

America's 1st Founding Document was the (1620) Mayflower Compact. The 2nd was the (1630) "city set on a hill" sermon--"A Model of Christian Charity"--of John Winthrop, the Mass. Bay Colony's first governor. This Thinksheet is a theological commentary on that sermon, which is in #3159.

## "Yes, but what is the question?"

The "" around the title? The last words of Gertrude Stein, in response to the anguished words of life-companion Alice B. Toklas, "What is the answer?"

Q/A (question-&-answer) dialectic is first internal (**reflection**, refining both Q & A), then **resolution** (concluding for action on an answer), next **response** to others when one goes public with one's resolve to act, next **re-examination** of the whole process which has brought one to a particular action-determination (unless, as the Barb says, "the native hue of resolution is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought").

THESIS: "W" is living on Monday what (lawyer) Winthrop preached on Sunday (in mid-Atlantic, maybe on Sunday: my reference is to the N.Eng. public influence of the Puritan preachers). American **exceptionalism** (viz., we are a chosen nation, "a city set on a hill" [Mt.5.14; cp.L.11.33] to be "a light to the nations" [Is.42.6; 49.6; L.2.32; Ac.13.47; 26.23]) as an Abrahamic vision & commission (Gn.12.3 TEV: "through you I will bless all the nations"): Pres.Bush **expanded** from national security from terrorism, to depriving Iraq of WMDs (weapons of mass destruction), to "regime change" (eliminating Saddam Hussein), to freeing Arab nations for democracy, to (as some Muslims claim, & I do not) the Crusaders' victory over Islam.

Palestinian scholar (Columbia U.) Edward W. Said (p.3 of the Mar/03 MANCHESTER GUARDIAN insert "Le Monde diplomatique") speaks profoundly of the contrast between U.S. pragmatism (which, he says, is antimetaphysical & antihistorical) & "the cultural-political field," which "is a place of struggle over identity, self-definition and projection into the future." He's virtually made a career of teaching that distinction. My view is that no nation, not even America, acts pragmatically; always in the selfdefinitional-decisional mix are the nation's past as made usable to its present self-understanding illumined by its eschatology (i.e., its visional projection into the future). For 55 years, his old Palestinian folk-leaders have failed to face the fact that their folk do not have the power to project into the future their self-understanding as the folk with the right (since the 1917 Hashemite/British anti-Ottoman agreement) to ecopolitical control of the whole of Palestine (thus, the State of Israel having no right to exist).

CONTRAST: The U.S. does have the power (albeit not unlimited) to project into the future (even, now, of the Near/Middle East!) its democratic-capitalist understanding of government "under God" (based on the answer to the question of our identity [Who are we?] as spelled out in our first three founding documents [1620, 1630, & the 1776 Declaration of Independence]). Note that the "under God" element in the three documents is pervasive: no separation of religion & state, but (as G.K. Chesterton put it) "a nation with the soul of a church." (The 4th founding document, the Constitution, deals not with under-God order but with ordering, a subsidiary concern not requiring further theological warrant.)

TRAJECTORY OF IDENTITY: The prior question to who-we-are (U.S. identity) is how-did-we-come-to-be-who-we-are? We (1620 lower-class, 1630 middle-class) were, most of us, religiously Calvinist-Puritans seeking freedom from the religious-political constrictions of church-state England, with economic funding by English investors speculating for bottom-line gain in new England. The 1629 royal charter (which Jn.Winthrop brought with him the next year) declared the Mass.Bay Colony to be "self-ruling": Geo.III's permission of **democracy** providentially fitting the trading companies' **capitalism**. (Best historic-park for seeing/learning how the economics worked out: The Bourne [Mass.] Trading Post.) Our best scholar on the theological (providential) dimension of democratic capitalism? In my opinion, Michael Novak (excellent interview: pp.44-45, Feb/03 CHRISTIANITY TODAY).

COMMENTARY by ¶s in the 1630 sermon: \*

1 ¶1, a sentence, speaks of God's "most holy and wise **providence**." Three sentences above (in this Thinksheet) I said "providentially," not "fortunately." The sermon breathes the immediacy of the divine presence/purpose/provision (of needs & of judgment): "the sky hung low." (The first four words in the Shirley Jackson

\* The spellings & capitalizations are those of the original manuscript.

Elliott  
△  
Thinksheets

309 Lake Elizabeth Drive  
Craigville, MA 02632  
Phone/Fax 508-775-8008 520 per year  
e-mail: wandelliott@attbi.com

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Case's classic THE NEW TESTAMENT IN ITS ENVIRONMENT: "The sky hung low over the ancient Mediterranean world.") God, in addition to being immanent, was transcendent-near (in contrast to the later [deistic] transcendent-far).

2 ¶12 explains the human diversity in ¶1 as God's "being delighted to shewe forth the glory of his wisdom in the variety and difference of the Creatures and the glory of his power, in ordering all these differences for the preservation of the good of the whole, and the glory of his greatness....[The] great King" with "many Stewards counting himselfe more honoured in dispening his gifts to man by man, than if hee did it by his owne immediate hand." The analogy is from "princes" with "many officers." Human government is divinely intended to "honor" God's "glory." Government is good when under leaders who see themselves as "stewards" of God, who is "most holy" (¶1), wise, powerful, good, great, (in a summary word) glorious.

3 ¶13 gives the second "reason" for a community as a "modell" of "Christian charity" is to give God "more occasion to manifest the worke of his Spirit" in (1) "moderating and restraining" "the wicked" oppressors & revolutionaries (the original-sin/Fall of the later Madisonian checks-&-balances), & (2) "exercising his graces in" "the regenerate" ("love, mercy, gentlenes, temperance, etc." in superiors ["the greater ones"]); "faith, patience, obedience, etc." in inferiors ["the poore and inferiour sorte"]). (We must demur from the sermon's belief that classism is [here & ¶1] by divine design.)

4 ¶14 gives the third reason: Beloved community is necessary to "the Bond of brotherly affection" in mutual dependency ("need of [one an]other"). Now the undercutting of classism: social position is not for self-aggrandizement "but for the glory of his Creator and the Common good of the Creature, Man," & both high & low are to act both in "JUSTICE and MERCY" (the capital letters, in the text). (NOTE: The sermon includes many biblical references, useful esp. in group study.) And all in the community are under "a double Lawe," viz. of **nature** ("the estate of innocency"; "the morall law") and of **grace** ("the estate of regeneracy"; "the lawe of the gospell"). ¶s 5 & 6 spell out the two laws (including love of enemies, & such "liberality" toward the needy as to avoid "tempt[ing] God" by asking him to do what we are able & therefore should do! (God the ever-Lover is so, in one dimension, as the instant-Punisher, on the principle that justice delayed is justice denied.)

5 ¶s 7-15 are "**applicacion** of this discourse by the present designe which gave the occasion of writing it." (1) As **persons**, "wee are a Company professing our selves fellow members of Christ" & "have comforte of our being in Christ" only as we are "knitt together by the bond of love." (2) Our "**worke**...is by a mutuall consent through a speciall overruleing providence," & through "Government both civill & ecclesiasticall" "the care of the publique must oversway all private respects." (3) "The **end** is to improve our lives to doe more service to the Lord...preserved from the Common corruptions of this evill world....[the "wicked" internalize evil as sin]." (4) The **means** must be the practice of our faith, not (as in the churches in England) the mere profession of it. We must have "brotherly love without dissimulation...beare one anothers burthens...." "Reasons": (a, ¶12) God, who has laid upon us a "more neare bond of mariage" (to him), is "jealous of our ["strickt"] love and obedience," & will especially "punishe you for your Transgressions." (b, ¶13) "The Lord will [insist upon] be[ing] sanctified in them that come neare him" (the sanctification of the Name, as in the Lord's Prayer). Special nearness to the Holy One, special holiness. (c, ¶14) "When God gives a speciall Commission, he lookes to have it strictly observed in every Article....wee have entered into a Covenant with him..., wee have taken out a Commission, the Lord hath given us leave to drawe our owne Articles, wee have professed to enterprise these Accions ...[& God, who "ratified" the Covenant by land-gift] expects[s] a strickt performance of the Articles [& if we selfishly "breache" the Covenant]...the Lord will surely breake out in wrathe against us [to] be revenged...."

6 ¶15 "Now the only way to avoyde this shipwracke and to provide for our posterity is to followe" Mic.6.8..., "always having before our eyes our Commission and Community....wee shall be as a Citty upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us," & then "we shall see much more of...[God's] wisdom power goodness and truth."\*