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Salvation in America: Puritan Conversion Narratives as American Media

Welcome to the lecture “Salvation in America: Puritan Conversion Narratives as American Media”! Do the Puritans’ writings count as “American”? What makes a piece of writing “American”? If something is written in America, or by people who have lived somewhere within the current boundaries of the United States, does that make it American? These are some questions we are going to investigate more deeply in this lecture. We’ll examine the question of the “American-ness” of the Puritans specifically: when the Puritans become “American,” when their writing became “American literature” and how that change was seen into their media. In this lecture we’ll examine Puritan conversion narratives, accounts that laypeople in churches gave of their spiritual journeys before the other church members. I’ll discuss what conversion narratives are, then introduce the debate over whether they are distinctively American or not. I take a side in this debate, stating that the narratives and even their medium can be considered uniquely “American.” The learning goals are for you to be able to describe the debate over the “American-ness” of the conversion narratives and explain why it might be considered an oral medium.

Puritan conversion narratives were a way in which church membership was determined. They helped church leaders and members determine if someone was truly saved or not. Actually, scholars are not entirely sure at what point all the elements of a typical conversion narrative coalesced (Caldwell 45). However, it is generally agreed that there are three key elements of a conversion narrative in early New England: first, these narrative are told to the entire congregation of the speaker’s church; secondly, the narrative is supposed to describe an experience of belief and faith that is authentic; and thirdly, anyone who wanted to join the church had to give a conversion narrative (Caldwell 45). Requiring a conversion narrative to become a member of a church was a little controversial; not all Protestants were persuaded of the need to have a kind of oral examination or test in order to join a church (Caldwell 47). However, the New England Puritans cited places in the Bible where people stated their faith to support their view on the importance of the conversion narratives, such as when an Ethiopian eunuch was baptized after stating his faith in Christ (Caldwell 47).¹ The records of the narratives are mostly found in three different person’s writings: the notebook of John Fiske, the diary of Michael Wigglesworth, and the records of Thomas Shepard, who was a pastor (Dorsey 629).

What kind of communications media are conversion narratives? These narratives primarily involve one person speaking before a large audience. They seem primarily oral, which is to say they are expressed through spoken words. Of course, though, these have been written down by various ministers, so we have a written transcript of them too. After someone delivered their narrative, they would then field some questions from the audience. If someone was too timid to speak out loud in front of such a large audience, ministers would write down the narrative for that person, and then read it out loud to the congregation (Rogers-Stokes 109). One feature of conversion narratives is what one writer calls their oral “formulas” (Pfeifer 12). Formulas are a feature of spoken performances that consist of an underlying collection of words or themes used repeatedly. The idea of an oral formula is pulled from the work of Milman Parry and Albert Lord who investigated spoken, recited poems in Yugoslavia. Pfeifer argues that conversion narratives contain these oral formulas, that they correspond with some of the key

¹ This example is found in the 1648 Cambridge Platform, which describes some requirements for church membership in New England.

themes or “steps” of a conversion narrative, including the recognition of a state of sin, conviction about the sin, and faith in Jesus’ work (Pfeifer 11-12; Morgan qtd in Caldwell 164).

Now: How “American” was the conversion narrative? This is a debate that links to a larger issue of how different, or “exceptional,” America is at all. Is there something about the conversion narrative that makes it “uniquely” American, somehow a forerunner of American culture today? Keep in mind that the Puritans moved here from England and that New England was supposed to be a colony of England. This time was before the American Revolution, before the United States became its own nation distinct from England. Some scholars say that the conversion narrative, indeed even New England Puritan culture as a whole, had become distinctive; in short, had something “American” about it that was different from England and other places in Europe. They were saying that slightly different ways of thinking and of expressing Christianity seemed to have begun to take root in 17th-century New England. But other scholars push against this. These scholars criticize what they call “American exceptionalism,” the idea of America being especially different and unique, set apart from other countries. The scholars that push against this say that there is nothing distinctive about the conversion narratives, that they either have appeared in some form amongst Puritans in England already or that they are not huge deviations from the practices of Puritans before they moved to America.

Let’s dig into this idea more deeply. Ultimately I’ll take a viewpoint on it myself. Let’s look at why scholars are saying that conversion narratives are uniquely American. One of these scholars is Patricia Caldwell: she explains how the people giving their testimonies needed to respond both to their spiritual state but also how that corresponded with the new place that they found themselves in—the land called “New England.” Caldwell says, “And as this feeling [of being in America] struggled to be articulated in the stories people told about themselves, the struggle may even have begun to take on a life of its own...” (134). It is the fact of being in a certain new place that leads to the new literary conventions of the Puritan conversion narrative. The American conversion narratives typically involve doubt and struggle over whether one has been “successfully” or fully converted (134). Another scholar who discusses how the conversion narrative is a distinct American form is Edmund Morgan. He states that one of the distinctive features of the New England Puritans is that they required church members to “test” each other through presenting their own spiritual narratives; this would allow them to form a church made up of only those who were truly saved.

On the other side, there are those who do not see anything especially distinctive about the conversion testimony, nothing that is worth showing that it was a uniquely American product. One of these critics is Andy Dorsey. He draws on scholar Andrew Delbanco to make his point, saying: “While still widely viewed as valid, such arguments [showing conversion narratives are distinctive] are nevertheless inherently problematic because they foreground American ‘experience’ as a unique essence that is either entirely or ‘at least partly free from ideological coercion’ (Delbanco 4)” (Dorsey). Dorsey criticizes the fact that we can isolate being in America as something distinctive. For him, doing so elides the fact that people came to the Northeast in order to follow some of their ideologies, or encompassing beliefs about the nature of society and government. When we focus just on a different “experience,” we neglect to consider the ideological reasons for how and why this experience happened. Dorsey sees what some claim as a distinctive mournful response to the migration as actually responses to the idea at the time of a hypocrite Christian. He describes how this concept of a hypocrite actually generated a lot of what we might have considered “distinctive” about the narratives.

One of the main issues under discussion is whether physically being in the land of America shaped the Puritans' experiences and led to a new genre of the conversion narrative. I will dive into this discussion to show that this in fact was a defining and extremely influential experience. Let's look at Caldwell's argument for the distinctiveness of the American conversion narrative. She describes a variety of people who described their spiritual journeys from England to America. Goodman Foster said that in coming to New England, one "was left a more flat condition than before" (Caldwell 122). One woman, Alice Stedman, said that one of her neighbors "[asked] what such a one should do that did think they had grace but since they came here could not see it" (122). John Stil said, "...upon my first coming I thought that then my heart was in a pretty frame. But being here some little time... my heart began to be troubled and so lost that frame I had" (122). These people have experienced some of the emotional roller coaster that comes with migration. They have expectations completely uprooted, hopes that have vanished, and new troubles that have arisen. One person since coming to Massachusetts had not been able to see the grace of God. John Stil's "heart" had lost its "frame." And yet, there are still questions and lingering hopes for the place that they are in. One woman, a widow, thought that "one sermon [in New England] might do me more good than a hundred there [in England]" (Caldwell 122). She hopes that something about the place might strengthen her spiritually. A new place promised a new start or a new stage of one's life, spiritually and emotionally. The Puritans had to wrestle with how their hopes and expectations corresponded to reality. One Puritan woman, Elizabeth White, says in her narrative how much she swayed between different states. Part of her narrative states: "So found sweetness. But I lost that which I found in the Lord. Sweetness lost. / Lord then stayed her heart, yet lost that" (121).

This land of the Northeast that people moved to shaped them. The land, and the journey itself, prompted new feelings and desires. Caldwell says that it is, in fact, disappointment in the land that the New England Puritans are really confessing: "this double disappointment [in America and in oneself for being disappointed in it] is often what is really being 'confessed' in the relation of religious experience... And it is indeed construed as a sin, a very special kind of American sin..." (130). The conversion narrative in America seemed to have led to a somewhat distinct theological category: sin as despair over the new place that one was in.

I want to suggest that it wasn't just that the content of the American conversion narrative was different, but the kind of medium that they were, too. Building on Pfeifer's work, I want to show that the oral formulas present in these narratives were distinctive. There was a certain pattern that people moved through in these narratives, which became more distinctive in America. Edmund Morgan's presentation of the steps of an American conversion narrative is well known: "knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect assurance" (Morgan 72). Pfeifer interprets these steps as an oral formula, as I mentioned previously (12). But also, conversion narratives became a kind of distinct oral tradition in which a layperson stood in front of the church and gave a speech. This was a significant moment for the church as a whole and for its members, because the narratives helped determine if someone would be added to the church as a member. It was an oral performance that partly determined if someone would become a member or not. They didn't choose a written and printed testimony, but they chose a speech. It was through the oral medium that people could evaluate sincerity and authenticity. Someone had the stage, and people were listening to him/her, compelled to gather together to listen to one individual's story. Certain distinct patterns in this oral performance, such as the steps that Morgan describes, arose from that. To address Dorsey's criticism of the legitimacy of

“experience” I suggest that experience is more fundamental than ideology, that the distinctive experiences the Puritans underwent would lead to new and different ideologies.

In this lecture, I've described Puritan conversion narratives and some of the scholarly debates around them. One of these debates concerns the idea of American exceptionalism, that America is somehow distinctive and different from other places, starting from its origins. While scholars like Dorsey and Delbanco disagree with conversion narratives as an example of American exceptionalism, Caldwell and Morgan seem to see the conversion narratives as exceptional. They are distinctly American in how they evolved because of their structure and their themes. The new land and the journey to it seemed to have generated distinctive experiences, feelings, and forms. These conversion narratives are largely an oral medium, in which a layperson stands before an audience and speaks. They might follow an underlying order of themes that, according to Pfeifer, we could call oral formulas. Standing before the congregation and giving an oral account of one's faith, in order to be accepted into membership in a church, might have evolved as something distinctly American. It could even be an oral ritual that grew to take on its own kind of significance and discourse. Now, it's your turn to respond! What do you think of these conversion narratives? How “American” do you think they were? I look forward to reading your responses in the discussion forums!

Discussion question 1: Read one of the conversion narratives from Thomas Shepard's notebook (these are collected in *God's Plot: Puritan Spirituality in Thomas Shepard's Cambridge*, edited by Michael McGiffert. The narratives are not extremely long). Do you notice any of the themes from this lecture? What comments might you make about what kind of communications medium it is?

Discussion question 2: Can you think of any media, genres, or inventions from history that people say are distinctly “American”? Why would it be distinctly “American” and/or why would it not be?

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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