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PREFACE

Father of Liberty is the first book on the politics of Dr. Jonathan Mayhew, pastor of the Congregationalist West Church in Boston from 1747 to 1766. This work contends that Mayhew was the most politically influential clergyman in eighteenth-century America and the intellectual progenitor of the American Revolution in New England. Among the handful of leaders who set the cultural context for colonial America's political resistance to British authority in the 1760s, Mayhew ought to be counted along with Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and James Otis. And yet he is little remembered today. The corridor of time between the 250th anniversary of his death in 1766 and the 300th anniversary of his birth in 1720 is a fitting moment to reexamine and reassess his historical significance. This book aspires to stimulate a renewal of scholarly and public appreciation for Mayhew's contributions to American thought and culture—and for a life of the mind lived always in fierce dissent.

This book does not purport to be an intellectual biography of Jonathan Mayhew, let alone a comprehensive account of his life. As the clergyman's protégé John Adams remarked in 1818, "To draw the character of Mayhew would be to transcribe a dozen volumes." It is, rather, a study of his political thought and political activism, understood in the context of his personal experiences and intellectual influences, as well as the cultural developments and political events of his time, in New England and the wider Atlantic world. Its object is to analyze and assess Mayhew's contribution to eighteenth-century New England political culture in general and to the intellectual origins of the American Revolution in particular.¹

Father of Liberty is the product of many years of research in primary sources, from microfilmed newspapers to archival documents. I made extensive use of the Jonathan Mayhew Papers, kept in the Bortmann Collection at Boston University's Mugar Memorial Library. I found it fruitful to draw upon archives at the Massachusetts Historical Society, Harvard University's Houghton Library, and the Huntington Library. My access to and acquisition of the primary

and secondary sources for this project relied upon the yeomen's work of librarians, library staff, and archivists from these institutions as well as Liberty Fund, Marymount University's Reinsch Library, Marquette Library's Raynor Memorial Library, and the University of Kentucky's Young Library.

The shortcomings of this work are entirely my own, but its merits I must share with the many heads and many hands contributing to its completion. For the manuscript's thorough and insightful review, I am deeply grateful to Rosemarie Zagarri, Chris Beneke, and Colin Nicolson. In various forms and stages of development, this book project benefited from lively conference chats, e-mail exchanges, editorial assistance, critical feedback on chapters, and moral support from several colleagues, among them, Michael Zuckert, Jack P. Greene, the late Pauline Maier, J. C. D. Clark, Joyce Lee Malcolm, Craig Yirush, William W. Freehling, Conrad C. Wright, James Ceaser, Robert A. Ferguson, Michael Winship, Jonathan H. Scott, Hans Eicholz, Robert G. Ingram, C. Bradley Thompson, Edward Stringham, Thomas G. West, Holly Brewer, Brad Jarvis, Paul Teed, Suzanne Carson, and Amanda Bourne. The late, incomparable, and much-missed Lance Banning directed much of the research on which this monograph is based, and to him I will always remain in debt.

During his tenure as director of the University Press of Kansas, Charles Myers also served as acting editor for the American Political Thought series, carrying on the brilliant legacy of Lance Banning and Wilson Carey McWilliams. Chuck embraced my Mayhew project from the start and pushed for it every step of the way. He did a magnificent job, and I thank him—as well as Joyce Harrison, Mike Kehoe, Larisa Martin, Karl Janssen, Martha Whitt, and the rest of the editorial, marketing, and production teams at the University Press of Kansas—for turning this project from an idea in my mind to the book in your hands. I appreciate financial support for my research, writing, and revision of the book from Marymount University, the University of Kentucky, and Liberty Fund. For their encouragement, I am grateful to my friends, Jack F. Wakeland, Margaret Tseng, and Charles R. Smith, as well as my parents, Donald W. Marshall, the late Nancy D. Marshall, and John P. Mullins, Jr., my first history teacher, who showed me the power of ideas to move the world. I am grateful to my stepdaughter, Shir Bloch, for enduring patiently my pontifications about Jonathan Mayhew over most of her lifetime. And thanks goes to my son, Jonathan Henry Bloch-Mullins, for always

giving my spirits a lift when I needed it most—and for being the only member of the family willing to join me, with his ingenuous gusto, in a hearty toast and three stout huzzahs to the 250th anniversary of the repeal of the Stamp Act. And, at last, I thank my wife and favorite Marquette colleague, Corinne Bloch-Mullins, for seeing this book through from beginning to end, for always believing in me, and for making life so dear and peace so sweet. She is first in my heart, and my first book belongs to her.



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Introduction

On the night of August 26, 1766, a “number of rude Fellows”—in the words of the *Boston Gazette*—rallied around a bonfire on King Street in downtown Boston and formed a torchlit mass of indignation. The crowd divided into two teams, ransacking the private homes of two officers of the British Crown. The mob then re-formed and marched to a three-story Palladian mansion, the home of Thomas Hutchinson, chief justice and lieutenant governor of Massachusetts. An eyewitness, lawyer Josiah Quincy, Jr., documented the riot in a diary entry the following day. As the crowd surged into Hutchinson’s house, the lieutenant governor fled with his daughter. Quincy believed that Hutchinson’s life would have been forfeit had he not made this narrow escape. The “Rage-intoxicated Rabble,” Quincy recalled, swept into the house and destroyed or stole everything of value. Over hours of steady work, the rioters pulled down interior walls and tore its stately cupola from the roof. They left a gutted shell behind and dispersed with the approach of daylight. Historian Bernard Bailyn described the Hutchinson Riot as “more violent than any yet seen in America, more violent indeed than any that would be seen in the entire course of the Revolution.” In the weeks that followed, mobs followed Boston’s example in cities up and down the Atlantic seaboard, from an assault upon the royal governor’s home in New York City to raucous street rallies in Charleston. The Hutchinson Riot was the spark that set Britain’s Thirteen Colonies on fire, turning American opposition to the Stamp Act of 1765 from a genteel affair of legislative petitioning into a violent popular up-

rising with the potential for armed revolution. Publicly, Lieutenant Governor Hutchinson blamed the attack on mistaken gossip that he was a supporter of the hated new stamp tax. Privately, he blamed Jonathan Mayhew.¹

As crowds gathered around the ruins of the Hutchinson mansion on August 27, the rumor spread in some social circles that this attack upon the private residence of the second-ranking Crown officer in Massachusetts, unprecedented in its destructiveness, had been incited by Dr. Jonathan Mayhew's sermon on August 25. In that sermon, the forty-four-year-old pastor of the Congregationalist meetinghouse in Boston's West End obliquely addressed the subject preying on the minds of all Bostonians: Parliament's universally hated stamp tax, scheduled for implementation on November 1. Mayhew offered his flock an explanation of the principle of civil liberty, which requires that the laws "are made by common consent & choice; that all have some hand in framing them, at least by their representatives, chosen to act for them, if not in their own persons." If people are "governed contrary to, or independently of, their own will & consent," then they are "in a state of slavery." Moreover, Britain's American colonists should be considered slaves rather than freemen, he contended, "if they are to possess no property, nor to enjoy the fruits of their own labor, but by the mere precarious pleasure of the mother [country], or of a distant legislature, in which they neither are, nor can be represented." While denouncing taxation without representation and government without consent, he also cautioned his congregation against the lawlessness of mob rule, which negates civil liberty as surely as parliamentary oppression.²

Mayhew's caveat regarding the dangers of anarchy was omitted from accounts of the sermon offered by Thomas Hutchinson and Governor Francis Bernard. Rev. Henry Caner, the King's Chaplain in Boston, wrote to the archbishop of Canterbury that, the day before the Hutchinson Riot, Mayhew "distinguished himself in the pulpit upon this Occasion (it is said) in One of the most seditious Sermons ever delivered, advising the people to stand up for their rights to the last drop of their Blood." It is unlikely that any of the rioters were moved to action by the sermon on civil liberty, and Mayhew denied vociferously the slander that he had instigated this violence. Such colonial champions of royal prerogative as Hutchinson, Bernard, and Caner were, however, inclined to blame Mayhew for the August 26 riot. His sermon on the Stamp Act had been only the latest political act in a long and controversial career of challenging authority and asserting liberty from the pulpit.³



Mayhew died on July 9, 1766, less than a year after the Hutchinson Riot, and almost exactly ten years before two of his disciples, John Adams and Robert Treat Paine, signed the Declaration of Independence on behalf of Massachusetts. Adams and Paine justified armed resistance to the British Crown in the name of political ideas: the Real Whig principles of natural human rights, popular sovereignty, a consensual government of limited and delegated powers, liberty of conscience, and the people's right to resist tyrannical government. They first encountered these principles as young men in Mayhew's sermons. Long after his retirement from the US presidency, Adams wrote his friend Thomas Jefferson that Mayhew's first political pamphlet, *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission to the Higher Powers*, served as his political "Chatechism," which he read at the age of fifteen and reread "till the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly grafted on my Memory." In 1818, Adams claimed, "If the orators on the 4th of July really wish to investigate the principles and feelings which produced the Revolution, they ought to study . . . Dr. Mayhew's sermon on passive obedience and non-resistance." Adams considered Mayhew, along with Samuel Adams and John Hancock, one of the five men who started the American Revolution in New England. Paine, who regularly attended Mayhew's services, called the clergyman nothing less than "the father of civil and religious liberty in Massachusetts and America."⁴

Mayhew's sermons and discourses shaped the political thinking not only of John Adams and Robert Treat Paine but many other "friends of liberty" in Massachusetts in the 1760s. Mayhew influenced politically such secular Yankee leaders as Paul Revere, James Otis, Jr., Samuel Allyne Otis, Mercy Otis Warren, Josiah Quincy, Jr., and his brothers Edmund and Samuel, James Bowdoin, Benjamin Church, Richard Cranch, Harrison Gray, *Boston Gazette* co-publishers Benjamin Edes and John Gill, and such clergymen as Samuel Cooper, Andrew Eliot, and Charles Chauncy, as well as New Yorker William Livingston and Pennsylvania's chief justice, William Allen. Mayhew's political writings also drew fire from "friends of government" on both sides of the Atlantic, among them Francis Bernard, Thomas Hutchinson, the Episcopal clergymen Henry Caner and Samuel Johnson, as well as Thomas Secker, the archbishop of Canterbury. Selling well in England, his tracts won the admiration of Catherine Macaulay, Joseph Priestley, Thomas Hollis, Richard

Price, and other English champions of the Enlightenment and the American cause. Within his lifetime, printers in both Boston and London produced multiple editions of some of his most popular books and pamphlets. Most of his published works were moral or theological in nature, but his political sermons attracted the greatest public attention (both positive and negative). According to historian Carl Bridenbaugh, by the 1760s, Mayhew “had won for himself a transatlantic reputation as the champion of British Nonconformity, and it is doubtful if even Benjamin Franklin had as many readers.”⁵

This study examines Mayhew’s political thought and activism in the context of the ideas and events of his time and place, demonstrating his critical contribution to the intellectual origins of American Revolution in Massachusetts. In the process, it illuminates the meaning of the Revolution as a political and constitutional conflict informed by the religious and political ideas of the British Enlightenment. It also corrects a historic injustice in recovering the largely forgotten achievement of “this transcendental genius,” as John Adams called Mayhew, who “threw all the weight of his great fame into the scale of the country in 1761, and maintained it there with zeal and ardor till his death, in 1766.” It is the conclusion of this book that no clergyman in eighteenth-century America dared more, struggled more, and succeeded more in advancing the cause of liberty than Dr. Jonathan Mayhew. If the principles of the Declaration were indeed “self-evident” for most New Englanders by 1776, this was due in no small part to the exertions of the West Church pastor, who preached those principles with fiery eloquence and forceful logic in the transatlantic press from 1747 to 1766. He should rightly be numbered with Patrick Henry, James Otis, and other early intellectual leaders of the American Whig opposition who set the cultural conditions and intellectual parameters for colonial resistance to Britain’s new imperial policies following the French and Indian War. More than any other clergyman, Mayhew helped prepare the New England conscience for disobedience to British authority in the 1760s.⁶

Raised in Massachusetts by a Puritan missionary and educated at Harvard at the height of the Enlightenment, Mayhew believed that the essence of Protestantism is the individual believer’s application of reason to the interpretation of Scripture and practice of the classical virtues from Christian motives. Per-

suaded that Scripture must be interpreted in the light of reason, the young Congregational minister rejected the main tenets of Calvinism. In the 1750s, he was the first American to repudiate publicly the doctrine of the Trinity as unscriptural and irrational. Embracing the “natural religion” of the British Enlightenment, Mayhew maintained that God is rational and benevolent, and that God created humans with the natural capacity for reason, virtue, and happiness. In accordance with the low-church Protestant doctrine of “the right and duty of private judgment,” he argued that humans should be free to think, worship, live, and seek happiness according to their own judgment. While most of his fellow Boston divines were Calvinist and Trinitarian and found Mayhew scandalous, the theologically heterodox pastor remained committed to New England Congregationalism, as he thought congregations should govern themselves independent of the control of unelected bishops (whether Anglican or Catholic, appointed by a king or a pope). In printed sermons of the 1750s and 1760s, the West Church pastor criticized orthodox Calvinist Congregationalists, evangelical New Lights, and high-church Episcopalians as bad Protestants for usurping the individual’s right of private judgment in religious and moral matters. Alienated from most of his colleagues in New England, Mayhew found intellectual kinship with anti-Trinitarian Presbyterian clergy in London, who feted him as one of their own and arranged an honorary doctorate from a Scots university.

From 1750 to 1766, Mayhew used press and pulpit to affirm the principles of natural rights, popular sovereignty, delegated powers, consensual government, and the right of resistance, which he thought to be under attack from the high-church Episcopal clergy in America and England. Considering these Whig “revolution principles” the theoretical basis for Britain’s Revolution of 1688 and the succession of the Hanoverian dynasty, he sensed no contradiction between preaching the right of the people to overthrow a tyrannical monarch and professing patriotic loyalty to the British Crown. During the French and Indian War, Mayhew celebrated Britain as the bulwark of constitutional monarchy and enlightened Protestantism against Catholic, absolutist France. But he remained ambivalent about the British Empire, fearful that Britain was becoming increasingly corrupt, and that the American people’s virtue would be corrupted by their imperial connection with Britain. Mayhew’s outspoken criticism of what he called “*high-church, tory-principles* and maxims” earned him the enmity of Francis Bernard, royally appointed gov-

ernor of Massachusetts. An affair of honor between the two men convinced the pastor that tyranny and corruption had already reached New England's shores. He began working in tandem with James Otis's Whig legislators to combat encroachments on liberty by the Bernard administration.⁷

In defending the transatlantic Protestant interest against the Catholic Church and Protestant nonconformity against the Church of England, the controversial minister won appreciation from theologically orthodox Congregational and Presbyterian clergy in New England, as well as Presbyterian admirers in New York and Pennsylvania. The archbishop of Canterbury's proposal to establish an Anglican bishop in the American colonies sent ripples of anxiety through the colonial clergy of Protestant denominations dissenting from the king's Church. Taking the lead against this plan, Mayhew's pamphlets argued that it assumed the principle that the Church of England had jurisdiction over America's churches and that Parliament had legislative supremacy over America's legislatures. He rallied low-church Protestant clergy against the episcopate as a danger to civil and religious liberty, compelling the archbishop and his colonial allies to back down. Mayhew's campaign not only helped to unify low-church Protestant clergy politically despite their theological differences, but also to alienate them from Britain and keep them wary of a broader British conspiracy against American rights.

Although he had long preached popular sovereignty, the right of revolution, and the British menace to American virtue and liberty, Mayhew was taken aback by the intensity of public protest against the Stamp Act of 1765. He was the only New England clergyman to denounce the tax act from the pulpit. When Boston rioters destroyed Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson's home the following day, Hutchinson and Bernard blamed Mayhew's sermon for inciting the violence. While his sermon likely did not play a role, he was genuinely heartsick over the riot and the rising threat of civil war between Britain and her colonies. He was immensely relieved by repeal of the Stamp Act, but he did not retreat from his lifelong commitment to Whig revolution principles and his warning to Americans to remain vigilant against future British encroachments on their liberty. Mayhew never seemed to acknowledge that his career as a Real Whig political propagandist, and particularly his agitation of the episcopate issue, helped create in New England the cultural conditions for a violent public response to the Stamp Act. Mayhew sowed the wind, but the American people reaped the whirlwind.



In an often quoted 1825 letter to Henry Lee, Thomas Jefferson remarked that the object of the Declaration of Independence was “not to find out new principles, or new arguments, never before thought of,” but “to place before mankind the common sense of the subject.” With respect to American rights and British violations of them, he claimed, “there was but one opinion,” such that “All American Whigs thought alike on these subjects.” Congress meant the Declaration to be “an expression of the American mind,” whose authority rested upon “the harmonizing sentiments of the day, whether expressed in conversation, in letters, printed essays, or in the elementary books of public right, as Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, &c.” Scholars and other commentators have long debated the intellectual sources of the American Revolution. Perhaps a greater mystery is the cultural process by which such radical moral abstractions as natural human rights, popular sovereignty, consensual government, and the right of resistance ever became so broadly accepted by the majority of eighteenth-century Americans as not simply true but “self-evident.”⁸

In his 1781 work, *The Origin and Progress of the American Revolution*, Peter Oliver, former chief justice of Massachusetts and Loyalist refugee to England, blamed the Congregational clergy for turning the people of New England against Britain and its colonial Crown officers unjustly. Oliver called the clergy the “black regiment” of the Whig opposition movement, and he styled Mayhew and his friends Charles Chauncy and Samuel Cooper the “sacerdotal Triumvirate” that led this regiment into political war against lawful government. He blamed the three pastors for “encouraging Seditious & Riots, until those lesser Offences were absorbed in Rebellion.” Perpetuating the claim by Caner and Hutchinson that Mayhew had incited the notorious Boston riot of August 26, 1765, Oliver wrote, “on the day preceeding the Destruction of Mr. *Hutchinson’s* House, he preached so seditious a Sermon, that some of his Auditors, who were of the Mob, declared, whilst the Doctor was delivering it they could scarce contain themselves from going out of the Assembly & beginning their Work.” Oliver accused Mayhew and his fellow clergy, along with James Otis and other secular Whig leaders, of setting the Revolution in motion not so much by teaching bad principles to the people as by appealing to such passions as fear, greed, and resentment of their social betters.⁹

In the nineteenth century, New England intellectuals (mainly Unitari-

ans) taught a Whiggish version of Oliver's Tory interpretation. They praised Congregationalist clergymen for contributing to the Revolution's intellectual origins by educating public opinion in the principles of civil and religious liberty (as grounded in rationalist theology). Following the death of his foremost advocate, John Adams, in 1826, Mayhew's role in the Revolution was perpetuated in public memory by pastor Alden Bradford's 1838 biography. On the eve of the Civil War, Congregationalist clergy seemed anxious to hold up Mayhew as evidence that Yankees had well preceded Southerners in intellectual leadership of the Revolution. In 1856 Cyrus Bartol (associate minister of the West Church) praised Mayhew as a champion of liberty, noting that his "hand was felt at the helm of our bewildered vessel of state, before the voice of Patrick Henry, in Virginia, was heard rising above the storm." Unitarian minister and abolitionist Theodore Parker memorialized Mayhew as "a profound and bold thinker, one who feared not the truth." Massachusetts lawyer and antiquarian John Thornton Wingate demonstrated the Revolutionary-era clergy's commitment to liberty and union in an 1860 collection of political sermons, *The Pulpit of the American Revolution*, which opened with Mayhew's 1750 *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission*. New Hampshire journalist Frank Moore edited a similar collection in 1862, *The Patriot Preachers of the American Revolution*, opening with Mayhew's 1766 political sermon, *The Snare Broken*. This Whiggish interpretive tradition, advanced by gentleman historians, culminated in 1910 with *The Heralds of a Liberal Faith*, by Boston Unitarian minister Samuel A. Eliot. Emphasizing Mayhew's precedence in preaching revolution principles, Eliot honored Mayhew as "the torchbearer who lighted the fires of his country's liberties," who was "not the associate, but the inspirer of the leaders of the patriot cause in the days before the Revolution."¹⁰

In her 1928 monograph, *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution*, Duke University historian Alice M. Baldwin gave the old Whig interpretation its first full presentation in academic scholarship—and its last, for decades to come. Herself the daughter of a Maine Congregationalist minister, Baldwin aimed for her study "to show how the New England clergy preserved, extended and popularized the essential doctrines of political philosophy, thus making familiar to every church-going New Englander long before 1763 not only the doctrines of natural right, the social contract, and the right of resistance, but also the fundamental principle of American con-

stitutional law, that government, like its citizens, is bounded by law, and when it transcends its authority it acts illegally.” Baldwin’s book contended that the political preaching of New England’s Congregational and Presbyterian clergy “may explain, in some measure, why these theories were so widely held, so dearly cherished, and so deeply inwrought into American constitutional doctrine.” Highlighting the clergy’s great and persistent influence over their congregations in the eighteenth century, she credited them with popularizing the political ideas of thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Cicero, Algernon Sydney, John Locke, and Benjamin Hoadly. The clergy provided one of the “lines of transmission” by which the political ideas of the seventeenth century were communicated in New England’s political culture over the generations to the Revolutionary era. Mayhew figured prominently in Baldwin’s study as a minister who “had long been writing in support of liberty, both civil and religious, and was known all over America and in England for his bold attacks in behalf of the right of resistance.” She denied that natural rights political philosophy was “foisted upon the people by a few book-learned political leaders when the Revolutionary ferment began.” In New England, the nonconformist clergy had rendered these radical doctrines mere common sense for the average Yankee, such that there was “not a right asserted in the Declaration of Independence which had not been discussed by the New England clergy before 1763.” Moreover, they gave these political ideas “the sanction of divine law,” making them seem sacred and undeniable to a religious population.¹¹

In Baldwin’s hands, the old Whig account of the nonconformist clergy’s political leadership provided a compelling explanation for how Whig revolution principles became so widely accepted by the Yankee populace over the decades preceding the Declaration of Independence—and why New England so frequently stood in the vanguard of American resistance to British authority, dragging the southern and mid-Atlantic colonies along. But Baldwin knew in 1928 that she was writing against the historiographic tide. At least since the 1913 publication of Charles A. Beard’s *Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States*, the Progressive interpretation had gained dominance in academic historical scholarship. Bringing a materialist worldview and positivist methodology to their analysis of the past, Progressive historians had little patience with the role of ideas and intellectuals—let alone religious ideas and clergy—in their analysis of the Revolution’s origins. In their studies of the Revolution’s origins, scholars such as John C. Miller

and Philip Davidson found Whig political writing to be mere propaganda for social classes scrambling for power and economic groups competing for advantage in largely quantifiable terms. Over the first half of the twentieth century, Jonathan Mayhew and the New England clergy gradually faded from scholarly consideration and public memory.¹²

In the second half of the twentieth century, though, some historians embraced John Adams's interpretation of the Revolution as an intellectual movement, a "radical change" in "the minds and hearts of the people." Repulsed by the totalitarian ideologies of Nazism, fascism, and communism in the wake of the Second World War and early Cold War, "neo-Whig" scholars rediscovered the importance of ideology as motivation for colonial resistance to British tyranny, taking seriously the colonists' own explanation of their motives in political literature. In his 1953 *Seedtime of the Republic*, Clinton Rossiter profiled the intellectual leadership of six colonial thinkers—including Mayhew—who explained and popularized those "liberal" political ideas from which the generation of American Revolutionaries would later draw guidance. Concurring with John Adams's assessment of the pastor's historical role, Rossiter found Mayhew "easily the most striking representative of the dissenting preachers who from the 1740s onward proclaimed Locke and Sidney from their pulpits and prepared the mind of New England for the Revolution." Rossiter's analysis of Mayhew's political writing began the gradual rehabilitation of his reputation as a historically significant figure.¹³

Building on Rossiter's rediscovery of Mayhew eleven years later, Charles W. Akers published *Called unto Liberty*, the only scholarly biography of the West Church pastor to date. Akers joined in Rossiter's neo-Whig approach to Mayhew as a radical in both religion and politics, a boldly independent thinker whose attachment to Real Whig political principles followed logically from his rejection of Calvinism and Trinitarianism in favor of a rationalist form of Christianity. He found Mayhew "the boldest and most articulate of those colonial preachers who taught that resistance to tyrannical rulers was a Christian duty as well as a human right." Akers concurred with Adams's Whig view of Mayhew as foremost among the New England Congregational clergy who promoted Whig ideology and laid the groundwork for popular resistance to Crown authority in the 1760s.¹⁴

In exploring the intellectual origins of the American Revolution, other neo-Whig historians evaluated the cogency of colonial Whig claims of a British conspiracy against their liberties in the 1760s, reconsidering the New England Congregational clergy as a conduit for Whig political thought. In his 1962 study, *Mitre and Sceptre*, Carl Bridenbaugh argued that religion was “a fundamental cause of the American Revolution,” finding that conflict over church-state relations provided the century-long context for conflict over relations between Britain and the American colonies. Bridenbaugh assessed Mayhew as foremost among the Congregational political activists of the 1760s who convinced New Englanders and their British co-religionists that Episcopal militancy was a threat to civil liberty. While Bridenbaugh highlighted religious zeal and sectarian fears as compelling motives for colonial resistance, Trevor Colbourn’s *Lamp of Experience* treated the Revolution as “the achievement of literate politicians who enlightened and informed American public opinion” through the appeal to reason and historical facts. Colbourn devoted a chapter to the Congregational clergy’s role in this cultural process, finding Mayhew “the most outstanding of New England’s politically minded clerics” who “led New England clerical criticism of England.”¹⁵

A fundamental pivot in the historiography of the Revolution came with Bernard Bailyn’s ideological interpretation, later dubbed “republican revisionism,” which attributed colonial political resistance primarily to the influence of American Whig political thought. In 1965, Bailyn published his edited collection of *Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750–1776*. He took Mayhew’s *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission* as the first pamphlet in his collection and the beginning of the great debate on the nature of government that culminated in the Revolutionary War. In Bailyn’s estimation, the *Discourse* was the “most famous sermon preached in pre-Revolutionary America,” and “the American Revolution itself” was “the fulfillment and application” of the arguments in Mayhew’s *Discourse*. Through the *Pamphlets* and his 1967 monograph *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, Bailyn’s work elevated the intellectual interpretation of the Revolution’s origins to historiographic dominance and won new scholarly attention for Mayhew and the clergy as part of that story. Focusing on colonial political pamphlet literature rather than political sermons, however, the republican revisionists tended to neglect religion, interpreting Whig political thought in largely secular terms.¹⁶



Fueled by academic fascination with the mass protests of the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new body of scholarship explored the centrality of religion to early American history. Leading the way in his 1966 work *Religion and the American Mind*, literature professor Alan Heimert located the antiauthoritarian impulses of the colonial Whig opposition in the New Light revivalism of the First Great Awakening. He characterized the rationalist critics of the Awakening—Mayhew prominent among them—as a self-serving establishment hostile to egalitarianism that aimed to keep the common people under control and maintain the sociopolitical status quo. Heimert revived the nineteenth-century Whig thesis that the Revolution had been led by rationalist clergy only to stand it on its head. “The image of Jonathan Mayhew as a ‘fiery liberal’ also has every virtue except consonance with the facts,” Heimert wrote.¹⁷

Other work in early American religious history incorporated the republican revisionist literature on colonial Whig political literature. In his 1977 study *The Sacred Cause of Liberty*, Nathan O. Hatch outlined the political thought of the New England’s Congregational clergy. Mayhew figured in his work as one among many pastors who used sermons to promote Real Whig ideas in New England’s political culture. Hatch denied that theological liberals like Mayhew, Chauncy, and Cooper were the vanguard of the Revolution, and he also denied that the Revolution was a product of the Great Awakening. He found the political beliefs of the Congregational clergy to be uniformly Whiggish, regardless of theological persuasion. In her 1986 monograph *Under the Cope of Heaven*, Patricia Bonomi agreed that the Congregational and Presbyterian clergy helped lead colonial resistance to British measures, finding the root of their commitment to antiauthoritarian, liberal politics in Protestant dissent’s resistance to Episcopal domination. But for Bonomi, theology made a significant difference in the politics of the clergy. She rejected Heimert’s view that the Revolution was a product of the Awakening. “Attacks on episcopacy and on blind obedience to government,” Bonomi noted, “came most often from rational-minded liberals of the educated elite,” of whom Mayhew was one of the most influential. She maintained that both evangelical and rationalist clergymen provided the laity with political leadership in the 1760s and 1770s, but theological liberals like Mayhew took the lead within the clergy itself. Harry Stout’s *New England Soul* concurred with Bonomi, Hatch, and Baldwin that “New England’s Congregational minis-

ters played a leading role in fomenting the sentiments of resistance and, after 1774, open rebellion.” Hatch trumpeted Mayhew’s “unparalleled success in setting forth a theology and ideology of resistance that all New England could endorse,” his political sermons standing “as the apotheosis of Revolutionary preaching in New England.”¹⁸

While early American historians in the 1980s rehabilitated the importance of Protestant dissent for the intellectual origins of the American Revolution, scholars of British history elaborated upon the connection between Protestant dissent and political radicalism in eighteenth-century Britain. In a prodigious body of scholarship, J. C. D. Clark reinterpreted British history from the Restoration to the early nineteenth century as an *ancien régime* characterized by dominance of monarchy, aristocracy, and episcopacy. Over the long eighteenth century, Britain remained an Anglican confessional state, undergirded by a traditional culture of deference to authority. The principal constituency for reform of this status quo, Clark found, was the Protestant dissenters, a view that largely jibed with James E. Bradley’s study of the British dissenters’ political activism. Clark, however, found the root of political radicalism in the anti-Trinitarian theology of the heterodox dissenters. Their assertion of a right of private judgment gave rise to an individualistic worldview incompatible with the Anglican insistence upon hierarchy and authority. In response, Bradley noted the theologically orthodox dissenters within the reform movement. Downplaying theology, he attributed the political radicalism of British Protestant dissenters to the egalitarian and contractarian character of their ecclesiology and their resentment of disenfranchisement and marginalization under Anglican hegemony.¹⁹

In the 1990s, historians of early modern British religion outlined a religious persuasion they called “Rational Dissent” or “Enlightened Dissent,” a synthesis of rationalist theology with congregational or presbyterian ecclesiology. Challenging the long-standing view of the Enlightenment as hostile to Christianity, Knud Haakonssen and other Rational Dissent historians contended that rationalism, individualism, and religious liberty originated, in part, from liberal forms of Protestantism. Providing a critical context for understanding Jonathan Mayhew and his fellow heterodox clergymen, John Corrigan has drawn upon the insights of this and earlier literature to demonstrate the presence of the Rational Dissent persuasion among the Congregational clergy in New England by the early eighteenth century.²⁰

While Alice Baldwin found natural rights political philosophy pervasive in New England political sermons, the republican-revisionist interpretation of the Revolution's intellectual origins marginalized natural rights in particular and individualism in general. Eager to carve out a place for "Lockean liberalism" within early American political discourse, some scholars of political thought rehabilitated the Baldwin thesis in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Steven Dworetz, Michael P. Zuckert, and Thomas G. West pointed toward the political sermons of New England Congregationalist clergy as proof of the prominence of natural rights in the Revolution's intellectual origins. The clergy were attracted to John Locke's natural rights philosophy, Dworetz observed, because they had already adopted the theological assumptions of the Enlightenment, particularly natural religion. Zuckert acknowledged that there were other intellectual sources for the Revolution, such as Real Whig political thought and classical republicanism. But, he maintained, these various strands of political thought were synthesized into an "amalgam" of American political thought to which Lockean natural rights provided the "cornerstone." Zuckert argued that Mayhew and the heterodox Congregational clergy broke with Protestant tradition by embracing Locke's rationalism. West concurred with the main thrust of the Dworetz-Zuckert thesis but offered a corrective, observing that New England rationalism should be understood as part of the broader American Protestant tradition.²¹

In the 1990s and 2000s, with the collapse of Communism and the rapid globalization of evangelical Protestantism and Islamic militancy, Western intellectuals could no longer take the secularization of society as an inevitable aspect of modernity. Historians came to recognize religiosity as central to any plausible account of the intellectual origins of the American Revolution. Over the last twenty years, republican revisionism has largely conceded the historiographic high ground to an eclectic postrevisionism that aims to synthesize republican revisionism with other twentieth-century interpretations of the Revolution, including the well-documented role of religion. Postrevisionist historians such as Mark Noll and Eran Shalev have found the Revolution's intellectual roots in a synthesis of British Whig or classical republican political thought with Protestantism. James P. Byrd agreed with Shalev

that colonial Whigs used biblical language to communicate Whig revolution principles to the people. The clergy were the most effective purveyors of Christianized resistance theory, and Byrd cited Mayhew as a consummate example of this “apostolic patriotism.”²²

Other postrevisionist studies have explored the interrelation of Enlightenment rationalism with Protestantism and Whiggism. In his 1997 analysis of the American Enlightenment, Robert Ferguson defined the European Enlightenment in terms of secular rationalism. But he found that colonial Whig writers such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, and Jonathan Mayhew selected their ideas from several traditions by an active intellectual process and synthesized them in their own New World contexts. Ferguson concluded that Mayhew’s political sermons, like the American Revolution as a whole, synthesized Enlightenment rationalism with Protestant religion. In his 2012 study, *The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders*, Gregg Frazer claimed that the American Revolutionaries, including Mayhew, espoused “theological rationalism,” a “new religion” of the Enlightenment that “denied every fundamental doctrine of Christianity” but jibed well with their preexisting commitment to Whig political principles. In convincing the colonists that the Bible conveyed a right of resistance, “Mayhew’s service to the Revolutionary cause was immeasurable.” Frazer saw the Enlightenment clergy as playing a critical role in the intellectual origins of the Revolution by converting a Christian populace to theological rationalism and Lockean political philosophy. By contrast, most scholars have, like Ferguson and Corrigan, found Mayhew, the Enlightenment clergy, and the American Revolutionaries to be both Protestant and rationalist.²³

In this postrevisionist landscape, a few historians have come to consider religion as one of the principal causes of the American Revolution. Seeing the conflict between Britain and the colonies as driven by the conflict between high-church and low-church Protestants, J. C. D. Clark mused that the American Revolution was “a war of religion.” Taking Clark’s cue in 2008, James B. Bell argued in *A War of Religion: Dissenters, Anglicans, and the American Revolution* that the denominational conflicts over a colonial episcopate and Episcopal missionary efforts raised constitutional questions about the relation of the colonies to king and Parliament. Jonathan Mayhew’s controversies with Anglican authorities figured prominently in Bell’s account, but he credited Samuel and John Adams with framing this sectarian conflict in

political and constitutional concerns that helped alienate the people against Britain. Bell found that the Church of England, “by the very nature of its Englishness, was one of the causes of the American Revolution.”²⁴

In his 2010 account of the outbreak of the Revolution in New England, T. H. Breen warned against historians’ focus on “the Founders” like Adams and Jefferson and instead considered the arguments for resistance that were heard, received, and applied by “ordinary Americans.” Like Baldwin eighty-two years earlier, Breen saw the political sermons of the Congregational clergy as the most successful cultural mechanism for the popularization of Whiggism. Ministers like Andrew Eliot recast Locke’s philosophy of natural rights—and argument for the right of resistance—in biblical terms that made war with Britain seem like a Christian duty, turning Yankee farmers into “popular Lockean.” Bell and Breen were concerned mainly with New England, where the religious interpretation of the Revolution’s origins seems most persuasive. But Joseph Tiedemann applied the Clarkian interpretive model to the Middle Colonies. He found that mid-Atlantic Presbyterians tended to become Whigs, while Anglicans tended to become Tories, with preexisting denominational conflicts helping to draw party lines in the years before war. Denominational differences and corresponding ethnic differences were compelling factors in a mid-Atlantic colonist’s politics, Tiedemann argued, but human motivation is complex, and religion was “not the only or always the determinant force.” Fresh scholarship on the role of religion for the Revolution in the southern colonies would be the next step toward determining whether the notion of the Revolutionary War as a religious war can be sustained.²⁵

With the emergence of a religious interpretation within postrevisionist historiography, scholarly opinion on the origins of the American Revolution over the last two centuries has ironically cycled back around to where the journey began. In exploring the origins of the American Revolution, historians now give serious consideration to the claims of John Adams and Peter Oliver for the importance of religion in general and the Congregational clergy in particular. Growing scholarship on this subject has gradually rehabilitated Jonathan Mayhew’s historical reputation, approaching a critical mass at which an extended examination and reassessment of Mayhew’s politics is not only possible but timely. The arrival of the 250th anniversary of Mayhew’s death

and approach of the 300th anniversary of his birth render the moment for such a reassessment not only timely but urgent.

Father of Liberty is the first book devoted to examining Jonathan Mayhew's political thought and activism and to outlining Mayhew's role in the intellectual origins of the American Revolution. Its claims derive from years of rigorous research in archival sources, but those claims are informed and conditioned by the discoveries and interpretations of commentators ranging from Bell, Clark, Zuckert, Bonomi, Bailyn, and Pauline Maier on back to Oliver and Adams. *Father of Liberty* offers a postrevisionist interpretation of Mayhew's politics that draws upon and integrates many interpretations.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, there is a rough consensus among scholars of the origins of the Revolution that, in interpreting British imperial policy and deciding about their own course of action, colonial Whigs sought guidance from multiple political traditions, such as Locke's modern natural rights philosophy, classical republicanism, and Real Whig political thought. Their political deliberations were, in turn, shaped by multiple philosophic traditions, such as Enlightenment rationalism and British Protestantism. Their religious and political thinking were, moreover, shaped by and shaping the political events and cultural developments of a transatlantic English-speaking world, from the French and Indian War to local provincial politics and street protests. There is no historiographic consensus, though, as to how such often conflicting and competing intellectual traditions fit together in the minds of Americans, let alone how they congealed into anything resembling what Jefferson called "the harmonizing sentiments of the day."

In *The Snare Broken*, his last published sermon, written two months before his death at the age of forty-five years, Mayhew looked back poignantly on his youthful enthusiasms. "Having been initiated, in youth, in the doctrines of civil liberty," he wrote, "as they were taught by such men as Plato, Demosthenes, Cicero and other renowned persons among the ancients; and such as Sidney and Milton, Locke and Hoadley, among the moderns; I liked them; they seemed rational." He went on to cite the example of the heroes of the Old Testament who combated tyranny. Mayhew concluded, "I would not, I cannot now, tho' past middle age, relinquish the fair object of my youthful affections, LIBERTY; whose charms, instead of decaying with time in my eyes, have daily captivated me more and more."²⁶

Mayhew took a synoptic approach to sources as disparate as Cicero, Locke, and the Bible. The quality attracting him to these ancient and modern authors was what he perceived as a shared rationality, and what he took away from them (among other things) were arguments on behalf of “civil liberty.” As a young man at Harvard College in the 1740s, he was “initiated” in these readings, but he actively extracted from them what he found persuasive and useful, and then synthesized these distinct elements into an ironbound fesces of fundamental principles. This passage from *The Snare Broken* suggests that passionate commitment to rationality and its free and responsible exercise is the key to Jonathan Mayhew’s personal character and his religious and political principles. It seems this commitment to reason preceded his politicization, and he deduced early on that there could be no free and responsible exercise of reason—both in contemplation and in moral action—without religious and civil liberty.²⁷

The American mind of Jonathan Mayhew might provide scholars with a model for how eighteenth-century American colonists adopted, reconciled, and applied intellectual influences from the ancient and modern, sacred and secular strains of the Western cultural heritage. In any event, rationality was the first cause of Mayhew’s political activism, and liberty was the final cause, pulling him forward into battle. Mayhew held fast to his rationalism and libertarianism with fervor and lifelong consistency, although he continually adapted the practical application of his principles to new contexts and shifting events. *Father of Liberty* demonstrates how Mayhew struggled to reconcile the Reformation with the Enlightenment, classical moral thought with modern political thought, a respect for monarchy with a thirst for freedom, an attachment to Britain with a love for New England. We will see how his religious and political principles motivated, guided, and sustained a remarkable life of “practical religion” and political activism. We will consider the ways in which Mayhew inspired a generation of young Yankee gentlemen to embrace his principles as their own and act on them with integrity. Unlike his friend Samuel Cooper, Mayhew did not live to become one of the Sons of Liberty. But, in an intellectual sense, he was their father.