

City on a Hill

John Winthrop's "A Model of Christian Charity" is a passionate sermon delivered on the idea that a harmonious Christian Community is possible. Even though he delivered this sermon almost 400 years ago one can still read it today and become wrapped up in a vision of what this "model of Christian charity" would look like in widespread practice. Winthrop who is a man of "unquestioned integrity and deep humanity" (91), outlines principles for a utopian American society. His "City on a Hill" is not just a church community but an American community. In the sermon, he ruminates upon ideas such as God's providence and wealth, justice and mercy, and Christian love. These principles are the guiding force to Christian charity and according to Winthrop it is a model by which all should live. Winthrop demonstrates his unrelenting optimism and faith in humanity in outlining his model of Christian charity. By analyzing the gentle words of Winthrop's sermon through the lens of his optimism and faith we can see an image of the utopian society he pictured for his community emerge. He displays his ability of deep reflection and being able to see humanity's capacity to care for other people and not just themselves.

At the beginning of his sermon Winthrop states, "God Almighty in His most holy and wise providence, hath so disposed of the condition of mankind, as in all times some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power and dignity; others mean and in subjection" (91). Winthrop's belief was that it is natural that some people are rich and some people are poor. According to Winthrop one should just accept their wealth. God

is guiding humanity's destiny and in order to be a cohesive society everyone must abide by, and respect, this fact. Part of this view of the "City on a Hill" is the idea that all men are equal, even if they're not. A community cannot be successful if those who have the means to share and help others do not do so. It also cannot be successful if those who come from a meager background try to rise against people with more money than them because it will lead to dissent among the people of the community. This is a concept that is almost completely not present in America today. Most people are focused on getting the most that they can. This can mean from other people, from the earth, from the government, or other places. The concept of being responsible for helping other people, and doing it willingly, has been all but expunged from our society. Part of this utopian mindset that Winthrop is coming from is that the community will not only abide by this guiding principle but do it willingly and happily. Part of this model of Christian charity that is so important is that you don't just live out these characteristics of a Christian but that you do it with a joyful heart and a willing mind.

This practice of accepting your wealth or lack thereof might be difficult if Winthrop had not discussed how and when to distribute justice and mercy. A second passage that supports Winthrop's idea of a utopian "City on the Hill" is:

There are two rules whereby we are to walk one towards another: justice and mercy. These are always distinguished in their act and in their object, yet may both concur in the same subject in each respect; as sometimes there may be an occasion of showing mercy to a rich man in some sudden

danger of distress, and also doing of mere justice to a poor man in regard of some particular contract, etc. (92).

These principles of justice and mercy are defining characteristics of Winthrop's model of Christian charity. This second idea coincides with his idea of accepting God's providence because here he is saying that you are just and merciful because you want to be; you want to do the right thing. According to Winthrop, someone who gives their money or belongings to the poor is actually lending them to the Lord. He says that individuals that lend their belongings will be repaid not just in heaven but in their live on earth "a hundred fold". Winthrop's inherent "spirit" of optimism and faith is embedded in the lines, "If he hath present means of repaying thee, thou art to look at him not as an act of mercy, but by way of commerce, wherein thou art to walk by the rule of justice; but if his means of repaying thee be only probably or possible, then he is an object of thy mercy, thou must lend him, though there be danger of losing it" (94). It is not that Winthrop is naïve, he is aware that there may be a time and place where justice must be imparted on an individual for their actions rather than mercy. He is very clear; however, this justice must be in correlation to their behavior. This utopian frame of mind doesn't mean that there isn't a time and place for this type of behavior; it just needs to be deemed a necessity.

In "A Model of Christian Charity" Winthrop concludes the sermon by talking about Christian love and the representation of it in the Christian community. Towards the end he equates the community to a body and explains that the ligaments of this body are

knitted together by love. He quotes from scripture, 'Love is the bond of perfection'. Then goes on to say, "First, it is a bond or ligament. Secondly it makes the work perfect" (96). The love that binds together the community, not just Winthrop's community but that of Christians, is a perfect love. This is an excellent summation of Winthrop's utopian views on what a Christian community should be:

The like we shall find in the histories of the church in all ages, the sweet symphony of affections which was in the members of this body one towards another, their cheerfulness in serving and suffering together, how liberal they were without repining, harborers without grudging and helpful without reproaching; and all from hence, because they had fervent love amongst them, which only make the practice of mercy constant and easy (97).

The overwhelmingly positive attitude that shines through the lines of Winthrop's sermon is undeniable. The difference between Christians residing in the same community and Winthrop's cohesive, utopian community is present in this passage. It isn't just that he wants the people who are listening to him to believe in God, not be gluttonous, revengeful or envious. He wants them to do this with an eager heart. Mary Rowlandson's thoughts in her "Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" are an excellent example. We see Winthrop's ideas of forgiveness, justice, and faith woven throughout the text. Rowlandson endures traumatic hardships and instead of losing faith she uses her suffering to bring her closer to God. When

justice has to be imparted it is not reproachful. One would think that this would be an impossible task to undertake but according to Winthrop it is easy. He says it is easy because of the Christian love among the community, fervent love. This is in some ways an almost practical view for a utopian community. He is aware that hardships occur but because of their deep love for each other and their common awareness of Christian principles it is possible to live in harmony.

“Winthrop and the other Puritans left England because in 17th century England there was no freedom of religion. They were opposed to corruption and abuses of the Church of England. The Puritans wanted to purify their church and make it holy and pleasing to God” (Shafer). The Puritan colonists of New England diligently strived to uphold this idea of a “City on a Hill”. They attempted to maintain the vision set forth by John Winthrop in a variety of aspects. They were very focused on their religion, morals, and forgiveness. Another important component of their society is that they created a community that promoted education and formed strong values that are still present in America’s government and society today. There is a difference between a community of naïve people and the utopian society that Winthrop was striving for. The Puritans were not regarded with respect in England. They were punished for not going along with what the monarchy wanted, instead seeking refuge in a new frontier. This is not naïveté on their part. There is fortitude in Winthrop’s speech, a strength that not very many people have. It isn’t an outwardly brute force that we witnessed in Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”. It takes a lot more effort and diligence to remain calm, poised and hopeful in the face of such adversity. Winthrop knew what the world was

like. He understood the magnitude of the corruption and sin that occur on a daily basis but he still had optimism and faith in humanity. He believed that he could take imperfect people and make them perfect in God's eyes. He believed he could take a community who believed in the same thing and make them an example for the rest of the world. Not an example of a naïve community where everything comes easy, but instead a community that in the face of the most difficult challenges they still rise above and strive to be greater than their individual selves. Instead of staying in their homes and bending to the power of the Church of England they left everything they knew and loved. If Winthrop had not come to America, if he had not written that sermon, the United States would not be the same today.

The lasting impact of Winthrop's sermon can be seen throughout the last few hundred years. For example, according to the Miller Center, in 1961 John F. Kennedy said:

I have been guided by the standard John Winthrop set before his shipmates on the flagship Arbella three hundred and thirty-one years ago, as they, too, faced the task of building a new government on a perilous frontier... Today the eyes of all people are truly upon us—and our governments, in every branch, at every level, national, state and local, must be as a city upon a hill.

Another example is Ronald Reagan's 1984 speech where he refers to the shining city on a hill. The question remains whether or not America maintains this reputation in the 21st century. In the last few hundred years the politics, religion and social structure of

America has evolved. The drive the Puritans had to prove themselves to England is gone, the Puritans are gone. The United States is also probably more developed and expansive than Winthrop ever could have imagined. The “city on a hill” in which Winthrop lived was small and secluded. The values of Americans today are a lot more varied than four hundred years ago. There are more religions more social groups and this results in a varying level of moral standards to which people hold themselves.

The spirit of unrelenting optimism and faith that John Winthrop used to guide his thoughts and actions shaped and developed this idea of a utopian community. This community doesn't necessarily only apply to “Christian charity”. It is a concept that can be a model for humanity as a whole. Although this sermon was written in the 17th century the ideas that surround these principles can still be relevant today. “Is needful for every true member of this lovely body of the Lord Jesus, to work upon their hearts by prayer, meditation, continual exercise at least of the special [influence] of His grace, till Christ be formed in them and they in Him, all in each other, knit together by this bond of love” (99). It was Winthrop's belief that through concerted spiritual and physical effort one could be influenced by God's “special grace” and Christ could be formed in all who practice this philosophy. If there was really such a community that operated around Winthrop's model of Christian charity America would be more self-sustained, happier, and more unified.

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