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From Physical to Spiritual Errand: The Immigrant Experience in John Winthrop, William Bradford, and Samuel Danforth

ABSTRACT

The paper analyzes early colonial representations of the New World, connected with immigration of the first- and second-generation religious dissenters in what was to become America. Taking into account the well-documented influence of Puritans on American identity (often noticed by scholars since Tocqueville), the paper elaborates on the Puritans' and Pilgrims' mindsets as they arrived in the New World, connected not only with their religious beliefs but most of all with a practical need to organize themselves effectively. Be it in John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity," William Bradford's "Of Plymouth Plantation" or Samuel Danforth's "New England's Errand into the Wilderness," the authors of these works clearly show how the Pilgrims and Puritans had to confront the experience of emigration/immigration and construct not only new ways of social organization but also new identity. The paper focuses on the immigrants' perception of the New World, their own role and challenges they were faced with, and their thinking about the society they came from and were about to construct. It deals with their process of adjusting to the surroundings and discussing values they decided to promote for the sake of communal survival in the adverse conditions of the New World.

The Puritan Influence

Immigrant heritage is among the most important aspects defining American identity. Those who were to become first Americans (as opposed to Native tribes, who were not part of the imaginary concept of "America") were themselves immigrants. Yet one way to argue with this viewpoint would be that presented in Huntington's *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America's National Identity*. For Huntington, those who arrived in America first were not "immigrants" but "settlers"—not adapting to an existing new society but creating a colony to which they transferred their former culture (39–41). However, this argument is rightfully refuted by Rogers M. Smith, who believes that "the distinction between settlers and immigrants is necessarily one of degree," since both groups bring their identity to a new place and both are forced to adapt to new conditions, creating a new culture (24–25). Thus, American society has been established through migration, not only of minorities, but, actually, also of the white majority.

It is intriguing to ponder the mentality of the first immigrants and their own conceptualization of their condition. This essay focuses on the most well-known writings of Puritans and Pilgrims who came to the New World in the first half of the seventeenth century. The Puritan influence upon American identity has been widely described by sociologists, critics and historians: since Alexis de Tocqueville, the Puritan spirit has been equated with liberty, and since Max Weber, with capitalism. Tocqueville believed that Puritans were unique in combining the Old Testament's legalistic "spirit of religion" and the New Testament's "spirit of freedom," which gradually became detached from "its religious framework and link[ed] to the doctrine of 'self-interest properly understood'" (Kessler 790). Whether this division into Old Testament and New Testament qualities is accurate falls outside the scope of this discussion. What is important here is that even the very association of Puritanism with freedom has been questioned. Milan Zafirovski's essay "The Most Cherished Myth: Puritanism and Liberty Reconsidered and Revised" is a blunt testimony to such objections; for him (as well as for many sociologists and historians whom he quotes) this pairing is simply a naïve myth, disregarding historic reality (27). He rightfully stresses the qualities of Puritanism quite incompatible with freedom: "coercion, intolerance, exclusion and monism or anti-pluralism" (32). However, he disregards the divisions within Puritanism itself: the movement separated into Presbyterians and the more liberal Independents, which makes it difficult to consider it a monolith in terms of granting its members personal freedom (Miller 16). Also, Zafirovski clearly exaggerates, claiming that "this authoritarian or totalitarian rule whenever and wherever in power is what precisely makes Puritanism

prefigure or converge with, if not inspire, fascism and other totalitarianism (plus fundamentalist Islam)" (35)—the comparison is quite far-fetched, and the suggested inspiration impossible to prove. For Zafirovski, the only instances of Puritan tolerance were those needed "in order to simply survive in and eventually destroy à la Machiavelli a non-Puritan political-cultural environment" (38). Despite promoting this conspiracy theory, which positions the Puritans as the source of all evil in human history, Zafirovski does voice a valid concern about interpreting the Puritan influence as that of liberty.

This problem might be partially resolved by redefining the key influence in American history. Alongside numerous books describing the Puritans as the source of American mentality, there exist attempts at presenting an alternative. Marxist critic V. F. Calverton's 1932 book *The Liberation of American Literature* offers an interesting interpretation of the nation's history. According to Calverton, what we have learned to identify with Puritan influence is in fact the bourgeois spirit, not shared by English upper-middle-class Puritans. For instance, he compares American theocracy with that championed by the Puritans in England, and demonstrates that the latter were far less strict or hostile towards art. Thus, he concludes that what became the dominant feature of American mentality was

> petty bourgeois individualism of the frontier which provided the basic psychological determinant in our [i.e., American—J.F.] national ideology. It was the influence of that individualism which accomplished our release from European culture, undermined the force of the colonial complex, and laid the foundation for an indigenous American culture. (Calverton 244)

This bourgeois individualism in America turned into "a mass phenomenon instead of a class one. It was not confined to one class . . . but extended through and included all classes. Or, to be more precise, it made all of America into one class in its ideology—middle class" (266). The spirit of equality meant that all were to imitate one model and uphold one aspiration:

> The only class divisions that arose, were within that middle class, divisions between the rich bourgeoisie and the poor bourgeoisie. The workers as well as the farmers developed an individualistic outlook, and adopted an unconcealed, petty bourgeois psychology. The whole country became afflicted with the psychology of the entrepreneur. (Calverton 266)

Calverton's interpretation of the source of American individualism is perhaps justified, especially since the Puritans were quite communally minded. Within the religious context, however, the emphasis upon individual freedom arose in the United States as late as during the Second Great Awakening, in the 1820s; it had not been a dominant feature of early Puritan writing. Calverton represents the voice of a minority, and such works as Sacvan Bercovitch's *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* confirm a significant role that Puritanism played in shaping American mentality, not only in the sphere of individualism.

The Immigrant Experience in Puritan and Pilgrim Writings

Colonial writing in what was to become America reveals that first- and second-generation religious dissenters had to confront the experience of emigration / immigration and construct not only new ways of social organization but also a new identity. John Winthrop's 1630 speech on board the *Arbella*, "A Modell of Christian Charity," is more than just a source of the famous "city upon a hill" passage, which established the Puritan community as an example for the Christian world and initiated the history of American exceptionalism. The whole text delineates the shape of the future community, preparing those travelling with Winthrop for a completely new life.

Firstly, what is striking in Winthrop's thesis is how much stress he puts upon hierarchy. Compared to the aforementioned conjunction between Puritan heritage and liberty, promoted by Tocqueville, Winthrop's writing clearly shows that this first-generation group of immigrants did not have liberal or democratic ideas in mind. Quite the contrary, Winthrop's ideology consists in strongly naturalizing and sanctifying social hierarchy. This is especially visible in the opening lines: "God Almighty in his most holy and wise providence, hath soe disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others mean and in submission" (33). It is very much an Old-World frame of mind, this insistence upon the rightfulness of the division into the rich and the poor. The governor lists three reasons for this state of affairs. Firstly, the differentiation of mankind into various social classes ensures an abundance of ways in which God is to be praised; secondly, God may incline the rich towards kindness and the poor towards obedience; and finally, such an arrangement builds a chain of dependence between the members of a community, thus turning them into a society.

It seems that, realizing the Puritans would face new adverse conditions—both wild nature and possibly hostile natives—Winthrop uses Biblical authority for the world view he promotes in order to create a society that can function

in the new surroundings. He looks for ways to bind the community together, eradicating all individualistic urgings that may arise from an opportunity to build a new life. Such group-oriented thinking is not only ideological from the religious point of view, but most of all pragmatic from the perspective of simple survival. Especially that, according to David D. Hall, "[Winthrop] knew that other such ventures, but especially the Virginia Company of London's efforts in the Chesapeake, had foundered on conflicts among the colonists and a disastrous erosion of common goals" (164).[1] Thus, Winthrop proposes a whole system of legal behaviours (e.g., money-lending based on Biblical law), highlighting two things. Firstly, that extraordinary times require extraordinary measures ("community of perills calls for extraordinary liberality" [35]), so the members of the community are expected to help each other more than usually; secondly, that, religious as they may be, the members of his congregation should rely upon themselves and not on Divine intervention ("whereby our christian brother may be relieved in his distress, we must help him beyond our ability rather than tempt God in putting him upon help by miraculous or extraordinary meanes" [35]). Both these provisions, their moral or ethical dimension aside, seem to be very sensible remarks about life in the severe conditions of the New World, which required tight cooperation. The settlers are encouraged to think more of their poor brethren than their posterity; to help financially those who are in need at present, and only in "ordinary" times to allow themselves the egoistic privilege of building their own heritage. The survival of the present community is Winthrop's primary goal since, rightfully, it constitutes a necessary condition for any future plans regarding individuals.

The almost organic unity expected from the Puritan settlers is described through the common metaphor of Christ's body:

> There is noe body but consists of partes and that which knitts these partes together, giues the body its perfection, because it makes eache parte soe contiguous to others as thereby they doe mutually participate with each other, both in strengthe and infirmity, in pleasure and paine. To instance in the most perfect of all bodies; Christ and his Church make one body . . . true Christians are of one body in Christ. (39–40)

The consequences of this vision of the community members as one body—and, moreover, as the body of Christ—are twofold, and they stem from the

[1] Exactly how demanding the New World conditions were can be illustrated by the following data: "The mortality rate of the Virginia colony had been horrifying—between 1619 and 1625 over two-thirds of the English colonists had perished from disease, Indian attack, or starvation" (Bremer 1).

assertion that "[i]f one member suffers, all suffer with it, if one be in honor, all rejoyce with it" (40). First, all people may count on one another, never being left alone in their problems or joys, since each experience affects the whole Puritan Christ-body. This is the effect stressed by Winthrop, who believes it to be a vital strength of the envisaged society. However, he does not mention the possibility of a negative interpretation of such a metaphor: if the society is treated organically, this leaves little room for individual error. A sick part infects the entire body, requiring immediate amputation; the subsequent impossibility of dissent is easy to foresee, and is confirmed by the history of Puritan intolerance.

Scott Michaelsen points to the fact that Winthrop speaks of the Puritan journey as of a "covenant" or "commission" between God and Puritans, but initiated, curiously, by the latter:

> There also are practical reasons why Winthrop described his version of the federal covenant as an offer to God, for his acceptance. He was, after all, merely transposing into covenant theology the actual history, legal status and terms of the charter issued to the Puritans in 1629, including its provisions allowing the Company to hold Court and establish laws in the plantation. (Michaelsen 88)

In Winthrop's text, secular and religious orders merge, giving rise not only to a theocratic utopia but also to a society governed by the practical needs of establishing a colony in the New World.

Unlike Winthrop's Puritans, the Pilgrims who arrived with William Bradford were not religious reformers, but separatists. Bradford's *Of Plymouth Plantation* tells the story of their journey to the New World, starting with the reasons for leaving England, and subsequently Holland. Their identity is constructed in opposition to the corrupt Church of England; curiously, in Bradford's account the Pilgrims are martyrs, willing to suffer for their faith and ready to abandon the "goodly and pleasant city" of Leyden (47) in order to spread true faith; yet at the same time they seem to have a very pragmatic reason for their departure to America, namely escaping poverty as well as the "great labour and hard fare" of Holland (23).

Even though Bradford's text is a historical account, detailing the events that took place during the Pilgrim immigration to the New World, his choice of facts to be described is also motivated ideologically. Thus for example in Chapter IX he recounts the death of a "very profane young man" (58), a sailor who disrespected the Pilgrims and who was struck with disease as a punishment from God. The passage is designed as proof of the

Pilgrims' righteousness and of God's approval for their actions. This is the angle Bradford uses in the remainder of the text, attributing to God's help all the victories of his group, including the Mystic massacre during the Pequot War. It is a Biblical view of history as revealing divine interventions in support of the chosen people; in fact, religious commentary on history rather than a simple historical account.

Interestingly, Bradford's ideas share certain affinities with Winthrop's speech; however, what Winthrop prescribes for the new community of Puritans, Bradford describes as actually happening. Like "A Modell of Christian Charity," *Of Plymouth Plantation* features similar emphasis upon mutual help among the settlers. Whereas Winthrop advises his followers to be like the members of Christ's body and share both joys and pains, Bradford describes the first winter, during which half of the Pilgrims die, and those who do not fall ill with scurvy and other diseases tend to the sick, disregarding their own health. This is contrasted with the behaviour of the sailors remaining on the *Mayflower*, who avoid their sick fellows for fear of contagion; the ship's ill are also helped only by the Pilgrims. Likewise, there is strict cooperation and division of roles when it comes to fortifying the Pilgrims' settlements and defending themselves against Indians.

Yet at the same time Bradford strikes a new note, in a passage where he clearly insists on private property. He explains that at first the settlers were supposed to share "the common course and condition" (120), owning everything as a community and working for the common good, dividing the fruit of their labour evenly. However, the Pilgrims' situation is so difficult that in 1623 the Governor "assign[s] to every family a parcel of land" (120) and decides each should work for his own needs, which results in much better crops. Bradford criticizes the initial egalitarian economic arrangement, viewing it as unjust, since young men had to work for others' wives and children, and the strong for the weak. It seems unfair to him that "the aged and graver men [were] ranked and equalized in labours and victuals, clothes, etc., with the meaner" (121). Thus, similarly to Winthrop, Bradford believes that hierarchy is wholesome and natural, and that the situation in which people think "one as good as another" leads to ruin and social decomposition (121).

If Winthrop and Bradford are both representatives of the generation coming from the Old World to the New, Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness*—a 1670 example of the American Jeremiad—already represents the second generation of immigrants. According to Perry Miller, "[s]ome historians suggest that the second and third generations suffered a failure of nerve; they weren't

the men their fathers had been, and they knew it" (4). They experienced an identity crisis; no longer able to see themselves as the heroes who crossed the Atlantic, they had difficulty finding another discourse that would accommodate their experience; the American Jeremiad is, for Miller, its expression. Some of the Puritans believed that if they performed well their task of instituting God's kingdom on earth, God would bring them back to England (Miller 14); by the time of the second generation it was becoming clear England had not mended its ways following the example of the Puritan theocracy. Also, the idea of the "city upon a hill" suggested that the success of their enterprise depended on the attention the Puritans were able to attract:

> If the rest of the world, or at least of Protestantism, looked elsewhere, or turned to another model, or simply got distracted and forgot about New England, if the new land was left with a polity nobody wanted—then every success in fulfilling the terms of the covenant would become a diabolical measure of failure. (Miller 15)

For the second generation, it seemed clear that "[h]aving failed to rivet the eyes of the world upon their city on the hill, they were left alone with America" (19).

The Jeremiad's model construction is composed of three set stages: first, the author depicts an ideal time, often Biblical; then, a departure from that ideal; finally, a possible shift of the community towards better times. Whereas this structure is seen by Bercovitch as almost the Hegelian triad of thesis, antithesis and synthesis, embodying the spiritual progress of the community (Bercovitch 91), Miller reads Danforth's Jeremiad as a move of a different sort. He elaborates on the two possible meanings of the word "errand," one being connected to working for someone else (as in the "errand-boy"), the other to performing one's own business (as in "the wife running her own errands" [4]). Danforth's sermon supposedly embodies the shift from the former meaning to the latter, i.e., from the Puritans' being sent by God on an errand to running their own errands. This newly found independence, according to Miller, was the beginning of the process of Americanization (11). In Bercovitch's view, however, this process "began in Massachusetts not with the decline of Puritanism but with the Great Migration, and . . . the concept of errand, accordingly, as a prime expression of the Puritan venture, played a significant role in the development of what was to become modern middle-class American culture" (92). For Bercovitch, the importance of the errand is connected to his understanding of the Jeremiad as an expression of progress leading to

synthesis. Namely, he claims that the American Jeremiad, unlike its European counterpart, was a "mode of celebration," attempting to "transform threat into promise"—a promise of continuing to the third, positive stage of better times (94–95). Both critics seem to agree, however, that it was the abstraction of Puritan ideas from religion that created, or influenced, the American spirit.

Conclusion

As evident in the two discussed texts, both Winthrop and Bradford promote the vision of a strong, organic community, where the mutual dependence of its members cements the group and allows it to face adversities. At the same time, this interdependence does not mean real equality. Far from it; in fact, both authors depict a strongly hierarchical model of society. According to Smith, all stories of peoplehood include three constitutive elements: "promises of economic well-being; promises of political power sufficient to ensure personal security and a measure of political influence; and what I have termed the 'ethically constitutive' themes, accounts depicting membership in a people as having intrinsic normative worth" (23). The ideal of a tight-knit community, advanced by Winthrop and Bradford, is an equivalent of the second of Smith's conditions. The first one is implied in Bradford's depictions of the economic hardship suffered by the Pilgrims in Holland—the reader may guess that their journey to the New World is supposed to free them from poverty. Finally, the ethically constitutive motive is the one prevalent among all religious dissenters: of establishing God's kingdom on earth, or providing a righteous example for the rest of the world.

This community of migrants created a society based on intolerance, which was supposed to cement its foundations:

> What a due form of civil government meant, therefore, became crystal clear: a political regime, possessing power, which would consider its main function to be the setting up, the protecting and preserving of this form of polity. This due form would have, at the very beginning of its list of responsibilities, the duty of suppressing heresy, of subduing or somehow getting rid of dissenters—of being, in short, deliberately, vigorously, and consistently intolerant. (Miller 7)

In this respect, we return to Zafirovski's reservations concerning the intellectual habit of equating Puritanism with freedom. At the same time, many authors agree that during the "Puritan experiment" the line

dividing the secular and the sacred became blurred (Michaelsen 88), which eventually resulted in the Puritan creed evolving into the American creed:

> In that fact, I would suggest, lies the major irony of colonial history. Insisting that the errand was the one sure way to success, the ministers drained it of its discrete theological and institutional content. Intent on preserving the past, they transformed it, as legend, into a malleable guide to the future. Seeking to defend the theocracy, they abstracted from its antiquated social forms the larger, vaguer, and more flexible forms of metaphor and myth (New Israel, wilderness, promised land, destined progress), and facilitated the movement from the New England to the American Way, and from errand to manifest destiny, American mission and the dream. (Bercovitch 97)

Thus, Danforth's use of the concept of errand shows the exceptionalist mission to be embraced later by all of America. The errand of Puritans and Pilgrims, however, was not only a spiritual one, but most of all a physical one, demanding an adjustment to the conditions on the part of small middle-class communities coping with the New World wilderness.

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