PURITAN MILLENNIALISM AND THEOCRACY IN EARLY MASSACHUSETTS*

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'Utopian thought', wrote George Kateb, 'is dominated by "a rage of order." A strong utopian impetus to save the world from as much of its confusion and disorder as possible. Utopia is a dream of order, of quiet and calm. Its background is the nightmare of history.' In this context, the Puritan migration to Massachusetts in the first half of the seventeenth century can readily be defined as a utopian movement—a movement whose abhorrence of political, social and ecclesiastical disorder and corruption in England and whose millennial expectations that Christ's second coming was imminent motivated it to attempt to establish in the wilderness of America a utopian society. This perfect society of harmony, order and peace envisioned by the Puritans who emigrated to Massachusetts was to be founded, according to the Puritan exegesis of the Book of Revelation, in time and history upon earth through the saints' efforts.2 Seeking the means which would facilitate the fulfillment of their utopian goal to build the City of God or the New Jerusalem, the Puritans evolved theocracy, a unique system of government in which God would rule directly and immediately over his saints in both church and state.

Historians have generally considered the pursuit of the millennium as a phenomenon belonging exclusively to the lunatic fringe of religious fanatics, zealots, sects and movements which developed within the Puritan movement in England before and during the Puritan Revolution. Consequently, millennialism has come to be regarded as characteristic of those radical sects which denounced any notion of order and authority and aimed at 'the world turned upside down'. The 'Antinomians', who believed that grace provided a direct link with God or the Holy Spirit and released Christians from the need to observe the moral law, did in fact claim for themselves total freedom from any political, social or moral obligation.3 But millennialism did not necessarily lead to Antinomianism, and in a different historical context such as the Puritan migration to Massachusettes, the pursuit of the millennium equally reflects the Puritan dream of order. Although even in England millennial expectations were inherently grounded in utopian visions of a period of general righteousness and happiness in which Christ would rule with his saints on earth as foretold in Revelation, the utopian aspect of millennialism intensified considerably with the Puritan migration to New England.

The wilderness offered the Puritans an opportunity to realise their utopian

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visions by creating the perfect Christian commonwealth in which both church and state would serve as two different means toward God's aims and goals. Defining their political system as a 'theocracy', Massachusetts Puritans believed that God would rule directly over his saints in both church and state; laws promulgated in both realms would involve both religious and civil obligations. As we will soon observe, millennial expectations and apocalyptical visions played a significant role in the Puritan efforts to establish, shape and justify theocratic government in Masschusetts.

The emigration of thousands of Puritans across the Atlantic to Massachusetts during the 1630s was on the one hand a flight from corrupt history and on the other a utopian search for social and religious reformation. Thus 'when England began to decline in Religion... in this very time Christ the Glorious King of his Churches, raised an Army out of English nation [and] creates New England for muster up the first of his Forces in.' The Puritan migration, then, as the emigrants themselves perceived it, was a confrontation within time and history, an earthly stand against the power of Satan and Antichrist. They came with the belief that the millennium was imminent and that it was the saints' duty to aid God in transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. 'If the servants of Christ be not mistaken,' wrote Edward Johnson in describing his fellow Puritan emigrants' millennial expectations, 'the downfall of Antichrist is at hand, and then the Kingdome(s) of the Earth shall become the Kingdome of our Lord Christ.' Seeing their migration as a crucial phase in the providential drama, the Puritans defined their duty in Massachusetts 'to rayse a bullwarke against the kingdome of Antichrist' that would insure that Christ and not Antichrist would rule the world. Divine providence had created Massachusetts and directed the Puritans to establish there the right and true Christian commonwealth in which Christ would reign over his saints. 'We chose not the place for the land,' declared the Puritans on the cause and origin of their migration, 'but for the government, that our Lord Christ might raigne over us, both in Churches and Common-wealth.'4

In the early seventeenth century, when the anticipation of a true reformation of the Church of England began fading away rapidly under King James I and Charles I, the millennial expectations and utopian visions of Englishmen increasingly associated America with the reformation. George Herbert, a poet and clergyman, envisioned America in his poem 'The Church Militant' (ca 1613) as the place of refuge for the true church in flight from the corruption of England:

Religion stands on tip-toe in our land Readie to pass to the American Strand. When height of malic, and prodigious lusts, Impudent sinning, witchcrafts, and distrusts (The mark of future bane) shal fill our cup Unto the brimme, and make our measure up . . . Then shall Religion to America flee.

In 1634 Dr. William Twisse, a Puritan divine, requested a correspondent's opinion of our English Plantation in the New World... not discovered till this old world of ours is almost at an end'. 'Why may not that be the place of New Jerusalem?' Twisse queried. When Thomas Welde wrote from Massachusetts

Bay to his friends in England in 1633, he made clear what in his and other Bay Puritans' view the Christian commonwealth in Massachusetts was all about: in Massachusetts, he happily noted, 'in the New Jerusalem, we shall enjoy together sweet society in all fullness of perfection to all eternity'.⁵

In the providential drama, where a Christian commonwealth was inextricably connected to the existence and well-being of the true church, church and state were but two complementary instruments through which the Puritans hoped to defeat and destroy Antichristian institutions and government and to realise their pursuit of the millennium by creating the perfect society in which God would reign over his saints. However, in order to do so the Puritans had to find that system of government in which God would be recognised as the true sovereign in the spheres of both church and state. For only within such a system could the New Jerusalem, or the Kingdom of God, be established upon earth. The search for that form of government in the Christian commonwealth in which God would reign supreme over his saints was therefore a precondition for Massachusetts' unique role in providential history, in the apocalyptic battle between Christ and Antichrist. It was inevitable, then, that the Bay Puritans would intensely dedicate themselves to the issues concerning the nature, foundation, and meaning of the true Christian commonwealth.

Two of the most prominent New England ministers, John Cotton and John Davenport, asserted that the best form of government for a true Christian commonwealth was theocracy, a form that assumed a special relationship between church and state, clergy and magistracy, and above all, the Puritan social and church covenant. 'Theocracy', wrote John Cotton, 'is the best forme of government in the common-wealth, as well as in the church', and he advised the Massachusetts General Court in 1636 'to persist in their purpose of establishing a *Theocracy* (i.e. Gods Government) over Gods people', so that the godly, or 'church-members... be governed conformably to the law of God'. To the same effect, John Davenport had argued that 'theocratic, or to make the Lord God our Governour, is the best form of Government in a Christian Commonwealth, and which men that are free to chuse (as in new Plantations they are) ought to establish'. 6

What lay behind Cotton, Davenport and other Puritans' arguments for establishing theocracy in the wilderness was the Puritan experience in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, and the possibility to realise in America what had been impossible for the Puritans to achieve in England until the Puritan Revolution. In the first place, the wilderness offered a unique opportunity for the Puritan emigrants to reconstruct the church as a spiritual society based on the covenant and thus realise the longstanding Puritan goal of separating themselves from profane and ungodly people admitted to membership in parish churches in England. In addition, the wilderness provided the possibility of forming a true Christian commonwealth in which the proper relationship between church and state might be achieved. Long before the Puritan migration to America began, efforts had been made as part of the pursuit of reformation to form civil and social covenants among Puritans in order to strengthen through mutual edification the resolve of individuals to keep their private covenants with God. 7 A social or civil covenant was undoubtedly distinct and different from a church covenant; the first related to civil and social affairs,

while the second pointed to a holy spiritual fellowship. Both, however, were religious covenants intended to further the premises of reformation in church and state alike. While the one regulated the saints in the commonwealth, the other governed them in the church.

This distinction is an important one because the problem of the relationship between the social or civil covenant and the church covenant lies at the root of the whole issue of the right foundations of a Christian commonwealth, or the Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts. When the Puritans sought to follow God's word and have Him reign over them in both church and state, they were attempting to constitute both realms on the basis of covenants. Thus, out of the Puritan premises of reformation, in state as in the church, the covenant became a device serving to exclude the ungodly from fellowship with the saints. 'Here the churches and commonwealth are complanted together in holy covenant and fellowship with God', wrote John Davenport, and therefore 'the people that choose civil rulers are God's people in covenant with him, that is members of churches.' 8 This radical linkage between the civil covenant and the church covenant would serve to exclude those who were not saints not only from the church but also from political power in the Puritan commonwealth. This is the clearest example of the Puritans' 'dream of order', a political and social system in which one's participation in the church covenant, or his membership in the church, would determine his right to participate in the political and social life in the colony, or to be a member in the civil covenant. This, then, was the foundation of Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts.

Few concepts have changed more rapidly over time. According to The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary, theocracy is 'a form of government in which God (or deity) is recognised as the king or immediate ruler, or 'a system of government by a sacerdotal order, claiming a divine commission'. According to the second meaning, then, theocracy is a state in which priests exercise political power, or, more precisely, a state ruled by ministers. Yet this meaning of theocracy is in fact a quite modern one. For according to the Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics, 'the term "theocracy" was coined by Josephus . . . to denote a certain kind of national polity. Any tribe or state that claims to be governed by God or Gods may be called "theocracy". To understand the difference between these two meanings of theocracy is important. While the first implies that a sacerdotal order exercises dominant political power, the latter requires ministers to assume no political power at all. When the Puritans in America declared their aim to establish a theocracy, they used the latter and older meaning of theocracy. This, said Davenport, was 'the Form which was received and established among the people of Israel whil'st the Lord God was their Governour . . . and is the very same with that which we plead for'.9

'The best Form of Government in a Christian Commonwealth', according to Davenport, was that in which 'the power of Civil Administration is denied unto unbelievers and committed to the Saints.' The presence of ungodly magistrates in England has been a crucial reason for the emigration of so many Puritans to America. Now that they were in a 'new plantation' and were 'free to chuse' the means with which to establish their government, they had no choice but to take every step possible to prevent the church from again being pursecuted by ungodly magistrates. Thus, in the name of purity and sainthood, the Puritans excluded

those they deemed unworthy not only from the church covenant but also from the civil or social covenant. In both church and state, they believed, the covenant was the foundation, and by its very nature the covenant belonged only to the 'saints', who 'by virtue of their covenant' were 'bound' to serve 'God and his ends'. To invest those who were not saints with civil power would necessarily signify breaking the covenant with God. As the covenant constituted the necessary foundation not only of the spiritual society of the church but of civil society as well, the Puritans transformed the religous obligations of the covenant into political obligations in the Christian commonwealth. Precisely because the ungodly were not 'consecrated to God and his ends', they could not be given civil power in a true Christian commonwealth.

As political society no less than church or holy fellowship was confined to those who could show their ability to maintain and sustain the covenant, the exclusiveness of church fellowship led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system. The justification for establishing these criteria in the theocratic polity was based essentially upon millennial expectations. 'God creates a New England to muster up the first of his Forces in', because 'assure your selves the time is at hand wherein Antichrist will muster all his forces and make war with the people of God. 'Massachusetts, or New England in general, was indeed new, but its dimension of time belonged as yet to history, not to the sacred realm of the New Jerusalem. The millennium was nearly at hand, as the Puritans believed, but until its actual advent, Massachusetts still had to play its part in the apocalyptical events preceding the millennium. Thus 'the Devil with his Instruments have contrived to swallow up that famous kingdom', wrote Rev. John Wilson from Boston, Massachusetts, 'and the Church of Christ in it, so now . . . all the Devils of Hell . . . busying themselves to batter down the walls of Zion, and to make breaches at the gates thereof, that so they might execute the utmost Butcheries that can be invented, thereby to overthrow the Kingdom of Christ.' It is not surprising then, in the light of these apocalyptical visions of the struggle between Christ and Antichrist, that the Puritans were convinced that the delegation of political authority to the ungodly would jeopardise the entire holy experiment in the wilderness and undermine the saints' capacity to assist Christ in the expected battle against Antichrist. Those who would commit power into the hands of those 'worldly spirits' who 'hate[d] the Saints and their communion', warned Davenport, would provide Satan with an instrument for 'resisting and fighting against Christ and his Kingdom and Government in the Church'.11

These principles concerning the establishment of theocracy were incorporated in the policy of the Puritan colonies in New England and in Massachusetts from its very beginnings. In 1631, 'to the end that the body of commons may be preserved of honest and god men', the Massachusetts General Court ordered 'that for the time to come no man shall be admitted to the freedom of this body politic, but such as are members of some of the churches'. The General Court thus clearly limited the right to participate in civil affairs to saints, a policy which constituted the essence of theocratic government. In Guilford (later part of Connecticut) as well, in 1634 'the inhabitants believed that only verified saints ought to vote or hold government offices and the verification was the function of the institutional church'. When Connecticut towns drew their Fundamental Orders in 1638/9, they did not explicitly stipulate that 'church membership

was . . . a preprequisite for the franchise', but this condition was implicit in the colony's constitution: 'The purpose of the Fundamental Orders was to provide a legal guide for the government of the holy and regenerate.' And in New Haven in 1639 a 'generall meeting of all the free planters' agreed that 'church members onely shall be free burgesses, and they onely shall chuse among them selves magistrates and officers to ha[ve] the power of transacting all publique civill affayres of this plantation'. ¹² Theocratic government then, in the colonies of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Haven, demanded the preservation of the political realm as the sole and exclusive domain of the saints.

The Puritans' rigid insistence upon excluding the ungodly from political power was thus a crucial element in shaping the foundation of their Christian commonwealth, based upon theocratic government, in the early years of Massachusetts. To realise their premises of religious reformation, the Puritans believed, they had to keep their covenant with God, in the civil realm as well as in the realm of the church, and that obligation required that civil authority be confined exclusively to the godly. John Winthrop justified and vindicated the necessity of establishing theocratic government in Massachusetts by confirming the Puritans' adherence to their millennial expectations and their belief in the special dimension of time they thought they were living in—the time of the millennium at hand. He radically reasoned that the providential process which according to the prophecies of Revelation would culminate in the reign of Christ and his church or saints on earth had already begun. 'Whereas the way of God hath always beene to gather his churches out of the world; now', argued Winthrop, 'the world, or the civill state, must be raised out of the churches.' 13

The radicalism embodied in this view can be fully understood only in the context of the Puritans' millennial expectations. While Dayenport had argued that the political realm should be the exclusive domain of the saints, who alone were proper governors in a true Christian commonwealth, or theocracy, Winthrop here declared that the body politic as such was the outcome of the gathering of churches, or more precisely, that the holy society of the churches in Massachusetts comprised the political body there. Winthrop's millennial expectancy impelled him to designate the political realm in the colony as the exclusive domain of the saints who would aid Christ in his apocalyptic fight with the Antichrist in order to establish the Kingdom of God upon earth. Thus Winthrop reaffirmed the principle and law in Mssachusetts that church membership, depending on the church covenant, was a prerequisite to participation in the civil covenant and membership in the holy body politic in the colony. To the same effect, when some Puritan lords in England considered emigration to Massachusetts and asked for admission to freemenship in the Puritan theocracy because of their hereditary privilege and material property, the Bay Puritans informed them that in the theocracy in Massachusetts 'none are admitted freemen of this commonwealth but such as are first admitted members of some church or other in this country', and only out of those were their 'magistrates . . . Chosen'.14

According to Winthrop, the body politic in Massachusetts theocracy was in fact congruent with the holy society of the church and the church covenant tightly interwoven with the civil covenant. The true Christian commonwealth, through such reasoning, became the earthly domain in which the saints would

exercise their holiness. Although complete identification of the church and civil covenant would occur only in the millennium, when the kingdoms of the earth become the Kingdom of God, Puritan Massachusetts would, in the meantime, seek to link the purity of the church and the holiness of the Christian commonwealth as two means to achieve the New Jerusalem. Therefore, according to the Puritans, if magisterial power were given 'to men not according to their godliness, which maketh them fit for church fellowship, but according to their wealth', they would themselves be 'no better than worldly men'. Such an alternative was unthinkable, since the possibility existed that 'worldly men' would become 'the major part' of the magistrates, and might 'turn the edge of all authority and laws against the church and the members thereof, the maintenance of whose peace is the chief end which God aimed at in the institution of Magistracy'. 15

A theocratic government thus grounded upon millennial expectations intrinsically embodied the Puritans' utopian search for order. Theocracy appropriately afforded a unique arrangement of the political body by which God, the true sovereign in both church and state according to Puritan premises of reformation, would reign directly and immediately over both. 'So as referreth the soveraigntie to himself', wrote John Cotton, 'Theocracy in both' church and state is 'the best forme of government in the commonwealth, as well as in the church'. 16 In the view of Cotton and his fellow Puritans, theocracy was the best form of government because only this system enabled God to be the immediate and direct sovereign of both church and state. In this sense, theocracy indeed signified the republic of the saints in which only Christ, and he alone, would be acknowleged as ruler, and neither bishop nor king could stand between God and his people. Theocratic government thus reflected not only a denial of the divine rights of king and bishops, but also a refusal to recognise any rights based on the privileges of property, heredity and wealth as determinants of eligibility to participate in the political life of the holy experiment in the wilderness. Whereas the political realm was held to be the exclusive domain of the saints by virtue of their covenanted relationship with God in both church and state, sainthood, holiness and saving grace were the sole prerequisites for membership in the body politic.

The revolutionary nature of this theocratic approach cannot be understood unless we consider it in the context of the Puritans' fervent millennial expectations which reinforced the Puritan goal of the migration and errand into the wilderness-'to make the Lord God our Governour'. Given the fact that God's kingdom would rise in time and history, the erecting of the true church in a theocratic framework uniquely situated the American Puritans in providential history. For 'these poore New England People' were, as a result of their situation, 'the forerunners of Christ's Army', who would perform their special role precisely at the time of the millennium when 'Christ the great King of all the Earth is now going forth in his great Wrath and terrible Indignation to avenge the bloud of his Saints' in 'the great and bloudy Battle of Gog and Magog'. In this 'dreadfull day, when the patience and long-suffering of Christ, that hath lasted so many hundreds of years, shall end', New England Puritans, guided by the hand of providence which had sent them to Massachusetts, would 'Preach in this wilderness, . . . [and] proclaime to all Nations, the neere approach of the most wonderful workes that ever the Sonnes of men saw'. Having been placed in the

middle of the apocalyptical drama that would mark the end of time, New England not only engaged in battle with Antichrist, but also became God's herald in announcing the second coming of Christ to the whole world. The colony's special function in the apocalypse then was the necessary result of its success in fulfilling the prophecies of Revelation; theocracy, by ensuring God's immediate rule over the Puritan commonwealth in Massachusetts, would set the appropriate example for the world to emulate during the millennium in preparation for the advent of the Kingdom of God on earth. ¹⁷

Theocracy in Massachusetts reflected the utopian visions of the perfect, godly and holy society in which Puritans would link all dimensions of human life—political, social and religious—to the covenated relationship with God to insure His supremacy in both church and state. But the need to create such a utopian society within a theocratic framework was also, and in large measure, influenced by Puritans' millennial expectations that heaven and earth were about to intermingle at one moment in time and history in which the Lord of heaven would come down to rule on earth with his saints. Believing that the achievement of the Kingdom of God in time and history on earth depended solely upon the efforts of the saints, Massachusetts Puritans were determined to guarantee the congruence of the body politic with the holy society of the church. In the context of providential history, then, Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts embodied the dual intent to create a utopian society in the wilderness and to serve Christ in the apocalyptic battle against Antichrist preceding the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God.

Although Puritan theocracy in Massachusetts can be regarded as a utopian end—the fulfillment of the will of God 'to re-build the most glorious Edifice of Mount Sion in a Wilderness'—it should also be considered as a crucial stage in the providential drama which would culminate in Christ's second coming and his reign with his saints on earth. The Puritans themselves provided a two-fold justification for theocratic government: 'to set up a government, not only for the orderly execution of judgement and justice among' the saints 'themselves, but also for the suppressing of all malignant adversaries of the kingdom of Christ'. For 'behold hee is comming againe, he is coming to destroy Antichrist, and to give the whore double to drinke the very dregs of his wrath. Then my deare friend unfold thy hands, for thou and I have much worke to doe, I[ay] and all Christian Souldiers the World throughout.'18

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NOTES

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318

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- 17. Johnson, Wonder-Working, pp. 60-1.
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Avihu Zakai