

The Gospel of Reformation: the Origins of the Great Puritan Migration

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They [the Puritans] drew in a sea of matter, by applying all things unto their own company, which are any where spoken concerning divine favours and benefits bestowed upon the old commonwealth of Israel: concluding that as Israel was delivered out of Egypt, so they spiritually out of the Egypt of this world's servile thralldom unto sin and superstition; as Israel was to root out the idolatrous nations, and to plant instead of them a people which feared God; so the same Lord's good will and pleasure was now, that these new Israelites should under the conduct of other Joshuas, Samsons and Gideons, perform a work no less miraculous in casting out violently the wicked from the earth, and establishing the kingdom of Christ with perfect liberty.

(Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, 1593, 'Preface')

There is a tendency among historians of early Puritan New England to attribute the origins and causes of the Puritan migration to America to a certain 'crisis', be it economic, political or ecclesiastical, that took place within English society on the eve of the great Puritan migration, that is, the late 1620s and the early 1630s.¹ This tendency, however, stands in sharp contrast to the approach evident in

¹ It will be sufficient here to deal only with the representatives of each interpretation which seeks to explain the origins of the Puritan migration to New England by a 'crisis' within English society. Thus James Truslow Adams in his famous book, *The Founding of New England*, Boston 1949 [1921], 122-4, stressed the view that both a political 'crisis' and an economic 'crisis' in the late 1620s were responsible for the Puritan migration. A decade later Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*, Gloucester 1965 [1933], 99, distancing himself from the economic emphasis typified by Adams, stressed the essentially religious motivation behind the Puritan migration. Yet his account tended rather to reinforce Adams's emphasis on the importance of the political 'crisis' in the late 1620s. Thus, for Miller, a crisis occasioned by Charles I's dissolution of the parliament of 1629 had enormous consequences for the Puritan migration. The political 'crisis' then, according to Miller, was essentially associated with the ecclesiastical 'crisis'. Similarly, David D. Hall in his excellent book, *The Faithful Shepherd*, New York 1972, 72-3, attributed the Puritan migration, in part, to an ecclesiastical 'crisis' within the circle of Puritan ministers in England during the 1630s.

the writings of seventeenth-century historians contemporary or nearly contemporary to the event. William Bradford, Nathaniel Morton, William Hubbard, Cotton Mather, Captain John Smith, John White and John Cotton, to mention only a few, never attempted to associate the Puritan migration to New England with any particular 'crisis' in England. They saw no easy equation between immediate governmental actions, economic changes or ecclesiastical struggles, on the one hand, and mass group discontent on the other. Hubbard and Mather, for example, the early historians of the Massachusetts Bay colony, viewed the Puritan migration as a gradual movement that slowly gained momentum and direction from the early 1620s on.²

This study, similarly, seeks to examine this migration within a larger historical context and a longer time frame. It attempts to explore some of the dimensions of the Puritan experience in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, from which the great Puritan migration arose, by focusing on the world of conflict within local communities, parishes, churches and towns. Thus far little attention has been paid to the social dynamics apparent in these internal Puritan struggles for religious and social reformation as they relate to the Puritan movement in England as a whole and the Puritan migration to America in particular. In doing so this study attempts to clarify those long-term trends in English society in which Puritanism revealed itself increasingly not only as an ecclesiastical power but, more importantly, as a strong social and political force able to disturb and divide communities with its uncompromising plea for full social and religious reformation. The growing unlikelihood of achieving these reforms and the increasing strife between the 'godly' and the 'profane' on the local level determined, in large measure, the decisions made by thousands of English Puritans to emigrate to New England in order to realise their vision of the godly society.

Writing in his diary in 1587, Richard Rogers, a Puritan minister at Wethersfield, Essex, noted time and again his struggle to keep his covenant with God and lead a godly life in the world. Yet he was pleased that 'god hath been veary merciful to me in this time to awake me again when I

² William Bradford, *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1647*, ed. Samuel Eliot Morison, New York 1967; Nathaniel Morton, *New England's Memorial*, Boston 1826 [1669], 142-61; William Hubbard, *A General History of New England, from the Discovery to 1680*, 2nd edn, Boston 1848, 111-34; Cotton Mather, *Magnalia Christi Americana, or the Ecclesiastical History of New England, 1620-1698*, Hartford 1820, i. 1-74; John Smith, *Advertisement for the Unexperienced Planters of New England* (1631), in *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, ed. Edward Arber, Edinburgh 1910, ii. 918, 926, 954; John White, *The Planters Plea*, London 1630; John Cotton, 'God's Promise to his Plantation', 1630, in *Old South Leaflets*, Boston n.d., iii.

On the Puritan emigration to New England as a part of the migration from England in the early seventeenth century see: L. Stone, 'Social mobility in England, 1500-1700', *Past and Present* xxxiii (1966), 16-55. For the number of emigrants to New England in the early seventeenth century see: T. H. Breen and S. Foster, 'Moving to the New World: the character of early Massachusetts immigration', *William and Mary Quarterly* xxx (1973), 189-222; Charles E. Banks, *The Planters of the Commonwealth*, Boston 1930, 3-43.

have been declineinge or growing weak or wearisome in well doeing to offer me occasions many wayes of continuance by good company, as cul[verwel]'. He and his friend, Ezekiel Culverweel, a famous Puritan divine and the author of a *Treatise on Faith* (1623), consequently made a covenant between themselves to lead a godly life and to watch over each other in that endeavour.

Seinge the lord had graunted to us some sight of the coldnes and halfe service of his [*sic*] which is in the worlde, and our selves also much caryed away with it, that thus we woulde renue our covenaut more firmly with the lorde, then we had done, to come neerer to the practise of godlines... and to indeavour after a more continual watche from thing to thinge that as much as might be we might walk with the lord for the time of our abideinge here below. These and such lik we communed of toghether... with great inflameing of our hartes farre above that which is common with us.

Later that year other godly people joined the two covenanters, ministers and laymen alike, and so this godly group came to constitute a 'covenant[ed] society' in Wethersfield. 'Great hope we have by our private company amonge our neighbours to woork as well more consc[ience] in their whole course as knowledge,' Rogers wrote in his diary.³ By mutual scrutiny and admonition, the members of this godly company sought to support each other in their commitment to God.

Yet Richard Rogers came to be prominent and famous among Puritans in the early seventeenth century not for his diary, but for his important book of 1603, *Seven Treatises*. By 1630 this book, which prescribed in over 600 pages daily routines of spiritual exercise for Christian readers, had passed through eight editions. In *Seven Treatises*, Rogers stressed above all else the importance of godly company to a Christian life. He related much of his own hometown experience by way of illustration. 'There is', he wrote, 'rule or dutie directing us in companie', because men 'who are ignorant and carelesse' should be 'exhorted, stirred up, called upon and instructed', until they 'might be edified and built up in our most holy faith'. His aim was not to convert the sinners, but to edify the godly. 'Scornefull, prophane and brutish persons' were not to be admitted into godly company. According to Rogers, godly company was but one company among many companies men entered into in their life, and each of those companies should be made 'sutable and correspondent to the other parts of Christian life'.⁴ For Rogers, godly company was thus only an extension of other social activities undertaken by men in this world.

Although he made it clear that godly company was not necessarily

³ 'The diary of Richard Rogers', in *Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries*, ed. M. M. Knappen, Chicago 1933, 61, 63, 64.

⁴ Richard Rogers, *Seven Treatises... called the practise of Christianitie*, London 1605 (2nd edn), 381-2, 385, 389. In the following discussion of 'covenant' and its important role in the Puritan experience in the early seventeenth century I owe much to Patrick Collinson's article 'Toward a broader understanding of the early dissenting tradition', in *The Dissenting Tradition*, eds. C. Robert Cole and Michael E. Moody, Athens, Ohio 1975, 3-38.

associated with the making of covenants, Rogers, toward the end of his book, gave 'an example of a couvenant made by certain godly brethren' that, he hoped, would 'help much to such as they are, to make better use of rules to direct them'. Here he cited at length from the covenant that his godly company had made in his town in 1588 and pointed out the blessings it had brought. He wrote that 'The covenant did knit them in that love, the bond whereof could not be broken either on their part which now sleepe in the Lord, whiles they heere lived, nor in them which yet remaine, by any adversarie power unto this day.'⁵

The contribution of Rogers's book was in its call for true 'Christian fellowship' and corresponding condemnation of mere religion. In this effort Rogers ventured forth on a path that Ernest Stoeffler has termed 'pietistic Puritanism': 'indifference toward political issues and overriding concern for the religious welfare of individuals'. For Rogers this path meant an increasing emphasis on the formation of godly companies 'for our reprooving, exhorting, and comforting one another' and a concomitant de-emphasis on the Church of England as the focal religious institution in his life. He inaugurated an important trend by means of this new emphasis. Subsequently, in many cases, long-standing loyalties, both ecclesiastical and political, to the Church of England gave way to a new personal loyalty, religious and social in nature, to one's own covenanted society.⁶

John Winthrop's 'Religious Experiencia', a diary in which he recorded his religious experiences from his early youth until his emigration in 1630, is in many ways quite similar to Rogers's diary, especially in its revelation of a restless striving for the godly life. Although there is evidence that during the late 1620s Winthrop slowly embraced what James C. Spalding has called the 'Deuteronomic' interpretation of history which envisaged God acting in and ruling through the events of ancient Israel's history, he was mainly guided during his early years by a pietistic yearning. Like Rogers, Winthrop found it hard always to keep his covenant with God, and he vowed many times in his diary 'to stand to the Covenant of my baptisme, renued so often since'. But Winthrop noted once in 1616,

The Sabbaothe came, I arose betymes, and read over the covenant of certain Christians sett down in Mr. Rogers booke, and therewith my heart beganne to breake, and my worldly delights which had heald my heart in suche slaverie before, beganne to be distatefull and of meane account with me, I concluded with prayer in teares; and so to my family exercise, and then to Churche, my heart beinge still somewhat humbled under Gods hand, yet could not gett at libertie from my vaine pleasures.

Winthrop's pietistic search, however, led him, as was the case with Rogers, to see the importance of godly company. In 1607 he wrote in his

⁵ Rogers, *Seven Treatises*, 389, 497-8.

⁶ F. Ernest Stoeffler, *The Rise of Evangelical Pietism*, Leiden 1965, 28; Rogers, op. cit. 387.

'Experiencia', 'I with my companye', met with other godly people in a conference in which everyone promised 'to be mindefull one of another in desiring God to grante the petitions that were made to him that day, etc.' Again, as with Rogers's experience, mutual surveillance and edification became foundations of covenant society or company. Family exercise also served in the keeping of ones's covenant with God.

I found at last that the conscionable and constant teaching of my familie was a speciall businesse, wherein I might please God, and greatly further their and mine own salvation... and I perceived that my exercise therein did stirre up in me many considerations and much life of affection, which otherwise I should not so often meet with.⁷

William Haller wrote in *The Rise of Puritanism* that the *Seven Treatises* by Richard Rogers 'was the first important exposition of the code of behaviour which expressed the English Calvinist, or, more broadly speaking, the Puritan, conception of the spiritual and moral life'. The book was widely read by Puritans in old and New England. Thomas Shepard, before he emigrated to the Bay colony, wrote that 'Mr. Rogers' *Seven Treatises*... did first work upon my heart'. But Rogers's book was more than a book for reading only, it was a guide to the godly life in this world through the instrument of the covenant. The Revd John Wilson, for example, before he came to Boston in 1630, was influenced by

that famous book of Mr. Rogers, called *The Seven Treatises*; which when he had read, he [was] so affected ... and pursuant unto the advice which he had from Dr. Ames, he associated himself with a pious company... who kept their meeting... for prayer, fasting, holy conference and the exercise of true devotion.⁸

Pietistic searching, then, led the way to social action through which a godly company was formed with the intention of strengthening through mutual effort the resolve of individuals to keep their covenant with God. An understanding of the importance of this process of social covenanting is crucial to the comprehension of the nature of the Puritan emigration. Already by the early seventeenth century, some Puritans in England were sufficiently dissatisfied with the established Church to withdraw into godly covenanted societies formed to aid them in their efforts to lead a godly life.

⁷ James C. Spalding, 'Sermons before parliament (1640-1660) as a public Puritan diary', *Church History* xxxvi (1967), 26; John Winthrop, 'Religious Experiencia', in *Winthrop Papers*, ed. Allyn B. Forber, Boston 1929-47, i. 194, 199, 169, 213. Among the many studies of the life of John Winthrop are Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma*, Boston 1958; R. C. Winthrop, *Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, Boston 1869; and Richard S. Dunn, *Puritans and Yankees, the Winthrop Dynasty of New England 1630-1717*, Princeton 1962.

⁸ William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism*, Philadelphia 1972, 36-7; Thomas Shepard, 'The autobiography', in *God's Plot, The Paradox of Puritan Piety, being the Autobiography & Journal of Thomas Shepard*, ed. Michael McGiffert, Amherst 1972, 42-3; Mather, *Magnalia*, i. 276-7.

The covenant that John White drew up in Dorchester in the early seventeenth century shows clearly how pietistic yearning could lead to social reformation. As minister in his town White wrote the Ten Vows 'for lifting up the weak hands and strengthening of the feeble knees' so as 'to bind orselves by solemnn Vow, and Covenant unto the Ld our God'. The vows sought to encourage 'true and pure Worship of God according to his owne ordinance, opposing orselves to all wayes of Innovaction or Corruption'. They entreated Christians 'to labour for a growth in knowledge and understanding by attending to reading hearing and meditating Gods word', 'to instruct O[u]r Children and families in the fear of the Ld', 'to watch our owne Ways dayly', 'to submit to brotherly admonicion and to perform that Christian duty towards others', and so on. Here, as employed by White, the covenant formed the basis for a close-knit spiritual society in which religious reformation entailed social reformation as well. Certainly, there were different circumstances surrounding Rogers's covenant and White's 'Ten Vows', or covenant. The first bound together only a tiny minority of villagers in Wethersfield, while the Dorchester orders, designed for a town under Puritan discipline, were formed in order to embrace all but the ungodly. But, as Frances Rose-Troup shows, the importance of White's covenant in Dorchester was in the fact that it served 'as a touchstone to exclude the ungodly from the Sacrament'. And others followed White in this effort. In 1633 Hugh Peters, to whom White sent his Ten Vows, closely emulated White's articles in the covenant he drew up for his own congregation in Rotterdam.⁹

More evidence exists to show that many Puritans who emigrated to Massachusetts Bay during the 1630s engaged before their departure in forming godly covenanted societies in England. Francis Higginson, who had already come to Salem on behalf of the New England Company in 1629, lived before his emigration in Leicester, a town divided into two parties. 'On one side, a great multitude of Christians, then called *Puritans*', attended the worship of God not only within the framework of the Church of England but also in 'their *assemblies* and more secretly in their *families*, but also they frequently had their *private meetings* for *prayer* (sometimes with *fasting*) and repeating of *sermons* and maintaining of profitable *conferences*, at all which Mr. Higginson himself was often present'. Against this godly party, 'there was a *profane party*, filled with wolvisch rage against the flock of the Lord Jesus'. Similarly, in John Cotton's Boston, in Lincolnshire, 'there were some scores of pious people in the town, who more exactly formed themselves into an *evangelical Church-State* by entering into *covenant* with God, and with one another, to follow after the Lord, in the purity of his *worship*'.¹⁰

⁹ John White, 'The Ten Vows', reproduced in Frances Rose-Troup, *John White*, New York 1930, 418-22, 222.

¹⁰ Mather, *Magnalia*, i. 324, 238-9; Larzer Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, Princeton 1962, 43, 49.

The details of the theological developments of the covenant theory need not detain us here. In *The New England Mind: the seventeenth century*, Perry Miller has dealt at length with 'the covenant theory' and its many varieties, including the covenant of grace, the federal theology, church covenants and social covenants. Apart from its theological implications, however, the covenant theory had important social and political implications for Puritans and non-Puritans in Jacobean and Caroline England. What is evident from the experience of Rogers, Winthrop, Cotton, Wilson and Higginson is that godly people in England during this period entered into covenants among themselves without necessarily forming connections with the established Church. 'These covenants', wrote Collinson, 'were not church covenants but belonged to the Puritan experience of covenant grace, an area quite remote at this time from any overt ecclesiological reference.' They were, in this sense, social covenants and, as shown above, they arose partly from the difficulties experienced by individuals in keeping their private covenants with God. Thus according to Thomas Cobbet, a minister in Lynn, Massachusetts,

God conveys his salvation by way of covenant and he doth it to those onely that are in covenant with him... This covenant must every soule enter into, every particular soule must enter into a particlar covenant with God; out of this way there is no life.

Godly society, or covenanting company, as Rogers recommended, was a necessary device by which a member could keep his covenant through actual involvement with other members of the company.¹¹

Thus covenants were an essential part of the Puritan experience in early seventeenth-century England, and there is evidence that many Puritans, laymen and clergy alike, engaged in the establishment of godly societies in order to shape their lives according to God's word. But covenants were also an essential part of the Puritan migration to New England. The two most famous covenants in relation to the migration are of course the Mayflower Compact and Winthrop's 'A Model of Christian Charity'. In relation to the first, as Bradford wrote, the pilgrims 'solemnly and mutually, in the presence of God and one another, covenant and combine

¹¹ Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, the Seventeenth Century*, New York 1939, Book iv. 'Sociology', 365-462; and 'Appendix B, the Federal School of Theology', 502-5; Collinson, 'Early dissenting tradition', 21; Thomas Cobbet, *A Just Vindication of the Covenant*, 1648, cited by Miller, op. cit. 378. For theological developments of the covenant theory see: Klaus Baltzer, *The Covenant Formulary*, Philadelphia 1971; Champlin Burrage, *The Church Covenant Idea*, Philadelphia 1904; S. A. Burrell, 'The covenant idea as a revolutionary symbol: Scotland, 1596-1637', *Church History* xxvii (1958), 339-50; Jens G. Moller, 'The beginnings of Puritan covenant theology', this JOURNAL xiv (1963), 48-67; Everett H. Emerson, 'Calvin and covenant theology', *Church History* xxv (1956), 134-44; J. Wayne Baker, *Heinrich Bullinger and the Covenant*, Athens, Ohio 1980; and Charles L. Cohen's important study, 'The heart and the book: faith, the Bible, and the psychology of Puritan religious experience', Ph.D. diss., Univ. of California, Berkeley, 1982, espec. ch. ii, 'Covenant psychology', 53-106.

ourselves together into a Civil Body Politic, for our better ordering and preservation'. And Winthrop in his lay sermon made it clear towards what end the Puritan emigration was directed:

The end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord the comferte and the encrease of the body of christe whereof we are members that our selves and posterity may be the better preserved from the Common corrupcions of this evill world to serve the Lord and worke out our Salvacion under the power and purity of his holy Ordinances.

And the means for that aim? 'For the meanes whereby this must bee effected, they are 2fold, a Conformity with the worke and end wee aime at.' Conformity and unity were thus, according to Winthrop, necessary conditions for the success of the whole emigration.

Thus stands the cause betweene God and us, wee are entered into Covenant with him for this worke, we have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to drawe our owne Articles wee have professed to enterprise these Accion upon these and these ends, wee have hereupon besought his favour and blessing.¹²

These covenants clearly were not church covenants. Likewise, as Lockridge has shown, before Dedham was a town and before it had a church, its settlers drew up a covenant in 1636, in which it was stated: 'that we shall by all means labor to keep off from us all such as are contrary minded, and receive only such unto us as may be probably of one heart with us'. Those who were within the company of covenanters had to work 'for the edification of each other in the knowledge and faith of the Lord Jesus'. The earliest covenant in the Bay colony was, of course, that of Salem in 1629. There, on 20 July, wrote the deacon in Salem church, Charles Gott, 'a company of believers... joined together in covenant, to walk together in all the way of God'. One month later, with the establishment of the church there, the members found it necessary to renew their previous covenant.

We... members of the present Church of Christ in Salem, having found by sad experience how dangerous it is to sitt loose to the Covenant we make with our God... Doe therefore... renewe that Church covenant we find this Church bound unto... That we Covenant with the Lord and with one another, and doe bynd our selves in the presence of God, to walk together in all his waies, according as he pleased to reveal him selfe unto us in his Blessed word of truth.

As a covenanted church, the members of the Salem church consequently declared that 'we willingly doe nothing to the offence of the Church'. Yet all the other articles of the covenant are similar to the civil covenants cited above.¹³

¹² Edward Arber (ed.), 'The Mayflower Compact', in *The Story of the Pilgrim Fathers, 1606-1623, As Told by Themselves, their Friends and their Enemies*, London 1897, 409; John Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity', *Winthrop Papers* ii. 283-4.

¹³ Kenneth A. Lockridge, *A New England Town, the First Hundred Years*, New York 1970, 5; Richard D. Pierce (ed.), *The Records of the First Church in Salem Massachusetts, 1620-1736*, Salem 1974, xiii. 3-4; and Mather, *Magnalia*, i. 66.

The emigrants who came to Massachusetts Bay were, therefore, engaged before and after their migration in an attempt to establish godly societies or companies based on social covenants. This kind of Puritan activity, though it does not get much attention from historians of the Bay colony, was necessarily related to and was indeed a precondition of the Puritan migration. For what these covenants reveal is a special engagement by Puritans to reconcile here on earth the law of nature and the law of grace. If the law of nature or the moral law was essential to man as a rational being, the law of grace could be realised only by faith and by divine grace. 'There is likewise', preached Winthrop aboard the *Arabella* in 1630, 'a double Lawe by which wee are regulated in our conversacion one towardes another... the lawe of nature and the lawe of grace, or the morrall lawe and the lawe of the gospell'. Thus, while the law of nature came to regulate civil society as such, the law of the gospel or grace came to regulate Christian society, a godly society in which one's covenant with God corresponded to the covenant of society at large with God. By maintaining the law of grace or the law of the gospel, which is the essence of the covenants described above, godly people fulfilled the conditions they took upon themselves in entering into covenant with God. At the same time, they could expect that God would fulfil the conditions he had taken upon himself concerning the covenant. 'Now, if the Lord shall please to heare us... then hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission, [and] will expect a strickt performance of the Articles contained in it.' And if the covenanters should succeed in their attempt, 'the Lord will be our God and delight to dwell among us, as his owne people and will commaund a blessing upon us in all our wayes'.¹⁴

Above all else, Puritans of the covenant, in England and New England alike, sought to realise the law of grace in this world. In pursuit of this end Puritans turned their backs, not only on the established Church, but on society at large. Not surprisingly, then, it was on this point, the realisation of the law of grace in one's life and society, that Puritans clashed with other groups in English society. In parish church, village, town and city, Puritans faced non-Puritans in what amounted to a battle for social reformation. The question at issue was how man was to live in society. Conflict over this basically social – and not solely theological – question thus provided the broad social context within which the Puritan migration movement first took root. Ultimately, Puritans would turn to America to attempt what they could not accomplish in England – the shaping of a Christian commonwealth on earth constructed according to God's word.

The history of early Massachusetts is to a great extent the history of attempts to fulfil the articles of the covenants, to realise on the North American continent the law of grace. Yet, we must ask ourselves, why was it necessary to cross the Atlantic to put into practice the law of grace? What hindered these Puritans from realising their covenanted society in England?

¹⁴ Winthrop, 'A Model of Christian Charity', 283, 294.

Was it Archbishop Laud with the High Church party? Did he, and the 'political crisis' surrounding him, most significantly obstruct the Puritan vision of a godly society and godly life? Or was Laud, major figure that he was, only one aspect of a broader social situation out of which the Puritan movement for emigration emerged? Our task here is to explore some aspects of the real world from which the Puritan migration came. An examination of the laity's unique and decisive role in the Puritan movement, for example, is important within this context because it may clarify more fully the origins and the causes of the migration.¹⁵

Apart from studies of Puritan divines, recent studies of English Puritanism have increasingly stressed the decisive role of the laity in the Puritan movement. Dissertations have thus shifted our attention from the theological writings of ministers to the social and political foundations for the movement. In her investigation of English villagers in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Margaret Spufford gives a vivid picture of Puritanism as a popular movement in the diocese of Ely. At one point she cites from an account of a Jesuit priest who had witnessed Puritan gatherings while a prisoner in Wisbech Castle in the late 1580s and 1590s:

From the very beginning a great number of Puritans gathered here. Some came from the outlying parts of the town, some from the villages round about, eager and vast crowds of them, flocking to perform their practices – sermons, communions and fasts ... Each of them had his own Bible, and sedulously turned the pages and looked up the texts cited by the preachers, discussing the passages among themselves to see whether they had quoted them to the point, and accurately, and in harmony with their tenets. Also they would start arguing among themselves about the meaning of passages from the Scriptures – men, women, boys, girls, rustics, labourers and idiots ... over a thousand of them sometimes assembled, their horses and pack animals burdened with a multitude of Bibles.

'There is then, proof, for the first time' in the late sixteenth century, notes Spufford, 'that large numbers of the laity in the diocese ... had been influenced by Puritan teachings, and were actively involved in doctrinal disputes'. According to her, the picture of the Puritans described by the Jesuit priest 'shows better than any other source the way the common people had been affected by the reformation and the growth of literacy'.¹⁶

Many other studies of Puritanism in England confirm the importance of the laity in the Puritan movement. A. Tindal Hart has pointed out that in many cases, 'the laity were much more protestant than their clergy, had little sympathy with the Laudian ideals, and greatly dreaded a re-introduction of popery'. In areas in which Puritanism was predominant, as R. C. Richardson shows, laymen 'were sometimes even more insistent

¹⁵ On the issue of the laity and the Church see the two excellent studies by Claire Cross: *Church and People, 1450-1660: the triumph of the laity in the English Church*, Trowbridge 1976, and *Royal Supremacy in the Elizabethan Church*, London 1969.

¹⁶ Margaret Spufford, *Contrasting Communities, English Villagers in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, Cambridge 1974, 262-3.

opponents of the sign of the cross than their ministers'. All this points to the fact that popular Puritanism was by no means guided and led by the clergy; the voice of the congregation or laity was important, if not always decisive. Patrick Collinson describes the relationship between the clergy and laity thus:

the popular protestant element in Elizabethan society was not subordinate to the preachers, but possessed a mind and will of its own to which the conduct of the Puritan minister, including his own nonconformity, was partly a response.¹⁷

With regard to the Puritan migration to Massachusetts Bay, the role of the laity can hardly be exaggerated. One need only look at the Adventurers' list of both the New England Company and Massachusetts Bay Company, in which ministers made up only a tiny minority, to see how the laity initiated this migration. More important, the Company invariably initiated the movement to send ministers to the colony. 'It was fully resolved, by God's assistance', wrote Matthew Cradock, governor of the New England Company and later first governor of the Bay Company, to John Endecott at Salem in February 1629, 'to send over two ministers.' In another letter, dated the following April, Cradock assured Endecott:

we have been careful to make plentiful provision of godly ministers ... And because their doctrine will hardly be esteemed whose persons are not revered, we desire that both by your own example, and by commanding all others to do the like, our ministers may receive due honor.

The essential and decisive role of the laity in the Puritan migration can be illustrated through a few examples. When Thomas Hooker departed for Holland in 1631, 'Mr. Hooker's company', wrote Winthrop in his *Journal* in 1632, 'came to the Bay colony'. The godly people, the laity, did not follow their minister to Holland but journeyed to Massachusetts and waited for him there. Many parishioners of St Stephen's, London decided to emigrate to New England with Winthrop's fleet, so that their former vicar John Davenport, found himself preaching 'before pews vacated by the great exodus to Massachusetts Bay'. Even before their ministers were ready to emigrate, many laymen had chosen migration.¹⁸

Captain Roger Clap supplies us with first-hand evidence as to the way godly people had been engaged in preparation for emigration. Upon leaving his parents' house, Clap writes, he went 'to live with a worthy Gentleman, Mr. William Southcot', who lived near the city of Exon [Exeter] in Devonshire. This gentleman 'was careful to keep a Godly Family'. Proceeding on in his search for good 'preachers of the Word of

¹⁷ A. Tindal Hart, *The Country Clergy*, London 1958, 27; R. C. Richardson, *Puritanism in North-west England*, Manchester 1972, 27; Patrick Collinson, 'The Godly: aspects of popular Protestantism in Elizabethan England', cited by Richardson, op. cit. 74.

¹⁸ Alexander Young (ed.), *Chronicles of the First Planters of the Colony of Massachusetts Bay, from 1623 to 1636*, Boston 1846, 134, 142, 144; John Winthrop, *The History of New England, from 1630 to 1649*, ed. James Savage, Boston 1853, i. 74; Isabel M. Calder, *The New Haven Colony*, New Haven 1934, 16.

God', Clap then travelled to Exeter to Puritan gatherings where he met the Puritan minister John Warham. 'I did desire to live near him: so I remove[d] ... into the city.' In Exeter, Clap lived with 'one Mr. Mossiour, as Famous a Family for Religion as I ever knew'. In his house a 'conference' of godly people met each week. Clap does not tell us if this godly company was based on a covenant. But he does indicate that he himself 'covenanted' with Mr Mossiour. Later, now in the late 1620s, Clap describes how he came to emigrate to the Bay colony.

I never so much as heard of New England, until I heard of many godly Persons that were going there, and that Mr. Warham was to go also ... These godly People resolved to live together; and therefore as they had made choice of these two Revd. Servants of God, Mr. John Warham and Mr. John Maverick to be their Ministers, so they kept a solemn Day of Fasting in the New Hospital in Plymouth in England, spending it in Preaching and Praying.¹⁹

What motivated these 'godly people' to emigrate? Surprisingly, no clear answer to this question exists. Historians of early Massachusetts have dealt almost exclusively with the emigration of clergymen, and not with that of the laity. Even in relation to John Winthrop, whose life has been the subject of many books, we still do not know exactly his motivation for emigrating, because (surprisingly again) historians in many cases have tended to overlook his 'Religious Experiencia'. Yet, if the argument about the decisive role of the laity in the development of Puritanism in England is correct, it seems that this is the place to look for explanations for the migration.

From its beginnings the Puritan movement in England did not operate in a vacuum. Theological developments accompanied developments in social action and behaviour among Puritans; for this reason, Puritanism often drew the critical attention of many sections of English society. Religious reformation, as contemporaries well knew, carried social implications. Illustrating this point are the many satires penned against Puritans in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. In this genre many in England expressed their dislike of the Puritan concept and practice of the godly life. For example, one W.M. wrote in 1609 in his satire about the social outcome of the Puritans' ideas:

My calling is divine
and I from God am Sent
I will not chop-church be,
nor pay my patron rent...

Satires against the Puritans' way of life were widespread, for to many the Puritans' religious and social manners and their devotion and pious behaviour caused irritation and outrage. Thus in Thyne's *Emblemes and Epigrams* (1600) the author wrote of the Puritans that

¹⁹ Roger Clap, *Memoirs of Roger Clap*, Boston 1844, 18, 39.

They sett upp churches twenties for their one,
for everie private house spirituallie
must be their church, for other will they none.

And the Puritans' militancy, along with their pretence to exclusive possession of the requisite knowledge of the true mode of salvation, brought in 1614 one R. C. in the *Time Whistle*, to write:

There is a sort of purest seeming men,
That aide this monster in her wrongfull cause,
Those the world nameth – Puritanes I mean –
Sent to supplant me from the very jawes
Of hell, I think; by whose apparent shew
Of sanctity doe greatest evils grow.

Most common were satires against Puritan insistence on the holiness of the Sabbath. Those who preferred recreation and sport most often charged the Puritans with hypocrisy: 'Upon the Sabbath, they'l no Phisicke take, Lest it should worke, and so the Sabbath breake'. Or, in relation to Sunday, 'Suppose his Cat on Sunday killed a Rat, She on Monday must be Hanged for that'.²⁰ Although the term 'Puritan' had not been sharply defined in the early seventeenth century, the satires evidence the fact that, among contemporaries, Puritanism had come to represent certain manners and modes of behaviour.

These satires of, and attacks upon, Puritans and their ways of life and belief reflected the fears and anxieties they created in English society. Winthrop described this world in his 'Religious Experiencia' in 1616, writing from the point of view of being Puritan and addressing God,

Thou tellest me that in this way there is least companie, and that those which doe walke openly in this way shalbe despised, pointed at, hated of the world, made a byword, reviled, slandered, rebuked, made a gazing stocke, called puritans, nice fooles, hipocrites, hair brained fellows, rashes, indiscreet, vain glorious, and all that is naught is; all this is nothinge to that which many of thine excellent servants have been tried with, neither shall they lessen the glorie thou hast prepared for them.

Richard Baxter gives a similarly vivid picture from his recollections of his youth. He reports that in and near the village where he grew up in the 1620s many ministers lived

scandalous lives and that only three or four constant competent preachers lived near us, and those (though conformable all save one) were the common marks of the people's obloquy and reproach and any that had but gone to hear them, when he had no preaching at home, was made the derision of the vulgar rabble under the odious name of a Puritan.

On Sundays 'the reader read the Common Prayer briefly, and the rest of the day ... was spent in dancing under a maypole and great tree... where all the town met together'. With all this activity, Baxter continued,

²⁰ William Holden, *Anti-Puritan Satire 1572-1642*, New Haven 1954, 77, 80, 57, 83.

we could not read the Scripture in our family without the great disturbance of the tabor and pipe and noise in the street. Many times my mind was inclined to be among them, and sometimes I broke loose from conscience and joined with them; and the more I did the more I was inclined to do it. But when I heard them call my father Puritan it did much to cure me and alienate me from them; for I considered my father's exercise of reading scripture was better than theirs... and I considered what it was for that he and others were thus derided.²¹

The picture presented by Winthrop and Baxter shows how the Puritans' way of life stood in contrast to that of other people and the extent to which their neighbours detested the Puritan way. This world of contrasting communities is the world of the great migration.

By entering into covenants to form godly societies and companies, Puritans not only took a step in determining their own way of life; they also commented adversely upon the way of life followed by those who continued to adhere to the old order. When Puritan ministers refused to wear the surplice, or use the sign of the cross in baptism; when some of them opposed the practice of having godparents, or kneeling during the reception of the sacrament; or when they opposed and preached against standing at the reading of the Gospel or bowing in the name of Jesus – in all these gestures of dissent Puritan ministers were not involving themselves in matters of narrow theological import. They were, in fact, challenging the appropriateness of ancient customs and thereby creating the potential for grave social conflict in parish, church, village and town. For example, when in 1604 Peter White, vicar of Poulton in the Field, failed to use the sign of the cross in baptism, his manner 'cause[d] many to be baptised out of the parish'. And when the minister in the Cheshire parish of Tarporley refused 'to execute the holy orders of the church' regarding the use of the cross in baptism, his action resulted in a child 'be[ing] carried to another church' where he could be 'baptised according to the lawful rites and ceremonies of the church of England'.²²

In these and other ways, Puritan ministers exercised their ministry to forward social reformation. They excluded 'ungodly' parishioners from communion and church, insisted on godly discipline and attempted to identify the visible saints with the Church. By such actions they offended many of their parishioners and undermined the working framework of the religious settlement under which the parish church was designed to encompass all people in its jurisdiction. Thus in 1626 John Swan of Bunbury caused 'sundry men that come prepare[d] to the communion to depart thence without any at all'.²³ The Puritan quest for reformation, social and ecclesiastical alike, carried with it severe penalties for those who were, as the Puritans defined them, 'profane'. What seemed to the Puritans as 'reformation according to God's word' was to others obviously

²¹ Winthrop, 'Religious Experiencia', i. 196; Richard Baxter, *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter*, ed. J. M. Lloyd Thomas and N. H. Keeble, London 1974, 4, 6.

²² Richardson, *Puritanism in North-west England*, 27-8.

²³ *Ibid.* 48.

an attack on the ancient practices, 'the lawful rites and ceremonies' of the Church of England.

These conflicts directly raised the issue of separation. The experience of John Cotton shows one of the many ways Puritans could seek after true reformation within the Church of England, and how the parishioners reacted to it. As early as 1615, Cotton, 'with cautious firmness rather than enthusiastic zeal', as his biographer says, 'set about distinguishing the lily from the thorns'. The issue he confronted was how to maintain the ideal of the Church as a community of visible saints together with the notion of the established Church as inclusive of all the inhabitants of a given area. He did so 'not by withdrawing from the parish church...but by identifying the elect and withdrawing into a tighter inner group with them'. This chosen group consequently 'entered into covenant with the Lord and with one another'. Thus, what was formed by Cotton in his Lincolnshire parish was a godly company within the parish church. Such an arrangement amounted to what contemporaries referred to as semi-separation, which stopped short of total separation from the parish church and thereby from the Church of England as a whole. What Cotton formed was not a church but a godly company based on covenant, a company that - without leaving the church - could avoid 'the offensive ceremonies' and 'was truly qualified to receive the sacrament'. The social implications of this act were immediately apparent. Those in the parish excluded from Cotton's godly group 'were outraged at the action of the covenanters'. They ran to the bishop's court in Lincoln, and the bishop suspended Cotton.²⁴

But Congregationalists in England did not stop where Cotton had stopped. In many cases during the 1640s and the 1650s, as Geoffrey Nuttall shows, the godly group of covenanters took over the parish church and remade it in their own image. Clearly, what could be done in the 1640s and 1650s, with the fall of the ecclesiastical order during the revolution in England, could not have been so easily accomplished in the 1630s, namely, the identification of God's covenanted company with the Church and the exclusion from the Church of all those not belonging to the godly. It is true that most Puritans who demanded separation from the profane, including almost all of those who emigrated to Massachusetts, strongly denounced the stand of rigid separation which would unchurch the Church of England. Emigration as a legal and loyal withdrawal may therefore be seen as an acceptable alternative to separation, as John White, for example, wrote in his defence of the Puritan migration to Massachusetts, *The Planters Plea* (1630). Evidence of the actual practices in the Massachusetts Bay churches indicates, however, explicit separation, as well as many instances in which the Bay Puritans accused the Church of England of being a false church. Emigration and the unlimited ecclesiastical freedom in Massachusetts thus radically transformed the Bay Puritans'

²⁴ Ziff, *The Career of John Cotton*, 49.

attitudes towards separation from the Church of England. Full discussion of this important historical phenomenon would, however, lead well beyond the limits of the present study.²⁵ In short, the option open to Puritans in the 1630s was the moderate course taken by Cotton in Lincolnshire whereby a congregation of godly people was assembled within the established Church.

From the point of view of the established Church, however, Cotton's moderate course carried the revolutionary threat of congregationalism. The nature of this threat was made explicit by William Ames, the most prominent theologian of this form of church government. 'A congregation or particular Church', proclaimed Ames, 'is a society of believers joyned together by a special bond among themselves, for the constant exercise of the communion of Saints among themselves.' In this proclamation, Ames made it clear both that the essential foundation of a particular church was the social covenant made among the godly people and that a necessary connection existed between the two.

Believers doe not make a particular church, although peradventure many meete and live together in the same place, unlesse they be joyned by a special bond among themselves... This bond is a covenant, either expresse or implicite, whereby believers doe particularly bind themselves, to performe all those duties, both toward God and one toward another, which pertaine to the respect and edification of the Church.²⁶

Ames thus enlarged the covenant's meaning, making it an indispensable feature of a true Church. Ames had transformed Rogers's restricted notion of covenant - as a social covenant with an emphasis on mutual edification among godly people - into nothing less than the essential core of the Church. Indeed, the godly company only became a Church by virtue of the covenant its members concluded among themselves.

The transformation defined by Ames was, in broad outline, the history of the early Massachusetts Bay colony. If godly people could not fulfil their religious goals in England, they had no other choice than to emigrate to America and seek those goals there. Already in 1630 the godly company to which Roger Clap belonged drew up a covenant and formed a church in old Plymouth on the very eve of their migration. But such conduct was exceptional in the great Puritan migration. More common was the Dedham pattern in which emigration preceded the drawing up of a covenant and the forming of a church. Cotton's attempt in old Boston was doomed to failure not only because the bishop objected to it, but because many parishioners objected to it as well. Yet, despite their uncomfortable predicament, Cotton and others of like mind were free to contemplate an

²⁵ Geoffrey F. Nuttall, *Visible Saints, the Congregational Way, 1640-1660*, Oxford 1957, 134-5; White, *The Planters Plea*, 59-61. For a further analysis of the separatist impulses in Massachusetts Bay see my 'Exile and kingdom: reformation, separation, and the millennial quest in the formation of Massachusetts and its relationship with England, 1628-1660', unpublished PhD diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1982.

²⁶ William Ames, *The Marrow of Sacred Divinity*, London 1642, 140-1.

enticing prospect. What if the godly simply left the parish churches and gathered in the Bay colony? There the way would be open to the proper execution of the premises of a true Church. Central to these was the belief that the Church should exclude all but visible saints. Precisely on this point Cotton and his associates in England had no hope. However, in New England prospects were entirely different. And so contemplation gave way to action. Emigration was far preferable to the forced inclusion of sinners in the church covenant. As Ames wrote, this was indeed the whole reason for the Puritan emigration to Massachusetts. Well informed in Holland concerning the migration, Ames justifies it on these grounds. 'Yet if believers contending for their liberty cannot procure this right in that part, nor without most grievous discommodities depart to a more pure Church, and doe keep themselves from the approbation of sinne... they sinne not.'²⁷ Only by leaving sinners in England could the true reformation be fulfilled in New England.

The failure to achieve reform in their local societies, the impossibility of reconciling the principle of a Church based on visible saints with the established one, continuing attacks on the Puritan way of godliness – all these stood in the background of the Puritan migration. The emigrants demanded nothing less than the whole – the transformation of society and state according to God's word. This radical plea could not be fulfilled in England. It only raised the ire of other sections of society, so that the attempt to distinguish and separate godly from ungodly people was accompanied by social struggles within the community and within the parish church. Emigration therefore represented the possibility, not only of establishing a true Church, but also of achieving social reformation through social covenants. As Captain Edward Johnson who sailed with Winthrop's fleet wrote, '[In New England] the Lord will create a new Heaven and New Earth, new Churches and new Common-Wealth together'.²⁸ For without a Christian commonwealth, godly people and their true churches could not be sustained.

Johnson, like Ames before him, revealed how much the social context in England caused the migration.

When England began to decline in Religion, like lukewarme Laodicea, and instead of purging out Popery, a farther compliance was sought not only in vain Idolatrous Ceremonies, but also in prophaning the Sabbath, and by Proclamation through their Parish churches, exasperating lewd and prophane persons to celebrate a Sabbath like the Heathen to Venus, Baccus and Ceres; in so much that the multitude of irreligious lascivious and popish affected persons spred the whole land like Grashoppers.

²⁷ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof*, London 1641, 63. On the close relationship between Ames and the great Puritan migration from its beginnings see: K. L. Sprunger, 'William Ames and the settlement of Massachusetts Bay', *New England Quarterly* xxxix (1966), 66–79.

²⁸ Edward Johnson, *Wonder-working Providence of Sion Saviour in New England, 1628–1651* ed. J. Franklin Jameson, New York 1910, 25.

These 'prophane persons' and that 'multitude of irreligious lascivious persons' had obstructed Puritans in England; they were a stumbling block to the Puritans' search for further reformation in social life and in the Church. The proclamation Johnson mentioned was the Declaration concerning Sports first issued by James I in 1617 and repeated by his son Charles I in 1633. To the Puritans' chagrin, this declaration allowed the populace to play games on Sunday after church service. Yet one needs to go beyond the royal proclamation, as in the case of Baxter above, to see in the interactions between the Puritans and the 'prophane' how the highest interest of the Puritans – keeping the purity of the holy day – clashed with the multitude's interest in having recreation on the same day. Concerning the latter Johnson wrote that, 'every corner of England was filled with the fury of malignant adversaries' of God and Godly people. So when the Puritans emigrated to Massachusetts they intentionally separated themselves not only from ceremonies, popery and bishops, but also from this multitude of 'malignant and prophane' people; for these people, in Puritan eyes, were the reason that further reformation was not attainable in England. It was, they believed, as a result of this struggle between godly and 'malignant' people that 'in this very time Christ the glorious King of his Churches' had raised 'an Army out of our English Nation' and created 'a New England to muster up the first of his Forces in'.²⁹

The present discussion has focused on the Puritan migration as an event arising out of the Puritan experience in England in the early seventeenth century. It is the thesis of this study that the appropriate context for examining the Puritans' reasons for emigrating is the small worlds of their individual communities. It was in these immediate worlds of their everyday lives that the Puritans faced opposition to their vision of godly life and the dilemma of whether they should or should not continue to live among 'prophane' people. This view partly contradicts the traditional assumption made by historians that the great Puritan migration was caused by a certain 'crisis' in England in the late 1620s or early 1630s. The differences between these two points of departure are clear enough. The former calls our attention to the long-term trends in English society in which puritanism increasingly revealed itself not only as an ecclesiastical power but also as a strong social and political force able to disturb and divide communities by its uncompromising plea for full social and religious reformation. The latter explanation, or theory of 'crisis', in attributing the origins of the Puritan migration to events occurring at the actual time of the migration, ignores some profound developments in English society that took place well before, and continued well after, the Puritans had sailed to the New World.

Undoubtedly, only further research will fully reveal the whole story of the origins and causes of the Puritan migration. This study, however, has

²⁹ Johnson, *Wonder-working Providence*, 23–5.

attempted to explore some dimensions of the real and actual world out of which the great Puritan migration came, a world of conflict in local communities, parishes, churches, villages and towns, in which Puritans struggled for religious and social reformation against fellow members of their own local societies who worked to defeat their social and ecclesiastical programme. These divided communities and churches provided one of the primary sources of the migration, and we should look more closely into the process by which godly people alienated not only ecclesiastical authorities but, more importantly, their own local communities. We know surprisingly little about this kind of social dynamic in relation to the Puritan movement in England as a whole, and in relation to the Puritan migration in particular, though there exists much evidence attesting to the profound social, political and ecclesiastical consequences of the rise of puritanism on English society in the early seventeenth century.

In general, then, it seems that the lessening of the prospects for reform on the local level and the interaction there between godly and 'prophane' people determined the Puritan migration. Emigration emerged as a possible solution for many for whom the only alternative was life among the 'prophane'. After all, Puritans carried with them not only theological tenets but also new visions of a godly society. And when the attempt to achieve and build a godly society in England failed, some of the Puritans turned their eyes to New England, deeming it the ideal place to make their vision a reality. Thomas Tillan, for example, describes this Puritan expectation upon his first sighting of New England in the summer of 1638:

Hayle holy-land wherein our holy lord
hath planted his most true and holy word
hayle happy people who have dispossesst
yourselves of friends, and means to find some rest
for Jesus-sake...

Posses this Country, free from all anoye
heare I'll be with yow, heare you shall Injoye
my sabbaths, sacraments, my ministrye
and ordinances in their purity.

But the urgency of the need for emigration is perhaps best revealed by the Rev. Thomas Welde in a message he wrote in 1633 in Massachusetts to his friends in England:

Here are none of the men of Gibea the sonnes of Belial knocking at our doors disturbing our sweet peace or threatening violence. Here blessed be the Lord God for ever Our eares are not beaten nor the aire filled with Oaths. Swearers nor Railers, Nor our eyes and eares vexed with the uncles[n] Conversation of the wicked.³⁰

³⁰ Thomas Tillan, 'Upon the First Sight of New England, June 29 1638', in *Seventeenth-century American Poetry*, ed. Harrison T. Meserole, New York 1968, 397-8; Thomas Welde, 'A letter of Master Wells from New England to Old England... 1633', *Massachusetts Colonial Society, Transactions* xiii (1910-11), 130-1. For a further analysis of the Puritan pursuit of religious reformation and its profound social and political consequences in Massachusetts see my 'Exile and Kingdom'.

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