

## *John Winthrop's Vision and the Evolution of the Boston Community*

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“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

These words, by Thomas Jefferson, are the foundation upon which our society rests. They have, it can be argued, done more to shape the course of our history than any others. They not only were used to justify our movement for independence, so well memorialized in this very building [Old North Church], but have served as the standard by which we judge our institutions ever since. Every American reform movement has been rooted in an attempt to make the reality of life measure up to these high ideals.

And yet.... The fact is that the man who wrote these words did not believe that women should participate directly in the political process nor hold positions as doctors and lawyers. This spokesman for human liberty owned ... slaves and, it appears now to be beyond doubt, fathered children on one of his slaves and kept those children as slaves.

My reason for beginning this talk by juxtaposing Jefferson's rhetoric with the limitations of the application of it in his own time is to remind us that such visions often hold a far greater potential than initially recognized by the men and women who first articulate them. In a fundamental sense, our political and social history has been shaped by an ever-expanding understanding of what the affirmation of equality in the Declaration of Independence can mean. And I begin in this fashion because the thrust of my talk today is to suggest that the vision for New England articulated by John Winthrop in 1630 and can also speak to the needs and desires of an ever-changing world the puritan founder could never have envisioned.

Prior to departing from Southampton – not Boston, England – as the *Globe* stated in last Sunday's coverage of Charter Day events, John Winthrop addressed his fellow emigrants in what Harvard's Reverend Peter Gomes has called the greatest sermon of the last millennium. The most famous part of the "Model of Christian Charity" is the warning and exhortation that "We shall be as a City upon a Hill. The eyes of all people are upon us." In invoking that image from the Gospel of Matthew, Winthrop was reminding his fellow colonists of their responsibility as individuals and as a community to lead exemplary lives – to put into practice the Christian values that they espoused so that they would serve as examples to others. Over the course of the English reformation various communities and individuals had earned that reputation. The citizens of

Elizabethan Colchester had been extolled as so earnest in the profession of the gospel that their town was “like unto the city upon a hill; and as a candle upon a candlestick.” The clergyman Richard Rogers talked of “particular churches ... that showed forth as shining lights,” and various individuals were similarly praised as shining lights, candles in candlesticks, and so forth. Like these others, New Englanders were called to create a society which would be an example to all. Over time, according to some historians, this sense of mission was transformed into a more general belief that America was a specially chosen land that was to be a model to the world.

This story of how the puritan errand into the wilderness was transformed into a sense of American exceptionalism and special destiny is one that we are all familiar with. What I want to take as a point of departure is Winthrop’s discussion of what was expected of a city upon a hill – Winthrop’s understanding of what made an exemplary society.

His vision was rooted in the social beliefs he had absorbed growing up in the puritan society of East Anglia in the late 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries – and it should be noted that Winthrop’s vision was rooted in his religious outlook. For him all men were equal in the eyes of God – equally sinners, one might add – but that the God who created them had given to each different talents so that at all times some must be rich and some poor, some rulers and others citizens. Because each person had different abilities each had need of others to perform that which he or she was less capable at. Like the parts of a physical body, each member of a society had a task to perform; though some roles were more

complex than others, each was needed if the body was to function properly. As Winthrop put it, because “every man might have need of other ... from hence they might all be knit nearly together in the bond of brotherly affection.” The “several parts of” a social body, “considered apart before they were united, were as disproportionate and as much disordering as so many contrary qualities or elements.” But, he reiterated, as with the human body, it cannot be perfect if the parts are not knit together, and the bonds that were to knit the body of colonists together in the colony of Massachusetts, were Christian love.

A body of many different elements, knit together by love. What did this mean in practice? As Winthrop expressed it, members of the society must not only treat each other justly, but exercise loving mercy towards one another. In words that are suggestive as our nation faces its own tragedy in New Orleans, Winthrop reminded his listeners that in a community when one suffers, all suffer, and that in the past those “such as have been most bountiful to the poor saints, especially in ... extraordinary times and occasions,” have “been high commended to posterity.”

All of this was contrary to nature, for Winthrop asserted that consequent upon Adam’s original sin, “every man is born with this principle in him, to love and seek himself only.” It was, in his view, the teachings of Christ that weaned men from such selfishness and led them to recognize that to love God they had to love one another. To illustrate the ways in which men should treat their neighbors, he cited the love between David and Jonathan in the Old Testament, that between a husband and a wife, and that between Christ and his church.

In sum, Winthrop envisioned a community knit together by a love that, as he stated it, “we must bring into familiar and constant practice ... -- we must love brotherly without dissimulation, we must love one another with a pure heart fervently, we must bear one another’s burdens, we must not look only on our own things, but on the things of our brethren.... We must entertain each other in brotherly affection. We must be willing to abridge ourselves of our superfluities, for the supply of others necessities. We must uphold a familiar commerce together in all meekness, gentleness, patience and liberality. We must delight in each other, make others Conditions our own, rejoice together, mourn together, labor and suffer together, always having before our eyes our commission and community in the work, our community as members of the same body.” It is Winthrop’s vision, though not necessarily how he applied it, that I want to suggest as his lasting legacy to future generations.

Very nice, I’m sure some of you who earlier this week attended the dedication of the Anne Hutchinson statue are saying, but where was the mercy and love extended to Anne Hutchinson and Mary Dyer? The point is a valid one, and brings us to the discussion of how John Winthrop conceived of the community so knit together.

The fact is that not everyone was welcome in the City upon a hill. Winthrop was explicit about this in his defenses of an exclusionary law adopted by the colony’s General Court in May 1637 that was designed to keep out those whose views might threaten the commonwealth. In explaining the right of the

colony to exclude some who would wish to settle, and – by implication – to expel some who were there, he began by defining the community, or commonwealth as he preferred, as “a company of people, consenting to cohabit under one government, for their mutual safety and welfare.” The commonwealth was founded by free consent and “the persons so incorporating have a public and relative interest each in other, and in the place of their cohabitation and goods, and laws, etc., and in all the means of their welfare.” They were responsible “to seek out and entertain all means that may conduce to the welfare of the body, *and to keep off whatsoever doth appear to tend to their damage.*” They were, in fact, “bound to keep off whatsoever appears to tend to our ruin or damage.”

In principle, none of this should sound particularly surprising. Every society has limits to what it will tolerate. The United States decided long ago that certain practices – animal sacrifice and polygamy to raise just too obvious examples – are not to be tolerated. In the early twentieth century we started to regulate immigration and since 9/11 we have (in theory at least) guarded our borders more carefully. But, you might say, banning terrorists in the twentieth first century and banning the Hutchinsonians are very different things. Perhaps, but what I wish to proceed to now is an examination of what makes for that difference, if indeed there is a difference.

Given Winthrop’s model of Christian community, the question for Boston in particular, and Massachusetts, in general, in his time and thereafter, was how to define the essence of the community and thus how to identify what contributed to the common wealth, and what threatened it. There was no single puritan mind in

the 1630s, nor was there a simple division between two orthodoxies in Massachusetts. Granted that most at that time and place were agreed that the goal of the community was to promote God's design, there were many different views as to what was essential to that task. Puritans began from the starting point that men were sinners and their faculties corrupted by original sin. God's grace gave his saints a better light by which they could understand his will, but few maintained that this illumination was unerring. Faced with a clear goal but an uncertain path, many puritans, and John Winthrop was one of them, believed that dialogue within the godly community was a means of making progress towards certitude. Others feared that too much freedom of expression might lead to notions that would undermine the commonwealth. (Interestingly, these views replicated the divisions in England during the latter 16th century between puritans, who encouraged the exchange of views in exercises called prophesying, and Queen Elizabeth, who saw such conferences as potentially subversive).

It is clear that there was a free discussion of various alternative puritan messages in the early years of Massachusetts. While some saw the value of encompassing such diversity within the community, others disagreed. Winthrop himself valued Roger Williams as someone who, despite some extreme opinions, had the root of the matter in him. He managed to save Williams from the wrath of fellow magistrates when the young clergyman first raised his voice against the majority and Winthrop was governor. Out of the governor's office in 1635,

Winthrop was unable to prevent Williams' banishment, but retained a friendly correspondence with him over the next decade.

The case of Anne Hutchinson was more complex. It is clear that the ideas regarding free grace that eventually split the colony were circulating in the Boston church prior to 1636 without adverse comment from either Winthrop or the church's pastor John Wilson. Only when the neighboring clergyman Thomas Shepard began to raise the alarm did a process of polarization begin that raised questions not only about the nature of salvation but about how to define the community. Shepard, Thomas Dudley and other clergy and magistrates wished to define orthodoxy so narrowly that John Cotton and many others would have been written out of the community. Winthrop and the newly arrived John Davenport had a broader understanding of what should be tolerated. They managed to save Cotton and limit the banishments. And Winthrop later assisted in the reintegration of Hutchinson's brother-in-law, the reverend John Wheelwright, back into the Massachusetts commonwealth.

I don't wish to portray Winthrop as a saint – after all, he had no qualms about banishing Hutchinson and those who would not moderate their more extreme views, and he was willing to take steps that he felt was necessary in the 1640s to protect the commonwealth against what he viewed as threats from Samuel Gorton, Robert Child, and others, though we are told that when asked on his deathbed to issue an order for banishment he declined, indicating that he had done too much of that work already. Not do I wish to imply a society divided into neat and discernable groups of liberals, conservatives, and radicals. After all, the

same John Cotton who on the one hand was close to be banished himself, wrote energetically in justifying the expulsion of Roger Williams. Rather, what was happening in early New England was an ongoing debate over who was to be included in and who excluded from the commonwealth in which all recognized one another as members of the same body and treated each other with brotherly love.

This dialogue over community has been an ongoing dimension of the history of Boston. Each step in the city's growth from John Winthrop's time to our own has prompted debate over how the community was to be defined, and in almost every case the resolution was to preserve the sense of Boston as a community while incorporating new elements into it. In the late seventeenth century and into the eighteenth the puritan establishment was forced to recognize other religious groups as part of their community. Increase Mather, who was the pastor of the original congregation in the North end, had spent a good deal of the latter seventeenth century seeking to maintain the purity of the Bible Commonwealths by excluding groups such as the Baptists. It marked a dramatic redefinition of the community when in 1717 he assisted in the ordination of the Reverend Elisha Callendar as pastor of the Baptist Church in Boston and listened to his son Cotton preach the ordination sermon on the text of "Good Men United."

The American Revolution redefined the nature and purpose of the Boston community in some obvious respects, but debate continued over what Boston was to be about and how it should define its community boundaries. How the

community placed the balance between liberty and law was at the heart of what divided Bostonians in the 1760s and 1770s. And subsequent to independence, the father of the Revolution, Sam Adams, called upon this town to be a “Christian Sparta” and sought to ban the pernicious influence of theater from its streets.

If the debate in the early colonial period was over the religious boundaries of the community, and that of the Revolutionary era over political bounds, the nineteenth century saw the boundaries being tested by ethnic diversity and class divisions. [And I need to interject thanks here to the distinguished local historian Tom O’Connor, without whose work has done so much to make sense of the history of Boston.] Ethnicity and race had been issues that influenced how some earlier New Englanders had defined their community. The efforts of John Eliot suggest that some colonists advocated an inclusion of natives into the community – or at least natives who became like Englishmen; and the writings of Samuel Sewall and the life of Phyllis Wheatley suggest that Blacks too were not excluded by all from the community, though relegated to a humble status. Yet nothing prepared Bostonians for the massive transformation of the city as a result of the influx of those fleeing the Irish famine. Any thought of expanding Winthrop’s community to the Irish was hindered by another legacy of the puritans – a deep and abiding anti-Catholicism which had flared on various occasions before the 1840s and was to contribute to the burning of the Ursuline convent in Charlestown and the rapid rise of the explicitly exclusionist Know Nothing movement.

Yet even as the older Bostonians resisted acknowledging the Irish as members of their community, the spirit of the “Model of Christian Charity” could be seen in the efforts to continue to define themselves. Unitarianism claimed the puritan heritage as its own and the leaders of the community created institutions such as the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Boston Athenaeum, and similar institutions to commemorate and preserve their past. The year 1830, the two hundredth anniversary of the founding of the colony and the city, saw the first major birthday celebration – the precursor of Charter Day commemorations – as a reminder of the puritan past and its contributions. Motivated by a concern for the less fortunate members of the local and national community, Bostonians in the pre-Civil War decades, dedicated themselves to expand the rights of women, treat the insane more humanely, and abolish the iniquity of slavery. Fearful of what they perceived as the ignorance of the immigrating masses, Horace Mann and others sought to build a public school system which would integrate the newcomers into the values of the traditional community. Again, this is not to deny that the debate over how the community was to be constituted and what it was to stand for was anything but polite – we can extol the openness of William Lloyd Garrison but should not forget that in 1835 a mob of his fellow Bostonians tried to lynch him on the Common.

The Civil War did something to heal these divisions as the sacrifices of the Black soldiers of the 54<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts and the Irish Catholics of the 9<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry earned those groups their place in the community and heal some of the divisions that had divided it. But the debate

over what Boston was continued as new groups flooded into the city in the decades following the war. The celebration of Boston's 250<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1880 was the first such observation to openly acknowledge how diverse Winthrop's City Upon a Hill had become. The grand parade honored the community's puritan roots and featured representatives of the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Genealogical Society, and various other groups that were dominated by the Brahmin descendants of the early colonists. The floats represented key moments in Boston's colonial – and Anglo-puritan – past, and the climax of the parade was the dedication of the stature of John Winthrop in Scollay Square. But also represented were the United Irish Societies of Boston, the Italian Mutual Relief Society, the French Canadian Society of Ste. Jean Baptiste, and the Knights of Pythias. Publicly, at least, ethnic Boston was invited to the party.

Fifty years later, the situation had largely changed. Though the Founders Memorial was dedicated on the Common by Katherine Winthrop, few descendants of the early settlers were to be found in the celebrations of Boston's 300<sup>th</sup>, and few acknowledgements of the city's early history to be found in the events. Some of this was due to the growing public confusion about and disenchantment with the puritan heritage, but some also reflected the growing rift between the old guard and the Irish political machine that had seized control of the Boston government – a rift at times deliberately played up by the then mayor James M. Curley, who had openly proclaimed that “the day of the puritan has passed.” Indeed, one might suspect an impish humor in the fact that the image

on the Founder's Memorial of William Blackstone, who welcomed John Winthrop to the Shawmut peninsular in 1630, was modeled after Curley himself.

Despite some brief episodes of civic cooperation, the twentieth century was for the most part one in which various groups sought their own advantage, even at the expense of others. How this contributed to the city's decline and the causes for its revitalization were touched upon by Paul Grogan in last year's Charter Day program. But in focusing on Winthrop's vision perhaps the most memorable event was the appropriation of that tradition by John F. Kennedy. Addressing the Massachusetts General Court on January 9, 1961, two weeks before he would take the oath of office as president of the United States and urge his fellow countrymen to ask not what our country could do for them, but what they could do for the country, evoked an inclusive image of the community of Massachusetts. He stated that the enduring qualities of the commonwealth were "the common threads woven by the Pilgrim and the Puritan, the fisherman and the farmer, the Yankee and the immigrant." And he quoted John Winthrop's image of the city upon a hill, setting forth four things that the eyes of the world and of posterity would be looking for: the courage of Americans, their judgment, their integrity, and, "were we men of dedication –with an honor mortgaged to no single individual or group, and compromised by no private obligation or aim, but devoted solely to serving the public good and the national interest."

I was eager to accept an invitation to speak again this year in the Charter Day celebrations, but I was especially happy to have the chance to speak here,

at the North Church. For I can think of nowhere more appropriate to deliver my message of today. The North end of Boston was originally a puritan stronghold. In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century Increase and Cotton Mather walked these streets. Increase lived where the Paul Revere house now stands, and Cotton Mather a few blocks away on what is now Hanover Street. The North church was their congregation. The first sizable Black community was located a stone's throw away from us on the slopes of Copp's Hill in the colonial era, and the burial ground there contains the graves of over a thousand Black Bostonians. But the neighborhood is now best known as the Italian North End, and the streets that Cotton Mather once walked are the sites of colorful festivals to honor Saint Anthony and other Catholic saints. The location of the Mather's original church is now the site of the Roman Catholic Church of the Sacred Heart. Nowhere is the point of this talk more visible. Where we are is a physical reminder of how a society can embrace the new without discarding the old, and how Boston has retained its roots while marching forward in time.

The call to place the community above the individual was not original to John Winthrop – indeed, the stirring words of his vision are almost all drawn directly from the Bible. And in our history not everyone who shared that vision drew their inspiration from Winthrop, or quoted him as did Kennedy. But I do believe that it is perhaps the most valuable element of our puritan legacy, and call that should inspire us to build a better community in town, state, and nation – even as we work to open our arms to welcome all groups into those communities.