

New England Puritans: “the Lord’s FREE People”

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The relationship between Puritanism and the concept of liberty has been controversial since the very origin of this religious sect in the XVIth. century. The Puritan defence of the dignity of the individual contributed to the dissolution of the feudal system in Great Britain and constituted one of the basic pillars in the development of capitalistic and parliamentary systems: during the 17th. century the growing middle-class saw the basis for a new social and political order in this doctrine that proposed the “integral sanctification of ordinary life” (Taylor 221) and labour as the only means to serve God and obey his calling.

But the Puritan sect was not homogeneous: the main branch within this religious group was constituted by Presbyterian Puritans, who defended the model of a “comprehensive, national but Calvinistic church tightly disciplined from the centre” (Brogan 44), with membership enforced by the state and ruled by “a hierarchy of governing bodies, from the national assembly down through the regional classis to the presbytery of the parish church, consisting of the minister and elders” (Miller 2). The existence of clear disagreements concerning church organization among Puritans became evident in the 17th. century: some followers of the Puritan ideal proposed a congregational¹ model based on a free covenant with God. According to their model each church was particular and each congregation had the power to choose -more or less democratically- their ministers and elders. Membership was voluntary: only those willing to enter into the covenant with God could become members of the congregation. This congregational model of a covenanted church was to become prominent in New England.

Although the religious approach of the first Puritans who settled in New England had its origin in the Old World, the development of Puritanism in the New Continent was different from the development of the English movement. Concepts such as order, liberty or authority achieved special relevance for these people, who had to confront the hardships of the wilderness in order to build a new community in a new continent.

As it has been traditionally considered the main reason for their migration was the religious purpose of establishing a community of God’s will where they could recover the purity and innocence of the first Christian communities. But in their early texts this religious purpose is usually translated in terms of liberty: their great religious mission required the achievement of freedom, so the development of their mission had to be parallel to a specific process of liberation.

¹ Some groups went even further than Congregationalism in their rejection of a national church and decided to separate themselves from the Church of England: they were known as Separatists and became the famous Pilgrims.

Both William Bradford in his account of the Puritan Pilgrimage to New England in 1620, and Edward Johnson in his narration of the Great Migration that arrived there in 1630 resort to the concept of liberty in order to explain and justify their religious migration.

Although Bradford and Johnson belonged to two different Puritan sects⁴ in their texts both point to the propagation of the Word of God and the achievement of freedom as two interrelated reasons for their migration. In fact, liberty was for them a direct consequence of their understanding of the Bible: Puritans were the “Lord’s free people” (Bradford 5)⁵ precisely because they had been endowed with the capacity to discern what they considered to be the “liberty of the Gospel”, which consisted mainly in the liberation from the “antichristian bondage” represented by the prelacy. Only the Word of God could bring the light of the truth, and only the knowledge of this truth could liberate human beings from the yoke of church hierarchy. Since Puritans rejected everything for which they could find no evidence in the Bible, the Word of God was understood as the force that freed human beings from any kind of bondage to anything external to the Holy Scripture-f.i., the prelacy-: the Gospel is presented in these texts not as the rule dictated by God in order to restrict human freedom, but as the main expression of the human liberation from non-biblical impositions. According to Johnson, their mission required both their liberation from servitude to the prelacy and their acceptance of God’s service: only the “servants of Christ” and His Word could enjoy the kind of pure liberty taught by the Gospel, and if they wanted to be “servants of Christ” they had to cease being servants of the prelates. Although the Word of God meant liberty only as long as human beings remained within the limits determined by the Scripture, these texts resort to the Gospel as a liberating force rather than as a repressing rule. In spite of the fact that the liberty of the Word of God did not imply any kind of freedom to choose -it simply meant a paradoxical imposition of Christ’s freedom- the Gospel is in these texts an expression of liberty rather than an instrument of control.

Although both Bradford and Johnson resort to the concept of liberty as one of the reasons for their migration, there is a subtle difference in their treatment of this theme. Bradford’s Pilgrims are “the Lord’s free people” (Bradford 5), whilst Johnson’s Puritans are the “servants” of Christ; the two terms do not exclude each other but can help us clarify the distance existing between the Pilgrim and

2 Bradford, William. *Of Plymouth Plantation*.

3 Johnson, Edward. *Wonder-Working Providence of Sion’s Saviour*.

4 The Puritans that arrived in New England in 1620 on board the *Mayflower* were Separatists: they represented an extreme expression of the defense of the covenant model which meant free membership and the democratic election of ministers. Their utter rejection of a national church was considered a kind of treason in England and so they were rejected by every other religious -even Puritan- sect. The second -and probably more representative- Puritan group arrived in New England ten years later, and although they defended and adopted the congregational model they were not Separatists: they were an economically strong and well-organized group armed with a royal charter that established the basis of their social and political organization.

5 The quotations from W. Bradford’s *Of Plymouth Plantation*, E. Johnson’s *Wonder-Working Providence in Sion’s Saviour*, T. Shepard’s *A Defense of the Answer*, J. Winthrop’s *Journal* and *Speech to the General Court*, N. Ward’s *The Simple Cobbler of Aggawan*, J. Cotton’s *Limitation of Government* and J. Wise’s *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* are taken from Perry Miller’s anthology: *The American Puritans: Their Prose and Poetry* (see BIBLIOGRAPHY).

the Puritan need of liberty. Bradford's Pilgrims constituted a Separatist branch of the Puritan sect and had suffered persecution and imprisonment in England before moving to the Low Countries and then to New England. As a member of this community Bradford knew the importance of freedom. His text is the story of a search for liberty for the sake of religion: his description of their pilgrimage in Europe reproduces the feeling of unsufferable imprisonment of a group of people rejected and persecuted at home, and at the same time not allowed to go away. Persecution and the precarious economic situation of these people define Bradford's emphasis on practical matters: liberty is for him not only a religious right but also a fundamental practical need. He justifies the Pilgrimage as the result of a combination of four religious and practical reasons: among them liberty is the first one and it underlies the other three. In contrast, "the propagating and advancing of the Gospel of the kingdom of Christ in those remote parts of the world" is the last -" (and which not least)" (Bradford 12)-reason mentioned. The prominence of the search for freedom is confirmed by the *compact* which the Pilgrims signed on board the *Mayflower* in order to protect their freedom and organize their community without violating their liberty: the *Mayflower Compact*, which contains the very rudiments of a democratic order, is a firm reaffirmation of their right to "use their own liberty, for none had the power to command them" (Bradford 18).

Johnson's Puritans were living under very different conditions in England: although they had been affected by the English trade depression, they were not suffering serious economic pressures, and although the threat of the English prisons was real, it was not so imminent for them as it had been for Bradford's Pilgrims. They were not Separatists and had not suffered the violent rejection and repression that the Pilgrims had experienced. Accordingly Johnson's account describes the motives for their migration almost exclusively in religious terms: they had a specific divine commission, and the performance of this commission required the liberation from the prelacy. Liberty was a consequence of their mission rather than the practical, immediate cause of their escape. In fact the subordination of liberty to the Gospel was the only acceptable way to justify their escape from England ... The understanding of their search for freedom in practical, lay terms would have marked their migration with the stain of cowardice.

The accusations of cowardice and treason made by the English Puritans during the English Civil War obliged the New England Puritans to justify their escape in unequivocal religious terms: Thomas Shepard organizes his answer to these accusations around the concept of liberty. According to him their escape from England, where the truth of the Word was being "smothered up in closed prisons", and their consequent search for freedom were just their answer to God's calling, their service to the Lord: New England Puritans had served God by means of escaping through the door of liberty as others had served Him by means of suffering imprisonment and war. The gifts that they had received from God had determined their service as searchers for liberty and preachers of "the blessed ministry of the word" (Shepard 27). Their escape was not an act of treason or cowardice but an act of obedience: the liberty of the Gospel was not only a privilege but also a duty, and their search for freedom to preach the Word of God had been precisely their divine duty.

Johnson's understanding of liberty exclusively in religious terms finds expression in the first reactions of the Massachusetts Bay Puritans: when they arrived in New England they adopted the congregational model proposed by the first Pilgrims, but they substituted their Royal Charter for the Pilgrims' Compact⁶ and soon began to impose restrictions on their liberties for the sake of ORDER.

The concept of liberty had been useful and productive in order to justify their migration, but as soon as they settled they realized that the organization and control of the new plantations required the

6 The Mayflower Compact "established a civil government under which the colonists would create congregations and profess loyalty to the Crown. The Majority would rule under their agreement" (Silverman 20). The Royal Charter determined that only *freemen* -stockholders of the *Massachusetts Bay Company* and members of the church- could participate in the government of the plantation.

strict limitation of liberty. Accordingly they substituted the emphasis on order for the wish of liberty, and the democratic basis of the covenant model was dissolved into the aristocratic fundaments of theocracy. In the hands of the Massachusetts Bay rulers the notion of the covenant lost its essence as a free compact and became a new instrument of repression.

Discipline and authority were keywords in the defence of social order. In his *Journal* Winthrop records how in his confrontation with Governor Dudley the strict discipline defended by the latter was considered by the ministers more adequate for the organization of the new communities than his own proposal of lenity.

..., and that hereby factions began to grow among the people, some adhering more to the old governor, Mr. Winthrop, and others to the late governor, Mr. Dudley-the former carrying matters with more lenity, and the latter with more severity- ...

Then the ministers were desired to consider the question by the next morning, and to set down a rule in the case. The next morning, they delivered their several reasons, which all assorted to this conclusion, that strict discipline, both in criminal offenses and in martial affairs, was more needful in plantations than in a settled state, as tending to the honor and safety of the Gospel (Winthrop 39-40).

In order to solve the conflict between liberty and authority Winthrop suggests in his *Speech to the General Court* his well-known distinction between *natural* liberty and *civil* or *moral* liberty. *Natural* liberty was similar to that enjoyed by animals whilst *moral* liberty was ruled -and in the hands of the Massachusetts Bay rulers restricted- by the covenant that defined the relationship between men and between men and God. The fundamental difference between these two concepts depended on their approach to authority: natural liberty was wild and consequently it was not subjected to any kind of civil or moral authority, whilst *moral* liberty was the liberty given by God to do what was "good, just and honest" (Winthrop 92). Since only the authorities could interpret God's Word and determine what was "good, just and honest", moral liberty represented a form of complete submission to authority. In Winthrop's *Speech* the emphasis is no longer on the liberating power of the Gospel but rather on the *limitation* of liberty suggested by the Scripture. God had given the gift of liberty to the human beings, but He had also established its limits: human beings could act freely but only in accordance with God's will, and God's will was determined by the authorities.

Nathaniel Ward in *The Simple Cobler of Aggawan* describes the relationship between men and authority in similar terms:

Authority must have power to make and keep people honest; people, honesty to obey authority (Ward 107)

Authority had to make people honest because honesty meant obedience and order: the system was a vicious circle, where everything had its beginning and its end in authority. Authority governed and people simply had to let themselves be governed.

The establishment of order and control seemed to require even the sacrifice of individual freedom. According to Winthrop the liberty to "do what is good in your own eyes" was too close to the "natural corrupt liberties" of the individual, the kind of liberties that show no respect for authority.

If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties and *will do what is good in your own eyes*, you will not endure the last weight of authority, but will murmur, and oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke (Winthrop 93)

Authority was then completely necessary in order to determine the limitations of liberty and so keep the devil away. Whilst in the historical accounts of the first settlements the devil was associated with the "unchristian bondage" of the prelacy that deprived human beings of the liberty dictated by the Gospel, in the texts dealing with the organization of the first plantations Satan and his power are rather associated with the violation of the obedience to the authority and the consequent practice of non-christian liberties. Nathaniel Ward -f.i.- considered that the religious liberty imposed by Oliver Cromwell and his followers in England in the 1640's had transformed this country into "the devil's dancing school" (Ward 101): by means of the toleration of other sects the English were opening the

door of non-Christian freedom to let Satan in. Ward resorts to Saint Augustine's words in order to justify his identification of liberty with the threat of evil:

Augustine's tongue had not owed his mouth one pennyrent though it had never spake word more in it but this: "*Nullum malum pejus libertate errandi*" ["No evil is worse than liberty for the erring"] (Ward 100)

The "erring" were of course those who dared to oppose the truth of the Word of God as determined by the authorities. According to Ward true religion "strictly binds every conscience to contend earnestly for the truth" (Ward 97), so "liberty for the erring" meant the violation of this commitment to the truth -as determined by the authorities-, and even an unconscious alliance with Satan.

The threat of Satanic damnation was the main weapon used by the Puritan rulers in order to justify their condemnation of those forms of liberty which could threaten their authority: liberty was dangerous because it contained the seed of damnation. John Cotton resorts to a similar argument in his *Limitation of Government* in order to explain his rejection of what he considers to be more than "full liberty": since according to him unlimited liberty was just an invitation to the devil's corruption, the limitation of liberty was the best way to fight the devil's seduction. According to John Cotton even the liberty of the magistrates had to be restricted. Nevertheless he draws a curious comparison between the liberty of the sea and the liberty of the magistrates in order to explain the violent consequences that an excessive restriction of their power could imply:

If you pinch the sea of its liberty, though it be walls of stone or brass, it will beat them down. So with the magistrates: stint them where God hath not stinted them, and if they were walls of brass, they would beat them down, and it is meet they should; but give them the liberty God allows, and if it be but a wall of sand it will keep them (Cotton 87)

Only God could set the limits of liberty, and only the Puritan rulers had the power to interpret God's will and so define these limits.

Since the great Puritan mission was the propagation of the Word of God, and the Gospel was their basic rule, language, speech and words were basic ingredients in their understanding of liberty. They had run away from England because there they could not preach the Word of God freely, and they had moved to New England to persecute all those who dared to speak freely against their own understanding of the Word-t.i., against their authority. They found a justification for their condemnation of the liberty to speak in the Genesis: the human fall in paradise had been the ultimate expression of the devil's capacity to seduce human beings thanks to his liberty to speak; the devil's free use of words in order to seduce Eve had caused the human disobedience of the Word of God. The devil's language had submerged human beings in a linguistic chaos: his use of language had originated a divergence between what was said and what was done, and had so *liberated* words from deeds. Linguistic liberty in this sense was understood as a sign of Satan's power to misguide human beings with his false words: any word freely pronounced against the Word of God -t.i., against the ministers' interpretation of the Word of God- was considered false and understood as a sign of devilish liberty. The liberty to speak was an instrument of the devil that had to be condemned and persecuted.

In only a few years Puritans had ceased being the persecuted and had become the persecutors; they had forgotten their search for freedom and had become the ultimate expression of the defence of authority and order even at the expense of freedom. Liberty was no longer a desirable dream but the threat of anarchy and social disorder.

But not all the first generation Puritans agreed with the rules imposed by their rulers. Among the dissenting voices Roger Williams's occupies a prominent position: nobody spoke about matters concerning liberty or the rejection of "persecution for cause of conscience" (Williams 59) more clearly than he did. His firm defence of individual freedom as a natural right that should be warranted by every civil government was understood as a serious threat by the Puritan powers of Salem, and he was expelled from the Massachusetts Bay territory. His doctrine concerning liberty is close to the proposals made by John Wise at the beginning of the 18th century. In his *Vindication of the Government of New England Churches* John Wise defends the natural rights of the individual and

suggests the democratic idea that the civil power should simply mean the free and voluntary sacrifice of man's natural liberty for the sake of the public good.

Williams was not the only dissenting voice: the conflict between liberty and authority lies at the very heart of the famous Antinomian crisis. Although the Antinomian crisis had a theological basis the reaction of the Puritan rulers was to a certain extent dictated by their fear to lose their authority - which they considered basic for the well-being of the community. This crisis could be understood as the fundamental expression of the general shift from the emphasis on liberty to the preeminence of order and authority: it is the best example of how authority and order had become the ruling concepts in the Massachusetts Bay plantations.

The Puritan order was based on a *covenant of grace*, which meant that salvation could only be achieved through God's grace and not by means of good works. In spite of this fact they considered that even the *visible Saints* -those who had received God's grace and had been so chosen for salvation- had to live a *christian life*, which constituted the process of *sanctification*. The Antinomians identified *sanctification* with the *covenant of works*, which defined the relationship between men and God in the Catholic church; they rejected *sanctification* as a treason of what they called the *covenant of free grace*. According to the Antinomians the process of salvation required only what was known as the *justification* of the individual, whilst according to the Massachusetts Bay rulers *justification* was only the step previous to *sanctification* in the process of salvation. *Justification* consisted in the "legal ascribing of Christ's virtue to an individual's account" (Miller 48); by means of this process the *justified* person was endowed with God's grace and could be so considered a *visible saint* -i.e., chosen for salvation. According to the Antinomians since the Holy Ghost dwelt in every *justified* saint, each *saint* should obey simply his own *holy* impulse from within, without being subjected to the rules of *sanctification* and the works proper to a christian life.

Although the Antinomian crisis found its seed in Master Cotton's defence of the "indwelling of the person of the Holy Ghost in a believer" and the possibility of maintaining "a personal union with the Holy Ghost" (Winthrop 50-51) the Antinomians were soon forced to accept what Ward called "free liberty to keep away from us" (Ward 97): in other words, they were repressed and expelled from Massachusetts. In spite of the theological reasons given in order to justify the persecution of the Antinomians, it is easy to discern the existence of more practical reasons for their repression: the Puritan rulers saw their authority threatened by the Antinomian doctrine that proposed the complete submission of one's will DIRECTLY to the Holy Ghost, and only to the Holy Ghost, not to God's ministers and their rule. The authority of the Puritan rulers was based on their power to interpret God's will and their capacity to decide what was "good, just and honest" in a Christian life; the Antinomian defence of the indwelling of the Holy Ghost in EVERY believer and the consequent personal individual union with God, as well as their rejection of *sanctification* meant the liberation of the *justified* person from the obligation of living a Christian life guided by the rules imposed by magistrates and ministers. The Antinomian proposals were considered by the Puritan rulers as an utter defense of ethical anarchy.

Roger Williams, the Antinomians and to a certain extent Thomas Hooker in Connecticut⁷ serve as evidence of the disconformity of some sectors of the Puritan population who saw how the original promise of liberty was being more and more repressed under the rule and authority of ministers, magistrates, governors ... The original democratic ideal of the covenant model and the defence of fundamental liberty were rescued by the 18th century thinkers and were to constitute the basic principles in Jefferson's Declaration of Independence.

⁷ Thomas Hooker represented a liberal trend among the New England ministers: he and his followers moved from Massachusetts to the Connecticut Valley, where they founded a new plantation. The basis of the organization of this plantation was a social compact: Hooker "wanted a government chosen by all for the welfare of all" (Silverman 24)

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