

Book Notes: Reading in the Time of Coronavirus

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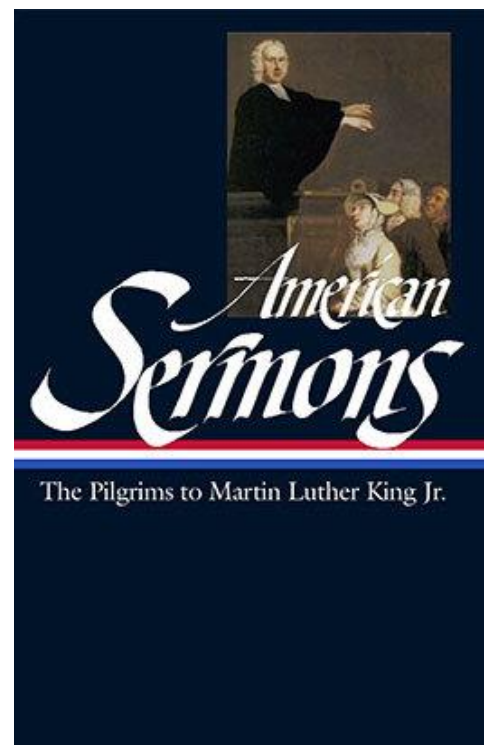
Winthrop's Lesson: Americans must love and care for one another

What can a 400-year-old Puritan sermon tell us about 21st century America?

More than Kurt Andersen might suspect.

Last week's [Book Notes](#) discussed Andersen's *Fantasyland: How America Went Haywire: A Five Hundred Year History*, in which Andersen traced Americans' love of unreality and magical thinking back to American culture's origins in Puritan New England and Cavalier Virginia. Although it is hard to argue with his basic thesis that the marriage of religious zeal and an equally zealous love of gold (lucre – material well-being – wealth) forms the foundation of American culture, I found his dismembering of America's Protestant heritage a bit much.

He used a meat cleaver where a scalpel would have provided his core insight greater precision. In short, Andersen asserts that the religious fanaticism of New England's earliest settlers, combined with the U.S. Constitution's First Amendment prohibition of



the establishment of an official state religion, created an environment where religious sentiment could flourish.

On a positive note, if at times contentious, this resulted in a culture of religious tolerance. On the negative, as Andersen repeatedly pointed out, it created a culture of religious freedom in which people could believe pretty much any damn thing they wanted, untethered from anything remotely resembling reality.

Well, yes and no, but that's a thicket I have no real interest in attempting to prune. Andersen's assertions, however, did get me thinking about American culture's origins and what light they might shed on our current discontents. Which discontents, to oversimplify a bit, really come down to an argument about whether America remains exceptional – a city on a hill, or, as Ronald Reagan's speechwriter Peggy Noonan recast it, "a shining city on a hill."

The origin of the phrase "a city on a hill" is John Winthrop's now almost 400-year-old sermon "A Modell of Christian Charity," which can be found in *The Library of America's American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (1999).

American Sermons proffers a wonderful insight into the evolution of American religious culture. No, not only American religious culture, but into the evolution of American culture. Its 58 selections range from Robert Cushman's "A Sermon Preached at Plimouth in New England" (12/9/1621) to Cotton Mather's "From The Wonders of the Invisible World: An Hortatory and Necessary Address, To a Country now Extraordinarily Alarum'd by the Wrath of the Devil" to Lucretia Mott's "Abuses and Uses of the Bible"; from Henry Ward Beecher's "Peace, Be Still" to Francis J. Grimke's "A Resemblance and a Contrast: Between the American Negro and the Children of Israel in Egypt, or the Duty of the Negro to Contend Earnestly for his Rights Guaranteed Under the Constitution" to Billy Sunday, Reinhold Niebuhr, and ending with Martin Luther King, Jr's last sermon, "I've Been to the Mountaintop."

In this Book Notes, however, we are only concerned with John Winthrop's "A Modell of Christian Charity." It is arguably the most important sermon in American history that almost no one has actually read; in fact, it might be the most important sermon in American history – period.

Why?

Because, in addition to its general excellence as an example of the formal Puritan sermon, one phrase has become a touchstone of American culture – "for wee must Consider that wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us..." [1]

This phrase, in its original spelling, has been read as the seed that generated American culture, in particular that strain of American culture that sees America as “exceptional,” that sees America as foremost among the world’s cultures, that sees America as humanity’s “last best hope,” that sees with Fitzgerald’s Dutch sailor’s eyes “a fresh, green breast of the new world ...face to face for the last time in history with something commensurate to his capacity for wonder.” [2]

Although for most of the 400 years since Winthrop preached his sermon it was ignored, occasionally partisans of various stripes would resurrect it in support of their nationalist or globalist claims. It became a trope for asserting American Exceptionalism.

At its best, usage of the phrase speaks to the idea of America as the world’s beacon of freedom, equality, and opportunity. It speaks to what Thomas Paine meant when he said, “The cause of America is in great measure the cause of all mankind” and “We have it in our power to begin the world over again.” [3] Or what Alexander Hamilton meant in Federalist No. 1 when he said if the several states failed to adopt the new U.S. Constitution, it “deserved to be considered the general misfortune of mankind” for it would suggest people were not capable of self-government but “forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force.” [4]

In the late 20th century, however, it became associated with a militant America-über-alles mindset. Invokers of Winthrop’s simile meant it to validate another sort of American Exceptionalism, a hubristic assertion of American national superiority and as an apologia for American expansionism. They sought to justify in its name everything from Manifest Destiny and western expansionism to America assuming a position as the world’s protector of capitalism and republican government. (Note the lower case “r” – that is not a partisan statement, just a description of American foreign policy in the post-World War II era).

This second brand of American Exceptionalism has three related ideas: 1) American history is inherently different from that of other nations; 2) the idea that America has a unique mission to transform the world; and, 3) the sense that America’s history and mission give it superiority over other nations. [5] Which easily descends into Americanism – either a genuine appreciation for those civic virtues that define America at its best (freedom, equality, and opportunity) or a provincial, reductionist “love or leave it” exclusionary spirit that sees America as reflexively superior to all other cultures. For insights into this vision of America, confer either or both Newt Gingrich’s *A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters* and Dick and Liz Cheney’s *Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America*. [6]

Which leads to two observations, one quick and relatively trivial and the other neither quick nor trivial. First, the trivial – who first said that America was/is exceptional? Well, some suggest Alexis DeTocqueville, but the evidence, incredibly enough, points to Joseph Stalin, who in response to an acolyte’s saying America will be difficult to convert to communism allegedly retorted, “What makes America exceptional”? [7]

The second neither trivial nor quick observation has to do with just how exceptional does America remain in 2020? Well, according to The Social Progress Index of national quality of life and general well-being, the United States ranks No. 28 out of approximately 163 countries on “50 metrics of well-being – nutrition, safety, freedom, the environment, health, education and more.” [8]

If this was a Top 25 college football ranking and America entering as the up-and-comer, one could say, “Wow, we are only three spots from cracking the top rankings.” But if one thinks of oneself as exceptional, the only place to be is at the top of the Top Ten. From that perspective, No. 28 doesn’t elicit much “Wow-factor.” It gets worse – the U.S.A. dropped from No. 19 in 2011.

We’re still good at some things; in fact, we’re superb at a number of things. But the picture muddies as one drills deeper into the data. The United States ranks No. 1 in the quality of its research universities, but only No. 91 in access to quality basic education; the U.S. ranks No. 1 in medical technology, but only No. 97 in access to quality health care. [9]

The U.S. ranks No. 1 in access to online governance, but No. 100 in discrimination and violence against minorities. We are No. 189 (literally outside the rankings among those “who also ran”) in greenhouse gas emissions. On the overall metric of Personal Safety, the U.S. ranks No. 57. The U.S. is No. 1 on Access to Advanced Education and mobile telephone subscriptions but only No. 73 on maternal mortality rates. Interestingly, given America’s religiosity, America only ranks No. 23 on religious freedom and a decidedly mediocre No. 57 on property rights for women. Those of us in Erie, blessed with Lake Erie and a high-quality water system, might be surprised that America ranks only No. 35 for unsafe water, sanitation, and hygiene attributable deaths. [10]

The United States' overall ranking and evaluation can be found [here](#).

Norway ranks No. 1 on The Social Progress Index, which can be found [here](#).

An excellent TED Talk by The Social Progress Index founder, economist Michael Green, can be found [here](#).

Green explains the index's genesis as he and his colleagues attempt to define a society's success in other than pure economic terms. In short, The Social Progress Index is an attempt to supplement the fixation on Gross Domestic Product as the sole barometer of a society's well-being. It is also a rebuke of Milton Friedman's dictum that a corporation's only responsibility is to its stockholders – that it had no social responsibility whatsoever. A pernicious idea that has caused no small amount of social havoc.

Now Green concedes that GDP is crucial and that corporations must produce NPAT (net profits after taxes and interest but before dividends), but society's interests cannot be ignored. Remembering that old acronym from Macroeconomics 101 – TINSTAAFL (“There is no such thing as a free lunch”) – Green points out that circumventing environmental, safety or other regulations to reduce costs and increase NPAT does not eliminate the cost of a firm's polluting activities. It just pushes it downstream onto others – the public at large and/or future generations.

Instead, Green and his colleagues argue that other metrics must also be considered. Measures such as *Basic Human Values*, *Foundations of Well-being* and *Opportunity* are vital to a society's overall social health and prosperity. Green argues that if people don't have access to personal safety and adequate shelter; if people don't have access to personal rights and personal freedom and choice; if people don't have access to health and wellness and basic knowledge among other variables, then the quality of their life suffers.

There are more than 330 million Americans – what percentage can answer positively to their enjoyment of the above characteristics of a high quality of life?

Not all? Half? Sixty percent? Whatever the number, America, the nation that boasts of being the richest country in the world, the exceptional nation without which the world cannot do, ranks only No. 28 and is falling.

How did this happen?

The value of all these variables are lessons America learned more than 100 years ago in correcting for the errors of the first Gilded Age. They are also truths America seems to have forgotten with Movement Conservatism's triumph in the post-Vietnam, post-Watergate age, during the Greed is Good 1980s, the deregulatory, anti-government fever of the turn of the 20th into the 21st century, and the emergence of a New Gilded Age sensibility.

This resulted from the triumph of Movement Conservatism, which wedded a neo-Ayn Randian libertarianism to the feel-good ethic of the 20th century's counterculture to produce arguably the most self-centered, "I've got mine, bugger the others" culture since Marie Antoinette said, "Let them eat cake." Fueled by Pat Buchanan's declaration of a culture war for the soul of America between those who would freeze time somewhere around 1955 and those who would march into a diverse future inclusive of all Americans, America seems to have splintered into warring tribes arguing about whose story defines America, about who is an American, and who is included in the great American experiment of freedom, equality, and opportunity.

It is a complicated story. We've brushed against it in other **Book Notes**. I do a deep dive into it on WQLN radio's **The American Tapestry Project**, which can be found [here](#). Click on the NPR link for the latest episodes. The **Jefferson Educational Society** will livestream five sessions on the topic beginning at noon on Sept. 29.

In short, Americans seem to have forgotten or have given up trying to understand that we are all in this together. They seem to have forgotten that what makes America exceptional is its commitment to an ever-expanding definition, to an ever-expanding inclusiveness of the "**We**" in our founding documents. To prevent 2020 from being a repeat of 1860, from being the beginning of the end of the great American experiment in democratic self-government we need to recall the genius of America.

The genius of America has always been its understanding – contentious as it might have been, as challenged as it frequently was – that we are all in this together. That almost from the beginning, America expanded and continued to expand its definition of "**We**."

As stated in *The Preamble to the U.S. Constitution*, "**We** the People in order to found a more perfect Union"; as in *The Declaration of Independence* we celebrate with picnics, music and fireworks: "**We** hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness."

As Lincoln said at Gettysburg "...a new nation conceived in Liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

In that "all" he meant "**We**."

As Emma Lazarus's poem on the *Statue of Liberty* states, "Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free ... send these ... to me."

She meant “**We.**”

As Martin Luther King, Jr. bellowed, “When we allow freedom to ring... when all God’s children will be able to join hands and sing ‘Free at last, Free at last...’”

He meant “**We.**”

We seem to have wandered a long way from *American Sermons*, from John Winthrop’s “*A Modell of Christian Charity*” and “a city upon a hill.” But we have not wandered so far that we can’t reconnect, for what might truly inspire us to put aside our tribal squabbles, what might inspire us to a renewed commitment to our shared ideals in order that we can begin to climb back up from No. 28 just might be to listen to John Winthrop – he who first said, “wee shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eies of all people are upon us.”

For the “woke” among you who want to tell me that John Winthrop was a religious zealot with a very narrow definition about who he would admit it to his colony, of course, that is true. I know that. It does give one pause. But it is also possible for one to speak truth more globally, to speak truth more far reaching than one can imagine or intuit. So, from the limited vessel of John Winthrop’s immediate concerns springs truth applicable in all times and to all places, perhaps never more needed than in 21st century America.

Now I’m not naïve.

I don’t think re-reading an almost 400-year-old sermon is going to magically heal our political divisions. But it just might help begin the process of remembering who we are and what is meant by “the better angels of our nature.”

John Winthrop is frequently quoted, misquoted, and paraphrased, but it would be more accurate to say he is very, very rarely, if ever, actually read.

Winthrop made his famous assertion in his sermon, “*A Modell of Christian Charity*,” which he wrote aboard the ship *Arbella* in 1630 on Massachusetts Bay before addressing his fellow Puritans as they prepared to found the Massachusetts Bay Colony.

He understood that his people faced an extreme challenge – the forest primeval before them, the howling North Atlantic behind them. He understood that if they were to survive, they must bond together one to another and all to all.

What did Winthrop say the Puritans had to do to survive?

And, by extension, what 21st century Americans must do to survive?

What did Winthrop say his fellow Puritans had to do to be a model of Christian charity, to be as a city upon a Hill?

Winthrop said “wee must brotherly love without dissimulation, wee must love one another with a pure heart ... wee must beare one another’s burthens, wee must not looke only on our owne things, but allsoe on the things of our brethren.” [12]

Or, in sum, quoting Matthew 7:22, Winthrop exhorts “Whatsoever Ye would that men should doe to you do yee the same to them allsoe.” [13]

If they did that, then they shall be as a city upon a hill, a light for all.

But if they failed to do this, if they failed to be true to their creed, if they failed to be true to their values they would still be as a city upon a hill. As Daniel Rodgers explains in his wonderful study of Winthrop’s sermon, ***As a City On a Hill***, Winthrop and his followers saw themselves as entering into a new covenant with God. They were the new Israel. [14]

As a covenanted people, they would be like a city on a hill exposed to God’s eyes, exposed to the eyes of all others who would know whether or not they were faithful to their creed. In Winthrop’s vision, they would not be some bright shining thing for others to envy and emulate.

No, as a city on a hill they would be exposed, incapable of hiding from the eyes of God who would know their virtue, or their lack of virtue. As a covenanted people to whom much had been given, they were bound by trust to be true to their creed.

If they were not, if they betrayed their creed, as Winthrop continued in the part that is never quoted, they would be “an evil story in the mouthes of our enemies...wee shall shame the faces of many of God’s worthy servants and cause their prayers to be turned into curses and wee be consumed out of the land.” [15]

If America is to be exceptional (a word Winthrop did not use), if America is to continue its experiment in freedom, equality and opportunity, if America is to improve on No. 28, then America and Americans need to understand **We** are all in this together.

If America is to survive, Americans need to join one to another and one to all and all to all; if America is to be a “shining” city upon a Hill, if America is to be a model

of Christian charity, if America is to be Lincoln's "last best hope of Earth," then Americans must love and care for one another.

That's Winthrop's American exceptionalism. Although John Winthrop had no vision of a United States – he died more than a hundred years before the American Revolution – he exhorted his proto-Americans to reaffirm their common ground, to renew their commitment to the *commonwealth* – to renew their commitment to one another, for together they prosper; apart they perish and will "be consumed out of the land."

So, what does a 400-year-old sermon almost no one has ever read but many erroneously misquote tell us about 21st century America?

It tells us that we need a renewed commitment to the idea of America; that we need a renewed commitment to an ever more inclusive understanding of the "**We**" at the heart of the American experience.

An understanding that "**We** the people" are truly "e pluribus unum" – out of many one.

Because whether one likes it or not, we are all in this together!



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1. **End Notes**
2. **Winthrop, John. "A Modell of Christian Charity," in American Sermons: The Pilgrims to Martin Luther King, Jr., Ed. Michael Warner. (New York: The Library of America, 1999), p. 42.**
3. **Fitzgerald, F. Scott. The Great Gatsby. (New York: Scribner's Classics, 1992. Originally Published 1925), p. 154.**
4. **Paine, Thomas. "Common Sense," in the Collected Writings of Thomas Paine. (New York: The Library of America, 1995), pp. 5 and 52-53.**
5. **Hamilton, Alexander. "Federalist No. 1," in Hamilton: Writings. (New York: The Library of America, 2001), p. 171.**
6. **"American exceptionalism," at Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia available at https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_exceptionalism#:~:text=American%20exceptionalism%20is%20the%20theory,developing%20a%20uniquely%20American%20ideology%2C accessed September 14, 2020.**
7. **Cf. Cheney, Liz and Dick, Exceptional: Why the World Needs a Powerful America. (New York: Simon and Schuster Threshold Editions, 2015) and Newt Gingrich A Nation Like No Other: Why American Exceptionalism Matters (London: Regnery, 2011).**
8. **Foner, Eric, "American Exceptionalism, American Freedom," The Montreal Review, (January, 2013) available at <http://www.themontrealreview.com/2009/American-Exceptionalism-American-Freedom.php> accessed September 14, 2020.**
9. **Kristof, Nicholas, "We're No. 28! And Dropping!" in The New York Times (September 9, 2020) available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/09/opinion/united-states-social-progress.html?action=click&module=Opinion&pgtype=Homepage> accessed September 14, 2020.**
10. **Ibid.**
11. **Ibid.**
12. **"United States", on The 2020 Social Progress Index available at <https://www.socialprogress.org/?tab=2&code=USA> accessed September 14, 2020.**
13. **Winthrop, p. 40.**
14. **Ibid.**
15. **Cf. Rodgers, Daniel T. As a City On a Hill. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), pp. 207-209.**
16. **Winthrop, p. 42.**
17. **Book Cover: <https://www.loa.org/books/132-american-sermons-the-pilgrims-to-martin-luther-king-jr>**

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