Theocracy in New England: The Nature and Meaning of the Holy Experiment in the Wilderness

Throughout the 1630s thousands of Puritans crossed the Atlantic to reach New England where they intended to dedicate their lives to God and His word. They came with the belief that the millennium, or the time in which Christ would reign on Earth with His saints, as described in the Book of Revelation, was at hand. 'If the servants of Christ be not mistaken' wrote Edward Johnson of his fellow Puritan emigrants' millennial expectations, 'the downfall of Antichrist is at hand, and then the Kingdom[s] of the Earth shall become the Kingdom of our Lord Christ.' The realization of their millennial expectations and the transformation of the world into the Kingdom of God, the Puritans believed, depended on the saints assuming an active and decisive role in the apocalyptic events preceding the millennium, as vividly portrayed in Revelation. Thus the saints were to gather themselves into fellowships, or congregations, consisting only of 'visible saints'. 'The great design of Jesus Christ in this age', wrote John Higginson from Guilford, Connecticut, to Thomas Thatcher of Weymouth, Massachusetts, 'is to set up his Kingdom in particular churches.' Therefore, continues Higginson, 'the great duty of such as are in church fellowship is to conform themselves to those primitive patterns'.


Accordingly, the Puritans set out to establish congregational churches as specified in the prophecies of Revelation immediately upon their arrival in New England.

One must not assume, however, that the Great Puritan Migration to New England was directed solely toward the establishment of Congregationalism. And indeed, perceiving themselves and their migration as crucial in the great providential drama, the Puritans assigned themselves a larger role than constituting the true Church in the Wilderness. They were ‘to raise a bulwark against the kingdom of Antichrist’, that would help to ensure that Christ and not Antichrist would reign in the world. New England was to be the site for the true Christian commonwealth in which Christ would rule over his saints. ‘We chose not the place for the land’, declared Johnson on the cause and origin of the Puritan migration to America, ‘but for the government, that our Lord Christ might reign over us, both in Churches and Common-wealth’. In the eyes of the Puritans, then, Church and state were but two complementary instruments through which they hoped to defeat Antichristian institutions and governments and realize their pursuit of the millennium. Thus, argued Johnson, ‘Godly civil government shall have a great share in the worke of the upcoming of the millennium, and in Massachusetts he happily noted, ‘Magistrates being conscious of ruling for Christ, dare not admit of any bastardy brood to nurse upon their tender knees, neither any Christian of sound judgment vote for any, but such as earnestly contend for the Faith’.

Clearly, the type of political system the Puritans succeeded in creating in the American wilderness would largely determine both their degree of success in effecting the religious and social reformation they had been unable to achieve in England, as well as the fulfilment of their providential mission to defeat Antichristian institutions and usher in the Kingdom of God. Precisely what was the nature of the Puritan commonwealth in New England, however, remains one of the most persistent questions in the historiography of American Puritanism. In the many works dealing with the Puritan colonies in America, whether or not the Puritans actually intended to and succeeded in creating a theocracy in New England, remains one of the essential questions not yet conclusively resolved.

In an attempt to clarify this troublesome issue concerning the basic character of the Puritan commonwealth in America, the premises of the New England Puritans, or more particularly, those of Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Haven, will first be examined. Second, it will be shown how, out of these premises concerning state, Church and the special dimension of time they believed themselves to live in, the Puritans shaped their Christian commonwealth. Finally, the holy experiment in the wilderness will be explored in the context of the transatlantic Puritan movement, in order to verify whether theocracy was a phenomenon peculiar to American Puritanism, or rather an essential feature of English Puritanism, especially during the so-called Puritan Revolution—when Puritans had the opportunity to establish a Christian commonwealth in England. Above all, this study underscores the requirement of the historian to closely examine the ideological context in order to understand men’s actions.

In England during the 1620s and 1630s, the Puritans found themselves thwarted from achieving their goal of separating themselves from ungodly people admitted to membership in parish churches. The wilderness offered them a rare opportunity to reconstruct the Church as a spiritual society based on the covenant, and thus realize their longstanding aim. As Edmund Morgan has shown, ‘the English emigrants to New England were the first Puritans to restrict membership in the church to visible saints, to persons, that is, who felt the stirrings of grace in their souls, and who could demonstrate this fact to the satisfaction of other saints’. At the same time, the wilderness also provided the possibility of forming the true Christian commonwealth in which the proper relationship between Church and state might be achieved. In the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, long before the Puritan migration began, efforts had been made as part of the pursuit of reformation to form civil and social covenants among Puritans, in order to strengthen, through mutual edification, individuals’ resolve to keep their covenant with God. ‘These covenants’, wrote Patrick Collinson in this regard, ‘were not church covenants but belonged to the Puritan experience of covenant grace, an area quite remote at this time.'
from any overt ecclesiastical reference. Accordingly, as Lockridge shows in his study on Dedham, when the godly reached New England they immediately covenant with themselves before settling or establishing a church. A social or civil covenant, then, was different from a church covenant; the first related to civil and social affairs, while the second to a spiritual fellowship. Both, however, were religious covenants intended to further the premises of reformation in Church and state alike. Yet while the one regulated the saints in the commonwealth, the other governed them in the church. This distinction is a crucial one, because the question of the relationship between the social or civil covenant and the church covenant constitutes the very crux of the issue of the right foundations of a Christian commonwealth. When the Puritans sought to follow God’s word in both Church and state, their intention was to construct both realms on the basis of covenants. Thus, out of the Puritan premises of reformation, in state, as in the Church, the covenant became a device to keep the ungodly from fellowship with the saints. 'Here the churches and commonwealth are continent together in holy covenant and fellowship with God’, wrote John Davenport of New Haven, and therefore ‘the people that choose civil rules are God’s people in covenant with him, that is members of churches’. This radical linkage between the civil covenant and the church covenant, served to exclude those who were not saints, not only from the church but also from political power in the Puritan commonwealth.

Two of the most prominent New England ministers, John Cotton and John Davenport, asserted that the best form of government for a Christian commonwealth was a theocracy, a form that assumed a special relationship between Church and state, clergy and magistracy, and above all, the social and church covenant. 'Theocracy', wrote John Cotton to Lord Say and Sele, an old friend of the Puritan settlement in New England, is 'the best form of government in the commonwealth, as well as in the church'. To the same effect, John Davenport had argued that

\[ \text{heocratic, or to make the Lord God our Governor, is the best form of Government in a Christian Common-wealth, and which men that are free to choose (as in new Plantations they are) ought to establish.} \]


Davenport argued in these queries was that 'the civil power' in the new settlement should be 'confined to church members'. Another minister, Rev. Peter Prudden, objected to Davenport's motion. In order to answer Prudden, Davenport composed his Discourse, aiming to show the necessity of confining the civil power to church members. Davenport's aim, in his words, was to prove the Expediency and Necessity . . . of entrusting free Burgesses which are the members of Churches gathered amongst them according to Christ, with the power of Chusing from among themselves Magistrates, and men to whom the managing of all Public Civil Affairs of Importance is to be committed. And to vindicate the Same from an Imputation of underpower upon the Churches of Christ.

As this passage suggests, Davenport argued that limiting the choice of magistrates to church members would not lead to theocracy in the sense of a state ruled by the Church. Rather, he contended, 'the Church so considered' was 'a spiritual Political Body' and would not interfere in any civil affairs. Yet not every church member, he argued, had the right to choose magistrates, but only those who were 'free burgesses' or freemen. Davenport premised his work upon a basic distinction between civil and ecclesiastical affairs. 'Ecclesiastical Administration', he contended, was 'a Divine Order appointed to believers for holy communion of holy things', while 'Civil Administration' was 'an Human Order appointed by God to men for Civil Fellowship of human things'. Any attempt to unite both orders—Church and state—could place 'the Spiritual Power, which is proper to the Church, into the hand of the Civil Magistrate'. Or the equally dire possibility existed, as had materialized with the Romish tyranny, that the Church might usurp the civil authority of the state. Davenport was concerned to prevent both these dangers. But he was also fearful of yet another, more important threat, that of separating Church and state so completely as to set 'these two different Orders, Ecclesiastical and Civil . . . in opposition as contraries, that one should destroy the other'. What he wanted was for Church and state to be in a 'co-ordinate state, in the same place reaching forth help mutually each to other for the welfare of both, according to God'. In shaping their Christian commonwealth, Puritans thus aimed neither at unification nor at complete separation of Church and State. Rather, they thought of Church and state as two different means to the same end.

In New Haven in 1638, as in Massachusetts in 1630, the wilderness provided an opportunity for Puritans to create a commonwealth according to their own premises of religious reformation. Two categories of people existed in the colony, 'free burgesses' or freemen, and 'inhabitants'. To exclude the latter from political power was natural because they were 'not Citizens' and were 'never likely to be numbered among . . . Rulers'.

10. Davenport, pp. 6-8.

Confining civil power to church members did not, therefore, deprive these particular people of any civil right they would otherwise have had. 'When we urge, the magistrates be Chosen out of free Burgesses, and by them, and that those free Burgesses be Chosen out of such as are members of these Churches', said Davenport, 'we do not thereby go about to exclude those that are not in Church-Order, from any Civil right or liberty that is due unto them as Inhabitants and Planters'. The only group which lost any civil rights, Davenport made clear, were those freemen who were not church members and could not, therefore, in a godly commonwealth be permitted either to choose magistrates or to exercise political power.

Davenport thus advocated disenfranchisement of all freemen who were not church members, for the reason that only godly magistrates could be entrusted with preserving civil and church covenants. It was his belief, and that of other Puritans also, that the covenant was the foundation of state as well as Church, and that by its very nature it belonged only to the 'saints', who 'by virtue of their Covenant' were 'bound to serve God and his ends'. To invest those who were not saints with civil power would therefore necessarily mean breaking the covenant with God. In this manner, Davenport transformed the religious obligations of the covenant into political obligations in the Christian commonwealth. Because the ungodly were not 'consecrated to God and his ends', they could not be given civil power.

It was precisely for this reason that Davenport and other Puritans argued that 'Theocratic, or to make the Lord God our Governour' was 'the best form of Government in a Christian Commonwealth'. Only in this unique political system, according to the Puritans, could there be absolute assurance that the civil covenant in society and the church covenant in the church would be adhered to. Davenport spells out precisely what he meant by theocracy. A theocracy, he wrote, was that Form of Government where 1. the people that have the power of chusing their Governors are in Covenant with God: 2. Wherein the men chosen by them are godly men, and fitted with a spirit of Government: 3. In which the Laws they rule by are the Laws of God: 4. Wherem Laws are executed, Inheritances allotted, and civil differences are composed, according to Gods appointment: 5. In which men of God are consulted with in all hard cases, and in matters of Religion. This, said Davenport, was 'the Form which was received and established among the people of Israel whilst the Lord God was their Governour... and is the very same that which we plead for'.

Davenport gave here the true and comprehensive meaning of Puritan theocracy, which was clearly not to invest ministers with political power, but rather to 'make the Lord God our Governour'; that is, to appoint civil magistrates who would govern according to God's word and will. Although Puritans did not believe ministers should assume civil power, they strongly stressed the obligation of magistrates to seek to make civil society conform

to God's purpose. Religious reformation was necessary not only in the church but in society as a whole. Because civil magistrates were charged with such weighty responsibilities, it was essential that they be saints.

A theocratic government, then, was one which gave 'Christ his due preheminence,' and godly people were obliged to make sure that 'all things and all Government in the world, should serve . . . Christ ends . . . for the welfare of the Church whereof he is the Head'. To meet this obligation civil authorities had to be 'wise and learned in matter of Religion'—and therefore church members, or 'Saints by calling'. With the presence of ungodly magistrates in England having been a crucial factor in the emigration of so many Puritans to New England, it was imperative to take whatever steps were necessary to prevent the church from again being persecuted by ungodly magistrates.

Since political society, no less than the church or holy fellowship, was confined to those capable of preserving the covenant, the exclusiveness of church fellowship led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system. Davenport warned that if political authority were delegated to the ungodly, the entire holy experiment in the wilderness would be jeopardized and the saints' capacity to assist Christ in the apocalyptic battle against Antichrist would be undermined. Those who would commit power into the hands of those 'worldly spirits' who 'hate[d] the Saints and their communion' would provide Satan with an instrument for resisting and fighting against Christ and his Kingdom and Government in the Church.15

It was Davenport who addressed these arguments concerning the establishment of theocracy to the new colony of New Haven, and there, according to Bruce E. Steiner, 'the practice championed in Davenport's Discourse had [also] triumphed'. A 'gencrall meeting of all the free planters' in New Haven in 1639 agreed that

church members only shall be free burgesses, and they onely shall chuse among themselves magistrates and officers to haie[+] the power of transacting all publique civil affayres of this plantation.16

These arguments however, were peculiar neither to Davenport nor to New Haven. In Massachusetts, in fact, they had been embodied in the colony's policy from its very beginnings. In 1631, 'to end that the body of commons may be preserved of honest and god [sic] men', the Massachusetts General Court ordered 'that for the time to come no man shall be admitted to the freedom of this body politick, but such as are members of some of the churches'.17

A similar belief was implicit in the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut that were drawn in 1638/39. As Mary J. A. Jones found: 'The purpose of the Fundamental Orders was to provide a legal guide for the government of the holy and regenerate'. In Connecticut, no less than in Massachusetts and New Haven, a social covenant preceded the establishment of the

commonwealth. The Fundamental Orders were indeed a civil covenant in which the godly declared that 'the word of God requires' that 'an orderly and decent Government be established according to God' and pledged themselves to

associate and conjoyne our selves to be as one. Publicke State or Commonwealth . . . to maintain and preserve the liberty and purity of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ we now profess, as also the discipline of the Churches, which according to the truth of the said gospel is now practised amongst us.

As Jones remarks, this was

a covenant between the godly property owners of Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield, not between all the residents on the Connecticut River, just as the church covenants were the agreement between the saints only. Civil rights were indeed the privilege of the few.18

If, then, the essence of theocratic government was maintaining the political realm as the sole and exclusive domain of the saints, the system of government in all these Puritan colonies, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Haven may justifiably be defined as theocracy.

The Puritans' rigid insistence upon excluding the ungodly from political power was thus a crucial element in shaping the foundation of their Christian commonwealth in the early years of Puritan New England. With religious reformation going hand in hand with social and political reform, the same drive for reformation that led to the admission into the church of only the 'visible saints', led, in the political realm, to the establishment of theocratic government, a political system which entrusted authority only to those in the Puritan colonies who belonged to the 'gathered churches' or the saints. The revolutionary nature of this theocracy in New England government is well illustrated by a few examples.

An important consequence of the Antinomian controversy in Massachusetts was an order, enacted by the General Court in 1637, 'that no town or person shall receive any stranger resorting hither, nor shall allow any lot of habitant to any . . . except such person shall have allowance under the hand of some one of the council, or two other of the magistrates'. In opposing the menace of the Antinomian heresy, civil authorities intended in this manner to restrict entrance into the Bay colony of those 'profane persons' who held antinomian views. This was the very policy over which 'Young Henry Vane' and John Winthrop clashed sharply in 1637. 'A family is a common wealth', Winthrop wrote in defence of the order of 1637, 'and a common wealth is a great family. Now as a family is not bound to entertain all comers . . . no more is [a] commonwealth.'

But to Henry Vane the Court's order revealed an alarming tendency in the Puritan concept of the refuge and shelter in the wilderness, 'because here is a liberty given by this law to expell and reject those which are most eminent christian, if they suit not with the disposition of the magistrates.'

The outcome of this policy, argued Vane, would be 'that Christ and his members will find worse entertainment amongst us than the Israelites did among the Egyptians and Babilonians'. Christ, argued Vane, 'is the head of the Church, and the prince of the kings of earth', but the colony's law, by giving the magistrates power to expel whomever they wanted, contradicted 'many lawes of Christ'. Vane declared further that Christ commands us to do good unto all, but specially to them of the household of faith. Many other lawes there are of Christ, which this law dathbeth against, and therefore is most wicked and sinnfull.  

Winthrop's answer to Vane's charges clearly reveals the character of the Puritan theocracy, and how tightly interwoven the social and church covenants were in the early years of the colony. Winthrop's response was that the magistrates were 'members of the churches here, and by that covenant' could not act in opposition to but were required and 'regulated to direct all their ways by the rule of the gospel'. And he continued by stating that this law was not a new policy, but was 'an established order in Massachusetts from the very beginnings of the colony.  

Winthrop's aim in his reply to Vane was more than an attempt to justify the Court's order. His primary concern was to vindicate the establishment of theocratic government in Massachusetts by confirming the Puritans' adherence to their millennial expectations and to their belief that they were living in a special dimension of time. Winthrop maintained that the providential process which was to culminate in the reign of Christ and his church or saints on earth had already begun. 'Whereas the way of God hath always beene to gather his churches out of the world; now', argued Winthrop, 'the world, or the civill state, must be raised out of the churches'.  

In other words, Winthrop declared that the body politic as such was the outcome of the gathering of churches, or more precisely, that the holy society of the churches in Massachusetts constituted the political body of the colony. With this radical approach, he clearly implied that the boundaries of the church covenant were exactly congruent with those of the civil covenant. This stand did not signify that Church and state were one, but only reaffirmed the principle that church membership, participation in the church covenant, was a prerequisite to participation in the civil covenant and membership in the colony's holy body politic.

It was, undoubtedly, because of the very radicalism of this outlook on the proper relationship between Church and state covenants that many in England were confused by the Puritan theocracy in America. Even staunch Puritans like William Fiennes, Viscount Say and Sele and Robert Drury, Baron Brooke, all long-time friends of the Puritan migration to America and the Puritan settlements there, were puzzled by the holy experiment in the wilderness. Like Henry Vane, who left the Bay colony in the summer of 1637 because he failed to come to terms with some of the more radical premises, not to mention the political and social consequences, of theocracy in Massachusetts, the Puritan lords too found themselves at great odds with their brethren in America when they discovered the true nature of theocracy in New England.

In 1636 Viscount Say and Sele and Baron Brook along with other nobles considered emigration to New England, as did so many other Puritans during the 1630s. Being noblemen, however, they sent 'Certain Proposals .. as conditions of their moving to New England'. In their answer, the Bay Puritans revealed that they could meet almost all of the legal and constitutional demands of the lords, with the notable exception of the issue of the relationship between Church and state, an exception that finally determined that the lords abandoned their plans to join the Puritan commonwealth in America. The controversy and debates among the Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic concerning the lords' proposals were based on the nature and foundation of the Puritan theocracy in America.

What the Puritan lords had demanded was that they be permitted to continue in New England to exercise the privileges of their noble rank. Thus, their first 'demand' before emigrating to New England was that the 'common wealth should consist of two distinct ranks of men', the one 'gentlemen of the country' and the other 'freeholders'. In their answer, the Bay Puritans declared that they 'willingly acknowledge: the lords' proposal about two distinct ranks'. The second condition was that the chief power of the commonwealth shall be placed' in the hands of the 'gentlemen and freeholders', which the colonists acknowledged already characterized the situation in the colony. When, however, the lords demanded that they be admitted as freemen without being church members, Bay Puritans would not assent, for this would destroy the very foundation of their theocracy. Thus they answered the lords that though they would 'receive them with honor and allow them pre-eminence and accommodations according to their condition, yet none are admitted
freemen of this common-wealth, but such as are first admitted members of some church or other in this country', and only out of those were their 'magistrates . . . Chosen'.

A Christian commonwealth, as Winthrop had made clear in 'A Model of Christian Charity', was based upon the law of grace as well as upon the law of nature. 'There is likewise', he preached aboard the Arbella in 1630, 'a double lawe by which we are regulated in our conversation one toward another. . . the lawe of nature and the lawe of grace, or the morall lawe or the lawe of the gospel'. The law of nature came to regulate civil society as such, while the law of the gospel, or that of grace, came to regulate Christian society. Thus, when the lords demanded admission to freemanship in the colony according to their noble status, the Bay Puritans replied that 'hereditary authority and power standeth only by the civil law' and not upon the law of grace. Not material property and hereditary privilege, but spiritual saving grace was the prerequisite for admission to freemanship in the Puritan theocracy. The justification for such a custom, explained the Puritans in their response to the lords, was 'a divine ordinance (and moral) that none should be appointed and chosen by the people of God, magistrates over them, but men fearing God . . . chosen out of their brethren . . . saints'. The assumption of authority by such men would result in the 'joy of a commonwealth'; whereas 'calamity' would ensue 'when the wicked bear rule'.

The most striking element in the Puritans' answer to Viscount Say and Sele and Baron Brook is the assertion that the exclusion of the ungodly from political power was 'a divine ordinance'. This approach is well reflected in Winthrop's earlier quoted statement that 'now, the world, or civill state, must be arised out of the churches'. Davenport in his Discourse never went so far as to call the premise of theocracy a divine ordinance. It was through reasoning such as Winthrop's that the Christian commonwealth took on the dimensions of the earthly domain in which the saints would exercise their holiness. Although complete identification of the church and civil covenants would occur only in the millennium, when the earthly kingdoms would become the Kingdom of God, Puritan New England would meanwhile seek to link the purity of the church with the holiness of the Christian commonwealth as two means of achieving the New Jerusalem. Only a theocratical political system could give saints exclusive political authority, to the exclusion of the ungodly from all political and ecclesiastical participation in the holy experiment in the wilderness.

Surely, the assertion that neither wealth nor property nor heredity, but faith and godliness were the conditions of citizenship in the Puritan colonies in New England sounded very strange indeed to Lord Say and Sele, Lord Brook, and those other persons of 'quality' who considered emigrating to New England in 1636. The Puritans clarified their position in their answer to the lords and warned that if magisterial power were given 'to men not according to their godliness, which maketh them fit for church fellowship, but according to their wealth', they 'would themselves be 'no better than worldly men'. Such an alternative was unthinkable, since 'worldly men' might become 'the major part' of the magistrates, and could possibly 'turn the edge of all authority and laws against the church and the members thereof, the maintenance of whose peace is the chief end which God aimed at in the institution of Magistracy'.

Thus the Massachusetts Puritans finally and definitely rejected the noble lords' proposals to join the holy experiment. Yet the controversy between New England Puritans and the Puritan lords was far from over. Apparently surprised by the reaction to his proposals, Lord Say and Sele wrote directly to Rev. John Cotton. Although this letter no longer exists, Cotton's answer makes it clear that Lord Say and Sele had accused American Puritans of having created a 'theocracy' in the sense of a state ruled by the church. Cotton flatly denied that in Massachusetts 'all things were under the determination of the church'. The colony's magistrates, Cotton pointed out, were neither 'chosen to office in the church, nor doe governor by direction from the church, but by civil laws, and those enacted in generall courts, and executed in courts of justice, by the governors and assistants'. Moreover, Cotton insisted, the church had no formal role in the civil realm other than to prepare 'fit instruments both to rule, and to choose rulers, which is no ambition in the church, nor dishonor to the commonwealth'. Cotton did not, however, deny that the state was subject to religious influence. On the contrary, because 'the word, and scripture of God do conteyne a short . . . platforme, not onely of theocracy, but also of other sacred sciences', including 'ethicks, economics, politicks, church-government, prophecy, academy', Cotton firmly believed that men should follow god's word in the state as well as the church.

What Cotton argued, in fact, was that God had actually prescribed the proper relationship between church and state:

'It is very suitable to Gods all sufficient wisdom . . . not only to prescribe perfect rules for the right ordering of a private mans soule to ever-lasting blessedness with himselfe, but also for the right ordering of a mans familie, yea, of the commonwealth too so farre as both of them are subordinate to spiritual ends, and yet avoids both the churches usurpation upon civil jurisdictions, in ordine ad spiritualia, and the commonwealth invasion upon ecclesiastical administrations, in ordine to civill peace, and conformity to the civil state. Because all human experience ought to be subordinate to spiritual ends, Cotton contended against Lord Say and Sele, the spiritual and temporal

realms could hardly be completely separated. Moreover, a certain degree of overlapping (as opposed to usurping) of authority was inevitable: 'Gods institutions (such as the government of church and of commonwealth be) should be close and compact, and coordinate one to another, and yet not confounded'.

God's word, then, according to Cotton, gave full warrant to the constitution of the Puritan commonwealth in Massachusetts, and theocracy was the proper form of the colony's government, for 'it is better that the commonwealth be fashioned to the setting forth of Gods house, which is His church, than to accommodate the church frame to the civil state'.

Not only Massachusetts Puritans, but as was seen earlier, those of Connecticut and New Haven as well, had fashioned the state in such a way that it might preserve the church and to ensure that the commonwealth be subordinated to spiritual ends, without attempting to unite Church and state. Theocracy facilitated their purpose by providing an arrangement by which God, the true sovereign in both Church and state, would reign over both.

It is worthwhile examining here the famous passage in Cotton's letter to Lord Say and Sele concerning democracy, monarchy, and aristocracy:

Democracy, I do not conceive that ever God did ordene as a fit government ethere for church or commonwealth. If the people be governors, who shall be governed? As for monarchy, and aristocracy, they are both of them clearly approved, and directed in scripture, yet so as referreth the sovereign to himself, and setteth up Theocracy in both, as the best form of government in the commonwealth, as well in the church.

This passage is especially significant, not for Cotton's consideration of the relative merits of democracy, aristocracy, and monarchy, but rather for his treatment of the term 'soveraignitie'. Cotton's prime concern here is clearly the issue of whom to invest with sovereignty, or who should reign and rule over church and commonwealth. He rejects democracy, not only because it had no warrant in scripture, but mainly for its failure to provide God with immediate and direct sovereignty over His saints. Likewise, despite their full warrant in scripture, Cotton rejects aristocracy and monarchy for not providing God with sovereignty over His people. Consequently, Cotton declares 'theocracy', the system in which God is the immediate sovereign of both Church and state, to be the 'best form of government in the commonwealth, as well as in the church'.

State and Church in the theocracy in Massachusetts, Connecticut and New Haven, were thus under the common headship of the Lord. Although separation between Church and state was unthinkable to the Puritans, they constantly reiterated that these were two different instruments in the sweep of providential history. Cotton's letter was largely a refutation of Lord Say and Sele's accusation to the contrary, that Church and state were united in the Puritan theocracy.

At this point it is necessary to examine the momentous social and political consequences of the ideological premises laid down by the Puritan theocracy in America. Those who advocated a theocratic government which explicitly acknowledged Christ as sole ruler over them, were presenting the revolutionary view that no one, neither bishop nor king, could stand between God and His people. Furthermore, with the political realm considered the exclusive domain of the saints by virtue of their covenant relationship with God both in Church and state, theocratic government entailed a denial that any rights based on the privilege of property, heredity and wealth could determine eligibility to participate in the political life.

The revolutionary character of theocracy is best seen in the barring of unbelievers from any participation in the system of civil government. Since the covenant, the foundation of both Church and state, belonged strictly to the godly, religious obligations were transformed into political obligations in the Christian commonwealth in New England, and the exclusiveness of the holy fellowship of the church led directly to the exclusiveness of the political system.

As long as England had bishops and kings, the establishment of a theocracy similar to that of New England remained an impossibility. But conditions changed radically in England during the 1640s: the office of bishops was totally abolished and King Charles I was beheaded. When confronted with this new reality, English Puritans also began to consider the idea of erecting a godly civil government in England based on the premises of theocracy. In 1649, for example, shortly after the king's execution, 'Certain Queries' were presented to Thomas Lord Fairfax, Lord General of the Army, and to the General Council of War, 'by many Christian people' from the county of Norfolk and the city of Norwich who wondered if indeed the time had come to establish a theocratic government. These people asked the leaders of the Army to ponder the question of 'the present interest of the Saints and people of God'. If indeed 'the time (or near upon it) of putting down that worldly government, and erecting this new kingdom' of God on earth had arrived, as the authors of 'Certain Queries' believed, the saints would have to assume their important role in the providential drama. Millennial expectations thus led to the demand for social and political action. According to this particular group, the saints' duty was to begin 'to associate' themselves 'together into several churches-societies' in accordance with the congregational way'. The convening of all these gathered churches in general assemblies, or church-parliaments, choosing and delegating such officers of Christ, and representatives of the churches, as may rule nations and kingdoms', would in turn result in God giving them 'authority and rule over the nations and kingdoms of the world' and 'the kingdoms of the world' becoming 'the churches'. Fearing that their aims would be thwarted by the election of the ungodly to positions of authority, this group questioned the 'right or claim mere natural and worldly men have to rule and government' in a holy Christian commonwealth and advocated a form of government strikingly similar to the theocracy which had already been founded by the Puritans in the wilderness.
Even before the king's death, millennial expectations and apocalyptic visions had led Puritans in England to propose barring the ungodly from political life and to argue for the exclusive right of the saints to rule in a Christian commonwealth. Thomas Collier, for example, in his sermon, *A Discovery of the New Creation* (1647), contended that 'as formerly God hath many times set up wicked men to rule and govern', so now 'he will give it into the hands of the Saints'. Using similar arguments during the Whitehall debates in 1649, Colonel Thomas Harrison expressed the belief that the day had come, 'God's own day', in which 'the powers of this world shall be given into the hands of the Lord and his Saints'. Harrison tried to calm his opponents who believed that 'our business is... only to get power into our own hands, that we may reign over them', with the claim that putting the reins of government into the hands of the saints was not usurpation, but rather the necessary consequence of God's 'coming forth in glory in the world'.

Only after the king was executed, however, did the Puritans in England seriously undertake putting into action the theocratic ideas. This was especially true of the Fifth Monarchists, who sought to clear the way for the approaching millennium by political means. Thus the author of *A Cry for the Right Improvement of all our Mercies* (1651) 'called for the restriction of membership of Parliament to those who were in church fellowship with some one or other congregation'. In the same year, the author of another tract, *A Model of a New Representative*, argued that 'borough M.P.s should be replaced by "two or more members" of the Congregational churches in their respective towns and that county M.P.s should be elected by the gathered churches of their shire'.

Now was the conviction that theocratic government should be established in England limited to the radicals such as the Fifth Monarchists. Many other Puritans shared their beliefs and their desire for action. 'A hundred and fifty-three members of Morgan Llywd's Independent church at Wrexham', for example 'urged' that 'the new representative should be elected by the gathered churches'. Those who strove, then, to establish theocratic government in England, like the Puritans in America, assumed the ultimate association between the church covenant and the civil covenant, and therefore claimed the political realm as the exclusive domain of the saints.

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32. Of this group to theocracy in America is readily apparent. As Austin Woolrich wrote: the people of this group tried to establish in England 'a government based not on the people as a whole but on the "gathered churches"', that is to say church congregations which had been voluntarily formed by a company of "visible saints". See, Austin Woolrich, 'Oliver Cromwell and the Rule of the Saints', in *The English Civil War and After*, 1642-1659, R. H. Parry (ed.), Berkeley and Los Angeles 1970, p. 63.


35. Watts, pp. 137, 142.

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Puritan theocratic impulses reached their peak in England during Barebone's Parliament in 1633. Never before had England been so close to the ideal of theocratic government as with this parliament with its revolutionary social and religious reforms. Many of its nominees had been elected upon the recommendations of the gathered churches, and the combination within it of Fifth Monarchists, radical Independents and Baptists, clearly revealed how serious the saints were in their intentions to play their role in providential history. As Woolrich writes, many members of Barebone's Parliament 'were not looking for a mere caretaker government to educate the people in the benefits and responsibility of a self-governing republic. They wanted a sanhedrin of the saints, a dictatorship of the godly that would prepare for the millennium by overturning every vestige of the old -carnal- government'. The radical goals of these saints were probably no better understood than by the anonymous author of *A True State of the Case of the Commonwealth* (1654); he warned that in 'this last Assembly' (Barebone's Parliament), 'there was a party of men... who assumed to themselves only the name of Saints, from which Title they excluded all others', and by 'pretense to an extraordinary Call from Christ himself' did 'take upon them to rule the Nation by virtue of a supposed Right of State in themselves'. Their 'dangerous attempts', he continued, 'extended not only to the abolition of Laws, but to the utter subversion of civil Right and Property'. Finally, this commentator on the radicals of the Barebone Parliament admonished against the dangers which would ensue should their policy succeed: 'it would have utterly confounded the whole course of Natural and Civil Right, which is the only Basis of foundation of Government in this world'.
... none as Cives (or free subjects, commonly called burgesses or enfranchised persons) but only those who have publicly owned the Baptismal Covenant, personally, deliberately and seriously should have the right to vote in a holy Christian commonwealth. He continues by emphasizing the need to exclude 'ordinary despisers of God's public worship, or neglecters of it, and of the guidance of God's ministers', from the body of electors. Above all, Baxter reiterates the principle that the foundation of theocratic government demands that the proper relationship between church and social covenants be maintained:

But that which I mean is, that the same qualification [that] maketh a man capable of being a member both of a Christian Church and Commonwealth ... is, his Covenant with God in Christ, or his Membership of the Universal Church. 36

Clearly, then, Puritans of widely differing persuasions were equally concerned with establishing theocracy, and they all agreed that, to reach their goal, a revolutionary approach to defining the political body was absolutely essential. It was partly in response to this extreme Puritan design to reshape the political system that Thomas Hobbes wrote his refutation in the Leviathan (1651). 37

Hobbes began by attacking what he perceived as pretentiousness in the Puritan claim to hold sole spiritual authority to exercise and impose the will of God:

For if every man, should be obliged, to take for God's law, what particular men, on pretence of private inspiration, or revelation, should obtrude upon him, in such a number of men, that out of pride and ignorance, take their own dreams, and extravagant fancies, and madness, for testimonies of God's spirit; or out of ambition, pretend to such divine testimonies, falsely, and contrary to their own consciences, it were impossible that any divine law should be acknowledged.

Hobbes goes on to deny 'that the present church now militante, is the kingdom of God', and therefore that 'the Church and commonwealth are the same persons'. Such identification of the Kingdom of God with the church, argued Hobbes, is unwarranted because 'by the kingdom of God, is properly meant a commonwealth, instituted by the consent of those which were to be subject thereto, for their civil government'. Contrary to Puritan belief that this was the time in which the kingdoms of the Earth would become the Kingdom of God, Hobbes asserted that 'the kingdom


39. For evidence of this theocratic quest among Dutch Calvinists in Holland during the first half of the seventeenth century, see Douglas Nobbs, Theocracy and Tolerance: A Study of the Dispute in Dutch Calvinism from 1600 to 1650, Cambridge 1938.


of God is a civil kingdom', and as such should be ruled only by 'civil sovereigns' and not by the church or its saints. Comparing advocates of Puritan theocracy to the 'Roman clergy', Hobbes denounces them as 'a confederacy of deceivers' who seek power on the basis of 'dark and erroneous doctrines'. 38

While Puritans on both sides of the Atlantic strove equally to achieve theocratic government, the Puritan experience on each side differed significantly. In New England, Puritans could, and did in fact, try to fully implement the premises immediately upon their arrival. In England, on the other hand, Puritans were given a similar opportunity only during the 1640s and 1650s, and even then faced such strong opposition that their holy scheme was never implemented. Only in light of the experience in England can one sufficiently appreciate the achievement of the New England Puritans in creating a theocracy in the wilderness. 39

Considering New England within the framework of the larger Puritan movement, the American Puritans did in fact succeed in their holy experiment to constitute theocracy. In another context, however, this holy experiment was far from successful. As with many millenial and Utopian movements in the past, New England Puritans came to learn that human nature can be a tremendous obstacle in the quest to transform the world into a divine domain. Thus, at the moment when it seemed that while the Puritan movement in England had failed, the holy experiment in the wilderness would survive, sounds arose in New England indicating that there, too, something had gone awry. In his poem, 'A Word to New England' (1654) William Bradford laments:

Oh New England, thou canst not boast;
Thy former glory thou hast lost.

Holiness, Bradford found, did 'languish more away', and

Love, truth, mercy and grace –
Wealth and the world have took their place.

Likewise, Michael Wigglesworth wrote in 'God's Controversy with New England' (1662) that he found in Puritan America

In stead of holiness Carnality,
In stead of heavenly frames an Earthly mind. 40

Thus did the people who succeeded so well in constituting theocracy in the wilderness and in shaping their church and state according to their ideals eventually find that not human institutions but human nature was the real obstacle to the pursuit of the millennium, the quest for transforming the world into the Kingdom of God. However, as the Puritan experiment in New England shows so vividly, human history can hardly be understood without an appreciation of its search for the ideal society and the fulfillment of Utopian visions.