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Reconsiderations

BEYOND THE "DEMOCRAT"/"CONSERVATIVE" DICHOTOMY: JOHN WISE RECONSIDERED

JOHN S. OAKES

ON 3 October 1687, John Wise and five fellow townsmen from Ipswich, Massachusetts, were tried in a Boston Court of Oyer and Terminer. Charged with "Contempt, & high misdemeanor," they had purportedly persuaded an August town meeting to refuse to appoint a commissioner to collect a new property tax introduced by the Dominion of New England. According to a resolution passed by the town, the Dominion's "Act for the Continueing & Establishing of Certaine Rates, Dutyes and Imposts" of 3 March "doth Infringe their Libertie as free=borne English Subjects of his Majestie by Interfeiring with the Statute Lawes of the Land, by which it was Enacted that no taxes Should be Levyed on the Subjects without Consent of an Assembly Chosen by the free-holders." Appointed to the ministry of Chebacco Parish in 1680, Wise was alleged to have been particularly outspoken at the 23 August town meeting. Among the official complaints against him was that he

> Did openly & publickly factiously maliciously and seditiously say publish and declair . . . the said Warrant . . . was not Legall & to Obey and Comply with the same were to lose the liberty of ffreeborne English men. And . . . did likewise then and there Excite and stirr up the people.

Wise had also been accused of stating that "we had a good God, & a good King, and Should Do well to Stand for Our Previledges."[1]

The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Jeff Cooper, John Craig, Nicholas Guyatt, David Hall, Kenneth Minkema, readers for *The New England Quarterly,* and members of the Historians of American Religion colloquium at Boston University, who generously responded to earlier drafts of this article.

[1]A helpful account of Wise's role in the Ipswich tax revolt of 1687 can be found in George Allan Cook, *John Wise: Early American Democrat* (1952; New York: Octagon

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Although Wise and Ipswich officials had subsequently declared their submission to government policy in a 21 September letter, they were found guilty on 24 October 1687. Wise was ordered to pay a fine of £50 as well as court costs and to "Give sufficient surety in One thousand pounds." He was also suspended from the ministry, but the suspension was lifted a month later. Prior to judgment, the Dominion court told the six co-defendants that "we must not think the Lawes of England follow us to the Ends of the Earth." Wise had pled, among other things, for the freedoms guaranteed by the Magna Carta and had also argued that colonists would "have no more previledges Left . . . than not to be Sould for Slaves." He spent several weeks in jail as a result of the proceedings against him, and it is unclear whether he was ever awarded damages following subsequent legal action. But when the Dominion fell in 1689, Wise's earlier resistance to the Andros regime enhanced his standing in Massachusetts.[2]

Wise built on this early public profile to become a respected and influential local minister, but he otherwise features only periodically in the historical record. Notable instances of his participation in events and debates outside the parish of Chebacco, where he remained until his death, include the Salem witchcraft and smallpox inoculation controversies of the 1690s and 1720s, on which he favored relatively open-minded positions. Except for what emerges from his two major publications and a limited number of unpublished documents, much about his everyday life and ministry remains relatively obscure. Wise became most famous for the stands that he took and the writings that he produced in defense of Congregationalist church polity in *The Churches' Quarrel* (1713) and *A Vindication* (1717). As his son-in-law, Gloucester minister John White, noted in a typically encomiastic funeral sermon, "the thing he had most at Heart, was the Well-being of these Churches; And no Risks were too great to run, no Pains too

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Books, 1966), pp. 43–60. See also Massachusetts State Archives, Boston (hereafter Mass. Archives), vol. 35, pp. 138–40, esp. 138–39; "Proceedings Ag^{t}. Wise and Others of Ipswich for Misdemeanors," reprinted from State Papers, Colonial, Bundle 55 (243), October 1687, in *Edward Randolph: Including his Letters and Official Papers . . . 1676–1703*, ed. Robert N. Toppan and Alfred T. S. Goodrick, 7 vols. (Boston: Prince Society, 1898–1909), 4:171–82, esp. 172, 175. Although he began his ministry at Chebacco in May 1680, Wise was not formally installed as minister until 12 August 1683. See Cook, *John Wise*, pp. 40–41.

[2]Toppan and Goodrick, *Edward Randolph,* 4:180; Mass. Archives, 35:138–39; Cook, *John Wise,* pp. 53–57, 50–51, 59–60. In addition, Cook reported in a joint complaint against Andros and his officers in May 1689 that Wise took independent legal action against Joseph Dudley, the outcome of which was unknown.

great to take, to Defend and Confirm the Order, and Established Constitution . . . of the same."[3]

Scholars have offered conflicting interpretations of Wise's works, and they have primarily differed over one key question. In writing about church government, was Wise voicing the views of what his biographer George Cook described as an early, even precocious, "American democrat," whose works, according to Perry Miller, were "truly forerunners of the literature of the American Revolution"? Or was Wise actually, as Jon Ericson has asserted, a "colonial conservative"? Raymond Stearns and Eldon Turner joined Ericson in dissenting from Cook, but the overwhelming majority of historians have touted Wise's democratic, egalitarian, and rationalistic impulses as first exemplified in his very public and political stance against the Andros government. In echoing Cook's characterization of Wise as a "defender of democracy in the government of church and state" and "a democrat both in action and thought," Timothy Breen, Phillip Chapman, and Clinton Rossiter thus followed an interpretative paradigm that Stearns traced to George Bancroft in 1839. Wise has attracted limited scholarly attention in recent years, but a helpful overview by James Cooper and passing references in works by Theodore Bozeman, Mark Noll, and E. Brooks Holifield, among others, show that historians have generally continued to view Wise in these democratic terms.[4]

[3]John White, *The Gospel Treasure in Earthen Vessels . . .* (Boston, Mass.: N. Boone, 1725), p. 38; John Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel Espoused, Or, A Reply In Satyre, to certain Proposals made, in Answer to this Question, What further Steps are to be taken, that the Councils may have due Constitution and Efficacy in Supporting, Preserving and well Ordering the Interest of the Churches in the Country?* (New York: William Bradford, 1713), and *A Vindication of the Government of New-England Churches. Drawn from antiquity; the light of nature; Holy Scripture; its noble nature; and from the dignity Divine Providence has put upon it.* (Boston: J. Allen for N. Boone, 1717).

[4]Cook, *John Wise,* p. 1; Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (1953; Cambridge: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 288–302, esp. 292; Jon Meyer Ericson, "John Wise: Colonial Conservative" (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1961); Raymond Stearns, "John Wise of Ipswich Was No Democrat in Politics," *Historical Collections of the Essex Institute* 97 (1961): 2–18; Eldon Turner, "Peasants and Parsons: Readers and the Intellectual Location of John Wise's *Church's Quarrel Espoused,*" *Early American Literature* 18.2 (1983): 146–70. See also Timothy H. Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler: A Study of Puritan Political Ideas* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), pp. 251–61; Phillip Chapman, "John Wise and the Democratic Impulse in American Thought," in *The Non-Lockean Roots of American Democratic Thought,* ed. Joyotpaul Chaudhuri (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977), pp. 1–16; Clinton Rossiter, "John Wise: Colonial Democrat," *New England Quarterly* 22.1 (March 1949): 3–32; James F. Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties: The Congregationalists in Colonial Massachusetts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 162–66;

The problem with this prevailing consensus is that it fails to do justice to the full complexity and inherent traditionalism of Wise's writings. Lacking sufficient historical contextualization, it also imposes anachronistic categories upon his thought. In recent studies of early American Puritanism, David Hall and Michael Winship have refocused attention on the reforming and democratizing elements of the Congregationalist polity that Wise later defended. Pointing to the intrinsic ambiguities and potentially misleading connotations of a term like "democracy" or an "image or idea" like that of "'mixed' government" in early seventeenth-century New England, Hall has further noted the risk of "substituting modern usage" for more authentic "nuances of meaning and practice." J. C. D. Clark has similarly rejected the application of terms like "conservatism" and "radicalism" to a pre-nineteenth-century context. Recognizing such linguistic and conceptual challenges, I intend to move the analysis of Wise beyond the "democrat"/"conservative" dichotomy that has hitherto dominated scholarship to offer a fresh interpretation of his role in championing the "New England Way" in Congregationalist churches.[5]

Grounds for a Quarrel

In the deeply religious society of John Wise's New England, deliberations over changing Congregationalist polity were not abstract intellectual exercises. As Hall has explained, because this was "a whole in which the social and the religious were commingled and inseparable" and "any change in one of its parts reverberated in the others," defining "the nature of the church" was "a many-sided issue that quickly became charged with politics." Such was especially the case

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Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 350–51; Mark Noll, *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 75; E. Brooks Holifield, *Theology in America: Christian Thought from the Age of the Puritans to the Civil War* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), pp. 81–82. For a much more detailed account of Wise historiography, see my "'Conservative Revolutionaries': A Study of the Religious and Political Thought of John Wise, Jonathan Mayhew, Andrew Eliot and Charles Chauncy" (Ph.D. diss., Simon Fraser University, 2008), pp. 69–80.

[5]David Hall, *A Reforming People: Puritanism and the Transformation of Public Life in New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2011), pp. 14–16; Michael Winship, *Godly Republicanism: Puritans, Pilgrims, and a City on a Hill* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012); J. C. D. Clark, *English Society, 1660–1832: Religion, Ideology and Politics during the Ancien Regime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 6–9.

when shifts in polity, like moves to consolidate more formal cooperation among Congregationalist ministers and churches in the early 1700s, threatened the existing order. Ministerial "associationism" or "consociationism" was nothing new, but its particular manifestation in the form of the 1705 *Proposals,* which Wise challenged in both of his major works, seemed especially menacing. By subjecting their laity and leadership to the determinations of larger bodies in which clergy would play a more influential role, the *Proposals* apparently threatened the autonomy and prerogatives of local congregations.[6]

From the first years of settlement, New England ministers had often met together in various, more or less consociational settings. William Youngs has found evidence of over 160 "deliberative" clerical meetings between 1630 and 1672 alone. But the earliest and most definitive statement of seventeenth-century Congregationalist polity, the Cambridge Platform, which was drafted in 1648, made no provision for greater consociationism. Representing the first of a resurgent number of more regularized ministerial bodies in Massachusetts, the Boston-Cambridge association, founded in 1690 to debate contentious doctrinal issues and problematic "cases," was, therefore, significant. Around the turn of the eighteenth century, ministers' plans for increased local centralization subsequently grew more ambitious, as leading ministers, including the traditionalist Cotton Mather, who observed a religious "declension" in New England society, urged a more coordinated Congregationalist response to it. Mather even found common ground with his rival, Presbyterian-ordained Benjamin Colman, first minister of Boston's Brattle Street Church, as the two men advocated the benefits of pastoral associations. On 6 November 1704, spurred by gathering momentum for ecclesiastical reform, the moderator of the Boston-Cambridge Association, Samuel Willard, senior minister of Boston's Third Church, circulated a letter urging greater cooperation, which was signed by colleagues at no fewer than twenty churches. Recommending that "the several associations of ministers may uphold some communion and correspondence with one another,"

[6]David Hall, "Editor's Introduction" to *The Ecclesiastical Writings,* vol. 12 of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), pp. 1–90, esp. 4. The 1705 *Proposals* against which Wise wrote were printed in Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 3–9, under a heading, which was included in the second half of that work's full title, "Certain Proposals Made, in Answer to this Question, What Further Steps Are to Be Taken, that the Councils May Have Due Constitution and Efficacy in Supporting, Preserving and Well Ordering the Interest of the Churches in the Country?" They are here simply referred to as *Proposals*.

Willard's letter included seven detailed proposals "to serve the great intentions of religion, which is lamentably decaying in the country."[7]

The following September nine delegates from five associations met in Boston and produced a much more expansive set of proposals that was circulated with a pastoral letter on 5 November and subsequently approved by a general convention of ministers on 30 May 1706. The primary recommendation was the widespread formation of associations to convene at appropriate times to "Consider such things as may properly lie before them, relating to their own faithfulness towards each other and the common Interest of the Churches." The associations' purview would include answering "Questions and Cases of importance," calling councils to investigate accusations of "Scandal or Heresie," examining ministerial candidates, and recommending interim ministers. The associations would also undertake to organize "Councils that shall be thought necessary for the Well-fare of the Churches," maintain "due Correspondence," and encourage nonparticipating ministers to take a more active role in them.[8]

The second half of the 1705 *Proposals* recommended a far-reaching program of annual church councils, which would be attended by member-pastors and delegated lay leaders. Such gatherings were to "act as Consociated Churches in all holy Watchfulness and Helpfulness towards each other." Councils would have the right to "Inquire

[7]William T. Youngs, *God's Messengers: Religious Leadership in Colonial New England, 1700–1750* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), pp. 69–78, esp. 69–71; *A Platform of Church Discipline Gathered out of the Word of God . . .* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1649); Cook, *John Wise,* p. 88; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana . . .* (London: Thomas Parkhurst, 1702), bk. 5:58–59; Samuel Willard et al., "Records of the Cambridge Association," *Publications of the Massachusetts Historical Society,* vol. 17 (Boston: The Society, 1879–80), pp. 262–81, esp. 280–81. On Mather's and Colman's advocacy for ministerial associations, see Cotton Mather et al., *Thirty Important Cases . . .* (Boston: Bartholomew Green & John Allen, 1699), pp. 5–6, and Mather, *Proposals for the Preservation of Religion . . .* (Boston: B. Green & J. Allen, 1702). Colman's undated "Proposals for promoting and settling an universall Correspondance among Protestant Dissenters . . . of the United Brethren, which is to be extended to all the Continent of English America," are in *Benjamin Colman Papers, 1641–1806* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society Microform Edition, 1978). See further Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1893), pp. 463–95; Robert F. Scholz, "Clerical Consociation in Massachusetts Bay: Reassessing the New England Way and Its Origins," *William and Mary Quarterly,* 29 (1972): 391–414, esp. 405–6. On Colman and like-minded contemporaries, see John Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety: Catholick Congregational Clergy at the Beginning of the Enlightenment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

[8]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 3–9, esp. 3–5. See further Cook, *John Wise,* pp. 100–102; Youngs, *God's Messengers,* pp. 71–2; and Walker, *Creeds and Platforms,* pp. 484–90.

into the Condition of the Churches, and Advise such things as may be for the Advantage of our holy Religion," together with the unprecedented power, subject to appeal, to make "final and decisive" determinations on matters presented to them. If "a particular church will not be Reclaimed . . . from . . . gross Disorders," for example, councils would have the authority to declare it "no longer fit for Communion with the Churches of the Faithful"—that is, effectively to excommunicate the offending congregation's members. As such, the 1705 *Proposals* promised a significant shift in traditional Massachusetts Congregationalist polity, which had long sought to uphold the relative independence of local congregations—albeit within an overarching synodical framework. The intended goal was a more cooperative, consultative model of governance in which consociated churches would work together more regularly, both through local associations and wider councils.[9]

Scholars have disagreed over the extent to which such recommendations were implemented. Cook suggested that although the number of ministerial associations increased, there is no evidence that any of the other proposals were fully adopted until 1790. That eighty-five-year delay, he posited, could be attributed to local congregations' reluctance "to yield themselves to a strangling formalism administered by corruptible men" as well as to the "indifference of the Massachusetts Government" under Governor Joseph Dudley, for whom "the church-state was a dead, dead letter." In a defense of New England church government written in 1726, Mather seemed to justify such an analysis. His statement that "the *Proposals* were never prosecuted"—later echoed by Miller, Cook, and Cooper—has, however, been shown by Ericson and Youngs to be misleading. So has the supposed corollary that in opposing the measures, Wise was essentially "flogging a dead horse." The *Proposals* may never have been formally adopted in Massachusetts, but they were approved by ministerial convention. Furthermore, as Youngs has argued, "the 'defeat' of 1705 was something other than it seemed[;] . . . more associations were formed. These groups did correspond with one another; they passed judgment on the qualifications of ministerial candidates; and informally they began to perform some of the functions of councils."[10]

[9]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 5–8.

[10]Cook, *John Wise,* pp. 102–3; Cotton Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae Fratrum Nov-Anglorum* . . . (Boston: S. Gerrish, 1726), p. 184; Perry Miller, "Introduction" to John Wise, *A Vindication* (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars' Facsimiles & Reprints, 1958),

Cotton Mather reported that ministers had initially conspired to ignore *The Churches' Quarrel,* and Cook remarked that "no one ventured" an extended, published "reply" to the work until 1774. But when Wise's major attack on the *Proposals* was reprinted in 1715, he drew heavy criticism from key figures in the Boston ministerial establishment. On 2 August, Samuel Sewall reported that both Colman and Cotton Mather denounced Wise in Fast Day sermons. In a letter of 17 September 1715 to Robert Wodrow of the University of Glasgow in which he accused Wise of being "a furious man" who had "lately published a foolish libel against some of us for Presbyterianizing too much in our care to repair some deficiencies in our Churches," Mather gave freer rein to his damning verdict on the author of *The Churches' Quarrel*.[11]

Such denunciations show that the *Proposals* remained a live issue when Wise criticized them. In addition, Ericson made a strong case that Increase Mather never clearly endorsed the *Proposals* and subsequently spoke out against at least three of its clauses in his *Disquisition concerning Ecclesiastical Councils* (1716). Youngs adduced evidence from Mather's papers that he had prepared his own critical "Answer to the Proposals" as early as 1705. Ericson also showed that "between 1705 and 1716 the question of councils had not been settled" even in Connecticut, where the 1708 Saybrook Platform, which was clearly informed by the *Proposals,* was disputed and, in most areas, eventually rejected despite having been approved by a general synod. But if the *Proposals* were not a "dead letter" when Wise responded to them, pressing questions remain as to a proper understanding of his ideas on church government, and an important point of departure for resolving them is his overall theological stance, which has hitherto been neglected.[12]

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p. xi; Cooper, *Tenacious of Their Liberties,* pp. 161–62; Ericson, "John Wise: Colonial Conservative," pp. 61–62; and Youngs, *God's Messengers,* pp. 73–77, esp. 73.

[11]C. Mather, *Ratio Disciplinae,* pp. 184–85; Cook, *John Wise,* pp. 103, 125–26; Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall, 1674–1729,* ed. Milton Halsey Thomas, 2 vols. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), 2:795; C. Mather to Robert Wodrow, 17 September 1715, in *The Correspondence of the Rev. Robert Wodrow . . . ,* 3 vols. (Edinburgh: Wodrow Society, 1843), 2:148. See further C. Mather to John Stirling, 16 September 1715, in *Selected Letters of Cotton Mather,* ed. Kenneth Silverman (Baton Rouge, La: Louisiana State University Press, 1971), esp. p. 185.

[12]Increase Mather, cited in Ericson, "John Wise: Colonial Conservative," pp. 64–66; Youngs, *God's Messengers,* p. 72; Ericson, "John Wise: Colonial Conservative," pp. 71–74. On Mather's influence, see further Colman to Wodrow, 23 January 1719, in "Some Unpublished Letters of Benjamin Colman, 1717–1725," *Proceedings of the*

The Question of Orthodoxy

Possibly because both his major publications focus quite narrowly on issues of church polity and his other writings address nontheological matters, scholars have differed about Wise's most basic assumptions. Rossiter asserted that "Wise seems to have freed his thinking completely from the harsh compulsions of the Calvinistic view of human nature." While emphasizing his dependence on reason rather than revelation in defending New England polity, Miller conceded that there was no cause to doubt that Wise *was* an orthodox Calvinist, and circumstantial evidence lends support to that view. Neither Wise's religious upbringing nor his formal education would have encouraged theological heterodoxy. His rigorously Calvinist son-in-law, John White, perhaps predictably confirmed that Wise was a "Faithful Pastor," concerned to "promote the Purity and Peace" of New England churches, and there is no record of opponents like Cotton Mather ever criticizing Wise's orthodoxy.[13]

Even though Wise's theological views are not detailed in *The Churches' Quarrel* or *A Vindication,* further indications emerge in his demonstrable respect for the person and work of Christ, his historically providentialist understanding of Congregationalist polity, and his careful observations on human nature. Wise made his strongest statements on Christology in the fifth "Demonstration" of *A Vindication*—"From the Dignity which the Providence of God has put upon the Constitution, both in the First Ages of the Christian Churches, and in the last Century." In it, he attributed "the fatal Arian Haeresy" to the early church's abandonment of first principles. His succinct summary of Arianism as "this Damnable Doctrine, *viz.,* That our Saviour Christ was neither God, nor Eternal, but a Creature; and that he assumed only the Body, not the Soul of Man, &c.," together with his classification of the beliefs it denied as "Essentials" of Christian faith,

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Massachusetts Historical Society, vol. 77 (Boston: The Society,1965), pp. 101–42, 108–15. On developments in Connecticut, see also Paul Lucas, *Valley of Discord: Church and Society along the Connecticut River, 1636–1725* (Hanover, N.H.: University Press of New England, 1976), pp. 189–202.

[13]Rossiter, "John Wise: Colonial Democrat," p. 18; Miller, *New England Mind: Colony to Province,* pp. 290, 295; White, *The Gospel Treasure in Earthen Vessels,* pp. 37, 38. White's Calvinism is obvious from a work like *New England's Lamentations . . .* (Boston: T. Fleet, 1734). Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler,* p. 255, echoed Miller's view. On New England Calvinism, see Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1954), pp. 92–97; Holifield, *Theology in America,* pp. 25–55.

reveals his commitment to established doctrine. As "the Great Shepherd" over the church, Wise considered Jesus the ultimate source of all authentic ecclesiastical power and authority and saw him as the *sine qua non* of gospel preaching.[14]

Wise's Christology was paralleled by his providentialist stance as a filiopietistic defender of Congregationalist polity. He fully espoused the Puritan notion that the founding of New England had been "an errand into the wilderness" to establish a godly society, including pristine gospel churches that would serve as witnesses to biblical truth for the whole world. In his opening "Epistle Dedicatory" of *The Churches' Quarrel,* Wise reminded his readers not only of their present "Liberties" but also of what those privileges had cost their "Progenitors, some of them having buried their Estates, and all of them their Bones in these Foundations." He went on to compare the government of New England churches to the "Theocracy" of ancient Israel, which "had more of God than of man in it" and had been "Honoured with great success, and many Blessings from its Beginnings to this day." In *A Vindication,* Wise consistently declared that it was by "the Grace of God, that we in these Countrys, are by his good Providence over us, the Subjects of the most Ancient, Rational and Noble Constitution in Church Order that ever was, will be, or can be."[15]

Apart from affirmations of Christ as "Saviour" and "Great Shepherd," Wise's major writings contain no sustained soteriological exposition; nor do they challenge the assumption that he was anything but a committed Calvinist. In the same treatise in which he highlighted the "very Honourable Character" of humanity and described "man" as "a Creature which God has made and furnished essentially with many Ennobling Immunities, which render him the most August Animal in the World," Wise signaled his acceptance of the traditional doctrine of humankind's Fall and its consequences. Toward the beginning of his third "Demonstration" in *A Vindication,* Wise took "a brief view of Man by Scripture Account under a Religious Notion, as the Subject of Grace," arguing that "its very certain that Man has greatly debased himself by his Apostacy"—a statement that is fully

[14]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 97–98, 99–102, esp. pp. 99–100, 102, and *The Churches' Quarrel,* p. 33. See also Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 28, 30, 51, 62, 85, and esp. 77.

[15]See Perry Miller, *Errand into the Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1956); Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 17, 41–42, and *A Vindication,* p. 103. See further, *A Vindication,* pp. 28–29.

consonant with a reformed doctrine of total depravity. Elsewhere in the same work, he wrote of "Man's Moral Turpitude" and of "Much ignorance, abundance of small ends, many times cloked [*sic*] with a high Pretence in Religion; Pride Skulking and often breeding revenge upon a small affront; and blown up by a pretended Zeal; Yet really and truly by nothing more Divine then [*sic*] Interest, or ill Nature," even "in the hearts of Good Men."[16]

What could have arguably encouraged the notion that Wise departed from a traditional Protestant view of humankind as born in sin and destined for hell in the absence of divine intervention are his more positive statements about human nature and capabilities in *A Vindication*'s second "Demonstration": "in the Light of Nature." But even when quoting the argument of German philosopher Samuel Pufendorf that "'The Word Man . . . is thought to carry somewhat of Dignity in its sound,'" none of his affirmations of human worth were inconsistent with a traditional understanding of original sin. Wise emphasized the strengths of humanity, created in God's image, primarily because he was deeply convinced that people were both free and worthy, under God, to govern their own churches, as they did in New England.[17]

On the only occasion in which he directly addressed the topic of conversion, Wise struck a fine balance between upholding human dignity and divine sovereignty, but he made clear that the latter was paramount:

> First, God treats him [i.e., man] as a Creature of a very Honourable Character, as free and at his own dispose. . . . [I]f God did not highly estimate Man . . . , he would not caress him as he does in order to his Submission; but rather . . . send his demands at the Mouth of his Cannon. But instead of such harsh measures, they are treated with the highest Reason, attended with Lenity and great Acts of Condescension. . . . Yea, under all impulsive means, which God Wisely and Graciously makes use of to gain Mans consent, he sets the Will to turn about it self without forcing it.

God, therefore, had ultimate power over the will in the process of conversion as well as the absolute right to command human "submission." God's "means" may have been subtle and cooperative, in

[16]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 71, 38, 56–57.

[17]Samuel Pufendorf, *Of the Law of Nature and Nations* . . . , trans. Basil Kennett, 2nd ed. (Oxford: L. Lichfield for A. and J. Churchil et al., 1710), p. 178, quoted in Wise, *A Vindication,* p. 40.

keeping with humanity's "very Honourable Character," but the end result of his "courting" would never be uncertain.[18]

The grace-driven ecclesiology and theological anthropology of Wise's two major works thus unite with their Christology and providentialism to suggest that his doctrine was broadly consistent with New England orthodoxy. A hitherto unpublished church covenant, which Wise apparently signed with eleven leading laymen of Chebacco at the beginning of his ministry, provides further evidence of a distinctively reformed understanding of the church as an "elect" community. "We whose Names are adjoined, now entering into in the Solemn Bonds of Church Relation with God & one with another, do Profess Reason of Astonishment," they stated in the document's opening paragraph:

> that (while the greatest Part of the World is now weltering in it's [*sic*] own Blood, having no Eye to pity it) the eternal Thoughts of God should be on us, most vile sinners, for such a Day as this, wherein we are inclin'd to espouse the most secret and glorious Interest, and Publicly do avouch God as ours; and wherein we desire to hope thro' Grace, that God (not only visibly by this our Act, but secretly by the moving of his Mercy towards us thro' Christ) will enter into a Covenant with us, taking us as Part of the Number of his Faithful and Chosen.

While the remainder of the covenant is predictably more activist in tone and content, subsequent references to "the Help of divine grace," "the Grace & Power of the Lord Jesus Christ," "God assisting," and "so far as God shall help us" underscore the twelve Chebacco churchmen's publicly declared understanding that they did not expect to make their "Calling & Election sure" without God's support. "And all this we engage," they concluded, after listing a stringent series of promises and resolutions, "not by any strength of our own, but by the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Blood we desire may sprinkle both our Persons and this our Covenant."[19]

A systematic exposition of the main arguments of *The Churches' Quarrel* and *A Vindication* will provide additional evidence of Wise's theological traditionalism in the form of his consistent biblicism, his "restorationist" view of church history, his use of Puritan sources, and

[18]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 71–72.

[19]"The Covenant of the Second Church in Ipswich," First Congregational Church of Essex, Mass., Records, MSS 256, box 9, folder 2, Phillips Library, Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Mass.

his ascription of constitutional status to his main source of extrabiblical authority, the Cambridge Platform.

"Proposals" on Trial

The apologetic agenda and style of *The Churches' Quarrel* are clear from the outset. In his opening letter "To the Fraternity of the Churches in the New-England Colonies," Wise announced that "the Constitution and Way of New-England Churches" was "the only way to advance Grace and mans Eternal Happiness." Offering his readers six "Petitions" aimed at stirring their sense of pride, Wise urged the defense of traditional polity. At a time when the office was becoming increasingly obsolescent, he called for the appointment of ruling elders in every church, despite the fact that it had "grown very rare to find one Individual" in that position, and he asked that the Cambridge Platform, which he described as "the Ecclesiastical Political Charter of these Churches," be reissued. After a lengthy "Epistle Dedicatory," the body of *The Churches' Quarrel* was then structured as a legal trial "in a form borrowed from Sir Edward Cooke [*sic*]." In adopting this satirical device, Wise made it clear that the *Proposals* themselves, indicted as "Criminal," were being prosecuted "at the Bar of Common Reason."[20]

Wise launched his attack with five "Queries" designed to highlight the strengths of the existing polity and the weaknesses of the system advocated by the *Proposals*. Central to his concerns, especially in considering the fourth and fifth proposals, was the question of where legitimate authority for maintaining or changing established church order was located. Although he examined a range of possibilities, including "Immediate Inspiration" and "Right Reason," he ultimately settled on biblical revelation and Puritan tradition as enshrined in the Cambridge Platform. "God hath made all things sufficiently plain, by this Time of day, either by Scripture or Reason, for the Conduct and Government of his Churches," he insisted. The Bible was, "tho' not the bigest [*sic*] of books . . . the saints Library and the Clergy-mans Pandects, whence he takes the Rules for the Mannagment [*sic*] of his Trust."[21]

[20]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 10, 12, 14, 15–31 (esp. 21, 29), 36–37. Wise's reference is specifically to Coke's prosecution of Sir Walter Raleigh for treason in 1603. For an account of the trial, see Charles Edward Lloyd, *State Trials of Mary, Queen of Scots, Sir Walter Raleigh, and Captain William Kidd* (Chicago, Ill.: Callghan and Company, 1899), pp. 61–126.

[21]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 37, 38, 40, 42, 44–6.

Although scholars have questioned Wise's commitment to biblical authority, his biblicist discourse is a consistent feature of his major works. He referred to specific passages more than thirty times in both *The Churches' Quarrel* and *A Vindication*. One of his major objections to the *Proposals* was their incongruence with scriptural precedent, which he summarized in two graphic metaphors:

> we have nothing for our Faith to lean on, but so many austerer *Ipse Dixits*, as bitter Pills of Death for the Churches to Swallow, without any of the Confection of Heaven or the Sweet Manna Sprinkled upon them; or else only so many naked Humane Persumptions [*sic*], as Arrows or Bolts, too Rashly shot out against the sides of our Churches, and no word of Scripture to Tip or feather them.

Questioning "whether the Proposals are deduced from this fountain," Wise went on to portray the Cambridge Platform as "by a kind of short *Prosopope* [personification]," saying that it had "never since it Possest the Government, so much as Dream'd of them."[22]

Wise attacked the *Proposals* as "a Conjunction of almost all the Church Governments in the World," with "the least part . . . Congregational." He then drew upon an anti-Catholic discourse, which permeates his works almost as thoroughly as his biblicism. From the outset of *The Churches' Quarrel*, Wise warned that the *Proposals* threatened to introduce a new "sort of Discipline" into New England churches redolent of Catholic absolutism, which had already "sunk [a] great part of the Christian World, as many times over, as Ages have past." The *Proposals* had such an obvious aim of "Enobling Government for Clergy-men" as to lead to the conclusion that "There is also something in it which Smells very strong of the Infallible Chair" (i.e., the papacy). Among particularly offensive "properties," Wise singled out "Disorder," "Usurpation," and a "Riotous," "Sacrilegious," and "Rebellious" nature. Such vices, together with the *Proposals*' "Unfaithfullness," "Ingratitude," and "Impolicy," stood in stark contrast to the virtues of Puritan tradition as embodied in the Cambridge Platform.[23]

[22]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel*, pp. 46, 49. Among scholars to have "questioned Wise's commitment to biblical authority" are, for example, Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province*, p. 298, and Rossiter, "John Wise: Colonial Democrat," pp. 13–14.

[23]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel*, pp. 50, 14, 51–63. On late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century anti-Catholicism, see Owen Stanwood, *The Empire Reformed: English America in the Age of the Glorious Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of

The remainder of *The Churches' Quarrel* is divided into two parts, each containing eight sections that address the sixteen proposals point by point, resulting in a powerful, systematic dismantling of their logic. Even appeals to the pragmatism and common sense of Wise's readers rest to a significant degree on the authority of the Cambridge Platform. In the course of an extended disquisition on the general topic of standing councils, Wise also disclosed more worldly goals to uphold the standards and structures of the unwritten British political constitution and thereby to avoid the dangers of "arbitrary," especially Roman Catholic, power. In making the argument that there was no legitimate legal precedent for standing church councils, Wise thus outlined seven exemplary "Principles of the English Government," centered on the rule of law and its protections, which he likened to "great Arteries in Nature, which Circulate the Blood and Spirits thro' the Imperial Body."[24]

Wise's immediate polemical purpose in citing English governmental principles was to indict the *Proposals* as "Despotick and Arbitrary Measures." In so doing, he also demonstrated that his concern to uphold a traditional order in both church and state was firmly rooted in a quintessentially Protestant vision of constitutionally ordered government. As Thomas Kidd and Owen Stanwood have argued, the rhetoric of British constitutionalism and anti-Catholicism became especially influential in the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Atlantic world after the Glorious Revolution. Winship has further noted that while "the colony's new charter [of 1692] was a disappointment," "having been rescued from a dictatorial royal governor and an absolute Catholic monarchy . . . , Massachusetts's residents learned to prize their membership in a powerful monarchical empire that protected civil and religious liberty and true religion." Wise certainly saw established metropolitan structures as key bastions against the perceived threats of Catholic absolutism. Maintaining that "English men hate an Arbitrary Power (Politically Considered) as they hate the Devil," he charged the *Proposals* with having "out King'd all Kings on Earth whose Prerogatives are Bounded, and their Kingdoms Governed by Law" to the point where "we must needs range

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Pennsylvania Press, 2011), and Colin Haydon, *Anti-Catholicism in eighteenth-century England c. 1714–80* (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1993).

[24]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel*, pp. 63–107, 107–52, esp. 116. Part 2 also contains a "Conclusion" (pp. 145–52) that responds to the last paragraph of the *Proposals*, which listed their circumstances of "assent."

them with the Arbitrary Princes of the Earth." He went on to allege that "they have out Bishop't all Bishops of Great Britain" and "out-Pope't the Pope himself, who is head of an Hierarchy supported by certain Laws, Acts and Ordinances." A parallel source of protection against Catholic excesses lay in the Protestant royal family, who guaranteed British constitutional protections. In concluding his "Epistle Dedicatory," Wise thus buttressed his anti-Catholicism with a royalist discourse that was another recurring, and often accompanying, theme in his writings. Heralding "the Great [Queen] ANNE, our Wise and Protestant Princes [*sic*]," he prayed that "she may live to see all the Protestant Churches thro' her vast Empire, more vertuous and more united."[25]

Whereas the Cambridge Platform, a principal instrument for preserving Protestant freedoms in New England, was "established by Certain or Legal and Orderly Familiarities, and Universal Consent," Wise insisted, the *Proposals* would lead to a growth in arbitrary, clerical power that had "utterly undone the Christian World" in times past. As few as thirty years previously, there had been "no Appearance of the Associations of Pastors in these Colonies," but "some Gentlemen that were inclined to Presbyterian Principles" gave rise to "these *Proposals* like Aaron's Golden Calf." Wise even attached providential and conspiratorial significance to the date on which the ministers subscribed to the *Proposals:* 5 November, the anniversary of the Gun Powder Plot.[26]

Wise's anti-Catholicism did not lead him to embrace a full-blown anti-clericalism. Ministers, like royalty, enjoyed an elevated status, but their supremacy should not be allowed free rein. While New England clergy were "in a high station, as they Represent the great Shepherd, and their Trust is Noble and Great," they "must never Infringe the Churches Power of Priviledge in any Branch of it." There was always a danger that ministers might "begin to soar a-loft, or above their proper Sphere." Because "the very name of an Arbitrary Government is ready to put an English mans Blood into a Fermentation," Wise feared clerical aggrandizement and consistently linked his notions of an ordered society to English Protestant political freedoms as well

[25]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 122, 120, 122–23, 32; Kidd, *The Protestant Interest: New England after Puritanism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 17–18; Stanwood, *The Empire Reformed,* pp. 20, 115–26; and Winship, *Godly Republicanism,* p. 247.

[26]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 39, 74, 102–4, 105–7, 149–50.

as to the distinctiveness of New England's Congregationalist church polity. Whereas the *Proposals* "smell so strong of the POPES Cooks and Kitchen, where his Broaths and Restoratives are prepared," the Cambridge Platform supported "the best Churches of Christ in the World."[27]

A Vindication of Congregationalist Tradition

Wise continued to combat the forces that endangered Congregationalism in *A Vindication,* in which he moved beyond offering a satirical defense of existing New England polity against the consociationism of the *Proposals* to a systematic *apologia* for traditional Congregationalist church order. He summed up the whole argument and structure of *A Vindication* in its first two sentences:

> The Constitution of New-England CHURCHES, as settled by their Platform, may be fairly Justified, from Antiquity; The Light of Nature; Holy Scripture; and from the Noble and Excellent Nature of the Constitution it self. And lastly from the Providence of God dignifying of it.

Wise then went on to divide the work into five discrete "Demonstrations," each of which ultimately served his stated purpose to justify the status quo as defined by the Cambridge Platform.[28]

In his first "Demonstration"—"the Voice of Antiquity"—Wise drew on a variety of Puritan authorities to expand on earlier comments in *The Churches' Quarrel* and to present a distinctively seventeenth-century interpretation of church history and New England's redemptive role in it. Chief among his sources was the English non-Conformist Whig Peter King, as well as leading Puritan ministers and theologians, including John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Urian Oakes, and John Owen. Cook has shown how Wise incorporated portions of King's text, *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity & Worship of the Primitive Church* (1691), "transposed" and "unacknowledged," into the first section of *A Vindication*. Oakes's 1673 election sermon, *New-England Pleaded with,* which dealt with religious declension, provided more than a page of *A Vindication*'s concluding chapter, while Cotton, Owen, and Hooker were cited more sparingly. Like Wise's earlier references in *The Churches' Quarrel* to William Ames, Nicholas Noyes, and Cotton and Increase

[27]Wise, *The Churches' Quarrel,* pp. 114, 109, 121, 141, 145.
[28]Wise, *A Vindication,* p. 3.

Mather, such citations specifically addressed matters of church order. In advocating adherence to a Congregationalist polity worthy of New England's founders, Wise's appeal to such sources was predictable, but he also sought to ground it in biblicist discourse by demonstrating, through a detailed comparison of "the Constituent Parts of a Church" in the earliest era of ecclesiastical history and New England tradition, that "the Churches in New-England: and the Primitive Churches are Eminently parallel in their Government."[29]

Wise's conclusion that the New England polity was "Apostolical" buttressed the restorationist or "primitivist" vision of church history that he had developed in *The Churches' Quarrel*. New England churches had done nothing less than further the work of the Reformation in restoring "the Essentials of Government" in church order and discipline. As in his earlier work,the forces he saw imperiling Congregationalist tradition were similar to those that had undermined the early church. During the fourth and fifth centuries, clerical ambition had led "Prelates" to "embrace all Opportinities [*sic*] of Introducing another Order into the Churches that might tend more to the Exaltation of their own power and Dignity." Quoting Oakes, Wise seconded his observation that it was important to "'consider what will be the sad issue of Revolting from the way fixed on to one extream or to another, whether it be to Presbyterianism or Brownism.'"[30]

Scholars have used Wise's second "Demonstration" in *A Vindication*—"in the Light of Nature"—to stress his progressive, even enlightened, reliance on reason. Wise believed that New England polity was rationally, as well as biblically, justified, and Pufendorf's influence is especially striking in the more innovative and rationalistic elements of Wise's argument. He not only mentioned the seventeenth-century legal scholar by name as a "Chief Guide and Spokes-man" on the "Civil Being of Man"; he quoted him verbatim over some three full pages in *A Vindication* and echoed his ideas on others. Yet even while taking what he called this "unusual and unbeaten Path" in defense of the New England polity, Wise also reminded his readers that his main argument remained grounded in scripture and traditional

[29]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 3–30, esp. 3, 12, 10, 28–9, citing Urian Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with . . .* (Cambridge: Samuel Green, 1673), pp. 44–45; Peter King, *An Enquiry into the Constitution, Discipline, Unity & Worship of the Primitive Church . . .* (London: Jonathan Robinson and John Wyat, 1691). See esp. Cook, *John Wise,* pp. 130–31, 212, n.11, on Wise and King.

[30]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 10, 11, 6–7, 28, citing Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with,* p. 45.

church order. Applying "several Principles of Natural Knowledge" in his efforts to show that New England congregations were "fairly Established in their present Order by the Law of Nature," Wise affirmed that "the Light of Reason as a Law and Rule of Right, is an Effect of Christ's goodness, care and creating Power, as well as of Revelation." In a discussion of "Man in a state of Natural Being," he stated that "Nothing can be Gods Ordinance, but what he has particularly Declared to be such" in "God's Word," that is, the Bible. Although "no particular Form of Civil Government" was "described" there, it was "certain Civil Government in General, is a very Admirable Result of Providence."[31]

Wise began the extended disquisition on the "Natural" and "Civil Being of Man," which constitutes chapter 2 of the second "Demonstration," with strong affirmations of human dignity as "the Subject of the Law of Nature," "Original Liberty," and "equality," for which he relied heavily on Pufendorf. Closely mirroring the German philosopher, Wise outlined the basic foundations of a political philosophy grounded in what Thomas Johnston aptly described as "a tripartite contract theory." Having identified three "Forms of a Regular State"—democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy—Wise left no doubt that he favored democracy, which he defined as involving "a company of Men" entering "into a voluntary Compact, to hold all Power in their own hands, thereby to use and improve their united force, wisdom, riches and strength for the Common and Particular good of every Member." In institutional terms, a government was democratic, he argued, "when the Sovereign Power is Lodged in a Council consisting of all the Members, and where every Member has the Priviledge of a Vote." Wise considered "Democracy" a "form of Government, which the Light of Nature does highly value, & often directs to as most agreable to the Just and Natural Prerogatives of Humane Beings." But his subsequent remarks on "Mixt Governments," which include a significant quotation from the English diplomat and royalist Edward Chamberlayne, also make clear that Wise saw the British system, which had "a Regular Monarchy; [in Distinction to what is Dispotick] settled upon a Noble Democracy as its Basis," as the ultimate model

[31]Wise, *A Vindication*, pp. 30–70, esp. 30–33. In a neglected, but somewhat flawed article ("John Wise: Early American Political Thinker," *Early American Literature Newsletter* 3.1 [Spring 1968]: 30–40), Thomas E. Johnston Jr. showed Wise's dependence on Pufendorf's political ideas in *A Vindication* more thoroughly than has any other scholar. See also Cook, *John Wise*, pp. 134–44, 212–14 nn. 17–39.

of civil rule, because it was "'most like to the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, whose Yoke is easie, and Burden light.'"[32]

Wise's dissenting Protestant and strongly Anglophile sentiments remain unmistakable in his analysis of church government. Since it was more "accommodated to the Concerns of Religion than any other," democracy was the only appropriate model for "Gospel Churches." In expounding the dangers of ecclesiastical monarchy and aristocracy, the anti-Catholicism of earlier historical commentary in both *The Churches' Quarrel* and *A Vindication* also resurfaced dramatically. Wise took it as an absolute certainty that the Pope, "either by reasonable Pleas, or powerful Cheats, has assumed an absolute and universal Sovereignty" and, "instead of Sanctifying, [has] absolutely Debaucht the World, and subverted all good Christianity in it." By contrast, ecclesiastical democracy was the form of government that Christ had settled "for his Churches[']safety, and for the Benefit of every Member." In concluding the second "Demonstration," Wise thus reminded his readers of the supremacy of scripture. Citing no fewer than eleven biblical passages in defense of the Cambridge Platform "in the Light of Nature," Wise deduced that "If we find that God has Disclosed his Mind by Revelation, that his Churches be the Subjects of a Democracy, then all stand obliged to comply under a double Bond."[33]

In the third "Demonstration" of *A Vindication*—"From Holy Scripture"—Wise reiterated his conviction "that the Scripture does Warrant a Government in Gospel Churches." It consisted "of the Exercise of several distinct Powers Inherent in the Fraternity," including the election of officers, church discipline, and churches' authority "to represent themselves in Synodical Conventions." Wise's discussion of disciplinary matters, which centers on an extended exposition of Matt. 18:15–20, is particularly notable for its strict adherence to biblical precedent. "Let the Reader lay all these Scriptures together," he suggested of a slew of Bible verses, "and then let him answer me with good reason if he can, and tell me why these Scriptures may not be

[32]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 32–70, esp. 34, 37, 39, 47, 61, 60, 50–51, citing Edward Chamberlayne, *Angliae Notitia* . . . (London: T. N. for J. Martyn, 1669), pp. 84–85, esp. 85; Johnston, "John Wise: Political Thinker," p. 35. Wise relied most heavily on Pufendorf in *A Vindication,* pp. 40–43.

[33]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 65, 69, 54, 56, 62, 69. Cf. *A Vindication,* p. 57: "The Primitive Constitution of the Churches was a Democracy."

esteemed the Churches' *Magna Charta,* in matters of Censure and Judicature."[34]

In "From the Excellent Nature of the Constitution," his fourth "Demonstration," Wise based his argument on three "Pleas," the last of which arose "From the near Affinity our Constitution holds with the Civil Governments of some of the most flourishing Commonwealths in the World." Although the English system of government was a "mixt," rather than a pure, democracy, Wise was as unstinting in his patriotic praise as he had been in *The Churches' Quarrel.* Deploying the political rhetoric of English Whiggery, he cited Henry Care, Henry Booth, and the anonymous author of *The Secret History of the Reigns of K. Charles II and K. James II.* Having described democratic rights to parliamentary representation and trial by jury as "two grand Pillars of English Liberty," Wise quoted Care's view that such "'fundamental vital Priviledges'" were those "'whereby we have been, and are still preserved more free and happy, than any other People in the World.'" He also saw an obvious connection between a traditional English concern to preserve civil liberties and the need for vigilance in New England's churches. All in all, he determined:

> The several Examples of Civil States . . . do serve abundantly to justifie the noble Nature of our Constitution in Church-Order; for that the several famous & august Nations . . . are either a perfect Democracy, or very much mixed and blendished with it. Then why should we in New-England be any more ashamed, or less careful of our Church-Government . . . then [*sic*] those nations are of their Civil Government?[35]

The fifth and final "Demonstration" in *A Vindication*—"From the Dignity which the Providence of God has put Upon the Constitution" of New England Congregationalism— recapitulated Wise's providentialist and restorationist understanding of ecclesiastical history. The first three, pre-Constantinian centuries in the life of the early church had been marked, he argued, by a "great and admirable Success of the Gospel, in the Conversion of so many Nations," by the churches' "singular Purity, and Vertuous Deportment" and by the fact that "they

[34]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 70–87, esp. 76, 85. The Magna Carta (1297) can be found at *legislation.gov.uk* (National Archives for UK Government, London): http://www.legislation.gov.uk/aep/Edw1cc1929/25/9, accessed 2 July 2014.

[35]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 87–97, esp. 93, 95–97, citing Henry Care, *English Liberties* (London: G. Larkin for John How, 1680), p. 5; *The Secret History of the Reigns of K. Charles II and K. James II* (London, 1690). See also Breen, *The Character of the Good Ruler,* pp. 253–54, and Noll, *America's God,* pp. 81–82.

were eminently supported & carried on by the Grace and Providence of God thro' all their direful Sufferings." In the very first chapter of *A Vindication,* Wise had described this golden age as "the most Refined and purest Time . . . that the Christian Church has been Honoured with." The decline that followed over some twelve hundred years in the post-Constantine era was thus a "subversion" of the "Old Constitution." After biblical and apostolic standards of church order were abandoned, "the frowns of Providence . . . pursued the Christian World," including the Arian heresy and the gradual decline of Christianity, "till all was swallowed up in a Universal and Direful Apostacy, never sufficiently to be deplored." Drawing on the same English Puritan historical understanding that was echoed and amplified by early colonial settlers—notably by William Bradford and John Cotton—Wise saw these dark ages marked by a huge aggrandizement of clerical power and the rise of Roman Catholicism as an ultimately anti-Christian institution. The Reformation reversed the trend, but it was left to New England to complete that work of grace by ensuring that its churches, "as to their Order and Discipline[,] . . . surpassed" their reformed predecessors. Wise thus viewed "the last Century," including colonial settlement, as one in which "God has been very Admirable in the works of Providence, and has therein highly Dignifyed our Constitution." This was, in fact, his concluding argument in defense of New England polity as a whole.[36]

Contending that New England's ecclesiastical constitution had been blessed by God because it marked the restoration of apostolic purity in church order and discipline, Wise ended his treatise where he had begun. To uphold the Cambridge Platform against dangerous innovations like the *Proposals* was to defend the most valuable of ecclesiastical traditions. Since the established polity that Wise strove to protect in local churches was decentralized by design and involved significant lay authority, it clearly embodied democratic elements, for which he strengthened his case with arguments based on political philosophy and paradigms—especially that of the English "mixed" constitution. Yet although Wise praised democracy as a polity that was biblically warranted, "as agreeable with the Light and Laws of Nature as any other whatsoever" and most suitable for New England churches, his major priority was never the pursuit of democracy per se. His primary concern in both of his main works was the preservation of Congregationalist church polity, especially from the centralizing and, he

[36]Wise, *A Vindication,* pp. 97–104 (esp. 98–99, 102–3), 3–4, 9.

thought, corrupting tendencies of early eighteenth-century ministerial associations, and in matters of state, his epitome was the "mixed" government of Great Britain, headed by a Protestant monarch and guided by the treasured values of its constitution.[37]

Creative Traditionalist

A holistic interpretation of Wise's writings thus reveals a traditionalist minister and theologian who justifies the label "early American democrat" only within the narrow confines of his own, historically contingent definition. More than earlier reforming Puritans who established novel political, as well as ecclesiastical, structures in seventeenth-century New England, Wise's monarchism and allegiance to a British parliamentary system constrained his advocacy of decentralized forms of government. Although he clearly preferred republican to absolutist forms, he never lost faith in the British monarchy or embraced the ideals of a civil republic. His views reflected the changing realities of his age, not least the new political settlement that followed the Glorious Revolution and considerably reduced Massachusetts' autonomy in the 1690s.

Wise's vigorous defense of Congregationalist polity and his commitment to New England's limited forms of ecclesiastical democracy must also be carefully contextualized within the broader framework of his constitutional traditionalism in matters of church as well state. There is strong evidence that he was an orthodox Calvinist and thoroughly biblicist theologian for whom earlier Puritan authorities, especially the Cambridge Platform, New England's "Ecclesiastical Political Charter," were decisive. Wise was relatively progressive on some issues. He had a high view of the value of human reason, and he was prepared to take an "unbeaten path" by drawing on less traditional sources like Pufendorf to advance more rationalistic arguments, but only when they served his polemical interests. Above all else, Wise consistently prioritized biblical over other principles. Combined with a patriotic royalism, a fiercely Protestant Anglophilia also underlay much of his interpretation of New England history and values. From the Ipswich tax revolt of 1687 to the publication of *A Vindication* in 1717 and beyond, Wise sought to uphold the rights of "free-born Englishmen," rights that extended back to the Magna Carta. Just as he thought them politically guaranteed by the British constitution,

[37]Wise, *A Vindication,* p. 65.

he saw them ecclesiastically reflected in the Congregationalism of the Cambridge Platform. A closely related and equally significant discourse was Wise's vigorous anti-Catholicism, which permeated both of his major publications and emerged whenever he perceived that arbitrary power or absolutism was threatening church or state.

Seeking to describe "the public ideologies widespread in the Anglophone world by the late eighteenth century," J. C. D. Clark highlighted the various denominational expressions of earlier intellectual traditions of dissenting Protestantism. "All parties to many different disputes claimed the 'rights of Englishmen,'" he noted, "or appealed to the libertarian inheritance of the Reformation," although "they interpreted these in different ways." Across denominational lines, however, all were uniformly concerned to protect their "ancient principles of ecclesiastical polity," and "frenzied anti-Catholicism" was, according to Clark, "the most consistent theme both of popular sentiment and of ideological exegesis" through "all the vicissitudes of English politics from the 1530s to the 1830s and beyond." Focusing on the early eighteenth century, Kidd has similarly argued that "international Protestantism, British nationalism and anti-Catholicism" were influential factors in shaping "a post-Puritan identity in New England society."[38]

Such are the very themes and discourses that feature prominently in the works of John Wise. While *A Vindication* also reflects the clear influence of other ideas and discourses, the text's staunch apologetics for Congregationalist polity, its rampant anti-Catholicism, its firm support for British constitutional values and structures, and its ardent admiration for England's Protestant monarchy thus place it firmly within the context of a dissenting Protestant religious and political worldview that had long been entrenched in New England. As Winship contended, when eighteenth-century New Englanders read "in imported popular radical Whig works like *Cato's Letters*" about "the corrupting dangers of unlimited power, the necessity to keep magistrates within bounds to preserve the people's liberties, and the perfidious nature of Roman Catholic tyranny," they were not so much "being introduced to a new Atlantic republican tradition" as being "reminded of what their radical puritan ancestors had already known."[39]

[38]J. C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 24, 219, 364, 250, 238; Kidd, *The Protestant Interest,* p. 18.

[39]Winship, *Godly Republicanism,* p. 248.

Given the longevity of such concerns, Wise's ideas emerge, therefore, as more traditionalist, sometimes even as more reactionary, than scholars have often suggested, especially when they have argued from a proleptic conception of eighteenth-century theological and philosophical development that culminated in Enlightenment, revolution, and religious liberalism. Yet because Wise was also an innovative apologist, eclectic in his interests and eager to deploy all the discursive resources at his disposal, it is equally misleading to label him a "colonial conservative." As he sought to uphold the structures of pristine Congregationalism, Wise employed religious and political discourses as diverse as those of traditional biblicism and German political philosophy, Puritanism and seventeenth-century Whiggery, British constitutionalism and anti-Catholicism. As such, his writings reflect the influence of what Alan Gibson has described in the context of late eighteenth-century American political thought as "multiple traditions," on which Wise drew "to address . . . concrete problems" with proposed changes to New England church polity.[40]

Notwithstanding his early acts of civil rebellion, Wise was also an obedient servant of the establishment that he sought to preserve. On 28 September 1687, just days before he was tried for "Contempt, & high misdemeanor," Wise signed his name as coauthor of a "humble Petition of the Selectmen and other of the Inhabitants of the Town of Ipswich." In it, he begged for clemency and declared his submission to the governing authorities, but the terms of his apology, far from representing an uncharacteristic or politic lapse in democratic zeal, as some have proposed, were entirely in keeping with what Wise wrote thirty years later on the general topic of civil rebellion. "It is our great sorrow," he wrote with his colleagues:

> That for want of due consideration and prudent conduct wee have by any of our inadvertent and rash actions unhappily precipitated and involved our Selves in so great inconvenience and mischiefe as justly to fall under your Exce[llency's] displeasure, and give any occasion to be represented as disloyal or in the least disaffected unto his Majesties Government . . . unto which we do and shall yield our willing Subjection and dutyfull Observance, and upon

[40]Alan Gibson, *Understanding the Founding: The Crucial Questions,* 2nd ed. (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2010), p. 163. Wise's rhetoric also echoes that of similar, ecumenically minded contemporaries identified by Kidd and John Corrigan, who sought to defend New England's "Protestant interest" against the threat of Catholic incursions in the aftermath of the Glorious Revolution and the significant political changes that followed. See Kidd, *The Protestant Interest*, pp. 12–28; and Corrigan, *The Prism of Piety,* p. 7.

all occasions give such demonstration and Testimony of our Allegiance and duty to our Sovereign as may bespeake us good and Loyal Subjects.[41]

"In General concerning Rebellion against Government," he subsequently wrote in *A Vindication:*

for Particular Subjects to break in upon Regular Communities duly Established, is from the premises to Violate the Law of Nature; and is a high Usurpation upon the first grand Immunities of Mankind. Such Rebels in States, and Usurpers in Churches affront the World, with a presumption that the Best of the Brotherhood are a Company of Fools, and that themselves have fairly Monopolized all the Reason of Humane Nature. Yea, they take upon them the Boldness to assume a Prerogative of trampling under foot the natural original Equality & Liberty of their Fellows.

Seen through the lens of these two declarations, and of his work as a whole, Wise emerges as the creative traditionalist that he was—one who found the best protections of traditional rights and freedoms in the rule of law and of established constitutional structures and who brought all his rhetorical ingenuity to bear on their defense.[42]

[41]John Wise et al. to Edmund Andros, 28 September 1687, *Mass. Archives,* 127:147.
[42]Wise, *A Vindication,* p. 52.

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