The Puritan Self-Image and Enemies Within: A Commentary

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New England Puritans hoped to establish in the new world a model society—A City on a Hill that would command the attention of all Christendom. Conscious of playing a starring role in the drama of providential history, they were determined to insist upon universal subscription of their orthodoxy. Timothy Sehr and Charles Lee have both examined examples of men who challenged that orthodoxy by their ideas or deviant behavior and who thus threatened the Puritans' self-image and the picture they hoped to present to the world.

Timothy Sehr's paper deals with the Puritans' attempt to preserve orthodoxy in Massachusetts at an extremely critical time in the history of their errand into the wilderness. Charles I had been executed in 1649. English Puritans had a unique opportunity to create a new model state and church. But the unanimity which had seemed to characterize Puritans during the Laudian persecution had dissolved when the Anglican establishment had crumbled. Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Arminians and numerous other proto-denominations came forward with their individual proposals for reform. Massachusetts had assumed the role of teacher to the English nation. The Bay colonists offered their English brethren not only a set of religious beliefs but a method for maintaining conformity. Because of their concern for the purity of their society the leaders of the Bay could not tolerate the threats posed to their system by the ideas of William Pynchon and the actions of William Clarke and his fellow Baptists; because of their role as a model for England they were compelled to defend and explain their actions.

For many years historians have assumed that as soon as the rumor reached America that the idea of toleration had been broached in England, New Englanders turned their backs on the mother country and abandoned all hope of leading a universal reformation. Such was not the case and Professor Sehr is one of the most persuasive of those scholars who are now revising our impressions of the relationship between the colonies and the mother country during the Interregnum. One of the most valuable insights we gain from his paper is the awareness that colonial persecution of Pynchon and others was undertaken with one eye on an English audience. Indeed, the argument could be pursued further than Sehr advances it. He

contends that in the Clarke case the Bay leaders did not take the initiative in describing the case because they didn't expect anyone in England to defend a troublemaker such as Clarke. This isn't very convincing. Since Roger Williams had mobilized the support of many Parliamentary leaders in his tractarian debate with John Cotton just a few years earlier, it is hardly likely that the colonists were surprised to find English defenders of Clarke. What is significant about the sequence of events is that as in the case of Pynchon, whose offensive book was published in London, the Bay sought to bring a defense of its actions before the English public only when that public had been made aware of heresy in the Bay. Massachusetts residents did not want to advertise the presence of deviants in their community, but once such deviants were known to exist their sentencing should be defended and Englishmen be made aware of colonial success in maintaining orthodoxy.

Another area of the paper that could be interpreted in a slightly different fashion is Sehr's assessment of colonial concern over English events. Early in the paper he claims that in the 1650s the colonists became less optimistic about English events and more critical of English policies. In his view they became so concerned that they abandoned their polity debates with English Presbyterians in order to advocate the need for all orthodox men to unite in opposition to heresy. A different scenario is possible. Norton, Cobbett and their colleagues identified most closely with English Congregationalists such as Thomas Goodwin and John Owen. In the 1640s Goodwin and his fellow Congregationalists had to struggle to prevent the imposition of a Presbyterian establishment. They enlisted the aid of English sectarians who shared their fears and the aid of their Congregational friends in America who lent their pens to attacks on Presbyterian doctrine. Such critiques of Presbyterianism stopped in the 1650s because with Oliver Cromwell's defeat of the Scots in the Second Civil War the threat of a Presbyterian establishment died. Cromwell was identified closely with English Congregationalists and as his star rose so did those of Goodwin, Owen and others—including former New England clergymen such as Hugh Peter and William Hooke. As they emerged from under the threat of Presbyterian dominance these ministers began to place some distance between themselves and the sects. The call for state enforced orthodoxy that Sehr notices New Englanders making corresponded with similar calls from their English allies. In 1652 and 1654 Owen, Goodwin and others proposed to Parliament a list of religious fundamentals and a call that they be enforced. If adopted these would have established a crackdown on Unitarians, Quakers, Arminians and other heretics. In 1654 John Owen as Vice Chancellor of Oxford University had two Quaker women whipped and driven from town. All of this was known to New Englanders and perhaps reassured them so that they did not view English events with quite the concern Professor Sehr believes existed. He feels that colonial tracts such as Cobbett's were intended to fill a perceived void, that New Englanders were shouting into an English wilderness. They may simply have been engaging in yet another example of trans-Atlantic Congregational cooperation.

Sehr comments on the difference in the way heretics such as Pynchon and Dunster were treated as opposed to the punishment meted out to Clarke and his associates. He suggests that this could be attributable to the social standing of the various offenders, or perhaps to the nature of their ideas. Here again another possibility should be explored. One of the problems faced by all the colonial governments was that of maintaining order in frontier communities with no traditions and weak institutions. Public affairs had a ritual importance which served to support authority. Michael Zuckerman suggested as much in his analysis of the functioning of New England town meetings,[1] and Gary Roeber's recent article in the *William and*

Mary Quarterly shows how the ritual of court procedures in colonial Virginia enhanced the authority of the courts.[2] With this in mind one of the striking things about New England heresy proceedings is that those who bowed to the authority of the magistrates received the most lenient treatment. Such confrontations not only settled questions of guilt or innocence and the bounds of orthodoxy, they also validated the authority of the magistrates. Perhaps Clarke and Holmes were treated so poorly because they refused to accept the magistrates' competence to judge such cases and thus posed a threat to authority's tenuous hold on the society.

Charles Lee is dealing with a different type of challenge, a different fringe of New England society. He argues that the poor laws and an increasingly biased public administration of those laws helped to define community acceptability in such a way as to cast suspicion on the younger generation. Dr. Lee raises important questions about the poor in Massachusetts, the status of youth in the colony, and the extent to which those categories overlapped to the detriment of the young. He seems to be saying that a large percentage of the unworthy poor, who were perceived as evil and troublesome, were young and that this generated concern about youth and added to the types of generational conflict which existed in farm communities and which ultimately helped fuel the American Revolution.

Certainly those who are identified legally or administratively as "the unworthy poor" are going to be pegged at the lower reaches of social respectability and Lee performs a valuable service in raising questions not about how poverty in the abstract was perceived, but how New Englanders actually viewed poor people. Whether the relationship between youth and the unworthy poor is proven here is open to question. Even if it were proven that a disproportionately large number of the poor were young, most youth were not poor and it is unlikely that the colonists would have generalized from the unworthy few to the whole youthful population.

The evidence which Professor Lee utilized falls into two categories. First, he uses literary sources, starting with Nathaniel Ward's letter and including quotes from the colony records. But he might be reading too much into those sources. While Ward, who was writing in an attempt to persuade Winthrop he was needed back in Ipswich and might have exaggerated, does specifically talk of "multitudes of young people," the other sources aren't quite so clear. The laws quoted refer to "idle persons," "single persons," and other such categories. It is Dr. Lee's interpretation that makes them *young*, single people, or so it seems from this paper.

There is a similar tendency to let assumptions run wild in Dr. Lee's use of other evidence such as the statistics of poverty. The most vexing aspect of his breakdown of the poor into mature and young adults is that we are never told what age forms the dividing line. He defends the looseness of his use of the categories by pointing out that he is not alone in this and that other historians have acknowledged that "youth" and "social immaturity" were terms that measured the same thing. But "social immaturity" was, he admits, in part gauged by wealth. If by "youth" he means "socially immature" and by "socially immature" one means the "poor" then it is not surprising that Dr. Lee finds a correlation between "youth" and "poverty.

Dr. Lee further assumes that an individual identified in the sources as single and not identified by age or trade *must have been* unmarried, unattached, and relatively

young. What precisely is meant by "relatively young" and is that assumption valid? Evidence can be found that it is not. John Waters' research into Barnstable has identified individuals who were mature and single. The vagabonds who occasionally troubled New England communities were often mature. Merchant seamen were among Boston's poor; they were often single and occasionally regarded as unskilled labor. There are enough such anomolies to cast doubt on Dr. Lee's assumptions and fully 1/3 of his "young adults" in one category are "young" *by assumption.*

Was there age bias in Massachusetts' views on poverty? Not necessarily. A system that classifies as "worthy poor" those on an age spectrum ranging from orphaned infants to elderly widows does not appear age biased. And if the residents of the Bay were so concerned with unworthy poor youth why did the colony's agents in England Hugh Peter and Thomas Welde raise £832 in the 1640s to send poor and fatherless English children to New England?

If Dr. Lee's answers to the questions he has raised are not fully convincing, he does offer evidence that New Englanders were concerned about some people who didn't quite fit in their society. Some of his evidence should be looked at for what else it might reveal about the society's misfits. Nathaniel Ward complained of "multitudes of young people, *servants and others.*" Were young servants perhaps the unruly and threatening element, a disruptive influence on the colony's other youth? Gary Nash in his new study of *The Urban Crucible* comments that servants who immigrated to Boston were typically 13-20 years old.[3] Philip Greven in *The Protestant Temperment* claims that in the colonial period "The presence of servants within the household posed a perpetual danger to the inculcation of values and the designs of parents for their children's lives."[4] Eli Faber's work on Puritan criminals reveals that servants were especially suspect of criminal behavior. The concerns which Dr. Lee perceives as being harbored about the poor also sound similar to Lawrence Towner's findings on Puritan perceptions of servants.[5] Nathaniel Ward, after all, does not refer to "the poor" but to "idle and profane" young men.

There are some additional questions that Dr. Lee should investigate as he continues to explore this subject. While he discusses changes in the numbers and categories of poverty he doesn't analyze changes in the causes of poverty. Military conflict, from King Phillip's War to King William's War to Queen Anne's War created refugees, soldiers' widows and orphans, and disabled veterans—all adding to the numbers of the poor (especially in Boston) after 1675 and altering the character of the poor population. Did the presence of these new victims of povery influence colonial perceptions of the poor? The growing number of the poor, the cost of poor relief, and the impact of war-generated inflation were all contributing factors to the increase of warning-out in Boston and other communities. How do these factors alter Dr. Lee's analysis? Finally, he should address the question of whether the perception of the poor and of youth was the same in Boston as in more rural communities.

Both of these papers raise important new questions touching upon the relationship between the world of ideas and the world of political and social realities. New Englanders dreamed of building a New Jerusalem, but there were those whose challenges or whose very presence in the region threatened to transform the dream to a nightmare. These are the subjects which Sehr and Lee have decided to explore. As with any pioneering efforts, these papers can be faulted for not answering all our

questions. Indeed, they provoke as many questions as they answer. But that in itself is evidence of the authors' imagination and skill in opening for our inspection new aspects of Massachusetts history.

NOTES

1. Michael Zuckerman, *Peaceable Kingdoms: New England Towns in the Eighteenth Century* (New York, 1970).

2. A. Gary Roeber, in *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d. ser., (January 1980), XXXVII, 29ff.

3. Gary Nash, *The Urban Crucible: Social Change, Political Consciousness, and the Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass. 1979).

4. Philip Greven, *The Protestant Temperament: Patterns of Childrearing, Religious experiences, and the self in early America* (New York, 1977).

5. Lawrence W. Towner, "The Sewall-Saffin Dialogue on Slavery," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., XXI (1964), 44ff.