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**Public Days in Massachusetts Bay, 1630-1685:  
Reasons Behind the Ritual  
and the Ironic Results:**

**By**

**Melissa Weinbrenner**

Humanity uses external actions to express internal realities. Emotions such as love, friendship, respect, or even hatred rely on symbolic acts for proper expression. Hugging a friend or kissing a mate means more than only the simple movements involved. Similarly, on a larger scale, corporate rituals can reveal such truths as the meaning of existence. A good ritual system enables individuals to find meaning in the universe and in their own lives. Religious ritual defines one's relationship with God and humanity.

More than many people, Puritans relied on physical actions and experiences to convey inner or unseen realities. They viewed religion as a mental choice that led to certain behaviors. An individual's actions or lifestyle revealed whether he or she was among the elect. Although the Puritans protested the Catholic belief in the efficacy of forms themselves and disagreed with the Anglican belief that one could be saved strictly through their use, the Puritans were strongly conscious of the purpose and power of ritual. Their anger lay not so much in the use of forms as in the improper use of them. Because they believed the rituals of the Catholic and Anglican churches stifled rather than revealed God, Puritans sought to replace them with a system that more accurately expressed their view of the proper relationship with God. As part of that effort, the Puritans

abandoned the former church holiday system in favor of the more accurately expressive fast and thanksgiving day arrangement.<sup>1</sup>

Puritans' denied the repetitive, cyclical relationship between God and man that the contemporary system of set-date holy days portrayed. They abandoned the commonly observed Christological festivals because of their pagan origin and lack of explicit scriptural directive. Saints' days were deemed extra-biblical and misleading about the identity of the true saints.<sup>2</sup>

For the Puritans, to worship God in a humanly devised manner was to worship the creature not God. Human invention could never suffice as sufficient warrant for keeping a day. Such days conveyed a message about the power of the church, not the authority of God. In his sermon entitled *The Sinfulness of Worshipping God with Men's Institutions*, Samuel Willard emphasized the point that "human inventions" detracted from God's glory. Why? Because "instituted worship ... must need therefore depend upon some authority ... and must suppose a power in him who doth enjoyn it." Humanly devised days (such as Christmas, saints' days, etc.) gave a message about the authority of the church or man, not God. Willard summarized his position bluntly when he wrote that "it is a sin directly against the Divine Prerogative" and that "for any to undertake in this matter to make any ordinances of their own heads in worship ... is an invasion upon his sovereignty." Accordingly, traditional Christological days were not legally observed under the Bay charter. In a *Testimony of Prophane Customs*, Increase Mather pointed out that "in Apostolical times the Feast of the Nativity was not observed" and that the

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Richard P. Gildrie, "The Ceremonial Puritan Days of Humiliation and Thanksgiving," *New England Historical and Geneological Register* 136 (January 1982): p. 3; Joyce Irwin points out the Puritan pre-occupation with forms of worship in "The Theology of 'Regular Singing,'" *New England Quarterly* 51 (February 1978): p. 192.

<sup>2</sup> Again, a number of books and articles point out this idea, but see especially Charles Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1982), p. 96.

“very name of Christmas savours of Superstition.” Indeed, the “New-Testament allows of no stated Holyday but the Lords-Day.”<sup>3</sup>

In addition, the popularly celebrated Christological festivals emphasized the past. Christmas portrayed Christ’s birth, Easter his death and resurrection -- events of more than fifteen hundred years earlier. The Roman and Anglican calendars only looked back -- not ahead -- and contained nothing to emphasize God in the present. This was unacceptable to the Puritans and their dynamic view of God. To them God was alive and vitally a part of their life -- not an ancient God whose actions were only in the past. They saw God in every blessing and in every misfortune that befell them. Needing an appropriate ritual system to convey that message, Puritans abandoned the cyclical, Christological calendar that venerated events of several centuries ago, for one that venerated the current, daily actions of God in their lives. They settled on “occasional days for special purposes.” A day of humiliation, or fasting, would be called in times of misfortune so that the people might draw closer to God, implore His mercy, and turn away His wrath. They would celebrate a Thanksgiving Day for blessings received. Thus God’s presence would be ritualistically and formally recognized in hardships and blessings. This system represented their view of a universe governed by a living God active in their daily lives.<sup>4</sup>

As a brief example of how the system worked, take the events of August 1633. The Massachusetts settlers watched in despair as their meager crops withered under a blazing summer sun. No rain had fallen in weeks. Believing God’s wrath had fallen upon them and desiring to encourage Him to send rain, the colonists met together in solemn assembly. On that feast day they lamented their sad state and wept openly. As they cried, the heavens “poured forth an answering watering.”

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<sup>3</sup> Samuel Willard, *The Sinfulness of Worshipping God with Men’s Institutions* (??), pp. 5, 8, 14, 12; Increase Mather, *Testimony against Prophane Customs: namely, health drinking, dicing, cards, Christmas-keeping, New Year’s gifts, cocksaling, saints’ days, etc.* (Boston, 1686), p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> Horton Davies expresses this idea most clearly in *Worship and Theology in England From Andrewes to Baxter and Fox, 1603-1690* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), p. 251. See especially chapter VI “Calendary Conflict: Holy Days or Holidays?” pp. 215-252; Gildrie, p. 3.

The colonists met again a few weeks later to acknowledge their gratitude and thank God for his “many mercies.”<sup>5</sup>

Thus the Massachusetts Bay Puritans used public fast and thanksgiving days to ritualistically portray their view of the proper relationship between God and humanity. If something beneficent happened, they thanked God. To offer thanks was not just a “nice thing to do,” but an imperative responsibility. “Thankful acknowledgment of Gods mercies” was a “duty very much incumbent upon the people of God,” states one public day proclamation. Failure to acknowledge God’s power could lead to divine displeasure. Giving thanks was necessary lest “the Lord ... be provoked to cut us short for want of returning to give God the glory.”<sup>6</sup>

At the same time, less favorable actions also required acknowledgment of God’s involvement. Distressing events such as God’s “visiting them with sickness and taking many from amongst them” could lead them to “set apart” a day to “humble themselves before God.” When the debate over Thomas Hooker’s removal to Connecticut “could proceed no further,” the entire colony kept a “day of humiliation to seek the Lord.” Additional fasts sought “favour from God” or “prevention of these evils.”<sup>7</sup>

But how did they know when to hold a special day? God did not cry from the heaven’s “I hereby declare September 22 a day of humiliation.” Nor did Winthrop climb a nearby mountain and return with a list of the year’s fast and feast days. Yet the Puritans insisted that indications for what days to observe came from God and God alone, or, as they put it, “when God by his Providence calls thereunto.” One of the reasons they rejected traditional days was that they emphasized human or church authority. The wording of Bay proclamations emphasized belief in that

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<sup>5</sup> Edward Johnson, *Wonder Working Providence of Sion’s Saviour in New England* (London, 1654; reprint, Andover, MA: W. F. Draper, 1867), John Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal “History of New England” 1630-1649*, vol. 1, ed. 1, James K. Hosmer, Original Narratives of Early American History series, Charles Scribner’s Sons (New York, 1908).

<sup>6</sup> These quotes are from proclamations announcing the November 20, 1673 and October 9, 1684 thanksgivings.

<sup>7</sup> The quotes are from proclamations ordering the September 18, 1634, March 25, 1685- and April 20, 1648 fasts.

divine call. The colonists fasted on April 22, 1663, because “god called us to humble our soulls.” “The Governour and Council upon mature Consideration of the many loud Calls of Providence” ordered the April 15, 1680, fast. On June 29, 1676, the people held a day of thanksgiving “fearing the Lord should take notice under so many Intimations of his returning mercy, we should be found an Insensible people.” They watched for signs, good or bad, of when to hold a day, fearing lest they earn the epithet “an Insensible people,” a people unaware of God’s workings. Numerous holy day proclamations remark that the reasons for holding the day are obvious to “those whose eyes are open to observe.” And there are several layers of meaning in calling the ministers the “Lords watchmen.” In the Puritan world-view, God obliged both civil and ecclesiastical leaders to watch for His “loud Calls of Providence.”<sup>8</sup>

Because the Puritans believed that they held fast or thanksgiving days on God’s authority, the reasons they gave for holding a day indicate their beliefs about how or through which events God worked. Ironically, despite their desire to get away from man-ordered days, they could not do so. People had to do the watching and decide through what events and incidents God spoke to them, through what areas he spoke his “loud Calls of Providence.” The areas where they saw God’s involvement were, necessarily, areas they were interested in, areas they themselves watched. They watched for God through their own colored lenses. When they listed God’s reasons, they were actually listing their own concerns and priorities. Not all harvests occasioned a thanksgiving, not all military defeats occasioned a fast and not all comets occasioned a public day. The reasons for holding a public day changed over time. For the Puritans, the

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<sup>8</sup> *Records of the First Church at Dorchester, in New England, 1636-1734* (Boston: New England Historical Geneological Society, 1891), p. 41; Massachusetts (Colony) Council, 1680. *At a Council ... March 8, 1679 ... Appoint ... the Fifteenth Day of April ... a Day of Humiliation and Power* [Boston: 1680] broadside; Massachusetts (Colony) Council, 1676. *At a Council ... June the 20th 1676* (Cambridge, 1676) broadside. The reasons for calling a day are referred to as being obvious to those with open eyes in proclamations such as the one for November 21, 1678 and June 6, 1678. Massachusetts (Colony) General Court, *At a General Court ... the Second Day of October* [Boston, 1678] broadside; Massachusetts (Colony) General Court, *At a General Court ... May 8, 1678* [Cambridge, 1678] broadside. Ministers were called *the Lord’s watchmen* in such proclamations as the one for December 11, 1679. Massachusetts (Colony) Council, 1679, *A Proclamation for a Fast ... December 11, 1679* [Boston, 1679] broadside.

evidence of God's will changed, as their own concerns changed, although they would not admit it.

The wording of Bay proclamations indicate both a belief that God spoke to them and a belief that they could speak to God and be heard by Him. Winthrop approvingly notes that rain fell the day after a June 13, 1639, fast that was held on account of drought. The colonists had brought the plight of the parched crops to God's attention, and He had answered as expected. The November 20, 1673, thanksgiving proclamation calls it a "duty" to offer "a thankfull acknowledgements of God's mercies, especially when they are bestowed in answer unto prayers." The March 1, 1677, fast plainly states that the colonists "have had experience of the Lords heering our prayers, & being a present, ready helpt to us." God heard and he helped -- in the present, not in the distant past or unknown future. When God did not seem to hear and answer speedily (i.e., in the present) the colonists wondered why. The April 4, 1639, fast had the people pondering why a previous fast had been followed by a terrible storm, perhaps indicating divine displeasure. In the March 2, 1676, fast the colonists searched for "why the Lord hath denyed to hear our supplications, and seemed to shut out our prayer." Because they believed God heard and answered their requests, proclamations also contained specific requests that God act a certain way, conscious expressions of their interests and concerns.<sup>9</sup>

The Puritan colonists fully realized and expected their holy day system to serve as a conversation with God. God spoke; they listened and responded. They spoke; God listened and responded. Or at least that was the ideal. Thus in public day proclamations the Bay leaders named their concerns both directly and indirectly.

What reasons occasioned the holding of a day? What events did the colonists and their God "converse" about? The first common concern that

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<sup>9</sup> John Winthrop, *The History of New England from 1630 to 1649* (New York: Arno Press, 1972, Research Library of Colonial Americana), p. 305; *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston: W. White, 1853-54), vol. 1, p. 565; *Dorchester Church Records*, p. [97], 71; *Records... of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 253; see also William deLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1895), p. 127; Massachusetts (Colony) General Court, 1675, *At a General Court ... February the 21", 1675* [Boston, 1675] broadside.

brought the Massachusetts Bay settlers together was the safe arrival of John Winthrop's fleet. On July 8, 1630, the settlers of the "various plantations" joined together in holy convocation to acknowledge God's "goodness and wonderful works" in bringing them to a new land in safety. More than fifty years later, the Massachusetts settlers met on March 25, 1686 (the last public day ordered by the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay), in a prayerful day of humiliation. They recalled the "spreading of infectious disease," "losse of many of our cattell", "the churches of Christ abroad" implored God's favor in the "spring & seed time approaching" and asked God to avert the "evills impending ourselves." The last phrase euphemistically referred to the upcoming revocation of the charter.<sup>10</sup>

During the intervening years, the Massachusetts settlers observed at least 131 public days. Although individuals or congregations could hold private fast or feast days, only the public days were observed throughout the entire colony and sanctioned by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Available broadside proclamations, descriptive orders in the colony records, detailed diary entries, and other helpful contemporary sources, such as local church records, provided detailed information on the reasons for holding 125 of those days. Entries in the colonial records such as "This Court ordered a day of thanksgiving to be kept throughout this jurisdiction on the twenty-fourth day of November next; the grounds thereof are printed" proved disappointing when the broadside had been lost. Thus the official reasons for holding six of the known public days are somewhat uncertain, though a general picture can be obtained. Of those days for which information survived, the reasons can be divided into four broad categories: the colony's physical survival, internal political concerns, the colony's spiritual state, and concerns for others, whether across the sea or elsewhere in the New World. Often the settlers held a public day for more than one reason, so a day often falls into more than one broad category.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> William Hubbard, *General History of New England, from the discovery to 1680*, Research Library of Colonial Americana (New York: Arno Press, 1972), p. 132. The "various plantations" referred to Salem, Charlestown and Dorchester. *Records... of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 509.

<sup>11</sup> Broadside has been lost and no contemporary sources indicate the specific reasons cited for holding the November 24, 1681, thanksgiving, noted in *Records of the*



Physical causes deal with the physical survival of the colony and its inhabitants, their lives and deaths, the things they needed to survive, and various physical phenomena and concerns. The colony set aside more days for one of these general causes than for any other category - 88 of 125, or over 70 percent of the known days.

The overwhelming preponderance of physical issues reveals how concerned the colonists and leaders were with making the colony a physical success. It indicates their long-term attitude toward the colony itself, an attitude they believed God shared. The Bay colony was here to stay - hence concern over issues such as health, prosperity, and the safe arrival of fellow colonists. They asked God for sufficient food supplies, but also for good weather, peace, and other intangibles that make a colony a pleasant place to live. They were not concerned merely with getting rich quickly or using the land as a temporary stopover on their way to a better location. As the thoughtful wording of their proclamations makes clear, they believed that God was intimately involved in their lives. From smallpox to comets to the caterpillars that crawled in the fields, God could influence and direct it all. Theirs was a personal God, an intimate God. And there was no doubt that He was their God, who cared about them personally and wanted their collective enterprise to succeed.

Concern over the colonists' food supply accounts for more days than any other single reason. It appears as a motivating cause in 47 of the 125 days or 38 percent of the days held. Thus there is no doubt of the importance to the colony of getting enough to eat. This may suggest some influence from the Harvest and Hearth Festivals observed in native England. But in New England, almost every possible aspect of the food supply appeared as a cause for a public day.<sup>12</sup>

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*Massachusetts Bay*, p. 324; the May 24, 1654, fast, noted in *Records of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 195; and the November 28, 1639, thanksgiving, *Records of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 277. The November, 1648, thanksgiving, noted in *Records of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 263, may or may not have been held. The other two unknown dates are noted in church records but not the court records. The Dorchester Church records speak of a public fast for July 5, 1677, and the Ecclesiastical Manuscript Archives of Massachusetts speak of an August 28, 1650 public fast day.

<sup>12</sup> The general trends mentioned in this paper are discussed in much greater detail in my unpublished dissertation, *Conversations with God: Fast and Feast Days in Colonial Massachusetts* (Texas A&M University, 1996).

The colony fasted in the midst of a food shortage and also to prevent a possible or anticipated shortage. Public days actually held or intended to be held could bring a response from God. If circumstances changed before the announced day arrived, they could change the purpose of the day, but they never canceled the day. For instance, early in the autumn of 1630, as it became apparent that the colonists would run short of provisions, Governor John Winthrop sent Captain William Pierce on the *Lyon* to fetch supplies from Ireland. En route, Pierce met the damaged *Ambrose* and towed the ship safely to port. Back in Massachusetts, the colonists believed the delayed ship had sunk and turned to clams to avoid starvation. In the spring, with the people hungry and worried, Winthrop ordered a public fast for February 22, 1631. Ironically, fasting is one way to conserve food. However, the *Lyon* returned on February 21, and the fast day became a Thanksgiving Day, illustrating the truly dual nature of the public holy day system. The day remained set apart to God, whether to fast or to feast. God worked through good and through ill. Simply the intent to fast appeared to be sufficient grounds for God to answer the colony's petition. On such occasions, the fast became a thanksgiving.<sup>13</sup>

As expected, they gave thanksgiving for abundance, such as the "plentifull harvest" remembered on October 16, 1633; but the harvest did not need to be abundant or greater than normal for the colonists to offer thanks to God. On November 5, 1662, the colonists praised God for "sparing such a part of the fruites of the earth, whereby man & beast may be sustained." A year later, the colony thanked God for "sparing such a portion of the fruites of the earth as may be necessary for sustenance." On November 25, 1680, came the ultimate thanks for the minimum -- they thanked God since he "hath not given us cleanness of teeth & want of bread in all our places," they did not starve to death.<sup>14</sup>

Next to concern over the colonists' food supply, the colonists' health and well-being was the second most cited physical cause, appearing as a contributing cause in thirty public days. The colonists' health remained

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<sup>13</sup> Winthrop, p. 47.

<sup>14</sup> Other thanksgivings for sufficiency included November 8, 1665, November 8, 1666, October 19, 1671, and September 24, 1674. *Records... of the Massachusetts Bay*, pp. 58, 280-81, 320-21, 293-4; *Dorchester Church Records*, pp. 65-8.

an issue of consistent interest and concern to the colonists, appearing as a contributing factor every decade of the Bay's existence. Of specifically named diseases, smallpox most frequently occasioned public fast and feast days. More often, general, not specific, diseases were named. Of course the colonists also gave thanks for good health and the end of epidemic sickness. On November 15, 1677, the Bay celebrated a day of thanks for the "hitherto mercifully preventing so great a spreading of Infectious Diseases that have been amongst us as was rationally feared by many." Just as with the food supply, the colonists did not celebrate only abundant health, but when fewer people died than had been anticipated.<sup>15</sup>

As stated, over 70 percent of the times the colonists gathered for a public day they commemorated some aspect of their physical survival. A great deal of the time it related to obvious physical issues like the food supply, the colonists' health, or safe ocean transit. The overwhelming preponderance of such issues seems to indicate a conscious desire to succeed on a physical level. However, physical concerns in public day proclamations deal with more than bare survival. Pleasant weather and moderately prosperous trade also appear in the conversation with God. The Bay leaders wanted the colony to survive, but also to do better than barely get by. Physical causes, listed in decreasing order of frequency, included: food, health, Indian concerns, lack of war (peace), weather (not food related), ocean transit, heavenly signs, fire, trade and prosperity, and the Bay's fighting forces.

During the fifty-five year period of the colonial charter, forty-nine days, or 39.2 percent of the known days held, expressed concern over Massachusetts's politics. Although political concerns were the least cited reason for holding a colonial public day during those fifty-five years, if one looks only at the days held after the Stuart restoration in England, 64 percent of the days mentioned political concerns. This steady increase peaked at 95 percent in the last decade of the charter's existence. After 1676, every public day except one (a thanksgiving for which the record may be incomplete) mentioned political survival, making it the most frequently cited concern. Political concerns dominated the last years of the Bay colony as much as physical concerns dominated the early years.

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<sup>15</sup> Massachusetts (Colony) General Court, 1677. *By the General Court ... October the Tenth, 1677* [Boston, 1677] broadside.

Survival of the Bay colony's unique way of life depended initially on physical issues, and later, on political issues. In a way, one could say that public days were most concerned with survival, in whatever form, at all times during the Bay charter period.

The most commonly cited political issue was the charter and what it stood for. Over the course of the Bay charter's existence, concern for the charter occasioned 37 of 125, or 30 percent, of the public days held. Every single fast day held from 1676 (shortly after Randolph's first visit) to Edmund Randolph's arrival in 1686 with a commission appointing Joseph Dudley as governor (when the Governor and Company of the Bay finally ceased operating) noted concern for the charter. Usually the General Court or Council could order colony-wide public days. On extremely rare occasions, such as when the Court was not at hand, the elders as a group could appoint a colony-wide public day. They established the committee or appointed the minister to write the proclamations, so it is no surprise that the proclamations strongly reflected a desire to retain the charter.

However, the officially printed and sanctioned proclamations never mentioned the word "charter." Rather than using the word "charter", proclamations referred to it in terms of what it represented. The most commonly used term, appearing in twenty-two proclamations, was the word "liberties." Losing the charter meant losing liberties; keeping liberties required keeping the charter. At least that was how the leadership interpreted the situation and presented it in their public day proclamations, and that was how the local congregations interpreted it. The Dorchester church recorder noted that the November 22, 1683, fast was held "in regard of the sad condition we were in respecting the danger of losing our liberties both Civil & Sacred our charter being called for." The proclamation issued by the General Court did not contain the phrase "our charter being called for," but local churches knew quite well what it meant when a public day proclamation spoke of "liberties both Civil & Sacred." Of course, that does not mean all the people shared this interpretation. But the message presented in the public day proclamations is clear and unwavering on that interpretation.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Dorchester Church Records*, p. 90.

Ministers helped reinforce that interpretation. In 1673, Urian Oakes warned against those that would “undermine and rob us of our Liberties, Civil and Religious.” Such a loss would lead to “enslaving of this people and their children.” Oakes summarized the view toward political concerns which appeared in the Bay’s public day proclamations -- a desire for a certain amount of independence of thought and action as guaranteed by the charter. Loss of such independence would mean “enslaving” of the population.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the apparent interest in independence of thought and action revealed in Bay public day proclamations, the same proclamations expressed limited recognition of the Bay’s political dependence on those above them. What is surprising is how *seldom* they sought favor from those above them, at least on an earthly plane. They frequently sought God’s favor, yet only five times did they specifically seek man’s favor. Public days reveal a desire for continued lack of involvement by England’s leaders, not increased loving involvement. The wording in public day proclamations indicate only slight recognition of the superior power held in England. In every area of political survival, the Bay proclamations expressed a strong belief in their reliance on God, as opposed to King or Parliament, and a desire to retain that belief despite the realities of the situation.

Even the physical proclamation itself reinforced that idea. The seal of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay in New England appeared prominently at the top of all the colony proclamations. The seal, an Indian<sup>18</sup> in a wilderness location, emphasized Massachusetts isolated or removed location. The seal does not point out the Bay’s relation with England or the rest of the kingdom. Below the seal in large letters, the proclamation declares whether the General Court or Council issued the order. The reasons for holding the day are listed, the day to be held, occasionally how to hold it (i.e., no eating, no servile work, etc.) and then,

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<sup>17</sup> Urian Oakes, *New England Pleaded with, And pressed to consider that things which concern her Peace, at least in this her Day* (Boston: 1673).

<sup>18</sup> Ironically, the seal itself portrays the Indians, or at least uses their image, in the conversation with God. So although the Bay leaders never declared a thanksgiving or fast because of the Indians’ welfare, the Indians were indirectly involved in every public day.

at the bottom, the secretary's signature. Nowhere in the document is stated recognition of New England's relationship with the government in London, whether King or Parliament. Nowhere does the document acknowledge the authority of King or Parliament although the first sentence of the proclamation usually acknowledged God's authority in calling the day. The only authority stressed in the document was that of God and the colonial authorities.

This contrasted sharply with public day proclamations issued under the provincial charter. The seal, rather than emphasizing the wilderness location of Massachusetts, used various symbols of royalty to indicate the colony's dependence on the crown and membership in the kingdom. Below the seal appeared the current governor's name and his title, emphasizing Massachusetts' status as a province. The end of the proclamation emphasized royal dependence. The date of the declaration is a particular year of the current sovereign's reign. The words "God save the Queen," or King, appeared in large letters. Although the proclamation itself still acknowledged God's involvement in the ordering of Providence, the proclamation, as a whole, emphasized civil authority and control over the declaration of public days.

The reasons for holding public days as well as the physical proclamation itself indicated Massachusetts' desire for independence of action and thought. It implies a belief that they knew what was best for the Bay and should be left alone to pursue those interests. This somewhat arrogant view of "knowing best" even appeared in the public days held for those outside the Bay colony.

Days held for events and people outside the Bay colony ranked second in frequency, at sixty-two days, or 49.6 percent of all public days held under the Bay charter. Nearly half the time the Bay colonists gathered on fast or feast days, they noted the affairs of others. But that apparently unselfish interest masked an element of selfishness. One fasted for others in order to learn from their troubles and avoid being troubled in a similar manner. At a public fast held in 1682 for the persecution of the French Huguenots, Increase Mather told his congregation at the Second Church of Boston to "Pitty & Pray for the Lord's suffering servants. To be grieved for the afflictions of Joseph ... is the way to prevent the like

sufferings from coming upon ourselves.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, awareness of a link with other Reformed Protestants did not stop the Bay leaders from suggesting that their particular brand of Protestantism was “better” than others.

Not surprisingly, of those outside the Bay, compatriots in England received the most mention. Thirty-seven days were held, in part, for the “native country.” The wording of public day proclamations reveals that the Bay settlers felt greater attachment to fellow believers (their spiritual brethren) than to the common people of England (their carnal brethren). Bay leaders were not afraid to publicly announce what religious state of affairs they wished to see in England. A colony of a few thousand had no qualms discussing with God the “errours abounding” in a nation of a few million.

Looking solely at public day proclamations, one gets the distinct impression that the Bay leaders disliked England’s religious affairs under Parliamentary rule even more than under Archbishop Laud. Apparently Protestantism with a few undesirable ceremonies was preferable to a tolerant Protestantism. The number of different religious groups in England increased under Parliamentary government. With a variety of groups united in a common struggle against the king, Parliament was reluctant or unable to enforce conformity of belief among them all. On the June 26, 1645 fast, Thomas Shepard itemized the diverse religions in England, such as the antinomians, Anabaptists, “rigid separatists, that refuse to hear an holy minister preach,” and “seekers, [who] deny all churches.” Shepard said that “liberty and toleration to all religions” was the “foundation of all other errors and abominations in the Churches of God.” Shepard concluded by noting New England’s favored position. “Let us look upon it as a rare and singular mercy of the Lord, that the Lord hath kept us here in peace, and saved us from being poisoned with the delusions in the world.” He ended his sermon by pointing out that: “In England, the great reason why so many are deluded, it is because they want instruction, and our condition here is pretty sad, that we should not have our discipline here published to the world and to ourselves and

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<sup>19</sup> Increase Mather, *A Sermon Whereon is shewed that the Church of God is sometimes a Subject of Great Persecution: Preached on a Public Fast at Boston in New-England: Occasioned by the Tidings of a great Persecution Raised against the Protestants in France* (Boston: printed for Samuel Sewall, 1682), p. 23.

therefore we have cause to bless the Lord that he hath put it into the hearts of his servants to take pains herein." The Synod of 1648 finally answered that need by producing the Cambridge *Platform of Church Discipline*.<sup>20</sup>

In the post-Restoration years, Bay proclamations increasingly expressed interest in the people of God everywhere. On occasion, such concern served to cover an indirect allusion to England. The January 22, 1662 fast lamented "the accursed combination of Antichrist & his adherents to ruine & trample upon all the sincere servants of God the world throughout" as well as "the afflicted condition of the people of God elsewhere." When one has already noted the need to pray for the "servants of God the world throughout", one can hardly suppose the "people of God elsewhere" is a reference to an off-planet location, rather it can be seen as an indirect allusion to England. The local churches and ministers did not bother with indirect allusions. The elders, not the General Court, appointed the April 22, 1663, public fast for the condition of "the people of god in Inland."<sup>21</sup>

Yet after "the severe hand of God in the pestilence raging in London" helped occasion the November 22, 1665, fast and the "amazing providence of god in burning the greatest part of the city of London" led to the March 21, 1667, fast, the General Court came out more bluntly (after these signs of God's disapproval with England and the reassurance that Massachusetts would not lose its charter) and called fasts because of the "present low estate of the churches ... in our dear native country."<sup>22</sup>

Thirty-four times Bay public days were held on behalf of "God's people," whether a specific reference to a place in Europe (outside England) or a general reference to the international Protestant brotherhood. Except for a single thanksgiving on behalf of "the good

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<sup>20</sup> Thomas Shepard, *Wine for Gospel Wantons: Cautions Against Spiritual Drunkenness. Being the Brief Notes of public fasting and prayer throughout the colony June 25, 1645 in reference to the sad estate of the Lord's people in England* (Boston: printed for Samuel Sewall, 1661).

<sup>21</sup> *Records ... of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 35; *Dorchester Church Records*, p. 41.

<sup>22</sup> *Records ... of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 281; *Dorchester Church Records*, p. 52; Daniel White, *New England Congregationalism in its Origin and Purity: illustrated by the Foundation and Early Records of the First Church in Salem* (Salem: J.D. Cushing & Bros., 1861), p. 71.



success of the king of Sweden, and Protestants in Germany, against the emperour,” on June 13, 1632, Bay public days lamented the state of religion outside the Bay. This lament was directed at “God’s people” and their difficulty in hanging onto the true faith, or the trials they faced with the Catholics. Except for one incident, the Bay leaders could not find Protestant successes for which to give thanks. The wording presents a gloomy picture of the religious state of the world outside the Bay. Ministers still found reason to praise the manner of worship within the Bay and emphasized Massachusetts’ unique status.<sup>23</sup>

Four times the Bay leaders singled out events affecting others in the New World -- whether other New England colonies or the Caribbean, areas involved in the Great Puritan migration of the 1630s. The Anglican-dominated colonies of the Chesapeake never warranted mention regardless of costly Indian wars or the turmoil of Bacon’s Rebellion. In all Bay public days which expressed interest in those outside Massachusetts, the common factor was similarity of belief. The Bay leadership’s primary focus on those of a similar belief indicates a strong conviction that the colony was part of the international Protestant brotherhood, and its most faithful member.

Despite being such a faithful keeper of truth, Increase Mather warned his congregation on the morning of the February 11, 1674, fast, that the current “abounding of Iniquity [in New England] is a sign that the day of trouble is near.” That afternoon he itemized “what sins are they for which God is wont to bring dayes of trouble upon his people.” Even as the North church bewailed its faults, Mather emphasized New England’s chosen status: “without doubt the Lord Jesus hath a peculiar respect unto this place, and for this people. This is Immanuels Land.” As a result, “it concerns us and becomes us now that trouble is near, to be a United people.” It was also important to worship God correctly, for “when things are managed aright as to Divine Worship, great prosperity is wont to follow.”<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Winthrop, pp. 78-79.

<sup>24</sup> Increase Mather, *The Day of Trouble is near. Two Sermons Wherein is shewed, What are the Signs of a Day of Trouble being near* (Cambridge: Marmaduke Johnson, 1674), pp. 7, 17, 26, 29.

Mather's sermon summarized the points emphasized in public days held because of Massachusetts' spiritual state: one, the nearness of trouble due to the presence of sin; two, the provocation of sin, for which God was especially sensitive where his people in Massachusetts were concerned; and three, the importance of worshipping God correctly, which the institutions of the Bay were suppose to ensure.

Although in essence every public day was a spiritual occasion, on 49 percent of the public days held, proclamations specifically mentioned the spiritual state of the colony. Reformation fasts reminded the settlers of specific sins, the "sins of the Times" that demanded repentance. Which specific sins the Bay leadership chose to include in public day proclamations reveal where their spiritual interests lay. Conversion, or the lack of it, was the spiritual problem most often lamented in the Bay. As Increase Mather explained in a fast day sermon: "The Interest of New England was Religion, which did distinguish us from other English Plantations, they were built upon a worldly design . . . when as now we begin to espouse a Worldly Interest and so to chose a new God, therefore no wonder that War is like to be in the gates."<sup>25</sup>

The foregoing briefly examines some of the main reasons given for holding public days, considering the actual words used as indicative of Bay leadership concerns rather than God's manipulating of Providence, as stated in the proclamations. The Puritans rejected traditional holy days, saying that they served to emphasize the authority of humanity or the church rather than God's power. But fast and feast days for occasional purpose, ostensibly held on God's ordering of Providence, reveal more about human interests than set-date holidays. Realization of the human element eventually became more obvious even to the Puritan settlers and leaders themselves, and at times public days became political weapons. Discussion topics and behavior on the ritual day took on political overtones and recognition of man's control. Church attendance on the day did not mean simple acknowledgment that God had intervened in one's life but that one agreed with the statement of a civil proclamation. Otherwise, one stayed at home.

Individual congregations voted on whether or not to keep the day, based on whether or not they agreed with the reasons listed. In August of

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<sup>25</sup> Increase Mather, *The Day of Trouble is near*, p. 23.

1663, after reading the proclamation for a day of humiliation, the Dorchester “Congregation did agree thereunto.” On January 14, 1683, “notice was given & the [Dorchester] church consented thereunto of a day of humiliation.”<sup>26</sup>

For individuals, attendance at services on a public day implied agreement with the proclamation. The October 12, 1637, thanksgiving commemorated victory over the Pequots and the “success” of the recent Synod. Celebrating the Synod, which denounced Antinomianism, as a success angered some people. Winthrop reported that because “of this latter, some of Boston would not be present at the publick exercises.”<sup>27</sup>

As already pointed out, fast and feast days were intended to be days ordered by God and present a message about God’s (versus the churches’ or Man’s) authority. But necessarily humans interpreted the “calls of Providence.” Since no list existed as to which event was more significant than another or which “call of Providence” should be more heeded than another, human interpretations about the “call” could differ. Such happened in 1676.

In the summer of 1676, ministers and magistrates differed in their interpretation of events. Even the ministers disagreed on whether God was calling them to hold a day of thanksgiving or humiliation. The colonists experienced recent (and rare) victory over King Philip’s forces in battles held December 10, 1675, and March 18, 1676. But those victories did not bring an end to the war. In addition, many ministers continued to lament what they saw as sinful behavior among the colonists. In the *Records of the First Church in Roxbury*, John Eliot notes that several elders, including Increase Mather, asked the Court to appoint a general fast, but they refused. The Governor proposed holding a day of thanksgiving instead. Some of the ministers, including William Hubbard, agreed with the Governor. As it turned out, Increase Mather’s North church held a congregational fast on June 21. The General Court ordered a colony-wide thanksgiving for June 29.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Dorchester Church Records*, pp. 41-2; 89.

<sup>27</sup> Winthrop, p. 24.

<sup>28</sup> John Eliot, “Records of the First Church in Roxbury, Massachusetts” *New England Historical and Geneological Register* 162-166: (July 1880): pp. 298-301.

Ironically, both Mather and Hubbard would claim that they accurately determined what God wanted and each point to the same events as indicative of God's supporting their position. Hubbard wrote that after this "day of thanksgiving, ... The Lord from Heaven smiled upon us at this time: for the day before this Thanks-giving, as also the day after, he gave us to hear of more of our Captives returned: particularly Mr. Rowlandsons children are now brought in." Note how Hubbard credits the intent to keep a day as having some influence. Mather wrote that "June 21 was kept as a day of solemn Humiliation in one of the Churches in Boston, .... After which we have not received such sad tidings, as usually such days have been attended with ever since the War began." The beneficial events Mather notes as following the June 21 congregational fast are the same events Hubbard credits as a sign that God "smiled upon" the colony because they ordered the June 29 thanksgiving. Both Mather and Hubbard take credit for correctly interpreting the signs and knowing what God wanted (fast or thanksgiving) and having the colony blessed as a result.<sup>29</sup>

The realization that the reasons listed for holding a public day were open to human, not just divine, interpretation can be seen in the debate for the 1685 thanksgiving. By 1685, the custom had developed in Massachusetts Bay of holding a seasonal, annual fall thanksgiving. So much so, that Samuel Sewall considered the failure to hold one worthy of mention in his diary. On October 22, he wrote, "No Thanks-Giving this Session."<sup>30</sup> The churches, however, wanted the Court to go ahead and designate a day of thanksgiving. The Court, unsure of its jurisdiction (the charter having been revoked but a new government not yet appointed), was reluctant to do so. Willard visited Sewall on November 6 and told him that the ministers wanted to hold a day of thanksgiving on December 3. The elders sought to get the Governor's approval. On Thursday, Governor Simon Bradstreet spoke to the council about the ministers'

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<sup>29</sup> William Hubbard, *The History of the Indian Wars in New England, from the first settlement to the termination of the war with King Philip in 1677* (New York: Kraus Reprint, Co., 1969), pp. 163-166; Increase Mather, *A Brief History of the Warr with the Indians in New-England* (London: printed for Richard Chiswell, 1676).

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Sewall, *The Diary of Samuel Sewall* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1973), vol. 1, p. 81.

desire. As Sewall noted, "The difficulty of printing an order is, lest by putting in or leaving out, we offend England." That "difficulty" led to a contentious Court session full of "extream sharp words" on November 18. When it was proposed to hold a day for the "Mercies of the Year," and thus avoid possibly offending England, Sewall and others strongly objected. Holding a day only for general causes, without naming any specific circumstances, violated the entire purpose for holding occasional days for extraordinary causes. To hold a day without naming the specifics which occasioned it, without telling through what events God called the day, would be to deny God's role in ordering the day.<sup>31</sup>

Disputes and sensitivity to the exact wording of public day proclamations became even more common later on, especially under the Dominion government. In June, 1688, the birth of James II's son ensured the potential survival of a pro-Catholic royal line. Earlier that year, when news of the pregnancy reached the Bay, Governor Edmund Andros designated a thanksgiving for April 18. Andros insulted Congregational sensibilities not only by declaring a thanksgiving for the pregnancy, but also for emphasizing that the pregnancy came as a result of "Gods great goodness." Although copies of the proclamation were sent out to the other Dominion colonies, for some reason the order was not delivered to the churches in Boston. The records of the Old South Church (the Third Church in Boston) indicate that the minister, Samuel Willard, knew about the order. But because he did not receive a printed copy of it, Willard did not announce the upcoming thanksgiving. The Saturday night before the thanksgiving, Willard received the order. The next day, rather than announcing the public day, the pastor noted that the Governor recommended giving thanks for the king. Except for praying "more particularly and largely for the King," Willard did nothing different and in no way acknowledged the public thanksgiving.<sup>32</sup>

Although the manner of keeping the day was meant to emphasize God's role in ordering the day, humans had to act as interpreters. Someone had to decide what events were calls from God. To the Bay Puritans, public days revealed God and how he worked. To historians,

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<sup>31</sup> *Sewall*, vol. 1, pp. 82, 84, 85.

<sup>32</sup> Benjamin Wisner, *The History of the Old South Church in Boston* (Boston: Crocker & Brewster, 1830), p. 270.

they reveal a great deal about the society that kept them. In Massachusetts Bay, fast and feast days reinforced the idea of a God genuinely concerned and actively involved in current affairs. In the beginning decades, the overwhelming appearance of physical issues indicate how concerned the Bay leaders were with the colony's physical survival. They also expressed their partnership with the international Protestant brotherhood as its most faithful member. The Bay bemoaned the rise of heresies and errors, especially toleration, in the world. Ministers emphasized the need for the colonists to hang onto the truth they had and which the rest of the world did not seem to value enough. Lack of appreciation figured prominently in the discussion of the Bay's own spiritual state. Political concerns overwhelmed all others in the latter years of the charter, and proclamations emphasized the charter as the source of liberty and peace. Even political issues emphasized the colonists' reasons to be grateful and the premium put on unity.

The God portrayed in this system was one who cared about the colonists in Massachusetts Bay more than anything or anyone else. He was also a remarkably intolerant being who hated disunity or any standard of religion other than that practiced in the Bay. Public days emphasized self-interest (how events affected the colonists in the Bay) and arrogance (the Bay residents knew and practiced religion the only way God loved). The revocation of the charter, by forcing the Bay to look outward, permanently shattered the emphasis on unity and the personal God of the colonial charter proclamations. A royally appointed government emphasized with every proclamation the source of its authority and subtly downplayed God's role in ordering the days.

The arrogance portrayed in the public day proclamations was also directed at God, though Bay leaders would not acknowledge it. They tried to manipulate Providence by blatantly requesting certain outcomes or events to take place. They tried to dictate policy to God himself. Although expressing belief in Providence or that one's personal salvation was predetermined, Bay leaders, by the very use of fast and feast days, prove that they did not consider colony happenings beyond human control. A rightly worded request or aptly held day could lead to a desired result. Public day proclamations, such as the one for November 17, 1669, pointed out when such happened. On that day the colony gave thanks for God's "hearing our prayers when wee cryed unto him this last summer, for his sparing & pardoning mercy & compassions to be towards us in

stopping the botles of heaven ... [that] seemed to threaten a grievous famine." Earlier that year, on March 25, the colony had fasted because of concern for, among other things, their crops. So in November they acknowledged the success of that previous fast day.<sup>33</sup>

Fast and feast days were an attempt to ritualistically portray and emphasize via certain behaviors the idea of a divinely ordered world. But in their desire to get away from days which emphasized the power of man or the church, the Bay Puritans used a system even more influenced by changing human interests, human arrogance, and political maneuvering than set-date holy days. Ironically enough, the best-known remnant of the Puritan "occasional days for special purposes" is the set-date Thanksgiving observed nationally in November - the very antithesis of randomly ordered days, yet more sheltered from the human vagaries of changing interests and political maneuvering.

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<sup>33</sup> *Records ... of the Massachusetts Bay*, p. 438; Massachusetts (Colony) Council, 1668. *At a council held at Boston, March 10, 1668* [Boston, 1668] broadside.