Foreword

Moderation has an enduring presence in Christianity, and no more so than in early modern Europe and early America. Seventeenth-century England had its "moderate" Puritans and its moderate Calvinists as well. In early New England, the practice of creating "gathered" churches frightened many moderates in England, yet any crisis was eventually mitigated by the fact that the congregationalism of the colonists was an oxymoron, a parochial congregationalism—that is, a single church per town, with every adult required to attend Sunday services and encouraged to have their children catechized. A mere year or two after the pieces of this system were falling into place, its implications for infant baptism were already been queried by lay people who wanted that sacrament for their children. At a moment of stress and strain, the great majority of the ministers and most lay people fashioned a classic compromise, opening up the sacrament to many more children but preserving a stricter set of rules for access to Holy Communion. Weighing the alternatives of exclusion and inclusion, a minister who favored this compromise defended it as "a middle way" between extremes. At this moment as at so many others, a middle way has appealed to churches, ministers, lay people, and theologians as a more satisfactory way of navigating church and world than the alternatives of severity and exclusion.[1]

The Enlightenment in America was a prime example of moderation at work, as, in its own way, was the run-up to 1776 and beyond. Far from being an enemy of Scripture or of the church, the many colonial Americans who endorsed "reason" and the orderly workings of nature as these had been uncovered in the course of the "scientific revolution" (a much-questioned term), found ways of reconciling the natural and the supernatural, free will and human sinfulness, the authority of Scripture and the authority of critical inquiry. The "radicals" were few, their presence exaggerated by moderates

1. See Lake, *Moderate Puritans*; Browne and Hall, "Family Strategies and Religious Practice." See also Trueman, *John Owen*.

who benefitted from contrasting their own policies with the specter of a de-Christianized society. So we learn from Henry F. May's classic study of *The Enlightenment in America* (1976). Even someone as staunchly orthodox as Jonathan Edwards had his moderate side, as evidenced by his intense dislike of the Holy Spirit-centered "New Lights" of the mid-eighteenth century. Edwards was no social revolutionary but an elite minister who prided himself on his learnedness.[2]

It must be said, however, that Puritan-style moderation was vulnerable in its own day and remains vulnerable in ours. What seems sensible compromise or sympathetic respect for continuity can, to others, become signs of moral failure. The English Puritans who complained about the defects of the Church of England but stayed within it were outflanked by the more daring who acted on the imperative to "come out from them that are unclean." Separatists such as Robert Browne and Henry Barrow accused the moderates of duplicity. If the Church of England was really so in need of reform, how could it be "true" in the sense of obeying what Christ had mandated? To accusations of this kind, which erupted again at the time of the English Revolution (1640-1660) when radicals of several kinds pressed for a complete reworking of church, government, and society, moderates replied that schism was a far greater sin than putting up with imperfections. Or, as was said in response to the fracturing of the Christian community in the 1640s,"The dispute is not now of what is absolutely best if all were new, but of what is perfectly just as things now stand: It is not the Parliaments work to set up an Utopian Common-Wealth, or to force the people to practice abstractions." Similarly, as word reached ministers in eighteenth-century New England of the conflicts that were fracturing Dissent in England, many of them decided that peace was better than war, agreement on a few basics outweighing certain differences.[3]

Should it surprise us that historians of moderation in early America vary so widely in how they assess the substance of that tendency? Hindsight can be unkind to temporizers, as it has been to moderate anti-slavery. The special merit of *Conservative Revolutionaries* is that it restores depth and complexity to a group of moderate-minded clergy in eighteenth-century New England. John Oakes does so in part because he eludes the traps that others can easily fall into, either by seeking the origins of nineteenth-century Unitarianism and therefore emphasizing the more rationalist or anti-Calvinist aspects of what they find, or by seeking the origins of

2. As I have argued in Hall, "Editor's Introduction."

3. Quoted in Fixler, *Milton and the Kingdoms of God*, 92n2. Shagan provides a much more critical appraisal of "moderation" in *Rule of Moderation*.

independence, and therefore emphasizing concepts of liberty. Happily, taking these men on their own terms has already happened in some of the scholarship Oakes cites in his opening pages. Yet no one before him has weighed as carefully as he does the situating of texts that their authors may have designed as ambiguous or open-ended, or as a "middle way" between extremes. Take doctrine, for example. Were we to find ourselves in Boston or Cambridge, Massachusetts, at the close of the seventeenth century, we could have listened to Samuel Willard, a minister on the eve of becoming president of Harvard College, lecture each week on that monument to Reformed confesssionalism, the *Westminster Catechism* fashioned by the Westminster Assembly of Divines in the mid-1640s, a catechism widely used in New England in the eighteenth century. "Westminster" (catechism and Confession) remained the official standard of orthodoxy for much of the eighteenth century. But its status did not paralyze theological reflection or innovation, even though—and this is the paradox of moderation—no one mounted a soapbox and denounced the tradition of which he was part. Jonathan Mayhew, one of the key figures in this book, came close to that kind of posture, but as Oakes points out, he too had his ties to the past, as, most tellingly, did the immensely important Charles Chauncy.

Oakes's, then, is a project of recovery and clarification based on manuscript as well as printed sources. Because he refuses to simplify, readers may miss some big bang of a conclusion of the kind that, at this moment, litter the field of American religious history—today's exciting book (to some), but tomorrow relegated to the shelves of a library to make room for the next new thing. The watchword of the historian should be solidity and, of no less importance, listening to your predecessors and building on them in the service of the goal of a better understanding of the past. We are in John Oakes's debt in both respects.

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