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Conservative Revolutionaries
Transformation and Tradition in the Religious and Political Thought of Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew
by John S. Oakes
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New Title From John S. Oakes

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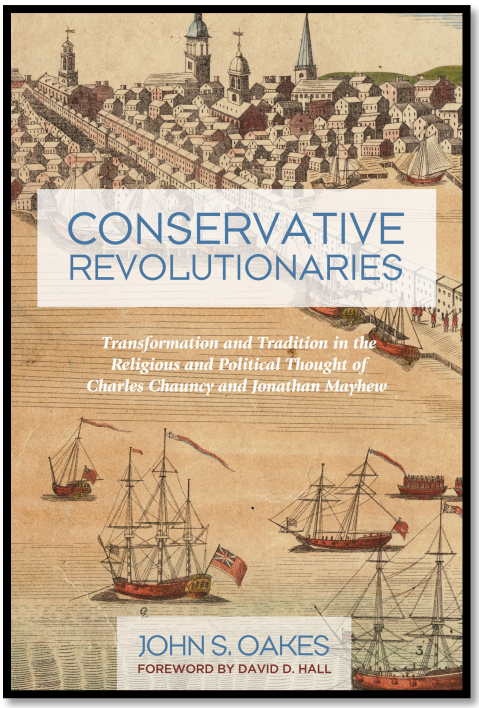

Boston Congregationalist ministers Charles Chauncy (1705–87) and Jonathan Mayhew (1720–66) were significant political as well as religious leaders in colonial and revolutionary New England. Scholars have often stressed their influence on major shifts in New England theology, from traditional Calvinism to Arminianism and, ultimately, to universalism and Unitarianism. They have also portrayed Mayhew as an influential preacher, whose works helped shape American revolutionary ideology, and Chauncy as an active leader of the patriot cause.

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

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

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

Interview with John S. Oakes

Why did you choose to study Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew?

First and foremost, because they were influential leaders with important ideas during a pivotal period of colonial and revolutionary American history. At a time when the population of Boston numbered some15,000 people, nearly all of them churchgoing, Chauncy and Mayhew held two of the major pulpits in the city for a combined total of nearly 80 years and they were significant voices among its civic and political elite.

The two ministers participated in many of the major religious and political controversies of their times. They pioneered fresh approaches to age-old theological questions about grace, free will, salvation, and the nature of God. But they were also sophisticated political thinkers, whose writings and sermons addressed key issues like the right to civil resistance, religious toleration, and opposition to colonial imperialism.

But while Chauncy and Mayhew have attracted some scholarly attention, they have not received what they deserve. The only serious comparative study was published nearly 30 years ago. The three major biographies of the two ministers are even older. In addition to their historical importance and human interest, the relative academic neglect of these two figures drew me to them.

What most interested you about their religious and political thought?

While they remained committed to key tenets of Congregationalist orthodoxy, Chauncy and Mayhew were theological innovators. In many ways, both ministers were socio-politically conservative, but they have also been strongly linked with the development of revolutionary ideology in New England. There are important questions about the true extent of their religious and political heterodoxy and how it connected with more traditionalist elements in their thought. I found those questions fascinating.

Why did you choose to study them together?

Since they were roughly contemporaries and ministered in the same town and denominational setting, it made obvious historical sense to do so. They were also friends and colleagues and their ideas and personalities offered interesting points of comparison. Comparing and contrasting key aspects of their biographies as well as their ideas allowed me to get a clearer understanding of both. That, I think, is one of the main benefits of this kind of comparative historical study.

What did you find most intriguing about your findings?

I was most intrigued by the competing and sometimes conflicting emphases in their thought. The question of how much Chauncy and Mayhew were upholders of religious and political tradition and/or agents of transformation lies right at the heart of *Conservative Revolutionaries*.

Interview with John S. Oakes cont.

What is the book's major contribution to modern scholarship?

The book offers thorough reinterpretations of Chauncy's and Mayhew's religious and political thought, broadly redefining their intellectual legacies as "conservative revolutionaries." In the process, it casts new light not only on the two ministers themselves, but on much wider debates in American history

What relevance does this book have in the context of contemporary debates about the role of religion in US politics?

The 2016 Presidential Election campaign has shown that it remains impossible to separate religion from American politics at the highest levels.

To take just a couple of recent examples, a prominent contender in the Republican primary process was once a prominent Baptist pastor and the Democratic vice-presidential candidate was once a Catholic missionary. Ministers of religion may no longer have such influential voices from their pulpits. But the discourse of both right and left in American political life remains suffused with biblical echoes and ambiguities and some of the most potent political appeals are couched in these terms.

The ideas of Chauncy and Mayhew in the more religious, but much less diverse setting of 18th century Boston may seem far removed from contemporary US religious and political concerns. But *Conservative Revolutionaries* uncovers intriguing resonances and surprising points of connection between their world and ours.

An Excerpt from *Conservative Revolutionaries*

All that can reliably be deduced about the full flowering of Chauncy's revolutionary commitment is that he had clearly, and quite enthusiastically, joined the patriot cause by the year the American Revolution began. In a letter of August 14, 1776, Abigail Adams was thus able to inform her husband, the future second president of the United States, John Adams, that when she had attended Boston's First Church the previous Sunday, "the Declaration of Independance was read from the pulpit by order of Counsel." "Dr. Chauncys address pleasd [sic] me," reported Adams. "The Dr. concluded with asking a Blessing 'upon the united States of America even untill the final restitution of all things.'" Yet despite this clear endorsement of the Revolution in 1776, Chauncy's last published sermon of the revolutionary period, *Accursed Thing* (1778), was hardly a ringing call to arms. It provided further evidence that Chauncy largely came over to the cause of independence to defend and conserve the traditional New England "rights and privileges" that he saw under threat by Britain. Its underlying analysis of the conflict also highlighted the providentialist terms in which he, like Mayhew, ultimately construed all human affairs. Warfare was a means of divine chastisement and potential moral improvement. "The parties in the war may both of them have sinned against the Lord . . . ," Chauncy observed, "in which case, they are both made use of in the providence of God to chastise one another; and to which of them God will give the advantage is known only to himself; unless that party in the war, whose cause is just, should put away the accursed thing."

Chauncy saw a direct correlation between progress or setbacks in battle and the spiritual and moral health of the combatants:

> By remarkable interpositions, in the government of Providence, we have been marvellously succeeded, at one time and another, in our attempts against the enemy; but, as the accursed thing has been retained among us, they, by like interpositions of heaven, have been succeeded in their attempts against us.

The "accursed thing," as he defined it, based on an exposition of Joshua 7:13, was, predictably, human sin, not "in its nature only, but in its effects and consequences also." Moreover, while Chauncy generally questioned whether New England had ever been "in a more corrupt and degenerate state" or "in a more unhappy situation, morally speaking, to engage in war," he perceived a central, moral problem at the heart of current military unreadiness. "As oppression of the poor, the fatherless, and the widow, is eminently the accursed thing in the midst of us," he contended, "it ought to be taken away, so far as may be, by the powers ordained of God to be his ministers for good." As a result of currency depreciation, some of the weakest members of society were unjustly suffering. Three years into the Revolutionary War, Chauncy viewed divine providence and Christian morality, conceived in very traditional terms, as the keys to colonial victory . . .

Defending a right of resistance against unjust rulers may have become commonplace in Massachusetts election sermons by 1776, but for Chauncy, as for [Jonathan] Mayhew ten years earlier, it was clearly one thing to uphold it in principle and another to support active rebellion against British imperial authority in practice. Rather than providing evidence of revolutionary ardor before that date, Chauncy's writings in the immediate pre-revolutionary period actually demonstrate a continuing commitment to traditional British values and ideals, which extended beyond the Declaration of Independence. They reveal an inherent social and sociopolitical traditionalism which he shared with his late West Church colleague, but which scholars have often neglected. Like many of his contemporaries, Chauncy hesitated to endorse the American Revolution fully before it became a matter of fact.

Praise for *Conservative Revolutionaries*

"In studies of early American evangelicals and evangelicalism that seem to dominate the landscape these days, Charles Chauncy is usually trotted out in a couple of paragraphs to represent the reactionary 'Old Lights' who were so shortsighted as to oppose the Great Awakening, and Jonathan Mayhew is mentioned in passing as an inlet of soulless rationalism on the road to Deism. But John Oakes' dual biography of these two rich and formative figures shows that these characterizations are too pat, too simplistic, and that a new, comparative approach to their religious and political thought reveals that 'traditional Calvinists' such as Chauncy and Mayhew are vital to understanding the great changes that occurred in the period from the Awakenings to the Revolution. In the process, Oakes shows that both of these figures had many points of similarity but were also unique thinkers and actors in their own right."

— Kenneth P. Minkema, Jonathan Edwards Center, Yale University

"A balanced, careful, and engaging study of two important figures who are more often captured in caricature. Oakes' book situates Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew not as pathfinders of revolution and Enlightenment, but as key figures in their own historical moment."

—Nicholas Guyatt, University of Cambridge

"Oakes' study of Chauncy and Mayhew has brought depth, texture, and a kind of iridescence to his subjects. For those who think 'moderate' means 'bland,' this book offers a powerful rebuttal. Far from monochromatic gray, Chauncy's and Mayhew's efforts to balance tradition and change drew from a rich palette of intellectual trends and cultural forces in eighteenth-century New England. Oakes' comparison of them vividly reveals, too, that such colonial balancing acts took multiple forms."

—David Holland, Associate Professor of North American Religious History, Harvard Divinity School

"John Oakes' erudite understanding of Reformed Protestantism has allowed him to give us a fresh, insightful, and nuanced analysis of how Charles Chauncy and Jonathan Mayhew articulated the momentous religious and political transformations that shook New England from the 1740s through the Revolution. By locating these two important figures in the socioreligious context in which they flourished, Oakes has framed a revealing window that sheds light on the way in which religiously based thought, as it evolved in New England, suffused the secular languages of liberty, and how tradition continued to shape the innovative discourses of the latter half of the eighteenth century. An exemplar of how disciplined comparative scholarship can significantly expand our understanding of long-studied events."

—Alan Tully, Eugene C. Barker Professor of History, University of Texas at Austin