The Science of Intolerance: Puritans and Dissention in Seventeenth-Century New England

Gregory Osborne

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The Science of Intolerance:
Puritans and Dissent in Seventeenth-Century New England

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Abstract

This thesis examines the relationship between science and Puritanism in colonial New England during the seventeenth century and early eighteenth century by examining outbreaks of opposition to Puritan hegemony. It examines how the trans-Atlantic world of early modern science shaped the mind of Puritan elites to think concurrently in scientific and theological terms in defense of their faith, specifically how the application of scientific principles supplanted inward experience in pursuit of knowledge. Focusing on certain Puritan luminaries, such as John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather, this thesis demonstrates that throughout the seventeenth century, Puritan leaders exceedingly defended their traditional form of congregationalism against opposition with a scientific mind. Additionally, this thesis utilizes a combination of sermons, journals, pamphlets, and publications, to uncover that for a short while in the colonial history of New England, science and religion coalesced for the betterment of both.

Key Words: Dissention, Science, Puritanism, Mather, Winthrop
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“Zeale is but a wildfire without knowledge.”
-John Cotton

“Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind.”
-Albert Einstein
INTRODUCTION

Progress is often marked by change but this in no way means that change is always a mark of progress. This is true today, and it was true for the seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Puritans of New England. Yet America’s Puritan forefathers are often retroactively denounced for their resistance to change, and they are often mislabeled as being resistant to progress because of it. This is a fallacy, and this line of thinking is why Puritans are so frequently cast aside into what Perry Miller has described as a state of “pathological gloom.”¹

Unfortunately, this misperception defines many of our disapproving sentiments toward Puritans, including H.L. Mencken’s well-known sneering definition of Puritanism: “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.”² This miscalculation extends into even more popular forms of media, with the History Channel chastising Puritans for their intolerance: “The Puritan’s ecclesiastical order was intolerant as the one they had fled.”³ The consistent pejorative outlook towards New England’s Puritan forefathers has had a lasting effect on the American psyche, one that permits a transference of blame for many of America’s least desirable qualities onto its Puritan ancestry.

The goal of this thesis is to remove the Puritans from Miller’s “haze of gloom” by reinterpreting Puritan intolerance not as an unwillingness to make concessions to progressive ideologies—as they often did—but as a defense of Puritanism against nonconformists that

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threatened the theological tenets of the colony. As Perry Miller demonstrated in The New England Mind, the likes of Anne Hutchinson, Samuel Gorton, and Oliver Cromwell touted ignorance as a “theological virtue.” Ignorance is not progress, and leaders such as John Winthrop recognized this fact. Despite variations among dissenters in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, common ground was often found in a disapproval of a learned elite. This is articulated by one of Anne Hutchinson’s followers: “I had rather such a one that speaks from the meere motion of the spirit, without any study at all, then any of your learned Scollers, although they may be fuller of Scripture.” Attitudes akin to that of the Antinomians were a direct threat to the vitality of the colonies because they violated one of Puritan theology’s most basic tenets: sola scriptura. Intolerance was not a ruthless power grab, but an effort to maintain discipline and education in a nascent colony. However, dissent throughout seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century colonial New England is only half of the focus of this thesis. How the Puritan orthodoxy responded to episodes of dissent by relying on their intellectual pursuits is the remaining half.

In Seers of God, Michael P. Winship reconstructed the Massachusetts Bay Colony as an “English backwater” that was more intellectually connected to the trans-Atlantic world than

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4 For instance, despite his initial opposition to the Half-Way Covenant, which would have allowed a form of church membership without proof of conversion, Increase Mather would come to embrace it as a necessity for the continuation of congregational membership.

5 Miller’s utilization of ignorance as a theological virtue is an idea that will appear repeatedly throughout this paper. More specifically, he employs the notion of ignorance as a manifestation of opposition to orthodox Puritanism by the varying dissenting sectarians of colonial New England. The Antinomians and the Gortonites are two examples of this opposition. Ignorance as a theological virtue, in this context, is a protestation of Puritanism’s emphasis on education and learnedness in the ministry. Many episodes of dissention throughout New England’s Puritanical supremacy can be reduced to piety derived from emotional zeal versus tempered piety derived from reason. Miller, The New England Mind, 74 – 75.

6 Ibid., 74.

7 The Antinomians that plagued John Winthrop and the magistrates of the Bay Colony were the proponents of the free grace controversy. Comprised primarily by Anne Hutchinson and her followers, the Antinomians argued that salvation and predestination were immutable. Therefore, if you were one of God’s “elect,” or, predestined for heaven, your actions on earth were irrelevant because they had no impact on your salvation. Free grace, according to the Antinomians, was essentially permission to forego work and education. The Antinomians believed that the elect need not work hard because their salvation is guaranteed in spite of earthly endeavors. Sola scriptura emphatically prioritized scripture as the source of truth and its belief necessitated a learned elite, which the Antinomians opposed.
previously assumed by scholarship.⁸ According to Winship, several of the prolific Puritan elites in the colonies were profoundly influenced by early Enlightenment and English Reformation thinking, suggesting that they were directly linked to science-minded developments throughout much of the seventeenth century.⁹ Winship’s intellectual “English backwater” gives credence to the remaining focus of this thesis which is to demonstrate that in preserving orthodox Puritanism against opposition, the Puritan elite relied extensively on their scientific interests in its defense. In this regard, I am contesting that each episode of dissention evaluated in this essay establishes that the Puritan leaders defended their authority from the conviction that the health of the colony was on the line, and that by using scientific rationalizations in defense of this belief, it can be determined that Puritan leaders utilized science conscious thinking for the betterment of their theology. Paradoxically, this interpretation of the relationship between science and Puritanism suggests that for a brief moment in time during the seventeenth century, science and religion coalesced in a mutually beneficial space: The Puritan mind.

The unfortunate hurdle of contending that Puritan leaders utilized scientifically rational thinking is, of course, the severity in which they display—frequently in their own accounts—a pitiable level of credulity that is seemingly maintained with alacrity. Perhaps one of the most piercing manifestations of an impediment to rational thought is evinced by Cotton Mather’s account wherein he misplaced notes to a sermon he planned to recite at Salem in 1693. Mather blamed the missing sermon notes on devilish spectral robbers, and then later credited God for

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⁸ Michael P. Winship, Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment (Baltimore, Maryland: The John Hopkins University Press, 1996). Michael Winship challenged the then dominant idea in scholarship that the Puritans were largely isolated and removed from English intellectual culture.

⁹ For a more consummate explanation about the influence of early Enlightenment thinking on Puritan intellectualism in the New England colonies, see Michael P. Winship, Seers of God. Additionally, for more information on the role of science in the colonies prior to the English Reformation, see Walter W. Woodward, Prospero’s America: John Winthrop, Jr., Alchemy, and the Creation of New England Culture, 1606-1676 (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2010).
helping him to remember a great deal of what he had written in the missing transcripts.\textsuperscript{10}

However, it is unfair to request more from a historical source than it is able to offer, so we must acknowledge the occasional contradictions imposed by presentism and accept that Cotton Mather, as a product of the seventeenth century, can be both scientifically minded and frustratingly naïve.

Irrespective of Mather’s shortcomings, knowledge of the theories of early modern science in the New England Colonies was ubiquitous among the Puritan elite. Academic scholarship on the Puritans has acknowledged this for some time, but most recently scholars of Puritan studies have begun connecting the impact of the relationship between Puritanism and science on colonial society and Puritan theology.\textsuperscript{11} Additionally, there seems to be a general consensus in these analyses that Puritanism and science coexisted, and Walter Woodward’s recently developed term “Christian Alchemy” exemplifies this concurrence.\textsuperscript{12} Yet there are arguably fewer contributions in scholarship that demonstrate Puritanism and science intimately cooperating, not merely coexisting.

There is a worthwhile distinction between coexistence and cooperation that scholarship has largely overlooked. Coexistence allowed for the cooperation between science and religion in the Puritan colonies, but through cooperation they did not only exist side by side, they joined. In this sense, Woodward’s distinction of “Christian Alchemy” is redundant because for many Puritans their faith and their scientific pursuits were one in the same. The Puritan’s theological interests informed and stimulated their scientific undertakings, likewise their scientific interests


\textsuperscript{11} Max Weber in 1904 first suggested that the Protestant work ethic was conducive to capitalist enterprise. This theory has since been extrapolate to the sciences by other scholars, see Max Weber, \textit{The Spirit of Capitalism} (New York: Routledge Publishing, 1992) Additionally, Walter Woodward, has offered an informative examination about John Winthrop Jr.’s pansophical pursuits in alchemy which had a profound impact on areas of colonial life: medicine, economy, and relations with native populations, see Woodward, \textit{Prospero’s America}.

\textsuperscript{12} Woodward, \textit{Prospero’s America}, 12.
informed and advanced their theology. It is more with the latter that this research is concerned because there is a tangible absence of studies demonstrating how early modern science worked for the advancement of Puritan theology.

This thesis is separated into three sections with the intention of chronicling the development of scientific thinking in the discourse of Puritan elite’s resistance to opposition. This includes incidences in the early and the middle of the seventeenth century as well as the early eighteenth century. Continuity is the most viable approach to understanding the development of scientific thinking in the rhetoric of Puritan authorities because it emphasizes how intertwined science and theology became by the early eighteenth century. In this context, John Winthrop’s defense of Puritanism would appear far less impressive if it were to follow Cotton Mather’s.

Although unmitigated religious zeal dominated the theological landscape for many denominations contemporary of the Puritans, it is anything but part and parcel of Puritan doctrine. Both discipline and education were the revered characteristics of Puritan society, and as such, issues in Puritan New England were most often approached by Puritan authorities both rationally and calmly. Yet Puritans are frequently remembered for their narrowness and fanaticism, allowing history to champion opponents of the Puritans as open-minded and reasoned. It is an unfortunate distinction, and one I hope to erase.

The three subjects I examine throughout this thesis are the three Puritan luminaries considered among the handful of New England’s foremost Puritan leaders: John Winthrop, Increase Mather, and Cotton Mather. Each of these men was directly connected to the burgeoning field of early modern science in the trans-Atlantic world. Although individually they participated in this world in varying degrees, they were each connected to it and they were each

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13 The Antinomians and the Gortonites are two examples.
aware of this connection. Chiefly, my selection of these three Puritan leaders as the focus of this thesis is because of the roles that they played during the most critical instances of opposition that Puritan hegemony faced. Their participation in these instances of dissent, in addition to their unique composition of scientific thinking and doctrinal rigidity, are the reasons I have chosen them as the focus of this thesis.

Throughout this thesis I will be regularly employing the terms “scientific thinking,” “rational thinking,” and “scientifically minded” to define the outlines of the Puritan leadership’s intellectual response to opposition and dissent. I consider these terms largely indistinguishable outside of the context of their sentence, and I will be using them accordingly throughout this thesis. Most importantly, I use each term to describe the ability of the subject to engage in foundational scientific principles in the discourse of sectarian opposition to Puritan hegemony. I use these terms, therefore, to describe principles such as a reliance on empiricism, a demand for evidence, and a valuing of experimentation. Although history considers Cotton Mather to be the only sincere pursuer of scientific interests out of the three subjects I analyze, all three of them were regularly exposed to and, therefore, well aware of, the world of early modern of science to which they were regularly engaged. Consequently, when I say that John Winthrop is scientifically minded, I am suggesting that he relies on a particular combination of scientific principles to derive truth in his pursuit of achieving religious goals.

An increasing dependency on scientific thinking throughout the seventeenth century in Puritan culture delineates a meaningful epistemological shift in Puritanism that will also be addressed in this thesis. For much of Puritanism’s reign in New England, *sola scriptura* was the most utilized doctrine for determining knowledge and truth. However, as opposition against orthodox Puritanism developed throughout the seventeenth century, an opposition that also relied
on scripture, the Puritan elite began looking beyond the boundaries of traditional doctrine in defense of their faith: their scientific interests. Thus, by the time of Boston’s smallpox epidemic of 1721, a new Puritan doctrine had emerged, one that combined *sola scriptura* with a scientific mind. This was not a doctrine dictated by zeal and emotion, but by rationalization and reason. To follow this development requires beginning where it is first most perceptible in New England’s Puritan history: the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630.

**John Winthrop and the Antinomians**

When John Winthrop preached his sermon, “A Model of Christian Charity,” to his fellow colonists embarking on their journey to the new world in 1630 he warned of the following:

> if we shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world. Wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the ways of God…and wee be consumed out of the good land whither wee are a goeing.¹⁴

Evidently, Winthrop did not consider this voyage to New England to be recreation. For him, America offered an opportunity for profound church reformation through the propagation of the gospel in new territory. Therefore, this enterprise was not alone concerned with material successes, but also spiritual; the stakes for Winthrop were high. And it was with a fervor that equaled these high stakes in which Winthrop endeavored toward success. Unfortunately for the mavericks living in the early seventeenth-century New England, John Winthrop would exercise

an expression of intolerance expected by someone who had so much to lose. Anne Hutchinson and her followers were such mavericks.

The Antinomians angered Winthrop and he feared that their proximity to the Massachusetts Bay Colony would convince God to officially withdraw his support. In referencing Hutchinson’s banishment in his journal, Winthrop cites the reason: “…that she had it revealed to her, that she could come here into New England, and she should here be persecuted, and that God would ruin us and our posterity, and the whole state [the Bay Colony], for the same.” According to Winthrop’s account, Hutchinson predicted the failure of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. It is unlikely that Winthrop actually believed the prognostications of Anne Hutchinson, and it is more likely that he perceived her as a threat because she was attracting a significant following that was ideologically in direct opposition of Winthrop’s “City upon a hill” philosophy. In this regard, Winthrop’s response to Hutchinson, though harsh, originated from his conviction that she threatened the dynamism of both church and state.

More significantly, Hutchinson and her followers challenged the standards of the seventeenth-century understanding of sanctification by insisting that the elect were above the Covenant of Works while also being above state and church discipline because they were God’s chosen. Although her teachings were not entirely dissimilar to that of the established church, Hutchinson’s primary deviations were her proselytizing that the regenerate need not work hard

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15 It is important to clarify that the professional role of John Winthrop in the Bay Colony was more political than spiritual. And although his primary influences in New England were secular because of this, his identity as a devout Puritan shaped his career in the colonial government.
17 According to Winthrop’s journal, Hutchinson had approximately 60 to 80 followers attending the weekly sermons at her home, see Winthrop, *Winthrop’s Journal*, 240.
18 Sanctification was the process by which an individual would gain access to heaven. As a strictly Calvinist theology, Puritans believed their salvation to be predetermined through a covenant of grace with God. In this regard, acquiring sanctification was an assurance of their salvation. However, as Calvinists, Puritans believed that despite sanctification offering absolute assurance of salvation, there was no true method of determining individual sanctification. Therefore, it was believed that the best assurance of individual salvation was to live like you were saved through successful earthly endeavors. This last step was known as the covenant of works.
nor be mindful of civil laws, for once God designated an individual predestined for heaven, no
number of misdeeds or sin would withdraw this election. Additionally, Hutchinson maintained
that she possessed the ability to identify the elect among her contemporaries. Ultimately, for
many of her followers, Hutchinson’s approval of individual sanctification was enough to place
the regenerate above the law of the church and the state that Winthrop so ardently struggled to
establish.

Yet, in spite of the threat that Antinomianism posed to Winthrop’s Massachusetts,
scholarship has grown increasingly critical towards his treatment of Hutchinson. This criticism is
textbook apologist, and it is not a recent development. John Gorham Palfrey, the former U.S.
Massachusetts Representative, wrote in his 1876 history of New England about Winthrop:
“Religious intolerance, like every other public restraint, is criminal wherever it is not necessary
to the public safety….” What Palfrey and many modern criticisms of Winthrop fail to
recognize is that Winthrop did believe that Anne Hutchinson was a direct threat to public safety
because she preached the failure of the Bay Colony. Winthrop did not dismiss the Antinomians
simply because they differed in perspective from the established Puritan doctrine, Winthrop
sincerely believed that they threatened doctrinal integrity and secular society.

Puritan authorities did not resist change for the sake of resisting progress. Subduing the
dissenting lay populations was not a pastime; change was resisted when change was unmerited.

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19 Hutchinson’s ability to “see” the elect in her community straddles the line between the supernatural and divine. With the likes of the established church and the civil government opposed to her, it is difficult to imagine how she was never officially accused of witchcraft. However, a reading of Keith Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1971), and David D. Hall’s Worlds of Wonder Days of Judgment: Popular Religious Beliefs in Early New England (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1989), offers a possible explanation: that the first two generations of Puritans retained a collection of dissipating beliefs from Elizabethan England that allowed them to embrace a belief in certain superstitions while execrating others.

20 For a more thorough investigation of Hutchinson’s beliefs and confrontations with colonial authority, see Michael P. Winship, The Times and Trials of Anne Hutchinson: Puritans Divided (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2005).

As David D. Hall has demonstrated, Puritan ministers demanded respect from lay populations, but they ultimately relied on their participation and were emphatic that the laity challenge their sermons with their own interpretations of it, and, even more significantly, the Puritan orthodoxy largely believed that the consent of the lay populations was an absolute necessity for the vitality of both the church and state. However, academics and government officials alike continue to admonish the intolerance displayed by Puritan authorities despite Puritanism’s inherently anti-authoritarian doctrine. Unfortunately for John Winthrop, his stance against the Antinomians is not viewed in this light, and he is branded negatively for it. Nonetheless, once designated a threat, Winthrop and his Puritan contemporaries set course to expel the Antinomians from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. How Winthrop arrived at this conclusion is important because it suggests that it was not through zeal but through a process of rational thinking that was akin to the values in the burgeoning world of early modern science.

Although not remembered for his scientific pursuits, John Winthrop was connected to the world of seventeenth-century science. His son, John Winthrop, Jr., for instance, was an avid alchemist with deep connections to England’s Hartlib Circle and he was a strong supporter of the Pansophic movement. Importantly, John Winthrop was well aware of his son’s scientific endeavors and despite the elder’s professional interests focusing primarily on political and

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22 The notion of individual agency and compliance in the seventeenth century is a tenuous topic. Hall has defined “popular religion” in colonial New England as a system of resistance and consensus that frequently traipses this fragile divide. For the more fanatical groups, such as the Antinomians, resistance often resulted in censorship and expulsion. However, in the nascent stages of Anne Hutchinson’s popularity she was supported by clergymen—John Cotton, specifically. The point I am making here is that the Puritan clergy were not focused on absolute censorship when confronted by ideas different from their own. See Hall, Days of Judgement, pp. 10-13.

23 The Hartlib Circle was the antecedent to England’s Royal Society. For a more complete perspective on the theoretical and practical interests of Samuel Hartlib, see: Mark Greengrass, Michael Leslie, and Timothy Raylor, Samuel Hartlib and Universal Reformation: Studies in Intellectual Communication (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).
religious objectives, he was no stranger to the world of science, and as some scholars have gone as far to argue, John Winthrop’s personal interests nurtured Winthrop Jr.’s scientific ones.\textsuperscript{24}

As a Puritan in the seventeenth century, John Winthrop was constantly searching for signs of God’s providence. These signs would manifest in myriad ways, ranging from natural phenomena to sightings of spectral ships off of the coast. David D. Hall refers to this seventeenth-century ecosystem of ceaseless portents and prodigies as a “world of wonders.” And living within this world of wonders, John Winthrop eagerly recorded countless observations in hopes of discerning meaningful signs of providence. It is even likely that John Winthrop passed the habit of recording observations on to Winthrop Jr., which, in turn, fueled his son’s early passions for science.\textsuperscript{25}

Although it is erroneous to say that John Winthrop was actively engaged in the scientific principles of experimentation like his son, it is enlightening to acknowledge that he possessed scientific interests insofar as he habitually recorded observation. These recordings positioned Winthrop uniquely: they directed him in making decisions based upon observation and experience. In other words, John Winthrop was an empiricist.\textsuperscript{26} Therefore, when his version of Puritanism clashed with the Antinomians, he was able to defend it with empirically sound arguments predicated on his doctrinal interpretations and his observational experience.

When Winthrop wrote to his English correspondents following the trials of Anne Hutchinson, he referenced her banishment as the will of God: “It is the Lords work, and it is marvellous in our eyes.”\textsuperscript{27} Epistemologically, Winthrop’s belief that he was performing God’s

\textsuperscript{25} Ibid., 275.
\textsuperscript{26} Some scholars, like Perry Miller, recognize Solomon Stoddard as Puritan New England’s first true empiricist. I disagree. This designation belongs to Winthrop.
\textsuperscript{27} Winship, The Times & Trials of Anne Hutchinson, 136.
work by banishing Hutchinson was not a display of fideism, rather Winthrop rationalized that he was executing the work of the Lord by banishing Hutchinson through several sound and reasoned judgements. Winthrop was able to harmonize his empirical practices with his faith, offering an early colonial example of piety and reason working in tandem in the pursuit of truth.

To understand how Winthrop used reasoned judgements to combat Antinomianism it is important to first establish providence as observational evidence of God’s will, or, in this case, to understand it as a seventeenth-century version of empirical data. It is also important to recognize what role Winthrop viewed the Puritans having in the acting out of God’s will. This is made clear when Winthrop remarks in *A Model of Christian Charity*:

> It is by a mutual consent, through overvaluing providence and a more than ordinary approbation of the churches of Christ, to seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical. In such cases as this, the care of the public must oversway all private respects, by which, not only conscience, but mere civil policy doth bind us. For it is a true rule that particular estates cannot subsist in the ruin of the public.²⁸

In this passage Winthrop makes it known to his fellow passengers that they have been tasked by God and the reformed Churches to colonize a new land in order to uphold the public and religious well being of the Puritan fellowship. The quality of public and religious health is consequently an expression of the fellowship’s success in carrying out God’s will. Therefore, if the state of the civil and the ecclesiastical government is unwell, it serves as empirically sound evidence that they are failing providence. When Winthrop reacted harshly to the Antinomian crisis, he did not react solely out of theological differences between them and Puritanism, rather he did so because he perceived the observable growing popularity of the Antinomians as evidence that God’s divined fellowship was failing.

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As the Antinomian crisis came to a conclusion, Winthrop reflected on the passing events counterintuitively, as Michael Winship has acknowledged. Winship asserts that Winthrop believed, “Hutchinson’s disastrous story proved that the Massachusetts church/state consensual disciplinary system worked according to divine plan.” 29 In other words, Winship contests, that rather than acknowledging the crisis as an exhibition in the failings of the church and state, Winthrop perverts the events to exemplify their successes and align them with providence. This is a criticism of Winthrop and it suggests an uglier side of Puritan authority: that any event could be corrupted to stimulate Puritan self-confidence. While this is ultimately a fair analysis of Winthrop and an exceptional example of how observational data can be skewed based on bias, it does not undermine my case for Winthrop, as there is no evidence suggesting that he did not sincerely believe in his own interpretation of the Hutchinson trials. 30

The historian Richard Dunn has observed that the language in which Winthrop used to describe Anne Hutchinson in his journal is both “sober and controlled.” 31 Because Winthrop wrote his journal as an intended Puritan history of New England, a tempered non-polemical recording of events makes sense. 32 Yet, there are examples of Winthrop engendering much harsher criticisms of Hutchinson, such as in his Short Story where references allude to her being an “American Jesabel.” 33 Reconciling this critical language, along with Winthrop’s celebration of Mary Dyer’s deformed stillbirth in 1638, with the proposition that Winthrop was a reasoned

29 Winship, The Times & Trials of Anne Hutchinson, 135.
30 Winship is suggesting that Puritan confidence derives from the ability to transform potential tragedy into a collective and divine triumph. Essentially, Winship argues that Puritan authorities were infallible because even failings were part of God’s will. In this regard, the narrative of Anne Hutchinson’s rise could have been manipulated for political gain by Winthrop, as Winship suggests. However, it is quite likely that Winthrop genuinely believed the rise of Antinomianism was a test of the colonial system by God. See Winship, The Times and Trials, 135-136.
and empirically driven Puritan authority is admittedly not easy. By today’s standards, Winthrop can appear to be misogynistic and authoritarian, and it would be myopic to rule the possibility out. Nonetheless whichever way Winthrop is argued, it should be paramount to the discussion that Winthrop did not act out of unbridled emotion; he was a man that valued observation and experience when verifying his arguments. This fact should not be overlooked in whatever way historians choose to examine Winthrop.

Increase Mather and the Conversion Narratives

Perhaps no dispute in the ecclesiastical history of middle seventeenth-century Massachusetts is better known than the quarrels surrounding the decrease in fully covenanted church members. The status of being fully covenanted meant that a church member displayed evidence of his or her conversion, or, sanctification, in a manner deemed suitable by the clergy. Once this status had been obtained a fully covenanted church member could have his or her children baptized into that particular congregation. Unfortunately, second generation Puritans were experiencing fewer episodes of sanctification than the first generation. This dip in fully covenanted church members threatened the stability of congregationalism by potentially shutting out the third generation of Puritans by denying them access to baptism. Despite profound disagreements regarding the solution to the diminution in membership, a majority of Puritan elites agreed that their system of congregationalism as established by the Cambridge Platform during the Synod of 1646 was vulnerable to the effects of declension.34 Much of the discourse

34 By denying a substantial portion of subsequent generations from church membership, the predominating fear among many of New England’s clergymen was that the lay population would descend into moral decay, otherwise known as declension. For perspective on the reason for the Synod gathering and the developments of Cambridge Platform, see B.R. Burg, “The Cambridge Platform: A Reassertion of Ecclesiastical Authority,” Church History, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec. 1974).
proposing resolutions to a decreasing church membership pivoted around concepts of modification, adaptation, and resistance. The focus of these disputes lied largely within the topic of the sacraments, both baptism and communion. Importantly, it is in this rhetoric that a sharper image emerges regarding the adoption of scientific language by the Puritan orthodoxy.

A resolution known as the Half-Way Covenant presented itself during the Synod of 1662.\textsuperscript{35} The 1662 Synod determined that membership loss was due to excessively stringent qualifications for admission to the church. Prior to the Half-Way Covenant, church members were required to demonstrate proof of their regeneration. To the dismay of the congregations, fewer and fewer people were having conversion experiences, meaning that fewer children were receiving baptism because fewer church members were receiving the rank of full church membership. The Half-Way Covenant was an effort to remediate the dilemma by offering partial, or half way membership status to church members not converted, which granted their children access to baptism. The Half-Way Covenant created two tiers of church membership: full members and half members. Full membership permitted comprehensive access to all the sacraments and rites of the church, while half members were given access to baptism for their children but were denied admission to communion.

Although the Half-Way Covenant would be adopted by a majority of New England congregations, its acceptance precipitated further contention between them when certain ministers proposed providing access to the Lord’s Supper to all church members, irrespective of their half or full status. Sanctification, a prerequisite to communion, and the approaches to acquiring it, became an intensely debated topic following the Synod of 1662, and it was an issue

\textsuperscript{35} The synod of 1662 was the initial official endorsement of the Half-Way Covenant by congregationalist New England. For background on the gathering and the need for halfway membership, Katherine Gerbner, “Beyond the ‘Halfway Covenant’: Church Membership, Extended Baptism, and Outreach in Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1656-1667,” \textit{The New England Quarterly}, Vol. 85, No.2 (June 2012).
that framed many of the disputes in New England religious culture through the early eighteenth century. Contentions surrounding the conversion narrative were not novel in Puritan New England, but the degree to which they were contested following the Half-Way Covenant reached new heights in the latter seventeenth century.\(^{36}\)

The two most outspoken rivals during this time were Increase Mather and Solomon Stoddard. Stoddard offered a resolution to the conversion crisis that would liberalize the congregational polity far beyond the limits of what his contemporaries proposed. While Mather, on the other hand, although eventually conceding to the Half-Way covenant, deeply opposed the further liberalizing access to the sacraments because he believed it was in direct violation of scripture.\(^{37}\) The disparity between Increase Mather’s orthodoxy-driven contestations and Solomon Stoddard’s liberalizing views would erupt in the pamphlet wars that dominated the religious discourse of the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century.

The focus of the pamphlet war between Mather and Stoddard concerned itself almost exclusively with church membership with regard to access of the Lord’s Supper. The main question was this: because the Half-Way Covenant divided church membership into two classes, should the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper be withheld from half-way members because there is no evidence of their regeneration? Stoddard, on the one hand, held the fundamental position that any who “are of a godly conversation, having knowledge, to examine themselves, and discern

\(^{36}\) John Cotton was the theological backbone to the early conversion narratives in New England. It is worth noting that his preaching profoundly influenced Anne Hutchinson. As a preeminent clergyman in the Massachusetts Bay Colony, this means that he is an example of a Puritan luminary influencing dissident theology. However, even Cotton believed Hutchinson had behaved too extremely and it was he who ultimately administered her excommunication. For further information on his background see: A.W. McClure and Nate Pickowicz, *John Cotton: Patriarch of New England* (Peterborough, Ontario: H&E Publishing, 2019).

the Lords body, are to be admitted to the Lord’s Supper."  

38 Mather, meanwhile, fundamentally argued that “when there is sufficient evidence that they are able to exercise grace at the Lords Table, then wee are bound to think that they will partake with profit to their own souls, and enjoy blessed communion with Christ at his Table.”  

39 Essentially, Stoddard, ever the contrarian, believed that Christian ordinances offered an opportunity for conversion, while Mather posited that only the converted should be granted access to the ordinances.  

Indeed, both men turned to scripture in an effort to defend their diametrically opposed views, but unlike Mather, Stoddard, as historian Paul Lucas has indicated, relied on an amalgam of the Old and the New Testaments to defend his position on an exclusively Christian practice.  

40 The importance of this, Lucas elaborates, is that Mather confronted Stoddard with such alacrity because Stoddard, from Mather’s perspective threatened not only the New England congregational system, but one of the core principles of the Protestant Reformation, which was to distinguish saints from reprobates.  

41 Stoddard, in this regard, challenged Mather’s belief that congregational doctrine should aim to decontaminate the papal littering of the churches with the unregenerate. By further defending his arguments with Old Testament references, Stoddard relied on pre-Christ doctrine to endorse his liberalization of the sacraments.  

42 For Mather, Stoddard was unravelling the roots of Protestantism that were the nucleus of New England’s Puritanism. In the mind of Increase Mather, Stoddard was not a Puritan, a Presbyterian, an


39 Ibid., 47.  


41 Mather ardently believed that it was in the New Testament, not the Old Testament, that substantial doctrine could be found to help purify the church. This belief, Lucas suggests, derives from Mather’s understanding that the New Testament best reflected the practices of the earliest Christians. See, Ibid., 269.  

42 Mather viewed Stoddard’s reliance on the Old Testament in his defense of a liberalized Communion as a perversion of early Christian practices.
Anabaptist, nor a Quaker; Stoddard was a particularly distinctive threat more comparable to that of the Catholics. This, at least in part, explains Mather’s nickname for Stoddard: the “Pope of the Connecticut Valley.”\(^{43}\) It is clear that Mather observed Stoddard as a menace to the New England system of congregationalism, but it is in his approach to confuting Stoddard that the confluence of Mather’s intellectual and theological interests is best witnessed.

Increase Mather, a second-generation Puritan leader, was a product of his time. This may appear to be an overly simplified way to examine a historical subject, but its consideration is an imperative if we wish to study someone as a composite of the time that he or she existed. Therefore, to suggest that Increase Mather was the pinnacle of Puritan character in seventeenth-century New England is an understatement; he was more. Although Puritan doctrine framed his temporal and spiritual pursuits, he existed in a time where profound trans-Atlantic ties exposed him to the burgeoning world of early modern science.\(^{44}\) So when he formulated a defense against those that threatened his Puritanical values, he did so not only as a Puritan theologian, but also as a seventeenth-century intellectual.\(^{45}\)

Mather’s accomplishments and interests as a seventeenth-century intellectual are numerous. Mather reigned as the President of Harvard College for twenty years from 1681-1701; he published *Illustrious Providences* in 1684, codifying the process of recording providential portents in order to mitigate unbridled interpretations; he catalogued in *Kometographia* observed comets throughout the entire epoch of human civilization in order to connect them with

\(^{43}\) Increase Mather as cited in Lucas, *An Appeal to the Learned*, 273.

\(^{44}\) Winship argues that Restoration England forced the hand of Puritan leaders to codify the wonders of providence in a way that encouraged a blending doctrine and science. Increase Mather was at the forefront of this discourse, and it allowed him to apply scientific principles to Puritan doctrine. Winship, *Seers of God*, pp. 53-60.

\(^{45}\) David D. Hall interprets Perry Miller’s *The New England Mind* to mean that Puritan leaders existed within a gap of theology and intellectualism. This gap is an expression of the tension that Puritans confronted daily created by the need to rationalize and the need to maintain an enraptured relationship with God. Here, I use Hall’s interpretation of Miller. David D. Hall, “A Reader’s Guide to The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century,” *American Quarterly*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (Spring, 1982), pp 34-35.
calamitous events; he took up the cause of inoculation with his son Cotton Mather in 1721; and he was an avid consumer of works written by Robert Boyle and Isaac Newton.46

As a whole, these endeavors indicate that, while perhaps not the most prominent scientist of the 1700s, Increase Mather was a man who valued the burgeoning world of early modern science. More to the point, although essays such as *Illustrious Providence* served as religious instruction more so than anything else, they were indisputably scientifically minded. Historian and Increase Mather biographer, Kenneth Murdock, identifies *Illustrious Providence* as “an effort to supply from experience facts from which might be derived, by induction.”47

*Kometagrophia* is structured on a similar platform and parallels *Illustrious Providence* in its dependence on observation. The importance of this profound: it replaces the authority of religious instruction from the written word to observable information. Although Mather’s demand for observable evidence alone does not constitute scientific mindedness, his belief that facts derive from experience, and his application of this belief to religious instruction, all the while consuming the publications of the great seventeenth-century scientists, suggests, at the very least, he valued observation immensely while also possessing a scientific mind.

All things considered, when Mather confronted Stoddard’s *An Appeal to the Learned* in his *Confutation of Solomon Stoddard’s Observations* he did so as both a Puritan and an intellectual. Reading through Mather’s rejoinder with his proclivity for observation in mind reveals *Confutation* to be a well-reasoned treatise that relies on Mather’s multiple intellectual pursuits in its expression. Perhaps this is best evinced when Mather responds to Stoddard’s

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46 *Illustrious Providence* is often considered one of the first true scientific writings to emerge from the American colonies by historians. Here I adopt the interpretation of *Illustrious Providence* that Winship has developed: a means to qualify observations as viable portents of God’s will. This same effort is applied to *Kometographia*, and here I will argue he does the same when confuting Stoddard.

opinion that all church members be permitted to the Lord’s Supper without proof of their regeneration:

there should be some growth in faith, and the lively exercise thereof; and that this should be positive evidences be manifest unto the charitable judgements of the church.\footnote{Mather, “A Confutation of Solomon Stoddard’s Observations,” 46.}

In other words, Mather posits that church membership alone is an insufficient qualification for access to communion because it ignores the need for measurable proof that an individual is indeed an elect acting within their Covenant of Grace with God; someone’s regenerate status should never ever be assumed, but made manifest as evidence under the scrutiny of the church. Mather, in other words, needed to experience evidence of an individual’s conversion to believe in it.

Mather’s insistence on proof of a church member’s regenerate status appealed to both his Puritan and intellectual leanings. By making certain that an individual was in fact an elect through perceptible methods, Mather utilized foundational principles of science to ensure that the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper was kept pure of reprobates.\footnote{Reprobates in this context means any individual that is morally corrupt. By opening a sacrament to any individual, literally any individual would be welcomed. Mather feared that this liberalization of the sacraments would grant access to those who should never be permitted. Additionally, in the passage I reference principles of science, by which I mean Mather’s reliance on experience and observation.}

It would be naïve to assert that Mather’s demand for evidence is irrefutable proof that he consciously mobilized science in defense of Puritanism, but it is rational to conclude that his pious endeavors converged with his scientific pursuits in a way that mutually benefited both. After all, \textit{Kometographia} was composed concurrently with \textit{Confutation}, and the former is an exhaustive example of Mather’s religious pursuits informing his scientific ones.\footnote{\textit{Kometographia} is an exhaustive catalog of observed comets throughout history. Mather believed that comets portended calamitous events, and he believed that by connecting each comet with a calamity that followed within a} It is this same vein that Mather allowed his intellectual background to inform his theological labors while writing \textit{Confutation}. 

\footnote{Mather, “A Confutation of Solomon Stoddard’s Observations,” 46.}
Likewise, by requesting evidential proof of conversion in this context, Mather was demanding observational truth to uphold scriptural truth. Increase Mather believed that there was extensive scriptural evidence substantiating the doctrine that any unsanctified persons were not to be permitted to the Holy Communion. In an effort to conserve this Puritan doctrine, Mather argued for irrefutable observational evidence of conversion. Thus, here is an example of Mather’s temporal interests intersecting with his piety.

The connection between *Kometographia* and *Confutation* is worth elaborating because both works respectively represent Mather’s scientific and religious interests, yet the methodological approach to each is the same. In *Kometographia*, Mather defines a comet as a blazing star and states the reason for writing it as: “…to evidence and evince that Comets are ordinarily the forerunners of disastrous Calamities, Mischiefs, & Miseries….” Mather achieves this by chronicling all of the observed comets throughout history and connecting each to a calamitous event that occurred in the same year it was observed. More remarkably, the greater achievement, according to Mather, of writing *Kometographia* was the opportunity to verify Scripture’s assertion that the stars can portend calamitous times. As is the case with *Confutation*, Mather uses observational data as evidential proof to defend Scripture.

Although *Kometographia* signifies Mather’s scientific pursuits and *Confutation* signals his religious interests, they both rely on measurable evidence for the validation of doctrine through scientifically minded enforcement. By the time the communion crisis swept the year, he could legitimize comets as omens. Mather’s goal in writing it was to “…inform and edifie the ordinary sort of Readers…to prepare for whatever changes may befall them.” *Kometographia* is perhaps the best-known example of Mather’s scientific undertakings. Increase Mather, *Kometographia. Or A discourse concerning comets* (Boston: Samuel Green for Samuel Sewall, 1683).

51 Increase Mather, *A dissertation, wherein the strange doctrine lately published in a sermon, the tendency of which, is, to encourage unsanctified persons approach the holy table of the Lord*, (Boston: Benjamin Green for Benjamin Elliot, 1708). Here Mather extensively relies on Mat. 22. 11, 12. to defend his argument.

52 Increase Mather, *Kometographia*, 2.

53 *Ibid.*, 9
theological culture of Puritan New England, Mather had developed a habit of combining science and religion in a way that simultaneously advanced both. Therefore, when Increase Mather refuted Solomon Stoddard’s doctrinal assault in regard to the Lord’s Supper, he did so as a Puritan and a scientist.

Solomon Stoddard uniquely threatened Puritan doctrine and hegemony in a way that was uncharacteristic of other Protestant groups that were perceived as dissidents by Puritan authorities. Stoddard’s assertion that Communion should be opened to any visible saints subverted the sanctity of the Lord’s Supper and violated a central doctrine of Puritan theology, at least according to Increase Mather. Mather refuted Stoddard by relying on his scientific mindedness that he had honed throughout his intellectual undertakings. The significance of Mather relying on scientifically minded reasoning during theological debates—particularly during disputes that potentially undermined Puritan hegemony—is that it reveals reason and science were supplanting doctrinal rigor in favor of a natural theology.

Ultimately, Mather’s demand that an individual display visible evidence of conversion, not simply a claim of faith in his or her own conversion, represents a leaning towards natural theology because he insists on a visible experience evincing conversion. Unlike Stoddard who maintained that an individual’s testament of his or her own imperceptible divine revelation of conversion—or a desire for it—was adequate. In this way, Mather shields the ordinance of communion from imposters and retains its doctrinal integrity by relying on observational fact and experience, not faith.

Increase Mather’s involvement in the conversion debates of the seventeenth century represents a shift in the reliance of Puritans on doctrine and scripture for edification. Mather’s composition of both *Illustrious Providence* and *Kometographia* mark this change, indicating that
observation and experience were adequate means for religious instruction. Mather’s injection of this belief into his debates with Solomon Stoddard reveals that this same process could in fact safeguard Puritan doctrine from cultural outliers looking to upend it. This shift would continue in Boston’s smallpox epidemic in 1721 when Cotton Mather, learning from his father, took up the mantle as the family’s foremost intellectual, and would combat fellow Congregationalists with his scientific mind.

Cotton Mather and the Boston Smallpox Outbreak

The smallpox epidemic of 1721 erupted in Boston nearly thirty years following the witch-hunting epidemic that erupted in Salem. Although Cotton Mather was a key player in each episode, he is remembered for largely contradictory roles. For involvement in the former, certain academics credit Mather as a “proto-Enlightenment rationalist.” While connection to the latter is marked as an imbecility in his lengthy career, citing that the Salem Witchcraft Trials occurred “among too educated a populace, for us to dismiss it as mere ‘superstition’.” Further marking the disparity between these two events is the degree of criticism Mather endured during each incident. Although opposition to Mather during the events in Salem were present, he was looked to by the general court with alacrity for guidance during the trials; he operated largely free from resistance. However, during the Smallpox epidemic, Mather received profound resistance from both his Protestant brethren and Boston’s academic hegemony.

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54 Woodward, Prospero’s America, 207.
56 Opposition to Cotton came from the Quaker community and even his own father, Increase. However, his father only became outspoken once the trials were publicly viewed as unbridled. Cotton Mather’s degree of guilt in 1692 is a heated topic in historiography. For a concise, detailed perspective on this issue, see: Richard H. Werking, “‘Reformation Is Our Only Preservation’: Cotton Mather and Salem Witchcraft,” The William and Mary Quarterly, Vol. 29, No. 2 (Apr., 1972).
The incongruence of these two episodes is perhaps a reflection of the diminishing authority that the Puritan hegemony could exercise in matters of public discourse by the early eighteenth century. Or, more directly relating to Cotton Mather, his position as an emblem of Puritan authority witnessed in Salem in 1692 was waning by the Smallpox epidemic of 1721. Historian Carol Karlsen attributes this phenomenon to the inextricable link between witchcraft’s power in New England and the influence of Puritanism. She contends, “their simultaneous demise is understandable.” In other words, the belief in witchcraft lessened—as it did after the Salem Trials—as confidence in Puritanism waned. In 1721, public belief in witchcraft was largely a memory and Puritanism was impacted accordingly.

When Cotton Mather articulated the benefits of inoculation to the Boston community, he did so as an underdog. And as an underdog, Mather was in a significantly distinctive position compared with the likes of John Winthrop and his own father, Increase. As will be demonstrated, Boston’s smallpox epidemic marks one of the initial incidences where a Puritan authority endeavored to bring change to a resistant public, not the other way around. For the first time, Cotton Mather, as a Puritan authority, was in opposition of prevalent opinion. In this regard, Mather was wedged between the elites of Boston’s scientific community and its outspoken lay and clerical Protestant populations. A defense of inoculation, therefore, had to weather the criticisms of both factions. Mather, in order to successfully appeal to both, had to design an argument for inoculation that was both scientifically minded and theologically sound. By virtue of this actuality alone, Mather could only efficaciously argue for inoculation as a Puritan scientist; fortunately, he was.

By 1721, Cotton Mather was a well-established man of science. He was a member of London’s Royal Society and was a frequent correspondent for the organization. In the same year

[57] Karlsen, The Devil in the Shape of a Woman, 255.
as the epidemic, Mather would publish *The Christian Philosopher*, America’s first complete composition on science that was revered across the trans-Atlantic landscape. Importantly, *The Christian Philosopher* argued for the harmonization of science and religion through natural theology. Of course, Cotton Mather did not develop these interests on his own; rather he inherited several of his scientific and intellectual interests from his father, Increase. Profoundly revering his father, Cotton Mather desired to achieve many of the same earthly successes his father had accomplished, including a failed bid for Harvard’s presidency.

Growing up as a third-generation Puritan, Cotton Mather was raised to defend himself in a trans-Atlantic world that grew exceedingly interconnected. Restoration England held few sympathies for the Puritan cause, and New England Puritans found themselves frequently on the defense because of it. Significantly, Increase Mather was introduced to this world as a young adult, but Cotton grew up within it. This, likely more than any other reason, positively situated Cotton Mather to withstand the criticisms he received during the epidemic, in a way even his father could not have maintained. The fact that Cotton Mather seemed poised to successfully support inoculation in 1721 was a combination of his father’s intellectual influences along with the lessons he learned from the world in which he came of age. Cotton Mather was a man of science and religion because the early eighteenth-century world demanded it from him.

Despite his intellectual readiness, what positioned Cotton Mather as an underdog and what made the laity resistant to his defense of inoculation is integral to the narrative of Puritanism and science in colonial New England. By 1721, Puritan authorities argued that reason was the preferred method for experiencing religion, not inward experience, as it once had been and would be once again following the Great Awakening.

Cotton Mather’s treatise *A Man of Reason* opines: “The Man who does not Hearken to Reason does Rebel against the Glorious

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58 Hall, *Worlds of Wonder*, 244.
God, who has placed man under the Guidance of Reason." The distinction between science and Puritanism grew less distinguished throughout the seventeenth century, and as this occurred, a fracture grew between the laity and clerical populations. So, it is important to note that unlike John Winthrop and Increase Mather in the seventeenth century, who were both defending established Puritan hegemony against outside opposition, Cotton Mather, as a Puritan, was the opposing force that was confronting broader public sentiments. This fact is crucial to understanding how Mather was able to reconcile his defense of inoculation with his religious beliefs, because by this time a reasoned and disciplined theology was part and parcel of Puritanism. Natural theology was the backbone of Mather’s piety and it influenced his understanding of doctrine.

Cotton Mather regarded Boston’s smallpox epidemic as a pestilence to be feared and he ardently believed that overcoming it necessitated preparation. The language he uses to refer to the epidemic in his journals is telling: “the grievous calamity,” “the horrid Venom,” and “the destroying angel.” Such biblical terms highlight the severity of the incident to Mather, and they help reveal the degree in which Mather interpreted the epidemic as nothing short of catastrophic. Although several of his religious contemporaries agreed with him on this point, many of them disagreed on how to manage it.

The main theological criticism attacking Mather’s justification for inoculation is perfectly logical as the American literature specialist Robert Tindol aptly summarizes it:

If God sends a disease as punishment, and if God can heal those diseases as a lesson in morals for the sufferer…then something is deeply wrong with using new

59 Cotton Mather, A man of reason: A brief essay to demonstrate, that all men should hearken to reason (Boston: John Edwards, 1718).
technology that circumvents God’s role and precludes many persons obtaining inoculations from ever receiving God’s chastisement.\textsuperscript{61}

In other words, inoculation interferes with God’s divine plan by not only aiding a person to recovery but by inhibiting God’s ability to punish them with the smallpox in the future. Or, as an anti-inoculator so eloquently worded it in 1721, “…the best means of deliverance from National Calamities are those of Gods appointment, not our own….”\textsuperscript{62}

By any set of standards, the arguments positioned against Mather were valid. To contest them, he would have to articulate how inoculation was not heretical, or, at the very least not in violation of God’s judgement. A broadside composed by both Mathers published in November of 1721 offered just that. It is a terse and rather simple justification for inoculation, citing one of the commandments: “Thou shalt not kill.”\textsuperscript{63} It is a seemingly straightforward argument but it is more convincing than it initially appears. Cotton’s reasoning is this: if inoculation has been proven to save lives, then denying individuals a transplanting of the smallpox for inoculation is the equivalent of willfully killing them.\textsuperscript{64} Cotton Mather would retrospectively apply this to mean that any citizens who had died from smallpox in Boston because they were denied access to inoculation were victims of a town “guilty before the Lord.”\textsuperscript{65} Anti-inoculators, Cotton Mather

\begin{footnotes}
\item[62] Grainger, \textit{The Imposition of Inoculation As a Duty Religiously Considered In a Letter to a Gentleman in the Country Inclin’d to admit it} (Boston: Nicholas Boone, 1721), 4.
\item[63] Increase Mather and Cotton Mather, \textit{Several reasons proving that inoculating or transplanting the small pox, is a lawful practice, and that it is blessed by God for the saving of many life} (Boston: S. Kneeland for J. Edwards, 1721).
\item[64] By this time, there was substantial evidence suggesting that inoculation was a viable means of prevention. Its discussion had been circulating within London’s Royal Society during the early eighteenth century. Robert Tindol has suggested in \textit{Getting the Pox off All Their Houses} that Cotton Mather was first convinced of inoculation because of his role in the Royal Society. For a more comprehensive understanding of the science driving inoculation in the eighteenth century, see: Emanuel Timonius, \textit{Procuring the Small Pox by Incision, or Inoculation; as it Has for Some Time Been Practiced at Constantinople} (1714).
\item[65] Mather, \textit{Diary of Cotton Mather}, Volume 2, 641.
\end{footnotes}
would lament, contributed to Boston becoming an “emblem of Hell” during the height of the epidemic.\(^{66}\)

In spite of his reasoned defense, anti-inoculators continued to harass Cotton Mather. The pinnacle of the conflict erupted when Cotton Mather inoculated his own son, affectionately referred to as “Sammy” in Mather’s journals. After this action was made public, an unidentified opponent of Mather propelled a homemade bomb through the window of his residence. The bomb failed to detonate, but it deeply unnerved Mather, leading him to conclude that Satan had overtaken Boston.\(^{67}\)

Cotton Mather’s journal is filled with pejorative sentiments about Boston during the epidemic. To him, anti-inoculators failed to appreciate the direness of Boston’s current state of depravity by failing to recognize that inoculation offered a way back towards providence, not away from it. Cotton Mather, in other words, upheld that the science of inoculation offered a pathway to God’s design. It is a remarkable example of cooperation between science and religion because Mather’s support of inoculation for pious ends precipitated some of the earliest examples of clinical trials which endeavored to quantify the efficacy of inoculation.\(^{68}\)

Although Mather was able to defend inoculation in scientific and theological terms, there remained a strong dichotomy in how his actions were perceived by an audience that was divided because of it. For Mather’s Royal Society constituents, his involvement in inoculation bolstered his standing within the cohort. While the lay communities of Boston perceived his advocacy for inoculation as detrimental to his reputation. Cotton Mather was a product of his time, but it becomes hard to overlook that his actions during the epidemic and his actions leading up to it

\(^{66}\) Ibid., 641.
\(^{67}\) Ibid., 635.
isolate him from the popular religion of New England. In this sense, Mather is defiantly reinventing the discourse of New England Puritanism.

There is an interesting transformation occurring among the Puritan hegemony during the eighteenth century and it is exemplified by the role that Cotton Mather maintained during the Boston epidemic. Robert Tindol identifies this change in a reference of his own to Mather, “…several instances display his tendency to privilege the discovery of new knowledge about the natural world over the religious compatibility of that new knowledge.”69 This thinking suggests that the pursuit for discovery in the natural sciences among Puritan intellectuals during the eighteenth century began to supplant the desire to satisfy doctrinal principles. Doctrine and dogma were becoming pliable and they adapted as Puritan authorities saw fit. Change was in the air.

The most striking transformations in Puritanism by 1721 were occurring from within, at the highest levels of the clergy, and the laity were by far the most resistant to its coming. Not only was Puritan authority diminishing within the colony, so to was doctrinal rigor. As Cotton Mather increasingly relied on his scientific mind and his reasoning skills, a persistent need for doctrinal precision in divining God’s will wavered, and it was replaced with reason. Cotton Mather asserted this best, “…the Great GOD is infinitely gratified in beholding the Displays of His Own infinite Power and Wisdom in the Works which He has made; but it is also a most acceptable Gratification to Him, when such of His Works are the rational beholders of themselves.”70 Discipline and education, of course, had always been hallmarks of Puritan culture, but never had the pursuit for reason and natural theology been at the forefront of the Puritan

69 Tindol, The Pox off All Their Houses, 2.
mind so completely as they were by the early eighteenth century. According to Mather, “…if there be Scripture for anything, lay this down for a Maxim: There is a Reason for it.”

Conclusion

From 1630 through 1700 New England was dominated by Puritan hegemony. During that time, several attempts by the region’s mavericks were endeavored to bring change to Puritan culture. These outliers challenged the Puritan orthodoxy and indicted them for hypocrisy and self-righteousness. Popular culture often reflects on these events as examples of abject intolerance, which taints the legacy that Puritan’s leave behind. Unfortunately, a legacy of intolerance invokes such phrases as narrow-mindedness, bigoted, and resistant to change. It is these phrases that are most often conjured when history remembers the Puritans. However, dissidents typically labored to destabilize the status quo of Puritan society by subverting the charted course that providence had laid out for them, or, at least that is how the Puritan leaders perceived it. Resistance to change, therefore, was often not a broad stroke of intolerance, but a focused and specific resistance that grew from the conviction that these particular dissidents threatened the well being of the colony.

Significantly, there was profound change in Puritanism throughout the time between John Winthrop and Cotton Mather. Here it can be seen that the Puritan mind evolved throughout the course of the seventeenth century to conform to the burgeoning world of early modern science that dominated the trans-Atlantic world. The evolution of this process can be best described as a

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71 Cotton Mather, *A Man of Reason.*
72 For Samuel Gorton, Puritan leaders were the modern equivalent of the biblical pharisees. It was his belief, as it was his followers, that the Puritan hegemony perverted the will and word of God. The source of this perversion, contests Gorton, is an educated ministry that was inherently authoritarian. Interestingly, he dedicated this work to Oliver Cromwell. This argument is laid out fully in: Samuel Gorton, *An Antidote Against the Common Plague Of the World* (London: J.M. for A. Crook, 1657).
transformation from religion informing science to science informing religion, and glimpses of this change in Puritan thinking can be captured and identified when analyzing Puritan elites’ response to dissent. What is most fascinating about this evolution of the Puritan mind and its impact on the doctrine and the dogma of the seventeenth century is that it too was met with intense resistance, but not from other Puritan leaders. The source of this resistance originated within the laity.

As mentioned, by the early eighteenth century, reason was defended by Puritan leaders as the most effective method to understanding God. This was a large departure from the method recommended initially to most Protestants: inward experience. Several historians have analyzed how these diverging theologies regarding the uncovering of Godly knowledge fueled the fracturing of the lay and clerical populations, which ultimately led to the spiritual eruption known as the Great Awakening.73 I agree with this position and would like to further it by suggesting that as New England’s Puritan leaders developed an increasingly scientific mind, they slowly developed a process of disconnecting themselves from a lay population that increasingly relied on zealotry and inward experience to define their faith. In this regard, the Great Awakening served as a counterbalance to the disciplined and scientific mind of the Puritan luminaries in the preceding century.

The imbroglio that was the Salem Witch Trials, therefore, cannot be solely responsible for the waning of Puritan authority in the eighteenth century. Rather, I suggest that the fallout from the witchcraft trials worked in tandem with the fracturing of the lay and clerical populations which in turn further diminished Puritan authority. In other words, the Salem Witchcraft Trials were a tipping point. The fallout of the trials caused the clerical population to turn to reason and

rational thinking with an unprecedented fervor, which, in turn, prompted an opposite reaction from the laity: to exercise inward experience and religious enthusiasm with an unprecedented intensity.  

Collectively, this places America’s religious history at a crossroads by the time of the Great Awakening. On one path exists the diminishing Puritan authority that had come to define their piety by primarily reason and logic. On the other path, a laity population growing rapidly in numbers turning to the likes of George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards to reestablish the older moral order. Some historians have suggested that the revolutionary sentiments displayed by America’s founding fathers were derivative of the passion and zealotry of the colonial lay populations witnessed during the Great Awakening. If this is the case, specifically in New England, then one of the most mythologized periods of America’s history is potentially rooted in a movement that was explicitly at odds with the disciplined, reasoned, and educated Puritan authorities. If this is extrapolated one step further, the question, therefore, can be asked: if the passionate roots of America’s republicanism are incompatible with our Puritan forefathers, are they also incompatible with scientific thinking?

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74 Karlsen, *The Devil in the Shape of a Woman* arrives at a similar conclusion in her book.

75 Although there appears to be a growing consensus among historians that the American Revolution would have transpired regardless of the Great Awakening, there is still debate regarding the degree of contribution that the Great Awakening had on the American Revolution’s success. Perhaps a more historically accurate question would then be this: did the fervor generated by the success of the American Revolution unbridle the religious fervor of the Great Awakening? Or, taking this idea a step further: do the values of American Republicanism stimulate the zealotry and emotion typified in the Great Awakening? See: John M. Murrin, “No Awakening, No Revolution? More Counterfactual Speculations,” *Reviews in American History*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Jun., 1983), pp. 161-171.
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