with the political theories of the Classical and Enlightenment thinkers. The numerous pamphlets and newspaper articles of the colonial period display thousands of references to Classical and Enlightenment political philosophy. Some authors were more careful in their use of these thinkers and exhibit a deep understanding of their principles, while other authors seem to have included quotes from famous thinkers merely to lend superficial credibility to their arguments. The Classical thinkers were

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<sup>2</sup> C.B. Macpherson, introduction to *Second Treatise of Government*, by John Locke (Indianapolis, 1980), p. vii.

<sup>3</sup> Hume, *Original Contract*, p. 388.

most often used to justify, rather than drive, American actions: “The classics of the ancient world are everywhere in the literature of the Revolution, but they are everywhere illustrative, not determinative, of thought.”<sup>4</sup> In other words, arguments from the classics were used to defend American actions *after* they had been determined. Americans had certain plans and ambitions, and they borrowed ideas from the Classical thinkers to defend those plans and ambitions, but the ideas did not shape what the Americans chose to pursue.

The ideas of the Enlightenment thinkers filled a similar role in the Revolution, though not quite to the same degree. The “major figures of the European Enlightenment...contributed substantially to the thought of the Americans; but, except for Locke’s, their influence, though more decisive than that of the authors of classical antiquity, was neither clearly dominant nor wholly determinative.”<sup>5</sup> Some of the Enlightenment thinkers at least partially shaped the actions of the Americans, but even their arguments may have been used more to defend than shape. It is difficult to assign to Locke alone the place of being “wholly determinative,” for analyzing the sources of ideology and determining whose arguments were used to shape action and whose were used to justify it is even more complicated than determining whose arguments influenced the thought in general. Perhaps Locke was more determinative than other Enlightenment thinkers; perhaps several thinkers were determinative. But it does seem that many ideas about proper government were influential in shaping the actions of the American leaders, not just the rhetorical defenses for those actions. Yet the arguments that ultimately drove many of America’s political elites to seek independence are not those under principal consideration here. Perhaps political philosophy was, in Hume’s words, used to protect the scheme of actions the American leaders had already chosen to pursue; perhaps not. It does seem, however, that

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<sup>4</sup> Bernard Bailyn, *Ideological Origins*, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 30.



Hume's observation of the role of political philosophy in British party politics applies to the American common people. American commoners used political philosophy to defend their decision to support the Revolution, but they did not choose to support the Revolution because of that political philosophy. Rather it seems that emotional and religious arguments were more influential in leading the American commoners to support the Revolution. It was the emotion contained in, for instance, the sermons of American Presbyterian ministers, that ultimately led the American people to fight for their independence, and the political philosophy of the elites was merely rhetorical defense for that fight.

Most historians recognize that Thomas Paine's *Common Sense* was incredibly influential in pushing the colonies towards war and independence. Yet there was little about his philosophical arguments that was new. His theories about government and the rights of the colonies had all been addressed before. What was new about his essay, and what made it so influential, was the emotion it contained. Paine's essay was one of the most emotionally charged documents of the Revolutionary period, and it led the Americans closer to war through its rhetorical firepower. There was little in *Common Sense* to convince Americans, on the basis of political philosophy, that they ought to break free from Britain. His intellectual arguments were already widely known. But *Common Sense* provided the emotional conviction that independence was legitimate.

The sermons of American Presbyterian ministers filled the same role. Many of them used political philosophy to argue for independence, but that political philosophy merely conceptualized the struggle and provided theoretical justifications for it. Not enough ministers relied on political philosophy in their sermons, even though they learned the theories in college and were surrounded by them in the many pamphlets circulating throughout the colonies.

Because the ministers did not heavily rely on political philosophy in their sermons, it is unlikely that that philosophy was an important determinant of the actions of the common people. The intellectual arguments were not complete enough to persuade Americans to fight for the Revolution on philosophical grounds. There were simply too many holes. But the same cannot be said of the emotional and religious arguments. American Presbyterian ministers presented their parishioners with very clear images of the future should the colonies not secure their independence, images that revealed successive generations suffering under the heavy yoke of slavery to British masters. They offered clear and thorough arguments that God permitted self-defensive wars, that the American resistance to the British was self-defensive, and that God supported the Americans. Presbyterian ministers posited America as the new Zion, as the new promised land, and the American people were the modern Israelites escaping oppression from an unjust king. Their sermons were full of these types of arguments, relying on Christian scripture and basic human instincts to stir up the emotions of American Presbyterians. And it seems that these arguments, and the emotion they invoked, played a pivotal role in driving the Revolution.

American Presbyterian ministers exploited existing tensions between Britain and the colonies and raised the stakes of the confrontation, arguing to their parishioners that it was not just about increased taxes or interference with local affairs, but about freedom for themselves and their posterity and, most importantly, duty to God. They took existing sentiments and magnified them in order to create the emotional force necessary to break free from Britain, and then they used political philosophy to defend and reinforce their chosen course. The political theories they borrowed from Classical and Enlightenment thinkers allowed them to claim that the American Revolution was about not the self-interest of the Americans but rather the defense of their natural and inalienable rights, that it was about justice, liberty, and proper government.

Political philosophy thus provided the intellectual rationale for the emotional desires of the Americans, desires which had already determined the course of action.

The same may not be true of the American elites, and thus there may be a difference between the role of intellectual and emotional arguments among the elites and among the commoners in the American Revolution. As mentioned, it is unclear the extent to which particular Classical and Enlightenment thinkers determined the actions of America's political leaders, but it does seem as if political philosophy did at least partially shape those actions. Many of the leaders of the American colonies believed in the philosophical principles of the Enlightenment, and many may have been motivated by them, not only in their words but in their actions. As Bernard Bailyn noted, it seems that at least some of the Enlightenment political philosophy was determinative, especially Locke's. Many of the early arguments for independence often relied on calm, rational principles of the Moderate Enlightenment, which made *Common Sense*, with its emotional firepower, so unique and original. Perhaps the American elites were driven by intellectual arguments grounded in political philosophy; perhaps they were driven by a mix of the intellectual and emotional arguments. But it seems, from the constitution of the American Presbyterian sermons, with their heavy emphasis on emotional and religious arguments, that American commoners were driven primarily by emotion. The debate over what truly motivates humans in the choices they make may never be decided, but, at least in the case of the American Revolution, it seems as if the majority of common Americans were led not by reason but by emotion. John Adams may have been right when he claimed that something changed in the minds of the American people in the years before 1776. But it seems that the change in the hearts and sentiments of the American people is what ultimately produced American independence.

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