4 The Political Philosophies of the Two Extremes

In the eighteenth century, organized religion concerned itself with such worldly issues as man’s duty to support government and his right to resist duly constituted authority, although religious denominations differed in their interpretation of the proper balance between these two competing forces. In part, the struggle between patriots and loyalists during the American Revolution involved opposing philosophies about the nature of government and human obligations to support existing political institutions. From the contractualist character of God’s covenant with his people, Puritan ministers concluded that if the king violated God’s commands in a serious and sustained way, his people had a religious duty to resist the monarch. These principles, when adopted or modified by revolutionaries, provided a religious justification for rebellion.¹

In contrast to latently revolutionary Calvinism, the Anglican church’s traditional doctrine of passive obedience and non-resistance, although modified by the Glorious Revolution, associated its members more closely with loyalism since both shared a conservative faith in the merits of existing political structures. Unlike Quaker pacifism, Church of England views did not entail the conscientious objection to the bearing of arms nor the consistent promotion of non-violent principles. Instead, Anglicans endorsed ‘just war’ concepts that recognized the occasional need for resistance but typically emphasized obedience to acceptable monarchs. Whereas Quakers refused to take oaths to civil authorities, the Church of England deliberately encouraged obedience to monarch and government, and it required its clergy to take a solemn oath of allegiance to the king. The church proclaimed that subjects ought to obey divinely instituted authority, but obedience had limits. Passive obedience insisted that unjust commands should not be obeyed if doing so violated God’s laws (and so the doctrine opposed unlimited obedience), but rather than plunge into war the disgruntled should more quietly accept the civil penalties for non-compliance.² For Anglicans, lessons learned in the English Civil Wars of the mid-seventeenth century and the Glorious Revolution of 1688 helped to define the appropriateness of both obedience and resistance, as well as the limits of each.

In late eighteenth-century England, High Churchmanship affirmed the union of church and king, and the church’s official message remained one of subordination to divinely constituted authority. Almost unanimously,
the clergy of the established church in England supported the Crown during the American Revolution. Their identity established by law, Anglican clergymen, like English justices of the peace, overwhelmingly defended Parliamentary supremacy against the illegal activities of the colonial rebels. From the king’s proclamation of rebellion, the clergy in England united in their loyalty; they signed few petitions for conciliation, and only three bishops disagreed with the administration’s policy of coercion. Fast sermons preached by these English clergy publicized their loyalism; only a small minority displayed sympathy for the American cause. When Richard Watson, Divinity Professor at Cambridge, declared that the war against the American colonies was unjust, he found himself accused of republicanism and disloyalty. Dissenting ministers and laymen led the protest against government policy, but since dissenters comprised only a fraction of the population, their ability to attract lay Anglicans into the opposition camp was quite important. Dissenter and Low Church Anglican cooperation in some regions broadened the nature of protest.

In the colonies, many prominent loyalists, including five of the best Tory propagandists, were Anglican clergymen. The notoriety of these individuals has served, in part, to characterize all Anglican clergymen as loyalists. One need only think of such colorful examples as Samuel Seabury Jr, Thomas Bradbury Chandler, or Jonathan Boucher. By declaring their political views, these men incurred the wrath of local patriots and gained subsequent historical fame as arch-Tories. In addition to being the first Bishop of Connecticut, Seabury is remembered as the author of the famous “Letters from a Westchester Farmer.” After penning An Appeal to the Public in 1767 which advocated the introduction of colonial bishops, Chandler also wrote several pamphlets against the Continental Congress. Boucher, a Maryland minister, so antagonized his parishioners that, before fleeing to England in September 1775, he found it necessary to preach with a pair of loaded pistols on a nearby pillow.

Despite the fame of several influential loyalists, many colonial Anglican clergymen supported the Revolution, especially in the southern colonies where the Church of England was established. The story of John Peter Gabriel Muhlenburg, an Anglican minister of Lutheran heritage, represents the opposite extreme of political affiliation. Muhlenburg participated in many of the major battles of the Revolutionary War, including Brandywine, Germantown, and Yorktown, and by 1777 was promoted to brigadier-general in the Continental army. Similarly, the military service of other Virginia ministers, including David Griffith and Charles Mynn Thruston, has been accepted as evidence of their extraordinary patriotic fervor.