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## HENRY LAURENS: CHRISTIAN PIETIST

SAMUEL C. SMITH\*

OF IMPORTANT LEADERS FROM THE AMERICAN COLONIAL ERA, Henry Laurens is one of the most neglected by historians. Outside a smattering of articles, a handful of dissertations, and a 1915 biography, relatively little has been done to examine his life and thought. Hopefully, as the yeoman work on *The Papers of Henry Laurens* continues at the University of South Carolina, now approaching the publication of volumes fifteen and sixteen, more attention will be paid to this important American.

One aspect often mentioned as vital to understanding Henry Laurens, yet seldom dealt with in detail, concerns his religiosity. Eventually most important Western historical figures are examined as to their religious ideologies. That seems especially true concerning American Colonial and Revolutionary figures. We all know, or at least we think we know, what Jefferson, Washington, Adams, Franklin, Madison, etc. believed about things divine. On a smaller scale, the same is true of Laurens. Descriptives such as Orthodox, Calvinist, Puritan, and Anglican are common throughout the early as well as recent Laurens' literature.

In his 1967 article "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," Edmund S. Morgan pitted Henry Laurens and William Drayton as philosophical opposites from the Lowcountry. Against the backdrop of their responses as members of the Continental Congress to the alleged improprieties of Silas Deane, envoy to France, Laurens is portrayed as representative of a strict "Puritan Ethic," while Drayton displays the tolerance of an enlightened republican.<sup>1</sup> Although Morgan admittedly uses the term "Puritan" as a "short hand" expression, his idea that Laurens was a recipient and representative of a pervasive New England religious ideal is not lost in the argument.

C. Vann Woodward countered in his 1969 article "The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World" arguing for a more sectional, and even secular explanation for the virtue of southern gentlemen like Laurens.<sup>2</sup> Although it is doubtful

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<sup>1</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, "The Puritan Ethic and the American Revolution," *William and Mary Quarterly* 24 (October 1967), 28-32.

<sup>2</sup>C. Vann Woodward, "The Southern Ethic in a Puritan World," *William and Mary Quarterly* 25 (July 1968), 350.



Portrait of Henry Laurens (1724-1792) by John Singleton Copley (ca. 1782).  
Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery of the Smithsonian Institute.

that Laurens would have recoiled at being called a Puritan as much as Woodward believes, "the indiscriminate applicability of the Puritan Ethic" is an all too common occurrence in the approach to American religion.<sup>3</sup>

Laurens' early biographer, David Duncan Wallace, hit upon the doctrinal tolerance of Laurens, a most important element in understanding his spirituality, yet failed to identify its source. Though he correctly saw the dominance of tolerance in Laurens' religiosity, his view of its origin was, I believe, misplaced. Citing Laurens' early disdain for religious dogmatism, Wallace attributed eighteenth-century Enlightenment ideology as the key to understanding this tolerance.<sup>4</sup> Laura Frech came closer to capturing the essence of Laurens' religiosity but fell short of any in-depth investigation of his spiritual motivations. "His religion," Frech wrote in her 1972 dissertation on Laurens, "was a mixture of Calvinism and pietism, with a touch of revivalism."<sup>5</sup> She then wrote, in the vein of Morgan, that "this South Carolina Puritan shared with the Calvinist Whigs of New England a desire to return to the austere virtue of an earlier day."<sup>6</sup> To her credit, in a later article exploring Laurens' republican ideology, Frech acknowledged more clearly the impact of Pietism in contrast to the religious rationalism of New England Republicans.<sup>7</sup> She recognized that a profound distinction in religiosity existed between Laurens and some of the better known "New England delegates to the Continental Congress." "What is distinctive about Laurens's thought," she added, "is an unusually strong strain of religious enthusiasm."<sup>8</sup>

The goal of this essay is to carefully explore this "unusually strong strain" in the thinking of Henry Laurens, a task that to my knowledge has not yet been done. Within the context of this goal I propose that although terms such as Puritan, Calvinist, Orthodox, and even Enlightenment have

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. It should be acknowledged that the term Puritan can legitimately be used in different ways. For example, Puritanism as a social and political force in Britain and America is sometimes distinguished from an altogether strict theological adherence to it. The political and social structure in late eighteenth-century New England, for instance, bore much in the way of a Puritan ethos even though a significant declension of Puritanism as a theological force had taken place. This flexible usage is far different, in my view, than that often associated with someone like Laurens who received little, if any, in the way of a definable Puritan influence.

<sup>4</sup>David Duncan Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens* (New York: The Knickerbocker Press, 1915), 439-440.

<sup>5</sup>Laura P. Frech, "The Career of Henry Laurens in the Continental Congress, 1777-1779" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 1972), 27.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>7</sup>Frech, "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 76 (April 1975), 71.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 78.

relevance to the religious understanding of Henry Laurens, they are peripheral in relation to the central factor of evangelical Pietism. Underpinning this argument is the belief that modern historians, unlike their careful attention to the language of other disciplines, anthropology and sociology for example, have in large measure ignored the necessity for precision in the use of religious terms. Religious terminology carries theological distinction often overlooked by some historians. Persistent generic usage of these terms over time has created a linguistic laxness resulting in historical inaccuracies.

Take the term "Calvinist." To the careful Christian theologian (liberal or conservative), this term carries specific meaning and necessary theological contradistinction not found in general historical usage. Laurens, for example, has often been referred to as Calvinist, primarily due to his clear resignation to God's sovereignty in the everyday affairs of life.<sup>9</sup> Once while suffering

<sup>9</sup>In her article "The Republicanism of Henry Laurens" Frech mentions the "Calvinist heritage" (p. 78) of Laurens, presumably due to his Huguenot background. This is a common though unwarranted association. There is very little evidence that the doctrines of Calvinism had significant sway on his religious leanings. On a broader scale Alan Heimert's important work *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* illustrates a similar misuse of the term Calvinism. In this work Heimert presents Calvinism as the underlying religious force in the First Great Awakening. True, most of the people he identifies as primary movers in the Awakening were Calvinists (i.e., George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, etc.), but what he fails to clearly show is that it was not the Calvinistic principles per se that informed the emotionalism which permeated much of eighteenth-century revivalism. Other strains of religious thought, such as medieval Catholic mysticism and Continental Pietism, two traditions far removed from Calvinism proper, were strong underlying forces behind much of what Heimert presents simply as Calvinistic. In fact Heimert sees the dynamic of inward experience as the core element that made the revivals Calvinistic. "The idea that essentially defined American Calvinism was acknowledged to be a rather simple one—a belief in, the 'inward operation of the holy spirit in regeneration'" (p. 6). To Heimert's credit he shows that the emphasis on an emotional experience, especially as stressed by some American Calvinists, would not have been favorable to John Calvin. It is doubtful, however, that the Genevan reformer would have, as Heimert suggests, winced at the notion of an evangelical New Birth (p. 42). Calvin never denied the inward operation of the Spirit in regeneration, but he did not stress the need for emotionalism to attend it. Heimert, in somewhat of an overstatement, clarifies his use of the term in an American context by stating that "the Calvinists of eighteenth-century America were hardly subscribers to the theology of the *Institutes*" (p. 6). See Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1966). It should be noted that although the likes of Whitefield and Edwards did not follow the *Institutes* to the letter, their basic theological framework, especially as it related to depravity, inability of human will, and predestination, did correspond with Calvin's system.

from one of his many severe gout attacks, with the threat of not making an important rendezvous with his sons in Paris, Laurens wrote, "it becomes us, in all Such cases of disappointment to our wishes, to Submit to the Will of divine Providence & even to be thankful from an assurance that all things are ordered for our benefit."<sup>10</sup> The problem in concluding that Laurens was Calvinist because of his consistent and outspoken trust in divine providence is that practically any evangelical Arminian of Laurens' day, John Wesley for example, would have readily expressed the same degree of resignation.<sup>11</sup> Calvinism has never held a monopoly on vocalized trust in the providential dealings of God. Laurens clearly rejected, as will be seen, certain fundamental Calvinistic distinctives such as limited atonement (Christ died only for an elect few) and unconditional election (God, based solely on his good pleasure, chose some for eternal bliss and others for eternal damnation). Although this essay is not for the purpose of expounding the nuances of Calvinism, suffice it to say at this point that many, Laurens included, have been miscast as doctrinal adherents to that system.

Neither is it tenable to consider Laurens a Calvinist because of his Huguenot heritage. Theological positions are not always passed down ancestral lines. Though very cognizant and appreciative of his rich and religiously oriented family heritage, he on occasion distanced himself from a strict personal conformity to it.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, being a Huguenot was not necessarily synonymous with being a Calvinist. In fact, Huguenots in colonial America were known principally for their quick assimilation to regional Protestant religious norms rather than clinging to their more exclusive past. In South Carolina the process of Huguenot religious assimilation began in earnest with the passage of the South Carolina Church Act of 1706 whereby the Anglican Church became the established ecclesiastical system. With this act many Huguenot congregations officially entered the Anglican Church securing to themselves the obvious political and legal benefits of conformity. With religion as the central focus of assimilation, a lessening of previously held theological distinction was inevitable. Henry Laurens was a product of that assimilation, and there is little evidence to suggest that Huguenot theological tenets (such as Calvinism) strongly informed his religiosity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Philip Hamer et al., eds., *The Papers of Henry Laurens* (hereafter *Laurens Papers*) (14 vols. thus far; Columbia, S. C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1968-), Vol. IX, 507.

<sup>11</sup>See Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1989), 432.

<sup>12</sup>See *Laurens Papers*, Vol. IX, 309; and Vol. X, 177.

<sup>13</sup>Jon Butler, *The Huguenots in America: A Refugee People in New World Society* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1983), 7-8.

In a slightly different way historians often misapply the term "Puritan." "Puritanism writ large" is the common but misleading interpretation of America's religious history.<sup>14</sup> Rare is the survey of American religion that portrays this vast and diverse field for what it actually is—vast and diverse.<sup>15</sup> For Henry Laurens, there is no direct historical evidence connecting him with a dominant Puritan influence. But for some, strict moral virtue combined with Christian profession seem to be sufficient for considering one within the lineage of a fluid "Puritan Ethic." Our understanding of Henry Laurens has unfortunately been a product of this over generalization of religious terms.

Before specifically examining Laurens in respect to Pietism, it will be helpful, in order to avoid studying him in a religious vacuum, to reacquaint ourselves with him by means of a brief biographical sketch.

Laurens' family migrated to New York from France in response to Louis XIV's Revocation of the Edict of Nantes (1685). They then moved south to Charleston where Henry was born in 1724. After receiving a practical (as opposed to classical) education suitable for a future merchant, Laurens went to London in 1744 to apprentice under former Charleston merchant James Crottatt. After completing his apprenticeship he intended to settle in London, but his planned partnership on that side of the Atlantic did not materialize, whereupon he returned to Charleston in 1747 and eventually became one of the wealthiest merchants in colonial America.<sup>16</sup>

Laurens married Eleanor Ball in 1750. Between 1751 and 1770 they had thirteen children, all of whom Henry outlived except three. Only four reached adulthood (of those four, John preceded Henry in death at age twenty-eight), five died after one year or less, one died at four, one at five, one at nine, and one at ten.<sup>17</sup> With the birth of their last child in 1770, his wife Eleanor died leaving Henry to care for their five surviving children. He never remarried. "I have remained single," he wrote four years after her passing, "& have no desire to hazard an alienation of my affections from our Children by a Second Marriage."<sup>18</sup>

A year after his wife's death he turned the everyday affairs of business over to his brother James and, for their education, accompanied his sons

<sup>14</sup>Jerald C. Brauer, "Regionalism and Religion in America," *Church History* 54 (September 1985), 367.

<sup>15</sup>For a work that demonstrates cognizance of America's religious diversity see Jon Butler, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990).

<sup>16</sup>David Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina, From its First Settlement in 1670 to the Year 1808* (Newberry, S.C.: W.J. Duffie, 1858), Vol. II, 260-261.

<sup>17</sup>See family chart, Appendix 3 in Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 502.

<sup>18</sup>HL to Messieurs and Madame Laurence, February 25, 1774, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. IX, 311.



(John, James, and Henry, Jr.) to England and later Geneva. After three years he returned under the swirling winds of revolution to Charleston and was shortly named president of the Council of Safety. In 1777 he was elected to represent South Carolina in Congress whereupon his talents were quickly recognized, and he was elected as that body's president. John Adams, after observing Laurens' deportment in the fulfillment of his duty wrote to his wife, "They have sent us a new delegate whom I greatly admire, Mr. Laurens, . . . a gentleman of great fortune, great abilities, modesty and integrity, and great experience too. If all the States would send us such men, it would be a pleasure to be here."<sup>19</sup>

In December of 1778 Laurens resigned his presidency in Congress over the Silas Deane affair, and a year later he was appointed minister to Holland. On his voyage to Holland his ship was intercepted by the British resulting in a fourteen-month imprisonment in the Tower of London. The condition of release was simply to consent to being an English citizen; he consistently refused.<sup>20</sup> After one such offer of release he wrote,

My conduct has been either right or wrong; If the former, I must not, in order to escape bodily suffering, commit an act which would place me in a despicable light before all mankind, friends and foes alike, and cause my children to blush for me after I am dead. On the other hand, if I felt a conscience of guilt, I would not content myself with offering 'future services.'

My conscience acquits me, is serene and undisturbed; if I die let me die in my integrity.<sup>21</sup>

Laurens was eventually exchanged for British General Earl Cornwallis.

Shortly after his release, Congress appointed him as minister, along with Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and John Jay, to negotiate a peace settlement with England in the city of Paris. On November 30, 1782, England officially recognized the independence of the United States upon the signing of this settlement. Though urged upon his return to Carolina to accept state and national offices of public service, Laurens chose rather to live out the remainder of his days at his Mepkin plantation. On December 8, 1792, he died.<sup>22</sup>

Before advancing any further, it is incumbent upon me, especially after calling for "truth in labeling," to briefly define "Pietism." Pietism focuses

<sup>19</sup>Quoted in Wallace, *The Life of Henry Laurens*, 229.

<sup>20</sup>Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina*, Vol. II, 262-263.

<sup>21</sup>*Collections of the South-Carolina Historical Society* (Charleston, S.C.: S.G. Courtenay & Co., 1857), Vol. II, 41.

<sup>22</sup>Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina*, Vol. II, 264.



**Fielding and Walker of Paternaster Row published this portrait of Henry Laurens as a young man on November 1, 1780. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**

on the inner, subjective elements of spiritual reality. Although external doctrine can play a foundational role (depending on the individual), the internal experiences of the soul dictate the extent of conformity to doctrinal propositions. Eighteenth-century Pietism was “a reaction against the lack of religious fervor, the moral laxity, the tendency toward cultural accommodation and the interconfessional bickering of the representatives of orthodoxy within the established Protestant communions.”<sup>23</sup> However,

<sup>23</sup>Daniel G. Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter Varsity Press, 1990), s.v. “Pietism,” by F.E. Stoeffler, 903.

due to the allowances made for allegiance to varying external denominational forms (as long as the internal realities regulated), a pietist might be found worshiping in any given Protestant congregation. In fact, the original plan set forth by Count Zinzendorf, founder of the pietistic Moravian sect, discouraged followers from becoming a separate denomination. He encouraged Moravians to maintain varying denominational ties in the spirit of the Church Universal.<sup>24</sup>

In sum, Pietism does not conform to any particular external form. "It had no one system of theology, no one integrating doctrine, no particular type of polity, no one liturgy, no geographical homogeneity. Yet, . . . it presented a discernible historical unity."<sup>25</sup>

Like Calvinism or Puritanism, Pietism is a "discernible religious movement." It, as is generally agreed, originated on the European continent first among German Lutherans.<sup>26</sup> Although Pietism by its very nature is not confined to any denominational setting, one of several identifiable pietistic representatives in the American colonies was the Unatas Fractum sect, more commonly known as the Moravians.

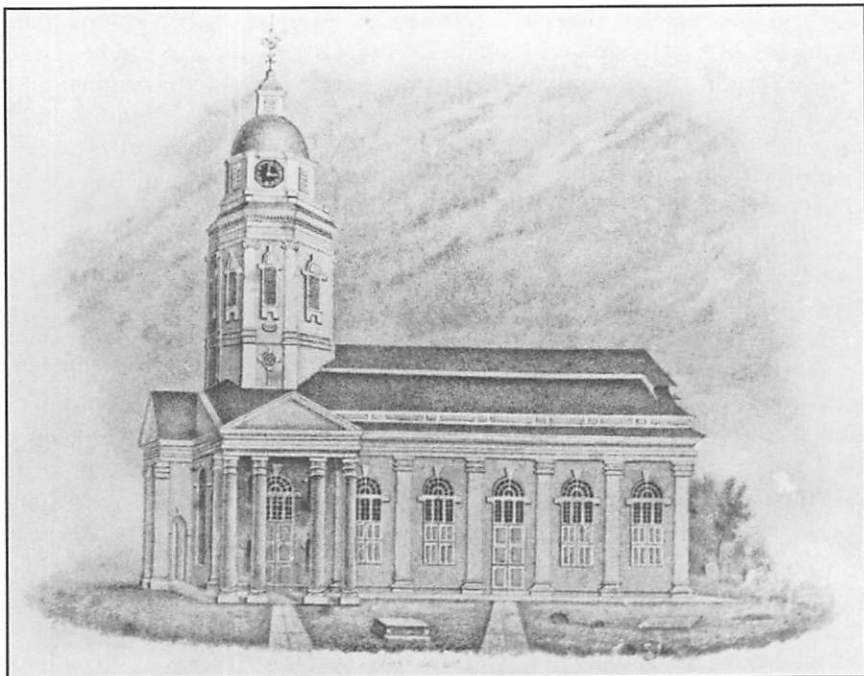
The influence of the Moravians on American Christianity cannot be underestimated. This influence often came indirectly. The confident piety of the Georgia Moravians had a profound impact on John Wesley leading eventually to his Aldersgate experience where his heart was "strangely warmed." George Whitefield owed much to the inner spiritual reality demonstrated by the Moravians as opposed to the cold orthodoxy he witnessed among his Anglican brethren. Due to this impact, Whitefield directly involved himself with early Moravian immigration to Pennsylvania. In order to aid in their establishment in the colonies he, among other things, offered them free transportation to Philadelphia on his vessel, the *Savannah*.<sup>27</sup> The Moravians, as will be seen, had an equally decisive impact on Laurens' spirituality, prompting him toward similar benevolent actions on their

<sup>24</sup>Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 99.

<sup>25</sup>F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971), 13.

<sup>26</sup>Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, 902-903. The men credited for initiating Pietism as an identifiable historical movement were the German Lutheran ministers Philipp Jacob Spener (1635-1705) and August Hermann Francke (1663-1727). Francke's writings and works of charity were particularly influential on the ministries of John Wesley and George Whitefield.

<sup>27</sup>Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder*, 96-97; Whitefield eventually broke fellowship with the Moravians over their tendency toward universalism and perfectionism.



**Engraving of St. Philip's Church by John P. Hall. This engraving depicts the second edifice occupied by the parish that was erected in 1737 and burned in 1834. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**

behalf.<sup>28</sup>

Since Pietism is somewhat theologically elusive, it is difficult to use any one set model as an all inclusive representation. If it can be determined, however, that certain religious beliefs and practices in a given individual proceed from an inward experiential dominance as opposed to an outward doctrinal dominance, a working pietistic model can be developed.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Adelaide L. Fries, ed., *Records of the Moravians in North Carolina*, Publications of the North Carolina Historical Commission (Raleigh, N.C.: The North Carolina Historical Commission, 1941), Vol. V, 1989, 1991, 2221, 2301, 2327, 2338.

<sup>29</sup>See Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 9-23; Stoeffler offers a four point working model of Pietism: experiential, biblical, perfectionistic, and opposite. Where I differ with Stoeffler is in his placing the experiential element as separate from and equal to the other three. Pietism is best understood, however, as predominantly experiential with all other factors subordinate. In my model for Laurens I have eliminated "perfectionistic" since there is no evidence of Laurens believing in sinless perfection in this life. It should be added that the early pietistic initiators such as Spener and Francke did not espouse perfectionism. Laurens did believe and long for what he called the "perfection of Existence" (HL to John Laurens upon the death of son James, age ten, January 4, 1776, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. X, 618).

The first such experiential factor pointing to Laurens' pietistic development concerns personal conversion. Again, this does not suggest that spiritual conversion is unique to Pietism but simply that for pietists the *experience* of conversion takes precedence over any doctrinal propositions held.

From early on, Laurens had been a communicant member at St. Philip's Anglican Church in Charleston under the watchful ministry of Alexander Garden. Garden was rector of St. Philip's for thirty-four years; much of which he served as the Commissary for the Bishop of London over the Bahamas, Georgia, North and South Carolina. He was known for his strict and methodical attendance to Church form and doctrine. It is particularly noteworthy that Commissary Garden took the lead in confronting Whitefield in Charleston, principally over his nonconformist, enthusiastic style.<sup>30</sup> In 1754 Garden left St. Philip's for health reasons. In the farewell letter signed by churchwardens William Stone and Henry Laurens, as well as several other parishioners and vestrymen, Garden is praised for his "able, constant, and unwearied diligence in the Ministry." The letter further stated "that whilst Christianity has such advocates, the Church of England such Pastors, and the Parish of St. Philip such Rectors as you have been, there can be no great Danger of Deism or Infidelity; on the contrary, we may, with great Reason and Justice, expect the Propagation of true Religion and Virtue amongst the Inhabitants of this Parish."<sup>31</sup> Little did these dedicated parishioners know what different form the "Propagation of true Religion" was to take at St. Philip's.

St. Philip's next rector was the Reverend Richard Clarke. Clarke, a graduate of Oxford, had already established himself as an astute theologian within the Anglican Church.<sup>32</sup> The differences, however, between Garden and Clarke were significant. Whereas Garden, in his great distrust of "enthusiasm," saw the need for a strict adherence to reason apart from any

Yet, in the context of his statement, such perfection is attained in the afterlife, a tenant commonly held even by non-pietistic Evangelicals. I have also eliminated the "opposite" characteristic (that a movement is identifiable in part through the contrast of its surrounding opposition environment) since it is more applicable to a group demographic analysis rather than an individual study. It should be noted, however, that the religious "opposite" element is present in certain of Laurens' relationships (i.e., Egerton Leigh).

<sup>30</sup>Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina*, Vol. II, 256; for letters by Commissary Garden concerning his tensions with Whitefield see George W. Williams, ed., "Letters from Alexander Garden, Commissary 1729-49," *South Carolina Historical Magazine* 78 (October 1977), 296-299.

<sup>31</sup>*Laurens Papers*, Vol. I, 244.

<sup>32</sup>See Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina*, Vol. II, 251; upon Clarke's departure his parishioners said of him that he was "known as a theologian beyond the limits of America, [more] than any other inhabitant of Carolina" (251).

notion of an experiential conversion, Clarke stressed the opposite.<sup>33</sup> Clarke's more evangelical ministry in Charleston had a profound impact on the parish. "When he preached," David Ramsay recorded, "the church was crowded, and the effects of it were visible in the reformed lives of many of his hearers, and the increased number of serious communicants."<sup>34</sup> Considering the nature of Clarke's emphasis on conversion, it appears that parishioners were finding an inner reality previously unknown to them under Garden's ministry.

Another difference between Garden and Clarke was the latter's ecumenical spirit. Whereas for Garden, one's "profession of religion" must be "regulated in all respects by the prescribed forms of the church," Clarke saw Christianity in an all-inclusive context.<sup>35</sup> He demonstrated this spirit by helping to form a nondenominational religious society in Charleston. The society consisted of members and ministers of Anglican, Congregationalist, Scots Presbyterian, and Independent Presbyterian congregations.<sup>36</sup> Henry Laurens was a co-founder and faithful supporter of this society for many years. For the pietist, inner conversion is not confined to denominational allegiance.

Clarke's ministry in Charleston was profound but brief. A tendency toward fanatical excess led to his eventual departure from Charleston. On September 1, 1759, Governor Henry Lyttelton gave this astonishing account to the Lords of Trade concerning the rector of Charleston's most esteemed parish:

In the month of February last the Reverend Mr. Clarke, Rector of one of the parishes in this town, a clergyman of much learning but of an overheated imagination, preached some sermons in which he asserted that the world wou'd very soon be at an end, and that in this month of September some great calamity wou'd befall this province. At length this enthusiasm rose to such a height that he let his beard grow and run about the streets crying, Repent, Repent for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand, but on the 25th of March he resigned his Benefice and embarked for England.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup>Lyon G. Tyler, "The Gnostic Trap: Richard Clarke and His Proclamation of the Millennium and Universal Restoration in South Carolina and England," *Anglican and Episcopal History* 58 (June 1989), 147-148.

<sup>34</sup>Ramsay, *Ramsay's History of South Carolina*, Vol. II, 251.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 256.

<sup>36</sup>*Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>37</sup>Quoted in George C. Rogers, Jr., *Evolution of a Federalist: William Loughton Smith of Charleston (1758-1812)* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1962), 33.

Significant for our study is what appears to have been a change in Laurens' religious direction during this time. After Clarke's ministry at St. Philip's, Laurens seems to have taken on the characteristics of a seeker. In 1761 he visited the Moravian community in Bethabara, North Carolina, in order to establish a trading link with that community and Charleston. It was clear, at least to some Moravian observers, that his visit entailed more than business.

... We had a visit from Mr. Frohock, our County Clerk, and Mr. Henry Laurens, a colonel and wine merchant from Charlestown. They and their company left on the 19th and Br. Ettwein accompanied them as far as Spach's. The Colonel said that he had not come out of mere curiosity, but that he had heard much about us and wished to know us. He modestly asked many questions about our doctrine and mode of life, and seemed well pleased with all. It appeared that he and others had been awakened by Whitefield, and had formed a religious association or club.<sup>38</sup>

Whether or not Laurens had been awakened directly by the ministry of Whitefield is uncertain. It is difficult to determine whether this Moravian observer simply assumed Laurens had been awakened by the famous evangelist or if Laurens actually made mention of it himself. Although he did become acquainted with Whitefield and expressed enthusiastic support for his ministry, no reference is made by Laurens to the effect that Whitefield was directly instrumental in his conversion.<sup>39</sup> What is certain however, whether under the influence of Clarke or Whitefield, Laurens did begin to manifest an experiential pietistic influence that would help to shape his religious perspective for life.

Another characteristic of pietistic experientialism is a strong spirit of catholicity. Pietism has a transcendent quality that avoids doctrinal distinction for the sake of a higher fellowship.

A revealing series of letters (1762-63) between Laurens and Moravian missionary John Ettwein demonstrates this pietistic element. "As I have once taken you as a Lover of Christ & a Friend to practical Religion;" Ettwein wrote Laurens, "And As we love all the Scatter'd Children of God in what Place & in what Christian Denomination they may be placed by Providence, we are also very glad to Know them & hear of them, to have a Fellowship in the Spirit." He went on to write of the unifying quality that exists in the

<sup>38</sup>*Laurens Papers*, Vol. III, 56n.

<sup>39</sup>HL to James Habersham, March 4, 1770, *ibid.*, Vol. VII, 241-242.

atoning work of Christ whereby those who are "saved by one Blood & Death" are members of "one Body, Whereof He is the Head," and "His Church is invisible." This common ground of experiential conversion elevates the believer to heights of fellowship that "outweigh all Differences in Sentiments and Persuasions." It was on these matters that Laurens had been inquiring. "You have been an excellent Enquirer," Ettwein continued, "and I have told you the Truth in the Presence of God to all your Queries, And shall always do so, if you at any time will ask me the Truth about this or that."<sup>40</sup>

The next month, Laurens wrote to Ettwein, "I am delighted with your truly catholic sentiment. Christs Church upon earth I believe is invisible, made up of Members of various outward denominations & professions amongst Christians all Led by the same Spirit & hungering & thirsting after the same Bread & Fountain of Life. Thy Kingdome come, Thy Will be done O Lord!" He also acknowledged in the same letter that he had carefully read a book given to him by Ettwein entitled *Of the Introduction to the Method or Way &ca.* This work has not been identified either to its authorship or content. Nevertheless, that it was of a pietistic Moravian strain there can be little doubt. Laurens informed Ettwein, "I put your Book . . . into the hands of a [sensible] Man, one of our Clergy lately, he read it & told me that he had marked with his pencil such parts as in his opinion were faulty . . . I have reviewed those parts again and again," assured Laurens, "but have not penetration enough to discover any repugnance in them to the precepts of our Saviour." Concerning other matters of religious inquiry Laurens wrote, "You gave me great satisfaction by your answers to such enquiries as I have heretofore made & I have no other [to make] at this time . . . "<sup>41</sup>

In the next correspondence Ettwein explained in considerable detail certain Moravian tenets and practices in answer to Laurens' concern over "secret" meetings held by the sect. Ettwein stressed that these special "private Meetings" were an essential part of their worship. The meetings were not for the purpose of hiding any doctrine or action, but simply a means whereby believers of like faith could sequester for a time of teaching on "Holiness and Chastity in Soul & Body." He assured Laurens that "the Gospel the Sweet Tiding of the Love of God, & our Redemption with the Admonition be ye reconciled unto God is for ev'ry body without

<sup>40</sup>John Ettwein to HL, March 20, 1762, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. III, 91; For a treatment of John Ettwein's wider ministry see Daniel Thorp, *The Moravian Community in Colonial North Carolina: Pluralism on the Southern Frontier* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); also see Kenneth G. Hamilton, *John Ettwein and the Moravian Church during the Revolutionary Period* (Bethlehem, Pennsylvania: Times Publishing Company, 1940).

<sup>41</sup>HL to John Ettwein, April 7, 1762, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. III, 92, 93.



Distinction."<sup>42</sup>

Although no other letter written by Ettwein is as detailed on religious matters as this one, the two men continued to correspond on spiritual subjects for months. In November 1763, during a time of widespread fever attacks in Charleston (five inhabitants of Laurens' home had been bedridden for two months—one of his slaves had died), Laurens expressed his mutual catholic spirit to Ettwein. "Methinks our religious sentiments are so little different & I believe our endeavors are so much the same that I am full of an humble confidence that after we have passed thro this Vale of Sin & misery we shall enjoy everlasting communion in the presence of the one ever blessed & adorable God, Father, Son, & Spirit. These are my most comfortable thoughts."<sup>43</sup> Even considering the pliable attitude that might accompany such a time of trial, for Laurens to identify himself so emphatically with the religious views of this Moravian missionary is no small testament to his catholic spirit and his settled persuasion toward a pietistic religious bent.

A third experiential characteristic that may be considered an outgrowth of this catholic spirit toward all Christian adherents is the recognition of eventual salvation to all men irrespective of their religious persuasions. Not all pietists were willing to take such an all encompassing position, but it is generally agreed that pietists first introduced the doctrine of universalism to colonial America.<sup>44</sup> Universalism is the belief that all men everywhere finally will be saved. The earlier adherents, as opposed to later universalists influenced by German rationalism, generally held to an evangelical belief in the infallibility of Scripture. They saw the sacrifice of Christ as all sufficient for all men to the point that all men ultimately benefited eternally from that sacrifice.<sup>45</sup>

During the time of Richard Clarke's ministry in Charleston, he began to demonstrate clear universalist tendencies.<sup>46</sup> Probably the two most potent influences on Clarke during his tenure in Charleston were the works of German mystic Jacob Boehme (1575-1624) and English mystic William Law (1686-1761).<sup>47</sup> The widely influential Boehme believed his writings to be directly inspired of God. Much of Clarke's millennial thinking (which has relevance to his universalist tendencies) can be attributed to Boehme.<sup>48</sup> Possibly, a more direct universalist influence on Clarke was the work of

<sup>42</sup>John Ettwein to HL, June 24, 1762, *ibid.*, 101, 103.

<sup>43</sup>HL to John Ettwein, November 10, 1763, *ibid.*, Vol. IV, 42.

<sup>44</sup>Reid et al., eds., *Dictionary of Christianity in America*, s.v. "Universalism," by R.P. Hesselgrave, 1205.

<sup>45</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup>Tyler, "The Gnostic Trap," 152.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*

William Law. Law, who himself had been profoundly influenced by Jacob Boehme, had a wide spectrum of appeal to evangelicals of eighteenth-century England and America. John Wesley and George Whitefield acknowledged their debt to William Law.<sup>49</sup> One particular tenet, however, that neither Wesley nor Whitefield adopted from Law was his universalism. Clarke, on the other hand, found Law's presentation of universalism much harder to resist and well within the scope of his ever-growing mystical approach to the Faith. As a memorial to Law upon his death, Clarke penned the following that aptly illustrates his own affinity for Law's religious dynamic.

Farwell [sic], good Man! Whose great  
and heavenly mind  
In Love embrac'd the whole of human kind . . .  
. . . Bound to no Sect, to no one party tied,  
To Sons of God, in every clime allied.<sup>50</sup>

It is important to remember that for an evangelical such as Clarke to adopt a universalist stratum of interpretation, orthodox distinctives must give way to a more dominant experiential standard.<sup>51</sup> Such an interpretive framework is readily accessible within a pietistic approach to doctrine. Clarke, Law, and other eighteenth-century universalists acknowledged scriptural authenticity while at the same time allowed the "spirit" to dictate the "letter."

<sup>49</sup>See [John Wesley], *The Works of John Wesley* (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), Vol. X, 403; and [George Whitefield], *George Whitefield's Journals* (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), 45, 46, 79, 144, 254; it should be noted that early in both Wesley's and Whitefield's ministries they distanced themselves, at least publicly, from the more mystical teachings of William Law.

<sup>50</sup>Richard Clarke, "Lines to the Memory of the Late Rev. William Law," chapter in *A Series of Letters, Essays, Dissertations, and discourses on Various Subjects* (London: R. Hawes, n.d.), 347.

<sup>51</sup>For a modern example consider Neo-Orthodox theologian Karl Barth. Barth "held" to evangelical distinctives through the medium of an "I-Thou" [experientially dominant] encounter within the realm of what he called "salvation history" as opposed to verifiable earthly history; thus, while rejecting a literal interpretation of eternal retribution passages, he avoided in his own mind a rejection of the eternal Word of God. For an example of Barth's dual view of history see Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, Vol. III, No. 3, *The Doctrine of Creation*, trans. G.W. Bromiley and R.J. Ehrlich (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), 374n.

Laurens sent several theological works by Clarke and Law for John Ettwein's examination. Though Laurens passed no value judgments one way or the other on the writings, it is likely that he had been influenced through Clarke's positive recommendation. "I send you together with his [Richard Clarke] Prophetic Numbers another treatise published by him, *The spiritual Voice & ca.*"<sup>52</sup> The three tracts by William Law were entitled *The Spirit of Love* (1752), *An Humble, Earnest, and Affectionate Address to the Clergy* (1761), and *A Collection of Letters on the most interesting and important Subjects, and on several Seasons* (1760).<sup>53</sup> *The Spirit of Love* typifies the universalism of Law. "To say . . . that Vengeance is to be reserved to God, is only saying, in other Words, that all the Evils in Nature are to be reserved and turned over to the Love of God, to be healed by his Goodness."<sup>54</sup> "Wisdom," Law wrote in another treatise, "*putteth forth her Voice, not here, or there, but everywhere, in all the Streets of all the Parts of the World*" seeking "Entrance into all [Christians, Jews, and Heathens] of them."<sup>55</sup>

The work by Clarke, *Prophetic Numbers* (1759), is a booklet written during his ministry at St. Philip's. It is an elaborate endeavor to calculate the numbers in the books of Daniel and Revelation so as to determine the end of the age. The booklet's full title clearly demonstrates Clarke's objective: *The Prophetic Numbers of Daniel and John Calculated In order to shew the Time, when the Day of Judgment for this First Age of the Gospel, is to be expected: And the Setting up the Millennial Kingdom of Jehovah and his Christ.* In this work Clarke predicted that the end of the age would occur in the year 1762, thus

<sup>52</sup>HL to John Ettwein, April 7, 1762, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. III, 93.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>William Law, *The Spirit of Prayer and the Spirit of Love*, ed. Sidney Spencer (Cambridge: James Clarke & Co. LTD., 1969), 227.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 62. There has been considerable debate as to whether or not Law actually taught universalism. It is true that in his earlier writings he did not. Yet, after beginning a systematic study of Boehme's works in 1735, Law began to adopt universalist teaching. Note the following from his *Spirit of Prayer* (1749): "See here the Beginning and glorious Extent of the *Catholic Church* of Christ, it takes in all the World. It is God's unlimited, universal Mercy to all Mankind; and every human Creature, as sure as he is born of Adam, has a Birth of the Bruiser of the Serpent within him, and so is infallibly in Covenant with God through Jesus Christ." Ibid., 43. For an explanation of this transition see *ibid.*, Introduction, 9. For works that argue against Law as a universalist see Tyler, "The Gnostic Trap," 167; Erwin Paul Rudolph, *William Law* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1980), 75-76. A. Keith Walker admits that Law did become a universalist but sees the evidence as sketchy. See his *William Law: His Life and Thought* (London: S.P.C.K., 1973), 222. In my view, there is enough evidence to conclude that the transition to a universalist position took place.

explaining his prophetic frenzy on the streets of Charleston.<sup>56</sup> Permeating this work are remnants of the mystic and even gnostic influences from Boehme and Law as is evidenced by the following.

Others expect Christ to be a *sin-offering*, which *Paul* the prophet says, was only *once* to be offered in our flesh: But the people of his holy *spirit, water, and blood*, who are *truly* partakers of his *spiritual* and *divine* nature, were to feed on him as their *daily-meat* and *drink-offering*, and *peace-offering* from the *alter of fire*: From whence he is *feeding* his great congregation, and *covering* them under the *glory* of all the *Cherubim* burning to the four corners of the earth.<sup>57</sup>

Important to our consideration of universalism is that underlying Clarke's emphasis on millennialism was his complementary adoption of an ultimate restoration for mankind through the sacrifice of Christ. Although the above statement bears marks of spiritual exclusivity (i.e., "people ... who are truly partakers"), Clark saw all men as eventually becoming part of the "great congregation." His statement of the Cherubim's covering glory that burns "to the four corners of the earth" hints of his universalist bent as well. "The central focus of Clarke's thoughts," as Lyon Tyler has written, "remained the soon-coming millennium and that last great judgment day when all mankind and angels would eventually be saved and love would reign supreme."<sup>58</sup>

Ettwein was very enthusiastic about William Law's works commenting on the "many Pearls & very essential Truths in them." "Tho' I am quite a Novice to Mystic Luanguage [sic]," he wrote, "the love of God &cc and these Scripture Truths, I eat with Delight."<sup>59</sup> As for Clarke's writings, Ettwein simply stated, "I wish he had remain'd a Preacher of Jesus Christ and think he would thereby have more wrought in the Vineyard of the Lord, than by his Writings."<sup>60</sup> Moravians were generally more mystically inclined than the above statements suggest. Yet, even for Ettwein, one of that sect's most prominent leaders in America, Clarke's strong mystical and millennial

<sup>56</sup>Richard Clarke, *The Prophetic Numbers of Daniel and John Calculated in Order to shew the Time, when the Day of Judgment for this First Age of the Gospel, is to be expected: And the Setting up the Millennial Kingdom of Jehovah and his Christ* (Charles Town: Peter Timothy, 1759), 27.

<sup>57</sup>*Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>58</sup>Tyler, "The Gnostic Trap," 152, 161.

<sup>59</sup>John Ettwein to HL, June 24, 1762, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. III, 103.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*

elements were, it would appear, too radical. Laurens on the other hand, at least at this stage in his spiritual journey, did not show the same degree of reservation.

The question for consideration at this point is, to what extent did this experientially generated, universalist thinking that surrounded Laurens by 1760 influence his own religiosity? Interestingly enough, Laurens' early childhood impressions indicate his natural bent for a more inclusive view of salvation. When Laurens became the chairman of South Carolina's Continental Association just prior to revolutionary hostilities, he was faced with the "Test Oath" controversy whereby certain zealous patriots wanted to stigmatize those of loyalist leanings who refused to sign an oath of colonial unity. Laurens unequivocally denounced such a requirement citing his long held distaste for oath requirements in the religious realm. In a letter to his son John he recounted his dissenting speech to the Association.

I hate all Dogmatic & arbitrary dictates over Mens Consciences\_ here Gentlemen is a Book\_ from which we have just heard Prayers, an Orthodox Book in which I find a Doctrine similar to that which I now object to in our intended Association\_ "Which Faith except every one do keep whole & undefiled without doubt he shall Perish Everlastingly" Long was this Athanasian Test, a stumbling block in the cause of Religion in general . . . Honest minded Men of narrow & fervorous Zeal for the same religion\_ abandoned & detested that Church which maintained such intolerant damnatory tenets, as essential to Salvation.

When I was a Boy. . . I have heard my Father & my Mother & many other good old People profess that Creed with great warmth of Devotion\_ I, at the same time inwardly exclaiming\_ this can't be true\_ I cannot beleive [sic] it\_....<sup>61</sup>

It seems, therefore, given this early religious flexibility, Laurens tended toward universalist thinking even prior to the influence of Clarke or Law. If that be so, it is safe to assume that their influence helped to strengthen his belief in the final salvation for all men. This resolve is aptly illustrated in his thoughts on one of Christianity's then most ardent critics, Francois Marie Arouet—better known by his pen name, Voltaire. While in Geneva attending to his sons' education in 1773, Laurens informed his London friend Richard Oswald that earlier hopes of seeing Voltaire would not be realized due to the latter's failing health. "I know too little of Voltaire," Laurens wrote, "to presume to enter upon particulars relative to his History, but in general I

<sup>61</sup>HL to John Laurens, June 8, 1775, *ibid.*, Vol. X, 176-177.

I cannot be such a Fool - I dare not be such a Villain - I hate all dogmatical & arbitrary disputes  
 over Mens Conscience - here Gentlemen is a Book - from which we have just heard prayers, an  
 Orthodox Book in which I find a Doctrine similar to that which I object to in our intended. Affirma-  
 -tion - "Which Faith except every one do keep whole & undefiled without doubt he shall perish  
 Everlastingly"  
 Long was this Athanasian Test, a stumbling block in the cause of Religion in general, a bar to the honour  
 & prosperity of the Church established by Law - upon that foundation Divis wrote their batteries, Like  
 warm Christians pleaded for their indifference - how <sup>said these</sup> can a Religion which contains such unmerciful Doc-  
 -trines be true, or acceptable to Mankind? Honest minded Men of nervous & fervorous Zeal for the same  
 religion - abandoned & detested that Church which maintained such intolerant damnatory tenets, as open-  
 -tial to Salvation.  
 When I was a Boy, before there was any settled principles of Religion in my mind, I have  
 heard my Father & my Mother & many other good old people profess that Creed with great warmth  
 of Devotion - I, at the same time inwardly reclaiming - this can't be true - I cannot believe it - I now

In this June 8, 1775, letter to his son John, Henry Laurens denounced the use of oaths in the religious realm. From the Henry Laurens Letterbook, South Carolina Historical Society.

may say that he seems to enjoy Blessings, . . . a sound Conscience & peace of Mind. His passage therefore, be his Errors in Judgement what they may, must be Smooth, and, I have too much Charity if it does not also prove, Safe. The mistakes of the most brilliant Reptile fancy," echoing William Law's principle of divine love's operational precedent over judgment, "cannot defeat the Schemes of unerring Wisdom."<sup>62</sup> Thus, to Laurens the workings of God's "unerring Wisdom" would overrule the "mistakes" and "Errors in Judgement" even of one who openly rejected the Christian faith. Laurens believed, in other words, that Voltaire would go to heaven.

A final element pointing to the pietism of Henry Laurens concerns his use of the Bible. Any evangelical movement, pietistic or otherwise, can in one way or other be characterized as biblical. That is, the Bible strongly informs the beliefs held. In characterizing evangelical Pietism as biblical, the emphasis is more on the extent to which pietists see in biblical passages a personal, practical, and contemporary relevance beyond a strict credal structure.<sup>63</sup> The Bible itself uniquely enters into experience providing an interpretive window for contemporary events.<sup>64</sup>

Laurens ability to naturally weave biblical context and language into the events of his life impressively demonstrates how dedicated he was to not only the careful reading and memorizing of Scripture but also to the principle of making inner, contemporary application of its precepts.

While in London in 1774 Laurens increasingly spoke of the ever-widening gap between the British and colonial positions. It is interesting to see Laurens begin to formulate the tensions into a biblical, and even millennial framework.

If the Americans adhere Steadily to their present Subsisting Resolutions & the British Ministry are as tenacious of their Diabolical plan, we Shall certainly be laid under many difficulties in our part of the World . . . . The view is painful & nothing less than that confirmed patriotism which is equal to forsaking Father & Mother & House & Land for the Kingdom of Heaven's Sake, can Support & conduct us chearfully [sic] through it.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup>HL to Richard Oswald, May 31, 1773, *ibid.*, Vol. IX, 57.

<sup>63</sup>For a similar Puritan pietistic (Samuel Sewall) usage see David D. Hall, *Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Belief in Early New England* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989).

<sup>64</sup>For a good discussion of this pietistic use of the Bible see Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, 20-21.

<sup>65</sup>HL to Ralph Izard, September 20, 1774, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. IX, 566; for other examples of Laurens' use of Scripture see *Laurens Papers*, XI, 463; Vol. XIV, 258.

By this stage of the tension (September 1774), the lines were clearly drawn in his mind between the iniquity of certain British officials and the righteousness of the American cause. The following month Laurens compared his plight to that of his grandfather who had lost all as a result of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685.<sup>66</sup> Though there is a clear risk of reading too much into his words, I think it plausible to suggest that Laurens viewed the shaping revolutionary events within the context of a spiritual battle similar to the plight of his Huguenot forebears less than a hundred years earlier.

When Laurens was a war prisoner in the Tower of London he exemplified this same characteristic. While in captivity certain of his friends informed him of the British plan to send agents from New York amongst the Pennsylvania defectors in order to solicit their enlistment into the British army. He compared the incident with a biblical account recorded in Acts 19. In this passage certain Jewish priests in Ephesus, sons of Sceva, took it upon themselves to exorcise, in the name of Jesus, evil spirits out of some who were possessed. Upon this attempt one of the spirits rebuked them saying, "Jesus I know, and Paul I know, but who are you?" (Acts 19:15). Laurens' biblical structuring of this event is significant on two counts. It not only illustrates again his pietistic application of written revelation, it also seems to indicate his own self identity as a possible instrument of prophetic utterance.

I said to those friends . . . "This circumstance is no more than I had expected, no more than I had foretold Congress before I quitted it . . ."

"With respect to the persons sent from New-York to enlist, depend upon it, they will meet a worse fate than the seven sons of Seeva [sic] did, (Acts 19th.) The defectioners will say to them, 'Congress we know! and Washington we know! but who are ye? who dare to interfere in our family quarrel?' They will seize those persons, and they will be treated as spies, and hanged. You will hear of this very soon."

These sentiments quieted the minds of true friends, and demonstrated to all, my confidence in the goodness of our cause.

My friends complimented me by saying in this article I had been prophetic: which lost me no credit with them.<sup>67</sup>

<sup>66</sup>HL to John Delagaye, October 21, 1774, *ibid.*, Vol. IX, 596.

<sup>67</sup>*Collections of the South Carolina Historical Society*, Vol. I, 44-45.



Another area that offers illumination on Laurens' experiential use of Scripture concerns his approach to the slavery question. Henry Laurens' view on slavery is somewhat an elusive and even paradoxical subject.<sup>68</sup> Laurens, early in his merchant career, trafficked in slaves. Gradually he turned down offers to participate in the trade, always careful not to offend his colleagues. By 1769 he had made a clean break. Slave trader and friend Richard Millerson sought out Laurens for a partnership whereupon Laurens replied, "I am very much obliged to you for the preference intended to me of your African business but I have wholly retired from that branch of trade & am endeavoring to draw all my commercial concerns within a very narrow compass."<sup>69</sup>

Not only did Laurens personally resign from that aspect of trading, he eventually became clear, at least privately, on his personal opposition to slavery all together. "I abhor Slavery," Laurens wrote to his son John (who had also come to oppose it and who would later make a more defined stand against it), ". . . I found the Christian Religion & Slavery growing under the same authority & cultivation\_\_ I nevertheless disliked it . . ." He expressed his desire for every man to "comply with the Golden Rule." Laurens saw a certain hypocrisy in people trusting God for national liberty on the one hand and denying the same to "thousands who are as well intitled [sic] to . . . freedom as themselves." "I shall appear to many not only of strange but of dangerous doctrines," he concluded, and "it will therefore be necessary to proceed with caution . . ."<sup>70</sup> "Proceed with caution" he did. To anyone who is familiar with the remaining years of Henry Laurens, the paradox of his position is evident, evident because he never relinquished his right to

<sup>68</sup>For a treatment of HL's ambivalent position on slavery see Gregory D. Massey, "The Limits of Antislavery Thought in the Revolutionary Lower South: John Laurens and Henry Laurens," *The Journal of Southern History* 63 (August 1997): 495-530; for a study that examines HL's slavery ideology without addressing the paradoxical element see Robert Olwell, "'A Reckoning of Accounts': Patriarchy, Market Relations, and Control on Henry Laurens's Lowcountry Plantations, 1762-1785," in *Working Toward Freedom*, ed. Larry E. Hudson, Jr. (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1994), 33-52; for a discussion showing this paradox translated into the spiritual struggles of Laurens' daughter Martha see Joanna Bowen Gillespie, "1795: Martha Laurens Ramsay's 'Dark Night of the Soul,'" *William and Mary Quarterly* 48 (January 1991): 81.

<sup>69</sup>HL to Richard Millerson, June 3, 1764, *Laurens Papers*, Vol. VI, 587.

<sup>70</sup>HL to John Laurens, August 14, 1776, *ibid.*, Vol. XI, 224-225.

purchase and own slaves.<sup>71</sup> It is not within the scope of this essay to solve this seemingly contradictory position. Certainly the obligation he felt for the protection and welfare of his slaves in the then uncertain world of "freedom" can be appreciated. He did go further than most of his day and position, but the paradox remains.

For our consideration, it is important to understand *why* he abhorred slavery. Admittedly, settlement upon any one motive for such action is tentative at best. Without concluding that the motive was purely born of contemporary biblical application, I suggest that such did play a significant role.

In the late 1760s during the legal battle between Laurens and vice admiralty judge Sir Egerton Leigh over the seizure of merchant vessels owned by Laurens, the exchange of public statements on the matter eventually reached a fevered pitch.<sup>72</sup> In his most elaborate and protracted published defense entitled *Man Unmasked* (May 1769), Leigh resorted to an outright personal invective against Laurens. In every way conceivable Leigh portrayed Laurens as the most hypocritical villain known to humanity. The volatile nature of this document warns the reader to proceed with utmost caution in making any concrete historical conclusions. Yet, there are some very interesting and consistent observations that may very well shed light on certain of Laurens' actions. After all, in order for Leigh to maintain any level of credibility, he would likely include traits that others had also observed in the well known merchant. For example, Leigh (who may have

<sup>71</sup>The following illustrates what may be considered a more typical attitude among Christian slaveholders and possibly represents how Laurens attempted to reconcile his paradox. In the summer of 1775 Laurens, as the president of the Council of Safety, defended a Scottish born preacher named John Burnet who had been accused of attempting to incite a slave insurrection on a plantation in St. Bartholomew parish. Laurens argued that Burnet "had never anything more in View than the Salvation of those poor ignorant creatures, that he had never a thought of exciting them to Insurrection, on the Contrary that he had endeavored to reconcile them to that Lot in Life in which God had placed them, and to impress upon their Minds; the Duty of Obedience to their Masters." Council of Safety to St. Bartholomew Committee, July 18, 1775, *ibid.*, Vol. X, 231. Laurens was so convinced of Burnet's evangelical motives that he offered him a job on one of his Georgia plantations. Three years later he wrote to him the following: "I hope I shall find you . . . in some other of my Plantations where you shall think you may be most serviceable . . ." HL to John Burnet, July 24, 1778, *ibid.*, Vol. XIV, 65. Laurens, it may be inferred, saw the Christian conversion of his slaves as a means by which he could balance his dislike for slave trading with his role as slaveholder.

<sup>72</sup>For an examination of Leigh's career see Robert M. Calhoon and Robert M. Wier, "The Scandalous History of Sir Egerton Leigh," *William and Mary Quarterly* 26 (January 1969), 47-74.

personally observed Laurens since they both were members of St. Philip's at this time)<sup>73</sup> berated Laurens for being "transcendently moved" during the repetition of the Litany—an appearance, incidentally, wholly consistent with a pietistic mode of worship. "Every feature pays its adoration," Leigh continued, "and all the man is swallowed up in sublime and heavenly contemplation!" All of this was to Leigh calculated hypocrisy since in his estimation Laurens' "constant aim [was] to seem religious."<sup>74</sup>

Leigh carried his accusations further criticizing Laurens for his unwarranted interpretation of Revelation chapter 18. This biblical passage concerns merchants of "all nations," who in concert with Babylon's riches, eventually participate in her destruction at the end of the age. One of the identifying marks of the doomed merchants was that they trafficked in slaves (verse 13). "He reads the Revelations," Leigh wrote, "which speak of divers articles of merchandize, and finding that *slaves* and the souls of men are also in . . . the enumerated list, swears that St. John meant, in his *vision*, the pernicious practice of the *African trade*; he therefore withdrew himself from the horrid and barbarous connection . . . ." Leigh played upon the aforementioned paradox as proof of Laurens' hypocritical use of Scripture by adding that Laurens retained "to himself, a few of those *jewels* [slaves] which he had heretofore amassed, some of the *wages* of this *abominable trade* . . . ." <sup>75</sup> It seems that one of Leigh's primary objectives in *Man Unmasked* was to try and establish that Laurens was disingenuous in all his dealings by suggesting overt hypocrisy in the one area that Laurens cherished most—the religious.

In *Appendix to the Extracts* (August 1769), Laurens responded to several of the accusations. Concerning Leigh's assessment on the slave matter he wrote, "What Benefit is it to the Public to know the Motives and Principles from which I quitted the African Branch of Commerce?" Leigh's "insinuations" are "false, calumnious and foolish . . . ." <sup>76</sup> As mentioned earlier, Laurens was always careful not to offend his colleagues in relation to their participation in the trade. Possibly he feared, with the publication of his personal biblical assessment in *Man Unmasked*, that such an offense was forthcoming especially if his friends concluded that he considered them under divine condemnation. He continued,

I had several Reasons for retiring from that Trade . . . .  
I had no Partner, and was not disposed to engage one;

<sup>73</sup>See D. E. Huger Smith and A. S. Salley, Jr., eds., *Register of St. Philip's Parish, Charles Town, or Charleston, S. C. 1754-1810* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1971), 42, 69, 74, 87, 289, 291, 294, 313, 321, 328, 332.

<sup>74</sup>Egerton Leigh, *Man Unmasked*, in *Laurens Papers*, Vol. VI, 523.

<sup>75</sup>*Ibid.*, 528.

<sup>76</sup>Laurens, *Appendix to the Extracts*, in *Laurens Papers*, Vol. VII, 99.

therefore seeing that I could not do that Justice to my Constituents which they had a Right to expect . . . about six Years ago, in the midst of many very *generous*, very *inviting* Offers, from my Friends in England, I relinquished the gainful Commissions arising from the Sale of Negroes: I could have resigned them into the Hands of young Men, whom I wished very well, and who would gladly have shared the Profits with me, but I refused . . . "to *retain such Jewels*;" I consulted therefore *solely* the Interest of my good Friends, and transferred their Business into the Hands of Gentlemen who could transact it to the greatest Advantage . . . .<sup>77</sup>

Even if we interpret from this response that Leigh completely made up the biblical comparison (a prospect which I do not believe Laurens' statement requires), the reputation that Laurens had gained for biblical contemporary application undoubtedly created the backdrop for Leigh to contrive such a story. Of the "several Reasons for retiring from that Trade," it is plausible that one, and possibly the dominant one, originated from his pietistic interpretation of Scripture. The Bible was more than a book expounding doctrines for life. To Laurens the pietist, the Bible was part of life itself, words to be woven into the fabric of his present existence.

In 1775 Edmund Burke stood before the House of Commons and warned that religion, in particular American religion, possessed a unique "principle of energy." The colonists are from that mold of Protestant belief "most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion." In fact, he stressed, their liberty is "built upon it." Within this evangelical mold of American Protestantism Burke saw the impetus for the colonists "strong claim to natural liberty."<sup>78</sup>

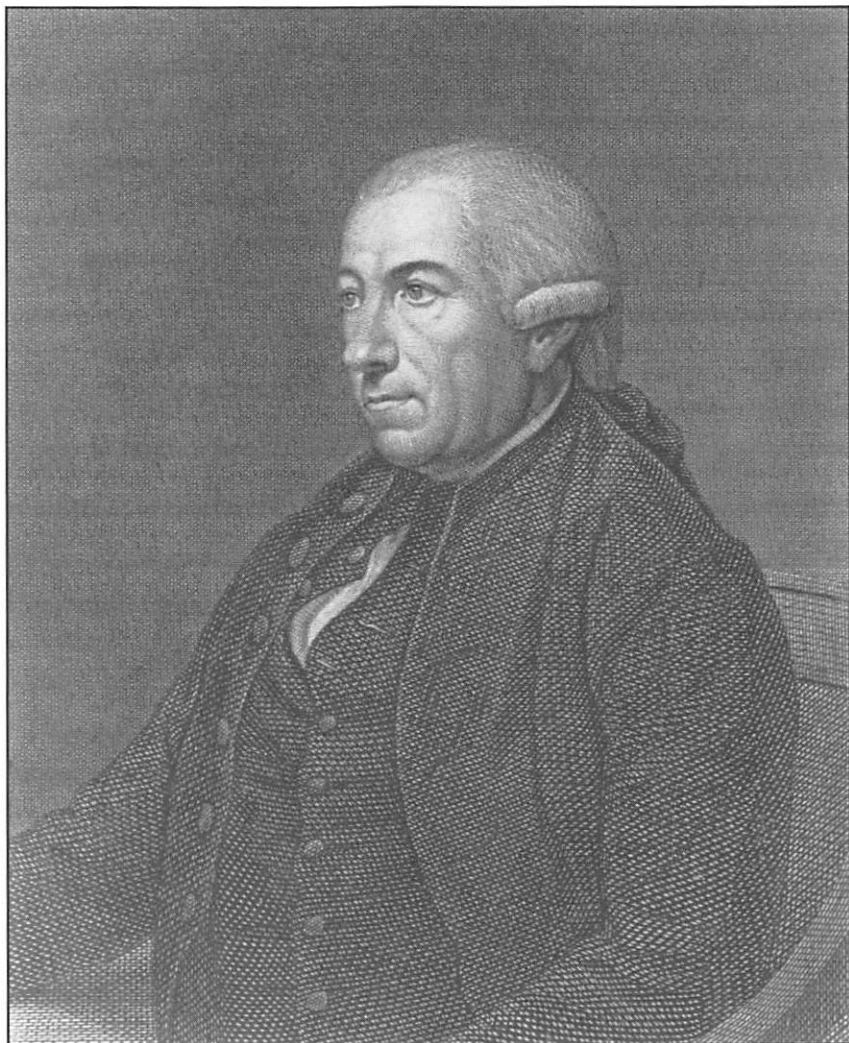
Much has been made of the role of Enlightenment ideology that accompanied the growing patriot sentiments prior to the outbreak of the American Revolution. What may justify more recognition, as David Lovejoy has shown, is the transfer of religious enthusiasm to the political realm.<sup>79</sup> Alan Heimert has also noted that the Revolution "was not so much the result of reasoned thought as an emotional outburst similar to a religious revival" since, in his view, "religious enthusiasm . . . fed the decade's tendency toward increasing political agitation."<sup>80</sup> Henry Laurens, although never

<sup>77</sup>Ibid., 99-100.

<sup>78</sup>Quoted in David S. Lovejoy, *Religious Enthusiasm in the New World: Heresy to Revolution* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1985), 215.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., 222.

<sup>80</sup>Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution*, 21, 355.



**An engraving of Henry Laurens by Neagle. From the collections of the South Carolina Historical Society.**

given to emotion in excess, still possessed a guiding experiential principle of religion that may justify considering him a microcosm of Heimert's proposition.

Patricia Bonomi has pointed out that Enlightenment Rationalism and Continental Pietism were the two leading spectrums of thought in competition for the Western mind.<sup>81</sup> Colonial leaders driven for American

<sup>81</sup>Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven : Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 131.

independence are generally considered more within the Enlightenment than Pietistic strain. Henry Laurens was of the latter. He had not always been. One might infer by his early adoption of Alexander Pope's motto in "Essay on Man"—"Whatever is, is best"—that Enlightenment thinking would dominate his life long philosophy. But at age fifty-eight he changed his motto to "Whatever God wills must be best, now or eventually."<sup>82</sup>

Laurens cherished independence as deeply as any of those patriots and founding fathers who wavered little from their rationalistic foundations of liberty, and it should not be assumed that his pietistic bent necessarily lead him to disparage the conclusions they reached by such thinking. But for him, beyond the sensory realm of earthly affairs, existed a world just as real, a world that represented a deeper and enduring freedom, not necessarily the world beyond the grave, but the spiritual world he sought to experience each day.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be "H. Laurens". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "H" and a long, horizontal flourish extending to the right.

<sup>82</sup>Frech, "The Career of Henry Laurens in the Continental Congress, 1777-1779," 29.