

## Congregationalism

In New England, congregations determined the politics and social organization of communities. Only church members could vote at town meetings, and until 1630, one could become a church member only by the minister's endorsement. Most colonists were not church members. The majority of immigrants came for social, political, and economic reasons, not to found a more perfect Christian society. Nevertheless, Puritanism was dominant. Biblical injunctions were specific guides for spiritual life and church organization; biblical law was common law. Puritans undertook a holy mission to demonstrate the "right way" to order church and society.

John Cotton (1584-1652), considered the leading Puritan pastor in England, joined the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1633. His "True Constitution of a Particular Visible Church," describing Congregational life and polity (organization and government), was read widely in England and influenced John Owen, chaplain to Oliver Cromwell, to embrace Congregationalism. As a result of reading Cotton's work, five members of the Presbyterian Westminster Assembly, "the Dissenting Brethren," would sign, in 1643, what was to become the manifesto of all Congregationalism, "An Apologeticall Narration."

Thus, through Cotton's writing, New England affected the growth of Congregationalism in England. Quite the opposite of the vigorous and variable Puritans of England, many of the American Puritans become intolerant of alien ideas.

## Anne Hutchinson: a New England dissenter

In 1634, Anne Hutchinson, daughter of a nonconformist minister from north of London, arrived. Described by critics as a "woman of haughty and fierce carriage ... of voluble tongue," she would influence Congregational practice and theological thought, such that the rigidly righteous shell of Massachusetts Puritanism, already weakened by Roger Williams (soon banished to Rhode Island), would be irreparably cracked. Opposing a doctrine of the elect, she held that anyone might receive the truth by direct revelation from God, and that the Bible was not its sole source. These ideas were greatly feared by the church because they easily could lead to irresponsible excesses. This "woman of ready wit and bold spirit," wife of gentle William Hutchinson, the mother of fifteen children, interrupted preachers with whom she disagreed. She gathered women regularly in her own home, where she preached to as many as 50 people at a time, often including men.



John Winthrop and Anne Hutchinson faced each other in a public hearing to examine her doctrines. Eventually, she was banished to the more tolerant colony of Rhode Island—founded by Baptist dissidents and the first American colony where all religions were guaranteed liberty.

Hutchinson's criticism of Puritan sermons stirred up a frenzy in Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Cotton, sent to stop her, merely warned her; but by that time, men of stature had taken her side, and the town of Boston was divided. Governor John Winthrop believed that if Anne Hutchinson could not be reformed, she must be exiled. Winthrop called a Synod of the Bay Colony churches in 1637, that once and for all "the breeder and nourisher of all these distempers, one Mistress Hutchinson," be silenced. She was charged with joining a seditious faction, holding conspiracies in her house, seducing honest people from their work and families and, worst of all, breaking the fifth commandment. Hutchinson exclaimed that Winthrop was neither her father nor her mother, to which Winthrop replied that "father and mother" meant anyone in authority. In the spring, John Cotton betrayed her trust by banishing her from the Colony. Mary Dyer was a friend who walked beside her through it all. She was later hanged for her Quaker faith on Boston Common. Anne Hutchinson settled with her children and husband in the Rhode Island Colony of Roger Williams, where laws were passed to ensure jury trials, end class discrimination, expand the right to vote and guarantee religious tolerance. This democracy was short-lived, for Rhode Island was soon annexed to the Bay Colony.

## **Native Americans and Congregationalists**

The colonists displaced Native Americans and invaded their ancestral territories. At first, because of their nature and because land was abundant, many Indians received the newcomers with charity and shared with them land and survival skills. Later, the proprietary aggression of some settlers kindled fear in the hearts of Indians. The colonists brought not only their religion, government, and social patterns, but also diseases against which Indians had little or no immunity. During the 17th century, New England Indians were plagued by a smallpox epidemic. There followed further decimation of their numbers in wars and skirmishes for possession of land. Distressed by wanton disregard for human beings, convinced that their mission was peacefully to carry the good news of Christ to their Indian neighbors, there were others like John Eliot, who was ordained as a pastor so that he might pastor and teach Indians. His concern for Indian neighbors was not only for their conversion to Christianity, but to raise their standard of living to a level enjoyed by the settlers. For 30 years, Job Nesutan, a Massachusetts Indian, was employed by Eliot as a language tutor and chief assistant in the ministry to Indians. With his help, the Bible was translated into the Indian language and Indians were taught to read.

By 1646, John Eliot drew increasingly large congregations each time he spoke. Churches in the colony were encouraged to support Eliot's work and Oliver Cromwell urged Parliament to help the movement financially. The "Corporation for the Promoting and Propagating of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in New England" was the result. A sum of £5,000 was sent to the colonies, much of this given to John Eliot for his work. Many Indian converts returned to the practices of their indigenous faiths, but others were filled with Christian missionary zeal and prepared the way for Eliot with the New England tribes.

The chiefs and councils tried to discourage the spread of the gospel, and his aides used underhanded tactics to retain "converts." As a result, Eliot's work suffered. Finally, the Massachusetts General Court passed a law prohibiting the use of threats or force to ensure Indians' conversion to Christianity, but at the same time, required all Indians living within the colony to refrain from worshipping "false gods" and from conducting native religious services. Roger Williams became the advocate of Indian freedom to worship as they saw fit.

Thomas Mayhew and his clergyman son, Thomas, Jr., were instrumental in leading the eastern Cape Cod Indians to Christianity. By 1652, Mayhew had opened a school for Indian children. Christian theology induced ferment and continued to challenge the essentially closed social patterns and purposes of the Puritans.

## **African Americans: equal and unequal**

There were blacks in Boston as soon as there were whites, and slavery was legal in New England until after the Revolutionary War. A certain number of blacks were admitted to membership in the churches when they were able to meet all the conditions for full communion, tests which did not include skin color, wealth, or social status. While slavery in New England had been dying out in the years prior to the Revolution, blacks felt keenly the reservations to their acceptance in the churches by the Puritans, who treated them as slaves outside the church, while within the congregation, members were called upon to regard one another as equal under the covenant of grace and united by God to one another. In response to this ambivalent status, many blacks withdrew from New England churches in the late 18th century to form their own congregations for separate worship.

By 1789, the Boston selectmen allowed blacks to use a school for public worship on Sunday afternoons. Eventually, the black congregation built its own church, called the African Church, on the back slope of Beacon Hill and worshiped there from 1806 until mid-century when it became a center for abolitionist meetings for blacks and whites. Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth were among the speakers at the church.

## **Cambridge Platform**

Religious exclusion was not confined to blacks or Catholics; Presbyterians had felt unwelcome as well. The Westminster Confession of 1646, the design for Presbyterian church government and an expression of Reformed faith and doctrine, was revised for church polity and discipline at the Cambridge Synod of 1648. Called the Cambridge Platform, it enabled a reconciliation between Presbyterians and Congregationalists and was highly venerated into the 19th century.

The Platform defined the "church catholick" as the body of all who are elected (chosen) by God's grace and called to salvation. A "militant visible church on earth" was understood to exist in particular congregations as "a

company of saints by calling, united into one body, by a holy covenant for the public worship of God and the mutual edification of one another." Christ was head of the church; the congregation, independent of outside interference, had the right to choose its own officials. The office of the civil magistrate was subject to recognition by the church. Churches were to preserve communion with one another in mutual covenant with Christ. Such covenants stabilized churches establishing themselves under disparate leadership.

### The Connecticut Way

A remarkable succession of educated clergy provided strong leadership. Despite the circumstances that cast him in the role of villain in the excommunication and banishment of Anne Hutchinson, no Puritan teacher was more respected in England and in America than the gentle intellectual, John Cotton, minister of First Church, Boston. His colleague from days in England was the plain-spoken master of rhythmic rhetoric and the effective metaphor, Thomas Hooker (1586-1647). Hooker, committed to democracy and constitutional free government, was minister across the Charles River at Newtowne (Cambridge). Concerned with human rights, Hooker became disenchanted with the elitism of the Boston hierarchy. He led over 100 followers to migrate on foot to Hartford in 1636. There, buoyed by his Christian conviction and liberating ideas of democracy, he established a colony.

Conservative Puritan minister John Davenport, founder of the New Haven Colony, was so offended by Hooker's willingness to secularize, even to a limited extent, civil government, that he returned to Boston when New Haven was gathered into the Connecticut Colony.

All these men were well educated, had high standards for church membership, and were clergy of the English establishment. Except for Cotton, their Reformed covenant theology had been nurtured on the continent. Hooker, who had been with the dissenters in Holland, diverged from the orthodox Puritan view that voting rights should be conferred only with church membership. He saw no justice in disenfranchising nine-tenths of the population, a proportion which included women, children, servants and apprentices, the unchurched who had migrated from England as non-land owners, as well as the sons of "the elect" who could not pretend to such a claim.

Under Hooker's leadership, the Connecticut Colony gave up the religious qualification for the franchise. New requirements were still restrictive. They gave the town meeting vote to "admitted inhabitants," "men" who could prove capable of "an honest conversation" and could swear that they were not "a Jew, a Quaker or an Atheist," and to "free men who were Trinitarians, land owners and of godly deportment." Nevertheless, Hooker is regarded by many as the father of democracy in America, for many of his ideas were embodied in the United States Constitution.

## The Half-Way Covenant



Cotton Mather

Later, Massachusetts adopted the controversial Half-Way Covenant of 1662, permitting children to be baptized whose grandparents had been members of the church, but whose parents were not. Males baptized under the Covenant could vote at town meeting when they came of age, but were not admitted to the Lord's Supper or allowed to vote for a pastor. Full church membership came with confession of faith. Its requirement to sit in judgment upon a person's Christian credentials would go to the extreme of the witchcraft delusion in Salem Village by 1692.

Later, Cotton Mather (1663-1728), John Cotton's grandson, sought to bring some authority to bear upon the waywardness of Congregational independence. He proposed that ministers in association with one another examine and license candidates for the ministry, and that a consociation of ministers and laymen have judicatory standing over the churches. A minister unpopular among his peers, Mather's proposal was at first unacceptable. In 1705-6, Massachusetts finally adopted his plan for the examination of ministers. Connecticut issued the Saybrook Platform in 1708, making both of Mather's proposals binding colonywide. The establishment in 1701 of Yale College assured high educational standards for ministers and leaders alike.

Until the Saybrook Platform of 1708, upheld by the Connecticut General Court, imposed upon the independent,

voluntary fellowship of the churches an obligation of "consociation," the Congregationalists drifted toward spiritual decline and anomaly. The consociation provided mutual aid and outside assistance in handling disputes. A penalty was provided for churches or pastors refusing consociation, a "sentence of non-communion," with less intent to control than to provide orderly procedures and mutual support. The new shape would enable Congregationalism as a denomination in the centuries to come, to maintain its integrity in the face of the American Revolution, religious revivals, the scandal of slavery, the challenge of cultural pluralism, and a call to mission that would carry the faith westward and world-wide.

## Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening

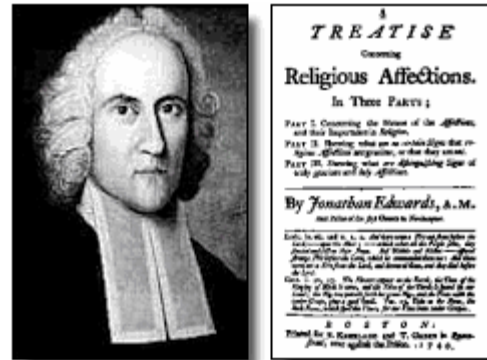
The morality of Pietism and the warm heart of England's Wesleyan revival that gave birth to the Methodist Church helped to energize the American Great Awakening. Itinerant preachers of various denominations swept across religious America during the mid-18th century, winning Christian converts and planting hundreds of new churches. While the "Coetus" (pronounced SEE-tis) of Pennsylvania was giving nurture and support to a continuing influx of German settlers, over 150 new Congregational churches were formed from 1740 to 1760.

Yale-educated Jonathan Edwards (1703-58) of Northampton, Massachusetts, Congregational minister of keen philosophical intellect, believed that the Awakening was breathing new life into the churches. It replaced a view of the church as a group of people who covenanted together to lead a Christian life, with one that insisted upon individual conversion as the accepted way to the kingdom of God. Emotions ran high, and the spiritual climates that had in many communities fallen into despair were transformed.

In 1750, Edwards was dismissed from the Northampton church. He tangled with the congregation on issues of church discipline and tact. For example, he read the names of both the convicted and merely indicted ("bad book controversy") aloud in church as a single list. The final issue surrounded a difference in his interpretation of the Half-Way Covenant (he rejected it as too lax a standard of church membership) from that of his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, whose associate Edwards had first been at Northampton. Edwards was convinced that admission to communion should include the requirement of a conversion experience. Although a strict Calvinist, Jonathan Edwards had become a "New Light" revivalist Puritan sympathizer. He disagreed with the narrow conservatism of the "Old Light" ministers such as Increase Mather and his son, Cotton, and stood firmly against liberal "Arminians," whose moral righteousness he saw as dangerously smug.

Nevertheless, Edwards believed that turning to God required a decision, a disavowal of selfishness and the adoption of the life of "disinterested benevolence." Edwards was joined in his position by a large group of New England clergy who supported the Awakening and opposed the more staid, rational, liberal movement in eastern Massachusetts. A group of moderates stood between both extremes. The Boston advocates of free will against Calvinism opposed the revivals, and the path they took would lead in the next century to the Unitarian separation from Congregationalism.

Jonathan Edwards, foremost of American philosophers, was responsible for a far broader synthesis of science, philosophy, and religion in Congregational and Presbyterian theology and practice than had been present in "Old Light" Puritanism. He integrated with Reformed theology the world view of Isaac Newton, John Locke's emphasis upon human experience, and Augustine's spiritual enlightenment, as well as Plato's idealism and the Neo-Platonic idea of emanation from the Divine Intellect to the soul. His ideas would cohere in his followers to give life to a "New England Theology." They would check the anti-intellectual tendencies of the revivalists and the decline of religious vitality during the Revolutionary period. They would give a theological framework to the recovery of intellectual leadership and a new morality in post-Revolutionary America. Edwards' writings inspired and informed the missionary movement of the 19th century as America expanded westward and looked once again to the lands across the sea. His influence rivaled Hooker's in developing the separation of church and state.



Jonathan Edwards and the title of his masterpiece, "On Religious Affections"

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