

"the puritan dilemma" by edmund morgans essay sample

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John Winthrop's "Puritan dilemma" arose out of his life long effort to accomplish two goals: to secure a community dedicated to upholding every aspect of God's will and to do this within the context of everyday life. His first challenge dealt with the depravity of the Church of England in the early seventeenth century and how to escape its wickedness without withdrawing from the world. Then, with the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, a decade of domestic problems took center stage as the "separatist impulse" and excessive purity threatened colonial stability.

Winthrop's last hurdle occurred in the realm of foreign affairs with the possibility of English intervention in colonial religious practices. On all three occasions, he used moderation and reason combined with the responsible exercise of authority to temper and defeat those forces standing in the way of his ultimate two-fold purpose. As Edmund Morgan's work shows, by his life's end, Winthrop had created in himself a powerful example of how to address the central "Puritan dilemma:" how a righteous man does right in a world that does wrong (182).

According to Puritan belief, every member bore responsibility for the Church of England's behavior, and all would be held accountable to God for its sinfulness (16). For this reason, Winthrop had a personal stake in England's incompetence, and he now confronted "the paradox that required a man to live in the world without being in it" (27) for the first time on a major scale. How could he rectify his moral responsibility to God without neglecting his duty to this world? Among his peers, the opportunity to colonize the New World and create a Puritan "city on a hill" arose as an increasingly attractive

solution, but Winthrop was still reluctant: " would it not be deserting the world...to flee into a brave new land?" (36). As popularity for this undertaking grew, he justified it by arguing that it would serve as an example for England to follow. Once she saw its successes, she might reform. In this way, Winthrop could fulfill both obligations, escaping God's fast approaching punishment, while at the same time, correcting and not abandoning England's imperfections. Departing in 1630, he would spend the greater part of the next decade confronting the " separatist impulse" — the tendency towards excessive purity and withdrawal so hostile to Winthrop's notion of how the Puritan must live.

The necessity of the community in the individual's effort to maintain a requisite level of godliness played a key role in Puritan thinking, for man could not meet these standards on his own. He needed society to keep him in line and correct him when he wavered. For this reason, threats to colonial stability could not be tolerated. John Winthrop understood this, and at the same time he sought to endow the new government with legitimization by extending political rights to the colonists, he preserved for the governorship almost absolute authority which would prove key in keeping dissenters in line. Of these agitators, Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson both promulgated incendiary convictions of religious superiority and exclusiveness incompatible with the fundamental beliefs which provided Winthrop's society with stability.

In the case of Williams, unrealistic expectations of godliness undermined the survival of the community by spreading the " separatist impulse" and by

defying authority. When the Boston church failed to repudiate the Church of England, Williams refused to "spoil his new purity" (104) by taking communion and withdrew from it all together. Although Winthrop recognized the futility of this act, Williams, consumed by excessive demands for purity, did not and continued "along the paths of perfectionism" (107), persuading others to adopt his cause. Additionally, he accused the king of blasphemy and questioned the legitimacy of the magistrates' role in religious matters (108). In doing so, Williams had assaulted the colony's government and its stability by encouraging others to break away and form a more perfect order. At first, Winthrop responded with arguments stressing the importance of reform over separating. Only when this approach failed, did he use his authority over the General Court to banish Williams from the colony. This pattern of persuasion and then force was a consistent feature of Winthrop's which he later used to subdue the problem of Anne Hutchinson.

Anne Hutchinson's antimonianism and her theories on justification and sanctification undermined the root purpose of the Massachusetts colony. She claimed that "the Holy Ghost dwells in a justified person" (124) and that "sanctification was no evidence of justification" (123). In effect, she devalued the Puritan demands on the individual to strive for perfection and refuted the state's responsibility to enforce proper behavior. Thus, Hutchinson attacked nothing less than the most basic principles upon which the colony came into being. On top of this, her belief that "justified," or saved, persons could distinguish between damned persons inspired a type of separatism that divided the colony "into two hostile camps" (127). Again,

Winthrop responded with letters of persuasion and tried to win over less committed followers. However, as was the case with Williams, he eventually turned to raw authority as the only remaining route and banished Hutchinson from the colony. With the defeat of Williams and Hutchinson, Winthrop turned to a new kind of threat in Robert Child's push for Presbyterianism.

In 1646, Robert Child's request that Parliament impose Presbyterianism in Massachusetts sparked "the greatest challenge [Winthrop's] colony ever faced from foreign intervention" (182). Unlike Congregationalism, Presbyterianism did not place stringent requirements on the individual to prove his purity to gain church admission, and because church membership was a requirement for the right to vote and hold office, it provided an appealing alternative for those disenfranchised under the current system. At the same time, English intervention in this way would hinder "the liberty of Massachusetts to carry out her commission" (182) and thus could not be tolerated. Initially, Winthrop responded by drafting a bill to extend political rights to nonmembers, but events escalated before he could get it passed. Predictably, when his first conciliatory attempt to dissolve the problem failed, "Winthrop fought...by fair means and foul" (181), seizing Child before he could depart for Europe. In the meantime, he made it a point to present Parliament with his version of the facts, and by the time Child was set free, the matter had been settled. Once again, Winthrop had protected his experiment with a godly society by whatever means necessary.

In *The Puritan Dilemma*, Edmund Morgan delineates John Winthrop's response to the question of what responsibility a man owes to society.

Winthrop makes his convictions clear that one must confront worldly temptations and resist the easier path of simply avoiding them. He justified colonization as a means of reforming the Church of England whose standards were too low, only to discover the opposite problem, of aiming too high, in America. In both domestic and foreign affairs, Winthrop addressed threats to the colony's well-being first with moderation, patience, and reasoned argumentation, and only as a last resort, would he utilize his expansive authority to ensure the commission's survival.

In many ways, Winthrop's battle with the " Puritan dilemma" parallels later struggles in United States history such as the relationship of the individual's liberty to established authority. Just as the Puritans departed from England to fulfill unmet personal needs, so too the American war for independence represents the triumph of individual freedoms over the restrictions of authority. In the same way that Winthrop overcame the " separatist impulse" of a few zealous persons, the American Civil War illustrates the preeminence of the larger society over divisive strands within it. Thus, in the life of John Winthrop, Morgan presents not only the story of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans, but also the greater American struggle to balance individual liberties with the restrictions of authority.