The American Puritans and the Historians

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In 1964, intellectual historian Henry May announced in a now-famous essay the beginning of "The Recovery of American Religious History." May has since recalled that his claim was greeted with scepticism (66). The subsequent record, however, has proven him more than right. In hindsight it is fair to say that May's essay heralded only the first trickle of an on-going flood of research that continues to the present. Numerous new emphases and approaches, such as those on popular religion and social history, have flourished, and virtually no theme, movement, tradition, group, or era has escaped attention: revivalism, esoterica, civil religion, indigenous peoples, women, new religions, ethnic imports, and just about every denomination twice-over.

One movement and era in particular, the Puritans of colonial New England, have received enormous amounts of investigation and analysis. So great has been the flow of scholarship that, as one history pundit has forecast, we can well imagine the day when there will be at least one book of serious "Puritan studies" for every fifty original Puritans. We now seem to near the threshold of knowing more about the Puritans than anyone should properly want to know about anybody (Morgan, "Historians" 41). Indeed, no group of mostly ordinary people, save maybe for the ancient Israelites, has ever been so closely inspected, analyzed, and interpreted (Murrin 226). Nevertheless, in spite of mountains and schools of past and present scrutiny, or maybe because of it, no stable image of the nature of Puritanism or its American settlement has emerged. Rather, we have seen in the last half-century large scale shifts of perspective and emphasis that have depended largely on the individual historian's interpretive goggles—the perceptual dispositions and biases the historian inevitably brings to questions of why and how humans and events occur as they do. The discussion that follows attempts to survey in brief the general contours of the last fifty years' major historical analyses of American Puritan culture. By examining the changing approaches and judgments of Puritan culture, we can perhaps derive an accurate working image of Puritan culture and make brief comment on its relevance to contemporary American social dilemmas.

The Progressive Era and Its Legacy

For the most part, the American Puritans' reputation has had a hard time of it through the middle part of the twentieth century, especially in what we might call popular intellectualism. However much the broad religious middle-class of the United States has venerated the pious and sentimental image of Plymouth Rock and Thanksgiving, the Puritans' fate among the liberally educated and urbane "new class" has been decidedly less kind. The stereotype there, old and vigorous still in the popular intellectual lore, pictures stern, repressive, and nosey black-suited ogres whose legacy consists of pious fanaticism, clerical tyranny, gross superstition, obsessive guilt, sexual denial, and heedless capitalism (the latest charge is environmental despoilation). While academic historians have long since largely discarded this caricature, that fact has not daunted innumerable media sages. Journalists galore, columnist upon
commentator, left and right alike, continue to manhandle the ill-famed Puritans as scapegoat, whipping-boy, and bugbear for just about everything wrong with American culture. How long this woeful distortion will persist remains one of the eternal mysteries.

While we cannot know the longevity of the popular caricature, the beginnings of that negative estimate are easier to trace, as is the course of current revisions that promises to assault still other prominent contemporary historiographic assumptions. The first substantive criticism of American Puritanism came in the nineteen-twenties and thirties. In 1921, using the economic interpretive filter set forth by historian Charles Beard in his work on the American constitution, James Truslow Adams declared in *The Founding of New England* that the primary motivation of the lay Puritan in coming to the New World was economic and political, the opportunity to do what one wished for oneself; in Adams’ eyes, the evidence indicated that religion was at best a secondary consideration (121-22). A few years later, in the first of three volumes on *Main Currents in American Thought*, historian Vernon Parrington celebrated the triumph of American “democratic liberalism” over Puritanism’s clerical tyranny and capitalistic fervor (13). For Parrington, a major figure in American historiography, religious ideas assumed value only insofar as they fostered, most often inadvertently, a progressive political liberalism. Intellectually as well as politically, the American Puritans feared “the free spaces of thought,” living in a “narrow and cold . . . prison” of intolerant “absolutist dogma” (12, 13). The sentiments of Adams, Parrington, and many other like-minded historians, generally known as the progressive school, found in the 20s and 30s an indomitable popularizer in gadfly journalist H. L. Mencken, whose syndicated columns lampooned Puritan intelligence, charity, sexuality, and piety. The combination of a pronounced interpretive “climate of opinion” or ideological cast among professional historians and a talented popularizer fairly well entrenched the still dominant popular biases and caricatures of Puritan New England.

The seemingly final nail in the coffin of Puritanism came not from America or the historical profession but from Germany and the emerging discipline of sociology. In 1904-05 German sociologist Max Weber published two articles that would become, in English translation, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. In that classic work, Weber set forth the notion that the rational and organizational processes necessary for the emergence of modern industrial capitalism were dramatically furthered by a single central facet of Puritan theology. According to Weber, the Calvinistic insistence on predestination imposed enormous psychological anxiety upon the believer. Uncertain of one’s eternal fate, the believer sought desperately for earthly signs of God’s election. The very urgency of the search impelled the seeker to interpret any good occurrence, especially material prosperity, as an indication of divine favor. With the prospect of validating one’s salvation as an impetus, and the Calvinistic notion of a worldly calling serving as justification, the Puritans threw themselves into the pursuit of wealth. This religious mindset in turn fostered a new single-minded efficiency in the marketplace; after all, the stakes were high—a life of grim uncertainty or sweet repose. The effect of Weber’s formulation was to further the notion of the Puritan as intellectually impoverished and, because of that, economically resolute or, put more bluntly, plain greedy. Moved by a powerful idea, predestination, Weber’s Puritans initiated the modern world.

One of the central and most hotly contested cultural theories about the origins of modern
life, Weber's work exerted an enormous lasting influence on the image of Puritan culture. Two rather large ironies emerge in this regard. On the one hand, Weber clearly intended his work to be a refutation of economic determinism, that interpretive filter that sees all activity and ideation as products of economic self-interest, whether self-conscious or not. In short, Weber wished to assert the primacy of religious ideas over economic causation. The idea has often been inverted, however, to assert the economic thesis or interpreted to indict the nature of Calvinism. A second irony, at least for the religionist, lies in the fact that while Weber perhaps in part accomplished his purpose, he did so with a sizeable toll upon the image of the Puritans. The argument suggests that whatever ideas the Puritans came up with, they weren't very good, either in themselves or in their social effects. Needless to say, Weber's work gelled with the mood of the progressive historians and became a major intellectual cliche. While much of Weber's historical understanding of Puritanism has been called into serious question and his theory markedly revised, his evocation of a selfish work ethic and a mercenary religious sect persist.4

The Rise of Intellectual History

The first assaults on the progressive school questioned both its historical method and its philosophic basis for judgment. Its first major critic, himself a descendant of the Puritans, Samuel Eliot Morison, took a long look at the Builders of the Bay Colony (1930), an examination that consciously set out to challenge the facts and conjectures of Adams' groundbreaking study. For Morison, the Puritans were more or less who they said they were, both politically and religiously; in short, he gave them the benefit of a doubt and supposed that their rhetoric did in fact approximate their actual motives and circumstances. His success lay not only in making the dread Puritans into plausible human beings but into stalwart brave souls who struggled morally and philosophically to tame a wilderness and to live and make sense of a commitment. In effect, then, Morison denied a central tenet of the progressive school: that religious ideas, unless socially radical, function mostly as ingenious cloaks for social and economic control desire.

In the decade that followed Morison's book, the Puritans found their most cogent and prolific defender in Perry Miller, a young Harvard historian. With exhaustive thoroughness, intellectual complexity, and literary passion, Miller undertook a decades-long foray into the Puritan mind and spirit, thereby initiating the current momentum of historical curiosity. In five different lengthy books, a total of roughly two thousand pages, Miller retrieved a staggeringly full picture of the Puritan psyche. One of America's great historiographic achievements, it remains a standard for historical sophistication and caution, regardless of subject area. Moreover, on Puritanism itself, Miller's description of Puritan intellectual, religious, and to some extent, social reality has become the normative picture with which subsequent historians of early America have had to reckon. And that reckoning is no easy process for Miller's thoroughness, taste for historical nuance, intellectual complexity, and occasional fuzziness make his books demanding reading. More than one historian, having launched "the attack" on where Miller was wrong, has been found guilty of not reading Miller closely enough. Indeed, with his capacious and subtle rendering of the Puritan past, Miller has almost become as finally unknowable as the voluble and now distant Puritans.5
Miller's first volume, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* (1933), surveyed the relationship of the theology of English Puritanism to the creation of the ecclesiastical and governmental forms of New England society. Edmund Morgan, the current dean of scholars of early America, best points to the nature of Miller's challenge to the progressive school:

he considered the actions of the founders to be the product of their ideas and not vice versa. He related the settlement of New England not to the economic discontents or social ambitions of the emigrants but to the ecclesiastical ideas developed among English Puritans during the preceding fifty years. The result was to place both the ecclesiastical and political history of New England in the context of intellectual history (52).

Miller followed in a few years with *The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century* (1939), an extensive examination of the crucial and complex theological and experiential core of Puritanism. Interrupted by World War II, Miller's next study did not appear until 1949. *Jonathan Edwards* advocated that its subject was not only the greatest of Puritan theologians but also the bold prophet of the toughest modern intellectual dilemmas. In 1956 Miller collected various essays on the New England Puritans in *Errand into the Wilderness*. Three years later, he concluded his venture with the second volume of the *New England Mind, From Colony to Province* (1959), which traced the fate of the Puritans' ideology through a century of wilderness life.

The nature of Miller's contribution has prompted a good deal of discussion among historians. The most frequent criticism of his work has focused on his approach to history. In the first volume of *The New England Mind*, Miller unabashedly confessed to not "giving more than passing notice to social or economic influence" in order to concentrate on "the importance of ideas in American history" (xii), especially with reference to "the integrity and profundity of the Puritan character," which was "one of the major expressions of the Western intellect" and "the most powerful single factor in the early history of America" (viii). That being the case, Miller "sought to discover what it held, what spirit and what thoughts inspired it and to what it aspired, what combinations it made of older ideas and what it added of its own, and what finally...it can be said to have meant or still means as a living force" (viii). In short, he was after what it was like to live inside a Puritan skin, the very shape and texture of the Puritan psyche. This venture evidenced a radical departure for the practice of history for Miller had made bold, as Edmund Morgan has put it, to "understand the past not through its contributions to political liberty, and not through sympathy with common or uncommon men, but through a study of the way men understood themselves" ("Perry Miller" 53).

Miller's attention to what he called "mind" went beyond intellectual or doctrinal matters to plunge into the intricacies and depths of the Puritan spirit. For him, the glory of Puritanism lay in its hard-headed analysis of the somber "plight of humanity" (8). The Puritans' Calvinism was but "one more instance of a recurrent spiritual answer to interrogations eternally posed by human existence" (4). The theology and deep piety of Puritanism "came from an urgent sense of man's predicament, from a mood so deep that it could never be completely articulated" (4); from a recognition, that is, "of the natural emptiness of the heart and its consuming desire for fullness" (22). Such realism fascinated Miller, and, in his eyes, throughout history
has appealed "irresistibly to large numbers of exceptionally vigorous spirits" (4). The consequence was a theology that sought desperately to understand and mediate between a yearning and deeply flawed self and an essentially mysterious and forbidding world, one more akin to those of Ecclesiastes, Job, and Augustine than to the visions of latter-day optimists, whether Unitarian or New Deal. Miller's Puritans shared, in the words of Francis Butts, a "profound sense of man's smallness in a universe that was both mysterious and majestic, frightening and elating" wherein they "acutely felt the abyss that separated them from what they called God" (670). What stands out, then, as their accomplishment, one which Miller respected, was their "drive for an intelligible universe" (Hollinger 160). Their task was, in the words of Henry May, "to make an intellectual system out of the mystery and terror of the Universe ("Miller's Parrington" 215).

If in the first volume of The New England Mind Miller confined his focus to "the architecture of the intellect brought to America by the founders of New England," in its second volume, From Colony to Province, Miller examined the fate that befell that intellect as it necessarily accommodated itself to an American setting (vii). With that as his task, Miller sought to generalize "about the relation of thought or ideas to community experience" (viii). There Miller traced the passing of the first generation and the strategies wherewith the second tried to sustain the religious fervor and purity of the forebears. His story was not a happy one, even though critics have lately subjected that as well to debate.6 He detected subtle shifts of religious mood and tone more than overt changes in theology and doctrine, although those too did transpire, as with the famous Half-Way Covenant. The formal content of New England theology did not so much change as soften or distract the sense of belief, what the spirit and imagination made of notions like sin, redemption, and holiness. Miller labelled this process declension or decline, and the Puritans themselves seemed to have judged it to be so, for they regularly inveighed against it in sermons known as jeremiads. In any case, the culprit seems to have been how richly God blessed Puritan efforts in the new world. Hard work "was mandated as a way to glorify God, yet the fruit of industry [wealth] distracted the Saints from their initial errand. Success bred failure" (Butts 683). The blandishments of an even modest prosperity amply diverted the culture from its whole-hearted pursuit of God. The texture of piety had changed: one could still believe the old doctrines but God had imperceptibly become less the end of the Puritan venture than the guarantor of its well-being.

Needless to say, Miller's grand edifice has undergone a steady and useful critique since his death in 1964, especially with regard to his unflinching emphasis on ideas as opposed to social factors as shaping forces in cultural history. While that allegiance was to some extent corrected by the second volume of The New England Mind, many later historians have seen there as well a large measure of insensitivity to the significance and complexity of psychological, class, or economic realities in conditioning various sorts of religious expression, be they ecclesiastical, theological, or devotional. While surely Miller erred in countless ways, especially in some emphases and occasional fuzziness, the boldness, freshness, and cogency of his rendering of Puritanism stands as the major historiographical accomplishment of the last half century. Miller not only reasserted the historical significance of ideas but initiated among historians the refurbishing of the image of religion as a potentially credible and rigorous
psychological and intellectual enterprise. Subsequent historians have most often looked at the adequacy of Miller's data or the soundness of his interpretations.

**The New Social History**

While by no means eclipsing the work of Miller and his disciples, the last two decades of Puritan studies have benefited greatly from the emergence of a whole new methodological school of historical research. With its conceptual origins in France, the first applications to Puritanism of what is called the new social history were to English settings. In 1963 Sumner Chilton Powell published his Pulitzer-Prize winning *Puritan Village: The Formation of a New England Town*, a study that attempted to trace the transfer of cultural patterns from old England to New England. English scholar Peter Laslett's *The World We Have Lost: England Before the Industrial Age* provided a detailed portrait of the last phases of medieval society before the onset of industrialization. Both studies were as remarkable for their methods as for their content. As a methodology, the new social history relies heavily on the use of almost any sort of extant data from long-gone social units, usually families, churches, and towns: genealogies, wills, tax ledgers, court and municipal records, parish records, and, in some cases, company books. By painstakingly collating and then sifting vast amounts of data, a process now helped by the computer, the social historians have constructed startlingly full portraits of innumerable persons and families and the larger social patterns their lives compose. With these techniques, we can now with some empirical certainty illumine what were either inaccessible or at best shadowy areas in the contours and texture of ordinary life several centuries ago. Historians have moved increasingly toward clarity on such factual matters, to name a few, as social and geographic mobility, marriage ages, fertility and mortality rates, family size, levels of family and community strife, and economic and trade practices. Previously scholars' conclusions about the daily life of ordinary people were necessarily more impressionistic, based as they were on surviving literary evidence which itself could be highly subjective in its depictions. The data can still occasion rather eccentric interpretation, but on the whole the new social history has provided a fresh route into Puritan New England and has yielded some surprising results.

This new wealth and kind of information has to some extent occasioned a shift of historical interest from the lives and thought of very small intellectual, political, and social elites, an "articulate few," to the experience and fate of the ordinary and unheralded yeoman, wife, merchant, craftsman, or magistrate—by and large common people who did not keep journals, who wrote few letters and no books, who never mounted a pulpit, or who in many cases could not read (Ruttmann 149). While this still does not put the historian inside the mind of the folk, so to speak, information about towns, families, and individuals does afford a comparatively full glimpse of at least the surface or external shape of the experience of large numbers of people whose lives until now have remained almost fully obscure. As historian Michael Murrin has commented, with the new social history, we come "as close to the lives of everyday men as the historians of the early modern era are ever likely to get" (227).

To some extent, at least in terms of the writing of religious history, this shift of study from elite to popular subjects—popular meaning, in this instance, ordinary or common—
was already underway. Most religious history in America has been what we call church history or, put simply, the fates of denominations, the chronicle of ecclesiastical, doctrinal, and institutional formation and change. The larger culture in which the denomination found itself was considered only insofar as it gave a setting for or influenced the denomination. Beginning with the progressive historians, whose interests were other than writing a holy history, at least of the traditional religious kind, historians have wondered more and more about the role of religion in the formation of American culture and history. As historian William Clebsch has suggested, the historian must write a very different story if she asks “to what uses American history has put its religion” or looks at the “function of religion and religious ideas in the common life of Americans” (3, ix). That possibility, needless to say, has introduced a secularist perspective in the writing of religious history that has brought much energy to bear on the history and nature of the religious life, even though much of that has not been particularly sympathetic to the religious enterprise.

**Puritan Social Reality**

One of the accomplishments of the new social history has been to expand our understanding the role of religion and its prominence in Puritan society, especially of the centrality of its social vision and the extent to which it often translated into communal reality. For example, the work of Perry Miller duly emphasized Puritan hopes for a free and “pure” religious and spiritual environment—a kind of utopia of holiness—far indeed from the repressive thumb of crown and state church. And when New England seemed to decline, Miller rightly highlighted the preachers’ concerns over the fraying of what we today call “personal piety.” In part because its methodology dictates its focus and the questions it asks, social history has allowed us to see to what extent Puritan piety was indeed also and perhaps foremost a social piety, which for them ideologically and practically meant a whole lot more than looking into their neighbor’s business. Put simply, because of the work of the social historians, we have a clearer picture of what American Puritans were after in coming to America and to what extent they fulfilled their goals.

On the question of Puritan social piety, in an important summary article, one pair of scholars, T. H. Breen and Stephen Foster, have gone so far as to claim that American Puritanism’s “greatest achievement” came in its “most startling accomplishment, fifty years of relative social peace” (“Achievement” 5). And this came, as they point out, during a period of general turmoil and strife in England and Europe. In accounting for this phenomenon, Breen and Foster point to a series of factors, not the least of which was the social vision promulgated by Puritan leaders. We catch a glimpse of that vision in John Winthrop’s “A Model of Christian Charity,” a sermon preached before landfall upon the flagship *Arabella* in 1630. A moderate Puritan lawyer in England, and a member of the gentry, Winthrop was asked to lead the large 1630 migration to Boston, after which he served as the colony’s elected governor for most of the twenty remaining years of his life. Winthrop besought the migrants to be “knit together in the bond of love” and “brotherly affection,” to live together “in all meekness, gentleness, patience, and liberality.” While New England was to retain a medieval hierarchal class structure, as was the norm for the time, it was nonetheless to be fully informed by cooperation, interdependence, and charity so that the “rich and
mighty” would not “eat up the poor,” as was increasingly not the case in England. Rather, as a holy enterprise, the migrants should all willingly “abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for supply of others’ necessities.” Beyond this economic mutuality, Winthrop urged a familial model upon his brethren: “We must delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together: always having before ourselves our commission and community in the world, our community as members of the same body.” Only by such a witness of love could New England become, in Winthrop’s most famous phrase, “a city upon a hill” by which the rest of the world might detect the worth of the Puritan experiment and the presence of divine care in the world. While the Puritan errand was primarily religious in establishing “a community dedicated to the fulfillment of God’s will,” their religious vision contained as an integral and crucial part “a model for society as a whole, not just for the religious institutions within society” (Labaree, 40, 72).

In recent years social historians have published a sufficient number of accounts of small inland New England farming villages to suggest strongly that Winthrop’s vision, spoken as it was by an elite leader, actually filtered down to a local lay level. As Breen and Foster comment, a “strong sense of communal responsibility...influenced the character of...the Bay Colony. It was incumbent upon all men to work out their disputes as peacefully as possible, thinking always of their greater obligation to the commonwealth as a whole and ultimately to God himself” (12). In neighborly disputes, usually over land, Puritans brought their problems to the courts which in turn usually told them to work out the problem among themselves, as in Paul’s advice good Christian folk should (I Cor 6:1-6; Breen and Foster, “Achievement” 15). And on town questions, officials usually did “everything possible to force group agreement by discussion” (Powell 108). Likewise, the Dedham town covenant, signed by all of its citizens, provided for a process of mediation that tried to avoid entirely the use of colony courts (Lockridge, Town 13). So successful was the small inland subsistence farming village that Kenneth Lockridge has described it, perhaps somewhat lavishly, as a “Christian Utopian Closed Corporate Community” (Town 16). While not all New England towns shared the harmony and stability of the small farm town, the social vision that animated them was “common to the founders of nearly all the towns in the first waves of New England settlers” and, as such, initiated “the mainstream of a wide and enduring New England tradition” that would be felt through the nineteenth century (Lockridge, Town 167).

The drive that fueled whatever degree of social accomplishment the Puritans pulled off came no doubt from the very puritanism of the Puritans, so to speak. Puritanism was, to be sure, theologically “precise and fervent” intellectually (Marty 63). It also entailed a vigorous and deep religious commitment. They were blessed or beset, depending on one’s bias, by a particular disposition or temperament, a complexion of spirit, which made them decidedly this-worldly, intensely earnest, and energetically reverent of God, the church, morality, and humanity—all traits in “the Augustinian Strain of Piety” that Perry Miller called the hallmark of the Puritan mind. Most who came in the early years were this sort of Puritan (Breen and Foster, “Moving” 55-56; Anderson 372-73). While not lacking in humor, earthiness, or frivolity—what today we call normalcy—they took their belief, devotion, historical hopes, and social intentions with high seriousness. Contrary to economic interpretations of Puritan
incentives for migration, their desire and motives seem to have been primarily religious, and once in New England “they imbued their society with a deeply spiritual significance” (Anderson 382). The broad currents of Puritanism, as perhaps best articulated in Winthrop’s sermon, supplied the first generations with a significant common vision—what today we might call a myth—“meaning for their present, a mission for their future, and, what was more, and perhaps most of all, a synthetic but compelling past” of spiritual heroism that would nourish them amid later travail and trouble (Breen and Foster, “Achievement” 10). These assorted English villagers lived, then, with a strong sense of destiny that not only furnished meaning and inspiration but a full range of responsibilities to the future. The Puritan cosmogony saw daily life infused with, and as a vehicle for, the divine will, a notion which in its social and ethical application encouraged the practice of charity. Life was a spiritual and ethical laboratory and drama.

The Puritans brought with them a particular social inheritance that helps explain the kind of social order they hoped to create. That is, what historians have come to call “localism,” by which they mean centuries-old habits and customs of English village life. Kenneth Lockridge defines this as a “peasant ethos” that has almost universally, quite apart from cultural differences, venerated utopian ideals of a cooperative village life of security, stability, interdependence, and harmony (Town 16). The disruption of these economic and “social folkways” in early seventeenth-century England threatened and angered Puritans like John Winthrop and other such diverse folk as Thomas More and Captain John Smith. The spread of a new individualism in England under the aegis of kingly power, a burgeoning capitalism, and Renaissance self-confidence distressed traditionalists who revered customary social and political mores. Although they were not necessarily themselves hard-hit by economic and social dislocation, they believed that what they saw did not bode well for the social well-being of the country. With this localistic affection, then, and the clear hostility of the crown to their demands for religious reform, Puritans required little added impetus to pull up stakes for a new place. Upon arriving there, it is easy to understand how leaders and villagers alike wished to freshen the traditions of English localism with a compatible Christian social ethic and a sort of spiritual ultimacy. The consequence was a cohesive and generous mutuality and cooperation. For historian Kenneth Lockridge, Puritanism “actually perfected and sanctified the ideal of the peasant past” with “a coherent social vision” whose hallmarks were “love, forbearance, cooperation, and peace” (Town 4, 13).

What beneficial “cultural baggage” the Puritans did bring to the rural farms of the new world was helped along by their relative good fortune once they arrived. For one, there were not usually very great differences in the economic status of the settlers, a condition very different from the contentious exercise of privilege and extravagance then current in England (Anderson 366-67; Lockridge, Settlement 10-13). In addition, the land was good and plentiful, and with hard work they were able to achieve a steady and modest prosperity (Breen and Foster, “Achievement” 9). A preponderance of nuclear families provided social and emotional stability in a strange place (Anderson 348-49). Further, first generation leaders lived to ripe old ages, on the average to their mid-sixties) a fact that guaranteed the continuity of the original vision (Greven 193). The leaders were disposed to share power and responsibility
to an extent undreamed of in England (Powell 100; Breen and Foster, "Achievement" 13). And during the early decades villages were laid out in a pattern that encouraged familiarity and cooperation.

An adequate treatment of the variety of settlement during the first decades demands far more attention than space here allows. In addition to the inland subsistence farming communities described above, there was an urbanized coastal region, towns like Boston and Salem, and a zone of highly commercialized agriculture, as in the Connecticut River Valley (Innes xvi). Less isolated and more commercial, Boston, only briefly if ever, shared in the sort of cohesive social vision of the agricultural towns (Ruttmann). By the time of Winthrop’s death in 1649, barely two decades after settlement, Boston citizens, churched and unchurched alike, were “generally failing in their duty to community, seeking their own aggrandizement in the rich opportunities afforded by land, commerce, crafts, and speculations, to the detriment of the community” (Ruttmann 243). Other towns, like Springfield, founded on the frontier for commercial exploitation by William Pynchon, differed still more radically from the cooperative farming village, looking mostly like a modern-day company town (Innes). And for still other towns along the Connecticut River interpretations conflict, depending on which social historian is reading the data. Where one has seen harmony akin to Massachusetts (Bushman), another has detected strife and acrimony from the start, often involving clerical domination (Lucas). And on and on the list might go, as studies of local communities have come forth. It is fair to say, however, that most communities, even those later beset by strife, started with similar high visions (Lockridge, Settlement 7-8). More difficult interpretive questions intrude when scholars question to what extent those visions were realized and how soon and why they began to lose their cogency, and those questions do indeed occasion a whole host of diverse responses.

Finding the Past

Most recent historians agree that, for better or worse, Puritanism made a sizeable and indelible impression upon America’s culture and political history. And that is where the interesting historical disputes begin, with the “better or worse”: on the questions of the nature of Puritanism and how it has affected, and still does, the shape and texture of American culture. A long venerable tradition of scholarly work on Puritanism has illumined much of the genesis and heritage of innumerable American practices, political, religious, and lately, and especially, social. And more research appears constantly on popular religion, Puritan life and influences, and other regions of early America. In the next decades, especially on such topics as religion in the American Revolution, we can expect fruitful integrative syntheses of different historical approaches that will provide fuller and still more accurate portraits of America’s past and the role of Puritanism within it.

Often these large questions have far more than antiquarian value. These historical estimates have immediate pertinence, for one, in much current public policy debate. Both the left and right have encouraged a politics of recollection—the effort to recall America to an elusive set of attitudes, customs, and mores, often referred to as distinctively Protestant or Christian, that some time back, at some unnoticed juncture, the country as a whole seems to have abandoned. The most prominent of these has been the resurgence of an energetic
Christian cultural and political conservatism or "right wing," as evident in the Moral Majority and the political ambitions of religious television pioneer Pat Robertson, who is currently debating running for the Presidency. Much the same sort of recollection of an exemplary past informs the work of prominent religious sociologist Robert Bellah in his influential 1975 book, The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial. Quoting extensively from Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity," Bellah lamented America's neglect of a Puritan communitarian social vision or, for that matter, any socially cohesive national vision. That same concern pervades Bellah's latest project, co-authored with four other researchers, The Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life. In that book, Bellah et al try to identify a commonly held coalescent center of value, other than individualism, that informs contemporary American life. Their search does not meet with much success. In looking at Bellah's work, we might follow his lead in the sub-title of The Broken Covenant and refer to the cohesive altruistic tradition as a "high" civil religion. Liberal critics of right-wing propensities toward civil religion have too often overlooked the fact that they too have their own highly prized civil religion. Insofar as both of these civil religions rely on a historical tradition for much of their validity, research into the dreams and realities of early America can tell us much how well grounded either might be in historical actuality. In any case, the question of whether there ever was such a golden day or vision has considerable bearing on the wisdom of retrieving or recalling the past as a contemporary civil agenda.

ENDNOTES

1 The considerable influence of Parrington's work among historians, even into the 1950's, is described by Richard Hofstadter's study of The Progressive Historians: Turner, Beard, Parrington (349-550). See 418-22 for Hofstadter's critique of Parrington's interpretation of American Puritanism.

2 Historiographer Gene Wise contends that the socio-political aspirations of the progressive historians of the twenties and thirties were so dearly and commonly shared that it is justifiable to label the group a "school of explanation," the "dominant explanation form in twentieth-century American historical scholarship" (Note one, 215, 216). In that judgment he follows the lead of their most careful analyst, Richard Hofstadter. The group formed by Beard, Turner, and Parrington gave the profession "the pivotal ideas of the first half of the twentieth century" (xii). On Parrington specifically, Lionel Trilling in 1950 described his Main Currents as having "an influence on our conception of American culture which is not equaled by that of any other writer of the last two decades" (91).

3 Edmund Morgan's comment on the economic interpretation of history is useful: this method "became less a spur to investigation of economic history than a way of interpreting the past without investigating it....the economic interpretation, too often accepted, substituted intuition for research. If the written record was a mare for the unwary, if what men said could not be trusted, there was no urgency to study what they said. When you are sure that a man who says X really means Y, there is no point in pausing over the value of X." ("Historians" 47).

4 A significant problem with Weber's thesis, one little attended to, lies with the lack of literary foundation for his equation of riches and salvation. Apparently Puritans did not think as Weber accused on either pre-destination or the doctrine of calling. In Calvin's and the Puritans' View of the Protestant Ethic, Mitchell's survey of Calvin and English Puritan theology finds no evidence for Weber's contentions. What references Weber does employ were usually taken out of context. Nor does John Sommerville find evidence of Weberian equations of wealth and salvation in his survey of popular Puritan literature in Popular Religion in Restoration England; there is apparently some trace of that sort of thinking in popular Anglican writers.

5 Lengthy recent essays by James Hoopes and Francis Butts attempt to locate Miller's central themes; defend his work against recent criticisms; and to show where others have gone astray in interpreting it. Both do concede, however, that Miller was on more than one occasion either fuzzy in his own thought or should have made what he was saying a good deal clearer.
In a well-known essay, Robert G. Pope has questioned the validity of the idea of declension, calling into question Miller's reading of "social and institutional realities" (99). He suggests that a decline in membership might actually reflect an increase of "religious scrupulosity that most historians have lost sight of" (99). Further, he contends that church membership actually rose in the last decades of the century in response to the brutal King Philip's War. Insofar as religion "is in part the human response to contingency and powerlessness," the war drove the beleaguered settlers into the churches in penance and fervent supplication (102). Pope in turn has drawn fire from Miller defender Hoopes (20-23) and Butts (680-86).


List of Works Cited


