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INTRODUCTION

“The Most Famous Lay Sermon in All of American History”

FOR THE LAST SIXTY YEARS, a story has been told about the origins of America. Like many historical stories, it is told as a parable: deep and timeless continuities flow out of the specifics of time and place. It is an uplifting story and a haunting one. And it is at least half wrong.

The setting is a vessel in mid-passage on the Atlantic Ocean. The year is 1630. Fast-forward another decade and a half, and a revolution among those passengers’ countrymen would turn the political and religious order of absolutist England upside down. But the voyagers aboard the *Arbella* were seeking out a new place of settlement in part because they did not believe such a striking break in human affairs was possible. Balancing hope against despair, they were headed instead for North America.

Somewhere in that mid-ocean passage, their elected governor, John Winthrop, confident and commanding in his presence, rose to deliver an address in which he outlined the purpose of their undertaking. “A Model of Christian Charity” Winthrop’s text would come to be titled. A “lay sermon,” historians since the middle of the

twentieth century have called it: “the most famous lay sermon in all of American history.”¹ In it Winthrop confirmed these new Americans’ commitment to a new life of obedience, love, and mutual affections. He reminded them that they sailed not on their own whim or private ambitions but under a covenant with God: a commission as clear as God’s covenant with biblical Israel. Their responsibilities to each other were intense, and the risks of failure were, literally, terrifying. But in return, Winthrop offered a promise. If they should keep true to their purposes they would not only overcome the hardships the future held for them in New England. The eyes of all people would be upon them. They would be made “a praise and glory.” And they would be “as a city upon a hill” to the world.

This story of John Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” has been repeated over and over in the history books and in the civic creed of Americans. It has been celebrated not only for its elements of drama—dangerous ocean passage, inspired words, and exalted sense of purpose—but as the origin story of the nation that the United States was to become. Ronald Reagan made a sentence-long extract from Winthrop’s Model—“we shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us”—into the signature line of his presidency. Preached to a “little band of settlers” crowded onto the “tiny ship” bearing them across the Atlantic, as Reagan saw the event in his mind’s eye, the Model set the vision to which “our people always have held fast . . . since our first days as a nation”—that they were destined from their origins to be a beacon of hope and liberty to the world, a model to all nations. “It was right here, in the waters around us, where the American experiment began,” Barack Obama told the graduating class at the University of Massachusetts at Boston in 2006 in the same vein. It was right here that the earliest settlers “dreamed of building a City upon a Hill . . . and the world watched waiting to see if this improbable idea called America would succeed.”²

This origin story is so familiar that it barely seems to invite question. Virtually no modern high school or college textbook on American history or the American political tradition fails to mention Winthrop’s words or impress upon students their enduring importance. “A Model of Christian Charity” has been heralded as the nation’s “point of departure,” as the “founding text in American political rhetoric,” and the key script in the “founding moment” of American civic republicanism.³ “City on a hill” is now an instantly recognizable phrase in the vernacular of American nationalism. Thousands of other lay sermons preached in a future United States would outstrip the original circulation of “A Model of Christian Charity.” But Winthrop’s Model is the statement that we have made foundational to “the idea called America.” “In relation to the principal theme of the American mind,” the immensely influential Harvard historian Perry Miller declared in 1954, “Winthrop stands at the beginning of our consciousness.”⁴

There are powerful reasons behind these judgments. The sense of national mission that marks American civic-political culture, its confidence, and its fervent sense of exception from the lot of all other nations: From what source could these have flowed except from that first, origin moment, when a sense of acting on a special covenant with God became fused with the experience of America? Winthrop’s “we shall be as a city upon a hill” seems to hold in its grasp what the future would bring for the United States: its magnet status for a world of immigrants, its economic ascendancy, and its rise to world leadership. The nation’s moralism, its Wilsonian idealism, the endurance of its religious cultures, and its certainty that it had been granted a unique and special part in the unrolling of human history all seem presaged in Winthrop’s text. Critics see less attractive traits of American national culture embedded there as well: the self-righteousness with which the Americans would roll across the continent and project their

power throughout the world as if they and God were working hand in hand to expand the special promises of America. All this has been traced to the Puritan origins of America and the mission statement that John Winthrop wrote for it.

No serious observer claims that “A Model of Christian Charity” holds *all* the elements of the nation the United States would become. There would be trial and error in the American future and furious contention as well. But since the middle of the twentieth century Winthrop’s Model has seemed to hold in embryo the nation’s most powerful and distinctive threads. To begin at the American beginning is to begin with a text in its mid-oceanic setting, just before its words and its promise to be a “city upon a hill” would begin to be etched on the land.

Most of this is a modern invention and much of it is wrong. None of those who voyaged with John Winthrop to the Puritan settlement in New England left any record that they heard Winthrop’s words in mid-passage. Most likely “A Model of Christian Charity” was never delivered as a sermon at all. Although copies of Winthrop’s text circulated in England during his lifetime, by the end of the seventeenth century they had all literally vanished from memory. One of those long-forgotten copies was discovered in a bundle of old sermons and documents of New England history in 1809, but it was not put into print until 1838. And then it lapsed from sight again almost as completely. An occasional nineteenth-century historian mentioned Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity,” but most did not and none pulled it—or its “city upon a hill” line—out of the mass of other colonial American documents as especially important. Through the 1970s mention of “A Model of Christian Charity” was a hit-or-miss affair in standard histories of the United States. It was only in the decade of the 1980s, three hundred and fifty years after its writing, that the incongruously parallel work of a conservative Cold War president, Ronald Reagan, and a radical, immigrant literary scholar, Sacvan

Bercovitch, combined to make Winthrop’s text and metaphor famous. “A Model of Christian Charity” is old, but its foundational status is a twentieth-century invention.

The meanings we now grasp for so eagerly in Winthrop’s words are largely twentieth-century inventions as well. John Winthrop never doubted that he and his fellow New England Puritans sailed under the seal of a covenant with God. Of nothing was he more confident than that they had a key part to play in God’s scheme of history. But in its own time, the call to greatness in Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” line was vastly overshadowed by its reminder of the settlement project’s immense vulnerability. Caution saturated his “city upon a hill” metaphor. It did not promise these incipient Americans that they were destined to be a radiant light to the world but that they would need to work out their ambitions under the world’s most intense, critical scrutiny. The core theme that laced the Model’s words together, from its opening statement of the mutual relations between rich and poor to its fervent closing peroration, was not nationalistic but local and intense: an insistence on love and the obligations of social solidarity that would be often sharply at odds with what capitalist America would become.

The conventional story of Winthrop’s “city on a hill” text is wrong in still other ways. Its current status as a founding statement of American “exceptionalism” to the contrary, almost none of the themes that circulated through Winthrop’s text were unique to the nation that would become the United States. Dreams of founding a new and purer Israel circulated all across the early modern Atlantic. During the long nineteenth-century era of economic and imperial expansion, conviction that a nation’s people had been uniquely commissioned to lead God’s forces of good and civilization played a bedrock role in patriotic cultures far beyond the United States. Even the idea that nations owed their essential character to a foundational moment, to a timeless and enduring origin statement, is far less unique to the United States than is typically acknowledged.

Most conspicuously of all, the phrase “city on a hill” was itself a borrowing, a repurposing for Winthrop’s occasion of the one of the Bible’s most familiar metaphors, which was to be repurposed hundreds of times again, in and far beyond the United States. The importance of Winthrop’s “Model of Christian Charity” is not that it broached ideas and themes exceptional to the history of the United States but that it was, from the beginning, so deeply enmeshed in the world around it.

Above all, to read Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” seriously we need to disentangle ourselves from the lure of simple origin stories. Texts live in and through time. A certain kind of nationalism recoils against that assumption. It strains to fix the nation to a foundational moment or proposition or text as if the *idea* of the nation—whatever its actual missteps or temporary disruptions—could be held exempt from history itself. But no words or text can be insulated from time. Their occasions change, the possibilities others see in them change, sometimes radically. Every subsequent use is by necessity a rewriting, a re-invention for new hopes, new conditions, and new contentions. To take a key historical text seriously is not to shove these afterlives aside as a debris of misreadings. It is not merely to sketch a history of “reception,” “circulation,” or “influence,” important as these themes may be. Texts endure only through their continuous reappropriation for inescapably shifting times and purposes.

The point is true of every document a nation holds sacred. The Declaration of Independence whose words reverberate through American culture now is not the Declaration of 1776. It is not the radically different Declaration that Thomas Jefferson’s political allies fashioned, taking his “all men are created equal” line out of the sidebar place it occupied in his original text and turning it into a political slogan. Nor is it the yet more sweeping Declaration that antislavery activists would make from a slaveholder’s words or rights activists would construct in the twentieth century. Into our own day the Dec-

laration of Independence has been simultaneously an object of veneration and a site for fierce, vitally important contention over the shapes and forms of justice. The “living Constitution” is, by the same token, not simply a phrase for loose constructionists. Even before its adoption, the U.S. Constitution was being reworked, its silences fleshed out, its ambiguities debated, and its elasticities contended for. Reinvention of their core texts is part of the work that nations do. There is potential chaos in this, of course. But without it there can hardly be any serious public life at all.

Pushing back against the origin myths that have obscured it, this book tells the story of the lives of a text that many twentieth-century Americans would construct to be foundational to the “idea” of America. It is a story of disappearance and revival, long absence and neglect, and successive modern reinventions.

Part I, “Text,” reconstructs the meanings of Winthrop’s words and metaphors in his own seventeenth-century setting. It begins with the occasion of Winthrop’s writing and the key terms he injected into “A Model of Christian Charity”—city upon a hill, chosen people, covenant, charity, and history. Set against the background of an Atlantic culture filled with model cities on a hill, scores of them more prominent in their time than New England, Winthrop’s phrases take on much less triumphant meanings than the standard *Arbella* story has it. “Charity” was the Model’s most important keyword. For Winthrop, it meant that the rule of love and mutual obligation must take precedence above mere calculus of price and market return whenever the public weal is at risk. From what occasion did that startling premise arise and how was it worked out in the day-to-day practice of economic life?

In part II, “Nation,” a second phase of the story of “A Model of Christian Charity” begins. In the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the text itself was all but forgotten. But as nationalism swept across Europe and the Americas, some of the themes that had lodged

a century earlier in Winthrop's text sprang into circulation all the more vigorously. Patriotic cultures fanned desires for origin stories and foundational texts. Empires were constructed on new convictions of divine-historical destiny. Critics turned the chosen people idea into a tool of dissent. African Americans carried the "city upon a hill" metaphor to the new black republic of Liberia. On the dying fields of World War I, where part II concludes, these globally circulating reverberations of the covenant idea played themselves out in a key of high tragedy.

Finally, in part III, "Icon," Winthrop's "Model of Christian Charity" and its "city upon a hill" phrase finally slips into the place that modern nationalism had already made for it: as an invented foundation for the new world colossus that the United States had become. Cold War American writers made the Model into the defining document we now take it to be. They did that in part by canonizing it and in part by unexpectedly remaking Winthrop's New England Puritans, whose reputation had long been buried under the burdens of their religious intolerance and labyrinthine theology, as the nation's true "Founders." Then, in the 1980s, Winthrop's text suddenly swept from the domains of the scholars into the White House and the rhetorical center of modern American politics. No presidents before Ronald Reagan had used the phrase "city on a hill" to define the very character of the American nation and its place in the world. After Reagan, virtually no serious political figure could escape the obligation to quote it.

But the Model's story had not reached an end. Social scientists attached a new term—exceptionalism—to Winthrop's text, even as the exceptional post-World War II character of the United States was visibly eroding beneath them. Evangelical Protestants struggled to decide if the America to which they were so deeply attached and yet with which they were so deeply in quarrel was properly called a city on a hill. And in 2016, the nation elected to the presidency a man who did not like the phrase at all—who, turning the Model on its head,

made not America’s shining example but rather the nation’s manifold “disasters” his signature trope.

Through these shifts and turns in uses and meaning, the career of Winthrop’s text runs as a skein of threads through the American past. A forgotten document would arc, much later, toward iconic status. A biblical image would become a metaphor for a settlement project, a free-floating cliché, an element in the transnationally circulating vocabulary of civic patriotism, a statement of high Cold War purpose, and the creedal foundation of a truly “exceptional” nation. Even in Winthrop’s day, his “Model of Christian Charity” carried no single, stable message. “The American point of departure” would be what people would make of it. Braiding together three centuries of making and remaking, this book tells the story of a text that we think we know so well that we barely know it all it.

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