



PROVIDENCE  
*and the*  
INVENTION  
*of the*  
UNITED STATES,  
1607–1876

NICHOLAS GUYATT

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## Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876

Nicholas Guyatt offers a completely new understanding of a central question in American history: How did Americans come to think that God favored the United States above other nations? Tracing the story of American providentialism from the founding of Virginia to the collapse of Reconstruction, this book uncovers the British roots of American religious nationalism before the American Revolution and the extraordinary struggles of white Americans to reconcile their ideas of national mission with the racial diversity of the early republic. Making sense of previously diffuse debates on manifest destiny, millenarianism, and American mission, *Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876*, explains the origins and development of the idea that God has a special plan for America. This conviction supplied the United States with a powerful sense of national purpose, but it also prevented Americans from clearly understanding events and people that could not easily be fitted into the providential scheme.

Nicholas Guyatt is Assistant Professor of History at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, British Columbia. He has studied at Cambridge University (B.A., M.Phil.) and Princeton University (Ph.D.). This is his first academic monograph, but his fourth book; a work on apocalyptic Christianity will also be published in 2007. He has written about American history for the *London Review of Books* and the *Nation*.



# Providence and the Invention of the United States, 1607–1876

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## Introduction

On January 28, 2003, George W. Bush delivered his State of the Union address to Congress at a difficult moment in his presidency. Facing an ailing economy and the prospect of war with Iraq, Bush sought to reassure Americans not only of his political competence but of a higher purpose to the nation's history. "We Americans have faith in ourselves," the president noted at the conclusion of his speech, "but not in ourselves alone. We do not know – we do not claim to know all the ways of Providence, yet we can trust in them, placing our confidence in the loving God behind all of life and all of history."<sup>1</sup> While the President's religious rhetoric unsettled some observers, his suggestion of a divine role in American policy making is hardly unique.

At first glance, one might see this providential theme as an unbroken thread, reaching back from George W. Bush across the entirety of American history. His references to a divine plan recall the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Woodrow Wilson, Abraham Lincoln, and a host of other prominent Americans.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, a founding myth of America holds that the Puritans of New England inaugurated this divine mission, settling with God's approval in a hostile New World and producing a mighty empire from an empty wilderness. From this vantage point, President Bush's references to Providence are merely the most recent public iteration of a very old theme: God was responsible for both the founding of Massachusetts in 1629 and the invasion of Baghdad in 2003. The idea that God has directed the history of the United States has become a commonplace in American life, a way of imagining America's purpose and history

<sup>1</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address," Washington, D.C., January 28, 2003. See also Laurie Goodstein, "A President Puts His Faith in Providence," *New York Times*, February 9, 2003, 4: 4. However, his speechwriter, Michael Gerson, later dismissed the notion that Bush had aligned God with American foreign policy. See Alan Cooperman, "Bush's References to God Defended by Speechwriter," *Washington Post*, December 12, 2004, A6.

<sup>2</sup> On the death of Ronald Reagan, Bush's vice-president, Dick Cheney, argued that the former president was "more than just an historical figure – he was a providential man." David von Drehle, "A Day of Ritual and Remembrance," *Washington Post*, June 10, 2004, A1.

that seems so thoroughly familiar that one can easily overlook its essential oddness.

This book is an attempt to recover the story of American providentialism and to answer two important questions about providential thinking that seem both obvious and elusive: How did Americans come to think that God had a special plan for their nation? And what did they do with this conviction in the 250 years between the founding of Virginia and the American Civil War? Historians have approached this topic on many occasions in the past, but they have been hampered in a number of ways. One group, exemplified by the great nineteenth-century historian George Bancroft, actually endorsed providentialism as a way of understanding America's development. Although he had trained in Germany and was a strong advocate of a more "scientific" scholarship, Bancroft nonetheless saw God's hand in American history with a kind of relentless assuredness.<sup>3</sup> Another group of historians has simply dismissed divine involvement in American history with the same enthusiasm as Bancroft's advocacy, maintaining either that Americans were uncertain about God's intentions or that providentialism had been eclipsed by secularism before the American Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Finally, historians who have taken providentialism seriously have tended to lose focus by generalizing or domesticating the idea. These scholars have presented the idea of God's involvement as a consistent and largely unchanging force in American history from the colonial period to the present, and they have usually portrayed providential thinking as innately American.<sup>5</sup>

This book takes a different approach. Based on a survey of sermons, histories, printed books, newspapers, magazines, diaries, and other sources from more

<sup>3</sup> Peter Novick discusses Bancroft's historical training and sensibility in *That Noble Dream: The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 44–46. Bancroft died in 1891, but a tendency not only to study but also to practice providentialism proved surprisingly durable among American historians in the twentieth century. See, for example, Frederick Merk, *Manifest Destiny and Mission in American History* (New York: Knopf, 1963). A recent (albeit unusual) call for a return to Bancroft's providentialist historiography is Jonathan Tucker Boyd, "This Holy Hieroglyph: Providence and Historical Consciousness in George Bancroft's Historiography," Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the debunking studies of an "American mission" in the seventeenth century by Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1988); and Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989). On the secularizing thesis, see Gordon S. Wood, "Conspiracy and the Paranoid Style: Causality and Deceit in the Eighteenth Century," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 39, no. 3 (July 1982): 401–41.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Albert K. Weinberg, *Manifest Destiny: A Study of Nationalist Expansionism in American History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935); Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America's Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640–1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978); and Anders Stephanson, *Manifest Destiny: American Expansionism and the Empire of Right* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995).

than two centuries of American history, I argue that providentialism played a leading role in the invention of an American national identity before 1865 and that its role was neither static nor timeless. A diverse group of people used the idea of God's involvement in history to influence some of the most important political debates in antebellum America. In the colonial period, providentialism offered a way to assuage anxieties about the brief past and uncertain present of the English settlements. During the Revolution and the early republic, providential thinking was used to promote the idea of American independence and to debate the place of nonwhite people in the new United States. Although the broad outlines of providentialism endured from the 1600s until the Civil War, the uses of this idea of divine involvement – and the political contexts in which providential arguments were deployed – changed profoundly. We should guard against the easy assumption of an American “mission” or “destiny” that links the seventeenth century to the nineteenth (or even to the present). To assess the true impact of providentialism, we have to recognize that the idea changed over time.

Beyond the core assumption that we should study providentialism historically, this book offers three fresh insights about the idea of divine involvement in American history. First, I reject the idea that providentialism was an American invention. The providential thinking of the colonial period originated in England rather than America, and we can best understand the emergence of American ideas about God's role in history by exploring their English and British analogues. In the seventeenth century, many English observers and politicians – including Oliver Cromwell himself – offered bold analyses of God's role in their national affairs, and a number of them suffered acute anxiety when events seemed to diverge from their predictions. A century later, as they gained an empire and then lost its American annex, Britons struggled to comprehend God's purpose in these events. While historians of Britain and the emerging United States have examined providentialism on each side of the Atlantic, this book offers an extended comparison between American and British providential thinking. This comparison is important not only in demonstrating that there was nothing intrinsically American about the idea of a national destiny but also in explaining why American versions of providential thinking proved particularly durable and influential.

The book's second innovation concerns the kinds of providentialism that prevailed in Britain and America during this period. While we can define providentialism simply as the belief that God intervenes in human history, Americans and Britons developed more specific visions of God's plan for their nations. Some argued that history was cyclical and that nations would rise and fall in God's estimation depending on the worth of their inhabitants at any given moment. Others believed that God had chosen some nations to play a special role in history and that this anointment confirmed benefits and responsibilities that set apart a particular place and people from the rest. Still others sought to map the specific books and predictions of Bible prophecy onto current events, looking to Revelation or Daniel for a primer to contemporary history. All three

of these beliefs were grounded in providentialism, but each constituted a distinct and important variation of the common theme. I argue that these variations are critical to our understanding of how and why providential ideas took such a strong hold in America, and why these ideas continued to appeal to Americans even after their eclipse in Britain.

Finally, I contend that providentialism was not only a component of American identity but also a strategy for achieving concrete political goals. Providential ideas were at work in some of the most important debates in early America, and this book focuses principally on the application of providence to politics. Part One describes how providential thinking came to America, and how the colonists struggled in their early years to understand God's involvement in the turbulent events of seventeenth-century England. By the 1660s American colonists had begun to develop their own understandings of God's purposes in America and to pay less attention to the providential meaning of English history. This exceptionalism was effectively forced upon the colonists by the political and religious confusion in England, but it provided a template for imagining American history as providentially significant and divergent from Britain. During the imperial crisis after 1763, this template was used to structure the colonists' demands and eventually to justify their separatist claims. By the time of the American Revolution, Patriots argued that God had given America a special role in history and that independence had been providentially determined. Although Britons initially dismissed this bold argument, they struggled during the Revolutionary War either to disprove the American conjecture or to sustain a vision of their own national purpose that could transcend it. Patriots continued throughout the war to argue that God had chosen the United States to advance the social and political welfare of the world. This claim, originally a justification for the Revolution, was vindicated and amplified by the Patriot victory.

Part Two explores the process by which this confidence about God's plan for America was undermined in the early republic, as Americans sought to determine the extent of their global influence and the relationship between race and citizenship at home. While Americans squabbled among themselves about the international significance of their political ideas during the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon, they adjusted their providential claims to accommodate their disappointments. They also struggled to make sense of the persistence of nonwhites in America. Did God mean for blacks and Indians to become citizens of the American republic? If not, what was the providential meaning of America's racial diversity? Although many white Americans after 1783 sought to maintain a progressive understanding of American history and purpose – which held that God had placed the United States on an upward trajectory and had shaped its past and future toward the improvement of the world – the extension of slavery and the continuing tensions between whites and Indians confounded this effort. Worse, a loose coalition of providential interpreters – including white abolitionists, opponents of Indian removal, and blacks and Indians themselves – began to circulate a very different understanding of God's will, one that promised national humiliation and

perhaps even national collapse unless nonwhites received justice from the United States.

Southern secession seemed initially to confirm that Americans had forfeited their special mission, but the book's final chapters chronicle the extraordinary retrieval of this destiny during the Civil War itself. While southerners struggled to find a place for the Confederacy in a progressive scheme of history, northerners – led by Abraham Lincoln – suggested that the abolition of slavery might purify the United States and allow the nation to resume its providential course. This argument invited northerners to set aside their long-standing aversion to racial justice in order to preserve another enduring conviction: that God had a special plan for their nation. Unfortunately, the providential bargain that encouraged northerners to accept emancipation helped to deny the rights of blacks thereafter.

The sustained application of providential thinking to the questions of race and slavery in the early republic, like the profusion of ideas about God's direction of the American Revolution, amounts to a case study in the political possibilities of providentialism. The achievement of American independence and the abolition of slavery were radical projects that could be explained and made feasible through assumptions about God's will: facing the might of the British army or their own prejudices toward southern blacks, Americans could feel reassured about revolution or emancipation if they imagined these controversial objectives to be providential milestones on their journey toward the redemption of the world. But the compulsion to imagine American history as inherently progressive and to identify an upward vector in which Plymouth or Jamestown was linked to a vast future for the United States blinded Americans to the missteps and the wrong turns that would punctuate the career of any nation.

Some of the key terms that will be used in this study may be unfamiliar to historians, especially those who work on politics and national identity. "Providentialism" refers to the belief that God controls everything that happens on earth: providential commentators from the early modern period to the nineteenth century liked to quote Christ's words from the Gospel of Matthew that not even the killing of a sparrow could take place without God's knowledge and involvement.<sup>6</sup> Americans and Britons were, however, keenly aware of a distinction between the ways in which God dealt with individuals, and his treatment of nations: I therefore use the term "personal providentialism" to refer to the former, and "national providentialism" for the latter. One of the fascinating aspects of the history of providentialism concerns the relationship between personal and national providentialism: with an important exception in the aftermath of the English Civil War, many Britons and Americans came to regard personal providentialism as superstitious and backward even as they continued to believe that God directed the fates of nations. Although this book builds

<sup>6</sup> "Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows." Matthew 10:29–31.

upon important studies of personal providentialism in England and America, the following chapters focus overwhelmingly on the national inflection of God's control over history.<sup>7</sup>

Within the framework of national providentialism, I define three broad ideas about God's involvement in history that were commonly invoked between 1607 and 1876. The first version – in which God judged nations solely on the virtues of their people and leaders and then rewarded or punished them without reference to any grand plan for humanity – is described in the following chapters as “judicial providentialism.” The belief that God imagined a special role for certain nations in improving the world and tailored their history to prepare them for the achievement of this mission is referred to as “historical providentialism.” Finally, the belief that God was literally working out the narrative of Revelation in current events and that he had cast various nations in the leading roles of this drama is described as “apocalyptic providentialism.” I say a good deal more about each category in the chapters themselves, but for now it is worth remembering not only that national providentialism was an important subset of the broader view that God controlled everything that happened on earth but also that Americans and Britons could imagine very different fates for themselves even as they accepted God's sovereignty over their history.

In researching this book, I have examined a wide variety of materials that might tell us something about how Britons and Americans imagined the relationship between their nation and God. This has led me to sources that discuss the development and the well-being of a nation, such as histories, newspapers, and political addresses, and sources that search for religious meaning in contemporary events, such as sermons and tracts. Because most can be described as public rhetoric – material written for a general audience and wide consumption rather than for private contemplation – it seems important to acknowledge the questions of audience and intention. What kinds of people wrote and spoke about providentialism in this period, and to whom were their claims addressed? Did these people actually believe what they were saying about God's role in history, or did they use providential language strategically to achieve a desired political or social end?

The first question is more straightforward than the second. The voices in the first half of this book are primarily privileged, literate, white, and male: preachers, politicians, lawyers, doctors, and other professionals who dominated the intellectual and political life of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Atlantic world. Yet the recurrence of providential thinking in sermons, political speeches and public festivals suggests that the broader population in both Britain and America was keenly attuned to a religious understanding of national history. In the political and religious rhetoric of Britain and America, providentialism was

<sup>7</sup> The key works on personal providentialism in early modern England and America are Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); and Michael Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996).

used to persuade ordinary people of the importance and rewards of a national political project.<sup>8</sup>

In the second half of the book, which focuses on the battles between Americans over the racial composition of the new United States, we can see evidence of a broad popular understanding of national providentialism both in the mass media of the early nineteenth century and in the willingness of those on the margins of American society to appropriate providential ideas. Blacks and Indians, in addition to white abolitionists and opponents of removal, based political appeals on the notion that God would revoke America's auspicious destiny if its leaders persisted in enslaving and expelling nonwhite people. While providential thinking continued to appeal to many religious and political elites, it was also directed at and appropriated by a diverse group of Americans who hoped to yoke their particular concerns to the fate of the entire nation. I conclude that providential thinking had considerable purchase among ordinary Americans and Britons as well as among elites.

This raises the question of intention, about which it is harder to generalize. Did everyone who employed the idea of divine involvement between 1607 and 1876 actually believe that God controlled national politics and world events? And that they might offer prescriptions for political action that would cohere with God's plan? This question is scarcely easier to answer even if we limit our focus to a single figure like Oliver Cromwell. Cromwell seems fervently to have believed that he was doing God's work in opposing Charles I and establishing the Commonwealth, and by 1649 – with the execution of the king and the triumph of Parliament – it appeared that God had rewarded Cromwell's efforts. By 1655, however, his providential arc had reached its zenith. Possessed of the idea that God intended England to challenge the Catholic empire in America, Cromwell launched a disastrous expedition to capture the Spanish island of Hispaniola. Upon the failure of his plan, he fell into a kind of providential paralysis, unable either to divine God's will or to muster sufficient confidence in his own actions to proceed in his course as God's instrument in England.<sup>9</sup>

Or we might study Thomas Paine, whose rejection of Christianity and other forms of revealed religion made him perhaps the most notorious writer in the Atlantic world at the opening of the nineteenth century. Paine's *Age of Reason*, conceived in captivity during the darkest days of the French Revolution, was intended to demolish Christianity. Paine spoke in his conclusion of taking an ax to the Bible, of leveling the forest of beliefs in which so many people had been lost for centuries. Earlier in his career as a Revolutionary propagandist, however, Paine had argued repeatedly both that God intended the United States to be independent and that America would play a special role in God's plan for the world. Had Paine changed his mind in the intervening years, or was

<sup>8</sup> On the relationship between public festival and nationalist sentiment, see David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989).

<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 1.

he merely a rhetorical opportunist? As he prepared his pamphlets *Common Sense* and *The American Crisis* for a wavering audience of would-be Patriots, did he employ the language of divine involvement with his tongue firmly in his cheek?<sup>10</sup>

Providentialism could be ideological or rhetorical – or both – depending upon the convictions of a particular person, or the political exigencies of a particular moment. In this book, I have approached providential claims as *arguments*: efforts to explain God’s purpose in the world that were harnessed to political goals in the present. This book is neither a religious history in the strict sense nor an analysis of some “American Mind” or collective consciousness for which providentialism was a universal grammar. Instead, I have focused on the application of providential thinking to politics and on the effects of providential claims upon some of the most important debates in early American history. It may be tempting to dismiss providentialism as simply a rhetorical device, a religious disguise that masked the true intentions and motives of brave revolutionaries, ambitious politicians, or committed racists. But the sheer profusion of providential language in early America demonstrates a broad public audience for these ideas. In many cases, we can be confident that a particular person who used providential ideas was a committed believer in God’s control over history. Even those whose public piety diverged from their private convictions – like Thomas Paine – adopted providential language precisely because they realized that many Americans accepted its premises. Yet, while providentialism might serve to embellish political debates, it could also shape them in ways that its promoters did not anticipate. In some cases, those who discerned God’s purpose in a particular debate or event would eventually rue their assertion.

This book describes how many Americans came to argue that their history and their nation were uniquely favored by God and shaped for the political and moral redemption of the world. These ideas were the building blocks of the nationalism that inspired the United States during the War of Independence; but they were obstacles to the resolution of the problems of racial diversity that confronted the new nation after 1783. (They also complicated the efforts of Americans to integrate themselves into a world that did not always share their redemptive optimism.) The idea of an American mission in the early republic was extremely powerful because it was based on an understanding of what God wanted the United States to do as well as on a progressive reading of American history that acted as a guarantor of God’s intentions. But missionary assumptions depended on a willingness to tidy up the past to preserve the nation’s upward trajectory and to elide or ignore those darker moments that might otherwise have been instructive. Providentialism in America offered its users enormous power to shape the future at the expense of a full accounting of the past. The benefits and the costs of this bargain deserve careful consideration.

<sup>10</sup> See Chapters 2 and 3.

PART ONE

BRITAIN, AMERICA, AND THE EMERGENCE  
OF PROVIDENTIAL SEPARATISM



## Providence and the Problem of England in Early America

In March 1640 John Winthrop took up his pen to write an angry letter. There were many reasons for the governor of the fledgling Massachusetts Bay plantation to be aggrieved. After ten years of constant growth, the colony was not only drawing fewer emigrants but even losing some of its prominent inhabitants to England. Winthrop's ire, however, was directed at a specific and, at first glance, unlikely target: William Fiennes, Lord Saye and Seale, one of the strongest supporters of the Puritan colonies in England. Although Fiennes was not in complete agreement with the Massachusetts settlers' religious and political decisions – he would have preferred a more aristocratic form of government, for one thing – he was a resolute defender of the Puritan settlements at a moment when King Charles I and the Anglican Church were suspicious of religious dissent in America. Fiennes had even used Winthrop's famous words – that New England was “a city upon a hill” – in a letter to an American correspondent, suggesting that he appreciated not only the political but the religious importance of the Massachusetts experiment.<sup>1</sup>

In 1640, however, Winthrop discovered that Fiennes had thrown his support behind another colonizing effort. While the English settlements in New England and Virginia had achieved a modest degree of success by this date, they had hardly established themselves as the leading colonies on the vast American continent. Fiennes and a number of other Puritan sympathizers in England, disappointed both by Massachusetts's rigidly Congregational government and by reports of religious intolerance, simply decided to look for another location in which to plant a new settlement. They chose Providence Island, a small outcrop near the coast of Nicaragua, which promised a more salubrious climate

<sup>1</sup> William Fiennes to John Cotton, July 1638, in Sargent Bush Jr., ed., *The Correspondence of John Cotton* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture, 2001), 283. Fiennes's proposals for a hierarchical New England are reprinted in *ibid.*, 519–23.

than New England and a beachhead into the vast, weakly defended territory of Spanish America. While Fiennes continued to write supportive letters to his friends in New England, he threw his weight behind this rival Puritan settlement. Moreover, he did little to check the many rumors in London and elsewhere that New England, and Massachusetts in particular, was on the wane.<sup>2</sup>

Winthrop's original letter is lost, but Fiennes's long reply summarized the first message and preserved the governor's chagrin. According to Winthrop, Fiennes was guilty of "bringing up an ill report uppon your [Winthrop's] land, and diverting mens intentions from cominge to you." For this, Fiennes could "expect and fear judgements" from God, because God himself had given Massachusetts its mandate and had underwritten its progress. Winthrop was adamant that God wanted English Puritans to come to New England rather than Providence Island; if Fiennes continued to undermine Massachusetts, God might hold him personally responsible for upsetting the divine plan. Fiennes's response was as passionate as Winthrop's original. While he conceded that the governor and his fellow settlers had founded "glorious churches" in America, he angrily rejected the suggestion that there was a direct parallel between the journey of the Israelites from Egypt to Canaan and the Puritan migration to New England: "I pray consider seriously," he warned, "and lett our frendes thear be judges betweene us, wheather this be not a taking of Godes name in vayne, to misaply scriptures in this manner." Fiennes's skepticism about God's intentions for Massachusetts was bolstered by the recent outflow of colonists, which comprised not only migrants returning to England but also settlers in search of another American plantation that might enjoy greater success. Archly referring to "them whoe dayly leave you att the Bay," Fiennes suggested that Winthrop leave Providence Island alone and instead ask his own departing neighbors "wheather they dowbt the worke be of God?"<sup>3</sup>

Fiennes pressed home his point in a way that infuriated Winthrop. Perhaps, Fiennes continued, God had intended New England not as a permanent resting place for the Puritan migrants but, instead, as a place where the godly could "be increased and fitted for the worke intended for you": the colonization not of Massachusetts but of Providence Island. Worse, if people like Winthrop refused to recognize this rival interpretation of God's will, they would "doe noe other than cast your selfe downe from the pynacle, and refuse the stayres wch are before you." There was a note of triumph in Fiennes's peroration, as if Winthrop's rival booster had won this argument and had exposed the flaws in Winthrop's thinking:

Thus may I argue with as much probabylytie as you; for it is as likely that you have in providence bin cast uppon that place, to remove from thence uppon due occasion, as to stay thear, and much more likely, when in some other you may doe more service, and receave more meanes by much of comfortable subsistence. Hear you see wch way

<sup>2</sup> On Providence Island, see Karen Ordahl Kupperman, *Providence Island, 1630–1641: The Other Puritan Colony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

<sup>3</sup> William Fiennes to John Winthrop, July 9, 1640, in Robert C. Winthrop, *The Life and Letters of John Winthrop*, 2 vols. (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1867), 2: 422–26.

all your arguments may be turned, with as much convincinge evydence, as to conclude that you bringe them for.<sup>4</sup>

Fiennes appeared to be winning the battle in 1640. Providence Island was bolstered by new settlers, who successfully repelled a Spanish attack and drew more migrants from New England. Winthrop urged the General Court to dissuade colonists from making the trip, arguing of Massachusetts that “God had chosen this country to plant his people in” and that any defectors from the colony would incur divine retribution. For some observers in both England and Massachusetts, however, there was nothing special about New England and, in spite of Winthrop’s protestations, there was no reason to imagine a divine mission for one colony that might not also – or better – be undertaken in another.<sup>5</sup>

Providence Island has received little attention from those who have discussed the existence or nature of an American mission or “errand” in the seventeenth century.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps this is partly because, as Winthrop gleefully told his diary, “the Lord showed his displeasure” against those who had favored the southern plantation over New England. In 1641 Spain seized the island and expelled its settlers. As if to make the divine dispensation still clearer, the mastermind of the effort to transport disaffected colonists from Massachusetts to Providence Island, John Humfrey, was the victim of a massive fire in the winter of 1640 that destroyed his corn and hay and forced him to seek the charity of the General Court. (A vindicated Winthrop rewarded Humfrey’s desperate appeal with munificence.)<sup>7</sup> But the story of this rival effort gives us an idea of the many meanings of America in the seventeenth-century English world and invites a fresh analysis of the purpose and identity of the early American colonies.

We can draw four useful conclusions from Winthrop’s altercation with Fiennes. First, Massachusetts Bay, and even New England more generally, was merely one of a number of English settlements and colonial projects in America, most of which were underpinned by some form of religious justification. Second, the religious meaning of these settlements was frequently bound up with an understanding of English history and politics. Third, there was substantial debate and disagreement over the purpose of settlements, and especially over God’s role in the colonizing enterprise. Fourth, the meaning of a particular colony was liable to change over time and was hardly immune to the vicissitudes of internal or external events. New England might have seemed like a crucial refuge for the godly in 1630, when Charles I and Bishop William Laud

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 425.

<sup>5</sup> Richard S. Dunn, James Savage, and Laetitia Yeandle, eds., *The Journal of John Winthrop, 1630–1649* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 324.

<sup>6</sup> The exception is Karen Ordahl Kupperman, “Errand to the Indies: Puritan Colonization from Providence Island through the Western Design,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 45, no. 1 (1988): 70–99. Kupperman engages the literature on the idea of a Puritan “mission,” but her essay attempts not to problematize this concept but instead to add the Caribbean as another option for Puritan settlement and thus to refigure the Puritan choice as “trilateral.”

<sup>7</sup> Dunn et al., eds., 333.

embarked on a new wave of religious repression. But just a few years later, as a resurgent English Parliament moved against Charles and the bishops, America seemed so peripheral to God's plan that many colonists sailed home.

This chapter describes how people in England and America thought about God's intentions during the particularly turbulent years of the seventeenth century. While religious groups and commercial entrepreneurs founded the first English colonies in the New World, England's political system was smashed to pieces in the 1640s, remade in the 1660s, then threatened again in the 1680s. All the while, commentators in England and America argued that these events must conform to a divine plan, but they labored to discover its outlines or to anticipate the direction in which it was headed.

## I. "Openinge a Dore": 1600–1640

### *Prophecy, History, and National Providentialism*

To understand the origins and development of national providentialism, we have to acknowledge two basic presumptions that enjoyed wide currency in Europe from the sixteenth to the nineteenth century: first, that God controlled everything that happened on earth; second, that God had a particular plan for human history. From the first presumption, one might interpret anything that happened in one's life, good or bad, as evidence of God's involvement. Events that seemed particularly random or sudden – like an illness, a shipwreck, or a storm – could be treated as evidence of God's judgment of a particular individual or community. This personal form of providentialism may have emerged from non-Christian beliefs in the early modern period; certainly, there was significant overlap between a prodigy or wonder that was attributed to devils, witches, or other occult forces and an unexpected event that was attributed to God. The impulse to interpret the unexpected from a Christian perspective was in many respects more restrained than its non-Christian antecedents. While God might be working out his will in these ways, it was not always possible for humans to gain a complete sense of the divine purpose in an event. Bad things sometimes happened to good people, and the wicked often prospered; only by considering the unknowable fact of someone's heavenly reward (or lack thereof) could providential justice be seen entire. Personal providentialism thus enabled Christians in early modern Europe and seventeenth-century America to read God's will into the events of their lives, but it also discouraged them from believing that they could interpret providence with perfect clarity.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Useful accounts of providentialism in this period are offered by Alexandra Walsham, *Providence in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Michael P. Winship, *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); Blair Worden, "Providence and Politics in Cromwellian England," *Past and Present* 109 (1985): 55–99; and Barbara Donagan, "Godly Choice: Puritan Decision-Making in Seventeenth-Century England," *Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 3 (1983): 307–34.

The second presumption, that God was working out a plan in human history, was rather different. The Bible offered an account of the trials of the Israelites and the story of Christ's sacrifice, but it also contained a number of books of prophecy. The narratives of the Old and New Testament composed only part of God's plan for humanity, and the prophetic books discussed events that would come to pass as surely as the historical sections had already done. The Antichrist would take over the world, Christ would appear in person to vanquish his rule, and God would build a heavenly kingdom on earth. (There was considerable debate about the timing and sequence of these events.) Beyond the judgments that God might work in the lives of individuals or communities, the events of contemporary history might yield clues as to the status of this prophetic scheme for the salvation of the entire world. Early modern Christians believed that they were living between biblical events that had already occurred and those which were promised by prophecy. If the promise of living in such a time was that Christ would eventually return to redeem every Christian, the burden was that believers had to watch for the signs that would indicate that the end times were at hand.<sup>9</sup>

Christians had lived with an awareness of the inevitability of Christ's return since at least the end of the first century CE, when John wrote the book of Revelation and a wave of Roman repression threatened the nascent church. Moreover, there had been numerous attempts to date the end times in the centuries before 1500, each of them overtaken by historical events that would not comply with these predictions. (Some church fathers, including Augustine, tried to dampen popular enthusiasm for a literal understanding of prophecy.) The Protestant Reformation generated a fresh sense of expectation that God's eschatological scheme – his plan for human salvation – had reached its final stages. The fracturing of the Christian Church into Catholic and Protestant wings created a clear candidate for the role of the Antichrist: the pope, whose abuse of religious authority had inspired the Reformation in the first place. As wars of religion raged across Europe in the sixteenth century, the connection between Catholicism and prophetic Scripture became a commonplace. Although it was hard to be sure of the exact chronology of either the biblical prophecies or their contemporary implementation in European history, Protestants were encouraged not only to see the Bible come alive in the political and military conflicts of their era but to recognize their own responsibility to bring about the culmination of the prophecies: the defeat of Catholicism and the establishment of an earthly kingdom of God.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> On the origins of eschatology and millennialism, see Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970); Eugen Weber, *Apocalypses: Prophecies, Cults and Millennial Beliefs through the Ages* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); and John J. Collins, Bernard McGinn, and Stephen J. Stein, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*, 3 vols. (New York: Continuum, 1998).

<sup>10</sup> See, for instance, Richard K. Emerson and Bernard McGinn, eds., *The Apocalypse in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992); McGinn, *Visions of the End: Apocalyptic Traditions in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979); and Andrew

Between these two understandings of God's role in the world – the belief that he meted out justice in the lives of individuals and that he was choreographing a grander drama through the events of prophecy – lay national providentialism. Several understandings of God's relationship with a nation were possible, from more minimal definitions of divine justice to complex amalgamations of contemporary history and biblical prophecy. Nations might, like individuals, receive reward or punishment from God depending on the piety of their people, the justice of their conduct toward other nations, and so on. A particular nation might, like the Jewish people in the Old Testament, enjoy a long relationship with God and receive favors that marked it out from other nations. More grandiosely, a nation might have a special role to play in the fulfillment of the apocalyptic narrative, either by striking a particularly powerful blow against Satan or by providing the location for Christ to found his earthly kingdom. Because the prophecies were both vague and written with no knowledge of Europe's post-Reformation political system, the problems and possibilities of politically motivated interpretations were enormous.

One final wrinkle of national providentialism involved the definition of a nation. The modern understanding of a nation as coterminous with a particular set of borders, and enjoying a particular form of sovereignty, took shape only after the middle of the seventeenth century and was hardly definitive even a century later. Christians who looked back at the Israelites of the Old Testament could recognize a nation as signifying not a particular ethnic group or geographical area but a shared sense of religious observance. The Reformation in Europe may have reinforced this religious definition of a nation, because international Protestantism was, unlike Catholicism, arranged in a series of national churches. Although the grand religious conflict between Catholicism and Protestantism had an enormous influence over European politics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these competing understandings of nation – a particular church versus an ethnic group or a geographical area – also complicated interpretations of God's will.<sup>11</sup>

Most ordinary Protestants had little cause to ponder the vagaries of prophetic promises and international politics as they lived their daily lives. Historians of early modern England have recovered a rich understanding of personal providentialism – encompassing unexplained fires, sudden outbreaks of disease, monstrous births, and other extraordinary phenomena – but have detected few

Cunningham and Ole Peter Grell, *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse: Religion, War, Famine and Death in Reformation Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). A useful account of seventeenth-century millennial thinking, including interpretations involving the geography or settlers of America, is offered by James West Davidson, *The Logic of Millennial Thought: The Eighteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977), 37–80.

<sup>11</sup> On the ambiguous definition of nation, and the uncertainty over the extent and representative potential of a "godly remnant," see Peter Lake, "Presbyterianism, the Idea of a National Church, and the Argument from Divine Right," in Lake and Maria Dowling, eds., *Protestantism and the National Church in Sixteenth Century England* (London: Croom Helm, 1987), 193–224.

signs of an active national providentialism in the lives of most people.<sup>12</sup> However, sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century English commentators frequently employed national providentialism to make sense of international affairs, especially as they involved England itself. The unexpected defeat of the Spanish Armada of 1588 was hailed as evidence of God's support for England and for Protestantism; the corresponding discovery of the gunpowder plot against King James I in 1605 also appeared to confirm that God was on England's side. These deliverances were celebrated throughout England, and while some people speculated that God had a particular regard for his English church, the international dimensions of the struggle against Catholicism probably kept this exceptionalist tendency in check. Although England might have received some spectacular favors from God, it was just one of a number of Protestant nations working toward the accomplishment of his greater designs.<sup>13</sup>

As English merchants contemplated the establishment of colonies in America at the beginning of the seventeenth century, national providentialism in England oscillated between a modest and an extravagant reading of God's role in contemporary history. The victory over the Spanish Armada, for example, might simply indicate that God had rewarded England for the piety of its people or the statecraft of its leaders. Viewed from the perspective of biblical prophecies, on the other hand, the defeat of the Spanish fleet suggested an important advance in the crusade against the Antichrist. The more modest version offered an understanding of God's involvement that was purely judicial: a nation would receive rewards or punishment depending on its immediate conduct and deserts. The extravagant version suggested a special role for the nation in the prophetic drama outlined in the Bible, and might imply a national responsibility to continue in the present course until Christ had triumphed over the Antichrist and returned to found his earthly kingdom. These different interpretations – judicial and apocalyptic – each affirmed the core presumption of national providentialism: that everything that took place was divinely controlled, and that one should not attempt to understand the world without recognizing God's superintending role. However, the difference between reactive and proactive understandings of providence – between, say, giving thanks to God for the victory over the Spanish Armada and imagining that God intended England to drive Spain from America – was of crucial importance to the application of providentialism in national politics.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> On the primacy of local identities in sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century England, see Anthony Fletcher, "The First Century of English Protestantism and the Growth of National Identity," in Stuart Mews, ed., *Religion and National Identity*, Studies in Church History 20 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 309–17, at 317.

<sup>13</sup> On the international focus of English Protestants, see Patrick Collinson, "England and International Calvinism, 1558–1640," in Menna Prestwich, ed., *International Calvinism, 1541–1715* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 196–223.

<sup>14</sup> For the argument that English writers imagined their nation to be set apart from Europe and specially chosen by God, see William Haller, *The Elect Nation: The Meaning and Relevance of Foxe's*

*Virginia: "Weake and Feeble Crutches"*

The first enduring English colony in North America was founded in Virginia in 1607, and the providential assumptions just described underpinned the efforts of the colony's boosters to attract investors and settlers to the ambitious enterprise. Historians have usually focused on Massachusetts rather than Virginia in discussing the origins of providential thinking in English America, given Virginia's predominantly commercial aspect and its almost complete dependence on London for political and administrative direction. This focus on New England is logical but misleading. While Virginians were less inclined to speculate on the higher purpose of their residency in America, the rhetoric surrounding the establishment of the colony confirms both the English origins of national providentialism and the application of providential concepts to multiple settlements on the American continent. There was nothing inherently separatist or innately "American" about providential thinking. Virginia also demonstrated that the interpretive challenges that faced the Massachusetts settlers – Why should they move to America? What was the meaning of their settlement project? How should they treat Native Americans? – were familiar to English colonists more than a decade before the arrival of William Bradford and the *Mayflower* in 1620.<sup>15</sup>

For much of the sixteenth century, English observers had looked on helplessly as Spain, England's great rival, had conquered the American continent. Although Spain was not the only European power to establish settlements and trading posts in America, the Spanish conquests were by far the most extensive and lucrative. In addition to the fleets of gold and silver that brought riches from the mines at Zacatecas and Potosí, Spain took pride in its apparent conversion of the native population. Boasting material and spiritual success from its new empire, Spain presented powerful evidence to England that God favored the Catholic Church. Moreover, at least some English commentators – Richard

*Book of Martyrs* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963); and David Cressy, *Bonfires and Bells: National Memory and the Protestant Calendar in Elizabethan and Stuart England* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1989). Dissenting interpretations which downplay either the extent of an English distinctiveness or the optimism that English commentators may have derived from this understanding of providence include Katherine R. Firth, *The Apocalyptic Tradition in Reformation Britain, 1530–1645* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Richard Bauckham, *Tudor Apocalypse* (Oxford: Sutton Courtenay Press, 1978); Patrick Collinson, "Biblical Rhetoric: The English Nation and National Sentiment in the Prophetic Mode," in Claire McEachern and Debora Shuger, eds., *Religion and Culture in Renaissance England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 15–45; Michael McGiffert, "God's Controversy with Jacobean England," *American Historical Review* 88, no. 5 (1983): 1151–74; and Walsham, 287–90. I argue in this chapter that a variety of providential interpretations of England's identity are possible and that no single definition of God's purpose for the nation prevailed in this period. For a judicious and balanced assessment of the question of England as an "elect nation," see Patrick Collinson, *The Birthpangs of Protestant England: Religious and Cultural Change in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1988), 1–27.

<sup>15</sup> For an overview of the founding of Virginia, see Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1975), 44–107.

Hakluyt among them – admitted the possibility that God had “reserved” America for Spain rather than England.<sup>16</sup> The prevailing tension and rivalry between England and Spain, however, hardly encouraged English commentators to follow Hakluyt’s example. The widespread English impression that Spain’s interest in America was material rather than spiritual – combined with reports from dissident Spaniards of cruelties toward the Indians – provided the basis for an English critique of Spain and for a withholding of any providential imprimatur for Spanish America.<sup>17</sup>

The early rhetoric promoting English settlement in Virginia combined an emphasis on America’s promise with an acknowledgment of England’s domestic problems.<sup>18</sup> From 1608, merchants and ministers, often at the behest of the for-profit Virginia Company that had obtained the royal concession to found a new colony, gave lectures and preached sermons in London in search of investors and emigrants for the enterprise. These boosters of Virginia frequently concentrated on the economic and social problems of England as well as the possibilities of America. Company chaplain Robert Gray remarked in 1609 that the English “are growne to be a great people, so that one lot is not enough for

<sup>16</sup> David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 79–80. Armitage suggests that Hakluyt was a more influential theorist of empire in seventeenth-century England than his providentialist contemporary Samuel Purchas, and he produces Hakluyt’s astonishing remark on God’s treatment of Spain to reinforce this argument. While Armitage’s assertion is important, it should be noted that very few other English promoters of American colonization appear to have endorsed Hakluyt’s view of Spain as providentially favored; many proponents of English settlement in New England and Virginia specifically cited Spain’s foothold in the continent as a divine imperative for a rival process of colonization.

<sup>17</sup> On the relationship between Spanish success in the Americas and early English colonization, see Anthony Pagden, *Lords of All the World: Ideologies of Empire in Spain, Britain and France, c. 1500–c. 1800* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); J. H. Elliott, “Empire and State in British and Spanish America,” in Serge Gruzinski and Nathan Wachtel, eds., *Le Nouveau Monde, Mondes Nouveaux: L’expérience américaine* (Paris: Éditions de l’École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, 1996), 365–82; and Elliott, *Empires of the Atlantic World: Britain and Spain in America, 1492–1830* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006). Bartolomé de las Casas, the Dominican friar who proved to be Spain’s most enduring critic of Indian abuse, was made available to English readers in a translation of 1583: *The Spanish Colonie; or, Briefe Chronicle of the Actes and gestes of the Spaniardes in the West Indies, called the newe World* (London: William Brome, 1583).

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Fitzmaurice offers an account of the sermons that accompanied the short life of the Virginia Company (1606–24) in “‘Every man, that prints, adventures’: The Rhetoric of the Virginia Company Sermons,” in Lori Anne Ferrell and Peter McCullough, eds., *The English Sermon Revised: Religion, Literature and History, 1600–1750* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2000), 24–42. Fitzmaurice’s focus, however, is more on the classical antecedents of this promotional literature than on its providentialist dimensions, a theme that he also explores in his “Classical Rhetoric and the Promotion of the New World,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 58, no. 2 (1997): 221–43. Although Fitzmaurice and David Armitage (*Ideological Origins of the British Empire*, 92–94) have rescued the company sermons from scholarly obscurity, both authors downplay their providentialist aspect.

us.”<sup>19</sup> His complaint was echoed in a Virginia Company promotional pamphlet of 1610 that pointed to the “inundation of people” in England who “doth overflow this little Iland”; and the pamphlet suggested that thousands, perhaps “millions” of these people would ultimately be settled in America, thus averting the harsh policies that would be necessary to control a crowded population in England.<sup>20</sup> Some supporters of Virginia (and of commercial settlements elsewhere in America) pointed to different motives for undertaking the enterprise: John Smith, perhaps the most famous early advocate of English settlements in the New World, suggested in 1616 that exploration and adventure needed no further justification: “What so truley sutes with honour and honestie, as the discovering things unknowne?”<sup>21</sup> Company official Robert Johnson, in one of the earliest pamphlets on Virginia, recalled the “Noble deeds” of Alexander the Great and Hercules and suggested that English colonization would “farre excell” these vaunted precedents.<sup>22</sup> John Smith, though, was skeptical over whether romantic or religious motives would sustain a colony: “I am not so simple,” he declared in 1616, “to thinke, that ever any other motive than wealth, will ever erect there a Commonweale.”<sup>23</sup> Unless the audience of merchants and prospective emigrants could be guaranteed a profit, there was little hope of success.

Thus the boosters of the first English settlements had an awkward task: they had to distinguish the English colonial impulse from that of Spain, cast by John Smith and others as merely self-gain, and yet also to harness precisely the same material interest on the part of investors and settlers. One indirect means of doing this was to focus upon the Indians. Smith’s first account of Virginia in 1608 placed Indian conversion in the foreground, arguing that England would win “everlasting renowne” if it succeeded in “the erecting of true religion among Infidells.”<sup>24</sup> This theme resounded throughout the Virginia Company’s rhetoric, which argued for the positive value of Protestant evangelism in America and dismissed the cynical idea that Indians would experience the same cruel treatment from Protestants as they had already received from Catholic Spain. “Must we bait them with dogges,” asked Puritan minister William Symonds, “that shall eate up the mothers with their children? Let such be the practises of the divell, . . . of Antichrist and his frie[r], that is of purple Rome.” A focus on Indian conversion might both differentiate the Virginia colony from Spain and provide

<sup>19</sup> Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia* (London: Felix Kyngston, 1609), n.p. [13].

<sup>20</sup> *A True Declaration of the estate of the Colonie in Virginia, With a confutation of such scandalous reports as haue tended to the disgrace of so worthy an enterprise* (London: William Barret, 1610), 61–62.

<sup>21</sup> John Smith, *A Description of New England* (1616), in Philip L. Barbour, ed., *The Complete Works of Captain John Smith*, 3 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1986), 1: 343.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Johnson, *Nova Britannia: Offering Most Excellent Fruites by Planting in Virginia* (London: Samuel Macham, 1609), n.p. [35].

<sup>23</sup> Smith, *Description of New England*, 1: 346.

<sup>24</sup> John Smith, *A True Relation of such occurrences and accidents of noate as hath hapned in Virginia since the first planting of that Collony* (1608), in Barbour, ed., 1: 25.

some armament against domestic critics who questioned the colony's motives or its effects on the natives.<sup>25</sup>

The culmination of this rhetoric was Robert Johnson's *The New Life of Virginea* (1612), a sequel to his earlier tract. Johnson built on the argument that England would approach Indians from a very different perspective than Spain, providing an eschatological framework to clarify the superiority of the English mission. According to Johnson, the Indians were God's "speciall members," who had been punished by the Spaniards but who now stood ready to receive the true Gospel. God had "raised up" the Virgin Queen and precipitated her interest in American settlement, resulting eventually in the eponymous colony. If the prospective migrants were asked for their "provocations," they could answer confidently: "What can bee greater than from the higher? from God that hath given us the light of his word, that wee might enlighten this blind people."<sup>26</sup> Other Virginia boosters shied from such an explicit providential role for England but shared Johnson's interest in the eschatological dimensions of Indian conversion. William Symonds noted the prophetic requirement that the Gospel be spread across the globe before Christ's return. Although he was prepared for objections to this speculation – "[I] seeme to encline to the Millenaries, or such as looke for the gospell to be spread over all the world" – he stood his ground in arguing that the transportation of Protestantism into Spanish America might have an important providential meaning.<sup>27</sup>

Virginia's first two decades were not without incident, and boosters of the colony in London were quick to seize on any success to argue for God's involvement. The fabled expedition of 1609 – in which Sir Thomas Gates and his men were initially shipwrecked on the unknown island of Bermuda, before escaping on makeshift boats and reaching Jamestown just in time to save the colony from collapse – offered irrefutable evidence that, in the words of one London minister, "God himselfe is the founder and favourere of this Plantation."<sup>28</sup> But while this rhetoric was undoubtedly central to the efforts to promote Virginia in England and to attract investors and migrants, the providential boosters were dogged by the need both to address the material interests of their audience and to acknowledge the many problems experienced by the fledgling plantation.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, Gray, n.p. [18], and William Symonds, *Virginia: A Sermon Preached at White-Chapel Inn, in the Presence of many, Honourable and Worshipfull, the Adventurers and Planters for Virginia* (London: I. Windet, 1609), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Johnson, *The New Life of Virginea: Declaring the Former Successe and Present Estate of that Plantation, being the second part of Nova Britannia* (London: Felix Kyngston for William Welby, 1612), n.p [9–10, 49].

<sup>27</sup> Symonds, 47.

<sup>28</sup> William Crashaw, "Epistle Dedicatorie," in Alexander Whitaker, *Good Newes from Virginia, Sent to the Counsell and Company of Virginia, Resident in England* (London: Felix Kyngston for William Welby, 1613), [viii]. For other accounts of the providential significance of Gates's expedition, see *True Declaration*, 48; [Silvester Jourdain], *A Plaine Description of the Barmudas, Now Called Sommer Ilands, With the manner of their discoverie Anno 1609 by the shipwrack and admirable deliuerance of Sir Thomas Gates, and Sir George Sommers* (London: W. Stansby for W. Welby, 1613), [iii–iv]; and Whitaker, 22.

The promoters of Virginia produced jumbled arguments in an effort to satisfy different audiences. One suggested in 1609 that “many actions both good in themselves, and in their successe, have been performed with bad intents.” The colonists might advance the kingdom of God “however our naughtiness of mind may sway very much.” Another acknowledged the greed of English merchants but derived from it a novel interpretation of the enterprise: if “so many Honorable and worthy persons” had been persuaded “to disburse so freely and so willingly, such fair summes of money,” this must demonstrate divine involvement. Puritan minister Alexander Whitaker even suggested that merchants should commit their funds in the understanding that providence would eventually reward their efforts. God had demonstrated by the sacrifice of his son that he would redeem his debts, and merchants should be happy to consider Christ as collateral against their investments in Virginia.<sup>29</sup>

Many of these sermons bear witness to the tortuous effort both to promote the Virginia colony as profitable and to deny that profit was the rationale for supporting it. Robert Johnson, even in his early 1609 sermon, balanced the injunction that “we are to looke for no gaine in lewe of all our adventures” with an important qualification: “undoubtedly there is assured hope of gaine, . . . but looke it bee not chiefe in our thoughtes.”<sup>30</sup> The other problem facing the supporters of colonization in Virginia was that the colony experienced at least as many setbacks as successes. The sailors who ferried supplies between London and Jamestown told of political intrigue, disputes with the Indians, and a neglect of religion. The Virginia Company had difficulty persuading people of means to make the journey to its colony and then struggled to control reports of unruly or un-Christian behavior on the part of those migrants who were prepared to make the trip. Although the company itself admitted in a 1620 pamphlet that “many disasters” had overtaken the settlement, it argued that God had now decided “to blesse and prosper our late carefull endeavours” and to correct “the present defects, wherewith the Colony was kept downe.”<sup>31</sup> By the spring of 1622, the colony had indeed turned a corner, or so it seemed. Patrick Copland, another London preacher, offered a Thanksgiving sermon before an audience of relieved company managers and investors. Noting that many of them had wished in recent years “that you had never put your hand to this Plough,” he happily observed that the tide had turned: “And now, Beloved, is not the case altered?” Recalling an early episode in the colony’s history, in which a vessel bound for Virginia had escaped from the clutches of a Turkish ship, Copland affirmed the certainty of God’s involvement: “Was not here the presence of God printed, as it were, in *Folio* on Royall Crowne Paper and Capitall Letters?”<sup>32</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Johnson, *Nova Britannia*, n.p. [15]; Whitaker, n.p. [xiv], [xix], 34.

<sup>30</sup> Johnson, *Nova Britannia*, n.p. [15].

<sup>31</sup> *A Declaration of the State of the Colonie and Affaires in Virginia* (London: T.S., 1620), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Patrick Copland, *Virginia’s God be Thanked; or, A Sermon of Thanksgiving for the Happie successe of the affayres in Virginia this last yeare* (London: J.D. for William Sheppard and John Bellamie, 1622), 11, 20. On some of the difficulties in the colony’s early years, see T. H. Breen,

Unbeknownst to Copland and his audience, however, the colony had just suffered its worst setback so far. More than three hundred colonists were killed in an Indian attack on March 22, a testament both to the poor relations between the English and Native Americans and to the slipshod organization of the colony's defenses. Once again, the efforts of the company and its supporters appeared to be in ruins. It was left to the poet John Donne, now serving as the dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, to make sense of the disaster for the company's investors in a sermon of November 1622. Donne chose perhaps the only line of argument available to him: the colony's backers were wrong to expect quick returns from their endeavors. Using a metaphor that recalled the colorful reputation of his youth, Donne insisted that "you cannot beget a Sonne, and tell the Mother, I will have this Sonne borne within five Moneths." God himself had chosen to populate the world not by "creating men of clay, as fast as they made Bricks of Clay in *Egypt*," but by entrusting the task to a single couple, Adam and Eve. Even here, however, Donne struggled to reconcile the urge for material reward with the need to deny that this was the colony's primary motivation. While promising that "great Creatures lye long in the Wombe," Donne insisted that his auditors "onely let your principall end, be the propagation of the *glorious Gospell*." If their consciences were "upright," then their "Seals, and Patents, and Commissions, are Wings"; if they had the wrong motives, then their colonizing efforts would proceed "upon weake and feeble Crutches." Once more, the company's boosters appeared to be promising that material reward would attend only the denial of this motive; and after so many people had been killed in Jamestown in 1622, this rhetoric became still less effective.<sup>33</sup>

The company soon fell into bankruptcy, and the colony's problems continued. Critics in England and, eventually, New England cast aspersions on the quality of the settlers in Virginia, and especially on the lack of any higher motive that might inspire their enterprise. The company may have been genuine in its efforts to determine such a motive, but the fact of the colony's dependence on London for money, new migrants, and administrative direction suggests that the audience for these discussions of Virginia's providential identity was more English than American. Apart from John Smith, whose residency in America was very brief, no Virginia colonists seem to have speculated in print on a higher purpose for their settlement. While Donne and others tried to identify this purpose, the persistence of self-interest and failure retarded the development of a providential identity for the colony. In spite of their ambitious providentialism, the colony's supporters in London were reluctant to commit their own destinies to the glorious future they projected for Virginia.

"Looking Out for Number One: The Cultural Limits on Public Policy in Early Virginia," in Breen, *Puritans and Adventurers: Change and Persistence in Early America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 106–26.

<sup>33</sup> John Donne, *A Sermon upon the Eighth Verse of the First Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, Preached to the Honourable Company of the Virginian Plantation* (London: Thomas Jones, 1622), 16, 18, 19, 28.

**New England: “The Houre for the Worke”**

For centuries, Americans have argued that the New England colonists founded a society that was uniquely purposive: a “city on a hill” that would escape from the pitfalls of history and would provide a guiding example for other nations. In recent decades, some historians have questioned the existence of a “mission” among the settlers of Plymouth and Massachusetts, but this debate has turned less on the absolute question of whether the colonists believed they were on an errand from God and more on the relevance of England to the experience of the first colonists.<sup>34</sup> This focus is helpful to our inquiry and may allow us to see both the outlines and the limitations of any American errand. American colonists thought about God’s plan for their settlements in the context of the Old World as well as the New. If God directed the course of European events, of English history, and of their own migration to America, the colonists had to define a particular role for themselves in this broad Atlantic context. Moreover, their sense of this role could shift dramatically if European events moved in an unexpected direction. In the case of New England, the question of a special providential mission was much more prominent than in Virginia, but it was no less dependent on England.

The explorer John Smith was an early proponent of settlement in New England, and he argued for an English presence along the same lines as the Virginia colony.<sup>35</sup> However, the first successful English settlers, the Puritans of Plymouth, had actually been living in Leiden in Holland for nearly fifteen years when they resolved to cross the Atlantic.<sup>36</sup> William Bradford, their leader, saw no particular providential purpose to their Dutch migration. The Plymouth settlers had struggled with the cold climate, the difficulty of finding employment, and the distracting permissiveness of their neighbors. The Leiden Puritans were afraid that, if they failed to move again in the early 1620s, they would grow too old and rooted to undertake a further removal in the future, and that their children would become more Dutch than

<sup>34</sup> See, for example, Ernest Lee Tuveson, *Redeemer Nation: The Idea of America’s Millennial Role* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968); Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975); Bercovitch, *The American Jeremiad* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1978); and Avihu Zakai, *Exile and Kingdom: History and Apocalypse in the Puritan Migration to America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992). The most extensive critiques of the idea of an original mission or “errand” in the New England colonies are Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *To Live Ancient Lives: The Primitivist Dimension in Puritanism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988); Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); and Joseph A. Conforti, *Imagining New England: Explorations of Regional Identity from the Pilgrims to the Mid-Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 11–34.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, his 1616 *Description of New England* and his 1631 *Advertisements for the unexperienced Planters of New England*, in Barbour, ed., 3: 253–307.

<sup>36</sup> On the precursors to the Plymouth settlement, see David B. Quinn, “The First Pilgrims,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 23, no. 3 (1966): 359–90.