

*Pilgrim "Others"*

Reclaiming the Agency and Identity of Women, Negroes and Indians in Puritan  
Massachusetts

BY

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## Abstract

This project is focused on the past, specifically a period between 1620 and 1799 in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. However, it is deeply rooted in contemporary concerns about building, bridging and restoring a multi-cultural existence in religious life and liturgy in the church. The idea for this paper is an outgrowth of my own lived experience as a descendant of Cherokees and Chinese and of blacks and whites. It was dually informed by my work as a seminary intern from 2009-2011 at The Riverside Church in the City of New York and my experience as a fellow at the 2011 Boston Seminar sponsored by the Congregational Foundation for Theological Studies (CFTS) and the Center for Congregational Leadership.

Examinations of “lived religion” have occupied scholars of religious history for more than a decade. Yet, this paper argues for a proposition that has not sufficiently been explored in the collective manner presented here. It is an ambitious project albeit with a relatively modest – although, perhaps, surprising – claim. This paper argues that colonists had inter-racial, multi-cultural liturgical experiences from the earliest beginnings of American religious life. Select examples from colonial churches across the Commonwealth – representing urban, suburban and rural congregations – show that women and Negroes and Indians, irrespective of gender, were involved in numerous aspects of the church as measured by admission, baptism, communion and marriage.<sup>2</sup>

This thesis attempts, in the briefest way, to add depth and contours to otherwise well-documented Puritan narratives and to add fresh detail to the historiography of this period.

**“...More truth and light yet to breake forth from his holy Word.”**  
**-- *Farewell discourse of the Rev. John Robinson*<sup>3</sup>**

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## A Brief Chronology

- 1536 Tyndale Bible is published. John Calvin publishes *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.
- 1560-61 Geneva Bible is published. First Calvinists settle in England.
- 1563 First usage of term "Puritan" to describe members of a socio-political and religious movement who believed the Bible was the true law of God and that it provided guidelines for Church governance; they sought reforms within the Church of England.
- 1602 William Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* parodies the term "Puritan."
- 1608 Puritan separatists from Scrooby in the county of Nottinghamshire leave England and migrate to Holland.
- 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible is published by the Church of England on the authority of King James I.
- 1620 *Mayflower*, a privately commissioned vessel, steers off course and misses its target at the mouth of the Hudson River. Upon landing off the coast of modern-day Cape Cod, English settlers establish Plymouth Plantation.
- 1621 Indigenous American population on Martha's Vineyard is estimated at 3,000 people.<sup>4</sup>
- 1622-23 The Indian population in New England continues to be diminished by disease and plague.
- 1630 Puritan migration begins after a land grant is issued to the Massachusetts Bay colony, which was chartered a year earlier and led by John Winthrop.<sup>5</sup>
- 1638 First slaves arrive in Massachusetts on the ship *Desire*.<sup>6</sup>
- 1641 Massachusetts Bay colony and Plymouth Plantation "authorize slavery by legislative enactment."<sup>7</sup>

- 1642-43 English settlers arrive on Noepe, later renamed Martha's Vineyard. Hiacoomes, a Nunpaug Indian converts to Christianity.
- 1645 Two Massachusetts merchants join with London-based slavers to attack an African village. Although about 100 Africans are killed and others were left wounded, "two Negroes, one of whom was an interpreter, were brought to Massachusetts and sold."<sup>8</sup>
- 1661 Estimated date that "intermixture both with the whites and the blacks" commenced with the indigenous population on Martha's Vineyard.<sup>9</sup>
- 1670 Hiacoomes and John Tackanash, a Capowack-Wampanoag Indian, are ordained by Congregationalist minister Thomas Mayhew Jr.<sup>10</sup> to preach the gospel.
- 1689-92 Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies merge.
- 1706 Members of Second Church (also known as "Old North" meeting house or church) present Cotton Mather with the gift of a slave, whom he names Onesimus.<sup>11</sup>
- 1709 Commonwealth population is estimated to be "56,000 souls, besides the blacks."<sup>12</sup>
- 1718 Population has nearly doubled to "94,000 souls...1,200 Indians; 2,000 slaves mostly Negroes."<sup>13</sup>
- 1720 Indian population on Martha's Vineyard is estimated at 800 people, or 155 families.<sup>14</sup>
- 1761 A kidnapped, nine-year-old girl is sold to Congregationalists John and Susannah Wheatley in Boston, a town of an estimated 15,000 people – about 800 of whom were "of African descent."<sup>15</sup>
- 1764 An estimated 440 mixed-race people live on Martha's Vineyard.<sup>16</sup>

1771

Woman listed as “Phillis” is baptized at Third Church<sup>17</sup> (also known as “Old South”).<sup>18</sup>

1790

More than 5,300 Negroes live in Massachusetts.<sup>19</sup>

**“...For the growing good of the world is partly dependent on unhistoric acts; and...is half owing to the number who lived faithfully a hidden life, and rest in unvisited tombs.”**

**-- *Middlemarch* by George Eliot<sup>20</sup>**

## **Prologue**

The silvery grey sky was overcast when I stood, last summer, on the deck of the 25-foot wide, 100-foot long square-rigged *Mayflower II*, moored at State Pier in Plymouth harbor. But the sky and sea were calm. Hardly comparable to the unforgiving mix of pewter and black that must have routinely churned beneath and blown over the 12-year-old vessel that brought 102 pilgrims<sup>22</sup> and a crew of 25 men on a privately chartered boat named for a chestnut tree's blossom. Until these religious separatists came aboard, the *Mayflower* commonly ferried Spanish salt, hops and wine between England, the Atlantic coast of France, and other European ports of call.<sup>23</sup> Can you imagine being on this boat? My answer, to the person who had queried me, was a smile. My reality was muffled by the shoving of a couple hundred years of chattel slavery deep into the background of American memory and cultural narrative. Had I answered, the reply would have been, "of course not." My passage, if lucky,<sup>24</sup> would have been supine, probably diseased and certainly contorted as slaves had "the worst accommodations of any humans ever transported across the Atlantic."<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, I was struck by the comment. It reflected how singularly and powerfully one particular story of journey and quest has been told in this country.

## **Introduction**

Thus I too, embarked upon this project as if on a quest - to understand journey, memory and accepted narratives while knowing that yet more truth might "breake forth." I ventured to grasp human experience and adventure but also to see, perhaps timidly, where I and others like me fit in. This project does not aspire to deconstruct or critique work already done, nor to revisit vividly told stories that were folded into American history far more intentionally than I had imagined.<sup>25</sup> In this way, George Eliot's words resonate with

