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## THEOCRACY IN MASSACHUSETTS: THE PURITAN UNIVERSE OF SACRED IMAGINATION

The idea of society is a powerful image. It is potent in its own right to control or to stir men to action. This image has form; it has external boundaries, margins, internal structure. Its outlines contain power to reward conformity and repulse attack. There is energy in its margins and unstructured areas.

Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 1979

By the side of every religion is to be found a political opinion, which is connected with it by affinity. If the human mind be left to follow its own bent, it will regulate the temporal and spiritual institution of society in a uniform manner, and man will endeavor, if I may so speak, to harmonize earth with heaven.

Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

The Puritan holy experiment in seventeenth-century New England has traditionally been considered in terms of Puritan efforts to establish a true system of church-polity or Congregationalism. Few historians have shown much appreciation of the extent to which those efforts were crucially informed by sacred imaginative visions, especially in regard to eschatological and millennial expectations. Yet the Puritans' apocalyptic ideology of history and their pursuit of the millennium were crucial forces in their migration to America. They played a role in shaping the holy effort to build Congregationalism in New England. Ultimately, as a powerful mode of conviction and persuasion, the Puritans' sacred imagination played a crucial role in shaping social and political action during the early years of Massachusetts Bay Colony.

Believing that they lived in a special dimension of time--the millennium being at hand--which would culminate in the Second Coming of Christ, Puritans left England both because they had given up all hope of achieving genuine reformation there and because they were deeply convinced that the Old World would be destroyed by the eschatological and apocalyptic violence that would precede the millennium. Consequently, they believed themselves sent by God's divine providence into exile in America to establish Christ's Kingdom upon the stage of the world. This divine plan would eventually transform the world into the Kingdom of God. They confidently expected their own rigorous adherence to God's Word would lead to the millennial rule of Christ, and, consequently, to the establishment in New England of the utopian New Jerusalem described in the Book of Revelation.

Ever since Perry Miller's influential essay "Errand into the Wilderness" (1952),

historians have debated the existence of an overarching, founding Puritan Errand in the settlement of New England. However, some historians have dismissed Miller's thesis altogether (Bozeman 81-119). Yet Puritans themselves felt no such skepticism concerning the ultimate goal and significance of their migration to Massachusetts within the framework of church history upon earth. They never relinquished their belief in the prophetic, redemptive, and revelatory significance of their adventure in America as part of the unfolding drama of human redemption. Behind them lay the vast history of the church upon the stage of the world. They knew the gloomy fate of God's chosen people undergoing the vicissitudes of time.

Hence, Puritans justified their migration to New England by the rationale of sacred providential history: "the rule of Christ to his Apostles and Saints, and the practise of Gods Saints in all ages . . . to fly into the Wilderness from the face of the Dragon" (Shepard and Allin 1:119). Such an apocalyptic imagination, based upon the sacred, prophetic, and redemptive vision of the Woman's flight into the Wilderness in the Apocalypse, was intertwined in the Puritan mind with eschatological visions motivating New England's role within the providential history now reaching its culmination. "How woonderfull is the lorde in mercye," wrote one Puritan in England in 1629, "that hathe reysed this newe plantation" of Massachusetts Bay Colony, "for so comfortable a refuge, for all suche whom he hathe exempted owte of that generall divastation, which [England's] Synnes have so much deserved" ("Robert Ryece" 2:129).

This unique eschatological vision of the universe, which played so prominent a role in the justification for settling New England, constituted the ideological context of the Puritan migration to, and experience in, New England. So, for example, Thomas Hooker was confident that "these are the times drawing on, wherein Prophecies are to attain their performances" (Survey, Preface). No wonder, then, that in his highly apocalyptic and eschatological consciousness, Hooker identified the Puritan migration to America with the flight of God's saints out of Sodom and Gomorrah: "God begins to ship away his Noahs, which prophesied and foretold that destruction was near" for England and the old world in general. Furthermore, "God makes account that New England shall be a refuge for his Noahs and his Lots, a rock and shelter for his righteous ones to run unto" (Danger 245).

Situated as it were in the middle of eschatological and apocalyptic fulfillments, the Puritan migration was considered by its participants as a prophetic, revelatory, and redemptive event in the drama of salvation history. This soteriological view also underlies John Cotton's interpretation of the Puritan migration to America. According to Cotton, beginning with Constantine the Great, who in 312 A.D. transformed Christianity from a persecuted sect into the official faith of the Roman Empire, the true church of God "fled into the wilderness" and almost vanished from the face of the earth because of the rise of the Beast, i.e., the Church of Rome. But now, he boldly declares, with the creation of the Puritan colony in the wilderness of America, "the Lord hath given us to enjoy Churches, and Congregational Assemblies by his Covenant, to worship him in all his holy Ordinances." "It is such a priviledge," proclaims Cotton, "that for 1260 years," or that span of time in which the Woman of the

Apocalypse was hiding in the Wilderness from the rage of the Dragon, "the Christian world knew not the meaning of it" (Exposition 122, 241).

Since Puritans defined their errand into the wilderness in eschatological and apocalyptic terms, we may with some justice speak of the "eschatology of the Puritan migration" or Puritan New England's singular role in the final stage of salvation history. Likewise, we may speak of the "apocalypse of the Puritan migration" or the prophetic, rederuptive, and revelatory significance of Puritan New England in the course of the drama of human salvation. Yet, within this visionary universe, one other concept by which the Puritans construed their errand should be considered essential to the ideological origins of the Puritan migration: active pursuit of the millennium. For Puritans were truly confident that "the downfall of Antichrist is at hand, and then the Kingdome[s] of the Earth shall become the Kingdome of our Lord Christ." Consequently, they further claimed, "we chose not the place for the Land. but for the government, that our Lord Christ might raigne over us, both in Churches and Common-wealth" (Johnson 146).

Eschatological and apocalyptic visions were inextricably associated in the Puritan imagination with the pursuit of the millennium. Yet millennialism quite often puzzles historians, especially in regard to "orthodox" Puritans in both England and New England. Historians find it hard to reconcile the activities and thought of the radical religious fanatics during the Puritan Revolution with those of "orthodox" Puritans. Yet, when closely examined and properly understood, millennialism would not be associated exclusively with the radical and revolutionary plans of religious enthusiasts or fanatics. Puritans were conditioned for many years, especially through reading the Geneva Bible ("Puritan Bible") of 1560, to look upon the millennium as a feasible, earthly historical phenomenon taking place within time and history. The differences between "orthodox" and radically fanatical Puritans in both England and New England concerned not some agreed-upon ultimate realization but only the means to achieve such realization. On this point, Edward Johnson explains the stand practiced by "orthodox" Puritans: millennialism means "not that he [Christ] shall come personally to Reigne upon Earth (as some vainly imagine) but [that] his powerful Presence and Glorious brightness of his Gospell . . . shall not onely spiritually cause the Churches of Christ to grow beyond number" all over the world "but also the whole civil Government of people upon Earth shall become his, so that there shall not be any to move the hand, nor dog his tongue against his chosen" (34).

This is the essence of Puritan millennial expectations, namely, the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God through the one-thousand year rule of Christ and His Saints in both church and state. In this context, one important dimension of the Puritan imagination and of the migration to New England was not only the quest to establish congregational churches of visible saints where Christ would rule directly over his people but also the creation of a unique system of social and political government. In such a theocracy, Christ would rule immediately over his saints in both church and state alike (Zakai, Exile 231-52; Zakai, "Theocracy"; Zakai, "Puritan").

Serious consideration of the apocalyptic, eschatological, and millennial dimensions of the Puritan imagination should reveal the Puritan experiment in America to be a more radical and revolutionary social, political, and ecclesiastical system than has been previously suggested. When examined seriously, the eschatology and apocalypse of the Puritan migration is seen to be based upon the ultimate rejection of, and total separation from, corrupted history and degenerating human traditions in England and the old world in general. The presence of powerful eschatological conceptions in the Puritan migration obligates us to reconsider as a whole the Puritan errand into the wilderness of America. Theirs was a radical quest after a theocratic universe, ruled directly and immediately by God's divine Providence, in which every sphere of human life should be reconstructed upon the sacred Word of God. In their advocacy of a theocratic government, Puritans sought nothing less than the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. With the restoration of God to the center of a theocratic universe, the Puritan apocalypse established an eschatological gulf between the Old World from the New World in the course of providential history. Their pursuit of the millennium acknowledged Christ, and only Christ, as a ruler over his saints in both church and state. The Puritan errand was in fact a daring attempt to realize in Massachusetts a radical exercise in holiness, a reconstruction of every dimension of human life upon a covenant with God.

The title of this essay points up my disagreement with Perry Miller's concept of orthodoxy in Massachusetts. I wish to illuminate more fully a radical thrust behind the Puritan migration and the revolutionary character of the holy experiment in Massachusetts. Miller explained the Puritan errand in terms of a transfer of orthodox Puritan culture to America. It should now be recognized, however, that this prominent historian of Puritanism in American history rejected any suggestions concerning eschatological visions or millennial expectations in the Puritan mind. He attached little significance to the apocalyptic mode of historical thought in the foundation of New England. Yet, by ignoring the overwhelming evidence in Puritan writings that the pursuit of the millennium was an essential feature of the Puritan mind or that discussion concerning prophecies of the Second Coming of Christ was widespread, Miller missed a crucial dimension of the Puritan imagination. He failed to understand some of the motives for the Puritan migration and some crucial premises of the holy experiment in the wilderness (Zakai, "Epiphany"; Zakai, "Millennial"; Zakai, "Gospel"; Zakai, "Reformation").

Miller's interpretation of the Puritan errand was based upon a conservative view--the transfer of an orthodox Puritan culture to America by orthodox Puritans. His understanding of the Puritan migration was based upon the general role he assigned to Puritanism in American history. As a cultural historian, Miller was primarily interested in the "narrative of the movement of European culture into the vacant wilderness of America." Believing that an interpretation of the American past ought to begin with explanation of those "traditions" that "have gone into the making of the American mind," Miller viewed the Puritans as the first principal transmitters of European culture to America (Zakai, "Epiphany"). Consequently, in his attempt to explain the processes involved in the establishment of orthodoxy in Massachusetts, Miller was determined to refute

any claim that radicalism motivated the Puritan errand.

Social-history studies during the 1960s and 1970s shifted attention from the debate over the ideology of the Puritan errand to a wide-scale exploration of life-conditions in the Puritan colonies. Yet the ability of such studies to illuminate life-experiences in Puritan New England has raised again the pressing need to reformulate an ideological framework for the Puritan migration. Only within a coherent ideological context can the rich findings of social history be meaningfully interpreted. Since social historians never intended to explain the Puritan errand, this task once again has been left to intellectual historians.

Even if some historians still dismiss the issue altogether, the 1980s was a period when some Puritan historiographers returned to the debate over the Puritan errand. Several studies have appeared which add to our understanding of Puritanism in America. Theodore Bozeman's discovery of a primitivist dimension is one of the most important since Miller's early work. Yet Bozeman tends to emphasize the historical past in the Puritan sense of time, so he downplays the role of sacred imagination in millennial expectations. He ignores the fact that the millenarian impulse sprang from roots deep in Protestant historiography and from a well-defined apocalyptic interpretation of history in sixteenth-century England. Another relevant study is Andrew Delbanco's *The Puritan Ordeal*, which argues that for the Puritans it was England rather than New England that constituted the wilderness. To accept Delbanco's attractive thesis would be to lose sight of the existential condition in America, i.e., the eschatologically oriented conception of the wilderness and the Puritans' vivid sense of exile in America. In one further recent study, Stephen Foster's account of the shaping of New England culture attempts to place Puritan New England in the wider context of English Puritanism. Unfortunately, Foster accepts Miller's thesis about the transfer of orthodox Puritan culture and thus attaches no importance to radical or revolutionary eschatology or millennialism. In general, these three interpretations fail to appreciate the revolutionary imaginative system created by radical Puritans.

Ironically, recent Puritan historiography suffers because it has lost Miller's wide grasp of the Puritan errand. Despite some flaws, Miller captured one essential dimension of the Puritans' imagination. For the Puritans, wrote Miller,

New England was the culmination of the Reformation, the climax of world history, the ultimate revelation through events of the objective toward which the whole human activity had been tending from the beginning of time. (Miller and Johnson 1:86)

This context of salvation history should not be overlooked. Rather, the common assumptions about the causes of the Puritan migration, the idea of American Puritans as non-separatists, the insistence upon Puritan orthodoxy in Massachusetts, and the meaning of Puritan theocracy--all must be assessed in light of the apocalyptic vistas prevalent among the Puritans at that time.

For many years the Puritan migration to America has been considered in context of a discourse of persecution and suffering. That is, Puritans were cruelly

persecuted by kings and bishops in England and forced to emigrate to a remote corner of the world. Less attention has been paid to the pre-emigration experience in England in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century. Ignored, that is, were cultural processes whereby Puritanism expressed itself as a social and political force able to disrupt communities by a radical and uncompromising attempt to reconstruct human life by the sacred word of God. The Great Puritan migration to New England thereby arose out of a world of conflict and strife in local communities, parishes, churches, villages, and towns.

We return again and again to our question: what motivated the Puritan migration to America? I am arguing that one motive was the diminishing prospects for reform at the local and national levels as a result of conflicts between the godly and ungodly or "profane" people, as Puritans termed those who opposed their vision of godly life. Emigration emerged as a possible solution for those radical Puritans for whom the only alternative would be life among the profane. When the attempt to create a godly society in England failed under Queen Elizabeth and the first Stuart kings, some of the more radical Puritans turned their eyes to New England, deeming it the ideal place to make their vision a reality.

Their theocratic quest to reconstitute human life according to God's Word provided the essence of Puritan belief and the motivating force behind the Puritan migration. Yet we must not forget the radicalism that motivated Puritan migration as expressing an apocalyptic interpretation of history. In recent years, many studies have in fact illuminated eschatological visions and millennial expectations in the Puritan mind. Less attention has been given to the relationship between such modes of conviction and the actions involved in shaping the American experience. Analysis of the eschatological and millennial dimension in the Puritan mind can clearly show that out of a unique apocalyptic interpretation of history Puritans were not only able to justify their migration to America within sacred, providential history but also to define the meaning of their holy experiment in the wilderness of America in the course of salvation history. Not only did Puritans believe in the imminence of the millennium; they also deemed themselves actors in the providential drama, the battle between Christ and Antichrist which would precede the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God. As the Puritan emigrants perceived themselves, their errand was at once a utopian search after religious reformation, a flight from human corruption, and a confrontation with Satan and his Antichrist within history and time.

The urgency of the saints to separate themselves from their profane countrymen in England and their reconstruction of a radical apocalyptic interpretation of history leads to the issue of separation. Ever since Miller coined the term "non-separatist congregationalism" (Orthodoxy) and advanced the theory that Massachusetts Puritans were not separatists, few historians have challenged this contention. However, as actions and proclamations amply demonstrate, and as English authorities and English Puritans recognized, Bay Puritans separated themselves intentionally and zealously from the Church of England. Not only did American Puritans refuse to use the traditional rites and ceremonies of the Church of England but they also radically transformed the old customs of church admission by making "Visible Sainthood" and conversion experience

prerequisites to church membership in New England. Even so, this reconstruction of the holy fellowship of the church as based only on visible saints led not only the authorities in England but also the majority of English Puritans during the 1630s and 1640s strongly to denounce the Bay Puritans as having conducted explicit separation from the Church of England.

Elsewhere I suggested why Miller invented the concept of non-separatist congregationalism ("Epiphany"). Scholars following Miller who advance the argument of the non-separatist Puritan migration or of orthodoxy in Massachusetts in fact miss a crucial point. Eschatology and apocalypse were based upon the rejection of, and total separation from, corrupted history and degenerating human traditions in England and the Old World in general.

The Puritans' denunciation of officials in England illustrates their desire for separation. By implication, congregational churches in Massachusetts were indeed revolutionary. Bay Puritans argued from the premise that each congregation held the Keys of the Kingdom of Heaven and independently wielded ecclesiastical power. As John Cotton declared, "in the Old Testament indeed we read of a national church . . . but we read of no such national church . . . in the New Testament" (Keys 128). Richard Mather believed that "in the Old Testament the church of the Jewes was a national church, but in the New Testlament] a nation or a country is not spoken of as one church, but there is mention of many churches in one nation or one country" (95,89). According to Cotton's exegesis of the Book of Revelation, deliverance could be expected "from this Monster . . . [and] from the remnant of the Image of this Beast, from all Diocesan and National Churches" (Exposition 8-9, 13, 17). However looked at, the establishment of Congregationalism in America staged an ecclesiastical revolution. During the 1630s and 1640s, orthodox Puritans in England assailed the saints in America as separatists and repeatedly condemned Congregationalism for its denunciation of the English church. Such controversy threatened to undermine the very notion of the national Church of England.

It is safe albeit surprising to say that little attempt has been made to explore theocratic imagination in the Puritan mind as being one key to theocracy in Massachusetts. Yet how can we deny that Puritans wished to realize their reformation by keeping their covenant with God? Their ideology required that only visible saints, those who visibly proved their covenant with God, could become congregational members. Civil authority should be confined to the godly. Thus, Puritan sacred imagination went hand in hand with social and political reformation. The radical drive for reformation led to a theocratic government manned only by members of the "gathered" churches.

The political system the Puritans created in America would influence both their success in effecting the religious and social reformation and in fulfilling their providential mission. The precise nature of the Puritan commonwealth in Massachusetts remains one of the most vexing gaps in Puritan historiography. We can fully grasp the ideological premises of theocracy by confronting the Puritans' imagination of history. Theocracy in Massachusetts literally signified a republic of saints. Furthermore, theocratic government entailed not only a denial of the divine rights of king and bishops but also a refusal of any privileges based on

property, heredity, or wealth. The sole prerequisites for membership in the body politic were sainthood, holiness, and saving grace; the exclusiveness of the holy fellowship of the church thus led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system.

The work of an historian is always based upon the achievements of past generations. This is especially true of Puritan studies in England and New England, where the important works of William Haller and Perry Miller obligate later historians to scrutinize the Puritan mind if they are to glimpse the meaning Puritans gave to their actions in time and history. There exists no other way to understand the Puritans than to confront their ideology, their religious imaginings, their vision of time and destiny.

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