

THE SIMPLE LIFE

*Plain Living and High Thinking
in American Culture*



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The Puritan Way

In 1920 the Spanish-born Harvard philosopher George Santayana observed that the American had always been “an idealist working on matter.” Indeed, the tension between accumulating goods and cultivating goodness appeared early in the American experience and has lingered long. Colonists were attracted to the New World for reasons both mundane and visionary. Some saw America as an Edenic garden of economic opportunity, a land of milk and honey, full of furs, venison, fish, timber, and—gold. In 1616 Captain John Smith bluntly admitted that most of his countrymen were considering colonization primarily for reasons of material gain. “I am not so simple to think,” he wrote, “that ever any other motive than wealth will erect there a Commonwealth.” Yet there were many who came to the New World with quite different priorities. Pious settlers hoped that America would be a sanctuary for saints rather than an entrepôt for adventurers. Though many of those who signed the Mayflower Compact in 1619 hoped to better their economic condition through emigration, they nevertheless affirmed that the voyage to America was undertaken primarily “for the glory of God and advancement of the Christian faith.” Americans have since inherited these divergent, yet frequently intermingled perspectives on the good life, and the tension between the two has served to define and complicate the pursuit of happiness in the United States.¹

Resolving the tension between prosperity and piety was clearly on the minds of the first generation of Puritan magistrates and divines who arrived in Massachusetts in the early seventeenth century. To ensure the success of their Bible Commonwealth they brought with them from the Old World a delicately balanced social ethic combining hard work, temperate living, civic virtue, and spiritual devotion. This original “Puritan ethic” had its roots in the social theory of late medieval Catholicism. Scholastic theology joined Biblical teaching and Aristotelian ethics in establishing a hierarchy of values in which commerce, money-lending, and other material pursuits were clearly

subordinate to ethical and religious ideals. Thomas Aquinas spoke for most medieval theologians when he declared that “it is impossible for happiness, which is the last end of man, to consist in wealth.” True happiness could be attained only through the “vision of the divine essence.” Economic activity was thus inextricably linked with otherworldly priorities and moral restraints. Whether in the church or the counting-house, the true business of life was spiritual salvation. Hence, Aquinas and others developed the concept of the just price, outlawed the practice of usury, and viewed trade with suspicion.²

Upon these basic assumptions of Thomistic thought, John Calvin and his later Puritan followers built their own social philosophy. At the same time, however, they recognized that the economic life of sixteenth-century Europe was far more complex and dynamic than that of the thirteenth century. Restrictions designed for a relatively static, agricultural medieval society frequently proved unworkable in an expansive urban and commercial setting. Consequently, Calvin saw the need to relax somewhat the limitations placed on economic behavior by Aquinas and the schoolmen, allowing, for example, the charging of interest on investment capital. But such concessions to changing conditions should not be construed as giving sanction to “free enterprise.” For Calvin, as for Aquinas, the glory of God and the good of the community outweighed individual freedom in the marketplace.³

Calvin was much more specific than the medieval theologians in explaining how people could serve the Lord in the world as well as in their hearts. In emphasizing the concept of the “calling,” he dignified hard work in one’s vocation, giving to common toil a respectability that earlier thinkers had at times denied by distinguishing between “sacred” and “secular” vocations. Like Martin Luther before him, Calvin rejected the notion that clergymen, monks, and nuns somehow received more providential favor than farmers, housewives, and shopkeepers. In criticizing those who piously withdrew from involvement in the affairs of everyday life, he bridged the gap between faith and work that had for so long troubled the Christian Church. Every Christian, Calvin asserted, has a spiritual and a temporal calling, both of which were imposed by God for the common good. One was a divine call, a spiritual summons to attain the salvation God offered through Christ. The other was a practical call to serve God diligently in one’s profession, skill, or vocation. In this sense the Christian at his labor would be a steward in the service of God and the commonweal. Although Calvin spent much more time discussing the divine rather than the temporal calling, he clearly believed that both were necessary to a full Christian life. Faith without work was sterile, and all forms of honest work were significant in the eyes of the Lord. In Calvin’s view, the conscientious pursuit of one’s vocational calling represented in essence a Christian duty. One must work hard in order to avoid idleness, for the idle man makes an easy target for the Devil.⁴

Some commentators, following the pathbreaking research of Max Weber, have fastened on the Calvinist concept of calling in linking the Protestant

ethic with the spirit of capitalism. Weber emphasized that Calvin's sanctification of work freed Christians from a sense of guilt about material pursuits. At the same time, the single-minded Protestant emphasis on frugality meant that the scrupulous would accumulate more and more wealth, thus unintentionally furthering the rise of modern capitalism. Had Weber concluded his study with this insight that the results of human actions are frequently the opposite of those intended, he no doubt would have avoided much of the scholarly criticism he has since received. But he went on to suggest in passing that Calvinism not only encouraged hard work but actually *enjoyed* the systematic accumulation of wealth as a visible sign of sanctification. The attainment of wealth, he observed, "was a sign of God's blessing."⁵

Weber himself was careful to qualify this point by noting that Reformed theology frequently acted as a restraining influence on economic behavior. Some of his overzealous popularizers, however, ignored such qualifications and drew an intimate and willing connection between Calvinism and *laissez-faire* capitalism. Aldous Huxley, for example, saw in the Protestant ethic "all that was and still is vilest, cruelest, most anti-human in the modern capitalist system." Such a statement is dangerously misleading, for it fails to distinguish between early Calvinist and Puritan theory and later practice in the post-Restoration period. John Calvin, as well as the early English Puritan social theorists, never equated salvation and wealth; they remained thoroughly suspicious of the "inebriation of prosperity" and never would have embraced what has since become the capitalist way of life.⁶

Calvin's social ethic as discussed in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* was in this sense much closer to Thomistic thought than to modern capitalism. To Calvin the primary rewards of work were to be spiritual, moral, and societal. He explicitly denied any correlation between material success and spiritual salvation, noting that God *may* reward the righteous with prosperity, but prosperity in and of itself was no guarantee of righteousness. Calvin emphasized that God cares more about attitudes than acquisitions: "There is nothing which God more abominates than when men endeavor to cloak themselves by substituting signs and external appearances for integrity of heart." The possession of superfluous riches was in fact a dubious blessing that endangered rather than enhanced one's spirituality. They "who are much engaged in the care of the body," he wrote, "are generally negligent of the soul." Calvin's alternative to the extremes of asceticism and profligacy was not a life of pinched frugality but a life of material moderation and spiritual devotion. The things of the world are not evil, he pointed out, but worldliness is.⁷

Calvin recognized that moderation as a standard lends itself to ambiguity. What is moderate for some may be considered excessive by others. The guideline he offered in such cases was that people "should indulge themselves as little as possible; that . . . they should perpetually and resolutely exert themselves to retrench all superfluities and to restrain luxury, and that they should diligently beware lest they pervert into impediments things which

were given for assistance." Every human decision and action should be directed toward God's service and blessing. Temperance must prevent excess and luxury; otherwise man's passions would promote a selfish materialism and social strife. "Men are of so perverse and crooked a nature," he believed, "that everyone would scratch out his neighbor's eyes if there were no bridge to hold them in." Moreover, if material instincts were allowed free play, God would soon be displaced in men's hearts by Mammon. "Where is our acknowledgement of God," he asked, "if our minds be fixed on the splendour of our garments?" Should hard work and simple living result in an accumulation of wealth beyond a comfortable subsistence, Christians must share such excess with the deserving poor. "Riches," he concluded, "are a means to help the needy. That is the way to proceed and keep a happy medium."⁸

This "broad and middle way" of saintly living was what the first generation of Puritan settlers brought with them to the New World. They arrived in America intent upon establishing a New Zion in the wilderness. Their settlement would be "as a city upon a hill," a carefully regulated community of saints that would provide a beacon of piety and virtue for all the world to emulate. Thus convinced that they had received a special commission from the Lord, the Puritans shouldered a tremendous sense of moral responsibility, and the early spiritual and political leaders of Massachusetts Bay forcefully reaffirmed the medieval and Calvinist standards of Christian piety and social conduct. The original settlers retained the rigid social hierarchy of the Old World, with its explicit inequality and privilege. People were expected to know their rank or station and accept it. And to promote such compliance, they established a formidable array of socializing agencies. Family, church, community, school, and state were all considered interlocking instruments of social control and social continuity. Together they would serve to instill conformity and "reduce every affection within its proper bounds."⁹

The Reverend John Cotton, who arrived in Massachusetts in 1633 and quickly became the colony's dominant spiritual spokesman, emphasized to the settlers the crucial importance of their social obligations, stressing that the Christian had a duty to work hard at his calling, but he must always do so for the glory of God and the "public good," making sure to exercise "diligence in worldly businesses, and yet deadness to the world." Ideally, heavenly and secular callings should not interfere with one another; Christians could serve "both God and man." But whatever good fortune might accrue to the saint should be taken only "in moderation." Christians who prospered in their temporal callings must act as stewards of God's material blessings and must resist the temptation to live a life of selfish luxury. When a man succeeds at business, Cotton advised, he "does it heavenly and spiritually; He uses the world as if he used it not."¹⁰

Cotton echoed Calvin in proposing a prudent sufficiency as the standard for the Puritan settlers to follow: "We may desire wealth from God, partly for our necessity and expediency, and partly to leave to our posterity. Thus

far a man may desire wealth. But we are never to desire more than we can make good use of." Early New England Puritanism, therefore, was not opposed to prosperity itself but to the selfishness and avarice that seemed to accompany it. Superfluous wealth almost inevitably diluted one's piety. "We are never more apt to forget God," Cotton wrote, "than when he prospers us." He envisioned an ideal Christian society with simplicity as its guiding virtue—simplicity of worship, dress, manners, and speech. The greater simplicity, he said, the "more evident witness to the truth of God," for the "holy and good man desires but a mean."¹¹

The founding Puritans knew that "loving the world with weaned affections" would be no simple task, and no one was more aware of the problem of developing the well-ordered balance and harmony required by the Christian simple life than John Winthrop, the colony's first governor. Born in 1588, he initially followed the traditional career of a young country gentleman, attending Trinity College, Cambridge, and Gray's Inn before succeeding his father as lord of Groton manor in Suffolk. Winthrop remembered that as a youth he had been "very wild, and dissolute, and as years came on my lusts grew stronger." But at some point as a young man he underwent an intense conversion experience and soon joined the Puritan movement, determined to learn how to be good and do good in a vicious world. So he gave up hunting and card-playing in order to devote more time to prayer and Scripture study. In addition he tried to "tame his heart" by moderating his diet. Such sacrifices did not come easily. It was perplexingly difficult for Winthrop to learn to "love the world with moderation and God without."¹² Winthrop's "conflicts between the flesh and the spirit" caused him to suffer pangs of conscience after succumbing to worldly pleasures. Periodically he would adopt the ascetic approach and try to cleanse his soul by resisting all such temptations. But this course also proved unsatisfactory: "When I had for some time abstained from such worldly delights as my heart most desired," he remembered, "I grew very melancholic and uncomfortable, for I had been more careful to refrain from an outward conversation in the world, than to keep the love of the world out of my heart, or to uphold my conversation in heaven." Asceticism, he decided, could be as dangerous as worldliness.¹³

After such moral trial and error, Winthrop fastened on the principle of worldly moderation and the diligent pursuit of one's calling in order to end his moral doubts and restrain his material instincts. Like Milton, he had discovered that it was better to wrestle with the sins and temptations of society, to combat them in the open field, than to avoid facing them. Such a stance required unflinching discipline in order to maintain a steady course. "I see therefore," Winthrop pledged, "I must keep a better watch over my heart, & keep my thoughts close to good things, & not suffer a vain or worldly thought to enter, etc.: lest it draw the heart to delight in it."¹⁴

By 1629 Winthrop was forty years of age, had a large family, and found himself in control of a floundering English estate that could not support his seven sons. Even more unsettling was the government's growing religious intolerance and the general decline in spirituality and sobriety among the English populace. "We are grown to that height of intemperance in all excess of riot, as no man's estate almost will suffice to keep sale with his equals." His personal situation and that of the larger social scene had deteriorated so much that emigration became an increasingly attractive alternative. In May 1629 Winthrop wrote his wife Margaret: "I am verily persuaded God will bring some affliction upon this land, and that speedily." Yet he assured her that God would "provide a shelter and hiding place for us and ours." Within a year they would be in Massachusetts.¹⁵

Winthrop knew as he led the Puritan colonists to America that their new home would provide them with plenty of "trials and temptations." In 1629, before leaving for New England, he stressed to his followers that the purpose of their expedition was primarily spiritual rather than material and that a simple life would be sufficient for their needs: "If we have foods and raiment (which are there to be had) we ought to be contented." He knew that life in America would at first be harsh and primitive, but argued that "if we have sufficient to fill the belly and clothe the back, the difference in quality may a little displease us, but it cannot hurt us." In fact, he suggested, the spartan conditions of the New World might prove spiritually beneficial, since "God will by this means bring us to repent of our Intemperance here at home, and so cure us of that disease, which sends many of us to hell."¹⁶

Yet Winthrop was also aware that after the initial hardships of settlement were overcome, the situation might change. During the voyage aboard the *Arbella* he delivered his famous lay sermon in which he warned the colonists that the economic opportunities awaiting them in the New World might prove too alluring. Material success could cause them "to embrace the present world and prosecute our carnal intentions, seeking great things for our selves and our posterity." Consequently, they must vigilantly ensure that the "good of the public outweigh all private interests."¹⁷

Winthrop's economic outlook in this sense was as medieval as it was modern, and he joined other leaders of Massachusetts Bay in arguing that "the life of business be placed within a structure whose proportions had been drawn by the hand of God." Prices, wages, and markets had to be regulated for the good of the commonweal. Winthrop also took the lead in urging the colonial government to pass sumptuary laws. He felt that luxurious living was wasteful, enervating, and distracting. It also distorted important class differences. Winthrop and the other magistrates and divines were anything but social levelers. They insisted early on that Old World distinctions of rank and privilege be maintained. Winthrop reflected the static, hierarchical quality of Puritan social theory when he remarked in 1630: "In all times, some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection." To try to live beyond one's means and

station thus endangered the social gradations and sense of subordination deemed crucial to communal order. In 1634 the Massachusetts General Court, concerned about the appearance of "new and immodest fashions" among all ranks, ordered that "no person, neither man or woman" shall make or buy clothes of "great, superfluous, and unnecessary expenses." Five years later they specifically prohibited "immoderate great breeches, knots of ribbon, broad shoulder-bands and rails, silk rases, double ruffs and cuffs," warning that such "superfluities" tended to "little use or benefit, but to the nourishment of pride."¹⁸

Winthrop recognized that riches would naturally tend to accumulate in the hands of the more enterprising colonists, but such wealth should not be idealized in itself, nor should it be flaunted. For this reason he felt compelled in 1632 to criticize Thomas Dudley, the deputy governor, for his usurious practices as well as for the extravagant expenditures he was making on his dwelling. Winthrop told Dudley that "he did not well to bestow such cost about wainscoting and adorning his house, in the beginning of a plantation, both in regard to the necessity of public charges, and for example." Dudley was not the only colonist frustrated by the limitations imposed by the Puritan social ethic. The emerging Boston merchant class especially chafed under the restrictions placed on their business and personal habits. Successful merchants, artisans, and traders struggled with the conflict inherent in a communal ethic that stressed both hard work and simple living. Inevitably, it seemed, the former took precedence over the latter.¹⁹

Winthrop soon found himself waging, along with John Cotton and others, a difficult battle against the combined forces of secularism, individualism, and materialism. From the beginning of the settlement there had appeared colonists who were prompted by other than religious and civic motives, and their number increased with the years. Moreover, many church-going Puritans themselves began to pursue profits at the expense of the public good that Cotton and Winthrop deemed supreme. The abundance of the colony's frontier environment and the entrepreneurial opportunities it afforded came to represent the rock that divided the economic and spiritual streams of Puritan social thought. Only two months after arriving in New England, a dismayed Winthrop saw the Devil amassing "his forces against us . . . so that I think here are some persons who never showed so much wickedness in England as they have done here."²⁰

Obviously, Winthrop's initial hope that the colonists could walk the tightrope of moderation had been misguided. Promoting austerity, diligence, and piety in a land of increasingly lucrative opportunities and among an increasingly diverse citizenry was difficult, if not impossible. As early as 1635 popular resentment forced the repeal of wage and price regulations. Moreover, colonists soon began disregarding the sumptuary laws. An English trader noted the penchant for luxury goods among the supposedly temperate settlers when he wrote Winthrop in 1637, observing that "many in your

plantations discover much pride, as appeareth by the letters we receive from them, wherein some of them write over to us for lace . . . cutwork coifes; and others, for deep stammel dyes; and some of your own men tell us that many of you go finely clad."²¹

By the middle of the seventeenth century, when John Winthrop died, the inability of many in the colony to live up to the ethic of the "middle way" seemed shockingly evident to those directly responsible for the governance of the commonwealth. Throughout the Massachusetts Bay Colony, it was reported, "men were generally failing in their duty to the community, seeking their own aggrandizement in the rich opportunities afforded by the land, commerce, crafts, and speculators, to the detriment of the community." Perhaps most disturbing to the new generation of magistrates was the desire among the laboring ranks to raise their social status and engage in costly display that went beyond their means and threatened the established social hierarchy. In 1651 the members of the Massachusetts General Court reported that "intolerable excesses . . . have crept in . . . amongst the people of mean condition, to the dishonor of God, the scandal of our profession, the consumption of estates, and altogether unsuitable to our poverty." To deal with this growing problem of maintaining traditional social distinctions, the Court issued a new sumptuary decree remarkable for its specificity and intent: "No person . . . whose visible estates shall not exceed the true and indifferent value of 200 pounds shall wear any gold or silver lace, or gold and silver buttons, or any bone lace above 2 shillings per yard, or silk hoods or scarves, upon the penalty of 10 shillings for every such offense."²²

This development reflects the many-sided nature of the simple life as a societal ideal. The double standard inherent in the sumptuary legislation passed at mid-century suggests that many members of the new ruling group were more committed to the maintenance of a stable, hierarchical social order than to the universality of plain living. As the seventeenth century progressed, the frequent declamations against high living were almost always directed at common people, who were enabled by an expanding commercial economy to afford luxuries once confined to the elite. Ostentation thus came to be seen by the wealthy as a danger to the virtue of others but not so much to themselves, and the simple life in this sense, both then and later, ran the risk of becoming an ethic that one group wishes (or enforces) upon another.²³ The self-interested paternalism reflected in the discriminatory sumptuary legislation may account in part for the unwillingness of ordinary folk to abide by such restrictions. For despite the passage of more sumptuary regulations, many colonists refused to be content with their lot, and the criticism of excessive getting and spending in Massachusetts Bay became a familiar litany in Puritan sermons and speeches. Materialism was coming to smother spiritualism, claimed minister Thomas Shepard, as more and more

people raced to elevate their social and economic standing. The colonists were busily engaged in their callings, as indeed they should be, but many had lost sight of their priorities. "There is a number among us, young and old, of all sorts among us, that swarm up and down towns and woods, and fields, whose care and work hitherto has been like bees, only to get honey to their own hive, only to live comfortably with their houses, and lots, and victuals, and fine clothes, but not to live hereafter eternally."²⁴

During the second half of the seventeenth century, such criticism increased in intensity as the disparity between ideal and real seemed to widen. The ministers, however, were faced with the logical dilemma inherent in the Protestant ethic. How could they limit social ambition without stifling economic enterprise? How could they promote opportunity without encouraging a fragmenting mobility? They railed at the dangers of materialism but could not condemn material success directly, since it was the result of the diligence they also preached. The puzzle of prosperity and piety thus limited the ministers and magistrates to attacking the love of wealth rather than wealth itself. What they emphasized time and again was that the colonists should strive to acquire a modest competency, not riches.

To accentuate the impleity and intemperance that they saw infecting their congregations as well as to provide examples of plain, pious living to follow, many second- and third-generation Puritan ministers and civic spokesmen highlighted the spiritual purity and material austerity of the original colonists. In his election sermon in 1663, John Higginson warned that young Puritans were casually abandoning the ideals of their ancestors in favor of the crass love of money. New England was "originally a plantation of religion," he concluded, "not a plantation of trade. Let merchants and such as are increasing cent per cent remember this."²⁵

But to recall the past is not to renew it. Throughout the second half of the seventeenth century, ministers and magistrates went beyond issuing such jeremiads and created new institutional measures designed to enforce simple living. They passed laws ordering parents to fulfill their traditional roles as guardians of the civil and social order by paying stricter attention to the discipline and education of their children. To buttress family authority and to ensure the transmission of cultural values, towns were required after mid-century to establish schools. The impetus behind such mandatory public education was the fear that the Puritan ethic would be "buried in the grave of our fathers" unless something was done to transmit the original values of the colony to the younger generations. The Court also created new governmental officials called "rithingmen," whose stated purpose was to serve as social censors and snoopers, monitoring the behavior of the citizenry and upbraiding those who did not follow the "middle way."²⁶

Yet such measures apparently did little to stem the tide of social upheaval and personal ambition. The pristine social vision of the colony's founders continued to be dashed upon the rock of selfish individualism. If one

accepts the jeremiads at face value, New England society was rapidly developing along lines that ran counter to the pious communal ethic outlined by Winthrop aboard the *Arbella*. Liberalizing influences were gaining ground in pulpits and politics. And, at the same time, the original goal of economic self-sufficiency for the colony as the best way to preserve social unity by insulating its members from greed and corruption was quickly being supplanted by a thriving commercial system linking Massachusetts Bay with an international trading network. As profits and personal incomes increased, so, too, it seemed, did high living and spiritual deadness. Boston by the end of the seventeenth century was said to have strayed from its original backwater moorings into the mainstream of worldliness, having become a center of commercial activity and theological liberalism, ruled not by a clerical elite but by a merchant oligarchy. "The merchants seem to be rich men," one visitor remarked in 1675, "and their houses as handsomely furnished as in London." Should material concerns clash with affairs of faith, there were many now ready to choose the former over the latter. In 1714 a concerned layman deplored the "great extravagance that people are fallen into, far beyond their circumstances, in their purchases, buildings, families, expenses, apparel, generally in the whole way of living."²⁷

Worldliness was not unique to the Boston area. Salem, New Haven, and other New England port towns were also witnessing the emergence of a high-living merchant aristocracy and an infectious commercial spirit. Even the backwoods settlements were beginning to feel the effects of creeping ostentation and declining spirituality. Solomon Stoddard, the powerful minister from Northampton, in western Massachusetts, was steadfast in his preaching against social status-seeking and energetic in his criticism of luxurious living. He once encouraged the prosecution of wealthy Elder John Strong's two daughters for wearing silk in a "flaunting" manner. Likewise, a Connecticut minister found that in his colony, at least, men were more eager to get "Land and Money and Stock, than they be about getting Religion revived, and securing the salvation of souls."²⁸

Year after year, New England's ministers continued to preach jeremiads reminding the faithful how far they and their unchurched neighbors had strayed from the vision of the founders. Eleazer Mather, the influential Boston pastor, wondered aloud from his pulpit in the early eighteenth century whether there had been "less of the world" in the first years of settlement but more of the spirit. "Less trading, buying, selling, but more praying, more watching over hearts, more close walking, less plenty and less inequity?" As he surveyed Boston social life, Mather concluded: "Outward prosperity is a worm at the root of godliness, so that religion dies when the world thrives." Throughout the early eighteenth century, New England ministers reiterated their belief in the original Calvinist ethic, all the while many of their parishioners joined non-churchmembers in undermining its survival. In 1729 the Reverend Peter Thacher of Middleborough, Massachu-

sets, lamented: "Enormities among us show our departure from the natural simplicity and justice of the first generation."²⁹

The jeremiad mentality of the seventeenth and early eighteenth century introduced what would become an important recurring element into the history of the simple life as a societal ideal. By constantly attributing "true" piety and simplicity to earlier generations, the Puritan reformers developed a nostalgic and self-flagellating mode of discourse that dates back to Aris- tophanes and Moses and has since become commonplace. Americans have inherited the burden of presuming themselves to be a people of providential destiny and therefore are repeatedly being told that they have sinned against the fathers.³⁰

Actually, of course, there is no way of knowing the true extent of saintly and selfish behavior in society at a given time. Generalized assessments of cultural behavior and values, whether issued by ministers, social critics, or historians, are notoriously intuitive and therefore inexact. This was true for the Puritan jeremiads, and it has remained true for the tradition of disillusioned social criticism they originated. Too often the past seems far more virtuous, simpler, and happier than it actually was. The first generation of settlers was never as saintly as the jeremiads claimed, nor were later generations as debauched. The ministers often mistook the vices of their society for its norms, and their sermons were therefore more prescriptive than precisely descriptive. Certainly there were multitudes of decent folk who still conscientiously adhered to the ideal of pious simplicity, especially in the backwoods settlements. And there were undoubtedly many successful merchants who steadfastly retained a sense of civic responsibility and individual piety.³¹

Yet, while acknowledging the distortions prevalent in such assessments of cultural behavior, one should not make the mistake of dismissing their relevance altogether. The jeremiads may have exaggerated the sinfulness of society, but they did help sustain the ideal of simple, pious living in a society undergoing rapid change. What people select to contrast with the past or emphasize about the present reveals much about their guiding hopes and aspirations. Without memory there can be little meaning, and the patina of assuredness that nostalgia adds to the concept of simple living has been crucial to its survival over the years. Many advocates have found it immensely comforting to presume that such an ideal was widely practiced in the past. And, no doubt, the second- and third-generation Puritan saints were equally buoyed by such a scrupulous image of their forefathers. Hence, in developing the jeremiad style, the Puritan reformers provided a mythic idiom for nurturing moral concern and social revival that has proven both durable and influential, if not entirely reliable.

It is also important to remember that hidden among the edifying sentimentality of the jeremiads was more than a germ of truth. If the social ethic of the original settlers was never a universal actuality, it was certainly even

less so by 1700. The first generation was indeed "simpler" in its habits and ways of living than its successors. Whether it was necessarily more pious or more virtuous remains a puzzle. But many ministers and concerned laymen were convinced that their ancestors had indeed been more saintly. And the rhetorical weight of their laments was enough to convince almost any doubter that such was indeed the case. Nevertheless, many of those who agreed with such a stylized depiction of the first generation did not always agree with its indictment of the present generation or its prescription for reform. The simple life may have seemed both necessary and reasonable to the original Puritan leaders faced with carving out a Christian utopia in a "howling wilderness." To many of their descendants a half-century later, however, the need for such spartan enthusiasm was less self-evident. Children growing up in relative comfort and stability rather than in the midst of royal persecution or the "starving time" of the first settlements were understandably less inclined to see the virtue of a stringent austerity and a static social order.

There were other factors at work that undermined pious simplicity. As New England grew in population during the first half of the eighteenth century, it also grew in complexity. Towns lost their original cohesiveness as the pressures of population growth and economic survival forced many sons to abandon the open-field system and either move to the port towns or establish new individual homesteads at some distance from the central village. Along the coast, urbanization, commercialism, and cosmopolitanism were also combining to introduce diversity into the heretofore homogeneous social order. Ships brought not only new goods but new people and new ideas. Such developments combined to weaken the unity of village life and undermine communal supervision of personal behavior. In the process, the original medieval impulse toward a consensual communalism was gradually displaced by a more modern Lockean individualism that separated economic activity from political and religious authority. Fewer and fewer people were willing to defer to the ruling elite. In the midst of such social turbulence, the original Puritan ethic did become an increasingly defensive and minority ideal in the seaboard towns. Arminian rationalism and Anglicanism grew rapidly as the eighteenth century progressed. The founders had never foreseen that Puritanism would come to represent the outlook of such a small fraction of its society. They could never have imagined that "emigration would bring to the shores of Massachusetts Bay such a horde of average lusty Elizabethan Englishmen."³²

As time passed, the traditional appeal for the public to practice simple living and sacrifice their individual interests to the common good was seen by many among the laboring classes as a "rhetorical cloak employed by those enjoying elevated status and material wealth to hide their covert selfish interests." The belief that the magistrates and merchants harbored such a hidden agenda convinced many that they must play by the same rules in order to survive and prosper. Thus, by the early 1700s, a new system of

values that legitimized profit-seeking for private gain as the best means of promoting the welfare of society began to surface in New England at the same time that such an economic liberalism was taking root in England. In the process the Puritan ethic began to be transformed into the secular entrepreneurial ideology found among eighteenth-century Americans and Englishmen by Max Weber and others. The self-limiting Puritans were becoming grasping Yankees. Admittedly, this creeping materialism and social fragmentation seems slight by twentieth-century standards, but to those New Englanders who still identified with the exacting standards inherent in the original social covenant, the gulf between profession and practice was dramatic.³³

The process of changing social values is far more complicated than such a compressed summary implies. Transformations in cultural norms are rarely sudden or complete. Old ideals are rarely displaced altogether. Nor do new beliefs and practices emerge full-blown. Instead, the old ideology and ways of living persist alongside the new. Though less noticeable, historical continuity has been almost as influential as historical change in defining the American experience. In fact, it has been the constant friction between the two that has given shape to the national character. Americans have embraced progress and tradition at the same time. This was especially true regarding the Puritan ethic. Religious traditionalists held on stubbornly to their original social vision throughout the eighteenth century, long after it had been challenged by a more modern outlook. Others tried to accommodate themselves to new conditions without compromising essential values. In New England at the end of the seventeenth century, there were numerous examples of both resistance and accommodation. One of the most complex was Cotton Mather.

Mather was the pre-eminent religious spokesman in New England at the start of the eighteenth century, and he reflected the transition taking place in the spiritual and economic life of the colony.³⁴ For the most part, his attitude toward work and wealth was decidedly orthodox. In language reminiscent of Calvin and Cotton, Mather emphasized the communal significance of work and frugality: "God hath placed us, as in a common hive. Let there be no drone in the hive; every man is to make some fair way, that the whole hive may be the better for him." Mather likewise adopted the jeremiad style so popular among Puritan ministers. In 1706 he charged that a tragic spiritual and moral decline had occurred since the original settlements because the colonists had mistakenly exchanged pious simplicity for worldly excess. "The cursed hunger of riches," he maintained, "will make men break through all the laws of God." And the Lord would thereafter wreak his vengeance. "If you make an idol of this world, God will throw your idol into the Fire!"³⁵

In his magisterial history of the Massachusetts Bay colony, *Magnalia Christi Americana*, Mather described with unfeigned adulation the simple habits and tastes of the Puritan fathers whose exemplary lives he held up as models for a fallen generation to emulate. He tried to shame his readers into restoring the "primitive principles and primitive practices" of the founders, chastising his peers for the "visible shrink in all orders of men among us, from that greatness, and that goodness, which was the first grain that our God brought from three sifted kingdoms into this land." He succinctly pinpointed the reason for the decline. Religion "brought forth prosperity, and the daughter destroyed the mother." Nature's bounty had caused the settlers to forget the primary reason for their "errand into the wilderness."³⁶

Mather repeated this refrain in his sermons at the turn of the century, warning Boston's merchants that God would find "an eternity to damn the man who cannot find the time to pray." Too many of them, he observed, were "wasting grand capacities on trivial ends." Yet it was not too late for reform, and he put forth the traditional Christian ideal of self-conscious material limitation as a standard. "I will mention," he advised, "the example of some eminent merchants, who have set their estates at a moderate and competent elevation, and resolved that they would never get any richer than that. . . . Whatever gain carried their estates beyond a *set sum*, they devoted it all to pious uses." Mather was convinced that such "stinted estates" were the answer to the ambiguity embodied in a Puritan ethic that demanded both diligence and temperance.³⁷

Yet at other times Mather appeared less orthodox in his practice of the traditional Puritan ethic. His own spacious three-story house on Hanover Street in Boston, some argued, befitted more a merchant prince than a minister. It was adorned with classic pilasters and lavish ornamentation. Nor was Mather a traditionalist in his view of certain other social practices. In 1691 he used his pulpit to defend the wearing of periwigs, saying that it was wrong "to be so zealous against this innocent fashion, taken up and used by the best of men." The crusty Puritan layman Samuel Sewall, always on the alert for such clerical backsliding, grumbled in reply: "I expected not to hear a vindication of Periwigs in Boston Pulpit by Mr. Mather." As illustrated by this incident, Mather in his personal life was a maze of contradictions, espousing values in public that he had difficulty practicing in private.³⁸

Mather also frequently seemed less critical of business life and material affluence than many of his predecessors had been, and as time passed he focused more of his attention on the dangers of idleness and sloth than on the dangers of avarice and luxury. Though still concerned about covetousness, he seemed to accept more readily the possession of great wealth as a sign of God's blessing: "Tis neither skill nor chance," he said, "that brings our estates into our hand, but it is of God, of whom we are told, that he is the maker both of the rich and the poor." Mather recognized that the nature of

colonial society had changed dramatically since the first years of settlement and that any reform program must reflect such new circumstances. Consequently, while never totally abandoning the original Puritan ethic, he tended to spend much more time emphasizing the need for the affluent to use their wealth to "do good" in the community than he spent chastising them for their preoccupation with making and expanding their fortunes. Where Winthrop had envisioned an entire society "knit together" by common purposes, Mather by the eighteenth century had to settle for what he called "bundles of love," small bands of dedicated believers sustaining the Word and themselves.³⁹

Mather's attempt to revive the spiritual life of the church through an appeal to good works and philanthropy had little tangible effect. Eighteenth-century Massachusetts was dotted with the reform societies he advocated, yet the hoped-for regeneration of individual piety among the larger public did not ensue. He grew increasingly frustrated at his inability to reverse such trends. "In my continual addresses unto people of all sorts, to set upon the practice of serious religion," he wrote in his diary, "I am still answered by them, that they can't." People were "so taken up with secular and sensual matters that they have no leisure to acquaint themselves with a precious Jesus." He was finally forced to admit that it would take more than hortatory sermons and doing good to restore the primacy of religion in the colony's hierarchy of values.⁴⁰

The widening distance between ideals and behavior that Mather and other colonial spokesmen bemoaned created what Erik Erikson has called a "guilt culture" which led them to explain social crises and catastrophes as the direct result of their society's failure to live up to the values its founders had preached. Thus it was with mixed feelings that Mather and other clerical leaders greeted the disastrous earthquake that rocked New England on October 29, 1727. While mourning the widespread loss of life, they saw in the natural disaster a possible catalyst to produce a spiritual and moral transformation. The day after the earthquake, Mather interpreted it to his congregation as an explicit warning from God that spiritual renewal was imperative. Among the causes of God's ire were the "excesses and vanities" of the people. "The earthquake says to us," he thundered, "put off some of your ornaments." A few days later he reiterated the point, cautioning his parishioners not to "lay the main stress of our demands on things, which the worst people in the world can as easily come to as the best . . . let all exorbitances and extravagances be rebuked and retrenched." Across the city, other ministers interpreted the earthquake in the same manner and made similar pleas. Thomas Prince of Boston's Old South Church saw the event as a violent token of God's displeasure with the colonists' just for "extravagant apparel, building, furniture, [and] expensive and pompous ways of living."⁴¹

For several weeks after the tremors subsided, religious ardor did seem to return to many of the city's residents. By the time Mather died the following

year, however, the regenerative effect of the earthquake had worn off, and the diminution of religious intensity again came to monopolize Puritan sermons. One minister regretfully admitted that "tho' nothing but the most amazing thunders and lightnings, and the most terrible earthquakes could awaken us, we are at this time, fallen into as dead a sleep as ever." Like Mather, the Puritan ethic in its original guise seemed to be suffering from old age, unable to comprehend or adjust to the dramatic changes transforming New England society.⁴²

Yet colonial spirituality and simplicity were not dead yet. Just as religious orthodoxy seemed to be falling into its final sleep, it was again awakened with a start. This time the catalytic agent was not an earthquake or epidemic, but a spontaneous series of revivals that began in the southern colonies in the early 1730s and quickly spread up the Atlantic coast. Whole towns and villages were swept up in the ecstasy of conversion or reconversion, and no group, denomination, or area seemed immune to the effects of this "Great Awakening." A Connecticut minister testified that the Awakening touched people of "all orders and degrees, of all ages and characters." Many of Boston's converts, observed Benjamin Colman, pastor of Brattle Street Church, were "among the rich and polite of our sons and daughters." Even sceptical Ben Franklin was inspired by a revivalist sermon to contribute to a charitable religious enterprise in Georgia.⁴³

The causes of the Great Awakening were many and complex, but a central concern of many of the revivalists was to halt their society's headlong rush toward impious materialism and to restore felt religion and simple living among the colonists. The Awakening's "primary appeal seems to have been for a renunciation of contemporary worldliness and a return to the simple, uncorrupted, pious, and virtuous life of an earlier generation. . . ." In 1733 a minister trying to encourage a revival of piety and plainness emphasized that the "powerful love of the world, and exorbitant reach after riches, which is become the reigning temper of all ranks in our land, is enough to awaken our concerns for abandoned, slighted and forgotten religion."⁴⁴

In an effort to counter such disturbing trends, Jonathan Edwards, the towering figure in the New England Awakening, forcefully restated the Calvinist position that the gift of grace had no relationship to personal wealth. In fact, as he maintained, superfluous wealth was more apt to weaken one's religious faith than strengthen it. For Edwards himself this meant adopting a stringent personal ethic in order to redeem every possible moment for the precious business of religious study and family relations. The intensity of his piety initially led Edwards to sanction an extreme asceticism that went well beyond the "middle way" espoused by Calvin and Cotton. In January 1723, at age nineteen, he expressed his desire to "live in self-mortification, without ceasing, and even to weary myself for as long as I am in the world, and never to expect or desire a life of ease or pleasure." Self-denial, he observed, meant "denying worldly inclinations," and "forsaking

and renouncing all worldly . . . enjoyments." In his almost total rejection of the material world, young Edwards came closer to expressing the monastic ethic than the Puritan ethic. Unlike John Winthrop, who had believed it neither desirable nor possible to deny material appetites or human passions altogether and who therefore chose to emphasize moderation as a guiding principle, Edwards seemed almost hysterically bent on self-mortification rather than merely self-control.⁴⁵

Yet by the time Edwards assumed the Northampton pastorate in 1726, he had moderated his social outlook considerably. The same pious soul who a few years before had gloried in his monkish asceticism now lived in a comfortable manse on King Street and sported silver-buckled shoes, a wig, and clothes custom-tailored in Boston. Edwards had not developed a "craving disposition," as some of his more disgruntled parishioners asserted upon learning that he had purchased a "gold locket and chane" for his wife; he merely had come to recognize that some material comforts were not necessarily hostile to faith and were in fact commensurate with his role as a leading spokesman for the community. In a sermon devoted to the subject of living standards, Edwards denied that he was opposed to all "adorning the body." He insisted, however, that it was "very provoking to God when persons go beyond their rank." But he did not stop there. To him, simplicity was a standard for all ranks to follow. "Some fashions in themselves," Edwards stressed, are "ill—extravagant—very costly—immodest," regardless of a person's station in life.⁴⁶

Judged by the ministerial standards of the era, Edwards and his family still led a conscientiously temperate existence. One of his early biographers emphasized that "wastefulness of any sort was not countenanced in the King Street home." George Whitefield, the stirring English evangelist who did so much to spread the Great Awakening throughout the colonies, confirmed this picture of Edwards. After visiting the Edwards household in Northampton in 1740, he recorded in his journal that "their children were not dressed in silks and satins, but plain, as become the children of those who, in all things, ought to be examples of Christian simplicity." In his public statements on the subject of Christian living, Edwards emphatically attacked the grasping for wealth and prestige he saw enervating the spiritual life of Massachusetts. "If one worm be a little exalted over another, by having more dust, or a bigger dunghill," he exclaimed, "how much does he make of himself?" Edwards attributed much of the prevailing social malaise to the emergence of a "false scheme of religion" that incorrectly attributed Divine favor to entrepreneurial success.⁴⁷

The concerns that Edwards expressed were not limited to the Awakening in New England nor to the Reformed churches. Throughout the colonies, revivalists and concerned laymen of all religious persuasions pointed to the growth of materialism and rationalism as the primary causes of degeneration.

In Virginia, for example, Commissary James Blair upbraided his Anglican peers for their addiction to "all manner of gratifications of their luxury, stately houses, furniture, and equipage, plentiful tales, mirth, music, and drinking." At the same time, in South Carolina, the colony's chief justice, Benjamin Whitaker, urged his fellows to "abstain from that luxury and excess which within a few years past, has poured in upon us like a torrent" and so "greatly contributed to enervate and soften our minds, and to sink us into indolence and inactivity."⁴⁸

But even more significant than the self-criticism among the ruling orders generated by the Awakening was the outspoken *popular* assault on the prerogatives and hypocrisies of the gentry elite. In this sense the Awakening backfired on those who had intended it to bolster church discipline and social order. Religious enthusiasm is not so easily manipulated, and in many ways the revivals proved more disruptive than reinforcing. The theology of individual conversion espoused by such popular exhorters as Whitefield, Gilbert Tennent, and James Davenport contained a potent new liberating element that would have far-reaching political and social implications. Although the Awakening's appeal initially cut across class lines, it proved more and more attractive to the lower ranks as it continued and spread. Tennent and Davenport, in fact, eagerly courted those at the bottom of the social scale—laborers, seamen, servants, artisans and craftsmen. By beseeching their listeners to renounce the established clergy and become the agents of their own salvation, the radicals sought to breed contempt for a new group of liberal church leaders whom they considered traitors to the original Protestant ethic. Their doing so served to erode even further the already crumbling edifice of a traditional deferential society.⁴⁹

For the radical evangelicals, therefore, the Awakening was far more than a religious revival; it also represented an explicit challenge to gentry materialism and social control. Tennent, Davenport, and others were tired of hearing the ruling elite call upon the laboring classes to practice plainer manners and adopt more limited ambitions while they themselves enjoyed considerable luxury and status. And the popular preachers ceaselessly emphasized this contradiction in their assault on the rich and powerful. They pointedly contrasted those who were preoccupied with gaining "temporary wealth and riches" with the truly virtuous colonists who were contented with the "riches of Christ." It was time, the evangelists demanded, that the upper classes began living up to the same standard of plain living and public concern that they had for years tried to impose on the masses. "The Grantees," Tennent exclaimed, "grow in wickedness in proportion to their increase in wealth," and they would be called to account by a wrathful God and an aroused citizenry. Similar rhetoric appeared in sermons throughout the colonies. The Baptist revivals occurred somewhat later than the Congregational and Presbyterian Awakening in the North, but they exhibited the same

contempt for the dissolute social behavior of the gentry. Baptists in Virginia adopted the austere ethic of other evangelicals, vigorously renouncing such "superfluous forms and Modes of Dressing . . . as cock't hats."⁵⁰

Such inflammatory rhetoric terrified the upper classes, who claimed that the radical revivalists were breeding "anarchy, levelling, and dissolution." Gentry critics characterized the Baptists as a "contemptible class of people" making up an "ignorant . . . and illiterate sect" which "none of the rich or learned ever join." Charles Chauncey, the staid spokesman for the new liberal theology and friend of the Boston merchants who dominated his First Church, was equally scornful of the Presbyterian and Congregational Awakeners. He warned that the itinerant rabble-rousers were attempting to "destroy all property, to make all things common, wives as well as goods." This was utter nonsense, but its hysteria reflects the nervousness felt by the urban elite when called upon to practice the stringent social ethic of self-restraint and stewardship that they themselves preached.⁵¹

For a time during the 1730s and 1740s the revivalists reported startling evidence of both renewed piety and simplicity among the well-to-do. Edwards pointed out in his *Thoughts on the Revival* that during the early stages of the Awakening, people began abandoning "those things of which they were extremely fond, and in which they had placed the happiness of their lives." Everywhere in New England the "wealthy and fashionable," the "great beaux and fine ladies relinquished their vanities" and "extravagance in apparel." He observed in 1734 that in Northampton people seemed to "dread their former extravagances." In Boston the Awakening produced a "week of Sabbaths" during which taverns and social clubs, which "have always proved unfriendly to serious Godliness," were abandoned in preference for prayer meetings, and religious discussions were said to be "almost fashionable." Affluent young men and women conspicuously discarded their imported finery and strolled down the Boston Mall wearing the plain dress of their forefathers.⁵²

But as had happened so often in the past, such regeneration was both exaggerated and fleeting. The Great Awakening, with its accompanying renewal of plain living, died out almost as suddenly as it had arisen, and the simple life continued its retreat in the face of the burgeoning economic growth of the colonies. By the late 1740s Edwards was forced to acknowledge that the revival of piety and plainness he had promoted in Northampton had quickly subsided. Between 1744 and 1748 there was not a single new applicant for membership in his church. And the simplicities he observed during the early stages of the revivals were likewise discarded. "We in this town," he remarked, "are evidently got to great excess. Boston is extravagant beyond London. And we, considering all things, I think beyond them." Not long thereafter, his congregation, grown irritated by his constant strictures, relieved Pastor Edwards of his duties.⁵³

Throughout New England at mid-century the gap between professed ideals and actual behavior seemed to grow ever wider, and the Puritan ethic took on a meaning that bore little resemblance to the credo preached by the colonial founders. Successful New Englanders continued to devote more and more of their time and energy to the pursuit of their particular calling at the expense of their general calling. Hard work and the enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor became an ethic almost complete in itself, devoid of much spiritual content. As an indentured farmhand reported in the 1740s, his master never mentioned religion: "His whole attention was taken up on the pursuits of the good things of this world; wealth was his supreme object. I am afraid gold was his God."⁵⁴

That Americans in the colonies came to emphasize material gratification more than pious self-restraint is not surprising. The simple life as expressed by early Puritans was circumscribed by a stringent set of limits. People were encouraged to work and prosper but not so much that they became crassly materialistic or intent upon living above their appointed station; they were reminded to be temperate in their style of living, since needless luxury for some meant penury for others; they were warned that individual liberty in the workplace and marketplace must always defer to the public good; and, they were told that by reducing their material desires they could afford more time for worship, their families, and community service. But such restraints no longer seemed appropriate either to many upwardly mobile Americans dazzled by the prosperous and seemingly fluid new society opening up before their eyes or to those already blessed with abundance. By the nineteenth century the British literary traveler Anthony Trollope could note that Boston still "calls itself a Puritan city, but it has divested its Puritanism of austerity." He then wryly added: "The Puritans of Boston are simple in their tastes and expense. Champagne and canvas-back ducks I found to be the provisions most in vogue among those who desired to adhere to the manner of their forefathers."⁵⁵