

Rev. John White, The Founder of New England Launching the Journey Towards Unitarianism

The founder of New England never saw its shores. John White was his name. He was the rector of St. Peters and Holy Trinity Parishes in Dorchester, the small county town of Devon in the West of England. He set into motion the movement that culminated in the establishment of the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

There had been several visitors to the coast for nearly a century before White began his endeavors, Champlain, Cabot, Smith, and Gosnold among them. Temporary trading posts were established with the goal of exploiting such resources as furs and fish. But there was no vision of establishing permanent settlements in the region. While a group of Separatists had landed on Cape Cod Bay in 1620, they had set out from Leiden after years of self-imposed exile in The Netherlands. They did pause briefly in Plymouth in Devon; they had little connection with any larger organized group in England. They survived in Plymouth in Massachusetts. Captain John Smith, after his initial efforts in Jamestown, became an advocate for more permanent settlements. But, unlike the so-called Pilgrims, those that were planted were not based on religious convictions. Samuel Eliot Morrison in his *Builders of the Bay Colony* mentions several.

“Massachusetts (named by Captain John Smith) was dotted with petty fishing and trading stations. There was William Blaxton, who set up bachelor quarters on the eminence later known as Beacon Hill, Thomas Watford, the pioneer of Charlestown; Samuel Maverick at Winnesimmit (now Chelsea), David Thompson, a Scots gentleman, who settled the island in Boston harbor that still bears his name...” (Morrison, p. 14)

Of particular interest was Thomas Morton. A free spirited lawyer, and an ardent advocate for the impoverished in his native county of Devon, he gained royal permission to establish a trading post in Massachusetts. He brought thirty men with him and established a post at Mount Wollaston in what is now Quincy. That he named his place Ma-re Mount is indicative of the spirit of the group. He was no friend of the conservative Plymouth colony, but developed warm and profitable relations with the Algonquins, selling guns and liquor, and frequently cavorting with them. The Pilgrims, probably accurately, accused him of being a heathen. In 1628, there was a bacchanal at Ma-re Mount complete with a May Pole, tributes to pagan gods and goddesses, and ample alcohol. Eventually the Pilgrims and other coastal settlements had enough of his antics, particularly of his selling guns to the Natives. He was captured by Captain Miles Standish of Plymouth, exiled to the Isles of Shoals off the coast of New Hampshire, and finally he fled back to England.

John White was no libertarian (or libertine). But he did share one commitment with Morton – to help alleviate the suffering of the impoverished classes in the West of England. The primary cause of their poverty was clear – the enclosure of arable lands by the rich landowners for the purpose of grazing sheep. Thousands of small farmers were driven from their miserable huts into the towns. The established crafts guilds in the towns would not admit them. And the market for common laborers was quickly saturated. Multitudes were reduced to begging. He arrived there in 1605. (For those familiar with the work of Thomas Hardy, Dorchester was the model for his Casterbridge.)

John White had not expected to become a social reformer. He was born 1575 in Stanton St. John, a village near Oxford, into a family of substance and consequence. Among his relations were a Lord

Mayor of London, a Bishop of Winchester, and a Warden of New College, Oxford. It was this latter connection that eased his way first into a top school in Winchester and then into New College in 1593. He was a person of genuine intellect, and was made a Fellow of the college. During this period, England was in a period of great religious ferment. Some were abandoning the Church of England and returning to Rome. The reaction was strong. In places like Oxford and Cambridge there was great emphasis on training a learned and preaching ministry. New College had purged its Catholic fellows. The college had been greatly influenced by the teachings of John Calvin, especially his *Institutes*. Predestination became accepted among the radicals. But the consequences of their challenge were not simply theological. They related to the way that religion was practiced within congregations. Many of the Puritan persuasion refused to wear the traditional Anglican surplices. They emphasized the Bible. They preached predestination. But they advocated reform within the Church of England, not separation.

However, the Puritan influence was presumed to be growing threat to the Established Church, The Conventicle Act of 1593 was a direct reaction to the rise of Puritanism. Religious gatherings of more than five persons outside an established church were forbidden. All persons over sixteen years of age were required to attend services. Forbidden also was any questioning of the Queen's authority in ecclesiastical matter. Disobedience would be punished by imprisonment, and, perhaps permanent exile. White was certainly something of a Puritan, but he did not advocate radical opposition to the established church. Many of his colleagues became ardent social reformers. White was one of them.

The college awarded him his BA in 1597, and his MA at the beginning of the year in 1600. He remained in residence at the college until he was ordained in 1602. During this period the Bible was being translated, and two of his colleagues in the college were among the translators. In 1605 the King gave him the living of Holy Trinity in Dorchester.

When he arrived in Dorchester he found a complacent and self serving oligarchy, living a relaxed and permissive life style. Most people were poor, but they did not attract sympathy or charity from their "betters". Nor did the leading citizens have much interest in the new Puritan doctrine of predestination with its admonitions to live a strict, moral life. White soon began to create opposition to his insistent preaching of Calvinism. Although none named him directly, anonymous poems began to appear in town accusing the Puritans of hypocrisy, dishonesty, greed, and sexual license. They objected to attempts to shut down stage plays and to the objections of some Puritans to the ringing of church bells. But at the center of the oppositions was the claim that only the Elect would be saved.

White did attract a substantial group of followers eager to join him in creating a moral and caring community. They emphasized the importance of loving, stable families, and worked against whatever might disrupt it.. While sexual license was a serious problem, drunkenness was even more disruptive of family and community life. The reformers were also troubled by swearing and a failure to attend church services. The transforming event was the Great Fire of August, 1613. Much of the town was destroyed, and the pious believed it to be a judgment from God. White led in the rebuilding, and used it as a stimulus to carry out basic reforms. Years later he listed them: a new hospital, a great increase in relief for the poor, the enlargement of the churches,, improved care for the sick and elderly, and greater educational opportunities. (Underdown, p. 90) Perhaps his most adventurous initiative was to sponsor the creation of a brewery, the profits of which were to be used

to assist the poor.

As the years passed, religious repression grew. And poverty did not diminish. Visionaries saw the possibility of significant financial profit in importing furs and fish from across the Atlantic. White saw this, but he also had a missionary impulse – to bring Christianity, Puritan Christianity, to the Native Americans. White’s vision saw an opportunity for the poor of England’s West to begin a new life in a new land. These colonists would establish permanent new settlements, and would help create a barrier against the colonization of expansionist Spain. Clearly White was no ordinary country parson. The same energies that enabled him to lead in reforming Dorchester created the connections with important and influential persons, not only in Devon, but in London and beyond.

In 1624 he led in organizing the Dorchester Company of Adventurers. It’s mission was commercial as well as religious. The commercial problem had been that, while fishing occupied vessels from England for eight to ten months, most of this time was taken up with the trans-Atlantic voyages, and the marketing of the dried fish in France and Spain. While the fishermen were using small boats and hand lines for the actual finishing, the larger ships sat idle. All provisions for the crews, and salt for the drying of the fish had to be shipped from home. So the overhead for the venture was enormous in relation to the potential profits.

The Dorchester Company consisted of “about one hundred and twenty three persons of substance, including merchants, clergymen, members of Parliament, and country gentry.” (Morison, p. 26) The first venture was to send a group of about thirty men to the place that is now Gloucester, Massachusetts. Conditions were harsh, and within a little more than a year, two thirds of the group had returned to England. Two more groups were sent, but most of those also returned to England. The most able of those who stayed was Roger Conant. He had gone to Plymouth in 1623, but left, unwilling to adhere to its’ rigid Separatism.

The venture was an economic failure, but White was undaunted. As the Gloucester colony was unraveling, he prevailed upon Conant to stay, promising renewed support. In 1626, those who did remain followed him a few miles south to what is now Salem. The Dorchester Company was later merged into a new and better capitalized company, the Massachusetts Bay Company. In New England. Its investors were person of substance and prestige. While they came from the East as well as the West of England, the first General Court, calling itself The New England Planters Parliament, met in Dorchester, another testimony to White’s role in this new venture.

Another motive for pressing forward was the growing strength of Armenianism within the Church of England, a clear challenge to the Puritan theological stance. The Puritans believed the ceremonies of the church to be “Popish“. In the past, they had not been enforced, but Archbishop Laud became increasingly insistent and punitive. The oppression had greatly increased since the original company had gone out in 1623. Then, no member of the clergy would leave his post to accompany the colonists. Now those with Puritan convictions saw little future for themselves in the new orthodoxy within the Established Church. However, these founders were not Separatists Nor did they want to appear to be establishing a Puritan religious colony.

In 1630, White authored a document called “The Planter’s Plea, or The Grounds of Plantations Examined”. He began by insisting that the Plea was not meant to be confrontational, but was an attempt to offer the Biblical justifications for creating new “‘plantations’ in New England. If God

meant man to occupy the earth and to make it fruitful, then it would be neglecting His mandate to leave some parts fallow. Humans are eager to have sufficient land to cultivate and to build homes in order to sustain their families. The insufficiency of adequate lands at home, has led to conflicts as strong as civil war. There are many talented tradesmen who can find no work at home; their idleness is a serious social problem. New England has proved to be a plentiful source of furs and fish, and there is land suitable for cultivation. Planting a colony could be an important economic asset for the Mother Country. Those who will lead the group are able and dedicated men. The leader they have chosen, John Winthrop, is a talented and deeply religious person. But there is also another mandate – to carry Religion to the Heathen. This Religion is not one of Separatism; it is, however, one which accepts that there will be differences about established ceremonies and convictions. There is great promise for missionary activity.

The document is a long and closely reasoned argument, mostly promising the economic and social advantages of colonization. It appeared at the outset of The Great Migration, but two years after a new colony had already been established in Salem. The Abigail landed there in 1628 with fifty colonists (mostly men) and an ample store of supplies. It also carried new Governor, Captain John Endecott. While the new enterprise quickly became established, Endecott established a reputation as a stern and punitive administrator. Equally important was the rapid evolution to new religious forms. When the group set sail, they clearly intended to establish a relatively flexible form of the Established Church. The causes are two fold. In 1629, a new infusion of capital enabled the sending of 300 additional colonists. And this group was accompanied by two ministers, Francis Higginson and Samuel Skelton. Their mandate was to organize a church in Salem. While they were well known as Non-conformists and feared being called before the authorities, they still came expecting to establish a Anglican church free of the corruptions that had afflicted the church at home. They wanted to eliminate use of the Book of Common Prayer, to ignore many of the canons, and to emphasize Biblically based preaching.

Morrison quotes Cotton Mather as saying that Higginson was preaching on the stern of the *Talbot* as it passed Land's End, "We will not say as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving of England, Farewel (sic) *Babylon!* Farewel *Rome!* But we will say, Farewel Dear *England!* Farewel the Church of God in England, and all the Christian friends there! We do not go to New-England as Separatists from the Church of England; though we cannot but separate from the corruptions in it: but we go to practice the positive part of church reformation, and propagate the Gospel in America. (Morison , p. 37) Some have claimed that White lwas the actual author of this speech.

Within a month of their arrival, they had organized a new church in Salem on the Separatist or congregational model. Had they been lying, or had something happened to change their views? There were significant breaks with Anglican practice. The thirty families that made up the congregation created a covenant for their group. They then proceeded to elect Higginson and Skelton as their ministers, and it was the laymen of the congregation who ordained them. The covenant itself not only affirmed the congregational form of ordination (denying the old orders of the established church, it also denied the sacraments to any communicant of that church who was not acceptable to the members of the Salem congregation. Perhaps the impetus for the change of stance came from Plymouth

Some months before the arrival of the *Talbot*, Samuel Fuller, the Plymouth physician, had come to Salem to help combat an outbreak of scurvy. Apparently he had long talks with Governor Endecott,

and had persuaded him of the validity of the congregational way. But surely it was more than the persuasiveness of a single doctor that prompted the change. Perhaps it was a sense of freedom available in the new world, which allowed the unleashing of suppressed hopes and desires. Morison asserts, "One aspect of Puritanism was the revolt of the laity from priestly control: desire for self-expression, to have a share in the running of the Church. In the old country, puritans had to compromise with the law, with tradition, with the terms of pious foundations, with their bishops, their pastors and their neighbors. The touch of New England cast these shackles from them." (Morrison, p. 40)

This revolt was not welcome news to White. Not only did he not approve of the ecclesiastical actions of the Salem people, he had become aware of the autocratic ruling style of Endecott. However, he continued his efforts to recruit new colonists. The Massachusetts Bay Company was organized in 1629. Its leaders were men of substance. Among them was Sir Richard Saltonstall, William Pynchon, John Humphry, Issac Johnson, Thomas Dudley, Thomas Leverett, and other gentlemen, mostly from East Anglia. Humphrey had been the Treasurer of the old Dorchester Company, and it was he and White who enlisted the interest of these men in creating a new company, the Massachusetts Bay Company, and succeeded in gaining a Royal Charter. Because they had ample means, they basically financed their own venture. One of their first acts was to recruit John Winthrop to be the Governor of the colony. In the process they deposed Endecott.

A great fleet set forth in the Spring of 1630. One of the first ships in that fleet to arrive was the *Arbella* with Governor Winthrop aboard. While still at sea, he preached a sermon which has become a fundamental document of the American experience. *A Modell of Christian Charity* is the renowned "city on a hill" sermon. It has been quoted again and again by leaders as consequential as John F. Kennedy. A brief passage:

Now the only way to avoid this shipwracke, and to provide for our posterity, is to follow the counsell of Micah, to doe justly, to love mercy, to walke humbly with our God. For this end, wee must be knitt together in this work as one man... For we must Consider that wee shalke be as a Citty upon a hill. The eies of all people are upon Us, soe that if wee shall deale falsely with Our god in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world... Therefore lett us choose life, that wee and our seede may live by obeying his voice and cleaving to him for he is our life and our prosperity.

As the ship approached New England, it cruised along the coast. Stopping in Salem, where the settlement might logically have begun, Winthrop determined that this was not necessarily the best site. He did pause long enough to inform Endecott that he had been superseded as governor. Further exploration led him to Boston Harbor, and it was here that he determined to settle. Within a few months sixteen ships had arrived bringing about 2000 colonists. Because of the magnitude of the venture, it came to be known as The Great Migration. The numbers were immensely larger than any previous attempt at colonization.

But another group arrived in what is now Boston before Winthrop and the *Arbella*. While the Winthrop fleet was being organized in the East, White was busy in Dorchester organizing a congregation to emigrate to New England. This is a unique event among the early Puritans. In Salem and in Boston, the congregations were organized after the group had arrived. Why did White take this step? He knew what had happened Salem – that a group ostensibly committed to Anglican

polity, had quickly adopted a congregational model form of church governance. Another new group might do the same. So White first gathered a group, mostly from the West Country who would commit themselves to emigrate. He soon constituted them as an Anglican congregation, and recruited two ministers to lead them. Two facts are important. White felt that he had the authority to select them. Endecott and Winthrop were both laymen; appointing ministers was a means to maintain some degree of ecclesiastical control. However, even though White still considered himself to be an Anglican, this new congregation voted to elect John Warham and John Maverick as their ministers. Following a model that would become the basis for New England congregational ministries, Warham was to be the preacher and Maverick the teacher.

John Warham was born in 1595 in Crewkerne, Somerset into an old and affluent family. He graduated from St. Mary Hall at Oxford in 1614, and received his M.A. in 1619. By the time he graduated he was already known for his Puritan convictions. Appointed to serve the congregation in his home town, his Puritan views attracted the attention of the High Church, William Laud, his diocesan bishop. Laud succeeded in forcing him out of his parish, so Warham moved on to Exeter where he again attracted a large and loyal following. He was so well known and respected, and seeing little future for himself in Laud's Church of England, he decided to emigrate to New England; this decision attracted many others to join him.

The new congregation gathered in Plymouth, Devon in late March, 1630. It was here that they formally became a congregation and elected Warham and Maverick as their ministers. While they adopted a covenant, they did not choose a creed. Two major breaks from the Church of England. After a day of fasting, White preached a farewell sermon, and they embarked on March 20. The *Mary and John* was a capacious ship of 400 tons, quite adequate for the 140 men, women, and their 72 children of the new congregation. Many of the families knew each other already. After first landing at Nantasket, they moved on to Dorchester, arriving on May 30.

Their destination was no accident. Roger Ludlow was one of the group, and he had bought and commissioned the *Mary and John*. Acting on advice of a friend of White's who had visited New England the previous year, he instructed the captain to make for the mouth of the Charles River.

The first year was one of great hardship, but the group endured. Winthrop's group began to arrive a few months later, and after a while he was able to secure a large supply of essential goods from England.

The Puritans had left England as members of the established church. But when they arrived in New England, they did not practice either its forms or polity. Their services were relatively simple, focused on prayer, biblical readings and lengthy sermons. In polity, they quickly began to adopt the congregational way. The impetus had been established in England. But the influence of the Plymouth separatists quickly became evident. Soon after the arrival of the Dorchester people, Samuel Fuller, the physician who had influenced Endecott, came over to offer assistance. He engaged Warham in extensive conversation, and tried to persuade him of the validity of the separatist way. But he found Warham to be an adversary. He reported to governor Bradford, "Mr. Warham holds that the visible church may consist of a mixed people, godly and openly ungodly." (Packer, p. 17)

This view placed him not only in opposition to Plymouth, but also to the rigidity of Winthrop and

his followers. Winthrop was no democrat in either religion or public life. He firmly believed that the magistrates should control all aspects of communal life. Only baptized and “saved” persons should be welcomed into the church and its services.

In 1635, Warham led the majority of the Dorchester congregation west to establish a new settlement at a place on the Connecticut river that they named Windsor. While the new land was especially fertile, Dorchester’s land was considered to be among the best around Massachusetts Bay. Probably the stronger reasons related to religious and civic governance. Warham believed in democracy; Winthrop and his oligarchy did not. They feared and condemned it.

A remnant stayed, and quickly called a new minister, the brilliant Richard Mather, the first of a great clerical dynasty.

What had John White initiated which ultimately led to the Unitarian way? Much of what he begun had unintended consequences. While a Puritan in his theology, he never left the Anglican church. His initial motives for encouraging emigration were more economic than religious. He wanted to offer a new beginning for the poor people of his region. Only as the hierarchy of the established church under Archbishop Laud began demanding strict conformity to its practices and doctrines, did those of the Puritan persuasion find themselves increasingly threatened. But the laity was also in danger if they didn’t adhere to these demands.

Neither he nor the people that he recruited initially intended to leave the Church of England. But, as stated in an earlier section, pent up resentments against the establishment were spontaneously released once out from the pressures of the old country.

However, the New England Puritans did not believe in religious freedom. They intended to create a pious and caring commonwealth, but primarily for those who accepted their civil and religious authority. John Warham was democratic in his views, a good reason for leaving Dorchester. But those who stayed seem to have shared his views. Richard Mather seemed to have at least agreed to democracy for the elect. He was the principal author of the Cambridge platform which sought to define the congregational way. It asserted that every member of a congregation ought to have an equal vote in its governance. And it was in Dorchester that America’s first town meeting was convened.

The most eloquent testimony to the significance of John White came from Edward Everett Hale during the celebration of the congregation’s 250th anniversary in 1880.

He was known and beloved at home, known and respected all through England. It was he who went back and forth from Dorchester to London, and from London to Dorchester, so as to make the great alliances between the London merchants and the seamen of the west of England. It was he who taught the men high in state, of the existence of this Bay of Massachusetts it was John White who chatted with the fishermen from Dorchester as they returned from the coast; who taught old England what it was which was waiting for them in the pre-emption of New England. It was John White who blew that gospel trumpet which has been so well described by old Johnson; which sounded to all the people the words, “Oyez! Oyez! Oyez! All you, the people of Christ, that are here oppressed, imprisoned, and scurrilously derided, gather yourselves together, your wives and little ones and answer to your several names, as you shall be shipped in his service in the western world, and more especially for his planting of the united colonies

of New England; where you are to attend the service of the King of Kings. Yes, John White is the hero of this day!” (Anniversary Volume, p. 143)

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