

## MASSACHUSETTS

### Religious Origins of the Great Migration

For these English Puritans, the new colony of Massachusetts had a meaning that is not easily translated into the secular terms of our materialist world. "A letter from New England," wrote Joshua Scottow, ". . . was venerated as a Sacred Script, or as the writing of some Holy Prophet. 'Twas carried many miles, where divers came to hear it."

The great migration developed in this spirit--above all as a religious movement of English Christians who meant to build a new Zion in America. When most of these emigrants explained their motives for coming to the New World, religion was mentioned not merely as their leading purpose. It was their only purpose.

This religious impulse took many different forms--evangelical, communal, familial and personal. The Massachusetts Bay Company officially proclaimed the purpose of converting the natives. Its great seal featured an Indian with arms beckoning, and five English words flowing from his mouth: "Come over and help us." However bizarre this image may seem to us, it had genuine meaning for the builders of the Bay Colony.

A very different religious motive was expressed by many leaders of the Colony, who often declared their collective intention to build a "Bible Commonwealth" which might serve as a model for mankind. The classical example was John Winthrop's exhortation which many generations of New England schoolchildren have been made to memorize: "We shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.... we shall be made a story and a byword throughout the world."

But most emigrants did not think in these terms. They were not much interested in converting heathen America, and had little hope of reforming Christian Europe. Mainly they were concerned about the spiritual condition of their own families and especially their children. Lucy Downing, the Puritan wife of a London lawyer, wrote to her brother in New England on the eve of her own sailing:

If we see God withdrawing His ordinances from us here, and enlarging His presence to you there, I should then hope for comfort in the hazards of the sea with our little ones shrieking about us ... in such a case I should [more] willingly venture my children's bodies and my own for them, than their souls.

---

Empirical evidence for the primacy of religion appears in repeated statements not only by leaders such as Richard Mather, John Winthrop, Thomas Dudley, John Cotton, Thomas Shepard and Thomas Hooker, but also by ordinary emigrants such as indentured servant Roger Clap, tailor John Dane, housewife *Lucy* Downing and many others. Evidence to the contrary consists of occasional complaints by Puritan leaders that some migrants were not religious enough; and of criminal proceedings against men such as bigamist Christopher Gardiner (banished from the Bay Colony) and fugitive William Schooler (hanged for rape and murder). Altogether, most American historians agree with John White, who observed the great migration at first hand and wrote as early as 1630, "necessity may press some, novelty draw on others, hopes of gain in time to come may prevail with a third sort; but that the most and most sincere and godly part have the advancement of the Gospel for their main scope I am confident" (*The Planter's Plea* (London, 1630)).

Many others embarked upon entirely personal errands. A tailor named John Dane explained that he "bent myself to come to New England, thinking that I should be more free here than there from temptations." His parents did not approve, but agreed to settle the question by consulting the Bible. Dane wrote afterwards:

To return to the way and manner of my coming:... My father and mother showed themselves unwilling. I sat close by a table where there lay a Bible. I hastily took up the Bible, and told my father if, where I opened the Bible, there I met with anything either to encourage or discourage, that should settle me. I, opening of it, not knowing no more than the child in the womb, the first I cast my eyes on was: "Come out from among them, touch no unclean thing, and I will be your God and you shall be my people." My father and mother never more opposed me, but furthered me in the thing, and hastened after me as soon as they could.

John Dane and his family did not emigrate to escape persecution. Even that motive, which we call "religious" in our secular age, was more worldly than his own thinking. He never wrote in grand phrases about a "city on a hill," and showed no interest in saving any soul except his own. John Dane's purpose in coming to New England was to find a place where he could serve God's will and be free of temptation. The New World promised to be a place where he would "touch no unclean thing." In that respect, he was typical of the Puritan migration.'

Most immigrants to Massachusetts shared this highly personal sense of spiritual striving. Their Puritanism was not primarily a formal creed or reasoned doctrine. In Alan Simpson's phrase it was the "stretched passion" of a people who "suffered and yearned and strived with an unbelievable intensity."

That "stretched passion" was shared by the great majority of immigrant families to Massachusetts. This truth has been challenged by materialist historians in the twentieth century, but strong evidence appears in the fact that most adult settlers, in most Massachusetts towns, joined a Congregational church during the first generation. This was not easy to do. After 1635, a candidate had to stand before a highly skeptical group of elders, and satisfy them in three respects: adherence to Calvinist doctrines, achievement of a godly life, and demonstrable experience of spiritual conversion.

These requirements were very rigorous---more so than in the Calvinist churches of Europe. Even so, a majority of adults in most Massachusetts towns were willing and able to meet them. In the town of Dedham, for example, 48 people joined the church by 1640---25 women and 23 men, out of 35 families in the town. Most families included at least one church member; many had two. By 1648, Dedham's church members included about 70 percent of male taxpayers and an even larger proportion of Women. That pattern was typical of country towns in Massachusetts. In Sudbury, 80 were admitted out of 50 or 60 families. In Watertown, 250 were in "church fellowship" out of 160 families. In Rowley, we are told that "a high percentage of men" joined the church---and probably a higher percentage of women---despite local requirements that were even more stringent than in the Colony as whole."

Church membership was not as widespread in seaport towns such as Salem or Marblehead. But even in Salem more than 50 percent of taxable men joined the church in the mid-seventeenth century. Those who did not belong were mostly young men without property."

This pattern of church membership reveals a vital truth about New England's great migration. It tells us that the religious purposes of the colony were not confined to a small "Puritan oligarchy," as some historians still believe, and that the builders of the Bay Colony did not come over to "catch fish," as materialists continue to insist. The spiritual purposes of the colony were fully shared by most men and women in Massachusetts. Here was a fact of high importance for the history of their region.

The religious beliefs of these Puritans were highly developed before they came to America.

Revisionist historians notwithstanding, these people were staunch Calvinists. Their spiritual leader John Cotton declared, "I have read the fathers and the schoolmen, and Calvin too; but I find that he that has Calvin, has them all." Many other ministers agreed.

Without attempting to describe their complex Calvinist beliefs in a rounded way, a few major doctrines might be mentioned briefly, for they became vitally important to the culture of New England. These Puritan ideas might be summarized in five words: depravity, covenant, election, grace, and love."

First was the idea of *depravity* which to Calvinists meant the total corruption of "natural man" as a consequence of Adam's original sin. The Puritans believed that evil was a palpable presence in the world, and that the universe was a scene of cosmic struggle between darkness and light. They lived in an age of atrocities without equal until the twentieth century. But no evil ever surprised them or threatened to undermine their faith. One historian remarks that "it is impossible to conceive of a disillusioned Puritan." They believed as an article of faith that there was no horror which mortal man was incapable of committing. The dark thread of this doctrine ran through the fabric of New England's culture for many generations.

The second idea was that of *covenant*. Puritans founded this belief on the book of Genesis, where God made an agreement with Abraham, offering salvation with no preconditions but many obligations. This idea of a covenant had been not prominent in the thinking of Luther or Calvin, but it became a principle of high importance to English Puritans. They thought of their relationship with God (and one another) as a web of contracts. As we shall see, the covenant became a metaphor of profound importance in their thought.

A third idea was the Calvinist doctrine of *election* which held that only a chosen few were admitted to the covenant. One of Calvinism's Five Points was the doctrine of limited atonement, which taught that Christ died only for the elect---not for all humanity. The iron of this Calvinistic creed entered deep into the soul of New England.

A fourth idea was *grace*, a "motion of the heart" which was God's gift to the elect, and the instrument of their salvation. Much Puritan theology, and most of the Five Points of Calvinism, were an attempt to define the properties of grace, which was held to be unconditional, irresistible and inexorable. They thought that it came to each of them directly, and once given would never be taken away. Grace was not merely an idea but an emotion, which has been defined as a feeling of "ecstatic intimacy with the divine." It gave the Puritans a soaring sense of spiritual freedom which they called "soul liberty."

A fifth idea, often lost in our image of Puritanism, was *love*. Their theology made no sense without divine love, for they believed that natural man was so unworthy that salvation came only from God's infinite love and mercy. Further, the Puritans believed that they were bound to love one another in a Godly way. One leader told them that they should "look upon themselves, as being bound up in one *Bundle of Love*; and count themselves obliged, in very close and Strong Bonds, to be serviceable to one another." This Puritan love was a version of the Christian *caritas* in which people were asked to "lovingly give, as well as lovingly take, admonitions." It was a vital principle in their thought.

These ideas created many tensions in Puritan minds. The idea of the covenant bound Puritans to their worldly obligations; the gift of grace released them from every bond but one. The doctrine of depravity filled their world with darkness; the principle of election brought a gleam of light. Puritan theology became a set of insoluble logic problems about how to reconcile human responsibility with God's omnipotence, how to find enlightenment in a universe of darkness, how to live virtuously in a world of evil, and how to reconcile the liberty of a believing Christian with the absolute authority of the word. For many generations these problems were compressed like coiled springs into the culture of New England. Long after Puritans had become Yankees, and Yankee Trinitarians had become New England Unitarians (whom Whitehead defined as believers in one God at most) the long shadow of Puritan belief still lingered over the folkways of an American region.

---

## The Friends' Migration: Religious Origins

The central truth about the Friends' migration was its religious purpose and inspiration. In large part this movement was a flight from persecution by a people who had suffered severely for their faith. Quaker monthly meetings in England kept special "Books of Sufferings" which recorded the many acts of oppression against them. After 1675 some of the worst abuses of physical violence had come to an end, but persecution of another kind continued--much of it at the hands of Anglican clergy whose income was threatened by Quaker refusal to pay church taxes. Friends were jailed in large numbers, and many had their property seized in amounts far beyond the tithes themselves.

Persecution played a major part in driving Quakers to America, but it was never the leading cause. The primary religious goals of the Friends' migration were positive rather than negative. An historian observes that the founders of the Delaware colonies wished "to show Quakerism at work, freed from hampering conditions."

The great majority of leaders in Pennsylvania and West Jersey shared this sense of collective inspiration, but among ordinary immigrants religious motives tended to be more personal and individual. Many came to America as a direct result of spiritual experiences. In the year 1711, for example, a sixteen-year-old London Quaker of humble rank named Jane Hoskins fell desperately ill of a fever. As she lay delirious in "a sore fit of sickness nigh unto death," the image of God appeared before her and said, "If I restore thee, go to Pennsylvania." Jane Hoskins later wrote, ". . . the answer of my soul was, wherever thou pleasest." On her recovery, she borrowed passage money from another Friend and boarded an emigrant ship for the Delaware.

For Quakers such as Jane Hoskins the Friends' migration became a spiritual pilgrimage that differed very much from the secular movements of our own time. Jane Hoskins did not count the material costs and benefits of coming to America, except in the most incidental way. She thought of herself as a servant of God's will, and embarked upon her westward voyage in a mood of optimistic fatalism, perfectly secure in the spiritual values of her faith.

To understand the culture that developed in the Delaware Valley, one must know something of the religious beliefs of Quakers such as Jane Hoskins. Quakerism, as we call it today, was a highly articulated form of Christianity, very different from Puritan and Anglican beliefs in its theology, ecclesiology and biblical exegesis.

To understand those differences one might begin with the way that Quakers read the Bible. All Protestants were children of the Book. The Bible was the foundation of their faith. But Quakers, Calvinists and Anglicans drew very differently upon that common source. The beliefs of the Quakers came from the New Testament. One of the most important Quaker texts, Robert Barclay's *Apology* (1675), contained 821 biblical citations, of which 656 (80%) referred to the New Testament. In Barclay's *Catechism*, 93 percent of biblical references were to the New Testament, and only 7 percent to the Old. This pattern differed very much from that of Anglicans and especially Puritans, who made heavy use of both books.

Closely linked to the Quakers' biblicism was their theology, which also set them apart from Puritans and Anglicans. The Society of Friends always maintained an official hostility to formal doctrine, and never required subscription to a creed. But Quakers developed what Barclay called a "system of religion," which repudiated the Five Points of Calvinism, and many Anglican dogmas as well. At the center of this Quaker "system" was a God of Love and Light whose benevolent spirit harmonized the universe. One American Quaker copied the following couplet into his commonplace book:

---

For love in all things doth Oneness call,  
Thinking no evil, but pure good to all,

Yea, love is God, and God is love and light.

Fullness of pleasure, joy and great delight.'

The Puritans worshiped a very different Deity---one who was equally capable of love and wrath---a dark, mysterious power who could be terrifying in his anger and inscrutability. Anglicans, on the other hand, knelt before a great and noble Pantocrator who ruled firmly but fairly over the hierarchy of his creatures.

A central tenet of Quaker theology was the doctrine of the inner light, which held that an emanation of divine goodness and virtue passed from Jesus into every human soul. They believed that this "light within" brought the means of salvation within reach of everyone who awakened to its existence. Most Quakers rejected the Calvinist principle of limited atonement. They believed that Christ died not merely for a chosen few, but for all humanity. Quakers also rejected the Calvinist ideas of inexorable predestination, unconditional election and irresistible grace. They agreed that people could spurn the spiritual gift that was given to them. "Man's destruction is of himself," wrote Thomas Chalkley, "but his salvation is from the Lord."

Quakers were twice-born Christians. They believed that salvation was attained through a process of spiritual conversion. Many were deeply troubled in their youth until they felt themselves to be born again. David Cooper recalled that "when very young, I experienced two spirits in strife in me." Benjamin Ferris remembered that "when I was about four or five years old I had many solitary hours alone by myself thinking of an endless world after death."

The psychology of conversion among Quakers was similar in some respects to that of Calvinists. But it was not precisely the same. Most Quakers had little doubt that salvation could be achieved by individual effort, and that the instruments had been placed by God in their hands. Once converted, they felt a sense of optimistic fatalism about the world to come. There was less of the brooding salvation-angst and violent mood-swings of hope and despair that troubled so many Puritans.

The ecclesiology of the Quakers was an extension of their theology. They invented a system of church government which differed radically from those of Anglicans and Puritans. Quakers condemned what they called a "hireling clergy," and "steeple house ways." They repudiated all sacraments, ceremonies, churches, clergy, ordinations and tithes, and maintained no ministers in the usual sense---only lay missionaries and exhorters whom they were sometimes called ministers. But the Quakers were not Christian anarchists. Of the many radical sects who appeared in seventeenth-century England, they were one of the few to survive beyond the era of their birth, largely because they also created an exceptionally strong set of religious institutions.

The Society of Friends was organized as a complex structure of meetings---men's meetings and women's meetings, meetings for worship and meetings for business, monthly meetings, quarterly meetings and yearly meetings. They recognized a need for leadership by elders and overseers, whose task was to teach, counsel and support. But authority belonged to the society itself; Quakers created a rigorous system of collective discipline which regulated marriage, sex, business ethics, dress, speech, eating and drinking, politics, and law. Special attention was given to the rearing of the young---an important factor in the survival of Quakerism, and in the culture that it created in the Delaware Valley.

These Quaker beliefs were not static. They changed in many ways through time. Four distinct stages might be distinguished in the history of this Christian denomination. The first was the seedtime of a revolutionary sect (ca. 1646-66), when Quakerism tended to be radical, primitive, militant, aggressive, evangelical and messianic. The second stage (ca. 1666-1750) was the time of flowering, when the Society of Friends became increasingly

institutional, rational, progressive, optimistic, enlightened, liberal, moderate, political and actively engaged in world, without losing its piety and godly purposes. The third stage (ca. 1750-1827) was an era when Quakers turned inward upon themselves and grew increasing sectarian, exclusive, quietist and perfectionist. A fourth stage of denominational division and maturity followed the Hicksite separation of 1827.<sup>9</sup>

Of these four stages, the most important for American history was the second (ca. 1666-1750), when the cultural institutions of the Delaware Valley were created. The guiding principles of Quakers in this period were not the revolutionary, messianic ideas of the first stage, nor the inward-looking ideas of the third stage, but something in between. In this second stage, Quaker ideals were exceptionally open, outgoing, and liberal in an eighteenth-century sense.

The special teachings of Quakerism in this second period entered deeply into the culture of the Delaware Valley. Friends and neighbors alike embraced the idea of religious freedom and social pluralism. They favored a weak polity and strong communal groups. Most came to share the Quakers' concern for basic literacy and their contempt for higher learning. They also accepted Quaker ideas of the sanctity of property, equality of manners, simplicity of taste, as well as their ethic of work, their ideal of worldly asceticism, their belief in the importance of the family and their habits of sexual prudery. All of these attitudes became exceptionally strong in the folkways of an American region.

After 1750, the Society of Friends turned inward, and distanced itself not merely from other people in the present, but also from its own past. It increasingly developed ideas of unyielding pacifism, withdrawal from politics, extreme sectarian discipline, and extravagant ways of "going plain" in the world. But the more open and liberal spirit of Quakerism's second period survived apart from the Friends themselves, in the culture of an American region which they did so much to create.