

Declension in a Bible Commonwealth

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I.

EVEN a Puritan society, even a people chosen of God, if they undertake to settle a wilderness, will meet with hardship and sometimes with disaster. Leaders will die, since men cannot live forever; winds and earthquakes strike equally the chosen and the unchosen; caterpillars will consume the grain of the righteous unless God contrive a very exceptional providence to divert them, while saints no less than other men must run the hazard of pestilence, drought, the measles, or shipwreck. When such afflictions overtake a community of the unregenerate, they know not what to do. They put the blame upon second causes or upon blind chance; they have no way to overcome the evil and must either endure or perish. But a holy commonwealth of Puritan saints is fully equipped with a method for meeting emergency. At the first flick of the lash, the whole body politic assembles for a ceremony of public humiliation and communal repentance, wherein the people take the responsibility for the disaster upon themselves, asserting that the fault is entirely theirs and that God has punished them justly and necessarily for their sins. Thereupon the way for accomplishing their relief becomes obvious: they must resolve to mend their ways and beseech the Lord to look with favor upon their reformation. Whole days should be officially set apart for these observances, called in New England "days of humiliation" or "fast days," to be observed not with complete fasting—that extremity was Popish superstition—

but with abstinence from all but the essentials of life, even, according to one instruction, from the pleasures of marriage. The principal action of the day should be the delivery of a public sermon before all the society, in which the minister, the spokesman for the community, would set forth the issues of the occasion, review the affliction, and make articulate the determination of the group henceforth to banish whatever sins had brought the distress upon it.

From the beginning Puritan settlements employed this method, and at first with spectacular success. At Plymouth in July, 1622, the colony was suffering from a drought which, continued a few days more, would have reduced it to starvation; the authorities appointed a day of humiliation and the next day rain fell, whereupon a second day was set apart for universal thanksgiving.¹ The advance guard of the Massachusetts Bay Company, even before it reached American shores, was saved from storms and seasickness whenever the Reverend Mr. Higginson bade them observe a fast aboard ship.² The procedure worked a memorable result at the Bay in February of 1631: when the fleet had landed the previous June, the canny Winthrop had realized that there was not enough food for the winter and hastened the *Lyon* back to England; by February provisions were almost exhausted and the people appointed a day of solemn humiliation with the result that the *Lyon* immediately hove into sight. The colony hastened to celebrate a day of thanksgiving, not to Winthrop—who was but the instrument of providence—but to the Lord Himself, who brought the *Lyon* safely into Boston Harbor, no doubt in direct response to the ceremonial humiliation.³

¹ W. DeLoss Love, *The Fast and Thanksgiving Days of New England* (Boston, 1895), pp. 81-85.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 103-06; *Winthrop's Journal*, ed. J. K. Hosmer (New York, 1908), vol. 1, pp. 57-59.

The meticulous promptness with which God answered these early fasts left an indelible impression upon the New England mind and furnished the models for later imitation. For a time there seems to have been some indecision as to who should issue the summons. Ideally the call ought to come from the churches, since it was in the churches that men would confess their sins and pray for relief. At the Bay they did originally determine the event, and when the General Court first took the initiative, on September 3, 1634, it contented itself with expressing merely a "generall desire" that a day of humiliation be observed throughout the several plantations.⁴ For years many congregations went through the form of voting to concur in fasts proclaimed by the state, and the politicians were always assumed to be acting at the desire of the churches, many fasts being ordained explicitly "upon the motion of the elders."⁵ Yet gradually, because public distresses affected all alike, the legislatures assumed the function of calling the people to repentance, and soon entrusted to governors and councils the right to proclaim fasts during the recess. The General Court in Massachusetts first openly commanded a fast in 1637 when it designated a day on which all inhabitants should bewail the Antinomian dissensions⁶—the occasion on which Wheelwright delivered his "incendiary" sermon and almost frustrated the purpose of the Lord. Antinomianism so obviously endangered the whole body politic that it behoved the central government both to take over the one method that would insure the public safety and to make certain that all the public took part. The Plymouth codification of 1636 officially required the Governor and

⁴ *Records of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts Bay*, ed. N. B. Shurtleff (Boston, 1853-1854), vol. 1, p. 128.

⁵ Love, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, pp. 221-24, 237-38.

⁶ *Mass. Records*, vol. 1, p. 187.

Assistants to command days of fasting and thanksgiving "as occasion shall be offered."⁷ In Connecticut, as in Massachusetts, the churches first determined the days, but gradually the General Court assumed the power of choosing those observed by the whole colony, and in 1655 delegated it to the magistrates during the intervals between sessions.⁸ However, particular churches were everywhere free to observe fasts in order to deal with local difficulties, and during the English Civil Wars, when colonial governments were obliged to tread softly lest their sympathy with Parliament cause them to offend the King, they ordered few public observances and left the churches to keep their own as they saw fit.⁹

Thus the colonies settled upon a ritual, and the custom thrived through the seventeenth century. Whatever afflicted them or grieved them became the occasion for a day of communal humiliation, when worldly pursuits were laid aside and the people gathered in the churches to acknowledge their sins, to promise reformation, and to pray for relief. Fasts were proclaimed because of dissensions and evil plots, "to prepare the way of friends which wee hope may bee upon coming to us," for lack of rain or too much rain, for excessive snow, cold or heat, for hail-storms, fires, winds, plagues, pests, the smallpox or witchcraft, for the deaths of leaders or ominous prodigies like eclipses or comets. Some of the later days were not quite so clearly and decisively rewarded as were the first. December 13, 1638, for example, appointed as a fast day after the Hutchinson party were banished, was followed the next night by a tempest of wind and snow in which many lives were lost. The shock was so

⁷ *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth* (Boston, 1855-1861), vol. 11, p. 18.

⁸ Love, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, p. 145; *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut*, ed. J. H. Trumbull (Hartford, 1850-1890), vol. 1, pp. 98, 277.

⁹ Love, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, p. 156.

great that some momentarily lost faith in the method and ventured to ask if there were no better way of seeking the Lord, "because he seemed to discountenance the means of reconciliation." The Court hurriedly sought the advice of the elders who, after deliberation, concluded that by no means should the practice be abandoned, but rather that a second day should be kept "to seek further into the causes of such displeasure."¹⁰ Innumerable colonial and local fasts were observed during the dark months of King Philip's War, and theological perplexities sprouted anew as day after day was followed by military disaster, but the clergy had a ready explanation: the people had not sufficiently abased themselves or truly repented. Therefore they should keep not fewer but still more days of public humiliation.¹¹

Behind the practice of these fasts lay a conscious theory, which in the first place was an inevitable corollary of Calvinism, and in the second was for these colonists immeasurably reinforced by the peculiar theology of New England. In Calvinist eyes the physical universe is under the continuous and unceasing direction of God's providence. Whatever comes to pass, a rainstorm, an attack of the smallpox, an earthquake, does not result from mere natural law; it is an event specifically ordained by an intelligent being for intelligible reasons. Afflictions do not just happen, but are sent from on high; public calamities are moral judgments upon a sinful people, literally "acts of God." The moral status of a people is therefore written out in events: if they are sinful, they suffer; if they are virtuous, they prosper. For this reason all Calvinists objected strenuously to annual celebrations, to religious feasts, like Christmas, that came about merely through the mechanical revolution of the calendar. Such days could take no account

¹⁰ *Winthrop's Journal*, vol. 1, p. 291.

¹¹ Love, *Fast and Thanksgiving Days*, pp. 192-200.

of the moment, whereas the proper time could be discovered only by a careful study of God's providence as it unrolled in daily events; whenever these revealed him tending either toward anger or benevolence, men were immediately to respond with lamentation or with joy, "pro temporibus et causis." To fix upon any one date for a recurrent festival of humiliation, the Puritan said, was "will-worship," and a pious people may solemnize a fast only for a demonstrable cause,—“when there is some notable or eminent publick Danger.”¹² A people would outrage God should they humiliate themselves when He was smiling upon them, and be guilty of blasphemy did they rejoice while He was chastising them. When they come under the rod of His wrath, and then foregather for repentance, He may listen to their prayers and grant them deliverance. When He is pleased to bless them, if they promptly show their gratitude in a day of thanksgiving, He is the more likely to continue their felicity. In the forefront of the Calvinist mind was the conception of an absolute sovereign whose will decreed the smallest event, and therefore Calvinists devised the ceremonial of a public humiliation as the best and surest method of relieving public misfortunes.

In the colonies this general Calvinist conception of providence was further particularized, and thereby further implicated in the career of the societies, by certain additions which New England theologians made to the original idea. Long before they came to America, they had become members of a school of doctrine now known as the "federal" or "covenant" theology. They revised or amplified pure Calvinism by defining the relationship between the predestined elect and his God not merely as the passive reception of grace, as did Calvin, but as an active covenant, after the model of that between Abraham and Jehovah in the Book

¹² Thomas Thacher, *A Fast of Gods Chusing* (Boston, 1678), p. 5.

of Genesis. According to this doctrine, the saint was redeemed not simply by an infusion of grace, but by being taken into a league with God, an explicit compact drawn up between two partners, wherein the saint promised to obey God's will and God promised infallibly to grant him salvation. Starting with this notion of a personal and inward covenant, the theologians extended it to the church and the state. They argued that a nation of saints, all of whom were personally in covenant with God, would also be in covenant with Him as a body politic, that as each individual had inwardly subscribed the bond, so a society formed by their regenerate action would swear to the covenant in outward unison. Hence, not alone in the privacy of their devotions, but in the forum of the commonwealth they would draw up a concrete treaty, they and God setting down the terms they would observe each toward the other, they promising to obey His law and He to reward their obedience. Under these happy conditions the New Englanders believed that their governments, alone among the nations of the earth, had been founded, and the circumstances of settlement lent plausibility to their belief. The idea that a whole nation might be taken into covenant with God had been invented by the English originators of the theology and was then taken up by their pupils, who later led the migration. At first, in the 1620's, they endeavored to argue that England had once entered into such a covenant, in which it had promised to erect the true polity, and so they had made capital out of England's economic and military reverses, proclaiming them a fitting punishment for a nation that was failing its plighted word. Thomas Hooker explained, while still at Dedham in Essex, that when a people flee the command of the Lord and break His bonds, "when we walke after our own wayes, are not governed by God, and content to be ruled by his holy word in all things, then are we said to forsake his cove-

nant."¹³ But no one could point to the precise time and place in which England had taken the covenant; individual saints might be in the Covenant of Grace, yet the majority of people obviously were not, and hence could hardly be thought of as in a national covenant with God. The New England communities of the 1630's were another story. Here the people entered into a holy society upon their own volition, inspired by their devotion to the word of God and their desire for pure ordinances; they joined in the migration deliberately in order to found sanctified commonwealths, and by that very act swore a covenant with God not merely as individuals but as a people. Thus John Winthrop expounded the idea in his magnificent sermon aboard the flagship of the Great Migration, before the society had set foot in Massachusetts. We are, he said, entered into a covenant with God to undertake this work together; the people have drawn up and subscribed the articles, "wee have professed to enterprize these Accions upon these and these ends."¹⁴ The first and the unquestioned premise of the New England mind was the conviction that unlike other states these had not come into being through accident, by natural growth or geographical proximity, but were founded in the conscious determination and the free will of saints, who had migrated for the specific ends of holy living. Voluntarism was reconciled with authoritarianism, in politics as in private life, by the hypothesis that none should have the benefit of the law but those who had subjected themselves to it. Just as the liberated will of the saint is at once submitted to the rule of the Bible, so the sovereign power of the holy commonwealth is committed through a national covenant to performing only those actions which God commands, while God will be the patron only of such nations as freely put themselves under His sway.

¹³ Thomas Hooker, *The Faithful Covenanter* (London, 1644), p. 11.

¹⁴ *Winthrop Papers* (Boston, 1931), vol. 2, p. 294.

The covenant of God and the nation was necessarily different from the covenant of God and the individual in one important respect: a society cannot receive the rewards of obedience in another world, for only particular individuals can be translated to heaven. Consequently, the compensations of social rectitude must be given here and now, in the tangible form of material success and victory over enemies. Of course a Calvinist God was originally free to dispense misery and happiness according to no rule but His tyrannical pleasure. He still deals with heathen nations just as He wishes, though He is apt to observe a few principles of common equity and will generally give more prosperity to the sober and industrious than to the violent and rapacious. With a Christian people who are not yet in covenant with Him, He is equally free to behave as He likes, and may afflict them when they are virtuous and prosper them when they are sinning, though with Christians He is more apt to accord His dispensations to their behavior, and we may be fairly certain that a sinning nation will sooner or later come to grief. But the situation is altered when a nation is formally in covenant with God. Then the master of the universe, the absolute monarch of creation, has limited His awful power to the terms of the covenant; He is bound by His own consent, but nevertheless He is bound. Thereafter He can inflict punishment only when the society has deserved rebuke. A nation so fortunate as to be in His covenant is no longer exposed to inexplicable and irrational distress; its public welfare will wax or wane with its morality, and it will receive nothing either of good or evil but what it merits. The saints had been reluctantly forced to admit that God's dispensations with England seemed to come under the head of His dealing with a heathen people rather than with a Christian society, let alone with a covenanted tribe. Hence nothing could be accomplished there, for God was

not bound to treat England by any rule of justice, but in New England, as Winthrop told the settlers, men would always know where they stood: after God ratifies this covenant, which He will do by bringing us safely to Massachusetts Bay, if then we strictly perform the articles of our bond, all will go well with us, but if we neglect the ends we ourselves have propounded, if we "shall fall to embrace this present world and prosecute our carnall intencions," the Lord will break out in wrath against us as a perjured people.¹⁵ The founders of New England imprinted this conception upon the New England mind. John Cotton declared that wherever God's servants may be, because they have a covenant with Him, when 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,"¹⁶ and He will provide not only spiritual benefits but also "whatsoever is good in the creature."¹⁷ If a covenanted people are true to their bond, said Cobbet, God "will tender them deliverances as their federall right"; all peoples, even pagans, are sometimes delivered by "common providences" which spring from the simple mercy of God, but these are not the sort of special providences that rescue a covenanted nation from affliction, "such as spring from the vertue of the Covenant."¹⁸ But on the other hand, just "As all good things are conveyed to Gods people, not barely by common providence, but by speciall Covenant," so whatever evils they meet with in this world, "upon narrow search will be found to arise from breach of Covenant more or lesse."¹⁹ Thus to the federal

¹⁵ *Winthrop Papers* (Boston, 1931), vol. 2, p. 294.

¹⁶ John Cotton, *The Way of Life* (London, 1641), p. 74.

¹⁷ Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life* (London, 1651), p. 33.

¹⁸ Thomas Cobbet, *A Just Vindication of the Covenant and Church-Estate of Children of Church-Members* (London, 1648), p. 40.

¹⁹ Thomas Shepard, "To the Reader," in Peter Bulkeley, *The Gospel-Covenant* (London, 1651), p. B2 recto.

theology, which presided over the founding of New England, crop failures, epidemics, massacres were not harsh decrees of an absolute Jehovah, but just penalties brought upon the populace by their own sins. God did not punish these folk out of spite or rancour or caprice, but in accordance with their deserts. Consequently, when they had violated the agreement, and were reminded of their lapse by the sudden descent of a whirlwind or a plague, there was but one way in which a covenant people could find deliverance, by admitting their fault, undertaking to reform their errors, and begging God to remember His covenant. The ceremony necessarily had to be a public one, with the entire society participating, because God had covenanted with the whole people. When He will not look at us any more and exposes us to evil, said Cotton, if now "we returne and bewaile our breach of Covenant with God, how little good we have done, and how little serviceable we are, then is he 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."²⁰ Unless men push their violations so far that God is obliged to annul the covenant entirely, they can always come back into the benefits of the promise by renewing the letter of their bond. Hence the necessity for setting aside a day of public humiliation and for enacting a renewal of the covenant by the whole society, for only thus could God be induced to become once more the ally of the society, as He had been at the founding, and be persuaded to withdraw whatever terrors the sins of the people had caused Him to send amongst them.

For two decades after 1630 both the theory and practice of the fast day remained exactly as the founders first worked them out, and the effectiveness of the rite was amply attested. John Hull remembered that in those years the

²⁰ Cotton, *Christ the Fountaine of Life*, p. 39.

Lord "was wont to hear before we called, when we did but purpose to seek God." He frequently chastened them by "nuturing, lopping, and pruning his poor children, by his own fatherly hand, for their good," yet in the main He was pleased to bless the colonies "with great prosperity and success, increasing and multiplying, protecting and defending from all mischievous contrivances, supplying and furnishing with all necessaries, maugre all adversaries."²¹ The ceremonial of the humiliation day, being proved the right method for securing such blessings, was quickly standardized. The formula can be seen, for example, in the call issued by the General Court of Massachusetts in 1648. First the afflictions were recited, in this case the distractions in England, an unknown disease which the Lord had visited upon New England, a drought that was endangering the corn, and the mortality of our countrymen in the West Indies; this was followed by the resolution that these matters be "intimated" to the churches; then came the appointment of a day to be kept as a day of humiliation, and finally the peremptory order, "all p[er]sons are here[by] required to abstaine from bodily labor that day, & to resort to the publike meetings, to seeke the Lord, as becomes Christians in a day of humiliation."²² In 1648, as in previous years, the rite worked the desired result, at least as far as New England health and corn were concerned.

In this proclamation, as in all the earlier ones, a meticulous distinction was observed between the physical afflictions, the disease and the drought, and the sins of the people which were assumed to have produced the afflictions. The theory held that travails were sent upon mankind to remind them of their obligation, whereupon they were to bethink them-

²¹ John Hull, "Diaries," *Archæologia Americana, Trans. and Coll. Amer. Antiq. Soc.*, vol. 3 (1857), pp. 185, 168-69.

²² *Mass. Records*, vol. 2, pp. 229-30.

selves of their sins and take to repentance. However, in the Massachusetts proclamation for October, 1652, a subtle modification of the formula was introduced: a fast was ordered for a number of reasons, most of them conventional—storms and rains, wars in England, the growth of heresy—but at the same time, among the provoking occasions for this fast were listed “the worldly mindednes, oppression, & hardhartednes feard to be amongst us.”²⁸ For the first time, the sins themselves were enumerated as evils from which the society was suffering along with such external afflictions as hitherto had furnished the causes for a ceremony. The original theory held that sensible deprivations were a just retribution for the people’s sins; it looked upon them as reminders through which God made the people aware of what they had been doing. The Puritans, in other words, had first conceived the relationship between God and the society in objective terms, and looked outward to read their inward condition by the course of events. At this point they began to turn their eyes from external happenings to internal misgivings, and to transfer the sins of the people into the column of causes in a way that had not been contemplated in the original theory. The modification in the formula, the shift from regarding a sin as something to be reformed *after* the physical affliction to considering it as in itself a sufficient reason for ceremonial mortification, is so slight that it would hardly deserve our notice did not this instance mark the beginning of an alteration that grew perceptibly with the years. Within a decade the formula was completely transformed, and the implications of the new version were subtly but profoundly different from the old. The proclamations steadily and increasingly listed sins rather than manifest troubles; though such calamities as King Philip’s War still furnished occasions for fasts, the

²⁸ *Mass. Records*, vol. 3, p. 287.

announcements of the '60's and '70's became progressively recitals of spiritual shortcomings rather than catalogues of misfortunes. Hard-heartedness, security, sloth, sensuality, lack of zeal among the rising generation, declension from "primitive affections," formality, hypocrisy were intruded among what had originally been the sole kind of provocations, such as mildew, droughts, caterpillars, shipwrecks and other such visible "tokens of God displeasure." Very shortly the visible tokens were offered as distinctly secondary to the sins. There was, in short, a steady drift toward emphasizing the subjective factors before the objective; the focus of attention was turned inward, and the authorities were more apprehensive over the hearts of the people than over their sufferings in the flesh. The significance of this transformation is not lessened by the fact that in all probability it was wrought unconsciously; it was in effect a silent revolution within the New England mind, or at least within the New England sensibility, with the result that between 1660 and 1690 the relationship of the society to God came to be felt in terms that practically reversed the primitive conception.

The altered emphasis of the proclamations was encouraged, if not actually instigated, by the clergy. In the first decades they had naturally devised a special kind of sermon to be delivered upon fast days. Inevitably it arraigned the sins of the society and exhorted the people to repentance. It was bound to present the state of affairs in a grave light and to persuade audiences that without reform still more serious consequences would follow. For the first ministers the delivery of fast sermons had been but a small part of their intellectual activity; they were engrossed in the larger issues of theology and of international Protestantism, and their energies were principally devoted to the complicated question of church polity. They had not fled into a provincial solitude but had moved to America in

order to carry on the great struggle of the Reformation, to produce the model of a perfect church which all Europe was to imitate. After 1660 such matters were of less concern to the New England clergy, but the spiritual health of their own societies was all-important. Protestantism did not heed the New England model, and after the Restoration the colonies had perforce to rest content with their modest provincial status. Meantime their theology, having been vindicated against all possible heretics, Arminians or Antinomians, was codified in the Westminster Confession which the Synod of 1648 adopted as its own, so that there was no longer urgent need for constructive thinking in affairs of doctrine. But with the isolation of New England, everything now depended on the maintenance of zeal and devotion among the people, for these societies had been founded upon the assumption that they were in covenant with God and would forever be active in His service. Hence the later ministers concentrated upon the fast-day sermon, the call to humiliation and repentance, not only in the towns but above all in the General Court either on days of humiliation or on the annual days of election. They developed, amplified, and standardized a sermon devoted exclusively to an analysis of the sins of the people. Year after year they preached it, and directed their energies less to reciting the judgments of God than to denouncing the spread of corruption. The visible tokens of divine displeasure were used chiefly to underline the mounting evidences of decay or to foreshadow the still more awful afflictions that could be expected unless the zeal of the people was rekindled. Through a succession of these fast-day and election sermons, in the proclamations, histories and tracts, a standard theme began to emerge, to become the recurrent moral of all these utterances: New England is steadily declining from the high purity of the founders. Where the characteristic writings of

the first generation were learned treatises upon polity or such profound musing upon the labyrinth of sin and regeneration as the great studies of Hooker, Shepard, and Cotton, the preëminent productions of the second generation—and also after 1660 of those of the first who, like Richard Mather or John Davenport, outlived their contemporaries—fall mainly into the category of the jeremiad. The most polished, thoughtful, and impressive creations of these decades, with few exceptions, are lamentations over the “declension” of New England and tirades against its lengthening list of sins. The pattern of the jeremiad took shape as a public review of the shortcomings of the society, designed to be spoken on formal occasions, when the people or their representatives were met together, and the form soon became as fixed and stereotyped as the funeral sermon or Latin oration. The people gathered year after year, doubtless knowing in advance exactly what they would hear, and every General Court, as soon as it had assembled in the spring, would listen once more to an arraignment of public evils before settling down to business. On these occasions the greatest of the jeremiads were delivered, which were generally printed and circulated throughout the colonies; the local ministers took more pains with their fast-day sermons than with any other, so that when a congregation subscribed to have something of their parson’s published, they generally selected his raciest jeremiad. Hence the published remains of the period 1660 to 1690 give a very one-sided picture of what was actually preached on ordinary Sabbaths, and manuscript notes taken by faithful listeners show that normally the general doctrines of theology and morality were exhaustively discussed. Yet the fact remains that on the great occasions of communal life, when the body politic met in solemn conclave to consider the state of society, the one kind of sermon it attended was not an

exposition of doctrine, not a description of holiness or of grace, not a discourse on what had once been the preoccupation of New England, the reformation of polity, but instead was a jeremiad in which the sins of New England were tabulated over and over again, wherein the outward judgments which God already had inflicted were held to presage what He would increase in violence unless New England hastened to restore the model of holiness.

Michael Wigglesworth sketched out the pattern of the jeremiad in his best verse, "God's Controversy with New England," in 1662. Higginson's election sermon of 1663, *The Cause of God and His People in New England*, approaches the form which achieved definitive shape with Jonathan Mitchell's *Nehemiah on the Wall* in 1667 and William Stoughton's *New Englands True Interest* in 1668. Thereafter the type lay ready to hand for every preacher, and was assiduously imitated in every pulpit. Later practitioners improved upon Mitchell and Stoughton only by extending the list of sins, by going into greater detail. Year by year the stock enumeration grew, and once a new sin was added to the series it kept its place in subsequent renditions. The great jeremiads of the 1670's were the literary triumphs of the decade and deserve to rank among the achievements of the New England mind; some of them made so deep an impression that they were cited and quoted down to the eve of the Revolution. Along with Mitchell's and Stoughton's the most important and elaborate were Samuel Danforth's *A Brief Recognition of New England's Errand into the Wilderness* in 1670, the younger Thomas Shepard's *Eye-Salve* in 1672, Urian Oakes' *New England Pleaded with* in 1673, William Hubbard's *The Happiness of a People* in 1676, Increase Mather's *The Day of Trouble is Near* in 1673, and his *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostacy* in 1677. All but Mather's *Day* were election sermons, and though

many similar works by other preachers, before the General Court, the Artillery Company, their own congregations or on lecture days, were published, these were considered the outstanding examples. Fifty years after the Great Migration, the literary form in which the New England mind found its most appropriate expression was a jeremiad. By 1680 forensic indictments of an apostatizing New England in the name of an idealized picture of its primitive sanctity had already become traditional and conventional.

Year after year the sins of New England were catalogued, the expanding list testifying to a steady deterioration. Though the preachers still dwelt upon calamities, and continued to point out that these were inflicted for breach of contract, their first concern was to press home the vast array of the sins themselves, and days of humiliation were celebrated not half so much because of losses to life and property as because of an acute self-consciousness among the children that they could not measure up to their fathers. That the religious interest "hath been for many years languishing and dying," that this is "the observation of all men that have their hearts exercised in discerning things of this nature,"²⁴ such was the unceasing refrain, and the transgressions of the people were painfully inventoried to prove that they should humble themselves much more for their lack of a godly frame than for their crop-failures or diseases. Consequently, in the sequence of these jeremiads the social evolution of New England can be traced step by step as it was registered upon the minds of the leaders. As the ministers took cognizance one by one of the defections, they unwittingly recorded the progression of the communities from primitive simplicity to complexity and diversity. Through the screen of clerical denunciation appears the curve of an economic

²⁴ Increase Mather, in Samuel Torrey, *A Plea For the Life of Dying Religion* (Boston, 1683), p. A2 recto.

expansion that was annually and inevitably increasing the need for humiliation because it was irresistibly carrying the society away from the original dedication to holiness and the will of God. In 1679, after even an Indian war had not caused New Englanders to reverse their descent, the leaders assembled in Synod at Boston for a supreme effort to remedy what for years they had been condemning. By now they were wholly concentrated upon the offenses and very little occupied with the punishments, which were assumed to be obvious. They issued a report that epitomized and systematized the contents of the jeremiads. More faithfully than could any traveller or royal commission, the clergy here composed a study of social trends in New England, except that, being federal theologians, they cast their findings into the form of an enumeration of the accumulated misdeeds, which they offered in part as an explanation for financial and military reverses, but more importantly as an inducement to public sorrow. That the compilers disapproved of everything they saw, and vainly called upon the populace to forsake its ways in an effort to reach the spirit of 1630 does not interfere with the accuracy or the historical validity of their description. Nor was their statement the superficial work of a moment, for they drew upon the jeremiads in which the story had been minutely and continuously documented.

The authors of the Synod's *Result*, of whom Increase Mather was the chief penman, were trained in the logic of Ramus and knew that when they subjected the themes of the jeremiads to the rules of "method" they should place the most important first; first on their list, therefore, was "a great and visible decay of the power of Godliness amongst many Professors in these Churches."²⁵ In a Puritan state,

²⁵ Williston Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (New York, 1893), p. 427.

as Urian Oakes made clear in 1673, a spiritual apathy among the saving remnant of the righteous, even though it produced no overt crimes, was more dangerous than the most flagrant of immoralities. The worst charge that could be brought against a covenanted people was that the "professors," even though they might not "make any notorious and scandalous Digression and Diversion from the good ways of God," were yet become weary and drowsy, formal and customary, were "drudging and plodding on in a visible regular course of Obedience and Profession: yet behold, *what a weariness is it?*"²⁶ No more awful failure could overtake a covenanted society than to stop pressing toward the mark of genuine holiness. "A cooling of former life & heate in spiritual communion," "a careless remiss, flat, dry, cold dead frame of spirit," security "in the Land of Rest, Quietness, and Fullness of Spiritual Enjoyment," "heart Apostasy" whereby men cease to fear and trust God "but take up their contentment and satisfaction in something else"—these are the revealing phrases heaped up in the jeremiads and proclamations. It was not that all the citizens were actively evil: "Many have gone a great way by civill honesty and morality," but that those who went thus far were generally "accounted to be in a state of salvation."²⁷ There is risen up a generation, said Increase Mather in 1674, "who give out, as if *saving Grace and Morality* were the same." No doubt, he countered, morality is necessary, but by itself it is not enough; a godly education is a great help, but if it alone is rested in, "without experience of a regenerating work of the Spirit, then a man's case is sad,"²⁸ and in New England of the 1670's he found too many born of Christian parents, bap-

²⁶ Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with* (Cambridge, 1673), p. 27.

²⁷ Charles Chauncy, in Abstracts of Sermons . . . Dec. 25, 1670 to April 2, 1671 (MS. in Harvard College Library).

²⁸ Increase Mather, *Some Important Truths Concerning Conversion* (London, 1674), 2nd ed. (Boston, 1684), pp. 46-48.

tised and educated in religion, who grew up to profess what they had been taught and who thought they needed no other conversion. What for ordinary nations would constitute virtue and civility was miserable inadequacy in a covenanted folk; they must hunger and thirst after the rich provisions of the house of God, they must not be, as Stoughton said many had now become, "empty outside Custom-born Christians," whose feeble profession of faith "hath run it self out of breath, and broke its neck."²⁹ Could the founders have imagined a more ghastly mockery than that their descendants should be carried to religious duties "from external considerations only, by a kind of outward force without any spiritual life or vigour or delight in them."³⁰ Yet to such a melancholy state were the posterity descending, and "clear sound Conversions" were becoming rare.³¹ Urian Oakes set forth with fervent eloquence the most appalling manifestation of the decline:

. . . there is great reason to conceive that many Professors may be grown Sermon-proof, that we had as good preach to the Heavens and Earth, and direct our discourse to the Walls and Seats and Pillars of the meeting house, and say, Hear, O ye Walls, give ear O ye Seats and Pillars, as to many men in these Churches, that are deaf to all that is cried in their ears by the Lords Messengers, and are indeed like Rocks in the Sea, not to be stirred and moved by the beating and dashing of these waters of the Sanctuary, or by the strongest gust of rational and affectionate discourse that can blow upon them.³²

From this basic defect flowed at once the most serious of all sins, according to the Puritan ethic: pride, manifesting itself variously as a rebellion of subordinates against superiors, as contention in the churches, and, most shock-

²⁹ William Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest* (Cambridge, 1670), p. 27.

³⁰ William Adams, *Sermons on Sacrament Days, 1678-1684* (MS. in Harvard College Library).

³¹ Increase Mather, *Pray for the Rising Generation* (Cambridge, 1678), 3rd ed. (Boston, 1685), pp. 181-82.

³² Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with*, p. 25.

ingly, as extravagance in apparel. Concepts of sin are subject to the vagaries of circumstance, and in ages of scarcity or in pioneer societies, frippery in dress is an especially heinous offense; in the Puritan colonies it was still more serious because by indulging in this vice the lower orders pressed upon the upper and endangered the stratified structure of the state. "Servants, and the poorer sort of People," said the Synod, are the most notorious offenders in this regard, endeavoring in their costume to "goe above their estates and degrees, thereby transgressing the Laws both of God and man."³³ However, according to the ministers, there was "excess, gaudiness & fantasticalness in those that have estates," as well as much striving "to make themselves as brave as they can" among those that have none.³⁴ During the war with Philip the leaders were sure that this offense above all others had let loose the rage of the heathen, and they attributed the defeats of the army to silks, "monstrous and horrid Perriwigs . . . Borders and False Locks and such like whorish Fashions."³⁵ The same spirit of sinful pride manifested itself in the congregations during the hot disputes over the Half-Way Covenant that embroiled the churches in the 1660's and almost produced open conflict in 1670, when the Old South seceded from the First Church of Boston. The original assumption of the New England order had been, said Stoughton, that in all disagreements "strict and impartial Examination would yield large matter of uncontrollable Conviction," but when saints degenerate and are content with a formal piety, they no longer can be persuaded by even the most infallible syllogisms.³⁶ The third evil, according to the Synod, was a direct consequence: the

³³ Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, pp. 427-28.

³⁴ William Adams, *Sermons on Fast Days, 1678-1684* (MS. in Harvard College Library).

³⁵ Increase Mather, *An Earnest Exhortation To the Inhabitants of New-England* (Boston, 1676), p. 7.

³⁶ Stoughton, *New-Englands True Interest*, p. 19.

appearance of heresies and errors, not merely those imported by Quakers and Anabaptists but those emanating from formal professors who "hearken & adhere to their own fancies & Satans delusions."³⁷

From this point on, the Synod came down to specific practices. The increase of swearing, which in 1676 Increase Mather said had gone so far that even children in the streets were guilty, was naturally associated with the vice of cards or dice and with the vicious habit of sleeping at sermons. The fifth evil was Sabbath-breaking. "Since there are multitudes that do profanely absent themselves or theirs from the publick worship of God, on his Holy day, especially in the most populous places [of] the land,"³⁸ and there was a steady lament that on the "night after the Sabbath . . . there is more wickedness committed usually . . . than in all the week besides."³⁹ The Puritan Sabbath began at sundown on Saturday and ended the next evening, and the pent up energies of a rebellious generation seemed particularly explosive on Sunday nights. In the sixth place there was the sad decay of family government; heads of families were accused of no longer praying or reading the scripture, of becoming "cockering" parents, indulging their children in licentious freedoms, "letting them have their swinge, to go and come where and when they please, and especially in the night."⁴⁰ Seventhly, there was the rank flowering of inordinate passions into innumerable lawsuits, with a frequent resort to lawyers, in spite of the Puritan belief that attorneys ought to be suppressed because they "will for their own ends espouse any Case right or wrong."⁴¹ The eighth head of the

³⁷ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, p. 428; William Adams, Sermons on Fast Days.

³⁸ Walker, *Ibid.*, p. 429.

³⁹ Increase Mather, *A Discourse Concerning the Danger of Apostacy*, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1685), p. 123.

⁴⁰ Samuel Willard, *Useful Instructions for a professing People* (Cambridge, 1673), p. 38.

⁴¹ Samuel Arnold, *David serving his Generation* (Cambridge, 1674), pp. 17-18.

Synod's *Result* incorporated material which always bulked large in the jeremiads, the sins of alcohol and of sex. Increase Mather heard some say by 1673 that more wine was drunk in Boston than in most towns of its size in the Christian world,⁴² and certainly, if the ministers are to be believed, militia training days had become such occasions as are not traditionally associated with the word "Puritanical": "every Farmers Son, when he goes to the Market-Town, must have money in his purse; and when he meets with his Companions, they goe to the Tavern or Ale-house, and seldome away before Drunk, or well tiplel."⁴³ Taverns, of course, had long been looked upon askance, but the Synod was forced to the admission that they were frequented not alone by "town-dwellers" but even by "church-members" who misspent their time there to the dishonor of the gospel and the setting of bad examples.⁴⁴ About the beginning of King Philip's War the preachers first discovered that the demon rum was becoming responsible for a new offense, that traders in the back country were using it to debauch the Indians and take advantage of them, which was a particularly crying sin, the Synod declared, because the planters came to this colony with a design to convert the heathen.⁴⁵ As for sexual morality, the proclamations and sermons would give the impression of a rapidly thriving promiscuity. Fornication in 1665 was "much increasing among us,"⁴⁶ and in 1668 the General Court was obliged to take some means "for the easing of tounes where bastards are borne";⁴⁷ in 1672 "the sinn of whoredom & uncleanes growes amongst us, notwith-

⁴² Increase Mather, *Wo to Drunkards* (Cambridge, 1673), p. 20.

⁴³ Samuel Nowell, *Abraham in Arms* (Boston, 1678), p. 15.

⁴⁴ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, p. 430.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*; Increase Mather, *A Brief History of the War with the Indians* (Boston, 1676); ed. S. G. Drake (Boston, 1862), p. 99; *Earnest Exhortation*, pp. 10, 15.

⁴⁶ *Mass. Records*, vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 143.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 393-94.

standing all the wholesome lawes made for the punishing & suppressing such land defiling evils,"⁴⁸ and in this year Alice Thomas made the first recorded attempt to supply Boston with a brothel, "giving frequent secret and unseasonable Entertainmen[t] in her house to Lewd Lascivious & notorious persons of both Sexes, giving them opportunity to commit carnall wickedness."⁴⁹ She was taken and whipped through the streets, but that was small comfort to the ministers who were forced to suspect that if so much fornication had been publicly discovered, "how much is there of secret wantonness & wicked dalliances?" The Puritans were wise enough to know that in any society "that which is seen is nothing in comparison of that which is not."⁵⁰

The ninth and tenth of the Synod's findings testify, in the fashion of the jeremiads, to a growing worldliness that was the moral consequence of an increase in wealth. The ninth told of frauds and deceits invented by a shrewd people in their business affairs, and commenced an indictment of the Yankee trader which many other critics were soon to take up. Still more significant for the student of the social history was the tenth topic: "inordinate affection to the world." The first comprehensive meditation on this theme had appeared in Higginson's election sermon of 1663: the Lord stirred up the founders to come to this land not for worldly wealth or a better livelihood for the outward man; there were no "rationall grounds to expect such a thing in such a wilderness as this," but God has blessed us with many earthly comforts and many "have encreased here from small beginnings to great estates." But it followed, said Higginson, that our prosperity is not the result of our efforts or our

⁴⁸ *Mass. Records*, vol. 4, pt. 2, p. 513.

⁴⁹ *Records of the Suffolk County Court*, ed. Zechariah Chafee, Jr. (*Col. Soc. Mass. Pub.*, vol. 29, 1933), vol. 1, pp. 82-83.

⁵⁰ William Adams, *Sermons on Fast Days*, p. 8.

resources, but of our piety, and if our piety fails so then will our comforts. New England, he declared in words that were to be quoted for a century, was "originally a plantation of Religion, not a plantation of Trades. Let Merchants and such as are increasing Cent per Cent remember this." If any among us make religion as twelve and the world as thirteen, "let such an one know he hath neither the spirit of a true New-England man, nor yet of a sincere Christian."⁵¹ But alas! the breed of true New-England men seemed to be dying out; in 1674 Samuel Torrey of Weymouth was sure that they were steadily deserting the religious interest and espousing a worldly one, and in the late '70's William Adams said all discerning observers had concluded that the world had so far got into New England's constitution "that there is no likelihood of getting it out till God pull us in pieces."⁵² The founders themselves had been aware of the danger that to land-hungry Englishmen, even to tried and approved saints, the prospect of vast reaches of land to be had for the clearing might eclipse all other visions. John Cotton had detected as early as 1642 a popular disposition to figure "if we could have large elbow-roume enough, and meddow enough, though wee had no Ordinances, we can then goe and live like lambs in a large place." If this, he promised, should become your fame of mind, "you may have part in Reformation of Churches, but no part in the resurrection of Christ Jesus."⁵³ But New England elbows grew sharper and longer with the years, and the Synod professed for all the world to read, "There hath been in many professors an insatiable desire after Land."⁵⁴ "Land! Land! hath been the Idol of

⁵¹ John Higginson, *The Cause of God and his People in New-England* (Cambridge, 1663), pp. 10-11.

⁵² William Adams, *Sermons on Fast Days*, p. 9.

⁵³ John Cotton, *The Churches Resurrection* (London, 1642), p. 26.

⁵⁴ Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, p. 431.

many in New-England," cried Increase Mather; whereas the first planters were satisfied with an acre a person and twenty for a family, "how have Men since coveted after the earth, that many hundreds, nay thousands of Acres, have been engrossed by one man, and they that profess themselves Christians, have forsaken Churches, and Ordinances, and all for land and elbow-room enough in the World."⁵⁵ Charles Chauncy became aware in 1655 that there were men in New England who would prefer to settle far into the wilderness without any ministry or schools or means of civilization if they might have their liberty; untroubled by strict sabbaths they could then follow their worldly interest any time, "and their children may drudge for them at plough, or hough, or such like servill employments, that themselves may be eased."⁵⁶ The lament over frontier plantations, where no ministry was settled, swelled to a constant cry in the next decades.

Meanwhile, as the frontier was extended, trade increased. Even in 1639 certain of the magistrates had protested against the fining of Robert Keayne for having dared to buy as cheaply as he could and to sell for the highest price he could get; they objected that in spite of all learned cogitation on the question, "a certain rule could not be found out for an equal rate between buyer and seller."⁵⁷ It had taken all the authority of John Cotton and the Word of God to silence them, to make the community accept the rule of the "just price." The later ministers repeated Cotton's dicta, but they were no longer able to force them upon the citizens. And still more horrifying was the fact that the lower orders, comprehending what treatment they were receiving from their employers, had begun to reply in kind. Oakes could

⁵⁵ Increase Mather, *Earnest Exhortation*, p. 9.

⁵⁶ Charles Chauncy, *Gods Mercy Shewed to His People* (Cambridge, 1655), p. 16.

⁵⁷ *Winthrop's Journal*, vol. 1, p. 316.

tell in 1673 of much "Griping, and Squeezing, and Grinding the Faces of the poor";⁵⁸ what wonder that by 1679 "Day-Labourers and Mechanicks are unreasonable in their demands"?⁵⁹ "Suppose a poor man," said Chauncy in 1655, "wants a pair of shoos, or other clothes to cover his nakedness, that hath no silver: truely he must be fain almost to sell himself, to get some mean commodities."⁶⁰ The poor man was apparently no better off in 1676; the merchants set such prices on their goods, Increase Mather observed, "it is enough to bring the Oppressing Sword." "And what a shame is it that ever that odious sin of Usury should be pleaded for, or practised in New-England?"⁶¹ How far New England in fact had departed from the theory in which it had been conceived can be seen by comparing the censure of Keayne in 1640 with Mather's lament in 1674, "A poor man cometh amongst you and he must have a Commodity whatever it cost him, and you will make him give whatever you please, and put what price you please upon what he hath to give too, without respecting the just value of the thing."⁶² The medieval and scholastic concept of the just price, like the medieval attitude toward usury, was simply dropping out of the economic code of New England, though the ministers were still, in the name of the original ideal, fulminating against a process that they could not hinder.

The last of the Synod's paragraphs described the fatal unwillingness of the people to reform, even after the Lord had called upon them in a series of severe judgments, and the corresponding decay of what in the seventeenth century was called "public spirit," which meant a disinclination to

⁵⁸ Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with*, p. 32.

⁵⁹ Walker, *Creeeds and Platforms*, p. 431; cf. E. A. J. Johnson, *American Economic Thought in the Seventeenth Century* (London, 1932), pp. 207-11.

⁶⁰ Chauncy, *Gods Mercy*, p. 20.

⁶¹ Increase Mather, *Earnest Exhortation*, p. 11.

⁶² Increase Mather, *The Day of Trouble is near* (Cambridge, 1674), p. 22.

pay the public charges, a neglect of education, and a reluctance to support the ministry. At this point the ministers were clearly fighting for the Puritan intellectual ideal, for the existence of a religious leadership that would be learned as well as pious, scholarly as well as fervent, against a spreading disposition among the people to prize education less than profits, and an academic discourse less than emotional rant. "Young men prefer cheap knowledge, easily come by, to wholesome wisdom."⁶³ The jeremiads ceaselessly bewailed the state of "inferiour schools" and of "the Colledge," that "School of the prophets," without which religion would fail and the light of the sanctuary flicker out. Furthermore, Puritan scholars had to be maintained not only at school but in their libraries, for the pursuit of learning in the Puritan code was a lifetime occupation. The people no doubt are "generally poor and low enough" Oakes admitted, but if the "Common Wealth of Learning" is once allowed to languish, there will be an end also of our civil and ecclesiastical state; unless there is a supply of learned men, and unless learned men are paid in the proper style, "who sees not what Ignorance, and Rudeness, and Barbarism will come in like a Floud upon us?"⁶⁴ "Should Academical Learning fall in this land," Increase Mather joined in the chorus, "darkness shall then cover the earth, and gross darkness the people."⁶⁵ Not that the Holy Spirit was "locked up in the narrow limits of Colledge learning," but assuredly ministerial gifts were not to be acquired "in a Shoemakers Shop."⁶⁶ To the last ditch the Puritan ministers would defend the ideal of learning and scholarship, even after they were induced to surrender the doctrine of the just price and to countenance the taking of

⁶³ *Publ. Col. Soc. Mass.*, vol. 28, p. 23; cf. Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge, 1936), pp. 329-34.

⁶⁴ Oakes, *New-England Pleaded With*, pp. 57-58.

⁶⁵ Increase Mather, *Earnest Exhortation*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ Samuel Willard, *Ne Sutor ultra Crepidam* (Boston, 1681), p. 26.

interest, but there were forces at work in their society as early as the 1670's which were challenging the ideal and creating a demand for religion more adapted to the appetites of an unlearned, land-grabbing, hard-drinking, and excitable people.

The Synod did not pretend that its digest of offenses was an original document. "The things here insisted on," it declared, "have . . . been oftentimes mentioned and inculcated by those whom the Lord hath set as Watchmen to the house of Israel, though alas! not with that success which their Souls have desired."⁶⁷ Even its systematic and devastating presentation appears to have wrought little of the success desired by the watchmen, and after the *Result* was published in 1680 they resumed the preaching of jeremiads. But now a new theme appeared along with the enumeration of particular breaches of conduct: a frank recognition that the jeremiad had become a kind of literary stereotype. With the models of the '60's and '70's before them, and the report of the Synod on their desks, the clergy openly acknowledged, as did Willard in 1682, that they were repeating a form which long since had come to be a set-piece. The Synod supplied a tabloid content for more and more jeremiads, and many preachers simply retailed from their pulpits the substance of the *Result*, mechanically and in the same sequence. The pattern had become conventional, and the preachers were compelled to admit that the people were getting bored. There were some, apparently, who grumbled that the jeremiads were "nothing else but the mistakes of an irregular (though well minded) zeal, or the dumps and night visions of some melancholick spirits." Yet, though such sermons were "condemned by some, contemned by many more, scarcely believed by any,"⁶⁸ and though the ministers

⁶⁷ Walker, *Creeds and Platforms*, p. 425.

⁶⁸ Samuel Willard, *The only sure way to prevent threated Calamity*, printed with *The Child's Portion* (Boston, 1684), pp. 179, 180.

had to confess as much, they resolutely persisted through a further succession of fast days and days of election. The best works of the 1680's were, monotonously, jeremiads: Willard's *The Only Sure Way to Prevent Threatened Calamity* in 1682, Samuel Torrey's *A Plea for the Life of Dying Religion* in 1683, and William Adams' *God's Eye on the Contrite* in 1685. The line was interrupted by the revocation of the charter and the establishment of the Dominion of New England, during which the ministers had to restrain their denunciations. But no sooner was Andros deposed than the provisional government of the saints met once more to hear a jeremiad, delivered by the young Cotton Mather and complete with all the old array of sins. Under the new charter the form was cultivated with new vigor, and persisted well into the eighteenth century, although from time to time an election preacher might lay it aside and devote himself to discussing the principles of political science. Except for a few such deviations, election sermons continued to be cast in the form of the jeremiad, and colonial or local fast days still produced them by the hundreds. Year after year denunciations of wrath against vicious and unclean practices, against a lifeless frame and flaccid zeal, sounded in the ears of New Englanders; time after time they were exhorted to repent and reform lest God in His anger destroy them utterly, but still they declined. Suddenly in 1740 the people took fire again, and a revival of fervor swept the back-country and the lower classes, but in a fashion that proved not at all to the liking of many who had preached the most stirring jeremiads.

II.

We must, of course, make allowance for ministerial exaggeration when we go to the jeremiads for a picture of life in the seventeenth century. Also we must remember

that a group of worried preachers calling upon the people to repent were not chronicling the history of their times in a scientific and objective spirit. Yet the sequence of their denunciations does provide a neat chronological summary of a chapter in the economic growth of New England. What they called sins are recognizable as manifestations of social change, and the phenomena they singled out are equally important to the modern historian. The jeremiads tell the story of a society that had been founded by men who believed, rightly or wrongly, that it was motivated solely by religion and was dedicated to realizing on earth the explicit revelation of God, a society organized on theological principles and ruled by an economic code that was a survival from the Middle Ages. They further testify that, in the course of the century, by the very necessities of its predicament, the society became increasingly involved in the work of settlement, of fishing and of trade, that it emerged by slow and insensible degrees into the now familiar outlines of a commercial and capitalist economy. The jeremiads are evidences of the grief and bewilderment that this uncomprehended evolution caused the leaders, who were conscious only of their inability to resist it. But the modern observer cannot help being struck with one remarkable fact about the whole series of denunciations: while the ministers were excoriating habits and tempers that were the direct result of the process, while they were lamenting the worldly spirit of merchants and frontiersmen and demanding that they come to humiliation, they at no time condemned the pursuit of wealth or the expansion of the frontier. They berated the consequence of progress but never progress itself. They deplored the effects of trade upon men's religion, but they did not ask men to cease from trading.⁶⁹ They arraigned men of great estates, but not the estates. Jonathan Mitchell

⁶⁹ Johnson, *American Economic Thought*, pp. 141-42, 205-07.

said that a people needed for their temporal welfare safety, honesty, civil privileges and orthodox religion, and also—"Prosperity in matters of outward Estate and Livelyhood."⁷⁰ His colleagues bemoaned the demoralizing influences of the frontier, but they did not call a halt to the march of settlement. In the midst of denunciation, colonial Jeremiahs continued their hearty endorsement of the precepts of pious labor and of the exploitation of worldly opportunities which had always been central teachings in Calvinism. New England merchants, farmers and shipbuilders increased "cent per cent," and the results were a decay of godliness, lust for possessions, class antagonisms, expensive apparel, and a lessened respect for learning. In these respects New Englanders seemed to be deserting the great tradition of their fathers. But they would have deserted it still more had they not labored in their callings with a diligence that was bound to increase their estates and widen the gulf between the industrious and the shiftless, the rich and the poor, between those who made money and those who borrowed it—and paid the interest!

That every man should have a calling in this world and should work in it faithfully was a first premise of Calvinism and Puritanism. William Ames, whose textbook of ethics was standard in seventeenth-century New England, laid down the dictum that even he who has an income must nevertheless work in a calling; each man has a talent for something, whether for government or banking or ditch-digging, which is given him of God.⁷¹ It is no disgrace according to Ames' teachings for a man to suffer poverty if the circumstances are beyond his control, for then the bad fortune is sent from God as a correction or a trial, but it is a

⁷⁰ Jonathan Mitchell, *Nehemiah on the Wall* (Cambridge, 1671), pp. 3-5.

⁷¹ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases thereof* (London, 1643), bk. 5, pp. 248-50.

loathsome crime for a man to accept poverty which he could avoid or remedy.⁷² As the Puritan conceived the order of things, God had cunningly contrived that men, if they would live at all, must seek the physical necessities of life in the earth or the sea, but in His benevolence He also provided that the objects of their search are there to be found, if men will only bestir themselves to hunt. "Whatsoever we stand in neede of," John Winthrop meditated before he set out for New England, "is treasured in the earth by the Creator, & to be feched thense by the sweate of or Browes."⁷³ Riches are ordained for use; they are dangerous temptations, but the path of the saint is beset with temptations, to be overcome and not to be fled. Private property is founded "not onely on humane, but also on naturall and divine right,"⁷⁴ and just as the laborer is worthy of his hire, so fidelity in one's occupation, if performed in the fear of God, will in the course of providence lead to wealth. These teachings were never challenged or altered in seventeenth-century New England, and they reappear in the very preachers who gave themselves most energetically to the composition of jeremiads. William Adams, for example, could explain that while in one sense the "world" means opposition to God, in another it may signify that which is good, beautiful, amiable and necessary, and when it is thus comprehended, "the believer is not to be crucified to the world: But hath much business to do in & about the world which he is vigorously to attend, & he hath that in the world upon which he is to bestow affection."⁷⁵ Ames's doctrine was recapitulated at the end of the century by Samuel Willard in his immense *summa* of all Puritan knowledge, *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, wherein

⁷² Ames, *Conscience*, bk. 5, pp. 251-54.

⁷³ Robert C. Winthrop, *Life and Letters of John Winthrop* (Boston, 1869), vol. 1, p. 315.

⁷⁴ Ames, *Conscience*, bk. 5, p. 222.

⁷⁵ Adams, *Sermons on Sacrament Days*, p. 178.

Puritans were informed that they were bound by their allegiance to God to engage themselves in an outward calling, for "Man is made for Labour, and not for Idleness."⁷⁶

John Cotton composed the finest exposition in the authentic language of New England Puritanism of what, since Max Weber, has come to be generally called the "Protestant ethic." He made abundantly clear that Puritan philosophy did not expect men to desist from profit making—on the contrary, it positively encouraged them—but it did expect them to get the profits without succumbing to the seductions. Civil life in the world, no less than the life of contemplation, is lived by faith, Cotton declared, and just as soon as a man finds faith in his heart he is drawn to live in "some warrantable calling," "though it be but of a day-labourer."⁷⁷ The true Christian does the work that providence sets before him sincerely and faithfully, not shirking the most homely or difficult or dangerous tasks. "If thou beest a man that lives without a calling, though thou hast two thousands to spend, yet if thou hast no calling, tending to publique good, thou art an unclean beast."⁷⁸ But the distinctive cast of the Puritan theory—in which it contrasts radically with the prevalent assumptions of the nineteenth century—appears first in Cotton's emphasis upon "the publique good" and second in his insistence that though a man have great gifts for his calling, he depend not upon his own powers but upon God for rewards and profits. The Puritan conception was far from "rugged individualism"; a man might not make all the money he could or spend it as he chose, for he was bound to serve the good of the whole, else he was an unclean beast. Furthermore, he was obliged to keep constantly in mind that his gifts were from God and that the providence

⁷⁶ Samuel Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity* (Boston, 1726), pp. 691-95.

⁷⁷ John Cotton, *The way of Life*, pp. 437, 438.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 449.

of God governed his success or failure, not the state of the market or the rate of exchange. If the saint worked at his business in such a spirit, he could not be corrupted by success. He would take all good fortune, according to Cotton, "with moderation,"⁷⁹ he would be an ascetic in the midst of prosperity, and no matter how much he outstripped the fathers of New England in wealth he would not fall below them in piety.

The Puritan ideal can be perceived in dramatic form in a little allegory that enjoyed great popularity among Puritans of both Englands during the seventeenth and even into the eighteenth century. *A Rich Treasure At an easy Rate; or, The ready Way to true Content*, purportedly by one "N. D.," was first published in London in 1657 and reissued in Boston at least in 1683 and again in 1763. According to this simple narrative, at one end of town lives Poverty with his wife Sloth, "in a sorry ruinous Cottage; which shortly after fell to the ground, and he was never able to repair it,"⁸⁰ while at the other end dwells Riches with his servants Pride, Oppression, Covetousness, Luxury, and Prodigality. He once had two sons, Honour who died young and Ambition who came to an untimely end; his daughter Delicacy has a bastard child Infamy, and daughter Avarice produced Misery, while his chaplain, Sir John Reader, stumbles through the prayers in a book and then gives himself to drinking and swearing. Into town comes Godliness, with his servants, Humility, Sincerity, Repentance, Experience, Faith, Hope, Charity, Temperance, and Sobriety. He tries living first beside Riches and then beside Poverty; Riches insults him, and Poverty raises such a hullabaloo by coming home every night from the ale-house drunk as a beggar that Godliness is in despair. For a time he is tempted to go into a cloister,

⁷⁹ Cotton, *The way of Life*, p. 446.

⁸⁰ *A Rich Treasure* (Boston, 1763), p. 4.

but he remembers—and here we have the essence of the Protestant ethic—“that Man was made for Society” and that he is bound “to honour God, as much as was possible, by doing good to humane Society.”⁸¹ At this juncture he meets with Gravity, who advises him to live in the middle of the town, half-way between Riches and Poverty, beside old Labour, the best housekeeper in the parish, and his good wife Prudence. Godliness and Labour get on famously, with the help of Labour’s servants, Forecast, Diligence, Expedition, Cheerfulness, and Perseverance, “early Risers and at their work.” As soon as Labour becomes the friend of Godliness, he prospers marvellously. Godliness teaches him to pray, and Labour’s estate increases still more, until at last Content comes to live with him, bringing in his train Justification, Adoption, Assurance and Sanctification. Labour’s happiness knows no bounds: “he had never prayed before, but now *Godliness* had thoroughly instructed him, and taught him a better Art, and the way of thriving.”⁸²

This all too transparent allegory might be taken for a symbolic rendering of the lives of a thousand New Englanders in the age of the jeremiads, most notably, perhaps, for the career of the mintmaster, John Hull. He was no child of “Riches,” for his father was a blacksmith, and he had but little “keeping” at school; he hoed corn for seven years, until “by God’s good hand” he was apprenticed to the trade of a goldsmith.⁸³ At the age of twenty-three he joined hands with “Godliness,” for the Lord had brought him under very choice means, the ministry of John Cotton, and had made the means “effectual”; so he found “room in the hearts of his people” and was received into the fellowship of the First Church of Boston.⁸⁴ The economic virtues that waited upon

⁸¹ *A Rich Treasure*, pp. 20-21.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁸³ Hull, *Diaries*, p. 142.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 145.

both Labour and Godliness were all his; he was an early riser and at his work, "and, through God's help, obtained that ability in it, as I was able to get my living by it."⁸⁵ He kept his shop so well that shortly it not only kept him but supplied him a surplus to invest in ships and land, and John Hull became one of the first merchant princes of Massachusetts. But always, whether tradesman or merchant or banker, he went in the fear of God, looking to Him for all rewards and submitting everything to His will. When the Dutch got his ships, he knew where to seek for consolation: "The loss of my estate will be nothing, if the Lord please to join my soul nearer to himself, and loose it more from creature comforts."⁸⁶ However, when his foreman at Point Judith Neck stole his horses, the Puritan saint knew what to say to him: "I would have you know that they are, by God's good providence, mine."⁸⁷ Business and piety mingled in his instructions to his captains; the Lord should be worshipped in his vessels, sabbaths sanctified, and all sin and prophaneness suppressed. "That the lords prescence may bee with you & his blessing bee upon you . . . is & shall be the prayer of yor friends & owners,"⁸⁸ but also, he wrote with the same pen, "Leave noe debts behind you whereever you goe."⁸⁹ He would tell his captains to follow their own judgment, knowing that business men must make the most of providential chances: "but indeed it is hard to forsee what will bee & therefore it is best willing to submit to the great governing hand of the greate Governor of all the greater and lesser revolutions that wee the poore sons of men are in-

⁸⁵ *A Rich Treasure*, p. 142.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

⁸⁸ Hermann F. Clarke, *John Hull a Builder of the Bay Colony* (Portland, Maine, 1940), p. 52.

⁸⁹ William Weedon, *Economic and Social History of New England* (Boston, 1891), vol. I, p. 250.

volved in by the invoice you see the whole amounteth to £405:16:3." There is no full stop in this passage, but every threepence is accounted for. In his old age he prepared for death, and would not send a venture to the Canaries because he was "desirous to be more thoughtfull of Lanching into that vast ocion of Eternity whether we must all shortly bee Carried,"⁹⁰ but one would hardly describe him, or the ethic he practised, as "otherworldly." Religion to a man of his temperament meant precisely seizing the main chance and getting ahead in the world, and sin was synonymous with wasted opportunities. He took into his shop two apprentices, Jeremiah Dummer and Samuel Paddy; by Puritan standards Dummer was a good boy, but Paddy was a wastrel, and after Master Hull was compelled to turn him out he went, as was to be expected, from bad to worse. There was no mercy for the prodigal in the heart of John Hull; years afterward he told Paddy off in a severe letter embodying the grim contempt of the successful Puritan for those who do not unite godliness and labor in their callings: "Had you abode here and followed your calling you might have been worth many hundred pounds of clear estate and you might have enjoyed many more helpes for your sole. Mr. Dummer lives in good fashion hath a wife and three children and a good estate is a member of the church and like to be very useful in his generation."⁹¹ John Hull died worth some six thousand pounds, and would have been worth twice that had he not supported the colonial treasury out of his own pocket. Samuel Willard preached his funeral sermon, reciting his many virtues but saying this outshone them all, "that he was a Saint upon Earth; that he lived like a Saint here, and died the precious Death of a Saint." However, he was a Puritan saint, and no Papist devotee who fled into

⁹⁰ Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England*, vol. 1, p. 249.

⁹¹ Clarke, *John Hull*, p. 133.

the unproductive solitude of a desert or a cloister; no, though he lived "above the World" and kept "his heart disentangled," he was always "in the midst of all outward occasions and urgency of Business," and Parson Willard did not hesitate to mention, among his accomplishments, "Providence had given him a prosperous and Flourishing Portion of this Worlds Goods."⁹²

Thanks to this spirit among its citizens, to the fact that there were many Hulls and Dummers as well as Paddys, providence blessed New England with a flourishing portion of this world's goods, much more, as Higginson remarked in 1663, than could have been expected from its slim resources and stony soil. The amazing truth is simply that the society denounced continuously in the jeremiads was not economically declining but advancing. There were a few bad years, of which pious conservatives like John Hull as well as the ministers would make the most; he gloomily recorded in 1664 that there was a smite upon all employments, "at least in general, all men are rather going backward than increasing their estates," but the same year he noted also that about one hundred sail of ships had come into Boston harbor, "and all laden hence."⁹³ Where there were ships there were profits, and New England business men got their share. For the first ten years New England lived happily and comfortably off its immigrants, the newcomers bringing in foreign goods and at the same time providing the market for New England produce. It can hardly be too much stressed that the orthodoxy of New England, the "New England Way" both in church and state, was formed during the halcyon decade of 1630-1640 when the economic problem took care of itself, in what Hubbard called "the first and golden age in this

⁹² Samuel Willard, *The High Esteem which God Hath of the Death of His Saints* (Boston, 1683), pp. 16-17.

⁹³ Hull, *Diaries*, pp. 214, 215.

new world,"⁹⁴ and the New England mind bore the impress of its origins in its inability thereafter to comprehend how any economic question could ever rise into such prominence. But this happy era was brought abruptly to an end when the calling of the Long Parliament shut off immigration and threatened New England with starvation. Then, for the first time, the colonies perceived the situation into which the providence of God had led them: they were in desperate need of English wares which they could not manufacture for themselves and without which they would not survive, but at the same time they possessed a limited and inadequate number of articles that could be sold in England; therefore in order to live, they had to find some way of converting their fish, lumber, wheat, flour and livestock into a means of paying for English cloth and tools. For reasons best known to himself, God had not laid before His saints the easy problem He set the Godless Virginians, who found at their doorsteps a crop that could be marketed in London and needed only to harvest it. The New Englanders had to learn commerce or perish. They did not perish, though once again they professed that they were not indebted solely to their own ingenuity or their capacity for hard work: "when the first way of supply began to be stopped up, God in his merciful providence opened another, by turning us into a way of Trade and Commerce, to further our more comfortable subsistence."⁹⁵ However, this way of trade and commerce was no half-time occupation. There would be a limit to the number of hours a man could spend meditating upon an intricate distinction between works as a condition of the Covenant of Grace and the Papal heresy of justification by works, when he was compelled to spend almost all his waking

⁹⁴ William Hubbard, *A General History of New-England* (Mass. Hist. Soc. Coll., 2nd ser., vol. 5), pp. 158, 247-48.

⁹⁵ Hubbard, *The Benefits of a Well-Ordered Conversation* (Boston, 1684), p. 97.

hours amid, according to an almanac jingle of 1648, "Heaps of wheat, pork, bisket, beef and beer. Masts, pipe-staves, fish, should store both far and near, which fetch in wines, cloths, sweets and good tobac."⁹⁶ "Our Maritan Towns began to encrease roundly"⁹⁷ wrote the pious historian in 1650, but he had seen only the beginning; the Restoration was a grievous set-back for the Puritan orthodoxy and John Hull was among the most depressed, for he found "the face of things looking sadly toward the letting-in of Popery",⁹⁸ yet he and his commercial colleagues had little cause to complain of the government of Charles II. The Navigation acts and the exclusion of the Dutch created a golden opportunity for the merchants of New England, and in this ironic fashion, at the hand of the most flagrant immoralist of the age, the providence of God compensated Puritan colonies for the ravages of King Philip. In 1691, when the spokesmen for Massachusetts were defending their society against criticism from the outside, they could conveniently forget the burden of the jeremiads and announce to the world that the people of New England had shown "that Necessity and Freedom could do wonders," that they in a few years had grown to a height and greatness that had brought more riches, industry and glory to the English nation than ever any colony had done.⁹⁹ Thus wealth did in fact accumulate, and if a man had the right spirit, if he rose early and worked in his calling, if he trusted to God for the return, he was almost certain not to be disappointed. Men who started as millers, being paid in grain, were compelled to find buyers and so grew to be traders, perceiving therein the guiding hand of providence; men who started as artisans settled down in work-

⁹⁶ Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England*, p. 152.

⁹⁷ Edward Johnson, *The Wonder-Working Providence of Sions Saviour*, ed. J. F. Jameson (New York, 1910), p. 247.

⁹⁸ Hull, *Diaries*, p. 196.

⁹⁹ *The Andros Tracts*, vol. 2 (1869), p. 243.

shops, took apprentices, and shortly were capitalists. Merchants imported the indispensable stocks and advanced them to farmers and frontiersmen on credit and so became bankers, and could crack the whip of discipline over their inefficient debtors, as did John Hull: "I am afraid lest by keepinge a drinkeing House you learn to tipples yor selfe and thereby stifle the voice of yor Conscience that else would call upon you to bee Righteouse me thinks some fruits might have come to mee last winter."¹⁰⁰ They bought up the fishing fleet as soon as God had made clear that the cod was to be the mainstay of Massachusetts, and by the beginning of the eighteenth century a few capitalists dominated the industry. By that time also the merchants had taken hold of their providential opportunities with such forecast, diligence, expedition and perseverance that not only had they succeeded the Dutch as the principal competitors of the English merchants but also they were steadily draining the interior of whatever had a market value, syphoning off money from Newfoundland, bringing in cargoes from southern Europe, diverting the coinage of the Caribbean into their pockets, and finally, to cap the climax of their brilliance, earning the freight-charges on everything they handled and then selling their very ships at a handsome profit! The great statesmen who led the migration lost money in the enterprise, and if their estates were worth a thousand pounds at their deaths, God had been merciful. But Robert Keayne the merchant, even though he was prohibited by his church from charging as high a price for his goods as he might have got, left over four thousand pounds in 1656, and John Holland, who fitted vessels for the cod-fisheries, had amassed more than that by 1653. Increase Mather cried that land had become the idol of many; to judge from the records, the many were church-members, leading citizens and the saintliest figures of the

¹⁰⁰ Weeden, *Economic and Social History of New England*, p. 250.

second or third generation. Bellingham, Endecott, and Willoughby in Massachusetts, Wyllys and John Winthrop, Jr., in Connecticut had engrossed "many hundred, nay thousands of Acres." By 1670 there were said to be thirty merchants in Boston worth from ten to thirty thousand pounds; they modestly denied they had yet reached such figures, yet by the end of the century the families of Lillie, Faneuil, Belcher, Foster, Phillips, Wharton, Clarke, Gallup, Sewall, were a long way from penury, and Ned Ward reported that "In the Chief, or high Street there are stately Edifices, some of which cost the owners two or three Thousand Pounds." He held that these illustrated the adage of a fool and his money being soon parted, "for the Fathers of these Men were Tinkers and Peddlers";¹⁰¹ the fact is that the merchants of Boston were generally no such fools as to build bigger houses than they could afford, but that many of them had come up in the social scale, and had come a long way, there could be no denying. The holy commonwealth was turning into a commercial society, so much so that the very language of piety was affected, and even those ministers who denounced worldliness expounded their theology in the imagery of trade. Joshua Moody, for example, would deliver a Thursday lecture in which he declared that salvation yielded a hundred per cent clear gain, and "It is rational that Men should lay out their Money where they may have the most suitable Commodities and best Pennyworths!"¹⁰² Samuel Willard's *Heavenly Merchandize* in 1686 was exactly what the title indicates, and Boston merchants could easily grasp every sentence. The Puritan tenet that men must know the conditions of redemption in addition to believing the Gospel came out as: "A prudent buyer will see his wares,

¹⁰¹ Edward Ward, *A Trip to New-England* (London, 1699), ed. G. P. Winship (Providence, 1905), pp. 38-39.

¹⁰² Joshua Moody, *A Practical Discourse Concerning the Choice Benefit of Communion with God in his House* (Boston, 1685), 2nd ed. (1746), p. 14.

& try them before he will buy them"; that one effect of sin is to make men try to haggle with God over the terms of salvation was thus expounded: "He that really intends to buy, will first cheapen; every one hath such a principle, that he could buy at the best rates; to have a thing good, and have it cheap, is most mens ambition." Willard concluded that Christ was a good buy and could be had not too dearly.¹⁰⁸

The question thus is forced upon us, why did New England of the late seventeenth century express itself most frequently and most earnestly in elaborate self-denunciation? Why did the spokesmen for a society that had triumphed over the frontier and the sea, that was piling up money and building more stately mansions on the high street, incessantly call upon that society to abase itself before the Lord, as though it were a loathsome and contagious leper? And why did the people listen, why did they read such jeremiads, why did they fill up their own diaries with similar meditations and include themselves in the general condemnation, even when, like John Hull or Samuel Sewall, they were fast progressing along the road to wealth? We must remember that the jeremiad sermons were delivered always on the most formal occasions, when the whole people assembled with the conscious purpose of taking stock of their condition. And always, either in their churches or in the General Court, they heard what already they had been told a thousand times, the only variation being that year after year the number of their sins increased. These ceremonies were obviously formal purgations of some sort, periodic gatherings for the solemn purpose of self-condemnation; the rite was kept up with gusto for a generation and was still being practiced, though with lessening conviction, a century later.

Explanation would be easy if the jeremiads had been

¹⁰⁸ Samuel Willard, *Heavenly Merchandize: or the Purchasing of Truth Recommended, and the Selling of it Disswaded* (Boston, 1686), *passim*.

directed solely at non-church members. Occasionally the ministers did bewail the presence of Philistines among the children of Israel. There were always a few dissolute persons like Peter Bussaker in Connecticut, who was whipped for "his fillthy and prophane expressions (viz that hee hoped to meete some of the members of the Church in hell err long, and hee did not question but he should),"¹⁰⁴ and Increase Mather complained in 1673 of unregenerate rogues who took particular pleasure in luring church members into the taverns and making them drunk, "which argueth a strange degree of impiety."¹⁰⁵ Urian Oakes dared to admit in 1682 that some New Englanders were weary of the "theocracy"¹⁰⁶ and by 1691 Josiah Scottow tried to argue that the more spectacular enormities had been perpetuated by the mixed multitude that came not over with the saints.¹⁰⁷ But had the sins of New England, enumerated in the jeremiads, proclaimed in the fast day bulletins, and tabulated by the Synod, been merely the sins of the reprobate, all would have been well. Instead, however, there was a universal confession that the saints themselves were guilty, that they especially furnished examples of declining zeal, security, hard-heartedness, and the like, for only the regenerated could exhibit these particular declensions.¹⁰⁸ The sins of pride and contention were more evident inside the churches than without. The decay of New England was definitely not a matter merely of the multitude; it was a backsliding of the children of the covenant.

Whereupon a second hypothesis suggests itself: did anybody really believe in the declension? Were the jeremiads

¹⁰⁴ *Records of the Particular Court of Connecticut* (Conn. Hist. Soc. Coll., vol 22, 1928), pp. 54-55.

¹⁰⁵ Increase Mather, *Wo to Drunkards*, p. 21.

¹⁰⁶ Urian Oakes, *A Seasonable Discourse* (Cambridge, 1682), p. A2 verso.

¹⁰⁷ Cf. Josiah Scottow, *Old Men's Tears For their Own Declensions* (Boston, 1691).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. Cotton Mather, *Magnalia* (Hartford, 1853-1855), vol. 2, pp. 493-94.

merely rhetorical gestures? Was this one more instance, in the long history of sanctimonious pretense, of a confession of sinfulness on Sunday to be followed on Monday by raising the interest rate or foreclosing a mortgage? Did the people listen on the day of humiliation to an attack on their fine apparel when they had come to church in order to exhibit it? To some extent this may have been true; but Puritan diaries and other evidences do not as a whole bear out such an impression. On the contrary, they show a people who were sincerely and genuinely overwhelmed with a sense of their own shortcomings. The mixture of business and piety in Hull's instructions to his captains was not hypocrisy, it was the natural expression of a man to whom religion and business were equally real, and he humbled himself most ardently on the days of fasting. The jeremiads bespoke something deeper than a pious fraud; they were the voice of the community, and they patently proceeded from some more profound anxiety, some apprehension of the spirit and trouble of the heart that needed constant and repeated assuaging.

The problem becomes more complex if we ask whether there really was in fact so terrible a degeneration as the jeremiads portrayed. If we took them at face value, we should conclude that New England was swept with what in modern parlance would be called a crime wave that lasted over forty years, and would expect that by 1700 it had become complete chaos. When Hutchinson reviewed the literature and studied the Synod of 1679, judging by the worldly and secularized standards of an eighteenth-century gentleman, he was compelled to interpolate, "we have no evidence of any extraordinary degeneracy."¹⁰⁹ No doubt one could collect enough instances from the court records to create the impression of extensive depravity, but the point

¹⁰⁹ Thomas Hutchinson, *The History of the Colony and Province of Massachusetts Bay*, ed. L. S. Mayo (Cambridge, 1936), vol. 1, p. 274.

would have to be made that these crimes were the exception rather than the rule and that even in the supposedly decayed state of public morality they still were punished. As for the mass of the people, whether full members or Half-Way members or merely inhabitants, they were hard at work, raising their families, clearing the land, attending church, searching their souls, praying for the grace of God and humbling themselves for their unworthiness. Above all, in accordance with the dominant ethic of the society, they were at work; they were obeying the Biblical injunction to increase and multiply, and they were, with some interruptions, receiving the rewards of pious industry in the form of material prosperity.

But as the rewards came in, and New England adjusted itself to different circumstances, it was perforce compelled to take cognizance of other matters than sanctity and polity. The truth of the matter seems to be not that New England was declining but that it was changing; it had become something other than it had started out to be, in spite of the fact that many who were responsible for the change still desired with all their hearts that it remain unchanged. The orthodox colonies were, as they themselves proudly admitted, "theocracies," which meant that they were medieval states, based upon the fixed will of God, dedicated to the explicit purposes of Revelation, that they were societies of status and subordination, with the ranks of man arranged in a hierarchical series, the lower obedient to the higher, with gentlemen and scholars at the top to rule and direct. They were to be governed with a view to the religious end of mankind, not to the profit motive. Things were right or wrong intrinsically, not relatively, and a just price for all merchandise could be determined absolutely by theologians. The ideal was not mere theory; it was implemented by such prosecutions as that of Robert Keayne and by repeated

legislation fixing the prices of commodities and the wages of workers. Three generations of experience in a changing world that would not remain obedient to the prescriptions of the founders could not shake the faith of the clergy in their code of social regulation, which Samuel Willard reproduced in the last decade of the century as part and parcel of the "body of divinity." From the textbook of Ames to the folio of Willard¹¹⁰ all agreed that rights to property were invalid if founded only upon "civil law" and not at the same time upon natural and divine law, which meant upon the moral law as well. All the relations of life, natural, economic, ecclesiastical, were held to be fully covered by the rules of the Bible, and especially the social, which by divine appointment were always to take the form of an orderly progression of ranks, classes and degrees. Condemnations of excesses in apparel were careful to point out that there was a lawful distinction to be observed between the dress of the upper and the lower orders, for "one end of Apparel is to distinguish and put a difference between persons according to ther Places and Conditions."¹¹¹ The jeremiads constantly endeavored to hold up in the face of a changing society the ancient ideal of a due subordination of Superiors and Inferiors, the static hierarchy of gentlemen, priests, scholars, burghers, and peasants. The most eloquent on this subject was William Hubbard's remarkable *The Happiness of a People* in 1676 which, though betraying on every page an awareness of altering conditions, of internal divisions and conflicts, pled fervently for the primitive conception of "order." The infinite and omnipotent creator had made the world of differing parts, "which necessarily supposes that

¹¹⁰ Cf. Ames, *Conscience*, bk. 5, pp. 236-39; Cotton, in *The Hutchinson Papers* (Albany, 1865), vol. 1, pp. 193-94; Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, pp. 696-721.

¹¹¹ Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with*, p. 34.

there must be differing places, for those differing things to be disposed into, which is Order." Especially must this subordination be observed in the political world, and "whoever is for a parity in any Society, will in the issue reduce things into an heap of confusion."¹¹² The angels in heaven are not all of one rank, and if we look at the firmament, "the pavement of that glorious mansion place . . . may we not there see, one star differing from another in glory?" Does not the eagle surmount "the little choristers of the valleys"? Therefore, "It is not then the result of time or chance, that some are mounted on horse-back, while others are left to travell on foot." The Lord appoints her "that sits behind the mill" and "him that ruleth on the throne"; the greatest part of mankind are but "tools and instruments for others to work by," rather than "proper agents to effect any thing of themselves," and they "would destroy themselves by slothfulness and security" were they not driven to labor and supervised by their betters. "In fine," Hubbard concluded, "a body would not be more monstrous and deformed without an Head, nor a ship more dangerous at Sea without a Pilot, nor a flock of sheep more ready to be devoured without a Shepheard, then would humane Society be without an Head, and Leader in time of danger." And though he disagreed with other preachers on many points, Hubbard was at one with them in contending that religion alone held such a society together, bound rank to rank, kept each in its place, and made all work toward the same inclusive end.¹¹³ "The Interest of Righteousness in the Common wealth, and Holiness in the Churches are inseparable," said Urian Oakes, "The prosperity of Church and Common wealth are twisted

¹¹² William Hubbard, *The Happiness of a People In the Wisdome of their Rulers* (Boston, 1676), p. 8.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

together. Break one Cord, you weaken and break the other also."¹¹⁴

By this ideal the jeremiads judged the society, and by this standard they found it failing. They testify, therefore, to the fact that the reality was corresponding less and less to theory and that men were conscious of the discrepancy even while they were unable to cope with it. The change came on apace, irresistible and terrifying, for no one could see where it was leading, though all could see it coming. Instead of zeal there was simple piety and industry; scholars became less influential as the pioneer and the business man became more important. Class lines drawn upon the basis of inherited status had to be redrawn on the basis of wealth. The social leadership of New England was later to become very adept at receiving into its ranks new men of wealth or ability, but it could do so with ease only after New England put aside its original social theory and gave itself entirely to the ethic of a commercial age. In the seventeenth century the shock was great when some fine names were dimmed and upstart families, Symonds, Brattles, and Whartons, forged ahead. In vain Samuel Willard preached that a civil deference ought to be paid to the gentlemanly class, "tho' the Providence of God may bring them into Poverty";¹¹⁵ by 1689 Cotton Mather could only shake his head in amazement over the changes New England had seen: "If some that are now rich were once low in the world, 'tis possible, more that were once rich are now brought very low."¹¹⁶ Nor did a family have to work its way to the very top of the social scale in order to upset the religious hierarchy. It was enough if a Robert Turner, for instance, admitted as an indentured

¹¹⁴ Oakes, *New-England Pleaded with*, p. 49.

¹¹⁵ Willard, *A Compleat Body of Divinity*, p. 643.

¹¹⁶ Cotton Mather, *Magnalia*, vol. 1, p. 104.

servant to the church of Boston in 1632, should become the master of the tavern, "The Sign of the Anchor," and die in 1664 with an estate of sixteen hundred pounds, or if a John Kitchin should start as the servant of Zachery Bicknell, and his grandson Edward be a merchant prince the equal of the Endicotts. Samuel Shrimpton began as a brazier, but he ended by owning a large part of Beacon Hill, while Thomas Savage, the son of an English blacksmith, began as a tailor, then erected wharves on Fleet Street, and finally made £2500.¹¹⁷ The social structure refused to stay fixed and classifications made by God Himself were transgressed with impunity. Thanks to the pious industry of the saints, or the near-saints, New England ceased to be a holy city set upon a hill, where men remained forever in the station to which they were born, where all ranks meekly submitted to the dictation of gentlemen and scholars.

Of course, had the fluctuation meant merely that a few social leaders were recruited from the abler among the lower ranks it would not in itself have endangered the Puritan social ideal. But the process by which the successful business man rose in the world played havoc with the primitive constitution of the society. John Josselyn sagely observed that in New England the diligent hand made rich, but that those of a "droanish disposition" became wretchedly poor.¹¹⁸ If there were men like Turner and Savage and Hull who left a long inventory of property, there were others whose whole estate did not go beyond that of Thomas Turvill in Newbury: "An old worne out coat and briches with an old lining £0 6s 0d; A thread bare, tho indifferent close coat and doublet with an old wast coat, 1:00:00; Two shirts and a

¹¹⁷ For examples of shift in social status in seventeenth-century New England I am indebted to an unpublished dissertation by Mr. Norman H. Dawes.

¹¹⁸ John Josselyn, *An Account of Two Voyages to New-England* (London, 1675), Boston, 1865, p. 129.

band, 11s; a pair of shoes, 4s; An old greasy hatt, 6d, a pair of stockings, 1s; An old doublet, an old wast cote and a pair of old sheep skin briches, 0:04:00."¹¹⁹ In the first decades New England had thought it might be an exception to the prophecy that the poor would always be with us, but by the end of the century it knew better. Still worse, however, the process which built up the fortunes of the few worked hardship not only upon the droanish poor, but upon the yeomen farmers, men of virtue and industry, who were permitted by the providence of God to accumulate estates worth no more than two or three hundred pounds. The workings of the economic system forced them to pay a reluctant tribute to the merchants, millers and ship-builders. They went into debt for the imported goods; they paid the merchants with their produce, but they received only the first cost and their little store of cash flowed into Boston coffers. The rural districts were reduced to trading on a commodity basis, in what was called "country pay," which figured prices at a higher rate than the goods would fetch in sterling, yet the merchants collected their debts at the rate of sterling and not at the higher level, and the back country began to agitate for cheap money. The class antagonism and the regional hostility which the jeremiads deplored were not figments of an overheated imagination, they were bitter realities, becoming more bitter with the years, and they were tearing the holy and united commonwealth apart. As the lines were more sharply drawn, even the upper class of inherited position, the sons and daughters of Winthrops, Nortons, Dudleys, Saltonstalls, Bradstreets became less dedicated leaders of a religious crusade and more a closed corporation of monopolists. They married among themselves, Winthrops with Bradstreets, Dudleys with Saltonstalls, while ministerial families

¹¹⁹ Joshua Coffin, *A Sketch of the History of Newbury* (Boston, 1845), pp. 89-90.

also intermarried extensively and each group took on the character of a caste. Though the church always offered an avenue of escape to the abler youth of the lower orders, to such men as John Wise, the son of an indentured servant, or Thomas Barnard, the son of a malster of Hartford, yet the ministers of New England no less than the magistrates and the merchants were formed into a vested interest by the end of the seventeenth century—which was not exactly what the founders had envisaged.

The new men, especially the new men of wealth, came up by a different ladder from that which Winthrops and Cottons had ascended, and they showed the effects of their training almost at once. Edward Johnson was horrified as early as 1650 to discover that merchants and vintners “would willingly have had the Commonwealth tolerate divers kinds of sinful opinions” because they were more interested in increasing the population, “that their purses might be filled with coyne,” than in upholding an orthodox régime.¹²⁰ Thirty years later the merchants of Boston and Salem were generally eager to come to terms with the English government even to the extent of surrendering the sacred charter. A Samuel Shrimpton would as soon serve as a councillor for Andros as an assistant for the commonwealth, and Thomas Maule, who started as a cloth worker in Salem and grew to be a large importer and exporter, was actually a Quaker. But even if the new men were loyal to the theocracy, they would not abide by its regulations in matters of business. The long succession of laws in which the Puritan authorities attempted to fix wages and prices, to decree proper fashions in dress for the different classes, and to hold the merchants in check as John Cotton had restrained Robert Keayne, fell to the ground. “Those good orders,”

¹²⁰ Edward Johnson, *Wonder-Working Providence*, ed. Jameson, p. 254.

Hubbard sighed, "were not of long continuance, but did expire with the first and golden age in this new world." In 1639, he noted, to seek a profit "above 33 per cent" had been to invite exemplary punishment, but "since that time the common practice of the country hath made double that advance no sin."¹²¹ On this point John Dunton seems to have spoken with greater accuracy than on some others: "Their Laws for Reformation of Manners," he said, "are very severe, yet but little regarded by the People, so at least as to make 'em better, or cause 'em to mend their manners,"¹²² while the ministers themselves could see no moral to the story but that "there are more divisions in times of prosperity than in times of adversity, and when Satan cant destroy them by outward violence he will endeavour to undo them by Strife and variance."¹²³ It was a complete defeat for the original plan of New England that frontier towns should be settled without a ministry, but, as Cotton Mather declared in 1690, the insoluble problem was how "at once we may Advance our Husbandry, and yet Forbear our Dispersion; and moreover at the same time fill the Countrey with a Liberal Education."¹²⁴

And all this time, when the advance of husbandry and the increase of trade was dispersing the society and dividing the classes, husbandmen and traders were constantly encouraged by the code of Puritanism itself to do exactly those things that were spoiling the Puritan commonwealth. They worked in their callings, and they created multiplicity instead of unity; they waited upon God for the reward and they became social climbers instead of subordinates; they took advantage

¹²¹ Hubbard, *History*, vol. 1, pp. 158, 248.

¹²² John Dunton, *Letters Written from New England, A.D., 1686*, ed. W. H. Whitmore (Boston, 1867), p. 71.

¹²³ John Allin, in *Sermons*, Sept. 19 to Dec. 15, 1689 (MS. in Harvard College Library).

¹²⁴ Cotton Mather, *The Serviceable Man* (Boston, 1690), pp. 50-51.

of their opportunities and they brought about laissez-faire instead of sumptuary regulation. But in so doing they were blessed, for the injunction they obeyed was as much derived from the primitive creed as was the ethic of regulation and subjection. The more the people worked in the right spirit, the more they transformed the society into something they never intended; the more diligently they labored on the frontier, in the field, in the counting-house or on the Banks of Newfoundland, the more surely they produced what according to the standards of the founders was a decay of religion and a corruption of morals.

The jeremiads, therefore, were more than a complaint of the saints against worldlings in their midst, more than a hypocritical show, more than a rhetorical exercise. They were necessary releases, they played a vital part in the social evolution because they ministered to a psychological grief and a sickness of the soul that otherwise could find no relief. They were the profession of a society that knew it was doing wrong, but could not help itself, for the wrong thing was also the right thing. They were social purgations, enabling men to make a public expiation for sins they could not avoid committing, freeing their energies to continue working with the forces of change. A predicament that was produced by the providence of God, a declension that was aggravated at every point by a precise obedience to the edicts of God, could be faced by a bewildered people only with a humbling of themselves before the inexplicable being who brought them into it. From such ceremonies men arose with new strength and courage; they had done the best they could, they had acknowledged what was amiss, they could now go back to their fields and benches and ships, trusting that the covenanted Lord would remember His bond, but when again they grew apprehensive they could look into their own

hearts, read what was amiss there and hasten once more to cleanse their bosoms of poison by public confession. The jeremiads called over and over for reformation, not merely for humiliation and repentance, but for an actual change in the social habits; they produced nothing of the sort, but only more days of humiliation. They did not really signify a resolution to reform, because the people were powerless to resist the march of events. Hence, knowing their impotence, the people needed some method for paying the necessary tribute to their sense of guilt and yet for moving with the times. They knew inwardly that they had betrayed their fathers, or were betraying them; they paid homage to them in the ceremony of humiliation and thus regained something of their self-respect, though paradoxically they had to acquire it by confessing their iniquities.

A literary form does not come into flower unless it answers some necessity in the emotional and social environment. The drama was a true expression of Elizabethan society and the jeremiad sermon was a perfect articulation for the little societies in New England, once the first rush of settlement was over and they were caught in the web of colonial economy. The form perfectly suited the needs of the moment, for on the one hand it satisfied the passionate desire to remain loyal to the Puritan tradition and on the other it sanctioned the pious ethic of godly labor which was destroying the tradition. Devotion to business, the accumulation of riches, the acquisition of houses and lands, these were the duties of all Christians, and what they earned in the way of elegance or luxury was the just reward of their holy diligence. But business and riches meant devotion to the world, and luxury was also a symbol of pride. The sins lamented in the jeremiads were not those of the notoriously scandalous, but such sins as were bound to increase among good men who

worked in their callings according to the right Puritan ethic, even though the results of their labor had to be condemned by the ideal which engendered it. Hence these sins had to be professed and denounced, the more so because they were incurable. After the proper obeisance had been offered to an ideal that it was abandoning, the society then had deferred to the past, and so was the more prepared to march into the future.

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