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Religion and Authority: Problems of the Anglican Establishment in Virginia in the Era of the Great Awakening and the Parsons’ Cause

Rhys Isaac*

“T
HIS Government has hitherto enjoined the singular Happiness, that all the Subjects here agree in Uniformity of Worship, according to the Doctrine of the Church of England, which is here by Law established: And we have among us no Conventicles, or Meetings.” George Webb, writing in 1736, was understandably complacent. Not only was he able to pass swiftly over the troublesome area of English laws governing diversity in religion, but also he could take pride in the single, simple system of community and authority which prevailed in the old Virginia whose laws he was reducing to rule of thumb. It would be misleading to refer to the colonial Virginia pattern as a union of church and state, but it is important to emphasize that legal and social authority coincided closely with, and were, at the local level, intimately related to, the Church. Vestrymen were officeholders with civil functions, and civil magistrates, such as the justices and the burgesses, were usually vestrymen. The community and the congregation were one; church attendance was still compulsory, and grand jury

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1 George Webb, The Office and Authority of a Justice of the Peace . . . (Williamsburg, Va., 1736), 133.
presentments for repeated absence were not unusual. Surviving evidence suggests strongly that in the period when Webb wrote, religion and the Church were not a particular source of anxiety in Virginia. Difficulties which arose could be handled in a relaxed ad hoc fashion without giving rise to conflict over fundamental principles. In 1735 Gov. William Gooch could write excusing an errant clergyman who, "living in the Northern Neck where drinking and boxing is too much in fashion has been tempted to quarrel."

Gooch's letter is dated by its lack of any sense of crisis. Soon it was to become impossible to treat as commonplace cases of human weakness the misdemeanors of Church of England clergymen. Within twenty years all had changed: ominous cracks appeared in the structure; religious unity had been breached; and there was discord in the Anglican Establishment itself. Conflict in the Church culminated in the notorious Parsons' Cause, in the course of which representatives of the clergy attempted to have a settlement in their favor imposed on the colonial government by the home authorities.

The imperial-constitutional aspects of the Parsons' Cause have been extensively discussed, and the Virginia Great Awakening has been interpreted by its historians both as a spiritual revival and as the first stage in a continuing movement toward democracy and religious liberty. In focusing this study on the problems of the Church of England

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2 No systematic quantification of presentments in the county courts has been undertaken. A check of the records of Caroline County for the 1740s failed to bear out the statement in David John Mays, Edmund Pendleton, 1721-1803, A Biography, I (Cambridge, Mass., 1952), 36, that presentments for nonattendance at church formed the bulk of the work of grand juries. Such presentments were clearly routine, but they were outnumbered 9 to 47 in the extant records 1740-1749 by charges of neglect against road surveyors, and stood on a par with charges of bastardy and profanity. See Caroline County Order Books, 1732-1740, 1740-1745, 1745-1754, Virginia State Library, Richmond.


4 See Bernard Bailyn, ed., Pamphlets of the American Revolution, 1750-1776, I (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 293-300, for a recent illuminating discussion of this aspect along with a review of its historiography.

5 See William Henry Foote, Sketches of Virginia, Historical and Biographical, 1st Ser. (Philadelphia, 1850); Henry R. McIlwaine, The Struggle of Protestant Dissenters for Religious Toleration in Virginia, Johns Hopkins University Studies in Historical and Political Science, IV (Baltimore, 1894); and esp. Wesley M. Gewehr,
in Virginia and emphasizing its importance as an integral part of the traditional social system, I have been led to search clerical and ant clerical polemics for indications of internal tensions, to view the Great Awakening as a stirring of social unrest, and to try to understand the feelings of those who watched the rise of dissent with alarm and distaste. This approach should be seen as complementary to earlier ones, for I do not deny that the Parsons' Cause did give rise to important constitutional formulations or that the Great Awakening was a popular spiritual movement. Indeed, the dramatic significance of the constitutional issues was undoubtedly amplified by uncertainties surrounding the Church, while both the popular and the revivalist character of the Awakening were highlighted by the hostility toward it exhibited by elitist upholders of the Established Church.

An account of the problems of the Church in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia must begin with an examination of the values and social structure of the Establishment, but its ultimate concern is to trace the subtle connections between the intensified conflict of the Parsons' Cause disputes and the beginnings of a general crisis of authority within colonial society. The problems of the Church were intimately related to those of the Virginia gentry because the most dramatic manifestation of social change in the colony in the period 1740 to 1760 took the form of a movement of planters out of the Church of England into newly formed dissenting congregations. The parish community at the base of the traditional social order was beginning to fracture.

The Parsons' Cause has been seen as a manifestation of antiestablishment feeling, a view which arises from the identification of the Angli-

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6 George MacLaren Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church and the Political Conditions Under Which It Grew*, 2 vols. (Richmond, 1947, 1952), is very valuable for its learning and insights, but Brydon's concern to defend the Church from the harsh judgments of dissenters has hampered him in the work of historical reconstruction. The tendency to dismiss, as devoid of understanding, those clergymen who tried to make the Church in Virginia conform to their idealized image of the Church of England indicates an anachronistic failure to appreciate the dilemmas of a colonial situation.

7 Gordon S. Wood, "Rhetoric and Reality in the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XXIII (1966), 3-32, provides one of the historiographical points of departure for this study.
can clergy as the Anglican Establishment in Virginia.\footnote{For an example of the clergy identified as Establishment, see Gewehr, \textit{Great Awakening}, 99.} This is to misunderstand the situation. Examination of the functioning of the Church in the mid-eighteenth century and of the contests that preceded the Parsons’ Cause disputes makes it clear that the essence of the Establishment was the vestry. This was a powerful and jealously guarded institution which served as an immediate embodiment of social authority, both secular and religious. The clergy, by contrast, had no tradition of corporate existence and were struggling to consolidate that measure of legal security which they had gained by act of the legislature in 1749.\footnote{William Waller Hening, ed., \textit{The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of All the Laws of Virginia . . .} (Richmond, 1809-1823), VI, 90.} The Parsons’ Cause dispute therefore occurred against a background of rivalry between the clergy and the vestries.

Anticlericalism is an endemic disease of established churches: it was of long standing in Virginia, where it was sharpened by certain abrasive features. In the first place, there was felt to be a lack of colonial-born clergymen. The fact that many of the incumbents were from Britain and that frequently they were Scots was resented. Secondly, the candidates for the clergy seemed to be largely drawn from social levels inferior to that required for the smooth functioning of the Anglican Church as conceived and organized in the eighteenth century.\footnote{I have been unable to undertake a quantified analysis of the origins of the colonial clergy. This would, in any case, have to be presented as a separate study. The argument in this article is necessarily concerned with the “image” of the clergy held by contending parties in controversy. The assertion made here constitutes one of the few points of real consensus in the divisive debates.} The bishop of London summed up the problems arising from these circumstances in a letter dated May 11, 1751: “The people of the Country are discouraged from bringing up their Children for the Ministry. . . . Of those who are sent from hence, a great part are of the Scotch and Irish, who can get no employment at home and enter into the service more out of necessity than choice. Some others are willing to go abroad to retrieve either lost fortunes or lost Characters.”\footnote{Bishop of London to Rev. Philip Doddridge, May 11, 1751, in William Stevens Perry, ed., \textit{Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church}. Vol. I: \textit{Virginia} (Hartford, 1870), 373.} A contemporary Virginian was even more
blunt when he referred to "the Trade of Pedlar's turning into Priest."\textsuperscript{12} A Virginia-born clergyman wrote that "the gentlemen of the Country shew on all occasions, that they think the provision here for the clergy, . . . too small an Encouragement for them to breed any of their own Sons to the Church."\textsuperscript{13}

The negative image and comparatively low status of the parsons gave rise to serious difficulties, for this was not a highly institutionalized society but one in which authority flowed from social standing rather than from officeholding per se. Hence the clergy, though theoretically an important part of the provincial social organization, had very little influence. "A beggarly Clergy," wrote one minister, "have been the Contempt and Derision of Mankind."\textsuperscript{14}

The temper of the gentry in Virginia was not such as to leave an area of authority unoccupied. The clergy's lack of rank and influence made for client status. Clerical correspondence makes it clear that the urge to dominate was strong among the leading gentry, or "grandees," as one victim called them.\textsuperscript{15} The Virginia Church did not provide many forms of patronage by means of which the clergy might have been manipulated, yet leaders among the laity were unable and unwilling to accord parsons and clerical professors the rank, authority, and independence which the forms of Virginia institutions, based on English models, required for them. The consequences of this denial were in turn considerable, for independence was a supreme social value in this slave-based society. Men not wholly their own masters were inevitably degraded.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{12} Harry Wood to Benjamin Waller, Dec. 4, 1753, Waller Collection, 1737-1759, Colonial Williamsburg Foundation.
\textsuperscript{13} William Robinson to the bishop of London [1761?], Fulham Papers, 13, 117.
\textsuperscript{16} The dominant importance of slavery in mid-18th-century Virginia society not only served to reinforce the significance of personal independence as an attribute of rank, but also created grave dilemmas for Christian ministers in the colony. Society did not impose on the masters the duty of instructing their slaves in Christianity. The initiative undertaken in this matter by some parsons, backed by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, gave rise to resentments which must have contributed to endemic anticlericalism. I have found no evidence, however, which suggests a direct relationship between this source
A dispute which arose in the 1740s served both to focus attention on the problem of clerical independence and to prepare the stage for future conflicts. In April 1747 the Reverend William Kay brought an action before the General Court in an attempt to save himself from being turned out of Lunenburg Parish, Richmond County, where he had been minister for some years. The evicted parson’s account of his difficulties is eloquent concerning the attitudes involved:

I found to my sorrow, that I had one wealthy, Great, powerful Colonel named Landon Carter, a leading Man in my Vestry, whom I could not reasonably please or oblige ... I soon perceived that he wanted to extort more mean, low, and humble obedience, than I thought consistent with the office of a Clergyman, all his houts and insults I little noticed, until he publicly declared that I preached against him (which I did not), cursed and attempted to beat me, saying my Sermon was aimed at him, because I preached against pride. I replied that I was glad he applied it, for it was against every one that was proud. After this he was my implacable Enemy and swore Revenge, that if he ever got a majority in Vestry against me, he would turn me out of the parish and said he would do it, and not be accountable to the King, Bishop, Government or any Court of Judicature, and vowed he would clip the wings of the whole clergy, in this Colony.17

When the colonel was able to secure a majority in the vestry (“most of those,” according to Mr. Kay, “his kindred relations, or such as were subject unto him”), an order was signed to discharge the parson and to “lock up the doors and Nail up the pulpits, Reading desks and windows of both Churches.” The rector’s glebe was turned over to lay tenants who made depredations on his livestock.18 Significantly, it was these tenants, and not the gentlemen of the vestry, whom the injured parson determined to challenge for his rights. The case was a protracted one, as the General Court had difficulty in deciding whether a minister received into a parish, but not inducted, had such security of tenure as

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17 William Kay to the bishop of London, June 14, 1752, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 389.
18 Ibid., 389-390.
would enable the court to set aside a lease of his glebe made by the vestry. A decision was eventually reached in the clergymen's favor and £30 damages were awarded Kay on April 21, 1749, but the parson's rights were once again jeopardized by the arbitrariness of the influential squire. Although there was a standing rule against appeals to the Privy Council in cases involving less than three hundred pounds, Landon Carter was able to secure permission from London for an appeal. Secretary Thomas Nelson tried to dissuade him from proceeding, but the obstinate colonel noted in his diary: "I told him neither should I be Scared out of my right. I claimed it as a Subject of Great Britain. It was an order of the King in Council to an inferior Court."

Nevertheless, the proud vestryman lost his appeal in May 1753. The General Court decided in October of the same year to award the parson two hundred pounds for arrears of salary. Meanwhile sympathizers had helped Kay to secure a new parish and so end the dispute. However, there had already been repercussions extending wider than Lunenburg Parish.

While the Kay case remained sub judice, the Assembly was induced by a reaction against Landon Carter's high-handedness to introduce an important amendment into the revised law "for the better Support of the Clergy." By the amended law, enacted in 1749, the clergy were given security of tenure from the time that they were received into a parish whether or not they were formally inducted by the governor. The clergy came to look on this law as their guarantee of independence.

Another important consequence of the Lunenburg Parish affair was the mood it engendered in the clergy. "Your's I take to be a common case," declared a minister. "Every Clergyman in the Colony is affected by the arbitrary illegal proceedings of your Vestry." The commissary opened a subscription for a defense fund in support of the dispossessed rector.

19 Fulham Papers, 14, 52.
21 Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 409-410; Fulham Papers, 14, 6, 30; 15, 139.
23 Charles Rose to Kay, Mar. 29, 1748, Fulham Papers, 15, 230. See also ibid., 15, 140; and Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 388.
and it is evident that numbers among the clergy did indeed see their own experience writ large in Kay's misfortunes. For a time a combative corporate spirit prevailed. "Many worthy men," wrote Commissary Thomas Dawson to his bishop, "are of opinion with me that more frequent conventions, would tend much to the good of our Church, . . . as . . . all in general . . . would from charges and Sermons upon these occasions be made acquainted with the dignity and the duties of their Sacred office." Coupled with such increased clerical self-assertion was an insistent demand for independence. "But what," asked the Reverend John Camm, "would be the condition of the Church of England in Virginia . . . when the preacher would be in danger of losing his bread, every time he had the courage and resolution to preach against any vices taken into favour by the leading Men of his Parish?" Another viewed with horror the prospect that the clergy might "by giving up a legal establishment . . . become dependants upon them [the laity] or rather mere servants to the House of Burgessess to be ranked with their doorkeepers for bread." The gentry's anticlericalism was encouraging the growth of a colonial clericalism whose principal tenet was that the clergy must enjoy a secure salary sufficient to give them that rank without which they could not have the social authority necessary for them to raise Virginia from immorality and semibarbarity.

The most extreme expressions of antagonism between lay and clerical churchmen belong to the years of the Parsons' Cause disputes, although the apogee of clerical corporatist ambitions had come earlier. A convention of the clergy which met on October 31, 1754, successfully challenged the highest authorities in the colony. The Council some time before had struck the name of the Reverend John Moncure off the Commission of the Peace for Stafford County, asserting "that every Clergyman has enough to do, to discharge his Duty as a Minister without engaging himself in Civil Affairs." This ruling implicitly denied the status of lei-

24 Mar. 11, 1754, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 409-410. At this time the commissary was discussing with the bishop schemes to curb the power of the vestries in the appointment of parsons. Ibid., 406.
25 John Camm to the bishop of London, June 4, 1752; W. Robinson to the bishop of London [1763], ibid., 388, 486.
26 Wilmer L. Hall, ed., Executive Journals of the Council of Colonial Virginia, V (Richmond, 1945), 499. The clergy played a leading role on the bench in England at this time. See Sidney and Beatrice Webb, English Local Government
sured gentlemen to the clergy, assimilating them to the category of employees. They now protested to the governor that “this Order reflects upon our Body, and has been so construed by many of the Laity.” Evidently gentlemen had been heard at courthouses and ordinaries to express satisfaction that the damned parsons would no longer be of the commission. Attendance at the convention was a further indication of a new spirit among the ministers; forty-six out of a possible seventy-three were present, and a further fifteen excused themselves, so that only twelve—a mere 16 percent—were silent and gave no evidence of a sense of obligation toward their order.  

Soon after, in 1755, members of the clergy were pressing for higher salaries. A strong sermon was preached before the governor and Council in the spring of 1755 which caused some hearers to walk out. The preacher, the Reverend James Scott, considered publication of this sermon. “If... what I have said of the Clergy may provoke any of the Laity to consider our circumstances... I shall submit it to... this carping generation... If they honour us so far as to read a sermon we shall discover the sentiments of the Assembly concerning our Salaries.”

The sentiments of the House of Burgesses were soon clear. When on May 15 Peyton Randolph, then burgess for the College of William and Mary, presented the petition of members of the clergy asking for an increase in salaries, the Burgesses flatly rejected it. The report in Landon Carter’s diary suggests the tone of the proceedings: “Waller, who had experienced the arts that might and had been used before in favour of that body [the clergy], argued for an immediate Consideration and [moved for the petition] to be rejected.” Apparently anticlericalism was at least keeping pace with the more active assertion of the clergy’s claims.

Open conflict was brought on by the Twopenny Acts of 1755 and

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27 Fulham Papers, 14, 83.
28 James Scott to T. Dawson, Apr. 26, 1755, Dawson Papers, II, 166.
29 Greene, ed., Landon Carter Diary, I, 122. Carter thought the Council inclined to intrigue on behalf of the clergy. Ibid., 104. Perhaps a different attitude did prevail among the governor’s courtiers. Would any burgess have written Thomas Dawson as Philip Ludwell did, regretting that he had not had the “pleasure... to have had the Honour of Kissing your Hands here to Day”? Dawson Papers, II, 271.
1758, under which provision was made for the sixteen thousand pounds of tobacco paid to the ministers annually according to the law of 1749 to be temporarily commuted into money payment at the fixed rate of twopence per pound.\(^{30}\) Since the price of tobacco went higher than twopence per pound in the period covered by these acts, they served formally to abridge the parsons' livings and seemed to an alarmed clergy to threaten the security of their order. A fierce quarrel ensued.\(^{31}\) Although the acts were of wide application and affected tobacco payments generally, there are indications that there was a particular animus against the clergy. In 1758, George Wythe, then burgess for the college, got little support when he urged that the clergy's salaries be exempted from commutation.\(^{32}\) John Camm reports that when the House was debating the rate of commutation, "several of the Members publicly threaten'd, that if the Clergy would not be content with Two pence a Pound, they should very soon be compell'd to take a penny a Pound."

The extent to which the antagonism was mutual was revealed by the utterances of the Reverend Jacob Rowe. On September 22, 1758, he was compelled to apologize for having asked, in company, how many of the burgesses were to be hanged, as well as for declaring that he would deny the sacraments to any that voted in favor of the Twopenny Act.\(^{34}\)

The first act caused the intransigents among the clergy to declare themselves by attempts to hold meetings and adopt a petition for disallowance of the act. Commissary Thomas Dawson declined to call a convention, but his correspondence with the bishop of London showed that he bitterly resented the act.\(^{35}\) The clergy's sense of insecurity was again in evidence: "Our being deprived of the benefit of this rising market, will still keep us in debt and so in a dependant State, a thing much aimed at

\(^{30}\) Hening, ed., Statutes, VI, 568-569; VII, 240.
\(^{32}\) Landon Carter, A Letter to the Right Reverend Father in God the Lord B—p of L—n . . . [Williamsburg, Va., 1759], 43.
\(^{33}\) John Camm, A Single and Distinct View of the Act, Vulgarly entitled, the Two-Penny Act . . . (Annapolis, 1763), 31.
\(^{34}\) McIlwaine and Kennedy, eds., Journals of Burgesses, 1758-1761, 18-22.
\(^{35}\) Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 447.
by the great men of this Country."\textsuperscript{86} However, the rate at which tobacco sold in 1755-1756 did not greatly exceed the twopence per pound fixed on for the remuneration of the clergy, and it proved impossible to maintain a movement for redress of grievance.\textsuperscript{87} No doubt the majority of the clergy were inclined to accept the loss imposed by a temporary emergency measure. The Reverend James Maury wrote his uncle that "each individual must expect to share in the misfortunes of the community to which he belongs."\textsuperscript{88} This initial moderation is significant when contrasted with the extreme view Maury soon adopted.

In the years between the Twopenny Acts of 1755 and 1758, a number of clashes exacerbated antagonism between clericalists and the lay authorities. In April 1757 Gov. Robert Dinwiddie received a complaint against the Reverend John Brunskill of Hamilton Parish, King William County, for "monstrous immoralities." English law placed such matters firmly under episcopal jurisdiction; Virginia law was uncertain on this head. The Council, consulted by Governor Dinwiddie, determined, despite the commissary's counterproposals, to try the case. On May 19 Brunskill was compelled to appear. Testimony brought to light "so many indecencies" that modesty prevented the governor from troubling the bishop of London with the details of them in his report on the case. He informed his lordship, however, that by the advice of the Council he had deprived the offender of his living and forbidden him to officiate in the colony.\textsuperscript{89} John Camm and William Robinson raised a protest and even arranged for the deprived minister to officiate in their churches in order to show their rejection of the governor's claim to ecclesiastical jurisdiction. For these acts of protest they were "recommended ... [by Governor Dinwiddie] to the Correction of the Grand Jury."\textsuperscript{40} The Brunskill case revealed the central issue as it appeared to the leading clericalists. Personal gain was not involved, nor is it to be supposed that Camm and Robinson readily condoned immorality. It is evident, therefore, that

\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 444.
\textsuperscript{87} W. Robinson to the bishop of London, Aug. 12, 1765, Fulham Papers, 15, 132.
\textsuperscript{89} Gov. Dinwiddie to the bishop of London, Sept. 12, 1757, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 455.
\textsuperscript{40} Carter, Letter, 38, quoted in Camm, A Single and Distinct View, 42.
they considered clerical independence, without which genteel rank could not be secured, of overriding importance for the well-being of the Church. The social background of the clericalists is also an indication that the growing disputes were not principally about money, for of the five most active champions of the clerical cause at the beginning of the Twopenny Act disputes, three—Robinson, Maury, and Scott—were Virginia-born gentlemen of good families.41

The Brunskill affair was still simmering when a row developed in the college during 1757 which brought anticlericalism strongly to the fore. First the Visitors put the Reverend Thomas Robinson, who had been master of the Grammar School for fifteen years, on six months' notice of dismissal. They informed the bishop of London that Robinson's ill health had led them to the decision, but at the same time they made it known that they would prefer a layman as a replacement.42 Robinson also wrote to the bishop. His letter expressed a deep conviction that he had been the victim of prejudice. He reported that the opinion generally prevalent in the college was that the real cause of his dismissal was a sharp rebuke administered by him to the usher in the Grammar School, "who by the by has some Sort of Connection with a few of these great Men." The usher, he maintained, should have been dismissed rather than reproved, "but thro' the Timidity of the President [Commissary Thomas Dawson] ... it was ... carry'd, that he should be continued." Robinson also discussed the type of replacement that the Visitors sought: "I cannot conceive, what makes 'em so very desirous of having a Layman; except it be, that they may have him more under their Thumbs, and make him as supple as a Slave."43

Soon afterwards the same usher was "turned out, and another put in his Place." The Visitors resolved on November 1, 1757, to inquire into the affair. Three professors refused to answer questions, claiming that the statutes secured to the president and masters the independent

41 Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 504-505; Maury, trans. and comp., Memoirs, passim; James Blair to the bishop of London, Sept. 17, 1741, Fulham Papers, 15, 212.
42 Minutes of the Visitors and Governors of the College of William and Mary, in Herbert L. Ganter, comp., "Documents Relating to the Early History of the College of William and Mary and to the History of the Church in Virginia," WMQ, 2d Ser., XX (1940), 537.
43 Thomas Robinson to the bishop of London, June 30, 1757, ibid., 540, 539.
regulation of such matters. The president had already yielded to the demands of the Visitors; the defiant professors were dismissed on November 11.44

John Camm, one of those removed, was Professor of Divinity. The Reverend William Robinson, a Visitor of the college, reported on the deliberations which followed: “When ... it became proper ... to think of a successor in his Place; one of the Visitors observ’d that there was no occasion for a Divinity Master. This was acquiesced in. ... To make this part of their conduct the more gross, they desire that all the other professors may be Laymen."45

Ten years earlier, in 1746, the Council had described the college as “the Source from whence so much real Happiness hath been derived to the People of this Colony,” and referred complacently to its “present good Order, Decency, and Discipline.”46 In the 1750s it became, and continued to be in the 1760s, a strife-ridden institution. The causes of the breakdown of order in the college were many and complex, but the lengthy correspondence of all parties surviving in the Fulham Palace papers leaves no room for doubt that this struggle between Visitors and professors, like that between vestries and ministers, centered on clerical pretensions to independence.47 The college was a key institution in the training of the Virginia colonial elite; thus it can be concluded that anticlericalism, through its abrasive part in the malfunctioning of the college, was contributing to a general anxiety about the future of the rising generation and unease concerning the state of order and authority in the community.48

Clashes between clericalists and laity were aggravated at this time

44 Minutes of Visitors and Governors, ibid., 541.
45 W. Robinson to the bishop of London [1761?], Fulham Papers, 13, 117.
46 “To the Honourable William Gooch ... The Humble Address of the Council,” Feb. 1745, C.O. 5/1326/182, Public Record Office. As early as Mar. 14, 1758, Gov. Dinwiddie was writing Thomas Dawson concerning the changes of personnel, and hoping that “this thorou change will retrieve the Character of the College, and engage the Gentlemen to Send their Children to it asformerly.” Dawson Papers, II, 201.
47 See Robert Polk Thomson, “The Reform of the College of William and Mary, 1763-1780,” American Philosophical Society, Proceedings, CXV (1971), 187-213, for a valuable narrative and discussion of the disputes. It is principally in my emphasis on the links between independence, rank, and authority in the context of Virginia social values that I differ from Mr. Thomson.
and made more disorderly by the fact that Thomas Dawson, commissary from 1752 to 1759, was a weak figure, "remarkable, poor man, for nothing more than compliances." Dawson's correspondence clearly showed that he felt the clergy's rights were being invaded, but he was unwilling to make a stand against the secular authorities. He was therefore unable to restrain the clericalist intransigents who resented, but he denied their actions the dignity of official protest.

Thomas Dawson's ineffectualness was further exposed when another Twopenny Act was passed in 1758. A second act so soon after the first created a strong sense of outrage among numbers of the clergy, for it now seemed that the Assembly might intervene frequently to relieve the taxpayers at the ministers' expense. There was protest at the way "the Assembly . . . made a large stride towards making our Salary entirely arbitrary." An unofficial convention, mustering some thirty-five parsons (about half of the clergy of the colony), assembled within weeks of the passage of the act and empowered the Reverend John Camm to serve as the clergy's agent in England in an appeal for its disallowance.

The appeal to London cast the clergy in the role of treacherous enemies of the colony. Their "representation," which became public in time, was harsh in its strictures against the Virginia authorities. The bishop of London proceeded to mix the charges contained in this with the gall which had accumulated in his archives over some years. He drew for the Board of Trade his own conclusion that the Virginia Assembly's policy toward the Established Church challenged the royal supremacy and must be regarded as nothing short of treason.

The House of Burgesses had meanwhile taken action to safeguard its interests. In February 1759 a long-desired act was passed providing for an agent in London responsible to a committee of correspondence in Virginia on which the Burgesses had a two-to-one majority. This committee was inactive until November 1759 when the attendance of

49 W. Robinson to the bishop of London, Aug. 12, 1765, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 517.
50 Willie to T. Dawson, July 25, 1758, Dawson Papers, II, 207.
51 W. Robinson to bishop of [?], Nov. 20, 1760, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 466. A survey of the clergy made in 1755 showed 70 rectors for 74 parishes. Fulham Papers, 14, 83.
53 Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 461-463.
54 Hening, ed., Statutes, VII, 276.
those doughty anticlericals, Richard Bland and Landon Carter, was recorded for the first time. Since it was by then too late to avert disallowance of the Twopenny Act, a letter empowering the agent to arrange for the defense of the vestries in any lawsuit at public expense was drafted for Assembly approval. The document, which reveals the strength of the hostility which assemblymen now felt, dismissed the clergy's protest as "but a thin Varnish," and complained that it "leaves too much Room to suspect...that they themselves rather wanted an Opportunity of feasting as largely as they could on all, both rich and poor....We cannot but think that the Act complained of, is but the studied Occasion of Contention to effect some other Purpose, still latent." 55 Each side in fact became convinced that the other was in conspiracy against it and that fundamental rights were at stake. William Robinson reflected this view on the clerical side when he declared that the Assembly had a "Design thro' the whole to oppress the Clergy," 56 and James Maury later vaunted the clergy's "Impatience of Oppression" and their "laudable Attempt to preserve and Secure...whatever can or ought to be dearest to an English Subject." 57

Landon Carter's cantankerous anticlericalism was utterly outraged by the clergy's appeal against the sacrosanct authority of the General Assembly, and yet more so by the charges of scheming disloyalty which the bishop of London had made against Virginia. In his published Letter to the Right Reverend Father in God he replied in kind. The fact that the dispute appeared to be over salaries enabled him to employ to great effect that stock-in-trade of anticlericalism, the contrasting images of apostolic poverty and a worldly, rapacious clergy. 58 He further drew on the stereotypes of English Puritanism and the Protestant Reformation itself by insinuating that the bishop was seeking a return to "Times,...in which Priesthood and Cruelty were the two inseparable Enemies of British Liberty." 59 On the fundamental issue of clerical independence, Carter

57 Maury to Blair, Oct. 25, 1764, Maury Letterbook.
59 Ibid., 14.
argued overtly a position which, it has been suggested, was implicit in much of the Virginia gentry's conduct toward the clergy. He admitted "that it was usual for Ecclesiastical Courts at Home to take Cognizance of the Misconduct of the Clergy," but he argued in favor of the jurisdiction of the Governor's Council in Virginia. Under such a regime "Deprivation, though perhaps not according to the Forms of Law," could be readily accomplished. "Judges could not, from any Kind of functional Connection, willingly resolve Acts of Lewdness and Debauchery into Flights of innocent Gallantry."

Richard Bland showed greater discretion in declining to attack the venerable Thomas Sherlock, bishop of London, further than to regret that he should have been imposed on by "the Crafty and Malevolent" (i.e., the clergy) so far as to present their "Memorial" as his own view of the case. In Bland's pamphlet the clergy were exhibited as priestly intriguers who "like Romish Inquisitors . . . carry on their insidious Practices in the Dark," and as grasping men who were prepared "to gain a small pecuniary Advantage, at the Expence of their Veracity." The pamphlet also contains a masterly summary of Virginia statute law governing the church establishment. Significantly, however, when Bland turned to explore common law rights pertaining to presentation and advowsons as applicable in Virginia, he made extreme claims for the vestries, "as Builders and Endowers of all the Churches within their Parishes," which were never sustained even in colonial courts.

The problem of disputed authority found expression in the polemics of both Carter and Bland through a juxtaposition of indignant affirmations of Virginia's loyalty with assertions of the right of the General Assembly to determine cases of urgent necessity, even if this meant "they should deviate . . . perhaps, in a small Degree, from the fixed Rule of the Constitution." Strictly constitutional arguments in favor of the Assembly's rights were at this stage overshadowed by ant clerical invective and a casuistical presentation of the Twopenny Act as serving not to amend but to enforce the 1749 act for the maintenance of the clergy.

60 *Ibid.*, 18. For the difficulty the courts had in determining jurisdiction in such matters, see Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church*, II, 324-335.
The discord within the Virginia Church was kept alive after the initial polemics by a series of lawsuits in which some of the parsons sought to claim the amounts which they had lost under the now voided Twopenny Act. In the process the relations of the clerical and lay authorities were tested in the county courts where some awkwardness and confusion was displayed by the gentlemen justices. There were three actions: Alexander White's case in King William County (August 1762); Thomas Warrington's in Elizabeth City County (January and March 1763); and James Maury's in Hanover County (November and December 1763).

Of White's case it is reported that "there were many fit and able persons . . . summoned [to serve on the jury] in this cause who refused to appear and suffered themselves to be fined, Others made excuses which were admitted, the Jury consisted at last of ordinary planters some of whom we found after had declared beforehand what they would do." The Reverend James Maury told how in his own case the sheriff, meeting with refusals from gentlemen, "went among the vulgar herd" and came up with a list of "people of whom I had never heard before." White lost his case after the bench had compelled the jury to decide. In Warrington's case the jury returned an open verdict and the bench determined the point of law against him. The Hanover County justices found the law to be in Maury's favor in November 1763, leaving damages to be assessed by a jury at the following session.

Uncertainty, ambiguity, and even a measure of deviousness characterized the way in which the gentry of the county courts handled the Parsons' Causes. The difficulties that confronted the judges were made clear by Patrick Henry's speech in Maury's case. The treason which Henry spoke has probably been exaggerated, both by Maury, who wished his letter to evoke the indignation which he himself felt, and by the mythmaking of patriots. Doubtless Henry urged no more than that if the king's annulments of salutary emergency measures were held to be

64 W. Robinson to the bishop of London [1763], in Perry, ed., *Historical Collections*, I, 481.
66 Perry, ed., *Historical Collections*, I, 481.
68 Maury to Camm, Dec. 12, 1763, Maury Letterbook.
retrospective, then the king "degenerates into a Tyrant, and forfeits all Right to his Subjects' Obedience." 69 This was bold enough for the times, and the effect was naturally reinforced by the declamation of harsh strictures against the colonial clergy. Thus Henry stood out from his fellow gentlemen by his willingness to lead a popular attack on religious authority as then established and sanctioned in Virginia. In a situation clouded by legal doubts his contribution was to blend rational and emotional conviction. The young lawyer was carried out of the court by a cheering crowd, and if he then replied to protests with a statement that he had told the people what they wanted to hear (which is more likely than the lame admission, reported by Maury, that he had sought "popularity"), he spoke no more than the truth. 70 Severe condemnation of the clergy had emotional appeal at all social levels in Virginia, but the uncertainty of the gentry suggests that its radicalism led to reservations concerning the public exploitation of such sentiments. The fact that the Hanover jury contained dissenters could only have intensified the disturbing aspect of this outburst of anticlericalism.

Doubts and hesitations at the upper levels soon became manifest with the long-delayed hearing of John Camm's suit against his parish collector before the General Court acting as a court of first instance. The councillor-judges found, five to four, against Camm, but two judges excused themselves. 71 The Privy Council subsequently rejected John Camm's appeal on December 3, 1766. 72 Warrington was refused leave to appeal in October 1768, yet soon after, at a convention of the clergy called to greet the new governor, Lord Botetourt, enough clericalist sentiment survived for Camm to prevail over the opposition of Com-


70 Maury to Camm, Dec. 12, 1763, Maury Letterbook. The version of this famous letter published in Maury, trans. and comp., Memoirs, 418-424, has evidently been bowdlerized. Omitted are Maury's references to Patrick Henry as "this little petty fogging Attorney," his likening of some of Virginia's leaders to "the most seditious Tribunes of old Rome," and his unserved enthusiasm for Camm's polemical exchanges with "Auster's taintive Gales" (Bland) and Landon Carter's "Shower of Stink-Pots."

71 W. Robinson to the bishop of London [1763], in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 495.

72 Joseph Henry Smith, Appeals to the Privy Council from the American Plantations (New York, 1959), 624.
missary James Horrocks and have a committee elected to explore the possibilities of further appeal. Only three meetings of the committee are recorded, and the commissary did not attend the last two sessions, which were held in the Williamsburg debtors' prison. There the actual dispute over the Twopenny Act seems appropriately to have ended.73

The Twopenny Act disputes gradually developed an important constitutional dimension, but this should not obscure the fact that hostility to the claims of the colonial clergy was the ruling passion in the first instance. Too little attention has been paid by historians to the phenomenon of anticlericalism as a manifestation of the breakdown of traditional religion-oriented systems of authority.74 It is essential to ask why in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia there was such a sudden growth from the persistent but controlled resentments against the clergy prevalent in the era of Governor Gooch and Commissary Blair to the extravagant and effective denunciations of Patrick Henry. The outline given above suggests the basic conditions of the conflict, which were the lack of genteel (and especially Virginian) candidates for the ministry and the status conflicts which this situation promoted between the squires and the parsons. But these conditions had prevailed for more than half a century and so cannot be advanced to explain the dramatic new development of disruptive conflict between lay and ecclesiastical authorities.

The tone of the invective against the clergy at the height of the furore—especially the tone of Landon Carter's pamphlets and of Henry's denunciation—suggests that the parsons were being used as scapegoats. It must be asked what ills and anxieties were charged to the clergy, and why they were singled out. Why were strongly orthodox churchmen so active in penning polemics against the clergy?

There were a variety of sources of disquiet in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia, but the most dramatic manifestations of change were apparent in the sphere of religion. The rise of dissent from the Church of England in

73 James Horrocks to the bishop of London, July 7, 1769, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, 1, 530-532.

74 For an example of misleading neglect, see George Rudé, The Crowd in the French Revolution (Oxford, 1959), 197, where anticlericalism is dismissed in a footnote, although, if the activities and utterances of the sans culottes are to be a test, this was a major preoccupation for them. I am indebted to Dr. F. B. Smith of the Australian National University for discussions concerning the significance of anticlericalism.
the 1740s represented a serious threat to Virginia’s traditional social system. The nature and extent of the disquiet produced by the Great Awakening in Virginia must be examined before the sudden intensification of anticlericalism can be made intelligible.

The first signs of the coming disturbance in traditionally Anglican parts of Virginia appeared in Hanover County about 1743 when numbers of ordinary people led by Samuel Morris, a “Bricklayer,”\textsuperscript{75} began reading religious tracts and absenting themselves from church. The group grew, was inspired by readings from George Whitefield’s sermons, and eventually reached such a size that it felt compelled to build a meetinghouse. Disaffection from the Church seems to have been general so that “when the Report of these Sermons and the Effects occasioned by reading them was spread Abroad [Samuel Morris] was invited to several Places . . . at a considerable Distance.”\textsuperscript{76} The movement took a new direction in the middle of 1743 when emissaries from Hanover persuaded the Reverend William Robinson, a New Side Presbyterian on mission among the Scotch-Irish in southwest Virginia, to come and preach. From then on the Hanover group identified themselves as Presbyterians and periodic visits from revivalist preachers were the occasion of mass meetings which created considerable commotion. At these gatherings the preachers reportedly had a way of “speaking pretty freely of the degeneracy of the clergy.” Their followers displayed similar disconcerting tendencies; one even suggested that the bishop of London might be “an unconverted man.”\textsuperscript{77}

The Hanover group, while it remained isolated, evidently had not excited much attention although members of it had been called upon to give an account of themselves and fines had been imposed for nonattendance at church. So uncertain were these dissenters of their own identity that when asked to declare to what denomination they belonged,

\textsuperscript{75} Motion in General Court, May 2, 1747, reprinted in Foote, \textit{Sketches of Virginia}, 1st Ser., 161. See also George William Pilcher, \textit{Samuel Davies, Apostle of Dissent in Colonial Virginia} (Knoxville, 1971), 27-34.

\textsuperscript{76} Samuel Davies, \textit{The State of Religion among the Protestant Dissenters in Virginia} . . . (Boston, 1751), 10-11. Luther’s “Comment upon the Galatians,” his “Table Discourses,” and “Sundry Pieces of honest Bunyan’s” were named by Davies as the tracts first used. Later a text of Whitefield’s, “Sermons preached in Glasgow, and taken from his Mouth in ShortHand,” came into use. \textit{Ibid.}, 9-10.

\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Ibid.}, 15; Rev. Patrick Henry, Sr., to William Dawson, Feb. 13, 1744/5, \textit{WMQ}, 2d Ser., I (1921), 263.
they had hesitated, as Samuel Morris later recalled, until "recollecting that Luther was a noted Reformer, and that his Doctrines were agreable to our Sentiments...we declared our selves Lutherans."78

When New Side preachers began attracting large crowds, the Reverend Patrick Henry, Sr., rector of St. Paul's Parish, Hanover County, called on authorities in Williamsburg for aid, denouncing itinerancy and the subversive doctrine "that a true Christian may know whether a Minister be converted or not by hearing him preach or pray."79 Commissary Dawson had already sought legal assistance. Benjamin Waller, clerk of the General Court, advised him in a letter of January 30, 1744/5, that "rigor should be used, not so much to reclaim a persone Enthusiastic...as to deter other unthinking Mortals, whose strongest Passion is often Fear." The gravest offense of which "those Simple Wretches" were guilty, "who vainly imagine they in their Folly have found a new Light," was the "depraving and despising [of] the Common Prayer." As itinerants they were liable to be "bound to their good Behaviour and treated as Vagabonds by a Justice of the Peace." Certainly, in order to benefit from the Act of Toleration they must seek licenses. Waller's letter, although it showed alarm at the appearance of the New Lights, was cautious concerning the possibilities of repression and concluded significantly by urging Dawson to put the Church's own house in order.80

Governor Gooch, acting at the request of the Council, was more resolute. He denounced to the grand jury in April 1745 "certain false teachers that are lately crept into this government."81 The grand jury charged one of the preachers, the Reverend John Roan, with speaking gross slanders against the Church, but the charge was not sustained. Dissenting laymen were, however, called to Williamsburg for trial and some were fined.82 The readiness of the grand jury to charge the dissenters with extravagant utterances is an indication of the manner in which alarm encouraged fantasy. The governor and Council remained determined to maintain strong action, issuing on April 3, 1747, a stiff proclamation calling for "all Itinerant Preachers" to be restrained.83

77 Davies, The State of Religion, 11.
78 Henry to W. Dawson, Feb. 13, 1744/5, WMO, 2d Ser., I (1921), 263.
79 Waller to W. Dawson, Jan. 30, 1744, Dawson Papers, I, 18-20.
80 The text is printed in Foote, Sketches of Virginia, 1st Ser., 135-137.
81 Ibid., 137, 161, 162, 165, 168.
82 Ibid., 137, 161, 162, 165, 168.
83 Hall, ed., Council Journals, V, 228.
Little of the *Virginia Gazette* survives to give fuller evidence concerning opinion in a wider circle of the gentry, but there is enough to show that alarm and indignation were being expressed. On October 31, 1745, approving reference was made to a letter published in February which exposed "our modern *New Light*, and the Propagators of it," and likened itinerants to "those who have turn'd the World upside down." 84 Samuel Davies complained in 1748 about satires in the newspaper against those who abandoned vicious living to become "New Lights." 85

In general, the surviving documents indicate the extent to which religious dissent was seen as a social revolt against authority. In the first place, the stereotype soon developed of the "New Light Man" as a self-seeking troublemaker out for what he could get. Thus one finds the president of the Council, Thomas Lee, writing to the Board of Trade telling how "one Davis a Presbyterian preacher came hither to get money and make Proselytes." 86 That he could write thus of the great divine, who had already appeared several times before the Council, is a striking instance of the strength of the prejudice. Davies himself was sufficiently conscious of the prevalence of this attitude to devote space to defending himself against it in a letter to the bishop of London in which he enumerated the personal sacrifices he had made in coming to Virginia. 87

The aspect of the dissenting preachers which the upholders of traditional order most deplored was their appearance as "itinerants." Encapsulated within this pejorative epithet was a whole view of authority and society. All members of the community were required to be under a spiritual guardian who needed proper authorization to exercise his function. Itinerancy was anathema because it negated these conditions. The preachers "who make it their Study to screw up the People to the greatest

84 "Nicholas Nameless," *Virginia Gazette* (Williamsburg, Va.), Oct. 24, 1745. The occasion for this anonymous outburst was the recent visit of George Whitefield to Virginia.

85 Samuel Davies, *The Impartial Trial, Impartially Tried, and Convicted of Partiality . . .* (Williamsburg, Va., 1748), 27-38. The year 1752 is the only one in the period for which more than an occasional issue of the *Virginia Gazette* survives. In the 1752 file two heartless satires on the New Lights may be found. See issues of Apr. 17 and May 22, 1752.


heights of religious Phrenzy, and then leave them in that wild state,"*88 removed persons from the old authorities without bringing them under a new one. More subversive yet were "Assemblies, especially of the common People, upon a pretended religious Account, convened sometimes by mere Lay Enthusiasts."*89 Governor Gooch took exception to "false teachers . . . who, without order or license, or producing any testimonial of their education or sect, . . . lead the innocent and ignorant people into all kinds of delusion."*90 The psychological importance of the license is thus revealed. Self-appointed teachers were regarded with abhorrence, while a commission from some recognized sect, or a degree from a college, would confer a measure of the proper authority which the function required. In February 1745 the Reverend Patrick Henry, contemplating the impending arrival in Hanover County of a new contingent of preachers, exclaimed, "I wish they could be prevented, or, at least be oblig'd to show their credentials."*91

Reactions were conditioned by considerations of social authority rather than religious doctrine as such. It would be hard to find clearer evidence of this than the very different attitudes which prevailed among the churchmen toward settled communities of foreign Protestants. Only a few months after his letter denouncing Samuel Davies, Thomas Lee wrote the Board of Trade advocating provisions to exempt German Protestants who might settle in the west from levies to support an Anglican minister.*92 In this spirit the formation of Lutheran and evangelical communities under their own framework of authority had occasioned no difficulty.*93 Sir William Gooch’s assurances of toleration to the Scotch-Irish Presbyterians in 1738 must be seen as part of the same policy.*94 The distinction between such readily accommodated autonomous and submissive religious societies and the spirit of the Great Awakening in the

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*88 Henry to W. Dawson, June 8, 1747, WMQ, 2d Ser., I (1921), 273.
*91 Henry to W. Dawson, Feb. 13, 1744/5, WMQ, 2d Ser., I (1921), 265-266.
*92 Lee to Commissioners for Trade and Plantations, Nov. 6, 1750, in Brydon, Virginia’s Mother Church, II, 134.
*93 Ibid., 88.
*94 Ibid., 74.
1740s was made even clearer by the behavior of the settled dissenting ministers who appealed to the governor when they found themselves challenged by New Light or Moravian preachers. A distinction between parishes settled by dissenters and those where they were a disruptive minority was formalized by the General Assembly in a law of 1759. The act provided that where dissenters were a majority of any vestry they might serve, but where they were a minority they should be unseated.

The advent of Samuel Davies as settled minister to the young congregation of Presbyterians in Hanover County hardly improved the situation. He was sent because the New York Synod recognized that the converts would be given no peace "till they were an organized Congregation, and had a Minister qualified, and their Meeting-Houses licens'd, according to Law." The regularization which the new minister did achieve in April 1747 by securing a license for himself and for four meetinghouses in Hanover and neighboring counties was soon offset by the alarm which his success as preacher aroused, "the Church-People in general being very eager to hear." After granting licenses for three additional meetinghouses in Goochland, Caroline, and Louisa counties, the Council evidently determined to check the progress of disaffection by curbing Davies's activities. A license for a meetinghouse granted by the New Kent County Court on April 12, 1759, was soon revoked by the General Court. It is noteworthy that the move toward greater restraint

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96 Hening, ed., *Statutes*, VII, 302-303. Landon Carter refers to this act as evidence that the Burgesses "did not in any Manner desire to countenance these Dissentions, to the Prejudice of the Church of England." *Letter*, 16.

97 For a contrary assumption, see Gewehr, *Great Awakening*, 75, 86-88; and Brydon, *Virginia's Mother Church*, II, 161. Davies's own reference in his diary (Jan. 22, 1754) to "my Mortifications in the General-Court in Virginia" should be contrasted with Gewehr's references to his forensic triumphs there. See George William Pilcher, ed., *The Reverend Samuel Davies Abroad: The Diary of a Journey to England and Scotland, 1753-55* (Urbana, 1967), 59. Pilcher's biographical study, *Samuel Davies, Apostle of Dissent*, came to hand after the completion of this article. It has not persuaded me to alter the interpretation of Davies's reception in Virginia advanced here.


should have come at a time when the provincial government, headed by Thomas Lee, president of the Council, was entirely in the hands of Virginians.

A long struggle ensued over the issue of licenses, during which it became clear that the Council was determined to hold the dissenters within bounds. President Lee informed the Board of Trade immediately after the refusal of the license that he thought that the liberty Davies sought to extend his preaching activities was "not within the words or intent of the Toleration [Act], and gives great uneasiness to the Clergy and the people." While the bishop of London supported the Council's endeavors, the Lords of Trade, never very sensitive to the needs of uneasy colonial ruling groups, gave cold comfort. They advised that "a free Exercise of Religion is so valuable a branch of true liberty, and so essential to the enriching and improving of a Trading Nation, it should ever be held sacred in His Majesty's Colonies." They urged the Council to do nothing "which can in the least affect that great point," although they might "admonish Mr. Davies to make a proper use of that indulgence which our Laws so wisely grant." The Council placed its own interpretation on these seemingly unambiguous instructions and continued to refuse new licenses to Samuel Davies pending further advice from England. In the meantime a statement was prepared by the Virginia attorney general, Peyton Randolph, which revealed the determination to retain restrictions.

Toleration was a shibboleth in the eighteenth-century Anglo-American world; it was unthinkable to question it in the open. Virginia traditionalists such as the attorney general, however, took the view that toleration implied only a respect for the status quo—a right to continue in the doctrine with which one had been nurtured. They did not consider that it included the right to disturb existing social arrangements by embracing new beliefs and propagating them. Peyton Randolph made this clear when he advised:

102 T. Dawson sent an extract of a letter from the Board of Trade to the bishop of London, Aug. 16, 1752, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 380.
There ought not to be more than one House licensed for one Preacher, for the people within the bounds of a country [sic] will sufficiently employ a preacher and it will give great Encouragement to fall off from the Established Church if they [the preachers] are permitted to range and raise contributions over the whole country. . . . Besides it tends to sow Dissension and Confusion among the People, and can only be calculated to put Money into the Pocket of the Teacher, whose Interest does not deserve so much Respect.\textsuperscript{104}

In 1752 anti-New Light feeling in Virginia government circles was strong enough for William Dawson to draw up a severely restrictive Toleration Bill, and for his brother to advise the bishop of London that while there was no hope of getting an act limiting the ecclesiastical patronage of vestries, there was a possibility of carrying measures to restrain itinerant preachers.\textsuperscript{105} The disappointment of Dawson's expectations is perhaps indicative of an aversion on the part of the Burgesses to solving the problems of the Church by repressive legislation. The readiness of the clergy to turn to lay authorities for this sort of assistance may well have contributed to the animosity of uneasy Anglican laymen.

Samuel Davies, being aware of the forces arrayed against him, moved cautiously, advised against fruitless petitioning, and even withdrew from precarious positions under threat. He too appealed overseas, calling on the dissenting deputies in London for help. They advised him that the Act of Toleration placed no restriction on the number of meetinghouses that could be licensed or on the movement of preachers from meetinghouse to meetinghouse, but in common with many in Virginia, they were uncertain as to whether the act was in force in the colony beyond the clauses enumerated in the Virginia law of 1699.\textsuperscript{106}

Prevailing uncertainty concerning the law must be emphasized in relation to the tensions of the 1750s, for continuing doubt contributed to the anxiety surrounding the rise of dissent. If the Act of Toleration were not in force in the colony, then the harsh Elizabethan statutes which it


was designed to mitigate must be. Since they were unenforceable, questions of acute public concern seemed to be effectively outside the law. The above quoted opinion of the attorney general, although given as legal advice, in fact consisted of policy recommendations turning on considerations of expediency. Here is another instance of the helplessness of colonial elites, threatened as a result of the uncertain outlines of their incomplete institutions. The Virginia law concerning toleration continued doubtful until resolved by the Declaration of Rights in 1776. Although official attempts to restrict the Presbyterians seem to have been abandoned after 1759, there was no formal ruling in their favor, and the Baptists had to face a yet more intense harassment in the following decades.

The House of Burgesses was largely inactive on the question of dissent in these years so that the attitudes of the leading county gentlemen are hard to ascertain, but it seems probable that the Burgesses, like the county courts, were more permissive than the Council. In a situation where harsh repression was unthinkable, and where the milder restraints imposed by the Council were proving ineffectual, a policy of inaction must have seemed no more than common sense to many burgesses. Yet the House was not unconcerned. In 1752 the two members returned for Hanover County were unseated because they had given bonds to voters not to divide their parish. It appears from Landon Carter’s account that it was not the bonds that were the principal source of offense, for “Mr. Waller argued that the bonds given to Church of England men would be of no consequence but to new Light men they were.” The House went on to order “that the said writing and Bond . . . given by the sitting members be immediately torn, and thrown under the table.” In the following year the House of Burgesses was pleased to vote their thanks to the Reverend William Stith and ordered a sermon he had preached before them printed. The House did not often give such an order, so it is notable that the sermon was directed against the New Lights and was a pointed statement of “rational” religion and social conservatism. It appeared as a direct rebuttal of propositions supposed to

107 The problems arising from an assumed but undefined correspondence between colonial and English institutions are given illuminating treatment in Bernard Bailyn, *The Origins of American Politics* (New York, 1968), 59-95.


be held by Samuel Davies concerning the small number of the elect destined for salvation. The explicit purpose of Stith's sermon was "to vindicate God's Ways to Man ... and to reconcile the Gospel to the Dictates of natural Justice" by showing that not only the virtuous pagans but also the ignorant poor who did their duty in their station would be saved.  

The legend of Samuel Davies has come to include the belief that his outspoken patriotism transformed attitudes toward Presbyterians during the French and Indian War.  

There is no positive evidence to support this view and, in view of the known prejudices of the Virginia gentry against "New Lights," it seems most improbable. The initial reverses of the war produced signs of a crisis of morale among Virginians with a loss of confidence in their own virtue and martial prowess (which they knew to be associated with virtue). Although colonial authorities issued public reproaches in an attempt to arouse a new spirit, it is hardly to be supposed that, coming from a dissenting minister, an excoriation of vice and irreligion fashionable among churchmen allayed prejudices any more than his assertions that these sins were the causes of divine wrath and of the prevailing impotence. When Peyton Randolph finally raised a company of gentlemen volunteers and marched them to the frontier in order to set an example to the common people, we may be sure that he was attempting to offset rather than to emulate the example of volunteer companies from Louisa and Hanover counties, whose Christian piety had been so pointedly contrasted by Presbyterian preachers with the short-

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111 McIlwaine, Struggle of Protestant Dissenters, 64; Gewehr, Great Awakening, 97-99.
112 Peter Fontaine to his brothers, Mar. 2, 1756, Maury Letterbook. See also Richard Bland's verse letter to Landon Carter, June 20, 1758, Miscellaneous Manuscripts, Morristown National Historical Park, N. J.
114 Samuel Davies, The Crisis; or the Uncertain Doom of Kingdoms . . . (London, 1753). The "Spirit of Security, Sloth, and Cowardice . . . in these Southern Colonies" is denounced and an unfavorable comparison is made with "the New England Provinces [where] a brave Spirit seems to prevail." (pp. 18, 12) See also the following by Davies: Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier . . . (Philadelphia, 1755); Virginia's Danger and Remedy . . . (Williamsburg, Va., 1756); and The Curse of Cowardice . . . (London, 1758).
115 See the 1755 letters of T. Dawson to the bishop of London, Dawson Papers, II, 180, 151.
comings of others. Samuel Davies was becoming a figure of some eminence in the Anglo-American world of dissenters, but since he was known for his perseverance under persecution and for his missionary work among the unconverted slaves, Davies's fame was Virginia's notoriety.

About the year 1757 the Presbyterians began to be active in the Northern Neck and again there were protests. On March 17, 1758, the Lancaster County Court was sufficiently alarmed to rescind a license for a meeting-house, given "unadvisedly and by surprize." Edwin Conway expressed very clearly the mood of outraged traditionalism: "I know of but two Freeholders in this County, Dissenters; and they both received the Holy Eucharist, in our Church, before Mr. Davies Preached here. I am the Oldest Freeholder in the County, and I never heard a Dissenter Preach." Colonel James Gordon, a Presbyterian Scot who probably was one of the freeholders referred to, noted in his diary on January 9, 1759, that Colonel Conway "has now fully dropped opposing the meeting house, which is mostly occasioned by a letter he lately received from Mr. Ben Waller, who advises that the Dissenters have power to . . . enjoy their religion by act of Toleration." Significantly, he went on to note that the Colonel now "complains very much of The Church of England for

116 Davies, Religion and Patriotism, 17; and John Todd's letter in the Va. Gaz., Sept. 19, 1755. An indication of hostile prejudice is given in a letter (by Samuel Davies?) in the Va. Gaz., Nov. 7, 1755, which reports well of Capt. Overton's expedition and expresses the wish that "it will not be turned to their Dishonor, nor be deemed Cant and Fanatism . . . [to] inform you, That from the very Beginning, they seem to have conducted their Expedition in a religious Manner."

117 George William Pilcher, "Samuel Davies and the Instruction of Negroes in Virginia," VMHB, LXXIV (1966), 293-300, accepts at face value Davies's optimistic assurance to supporters overseas that "the Negroes in these parts are freely allowed to attend upon my ministry." (p. 297) He makes no mention of Edwin Conway's cry of alarm that "Mr. Davies hath sent among our Negroes a Small Pamphlet, . . . wherein you may Perceive [he] hath much Reproached Virginia. And informs the Negroes they are Stronger than the Whites." Conway to T. Dawson, Mar. 3, 1758, WMQ, 2d Ser., I (1921), 280. In view of the Virginia gentry's long record of hesitation over, and obstruction of, Negro missionary work undertaken by Church of England parsons, it is improbable that Conway was alone in his disquiet concerning the proselytizing activity of the dissenters. Dr. Bray's Associates MSS, 355 and passim.

118 Gewehr, Great Awakening, 94, n. 109.

119 Conway to T. Dawson, Mar. 3, 1758, WMQ, 2d Ser., I (1921), 280-281.
petitioning the King about a law ... which they call the two penny act, and which is likely to make great noise in this Country.”¹²⁰

The spread of New Side Presbyterianism and the defection from the Established Church of the common people in settled parts of Virginia evidently continued to occasion anxiety throughout the 1750s. The evidence suggests that Presbyterianism only came to acquire a measure of respectability in the eyes of the gentry when its role as the focus of popular disaffection was taken over in the 1760s by the Separate Baptists.¹²¹

The social structure and values which were sources of endemic conflict between the gentlemen of the vestries and the parsons in the Virginia Church have been reviewed; the sense of crisis for Church and social order arising from religious defection in the 1740s and 1750s has been outlined. It remains to discuss explicitly the evidence for a connection between the anxiety arising from social-religious upheaval and the intensification of conflicts among Church of England men in the form of disputes with the clergy during this period.

There was remarkable agreement on the location of the cause of the falling away from the Anglican communion. The leading dissenters were almost brutal in their assertions that it lay above all in the laxity of the Established clergy, as to both morals and doctrine.¹²² Members of the Church of England clearly shared this view, although they usually preferred to express it less bluntly. The clericalist movement, whose emergence in the 1750s has been traced, derived its meaning from a desire to enhance the quality, by improving the status, of the clergy. Nowhere was this more clearly indicated than in the petition of John Camm and Thomas Warrington, put before the House of Burgesses on May 15, 1755, in which they expressed concern at low standards and urged increased salaries as a remedy.¹²³ The association between this concern over

¹²¹ The beginnings of this process appear clearly in a letter from the Rev. James Craig, a Church of England minister, to T. Dawson, Sept. 8, 1759, Dawson Papers, II, 217. Referring to the difficulties of the Church and of the Presbyterians in the southwestern counties, Craig deplored the way “the ignorant en[thusiastic anti]paedobaptists, subvert all rational and man[ly Religion again]st us both.”
¹²² Davies, Impartial Trial, 6, 24, 26-27, 30-31.
¹²³ McIlwaine and Kennedy, eds., Journals of Burgesses, 1752-1758, 257; Greene, ed., Landon Carter Diary, I, 122-123.
poor conditions of service and anxiety at the inroads made by dissent is
made explicit in a petition to the bishop of London against the first Two-
penny Act, which complained of the deterioration of conditions which
the act would produce and asserted that "the people here are not like to
be long without instructors, because certain Dissenting teachers amongst
us cannot but be thought ready and eager enough to succeed the Estab-
lished Clergy."124 The same anxiety is revealed in a letter from Thomas
Dawson dated July 9, 1757, referring to the conflict over the deprivation
of John Brunskill, Jr., and lamenting "this present distracted and unset-
tled state of our Church and Clergy, matter no doubt of great joy and
triumph to the Newlights."125 In September 1759 the Reverend James
Craig, coming young and fresh to the difficult task of sustaining the Angli-
can Church in Lunenburg County on the southern frontier, wrote thus:
"And sorry I am to say, That if the Clergy in the Establishment had
acquitted themselves, as they ought to have done, we would have had
no Occasion at this Time to use ... any ... Expedient to curb or expell
Enthusiasm and Superstition."126 Few of the clergy chose to be so out-
spoken, and one may suppose that Craig was in part echoing the views of
concerned gentlemen in his parish.127 Certainly the laity were not retic-
ent. In one of the earliest documents relating to the Great Awakening
in Virginia, Benjamin Waller concluded his advice to William Dawson
on means of preventing the spread of dissent by suggesting that "the
immoral and almost scandalous Lives some of them [your clergy] lead
gives the Enemy too much Occasion of reproach.... If therefore the Heads
of the Churches would join pious Examples to gentle and charitable
Persuasions, these poor Souls who [are?] mislead by every blast of vain
Doctrine ... would be more wrought upon than by Severity which they
will call Persecution for Conscience Sake."128 Even more pointed was an
anonymous letter to the bishop of London, dated February 1, 1754, pro-

124 Nov. 29, 1755, in Perry, ed., Historical Collections, I, 435. See also W. Dawson
to the bishop of London, July 11, 1749: "There is now the greater occasion for a
regular Ministry abroad in respect of the Dissenters, whose teachers ... are ... as zealous and active as ever in seducing the members of our communion." Ibid.,
365; and T. Dawson to the bishop of London, July 23, 1753, ibid., 406.
125 To the bishop of London, ibid., 454.
127 Craig worked closely with laymen in collecting a fund of £38 to combat
the spread of the Baptists. Ibid.
testing: "My zeal for religion as profess'd in the Church of England (of which I am a member), prompts me to add that it is easy to determine whether the interest of the Church or that of the dissenters, is most likely to prevail here, where the former is promoted by some of the weakest and most worthless men; and the latter by men of sufficient learning adorned with piety and virtue."\textsuperscript{129}

In his pamphlet \textit{Letter to the Right Reverend Father in God} Landon Carter elaborated a similar point of view without sparing any praise for the dissenters. Meeting the bishop's strictures on the recent rise of Non-conformity in Virginia, he stated: "It was the Disrespect to some few of the Clergy that occasioned the Dissension... Whilst Faith and Works went Hand in Hand, in Instances of pastoral Care, even Whitfield did but hum and buzz, and die away like the Insect of the Day; but, when ... Faith had nothing to distinguish it from the Emptiness of Sound in the Preacher, a Davies was then able to collect his Admirers."\textsuperscript{130}

While there was agreement on the diagnosis of the malady of the Church, there could be none concerning the prescription for remedying it. The ministers sought to improve their standing as "Gentlemen, Christians and Clergymen,"\textsuperscript{131} so that by having sufficient social authority they might reverse the movement away from the Church. Laymen like Landon Carter, on the other hand, urged disinterested devotion, if not apostolic poverty. Reform must begin with the clergy's morals, for only "if anyone would find out a Cullender to separate the bad [parsons] from the Good," would Carter "Join with the Petitioners" for higher salaries.\textsuperscript{132} The squire clearly wished to confirm the subordinate status of the clergy, demanding that they accept a discipline imposed by lay authorities which would ensure that "those of the Clergy, who had fled to the Calling, as the dernier Resort for a Livelihood ... either accommodated their Behaviour ... or became really Men of pious Dispositions." He expressed assurance that "the People, who are ever strongly acted on by Example, observing such a strict Harmony between Life and Doctrine," would be retained within the Church.\textsuperscript{133}

\textsuperscript{129} Perry, ed., \textit{Historical Collections}, I, 408.
\textsuperscript{131} The phrase with its revealing order is James Maury's. See letter to Rev. William Douglas, Nov. 20, 1759, Maury Letterbook.
\textsuperscript{132} Greene, ed., \textit{Landon Carter Diary}, I, 122.
\textsuperscript{133} Carter, \textit{Letter}, 18.
"Is the Church deserted?" he asked the bishop of London. "Secure the Virtue and Decency of the Ministry . . . check the vicious Practice . . . by which the Church is often disgraced with Meaness . . . you will then see the wandering Flocks gathering to their former Folds."\(^{134}\)

Neither of the rival prescriptions could be dispensed to the ailing Church in the circumstances of the time, nor could they have worked a cure, for they were addressed to the institutional symptoms rather than to the causes of social disorder in traditional Virginia. Our recognition of this, however, should not cause us to underestimate the importance of the passions expressed in the mutual recrimination of parties who believed that the remedy was simple if only the willful obstinacy of those opposed could be overcome.

The Established Church was an important part of the fabric of colonial Virginia society and its system of authority. The crisis of the Church and the helplessness of its adherents therefore had broad implications. Helplessness breeds resentment and recrimination, so that a house threatened is frequently a house divided. The Church of England in Virginia conformed to this pattern. The clergy were the most directly threatened and it is humanly understandable that reviled by their adversaries and resented by their own laity, numbers of them should have sought strength in a jealous corporate unity and in appeals overseas. Intensified anticlericalism was an equally understandable consequence of the gentry's exasperation at a ministry which was unable to retain the allegiance of the common people to the Establishment.

In the end the conflict led to no triumphs. Both parties sustained damaging defeats—the antireligious in the disallowance of the acts, the clergy in the odium of unpopular and unsuccessful litigation. The Virginia legislature was restricted in its right to regulate affairs relating to the clergy; the clergy discovered that the crown could not effectively support them against hostile local pressures. The discredit arising from internal dissension certainly contributed to the downfall of the Established Church during the Revolution, but the clergy were not the major losers by the disestablishment of 1776 to 1785. They had already lost the support of the crown upon which they had depended. The real loser by the transformation was the gentry establishment as embodied in the

\(^{134}\) Ibid., 39.
vestries. In the end it was those who had sought to make the clergy dependent who had their own wings clipped.

The connection between the rise of dissent and the intensification of conflict within the Church is not stressed as a single cause explanation, for we are dealing with so complex a process of social change that such simplifications are inappropriate. The Parsons' Cause controversy is best understood as one of the more dramatic manifestations of a developing crisis in mid-eighteenth-century Virginia. The difficulties of the Church revealed the weakest link in the chain of traditional authority at a point where popular pressures were most acutely felt.