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A Well-Bounded Toleration: Church and State in the Plymouth Colony

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In recent years there has been a revival of interest in Plymouth Colony, after years of relative neglect by students of seventeenth-century America. A number of contributions have been made to a new understanding of the Old Colony.¹ One aspect of Plymouth which remains unclarified, however, is the colony's overall religious position. Most scholars recognize that the Old Colony did, throughout its independent existence, maintain a distinct religious way which stood somewhere between the rigid orthodoxy of Massachusetts and the soul liberty of Rhode Island. Exactly what this meant in practice has never been adequately discussed.

Plymouth was never entirely committed to the concept of church establishment, and it never completely institutionalized the principle of territorial churches. Even more important, the colony was far more flexible in its definition of orthodoxy than its larger neighbors—particularly on the issue of infant baptism—and it was reasonably tolerant of religious eccentricity. Furthermore, its “approved” churches remained largely unaffected by the great developments of Puritanism in America: the Cambridge Platform, the halfway covenant, and the insistence on strict qualifications for the ministry. The “Plymouth Way” always maintained a residual antipathy to rigidity and compulsion in religious matters. How deeply these differences between Pilgrim and Puritan penetrated into the very fabric of Plymouth's religious life and ecclesiastical institutions deserves recognition.

The variances between Plymouth and Massachusetts in religious policy were a logical result of the two distinct schools of English Puritanism which the founders of the two colonies embodied. The Plymouth tradition was separatistic, having rejected the Anglican Church and withdrawn from it to begin

¹John Demos, “Notes on Life in Plymouth Colony,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XV (April 1965), 264-286; George D. Langdon, Jr., “The Franchise and Political Democracy in Plymouth Colony,” *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., XX (October 1963), 513-526; Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (New York: New York University Press, 1959), pp. 58-63. *Pilgrim Colony: A History of New Plymouth 1620-1691* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1966), a full length study by George D. Langdon, Jr., appeared too late to be employed in the preparation of this article.

afresh in the proper manner. The Bay Colony was settled by non-separating Puritans who had sought to purify the Anglican Church by reforming it from within.² Both traditions agreed on doctrine, but on questions of church government—and particularly with regard to the crucial connection of church and state—there was little consensus.

As a result of their non-separatistic approach, the founders of Massachusetts demonstrated little fear of a contamination of the saints following from a close connection between church and state. The leadership of the Bay Colony was not hostile to a formal church establishment; it simply wanted one scripturally correct.³ Massachusetts Puritanism did attempt to maintain a sectarian ideal—the fellowship of the saints—within the framework of its national church, and it was forced to adjust to become both more exclusive and more comprehensive in the American environment. Exclusiveness was achieved by the introduction of the practice of “testing prospective members of the church for signs of saving grace.”⁴ This innovation, begun in Massachusetts in the 1630s, preserved the voluntary society of visible saints, and appeared in the Bay Colony almost simultaneously with the decision to support the saints by compulsory taxation.⁵ Such taxation meant that all property-holders had a share in public worship, and the church had to be sure that this did not lead everyone to assume themselves eligible for church membership. The new requirements preserved the saints, but narrowed the doors of membership in particular churches. Puritans considered that the visible church consisted of “Saints by calling,” and the “children of such, who are holy.”⁶ By 1648, saints were “visible saints,” and only the children of a small elite were eligible for baptism.⁷ This intolerable situation, where most of those paying taxes for the support of religion were excluded from membership and the sacraments, was corrected by the so-called “halfway covenant.” Children of non-saints could be baptized if their parents had been baptized in infancy and at

²Perry Miller, *Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630-1650* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959), pp. 73-101.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 73-101.

⁴Morgan, *op. cit.*, pp. 58-105.

⁵Samuel S. Green, “The Use of the Voluntary System in the Maintenance of Ministers in the Colonies of Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay during the Earlier Years of their Existence,” *American Antiquarian Society Proceedings* (1886), pp. 86-126, especially pp. 107-109.

⁶William Walker, *The Creeds and Platforms of Congregationalism* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1960), pp. 205-206.

⁷Perry Miller, *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), pp. 82-92.

majority accepted the doctrines of the particular church as embodied in its covenant.⁸

While the Puritans were debating the membership problem and taking measures to adjust their practices, Plymouth remained largely oblivious to the problem. Only the First Church of Plymouth adopted the public test of membership, and this followed a decision to support that church by public taxation.⁹ With the possible exception of the church at Yarmouth, which may have adopted the halfway covenant under Thomas Thornton, no other church in the colony practiced this innovation before 1691.¹⁰ The greater flexibility in membership requirements was possible only where emphasis was not placed on a territorial church.

The churches of the Old Colony failed to follow the lead of the Bay not only in qualifications for membership, but in other aspects of church polity as well. Plymouth's position was always conditioned by a strong tradition of sectarian separatism. Massachusetts Puritanism, despite its objections to the centralization of power in the Anglican Church and in Presbyterianism, had no objection to the settling of important issues by the calling of synods—particularly those of 1637, 1646-48, 1662, and 1679-80.¹¹ Although individual ministers from Plymouth attended several of these assemblies, the decisions arrived at were seldom imported into the Old Colony, and the Cambridge Platform had no standing there.¹² Within Plymouth itself, the ministry assembled together only once, and then because of the emergency produced by King Philip's War.¹³ The colony's churches and magistrates not only had the right to determine their own religious policy—a right for the most part limited elsewhere in New England—but were never seriously

⁸Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 328.

⁹John Cotton first records the new requirements in 1669. *Plymouth Church Records, 1620-1859*, (Boston: the Colonial Society of Mass., 1920), I, 145. Plymouth first began to raise money by rate for the ministry in 1661, when a tax was levied to build a parsonage. First mention of rates for ministerial salary came in 1663, when a supply minister was paid through taxation. John Cotton was voted his salary in July 1667 "to be raised by way of Rate to be payed in such as god gives." *Records of the Town of Plymouth* (Plymouth: Avery & Doten, 1889), I, 45, 78, 87.

¹⁰John Cotton, Jr., to Increase Mather, Plymouth, August 26, 1678, Mather Papers, Boston Public Library, Boston, Massachusetts.

¹¹Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 191-192.

¹²Ralph Partridge of Duxbury produced a draft of a platform for the Synod of 1648. Unfortunately, the text of the draft has been lost, and only a few excerpts and analysis remain in Henry Martyn Dexter, *The Congregationalism of the Last Three Hundred Years, as Seen in its Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1880), pp. 444-446.

¹³A copy of the result of this meeting, in John Cotton Jr.'s handwriting, dated July 12, 1677, is in the Cotton Papers, Boston Public Library.

influenced in their deliberations by the results of great assemblies of their learned divines.

Indeed, Plymouth churches were not very insistent upon what Massachusetts considered a learned clergy. The Old Colony commonly followed the separatistic practice of ordination by brethren within the church rather than by councils of neighboring ministers.¹⁴ In the Bay, these councils tested the learning and orthodoxy of the candidate, an opportunity to assure uniformity not emphasized in Plymouth. In the Old Colony, before 1691, at least a dozen of the standing ministers lacked a demonstrable university education. When the ministers of the colony met in their only recorded conference in 1677, fully a third of the eleven men present had no known university degrees.¹⁵ Such men were highly literate, but were inclined to be unpretentious about their learning and their conclusions.

The Plymouth attitude toward church membership, toward synods, and toward a learned ministry remained consistent with sectarianism. But nowhere is the strength of this viewpoint more apparent than in the relationship of church and state in the colony. Gradually, under pressure from events and her neighbors in the New England Confederation, Plymouth reluctantly came to insist upon uniformity and public support for religion. But the reforms were not only half-hearted; they were opposed by many in the colony.

Prior to 1650, the Plymouth General Court made no laws which could in any way be interpreted as attempts to force or regulate religious worship.¹⁶ But the growth of religious irregularities and the colony's failure to attract ministers seemed to threaten religion and call for some religious guidelines. In 1650, the General Court, "forasmuch as there are risen amongst us many scandalous practices which are likely to prove destructive to our churches and common peace," passed acts prohibiting the creation of new churches without the consent of the government. It also prohibited the villification "by approbrius tearmes of speeches any church or ministry or ordinance," and provided a penalty for the profaning of the Lord's Day "by doing any

¹⁴No evidence of an ordination council in Plymouth before 1691 exists. For the Cambridge Platform position, see Walker, *op. cit.*, p. 216.

¹⁵Samuel Arnold of Marshfield, Noah Newman of Rehoboth, John Smith of Barnstable, James Keith of Bridgewater. George Shove of Taunton had attended Harvard but never graduated.

¹⁶Plymouth had laws relating to various aspects of morality, but not laws regulating particular churches or ministers.

servill worke or any such like abusses.”¹⁷ In 1651, cash fines or whippings were instituted for “whatsoever person or persons shall neglect the frequenting the publick worship of God that is according to God in the places wher they live or doe assemble themselves upon any pretence whatsoever in any way contrary to God and the allowance of the Government tending to the subversion of Religion and churches and palpable prophanacon of God’s holy ordinances. . . .”¹⁸ These laws, which made no attempt to define the public worship of God, constituted the colony’s initial attempts to regulate religion.

Laws identifying approved churches by providing for public support of the ministry had to wait longer than laws attempting to prevent what seemed to be religious chaos. Plymouth was convinced that government could legislate in religious matters, but it was far less certain about maintenance of the ministry. John Robinson, the great religious leader of the Scrooby-Leyden years, had indicated a preference for ministerial support by “the people’s voluntary contribution, whether it be less or more, as the blessing of God upon our labor, the fruits of our ministry, and a declaration of their love and duty.”¹⁹ Although Robinson did not come to the New World, his voluntaristic concept of financial support for the ministry did get to the New World. When asked for a scriptural text “to prove that the world should be compelled to maintain the Churches officers,” the Plymouth Church replied, “it is not knowne to be the Churches Judgment; and wee are sure it never was their Practicae; and for us to meddle in that which doth not concerne us wee should heerby declare ourselves to be busy in that which is Needles as from us.”²⁰ The vehemence of this answer indicates that forced maintenance in the Old Colony had many obstacles to overcome.

The first attempt of the colony to solve the problem of ministerial support came in 1655, when the General Court responded to “many complaints of want of due maintenance of the minnesters” with an order that “noe Pastor or Teacher of any Congregation shall remove before his complain hath been tendered to the Majestrates and they have heard both sides.”²¹ This was more than arbitration, for although the magistrates

¹⁷*The Compact with the Charter and Laws of the Colony of New Plymouth* (Boston: Dutton and Wentworth, 1836), p. 92.

¹⁸*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 93.

¹⁹Robert Ashton, ed., *The Works of John Robinson, Pastor of the Pilgrim Fathers* (London: J. Snow, 1851), III, 277.

²⁰*Plymouth Church Records*, I, 99.

²¹*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 99.

were to use "all gentle meanes" to persuade the congregations "to do their duty heerin," the order stressed that "if any of them shall not heerby bee reclaimed but shall persist through plain obstinacy against an ordinance of God that then it shalbee in the power of the Majestrate to use other such means as may put them upon their duty."²² One of the petitions leading to this order came from Rehoboth, in the western part of the colony. In accordance with "the orders of the other Colonyes about them," Rehoboth wanted some way to "compell all the Inhabitants of that towne to pay a certain sune every yeare toward the maintenance of the minister."²³ Implied threats by the General Court worked for Rehoboth; one of the magistrates—a Rehoboth inhabitant and later a Baptist—offered that if the names were taken of those supporting compulsory maintenance, he would guarantee the voluntary contributions of the others "out of his Estate."²⁴

However successful the order of 1655 was in Rehoboth, it did not work everywhere, and by 1657 the ministerial situation in the colony was desperate. Only three ordained ministers remained, and the Plymouth Church had itself been without a pastor since 1654. Understandably concerned, the General Court took "into their seriouse Consideration" the difficulties presented by "want of an able Godly Teaching Minnistry and the great prejudice to the soules of many like to ensue."²⁵ The result was the first law providing for forced support of the ministry, passed in 1657. The statute, which insured the "convenient maintainance" of ministers "as shalbee agreed upon by the Church in each township where any is with the concurrence of the rest of the Inhabitants if it may be had or by the Majistrates . . . in case of their apparent neglect," also added that "in case there bee any other way wherby any township doe or shall agree that may effect the end aforesaid this law not to be binding to them."²⁶

Not everyone in the colony was pleased with the new law.

²²*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 99.

²³Rehoboth Town Records, I (1644-1673), Rehoboth Town Clerk's Office, Rehoboth, Mass., p. 117.

²⁴*Ibid.*, I, 117.

²⁵*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 101.

²⁶*Ibid.*, pp. 101-102. In 1656, the Massachusetts General Court wrote the commissioners of the United Colonies about the sad state of religion in Plymouth, and requested that "such course might be taken as that a pious Orthodox Minnistry may bee Restated amongst them." N. B. Shurtleff, *et al.*, eds., *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England 1620-1692* (12 vols.; Boston: Press of W. White, 1855-1861), X, 155-158.

One Scituate man argued that "now we must have a State-Religion . . . a State-Minister and a stateway of Maintenance; and we must worship and serve the Lord Jesus as the world shall appoint."²⁷ In Plymouth, a leading citizen was fined for insisting that "the divell satt att the sterne" when the law was enacted.²⁸ In the towns of the colony, the new regulation was greeted in various ways. Some towns took advantage of the exclusion clause and continued to support ministers through voluntary contribution; others, when they settled a minister, did vote to support him by rate.²⁹ Several specifically exempted from rates any who paid their fair share voluntarily.³⁰ At least one town registered its opposition to the law. The raters of Sandwich protested "an order that ties them to doe that that is unjust in their apprehensions," and declared themselves willing to take the penalty of the court. The town voted in January of 1659 to leave "the Raters to proceed according to theire wisdom and discretion God hath given them."³¹ What happened is not revealed in the records. But the General Court did attempt to make it easier for towns opposed to forced maintenance to support a ministry without it. It continued to encourage towns to admit their ministers into the proprietorship of town lands, and in 1662 it recommended in a law regulating the disposal of drift whales that the towns "should agree to sett apart some pte of every such fish or oyle for the Incouragement of an able Godly Minnester amongst them."³²

²⁷George Bishop: *New England Judged, Not by Man's but the Spirit of the Lord: and the Summe Sealed up of New England's Persecutions* (London: n.p., 1661), pp. 131-132.

²⁸*Plymouth Colony Records*, III, 50.

²⁹The Taunton records have been destroyed. Scituate began raising money for salaries by rate in 1665; Scituate Town Records, I (1665-1742), Scituate Town Hall, p. 14. Eastham started in 1663; Eastham Town Records, I (1648-1705), Eastham Town Hall, p. 26. Rehoboth began irregularly in 1662; Rehoboth Town Records, I, 99 ff. Yarmouth raised ministerial rates in 1678; Yarmouth Town Records, I (1677-1726) Yarmouth Town Hall, p. 6. Sandwich in 1657 tried voluntary contribution and subscription, and voted rates only in 1680; Sandwich Town Records, I (1652-1692), Sandwich Town Hall, pp. 30, 158. Marshfield employed voluntarism, but in 1662 ordered rates for those who refused or failed to pay support without compulsion; Marshfield Town Records, I (1643-1778), Marshfield Town Hall, p. 84. Bridgewater adopted rates in 1660; Bridgewater Town Records, I (1656-1702), Bridgewater Town Hall, pp. 6-8. Middleborough settled no minister, but voted rates in 1679; Middleborough Town Records, I (1658-1705), Middleborough Town Hall, p. 11. Plymouth initiated rates in 1661 and 1663; *Plymouth Town Records*, I, 45, 78. Dartmouth had no church and Swansea no rates, Freetown, Little Compton, and Tiverton—established subsequent to the law—had no clergy under the Plymouth patent. The town of Bristol had much trouble with its first ministers in the 1680's and apparently did not publicly support any before 1691.

³⁰Sandwich, Marshfield, Yarmouth, and Plymouth.

³¹Sandwich Town Records, I, 51.

³²Almost every minister received land from proprietors or the town, and most became proprietors themselves. For the whole act, see *New Plymouth Laws*, p. 135.

The response of Rehoboth to the problems of ministerial maintenance may serve as an example of town reaction. Prior to 1655, the Reverend Samuel Newman received no financial support from the town, although he was made an inhabitant and given choice lands.³³ A semi-voluntary agreement worked out in 1655 in response to the General Court's implied coercion was not entirely successful.³⁴ In 1657, following the passage of the compulsion law, the town voted to give those in arrears to Newman a specified time to catch up, or else agents of the town and the deacons were to "labor to convince them of the neglect of this duty." If persuasion did not work, "then the court order is to be attended on."³⁵ In 1658, the law was observed, and the sums to be paid Newman were set in commodities, a five man committee to "assist the Deacons" in collecting the goods.³⁶ Newman was given his firewood in 1662, the cost of which was raised by rate.³⁷ When he died soon after, the town dropped all pretense of voluntarism in seeking a successor. It voted to pay a supply minister an annual salary and agreed to a rate to build him a parsonage.³⁸ As late as 1680, however, Rehoboth was still experimenting with little success with voluntary contribution.

Whether because of the new regulations or for other reasons, Plymouth's churches did acquire ministers, until by 1670 most towns had obtained one. In that year a law provided for the appointment of two persons in each town who would see to the "gathering in of their minnesters maintainance."³⁹ The law also provided for the disposition of money raised by rates "in case any minnester shall scruple to receive what is soe raised," indicating that some still felt rather tender about the whole business. Towns without ministers and "remiss in the obtaining of one" could have rates imposed by the General Court.⁴⁰ The order of 1670 was further clarified in 1677 to make the procedures for levying rates in destitute towns more specific and to allow for defalcation by the town constables, apparently signifying that the matter was still not entirely settled in a fashion acceptable to all.⁴¹

³³Rehoboth Town Records, I, 48.

³⁴*Ibid.*, I, 117.

³⁵*Ibid.*, I, 122.

³⁶*Ibid.*, I, 128.

³⁷*Ibid.*, I, 145.

³⁸*Ibid.*, I, 153-155.

³⁹*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 159.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, p. 186.

The law of 1677 was the final step in the process of creation of the church establishment in force in Plymouth until 1691. While Plymouth did insist that towns have settled ministers supported by the compulsion of the civil government, it is not entirely accurate to conclude that "the legal relations between church and state were practically the same in Plymouth as in the Bay Colony."⁴² In the first place, the colony never seriously attempted to ensure that every township have an orthodox church and minister. Moreover, the very fact that Plymouth did not divide into counties its rather extensive territory until 1685 indicates a typical laxness of enforcement which prevailed throughout the colony's history.⁴³ The distance from Plymouth-town to the western border of the colony made it difficult for the General Court to enforce its will in the west, and this was the area most strongly opposed to establishment. Finally, the semi-fictional distinction made elsewhere in New England between the inhabitants acting as a town and as a parish (or society) was never employed in Plymouth.⁴⁴ When Plymouth began erecting an ecclesiastical establishment, it did so through the town directly.⁴⁵

Perhaps more important than the legal relations of church and state was the colony's interpretation of orthodoxy—essential for determining which ministers and churches were acceptable to the civil authority—and its attitude toward religious dissent. Here too, Plymouth stood apart from Massachusetts Bay. Puritanism did have standards against which to measure orthodoxy: the Cambridge Platform and the doctrinal statement adopted by the Cambridge Synod and the Synod of 1679-80.⁴⁶ As has already been noted, neither the Cambridge Platform nor the decisions of other New England synods had any standing in the Old Colony, and in at least one matter regarded by the Cambridge Platform as essential—infant baptism—the Plymouth churches had a curiously equivocal attitude. When in 1677 the

⁴²Jacob C. Meyer, *Church and State in Massachusetts from 1740 to 1833* (Cleveland: Western Reserve University Press, 1930) p. 6.

⁴³*New Plymouth Laws*, pp. 206-209.

⁴⁴English local government and the parish is discussed in Sidney and Beatrice Webb, *English Local Government from the Revolution to the Municipal Corporations Act: The Parish and The County*. (London, New York, and Bombay: Longmans, Green and Co., 1906) Also useful are Sumner C. Powell, *Puritan Village: the Formation of a New England Town* (Middletown, Ct.: Wesleyan University Press, 1963), and Emil Oberholzer, *Delinquent Saints: Disciplinary Action in the Early Congregational Churches of Massachusetts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1963), especially pp. 7-8.

⁴⁵In Scituate, for example, two ministers were supported by the town, and parish records distinct from town records begin only in 1691. Scituate Town Records, I, 13-14.

⁴⁶Walker, *op. cit.*, pp. 340-408.

ministers of the colony did produce their own doctrinal statement, it was relatively brief and general.

Although John Robinson had insisted upon infant baptism and approved of sprinkling, the ministry in the colony itself was not in agreement on these points.⁴⁷ Charles Chauncy of Scituate favored baptism by total immersion rather than by sprinkling, and even though several of the colony's ministers remonstrated with him about this, there was no suggestion that either he or his church be read out of the colony.⁴⁸ In spite of the fact that antipedobaptists did not always have an easy time in Plymouth, the colony hesitated to censure them, and failed to ostracize them. John Cooke, a first settler, was excommunicated from the Plymouth First Church for his antipedobaptist views, but he merely moved to Dartmouth, where he served not only as a Baptist lay preacher but as a town officer and Dartmouth's deputy to the General Court!⁴⁹

The most striking illustration of Plymouth's attitude toward antipedobaptism is the treatment accorded John Miles and his Swansea Church, which had been organized in Wales in 1649. Miles was chosen its elder in 1651, was ejected for non-conformity after the Restoration, and migrated with part of his congregation to Rehoboth in 1663.⁵⁰ Here he preached on supply after the death of Samuel Newman, but some of his people refused to worship with the Rehoboth Church and ran into difficulty with the Plymouth General Court. In 1667, Miles and others of his group were fined "for their breach of order in setting up of a publicke meeting without the knowlidge and approbation of the Court, to the disturbance of the peace of the place." The Court did not attempt to persecute the Miles group or eject them from the colony, although it considered that "their continuance at Rehoboth, being very prejudicial to the peace of that church

⁴⁷For Robinson's position, see Ashton, *op. cit.*, III, 1-79, especially pp. 17-19. The Plymouth Church held that "Infants of believing [sic.] parents are to be baptised." *Plymouth Church Records*, I, 97.

⁴⁸William Bradford, *History of Plymouth Plantation, 1620-1674*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), II, 302-306.

⁴⁹Cooke was excommunicated from the Plymouth Church for "the error of Anabaptistry." *Plymouth Church Records*, I, 92. He did not organize a Baptist church in Dartmouth, but joined John Clarke's Newport church. John Cotton Jr. to Cotton Mather, Plymouth, April 19, 1681, Mather Papers, Boston Public Library. Cooke was Dartmouth constable in 1669, selectman in 1670, and deputy in 1675. *Plymouth Colony Records*, V, 18, 35, 165.

⁵⁰For biographical details of Miles (or Myles), see H. M. King, *Reverend John Myles and the Founding of the First Baptist Church in Massachusetts* (Providence: Preston & Rounds, 1905); Isaac Backus, *A History of New England, with Particular Reference to the Denominations of Christians Called Baptists*, David Weston, ed. (Newton, Mass: Backus Historical Society, 1871), I, 282-285.

and that town, may not be allowed." It was decided that if they moved elsewhere and "not prejudice any other church, and give us any reasonable satisfaction respecting their principles, we know not but they may be permitted by this government so to do."⁵¹ Soon after, the Miles people were granted permission to settle a separate township at Swansea, on land previously considered part of Rehoboth. The most unusual feature of these proceedings was that the Miles group practised mixed communion with both paedobaptists and antipaedobaptists admitted to the same celebration of the sacrament, and Miles himself was an acknowledged antipaedobaptist.⁵²

Such action as taken with the Swansea church might be merely an illustration of Plymouth tolerance and forbearance, but for the fact that the church was more than tolerated. A large share of the proprietorial lands were set aside for the maintenance of religion and education, and Miles and his church enjoyed the income from this land without interference from the General Court. For all intents and purposes, Miles was the standing minister at Swansea, notwithstanding his insistence that "the minister or ministers of the Town may take their liberty to baptise Infants or grown persons as the Lord shall persuade their Consciences and so also the Inhabitants to take their Liberty to bring their Children to Baptism or forbear."⁵³

Not content with settlement at Swansea and tacit acceptance by the colony, Miles sought fellowship with the other ministers and churches of Plymouth.⁵⁴ From the scattered records surviving, it is not clear whether the Swansea church was ever fully accepted into the Plymouth fellowship. But if not, rejection came only after a trial period by several churches, and the obstacle was less Miles' objection to infant baptism than his willingness to rebaptize adults who had previously been baptized by other churches. The Plymouth ministry made it clear that it would accept believer's baptism and extend fellowship to Miles, if he in turn would respect their infant baptisms.⁵⁵ This

⁵¹*Plymouth Colony Records*, IV, 162.

⁵²Swansea Church Records (1650-1844), Brown University Library, Providence, R. I., p. 33.

⁵³Swansea Town Records, (1667-1775), Swansea Town Hall, I, 3.

⁵⁴The church covenant stated "as Union in Christ is the Sole ground of our Communion, Each With Other So we are Ready to accept of, Receive too, and hold Communion with all Such as by a Judgment of Charity we Conceive to be fellow members with us in our head Christ Jesus the Differing from us in Such Controversial Points as are not absolutely and essentially Necessary to Salvation." Swansea Town Records, I, 203.

⁵⁵Noah Newman to John Cotton Jr., Rehoboth, January 10, 1670; John Cotton Jr., to John Miles, Plymouth, March 19, 1670; Thomas Walley to John Cotton Jr.,

he was apparently unwilling to do. But the entire tone of the discussions were on a far different level from that employed by the Massachusetts Puritans with antipedobaptists. At the same time that the Plymouth ministers were debating fellowship with John Miles, their compatriots in the Bay Colony were aggressively persecuting Baptists. With the Swansea church, as with Plymouth's Baptists generally, the issue was recognition by the Standing Order rather than survival.⁵⁶

The Plymouth attitude toward those with eccentric religious principles was undoubtedly influenced by the colony's separatistic beginnings and the relative open-mindedness of early leaders like John Robinson, who held that "it was not possible the Christian world should come so lately out of such thick anti-christian darkness, and that full perfection of knowledge shall break forth at once."⁵⁷ The tradition survived, and as late as 1658, the Plymouth General Court, having insisted that the magistrates uphold God's worship and service, added, "with due respect alsoe to be had unto those that are really consciencyous though differing and decenting in some smaller matters."⁵⁸ A similar tone pervaded Thomas Walley's election sermon before the General Court in 1669, one of the few published Plymouth sermons. *Balm in Gilead to Heal Sions Wounds*, as Walley titled his sermon, was in part jeremiad, but it was also an attempt to enunciate publicly Plymouth principles thought important enough to justify publication.⁵⁹ The Barnstable minister distinguished several classes of "persons that are in Errour." Some had "*weak understandings*, and yet have sincere hearts, tender consciences, and unwillingly differ from the generality of the godly." He pleaded "Pity and forebearance" for these poor folk. Others

undated but received by Cotton March 4, 1671. All are in the Cotton Papers at the Boston Public Library. See also *Plymouth Church Records*, I, 146.

⁵⁶Although the Quakers were disenfranchised from 1658 to 1668, Baptists were never excluded from freemanship. Langdon, "Democracy in Plymouth Colony," p. 523.

⁵⁷Edward Winslow, *Hypocrisie Unmasked: By a True Relation of the Proceedings of the Governor and Company of the Massachusetts against Samuel Gorton* (London, 1646), p. 97.

⁵⁸*New Plymouth Laws*, p. 107.

⁵⁹Thomas Walley, *Balm in Gilead to Heal Sions Wounds: Or, A Treatise Wherein There Is a Clear Discovery of the Most Prevailing Sickneses of New England, Both in the Civill and Ecclesiastical State; As Also Sutable Remedies for the Cure of Them* (Cambridge, Mass.: n.p., 1669), pp. 13-14. A brief excerpt from Walley's sermon has recently been reprinted in Russel B. Nye and Norman S. Grabo, eds., *American Thought and Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1965), I, 76-78. Ironically, the editors found the sermon "interesting both for Walley's relating the spiritual to the civil disorders of the commonwealth . . . and for his use of the metaphor of a diseased body politics," but they neither note nor reprint Walley's plea for toleration, discussed briefly in this article.

were willful and proud, exhibiting "a Frenzy, a Madness."⁶⁰ For such people as these, who differed from the godly in "*Fundamentalia in Fide*, which are called *Magnalia Dei*," toleration was impossible.⁶¹ But, warned Walley, other errors were "*Minutilla*." While toleration could hardly be extended to those errors which "would blaspheme the Name of God" and "damn the Souls of Men," at the same time,

Neither would it consist with our profession of love to Christ or Saints, to trouble those that peaceably differ from the generality of Gods people in lesser things. . . . Those that differ in lesser things, and do not infringe the just liberties of others, why should they not have peace? A *well-bounded Toleration* were very desirable in all Christian Commonwealths, that there may be no just occasion for any to complain of Cruelty or Persecution. . . . Though it be the duty of Magistrates to see that the great Truths of God be not vilified, nor trampled in the dust, yet this I judge I may confidently affirm, that Truth never got ground by a violent opposition of smaller Errours.⁶²

Walley in 1669 did not distinguish in detail between the greater and lesser errors. But a few years later, the ministry of the colony had an opportunity to deal with this question when called to consider the "due bounds & limits which ought to be set on Toleration in Matters of Religion as may consist with the Honour of Christ, the good welfare of the churches and of civil government."⁶³ The ministers produced a confession of faith to which those to be tolerated had to subscribe. The confession was extraordinarily brief, emphasizing only: the Old and New Testaments as the word of God and the rule of man; the doctrine of the Trinity; the creation of the world from nothingness in six days; the doctrine of original sin with Christ the only mediator between God and man; the doctrines of redemption, justification, and sanctification in accordance with the Westminster Confession; the belief that the souls of men return to God, with the good saved and the wicked cast into hell; and a belief in the day of judgment and the millenium.⁶⁴ Subscription to infant baptism was not required. These few points of doctrine considered fundamental by Plymouth were a far cry from the

⁶⁰Walley, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

⁶¹*Ibid.*, p. 14-15.

⁶²*Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶³Answer of George Shove and others . . . , July 12, 1677, Cotton Papers, Boston Public Library.

⁶⁴Answer of George Shove.

"New England Confession of Faith" (actually the Savoy Confession) adopted as a standard of orthodoxy by Massachusetts ministers only two years later.

No fundamentals regarding church polity in any way paralleling the Cambridge Platform were listed, although a number of additional clauses, directed largely at the Quakers, did specifically exclude from toleration those who practiced "abuses." These included reviling or reproaching the civil authority and churches approved by it; admitting to communion persons excommunicated "for scandalous evils" by the churches without requiring that the individual's peace be made with his church or the censure pronounced unjust by other churches; refusing to hold communion with approved churches on grounds that this would be "sinfull and unchristian"; disturbing approved churches in their public administrations; and setting up a public worship "upon pretence of Religion" while declaring unwillingness when required by the government to "give assistance of others of the country against the common enemy."⁶⁵ Since the meeting of the ministers was held in the midst of King Philip's War, a certain special hostility to the pacifistic Quakers was understandable. Thomas Walley admitted that he called the Quakers "blasphemous and idolators" in sermons, but he denied that they were actually persecuted. Indeed, he blamed the wrath of God manifested in Indian war on Plymouth's "suffering the publick exercise of their false worship which for ought I know is suffered only in this Collony."⁶⁶

Even with the Quakers, neither churches nor state in Plymouth assumed that an absolute uniformity or orthodoxy could be enforced. Plymouth's tolerant, flexible, frequently lax attitude in religious matters was probably in practice closer to Rhode Island soul liberty than to the clearly articulated and rigid orthodoxy of Massachusetts. Rhode Island was so far beyond the pale that its practices had very little impact on New England Puritanism. But because the Old Colony was not able to get a charter and was literally annexed by Massachusetts Bay in 1691, the "Plymouth Way" did influence her northern neighbor. After 1691, the Old Colony's towns and churches were integrated into the political and ecclesiastical system of the Bay. Massachusetts soon reconstructed its old ecclesiastical establishment, but found the major obstacles to the re-establishment of Puritanism as the state religion in Massachusetts were

⁶⁵*Ibid.*

⁶⁶Thomas Walley to John Cotton Jr., July 28, 1675, Cotton Papers.

the dissenting sects and towns in the Plymouth area, particularly in Bristol County, which successfully fought for laws permitting dissenters to remain outside the standing churches.⁶⁷ Plymouth's most striking religious tradition—its sectarian separatism—became submerged under the newly introduced Puritan orthodoxy, but when the Great Awakening came in 1740, the revival's more radical religious ideals found fertile ground in the Old Colony area.⁶⁸ It was not by accident that the Plymouth area—founded by separatists and never entirely hostile toward antipedobaptism—served as the spawning ground of the Separate Baptist movement of the eighteenth century.

⁶⁷Susan M. Reed, *Church and State in Massachusetts, 1691-1740* (Urbana, Illinois: The University of Illinois, 1914), pp. 86 ff.

⁶⁸William G. McLoughlin, *Isaac Backus and the American Pietistic Tradition* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1967), pp. 57-109; John M. Bumsted, "The Pilgrims' Progress: The Ecclesiastical History of Southeastern Massachusetts, 1620-1776" (unpublished Doctoral dissertation, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, 1965).