

From Disunity to Integration: Evangelical Religion and Society in Yarmouth, Nova Scotia, 1761-1830

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In recent years there has been a resurgent interest in the New England Planters. However, little serious attention has been given to Planter settlements as they evolved into the nineteenth century. Even the works which ably interpret the religious awakenings of the Planters have failed to probe the role of religion in the development of specific settlements.² In response to this gap in the field of Planter Studies, this paper charts four phases of religious development in Yarmouth Township from 1761 to 1830. These phases include disunity, identity, structure and integration. Although economic and political factors were undoubtedly important in the development of Yarmouth Township during these years, the focus is confined primarily to the role of Planter religion.

DISUNITY

The early years of settlement in Yarmouth Township, 1761-1779, marked a period of disunity and strife as the newly settled Planters tried to create a society comparable to that of their former New England homeland. The first major problem for the struggling immigrants was the actual settlement process. Because the procedure for relocating had not been planned in detail for Yarmouth Township, families which settled in the township came from as many as twenty different towns and villages in Massachusetts and Connecticut.³ Hence, large numbers of Yarmouth settlers were not linked together by shared life experiences or family relationships which had been the case in other Planter settlements such as Falmouth, Horton and Cornwallis.⁴ Since the church was the only visible public institution in Yarmouth society during the early years, it is not surprising that it reflected the tensions of this period. Although most of the

1 I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Barry Moody, Department of History, Acadia University, who acted as my M.A. supervisor when the material for this paper was collected.

2 The following represent the most important works on Planter religion: G.A. Rawlyk, *Ravished by the Spirit: Religious Revivals, Baptists and Henry Alline* (Montreal, 1984); G.T. Stewart and G.A. Rawlyk, *A People Highly Favoured of God: The Nova Scotia Yankees and the American Revolution* (Toronto, 1972); J.M. Bumsted, *Henry Alline, 1748-1784* (Hantsport, N.S., 1984).

3 George S. Brown, *Yarmouth, Nova Scotia: A Sequel to Campbell's History* (Boston, 1888), 159-161.

4 A.W.H. Eaton, *The History of Kings County, Nova Scotia* (Salem, Mass., 1910), 71-72; John V. Duncanson, *Falmouth Township, Nova Scotia* (Belleville, Ont., 1983), 11.

Yarmouth settlers were Congregationalist, the religion which they had in common was unable to provide societal stability because New England Congregationalism itself was far from being uniform by 1760. In spite of religious differences among the township residents, two churches were established in 1767; one in Cape Forchu and the other in Chebogue, the larger of the two communities. The Congregational church in Cape Forchu was organized on 2 September 1767, under the leadership of the Reverend Nehemiah Porter.⁵ Signs of dissatisfaction soon erupted, however, as Porter was not thought by some to be “friendly to the revival of Religion” and doctrinally unsound because he “did not so well agree with the Doctrines of Grace in some Particulars.”⁶ The evidence suggests that doubt was cast upon Porter by some, not for theological reasons but because of the way in which he preached the doctrines. He did not preach in the intensely emotional style which was characteristic of New Light preachers and popularized in America by George Whitefield. By 1771 the hostile opposition towards Porter had reached unacceptable proportions and caused a division within the congregation. As a result, Porter was forced to return to New England, discouraged, distraught and impoverished. For the next twenty years this church went without a full time pastor.⁷

The Chebogue church, which was officially organized on 18 December 1767, chose John Frost, a lay preacher from Argyle, to be its minister. Like the congregation in Cape Forchu, there were divisions from the very beginning in Chebogue. One cause of division was the fact that many individuals were not eligible for full membership because they were unable to obtain letters of dismissal from their churches in New England. Therefore, only a small percentage of residents were eligible to covenant together to form the ‘church’ proper. Those who were not members but attended were known as the ‘society.’⁸

The second cause of division, became evident when many in the congregation (church and society) thought that Frost “had not an entertaining and easy Way of delivery in his publick discourses.”⁹ Given the importance that New Light’s placed on preaching style, the church invited Frost to resign from his position as pastor. To this request he replied, “he was chosen or elected to the Sacred Office, and had not forfeited his Right by any Scandalous Behaviour,” and was, therefore,

5 Public Archives of Nova Scotia [hereafter PANS], MG 2, Vol. 770A, No. 1, Letters and Papers of Reverend Nehemiah Porter.

6 G.T. Stewart, ed., *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia, 1760-1791* (Toronto, 1982), 20.

7 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 20.

8 Stewart, *Documents Pertaining to the Great Awakening*, 18.

9 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 13.

“bound in Conscience not to give Way.”¹⁰ Since a covenant relationship, which bound together pastor and church under God, was a solemn and serious oath, the church did not dismiss Frost from his position.

These divisions led to a separation in the congregation, primarily along the lines of church and society. Since the society was under no covenant obligations to remain in fellowship with the congregation, it sought the leadership of a Baptist preacher, the Reverend Ebenezer Moulton, who lived in Yarmouth Township.¹¹ In a desperate attempt to heal the separation, the church ordained Frost on 21 September 1769. Contrary to accepted practice, the ordination took place without the assistance or representation of any other church body or association. It had been assumed, erroneously, that those who had separated would return when it was known that the church possessed a valid minister who was ordained. The plan failed. The irregular ordination of an unwanted, stubborn pastor who had questionable talents for the ministry did little to unify the congregation. If anything, it widened the gulf between the two groups.¹²

In one final attempt to bridge this separation in the congregation, the church petitioned a number of churches in Massachusetts for assistance. In response to this desperate plea for help, the Massachusetts brethren sent the Reverends Sylvanus Conant and Solomon Reed of First and Third churches, Middleborough, Massachusetts, respectively, to Yarmouth Township to assess the situation. After their evaluation was completed the New England pastors made the following suggestions: first, that Frost and Moulton cease all Sunday preaching activities; secondly, that Jonathan Scott, a lay preacher and church member, assume the role of interim pastor until such time that a full time minister could be obtained. Both recommendations were followed and the congregation was unified once again.¹³

Since Scott's preaching and pastoral gifts were found to be acceptable by the congregation, and the likelihood of engaging a settled pastor from New England was slim, the Chebogue congregation invited Scott to be its permanent pastor. Sensitive to the instability of the congregation and the disastrous effects of Frost's irregular ordination, Scott requested that he be examined and approved for ordination by the churches in Middleborough, Massachusetts. Scott's request was granted and he was ordained 29 April 1772.¹⁴

The congregation now looked to a future of unity and solidarity as Scott appeared to be able to meet the expectations of the different factions. He

10 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 18.

11 G.T. Stewart, "Ebenezer Moulton," *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Vol. 5, 564-5.

12 C.B. Fergusson, *The Life of Johnathan Scott* (Halifax, 1960), 25.

13 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 23-8.

14 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 30-1.

preached in the accepted tradition and possessed a legitimate claim to the pastoral office, having been affirmed by the Chebogue church and ordained through proper channels. However, congregational or township unity was not to be realized under Scott's direction. Soon after he assumed his responsibilities as permanent pastor, Scott introduced and enforced a rigid church discipline. During his first decade as pastor, people were admonished for "Dancing and Frolicking with losse company," breach of sabbath, family disputes, giving children too much freedom, failing to attend worship and cursing. Discipline was often carried out in the face of great opposition because people were asked to confess their sin publicly and repent of their wayward behaviour.¹⁵ If some persons regarded the behavioural code upheld by Scott to be too rigorous and too strict, others such as Cornelius Rogers regarded Scott to be lax in his duties in this area.¹⁶ Squabbles on both sides erupted around the discipline issue, indicating that the congregation was far from being uniform in its expectations of Scott and what constituted proper church practice.

Further doubt was cast upon Scott's ability and sincerity when in the fall of 1778, prior to his visit to the Congregational church in Cornwallis, he complained to his parishioners that his income was far too small, and that he lived too far away from the bulk of his congregation and had little time to operate his small farm. During his absence, the congregation attempted to correct the problems he had presented to them.¹⁷ Sensitive to their pastor's situation, the congregation secured land near the meeting house and funding to build Scott a new house. In addition, the congregation increased his salary to fifty pounds yearly. Upon return from Cornwallis, Scott was informed that his complaints had been addressed. However, legal difficulties resulted in the deed for his land being improperly registered. Responding unwisely, Scott remarked, "What you have proposed to give, will half support my family." The lasting impression was that "Mr. Scott was after Money" and wanted to leave his pastoral charge to go to Cornwallis.¹⁸

The division within the two congregations in Yarmouth Township were restricted to religious and ecclesiastical concerns; nevertheless, they reflect the disunity, vulnerability, fragility and growing pains of Yarmouth Township in the first decade of settlement. These divisions would soon be further widened when Henry Alline, the dreaded 'church wrecker' and catalyst for the Great Awakening in Nova Scotia, appeared in Yarmouth.

15 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 45-64.

16 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 128.

17 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 80.

18 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 86.

IDENTITY

On 20 October 1781, Henry Alline arrived on the Yarmouth scene with his unique gospel message. Having worked with the Congregational church in Cornwallis where Alline had caused discord, Scott immediately opposed Alline from a theological perspective, questioning his heterodox theology as found in the *Two Mites*.¹⁹ Since the Yarmouth Planters assessed the validity of their ministers primarily by their preaching style, Alline was received with open arms. Their attitude was best expressed by deacon James Robbins who said that Alline was acceptable because he “was desirous to promote Reformation” and Amos Hilton who remarked that it “was no matter of any great Consequence to him what a Man’s Principles were, if he was but earnest in promoting a good work.”²⁰ It is ironic that the same standard which declared Jonathan Scott to be an acceptable minister of the gospel also affirmed that Alline was one sent by God to do a good work.

Scott failed to realize that his congregation placed ‘Alline’s reformation’ clearly within the accepted bounds of their New England Congregational experience. By vehemently attacking Alline, both privately and publicly — and publishing his views in a 1784 tract entitled *A Brief View*,²¹ Scott added great pressure to his already unstable congregation. Those who opposed Scott’s position, formed a separate religious group in 1783. In the beginning this split in the congregation was not unlike that of 1771 when Ebenezer Moulton established a second group but there was one important difference. By forcing many in his congregation to define the Allinite movement as something distinct from New England Congregationalism, Scott reinforced the uniqueness of the Great Awakening in the minds of those who supported Alline. Ultimately they began to define their religious orientation as “Allinite.” Although the evangelicalism held by those who separated was not significantly transformed by Alline, the Scott-Alline controversy consolidated the separated group’s corporate sense of sharing in a significant religious experience under the direction of Alline.²²

Henry Alline left Yarmouth in 1782 never to return but the Allinite group continued to flourish. Local lay leaders such as Cornelius Rogers and itinerant Allinite evangelists such as Thomas Handley Chipman, John Payzant, Joseph Dimock and Harris Harding gave direction to this

19 The most comprehensive one volume collection of Alline’s theological works and other writings is G.A. Rawlyk, ed., *Henry Alline: Selected Writings* (New York, 1987).

20 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 124.

21 Jonathan Scott, *A Brief View of the Religious Tenents and Sentiments lately Published and Spread in the Province of Nova Scotia* (Halifax, 1784).

22 I have developed this in “Advancing Light: Evangelicalism in Yarmouth Township 1761-1830,” M.A. thesis, Acadia University, 1986, 66-73.

Allinite following,²³ and helped to maintain the unique identity held by the separated group which the Scott-Alline controversy had caused in Yarmouth. This leadership prevented any possible reconciliation which might have taken place between the Allinite group and the Congregational establishment in Yarmouth Township.

Of all the Allinite evangelists who continued to preach in the Yarmouth area, Harris Harding was by all counts the most influential. He not only assisted in forming the separated group into a Newlight Church, but also became its permanent minister in 1798. So strongly entrenched in the Allinite tradition was Harding that he tried physically to appear and preach as had Alline.²⁴ Only Alline himself would have been a more appropriate choice of a pastor at Yarmouth.

By 1800 the Newlight church embodied a distinct identity in that its evangelicalism, though remarkably similar to that of New England Congregationalism, was regarded as Allinite. Implicit in this orientation was an evangelistic zeal which greatly increased its numbers and influence in the Yarmouth area. Since the Newlights had established their meeting house in Cape Forchu, now the larger of the two township communities, they were in the best location for influencing the area with their religious orientation.²⁵ For the first time, a significant number of people in Yarmouth township shared a common religious identity which was the direct result of having experienced in a dramatic way the Great Awakening and subsequent more localized revivals led by Allinite preachers such as Harding.

STRUCTURE

Despite the growth in Allinite followers, a well-defined structure within the Yarmouth Newlight church was slow in coming. It was not until 1820 that the Allinite body had developed structurally into a Baptist church. The beginning of this development may be traced to a series of revivals which took place between 1790 and 1810. These 'religious outpourings,' which occurred throughout the western end of the colony, are often referred to collectively as the Second Great Awakening in Nova Scotia.²⁶ An outpouring of evangelical zeal coupled with baptism by immersion 'en

23 Stewart, *Documents Relating to the Great Awakening*, 138; I.E. Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptists in the Maritime Provinces* (Saint John, 1880), 184.

24 G.A. Rawlyk, ed., *New Light Letters and Spiritual Songs* (Hantsport, N.S., 1983), 147; G.A. Rawlyk, "From Newlight to Baptist: Harris Harding and the Second Great Awakening in Nova Scotia," in Barry Moody, ed., *Repent and Believe: The Baptist Experience in Maritime Canada* (Hantsport, N.S., 1980), 1-26.

25 John Davis, *Life and Times of the Late Reverend Harris Harding* (Charlottetown, 1866), 73-4.

26 Rawlyk, *From Newlight to Baptist*, 1.

masse' characterized this revival. This fusing of believer's baptism by immersion with the revivalistic orientation altered, slightly, the Allinite tradition but more so in Yarmouth than elsewhere in Nova Scotia.²⁷

During the Yarmouth revival of 1799, James Manning baptised the Reverend Harris Harding by immersion.²⁸ By 1807 Harding had led his congregation to acceptance of much of the Baptist system of faith and practice. However, the church still maintained the practice of open communion, admitting to membership those who had not received believer's baptism by immersion.²⁹ This open communion practice was the main reason for the Yarmouth Baptist church's succession in 1809 from the Nova Scotia Baptist Association which insisted on closed communion.³⁰

In 1807 Zachariah Chipman of Bridgetown, Nova Scotia, settled in Yarmouth. An active lay-person and promoter of the Regular Baptist position, as espoused by the Nova Scotia Baptist Association, Chipman was sensitive to the 'Newlight to Baptist' transition which had occurred in many churches in the colony. Having witnessed this transition in the Bridgetown Baptist church, Chipman played a crucial role in the development of the Yarmouth church as it evolved into the Regular Baptist fold.³¹

In 1814, the much neglected principle of "occasional communion," which had been embraced officially in 1807, was enforced under the influence of Zachariah Chipman. Thereafter unimmersed persons were denied full membership status in the church, although they were still permitted to receive the Lord's Supper.³² Further structural advances made under Chipman's direction included the introduction of church discipline, an emphasis on regular church attendance and the appointment of deacons.³³ Although much effort was channelled into the development of internal church structure, social responsibility was not ignored. In fact, the Baptists became the most socially active denomination in the township by unanimously resolving to take a weekly collection to assist the poor and aged.³⁴

By 1820, the Yarmouth Baptist church, under the careful direction of

27 Baptist Collection, Acadia University Archives (hereafter BCAUA), Manning Correspondence.

28 BCAUA, Manning Correspondence.

29 Davis, *Life and Times of the Late Reverend Harris Harding*, 85.

30 BCAUA, Minutes of the Nova Scotia Baptist Association, 26-28 June 1809.

31 *Christian Messenger*, 1 August 1860.

32 BCAUA, Zion Baptist Church Records.

33 BCAUA, Zion Baptist Church Records.

34 For an assessment of Chipman's crucial role in this transition consult Davis, *Life and Times of the Late Reverend Harris Harding*, 83-4.

Zachariah Chipman, developed a well-defined structure and had assumed a vital role within the society of Yarmouth. The Allinite identity of the church was maintained primarily because the implementation of church order and structure did not threaten the essence of the people's evangelicalism which was steeped in Allinite tradition.³⁵ If the church adequately reflected the society at large then these two decades may be seen as crucial for the development of the township. Its largest social institution, the Baptist church, established order and structure, perhaps out of necessity to accommodate its growing numbers and more likely as a reflection of a changing society.

UNITY/INTEGRATION

The most dramatic expression of the church's role in the development of Yarmouth Township is found in the massive revival of 1827-28. Whereas the church had often caused or at least reflected the instability of the township communities in the past, this revival proved to be the catalyst for the actual integration of Yarmouth society.

The developments leading up to the revival of 1827-28 placed the Baptist church in an excellent position to reap the benefits of this religious outpouring. By the mid-1820s the Baptist church had attracted a significant number of people to its fold while the other denominations of the township, including Methodists, Anglicans and Congregationalists, do not seem to have gained large followings.³⁶ At the same time, the Congregational church in Chebogue, the only real threat to the Baptists, suffered another period of disunity which prompted several of its prominent leaders to leave the church.³⁷

In response to the needs of a growing township, the Baptist church began to hold extra meetings in some of the outlying areas. By 1826, monthly meetings were being held in Chebogue, the Ponds and Beaver River. Although this small network of mission posts, which were manned by Harding and a number of lay leaders, did not generate a rapid increase in the church's membership, it did ensure that Baptists in the out-lying areas of the township would not be swept into the folds of other denominations.³⁸

35 For a discussion of church discipline in Maritime Baptist Churches see Charles W. Dewese, "Church Covenants and Church Discipline among Baptists in the Maritime Provinces," in Moody, ed., *Repent and Believe*, 27-45.

36 Holy Trinity Anglican Church, Yarmouth, N.S.: "Church Records," United Church Conference Archives, Halifax, N.S., Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Reel No. 1; PANS, MG 4: Vol. 12A, Records of the First Chebogue Congregational Church, 1790-1840.

37 Records of the First Chebogue Congregational Church, 282.

38 Zion Baptist Church Records, 1821-1826.

During the years that the church expanded its ministry into the smaller communities of Yarmouth Township, the Baptist Church began controversial discussions concerning the possibility of joining the Nova Scotia Baptist Association. Each time the question was raised it was deferred for further consideration because the association's statement of faith, to which member churches were required to subscribe, held to the principle of closed communion, which denied the Lord's Supper to all who were not baptised by immersion. The Yarmouth church was still not willing to deny the eucharist to unimmersed believers. To do so would have been to ignore the church's rich and varied Allinite heritage.³⁹

In order to convince the church to accept closed communion and join the Nova Scotia Baptist Association, Zachariah Chipman invited the Reverend Thomas Ansley, an association minister/evangelist from Bridgetown, to supply preach while Harding itinerated in various areas of the province. Having been raised in the Episcopal tradition, and later converted to the Baptist position, Ansley's experience provided him with a sensitivity to Baptists who had emerged from a number of traditions, such as those in Yarmouth.⁴⁰ Therefore, he was able to preach, with great zeal and effectiveness, the salvation message of new life in Jesus Christ along with the polity and doctrinal position embraced by the Nova Scotia Baptist Association.

Ansley's remarkable success in Yarmouth as an evangelist and promoter of the regular Baptist cause, however, did not rest primarily on these factors. During this revival an acute and frequently fatal disease ravished the township. Writing on 14 April 1828, Zachariah Chipman provided the following background to the revival:

Alarming Diseases still prevail viz, a resemblance of the cold Plague, Scarlet Fever, Cancer Rash, Arraipolis(?) with other uncommon Diseases. Some are first attracted in the fingers others in the legs, throat, and other parts of the Body when imperfect Health, and ends their existence here in some cases in the course of 2 to 10 days time, 9 funerals were attended in this town in 8 days[.] the Lord has in his great[?] prepared this people for his Judgements, out of 104 deaths there were but 4 persons that we can learn who gave no evidence of a saving Faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.⁴¹

In the midst of this epidemic, which Harris Harding defined as "the Judgements of the Lord by which people learn righteousness," Ansley

39 Zion Baptist Church Records, 1821-1826.

40 Bill, *Fifty Years with the Baptists*, 192.

41 Zion Baptist Church Records, 14 April 1828.

offered the people of Yarmouth Township meaning to life, security and comfort.⁴² Although no examples of Ansley's sermons have survived, the evidence suggests that the message included the following themes: God's judgement graphically illustrated by the "plague," God's Love in the hope offered in Christ for eternal life, and a plea for the acceptance of the closed communion principles advocated by the Nova Scotia Baptist Association. This culminated in mass conversions, baptisms and reunions in the church.

The Planter revivalist tradition, which had indirectly precipitated divisions in the past, was the catalyst for a transformed and integrated township. People responded from all levels of society regardless of sex, age, social status and occupational standing. For example, among male respondents identified 61.6 percent were farmers, 19.8 percent seamen and 18.6 artisans. This is clearly in keeping with the township as a whole with 63.4 percent farmers, 20.1 percent seamen and 18.5 percent artisans. As well, this revival attracted equal numbers of men and women with 51.3 and 48.7 percent respectively. This was a marked contrast to the decade prior to the revival when for every male convert there were three females. The mean age of respondents by sex was higher than is usually assumed to be the case in nineteenth-century North America. The average age of women was 32 years while the men averaged 38.8 years.⁴³ Although these average ages in themselves do not indicate the breadth of age categories represented in the respondents identified, they do challenge the often-held assumption that the majority of converts in nineteenth-century revivals were young adults.

The effect of this revival on Baptist church organization in the township was significant. Six districts, each entrusted to the care of a deacon, were established in the area during and after the revival. While the main function of these districts was initially to raise church funds, they also provided a workable system whereby new members and adherents of the church could receive pastoral help and be kept informed of church activities.⁴⁴ Together with the network of religious meetings which had been established prior to and during the revival, this structure linked and integrated most of the significantly settled areas of the township in a way that they had never experienced before. People who may have had little or no personal contact with each other, living miles apart, were now drawn together as members and adherents of the Yarmouth Baptist church.

42 *Baptist Missionary Magazine of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick* 1(October 1828), 251.

43 For a fuller analysis of this revival consult chapter four of my "Advancing Light: Evangelicalism in Yarmouth Township 1761-1830."

44 *Zion Baptist Church Records, Misc. papers.*

Consequently, the township was drawn together not only religiously but socially, as well. This is not to suggest, however, that many Yarmouth people were not linked by marriage, occupation and location prior to the revival. In fact, it was probably these existing links that were the significant unseen factors in the revival itself and crucial to the integration process.

CONCLUSION

Although the process of societal integration was not fully accomplished during the 'Great Yarmouth Revival' of 1827-1828, it is clear that evangelical religion played an essential role in the development of Yarmouth society from its early years of hopeless disorientation to a more cohesive and unified community. Only as more studies emerge which chart the evolution of Planter religion in specific communities can the possible wider application of this four-phase model of societal evolution be tested. If, however, the findings of this case study are not atypical, the commonly accepted thesis that the New England Yankee Planters achieved a collective identity during the First Great Awakening may have to be re-evaluated.⁴⁵ Indeed, it may have to be conceded that a genuine Nova Scotia identity, an integration of society, only emerged in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Since this study deals only with one township, the implications are merely suggestive and point to the need for further research in the Nova Scotia Planter context. Regardless of whether the implications of this study are substantiated, it seems clear that evangelical religion played a crucial role in the societal development of Planter townships. It is to this point that future researchers of Planter history will have to address themselves.

45 This thesis is best expressed in Stewart and Rawlyk, *A People Highly Favoured of God*. For a different perspective on the interpretation of Planter society consult G.T. Stewart, "Charisma and Integration: An Eighteenth Century North American Case," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 16 (1974), 138-49.