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Private Sin and Public Shame

Humans naturally have a desire for personal relationships and community. Monica D. Fitzgerald writes in *Puritans Behaving Badly: Gender, Punishment, and Religion in Early America* that, “Sinners did not face their congregations for most private sins, which often dealt with impiety and struggles with faith. [Diary entries] about struggles [meant the minister was] encouraged to pray. [But] ‘blasphemous’ words about the Holy Ghost in a public [setting] was met with strict punishment.” The Puritans began arriving in America in the 17th Century and their goal was to purify the Anglican Religion. The Puritans went about their purification by holding fast to the belief of predestination and covenant theology. They believed at birth a person was predestined to spend eternity in heaven or hell, regardless of earthly actions. They also believed that as a community Puritans had a divine duty to obey God’s law, due to a binding covenant being made between man and God. Specifically, during the mid-1600s, Puritan ministers were looked to by their communities as examples on how to lead a life in covenant with God. Their doubts and personal failures, which are not inherently evil or bad, were hidden away from those they publicly ministered to out of shame or self-preservation. The Puritan movement fosters a community environment absent from the modern views of personal relationships and community. The contrast between the public and private lives of Puritan ministers depicted in the diary of Michael Wigglesworth and his poem "The Day of Doom," as

well as John Winthrop's journal and sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity," exemplifies how Puritanism focuses less on the comfort and peace faith can bring to a society, but rather on the ways that religion can control life on both a public and private scale.

Michael Wigglesworth, a Puritan minister, experienced many conflicting feelings in his personal and professional life. His personal diary, which he never intended to publish, provides a glimpse into his troubled mind. Repeatedly, he references his "vain thoughts," "detestable pride," and "unnatural lust" (1). Wigglesworth feels extremely guilty for his thoughts and believes he does not live a life according to God's will, despite being a minister. One of his diary entries outlines his battle with lustful feelings towards his young students. He writes, "such filthy lust also following from my fond affection to my pupils while in their presence" (3). In a modern sense, nothing is inherently wrong with thinking about his students in a lustful way; humans cannot generally control what crosses their minds. However, the entertainment of such thoughts would be sinful and a cause for alarm. While Wigglesworth has colleagues and friends he could confide in, they are of the same belief that such thoughts are sinful. Perhaps, if he could talk through his urges with someone, it might be easier to overcome them; however, speaking about them could be incriminating. The alternative is begging for God's mercy, which he does. Later in his entries, he describes his conflicted feelings regarding his neighbor's open fence. He observes that "a stable door of Mr. Mitchel's beat to and fro with the wind," and he wonders "whether [he] should out of duty shut it or not; no temptations perplex [him] so sorely such as like, when [he] is not clear concerning [his] duty" (3). He fears he will fall out of God's favor because of his "sloth and fulness of self" that keeps him from going and closing the gate (3). He prays to God for clarity and feels slightly better. Without the ability to speak freely, he cannot simply go to his neighbor and apologize for not closing the gate due to his laziness. If he confides in his neighbor,

he admits to succumbing to sin, which is unlawful. His belief in God's wrath has isolated him completely from anyone able to help ease his mind.

Michael Wigglesworth's poem "The Day of Doom" echoes the ideas in his journals, but stresses God's merciless judgment on sinners. Early in the poem, unbaptized dead babies cry out saying, "why was our Nature / depraved and forlorn?" and "why so defiled, and made so vild / whilst we were yet unborn?" (1). The only crime the babies are guilty of is being killed before being able to have a baptism, and they cry out for mercy. Publicly, Wigglesworth reasons that God simply did not elect for those babies to live. To Puritans, God's choices were absolute and decided without witness from those on earth. Whatever actions they would have done in life did not matter; they were damned from the moment of their creation. Infant death was not uncommon during the Puritan era, but it still would be upsetting to the public. Teaching the people to equate such a tragedy with something inherently wrong with the baby's nature allows church leaders to control the hysteria surrounding something so disheartening. Throughout the poem, Wigglesworth continuously references mankind's fallen nature, faulting the biblical figure Adam "whose sinful Fall hath split us all" (1). The Puritans believed wholeheartedly that humans were naturally sinful, and salvation was already decided upon creation. A knowledge of their fallen state coupled with a genuine fear of eternal damnation created a perfect environment for control. Wigglesworth also preaches, "every sin's a crime" (3). He places a blanket statement over all sins, making them punishable, but a sin can only be punishable by law if the sinner admits to the crime. Wigglesworth ensures the sinners punish themselves for their crimes by making them feel guilty on a personal level, without ever needing to admit anything. The shared belief of Puritans being innately sinful is enhanced by their inability to confide in one another for help and comfort. Even though the ministers do not believe themselves better than the sinners

they damn, they kept their personal shortcomings secret from their congregations who struggled similarly.

The works of John Winthrop, another prominent Puritan minister, mirror those of Michael Wigglesworth with a few key differences. Winthrop famously envisioned the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a “city upon a hill,” and governed the colony for multiple terms. Wigglesworth struggled with moral concerns regarding the mercy of God. Winthrop calls outwardly for a community full of love and acceptance but privately wrote about persecuting those who stepped out of line. His public sermon “A Modell of Christian Charity” was given to the Puritan colonists upon their arrival on the continent. Winthrop’s purpose is to give the colonists an outline for what exactly their mission and way of life will be in the New World. He explains how the Puritan colonies are supposed to act as a model for other colonists, highlighting how God “hath soe disposed the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poore, some high and eminent in power and dignitie; others mean and in submission.” Winthrop believes that God has divinely given each Puritan colonist a set purpose and role in society. In abiding by a predetermined condition, Winthrop and other ministers can keep people controlled and in their place in society, and any violation or retaliation could be seen as an act against God. He discusses how colonists are supposed to be loving, forgiving, and generous to their neighbors at length. He explains, “true Christians are of one body in Christ... All the partes of this body being thus vnited are made soe contiguous in a speciall relation as they must needes partake of each other's strength and infirmity; joy and sorrowe, weale and woe.” The public teachings of Winthrop have a different tone than those of Wigglesworth. Where Wigglesworth warns of judgment by the hand of God, Winthrop calls for public shaming for any shortcomings. He calls for the colonists to “shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants” out of fear that God will

lose his favor for the colonists. Winthrop, as a minister, places the power to control the people in the hands of the citizens, who are likely to incriminate their neighbors to save themselves and their families. Instead of fostering community, Winthrop promotes division and distrust disguised as teamwork.

The private journals of John Winthrop, which also were not intended to be published, do not share the same ideas of divine purpose and community that his sermon reflects. Winthrop's journals convey his experience moving over to and settling down into life within the colonies. Within the journal, multiple entries concern the case of a woman named Anne Hutchinson. Hutchinson and her family moved to the colony following a favorite preacher of hers and later she began to teach a doctrine in direct contradiction with that of the Puritan leaders. She was charged with "keeping two public lectures every week in her house, whereto sixty or eighty persons did usually resort" (6). It was not lawful for women in particular to gather and hold meetings about religion in the privacy of their own homes. Women giving lectures in their own homes took away the control ministers had over the message being preached. Hutchinson was free to say anything she wished within her home, and the leaders of the church would be unaware. She preached "a covenant of free grace, and that [the colonists] had not the seal of the spirit, nor were able ministers of the New Testament" (6). Hutchinson believed that God's grace was simply too mysterious for ordinary humans to comprehend. She was not in agreement with the teachings of the Puritan ministers, but Winthrop does not treat her with the same ideas of love and community that he preached in his sermon. Winthrop writes, "she expected deliverance of a child," which "was delivered of a monstrous birth" (7). Winthrop is referring to the stillbirth of her child; he takes her irregular birth as God's punishment for her sins. He neglects his former notions of being compassionate and helping members of the community because it only applies

when members are in compliance with the church leader's idea of God's will. Later in his journal, he notes her death and the death of her followers who were banished with her. He writes, "these people had cast off ordinances and churches, and now at last their own people, ...had subjected themselves to the Dutch and dwelt scatteringly near a mile asunder" (9). The tone Winthrop writes in conveys a message that Hutchinson's actions are what lead her to such a fate, and that it is completely deserved. Hutchinson violated the Puritan's beliefs, making her at fault for her banishment. Her demise exemplifies the genuine beliefs of those trying to live out God's divine will in the "city upon a hill."

Puritan leaders had successfully organized society in a way that makes the people feel as if they are helpless and completely at the mercy of a mysterious God. Additionally, church leaders have the power to shape how God's will is given to the people and how it is applied throughout society. Puritan ministers, including Wigglesworth and Winthrop, symbolize the many internal battles fought within Puritanism. The same theme Monica D. Fitzgerald writes about is echoed throughout both ministers' texts; a people cannot in in communion with a God who created them to have a sinful nature.

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