

JUL 31 1993

THEOLOGICAL MILESTONES IN COLONIAL NEW ENGLAND
A CRITICAL EVALUATION OF
MEN AND MOVEMENTS

AN ABSTRACT OF
A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE GRADUATE FACULTY
OF DANBURY STATE COLLEGE

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF SCIENCE

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June 1964

As the life of the New England colonists centered on the church, it is only natural that the important clergymen of the day dominated both the religious and political life of the times. The clergymen were also the intellectual leaders in a period when the colony was getting settled. A study of the preaching and teaching of clergymen during the first century and a half of the colonial period does much to show the changing religious patterns as well as giving a broad picture of life in the colonies.

During this period, colonial New England showed several major fluctuations in its religious life. The orthodox Calvinistic doctrine shared the spotlight with the more liberal Arian teachings and as a result, the two often came into conflict. Four distinct patterns can be traced through the lives of four representative religious leaders of this period. This thesis is the result of a study of four men whose ideas ranged from orthodox Calvinism to the newer liberal thoughts coming from England. In this study I have tried to show the nature of these religious patterns and how these four men played an important role in bringing about the religious changes in colonial New England.

Two of the clergymen who took opposing views in the early part of the colonial era were Increase Mather and Solomon Stoddard. Mather was an orthodox Puritan who adhered to the Calvinistic tradition, whereas Stoddard showed a more liberal viewpoint as he gathered together his Connecticut Valley empire. Later in the colonial period, Jonathan

Edwards and Charles Chauncy expounded opposite beliefs and carried on their debate extensively in writing. Although Edwards was the grandson of the liberal Stoddard, he eventually turned toward the early Calvinistic leanings of the Puritan Fathers. Chauncy, on the other hand, was decidedly liberal and was to set the stage for the Unitarian movement in the nineteenth century.

Not only do we see the role of the colonial clergyman in this study, but also the intellectual life of the times. Both Mather and Edwards wrote on scientific subjects in a period when science was not an important academic discipline. They both reflect the probing New England mind and did much to further the intellectual reputation of colonial America in the eyes of the world from which their ancestors had come. Stoddard contributed writings which are among the chief theological works of the period. In Chauncy we see the direction in which religious views were moving as the nineteenth century dawned.

In studying the theological milestones erected through the lives and teachings of these leaders of colonial New England, one comes to a deeper and more sympathetic appreciation of the history of the country and the way in which it developed intellectually, politically, and spiritually.