



THE NEW ENGLAND MIND
FROM COLONY TO PROVINCE

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CHAPTER I

THE WRATH OF JEHOVAH

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first thanksgiving, held at Plymouth in 1621, has become enshrined in an American institution. In the seventeenth century, New England observed many days of rejoicing, but none in imitation of this original; all were ordered "pro temporibus et causis," according to the manner in which providence was dealing with the land. Accordingly, it observed mostly days of humiliation; over the years there were more chastisements than blessings. For the Puritan mind, to fix thanksgiving to a mechanical revolution of the calendar would be folly: who can say that in November there will be that for which thanks should be uttered rather than lamentation? By the time ceremonial gratitude can be channeled into an annual festival, calculated in advance, society is rewarding its own well-doing, not acknowledging divine favor. When this happens, Calvinism is dead; though the society doggedly persists in giving autumnal thanks, it no longer has a mechanism for confessing its shortcomings and seeking forgiveness for its trespasses.

From the Puritan point of view, an event occurred at Plymouth in July of 1622 which, much more than the thanksgiving of 1621, ought to be remembered by posterity. The colony was suffering a terrible drought, crops were despaired of: when the situation became desperate, the authorities appointed a day of humiliation. Whereupon rain fell. The colony responded with a second ceremonial—a day of rejoicing and gratitude.

Nothing in the doctrine governing these observances can be attributed to American experience. Even before the advance guard of Massachusetts Bay reached Salem, in 1629, ships were saved from storms, passengers from seasickness, whenever the Reverend Mr. Higginson held a fast. The procedure worked a dramatic result in February of 1631: the canny Winthrop, realizing in the previous June that there would not be sufficient provisions for the winter, had despatched the *Lyon* back to England; when stores were almost exhausted, the magistrates called for a day of humiliation—upon which the *Lyon* hove into view. The colony immediately decreed a day of thanksgiving—but not to John Winthrop, who was only an instrument of providence. The Lord of Hosts brought the *Lyon* into Boston harbor, beyond all doubt in response to the day of humiliation.

The success of these early fasts left upon the New England mind an impression in which we may locate minute beginnings of adaptation to an

American situation. For the moment, however, events had merely fallen out according to imported doctrine, and the only question was from which authority should the summons issue. Ideally the call should come from the churches, because there men confess their sins and pray for relief. In the Bay, churches did in fact originally decide; whenever the General Court took the initiative, they expressed no more than a "generall desire," leaving the churches theoretically at liberty. For years many congregations went proudly through the form of voting whether they would concur. Yet gradually, because public distresses afflicted all alike, legislatures confidently assumed the function of summoning to repentance. The Massachusetts General Court first acted entirely on their own by voting a fast for January 19, 1637; since Antinomianism was a threat to the entire body politic, the central government had to take measures for common safety without standing upon constitutional scruple. Of course, churches were always free to observe fasts according to local circumstances. During the Civil Wars, when the governments had to walk warily to avoid openly offending either King or Presbyterians, they ordained few observances, discreetly allowing particular churches to set aside days for praying that their enemies be undone.

Thus a ritual—or at least a ritualistic response to events—took shape. Whatever afflicted the colonies became the occasion for a day of humiliation; whatever rejoiced them evoked a day of thanksgiving. In either event, worldly pursuits were laid aside (being inquests upon the significance of such work as the community had done in its various callings, these observances could not be distracted by work itself); the people gathered in their churches, either to acknowledge their sins and promise reform, or else to thank God for the favor He had shown and to assure Him of continued obedience.

Before long, it became apparent that there were more causes for humiliation than for rejoicing. Fasts had to be proclaimed because of dissensions and evil plots, "to prepare the way of friends which wee hope may bee coming to us," for lack of rain or too much rain, for snow, cold, or heat. They were held in the face of smallpox, hailstorms, fires, winds, plagues, pests, tremblings of the earth, or witchcraft, and of such ominous prodigies as eclipses or comets; for years before Richard Mather gave his sermon to Dorchester, many of them lamented the passing of great founders.

In later days, responses were neither so prompt nor so unequivocal as in earlier times. The fast held on December 13, 1638, to assuage grief caused by the necessity of banishing the Hutchinsonians, produced a tempest in which several lives were lost. This seems to have been the first moment doubt stirred: some even ventured to ask whether there were no better way of seeking the Lord, "because he seemed to discountenance the means of reconciliation." The General Court turned to the elders, who deduced that a second day should be kept "to seek further into the causes of such displeasure." In King Philip's War, repeated humiliations were

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followed by disasters, but the clergy had a ready explanation: the people had not sufficiently humbled themselves. Thus early, the first episodes began in retrospect to take on symbolic value: they had been answered because the society, as compared with now, was then virtuous. Therefore the present society, by repeating a once magical incantation, was trying to recapture something it had lost. The ministers' cry for more and more days of humiliation had reached a crescendo when, in June 1676, as the Indians were at long last checked, a secular insight proved to be in closer rapport with the will of God. Defying the advice of Increase Mather, the general courts of Connecticut and Massachusetts demanded a day of thanksgiving instead of contrition. Immediately victories increased, and by August, Philip was dead!

The previous part of this study endeavored to show how the conception of a covenant was to certain English Puritans, above all to those who populated New England, the master idea of the age. That the illimitable sovereign of the universe should relate Himself to His creatures not only as absolute power but as voluntarily abiding by the stated rules of His regime offered a solution to all difficulties, not only theological but cosmological, emotional, and (most happily) political. This idea was the basis both of church polity and of social theory. Starting from the premise that a regenerate person, entering the Covenant of Grace, is taken into legal compact with God (this being available to him because God and Christ had, in a previous compact between themselves, the Covenant of Redemption, provided the foundation), federal theologians worked out a corollary that God likewise enters into covenant with a group as a unit. The two covenants—personal and public—were "branches" of the same, and yet distinct: saints dwelling alone may be in the Covenant of Grace without participating in a pledged society; a society may achieve this honor even though many (or most) of its citizens are not gracious. Over and above His contracts with persons, God settles the social terms with a band of men, which thereupon becomes committed, as a political entity, to a specifically enunciated political program.

This philosophy of the national covenant was not only a logical deduction from the Covenant of Grace, but also the theme of the Old Testament: Jacob wrestles in solitude with Jehovah, but Israel make their cohesion visible in an external organization—a church, a corporation, a nation, even a plantation. In their corporate capacity, saints stand, as long as they hold together, in a relation to God separate from (although bound up with) their spiritual salvation. As a people they are chosen because by public act they have chosen God. The prerequisite is not, cannot be, a flawless sanctity of all citizens, but a deliberate dedication of the community to a communal decision, like a declaration of war.

Theorists recognized at once that there are at least three respects in which a national covenant necessarily differs from the Covenant of Grace. A group exists only in this world: it does not migrate *in toto* to heaven;

both saints and sinners leave their earthly community behind, along with their clothes and property. Hence the relation of God to a community is not internal but external and "foederall." It has to do with conduct here and now, with visible success or tangible failure. Secondly, since a society cannot be rewarded in heaven for its obedience (whereas an individual may suffer torments here, but receive endless compensation hereafter), and cannot be punished in hell (a reprobate may prosper all his life, but suffer throughout eternity), it must perforce contract with the Almighty for external ends. Its obedience, in short, means prosperity, its disobedience means war, epidemic, or ruin. "What concerns such a People as they are a Body, or a Company of Professors standing under the Obligations of such a Covenant, refers unto this life and the Affairs of it." In the third place, a community is not joined to God by so irrevocable a contract as will endure no matter how depraved it becomes. (A saint is at best imperfectly sanctified, but his sins have been atoned for; nothing he does, even the worst enormity, breaks the bond.) If a society, no matter how many saints may still be in it, sinks so deep into corruption that its abominations call for destruction, then the national covenant is ended. "It is true," said Thomas Shepard, "the Covenant effectually made, can never be really broke, yet externally it may."

An ironic, or rather agonizing, paradox lies at the heart of this doctrine. In the course of nature (of "common providence") any nation will have good or bad times; even Philistines wax before they wane. But a company received into the federal covenant has consciously accepted certain obligations: it *knows* that its successes in war or business do not arise from accident, from industry or ingenuity or opportunity, but that they are given. "For the substance the gist is one, both to the Iust and vniust: but in respect of the cause, possession and vse, there is great difference: which is discerned by faith, though it cannot be seene with the eye." Wealth, for both the covenanted and uncovenanted, seems to flow from natural resources, from inventions and policy; but the gains of the chosen are "gifts" of the national covenant.

Therefore it followed that for them afflictions are reprimands, entirely dissimilar to reverses which befall, by chance, right or left, a natural corporation. France and Spain are unlucky, or they miscalculate, or smallpox ravages them, and that is that. But a nation in covenant is systematically punished, the degree of affliction being exquisitely proportioned to the amount of depravity. While thus being chastised it is still in covenant—or, at least, as long as it has not committed the unpardonable sin which conclusively severs the covenant. Until that moment, no matter how bleak the prospect, there is always hope: if it reforms, it will recover the blessing. But where is that point of no return? On the one hand, a succession of disasters may be a sign that the nation is still chosen; on the other, a misery indefinitely prolonged may mean that it is forever lost. Was New England to say that defeats in Philip's War were no more than severe

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judgments upon an extreme decay of public morality, or was it to conclude that it had degenerated beyond recovery and been cast off?

Long before Winthrop and his Company assembled in Southampton Water, federal theologians had supplied him with an answer to this problem; aboard the *Arbella*, before setting foot in America, he employed it:

Thus stands the cause between God and vs, wee are entred into Covenant with him for this worke, wee haue taken out a Commission, the Lord hath giuen vs leaue to draw our owne Articles we haue professed to enterprise these Accions vpon these and these ends, wee haue herevpon besought him of fauour and blessing.

His Christianity permitted him—indeed, obliged him—to define the purpose of this expedition as a set of articles drawn up by the adventurers themselves, which the Lord *thereafter* (in point of time) accepted. Whatever doubts or homesickness might trouble particular passengers, one thing was certain: the communal responsibility could be defined; the society might thereafter go terribly wrong, but it would always know what was right.

The articles being thus definite, the sanctions become automatic. If the Lord has accepted our terms, He will seal the contract by bringing us to New England and prospering our settlement; if then we fail to observe them, "the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against vs [,] be revenged of such a periured people and make vs knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant." We must on this account "be knitt together in this worke as one man"—because in the federal covenant a people are treated (externally) as one. This band was not as others, who sink or swim according to the hazard of wind and weather, but one that should be delivered by "foederall right" as long as it remained federally righteous. In the worst of times, this company would have a resort not permitted ordinary nations, the chance to bewail its transgressions. Thus it could always (by mending its ways) recoup its losses.

The New England mind, at the moment of the founding, did not regard the federal theology and Calvinism (or more accurately Protestantism) as distinct systems. True theology was so thoroughly articulated in the language of the covenant that the founders had become as little conscious they were talking a peculiar doctrine as was M. Jourdain that he spoke prose. The physical universe is under the continuous control of providence, so that whatever comes to pass—rainstorm, smallpox, earthquake—is not mere natural law but judgment. Afflictions do not just happen, they are, literally, acts of God. In that sense, uncovenanted nations, dwelling in the realm of nature, are also subject to divine regulation; in theory, they may pray to God for deliverance, and He may be pleased to grant them succor if they reform. But they have no promise; their best endeavors may prove unavailing. A plighted community can interpret events, and so take appropriate measures with the assurance of success.

"As all good things are conveyed to Gods people, not barely by com-

mon providence, but by speciall Covenant," said Shepard, "So all the evils they meet with in this world . . . upon narrow search will be found to arise from breach of Covenant more or lesse." The federal covenant does not shield a federated people from the wrath of God: it makes that wrath intelligible. Public humiliation was the only sure method of relieving public misfortune, not only because it sought for mercy, but because it translated misfortune into a common resolution to do something about it.

The doctrine of the national covenant was therefore of greatest value to New England as a more accurate way of searching social conscience than was permitted other nations, including England. Other communities, containing good and bad, cannot comprehend wherefore they are punished; because the righteous suffer along with the unrighteous, confusion is confounded. The godly can do nothing but go aside, pray in their secret chambers, and condemn the administration. But in a covenanted condition, the virtue as well as the ability of saints is put to work. Success or failure is not sporadic, not fragmentary, but universal. "Deliverances from common providence are common to all, even Pagans, but not such as spring from the vertue of the Covenant." Both deliverances and trials become measures of fulfillment, and to the covenanted disclose what others can never perceive. For a dedicated people, seeking the Lord on a day of humiliation thus becomes a redefinition of the common purpose; a thanksgiving is a reaffirmation of it.

To our ears, the proposition held forth in Winthrop's *Modell* may at first sound like what Francis Bacon labeled a sophism, that felicity is most admirable when gained by merit. True, the promise of blessing was attached to performance, but the Puritan Jehovah, even when tied in a covenant, was still inscrutable. The principal effect of distinguishing the federal covenant as a separate transaction from the Covenant of Grace was not to assert that public prosperity could be earned whereas personal comes only by election, but merely to mark off the public realm from the private, and to specify the difference in the respective terms. A prospering people would not relax in self-congratulation but would, as Winthrop told them, "see much more of his wisdom power goodnes and truthe then formerly wee haue beene acquainted with." A communal thanksgiving, recognizing that felicity was a sign of divine favor, would therefore, in Bacon's phrase, create confidence and alacrity. So a day of humiliation would be a device both for regaining confidence and for reasserting, in the face of adversity, an assurance that felicity exists. John Cotton thus expounded the theory:

To shew you how God is wont to expresse himself to his people, when we have broken Covenant with him, God will say, he will not look at us any more, he will never protect us more, he will neither meddle nor make with us, but will expose us to all evil; now if hereupon we return and bewaile our breach of Covenant with God, how little good we have done, and how little serviceable we are, he is then wont to let us see, that his Covenant was never so far broken, but he can tell how to be good to us, for the Lord Jesus Christs sake.

There was consolation in the worst of afflictions; a suffering individual knows he is being tried, yet must endure in silence and secret prayer; but something more is required from a trial imposed upon an entire people. Because outward afflictions signify the presence of God, a people need not despair: their sins, the stupidity of their politicians and generals, even their most furious dissensions, cannot destroy the body politic so long as they retain a sense—periodically reinvigorated—that their material welfare, although depending upon their own exertions, depends not entirely upon them.

A writer does not come to so succinct a statement of a body of thought as Winthrop achieved in *A Modell of Christian Charity* unless he has re-thought and digested the speculations of his predecessors. The decision at Cambridge on August 26, 1629, to transport the charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company to America was reached in fear and trembling. Behind Winthrop's exposition lies a deep conviction: the heroic attempt of two generations to bring England into federal covenant had failed; the nation seemed too far gone in depravity ever to be reunited to the bond. By the 1620's those Englishmen who found in the covenant a key to the universe had no other choice but to form themselves into smaller societies; they could prove that units might observe the external terms, even if England did not. Though the external covenant was called "national" it was not a nationalistic conception; Winthrop did not conceive of the migrants as a nation, but as a "Company," a "Community." Nor did he conceive of the federal covenant as being made with the soil of New England: he did not say that God had taken this piece of terrain and all upon it into the treaty. God was covenanting with the band, who had to foregather in some one "place of Cohabitation and Consorteshipp." Theoretically, this group might stay in England, as did many of their comrades, and still collect themselves into a covenanted society; they were simply convinced that it could be better done elsewhere.

The Great Migration thought of itself as achieving corporate identity by the act of migrating, but it did not identify the covenant—its promise of good to virtue and of evil to vice—with the opportunity of America. Any place in the world would have served. Massachusetts was only a convenient (not too convenient) platform on which the gathering might be enacted, so that the city upon a hill would be visible to Europe. The doctrine was developed as a way of finding hope for England, but had to be tried out in Massachusetts. This is what Winthrop meant by carefully selecting a title for his mid-ocean discourse: it was a "modell" of that to which England might yet be reclaimed, and of "charity," which meant, not giving alms to the poor, but the knitting of individuals together as one man in order to obtain the prosperity of all. The federal cast of mind could conceive of charity only in a social context, requiring the reduction of complexity to a single rationale. Were this model ever to triumph in England, the founders might well go home.

John Cotton had preached in Lincolnshire, "Where ever Gods servants are, because of his Covenant with them, where ever they crave a blessing, and mourne for the want of it, God will provide it shall be stretched forth upon the whole Country they live in." When he said this, he was trying to tell English Puritans that they did not need to be a majority, or to control the economy, before they could be of some effect in saving their country. Since the reward was not to be earned but given, they could, in a comprehensible way, become the occasion for it. What was necessary in 1629 was an organization of the saving remnant, which was not a geographical designation. In order to rescue England, that remnant had to demonstrate by a strict performance of articles in a covenant how a society thrives. This was what Winthrop meant by a city set upon a hill; he did not mean what today we call Boston.

Because those who came to New England had decided that there was slight hope for the covenant at home, they brought it about that a new land became the setting for experiment. Winthrop did hope "that men shall say of succeeding plantacions: the lord make it like that of New England," but he was not voicing incipient patriotism. New England was not an allegiance, it was a laboratory. The theory of feast and of fast days was already complete in every detail: it had not been invented as an engine of Americanization.

Yet that is what it became. John Cotton may have meant, even after he removed to Boston, that because the blessing would be stretched forth upon the land of the saints, they in New England would obtain it for England. In England, as in all Europe, while victory seemed impossible, still defeat was inconclusive. But failure in America would be clean-cut. Here the inhabitants were no longer, Winthrop told them, scattered and oppressed cells, "absent from eache other many miles, and had our employments as farre distant," but were now in the "good Land" which they had passed over the vast sea to possess. They did possess it. To confess through formal lamentation that they had not come up to European expectation now amounted to a confession of American shortcomings. It might be failure, but it was theirs. So, by an exceedingly oblique device, the more these people accused themselves of having shirked their covenant, the more they asserted that they had not lost confidence.

After the isolation into which New England was driven by the Civil Wars, that faith perforce became one with the possibilities of New England alone. Imperceptibly the cry became less "the sins of the people," and more often "the sins of the land." Public purgations on days of humiliation, after experiences of divine wrath, became a method of recognizing, if not quite of becoming reconciled to, the actualities of American life. This was not a logical development: it was a matter of having lived long enough, deeply enough, in this particular country.

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