CHURCH HISTORY & PURITAN THEOLOGY

NEW ENGLAND PURITAN ATTITUDE
TOWARD BLACK SLAVERY

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THE Puritan involvement in black slavery was a response to a two-fold economic necessity: first, to provide capital, and second, to develop a labor force. A dichotomy in the Puritan attitude toward black slavery arises from considering the slave as an economic unit and at the same time an element in the divine plan. The Puritan economic view and the theocratic overview led to the unique position which the slave held in early New England society. John Hope Franklin identifies the distinction between the status of the black slave and the white indentured servant by viewing the slave's initial status as vaguely indeterminate and later fixed by custom: "The status of these first Negroes is not at all certain. In all probability the first were, as in the case of Virginia, servants bound to masters for a definite number of years. The desirability of a permanent labor force led to the establishment of slavery by custom before it was firmly entrenched by legal recognition."[1] Lorenzo Johnston Greene views this indeterminate status as a result of Puritan Hebraicism: "Legally, the New England slave held a position somewhere between that of a plantation slave and an indentured servant. This was due to the influence of Jewish slavery after which the Puritans patterned their system of involuntary servitude. The New England slave was in a measure a member of his master's family and, following the Hebraic tradition, was usually referred to as 'servant,' rarely as slave. Holding this intermediate status, Negroes were considered both as property and as persons before the law; hence their legal status was never rigidly fixed."[2] Due to a combination of economic and religious forces, the black slave held an indeterminate position in society, a position derived from the Puritan attitude toward the slave as both property and person.

Although New England legislators did not define the status of the black slave, they did recognize the institution of slavery and sought to justify the circumstances by which it was introduced to the colony. With the *Body of Liberties* of 1641, Massachusetts became the first colony in America to recognize the institution of slavery. On the "Liberties of Forreiners and Strangers" the Massachusetts legislators ruled:

there shall never be any bond slaverie, villinage or captivitie amongst us unles it be lawful captives taken in just warres, and such strangers as willingly selle them selves or are sold to us. And these shall have all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israell concerning such persons doeth morally require. This exempts none from servitude who shall be Judged thereto by Authoritie.[3]

The legal recognition of slavery implied a view of the status of the slave as property capable of selling himself or being sold, and also implied a view of the slave as a person subject to the rights and liberties of Christians. Although ostensibly reducing the slave to the status of property, Puritan legislators created the ambiguity of status in their legal code by

considering the slave as an economic unit and as a person subject to rights established by Hebraic precedent.

After having passed the code on the "Liberties of Forreiners and Strangers" in the Massachusetts *Body of Liberties*, legislators next emended the law to provide a more definite specification of the status of the slaves. The General Court corrected the original law: "Page 5, 1j., 3, tit. Bond Slavery read 'or such as shall willingly.'"[4] Such an emendation removed the necessity of alien birth as a qualification for slavery and removed the prohibition against the children of slaves being born into slavery. Although the *Body of Liberties* sought to restrict slavery to the captives of just wars, later legislation recognized slavery as a legal status which could be transmitted to children from generation to generation. Winthrop Jordan characterizes this early legislation: "as early as 1641 the Puritan settlers were seeking to guarantee in writing their own liberty without closing off the opportunity of taking it from others whom they identified with the Biblical term, 'strangers.'"[5] Other laws which recognized the status of the slave as property were written in 1641 and 1643 and provided for the return of runaway slaves to the master.[6] From 1700 to 1719, the legal code gave the right to own property in slaves and guaranteed that right by a system of taxation in which slaves were regarded as "personal estate."[7]

As the number of slaves in Massachusetts increased, Puritan legislators sought to preserve and to protect a stable social order by reducing their rights. The *Body of Liberties* had recognized the institution of slavery, but stipulated certain rights, "Christian usages." To maintain a stable order and to protect themselves against the possibility of Negro insurrections, they passed laws which stripped the Negro slave of his civil and personal rights. The modification and the restriction of the rights of slaves gradually reduced the status of the slave.

The Act of 1657 denied franchise to the slave by limiting the franchise to those "who are at their own dispose."[8] The Act of 1664 provided a more definite specification for voters by limiting the franchise to "all freeholders of competent estate, not vicious in conversation and orthodox in religion."[9] The Act of 1656 reduced the role of the Negro slave in maintaining civil order by forbidding him the right to bear arms, thus ending the period from 1652-1656 when the Negro was required to train in the militia with the other colonists.[10] The Act of 1698 denied the right to trade on the penalty of whipping.[11] By forbidding the slave the right to vote, the right to trade, the right to serve in the militia, the legislators clearly defined the extent to which the slave could participate in the civil affairs of the colony.

Puritan legislators sought to limit not only the civil rights of the black slave, but also his personal rights as well. Later slave laws represent a body of repressive legislation aimed at regulating the behavior and social conduct of the Negro slave. The Act of 1703 constituted a denial of personal liberty by forbidding him to be abroad after 9 P.M. on the penalty of being sent to the house of correction or on the penalty of a whipping not to exceed ten stripes.[12] The Act of 1705 forbade the Negro to strike a Christian on the penalty of a whipping.[13] The Act of 1708 denied the Negro the right to marry a white. The white entering into such a marriage would be subject to a fine of £5; the clergyman contracting such a

marriage would be subject to a fine of £50; and the Negro would be "ordered to be sold out of the province."[14] The Act of 1707 further restricted personal liberty by denying the slave the right to social intercourse with free Negroes "harboring and entertaining."[15] Motivated by a concern for a strong social order and by the fear of insurrections, Puritan legislators clearly defined civil and personal liberties to regulate the behavior and conduct of slaves in the colony.

The restriction of the civil and personal liberties of black slaves ultimately determined a legal view of the slave as a mere unit of property.

Due to the relative insignificance of the number of slaves and due to the proximity of Massachusetts, New Hampshire seems to have derived its attitude toward slaves from the example set by the Massachusetts colony. Isaac W. Hammond maintains that "Negro slavery was never established in New Hampshire by any law of the province, or state; nor was it ever abolished by any legislative enactment."[16] It is likely that in adopting the Massachusetts *Body of Liberties*, New Hampshire probably adopted the same legislation and regulations which governed the liberty of the slave in Massachusetts. The legislators of New Hampshire passed few acts to regulate the conduct of slaves, and those which exist follow the pattern of the slave legislation of Massachusetts. For example, the Law of 1714 was an act to prevent men's servants from leaving without consent and forbade them to be abroad after 9 P.M.[17] The Law of 1715 sought to protect the Negro by restraining the master from inhuman severities.[18] In general, the issue of slavery does not seem to have assumed a role of significance during the colonial period in New Hampshire.

Unlike Massachusetts, Connecticut did not recognize the institution of slavery by a direct act of legislation, but instead legalized it through regulative legislation and by custom. Benjamin Brawley states: "It was almost by accident that slavery was officially recognized in Connecticut in 1650. The code of laws compiled for the colony in this year was especially hard on the Indians. It was enacted that certain of them who incurred the displeasure of the colony might be made to serve the person injured or 'be shipped out and exchanged for Negroes.'"[19] In the code of 1650, Connecticut colonists passed a law providing for the return of runaway slaves. In this regulative legislation, the Puritans recognized slavery as a legal status and defined that status as property.

Although Connecticut made no official legal recognition of slavery, its legislators gradually restricted the civil liberties of its slaves in a manner similar to the example of Massachusetts. In 1639 the colonists denied the franchise to the Negro in the constitutions of Hartford and New Haven, a restriction which was confirmed by the Act of 1715 relating to free men.[20] The Acts of 1650 and 1708 denied the negro the right to trade on penalty of a whipping not to exceed thirty stripes by law (1708) if the goods appeared to be stolen.[21] The Act of 1660 denied the slave the right to watch or to ward in the colony, and reserved this duty for firemen.[22] As in the case of Massachusetts, the denial of civil liberties determined the status of the slave and regulated his participation in colonial society.

In addition to restricting civil liberties, Connecticut passed a body of legislation which significantly limited the personal liberties of slaves. The Act of 1690 re-

quired a slave to hold a pass of consent from his master if he left the bounds of the town, otherwise he was considered a runaway slave and so treated.[23] The Act of 1723 further restricted free movement by denying the right of the slave to be out-of-doors after 9 P.M.; this law also refused the right of the slave to social entertainment after that hour.[24] The body of legislation restricting the personal liberties of slaves, including successive acts in 1703, 1708, and 1730, indicates the particular concern of Connecticut to maintain a strong and stable social order.

Having limited the civil and personal liberties of the black slave, the Connecticut colonists extended legislation to protect the stability of the society. The Act of 1702 required the owners of slaves and executors of estates to make provisions for slaves when aged and helpless.[25] The legislation of 1703 and 1711 provided that upon the refusal of the former owners to make provisions for their slaves, the selectmen of the town would take care of them and sue the owners for the expenses incurred.[26] The Connecticut colonists viewed the slave as a threat to the stability of social order and produced legislation reducing the status of the slave to property in order to protect their society.

Unlike the other New England colonies, Rhode Island founded a legislative code with a stern prohibition of slavery. In 1652 the Rhode Island legislators ruled:

Whereas, there is a common course practised amongst English men to buy negors, to that end they may have them for service or slaves forever; for the preventinge of such practices among us, let it be ordered, that no blacke mankind or white being forced by covenant bond, or otherwise, to serve any man or his assighnes longer than ten yeares, or untill they come to bee twentie four yeares of age, if they bee taken in under fourteen, from the time of their cominge within the liberties of

this Collonie. And at the end or terme of ten yeares to sett them free, as the manner is with the English servants. And that man that will not let them goe free, or shall sell them away elsewhere, to that end that they may bee enslaved to others for a long time, hee or they shall forfeit to the Colonie forty pounds.[27]

In their recognition of slavery, Rhode Island colonists attempted to establish the status of the black slave as that of an apprentice or an indentured white servant.

Like Massachusetts and Connecticut, Rhode Island enacted a code of repressive legislation which restricted the civil and personal rights of slaves. The Act of 1663 denied both franchise and freedom by stipulating that no man could become free unless he had "competent estate."[28] To restrict the right to freedom further, the Act of 1728 required from the master a bond of £100 for each Negro set free.[29] Rhode Island followed the general pattern of slave repression characteristic of other New England colonies by denying civil and personal liberties. Like the other New England colonies, Rhode Island created certain inconsistencies in the legality of slavery by granting the slave the ordinary procedure of arrest, trial, and punishment by the courts unless the master interfered.[30] Despite their original prohibition of slavery, the Rhode Island colonists presented a dichotomous legal view, asserting the slave to be both a unit of property and a person subject to certain legal rights before the courts.

The religious authorities of New England manifested a similarly dichotomous view of the black slave by considering him as property to be repressed in order to safeguard the colony and as a human being endowed with a soul capable of eternal salvation. The Puritans justified slavery as a right and responsibility of their divine mission in the new world.

Cotton Mather illustrates this dichot-

omy of religious attitude. According to Mather, the conversion of the black slave was a means to elevate the spiritual condition to achieve eternal salvation. At the same time, conversion to Christianity constituted a means of maintaining a strict social control over the slave.

In 1693 Cotton Mather drafted the *Rules for the Society of Negroes,* a body of rules which would govern the religious life of the Negroes of the colony. Some of the rules did seek to convert the slave to the Puritan moral order,[31] but most sought to preserve the existing social order. These rules regulated not only social conduct but also the relationship of slave to master:

If any of our Number, fall into the Sin of Drunkeness, or Swearing, or Cursing, or Lying, or Stealing, or notorious Disobedience or Unfaithfulness unto their Masters, we will Admonish him of his Miscarriage and forbid his coming to the Meeting, for at least one Fortnight, but except he then come with great Signs and Hopes of his Repentence, we will utterly Exclude him, with Blotting his Name out of the List.[32]

The *Rules for the Society of Negroes* encouraged slaves to become the agents of their own social repression:

We will, as we have Opportunity, set our selves to do all the Good we can, to the other Negro-Servants in the Town; And if any of them should, at unfit Hours, be Abroad, much more, if any of them should Run away from their Masters, we will afford them no Shelter. But we will do what in us lies, that they may be discovered, and punished. And if any of us, are found Faulty, in this Matter, then shall live no longer of us.[33]

In drawing together the *Rules for the Society of Negroes,* Cotton Mather indicated his concern for the moral welfare of the slave's soul, but subverted religious function to maintain a repressive social control.

In *The Negro Christianized,* Mather attempted to resolve the apparent inconsistency of his view of the slave as an element of society to be repressed and as a soul capable of divine salvation. Urging the conversion of all black slaves to Christianity, he emphasized the transformation of the spiritual awareness of the slave. Conversion, according to Mather, was a way to heighten the promise of spiritual salvation in the next world, not a force to elevate the status of the slave in this world. He attributes the lowly status of the slave to a divine order which granted the slave the inferior status in this world with the promise of divine salvation in the afterlife.[34]

To urge conversion, Mather emphasizes the duty of elevating the spiritual condition of the slave. He views conversion as a means of transforming the abject spiritual condition of the slave to fulfill divine potential. In such a view, the conversion of slaves transforms spiritual condition and protects the slave—and the community—from possible evil influences.

In the course of his argument, Mather demonstrates the methods by which social control may be maintained through the means of prayers and instructions. He would instruct the Negro slave to pray: "Teach me to Serve Thee, O Lord. And make me a Blessing unto those that have me for their Servant."[35] In his catechism for Negroes, Mather instructs the slaves:

Q. If you Serve Jesus Christ, what must you do?
A. I must Love God, and Pray to Him, and Keep the Lords Day. I must Love all Men, and never Quarrel, nor be Drunk, nor be Unchast, nor Steal, nor tell a Ly, nor be Discontent with my Condition.[36]

Having established the methods of social control over the Negro, Mather concludes his argument for the conversion of slaves by denying that baptism entailed

the legal freedom of the slave. Mather emphasizes that "Christianity directs a Slave, upon his embracing the Law of the Redeemer, to satisfy himself, That he is the Lords Freeman, 'tho he continues a Slave."[37] In effect, he promises freedom to the slave in heaven while denying it to him on earth. *The Negro Christianized* represents an elaborate justification for slavery by suggesting conversion as a means of fulfilling the promise of divine salvation, while fixing the slave securely to the position that society had ascribed him.

Despite the attempts of the legislators and the clergy to justify the institution of slavery, antislavery sentiment flourished in New England and was championed by such prominent authorities as Judge Samuel Sewall. Sewall embraced the antislavery movement at a critical point in the history of the slave trade. In *The Selling of Joseph; a Memorial*, Sewall maintains that "the Numerousness of Slaves at this day in the Province, and the Uneasiness of them under their slavery"[38] incited his critical evaluation of the institution. In this work, Sewall reflects the Puritan ill-boding over slavery and shares the contemporary prejudice which regarded the Negro as inherently inferior beings who could never be integrated into colonial society on equal terms with their Puritan masters.

Sewall prefaces the body of his objections to slavery by asserting the universal freedom of men. To develop his argument, he claims that the equality of men is a manifestation of divine authority beginning with postlapsarian history. Sewall considers the "Fall of Man" the great leveling force which endowed all men with an equal status before God. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sewall viewed Biblical history as having estab-

lished the equality of man, and denied the possibility of a Biblical justification of slavery.

In the body of his argument, Sewall sought to undo the traditional defenses of slavery. To counter the view of man as salable property, he denies the right of the brothers of Joseph to sell him to the Ishmaelites: "Joseph was rightfully no more a Slave to his Brethren, than they were to him: and they had no more Authority to Sell him, than they had to Slay him."[39] Arguing analogically that since the brethren lacked the authority to sell Joseph, Sewall denies the Puritans the right to engage in the slave trade. Next, he reverses the traditional arguments defending slavery as a result of the curse on the posterity of Cham, by claiming that: "the Blackmores are not descended of Canaan, but of Cush,"[40] and thus escape the curse of slavery. Opposing Puritan authorities who justified the introduction of slavery for the conversion of the Negroes, Sewall argues that merchants enslaved only those captives taken in just wars, and questions the influence of the Puritans in creating the strife: "by Receiving, we are in danger to promote, and partake in their Barbarous Cruelties."[41] Sewall conceives slavery as a self-perpetuating mechanism which encouraged war to fulfill the demands of trade, and denies any Biblical authority as a precedent for the institution of slavery. To conclude his argument against slavery in New England, Sewall insists that the Negro could never be successfully integrated into colonial society. Despite his original assertions of the equality of all men, his condemnation of slavery displays a prejudice which views the Negro as inferior and ultimately foreign to New England society.[42]

Aroused by the antislavery sentiments

of Judge Sewall, Judge John Saffin responded with a vigorous rebuttal, defending the right of the brethren to enslave Joseph since he was their kin. Saffin recognized the curse of Cham and captivity in a just war as justification for Negro slavery. To Sewall's argument that the Israelites had not enslaved one another, Saffin replied: "Though the Israelites were forbidden (ordinarily) to make Bond men and Women of their own Nation, but of Strangers they might."[43] Concluding his argument in defense of slavery, Saffin appeals to the prejudices and fears of the Puritans to demonstrate the necessity of maintaining the existing social order for the safety of whites.[44]

The New England Puritan attitude toward black slavery arose from economic necessity and chronic labor shortage. To justify the introduction of slavery to the New England colonies, Puritans looked to the Hebraic precedent of the institution of slavery. Viewing the slave in the context of a Hebraic framework, the Puritans established the status of the slave both as property to fulfill the economic

demands of the colonies and as a person endowed with the promise of divine salvation which Providence had entrusted to help fulfill. With the sanction of the British Parliament repealing the monopoly on the slave trade and encouraged by growing slave markets, New England merchants engaged in slave traffic and introduced slavery in significantly greater numbers to New England. This increase in numbers instilled the fear for security among the Puritans and motivated their legislators to view the black slave as primarily an economic unit. To reduce the possibility of Negro insurrections, Puritans attempted to subvert the forces of the church to maintain social control over the slaves. The attempts to resolve the inconsistency between the status of the slave as property and as person, regardless of the economic and religious justifications, ultimately proved fruitless and resulted in the abolition of slavery which commenced in the New England colonies during the time of the American Revolution.

NOTES

[1] John Hope Franklin, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of Negro Americans* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1947), p. 101.

[2] Lorenzo Johnston Greene, *The Negro in Colonial New England, 1620-1776* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1942), p. 16.

[3] George H. Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts* (New York: Appleton & Co., 1866), p. 12.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

[5] Winthrop D. Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1968), p. 68.

[6] Colonial Laws of Massachusetts, 1672-1686 (Boston, 1887), p. 51.

[7] Joseph Felt, *Collections of the American*

Statistical Association (Boston: Little, Brown, 1845), Vol. 1, p. 586.

[8] John Codman Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States* (1866; reprint New York: Negro Universities Press, 1968), p. 256.

[9] N. B. Shurtleff, ed., *Records of the Governor and Company of Massachusetts Bay in New England* (Boston, 1855), Vol. 4, p. 397.

[10] *Ibid.*

[11] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

[12] *Acts and Resolves of the Province of the Massachusetts Bay, 1692-1714* (Boston: Wright & Potter, 1869), Vol. 1, pp. 535-536.

[13] *Acts and Resolves*, Vol. 1, p. 578.

[14] *Ibid.*

[15] *Ibid.*, pp. 606-607.

[16] Isaac W. Hammond, "Slavery in New Hampshire," *Magazine of American History*, XXI (January-June, 1889), p. 62.

[17] Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, p. 266.

[18] *Ibid.*, p. 267.

[19] Benjamin Griffith Brawley, *A Social History of the American Negro* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1921), p. 12.

[20] Hurd, *The Law of Freedom and Bondage in the United States*, pp. 267-268.

[21] J. Hammond Trumbull and Charles J. Hoadly, ed., *Public Records of the Colony of Connecticut* (Hartford, 1850-1890), Vol. 5, p. 52; Vol. 1, p. 531.

[22] *Ibid.*, Vol. 1, p. 349.

[23] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 40.

[24] *Ibid.*, Vol. 6, p. 391.

[25] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 375.

[26] *Ibid.*, Vol. 4, p. 408; Vol. 5, p. 233.

[27] J. R. Bartlett, ed., *Records of the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations in New England* (Providence, 1856-1865), Vol. 1, p. 243.

[28] Edward Channing, *The Narragansett Planters: A Study of Causes* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1886), p. 114.

[29] *Acts and Laws of His Majesty's Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations, 1636-1705* (Providence, 1896), (1730), pp. 162-163.

[30] William D. Johnston, *Slavery in Rhode Island* (Providence: Rhode Island Historical Society, 1894), p. 127.

[31] Cotton Mather, *Rules for the Society of Negroes* (Boston: B. Harris, 1693).

[32] *Ibid.*

[33] *Ibid.*

[34] Cotton Mather, *The Negro Christianized* (Boston: B. Green, 1706), p. 1.

[35] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 39.

[37] *Ibid.*, p. 21.

[38] Samuel Sewall, *The Selling of Joseph; A Memorial*, edited by Sidney Kaplan (Northampton, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1969), p. 7.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 8.

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 13.

[41] *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

[42] Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro, 1550-1812*, p. 196.

[43] Moore, *Notes on the History of Slavery in Massachusetts*, p. 253.

[44] *Ibid.*, p. 256.