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*Reviews in American History* is currently published by The Johns Hopkins University Press.
IN RETROSPECT

“EPIPHANY AT MATADI”:
PERRY MILLER’S ORTHODOXY IN MASSACHUSETTS
AND THE MEANING OF AMERICAN HISTORY

Avihu Zakai

When it first appeared in 1933, Perry Miller’s Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630–1650 attracted little attention. “As I remembered,” wrote Miller, “the book did not receive a wide or immediate response.” The destiny of the book, however, proved to be radically different. Today, over fifty years since Orthodoxy in Massachusetts was first published, every student of early American history would certainly concur that the publication of this work signified a turning point in the field of American Puritan studies and that it became one of the most authoritative studies in American historiography. With its powerful arguments and brilliant narrative, the book continues to exercise a great and inspiring influence on the historiography of the early years of Puritan New England. This in itself is unique in a field where books rapidly come and go, and young and striving historians often raise new interpretations in an attempt to supplant the old ones.

The book’s vitality provides an opportunity to reconsider this impressive study. By increasing our understanding of the historical context in which Miller wrote Orthodoxy in Massachusetts we may be able to further clarify his working assumptions regarding the meaning of American history and the unique role of the Puritans and Puritanism within the American past. What follows is not so much an examination of Orthodoxy in Massachusetts in the light of recent Puritan studies, but rather a more modest course of inquiry: to explore the book within the context of its time and according to the objectives set by Miller when he wrote it. This study will thus begin by discussing Miller’s “mission” to search for the meaning of American history. Next I will demonstrate how and to what extent Miller’s efforts to accomplish this mission were affected by the period in which he lived and wrote. Finally, I examine important questions concerning Miller’s suppositions and findings.

Although it has been generally accepted that Orthodoxy in Massachusetts marked the first of Miller’s major writings on the Puritans, Miller himself considered this book the final phase in a long search in which he had grappled with the issues of the meaning and nature of the American past, the singularity of the American experience, and the means with which to convey these
ideas to the American public during the first half of the twentieth century. No
doubt, Miller was initially drawn to Puritanism because it represents a genu-
inely rigorous intellectual tradition at the foundation of the American experi-
ence. Yet the fact that his quest for the significance of American history
casted Miller to become deeply preoccupied with Puritanism and Puritan
studies undoubtedly affected his premises concerning the role of Puritanism
in American history. In Miller's view, Puritanism was not merely a historical
phenomenon of seventeenth-century New England, but rather a fundamental
component underlying the entire American past from its beginning until his
own time. Puritanism, according to Miller, became "one of the continuous
factors in American life and thought. Any inventory of the elements that
have gone into the making of the 'American mind' would have to commence
with Puritanism." Puritanism thus provided Miller with the instrument for
realizing his mission to conduct a comprehensive study which would decipher
the meaning of the entire American past.

This historical mode of inquiry, in which the American past as a whole was
primary and Puritanism secondary, with the latter serving as a means to ex-
plain the former, was a clear reaction to the school of Progressive historians
so dominant in American historiography during the 1920s, the decade in
which Miller wrote Orthodoxy in Massachusetts. The Progressives, including
James T. Adams, Vernon L. Parrington, and Thomas J. Wertenbaker, had
depicted the Puritans as opponents of the liberal and democratic tradition in
American history and strongly rejected the notion that Puritanism had played
a crucial role in American history. Miller's mission, therefore, was to estab-
lish the function of Puritanism as central to the American past by view-
ing Puritanism as "the innermost propulsion of the United States," capable of
revealing the significance of American history.

In other words, while he never claimed that Puritanism was the only means
by which to interpret the American past, Miller considered a grasp of the
Puritans' special role as a necessary condition for an understanding of
American history. Both Orthodoxy in Massachusetts and later The New
England Mind were in large measure expressions of Miller's reaction to the
anti-Puritan sentiment of his age, which denied the significance of Puritanism
or its contribution to American history, and he was undeniably successful in
his task. In the very centrality of Puritanism in Miller's approach, however,
lies a risk of distortion or neglect of certain essential features of the Puritan
mind and experience in early Massachusetts.

In the early 1920s, young Perry Miller decided to defer his undergraduate
studies at the University of Chicago in order to realize his own personal
search for meaning, his desire for "unmediated experience," as Professor
Kenneth Lynn described it in his appreciation of his great teacher and colleague. He lived for awhile in Colorado, "where he rejoiced in the spectacular scenery and the company of hoboes and IWWs." Still dissatisfied and restless, he moved to Greenwich Village where "he wrote 'true-confession' stories for pulp magazines, and picked up an occasional part in a play." Miller spent the next two years in Mexico, sailed to the Mediterranean and finally took a job "unloading oil drums in the Belgian Congo." 7 "I came there seeking 'adventure,'" Miller recalled many years later in describing his experiences in Africa; he felt "jealous of older contemporaries to whom that boon had been offered by the First World War." It was not long before Miller discovered that "the adventures that Africa afforded were tawdry enough." The African experience, however, seriously affected the rest of Miller's life, for during his stay, "a determination [was] conceived" to dedicate himself to "the pressing necessity for expounding my America to the twentieth century." Away from "the wilderness of America," in the midst of that "barbaric tropic" of Africa, while sitting "disconsolate on the edge of a jungle," Miller underwent a sudden revelation — "the epiphany at Matadi" — which set the young man in pursuit of what became his lifelong goal: "It was given to me to have thrust upon me the mission of expounding what I took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States." Armed with this mission, Perry Miller immediately sailed back to America ready to assume the calling to realize his "vision" and interpret the nature and meaning of the American past to his America of the early 1900s. 8

Miller initially discerned two possible approaches to interpreting the American past. His decision to consider Puritan New England rather than the settlement of Virginia as the starting point for his exposition is, for our concerns, of the utmost importance for understanding his overall historical method and his system of historical explanation. Although he recognized the priority of Virginia in the settlement of America, he nonetheless found it obvious and even necessary to commence his work "with the Puritan migration," for only with these colonists and not with those of Virginia did Miller find the "coherence with which I could coherently begin." Not having discovered any clear social or ideological system among the Virginians, Miller turned to the Puritans, whose ideology appeared to be "the most coherent and most powerful single factor in the early history of America." 9 Believing that an interpretation of the American past ought to begin with an explanation of those "traditions" that "have gone into the making of the 'American mind,'" Miller chose Puritanism as "the first of these traditions to be fully articulated, and because it has inspired certain traits which have persisted long after the original creed." 10 For Miller, then, the Puritans were the first "coherent" group to have transmitted a tradition from the Old World to the New.
Such an interpretation encountered severe opposition during the 1920s, for when Miller began his work in that decade the field of American Puritan studies was dominated by the school of Progressive historians, who not only rejected the idea that Puritanism had made any meaningful contribution to American liberalism and democracy, but described the Puritans as the opponents of those traditions. The Progressive historians believed rather that those who had fought against the Massachusetts Bay Puritans should be considered the protagonists of the liberal and democratic traditions in American history. Thus James T. Adams in The Founding of New England attributes the American nation’s “hard-won liberty . . . [in] no small measure . . . to . . . the noble men and women who suffered and gave their lives that the power of Massachusetts theocracy might be broken, and the human mind unshackled.” Viewing the whole American past in terms of an ideological clash between liberals and reactionaries, freedom and tyranny, Adams describes those who were banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony, “the leaders and citizens of Rhode Island, the martyred Quakers” who lived and died “that the glory of a heritage of intellectual freedom might be ours,” as the Americans whom “it should be our duty to honor.” Similarly, Parrington, in The Colonial Mind denounced the Puritans for resisting the heritage of liberalism in America. “The Colonial Mind,” according to Parrington, is characterized by the “clash between a liberal political philosophy and a reactionary theology.” Roger Williams, for example, who “transported to the new world the plentiful liberalism of a great movement and a great century,” represented the former; John Cotton, who exemplified the latter ideology, was described as “the Jacobean theocrat,” who with the rest of Massachusetts Bay Puritans “envisaged different ends for America and who followed different paths” in contrast to democracy and liberalism. Parrington thus concludes that “in banishing the Antinomians and Separatists and Quakers, the Massachusetts magistrates cast out the spirit of liberalism from the household of the saints.”

The Progressive historians’ total denial of Puritanism’s unique role in American history was only part of the widespread “anti-Puritan rebellion” of the early 1900s. Even Miller, before his “epiphany at Matadi,” had acted as “an adolescent campaigner” in this anti-Puritan cult. Influential writers of the time, such as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, ridiculed Puritanism and the Puritans in their books and satires, and identified them with hypocrisy, censorship, narrow-mindedness, and joylessness; they were accused of having withstood everything related to the growth of realism in American life and literature. Miller, years after he had freed himself from this anti-Puritan outlook, referred to the general attitude toward the Puritans in the 1920s: “I had commenced my work with the emotional universe dominated by H. L. Mencken. My contemporaries and I came of age in a time when the word
'Puritan' served as a comprehensive sneer against every tendency in American civilization which we held reprehensible — sexual diffidence, censorship, prohibition, theological fundamentalism, political hypocrisy, and all the social antics which Sinclair Lewis, among others, was stridently ridiculing. Miller's task became to counter this prevailing "Menckenesque hatred of the kill-joy Puritan."  

Another mode of historical approach toward the Puritans which Miller had to confront emphasized the centrality of social history. Arguing that "the field of intellectual history" should be "considered as legitimate a field for research and speculation as that of economic and political," Miller attempted to demonstrate in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* that early Puritan New England should indeed be discussed within the framework of intellectual history: "the narrative of the Bay colony's early history can be strung upon the thread of an idea." Miller thoroughly rejected the social historian's mode of historical explanation, which, as typified by J. T. Adams, examined "the creed and platform" of the Puritans, yet "always passed judgment" against them "in the name of the enlightened insight of modern social science." In Miller's view, this "anti-intellectualism" among social historians who "slide over" the role of ideas in history "in a shockingly superficial manner simply because they have so little respect for the intellect in general," was incomprehensible. In stark contrast, Miller affirmed his own belief: "I have difficulty imagining that anyone can be a historian without realizing that history itself is part of the life of the mind; hence I have been compelled to insist that the mind of man is the basic factor in human history."  

In summary, then, when Miller turned to seventeenth-century New England Puritanism as the beginning of his exposition of the American past, he had to contend with two dominant attitudes: the anti-Puritan sentiment which characterized the Progressive historians and influential writers such as H. L. Mencken and Sinclair Lewis, and the anti-intellectualism among social historians concerning the role of ideas in history. Many of the important arguments in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* were indeed strongly influenced by Miller's desire to change these approaches to Puritanism. To avoid the risk of augmenting the prevailing bias against the Puritans, Miller omitted a description of some of the main features of the Puritan mind and practice, such as millennial expectations and eschatological vision, and the radicalism embodied at the foundation of the holy experiment in the wilderness — everything that could give evidence to the Puritans' radicalism rather than to their orthodoxy. He thus overlooked — even distorted — some of their essential modes of conviction and modes of action. Furthermore, in his attempt to oppose the social historians' anti-intellectualism, Miller tended to isolate ideas from the social and political setting within which they operated. Conse-
quently, he ran the risk of widening the gap between ideas, on the one hand, and social and political processes on the other. Both his reluctance to provide evidence which might heighten anti-Puritan feeling and his overemphasis on the role of ideas removed from their historical context are clearly exhibited in Miller’s treatment in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* of the origins and causes of the Great Puritan Migration, of the meaning and nature of theocracy in Massachusetts, and in his almost total disregard throughout the book of the Puritan pursuit of the millennium. In all these cases, as well as in many others, Miller overlooked time and again the Puritan radicalism which characterized the Puritan migration to and settlement in Massachusetts, in his attempt to prove the establishment of orthodoxy—rather than radicalism—in Massachusetts. It is in this context that we examine the role of the concept “Non-Separatist Congregationalism,” which Miller invented in his efforts to prove his argument.

Unquestionably, Miller’s single most important contribution in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* is his distinction between “Separatist Congregationalism” and “Non-Separatist Congregationalism”; supporters of the former had separated themselves from the Church of England during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, while the adherents of the latter, though intent on reforming the Church of England along Congregationalist lines in terms of church-government, always proclaimed themselves to be members of the Church of England. Since Miller fully utilized this distinction as the basis of his interpretation of the causes and origins of the Puritan migration to New England, it may be regarded as the core and heart of *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts*. Both Geoffrey Nuttall and Patrick Collinson, however, have shown that no substantial evidence exists which would support Miller’s central distinction. Nuttall doubted “whether the Non-Separating Congregationalist group was a ‘group,’ or truly ‘congregationalist,’ or ‘nonseparating,” and thus concluded that the term “‘semiseparatist’ as ‘used by contemporaries’ was “preferable.” Collinson contended that Perry Miller’s famous distinction in *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* “was vitiated (the word is hardly too strong) by a radical misapprehension of the Puritan doctrine of covenanted grace,” and a misunderstanding “of Puritan ecclesiology.”

It is important to understand why Miller was so anxious to prove that the Non-Separatist Congregationalists rather than the Separatist Congregationalists settled the Massachusetts Bay colony. Not only does Miller painstakingly devote two long chapters of *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* to establish this distinction, but he repeatedly emphasizes that the Puritans who emigrated to New England were neither Separatists nor “schismatics” because they never sought “separation” from the Church of England. Only a partial explanation for this single-mindedness is that it constituted a reaction to nineteenth-
century historians of Puritan New England who commonly regarded the Bay Puritans as Separatists. 18

Another and more important reason for Miller’s denial that the Bay Puritans were Separatists may be discovered if we bear in mind Miller’s prime interest in Puritan New England as it related to “the meaning of America.” 19 He viewed Puritanism as “one of the continuous factors in American life and American thought,” and declared that “its role in American thought has been almost the dominant one.” 20 Preoccupied with explaining how this “imported and highly articulated system of ideas” was transferred from the Old World and implanted in the New, Miller refers to the “process” of becoming American as one of being “driven by local influences, and yet . . . constantly diverted or stimulated by the influx of ideas from Europe.” 21

Puritanism thus provided Miller with the means with which to “coherently” demonstrate the process of the transfer, diffusion, and accommodation of European ideas in the American wilderness. 22 Ultimately, as a cultural historian in the broadest sense, Miller was interested in the “narrative of the movement of European culture to the vacant wilderness of America,” 23 and he examined the role of Puritanism in the history of both Europe and America: “I assume that Puritanism was one of the major expressions of the Western intellect, that it achieved an organized synthesis of concepts which are fundamental to our culture.” 24

The radicalism embodied in this interpretation can easily be discerned when we consider the fact that nineteenth-century historians of early New England had not regarded those who emigrated to the Massachusetts Bay colony as Puritans at all, but rather as Separatists—those radical, sometimes fanatical, but ever marginal religious groups which had left the Church of England in the name of purity and the pursuit of the millennium. In Miller’s grand scheme, however, the Puritans were the first and principal transmitters and diffusers of European culture and ideas into America, and he was thus determined to refute the nineteenth-century historians’ view concerning the separation of the Bay Puritans. For this reason, and only for this reason, as Miller himself admitted, he invented the hypothetical concept of Non-Separatist Congregationalism as a starting point from which to begin not only his Puritan studies, but more important, his exposition of the whole American past. 25

Once the Bay Puritans were recognized, not as a marginal, Separatist group, which had cut itself off from both the Church of England and mainstream Puritanism, but rather as orthodox Puritans who had never separated themselves from the main body of Puritanism in England, then, clearly, they could be regarded as genuinely responsible for the transfer of European culture and tradition into America. The concept of Non-Separatist Congrega-
tionalism thus made it possible for Miller to argue, in terms of American history in general, that the people who settled New England "carried . . . Protestantism intact from Europe to America," where the "New England 'theocracy'" they established was "simply a Protestant version of the European social ideal, and except for its Protestantism was thoroughly medieval in character." 26

Perry Miller once described his Puritan trilogy — Orthodoxy in Massachusetts (1933), The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century (1939), and The New England Mind: From Colony to Province (1953) — as having been written in the wrong order. "The second book," he acknowledged, "was in reality the introductory exploration; Orthodoxy in Massachusetts consists of the first chapters of a tale which the New England Mind: From Colony to Province resumes." Since Orthodoxy in Massachusetts was founded upon, in Miller's words, a "hypothetical starting point, from the vast literature of what I have called Non-Separatist Congregationalism," it should have appeared after the first volume of The New England Mind. 27 This explanation again indicates that Miller's major historical occupation in Orthodoxy in Massachusetts was the transfer of Puritan culture, and that in the Non-Separatist Congregationalists he discovered the group which had executed that transfer.

If the first volume, The New England Mind: The Seventeenth Century, was designed "for large excursions into the background of English and European opinion," the focus of the second volume, The New England Mind: From Colony to Province, was "narrowed down to a merely provincial scene." 28 And if the role of the first volume was to describe "the architecture of the intellect brought to America by the founders of New England," the aim of the second volume was essentially to deal with the "history of the accommodation" of Puritanism "to the American landscape." 29 Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, on the other hand, was motivated entirely by the aim of showing the movement which executed the transfer and establishment of Puritanism in America; and being thus intended, the role of this volume was to bridge the gap between the other two by showing precisely by whom, how and why Puritanism passed intact from England to New England, or in other words to expose "the continuity of thought extending from the initial stages of English Puritanism to the peculiar institutions of New England." 30

This is the essential role Miller assigned to Orthodoxy in Massachusetts in this Puritan trilogy. And that is why only after first writing this book, in which he was so convinced that he proved beyond doubt the transfer of orthodox Puritanism to America, could he later write the two volumes of the New England Mind. For only after demonstrating conclusively that Puritanism had indeed passed intact to America could Miller proceed first to look
into its background in English and European history and later to explore its accommodation into the wilderness in America. What precisely the nature and meaning was of the Puritanism which transferred to America is of concern to us here. And if Miller's distinction between Separatist and Non-Separatist Congregationalism is no longer accepted, is it possible that his description of the Bay Puritans as Orthodox Puritans is also invalid?

The very title Orthodoxy in Massachusetts suggests, and indeed the whole discussion within the book affirms, that Miller viewed the Bay Puritans as orthodox Puritans, and he declared once and again that "Massachusetts was not schismatical." It should be noted, however, that he used the term "orthodoxy" in the sense of the sixteenth and seventeenth century meaning, which, according to The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary of Historical Principles, is "right in opinion," or "holding correct, e.g., currently accepted opinions." Orthodoxy in Massachusetts stresses that the Bay Puritans had been closely associated and connected in their views, beliefs, and practices with the currently accepted opinions held by English Puritans, and this argument strengthened Miller's claim in the book to regard the settlers of Massachusetts as orthodox Puritans. After devoting the first two chapters to defining Puritan orthodoxy, Miller strove to show that the Bay Puritans did not deviate from it, and that orthodoxy thus passed without alteration to Massachusetts. In both England and New England, he wrote, "the Puritans preserved intact the principles of uniformity and of civil and ecclesiastical cooperation, the principles which had come down to them from the Middle Ages and which were unquestionably presupposed in all social thinking of the time." It is in this context of orthodoxy that Miller even claimed that "the New England 'theocracy' was simply a Protestant version of the European social ideal" in regard to the notion of "subjection to . . . social and ecclesiastical superiors." More specifically, orthodoxy according to Miller signifies "the joining of Church and Commonwealth under the civil power," which entailed the magistrate's supremacy over and responsibility for the church.31

With Puritan orthodoxy thus defined, it is left to us now to consider to what extent Miller's contention concerning orthodoxy in Massachusetts was right. With the entire thrust of Orthodoxy in Massachusetts being to prove the transfer and establishment of Puritan orthodoxy in America, Miller, as we saw earlier, overlooked in many cases evidence which pointed rather to the radicalism inherent in the causes and origins of the Puritan migration, and in the premises upon which the holy experiment in the wilderness was based. The only radicalism which Miller was willing to allow to the Bay Puritans was their polity of church-government, or Congregationalism, but even here he tried to minimize its quality.

Regarding the concept of national church, such as the Church of England
which theoretically possessed the sole means of salvation within the nation, the implications of Congregationalism were indeed revolutionary. The Bay Puritans argued that each particular congregation, over which all ecclesiastical power was denied, held the means of salvation through its possession of the "Keys to the Kingdom of Heaven" — and this was a premise clearly incompatible with the notion of a national church. "In the Old Testament indeed," wrote John Cotton, "we read of a national church . . . but we read of no such national church . . . in the New Testament." 32 From the point of view of orthodox Puritans in England, who sought to reform the Church of England as a national church, Congregationalism staged an ecclesiastical revolution, and they never considered it to be orthodoxy. In the 1630s as well as the 1640s, most English Puritans repeatedly condemned Congregationalism as a movement for religious reformation that threatened to undermine the existence and the very notion of the national church of England. Both Congregationalism and Separation were regarded by orthodox Puritans as radical movements which accused the Church of England of being a false church and desired its abolition. "In the Old Testament the church of the Jewes was a national church," wrote Richard Mather in America in 1636, "but in the new Test[ament] a nation or country is not spoken of as one church, but there is mention of many churches in one nation or one country." 33 The whole Puritan migration to New England became, according to John Cotton's exegesis of the Book of Revelation, a deliverance "from this Monster . . . (and) from the remnant of the Image of this Beast, from all Diocesan and National Churches." 34

Miller attempted in *Orthodoxy In Massachusetts* to prove that orthodox Puritans emigrated to New England, yet he offered not even a glimpse of the actual world out of which the Great Puritan Migration arose. All that he did say was that "along with other Puritans the Congregationalists had identified themselves with the Parliamentary cause," but "with the dissolution" of the Parliament of 1629 by Charles I, "their last hope was gone" and they began to emigrate to Massachusetts. 35 This interpretation, devoid of all social and political factors, easily avoided acknowledging the essential radicalism embodied in the Puritan migration. In truth, however, this migration arose out of the Puritan experience in England in the early seventeenth century, and was the result of a long-term trend in English society whereby Puritanism increasingly revealed itself not only as an ecclesiastical power but as a strong social and political force able to disturb and divide communities by its uncompromising plea for full social and religious reformation. The actual world, therefore, out of which the Great Puritan Migration came was a world of conflict in local communities, parishes, churches, villages, and towns, in which Puritans struggled for religious as well as social reform against fellow
members of their own local societies. And it seems that what determined the migration was the diminishing of the prospects for reform at the local and national level, and the interactions between godly and "ungodly" or "profane" people, as the Puritans termed those who opposed them. Emigration emerged as a possible solution for many for whom the only alternative was life among the "profane." After all, Puritans carried with them not only theological tenets, but also and most importantly new visions of a godly society. And when the attempt to create such a society in England failed, some of the radical, rather than orthodox, Puritans turned their eyes to New England, deeming it the ideal place to make their vision a reality. But Perry Miller, a historian of ideas, explained the Puritan migration exclusively in terms of Non-Separatist Congregationalism, and thus overlooked the social, political, and ecclesiastical radicalism which stood behind the origins and causes of the migration and which later characterized the foundation of the Puritan Christian commonwealth in the wilderness.

It was a radical and uncompromising plea for full social, political, and ecclesiastical reform which motivated radical Puritans to emigrate to Massachusetts. Once settled in the wilderness, they found the door finally open to them to realize their radical premises concerning the shaping of the true Christian Commonwealth. The Puritans believed that, to realize their premises of religious reformation, they must keep their covenants with God in the civil as well as in the ecclesiastical realm, a conviction which required that civil authority be confined exclusively to the godly. Religious reformation, then, went hand in hand with social and political reform. And while the pursuit of reformation led in the religious sphere to the policy of admitting only "visible saints" into the church, the very same drive for reformation led, in the political realm, to the establishment of theocratic government—a political system that entrusted authority only to those in the Puritan colony who belonged to the "gathered churches" or the saints. This was the essence of the holy experiment which was based upon premises so radical and revolutionary that orthodox Puritans in England found it difficult to accept them. Viscount Say and Sele and Baron Brook, for example, orthodox Puritan nobles, abandoned their plan in 1636 to emigrate to Massachusetts when the Bay Puritans boldly informed them that privileges based on wealth, property, and heredity, were incompatible with the communion of the saints according to the law of grace, or the law of the Gospel.

One must fully grasp the tremendous revolutionary, social, and political consequences of the ideological premises of Puritan theocracy in America in order to realize that it was indeed radical Puritans who settled Massachusetts and not orthodox ones. In their advocacy of a theocratic government which explicitly acknowledged Christ, and only Christ, as ruler over them, these
Puritans were laying the foundation for profound change in the traditional English political and social obligations: no one, neither bishop nor king, could stand between God and his people. In this sense, theocracy indeed signified the republic of the saints, in which only God was the accepted ruler. Furthermore, theocratic government entailed not only a denial of the divine rights of king and bishops, but also a refusal to acknowledge that any rights based on the privilege of property, heredity, and wealth determined eligibility to participate in the political life of the holy experiment. Inasmuch as the political realm was held to be the exclusive domain of the saints by virtue of their covenanted relationship with God both in church and state, the sole prerequisites for membership in the body politic were sainthood, holiness, and saving grace. Religious obligations, thus, were transformed into political obligations, and the exclusiveness of the holy fellowship of the church led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system.36

It is ironic that the most prominent historian of the seventeenth-century “New England mind” should have attached so little importance to the Puritans’ pursuit of the millennium in either Old or New England, and refused to acknowledge the existence of a real and vivid Puritan interest in speculation concerning the second coming of Christ. By ignoring the overwhelming evidence in English Puritan writings that the pursuit of the millennium was an essential feature of the whole Puritan movement, and that discussion concerning prophecy about the second coming of Christ was widespread, Miller excised from the origins of the Puritan migration and the premises of theocracy in Massachusetts a crucial dimension. The reasons for his rejection of Puritan millennialism may again be found in Miller’s overall goal to prove the existence of orthodoxy in Massachusetts. Given the fact that historians for a long time have generally considered the pursuit of the millennium as a phenomenon belonging exclusively to the lunatic fringe of religious fanatics, zealots, sects, and movements which developed within the Puritan movement in England before and during the Puritan Revolution, it was only natural that Miller, who was always reluctant to acknowledge any evidence of Puritan radicalism, should refuse to allow the existence of the millennial strain of thought in the mind of orthodox Puritans. Indeed, for him, Puritan orthodoxy and millennialism were always incompatible. Yet millennial expectations and eschatological visions were in fact intrinsically connected with the Puritan movement in England from its very beginnings. They reflected the Puritan dream of order, being grounded in utopian visions of a period of general righteousness in which Christ would rule with his saints on earth as foretold in the Book of Revelation.

By omitting both millennial thought and the Book of Revelation from the Puritan cosmology and experience in Old and New England, Miller misappre-
hended the main thrust of the Puritan migration and of the holy experiment in Massachusetts, for not only did Puritans believe in the imminence of the millennium, they deemed themselves actors in the providential drama of all time—the battle between Christ and Antichrist which would precede the second coming of Christ. As the emigrants themselves perceived it, the Puritan migration was not simply a utopian search after religious reformation, a flight from corrupt history; it was rather a confrontation within time and history, an earthly stand against the power of Satan and Antichrist. Furthermore, the Puritan theocracy in New England was a precondition for Massachusetts’s unique role in providential history: through the two complementary instruments of church and state, the Puritans hoped to destroy Antichristian institutions and government, and realize their pursuit of the millennium by creating the perfect society in which God would rule over his saints as the true sovereign in the spheres of both church and state.

It seems inconceivable that Miller did not realize the tremendous wealth of evidence to counter his claim of “orthodoxy” in Massachusetts in both the context of the Puritan movement in England and the New England reality. Nevertheless, he fervently defended his argument and refused to consider the idea that the theocracy in Massachusetts might be radically different in nature and meaning from the views of orthodox Puritans in England, and that consequently the premises upon which the holy experiment in the wilderness was based might be radical and revolutionary in terms of the Puritan movement in England. Miller’s rigid insistence on the orthodox character of the Bay Puritans may be explained by his goal to present a coherent Puritan tradition which would facilitate an interpretation of the whole American past. To accomplish this he apparently believed he had to establish conclusively that the Puritans in Massachusetts were the true heirs of English Puritanism, and not radicals and millenarians who had abandoned both the Church of England and the general Puritan movement in pursuit of religious reformation. The concept of orthodoxy in Massachusetts provided the bridge by which Puritanism was transferred and diffused in America. The fact that in creating this concept Miller was compelled to ignore some of the essential features of the Puritan mind and action which explicitly indicated that Puritan radicalism rather than orthodoxy was established in Massachusetts, is less surprising when we realize that Miller’s ultimate goal was to bring Puritanism back into the center of American history. Only if Puritanism as a culture and tradition had been transferred intact from England to America could Miller go on to establish the unique role this tradition assumed in the American past.

Historians of Puritanism in the early Massachusetts Bay colony owe an enormous debt to Perry Miller for having conveyed in *Orthodoxy in Massa-
chusetts what very few have rarely achieved: the creation of a new historical field and a new sense of historical consciousness. Yet, as with other historical interpretations, Miller’s *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts* should be considered within the context of the age in which it was composed; the increased perspective afforded by the passage of fifty years since its publication should facilitate this task. In addition, the work should be studied in the light of Miller’s own private mission. Whether or not, as Lynn suggests, there is a “fundamental similarity” between “Miller’s pattern-making mentality” and that of the Puritans should not deter us from examining the way in which the objective of returning Puritanism to the center of the American past affected Miller’s historical assumptions and method. Only then can we further our understanding of the relationship between Miller’s “mission” and his interpretation of the Puritan “errand into the wilderness.”


25. Miller, NEM: From Colony to Province. Foreword.
27. Miller, NEM: From Colony to Province. Foreword.
28. Miller, NEM: Seventeenth Century, Foreword, p. vii; NEM: From Colony to Province, Foreword.
29. Miller, NEM: From Colony to Province, Foreword.
31. Miller, Orthodoxy, p. 72; The Puritans, I: 16–17; Orthodoxy, p. 5.
35. Miller, Orthodoxy, p. 99.