

Model of Christian Charity (1630)

John Winthrop

Historical Background

When King Charles I began persecuting Puritans, John Winthrop, with the Massachusetts Bay Company, helped to found the second major Puritan settlement in North America, after the Plymouth colony. In 1630, he traveled with hundreds of people in a fleet of ships, carrying the charter to establish the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Winthrop was an English Puritan, from a wealthy family, and trained in law. He became the first Governor of the colony, and served twelve annual terms. As his ship, the *Arabella*, sailed across the Atlantic, he composed a sermon, and delivered it to those aboard. The sermon described his hopes, as a Puritan, of creating a model community, free of the corruption the Puritans felt was plaguing the Anglican Church and English society as a whole. He articulated a structured hierarchy, admonishing the new colonists that success in the dangerous endeavor was dependent upon obedience to what he proposed was the plan of “God Almighty.” During the 1630s, more than 20,000 Puritans migrated to the New England area, and Winthrop’s sermon remained an influential guide for their society.

Historical Significance

Winthrop told his followers that the colony would be a “city upon a hill,” setting an example of purity and righteousness that would influence the world. This concept has resonated over the centuries, and is one of the earliest examples of the concept of “American exceptionalism.” It has been invoked by politicians including Presidents Kennedy and Reagan and is widely considered to be one of the ideological foundations of the United States.

Key Concepts and Learning Objectives

Concepts: City on a hill; American exceptionalism; Christian charity; hierarchy; law of nature; law of grace.

On completion of this lesson, students will be able to

- summarize Winthrop’s vision of a Christian commonwealth and of the major virtues it will inculcate;
- explain and evaluate Winthrop’s reasons for maintaining that everyone should have a prescribed place in society and that aspiring to assume a different place would be detrimental to the greater good;

- define the term “American exceptionalism” and compare Winthrop’s version of this idea with some other versions of it in American history.

Questions to Explore

Winthrop argues against both social equality and individual self-reliance in this speech. What are his reasons, and what do you think of them? Can you think of any specific disadvantages of the considerable equality and individual freedom that we enjoy today as Americans?

What does Christian charity look like in practice according to Winthrop? Is it necessary to forget one’s own good in being charitable? Why or why not?

What are the most important differences between Winthrop’s understanding of the glue that properly holds a community together and that of the American Founders? Which account do you find more persuasive, and why?

Are Winthrop’s vision and the vision of the Founders compatible? Is there a way we might have the best of both worlds, or is there a necessary tension between them?

Do you think there are elements of this vision still guiding American society? If so, which? If not, why not? How does Winthrop’s view of what is exceptional about America differ from that of more recent speakers who have appealed to his image of a city on a hill—for example, President Ronald Reagan in his First Inaugural Address?