

The Right of Private Judgment: Jonathan Mayhew's Religious Route to Political Individualism

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Abstract

Some libertarian economists acknowledge the importance of ideology and public opinion in advancing the cause of liberty and limiting the scope of government, but they tend to neglect the importance of religion in shaping the American people's premises about government. The American Revolution itself was the result of a shift in public opinion toward individual rights, limited government, and the right to resist tyranny. One critical source of that shift was the New England clergyman Jonathan Mayhew, a forgotten giant in the history of American liberty. In this article, one can see how his own commitment to the right of individuals to think for themselves and pursue their own happiness derived from his religious beliefs. Using pulpit and press to advance a radically individualistic philosophy of government, Mayhew had a major ideological impact on the lower class and middle class in New England, as well as such Revolutionary leaders as John Adams, James Otis, and Paul Revere. Mayhew thereby provides an example of how Christian clergy, when influenced by reason, have served historically to turn public opinion toward political individualism.

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I. Introduction

As Ayn Rand wrote, “There is only one power that determines the course of history, just as it determines the course of every individual life: the power of man’s rational faculty – *the power of ideas*.” (1967, p. 165) Many classical liberals believe that the restoration of the economic and political liberty Americans enjoyed in the past requires a radical change in American political culture – a renewed understanding by the American people of the proper purpose and limits of government.¹ But where does public opinion come from? This question is a black box to most economists who do not investigate the source of people’s beliefs. Yet if public opinion and ideology are so crucial, understanding what influences them is of the utmost importance for those advocating social change. One of the purposes of this article is to highlight an extremely important yet often overlooked source of ideological change in political culture: religious figures.² Over the centuries, American clergy have served as both the enemies of liberty and its most dogged champions. In this

¹ A number of classical liberal economists argue that one must change a society’s ideology before one can change the policies of its government. Jeffrey Hummel, for example, has observed that ideologies, including religions, can prevail even in the teeth of government opposition, and that “[s]uccessful ideologies therefore can induce alterations in the size, scope and intrusiveness of government.” (Hummel, 2001, pp.530-532). Eric Crampton has contended that, despite accumulating empirical evidence that economic and political liberty advance human life and happiness, the American people still vote for politicians who promise to implement illiberal policies such as trade and immigration restrictions (Crampton, 2002). In their survey of global economic freedom, James Gwartney and Robert Lawson pointed out that majority rule often results in the curtailment of economic liberty (Gwartney and Lawson, 2007). The American people elect anti-liberty politicians – Bryan Caplan and Edward Stringham have explained – precisely because they are acting on anti-liberty premises (Caplan and Stringham, 2005, pp.79-105). To change policy, one must change what the public thinks about what government should do. Radical political change can only follow from radical ideological change.

² While many libertarians neglect the role of religion in the history of liberty in America, Murray Rothbard believed that people’s religious beliefs had an important influence on their political beliefs. This was certainly true during the American Revolution, in which one’s religious denomination largely determined one’s political allegiance. As Rothbard contended in his four-volume history of the American Revolution, *Conceived in Liberty*, the clergy of such Protestant denominations as Presbyterianism and Congregationalism played a critical role in making liberty the core value of American political culture before and during the Revolutionary War (Rothbard, 1975, pp.171, 181-185, 196-198; idem, 1976, pp.71, 107).

article, I highlight the importance of one clergyman who used religion – in its rationalistic, Enlightenment form – to instill a love of individual rights in the leaders of the American Revolution as well as the general public: Dr. Jonathan Mayhew.

Over the twenty-five years preceding the Declaration of Independence, no minister did more to advance the political principle of individual natural rights than Jonathan Mayhew, whom Murray Rothbard correctly described as America’s “leader of libertarian thought since. . . 1750” (1976, p.334). Mayhew helped radicalize the political outlook of his congregation, his lay readers, and his fellow Congregationalist clergymen during his tenure as pastor of Boston’s Old West Church from 1747 to 1766. His political sermons resonated with New Englanders, from the mob in the street to middle class readers and such rising secular Whig leaders as John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Paul Revere, James Otis, Samuel Otis, and Samuel Quincy. Adams explained to his friend Thomas Jefferson that he read Mayhew’s first political pamphlet at the age of 14 and re-read it “till the Substance of it was incorporated into my Nature and indelibly grafted on my Memory” (Cappon, 1959, p.527). Calling him a “transcendent genius,” Adams named Mayhew, along with Samuel Adams and John Hancock, among the six men most responsible for starting the American Revolution. Meanwhile, Robert Treat Paine styled him as nothing less than “the father of civil and religious liberty in Massachusetts and America.”

In his first book, *Seven Sermons* of 1749, one can see how the pastor’s lifelong advancement of radical Whig political ideas followed from his religiously inspired commitment to the “right and duty of private judgment.” By grounding Whig politics in Protestant Christianity by way of rationalist theology, Mayhew mobilized his Boston congregation and his international readership for political activism on behalf of liberty, thereby contributing to the intellectual origins of the American Revolution. His great success in demonstrating the religious significance of liberty to the general public and a new generation of leaders provides a historic example of the role that American religion, when allied with reason, has played in shaping the general public’s understanding of the proper role of government in human life.

II. The Right and Duty to Think for Oneself

Jonathan Mayhew's commitment to individual natural rights originated in his view of man as the rational and moral creature of a rational and benevolent God. In the first of his *Seven Sermons*, the twenty-eight-year old pastor defended his proposition that God creates all human beings with the natural capacity for acquiring moral and religious knowledge. He conceded that all people do not possess this ability to the same extent, as there is a "great variety in their intellectual faculties." People of "the lower class," for instance, have little time to think about religious and philosophical issues, but "even these may have the power of judging in *some degree*." Rejecting the orthodox Calvinist doctrine of "the total depravity of man," Mayhew held that original sin had not crippled man's natural ability to reason for himself, without the assistance of supernatural grace. "It is principally on account of our reason," he intoned, "that we are said to have been created *in the image of God*," such that, to insult reason in general, is "nothing less than blasphemy against God." Shaped by the rationalist theology of the British Enlightenment, Mayhew's view of God led him to view man as a being capable of rational and moral self-mastery (Mayhew, 1750, pp.30-40).

In the third of his *Seven Sermons*, "The Right and Duty of Private Judgment Asserted," Mayhew explained just what it means to exercise reason in search of truth and right. To form objective judgments about reality, a person must begin by suspending his "judgment intirely concerning the truth or falsehood of all doctrines; and the fitness or unfitness of all actions; 'till such time as he sees some reason to determine his judgment one way rather than the other." Only once his mind is in such a state of impartiality can it "be determined solely by reason and argument. He does not bring his old prejudices and prepossessions to determine the point; but comes prepared, by an unbiassed mind, to receive the impressions of reason, and of reason only." The next step is "the exerting of our own reason in weighing arguments and evidences that offer themselves to us, or that are offered by others." We must be "active and vigorous in the pursuit" of knowledge, "inquire into facts" and consider a proposition from different perspectives, "not taking up the arguments that are brought to support any doctrine or practice." The pursuit of truth is useless, Mayhew maintained, "unless we follow it wherever it leads" and accept its conclusions without regard for "whatever notions it may contradict; whatever censures it may

expose us to.” He warned his flock to “have no superstitious veneration for *great names*” and guard against the temptation “to believe as our forefathers did, or as any particular body of men does at present.” Finally, one should make one’s belief in a given proposition proportional to the evidence available for it. Mayhew tried nothing less than to teach his congregation the proper method of reasoning. By this method, he held, one can become an independent thinker, an intellectually autonomous individual (Mayhew, 1750, pp.43-45).

According to Mayhew’s rationalist theology, men and women not only can guide their lives by their reason: they must. Each person should think for himself, first, because it is in his divinely created nature as a rational being to do so. What man *is* determines what he *ought* to do. All of man’s natural organs and faculties have “an apparent *final cause*.” Just as eyes are for seeing and ears are for hearing, Mayhew argued, so our minds exist to search for truth, since truth is “the natural object of reason.” “Our obligation, therefore, to inquire after truth, and to judge what is right,” the minister observed, “may be found within us, in our own frame and constitution. This obligation is as universal as reason itself; for every one that is endowed with this faculty, is, by the very nature of it, obliged to exercise it in the pursuit of knowledge; especially of moral and religious knowledge” (Mayhew, 1750, pp.51-52).

III. The Right and Duty to Pursue One’s Happiness

It is not enough to depend upon the rational thinking of others, Mayhew contended; each person must rely upon his own private judgment. While some fields of knowledge, like medicine and law, are specialized, morality is the proper concern of all human beings, and each must judge for himself. “If one man is to think and judge for all the rest of the species, why was reason given to all?” Paraphrasing a line from John Locke’s *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Mayhew insisted that we can no more “see only with another’s eyes” than we can “think, and judge, and believe, with another’s understanding.” Independent thinking is the only way for a person to attain his own happiness. “Pain and pleasure, at least, are private and personal things,” such that those who “arrogate to themselves the right of *judging for us*, do not pretend to *feel for us* also.” If one is “to be happy for ourselves, it is of importance to judge for ourselves also,” he maintained, “for this is absolutely necessary, in order to our finding

the path that leads to happiness” (Mayhew, 1750, p.46). Having begun with the premise that man is naturally capable of independent thinking, he quickly arrived at the conclusion that each individual is morally obligated to think and act independently, for his own benefit.

Mayhew did not advocate ethical egoism. Considering happiness an intrinsic good and misery an intrinsic evil, he concluded “it is in itself right to do good to others, as well as ourselves, happiness being as valuable to them as it is us.” From this principle, he reasoned, one may infer all of the classical moral virtues, such as “fidelity, justice, charity.” A person’s practice of such virtues, though, need not benefit others at the sacrifice of his own happiness. Mayhew found that, “by the steady, uniform practice of these virtues, both the good of individuals, and of the publick, is promoted.” The individual’s pursuit of his own happiness is not a threat to the public good. “For publick happiness is nothing but the happiness of a *number of individuals* united in society,” the minister explained, “So that if the individuals of which the society consists, be happy, the community must necessarily be happy also. And, on the other hand, the *community* is rendered miserable in the same degree that *individuals* are so” (Mayhew, 1750, p.11). While not an ethical egoist, he did believe that happiness should be the ultimate end of each man’s actions, and that one man’s happiness – if pursued in accordance with reason and virtue – contributes to the good of the whole.

According to Mayhew, the religious duty to exercise one’s private judgment in the pursuit of happiness is the source of the individual’s natural right to be free from coercion by others. Those, he said, “who any ways discourage freedom and judgment in religious matters, are . . . incroachers upon the natural rights of mankind. . . because God has not only given us liberty to examine and judge for ourselves; but expressly required us to do it.” While political tyrants “enslave the bodies of men,” those “spiritual invaders” who “throw their chains and fetters upon the mind” thereby violate God’s will and man’s God-given nature. “If a man has a right to judge for himself, certainly no other has a right to judge for him,” Mayhew maintained, “And to attempt it, is to strike at the most valuable interest of a man considered as a reasonable creature” (Mayhew, 1750, pp.59-60). It is man’s status as the rational creature of a benevolent God that is the source of his natural right to liberty of thought and action.

Just as the happiness of society is inseparable from the happiness of the persons comprising it, so despots who invade the right of private judgment not only destroy individual lives but blight entire societies. Mayhew claimed that one effect of religious tyranny is “to prevent all improvements in religious knowledge, and to entail ignorance, error, and superstition upon future generations.” Had such restrictions been placed centuries ago on the arts and sciences, he suggested, they would have suppressed “the greatest and most enterprising *Genius’s*” and deprived mankind of the blessings of material progress. Religious coercion can establish and propagate not true ideas but only “*ignorance and hypocrisy.*” It is incapable of making people religious, because the conviction of the mind is not subject to physical force. “A blow with a club may fracture a man’s skull,” Mayhew sardonically quipped, “but I suppose he will not think and reason the more clearly for that; though he may possibly believe the more *orthodoxy*, according to the opinions of some . . . [whose] doctrines are generally such as are much more readily embraced by a man after his brains are knocked out, than while he continues in his senses, and of a sound mind” (Mayhew, 1750, pp.65-66). Force can destroy a man’s mind, but it cannot change it. Blind faith begets tyranny while reason takes its stand with liberty.

IV. Mayhew’s Political Philosophy and Its Influence on the Revolution

Mayhew’s rationalist interpretation of Christianity brought him to an individualist view of liberty. “We have not only a right to think for ourselves in matters of religion, but to act for ourselves also,” he asserted in *Seven Sermons*. “Nor has any man whatever, whether of a *civil* or *sacred* character, any authority to controul us, unless it be by the gentle methods of argument and persuasion.” All human beings have this individual right to liberty by their nature as rational creatures, so each of us must respect that liberty in others which we value for ourselves. Warning the sons and daughters of Massachusetts Puritans “not attempt to incroach upon the rights of others,” he reminded his congregation, “*They* have the same right to judge for themselves and to chuse their own religion, with ourselves. And nothing is more incongruous than for an advocate of liberty to tyrannize over his neighbours. We have all liberty to think and act for ourselves in things of a religious concern; and we ought to be content with that, without desiring a liberty to oppress and grieve others.”

Mayhew's theological convictions and religious commitments guided him to an understanding of liberty as personal autonomy and personal autonomy as a natural, individual, universal, human right (Mayhew, 1750, pp.87-90).

His rationalist view of Christianity and individualist view of liberty implied a liberal philosophy of government. Mayhew was quick to add that the magistrate has no more right than any private person to invade individual liberty. Civil government, he explained, exists to secure individual natural rights from violation by physical coercion. Far from commanding him to impose religious orthodoxy by force, Scripture requires that the magistrate "preserve the liberties and natural rights of his subjects, one of the most important of which rights is that of private judgment, and an unmolested enjoyment of a man's own religion, let it be what it will, provided he is a peaceable subject and a good member of society." The protection of individual rights is the purpose for which "the magistrate is ordained of God, and not to make a religion for his subjects." For a magistrate to enforce belief would be "to invade, and incroach upon, those natural rights of his subjects, which it is his business to preserve inviolable" (Mayhew, 1750, p.86).

Following the publication of *Seven Sermons* in 1749, Mayhew's political sermons of the 1750s and 1760s premised their assertions of civil and religious liberty on man's natural right, duty, and capacity as a rational creature to exercise his private judgment. In *A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers*, his controversial 1749 affirmation of the people's right to defend their rights against tyrants by force, Mayhew insisted that "[t]he people know for what end they set up, and maintain, their governors, and they are the proper judges [of] when they execute their *trust* as they ought to do it." For one to say the people are "not proper judges when their governors oppress them, and play the tyrant," he angrily declaimed, "is as great *treason* as ever man uttered; it is treason, – not against one single man, but the state – against the whole body politic; – 'tis treason against mankind; – 'tis treason against common sense; – 'tis treason against GOD." In his equally notorious sermon on August 25, 1765, which some blamed for inciting the riot that destroyed the home of Massachusetts Chief Justice Thomas Hutchinson the following evening, Mayhew argued that "civil liberty" presupposes "the restraint of laws. . . made by common consent & choice," such that "people are real slaves, not in a state of civil

liberty, if they approve neither the persons nor laws, by which they are governed, but are obliged to submit to them contrary to their will.” He contended that the people “delegate the powers of government” to the ruler of their choice, while “still reserving to themselves a right to judge, whether he discharges his trust well or ill, to discard him, and appoint another in his stead” (Mayhew, 1970, pp.141-143).

Mayhew’s contention that the right and duty of private judgment implies a radically individualist view of liberty did not appeal only to lower-class Bostonians but also to several members of the rising Massachusetts political elite. Introduced to radical Whig politics by Mayhew’s *Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission*, John Adams looked to the pastor as his “oracle,” the main influence on his religious and philosophical views, by the mid-1750s. In his capacity as a young lawyer, Adams followed Mayhew in applying the right and duty of private judgment to political and constitutional issues. “We know it to be our Duty, to read, examine and judge for ourselves, even ourselves what is right,” Adams wrote in 1761 while preparing for a court case, “Every Man has in Politicks as well as Religion, a Right to think and speak for himself. No man either King or Subject, Clergyman or Layman, has any Right to dictate to me the Person I shall choose for my Legislator and Ruler. I must judge for myself” (Adams, 1961, pp.219-220). Mayhew’s college friend, James Otis, leader of the Massachusetts Whigs in the early 1760s, applied the right and duty of private judgment to Parliament’s taxation of colonial property under the Sugar Act of 1764. “If there is not a right of private judgment to be exercised, so far at least as to petition for a repeal,” he wrote in *The Rights of the Colonies Asserted and Proved*, “the parliament might make itself arbitrary. . . . I think every man has a right to examine as freely into the origin, spring and foundation of every power and measure in a commonwealth. . . . [I]t is the duty of every good citizen to point out what he thinks erroneous in the commonwealth.” By demonstrating the political significance of the right of private judgment, and the religious significance of individual natural rights, Mayhew provided the Massachusetts Whigs with a powerful incentive to resist their British masters (Greene, 1975, p.32).

The new political leadership of Massachusetts in the 1760s provided the vanguard of colonial opposition to Britain in no small part because their clergymen – Jonathan Mayhew, above all – convinced them to repudiate the religious duty of passive obedience

to rulers and to exercise the religious right and duty to judge rulers, hold them accountable, and resist them by armed force, when necessary. Almost all of these secular leaders identified with the Enlightenment's rationalist theology, and many – like John Adams, Robert Treat Paine, Samuel Otis, and Paul Revere – arrived at their liberal principles under the pastoral guidance of Mayhew. Over his nineteen year tenure as minister of Boston's West Church, no clergyman did more than Mayhew to advance liberty as the central value of New England's political culture. The rational theology of the English Enlightenment led him toward a profoundly radical principle: the epistemological, ethical, social, and political primacy of the individual. By this religious path did reason bring Mayhew and his disciples to a zeal for liberty. From his example one may draw important albeit paradoxical lessons about the power of religion to energize and mobilize earnest young minds for the struggle for freedom and happiness on earth.

V. Conclusion

Jonathan Mayhew clearly was an important influence on the American Revolutionaries. Modern lovers of freedom can learn great deal by studying his message and how he communicated that message in American political culture. Most Americans today acquire their first exposure to fundamental philosophic ideas – including, explicitly or implicitly, basic premises about government – from religious instruction. As Murray Rothbard observed, “the political ideas of Americans can be reduced, with almost remarkable precision, back to their religious attitudes and beliefs.” (1977, p.ii) Most libertarian intellectuals concerned with improving public opinion tend to focus on universities as the engines of national culture. That strategy may not be sufficient, as many young minds framed by their religious upbringing prove impervious to the secular ideas they encounter on universities (for good and for ill). Libertarians advocating social change could do well to consult the example of Jonathan Mayhew and consider the role that religion has played historically in previous campaigns to advance the cause of liberty.

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