

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “All Say He is a Downright Methodist”: The Ministry and Evangelical Loyalism of the Rev. William Stringer

Gregory Tirenin

Department of History, Boston University, Boston, MA, USA

Email: [gtirenin@bu.edu](mailto:gtirenin@bu.edu)

## Abstract

William Stringer was at various times a cheesemonger, a Methodist lay preacher, a priest, and an American Loyalist exile. Originally from London, Stringer preached the Gospel for the early Methodist movement, but longed for priestly ordination in the Church of England. Unable to achieve this goal due to his humble background, he was instead ordained in 1764 by the controversial and ecumenically minded Greek Orthodox bishop, Gerasimos Avontilies (also known as Erasmus of Arcadia), who ordained several Methodists under Greek Orthodox rites in London. Having acquired illicit ordination, Stringer moved to Philadelphia where he ministered to a parish that had broken from the Church of England during the Great Awakening. The clergy of Philadelphia responded negatively and wrote to Archbishop Richard Terrick of London, who ordered Stringer to desist from his ministry. However, Stringer did such a remarkable job of bringing his congregation back into the Anglican fold that Terrick agreed to re-ordain him in London under Anglican rites in 1773. With the outbreak of the American Revolution in 1775, Stringer supported the British cause and rejected the revolt as inconsistent with Christian obedience. He was forced to leave America and return to England, where he lived out the rest of his life as a curate. Despite his initial transgressions, I argue that Stringer was a force for order, stability, and orthodoxy in a revolutionary world.

**Keywords:** Methodism; Anglicanism; Eastern Orthodoxy; American Revolution; Loyalism

## I. Introduction

On August 30th, 1768, Rev. Richard Peters, rector of Christ Church and St. Peter's in the city of Philadelphia, wrote to Archbishop Richard Terrick of London describing his ongoing missionary activities in America, including his attempts to bring the German and Swedish Lutheran community of Pennsylvania into communion with the Church of England.<sup>1</sup> Toward the end of his letter, Peters informed Archbishop Terrick of a

<sup>1</sup>The Archbishop of London held ecclesiastical jurisdiction over all Anglican churches in British North America. Terrick served as Archbishop from 1764 until his death in 1777.

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curious development at St. Paul's Church, also located in Philadelphia. St. Paul's had an irregular canonical relationship with the Church of England since its formation in 1760, when the evangelical wing of Christ Church withdrew from the parish without the permission of the Archbishop of London and placed themselves under the ministry of the Rev. William McClenachan, who had been dismissed from ministry in 1760 due to his "Railings and Ravings in the Pulpit" and "extemporaneous Prayers and Preachings."<sup>2</sup> In this new church, congregants fully embraced their evangelical identity to an extent that made the Philadelphia clergy very uncomfortable.<sup>3</sup> In 1765, McClenachan left Philadelphia shortly before his death, leaving St. Paul's without a rector.

Returning the letter, Peters went on to inform Terrick that:

last week & not before there arrived a Minister here recommended by Lord Dartmouth & sent by Mr. Whitfield who it is said is soon to follow. He comes to supply St. Pauls Church- But as he has only Ordination in the Greek Church their Articles, bad as they are, will not suffer them to make such an irregular man their Minister – but they have- (which is downright [illegible]) taken him in to their acceptance as an occasional Visitant & have hired him for a time. What he is more than that his name is Stringer & has a Wife & Family I know not. He has preached one sermon & all say he is a downright Methodist in the Scheme of an angry Predestination & Election.<sup>4</sup>

Peters's letter concerning this man was not the only report that Terrick received in the coming months. On October 22nd of the same year, William Smith, the first provost of the College of Philadelphia (later University of Pennsylvania) wrote to the Archbishop about Stringer's ministry, telling him that Stringer had been "ordained by a Greek Bishop in England" and described his preaching as "much in the Whitfieldian Strain, & very incoherent; but his Life and Character are good and quiet."<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, it may well have appeared to the Philadelphia clergy that Stringer's shadowy background and outward disunity with the Church of England threatened to undermine the ecumenical progress that they were making with Lutherans and other groups. This progress had been especially promising in the 1760s with German and Swedish Lutherans and even Dutch Calvinists expressing interest in a formal union.<sup>6</sup> The

<sup>2</sup>Born in County Armagh, Ireland, McClenachan was originally ordained in the Presbyterian Church. In 1734 he settled in Georgetown, Maine, where he exercised ministry until 1744, when he moved to Chelsea, Massachusetts. While in Boston, he was attracted to the Church of England and subsequently went to England where he was ordained to the priesthood by Archbishop Thomas Sherlock in 1755. After returning to America as a missionary for the SPG, he was eventually made an assistant rector at Christ Church, Philadelphia until his dismissal in 1760. Robert Boak Slocum and Don S. Armentrout, *An Episcopal Dictionary of the Church: A User-Friendly Reference for Episcopalians* (New York: Church, 2000), 326.

<sup>3</sup>Deborah Mathias Gough, *Christ Church, Philadelphia: The Nation's Church in a Changing City* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995), 79–82. St. Paul's represents an exception to Gerald Goodwin's useful survey of colonial Anglicans as "the one major church hostile to the Great Awakening," who saw the movement as representing "only preposterous enthusiasm." Gerald J. Goodwin, "The Anglican Reaction to the Great Awakening," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 35, no. 4 (1966): 343–371.

<sup>4</sup>Rev. Richard Peters to Archbishop Terrick August 30, 1768, Fulham Papers Colonial Volume VIII Archbishop Richard Terrick, 36–39.

<sup>5</sup>Rev. William Smith to Archbishop Terrick October 22, 1768, FP VIII, 44–45.

<sup>6</sup>Nancy L. Rhoden, "The English Clergy as Political Agents of Loyalism and Revolutionary Order," in *The Transatlantic World of Heinrich Melchior Mühlenberg in the Eighteenth Century*, eds. Hermann

*motus operandi* of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG) clergy relied heavily on the presentation of the Church of England as a unified, traditional, and coherent alternative to the denominational (and revivalist) milieu that existed across the colonies.<sup>7</sup> As Rev. Thomas Bradbury Chandler explained years after his own conversion from Congregationalism to Anglicanism: “large numbers of cool and considerate people, finding no rest among the dissenters, betook themselves to the church, as the only ark of safety.”<sup>8</sup> In a colony like Pennsylvania, in which every denomination operated on a level playing field, Anglicans needed to present an especially strong and coherent case for themselves.<sup>9</sup> Surely, people like Stringer and the laity of St. Paul’s could only undermine the catholicity of their mission? Smith, who had been active in the failed campaign for an American episcopacy, also tied the lack of colonial bishops to the irregularity of the situation asking Terrick: “Shall we never have a Bishop to regulate these Excesses?”<sup>10</sup>

The vestry books of St. Paul’s reveal an incredibly strained relationship between the parish and the Church of England hierarchy. Following McClenachan’s departure, the vestry contacted Whitfield, who placed them in contact with multiple candidates for ministry, all of whom either declined outright to take the position or proved unable to relocate to America. The vestry’s criteria for a minister made the recruitment process very difficult, since they required an episcopally ordained priest who was also willing to take on a role that would potentially leave him with irregular canonical status with the Church of England. Indeed, when Archbishop Terrick heard that this search was taking place at St. Paul’s he sent the vestry a lengthy letter ordering them to desist from their actions which “had not the appearance of any great respect to me, in whose goodness

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Wellenreuther, Thomas J. Müller-Bahlke, and Anthony G. Roeber (Halle: Franckeschen Stiftungen; Harrassowitz in Kommission, 2013), 323–332; Nancy L. Rhoden, *Revolutionary Anglicanism: The Colonial Church of England Clergy during the American Revolution* (New York: New York University Press, 1999), 21–22.

<sup>7</sup>For an excellent overview of the denominational diversity across the colonies see Jon Butler, *New World Faiths: Religion in Colonial America, Religion in American Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 71–91. Pennsylvania and other middle colonies are prime examples of the overlapping, multi-confessional “scaffolding” described by Katherine Carté, in which no single Protestant denomination was able to exercise exclusive privileges in any one area, especially after 1688. Carté briefly mentions the congregation of St. Paul’s, saying that they “came back into the Anglican fold through the agency of Whitfield in London.” However, according to Goodwin, Whitfield had cut himself out of the Anglican fold by this time, as discussed in footnote 11. Katherine Carté, *Religion and the American Revolution: An Imperial History* (Williamsburg, Virginia Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture University of North Carolina Press, 2021), 5–6, 70. In her seminal study of Methodists in revolutionary America, Dee Williams briefly mentions Stringer and St. Paul’s, noting that after Whitfield’s death, Wesleyan Methodists took their place as “objects of suspicion of the Anglican hierarchy.” With his connections to both wings of the Methodist movement, Stringer fits this characterization well. Dee Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America, 1760–1800: The Shaping of an Evangelical Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 47.

<sup>8</sup>Qtd. in S. Scott Rohrer, *The Folly of Revolution: Thomas Bradbury Chandler and the Loyalist Mind in a Democratic Age* (Philadelphia: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2022), 26.

<sup>9</sup>As a Quaker dominated colony with broad religious toleration, Pennsylvania presented unique challenges for the colonial Church of England, since its founding principles stood athwart the goal of universal Anglican establishment that many SPG missionaries aspired to. Ned C. Landsman, “Roots, Routes, and Rootedness: Diversity, Migration, and Toleration in Mid-Atlantic Pluralism,” *Early American Studies* 2, no. 2 (2004): 284–298.

<sup>10</sup>William Smith to Archbishop Richard Terrick, Philadelphia, October 22, 1768, FP VIII, 40–41. As Rhoden points out, SPG missionaries in Pennsylvania were often critical of the religious liberty found in that colony. Rhoden, “The English Clergy as Political Agents,” 332–335.

you say you have a Confidence.”<sup>11</sup> Eventually, when Stringer arrived in Philadelphia bearing a recommendation from Whitfield, and a keen enthusiasm to minister to St. Paul’s, it seemed their prayers had been answered.

This unusual situation demonstrates the extent of the religious chaos in colonial British America ultimately stemming, as Smith realized, from the lack of a resident bishop to regulate Anglican practices.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Stringer’s uninvited presence in Philadelphia was not the first example of Anglican disorder in colonial Philadelphia. In the early eighteenth century two Nonjuring bishops, James Talbot and Robert Welton, attempted to exercise ministry in New Jersey and Pennsylvania as a response to the failure of the Church and state to establish an episcopacy.<sup>13</sup> In New York, another Nonjuring priest, Rev. John Ury was executed after being falsely accused of being a Catholic priest and masterminding the 1741 Slave Insurrection.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the eccentric history of Anglicanism in this region, the presence of a Methodist itinerant officiating in a priestly capacity under Greek Orthodox Holy Orders is almost as surprising now as it was in the eighteenth century. The correspondences between the Philadelphia clergy and their Archbishop beg several questions. Who was Stringer? What was his connection to Lord Dartmouth? And how did he, as a “Whitfieldian” Methodist, acquire Greek Orthodox ordination in England?<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Terrick to St. Paul’s Vestry February 19, 1767 “Vestry minutes, 1762–1774,” *Philadelphia Congregations Early Records*. Philadelphia Congregations Early Records Project, <https://philadelphiacongregations.org/records/>. The vestry’s contact with Whitfield represents another reason why the clergy of Philadelphia were so opposed to St. Paul’s parish and Stringer’s ministry there. As Goodwin points out, Whitfield empowered Dissenters by opposing normative Anglican interpretations of the Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion, BCP liturgy, enthusiasm, and spiritual rejuvenation. Goodwin, “The Anglican Reaction,” 356–357.

<sup>12</sup>Since the reign of Charles I, plans for an American episcopate were discussed but never came to fruition. After the Seven Years War, Archbishop Thomas Seeker of London introduced a plan for an American episcopate, but Dissenting opposition led by the Reverend Jonathan Mayhew of Boston caused the plan to be abandoned. A final push for episcopacy was occasioned in Maryland and Virginia 1770, but it was opposed by the vast majority of clergy and laity in the region. There would be no episcopate in colonial America, due to enormous opposition on the part of colonial Dissenters, who viewed such plans as an effort to reduce their freedoms and replicate the English confessional state. The anti-episcopal views on the part of many Southern Anglicans (who had developed a quasi-presbyterian churchmanship and ecclesiology) also obstructed the plan. Peter W. Walker, “The Bishop Controversy, the Imperial Crisis, and Religious Radicalism in New England, 1763–74,” *The New England Quarterly* 90, no. 3 (2017): 306–343; Frederick V. Mills, “The Internal Anglican Controversy Over An American Episcopate 1763–1775,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 44, no. 3 (1975): 268–270; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideas, Personalities, and Politics, 1689–1775* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1962); Jonathan C. D. Clark, *The Language of Liberty, 1660–1832: Political Discourse and Social Dynamics in the Anglo-American World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 340–345.

<sup>13</sup>Robert Wm. Duncan, “A Study of the Ministry of John Talbot in New Jersey, 1702–1727: On ‘Great Ripeness’ Much Dedication, and Regrettable Failure,” *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 42, no. 3 (1973): 233–256. The Nonjuring Schism was a split within Anglicanism following the Glorious Revolution of 1688, in which some clergy and laity felt unable to renounce their allegiance to King James II and the House of Stuart.

<sup>14</sup>Martin I. J. Griffin, “John Ury,” *Records of the American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia* 39, no. 3 (1928): 225–238.

<sup>15</sup>In his exhaustive list of colonial Anglican clergy, James B. Bell identifies Stringer as a graduate of Trinity College Dublin. However, this is not possible, as the only William Stringer to graduate from Trinity College in this period took his degree in 1770, when the subject of this article was in Pennsylvania. Aside from this small point, Bell’s list (and other works) has been a reliable and valuable

This article will show how an initially transgressive Methodist was facilitated in his vocation by an enigmatic Greek Orthodox hierarch and defied his critics to become not only a priest, but an advocate for political and doctrinal stability in a revolutionary world. Stringer and many of his Methodist contemporaries combined evangelical piety and traditional Christian loyalty to divinely constituted authority. While this combination earned them no favors during the Revolution, it offers potential insights into Methodist political theology during this crucial period.

## II. The Gerasimos Connexion

At some point in spring of 1764, Greek Orthodox Bishop Gerasimos Avlonites, commonly known as “Erasmus of Arcadia” placed his hands upon the head of William Stringer, preformed an ordination rite in Greek and pronounced him “Axios!” (“worthy”) to those in attendance. If the ordination was accompanied by the customary celebration of the Holy Eucharist, Gerasimos would have placed the Body of Christ into Stringer’s hands with the injunction: “Receive this Divine Trust, and guard it until the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, at which time He will demand It from you.”<sup>16</sup>

Stringer, of whom biographical details are scant, was a cheesemonger, Methodist itinerant preacher, irregularly ordained Greek Orthodox priest, eventual Anglican priest, and a Loyalist exile. His ordination in London along with several other Methodists, at the hands of a rogue Greek Orthodox bishop, was extremely controversial, most likely violating the laws of England and the canons of the Greek Orthodox Church.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, this seemingly transgressive act revealed a deep commitment to tradition and apostolic authority on the part of Stringer, themes that would clearly manifest later in his clerical career when faced with revolutionary upheaval.<sup>18</sup> Before addressing this controversial ordination and the career of William Stringer, one must first understand how and why this extraordinary event occurred.

By 1765 when the details of Gerasimos’s ordinations became public, John Wesley, then living in London, recounted in the pages of the *St James’s Chronicle* how he came to be acquainted with this curious prelate:

A Year or two ago I found a Stranger perishing for Want and expecting daily to be thrown in Prison. He told me he was a Greek Bishop. I examined his Credentials,

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resource for historians. James B. Bell, “Anglican Clergy in Colonial America Ordained by Bishops of London,” *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 83 (April 1973): 103–161, 152; Trinity College Dublin, *Alumni Dublinenses: A Register of the Students, Graduates, Professors, and Provosts of Trinity College, in the University of Dublin* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1924), 790. Furthermore, Stringer’s origins were explained by Archbishop Terrick, as I shall discuss below.

<sup>16</sup>“The Holy Sacrament of Ordination to the Priesthood” in “Liturgical Texts of the Orthodox Church – Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America,” <https://www.goarch.org/chapel/texts>.

<sup>17</sup>For example, if Gerasimos was paid for the ordination (as it was alleged), he would have violated the second canon of the Council of Chalcedon. If Stringer was ordained quickly without due examination, the ninth canon of the same Council would also be broken. As for English law, the Act of Supremacy stated that all ordinands must take the Oath of Supremacy, which, of course, was not a feature of the Greek Orthodox ordination rite. This matter became an issue in the ordination of John Jones, as discussed below.

<sup>18</sup>As Georgan Hammond has demonstrated, reverence for the primitive church and patristic traditions were not absent from early Methodism and featured prominently in Wesley’s own theological formation and relationship with the Nonjurors. Georgan Hammond, “High Church Anglican Influences on John Wesley’s Conception of Primitive Christianity, 1732–1735,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 78, no. 2 (2009): 174–207.

and was fully satisfied. After much Conversation (in Latin and Greek, for he spoke no English at all) I determined to relieve him effectually, which I did without Delay, and promised to send him back to Amsterdam, where he had several Friends of his own Nation. And this I did without any farther View, merely upon Motives of Humanity. After this he ordained Mr. John J. a Man well versed both in the Languages and other Parts of Learning. When I was gone out of town, Bishop Earasmus [sic] was prevailed upon to or-dain L— C—, a person who had no Learning at all.<sup>19</sup> Some Time after, Mr. M—d, or his Friends, sent for him from Amsterdam, to ordain Mr. S—t<sup>20</sup> and three other Persons, as unlearned as any of the Apostles; but I believe not so much inspired. In December last he was sent for again, and ordained six other Persons, members of our society, but every Way, I think, unqualified for that Office. These I judged it my Duty to disclaim (to waive all other Considerations) for a Fault which I know not who can excuse, buying an Ordination in an unknown Tongue.<sup>21</sup>

If not for the diligent work of Professor Ted Campbell, little would be known of Gerasimos, whose credentials were disputed from the 1760s, through the twentieth century.<sup>22</sup> While some contemporaries such as the Rev. Augustus Toplady accused Gerasimos of being a fraud and even a papist, Campbell has established a whole dossier of documentary evidence suggesting that he was indeed a valid Orthodox bishop from Crete, then under Ottoman control.<sup>23</sup>

Born to a prominent family on the Venetian controlled island of Corfu and exiled from Turkish controlled Crete during his episcopal career for reasons that are still

<sup>19</sup>Laurence Coughlin, another other ordinand of Gerasimos traveled to America and ministered under his Greek orders in Newfoundland in the 1760s before being re-ordained in the Church of England. David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2005), 19–20.

<sup>20</sup>Unknown, but possibly Stringer.

<sup>21</sup>Excerpt from John Wesley, Letter to the Printer of the St James's Chronicle, February 10, 1765, in Ted A. Campbell, *The Works of John Wesley Volume 27: Letters III*, ed. Randy L. Maddox (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015). Wesley wrote this letter in the Chronicle as a rebuttal to an anonymous letter in that paper claiming that he had attempted to secure his own consecration at the hands of Gerasimos and was refused by him on the basis that the presence of three bishops was needed for a consecration in the Greek tradition. The author also challenged the validity of the priestly ordinations preformed in an unknown tongue. "Anonymous letter published in the St James's Chronicle February 7–9, 1765," in Ted A. Campbell, ed., "A Dossier of Texts relating to Gerasimos Avlonites"; published by the SMU Digital Repository, 2015.

<sup>22</sup>In 1954 The Very Rev. George Tsoumas argued that Gerasimos was a fraud and not in fact an Orthodox bishop. However, his objections now seem surmountable in light of the documents produced by Campbell. George J. Tsoumas, "Methodism and Bishop Erasmus," *The Greek Orthodox Theological Review* 2, no. 2 (1956): 62–73. In 2001 Kallistos Ware acknowledged the likelihood of Gerasimos's episcopal status. Kallistos Ware, "The Fifth Earl of Guilford and his Conversion to the Orthodox Church," in *Anglicanism and Orthodoxy: 300 Years after the "Greek College" in Oxford*, ed. Peter M. Doll (Oxford: Lang, 2006), 294.

<sup>23</sup>Augustus Toplady, "A Letter to the Rev. Mr. John Wesley; Relative to his Pretended Abridgment Zanchius on Predestination 26 March 1770 in Augustus Montague Toplady," *The Works of Augustus Toplady*, 2nd ed. (London: J. Cornish, 1853), 726. Toplady also claimed Gerasimos was fraudulent on the basis that he was unknown to the Russian embassy in London, a fact that is irrelevant concerning a Greek bishop; Campbell, ed., "A Dossier of Texts relating to Gerasimos Avlonites"; Campbell analyzed these findings in a separate article, Ted A. Campbell, "The Transgressions of Gerasimos Avlonites," *Methodist History* 61, no. 1 (2023): 58–84. Campbell builds on the partial documentary evidence earlier established by A. B. Sackett, "John Wesley and the Greek Orthodox Bishop," *Proceedings of the Wesley Historical Society* in two parts, vol. 38 (December 1971 and May 1972), 81–87 and 97–102.



unclear, Gerasimos undertook extended travels through Protestant Europe, living in London from 1761 to 1764, Sweden from 1768 to 1769, Switzerland from 1772 to 1773 as well as other undocumented destinations.<sup>24</sup> Prior to meeting Wesley, Gerasimos had been involved in printing an Eastern Orthodox work, *Petra tou Skandalou* (*The Stone of Stumbling*), originally written by Orthodox Bishop Elias Meniatis (1669–1714). Displaying his ecumenical inclinations, Gerasimos authored an introduction to the work in which he emphasized the need for mutual love and understanding among Christians. However, the publishing business proved incapable of financially sustaining him, as we learned from Wesley's letter.

We also know from a January 1765 letter from John to Charles Wesley, that six other itinerant preachers "bought an ordination in an unknown tongue." John Wesley identifies these men as James Thwayte, Benjamin Russen, Richard Perry, James Satles, John Oliver, and Thomas Bryant, whom he concluded must be disbarred.<sup>25</sup> About one month later, Wesley wrote to the six men ordering them to desist from the mission for the time being, sympathetically telling them: "That you will preach again by-and-by I do not doubt, but it is certain that the time is not come yet."<sup>26</sup> While declaring their ordination to be invalid upon the basis that they paid Gerasimos a fee and did not understand Greek, Wesley maintained that only Gerasimos's ordination of his assistant John Jones was both valid and legal since no payment was made and Jones had a sufficient command of Greek. However, other detractors (including Charles Wesley) claimed that the ordinations were invalid on the basis that they did not include the Oath of Supremacy, which was required by law. Writing to Charles in August 1765, John Wesley rejected the notion that Jones's ordination was invalid because it did not include the Oath, saying "I cannot see that the oath of supremacy affects his ordination anymore than it does my field preaching" and argued that the oath was not designed to prevent occasional Greek Orthodox ordinations from occurring in England.<sup>27</sup>

As Stringer was not listed by Wesley as one of his disbarred members and is not mentioned by name in any of his correspondences, it is possible that he was part of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion, as Campbell points out that Gerasimos performed ordinations for that evangelical body as well.<sup>28</sup> However, it is important to bear in mind that Stringer journeyed to America before the schism between Wesleyan and Huntingdonian Methodists truly came into effect after the 1770 Methodist Conference in London, when the two factions fell out over accusations that Wesley was promoting the doctrine of justification by works.<sup>29</sup> It is therefore possible that

<sup>24</sup>Given his unusual decision to embark for Northern Europe instead of another Orthodox or Catholic country, Campbell posits that Gerasimos may have had a falling out with the Orthodox hierarchy. Campbell, "The Transgressions of Gerasimos Avlonites," 75–76.

<sup>25</sup>John to Charles Wesley, January 11, 1765, in Campbell, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 27, 413.

<sup>26</sup>To the Six Disbarred Preachers February 27, 1765 in Campbell, *The Works of John Wesley*, Volume 27.

<sup>27</sup>John Wesley to Charles Wesley, August 9, 1765, in *ibid*.

<sup>28</sup>Campbell, "The Transgressions of Gerasimos Avlonites," 68. On April 24th, 1764, the Rev. John Newton wrote to Wesley saying: "It has been learned lately that there is in Crete a man, the Bishop of Arcadia, who having abundant credentials as to his character has been admitting to the order of deacon, priesthood and the order of bishop by the laying on of hands. Lady Huntingdon believes his services would be of unestimable value in the creation of a new ministry. Her advise will be in your hands shortly." Campbell, ed., "A Dossier of Texts relating to Gerasimos Avlonites," 6.

<sup>29</sup>That is not to suggest that a clear Calvinistic wing of the Methodist movement did not exist prior to 1770 – it certainly did but had yet to rupture from the Wesley brothers. Henry D. Rack, *Reasonable Enthusiast: John Wesley and the Rise of Methodism* (Philadelphia: Trinity, 1989), 450–470.

Stringer may have been a London itinerant preacher for Wesley and it may even be the case that the “Mr. S—t” referred to in Wesley’s January 1765 letter was William Stringer, even though the terminal letter is wrong. In his letter of recommendation to the vestry of St. Paul’s, Whitfield explained that Stringer “Hath been a preacher several years and hath kept up a considerable Congregation with honour and reputation—Was Ordained by a Grecian Bishop and brings the opinion of the Doctors Commons along with him.” Whitfield also specified that Stringer had been “strongly recommended by Lord Dartmouth,” thus further bolstering his evangelical credentials.<sup>30</sup>

By November 25th, 1768, Peters heard back from the Archbishop, who was able to provide him with an official backstory on Stringer. According to Terrick, Stringer was nothing more than an uneducated cheesemonger from Southwark:

He came to me some time ago, and produc’d letters of Orders from a Greek Bishop, who presum’d to ordain in London, but was generally thought to be an Impostor. He had admitted several low people bred up to Trades, and they were employed by Mr. Wesley. Mr. Stringer, who had been a Cheese Monger in the Borough of Southwark, and very illiterate was one of them.<sup>31</sup>

Terrick went on to inform Peters that Stringer admitted to the “irregularity of his Ordination,” gave Terrick his ordination papers and asked to be admitted to the Church of England ministry. Terrick’s letter gives further reason to believe that Stringer was one of Wesley’s lay preachers as he claimed that Stringer “assur’d me, that he would not officiate any longer for Mr. Wesley by virtue of the orders he had already reciev’d.” In this case, the entirely contestable meaning of the word “orders” complicates matters, as it may refer to (a) Holy Orders, or (b) orders handed down by Wesley telling those ordained by Gerasimos to cease and desist from ministry.

Terrick claimed that Stringer did not in fact stop his ministry but continued to officiate while applying without success to the SPG to send him on a mission. At this point, William Legge, Second Earl of Dartmouth, who had deep commitments to the Methodist movement, became involved in the matter. While Dartmouth had indeed supported Stringer’s applications to the SPG, Terrick claimed that when he approached him about the fact that Stringer had made his way to Philadelphia bearing Dartmouth’s application, his Lordship “assur’d me, that He knew nothing of his intentions to go there, and that He had no recommendation from him.”<sup>32</sup> It would seem from Terrick’s account that Stringer may have made his way to Philadelphia bearing Dartmouth’s original recommendation to the SPG, rather than a specific endorsement of his American journey. Terrick closed the matter hoping, that the vestry of St. Paul’s would, upon learning Stringer’s backstory, discontinue his employment.

<sup>30</sup>George Whitfield to St. Paul’s Vestry April 1768. St. Paul’s Church (Philadelphia, PA), “Vestry minutes, 1762–1774,” Philadelphia Congregations Early Records. The next page of the vestry book reports that Stringer presented his ordination certificate “under the Hand & Seal of Erasmus of Arcadia in the Island of Crete with an English Translation thereof together with Mr. Harris (of the Doctor’s Commons) Opinion of the Validity of said ordination in the Church.”

<sup>31</sup>Richard Terrick to Richard Peters, November 25th, 1768 (Archives of the Episcopal Church, Smith MSS, RG 117, III-71).

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.



Unfortunately for the Archbishop, the congregation of St. Paul's refused to terminate their relationship with Stringer. Peters replied to Terrick's letter on December 6, 1769 confirming that he had conveyed his message to the vestry to no avail. However, Peters's tone toward Stringer had changed dramatically since his first letter on the subject. While he still described the people of St. Paul's in unfavorable terms, he noted that Stringer had been conducting himself admirably: "Mr. Stringer notwithstanding the Irregularity of his Introduction into Orders is a quiet inoffensive & good man. He gives constant Attention to his duty which he punctually preforms according to the Rites & Ceremonies of our Church."<sup>33</sup> Peters went on to praise Stringer's dedication to preaching and the "universal Esteem" that he acquired throughout the city of Philadelphia.

Stringer, it seemed, could not have been more different from the illiterate cheese-monger described by Terrick. Furthermore, when confronted with Terrick's account, Stringer presented a slightly different perspective concerning his ordination and the promises that he made to the Archbishop. Essentially, Stringer claimed that he did not promise Terrick that he would cease officiating under his Greek Orders but had merely promised not to act under them while the Archbishop deliberated upon his application. Concerning Terrick's accusation that Gerasimos was a fraud, Stringer told Peters that "he had got a good Enquiry made unto that Fact, & found that he was truly the Bishop he presented to be, and therefore he had applied to him who was then still at Amsterdam to send him duplicates of his Orders which he did and under these he now acts."<sup>34</sup> Stringer also claimed that he came to America with no particular plan except to follow his vocation in any capacity whatsoever. According to Peters, Stringer felt that: "all Places are alike to him and he should go where God directed him."<sup>35</sup>

While Peters had been very generous in his descriptions of Stringer throughout the letter, he concluded with a blistering condemnation of the congregation of St. Paul's who had been "particularly ungrateful to me in the manner they have thought fit to demean themselves."<sup>36</sup> Ultimately Stringer may have acquitted himself well overall, but Peters was still obliged to tell Terrick that he would cease any association with him, since he was disobeying the Archbishop's wishes by continuing in ministry. It seemed for the time being that St. Paul's Church would continue to function beyond the pale.<sup>37</sup>

### III. Re-Ordination and Acceptance

Despite the scandalous reception that Stringer first encountered from the Philadelphia clergy and Terrick's very unfavorable opinion of him, his fortunes gradually began to turn and ultimately culminated with the Archbishop re-ordaining him under

<sup>33</sup>Richard Peters to Richard Terrick December 6, 1769 (AEC, Smith MSS, RG 117, III-73).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

<sup>35</sup>Stringer evidently said nothing regarding Whitfield, as Peters claimed.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid.

<sup>37</sup>Few details are known about Stringer's ministry between his arrival at St. Paul's and re-ordination, aside from what was communicated to Terrick by the clergy of Philadelphia. In October of 1769, Stringer was visited by the Methodist itinerants Joseph Pilmore and Captain Thomas Webb, who oversaw the Methodist community in the city. According to Pilmore, both he and Webb received Communion from Stringer and heard him preach. Nelson Waite Rightmyer, "Joseph Pilmore, Anglican Evangelical," *Historical Magazine of the Protestant Episcopal Church* 16, no. 2 (1947): 184–185.

Anglican rites in London on March 7th, 1773.<sup>38</sup> This unanticipated turn of events can be largely set down to Stringer's efforts to conform the congregation of St. Paul's to the Church of England and put an end to their rebellious *motus operandi*. Stringer's attachment to the liturgy of the Church of England no doubt played a key part in this process, particularly his insistence upon conforming the congregation to proper Anglican rites, opposed to the "Railings and Ravings" of his predecessor. It is clear that the Archbishop remained implacably opposed to ordaining Stringer for some time, although he was kept abreast of positive developments at St. Paul's. In August of 1770, Terrick wrote to Peters saying:

I find, that the Congregation of St. Pauls are willing to come into Order and Regularity, But it seems, as the admission of Mr. Stringer into Orders is to be the Condition. I have absolutely refus'd to give him any Encouragement to offer himself as a Candidate. I hope I have done right in taking this resolution as I cannot think every Tradesman & Merchant, who fancies He has a Call to quit his Shop for the church, has had a proper Education for our Profession.<sup>39</sup>

How exactly Stringer accomplished this turn-around is unclear, but within a couple of years everyone in the city seemed prepared to support him. Indeed, despite his irregular orders he was publicly regarded as an Anglican priest. An obituary notice for one of his parishioners, Mary Kighley, states the deceased was "a Member of the Church of England, and stately sat under the faithful Ministry of the Rev. Mr. WILLIAM STRINGER, whose Labours and pastoral Care she acknowledged as one of the greatest Comforts of her declining Life."<sup>40</sup> Kighley's clear self-identification as a member of the Church of England suggests that Stringer had succeeded in safeguarding the Anglican identity of St. Paul's.<sup>41</sup>

Both the vestry of St. Paul's and, more importantly, the neighboring clergy: Richard Peters, William Smith, and Thomas Coombe, wrote to Terrick recommending him for ordination.<sup>42</sup> As for the clergy, their recommendation had less to do with Stringer's personality or abilities, and much more to do with the fact that he actively endeavored to return St. Paul's to the Anglican fold. Writing to the Archbishop on December 5th, 1772, informing him that:

<sup>38</sup>Bell, "Anglican Clergy in Colonial America Ordained by Bishops of London," 103–161: 152. By October of 1773, Stringer is listed as paying into the "Corporation, for the Relief of the Widows and Children of Clergymen, in the Communion of the Church of England in America" *An Abstract of the Proceedings of the Corporation, for the Relief of the Widows and Children of Clergymen, in the Communion of the Church of England in America*. Printed by James Humphreys Junior, in Front-Street, MDCCLXXIII. [1773]. *Eighteenth Century Collections Online*, 40.

<sup>39</sup>Richard Terrick to Richard Peters August 25, 1770 (Smith MSS, RG 117, III-74).

<sup>40</sup>"Philadelphia, March 18." *Pennsylvania Chronicle* (Philadelphia, PA) V, no. 8, March 18, 1771: 31. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>41</sup>Even though Stringer restored the Anglican identity of St. Paul's, the parish clearly retained a strong Methodist character. For example, in October 1770 Stringer preached a funeral sermon following the death of George Whitfield during which time the church was "hung in mourning." "Philadelphia, October 15." *Providence Gazette* (Providence, RI) VII, no. 356, November 3, 1770: 176. *Readex: America's Historical Newspapers*.

<sup>42</sup>In a *nota bene* at the bottom of the letter, the priests inform Terrick that the Rev. William White would have joined their appeal if he had been in town at the time. Clergy of Philadelphia to Bishop Terrick, Philadelphia, December 5, 1772, FP VIII 50–51.

The Congregation of St. Paul's in this City, earnestly desirous of being in perfect Unity with our Churches here, have intreated us to intercede for them with your Lordship. The former Heats having subsided at length, even among the warmest of them, they now acknowledge their past mistakes, and have unanimously submitted themselves and their whole Case to your Lordship's Goodness, as by their enclosed Address will appear. They promise to adhere strictly for the future to their Constitutions, which were originally framed in perfect Agreement to the Discipline & Order of our Church; and that no part of their Conduct shall again deserve your Lordship's Reprehension.<sup>43</sup>

The clergymen went on to acknowledge Stringer's role in this turn of events, saying: "for tho' Mr. Stringer's literary Abilities are not so great as might be wished, he has been diligent in the Improvement of them & the Affection of his people towards him is such, that they cannot easily bear the Thoughts of being parted with Him." Interestingly, despite Stringer's Methodist background, the signatories of the letter displayed open hostility toward that movement saying of St. Paul's congregation: "had that People fallen into the Hands of Methodist & other Strolling Preachers of the present Day, they would have been drawn still further on in their Irregularity, and at last totally lost to our Church." They concluded the letter, affirming that they too could live with Stringer in "Peace & Love" and reiterated the importance of brining St. Paul's back into the fold.<sup>44</sup> Although Stringer had seemed a menace to the other clergymen when he arrived, both parties were now in a strong position to help each other.

The efforts of Peters, Smith, Duché, and Coombe were ultimately successful in healing the schism between St. Paul's and the wider Anglican community and fixing the irregular clerical status of Stringer, who was re-ordained by Archbishop Terrick in London in 1773. The subject of Stringer's re-ordination represents a curious theological conundrum. If the Church of England recognized Catholic ordinations as completely valid and never subjected a single ex-Catholic priest to re-ordination, why didn't the Archbishop recognize Stringer's Greek Orthodox ordination as valid?

Anglican views of Eastern Orthodoxy were extremely varied during the eighteenth century and even earlier. In 1699 the "Greek College" of the University of Oxford was established to facilitate relations between the Church of England and the Greek Orthodox Church, but it closed by 1705, having only fifteen students by the time that leaders of the Greek Church withdrew from the arrangement.<sup>45</sup> Between 1716 and 1725, the Nonjurors had entered correspondences with several Orthodox Patriarchs in the hopes of establishing intercommunion with them. However, the Patriarchs quickly rejected their proposal on the grounds that Anglicans were "born and bred in the principles of the Luther-Calvinists."<sup>46</sup>

In New England, one prominent Anglican priest, the Rev. Samuel Johnson of Connecticut wrote during the campaign for the establishment of an American episcopate: "I have sometimes thought that when we have tried all reasonable measures to obtain Bp's from England & are denied, we ought to get a Bp where we can from

<sup>43</sup>Ibid.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>E. D. Tappe, "The Greek College at Oxford, 1699–1705," in *Anglicanism and Orthodoxy: 300 Years after the "Greek College" in Oxford*, ed. Peter M. Doll (Oxford: Lang, 2006), 169–174.

<sup>46</sup>Ann Shuckman, "The Non-Jurors, Peter the Great, and the Eastern Patriarchs," in *ibid.*, 185.

Denmark, Sweden, or even *Russia* & form an American Chh.”<sup>47</sup> This interest in potentially acquiring a line of valid apostolic succession from Russia indicates that Johnson, like many Anglicans, saw Eastern Orthodox orders as entirely acceptable. If an Eastern Orthodox bishop would be willing to elevate a colonial Anglican priest to the episcopate, American Anglicans would have access to holy orders and confirmations without making the dangerous voyage to England.<sup>48</sup> Herein lies a major connection between the challenges facing the SPG, the Methodist movement, and Stringer himself. Like the SPG affiliated missionaries who lamented the lack of a colonial episcopate, Methodists faced even greater hurdles, lacking not only the benefits of episcopacy, but also access to ordained priests (like Stringer) who were not distrustful of the Methodist movement, and were willing to collaborate with, and facilitate it throughout the colonies.<sup>49</sup>

The most obvious reason why Stringer required re-ordination was the unclear status of Gerasimos who many, including Terrick, regarded as a fraud. Furthermore, any recognition of Stringer’s right to officiate in an Anglican church under Greek Orthodox orders would encourage others to pursue illicit Orthodox ordination. John Jones, the one Methodist preacher whose ordination by Gerasimos was recognized by John Wesley went on to be re-ordained in the Church of England and became a parochial priest.<sup>50</sup>

In any case, Stringer’s re-ordination occurred in London at the hands of Terrick, who had previously dismissed him as an illiterate with no vocation, until he conceded that Stringer was making an outsized contribution to the mission of the Anglican Church in Pennsylvania. By October of 1773, Stringer himself wrote to the Archbishop in glowing and deferential terms, clearly delighted to have succeeded in having his priestly vocation sanctioned by the Church of England. With no ill will toward Terrick, Stringer told the Archbishop that his willingness to ordain him laid his congregation “under the greatest obligation to you.” As for his own feelings and his past offenses toward the constitution of the Church of England, Stringer remarked that “your Lordship has not only forgiven me, but made me a Minister of one of the best Constituted Churches in the world.” What Stringer said next is most relevant, as it establishes his frame of mind shortly before the American Revolution, when Anglican clerics were asked to discard the sacred oaths taken during their ordination:

If a cheerful submission to your Lordships Authority, a strict conformity to that Church of which I have the honour to be a Minister, a zealous and constant endeavour to promote harmony and virtue among the Members of it; together with a behaviour suitable to my Character; if this is only what your Lordship expects of me, I hope I can assure you that it is my fixed determination never to loose sight of such pleasing objects, but to pursue them to my last breath.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>47</sup>Qtd. in Peter M. Doll, *Revolution, Religion, and National Identity: Imperial Anglicanism in British North America, 1745–1795* (Madison, NJ: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2000), 208.

<sup>48</sup>In this period, the voyage to London for ordination typically cost around £100 and frequently proved deadly. This was due not only to the dangers of the high seas, but also the risk of smallpox contraction by American ordinands upon arrival in England. James B. Bell, *The Imperial Origins of the King’s Church in Early America, 1607–1783* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 157–164.

<sup>49</sup>This situation would not be remedied for the Methodists until John Wesley’s consecration of Thomas Coke as “superintendent” of the American Methodist mission in 1784.

<sup>50</sup>Albert Barrett Sackett, *John Jones – First After the Wesleys?* . . . (Chester: A. A. Taberer, 1972), 33.

<sup>51</sup>William Stringer to Bishop Terrick, Philadelphia, October 28, 1773, FP VIII 56–57.

While his praise of Terrick probably contained an element of flattery, the expectations that Stringer outlined for himself would soon go on to determine the course of his life, as relations between Britain and the thirteen colonies deteriorated.

#### IV. War and Upheaval

In May of 1774, Stringer wrote to Lord Dartmouth, whom he had visited in London when he returned to England for ordination a year before. After thanking Dartmouth for the Bibles and Prayer Books that he had sent to St. Paul's, Stringer appraised Dartmouth of the political tensions in America, particularly the blockade of Boston Harbor: "All the Colonies seem to unite to oppose the Authority of Parliament: this your Lordship will know is the great Cause of the present disturbances; and it is the opinion of sensible men here, that if the Matter is not speedily determined; it will soon be too late to string the Colonies into subjection."<sup>52</sup> A largely non-ideological figure throughout his life, Dartmouth was by this time serving as the Secretary of State for the Colonies and the First Lord of Trade for his stepbrother, Fredrick, Lord North. However, with the failure of the Coercive Acts and all attempts at mediation, Dartmouth resigned his position in November of 1775 and took a much more nominal position as Lord Privy Seal. Like Dartmouth, Stringer displayed no traceable partisan inclinations up to this point. Yet in his letter one easily sees that he considered obedience to lawfully constituted authority was the only way to prevent a violent rupture within the British Empire.

In the lead up to and early days of the Revolution, Philadelphians were extremely mixed in their responses to the conflict. Although ten out of the eleven Anglican priests in Pennsylvania ultimately became loyalists, their politics were not that of reflexive reaction. Initially, these clergymen hoped to avoid taking any divisive political positions.<sup>53</sup> The first priest to make a foray into the political arena was Jacob Duché, who said the opening benediction for the Continental Congress and then was chosen to serve as its chaplain in 1774. The most pro-Revolutionary priest was William White, who would go on to be the first Pennsylvanian bishop in the independent Episcopal Church following the war. Yet even he expressed an unwillingness to "beat the ecclesiastical drum" in favor of the rebels, until he had taken the oath to the revolutionary government, thus breaking his ordination vows.<sup>54</sup>

By late spring of 1775, the city government earnestly requested additional sermons from Philadelphia clergy in support of the American cause. In June of that year, the Anglican clergy acquiesced to the Continental Congress's call for a fast day. The foremost purpose of these fast days was to publicly promote a providential view of American resistance.<sup>55</sup> How then, could Anglican clergy participate in an event in which prayers were directed against British interests? To account for this contradiction, they quickly wrote to Terrick reassuring him that they still hoped for peaceful mediation

<sup>52</sup>Stringer to Dartmouth May 14, 1774, D(W)1778/II/901. The fact that Stringer visited and corresponded with Dartmouth indicates that his lordship did not bear ill will toward Stringer for claiming to act under his recommendation when he first arrived in Philadelphia.

<sup>53</sup>William Pencak, "Out of Many, One: Pennsylvania's Anglican Loyalist Clergy in the American Revolution," in *Pennsylvania's Revolution*, ed. William Pencak (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 97.

<sup>54</sup>Qtd. in *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>55</sup>Spencer W. McBride, *Pulpit and Nation: Clergymen and the Politics of Revolutionary America* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 18–19.

and took part in the fast partially to prevent “our religious usefulness [being] destroyed among our people.”<sup>56</sup>

Likewise, Smith had an early inclination to support American grievances, publishing his acclaimed work “A Sermon on the Present State of the American Affairs” in June of 1775. However, he was arrested in December of 1776, when he refused to sign an association in support of American independence.<sup>57</sup> Duché, despite his historic sympathy for American grievances, also declared his loyalty (after one day’s incarceration by the British).<sup>58</sup> Peters, who had also expressed pro-American sympathies but no inclination toward political independence died in 1776 before the Declaration of Independence was issued. Coombe omitted the liturgical prayer for the Royal Family after independence was declared but refused to swear allegiance to the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and was ordered to leave for the West Indies. However, the British Army arrived before he was expelled, and he later followed them to New York once the Americans retook Philadelphia.<sup>59</sup>

Thomas Rankin, one of John Wesley’s itinerants who had resided periodically in Philadelphia since 1773 wrote on May 16th, 1775, that he and the other Methodist preachers from the area met to discuss the “present critical situation of affairs” and were joined by Stringer, who “spent some time with us.” Over the course of their conference, Rankin and the others unanimously resolved “to follow the advice that Mr. Wesley and his brother had given us; and leave the event to God. We were decidedly of the opinion that we durst not countenance our people in taking up of arms, either on the one side or the other.”<sup>60</sup> Indeed, as historian Dee Williams has emphasized, colonial Methodism preached “a gospel of personal transformation” not mass political action.<sup>61</sup> Rankin’s appraisal is also consistent with the sentiments of John Wesley, who in June 1775 wrote to Dartmouth stating that while he was a “High Churchman, the son of an High Churchman, bred up from my childhood in the highest notions of passive obedience and non-resistance,” he still opposed the use of violence against American subjects.<sup>62</sup> However, Wesley and his American missionaries became firm supporters of the British war effort once reconciliation between Britain and the thirteen colonies became untenable.

During this period following the first outbreak of violence in April 1775 Stringer attempted to avoid alienating his congregation and the revolutionary authorities by omitting the prayer for the King and Royal Family when pressed to do so, an act that separated him from the staunchest loyalist clergy. However, when the British Army entered Philadelphia in 1777, he decided to publicly declare his loyalism. This he accomplished by preaching a sermon on Ezekiel 20:38: “And I will purge out from among you the rebels, and them that transgress against me: I will bring them forth out of the country where they sojourn, and they shall not enter into the land

<sup>56</sup>Philadelphia Clergy to the Bishop of London, June 30, 1775, in William Stevens Perry, *Historical Collections Relating to the American Colonial Church* . . . (Hartford, Conn.: Church, 1870), 470. Peters also sent a short note to the SPG secretary reiterating his claims to the Archbishop. Ibid., 473.

<sup>57</sup>Pencak, “Out of Many, One,” 102.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 104.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid.

<sup>60</sup>Thomas Rankin, *The Diary of the Rev. Thomas Rankin, One of the Helpers of John Wesley*. [Aug. 29, 1773–Aug. 12, 1777], 1900 [typescript, Styberg Library Archives Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary], 128.

<sup>61</sup>Andrews, *The Methodists and Revolutionary America*, 40.

<sup>62</sup>D(W)1778/1/ii/1135, “In the Way to Dublin,” John Wesley to Earl of Dartmouth, June 14, 1775.



of Israel: and ye shall know that I am the Lord.” At this point, his pro-revolutionary congregation did what Archbishop Terrick hoped they would do in 1768: fired him.<sup>63</sup>

Many historians have recognized a high degree of correlation between New Light evangelicals and the Patriot cause.<sup>64</sup> St. Paul’s parish was no exception, even though Stringer had made such strides in bringing their canonical status in line with the Church of England. While Stringer and other Methodist religious leaders undoubtedly shared the New Light’s religious enthusiasm, they held fast to the high church political theology of Wesley. Such conflicts show that colonial American Methodism defies the assignment of a dominantly radical or conservative character, as some twentieth-century historians of the left attempted to impose upon British Methodism.<sup>65</sup>

The next clues concerning the course of Stringer’s life come from the letters he wrote to Dartmouth in December 1777 and again in March of 1778. In his December 12th letter, Stringer lamented the decline in loyalism in Philadelphia but hoped for a brighter future for the British cause: “Through the blessing of Divine Providence on his Majesty’s arms, the troops are now in possession of Philadelphia, and we are looking forward to happier times than we have lately seen.” The main reason for his letter was to defend the actions of Duché, who was still in hot water with British authorities over his actions as chaplain to the Continental Congress. Stringer informed Dartmouth that Duché, who “really thought the claim of Parliament to bind the colonies in all cases whatsoever, to be unconstitutional” had only taken up the chaplaincy “to serve the Church of England in America: which he saw must fall, if the Congress carried their points.”<sup>66</sup> It is impossible to say what effect Stringer’s letter had on the matter, but Duché was eventually acquitted upon his return to England in 1780.

Stringer next wrote to Dartmouth on March 6th, 1778, expressing a far more pessimistic view of the American war. His sending of the letter seems to have been

<sup>63</sup>Norris Stanley Barratt, *Outline of the History of Old St. Paul’s Church, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: With an Appeal for Its Preservation, Together with Articles of Agreement, Abstract of Title, List of Rectors, Vestrymen, and Inscriptions of Tombstones and Vaults* (Philadelphia: Colonial Society of Pennsylvania, 1918), 93–94.

<sup>64</sup>John M. Murrin, “No Awakening, No Revolution? More Counterfactual Speculations,” *Reviews in American History* 11, no. 2 (1983): 161–171; Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind from the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1966); Harry S. Stout, “Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution,” *The William and Mary Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (1977): 519–541; Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Clark, *The Language of Liberty*, 257–282.

<sup>65</sup>In the early twentieth century, French liberal historian Élie Halévy posited that Methodism represented a conservative force that stood in the way of social revolution. Further to the left, Eric Hobsbawm argued to the contrary that Methodism contained a strong reformist impulse, which laid the foundation for organized labor. E. P. Thompson attempted to bridge the gap between these interpretations by arguing that grassroots Methodists often had radical tendencies but were not powerful enough to derail their conservative leadership. None of these three interpretations can be mapped with any success onto the situation in colonial America. Eric Hobsbawm, “Methodism and the Threat of Revolution in Britain,” *History Today* VII (February 1957): 115–124; Élie Halévy, *The Birth of Methodism in England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1906] 1971); E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 810–817; Stephen Heathorn, “E. P. Thompson, Methodism, and the ‘Culturalist’ Approach to the Historical Study of Religion,” *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 10, no. 2 (1998): 210–226.

<sup>66</sup>William Stringer to Dartmouth, December 12, 1777 D(W)1778/II/1810. In his biography of Duché, Kevin J. Dellape argues (much like Stringer did) that Duché’s apparent volte face was actually the product of his lifelong moderation in both theology and politics. Kevin J. Dellape, *America’s First Chaplain: The Life and Times of the Reverend Jacob Duché* (Lanham, MD: Lehigh University Press, 2013).

occasioned by the England bound journey of Rankin. Stringer informed Dartmouth that Rankin “had been a good deal persecuted by the Rebels, and made his Escape from them with much difficulty. Mr. Wesley’s preachers have followed his steps, and evidenced their fidelity to their King and Country, by a steady uniform Conduct from the beginning of this unhappy dispute.”<sup>67</sup> On this matter Stringer was certainly correct, as overall loyalism of Wesley’s preachers in America and of Wesley himself was common knowledge by this stage of the war.<sup>68</sup> Even before the outbreak of hostilities, Dartmouth received a letter from the soldier and Methodist lay preacher Thomas Webb condemning revolutionary attempts to “overthrow the constitution and, if possible, Establish a democracy upon its ruins.”<sup>69</sup>

Stringer also took the opportunity to re-enforce his own loyalist credentials and point out his precarious status, should the British Army not prevail: “It is Notorious that I am the only Minister in Philadelphia, that has acted Consistent with his oath of Allegiance to the King, and his duty as a Clergyman of the Church of England; although my congregation were 3 parts of them active in this Rebellion.” While his claim to be the only consistent loyalist in town may sound odd given his previous advocacy on behalf of Duché, one must remember that Duché and Coombe were no longer in Philadelphia. Stringer detailed his hardships since the outset of the Revolution, including his congregation’s refusal to pay him. Finding himself without a source of income, Stringer applied to General Howe for a position as a regimental chaplain who assured him that he “should not be forgotten.”<sup>70</sup>

This letter from Stringer to Dartmouth speaks to his deep alienation from the people of his parish, with whom he had formed such a strong bond prior to the war. Previously, Stringer had been content to leave the American dispute in the hands of God and avoid alienating either side of what had initially appeared to be a mere political dispute that few initially believed would shatter imperial protestant identity and allegiance to the king.<sup>71</sup> Now, he felt that a righteous, armed struggle against the rebels was the only option consistent with his Christian faith. These views were very much in line with other loyalist exiles such as Myles Cooper who argued that Britain had the moral responsibility to crush the rebellion by force in order to protect people like Stringer who had refused to “bow the knee to the BAAL of INDEPENDENCY.”<sup>72</sup> It is likely, then, that Stringer’s Methodist background and his

<sup>67</sup>William Stringer to Dartmouth, March 6, 1778, D(W)1778/II/1845.

<sup>68</sup>Allan Raymond, “‘I Fear God and Honour the King’: John Wesley and the American Revolution,” *Church History* 45, no. 3 (1976): 316–328. While it is unknown whether Stringer read John Wesley’s pamphlet “A Calm Address to the American Colonies,” he would have certainly learned of Wesley’s sentiments through Rankin or others.

<sup>69</sup>Thomas Webb to Dartmouth, March 1, 1775, D(W)1778/II/1172.

<sup>70</sup>William Stringer to Dartmouth, March 6, 1778, D(W)1778/II/1845.

<sup>71</sup>As Brendan McConville has argued, colonial Americans remained deeply connected to the British monarchy until the outbreak of Revolution: “almost everything printed between 1689 and 1775 expressed an intense admiration for the monarchy and situated their rulers within a dynastic British history that ran back to the Anglo-Saxons and in terms of the ongoing struggle between pan-European Protestantism and Catholicism, absolutism and popery”; Brendan McConville, *The King’s Three Faces: The Rise and Fall of Royal America, 1688–1776* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, Williamsburg, Virginia, 2006), 7.

<sup>72</sup>Myles Cooper, *National Humiliation and Repentance Recommended, and the Causes of the Present Rebellion in America Assigned, in a Sermon Preached before the University of Oxford, on Friday, December 13, 1776. Being the Day appointed by Proclamation for a General Fast*. Published at the Request of the Vice-Chancellor and Heads of Houses (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1777). Sold by J. and

tenure as an Anglican priest both impacted the lifechanging decisions that he took during the Revolution.

As J.C.D. Clark has argued, the orthodox Anglican theology of many loyalists played an important role in opposing republicanism and supporting British interests.<sup>73</sup> For clergymen like Stringer and Cooper, their loyalism was, above all, an outgrowth of religious commitments. Ultimately, the inherent caesaropapism of the Church of England and the ordination oaths taken by Anglican priests welded their religious commitment to the status of the king-in-parliament, thus making loyalism an inherently religious duty for many. However, loyalists also firmly believed that the regime was equally obliged to support them in their time of need, a conviction that would leave many disappointed in the post-war years.

## V. Exile and Final Traces

Despite Howe's assurances, it seems that a chaplaincy position was never obtained for Stringer. The next details about his life come from his applications to the Loyalist Claims Commission. By September of 1778, the Americans were back in possession of Philadelphia and Stringer was brought before a committee and charged with treason against the State of Pennsylvania for memorializing the King and Royal Family in the liturgy during the British occupation.

Faced with either pleading allegiance to the United States and abjuring George III or leaving the state, Stringer chose the latter and left for British occupied New York with his wife and child. Once safely arrived in New York, he applied to General Henry Clinton for a regimental chaplaincy but was again refused. After waiting in New York for nearly three months he finally secured passage to London in December 1778 and arrived in London in late January 1779.<sup>74</sup> His first application for financial assistance was filed on March 25th, 1779, detailing his experiences during the war, his loss of income and expenses as an exile. At this time, the Loyalist Claims Commission had yet to be formed, so Stringer did not initially request a specific amount of monetary compensation, but merely asked the treasury for "something to subsist upon."<sup>75</sup> His application was supported by other loyalists including Rev. Thomas Bradbury Chandler and Joseph Galloway as well as Lord Dartmouth, all of

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J. Fletcher, S. Parker, and D. Prince. By J. F. and C. Rivington, in St. Paul's Church-Yard; J. Robson, New Bond-Street; and J. Pridden, in Fleet-Street, London. And J. Woodyer, at Cambridge, MDCCCLXXVII, 18. Stringer's decision-making process is consistent with Edgar Legare Pennington's 1939 assessment that Pennsylvania's loyalist clergy embraced loyalism not "through conviction as to the merits of British or colonial claims or actions, but simply because they could interpret their ordination vows in no other way but as pledging them to loyalty to the king." Regarding Stringer, Pennington says only "William Stringer was at the time of the letter in charge of St. Paul's, a third Episcopal church in Philadelphia, which had shortly before been built 'by a schismatic following' of the Reverend Mr. William MacClennachan- a most interesting figure, a species of stormy petrel among the colonial clergy whose activities have no bearing upon the present study. Mr. Stringer, who had come to Philadelphia in 1773, disappears entirely from the record immediately after the date of this letter [Philadelphia clergy to Terrick 30 June 1775], apparently returning to England to be heard of no more." Edgar Legare Pennington, "The Anglican Clergy of Pennsylvania in the American Revolution," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 63, no. 4 (1939): 405, 414.

<sup>73</sup>Clark, *The Language of Liberty*, 340–342.

<sup>74</sup>"The Memorial of William Stringer," March 25, 1779, The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; *American Loyalist Claims, Series II*; Class: AO 13; Piece: 072. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). UK, American Loyalist Claims, 1776–1835 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) Operations, Inc., 2013.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid.

whom affirmed his consistent loyalism and backed up the narrative leading up to his exile. This application resulted in Stringer being paid £575 by the government between January 5, 1779 and September 20, 1783.<sup>76</sup>

In 1783 the Loyalist Claims Commission was established by Parliament to regulate the increasing volume of requests for compensation being made to British authorities throughout the empire as a result of the loyalist diaspora. At this point, Stringer made another application with specific itemized accounting of his lost income and property totaling £1,225, including lost income and property sold at a loss during his flight from Philadelphia.<sup>77</sup> For this application he also acquired the endorsement of the Rev. Charles Inglis, another loyalist exile who went on to become the first Anglican bishop of Nova Scotia. None of his applications for restitution mentioned the peculiar circumstances that brought him to America, as they were not relevant to his wartime experience. In this later application, it seems that Stringer did not prevail, as he is not listed on the index of successful claimants under the 1783 legislation.<sup>78</sup>

In 1785 Stringer's name and place of residence in Barnet, England crops up as a supporting reference for the priestly ordination of his friend and Methodist itinerant Joseph Pilmore in Connecticut by the former loyalist, Bishop Samuel Seabury.<sup>79</sup> By 1796 he is mentioned in a travel book about greater London as curate of the chapel-of-ease at Chipping Barnet.<sup>80</sup> Curates in the late eighteenth century made roughly £50–100, so there is little reason to believe that Stringer and his family enjoyed anything beyond a simple subsistence.<sup>81</sup> The final record of his life is dated June 22nd, 1799, when his last will and testament was administered, leaving all of his earthly possessions to his wife, who we learn is named Mary.<sup>82</sup>

## VI. Conclusion and Significance

While Stringer was an outsider who initially undermined the authority of the Church of England by acting under illicit holy orders, his initially transgressive qualities had clear limitations that in no way obstructed his embrace of the loyalist cause. While Stringer faced enormous obstacles in the exercise of his vocation and even prejudice based on his humble background, those obstacles clearly did not imbue him with a rebellious disposition in matters of church or state. To the contrary, he remained deferential to those in positions of ecclesiastical and civil authority. When he did temporarily disobey the wishes of Archbishop Terrick, the actions that he took at St. Paul's Church ultimately helped the Archbishop expand the Anglican mission in Pennsylvania.

<sup>76</sup>"The Memorial of William Stringer," December 15, 1783, The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; *American Loyalist Claims, Series II*; Class: AO 13; Piece: 102B. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). UK, American Loyalist Claims.

<sup>77</sup>Ibid.

<sup>78</sup>The National Archives of the UK; Kew, Surrey, England; *American Loyalist Claims, Series II*; Class: AO 13; Piece: 140. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). UK, American Loyalist Claims.

<sup>79</sup>Rightmyer, "Joseph Pilmore, Anglican Evangelical," 191.

<sup>80</sup>Daniel Lysons, *The Environs of London: Volume 4, Counties of Herts, Essex and Kent* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1796), 5. Curates were the lowest paid rank of Church of England clergy.

<sup>81</sup>W. M. Jacob, *The Clerical Profession in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1680–1840* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 64–68.

<sup>82</sup>The National Archives; Kew, Surrey, England; *Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, Series PROB 11*; Class: PROB 11; Piece: 1326. [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com). England & Wales, Prerogative Court of Canterbury Wills, 1384–1858 [database on-line]. Provo, UT, USA: [Ancestry.com](https://www.ancestry.com) Operations, Inc., 2013.

Following the outbreak of hostilities, he could have easily thrown in his lot with the Revolutionary authorities and the great majority of his parishioners. Instead, his actions present us with a figure seldom considered in the religious and political histories of early America: that of an evangelical loyalist. The fact that Stringer had relentlessly pursued the call to “go where God directed him” made the keeping of his ordination vows to the Church and Constitution of England a top priority, even if it meant forfeiting the personal successes that he had achieved in America. Having been made a priest of what he described as “one of the best Constituted Churches in the world,” Stringer refused to violate those vows, no matter how painful the consequences. Little did Gerasimos of Arcadia know, but in illicitly ordaining an evangelical cheesemonger, he provided Church and King with an unfailing servant.

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**Gregory Tirenin** is a PhD candidate in the Department of History at Boston University. He earned a B.A. in History from Siena College (2018) and an M.Litt in Early Modern History from the University of St Andrews (2019). He has also published in *British Catholic History* and *Wesley and Methodist Studies*.

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