

THOMAS HINCKLEY

Governor Thomas Hinckley's involvement with religion can be classified in three different areas. First, is his private religious life, second his involvement due to his position as Governor of Plymouth Colony, and third his conflict with the Quakers. This third area is found in both his private and public life, however due to the magnitude of it I have decided to write seperately about it.

Governor Hinckley's letters were almost always filled with references to God and God's Will. He attributed his own position and health to the mercy and grace of God. On February 10, 1676, he wrote a letter to his wife from Boston. The first part of the letter concerned the Indian uprising in the Massachusettes and Plymouth Colonies. His hope for victory was stated in these words:

"...The good Lord fit us for his pleasure and help us not only do something near a reformation, but make us thorough in it, that he may not only bring us only near a deliverance as He hath seemed many times to do, but thorough in it." (p. 1)*

It is evident that the Governor is placing deliverance from the Indians in the Lord's hands and the extent of the deliverance was also prayed for. He then states to his wife:

"Meanwhile, I desire and hope God's gracious presence will be with thee, far better than mine to support and carry thee through any present trials and difficulties." (p. 2)

* All page numbers refer to Collections of the Massachusettes Historical Society, Vol. V Fourth Series.

Here the Governor acknowledges to his wife that God can help her through the difficult times much better than he could. In closing he stated, "I am through mercy, in health." Again an acknowledgement of being in good health through the mercy of God.

The Puritan belief that man's destiny was totally controlled by God was fully ingrained in the Governor. The state of the colony as well as the state of his family were totally dependent upon the Grace of God. The Governor was supplicating to God for blessings and guidance.

In 1686, Bacon, the daughter of the Governor and his first wife passed away. He was unable to return home immediately and wrote a letter to his second wife. The letter was one of comfort, explaining that God had decided the time for her passing. In closing, the Governor again placed his future in this world and the next in God's hands.

"...God, that performeth all things for us, bring us together again, if he see fit, in this world to his praise, and our mutual futherance in the way to his everlasting kingdom; however that I may so live here, as we may meet and dwell together with Jesus Christ in that Kingdom of his which is best of all, where we shall see neither sin nor sorrow any more, to the everlasting praise of the glory of his grace through our Lord Jesus Christ." (p. 148)

This type of consolation was the backbone of the Puritan's private faith in God. On January 10, 1684 the Reverend John Cotton wrote a letter of condolence to Mary Hinckley at the death of her grandchild:

"...God hath done what is done, and he did you no great wrong. His right was greater to that little one than yours...A babe embraced in the arms of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Shepherd of these lambs, lies safer and more comfortably than in the bosom of the most tenderhearted grandmother...Certainly you meant, while it was with you, to train it up for the Lord; and did you not often pray for it, that its soul might be accepted in the covenant of grace?" (p. 114)

This message is a reflection of the belief's of the Governor. They were very personal but because of his public positions, they were expressed in the public world of his day.

The office of Governor did not carry with it the official title of Head of the Puritan Faith in the Colony. However the Colony was founded by religious people and they looked to the Governor to use the power of the "State" to enforce their beliefs. This is shown in a letter to Thomas dated April 7, 1690 which began:

"It is our great joy that God has continued you among us hitherto to be the stay and staff of Church and State." (p. 234)

As Governor, Thomas became a sounding board for all those in the Colony that objected to certain religious or non-religious practices. Some felt that the Governor was not doing enough to protect the religious nature of the Colony. On February 23, 1682, a Mr. George Shove wrote in part as follows:

"...Yet one thing I cannot but suggest, which sometimes formerly I have mentioned as of great concernment; and that is, that some effectual provision (if it be possible) may be made against the open profanation of the Lord's Day. I must confess, it is very hard to suppress that sin in

some parts of our Colony;...If, in this desperate a case, your honor can find out any sure expedient that the profaning of the Lord's Day may be prevented, it will much conduce to the securing of religion..." (p. 57)

The original religious settlers were soon followed to the Colony by fishermen and other commercially oriented settlers. Their needs and life styles were not always compatible with the staunch Puritans. One such item of dispute involved the number of Taverns. On March 7, 1682 the Church at Plymouth officially petitioned the Governor on this matter. Their basis for so doing was stated as follows:

"...As it is the duty of churches in their way to bear due testimony against growing scandals, so we are humbly bold in the Lord to present to your serious considerations, that we cannot but think the Lord calls upon you in your political capacity, as to be a terror to evil-doers, and therefore not to suffer such offenders to pass without due shame and punishment..." (p. 60)

Once they established their right to appeal and served notice on the Governor that the Lord also called upon him to meet out retribution, they advised him of the object of their wrath.

"...The multiplying of ordinaries, or places of strong drink, we judge to be as the digging or opening of a pit;...Such places, we know, cannot lawfully be without your allowance and approbation; and therefore we humbly entreat that the power you have received from God may be improved for God in this specialty amongst others;- namely, the lessening the number of such houses in this town, We are very confident, that, in the middle of town, one public house is very sufficient for the entertainment of travellers; and yet within your sight... you may behold at least four or five houses..." (p. 61)

The Puritans felt that they had an obligation to "Christianize" the Indians. Indian affairs were under the province of the Governor and again religion and politics were mixed. One report to the Governor concerning the religious activities reads in part:

"...I have taken the best account I could of the most intelligent Indians amongst us, of what Indians do frequent their meetings on the sabbath days. In general, they give me this account: That most of them do, except aged, decrepit persons, and infants, and some few extravagant fellows that run from one place to another that they cannot inspect." (p. 131)

The early Puritan ministers were in high demand. If a minister died or moved away to a new congregation it usually fell upon the most prominent citizen or citizens to recruit a new minister. Thomas as the Governor was the most prominent citizen of Barnstable. When Barnstable lost its minister in 1678, Thomas spent nearly a year in efforts to find a replacement. Thomas first approached Isaac Foster of Cambridge. In a long letter of appeal Thomas stated:

"...We humbly pray that God would graciously please so to appear to you in our praying you to come to Barnstable to help us, as you may assuredly gather that the Lord hath called you to come to preach the gospel unto us...There will be also a good opportunity to promote Christs' work amongst the poor Indians here..." (p. 13-15)

Mr. Foster however felt more prevailed upon by other forces and he was installed as Fellow of Harvard College. Thomas then wrote to Mr. Peter Thacher of Boston.

"...We hope the Father of mercies will move you here to pity us in our great needy and desolate condition...Meanwhile we pray God to direct and speed your way to us, if it be his good pleasure..." (p. 17)

Again, however, Thomas was unsuccessful in his efforts. He next tried to recruit a Mr. Samuel Phillips. Mr. Phillips reply started as follows:

"Yours of the 6th of June came to hand on the 15th instant, and was read before the church in Rowley the same day; and the result is, that almost the whole church did show their dissent as to parting with their minister, and not one would show any consent to it:..."(p. 26)

The scarcity of ministers required Thomas to seek one from another congregation. Though Thomas was eagerly recruiting he was not willing to accept just anyone. The Reverend John Cotton wrote to Thomas lobbying for a Mr. Bowles to be granted the position;

"...I need not tell you, worthy sir, that it is a dying time with preachers, young as well as old; and it is very manifest, there is very great likelihood of scarcity of ministers; and if I may without offence, whisper it in your ear, I dare say Mr. M. is far below Mr. B.(Bowles) for learning and abilities... And good sir, if you should appear slow to promote a call for Mr. B, out of a secret hope and desire to obtain one yet more suitable, I verily fear you will find yourself uncomfortably disappointed..." (p. 22-23)

Thomas did not respond positively to this lobbying. At one time five ministers wrote to Barnstable concerning their attempts to obtain a minister. Finally a Mr. Jonathan Russel was ordained at Barnstable. (p. 29)

The Plymouth Colony's attitude toward the Quakers was intolerant at best. The Puritans were strict in the following of their beliefs and would not tolerate deviations from that belief. The Quakers in turn totally rejected the Puritan belief. This caused an increase in the discrimination towards the Quakers.

Since Thomas was Puritan and Governor, the Puritans expected his to use political pressure on the Quakers. An example of such expectations is found in a letter to Thomas from Mr. George Shove which reads in part:

"...Finally, as to the matter of the Quakers: if it be granted now not advisable to take notice of them as Quakers and seducers (which yet I determine not), yet if they be found guilty of high immorality,--as riot, blasphemy, or blasphemous irreverence, in speaking of the dreadful name of God, &C.-- and escape without condign punishment, I see not how those whose duty it is to be a terror to evil works can be discharged of guilt. And if, by occasion of such fearful crimes committed by such, any provision can be made against their going about to seduce, I incline to think God would accept it as service done to his name." (p. 87)

Thomas had early in his political career taken the position requested by Mr. Shove. Pratt, in his The Early Planters of Scituate, (P. 142-143) refers to a civil law passed in 1658 as "Hinckley's Law" and quotes it as follows:

"If any neglect the worship of God in the place where he lives, and set up a worship contrary to God and the allowance of this Government to the Publick profanation of God's Holy Day and ordinances he shall pay 10 schillings."

This law and similar laws were contested by the Quakers and men like Roger Williams. The Quakers response to a tax requiring them to support Puritan Ministers is stated in part:

"5. We do really believe your preachers are none of the true ministers of Christ. Now, how can it reasonably be expected from us we should maintain or contribute towards the maintenance of such a ministry as we judge not true, without guilty consciences and manifest contradiction of ourselves and principles." (p. 20)

The straightforwardness of the Quakers resulted in many fines and other punishments. They were openly disobediant and Thomas strictly enforced the Laws of the Colony against them. The religious dissenters were also quite eloquent writers. One of the most famous, Roger Williams, on July 4, 1679 wrote to Thomas and stated in part:

"...I have (as I believe) been the Eternal his poor witness in sackcloth against your churches and ministries, as being but State policies and a mixture of golden images, unto which (were your carnal sword so long) you would musically persuade, or by fiery torments compel, to bow down, as many as (that great type of inventors and persecutors) Nebuchadnezzar did." (p. 30)

To be sure, Thomas did not take kindly to being compared to King Nebuchadnezzar. The problems with religious dissenters in Plymouth was also a political problem. The Puritans left England because of religious persecution and now were persecuting others. They governed Plymouth without a Charter from the King and had to be careful not to antaanize him.

Thomas when requesting political help from a William Blathwayt of England in the preparing of a Charter, had to explain why certain complaints had been filed by Quakers. His statement written November 22, 1683 is:

:-- if any complaint shall be made by any of the Quakers, we have to say, that, many years since some fines were levied upon their estates for their perverse practices to public disturbances through their heretical and heterodox principles, tending to undermine religion and all civil order; refusing to take the oath of allegiance to his

majesty, or fidelity to the government. But since we had any hints of his majesty's indulgence towards them, we have forborne the execution of such penalties upon them; only, of late, some few of them have had small fines executed on them for their perverse, disorderly carriage together as man and wife in a clandestine way of their own..." (p. 95-96)

The political nature behind this letter was a tight rope for Thomas. He refers to previous fines for generally anti-religious behavior. He does not refer to anti-Puritan behavior because England is Anglican and they believe Puritan beliefs to be heretical in nature. There is however, great emphasis on Quakers undermining civil order and showing no allegiance to the King and government of England. This makes the Plymouth Colony appear to be fining the Quakers on behalf of the King.

One needs to contrast Thomas's letter with one written to him two days later by Mr. Edward Randolph.

"I am not a little concerned to find that not only the complaint that the Quakers in your Colony are whipped and fined for not marrying according to your law, but that you have countenanced the lat arbitrary, and till now unheard-of proceedings against Mr. Saffin, by imprisoning him, with other illegal practices; all which will fall very heavy upon you particularly." (p. 96-97)

Thomas referred to small fines and Edward Randolph referred to whipping, fines and imprisonment. The major concern, was the manner in which Quakers were married. They were not married by ministers but married themselves. Pratt, Supra, in his book on page 95 stated that in front of witnesses a man and woman mutually promised to live faithfully and they considered themselves married. This

led to what Puritans felt to be improper sexual activity and was why they extolled such heavy punishment on Quakers.

One month after Thomas's letter to Mr. Blathwayt, John Cotton, a Puritan Minister wrote Thomas concerning the persecutions taking place in England.

"Persecutions of the dissenters do increase in England, etc., to a marvellous height; and many persons of all ranks are forced to fly. A gentleman...told me that there are warrants out for every nonconformist minister in the City of London."
(p. 103)

Religious persecutions in England were often followed by persecutions against nonconformists in the Colonies. It was a vicious circle with every one persecuting others and at the same time appealing to each other for freedom of worship.

"...And it is the special end why we have desired those civil liberties and privileges for which we have humbly petitioned his gracious majesty to grant, that we might be secured in our peaceable enjoyment of said religious liberties." (p. 124)

It is difficult for the writer to understand the level of religious fervor that prompts one religion to persecute others on one side and then plead for freedom of worship on the other. Just as the Quakers believed that the Puritan Ministers were not true ministers of Christ, the Puritans would not believe the teachings of the Church of England. This put the Puritans in a difficult position when on April 4, 1687, King James II of England published his Declaration for Liberty of Conscience which states in part:

"I am resolved to keep all in peace; and there shall be no persecution in my dominions for conscience' sake for mere matters of religion. I should never be of that party of Protestants who think the only way to advance their church is by undoing those churches of Christians that differ from them in small matters as I find is confessed by all my nation now. To give man power and liberty to choose for themselves what church they will hold communion with for their edification, I am ignorant what church this will prejudice or undo," (p. 153)

King James II did not rule England long. He was dethroned shortly after his proclamation.

The religious persecution eventually was eroded by the lack of any religion that entered into the Colony with new settlers. While the initial settlers settled the land in part for religious purposes, later merchants, sailors, etc., were there for money and adventure. The lack of support for the Puritan way of life concerned Thomas.

"...But an unhappy conjunction of poverty and wickedness has caused too many people to refuse doing their part for the maintaining of a godly ministry among us. This one thing is as unjust as it is like to be fatal, if it proceed unto such measures as are by some propounded..." (p. 202)

The record shows Thomas Hinckley to be a devout Puritan. He felt it was his responsibility to use his office as Governor to both protect and further his Puritan beliefs. Much of what he did was controversial. This is shown by the letters from religious people of all faiths. This record is meant to accurately record his religious beliefs and the impact he had on the religious life in Plymouth Colony.