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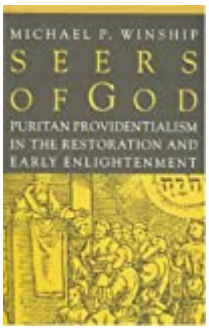

Michael P. Winship. *Seers of God: Puritan Providentialism in the Restoration and Early Enlightenment.* Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996. 226 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8018-5137-7.

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Seers of God, by Michael Winship, is an ambitious and, for the most part, persuasive book. Winship combines extensive research with a skillful use of discourse theory to offer a thoughtful explanation of the declining power and respectability of Puritan providentialism during the Restoration and early Enlightenment. What the title of the book does not disclose, however, is that half of the chapters focus on the providential thought of one man, Cotton Mather, who Winship argues may be considered a "barometer of cultural change" (p. 5). While this approach has the advantage of permitting a close analysis of sweeping transatlantic change, it also raises questions about Mather's representativeness of learned Massachusetts Puritans.

Winship's story begins in the political and religious upheavals of seventeenth-century England. Disturbed by popular radicalism and sectarian violence, reform-minded Anglicans worked to marginalize dissenting groups by delegitimating the culture of wonders, immediate revelations, and intense supernaturalism on which their providentialism rested. They "deliberately redefined the nature and hermeneutics of Providence," offering a reformed providentialism with new discursive practices. This providentialism dismissed supernatural prodigies and explained God's will in terms of natural law, leaving little space for the "enthusiastical" pronouncements and prognostications of its opponents. What began as a politicized discourse gradually became a normative value of the Enlightenment. By the end of the seventeenth century, those who did not accept the reformed providentialism found themselves outside the pale of intellectual respectability, lumped in with unlearned visionaries and melancholic enthusiasts.

In the third chapter, Winship traces the transmission of reformed providentialism to learned circles in Massachusetts, and begins to answer the question he raises in his introduction: "[H]ow and to what extent, were the imperatives of the early Enlightenment absorbed into Massachusetts culture?" (p. 5). Winship argues that reformed providentialism did not attract many converts at first. Rather, it was seen as one interpretive framework among many. He focuses on Increase Mather who, he writes, "typified older Massachusetts ministers, whose intellectual development was set before they had to confront the full implications of changing cultural norms" (p. 73). Though Mather kept abreast of religious and scientific developments, they did not fundamentally alter his providential sensibility.

Those who reached intellectual maturity at the end of the century did not rest so easily within the traditional providential framework. In chapters 4 through 7 Winship offers a case study of one minister who was

troubled by the discrepancies between orthodox Puritan providentialism and the ascending paradigm. Unlike his father, Cotton Mather could not live easily with the contradictory providential frameworks. His writings reveal a persistent tension between his loyalty to orthodox Puritan providentialism and his growing awareness that these beliefs and the discursive practices that supported them were no longer acceptable to Europe's mainstream learned culture. Winship argues that although Mather never abandoned the prodigies, portents, diabolical possession, supernatural judgments, and witchcraft that were the hallmarks of dissenting providentialism, his belief in these things softened and became less intense.

The concluding chapter argues that other ministers, especially those younger than Cotton Mather, adapted more easily to reformed providentialism. Winship analyzes election sermons delivered between 1701 and 1728 to suggest that ministers born after 1660 had largely accommodated the discursive practices of reformed providentialism. The same chapter also paints the Great Awakening as a "provincial coda" to the Restoration. In the 1740s, religious enthusiasm and cultural unrest crystallized the changes in providentialism that had begun a century earlier in England. While the traditional understanding of providence, with its wonders and intense supernaturalism, continued in the popular cultures of New England, it ceased to be intellectually respectable among the learned.

Seers of God is an important contribution to Puritan studies. As Winship points out, the changing providentialism of Massachusetts Puritans is often mentioned but has not been fully explored. This book goes far toward filling that gap in the historiography. It also addresses the issue, raised most notably by Keith Thomas and David D. Hall, of "elite withdrawal" from a shared culture of wonders. Through the lens of Cotton Mather, Winship examines the process of withdrawal in beautiful detail. Just as remarkable is Winship's mastery of diverse strands of historiography, and his ability to bring them together to create a broad geographic and intellectual context for his story. His extensive and valuable footnotes teem with works from the history of science, European cultural history, the religious and intellectual history of New England, and the history of religious and political unrest in seventeenth-century England.

Seers of God covers much new ground, but it also makes a few revisionist statements. For example, Winship continues a historiographical trend that emphasizes the European roots and context of American religious and intellectual culture. He also engages a long-standing debate about Mather's reaction to Newtonian natural philosophy. Most have seen Mather as more or less accepting of the new science, but Winship argues persuasively that, though Mather admired Newton's immediate and sustaining deity, he was uncomfortable with the discursive practices that underwrote Newtonianism.

The book does have weaknesses which, paradoxically, have the same source as one of its strengths. Winship's decision to use Cotton Mather as a lens through which to explore the conflicted and shifting intellectual discourses of the period both enhances and limits his study. Without a doubt, Mather's extensive writing, his intense self-consciousness, his strong desire to be accepted abroad, and his commitment to the faith of his fathers make him an ideal subject through which to study providentialism. Yet his prominence and idiosyncrasy raise questions about how representative he is of the Puritan ministry of Massachusetts.

Winship seems aware that using Mather as "a barometer of cultural change" is controversial. At one point he even concedes that the cultural hinterlands of Massachusetts may not have been as profoundly affected by the changes he describes as was Boston (p. 139). Nonetheless, he constantly defends Mather's representativeness. "While Mather's publications are unusual in their range and sociological transparency," he writes, "ample evidence exists confirming that his assessments were not idiosyncratic; Mather made visible in his writings cultural pressures and dilemmas that others worked out tacitly" (p. 5). However, since the "ample evidence" he mentions is not footnoted, the reader is left wondering whether Mather may truly be considered representative. The section of the final chapter where he studies the providential content of twenty-seven election sermons begins to address this question, but it could have been profitably expanded. In this one respect the book may fall short of its very ambitious title, but it remains an extremely valuable contribution to the field.

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