

THE POLITICAL SERMON AS CULTURAL TEXT: JOHN WINTHROP, INCREASE MATHER, JONATHAN EDWARDS, AND AMERICAN IDENTITY IN THE COLONIAL ERA

by Laura McGee

ABSTRACT:

Scholars of American exceptionalism often suggest that this concept was born from the American Revolution. This paper argues that this ideology enjoys a longer history, one that can be traced to the sermons of three prominent colonial ministers: John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and Jonathan Edwards. Through their 'political sermons' these men emphasized the exceptionality and divine ordination of the Puritan mission in America. These men provided the literary foundations from which the national culture derived much of its foundational doctrine. The 'city upon a hill' that Winthrop envisioned, entailed the social, spiritual, and political commitment of the colonists and their descendents, which he and subsequent ministers invoked through a variety of literary devices. By emphasizing individual and community fulfillment of the spiritual covenant, these sermons explicated and expounded the colony's exceptionality. As a source of textual authority, these tracts provided the foundation for a distinct national ideology.

In recent years, scholars have paid greater attention to the so-called "American jeremiad" and the rhetoric of American exceptionalism (Murphy 2009, Jendrysik 2008, Altschuler 2003). Richard Hofstadter argues that America needs no ideology because America is an ideology (Kazan, 18). It is useful to review the foundations of such beliefs and it is with this subject that this paper is concerned. This article explores the political sermons of three prominent colonial ministers and relates these tracts to the construction of American identity. It argues that the subject and form of these literary tracts formed the basis of a distinct national ideology, predicated on a belief in American exceptionalism and divine ordination. Through their speeches, sermons and writings, early colonial ministers affirmed the belief that the New World and its inhabitants are unique, distinct, and destined for greatness. Also, these tracts served as a crucial source of textual authority as the Puritan mentality developed into a national ideology. For illustrative purposes, this paper evaluates the writings of three of the most influential ministers of colonial America. During their respective time periods, John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and Samuel Danforth invoked the same spiritual doctrine through similar literary frameworks. In so doing, they contributed to the entrenchment of a distinct form of American national identity.

Shortly after the War of Independence, political leaders concerned themselves with the construction of a national cultural identity. Scholars of the burgeoning American Studies discipline have traced the creation of a national identity in the post-revolutionary period. Richard Slotkin writes, "[a]s the state becomes a nation, its proponents use all the instrumentalities of law and culture to substitute identification with the nation's fictive ethnicity for the particularities of real ethnicities" (Slotkin, 471). He contends that newspapers and education, as primary instruments of nationalization, provided Americans with "a language of nationality, a common form of speech and reading, a common ideology or moral vocabulary, a common set of historical fables, [and] a pantheon of cultural heroes" (Slotkin, 471).

Above all, the former colonists shared a commitment to their own particular national destiny. Known as American exceptionalism, this conviction did not emerge when the states united; it had been established by the colonial Puritan ministers and entrenched in the American literary canon. These ministers provided a record of America's exceptionality and served as the cultural heroes crucial for a strong national ideology. Thus, when the founding fathers concerned themselves with nation building, they employed the rudiments of national culture built by the Puritan forefathers.

The New England political sermon intended to situate its recipient within a larger spiritual context. Scholars of American exceptionalism note that this spiritual context entailed the supreme conviction that the Puritans and later the United States, had been drawn to the New World to perform a special task. The religious dissenters who travelled to America in the seventeenth century believed they were charged with what Perry Miller refers to as an "errand into the wilderness" (Miller 4). In pursuit of this mission, the early colonists embarked on a mass transplantation to the New World. However, upon arrival, the Puritans found a land that was geographically and culturally unfamiliar. This sense of physical and institutional alienation was perhaps their greatest challenge and it became the task of the colony's leading ministers to resolve this anxiety. Fearful that this angst would foster social disorder and a declension into apostasy, political leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries constructed a uniquely American ideology. The political sermon bolstered and reinforced the sense of distinctness and exceptionality that formed the crux of this ideal.

Recognizing that political doctrine alone was insufficient to produce an effective ideology, a succession of Puritan religious leaders employed a series of literary devices that transformed their sermons into culturally expressive literature. As leaders of colonial America, John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and Jonathan Edwards politicized the religious sermon in an effort to create a New World identity that was separate and distinct from their Old World heritage. According to this intention, early American sermons were both literary and political texts, whose implications were broad and far-reaching. These political sermons articulated and prescribed a set of social characteristics that, while indoctrinating the spiritual mission, served to unite and stabilize the colony. As such, this rhetorical mode became the nation's original literary form and the earliest architect of a distinctly American social ideology.

The point of the Puritan exodus was to escape the corruption of the English church and Old World culture. When the Massachusetts Bay Company evaluated potential settling points, they rejected more familiar geographic areas for the (ostensibly) culturally barren colonies overseas. They intended to remove themselves and their heirs from Old World influence in order to build their beacon from a clean slate. These settlers sought to establish a "literate ministry" and established an advanced education system that taught the majority of colonists to read (Miller, I:14). As Perry Miller argues in *The New England Mind*, the Puritans believed in the use and importance of language, text, and communication. Their successors similarly placed great importance on education and literacy. The colonists gathered to hear their ministers' weekly sermons. Equally important, these sermons were recorded and passed down. They constituted the earliest components of the American literary canon, which was used to educate and socialize generations of Americans. Anthologies of American literature almost invariably begin with John Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" of 1630, are often followed by sermons by a second-generation Puritan minister such as Increase Mather, and typically include a substantial treatment of Jonathan Edwards. The Norton, Heath, and Bedford Anthologies may be referred to as examples.

As the governor of one of America's earliest colonies, Winthrop is probably the best known of the

group. He was elected governor of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1629 and delivered his famous “Little Speech” en route to the New World in 1630. In this tract he dictated the purpose and conception of the New England settlement, paying special attention to their privileged status and the consequences of failure. Samuel Danforth and Increase Mather led the second generation of Puritans in America. They too stressed the importance of the American mission, which became all the more important when facing a group that had not come to the New World of their own accord. Jonathan Edwards catalyzed the first ‘Great Awakening’, presiding over the conversion of as many as ninety-seven individuals in a single day (Winiarski 683). This movement emphasized the significance of the Puritan mission, and Edwards’ sermons were administered to an unprecedented audience. His tracts were also recorded and repeated throughout New England, which further entrenched the spiritual ideals at the heart of his preachings. Though they spoke to different generations, these men relied on the same spiritual doctrine and literary prototype to unite Americans under a common agenda.

In high school classrooms and university lecture halls, these men are remembered as the literary giants of the colonial era. It is this deference and respect that is perhaps of the greatest significance: they met their goal of constructing American culture because ensuing generations of Americans chose to revere them as cultural forefathers. Winthrop’s speech aboard the *Arabella* is identified as one of the earliest tracts of the nation’s literary heritage. As a group the Puritans were devoted to encouraging literacy and such texts were an important part of this task. They were also devoted to preserving the new colony’s spiritual integrity from the corruptive influence of European literature. The colonial ministers faced a double dilemma when it came to their own heritage. They felt compelled to reject the corrupted Old World literature, yet they recognized the need to claim a literary heritage as a point of identification in a culturally barren territory. To overcome this, the political sermon invoked religious parable in the same way that contemporary European writers invoked authors like Milton and Shakespeare. Although the Puritans believed in a literal interpretation of the Old Testament, biblical allusion served a purpose that transcended the historical. Far from objectively employed, these religious references provided a source of identification as well as an admonition of the dangers of apostasy. As such, religious parable serves as both literal and figurative inspiration. In the opening section of the earliest American political sermon, the 1630 “Model of Christian Charity”, John Winthrop almost immediately refers to Ezekiel: 16.17 and Proverbs: 3.9, stating: “He there calls wealth, His gold and His silver [and] He claims their service as His due, ‘Honor the Lord with thy riches” (Winthrop 76). He proceeds to explore the New England Puritans’ contemporary religious mandate, thereby drawing a literary connection between his speech and biblical doctrine. Significantly, the subjects of his biblical references are God’s “chosen people”, particularly the Israelites. From here, Winthrop situates the Puritans at the end of a spiritual narrative, as the final generation in a succession of the religious elect. The metaphor is clear: the Puritans have undertaken a spiritual task from a particular vantage point and in this narrative, each constituent is crucial to the fulfillment of the task. Insofar as “divine Providence” had laid out ground rules for “our conversation towards another” and “our dealings with men”, the personal activities of the Israelites and the colonists had a social and a religious significance. This metaphor was intended to emphasize the inherent value of the individual by asserting the historical significance of the elect and the Puritans’ particular religious covenant.

One of the most important applications of the religious parable was the creation of an historical correspondence between the Puritans and God’s other chosen people. In the 1733 sermon “A Divine and

Supernatural Light”, Jonathan Edwards concentrates on the conversion experience, a spiritual awakening reserved for the elect. He emphasized that the “true sense of divine excellency of God’s word” (Edwards 186) is not something “of which unregenerate men are capable” because it is “peculiar to the saints” (Edwards 189). Edwards began his sermon with a passage wherein Christ addresses Peter as one of God’s chosen people. Having been “pronounced blessed on this account” Peter had been enlightened of this state of being from “some knowledge as only my Father which is in heaven can give.” (Edwards 181). As one of the Apostles and the first pope, Simon Peter had been charged with the spiritual mission of spreading Christianity (Bruhn 33). His soul’s recognition of this task and the means by which he would complete it, could come only through a divinely inspired enlightenment. The paramount evidence of Simon’s divine ordination was his supreme conviction of his election by God. As evidenced by the ministers’ evaluation of their own congregation on similar criteria, this spiritual conviction was transposed onto the American errand.

This parallelism enabled the New England ministers to establish a sense of purpose in the New World while providing a textual authority from which to claim a purified heritage. The most pervasive anxiety of the Puritans was the potential insignificance of the spiritual mission, whereupon they had come to terms with the unfamiliar and incomprehensible wilderness. In order to counteract this anxiety, the political sermon provided a prototype from which the Puritans could comprehend themselves and the world. The political sermon was both constructive and preventative: it created an “exceptional” identity through religious metaphor and it prevented an impending identity crisis by asserting a colonial purpose. The motif of American exceptionalism was integral to both parts of this campaign. Winthrop claimed that his followers were destined for salvation by proposing that “this great King will have many stewards, counting Himself more honored in dispensing His gifts to man by man” (Winthrop 76). The great irony of this kind of identity formation is that it united the colonists according to a characteristic that had yet to be attained. This was also its greatest strength: it united the colonists under a common purpose rather than a common feature or trait. A spiritual mandate is inherently immeasurable and therefore less open to contestation. As the colony diversified and these ministers addressed a greater audience, this purpose remained a prominent source of social unity. Winthrop oriented the Puritan social consciousness toward the future by placing a value on that which had not been achieved. Those born in “God’s land” were part of a great social project that demanded community cohesion and personal dedication. He stressed that contemporary social obedience was necessary to maintain the “unity of spirit in the bond of peace” (Winthrop, 86) that would ensure their eternal gratification. The political sermon thus employed biblical allusion and allegory to reinforce political conformity through a sense of spiritual election and the significance of the American experiment.

Once the ministers had established a Puritan identity and held up the possibility of reward, they further entrenched the significance of the mission by emphasizing the potential for failure. The fate of the Israelites was perhaps the most powerful account presented in these speeches and functioned as a source of both admonition and reassurance. Winthrop ensured his followers that repeating the Israelites errors would “cause Him to withdraw His present help from us” and that they “shall surely perish out of the good land whither we pass over this vast sea to possess it” (Winthrop 86-7). In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, Edwards immediately invokes the biblical passage of the Israelites’ damnation in what was essentially a prescriptive manual of spiritual reform. He first identifies his audience with a previous generation of “God’s visible people” (Edwards 194) and proceeds to outline the punishment and

destruction afforded to the earlier backsliders. To reinforce his point, he periodically refers to the presence of “natural men” in the congregation who had not yet converted and therefore threatened to bring about a similar spiritual degeneracy. These “natural men” created two kinds of fear in the audience: a fear of the men themselves but also the fear that they themselves were the unconverted heathens. Edwards so effectively used this strategy that he presided over some of the largest one-day church admissions rituals in colonial New England (Winiarski, 683).

The admonition of divine retribution carried with it a peculiar reassurance of spiritual significance. The severity of the punishment reinforced the significance of the covenant. Although his speech was inundated with condemnations of the backsliding congregation, Edwards importantly distinguishes between the elect and the non-elect by the capacity to achieve redemption. He implored the congregation to redeem the mission by undergoing conversion, thereby positioning them in the former category and drawing a parallel between their own spiritual state and historical figures of biblical significance. Thus, the allusion was transformed into allegory as the Puritans come to see these characters as representatives of themselves and their mission. Yet the renunciation of the Israelite failure functioned as a point of divergence. The Puritan ministers recognized the colony’s spiritual affinity with the Israelites, while disavowing their covenantal failure. Implicit in this condemnation was the assumption that the Puritans had been endowed with the potential for success where the Israelites failed. In this respect the parable of the Israelites served as a foil for the Puritans, one that retrenched the exceptionalism of the New World experiment. Through the use of positively and negatively framed biblical allusion, the political sermons reinforced the doctrine of spiritual election and American exceptionalism as the essential theme of the colony’s cultural tradition. As such, the sermons contributed to a social consciousness that emphasized the need for both community compliance and personal dedication to the political mandate of the colony.

After situating the Puritans at the end of an historic succession of religious covenants, the political sermon created a community identity through the claim that the colonists shared a spiritual affinity due to their role in the New World. Given the cultural background of the initial settlers, this was perhaps the most difficult task faced by the colony’s political leaders. The initial diaspora consisted of an amalgamation of classes and occupations that came from a society defined by social stratification (Morgan 167). Professedly rejecting this hierarchical structure, the earliest American cultural architects faced a kind of cultural void that resulted from the absence of entrenched social relationships. Ironically, the political sermon achieved social cohesion through the propagation of individualism. In order to effectively reject the corrupted European social order, Winthrop, Mather, and Edwards endeavored to replace this system with a democratic ideology that was more consistent with the Puritan doctrine. According to Winthrop, the creation of a sustainable community demands that “the care of the public [should] overshadow all private respects” (Winthrop 85). To be successful, the colony needed a stable, integrated, and mutually dependent social order. Yet the reality of wealth distribution and power structures meant that community stability relied on compliance with certain forms of inequality. Hence the significance given to the conversion experience: it provided each colonist with a sense of autonomy and self-worth that enabled them to overlook such inequalities. The emphasis on personal redemption contributed to a focus on the individual as a self-contained social unit. The political sermon constructed a stable community by evincing a social consciousness based on a common purpose and personal dedication to the community.

The political sermon further used metaphor to support a unitary spiritual affinity within the congregation and the mission itself. Winthrop implored that they are all “knit together in the bonds of

brotherly affection” (Winthrop 76), and Edwards stated that “the Holy Spirit operates in the minds of the godly, by uniting Himself to them, and living in them” (Edwards 183). This affinity was emphasized in order to stabilize the political order by precluding degeneracy and complacency. Some of these metaphors were so resonant that they remain a part of the cultural vocabulary. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” he famously invoked the image of a spider “dangling over the pit of hell” (Edwards 200) to represent the unconverted soul. The impending “black clouds of wrath” and “floods of vengeance” (Edwards 199) represented the breaking of the covenant. These grisly images induced religious conformity; they also paradoxically provided a source of comfort. That their souls had not yet been cast into the fire and the floodwaters of damnation not yet set loose upon the community, meant that they had not yet failed in their task. The threat of damnation impelled the congregation to take up a renewed commitment to the task.

Metaphor was also used to equate individual purity with the state of the covenant itself. The success of the mission as a whole rested upon the spiritual devotion of each constituent; individual conformity would contribute to community success whereas individual corruption would pervert the entire covenant. Edwards addressed both possible outcomes in two contrasting sermons. In “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” the presence of the unconverted soul imperiled the fate of the community as a whole, while “A Divine and Supernatural Light” applied the prospect of redemption at a personal and societal level. The resulting construct of a spiritual kinship marked by the fear of others’ retrogression provided the impetus for a communally enforced code of behaviour that stabilized and directed the New England colony. Colonial ministers extend this spiritual metaphor to encompass the physical locus of the experiment. Edwards stated that “the spirit of God may act upon inanimate creatures” (Edwards 183), meaning that the state of the covenant, itself an expression of individual purity, was further manifested in the external conditions within which the community lived. By promulgating the physical environment as particular to the religious covenant, seemingly arbitrary incidents became significant to the overall mission.

The political sermon thereby generated another point of unification for the early colonists: it saw geographic and physical conditions as a source of spiritual identification. Winthrop referred to America as a “city upon a hill”, where the Lord would “delight to dwell among His own people” (Winthrop 86). In this regard, the hill is as important as the city that is to be created. In the 1685 sermon “A Call From Heaven” Increase Mather asserted that “the Elect are found in all places alike, but in some Nations more than others” (Mather 9) and Edwards reiterated that “God seems now to be hastily gathering His elect in all parts of the land” (Edwards 203). Given the exceptionality of the New World itself, environmental and social calamities were interpreted as evidence of God’s continuous appraisal of the covenant. Mather buttressed this argument by emphasizing that “we that are now converted and made Apostles of Christ, by nature are subjects of the wrath and righteous displeasure of God” (Mather 3).

Onboard the *Arabella* Winthrop envisioned that New England would become a utopia; Mather and Edwards faced the task of convincing the colonialists that this volatile wilderness was indeed the site of God’s earthly project. Perry Miller points out that Mather’s “A Brief History of the Warr With the Indians” presents King Philip’s War as “a revenge upon the people for their transgressions” (Miller, 9). The symbolization of physical phenomena elevated the colonial experience to a spiritual level. The religious mission was useful for creating a unifying sense of identity because such a mission is immaterial and therefore immeasurable, yet it was precisely this characteristic of the divine mission that rendered it psychologically suspect. How could they be sure that they were a chosen people in a chosen land? Winthrop foresaw that the colonial experience could be far from pleasant and so established a double

interpretation of America's physical conditions. If things were bad, it was a sign that the Lord had "surely [broken] out in wrath against us, and be revenged against such a people" and if things were good, it was a sign of his "favor and blessing" (Winthrop 86). He did not go so far as to outline the conditions that would render the mission fulfilled. In this regard, Mather's speech affirmed the identity of the settlers. For as long as God subjected the Puritans to trial and tribulation in the form of Indian wars, long winters, and periodic disease, they could not yet have failed in his task.

Jonathan Edwards also used symbolism to comment on the state of the covenant. Each listener was as a spider, poised over the angry floodwaters that epitomized damnation. The symbolization of the congregation and their spiritual fate resonates with his claim that "the earth would not bear you one moment" were it not for "the sovereign pleasure of God". There was no guarantee that He would continue to "save" the colony but this frightful scenario affirmed their current state of election and encouraged them to persevere in God's land. He further symbolized the state of the covenant through the signification of light as the channel to God. For Edwards, the ultimate sign of election was the ability to reconcile Earth and spirit by perceiving the supernatural light in all experience. He declared: "That some sinners have a greater conviction of their guilt and misery than others is because some have more light, or apprehension of truth than others" (Edwards 183). Manifested in this suffering was the opportunity to translate God's presence within the physical environment into the corresponding inner spirit, a connection that was used to facilitate the conversion experience and purify the mission. The listener first recognized that the colonial experience was difficult by necessity, and, having been converted to the doctrine of election and exceptionalism, he (or she) would perceive the "divine and supernatural light" in all colonial experience. The conversion experience thus became a crucial part of identity formation and colonial solidarity, in that it symbolically brought the convert into the community.

Apart from external phenomena, these ministers found symbolic importance in instances of community sin. Winthrop's speech set high standards for the covenant and the ministers' subsequent assessments of the mission emphasized where the community had gone wrong. What resulted was a distinctly "American" jeremiad whose "exhortation to reformation" was intended to rejuvenate the community's commitment to the mission (Miller 11). In his 1685 sermon, Increase Mather confronted the social affliction of unsatisfactory children. Rather than interpreting this as a sign of social declension and impending failure, he presented this dilemma as a trial to be overcome. Mather deplored the "doleful degeneracy appearing in the face of this generation, ... a considerable part of [whom] will perish both temporally and eternally". Yet he maintained that "there is hope in thine end' ... with respect to succeeding generations in New England." (Mather 26). By conflating and equating the physical colony with its spiritual mission, the use of symbolic interpretation and spiritual appraisal transformed the political sermon into a social and cultural text.

The initiation of an "American jeremiad" was part of an attempt to found a revolutionary convention that would distinguish American culture from its European brethren. As a product of this mandate, the structural composition of the political sermon reflected the establishment of a new social ideology. Yet the literary formulation of the sermons was fundamentally a product of the contemporary European context. The irony of the political sermon is that manifest within the explicit rejection of a secular Enlightenment philosophy was an affirmation of the rationalist doctrine it set out to avoid: the religious leaders employed reason and logic to enforce an ostensibly self-evident doctrine. While seemingly inconsistent with its transcendental subject matter, this kind of rationalist formula was typical of sermons at the time. In

1636, Winthrop created the prototypical political sermon, wherein he presented a series of conclusions supported by logically consistent premises and authenticated by textual corroboration. This structure provided his revolutionary doctrine with immediate credibility. It legitimized his transcendental subject matter and rendered it acceptable to a congregation socialized by an Enlightenment ideology.

This formulaic precedent was carried through to eighteenth century sermons of Jonathan Edwards, who employed Winthrop's structure to counter the secular influence that had impinged upon New England society. In "A Divine and Supernatural Light" Edwards immediately asserted his intention to validate his "Doctrine" by proving "that there is such thing as a spiritual and divine light" (Edwards 182). He did so by subdividing three arguments into a logically consistent set of premises and conclusions. Like with Winthrop, the sophisticated use of logic and rationale bolstered his authority as a cultural commentator and social leader. The sermon's formula was designed to come to the ultimate purpose of "conclud[ing] with a brief improvement" (Edwards 182). Having established itself as a legitimate source of social prescription, the political sermon proceeded to exhort some sort of behaviour or reaction from the recipient. For Winthrop it was to "live in the exercise of brotherly love" (Winthrop 84) and for Mather it was for "Young Men" to "remember their Creator" (Mather 1). By employing scriptural quotations as rationale, the political sermon substituted religious doctrine for empirical fact and established a spiritual basis for the colonial ideology. Having drawn from Enlightenment tracts, the consistent structure of these sermons acted as an immediate source of authority that reinforced their message: the enormity of the community and the covenant.

Through the use of allusion, metaphor, symbolism and structure, the political and social architects of Puritan America transformed the political sermon from a "state of the covenant" address into the earliest form of colonial literature. Functioning as both cultural expression and social prescription, the political sermon imbued the cultural growth of the newly forming nation with a spiritual connotation that reinforced its political ideology and religious mandate. The explicitly American doctrine propounded by these documents served as a point of identification for a dislocated group of settlers and simultaneously averted social anxiety by serving as a stabilizing force. While a codified set of laws may have created a framework for social relations, the literary aspects of these sermons rendered the spiritual covenant meaningful and intelligible, significantly contributing to the construction of early American culture. Furthermore, the framework and doctrine of the political sermon is identifiable in the rhetoric of leaders such as Ronald Reagan, George Bush, and Barack Obama through their invocations of the city upon a hill. The nation may seem to have undergone a period of secularization but the Puritan mentality continues to influence the American self-conception.

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