Worlds of Wonder, Days of Judgment
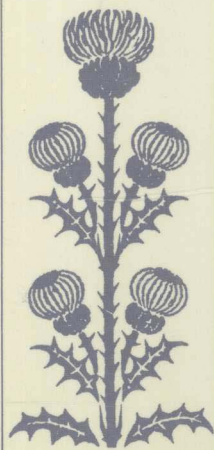
Popular Religious Belief in Early New England

David D. Hall

WORLDS OF WONDER, DAYS OF JUDGMENT

POPULAR RELIGIOUS BELIEF
IN EARLY NEW ENGLAND

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THE FAITHFUL SHEPHERD:
A History of the New England Ministry in the
Seventeenth Century
(1972)

THE ANTINOMIAN CONTROVERSY, 1636–1638:
A Documentary History
(1968)

Co-editor
NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES
IN THE HISTORY OF THE BOOK:
America, 1639–1876
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SAINTS AND REVOLUTIONARIES:
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SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY NEW ENGLAND
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PRINTING AND SOCIETY IN EARLY AMERICA
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WORLDS OF WONDER,
DAYS OF JUDGMENT

For

JOHN, JEFFREY, and HUGH

Now so bad we are that the world is stripped of love and of terror. Here came the other night an Aurora [Borealis] so wonderful, a curtain of red and blue and silver glory, that in any other age or nation it would have moved the awe and wonder of men and mingled with the profoundest sentiments of religion and love, and we all saw it with cold, arithmetical eyes, we knew how many colors shone, how many degrees it extended, how many hours it lasted, and of this heavenly flower we beheld nothing more: a primrose by the brim of the river of time.

Shall we not wish back again the Seven Whistlers, the Flying Dutchman, the lucky and unlucky days, and the terrors of the Day of Doom?

    —EMERSON in his journal, September 14, 1839

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INTRODUCTION

THE PEOPLE of seventeenth-century New England lived in a world that had not one but several different meanings. This book describes the cluster of those meanings that we designate as "religion"— the mentality of the supernatural, the symbolism of the church and sacraments, the ritual enclosing of sickness, death, and moral disobedience, the self-perception of "sinners" in the presence of a judging God. More exactly, this book is about religion as lay men and women knew and practiced it. Mine is a history of the religion of the people, or popular religion, in early New England.

Religion in seventeenth-century New England encompassed set procedures and precise locations. The pace of feeling quickened and emotions became more intense on Sundays in the meetinghouse. But religion was embedded in the fabric of everyday life. It colored how you thought about your children and your parents. It entered into perceptions of community, and of the world that lay beyond New England. Religion achieved system in the tight order of the catechism. Yet in the flow of experience it was partial, ambiguous, and even contradictory. Empowering with its gift of spiritual renewal, it could also result in dark feelings of unworthiness. It added to the fearfulness of life, even as it reassured the faithful of God's providence. And though its claims were total—what was more important than preparing for the Day of Judgment?—people overlaid these claims with others that arose from family obligations and the structures of community.

In describing the religion of the people, I hope to indicate some of the ways that culture works. We may think of culture as both ordered and disordered, or, as I prefer to say, ambivalent. It has multiple dimen-

sions; it presents us with choice even as it also limits or restrains the possibilities for meaning. What I attempt in this book is to sketch some of the possibilities that were present to the people of New England, and to suggest how they may have acted on them. In the main I have ignored the rich history of the "Puritan" movement.[1] I also pass by most of the vocabulary of religion as we find it in creeds and catechisms of the times. These are important, indeed crucial, matters. But I have preferred to describe matters that are less familiar to us, or that have been misinterpreted. Above all, I have tried to deal with the vexing question of the relationship between the people and the clergy. At the center of this description of popular religion stands a political, social, and theological circumstance, the authority of the men who held office as religious teachers. In what ways was this authority effective? In what ways was it rejected or its consequences blunted?

To raise these questions is to invite definition of the term "popular religion." In borrowing this term from historians who have studied religion and society in early modern Europe,[2] I have come to realize that its meaning for my story must emerge from the circumstances of New England in the seventeenth century. These were not the circumstances to which Europeans were accustomed. The differences are great enough to force us to revise the very sense of "popular religion."

From the vantage of his personal situation, the Anglo-American novelist Henry James was unusually aware of the differences between Europe and America, and how they had affected the American writer. Describing the career of Nathaniel Hawthorne, James paused to enumerate the "items of high civilization" that were absent in America and whose absence gave our culture its "simplicity":

> No sovereign, no court, no personal loyalty, no aristocracy, no church, no clergy, no army, no diplomatic service, no country gentlemen, no palaces, no castles, nor manors, nor old country houses, nor parsonages, nor thatched cottages, nor ivied ruins; no cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches . . .[3]

In the spirit of this passage, it is tempting to enumerate the religious institutions and activities that were absent in seventeenth-century New England:

No cathedrals, nor abbeys, nor little Norman churches; no liturgy, as in the Book of Common Prayer; no tithes to pay the clergy, no ranks of bishop and archbishop, no church courts, nor processions of the clergy; no altars or candles, no prayers for the dead.

And let us move beyond the narrowly religious:

No saints days or Christmas, no weddings or church ales, no pilgrim-

ages, nor sacred places, nor relics or ex-votos; no "churching" after childbirth, no godparents or maypoles, no fairy tales, no dancing on the Sabbath, no carnival!

Events that were commonplace in much of Europe were not re-created in New England. Nor was this accidental. The differences ran deep into the structure of society and the structure of religion. Six main circumstances deserve close attention: the role of the "folk," the geography of religion, the relationship between church and state, the appeal of "radical" religion, the appeal of "magic," and the sway of literacy.

FOR MUCH of Christian Europe, it seems plausible to distinguish between two Christianities, the one that clerics taught, the other of the peasants or the lower social orders. The distinction rests on certain indisputable differences: the language of the clergy was Latin, they subscribed to points of doctrine less well understood by laymen, and they practiced a demanding way of life. The distinction also flows from the perception that European peasants clung to a "folk" culture that resisted the encroachments of official Christianity. Referring to the Middle Ages, a French historian has insisted that the religion of the clerics "had incompletely penetrated among the common people." As he sees the situation of these people, "their religious life was also nourished on a multitude of beliefs and practices which, whether the legacy of age-old magic or the more recent products of a civilization still extremely fertile in myths, exerted a constant influence upon official doctrine."[4] Others have suggested that this mixture lingered well into the early modern period. Summing up this point of view, a historian has declared more recently, "In religion, therefore, popular culture within the framework of the pre-Reformation church reflected limited mental horizons which rarely extended beyond the customary pattern of religious or semireligious rituals and observances or beyond local cults and traditions. Moreover, that religion had much in common with folk beliefs relating to the magical techniques of wizards and cunning folk."[5] According to this interpretation, most of these folk beliefs were eventually suppressed or simply faded away. But it is their persistence, their intermixture with orthodox belief, that defines popular religion in early modern Europe. We shall find that folk beliefs persisted in New England. Yet otherwise the situation was quite different, for the people who came to this region in the seventeenth century were not peasants but of "middling" status—yeomen, artisans, merchants, and housewives who knew how to articulate the principles of religion, and who shunned the "superstitions" of Catholicism. Emigration simplified the cultural system by making it more uniform.

We must start, therefore, by rejecting the conception of two separate religions, one rooted in folk ways of thinking, the other maintained by the clerics and their bourgeois allies.

In New England, too, space was much less consequential than in Europe. The significance of space was that religion varied with the distance between center and periphery. In outlying regions Christianity took on the character of "local" religion as distance turned into differences of style and understanding.[6] This was true in part because so many of the clergy were but poorly educated, and because so many others chose to live outside their parish. Either circumstance enabled ordinary people to ignore the duties of religion and perhaps to remain ignorant. But space did not have the same meaning in New England. Here, *no minister held office unless he was in residence*, a rule (and practice) obligated by the "congregational" structure of the church. Here, there was no court or urban center to which the more ambitious clergy moved; the social and the spatial order of New England was radically decentralized. Dispersed throughout a hundred towns, the clergy helped maintain a common system. They had all been trained alike; they all thought alike.[7]

A third point of difference concerns church and state. In most parts of Europe, church and state were closely allied. Every citizen was obliged to profess the religion of the king; everyone became a member of the church. The church itself had social functions to perform, and perhaps courts that imposed civil penalties; it owned vast properties, though also looking to the state for revenue. Such situations tended to arouse strong currents of anticlericalism, as in protests against tithes or in folk humor that mocked fat and overbearing clergy.[8] In contrast to the normal European system, the colonists eliminated all church courts, abolished tithes, and made church membership voluntary. Here too, although the civil magistrates were quick to act against dissent, the system of control did not include an Inquisition or a central group of clergy who enforced conformity. Nor could "censure" by a church "degrade or depose any man from any Civil dignity, office or Authority." Cooperation was offset by independence, and the power of the clergy was defined as merely "spiritual."[9] No longer agents of the civil state, and practicing, perforce, a life-style of asceticism, the New England clergy were less likely to arouse anticlericalism.

These clergy had their enemies. But we cannot define colonial popular religion as the worldview of those disaffected from official creeds. Somewhere in most European countries dissenters argued that Christianity promised universal redemption, that sin did not exist, that men possessed free will, that priests were superseded by new prophets, that the coming kingdom was at hand. Some of these beliefs were circulating in

England in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, though they gained their widest hearing in the period of the English Civil War, when the weakness of the church made it safe to express "radical" ideas. The sects that came and went throughout this period all gained spokesmen in New England. Yet never in the colonies did such groups attract many converts; and never did they speak for those resentful of their poverty. A few Baptists emerged in the 1640s and again two decades later, enough to organize a congregation of their own in 1665. Quaker missionaries worked hard after 1656 to gain converts, but without much success. Even the most prominent of the New England radicals, Samuel Gorton, was unable to recruit more than a handful of "Gortonists," and his group, which settled finally in Warwick, was dying out by 1670. To equate any of these groups with popular religion is to eliminate the majority of people; and it is the religion of that majority that I want to describe.[10]

Indifferent for the most part to the Quakers and the Baptists, ordinary people had more sympathy for ideas originating in the occult sciences. Many of the almanacs that every household used contained bits and pieces of astrology. Some people practiced magic to defend themselves from witchcraft, and some consulted fortune-tellers. It has been argued that such "magical" ideas and practices provided an alternative to Christianity.[11] But when New England ministers lashed out at "superstitions," their anger fell on an eclectic range of practices, from celebrating Christmas to nailing up horseshoes.[12] No war broke out between magic and religion, in part because the clergy also were attracted to occult ideas; it was they who wrote most of the almanacs, and in their response to the "wonder" they relied on older lore as much as any layman. As I argue in detail in a succeeding chapter, we do better if we perceive an accommodation between magic and religion than if we regard magic as somehow the substance of a different tradition.

One other way of putting boundaries around popular religion has been to propose that religion varies in accordance with the line that divides those who read from those who share an "oral culture." Did literacy have revolutionary consequences for one's worldview, or sustain other differentiating factors?[13] Whatever may have been the case for early modern Europe, the evidence is lacking from New England to uphold this argument. It seems likely that most people in New England learned to read as children. Of no less importance is the fact that everyone had access to the Bible in his native language, and to cheap books marketed especially for lay readers. Always there were some who did not own a Bible or lacked fluency in reading. But we can safely assume that most of the emigrants to New England had broken through into the world of print—though what this meant exactly will concern us in a moment.

All of these differences point to the influence of the Protestant Reformation in transforming the relationship between Christianity and the people. This one reason, this one cause, is why New England was so different from Catholic France and Italy. Consider that the Reformation forced a shift from Latin to the vernacular in the language of church services, that it opened up the Bible to lay men and women, that it drew laymen into church government, and that it affirmed a vernacular religion, as in a Book of Common Prayer.

Then too, consider that the Reformation was a people's movement; originating with the clergy, its motifs passed quickly into images and slogans that everyone could understand, and that many took up on their own.[14] Simple people—yeomen, housewives, even laborers—became Protestants in response to the liberating message of free grace. A church trial that took place in England in the 1530s reveals a boy of fifteen years who owned a primer and New Testament in English, and who described how

> divers poor men in the town of Chelmsford . . . bought the new testament of Jesus Christ and on sundays did sit reading [aloud] in lower end of church, and many would flock about them to hear their reading. . . .

In 1541 a church court in London was hearing evidence that certain Londoners, variously employed as bricklayers, shoemakers, plumbers, grocers, haberdashers, and servants, had rejected the mass and related ceremonies. Debate occurred in such settings as a Colchester inn to which "repair[ed]" a group of men and women who discussed in this setting the divinity of Christ, while others performed "Christian exercises."[15]

In these same years, Protestant ideas were also gaining ground among the clergy. William Tyndale, who encountered Martin Luther's writings in the 1520s, completed his translation of the Bible into English while in exile. The fortunes of reformers such as Tyndale rose and fell in rhythm with political events, but by the early 1550s those more ardent for reform, some of them by now the leaders of the church, rewrote the liturgy to make it truly "common" to both priests and people and to rid it of most ceremonies. The reign of Mary Tudor (1553–58) reversed this situation. Protestantism returned as the state religion with the reign of Elizabeth, and reformers resumed their campaign to purify the church. What happened in the years thereafter would have many consequences for New England. Reformers—it is too limiting to refer to them as "Puritans"—wished to raise the level of belief and practice among people and the clergy. As described by critics, too many of the clergy could scarcely teach the Christian message. A half century later, a better-dis-

ciplined and better-educated clergy were beginning to predominate, men who shared the vision of transforming Englishmen into sincere Christians.[16] To market towns, to London, to the "dark corners of the land," they brought their ideal of a disciplined, ascetic Christianity. The way to Christ was strenuous, for God demanded action against sin. In issuing this challenge, the preachers attacked a prevailing wisdom summed up in the proverb "The God that made me, save me."[17] They lamented the sheer ignorance of many: "For what a pitifull thing is it, to come into a congregation of one or two thousand soules, and not to finde above foure or five that are able to give an account of their faith in any tollerable maner. . . ." Arthur Dent, a minister who wrote a best-selling description of the way to heaven, denounced the throngs of people who "sit idle in the streets even upon the Sabbath. . . . Many will heare a Sermon in the fore-noon: and they take that to be as much as God can require at their hand. . . . but as for the after-noon they will heare none."[18] And there were demands for a change in life-style, as in the new requirement of Sabbatarianism.[19]

Some lay men and women took up this message with enthusiasm. The social costs of doing so were high in towns where others were in control. In such towns the people who thought of themselves as "the godly" sometimes withdrew from the "mixt multitude" in order to celebrate the sacraments and hear sermons on their own. Where they had power, the godly often sought to impose "discipline" on others.[20] Thus in the town of Dedham (Essex) the ministers and magistrates collaborated in 1585 in affirming fifteen rules or principles designed to bring about "the observation and mayntenance of all christian order" and "the banishing of the contrary disorder."[21] A handful of lay Puritans renounced the church completely; a few such "separatists" fled England between 1607 and 1609 for the safety of the Netherlands, whence they removed some years later to Plymouth in New England. But most of those who sought to cleanse themselves by separating from the "mixt multitude" were less openly rebellious or less radical.

When emigration to New England began, the new colony of Massachusetts attracted thousands of the godly who had previously accepted the message and the life-style we think of as Puritanism. What these people brought with them was also a deep revulsion against older customs and beliefs. Long before the great migration to New England, reformers in the sixteenth century had gone into churches to destroy statues and stained glass. The same people had renounced the ritual calendar of saints' days and holy days. They rejected certain forms of play, as when men dressed up as animals or people danced around a maypole. This conscious attack on "pagan" ways and "superstitions" was occurring