

ABRAM C. VAN ENGEN, *Sympathetic Puritans: Calvinist Fellow Feeling in Early New England* (New York: Oxford UP, 2015), xii + 311 pp.

Anyone who picks up a copy of *Sympathetic Puritans* might wince at what purports to be something of an oxymoron: “Sympathetic Puritans”? Are you kidding me? Whatever happened to H. L. Menken’s old gibe, “A Puritan is one who is afraid that someone, somewhere, is having fun,” or: when the Puritans arrived on New England’s shore, they first “fell on their knees and then on the Indians,”? Clichés about witch-crazed Puritan killjoys and hard-nosed Indian haters are more popular than ever, and Professor van Engen’s fine book, I am afraid, is not going to change anyone’s mind reared on Jonathan Edwards’s *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*, let alone Hawthorne’s obligatory high-school read, “Young Goodman Brown” or his classic *The Scarlet Letter* (A+). If anything, Adam Simon’s and Brannan Braga’s serialized TV drama *Salem* (2014), now in its third season, will only boost our national obsession with dour superstitious Puritan zealots who gave us Cotton Mather, Salem witchcraft and, yes, Thanksgiving!

To be sure, van Engen’s *Sympathetic Puritans* is about none of the above. Quite to the contrary, it posits that a “Calvinist theology of sympathy shaped the politics, religion, and literature of seventeenth-century New England” and that the manifestation of “fellow feeling and mutual affections” among the elect served as visible markers to distinguish the community of saints from carnal hypocrites (2). As is well known, the early seminal conflict between John Cotton’s sudden Pauline conversion and Thomas Shepard’s preparational theology constituted the stone of stumbling in the formative Antinomian Controversy. It pitted the followers of John Cotton and Anne Hutchinson with their emphasis on a rapturous conversion (like that of Paul on the road to Damascus) against those who embraced a gradualist conversion morphology as codified in the “preparationism” of Shepard and his father-in-law Thomas Hooker. The latter defined the *ordo salutis* as a drawn-out process of successive stages—contrition, humiliation, vocation (grace), justification, adoption, sanctification, and glorification—which became normative in New England. They knew that undergoing conversion could be an emotional rollercoaster of the first order. For

instance, the posthumously published account of Joanna Drake’s harrowing experience, in *The Firebrand Taken Out of the Fire* (1647, 1654), testifies to the agony of one caught in the maelstrom of self-condemnation engulfing the rock of assurance. Those familiar with Thomas Hooker’s oft-reprinted vademecum *Poor Doubting Christian Drawn unto Christ* (1628) or with John Bunyan’s popular allegory *Pilgrim’s Progress* (1678) can testify to Christian’s doleful encounter with Giant Despair and the Slough of Despond; if only the disciples of the New England Way could have attained faith and assurance of salvation more easily and firmly. Alas, did not Arthur Hildersam remind his New English confreres in his *Lectures Upon the Fourth of John* (1629) that while assurance of salvation is a comfortable thing, certainty is the primrose path to damnation? It would therefore be much better to be wracked with doubt and never attain certainty of salvation than to be lulled asleep in false security. The best one could do then was to examine one’s Self and look for signs of grace in one’s daily conduct and in the realm of emotions: a burning desire for Christ, and (so van Engen) love and fellow feeling for the community of saints. That being said, van Engen cautions that the vital concepts of fellow feeling underwent significant changes; sympathy or affections for the members of one’s tightly bound cohort of the elect became more and more exclusive and narrow over time. To complicate matters, there was no consensus among Puritan divines from the start, either about the meaning, extent, and value of affections or about sympathy as a sign of election. These disagreements became all the more pronounced as theological controversies, migration, Indian conversions and wars, the revocation of the Charter (1684), and the Act of Toleration (1689) destabilized the cohesion of Puritan society and, ultimately, terminated Congregationalism as the de facto state church in New England. “In the crucible of these contingent events,” van Engen argues, “the requirement of fellow feeling and the necessity of demonstrating sincerity turned Puritan writers to literary techniques that would later be found at the heart of sentimental literature” (24). In short, the persistent emphasis on sympathy became a genetic factor in the rise of sentimental literature in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in America. The evolving cult of sensibility (sentimentalism), van Engen avers, therefore

should no longer be viewed as the offspring of the Scottish Enlightenment or as a visceral reaction to corpse-cold Calvinism.

With this matrix in place, Professor van Engen traces in chapter 1 the concept of sympathy from its roots in ancient Greek science and medicine to its entrance into English theological vocabulary via Erasmus and Calvin. Following in their steps, English Reformed theologians such as William Perkins, Richard Sibbes, and William Ames made self-examination, the affections of the heart, and the vicarious experience of fellow feeling among the elect, central markers of the conversion process; and if John Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity* is still allowed as waterproof evidence, the bonds of brotherly affections between rich and poor, and the practice of charity through kindness and forbearance, became the rock upon which Puritan New England reared its City upon the Hill. It is perhaps a bit curious that—against our better judgment—Winthrop's *Model* continues to serve as Urtext of American exceptionalism and the origin of American literature. True, thanks to Perry Miller, Winthrop's lay sermon is perhaps the most anthologized document in all American literature, at least since Miller published his *Errand into the Wilderness* (1956). Yet it is also well known by now (as van Engen acknowledges in a footnote) that Winthrop himself never mentions his *Model* in any of his extant papers (not even in his *Journal*), nor do any of his fellow travelers on the Arbel-la comment they heard him deliver it, nor do any of New England's historians from Edward Johnson, to Thomas Morton, William Hubbard, Cotton Mather, Thomas Hutchinson, all the way to the illustrious George Bancroft in his early nineteenth-century editions of his multivolume history, show any awareness of its existence, let alone its seminal importance as a foundational text. In fact, Winthrop's *Model* was completely unknown among his contemporaries and his intellectual descendants; the only extant fragment of the text (not in Winthrop's hand) was rediscovered in the early nineteenth century among the papers of an English correspondent and subsequently published in 1838. For these reasons, I am not comfortable accepting the use to which Professor van Engen puts Winthrop's *Model* in his reexamination of the Antinomian Controversy as in fact throughout his entire work. Perhaps, my cavils are nothing but academic nitpicking?

Reservations aside, van Engen's tightly argued thesis in chapters two through four elucidates the Antinomian Controversy in fresh ways. In fact, his discussion of the conflict between the Hutchinsonian followers of John Cotton (the party of free grace) and the preparationist disciples of Shepard, Hooker, and Winthrop (dubbed preachers of works), is among the most intriguing aspects of the book, for it also provides side glances at Edward Johnson's history, Anne Bradstreet's poetry, and Mary Rowlandson's captivity narrative in subsequent chapters. The differences between the Antinomians and the orthodox were primarily grounded in "pastoral, not political" matters, van Engen insists: "they debated assurance and salvation, not authority and stability" in the community of saints (59). Their disagreements centered on 1 John 3:14-19, the link between love of brethren, eternal life as markers of operative grace, and assurance of salvation as inward testimony of the Holy Spirit. The bone of contention, then, was their diverging conceptions of what counted as inward evidence of grace or, more generally, what precisely constituted orthodoxy. To the Hutchinsonians the infusion of saving grace manifested itself in "immediate assurance," an intuitive, transcendent, rapturous joy, which the Holy Spirit bestowed on his chosen as evidence of their election. This joyful mystical experience, they insisted, henceforth guided their every motion in life and thought, and stood in stark contrast, so they argued, to that among their opponents who sought for evidence of gracious assurance in an interminable process of sanctification in their workaday lives. From the perspective of the Antinomians, the preparationists appeared to preach Works at the expense of Grace. In other words, the Hutchinsonians (as is traditionally argued) stood for rapturous feeling and spiritual freedom, whereas their opponents, the so-called orthodox, for logic, reason, and obedience to moral law. Conversely, to Shepard, Hooker, and Winthrop, the Hutchinsonians were dangerous enthusiasts prone to direct revelations and excesses similar to those among the English Levelers and the lunatic fringe who turned the world upside down. At least, this is the time-honored explication of the Antinomian Controversy as it has come down to us in nineteenth-century histories. According to van Engen and his peers, this argument no longer holds up to scrutiny.

It is too simplistic to argue that the orthodox stressed good works as signs of election, van Engen insists. To the orthodox, good works in themselves were not meritorious, let alone efficacious; in fact, what mattered most were not outward acts by themselves, but the frame of the heart, the elects' gracious motivations behind their acts of brotherly love and affections. That is why the narratives of conversion in Shepard's congregation focus on the motions of the heart—not external behavior. It is also why Winthrop's *Model of Christian Charity*, according to van Engen, plays such a prominent part: Winthrop does extol acts of charity and compassion for the poor as the fruits of the spirit. Thus, deeds of brotherly love among fellow saints, though not efficacious by any means, could stand in for what the doubting Thomases needed most of all: assurance of salvation. John Cotton, Hutchinson, and her brother-in-law, John Wheelwright, vehemently denied this because it amounted to deriving saving merits from good works. To Cotton and his followers, love of brethren or deeds of charity could never ground assurance of grace. Modern readers unfamiliar with the intricacies of Puritan soteriology may rightly be dismayed; such precisionist arguments eminently typify the casuistic hairsplitting to which our venerable forefathers seemed prone. Let anyone who can limn the lines of demarcation between the primary colors and their spectral cousins in the panoply of the rainbow.

Be that as it may, the traditional explanation of the Hutchinsonian crisis as it has come down to our times in nineteenth-century histories does not get to the heart of the matter. "The theological debate of the Antinomian Controversy," van Engen contends, "did not set up inner spiritual emotions against outer moral behavior. It was not a contest between discipline and feeling as countless scholars have suggested; rather, it opposed one view of religious experience to another" (75). Thus, the debate per se did not center on works versus grace, as is commonly argued, but on the value of fellow feeling as signs of grace. It could serve the weak in faith as comforting evidence of their regeneration. In fact, as van Engen demonstrates throughout his book, it can be discerned in the spiritual autobiographies and memoirs of Winthrop, Shepard, and Roger Clap, just as much as in Anne Bradstreet, Edward Johnson, and Mary Rowlandson. Most of all, it occupies a prominent place

in the Eliot tracts on Indian conversions, in which the profusion of Indian tears could take the deed for the word.

Professor van Engen's analysis of John Eliot's missionary tracts of Indian conversion (chapter five) perhaps best illustrates his argument that the literary techniques deployed in Puritan homiletic discourse grandfathered the rise of sentimental novels in America. To be sure, the Eliot tracts are invaluable documents testifying to Native American acculturation, conversion, and adaptation of English mores. They also reveal the nearly insurmountable linguistic challenges missionaries faced in conveying abstract concepts of the Judeo-Christian religion completely foreign to New England's indigenous peoples. If the Antinomians and orthodox among the Puritan settlers were unable to see eye to eye on the precise nature of work and grace, let alone the meaning and efficacy of assurance, regeneration, and sanctification, how could John Eliot and his fellow missionaries expect his Indian charges to fathom theological abstractions for which no linguistic and conceptual equivalents existed in the Algonquian language? Yet more problematic: since Indian oratory privileged the display of emotions, especially groaning and weeping, how could Puritan missionaries distinguish expressions of culturally predicated emotions in Indian hortatory discourse from signs of authentic conversion, manifestations of regenerate feelings from transitory emotions—or worse, hypocrisy—if sincerity was to be adjudged by the profusion of tears and gushing emotions? Add to this the problematic demand for accurate and trustworthy Indian conversion narratives to garner financial support from English sponsors. Van Engen is right on target when he draws our attention to the complex challenges Eliot and his fellow missionaries encountered, and the literary techniques they employed in their evangelizing work.

Truth to tell, the accounts of Indian conversion (Eliot tracts) are awash in tears. Tearful emotions became the principal signifiers of Indian conversion; everyone could *observe* the spectacle of lachrymose penitence, few if any could understand the words employed to render them authentic. Perhaps the surest way to ascertain their truthfulness was to study their "contagious" effects on their fellow converts: "The repeated evidence of contagious emotions," van Engen points out, "highlights an underlying component of true conversion:

love of brethren [...] The Praying Indians, in their mutual joy for one another, verified their membership in the Body of Christ. The emotional community of saints comprised a worldwide spiritual brotherhood—a fraternity that was supposed to extend beyond kindship and race” (157, 158). Given their circulation and promotion in English parishes, Indian conversion narratives also worked in the opposite direction: they not only testified to the progress of the Gospel among America’s indigene, but also served as evangelical instrument to lead the unregenerate among English readers to repentance and sympathy. A well-known example of this type is Laurence Harlow’s *Conversion of an Indian, in a Letter to a Friend* (1774), which Olaudah Equiano acknowledges in his *Interesting Narrative* (ch. 10), as a great influence on his own conversion. Thus, literary productions of conversion narratives—like the Eliot tracts and their semi-fictionalized descendants in eighteenth-century England—attained a great measure of popularity, precisely because they aroused strong feelings of

sympathy among their target audience. They devised the kind of affective didacticism that, a century and a half later, became unmistakable in sentimental fiction.

Abram van Engen’s *Sympathetic Puritans*, then, is a major contribution to the ongoing revisionist scholarship engaged in putting Puritans and their contributions to American culture back onto an even keel. In drawing our attention to the “genealogical links” between the power of emotions in Puritan soteriology and their latter-day descendants in sentimental fiction, van Engen points us in the right direction. His re-examination of the affective dimensions at the heart of the New England Way, indeed, helps to “overturn the caricatured idea that sentimentalists turned to sympathy as an antidote to their intellectual, doctrinal, stern, and rigorous Puritan past” (169). In this and in many other aspects, van Engen’s first book establishes him as a promising new light in the discipline.

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