

Calvinism and Colonial Native American Religious Worldviews

By Robert J. King

INTRODUCTION

The interaction between the original Puritan settlers and Native Americans, as recorded in *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth*, demonstrates a complexity of interactions concerning theological understandings of God's Providence and Puritan social relations with Native Americans. Such theological understandings, as can be demonstrated through later ecclesiastical records of First Church, Plymouth, can be fully understood according to the distinctively Calvinist heritage of Puritan English Reformation history. The struggle for physical survival of the Mayflower Pilgrims in which more than half of the original Puritan settlers died during the first winter combined with early positive interactions with Massasoit, and finally culminating with the breakdown of English-Native American relations during King Philip's War, paint a portrait of stoic Calvinist acceptance of God's Providence irrespective of the blessing or misfortune that befell the Mayflower Pilgrims and their future English inheritors of Plymouth and surrounding areas.

To understand fully how Calvinist emphasis on Providence was understood by the Mayflower Pilgrims is beyond the scope of this primary textual engagement, but through focusing on select passages from *Mourt's Relation* as historically contextualized alongside of earlier Native American religious worldviews, a preliminary statement of Calvinist theological identity morphing into bifurcated religious and secular variants of either religious conversion or material prosperity can be proposed. The structure of the following engagement will thus include excerpts from *Mourt's Relation*, followed by a descrip-

tion of Wampanoag religious worldview, and concluding with a synthesis rendering of how such interaction produced a split in Puritan religious self-identity.

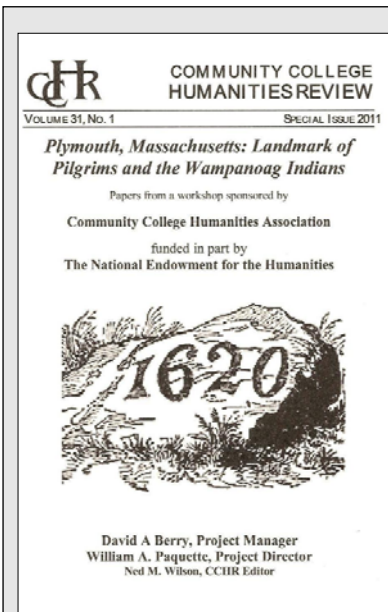
MOURT'S RELATION: DIVINE PROVIDENCE

"Good Friend: As we cannot but account it an extraordinary blessing of God in directing our course for these parts, after we came out of our native country, for that we had happiness to be possessed of the comforts we receive by the benefit of one of the most pleasant, most fruitful parts of the world..." (Heath 3)

So begins *Mourt's Relation*, yet the appeal to God's Providential blessing was to show signs of unraveling from its stricter Calvinist theological influence within the first generation of settlers at Plymouth. Such a unified vision shows signs of such later bifurcation between theological and economic emphases within the opening sentences of notes "To the reader" within *Mourt's Relation*:

"Courteous Reader, be entreated to make a favorable construction of my forwardness in publishing these ensuing discourses. The desire of carrying the Gospel of Christ into those foreign parts, amongst those people that as yet have had no knowledge nor taste of God, as also to procure unto themselves and others a quiet and comfortable habitation were, amongst other things, the inducements (unto these undertakings of the then hopeful and now experimentally known good enterprise for plantation in New England) to set afoot and prosecute the same." (Heath 6)

The desire for evangelizing the inhabitants of the New World combined with a concern for securing material prosperity in itself is not problematic, nor contradictory to Christian



Dr. William Paquette of the Virginia Mayflower Society directed a research project examining relationships between the Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians that was later featured in a special issue of the Community College Humanities Review.

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understandings of Providence. Calvinist emphasis on material blessing as a sign of election had always marked Reformation understandings of predestination. Later development of New England prosperity (as recorded in *A Cubberd, Four Joyne Stools & Other Smalle Things: The Material Culture of Plymouth Colony and Silver and Silversmiths of Plymouth, Cape Cod & Nantucket*) demonstrated such a fascination with material prosperity through both artistic style and inherent economic value. The Puritans had been most familiar with “Mannerism,” the ornate artistic style characterized by, “lavish decoration, heavy embellishment and exaggerated proportions.” (Cullity 7) The Mannerism style would have been doubly familiar to those Plymouth settlers who had sojourned in Leiden, Netherlands for it was craftsmen emigrating from the Netherlands who had introduced the style to England during a time of “decorative and financial revival.” (Cullity 7) Due to religious war waged by Catholic Spain in 1567 such Protestant Mannerist artisans were driven to settle in England thus bringing with them their Mannerist artistic style (Cullity 8). Marked by exaggeration and geometric patterns, Mannerist furniture therefore exuded a greater sense of elegance than later anachronistic renderings of Puritans having solely a stark simplicity in taste would lead the interpreter of history to believe. Moreover, although the Puritan settlers exhibited few gentry, since entire churches, parishes or extended families would emigrate together, the “customs, dress, language, fashion and social status” of their original English culture would often be transported wholesale across the Atlantic so that material cultural norms largely remained intact (Cullity 8).

Thus, although Puritan spiritual tastes might have indeed been stark (especially due to an aversion to Roman Catholic and Anglican fascination with and use of liturgical formalism and sacramental theological elevated emphasis on material forms), Puritan aesthetic tastes nonetheless reflected the ornate English Mannerist style of the day. Surely, the Plymouth Puritan community was not wealthy monetarily as can be evidenced by substitution of normal wages paid to its clergy with items such as partial payment in firewood in 1666, and as late as 1677, one third salary payment to their clergy, Mr. Cotton, made in wheat, butter, tar, shingles, rye, peas, malt and Indian corn rather than in exclusively in English pounds (*Plymouth Church Records, 1620 – 1859* xxvi - xxvii). However, in lacking financial prosperity, as evidenced further by their debt to mone-

tary backers in London (Bunker 4), the Plymouth community nevertheless experienced material abundance. For example, during the 1620’s, beaver pelt reached its peak price, fetching four times its normal price, at a high of 40 shillings, enough to rent nine acres of English farmland for a year (Bunker 5). Additionally, although Mr. Cotton did receive a third of his salary in material goods in 1677, his monetary salary of “four score pounds for this yeare” still represented an increase of ten pounds over what had been previously paid to the clergy, Mr. Brinsmead in 1666 (*Plymouth Church Records, 1620 – 1859* xxvi). Thus, even though somewhat hampered by debt, and not exclusively demonstrating prosper-

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ity in monetary gain, Plymouth nevertheless demonstrated an increasing material abundance. So, when appeal to economic comfort is heralded within *Mourt’s Relation*, the question is not whether or not such comfort was a sign of Providential blessing, but whether or not economic comfort and material prosperity

were not simply greater concerns than explicit theological concerns for salvation, Divine election, etc. With increased material prosperity (even if partially in wheat, rye, malt, beaver pelt, etc.) a hidden temptation of seeking such abundance rather than evangelistic witness, and other explicitly theological concerns can be posited.

Concerning Providence, *Mourt’s Relation* demonstrates the stoic acceptance of Divine Will irrespective of whether such Divine Will renders blessing or misfortune. Further into *Mourt’s Relation* one notices such stoic acceptance of Providence when the writer states, “take not offense at God himself, which yet we certainly do so oft as we do murmur at his providence in our crosses, or bear impatiently such afflictions as wherewith he pleaseth to visit us.” (Heath 12) Or slightly later upon sighting Cape Cod on the ninth of November 1620 “after many difficulties in boisterous storms, at length, by God’s providence.” (Heath 15) And surely, such difficulties wrought by Providence did ensue as the Mayflower Pilgrims experienced mussels that made them sick when they ate them, whales that they were incapable of harpooning and converting into material wealth due to a lack of whaling equipment, frigid water that resulted in severe colds, and finally even near mutiny that led to the signing of the Mayflower Compact on November 11, 1620 (Heath 16 - 18).

Upon arrival on shore, however, the Mayflower Pilgrims encounter the foreign world of Native American culture and material items through a lens of unequivocal interpretation of God’s Providential bless-

ing. Native American buried corn is discovered and immediately unearthed with the Pilgrims taking “as much of the corn as we could carry with us; and when our shallop came if we could find any of the people, and come to parley with them, we would give them the kettle again, and satisfy them for their corn.” (Heath 22) Shortly after, upon finding additional Native American corn (along with wheat and a bag of Native American beans), explicit reference is given to God’s Providence in having discovered such provisions. “And sure it was God’s good providence that we found this corn, for else we know not how we should have done, for we knew not how we should find or meet with any Indians, except it be to do us a mischief.”

(Heath 26) The initial appeal to Divine Providence, however, is later qualified not as a sign of blessing, but as a potential snare for having potentially stolen the corn from its rightful owners. In “A Journey to Pokanoket, the habitation of the great King Massasoit,” a much later portion of *Mourt’s Relation*, grave concern for not having stolen Native American corn is expressed when the writer stated, “And whereas at our first arrival at Paomet (called by us Cape Cod) we found there corn buried in the ground, and finding no inhabitants but some graves of dead new buried, took corn, resolving if ever we could hear of any that had right thereunto, to make satisfaction to the full for it.” (Heath 62) Due to the redacted and anonymous nature of the text of *Mourt’s Relation*, it is quite possible that both ethical interpretations of the discovery of Native American corn can coexist. Similarly, the later section of *Mourt’s Relation* entitled, “Reasons and Considerations touching the lawfulness of removing out of England into the parts of America” demonstrates a fuller Providential justification for land seizure that stands in tension with promise of restitution for items taken from the Native American population. In citing the Biblical example of God’s giving of the land of Canaan to the Jews, the writer directly made the claim characteristic of all later Manifest Destiny when he wrote:

“This then is a sufficient reason to prove our going thither to live lawful; their land is spacious and void, and there are few and do but run over the grass, as do also the foxes and wild beasts. They are not industrious, neither have art, science, skill or faculty to use either the land or commodities of it, but all spoils, rots, and is

marred for want of manuring, gathering, ordering, etc. . . . so it is lawful now to take a land which none useth, and make use of it.” (Heath 92.)

Justification for such land seizure is based directly upon the Old Testament example with the writer having quoted Genesis 13:6, 11, 12; 34:21 and 41:20, with Genesis 13 being a reference to the separation of the land of Canaan between Abraham and his brother Lot, with Genesis 34 referencing Jacob’s family intermarrying with Canaanite inhabitants (upon male circumcision), and with Genesis 41 referencing the famine set against Pharaoh in a dream as interpreted by Joseph. Therefore, although the original Catholic “Doctrine of Discovery” had been issued in 1452 by Pope Nicholas V to King Alfonso V of Portugal in the papal bull *Romanus Pontifex* (Newcomb 1), more straightforward Calvinist appeal to Biblical theology is given for such seizure of Native American resources.

COLONIAL NATIVE AMERICAN RELIGIOUS WORLDVIEWS

Set against both Calvinist and earlier Catholic appeals to Providence as justification for an exploitative relationship with Native American culture, several trends within New England Native American religious worldviews must be noted. First, prior to the arrival of the Plymouth Pilgrims, at least 80% of Native Americans in New England had been estimated to have died from European diseases such as smallpox or the bubonic plague (Simmons 12). The effects of such an epidemic must have left a significant scar on earlier Native American religious worldviews. Such historical context should be taken into account when evaluating how Native American leaders either received or rejected the new teachings of Christianity.

Second, the political structure of the sachem must be noted for the specifically “religious” aspects of Native American self-understanding can only be understood as embedded within an entire cosmological, mythological, cultural and political network of semantic associations. The sachem, ruled by hereditary kinship relations passing from either father to son or from older brother to younger brother (or to daughter or sister in absence of male heirs) was the nexus of kinship authority used in administering justice, receiving guests (e.g. Massasoit’s



Massasoit smoking peace pipe with John Carver

reception of the Plymouth Pilgrims), practicing ritual, conducting diplomacy, allocating land and collecting tribute (Simmons 12).

Third, upon conversion to Christianity, the nexus of kinship authority either could remain intact through the establishment of semi-independent enclave communities of Native American Christian converts or could assimilate to English culture.

These semi-independent enclave communities, formally established as “praying towns,” however, produced unstable political diplomacy by the time of King Philip’s War in 1675 for although fourteen “praying towns” existed by this time, due to their indigenous ethnic composition “praying towns” were nonetheless still distrusted by English Christians. One example of such distrust at the time of King Philip’s War was the mass confinement of Native American Christians to Deer Island in Boston Harbor (Simmons 16). Sadly, such an experiment in indigenous evangelization ended abruptly following King Philip’s War in which only four “praying towns” survived, yet with a declining population (Simmons 16). Following King Philip’s War, the plight of Native American society in New England suffered even further decline characterized by racism, exploitation, indebtedness, drunkenness, and harsh legal penalties all of which resulted in increasing necessity of selling off Native American land to English colonialists to pay off debts and legal fines (Simmons 16).

Fourth, although the experiment in indigenous “praying towns” met with failure, often Native American preachers would adopt the original Congregationalist model of Christianity, but then later flourish as Baptist Christians with greater autonomy, for example, much later in 1830, the legendary Native American Baptist preacher, “Blind Joe” Amos who preached to a majority Mashpee congregation (Simmons 21), or Gay Head Native Americans who by the late seventeenth century had left their original Congregationalist association to then form a Baptist meeting (Simmons 24).

Fifth, through inter-marriage the Native American population rapidly assimilated into either the dominant English culture or mixed with other ethnicities, most notably African. For example, by 1764, of 276 Native Americans identified at Gay Head, only 25% could still claim unmixed Native American descent (Simmons 25). The effects of such inter-marriage therefore must be taken into account when reconstructing what might

have been original Native American religious worldview.

Of the original Native American worldviews the following broad sociology of religions descriptions can be made. First, the Native American pantheon of deities in New England was headed by the principal god Hobbamock, known also as Cheepi, Chepi, Chepian (Simmons 39). Hobbamock’s name was related to the

words for death, the deceased and cold northeast wind, and would often appear “in the shapes of Englishmen, Indians, animals, inanimate objects, and mythical creatures.” (Simmons 39) Second, the person who had attained the status of having received a vision of Hobbamock became known as a pniese, a status attested among the Massachusetts and Wampanoag, but not the Narragansett or Pequot-Mohegan (Simmons 39).

Related to the religious specialist known as the pniese was the powwow who through direct contact with the spirit world could advise their sachems (Simmons 44), divine the cause of illness (Simmons 50), and conduct physical healing (Simmons 55 - 58).



Massasoit statue, Plymouth, Massachusetts

SYNTHESIS

Upon arrival in Plymouth, the Mayflower Pilgrims adapted by both assimilation to new agricultural methods while also maintaining distinction between Native American and English culture. Christian influence upon Native American converts produced true religious reorientation, yet the cultural distinction between Native American and English remained. To pose the question of how Native American religious worldviews changed would presuppose that some original set of specifically religious beliefs and practices can be analyzed and places where abandonment of original religious worldview happened could thus be noted.

To analyze how English Puritan religious worldviews changed, however, is more difficult. One person’s heretic is another person’s defender of orthodox belief and practice. However, with an appeal to Divine Providence as a hermeneutic lens one can recognize how material prosperity and evangelistic concern were dual emphases expressed by the Plymouth Pilgrims in *Mourt’s Relation*. Although such dual emphases were expressed as part of a single, unified Calvinist Puritan theological worldview of Providence, one can notice potential bifurcation happening even in such an early text as 1622. Certainly, later New England history would see the development of an entirely distinct eco-

nomically prosperous society at home in Christian society, but an economically prosperous New England high society no longer defined by Christian theological categories. As the later original congregation of First Church of Plymouth demonstrates, the shift from an evangelical form of strict Puritan Congregationalist self-identity to a less distinctively Christian Unitarian Universalist congregation was perhaps a bifurcation with seeds already planted among the original Plymouth Pilgrims of the 1620's.

Such theological transition from strict Calvinism in which founding pastor, John Robinson was described as “terrible to the Arminians,” and who wrote an Appendix to the six principles of Calvinism penned by William Perkins (i.e. Trinitarian God-head, total depravity of humanity, Jesus’ atoning sacrifice, justification by faith alone, etc.), to a less theologically robust form of Protestant Christianity can be the result of numerous factors (*Plymouth Church Records, 1620 – 1859* xviii - xix).

First, disruptions in pastoral leadership were a reoccurring norm starting with Robinson’s death on March 1, 1625 so that in the absence of the pastor, marriages were performed by civil, rather than ecclesiastical authorities—i.e. following the practice in Holland (xxiii). Such disruption in pastoral leadership also marked the Mayflower community following their arrival in Plymouth with their first pastor in Plymouth, John Lyford, arriving in 1624 only to be discovered as a “vile man and an enemy of the plantation,” and thus banished so that Plymouth was left without a pastor from 1624 – 1628, and again, upon receiving as pastor a young man named Rogers, found him to be “crased in his braine,” and summarily sent him home to England (xxiii). Although the Plymouth community did receive its first settled pastor in 1629 – 1635 with Rev. Ralph Smith, later disruptions continued in the original pattern, for example a fifteen year period without a minister from 1654 – 1669 with the ordination of Rev. John Cotton (xxiii - xxvi). Thus, in the absence of theologically trained pastors, laity could spend numerous years adhering to less pristine renderings of their original English Calvinist formation.

Second, given sporadic pastoral oversight lasting several years at times, the human tendency to ignore one’s religious duties mandated a use of civil court to enforce religious obligations. For example, in 1651, a penalty of 10 shillings was to be paid as a fine for missing public

worship, and by 1655, the General Court of Plymouth similarly mandated that “such as shall deny the Scriptures to bee a rule of life shall receive Corporall punishment,” but not to the point of jeopardizing “life and Limb.” (xxviii) Such severe punishments for skipping worship or for denying the Biblical foundation of life’s practice demonstrate that what was once entirely



Wampanoag village recreation

self-chosen and voluntary had already, within only three decades following the original landing at Plymouth, become a matter necessitating coercive force in order to maintain. Thus, by June 1676, Plymouth and its off-shoot churches (e.g. Duxbury, Green’s Harbor, etc.) were to be brought in compliance with the General Court of Plymouth with a renewal of covenant, which stated:

“In the Name of our Lord Jesus Christ & in obedience to his holy will & divine ordinances. Wee being by the most wise & good providence of God brought together in this place & desirous to unite our selves into one congregation or church under the Lord Jesus Christ our Head, that it may in such sort as becometh all those whom He hath redeemed & sanctified to himself, wee doe hereby solemnly & religiously (as in his most holy presence) avouch the Lord Jehovah the only true God to be our God & the God of ours & doe promise & binde ourselves to walke in all our ways according to the Rule of the Gospel & in all sincere conformity to His holy ordinances & in mutuall love to & watchfullnesse, over one another, depending wholly & only upon the Lord our God to enable us by his grace hereunto.” (xxxi)

As is the case with any recommitment, those who adhere to such covenantal agreement will reflect a greater social inclusion, and for those who only profess such recommitment as a matter of polite civic conformity such covenants potentially create further bifurcation between religious and civil spheres. Such potential bifurcation must also be analyzed with recognition of gaps, including a fifteen year gap (1654 – 1669), in pastoral leadership so that what was once a separatist English Calvinist enclave would eventually produce distinction between those who adhered to such original religious fervor, and those who would seek only nominal adherence to the Plymouth community’s religious identity.

In conclusion, although difficult to fully reconstruct



Reformation leader John Calvin

Native American religious worldviews due to annihilation by disease, and assimilation and conversion to Christianity, the English Calvinist heritage's potential bifurcation into spiritual and material emphases can be noted. With such potential bifurcation, however, although English Christian adherence continued to prosper materially, Native American conversion to Christian belief did not similarly result in such prosperity. Native American autonomous Christian communities (i.e. "praying towns") were treated little differently than non-Christian Native American groups. Thus, although portrayed as a spiritual battle for souls (Simmons 73 - 78), given increasing material prosperity by specifically English cultural, not Christian religious, influence Native Americans perhaps fared much worse than prior to the arrival of the Plymouth Puritans with their "English God." But such later anthropological history is beyond the brief scope of this textual engagement of *Mourt's Relation: A Journal of the Pilgrims at Plymouth* as set within its immediate historical context. ■

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