The Radical Ideology of Samuel Gorton: New Light on the Relation of English to American Puritanism

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SAMUEL Gorton remains one of the most enigmatic characters in early New England history, primarily because his doctrinal link to prominent English radicals has not been sufficiently understood. Most historians' accounts of him have fallen into the historical typecasting that either resembles Nathaniel Morton's vituperative description of Gorton as "a proud and pestilent seducer . . . deeply leavened with blasphemous and familistical opinions," or errs in the opposite direction through excessive but oversimplified praise, suggesting that he was an early American advocate of religious freedom second only to Roger Williams in vehemence for the cause. Even so profound a scholar as Perry Miller described Gorton's beliefs merely as "part and parcel" of a "lunatic fringe" of Puritanism in Stuart England.1

Because of Gorton's relatively inaccessible prose style—one nineteenth-century historian stated that Gorton's religious discourse "employ[ed] a
dialect utterly incoherent to the uninitiated”—most students have glossed over his religious opinions and have accepted the simplistic exaggerations of earlier historians. We are seldom reminded that Gorton's theology was similar to that of such English Puritan radicals as John Saltmarsh and William Dell, chaplains in the new model army and men prominent in the Seeker and Ranter movements of their day; or that while in England in the mid-1640s Gorton enjoyed great success as an itinerant preacher; or that after he returned to New England in 1648 he was one of the few men to defend the Quakers when they attempted to land in Boston in the 1650s. Instead, Gorton is tossed haphazardly into that murky and seldom-stirred cauldron that contains such American religious misfits as John Wheelwright, William Coddington, and Anne Hutchinson, idiosyncratic troublemakers who obstructed the Bay Colony's march to the New Jerusalem but whose political ideology differed significantly from Gorton's.

New England's deepest fears about Gorton stemmed from the ideological implications of his profoundly held mysticism, and Massachusetts's prolonged attempts to slander him were part of a pressing need to condemn Gorton's deviance from the traditional norms of their community. Gorton's actions too closely resembled those of many "antinomian" radicals in England, and he threatened to broadcast to the Protestant world that New England's "pure"

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3 While my analysis of Gorton's thought suggests his connections to English radicalism, his association with "antinomian" elements in America cannot be neglected. When he first moved to Rhode Island, he lived among many of those who had been exiled from Boston because of their connections to the Hutchinsonians, and an analysis of his supporters reveals many of them to have had close sympathies with the exiles. See John Gorham Palfrey, The History of New England during the Stuart Dynasty, II (Boston, 1865), 121-122, n. 3. George Arthur Johnson in "From Seeker to Finder: A Study in Seventeenth-Century English Spiritualism before the Quakers," Church History, XVII (1948), 299-315, briefly mentions Gorton's connection to English "Spiritist" groups, and Rufus M. Jones notes that "there was much more of the Seeker type of dissent in the American colonies than most historians have reckoned with" (Mysticism and Democracy in the English Commonwealth [Cambridge, Mass., 1932], 100), but no one has since followed up these hints. See also James Fulton Maclear, "'The Heart of New England Rent': The Mystical Element in Early Puritan History," Mississippi Valley Historical Review, XLII (1956), 621-652, and Geoffrey F. Nuttall, The Holy Spirit in Puritan Faith and Experience (Oxford, 1946).
Congregational polity offered a fertile spawning ground for the chaos threatening England during the civil wars. He brought into dangerously close focus not only the questions of the political jurisdiction of magistrates and the proper use of ordinances but also the more basic issue (also faced by the colonists' brethren in England) of how Puritans committed to a Congregational or "Independent" ecclesiastical polity could control behavior that stemmed from a fervent mystical faith—what Emery Battis calls the "inherent Jacobinism of Protestant theology" that produced a "revolutionary dynamic . . . irrepressibly particularistic and anti-authoritarian."  

Claiming victory over Gorton, the New England Puritans could more confidently march to the synod at Cambridge in 1648 and proclaim with Nathaniel Ward that "all Farnilists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other Enthusiasts shall have free Liberty to keepe away" from the American strand. The colonists dramatically announced that, despite the military successes of the new model army and the increasing toleration for Christian sects in England, New England would not become the mirror image of old. The "New England Way" became possible only when the Puritan colonists comprehended the newly formalized doctrinal boundaries of their church-state, boundaries that precluded anyone's turning the world upside down in the way sought by Gorton and many English Puritan radicals. But, given the New England Puritans' hyperbole when dealing with their enemies, it should come as no surprise that the historian who penetrates to the marrow of Gorton's theology discovers not a dangerous and immoral troublemaker but rather a man who, more than any other New Englander, was in step with the religious politics of his times and whose history illuminates the complexity of the relationship of American to English Puritanism.

A sketch of Gorton's New England career demonstrates how violently the Massachusetts Puritans reacted to anyone whose behavior deviated from the standards set by their own ministers, especially if that behavior seemed antinomian in its tendencies. Born about 1592 in Gorton, England, an area near Manchester which, from the 1580s on, was known as a Puritan stronghold, Samuel Gorton eventually found his way to London, where he engaged in the respectable middle-class trade of a clothier. The motive for


his removal to the Puritan colony is unknown, but in 1636/7 he arrived in Boston, at the height of the troubles with Anne Hutchinson and her followers. Remaining apart from the immediate controversy, Gorton, by 1638, was within the boundaries of the Plymouth patent, having left Boston—at least so William Hubbard and Cotton Mather would have us believe—because he was dunned for one hundred pounds by the agent of a Londoner from whom he had solicited such an advance before coming to New England.7

A more plausible explanation for the brevity of his stay in Boston is that he recognized the direction in which the ministerial winds were blowing. If Gorton sensed that his religious beliefs were similar to those held by the beleaguered Hutchinsonians and did not want to risk bringing the wrath of the synod on himself as well, he was wise to remove to more peaceful Plymouth. But as much as he tried to stay clear of those not likely to tolerate his peculiar religious opinions, once he began acting on the Word as it was revealed to him he was bound for trouble. Nathaniel Morton’s account sets the tone for later reports. Though harboring little affection for Gorton, Morton still admitted that upon Gorton’s first coming to Plymouth there was hope that he would be “a useful instrument”; but all too quickly Gorton showed himself “a subtle deceiver, courteous in carriage to all, at some times (for his own ends) but soon moved to passion.” His passions raised by difficulties over his wife’s serving woman (whom the Plymouth authorities threatened to banish when “nothing was laid to her charge, only it was whispered privately that she had smiled” in the Sabbath meeting), Gorton was not long in condemning Plymouth’s government.8

edition of Gorton’s Simplicitie Defence against Seven-Headed Policy . . . (1646) (Rhode Island Historical Society, Collections, II [1835]), hereafter cited as Gorton, Simplicitie Defence, which provides extensive annotation to Gorton’s life as well as to his treatise. Early Puritanism in the Manchester area is discussed in R. C. Richardson, Puritanism in North-West England: A Regional Study of the Diocese of Chester to 1642 (Manchester, 1972), chap. 1. For Roger Brearley and the Grindletonians, who were active nearby and who held views similar to Gorton’s, see Christopher Hill, The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution (New York, 1972), 65-69; Jones, Mysticism and Democracy, chaps. 3, 4; and n. 39 below. Ronald A. Marchant, The Puritans and the Church Courts in the Diocese of York, 1560-1642 (London, 1960), 40, 41, also describes Brearley’s activities.

7 Documentary evidence suggests that the first time Massachusetts heard criticism of Gorton was in a letter from Roger Williams to John Winthrop, Mar. 8, 1641, in Edward Winslow, Hypocrisie Unmasked: By a true Relation of the Proceedings of the Governour and Company of the Massachusetts against Samuel Gorton . . . (London, 1646), 55, and in Deane’s “Notice of Gorton,” NEHGR, IV (1850), 201-221. In this letter the term “familist” is first used in connection with Gorton.

8 Morton, New Englands Memoriall, 108-110. Gorton’s side of the story is told
The animosity soon displayed toward Gorton was caused by more than his uncivil behavior in his defense of the woman, for the Plymouth records charge him not only with "misdemeanours in the open Court, towards the elders, the Bench, and [with] stirring up the people to mutiny in the face of the Court," but with heresy as well. It was rumored that Gorton had already begun "to sow such seeds... whereby some were seduced," and among those whom he influenced was none other than the wife of Ralph Smith, the colony's minister; she frequented Gorton's home for daily prayer and told her neighbors "how glad she was that she could come into a family where her spirit was refreshed in the ordinances of god as in former dayes." The scenario was all too familiar, especially since Gorton, like Anne Hutchinson, was engaged in lay preaching that alienated the community from the settled ministry. Not about to risk more dissension—or the further embarrassment of Smith—the elders tried Gorton for religious and civil insubordination. Charging him with preaching (among other things) "no more happiness than this world affords," they banished him from the patent.9

By 1639 he reached the newly established settlement of Aquidneck (later Portsmouth) where William Coddington, John Clarke, and others forced out of Massachusetts in the Antinomian controversy had joined the Hutchinsonians.10 But Gorton soon upset the political alignment of that infant colony, and Coddington, from the outset suspicious of Gorton's religious eccentricities, moved swiftly against him. Thomas Lechford, who had his own bones to pick with New England, described the proceedings with precious understatement. "They began about a small trespass of swine," he noted, but "it

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9 Nathaniel B. Shurtleff, ed., Records of the Colony of New Plymouth, 1: Boston, 1855, 105; Gorton to Morton, June 30, 1669, 7; Morton, New England's Memorial, 108. Complicating events, Gorton rented half of Smith's house; once Smith was aware of Gorton's highly regarded meetings he sought to evict him, against the terms of the agreement on which Gorton had leased the home.

10 A minority party—headed by the Hutchinsonians and strengthened by Gorton and a band of supporters who had moved with him from Plymouth—ousted Coddington from his "judgeship" during his absence from the settlement. Coddington moved to the southern tip of the island and established Newport; and, after his new base of power was consolidated, he acted to unite the island settlements under one government, a task aided by friction between Gorton and Hutchinson. Gorton, Simplicities: Defence, 3; Charles M. Andrews, The Colonial Period of American History (New Haven, Conn., 1934-1938), II, 8-10. For an economic and sociological analysis of the Rhode Island settlements in the 17th century see Carl Bridenbaugh, Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience: Society in Rhode Island, 1636-1690 (Providence, 1974).
is thought some other matter was ingredient." Indeed it was, for after Gorton refused to acknowledge the authority of the local government in a trespassing complaint, he behaved as he had at Plymouth, calling the town's magistrates "great asses" and its judges "corrupt," and taunting Coddington with the words, "all you that are for the King, lay hold on Coddington!" For this seditious behavior—Mather sarcastically pointed out that Gorton had affronted "what little government they had"—he was whipped and banished from the area.11

Matters went no better in Roger Williams's settlement of Providence, where Gorton again became embroiled in disputes. Within a few months of Gorton's arrival, the usually mild-mannered Williams wrote an exasperated letter to John Winthrop, complaining that Gorton, "having foully abused high and low at aquedneck, [was] now bewitching and bemadding poor Providence." Besides censuring "all the Ministers of this Countrey," he was "denying all visible and externall ordinances," and his opinions seemed to be spreading, for "all most all suck in his poyson as at first they did at aquedneck."12 Then, on November 17, 1641, Gorton's name was brought officially to Governor John Winthrop's attention in a petition from thirteen inhabitants of Providence, who requested aid in settling the disputes Gorton had complicated. They "counted it meet and necessary to give... true intelligence of the insolent and riotous carriages of Samuel Gorton and his company," who had "no manner of honest order of government, either over them or amongst them" and who taunted, threatened, and assaulted those who sought to resist their "lewd, licentious courses." Faced with this unusual complaint (the settlement was not within his jurisdiction), Winthrop acted cautiously, replying that the Bay "could not levy war, etc. without a General Court," and "except they [the petitioners] did submit themselves to some jurisdiction, either Plymouth or ours, we had no calling or warrant to interpose in their contentions." Then in September 1642 the petitioners formally subjected themselves to the authority of Massachusetts Bay and so solicited its protection.13

Having recently battered down the Antinomians, Massachusetts now was presented with an opportunity not only to drive a wedge into the plantations

12 In Providence the difficulties were over land boundaries. For a description of the near-battle that resulted from Gorton's presence see Mackie, "Life of Gorton," 336. Williams to Winthrop, Mar. 8, 1641, in Winslow, Hypocrisie Unmusked, 55.
13 This petition is found in its entirety in an appendix in Gorton, Simplicities Defence, 191-194. See also Winthrop's Journal, II, 53-54. It is important to note that Roger Williams was not among the signers of this document.
begun as refuges for those seeking that "soul-liberty" New England Congregationalists so distrusted, but also to secure a strategic window on Narragansett Bay, facing the Dutch plantations to the south. Winthrop soon issued a warning for the Gortonists to halt further agitation among the inhabitants of Providence.  

Gorton's patience—never his prominent virtue—became strained, and he sent the Bay Colony an immoderate reply unequivocally refusing compliance with their directive. He objected to the Bay Colony's attempt to enlarge its jurisdiction without the consent of a majority of the inhabitants, for by English law "neither the one nor the other [that is, neither William Arnold and the other petitioners nor the Bay Puritans] . . . have power to enlarge the bounds, by King Charles limited" to them. He claimed that Massachusetts betrayed the true intent of its actions by its willingness to honor the request for aid from men like William Arnold whom it once had banished from its society because they had been associated with Anne Hutchinson. "We know very well," he argued, "that it is the name of Christ, called upon us which you strive against, whence it is that you stand on tiptoe to stretch yourselves beyond your bounds, to seek occasion against us. . . . We know, before hand, how our cause will be ended, and see the scale of your equal justice turned already, before we have laid our cause therein."  

Gorton declared that his band would not capitulate to the Bay's jurisdiction, for they had "wronged no man" and "will not be dealt with as before; we speak in the name of our God, we will not; for, if any shall disturb us . . . secret hypocrites shall become open tyrants, and their laws appear to be nothing else but mere lusts, in the eyes of all the world." Hurling a final insult, Gorton maintained that if any people thought his words "unchristian" it was because their magistrates had kept them "ignorant of the cross of our Lord Jesus." Gorton accused the Puritan leaders of setting up their own cross, "Seignirim," signifying "horror and fear," and he dared tell Winthrop that this was the cross the governor held and taught and by which he thought to be saved.  

By his unrestrained sarcasm Gorton openly challenged the Puritans to persecute him as they had the Antinomians, but his only defense was the location of his settlement beyond the boundaries set in the Massachusetts charter. To insure his safety—and because of bitter feelings in Providence—Gorton moved even farther south, finally purchasing a piece of land called Shawomet (later Warwick), where he felt secure from any intrusion by Massachusetts. But to his immense surprise and consternation the Mas-

14 Gorton, Simplicities Defence, 52-54.  
15 Ibid., 61-62, 68. For an analysis of the European-Indian relationship in Rhode Island during this period see Francis Jennings, The Invasion of America: Indians, Colonialism, and the Cant of Conquest (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1975), 262-272.  
16 Gorton, Simplicities Defence, 83.
Massachusetts magistrates soon summoned him and his followers to Boston on the complaint of two Indian sachems who claimed that he had seized their land unjustly. Urged on by Gorton's enemies (one of the Providence petitioners acted as the Indians' interpreter in Boston), both sachems had appeared before the authorities, submitted to the jurisdiction of Massachusetts, and asked aid in recovering the property they claimed was swindled from them. Having lost their quasi-legal hold on Gorton when he moved from Providence, and outraged at the numerous heresies and blasphemies in his letters to them, the Massachusetts magistrates took the opportunity to strike. An expeditionary force led by Edward Johnson captured the Gortonists after a duplicitous attempt at negotiations and brought them to Boston for trial as heretics and enemies to civil government.

Unable to reach a verdict from the available evidence, the magistrates made Gorton answer in writing, under penalty of death, a set of doctrinal and hermeneutic questions. Just as he had done before Coddington at Aquidneck, Gorton claimed that, before any such penalty could be carried out, he should have recourse to an appeal to England. But the Puritans' patience had worn thin: they told him "never [to] dream or think of any such thing," for no appeal would be granted. Storing this threat for later use against them, Gorton complied without further resistance. Surprisingly, Winthrop then told him that, after studying his responses, the court was "one with him in those answers" and asked only that he retract his earlier insults to the colony. But Gorton refused, claiming that all he had previously written to them agreed with the present documents. Astounded by this insolence, an irate Joseph Dudley proclaimed that "he never would consent to it whilst he lived, that they were one with him in those answers," and he

17 Ibid., 91. The Arnolds were trading with the Indians in the immediate area and evidently wanted to establish their legitimacy among the natives. The Gortonists' land had been purchased from Miantonomo, supposedly the head sachem of the area, and the minor sachem, Socconocco, had signed the deed with him. There is still dispute over whether Miantonomo was the chief in that area; further, Socconocco claimed that he had been forced into signing the deed. See Jennings, *Invasion of America*, 262-272. Andrews, in *Colonial Period of American History*, II, 14, and 24, suggests that the Arnolds may have been interested in maintaining the power of the minor sachems in the area because they themselves had purchased land from them.


19 See Gorton, *Simplicities Defence*, 119-135, for an account of the trial. While the Gortonists were imprisoned, Nathaniel Ward came to their window and urged them to renounce their errors, assuring them that it would be no embarrassment. As an example he cited the case of John Cotton, "who ordinarily preacheth that publicly one year, that the next year he publicly repents of, and shews himself very sorrowful for it to the congregation" (*ibid.*, 122n). Evidently Cotton was still smarting from his about-face in the Antinomian controversy.
moved the court to vote on whether the Gortonists should be executed for heresy.\textsuperscript{20}

Their lives were spared by a few votes but, instead of being freed as innocent, they were sentenced to wear irons and to do hard labor in towns surrounding Boston. The populace, however, was "much unsatisfied" with the punishment dealt out to Gorton and his followers, and within a few months the General Court, without any further testimony, overturned the Gortonists' sentences, freeing them to return to Shawomet and setting the stage for their leader's voyage to England to bring complaint against Massachusetts.\textsuperscript{21} In England, Gorton found opportunity to publish his theological doctrines for a public including many prominent people sympathetic to the ideology he represented.

When Gorton's doctrinal and polemical writings are juxtaposed with his unsettling behavior in New England, there is substantive proof that the reputation that had followed him throughout the Narragansett settlements was rooted in doctrines that closely paralleled those of certain prominent English radicals. For although none of his treatises was published until he returned to England in the mid-1640s, the implications of the theology later outlined in such works as \textit{An Incorruptible Key, composed of the CX. Psalme . . . (1647)}, \textit{Saltmarsh returned from the Dead . . . (1655)}, and \textit{An Antidote against the Common Plague of the World . . . (1656)} already were evident in his dealings with the Bay Colony, Plymouth, and Rhode Island authorities, suggesting that prior to his initial removal to New England he may have imbibed his "heresies" from some of the same sources as his English counterparts. Gorton's central idea was also held by such members of the complex "antinomian" culture in England as John Saltmarsh, William Dell, and William Erbury, and later became the keystone to Quaker theology. He argued for an essential divinity in all human beings, a divinity that was defined by the Holy Spirit's presence and that precluded any arbitrary distinctions (be they religious or political) between saints and sinners. For Gorton, as for many other seventeenth-century mystics, conversion consisted in the true and full apprehension of this indwelling divinity and a willingness to follow its dictates against human authority. Though not a Seeker, Ranter, or Quaker, Gorton strongly maintained the all-sufficiency of the Holy Spirit in the true Christian, a concept that exempted the believer from obedience to mankind's perverse and troublesome laws, whether they stemmed from the English Parliament or the Massachusetts General Court.\textsuperscript{22}

\textsuperscript{20} \textit{Ibid.}, 125, 132.
\textsuperscript{21} \textit{Ibid.}, 134-135, 147.
\textsuperscript{22} Hill, \textit{World Turned Upside Down}, is a good introduction to the radical spiritualists in England. Also see Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'"
During the time of Gorton's trial in Boston the question of his guilt had revolved around not only his civil insubordination but also his doctrinal understanding of the process of regeneration and Christ's role in freeing man to receive the Holy Spirit, a subject that had been at the heart of the Antinomian controversy. Winthrop noted that after one of John Cotton's sermons Gorton desired "leave to speak" and openly pronounced that "if Christ lived eternally, then he died eternally." He further remarked that Christ had been "incarnate in Adam" and had been the "image of God wherein Adam was created." Christ's "being born after of the Virgin Mary and suffering" was, then, but "a manifestation of his suffering, etc., in Adam." To these heretical suggestions that the image of Christ had been present in Adam and so was present in all his descendants, Cotton, who had been using "all due pains to charm these adders, with convincing disputations," replied that a true Christian had to believe that the death of Christ was the cause of "our redemption, whereas the fall of Adam was . . . but the cause of our condemnation." Intent on showing how through Christ's death God was reconciling all men to Himself (and not just "imputing their sins"), Gorton countered that, when Christ died, the image of God died just as His image had died in Adam's fall.

Gorton stubbornly maintained that "Christ was incarnate when Adam was made after God's image" because God could have but one image. In human terms "that image was Christ," and "this making of Adam in that image was the exinanition [humiliation, abasement] of Christ." Further, Gorton understood that God Himself was unknowable, making Christ the only rational object of worship; or, as he later put it, "the Father was never knowne nor is he knowable but in Christ." Man's spiritual contact with God was made through His Son, and since man's literal ancestor, Adam, had been formed in the image of God (that is, Christ was "present" in him), so could the Holy Spirit, through Christ's sacrifice, be present in and available to all.

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23 See Jesper Rosenmeier, "New England's Perfection: The Image of Adam and the Image of Christ in the Antinomian Controversy," William and Mary Quarterly, 3d Ser., XXVII (1970), 435-459. Rosenmeier's sketch of Cotton's position on Christ's role in the process of regeneration suggests that Cotton was closer to Gorton's beliefs than to such ministers as Thomas Shepard, for Cotton stressed that when Christ's image was engraved on the soul there was not merely a return to Adam's innocence but a discovery of a new and richer holiness caused by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

24 See Winthrop's Journal, II, 145, and Mather, Magnalia, II, 436-437, for accounts of the disputation.
believers, enabling them to be justified not through works, but through faith: "That doctrine which ties the death of Christ to one particular man in one time and age of the world, as being the scope and intent of God's will concerning the death of his son in the salvation of the world, that doctrine falsifies the death of Jesus Christ, and sets men upon the law of works in the ground and matter of their salvation, by which law no man is justified." Gorton expressed the same sentiment later in his life in a letter to John Winthrop, Jr., in which he maintained that "to hold that Christ Jesus was not exhibited in the Church from the beginning, is a point of [the] soules disease and sickness . . . [for if He] was in purpose and promise in the beginning, but not actually [in existence] till some thousands of years after; [this belief] idolizeth the Lord to be like a corruptible man." If men understood the true meaning of God in Christ, they would discover the inherent divinity of all mankind—what Gorton termed "the equal nearness of the divine spirit to [both] the sinner and the saint." Through this spiritual union, all believers in Christ partook of the perfection of God Himself. In the very same act of the Son of God descending into the world and becoming a finite man, man himself was raised to a state of dignity equal to that of the Son of God.25

Such doctrine argues Gorton's spiritual connection to certain English Puritan radicals (especially to some of Oliver Cromwell's chaplains in the new model army), whose conceptions of free grace were quite similar. For example, John Saltmarsh, one of the most prominent preachers in the army, in his Free Grace; Or The Flowings of Christs Blood Freely to Sinners (London, 1646) offered a clear exposition of what the doctrine of free grace meant to the group known as "Seekers." He proclaimed that one should not "serve the oldnesse of the Letter . . . but the newnesse of the Spirit," and that because of Christ's sacrifice all Christians were no longer "under the Law, but under Grace." His comrade-in-arms William Dell spelled out the political implications of such doctrines. Maintaining that once a man understood the meaning of salvation through Christ he became a new being, and that "it is not I that live, but Christ that lives in me," Dell convinced his soldiers that if they were true saints nothing could stand in the way of their

uprooting England's carnal government. Similarly, men like Gorton, Saltmarsh, and Dell believed that Christians who placed too strong an emphasis on outward ordinances at the expense of an experience of the Spirit (for example, magistrates like those at Aquidneck and Boston, as well as King Charles) were forcing people to live by the wisdom of men rather than by faith in Christ and had no true sense of the freedom the saint possessed.

Gorton's contempt for the New England Puritans' magistracy and its attempts to prescribe matters of faith and belief stemmed from similar doctrinal premises. Believing in the liberty Christ's presence offered mankind, Gorton was dismayed that even the inhabitants of the City on the Hill subjected themselves "to the hand or skill of the devised ministrations of men," as though God "made man to be a vassal to his own species." Rather than ushering in the millennium by listening to the voice of God, the New England Puritans were merely establishing another worthless set of "idols," best evidenced by their ridiculous concern with turning "the juice of a poor, silly grape . . . into the blood of our Lord Jesus" through the "cunning skill of their magicians," an act that effected no lasting change in the character of its participants and that suggested that New England's polity was becoming just another arm of Antichrist. The New England saints always had "some fast to keep, some Sabbath to sanctify, some sermon to heare, some Battel to fight, some church to constitute, some officers to raise up"; and they erroneously believed that such issues had to be settled before they took "God upon his word, that we are complete in Christ." Winthrop and his fellow-colonists, as well as many persons in England, depended on the contrived ordinances of man and not on the Lord; and when their idolatry was threatened by the likes of Anne Hutchinson or Roger Williams, they could "never rest or be quiet" until they had put the witness "under a bushel," that is, "bounded and measured the infinite word of God" according to their own "shallow, human, and carnal capacities." 27

26 See John Saltmarsh, An End of One Controversie . . . (London, 1646), and Free Grace; or the flowings of Christ's Blood freely to Sinners (London, 1645); and William Dell, The Crucified and Quickened Christian . . . (London [1652?]), in Several Sermons and Discourses of William Dell (London, 1709), esp. 342-343. For good accounts of these and others of the "antinomian" Puritans see Solt, Saints in Arms; Morton, World of the Ranters; Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'" MVHR, XLII (1956), 621-652; Johnson, "From Seeker to Finder," Church History, XVII (1948), 299-315; and Nuttall, Holy Spirit.

27 Gorton, Simplicities Defence, 263, 268, 270, and An Incorruptible Key, 73. That magistrates should have power only in matters of civil concern was a position espoused equally vociferously by Williams and was the reason for his initial banishment from Massachusetts. In England such ideas were more common, especially among the "Seekers" in the 1640s and 1650s. See Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'" MVHR, XLII (1956), 621-652; Johnson, "From Seeker to Finder," Church History, XVII (1948), 299-315; and Hill, World Turned Upside Down, 148-149, 153-154.
But while New England Puritans "contended" and made "great stirre" about such outward displays of piety, and while "the life and spirit of the Gospel" lay "buried under humane ordinances and carnall traditions," the voice of the Holy Spirit was every day revealed to Gorton and his followers. It offered a higher calling than the Puritans' legalisms, which "tend[ed] only to the carriage of one man toward another" and neglected those "principles of divinity . . . tending to faith toward God in Christ." If Christ were a "sufficient King and Ruler in his Church," Gorton maintained, "all other Authority and Government erected therein is superfluous, and as a branch to be cut off." Sounding a note as militant as any uttered by Saltmarsh or Dell, Gorton warned Massachusetts that "if you put forth your hands to us as a countryman, ours are in readinesse for you . . . [but] if you present a gun, make haste to give the first fire, for we are come to put fire on the earth . . . and it is our desire to have it speedily kindled."28

This intense belief in the animating presence of the Holy Spirit fostered more than a suspicion of the religious forms and ordinances instituted by governments, for Gorton's ideology also supported an anti-authoritarianism that threatened the social hierarchy adhered to by most New England Puritans. To Gorton, the equality of all men was so literal a fact that deference to a hierarchical system—be it civil or religious—denied the true priesthood of all believers. He criticized the Massachusetts Puritans because they had to have men "be honorable, learned, wise, experienced and of good report" before they could rule, but they did not realize that, to be judged honestly, a man had to be brought before his spiritual peers. Edward Winslow, sent as New England's agent to present its case against Gorton in London in 1646, insisted that to preach free grace as Gorton did was to offer an inconceivable political liberty. He feared that if "the administration of Justice and judgement belongs to no office, but to man as a Brother, then to every Brother, and if to every Brother, whether rich or poore, ignorant or learned, then every Christian in a Commonwealth must be King, and Judge, and Sheriffe, and Captain."29

But this was precisely Gorton's point and the reason for much of his uncivil behavior—for example, his addressing Winthrop as the "great and honored Idol General . . . whose pretended equity in distribution of justice unto the souls and bodies of men, is nothing else but a mere device of man." After studying such brash statements, Winslow correctly, if sarcastically, reported that Gorton meant that "to be a Brother, and consequently a

28 Janes, Samuell Gorton, 93; Gorton, Incorruptible Key, 2. The Gortonists' belief that the Holy Spirit was present in every man led to some shocking pronounce-ments; after Gorton's whipping at Aquidneck "some of his faction said, Now Christ Jesus has suffered" (Deane, "Notice of Gorton," NEHGR, IV [1850] 221).
coheire in Christ, is a higher sphere than to be a civil Officer." Moreover, Winslow well understood where such doctrines led: when in 1649 he republished his *Hypocrisie Unmasked* (1647), New England's defense of its actions against Gorton, he had it printed with a new title page aimed directly at Englishmen already suspicious of such radical ideas: it could be purchased under the title of *The Danger of Tolerating Levellers in a Civil State*. Later, in *Saltmarsh returned from the Dead*, Gorton further clarified his democratic beliefs. "The ground of these particular and nominal religions, (as Independent, Presbyterian, Anabaptist, Papist, Generallist, for they all stand on one root) is [that] they limit and infringe the grace of the Gospel" and so disregard the universality of the Holy Spirit. Similarly, Dell, in his *The Way of True Peace and Unity in the True Church of Christ*, proclaimed that, while "according to our first Nativity" men are born into different stations and religions, "yet according to our new or second birth, whereby we are born of God, there is exact equality . . . [and] all have the same faith, hope, love." As envisioned by Gorton and Dell, the Kingdom of God on earth was based on spiritual and political equality.

Gorton's anticlericalism was equally pronounced. As one recent critic correctly asserts, Gorton recognized the allegiance between the "Puritan reliance on learning and Puritan social control" and held that any community built on a formal church covenant and supporting an educated, paid ministry was a form of Antichrist—a belief held by many left-wing Puritans during the English Civil Wars, including Dell and William Erbury, the Welsh Puritan radical who linked clergymen and lawyers as the "chiefest oppressors" of the age.

Answering Morton's attack on him in *New England's Memorial* . . . (1669), Gordon expressed sharp disapproval of the ministry's status as a privileged class. He maintained that, although Morton


had termed him nothing but "a Belcher out of Errors, . . . I would have you know that I hold my call to preach . . . not inferior to the call of any minister in the country . . . [I have not] bin drowned in pride and ignorance through Aristotle's principles and other heathen philosophers, as millions are and have bin, who ground the preaching of the Gospel upon humane principles to the falsifying of the word of God." His call to preach the Word was "as good as the Degrees in Schooles" or any authorized by bishops, elders, or the "call of a people"; and though never formally ordained, he "doubted not but there hath bin as much true use made of languages . . . for the opening of Scripture in the place where I live, as hath bin in any church in New England." To require a more formal "call" than that of the Holy Ghost was to institute another of those crass "idols" which Massachusetts leaders were so intent on fabricating to augment their power. Speaking to some "praying Indians" who had wandered to Shawomet, Gorton elaborated his sentiments. He argued that, while New England Puritans "teach that you must have Ministers," these church officers "cannot change men's hearts, God must do that, and therefore there is no need of Ministers." Since true religion depended on a unique personal experience of the Spirit, formal training in language, arts and sciences, and divinity was superfluous; any man could address others from his own experiences, and under the true dispensation no external education could reform one's life as Christ could.

Gorton resented the charge that he denied life after death and that his preaching of the doctrine of universal salvation encouraged hedonism. He stoutly maintained that there was "not a man[,] woman[,] or childe upon the face of the earth that will come forth and say that ever they heard any such word[s] come out of my mouth." On the contrary, he was "farre from understanding" John's message that Christ died for the sins of the whole world in the "sense of the generallists," because they "exterpare[d] and roote[d] out" Christ's role in the work of redemption. They denied any more "Divine or eternall nature th[a]n is in the elements or beginnings of all earthly and transitory things" and, because of this incipient pantheism, were
prevented from being witness to an "eternal power manifest in that which in it selfe is temporary," that is, the power of the Holy Spirit.\(^{36}\)

Further, the subtlety by which Gorton maintained his innocence in the face of the New England Puritans' charge that he rejected the usual meaning of the word "eternal" involved his belief that once the soul was touched by the spirit of God it already was in eternity, a point of doctrine which had been spread in England by such men as the spirit-mystic John Everard. To Gorton as to Everard (who had translated works of such Continental mystics as Nicholas of Cusa and Sebastian Franck), righteousness was in itself eternal life, and sin eternal death and punishment. A penalty was not assessed arbitrarily at some future time but was rather the natural and inevitable result of evil action. Such doctrine, Gorton declared, "as sets forth a time to come, of more worth and glory than either is, or hath been, keeps the manna till tomorrow, to the breeding of worms in it." Heaven was a condition of the soul on earth, and the divine spark of regeneration implied the immediate and eternal destruction of evil as well as the salvation of good, opening the way for man's final perfection in this life. "The righteousness of God is of eternal worth and duration," he maintained, "but the one and the other [courses of life] being wrought into a change at one and the same time, thence comes the capacity of an eternall life and eternall destruction." Or, as Everard suggested, men who are estranged from Christ crucify Him anew in their own hearts and so "live in Hell . . . in the very condition of Devils and Reprobates," while a "good man hath God in him, and he seeth, knoweth, and believeth it."

Heaven and hell were psychological conditions, and morality was to be upheld because it made one feel spiritually healthy. "Whose oxe or whose asse have I taken[?]" Gorton asked rhetorically when Morton accused him of leading a "sordid" life. "Or when and where have I lived upon other men's labours and not wrought with mine owne hands for things honest in the sight of men[?]"

Possession by the Holy Spirit ruled out such immoral activities.

Viewed against the background of English Puritan radicalism, then, Gorton's theological doctrines, as well as his "political" activity in New

\(^{36}\) Gorton to Morton, June 30, 1669, 9.


\(^{38}\) Gorton to Morton, June 30, 1669, 12.
England, appear less eccentric than some historians have suggested. Moreover, his behavior while he was in England from 1644 to 1648 suggests that his main importance—like that of many of his spiritual brethren among the Seekers, Levellers, and Ranters—lay in his public support of those doctrines that would later be embodied in the enduring form of Quakerism.

Even though an emphasis on the doctrine of the indwelling and guidance of the Holy Spirit was common in the hortatory works of such Independent Puritans as Richard Sibbes, John Cotton, and John Preston, Gorton and his counterparts seem to have been influenced by more underground sources, perhaps by the enclaves of Familists found in certain parts of England from the 1580s on, or by the preaching of such men as Roger Brearley or Everard, who after 1618 was preacher of St.-Martin's-in-the-Fields near London and who drew large crowds of both "mechanicks" and gentry with his stress on the power of the Holy Spirit. From any of these sources Gorton could have absorbed the germs of the doctrines he later developed in his theological tracts. Though concrete evidence of such formative influences is lacking—for he rarely mentioned any theologians by name and it is impossible to reconstruct the details of his life before he moved to New England—once he returned to London there is substantial proof of his link to certain English sectaries, especially to those who became the spiritual midwives of the early Quaker movement.

Gorton found an England profoundly changed in the eight years of his absence, a change most noticeable in the increased toleration championed by some parliamentary leaders, who required broad support to continue the war against the king. Probably sensing how closely allied many of his doctrines were to those of the sectaries, Gorton quickly contributed his own thoughts

39 See Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'" MVHR, XLII (1956), 621-652; and Nuttall, Holy Spirit. Also see Sibbes, The bruised reede and Smoking flax . . . (London, 1630); Cotton, Christ the Fountaine of Life . . . (London, 1651); and Preston, The breast-plate of faith and love . . . (London, 1650). For Brearley and the Grindletonians see n. 6 above. Brearley denied the significance of formal ordination, emphasized the spirit over the letter of the Bible, and claimed the possibility of perfection in this life, as did some Familists. Even the New England saint, Thomas Shepard, admitted that in his youth he had almost fallen into the snares of the comforting Grindletonian heresy; see his "Autobiography," in Michael McGiffert, ed., God's Plot: The Paradoxes of Puritan Piety, Being the Autobiography and Journal of Thomas Shepard (Amherst [Mass.], 1972), 42. On John Everard see Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'" MVHR, XLII (1956), 629; Haller, Rise of Puritanism, 207; Hill, World Turned Upside Down, 149; and Rufus M. Jones, Studies in Mystical Religion (London, 1923), chap. 18. It is important to remember that Gorton was termed a "familist" not only by Winthrop, Morton, and Hubbard, but also by Williams (see n. 7 above), who conceivably would have been more tolerant of religious eccentricities and would not have used the term in the same pejorative way as the others.
to the revolutionary movement. And, as Edward Winslow astutely pointed out in a letter to Winthrop, an "evil... long feared concerning Gorton" was coming true: he was quick to find a "potent friend" among the radicals. His Simplicities Defence against Seven-Headed Policy and An Incorruptible Key, composed of the CX. Psalme assured his passage into the world of the radical Puritans.40

Simplicities Defence is primarily a historical narrative of Gorton's troubles with the New England Puritans, but many of its internal documents—copies of his correspondence with Massachusetts—contain political and theological discourse that marked him as sympathetic to the ideas of certain English sectarians. Besides suggesting that New Englanders paid little attention to English law, his complaints against the magistrates' repression of religious opinions not consonant with their own would find many sympathetic ears and would cast further doubt on New England's claim to be the beacon for the course of Protestantism in the home country. Moreover, Gorton's report of the strict social hierarchy maintained in the colony would have aroused the ire of anyone associated with the democratically oriented Leveller movement, which was just becoming organized: with Gorton's documentary evidence they could point to Massachusetts as an example of how restrictive a system Independents would establish in England if they assumed power there.41 An Incorruptible Key further defined Gorton's radical beliefs. For while this treatise was an explicit answer to John Cotton's exposition of the same psalm, it also clarified Gorton's belief (akin to that of Saltmarsh and Dell) that, while possessing power in civil matters, magistrates had no right to meddle in affairs of conscience.42

Further evidence of his active involvement with English radicalism in the

40 Edward Winslow to John Winthrop, June 1646, in Mass. Hist. Soc., Colls., 4th Ser., VI (1863), 181-183. In a letter of May 19, 1977, Stephen Foster has suggested that "the potent friend" could have been Sir Henry Vane or Cornelius Holland, among the radicals, or possibly the earl of Warwick. The Puritan colonies were already under simultaneous attack by Robert Childe, who accused them of being high-handed and virtually autonomous states; see Miller, Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 298-306.


42 Cotton's preaching on the subject had not given "satisfaction to all that heard him upon it," and several of Gorton's followers had encouraged him to publish his own interpretation. Staples, in his introduction to Gorton's Simplicities Defense (p. 15), gives a generous excerpt from Incorruptible Key which contains the gist of Gorton's argument.
mid-1640s is furnished by two other tracts which he sent to England in the 1650s, several years after his return to his plantation at Warwick. One of these, Saltmarsh Returned from the Dead, took its inspiration from the prominent new model army chaplain, who had died in 1647. The subtitle is an indication of how highly Gorton regarded Saltmarsh: The Resurrection of James the Apostle . . . for the Correction of Universal Apostasy, which cruelly buried him who liveth yet. The last phase may be a veiled reference to Saltmarsh’s return to the army during a severe illness (“as one risen from the grave”) to berate its officers for not acceding to the populist demands of the Levellers as presented in their The Case of the Army Truly Stated (1647). Gorton’s volume was printed by Giles Calvert, whose shop was a center of radical activity in London and who “came nearest to uniting the radicals in spite of themselves” in the years before the Restoration. Calvert had published Everard’s translations of the Continental mystics (including the founder of Familism, Henry Nicholas) and scores of tracts by such people as Saltmarsh, the Digger Gerrard Winstanley, and many early Quakers. Given Gorton’s political orientation, it seems entirely probable that he had met Calvert—or at least men of his circle—during his stay in England, and that they had reinforced his own radicalism.

In An Antidote Against the Common Plague of the World, sent to London from Warwick in 1656 with an apology that its contents were so unsophisticated because of the privations of life “in this rude, incumbring and way-less wilderness,” Gorton again invoked Saltmarsh, this time as one who had “ascended into the throne of Equity, for the Arraignment of false interpreters of the Word of God.” He dedicated this tract to none other than “His Highness, Oliver, Lord Protector,” whom he praised as one whose “spirit profoundly looks into . . . that only weighty and great change [in the world, that] which concerns the life and death, humiliation and reign of the Son of God.” Primarily a commentary on the twenty-third chapter of Matthew—a condemnation of the scribes and Pharisees who threatened to shut out the Word of God—the volume is significant because it offers proof

43 The whole episode concerning the Levellers’ failure (after the Putney Debates) to persuade the army to back their democratic and tolerant measures is discussed in Solt, Saints in Arms, chap. 1, but more completely in Brailsford, Levellers and the English Revolution, ed. Hill, 143-309. See also Saltmarsh, Wonderful Predictions Declared in a Message . . . (London, 1648).

that Gorton, who by his own admission never actually met Cromwell, had been deeply stirred by that leader, especially by "the reports which I have heard [and] the things which I have seen, that have proceeded from your lips." Gorton admitted to having "sensibly felt, and tasted off" similar thoughts, particularly those concerning his distaste for the insincerity evidenced in most of the commonly accepted preaching of England and America. In dedicating such a book to Cromwell, Gorton placed yet another seal on the testament of his own radical ideology, even though by 1656 Cromwell had been abandoned by the remnants of the Levellers and the Fifth Monarchists.

Given what we know of Gorton's beliefs, he is best understood as a member of the complex radical community that defined itself around the "spiritist" doctrines of many preachers in the new model army in the 1640s. There is even evidence that while in England, Gorton had become so well known that his preaching was in high demand. Witness, for example, his declaration that when he was abroad he often had been "persuaded to speak the word of God publicly in divers as eminent places as any were then in London and also about London and places more remote." He had been given the opportunity to preach to audiences "of all sorts of people and personages under the title of a Bishop or a King" and "in the presence of such as had the title of excellency"; and he had been "lovingly embraced" wherever he went "in the word [he] uttered," even being entreated for "stay and further manifestation," having an offer of a church and five hundred pounds a year salary if he would remain in London.

Moreover, while not himself a preacher in the new model army, Gorton became so renowned that he was summoned before a committee of Parliament on the complaint of some Independent ministers who charged not only that he preached without proper authority (they said he was not "a university man"), but that many of his sermons were openly blasphemous. To strengthen their case they produced Simplicities Defence and then called out Edward Winslow from the crowd "(for there was a multitude of people[,] the place being spacious)" to testify against him. But, acting judiciously, Winslow desired "to be excused[,] for he had nothing to say" concerning Gorton's right to preach in England: his own "businesse" concerned the Bay colony and lay "before another Committee of Parliament." After this

46 Gorton, An Antidote against the Common Plague of the World. Or, an answer to a small treatise . . . intituled Saltmarsh returned from the dead . . . (London, 1657), sigs. A3v, A4v, A4v, 63v.

46 Gorton, Incorruptible Key, Preface; Gorton to Morton, June 30, 1669; Mackie, "Life of Gorton," 380. In the prefatory epistle to Saltmarsh, Gorton acknowledges not only his "honored friends in London" but also his "much respected and honored friends in and about Lynne, in Norfolke" (ibid., 407). These are the only hints as to the whereabouts of his preaching in the 1640s.
unexpected setback, the committee declared Gorton fit to preach the gospel; and his cause had been so popular that he was quickly congratulated by many "eminent preachers living remote from London" who had heard his arguments before the committee.47

But by June 1648, with the Revolution still not over, Gorton returned to Warwick, leaving behind the excitement of the civil war. Why he returned at that time is not clear; but if, as the available evidence suggests, his doctrines do link him to the English radicals, it is conceivable that his remigration to America was occasioned by the disenchantment many others (most notably Saltmarsh and Dell) felt when the Leveller movement began to experience setbacks in its attempts to reorganize English society. And with Saltmarsh's death, it may have been that Gorton perceived a temporary end to the movement toward increased toleration and democracy with which he was sympathetic, and so chose to return to the settlement at Warwick.48 It is important that he might have safely returned to New England as early as 1646, after his favorable hearing before the parliamentary commission on plantations, to which he had taken his case against the Massachusetts Puritans. In that year his associate Randall Holden did return to Rhode Island, with safe passage through Massachusetts guaranteed by the earl of Warwick, head of the commission. And earlier, in 1644, Roger Williams had succeeded in obtaining a legal patent encompassing Providence, Aquidneck, and Shawomet, thus making Gorton's home formally part of "Providence Plantations" and safely beyond the reach of the Bay.49 But through 1647 Gorton chose to remain a part of the radical community in England.

Before his death in 1677 he made one last political gesture, again directed at the Massachusetts Puritans, one perfectly consistent with the doctrinal positions he had espoused and defended all his life. When in 1656 four Quakers arrived at Boston and were imprisoned by the authorities, Gorton quickly sent the prisoners a sympathetic letter in which he offered asylum if they "had a mind to stay in these parts." Several missives were exchanged, but before any further plans could be made the captives were returned to England.50 Gorton himself never formally became a Quaker; indeed, oral tradition has it that when George Fox "came over [to Rhode Island] he went to Warwick to see Gorton" but displayed himself "a mere babe" in theology.

48 See Morton, World of the Ranters, 62-68.
49 Wall, Massachusetts Bay, 150-151.
50 These letters were first printed as appendices to An Antidote but are more easily available in Staples's edition of Gorton's Simplicities Defence, 16-19. Gorton's behavior after his return to Warwick was exemplary. He was repeatedly elected a member of the town council and a delegate to the General Assembly of Rhode Island colonies, thus putting the lie to the Massachusetts Puritans' frequent claims that his behavior tended toward social anarchy.
compared to his host. But having absorbed the spirit of toleration when he was in England, Gorton did not allow points of doctrine to prevent his hand from reaching out to people who were persecuted for beliefs that stemmed from the same spiritual fountain as his own. For example, the Quaker Humphrey Norton acknowledged in 1659 that he and other Friends were "well received" by "such as were by the English accounted the basest of men, whom many of them they had barbarously banished... to Rhode Island."\(^{51}\) The most important effect of Gorton's experience with the radical ferment in England may well have been in his sympathy for the early Quaker movement in America.

There is still more to be learned about the connection between Gorton—and the Rhode Island dissenters as a whole—and the rise of Quakerism in that area, for the presence of Gorton, as well as of a host of minor figures who in one way or another had experienced some of the excitement of England in the 1640s, may have been significant in encouraging Quakers to settle in Rhode Island.\(^{52}\) But more important, beyond the immediate lesson to be gleaned from a careful study of Gorton's ideology—that he is best comprehended in the context of English radical spiritualism—historians should be aware that the seriousness of New England's attacks on Gorton is accounted for by the fact that his presence could be construed as proof of the English and Scotch Presbyterians' charge that an Independent or "Separatist" polity gave rise to such aberrant doctrines as his. Thus the true significance of Samuel Gorton becomes apparent when one understands him not just as a belligerent Rhode Island mystic but as a threat to the New England Puritans' self-image and to the representation of that image in England. But that is part of another story, one concerning the ways in which English opinion forced New England Puritans to rethink their metaphorical understanding of the American mission in Protestant history.\(^{53}\) Before that

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\(^{52}\) Maclear, "'Heart of New England Rent,'" MVHR, XLII (1956), 649-652; Johnson, "From Seeker to Finder," Church History, 299-315; Nuttall, Holy Spirit. Jones claims that "the Quaker invaders of the colonies did find... numerous groups of Seekers who risked the dangerous adventure of joining the hated invaders and swelling the ranks of what the early Quakers called 'the seed' of the Church of the Spirit" (Mysticism and Democracy, 103-104). Also see Hill, World Turned Upside Down, chap. 10.

\(^{53}\) Sacvan Bercovitch, The Puritan Origins of the American Self (New Haven, Conn., 1975), has provided the most profound and detailed exposition of the "corporate selfhood" which New Englanders, especially those of the third generation, tried to preserve.
chapter in the history of the relationship between American and English Puritanism can be written, we have to consider more thoughtfully what it meant for New England to have at its southern borders a man whose closest affinity was to a group of Englishmen whose vision of the City of God was so different from that of John Winthrop.