

**THE USE OF THE VOLUNTARY SYSTEM  
IN THE MAINTENANCE OF MINISTERS  
IN THE COLONIES OF PLYMOUTH AND  
MASSACHUSETTS BAY DURING THE  
EARLIER YEARS OF THEIR EXISTENCE**

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The use of the voluntary system in the maintenance of ministers in the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay during the earlier years of their existence by Samuel Swett Green

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THE HISTORICAL PORTION OF THE REPORT OF THE COUNCIL OF THE AMERICAN  
ANTIQUARIAN SOCIETY PRESENTED AT THE SECO-ANNUAL MEETING  
OF THE SOCIETY HELD IN BOSTON, APRIL 28, 1886.

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## MAINTENANCE OF MINISTERS.

The subject which has been selected for the historical portion of the Report of the Council is the use of the voluntary system in the maintenance of ministers in the colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay during the earlier years of their existence.

Both Pilgrims and Puritans supported their ministers by voluntary contributions for several years after coming to America. They did this, too, largely from principle and not merely because it was convenient to do so. No historian has brought together the statements of early writers and the facts in the history of the two colonies which afford the proof of these two propositions.

In Boston the plan of maintaining ministers by voluntary payments was never given up, and has been in use during the entire period covered by its history.<sup>1</sup> In most other

<sup>1</sup>"The right to levy taxes for the support of the ministry which prevailed in country parishes until quite a recent date was never exercised in the town of Boston."—*History of the First Church in Boston*, by Arthur B. Ellis, p. 79, note.

"These early laws were made when King's Chapel alone represented the Church of England in the province; and as that was in Boston *where from the beginning the ministers were maintained by a voluntary contribution*, no injustice was done to its members by Taxation."—*Annals of King's Chapel*, by H. W. Foote, vol. I., p. 440. See, also, Hutchinson's *History of Massachusetts (1628 to 1760)*, third edition, 1795, v. I., p. 376, and Winthrop's *History of New England*, new edition, vol. I., p. 141.

For accounts of methods in use in Boston in early times for raising money needed in paying the salaries of ministers, see Lechford's *Plain Dealing*, p. 18 (Ed. in collections of *Mass'ts Hist. Soc.*, 3d ser., vol. 3, p. 77, Trumbull's ed., p. 48); Winthrop's *Hist. of New England*, vol. I., pp. 144 and 362; *An Historical Sketch of the First Church in Boston*, by Rev. William Emerson, pp. 160-1; *History of Second Church*, by C. Robbins, p. 11 (note). Compare, also, *The Way of the Churches of Christ in New England*, by J. Cotton, London, 1645, p. 69; Josselyn's *Account of Two Voyages to New England*, in *Colls. of Mass'ts Hist. Soc.*, 3d ser., vol. 3, p. 331, and *Letters from New England*, by John Duntton, Ed. of the Prince Society, p. 79. Rev. Dr. E. E. Hale was reported in the *Boston Daily Advertiser* of February 18, 1884, as having said in a lecture given at about that date (while speaking of the custom once in vogue in Boston, of using a portion of the money collected at church on Sunday in rendering

portions of the colony of Massachusetts Bay the system of supporting the clergy in this way was discontinued in a few years. At a somewhat later period it was also given up in the Plymouth Colony. Some of the residents in both colonies refused to aid, of their own accord, in paying the salaries of ministers. After a while the majority of the inhabitants, both in Massachusetts Bay and in Plymouth, concluded to make it obligatory upon all to do so.

Both colonies from the beginning enforced attendance at meeting as persistently as the people of Massachusetts to-day adhere to the policy of compelling children to go to school. Public religious instruction was regarded as necessary to the well being of the community. It was thought, too, that as everybody had the benefit of the teachings of ministers, everybody should help support them, notwithstanding some persons might not consider their instructions beneficial or might object to help pay their salaries on the

compensation to ministers), that his own grandfather, a minister in Boston, received payments from this source and had money "paid to him every Sunday, in the proper proportion, from the contents of the contribution box of that day, so that it came to him in the very sixpences, shillings and pistareens which the parishioners had put into the box." The minister referred to by Dr. Hale, writes that gentleman, is Rev. Oliver Everett, pastor of the New South Church. Mr. Everett became the settled minister of that church in 1782.

An act of the Province of Massachusetts Bay passed at the session of the General Court begun and held Oct. 12, 1692, provides "that every minister, being a person of good conversation, able, learned and orthodox, that shall be chosen by the major part of the inhabitants in any town, at a town meeting duly warned for that purpose (notice thereof being given to the inhabitants fifteen days before the time for such meeting), shall be the minister of such town; and the whole town shall be obliged to pay towards his settlement and maintenance, each man his several proportion thereof." Boston was not excepted from the operation of this law. But besides the fact that that town had more than one church it had supported its ministers by voluntary contributions, heretofore. At the session begun Feb. 8, 1692-3, "upon further consideration of the said section or paragraph in said act, and the impracticableness of the method therein proposed for the choice of a minister in divers towns wherein there are more churches than one, and inconveniences attending the same not so well before seen," it was amended and in its modified form arrangements were made for the choice of ministers by the churches with the concurrence of the major part of the congregation entitled to vote in town affairs and for their settlement and maintenance by taxation, and this provision was added to the law, namely, that nothing therein "contained is intended or shall be construed to extend to abridge the inhabitants of Boston of their accustomed way and practice as to the choice and maintenance of their ministers."



ground that they did not care for their services. The following passage from Hutchinson's History reproduces the sentiments of most of the residents of both colonies after the earlier method of ministerial support had been set aside in favor of taxation. Writing towards the close of the seventeenth century "the late Governor of Plymouth, Mr. Hinkley, complained of this, as one great grievance, that not being allowed to make rates for the support of the ministry the people would sink into barbarism."<sup>1</sup>

In the year 1618, while James the First was King of Great Britain, the learned John Selden (who during the reign of James's successor, Charles the First, was committed to the tower to punish him for the part which he took in supporting the remonstrance of the commons against the levying of duties known as "tonnage and poundage"), was summoned before the High Commission Court to answer charges preferred against him for publishing his History of Tithes. He was accused of denying in that work that tithes are founded in divine right, and although he did not make such a denial in direct terms, it seems probable that he arranged the materials of his history so as to lead to a similar conclusion. He did not deny, however, the legal right of ministers to enjoy tithes. Still he was condemned, his book was suppressed, and he made to apologize for having published the sentiments contained in it.

Four centuries before the time of Selden, in the beginning of the thirteenth century, Francis of Assisi organized the order of friars which received his name. The members of this order were not only forbidden to hold property as individuals, the rule with monks in the Catholic church, but also as members of a religious corporation.

John Wyclif, who died just two hundred years before Selden was born, maintained strenuously that the condition of priests should be that of poverty (without mendicancy, however), and vigorously opposed ecclesiastical endow-

<sup>1</sup> History of Massachusetts, 3d ed., vol. I., p. 819, note.

ments by individuals and subsidies to the church from the state. Wyclif was also ready to adopt to a certain extent the voluntary principle in regard to the payment of tithes. He would not relieve the people from the support of the ministry. He would have them urged to pay tithes, even excommunicated if they persistently refused to pay them.<sup>1</sup> But he would have tithes used very largely for relieving the distresses of the poor, and allow out of them only a meagre support to priests and have the parishioners withhold even this small compensation after having decided in an orderly manner that the priests are unfaithful in respect to the discharge of their duties.<sup>2</sup> "Think ye wisely," says the great reformer, "ye men that find" (maintain) "priests, that ye do this alms for God's love, and help of your souls, and help of Christian men and not for pride of the world to have them occupied in worldly office and vanity."<sup>3</sup>

The work from which this extract is taken "exhorts the laity to support worthy priests, and such only; admonishing them, that if they furnish the means of subsistence to men of an opposite character, they will be found partakers in all the sin, mischief, and punishment attendant on the course of unfaithful stewards."<sup>4</sup>

From a passage in *The Great Sentence of the Curse Expounded* it would seem, indeed, that Wyclif sometimes, at least, felt that it would be best that tithes should be given up altogether rather than that those abuses of their products which he saw around him should be tolerated. "If," writes he, "tithes were due by God's commandment, then everywhere in Christendom would be one mode of

<sup>1</sup>Always, however, "on the condition that the discipline is exercised for the good of the sinner and not for the greed of the priest," writes F. D. Matthew in his introduction to the *English works of Wyclif*, hitherto unprinted, published by the Early English Text Society, p. XXXVIII. or p. XXXIX.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. XXXVIII. or p. XXXIX.

<sup>3</sup>*De Stipendiis Ministrorum*. Tracts and Treatises of John De Wycliffe, D.D. Edited for the Wycliffe Society by Robert Vaughan, D.D., p. 43.

<sup>4</sup>Analysis of Wycliffe's *De Stipendiis Ministrorum* in Tracts and Treatises, etc., just referred to, p. 43.

tithing, but it is not so. Would God that all wise and true men would inquire whether it were not better for to find good priests by free alms of the people, and in a reasonable and poor livelihood, to teach the gospel in word and deed as did Christ and his apostles, than thus to pay tithes to a worldly priest, ignorant and negligent, as men are now constrained to do by bulls and new ordinances of priests."<sup>1</sup>

Honorable Arthur Elliot states in his recent volume entitled "The State and the Church," that the provision by tithes for the support of religion is of no very early institution in Christian countries and that it does not appear to have been known before the end of the fourth century.<sup>2</sup>

He differs from Dr. Morgan Cove, Prebendary of Hereford, who suggests in his *Essay on the Revenues of the Church of England*, written in 1816, that the institution of tithes must have been contained "in some unrecorded revelation made to Adam and by him and his descendants delivered down to posterity."<sup>3</sup>

The plan of supporting ministers by giving them the right to take tithes, after a time became general throughout Christendom.<sup>4</sup>

The payment of tithes was ordered in England "by ecclesiastical councils at the end of the eighth century; and on the Continent of Europe at about the same time, was prescribed by an ordinance of Charlemagne."<sup>5</sup>

Tithes have never been abolished in England, but by the Tithe Commutation Act passed in 1836, they were generally changed into semi-annual money payments.

During the few years which preceded the appearance of Selden's great work considerable interest seems to have been manifested in England in discussing the grounds on which the institution of tithes rests, and in that period several treatises were put forth to prove that it is founded in divine right. Jeremiah Stephens, in a preface to the

<sup>1</sup> Analysis of Wycliffe's *De Stipendiis Ministrorum*, Chapter XVII. Quoted in *Tracts and Treatises*, etc., p. 40.

<sup>2</sup> Page 86. <sup>3</sup> Elliot, p. 86. <sup>4</sup> Page 86. <sup>5</sup> Page 86.