

Expressions of Popular Religious Sensibility:  
Relations of Conversion from 18th-Century Westborough, Massachusetts<sup>1</sup>

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Historians know relatively little about the religious experiences of non-elite people in colonial America. In that most studied of all regions, New England, what is known derives principally from the writings -- doctrinal, prescriptive, and autobiographical -- of a limited number of clergymen and prominent laymen. Even the voluminous literature from the Great Awakening, which is rich in descriptions of religious experience, was largely generated by ministers who used manifestations of popular piety to serve their own ends as New Lights or Old Lights. The most concrete information concerning popular religious experience is found in the records of admissions to churches, which, when placed in the context of data on age, marital status, gender, and wealth, provide insight into rates and timing of church joining and, by implication, religious experience.<sup>2</sup>

This introduction takes, in Edmund Morgan's phrase, yet "another approach" to New England Puritanism<sup>3</sup> by examining the "relations" or narratives of religious experience that were presented by new communicants to the church of Westborough, Massachusetts, during the

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<sup>1</sup>First presented by the Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians, Los Angeles, Apr. 6, 1984; also at the Fall Meeting of the New England Historical Association, Framingham State College, Oct. 27, 1984.

<sup>2</sup>J. M. Bumsted, "Religion, Finance, and Democracy in Massachusetts: The Town of Norton as a Case Study," *Journal of American History* 57 (1971), 817-31; James Walsh, "The Great Awakening in the First Congregational Church of Woodbury, Connecticut," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 29 (1971), 543-62; Gerald F. Moran, "Conditions of Religious Conversion in the First Society of Norwich, Connecticut, 1718-44," *Journal of Social History* 5 (1972), 331-43; Philip J. Greven, Jr., "Youth, Maturity, and Religious Conversion: A Note on the Ages of Converts in Andover, Massachusetts, 1711-1749," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 108 (1972), 119-34; William F. Willingham, "Religious Conversion in the Second Society of Windham, Connecticut," *Societas* 6 (1976), 109-19; Peter S. Onuf, "New Lights in New London: A Group Portrait of the Separatists," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser. 37 (1980), 627-43; Harry S. Stout and Peter Onuf, "James Davenport and the Great Awakening in New London," *Journal of American History* 70 (1983), 556-78.

<sup>3</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, "New England Puritanism: Another Approach," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 18 (1961), 236-42.

ministry of the Reverend Ebenezer Parkman (1703-1782).<sup>4</sup> In requiring a public presentation of one's religious experience, the Westborough church was following a century-old tradition, for as early as the mid-1630s New England churches had begun to require relations from new members. No longer was it sufficient to demonstrate one's understanding of doctrine, repentance for past sins, and willingness to place oneself under the watch and care of a church. It was now necessary that prospective members present a public "relation" or narrative of their spiritual experiences, demonstrating (to a judgment of charity) that they were among God's elect.<sup>5</sup>

Despite widespread adoption of the requirement that new members testify to their regeneration, few examples of relations have survived. The relations appear not to have been systematically recorded in the formal records of any church, and like other ephemeral documents such as prayer bids, they disappeared.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>The relations are in the Parkman Family Papers, American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, MA. In addition to these sixty relations, the relation of Antipas Brigham, Oct. 16, 1785, is printed in Heman Packard DeForest and Edward Craig Bates, *The History of Westborough, Massachusetts* (Westborough: The Town, 1891), 205-6. Eli Forbush (Harvard College 1751), who was admitted to communion Oct. 21, 1744, wrote to Parkman at about the same time, describing in detail his spiritual awakening; see Eli Forbush to Ebenezer Parkman, n.d., (Parkman Family Papers, Box 3, Folder 1). For a chronological list of the relations, see Appendix I.

<sup>5</sup>Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea* (1963; New York: Cornell University Press, 1965); Raymond Phineas Stearns and David Holmes Brawner, "New England Church Relations and Continuity in Early Congregational History," *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 75 (1965), 13-45; Baird Tipson, "Invisible Saints: The 'Judgment of Charity' in the Early New England Churches," *Church History* 54 (1975), 460-71.

<sup>6</sup>In addition to the Westborough Relations, the most significant groups are from Cambridge, Ipswich, Freetown, and Medfield. See *Thomas Shepard's Confessions*, ed. George Selement and Bruce C. Woolley (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1981); J. M. Bumsted, "Emotion in Colonial America: Some Relations of Conversion Experience in Freetown, Massachusetts, 179-1770," *New England Quarterly* 49 (1976), 97-108; Christopher M. Jedrey, *The World of John Cleaveland* (New York: Norton, 1979), 117-19. Other relations appear in Donald E. Stanford, "Edward Taylor's 'Spiritual Relation,'" *American Literature* 35 (1964), 467-75; *The Diary of Michael Wigglesworth*, ed. Edmund S. Morgan (New York, 1965), 107-25; Thomas Henry Billings, "The Great Awakening," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 65 (1929), 94-96; "Confession and Declaration of Faith of Col. John Higginson," *Essex Institute Historical Collections* 6 (1864), 255-56; *The Notebook of the Reverend John Fiske*, ed. Robert C. Pope (Boston: Colonial Society of Massachusetts, 1974); "The Commonplace Book of Joseph Green," *Publications of the Colonial Society of Massachusetts* 34: 241-44.

For a recent reading of the Cambridge relations, see Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), 86-89; and George Selement, "The Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds at Cambridge, New England, 1638-1645," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 41 (1984), 32-48, with comments by David D. Hall, "Toward a

The relations from the Westborough church provide an unusually good opportunity to examine popular religious experience within the institutional context of an established church. The collection is large, totaling sixty, and many were recorded in the handwriting of persons other than the minister. The relations, studied in conjunction with a substantial range of sources, reveal much about the religious views and experience of ordinary church members: vital records and genealogies permit the reconstitution of families; the Westborough church records provide dates for baptisms, admissions under the half-way covenant, and admissions of new communicants, as well as information on discipline; and the extensive diary of Ebenezer Parkman provides not only information on the minister's dealings with prospective communicants but also material about church members and other residents of Westborough and surrounding towns.<sup>7</sup>

This introduction analyzes, first, membership patterns in the Westborough church from the 1720s to the 1780s; second, the steps by which an individual became a member of the church and, within that process, when and under what conditions the relations were written and possibly revised; and, third, the contents of the relations.

During Parkman's fifty-eight-year ministry, the Westborough church received 407 new

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History of Popular Religion in Early New England," 49-55, and Darrett B. Rutman, "New England as Idea and Society Revisited," 56-61.

On prayer bids, see Stephen J. Stein, "'For Their Spiritual Good': The Northampton, Massachusetts, Prayer Bids of the 1730s and 1740s," *William and Mary Quarterly* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 37 (1980), 261-85.

<sup>7</sup>Portions of Ebenezer Parkman's diary have been published in *The Diary of the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, of Westborough, Mass., for the Months of February, March, April, October and November, 1737, November and December of 1778, and the Years 1779 and 1780*, ed. Harriette M. Forbes (Westborough, Mass.: Westborough Historical Society, 1899), and *The Diary of Ebenezer Parkman, 1703-1782, First Part Three Volumes in One, 1719-1755*, ed. Francis G. Walett (Worcester, Mass.: American Antiquarian Society, 1974). About sixty percent of the diary remains unpublished, with the principal manuscript portions at the American Antiquarian Society and others at the Massachusetts Historical Society. See also "Extracts from the Private Journal [1742] of the Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, of Westborough, Mass.," in Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston, 1845), 204-12. For the location and publication of the extant portion of Parkman's diary, see Appendix II. The manuscript Westborough Church Records are held by the Westborough Public Library; the American Antiquarian Society has a microfilm copy of the first volume, which contains the eighteenth-century records.

members. Of these, 92 had been church members in other communities and were received into the Westborough church by virtue of letters of dismissal from their former churches. For the other 315 persons, admission into the Westborough church marked their first full relationship with a church, allowing them to participate in communion and, if males, in the church's government through the selection of officers and voting on issues before the church. It is these 315 first-time communicants (122 M, 193 F) with whom this introduction is concerned.<sup>8</sup>

In terms of demographic characteristics, the new communicants fit into patterns that historians have identified for other churches -- Andover and Norton, Massachusetts, and Woodbury, Windham, and Norwich, Connecticut, for example. Women outnumbered men by more than three-to-two, joined the church at earlier ages than men, and were more likely to be single when they joined. Thus, among new communicants whose ages are known (88F, 77M), the average age at admission for women was 24.8 years; for men, 27.6 years. About 85% of the men and nearly 80% of the women were married. Seventy of the 93 married men joined the church on the same day as their wives; these 70 couples represented nearly half of the church's first-time communicants (44.4%).<sup>9</sup>

The ages at admission ranged from 12 to 52 years, but both men and women typically joined in their twenties. Only fifteen persons (1 male and 14 females) became communicants

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<sup>8</sup>As Daniel Scott Smith notes, church-joining and membership should be seen in the context of the numbers "at risk" -- that is, those who were capable of becoming members; Smith, "A Perspective on Demographic Methods and Effects in Social History," *WMQ* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 39 (1982), 446-48. For example, if we assume that half of the population of a New England town was under the age of 16, most, indeed, nearly all of that half would not be "at risk." Given the expected age-patterns of church-joining, it was unusual for persons in their early teens or younger to join. In the absence of census data and extant local tax and assessment lists for the years of Parkman's ministry, the best approximation of the town's population might result from a reconstitution based on the 1771 provincial valuation list. That list contains the names of 146 residents (140 men and six women). Among the men, 42 (30%) were church members, while four of the six women were members. On church membership patterns, see Patricia U. Bonomi and Peter R. Eisenstadt, "Church Adherence in the Eighteenth-Century British America Colonies," *WMQ* 3<sup>rd</sup> ser., 39 (1982), 245-86.

In "An Account of Westborough (Mass.)," Jan. 28, 1767, Parkman stated that there were 120 families and that the church had 42 male members who were residents; see DeForest and Bates, *History of Westborough*, 480.

<sup>9</sup>See Appendix, Tables 1-4.

before age 20. When twelve-year-old Mary Bradish became a communicant, Parkman noted her date of birth in the records, thereby indicating the exceptionally early age of her membership.

Over the fifty-eight years of Parkman's ministry, the church added, on the average, seven new members each year, including five who were joining a church for the first time. The numbers of new communicants ranged from none in each of three years to a high of twenty-four in 1728 following the earthquake of 1727. Although Parkman was a moderate New Light, the church added only twenty-two members between 1741 and 1743, the height of the Great Awakening in most churches.

The sixty extant relations from the Westborough church represent about one-fifth of the 318 first-time communicants. The earliest relation dates from 1736, the last from 1774; thus, there are no relations from the first twelve or last eleven years of Parkman's ministry. Thirty-one of the sixty relations are from the 1760s, a decade in which the church received fifty-nine first-time communicants. Twenty-three of the relations (or 38.3%) were offered by men and thirty-seven (or 61.6%) by women. Of the 57 whose marital status is known, forty-eight were married and nine were single. All but one of the new communicants were residents of Westborough.

Parkman's diary permits us to trace the steps that an individual took to become a communicant member of the church. A prospective communicant was first examined by the minister. Although Parkman usually only noted in his diary that he had "examined" the person who wished to become a communicant, the examinations appear to have focused primarily on a candidate's knowledge of doctrine and religious experience. Thus, Hannah Andrews passed her "Examination freely, as to knowledge and hopeful Experience" (July 21, 1780).<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup>Dates in parentheses refer to Parkman's diary.

The examinations appear usually to have been private -- that is, with only the prospective communicant present with Parkman. Even though 70 couples (or 140 persons) joined at the same time, the examinations of husbands and wives were conducted separately. In at least one instance, however, the candidate brought an assistant -- perhaps for moral support. Thus, Mrs. Sarah Thurston brought her mother "to assist her in her Examination" (July 12, 1780).

Most examinations apparently went off without a hitch, but in some cases there were difficulties that indicate something of what Parkman was looking for in those whom he would propound for membership. Thus, he found "Much Difficulty" in the case of Mrs. James Miller: "whilst she desires to come to the Lords Supper yet she tells me She does not pretend to a Saving Change" (Aug. 15, 1749). Jonathan Rogers came to Parkman on at least two occasions, and Parkman "took pains with him in examining him for some Hours" (June 3, 1748). Jonas Child came to Parkman "to be Examin'd and taught in order to his joining with the Church" (Feb. 17, 1746). Parkman's instruction of Child evidently took some time, for Child was not propounded for admission for another two and a half months (May 4, 1746). Noah How and his wife Mary also fell short of what Parkman expected of them, and he was "oblig'd in Conscience to put them by and request them Still to take further Pains" (Mar. 20, 1752). Whatever further pains they took were inadequate, for the Hows did not become communicant members.

Occasionally Parkman and the prospective communicant disagreed on matters of church practice, as when Samuel Baker disputed with Parkman "on Visible and Real Right to Special Ordinances" (Feb. 18, 1745). Whatever the nature of this dispute, it was evidently settled to Parkman's satisfaction, as Baker was admitted to the church (Apr. 14, 1745). Cornelius Cook was less fortunate. While giving an account of "his Experiences and what he thought to be his Conversion" (Sept. 11, 1744), he asserted that Parkman and his family had abused him. This and

other matters caused Parkman to doubt “whether he who brot forth so Contrary Fruits to the Spirit had that glorious Spirit.” Parkman administered a reproof and reasoned with Cook; Cook never joined the Westborough church.

In addition to the candidate’s knowledge and experience, Parkman was also concerned that the candidate be reconciled to persons with whom he or she had had disputes. Thus, Cornelius Biglow brought a relation to Parkman, but Parkman was unwilling to proceed with Biglow’s admission until Biglow had been reconciled with his wife (Feb. 28, 1777). Benjamin Fay and his wife sought admission, but Parkman refused until they had been reconciled with Thomas Whitney or had sought arbitration of the differences between them (Apr. 5, May 15, 1777). Fay sought admission four years later, but Parkman again refused to propound him until Fay had been reconciled with Whitney (17 Sept. 1781).

Parkman’s judgments seem to have been accepted by most members of the church, although on one occasion Lieutenant Thomas Forbush complained of Parkman’s “strictness in Examining Candidates for Admission into the Church” (July 21, 1752). After Parkman’s death, the church encouraged its half-way members to become communicants, but several protested that they had examined themselves and were not confident that they were worthy of communion.

Following the examination of the candidate, Parkman “propounded” the individual for admission to communion -- that is, publicly placed the individual’s name before the church for its approval. The propounding typically took place on a sabbath two weeks before communion was to be celebrated. The fact that the minister propounded the individual represented a form of certification. That is, the minister thereby indicated to the church and congregation that he was satisfied that the candidate understood the principal doctrines of the church, was willing to subscribe to the church’s covenant and place himself under the church’s watch and care, had

expressed repentance for past errors, and had had a religious experience that the minister judged qualified the individual for membership. This certification did not guarantee that the individual would be admitted to communion, but if the minister's examination of the candidate had been sufficiently searching and careful, it was unlikely that members of the church or congregation would object to the individual's admission.

In Westborough, there was only one recorded case in which an individual's candidacy was challenged by a member of the church. In 1771, after twenty-two-year-old Jonathan Batherick had been propounded for membership, one church member complained to Parkman that Batherick had left the young men's religious meetings without good cause (Feb. 27, 1771). Since Batherick was admitted to the church on schedule, Parkman and other members must have considered this objection insubstantial, or perhaps the objection was withdrawn.

Between the propounding and admission, a relation would be written. The candidate sometimes brought Parkman the written relation for his approval or correction. In other cases, the candidate presented a document that Parkman transcribed. And on still other occasions, Parkman wrote down what the individual dictated. Of the sixty relations, sixteen are entirely in Parkman's handwriting; forty-two are in the handwriting of another person, possibly but not necessarily the candidate; and the remaining two are in another person's handwriting with extensive corrections and additions by Parkman. All twenty-three men signed their names, as did twenty-seven of the thirty-seven women. The other ten women made their "mark" in place of a signature.

Parkman occasionally had to correct or transcribe relations. He asked Abigail Bathrick to answer "some Questions and to have some Correction in the Draught of her Relation" (Mar. 9, 1771). Isaac Parker brought his own and his wife's relations but "excused the incorrectness of

his for want of time, and took it again” (Nov. 13, 1779). The relations of Joseph and Lucy Hardy required many alterations; Lucy Hardy’s required so many corrections that Parkman had to make a transcription (May 22, 25, 1780). Parkman corrected Beulah Fay’s relation “in some respects,” but he was unable to “methodize it” (Sept. 25, 1781).

For some persons who could not write -- or who were perhaps unable to read handwriting -- Parkman took down their relations and then read them back. Thus, Sarah Harrington told Parkman “the substance of her Relation,” which he wrote for her (Nov. 1, 1781). The next day he went to her home, where he read what he had written. She consented to its correctness in her husband’s presence, and at her request, her husband “wrote her Name” (Nov. 2, 1781). On another occasion, Parkman “took” Martha Warrin’s “Relation from her Mouth” (Mar. 1, 1745). When Jonas and Persis Brigham came to Parkman “to have their Relations writ,” the minister was raking hay with his sons. Jonas Brigham took Parkman’s rake while Parkman wrote out his wife’s relation (Aug. 6, 1747).

Not surprisingly, Parkman wished to approve or amend the relations before their delivery. Since he had certified the candidate’s knowledge and experience, he naturally wished that the relation be so phrased as to support his judgment. At the same time, since relations were intended to be exemplary and instructive for church members and the congregation alike, he would want the relations to further the cause of religion rather than raise questions or doubts about the nature of appropriate religious experience. Nevertheless, in a number of cases, the candidates brought their relations to him immediately before the start of church services, thus presenting him with a *fait accompli*. To Parkman’s sorrow, even his eldest son and daughter-in-law brought their relations to him on the morning of their admission (Apr. 24, 1757). On another occasion, he was “much disquieted” by Mehitabel Brigham, who did not bring her relation to

him until he was on his way to the meeting house (Nov. 19, 1749).

During Parkman's ministry, the Westborough church never formally adopted a policy with respect to the delivery of relations. There is evidence, however, that Parkman himself, rather than the candidate, read the relation to the church. Thus, early in his ministry, when Thomas Forbes hesitated to make a relation, Parkman persuaded him of "the usefulness of the Practice." Forbes thereupon presented Parkman with a relation "to be Read to the Church" (Dec. 11, 1726). In addition, the fact that sixty relations remained among Parkman's papers further suggests that he read the relations to the congregation.<sup>11</sup> Thus, on Hannah Snow's relation, Parkman noted "Read; and She was admitted July 16. 1769."

Whatever the style of presentation, clearly the substance of the relations was more important in the process of admission to communion. Indeed, the relation itself was not important in terms of the candidate's admission, for the candidate would already have passed the crucial steps -- examination by the minister, propounding, and the interval between propounding and actual admission. The contents of the relations should therefore be seen as expressions of the community's religious values.

In his study of the relations presented before Thomas Shepard's Cambridge church between 1638 and 1645, George Selement compares Shepard's "thought and experience...with his parishioners' understanding of his ideas." He concludes that the "laymen displayed a remarkable knowledge of Shepard's theology of conversion." Thus, the contents of the Cambridge relations support the assumption that "there was at least a rough correspondence between lay and clerical thought."<sup>12</sup>

This conclusion is not terribly startling, although Selement is the first to devise a way of

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<sup>12</sup>Selement, "Meeting of Elite and Popular Minds," 34, 39, 48.

testing the degree of correspondence. As he points out, persons who became communicants represented only a portion of the population. Furthermore, given the tests of doctrine and experience that prospective communicants had to pass before making a relation, there would have been every likelihood that non-corresponding ideas would have been excluded or corrected prior to the delivery of the relations.

For purposes of analysis, the relations can be seen in another context. They were the culmination of an elaborate and extended social ritual that served to set apart certain members of the community, to affirm and to inculcate the community's central religious values, and to authenticate or validate the legitimacy of the religious experience of the individuals presenting the relations.

For the individual, delivery of the relation and admission to communion were the culmination of a process that, in one sense, began at the beginning of time. In terms of secular time, the process included the individual's birth and education, spiritual awakenings and backslidings, acceptance of God's design, closing with Christ, and decision to seek membership in the church. The ritual, both private and public, included the individual's examination, propounding, composition of a relation, its delivery, acceptance into membership, and first communion.

The relation itself had two functional roles to play in the ritual: first, to repeat and to affirm the community's religious values, and, second, to authenticate or validate the individual's experience within the context of those values. The result was, on the one hand, a fairly common structure and repetition of key themes among the relations and, on the other hand, a wide range of individual experiences that served to authenticate the individual's experience within the context of God's grand design.

Statements of doctrine frequently appear in the relations: a belief in the trinity, the creation of the world and of man in God's image, the covenant of works, the fall, the second covenant, and salvation through faith in Christ. Thus, Mehitable Brigham summarized doctrines that appeared, at least in part, in thirty-three of the relations: "I believe there is one God in three persons the father, Son and Holy-Ghost and that when God Created man he Entred into a Covenant of Life with him on condition of perfect obedience and that man by Sin and Disobedience Broke Covenant with God and forfeited all Claim to Life and Hapiness thereby. and I Believe according to Scripture that adam was Constituted the head and Representitive of all mankind and that we all sinned in him and fell with him in the first and Great Transgression and his sin is Justly ours by Imputation as it is written by one mans Disobedience many were made sinners. and I believe according to Scripture that God was pleased in his Infinite mercy to Enter into a Covenant of Grace to Deliver us from a State of Sin and misery that the second person in the Godhead is the mediator of this Covenant that he be came man Suffered and Died for our sins and Rose again for our Justification and that it is through the Imputation of his Riteousness unto us that we are Justified." Such statements of doctrine reflect the shorter catechism of the Westminster Assembly and provide an appropriate -- although not essential -- doctrinal framework for the individual's relation of personal spiritual experience.

Much more common than statements of doctrine -- indeed, pervasive and central -- was the narrative of the individual's danger in the face of inherited sin and deserved punishment, the individual's powerlessness to merit anything on the basis of personal worth, the struggle against temptation, self, and despair, and the recognition that only faith in Christ could lead to salvation, yet doubt that one was worthy. This dilemma was frequently prefaced with an expression of both thanks for being born in a land where the gospel was preached and remorse for not having

taken better advantage of one's circumstances. Thus, Abigail Bathrick wrote: "I have Reason to thank God i was born and brought up in a Land of gospel light where i have had his word to Read and his gospel Preached to me from time to time, and was given up to God in Baptism in my infancy. I have Reason to be ashamed that i have made no better Improvement of the Advantages I have enjoyed considering Especially the Bonds and obligations i am under by my baptism and Dedication to God." Thirty of the sixty relations contain such statements of gratitude and remorse.

The individual's dilemma was best summarized in the tension between seemingly contradictory invitations found scripture. In Matthew 11:28, the prospective communicant was urged, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." Similarly, in Isaiah 55:1, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money, come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price." In sharp contrast stood the stern admonition in 1 Corinthians 11:29: "he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself, not discerning the Lord's body." These passages were among those most frequently cited in the relations.

Confidence of one's salvation in the face of individual unworthiness and scriptural warning was, of course, impossible. The next central theme in the relations was an expression of acceptance of the way in which God had ordered the world, the hope -- faint, humble, and qualified -- that one had accepted Christ as the only ground for hope and as one's prophet, priest, and king,<sup>13</sup> and the realization that one could not be certain. As Hephzibah Crosby wrote, "tho I have experienced much Enlightening and humbling and [have] been some times encourag'd yet I have had great Concern and [have] been in great Trouble questioning myself whether I had been

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<sup>13</sup>Twenty of the sixty relations include references to an individual's acceptance of Christ as prophet, priest, and king.

thorowly humbled before God, whether I have accepted Christ aright, and whether my Hope was not a vain Hope. I acknowledge, it is one Thing to say what one has heard or read or got by rote, and another thing what a person has really felt and experienced; therefore I would not offer any thing but what I hope I have really found.”

Finally, the relations typically end with an expression of the individual’s desire to join the church, to seek forgiveness for past sins, and to request prayers on one’s behalf. As Zebulun Rice wrote, “I would humbly offer my Self to join in Church Communion with the people of G. in this place; and I Desire hombly to approach to the ordinance of the Lords Sup[p]er. I hartily desire the forgiveness of what Ever any of the people of God have Sean me Gilty of[.] I Earnestly intreat your prayers to God for me that he would Give me his Grace to inabel me to Live and walk as becomes one of his Children.”

These four elements of the relations -- first, the statements of doctrine; second, the individual’s lack of worth and ability to influence salvation; third, the acceptance of God’s will and a closing with Christ; and, fourth, the expression of a desire to join the church -- are so predictable as to be almost formulaic. Indeed, the church members and congregation would have expected to hear such statements as the relations were read. After all, the prospective communicant professed a oneness with the church through a shared world view and experience that warranted the individual’s admission to the select group that constituted the church’s membership.

The apparently formulaic character of the relations should not mislead us into denying the depth or variety of individual experience that the relations express. Prospective communicants had to convince themselves, their minister, and the church that, in a judgment of charity, they were worthy of membership and communion. A mere recitation of doctrine or of

the familiar stages of conversion would not do. As Hephzibah Crosby reminded her listeners, “there is a great Difference between giving the Hand (in profession) and giving the Heart to the Lord.”

The relations set forth the great truths of existence and salvation, thus attesting to their legitimacy and to the individual’s acceptance of them. But confirmation of truth was only one aspect of the relation. The individual’s own experience also had to be authenticated or validated within the framework of the universal religious truths. This authentication was achieved in at least four ways. First, all of the relations place the individuals in a posture of humility and hope, unwilling and unable to do more than trust in Christ. Second, more than a third of the relations recount specific or general providences that awakened the individual to a sense of insufficiency. Third, all the relations cite the scriptures; while some biblical passages are used more frequently than others, the authors of the relations turned to a wide range of texts to explain themselves. Finally, the variety in length and content suggests that that the prospective communicants were seeking not merely to express central truths but to show how their lives fitted into those truths.

The posture of humility and hope is found in all the relations -- most often expressed by the statement, “I hope,” and the adverb, “humbly.” Lois Rice humbly hoped that she “had not only an historical faith but a true and a saving knowledge of Christ.” Lucy Sever stated, “I humbly hope I am sincere herein having carefully examind my self.” Elizabeth Miller wrote, “tho I have not attained assurance, yet I have made great Search in to my self examining by the Marks and Signs of Conversion which I hope I can answer something to.” As Pelatiah Metcalf professed on his deathbed, “I own I cannot Say that I have had a Work of Grace wrought in me -- But am daily waiting upon God, and desire to make a Profession of His Name, and to do what in me lies to Glorifie Him while I am continued in Life.”

More than a third of the relations mentioned personal circumstances. Some authors made general references to events. Benjamin Fay, for example, noted that God had been pleased “for these several years to Exersis” him “with the Rod of affliction.” Charles Brigham said that he had been awakened by God’s word and providences. In other cases, individuals pointed to specific personal afflictions: Isaac Miller had lost his hand in an accident at his mill; Benjamin Tainter had been captured by Indians, but God had preserved him in captivity; Mary Miller had become deaf; and Mary Warrin suffered from “weakness and continuall Wasting” of her limbs. Illness and death were frequently mentioned. Lydia Bathrick had been awakened by the death of a child and deaths among her neighbors. Mehitable Brigham was especially awakened by the death of her youngest and eldest sisters and by her own sickness; Martha Wood noted her mother’s death; Eleazer Beeman pointed to sickness that afflicted his entire family and killed three of his children; and Mary McAllester was awakened “by the late judgment of Sicknes in the providence of god in this place.” There seems to be a qualitative difference in ways men and women referred to God’s special providence. Men tended either to refer in general to God’s providences or to cite specific circumstances afflicting themselves. Women also cited specific events but also professed to be affected by circumstances that had a wider impact. Abigail Gale, for example, spoke of “the many Deaths which have been among us at our House,” but her husband was silent on these afflictions.

All of the relations cite passages from the Bible, either through specific references or by paraphrases. Certain passages are frequently cited, but more significant is the range of scripture to which the authors turn. Fifty-two passages are cited by specific chapter and verse. Some are cited a dozen or more times, others a few times, and many only once. Take, for example, Isaiah 1:18: “Come now, and let us reason together, saith the Lord: though your sins be as scarlet, they

shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool.” Six persons found comfort in this promise. Only one person, however, turned to Jeremiah 13:23: “Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots?” Those who presented relations to the church and congregation were part of a Bible-literate culture whose members closely studied and drew inspiration from the scriptures. While they certainly knew their catechism and frequently referred to the “word preached,” they were not dependent on a narrow range of sources for inspiration and comfort.

Finally, other differences in the contents of the relations suggest the individuality of experience and expression of these sixty prospective communicants. Part of that individuality is seen merely in the length of the relations, ranging from about 300 to 2,000 words, with most falling between 400 and 600 words. More importantly, the style of expression and choice of imagery place a stamp of individuality on the documents. Thus, all the relations attempt to balance hope and humility, that is, an expression of trust in and reliance on Christ combined with a sense of unworthiness and doubt. But only Hephzibah Crosby so directly articulated the difference between saying what one had learned by rote and expressing what one had felt and experienced. So, too, none of the authors balanced hope and uncertainty as did Abigail Kenney: “I don’t know what I am Elected, but I can truly Say that I hope I have been so far Called of God as that my Mind is very Different, and my Disposition and Inclination changd from what it once was. If I can’t say that all old Things are passed away and that all Things are become new, yet a good many are, and I am Striving to have it to be wholly so.”

The use of the word “blood” will serve as a final example of the variety and individuality of expression in the relations. Twenty persons used the word. Some echoed 1 Corinthians 11:27 in their fear that if they took communion unworthily, they would “be guilty of the body and

blood of the Lord.” Others turned to 1 John 1:7 for assurance that “the blood of Jesus Christ...cleanseth us from all sin.” Still others used John 6:53 for assurance that “Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you.” Another turned to Paul’s epistle to the Ephesians 2:13 for the promise the “now, in Jesus Christ, ye who sometime were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ.” Yet others turned to “the blood of the everlasting covenant” in Hebrews 13:20. Others used the reference in Revelation 1:5 to Christ, who “washed us from our sins in his own blood.” Finally, in the most vivid language, Jemima Hardy proclaimed, “accordingly I Do here throw my guilty Soul into the open Arms of a Crucified Jesus, lodge it in his wounds and Clasp a bout him as by Bleedin[g] high Priest and Surety to make Atonement...and wash me in his Blood...” Two other women used comparably vivid language: “I do here throw my guilty Soul into the Arms of a crucified Saviour” (Elizabeth Beals), and “I do find in my Self freely to cast my Naked Soul into the open Arms of my crucified Redeemer” (Mary Chase).

The range and richness of scriptural references within which these sixty prospective communicants placed their individual experiences underscore the fact that they were part of the culture of “traditional literacy” that characterized early New England. As David Hall has noted, members of that culture were “intensive readers” of a limited number of “steady sellers,” and no book was more important or better known than the Bible.<sup>14</sup>

The relations presented before the Westborough church thus served a dual purpose. On the one hand, they set forth, in fairly predictable fashion, many of the central doctrines of religion that believers professed, and they provided a summary of the challenges that faced the individual soul in closing with Christ. The pattern of experience that Edmund Morgan finds in

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<sup>14</sup>David D. Hall, “The Uses of Literacy in New England, 1600-1850,” in William L. Joyce et al., eds., *Printing and Society in Early America* (Worcester, MA: American Antiquarian Society, 1983), 23-24.

seventeenth-century conversions applies to these eighteenth-century experiences as well: “knowledge, conviction, faith, combat, and true, imperfect, assurance.”<sup>15</sup> Like a folktale that gains authority and authenticity through repetition, the relation was not intended to reveal new or original truths or insights but to reinforce and affirm the values of the community as set forth in its religious beliefs.<sup>16</sup>

While they affirmed the values of their culture, the authors of the relations also presented evidence that, they hoped, would authenticate or demonstrate the validity of their own personal or individual experience. The relations thus placed individual experience into the context of inherited values, combining -- to use Hephzibah Crosby’s words -- “what one has heard or read or got by rote” with what “a person has really felt and experienced.”

George Selement has posited the existence of one or more collective mentalities in early New England, each of which would reveal at least a rough correspondence between lay and clerical thought. The existence of other sets of relations invites identification of and comparison among those different mentalities -- if, in fact, they did exist -- although that is not the task of this essay. So, too, changes in or the disappearance of a collective mentality invite investigation -- as, for example, the discontinuation of the practice of presenting relations, something that occurred in Westborough at the end of the century and in scores of other churches as well.

At this point, it is safe to say that there was among the Westborough communicants a collective spiritual universe, shaped by the town’s Puritan roots, informed by an extensive style of scriptural searching and reading typical of an intensely Bible-literate culture, and reiterated and reinforced over a period of nearly sixty years by the delivery of relations of spiritual

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<sup>15</sup>Morgan, *Visible Saints*, 72.

<sup>16</sup>On folktales, see Stith Thompson, *The Folktale* (New York: The Dryden Press, 1946), 45. For this reference, I am grateful to Phyllis M. Jones, “Puritan’s Progress: The Story of God’s Salvation in the Early New England Sermons,” *Early American Literature* 15 (1980), 14-28.

experience.

**Appendix I**  
**Chronological List of the Westborough Relations**

Note: Dates without parentheses appear on the relations; dates within parentheses are the dates of admission that appear in the church records.

Rice, Anna	Aug. 26, 1736
Warrin, Mary	(Aug. 27, 1738)
Bradish, Ruth	(Sept. 2, 1739)
Harrington, Elizabeth	(Oct. 5, 1740)
Fay, Benjamin	(July 26, 1741)
Beeman, Eleazer	(Oct. 18, 1741)
Mainard, Hannah	(Nov. 8, 1741)
Rice, Zebulun	May 21, 1743 (admitted June 5)
Brigham, Susanna	(Apr. 12, 1747)
Brigham, Levi	(Apr. 12, 1747)
Tainter, Benjamin	(Nov. 6, 1748)
Crosby, Hephzibah	(Apr. 9, 1749)
Brigham, Charles	(Aug. 6, 1749)
Bathrick, Lydia	(Aug. 27, 1749)
Brigham, Mehitable	(Nov. 19, 1749)
Miller, Elizabeth	(Nov. 19, 1749)
Forbush, Hannah, Jr.	(Mar. 3, 1751)
Gale, Abigail	(c. 1751)
Gale, Abijah	(c. 1751)

Note: The Westborough church records contain no entry for the admission of Abigail or Abijah Gale. Parkman noted in his diary, Apr. 28, 1751, “Abigail Gale, the Wife of Abijah Gale, made profession of the Christian Religion, and was baptized.” Then, on July 15, 1751, “Mr. Abijah Gale and his wife here with their Relations.” Abijah Gale appears on an undated “List of Male Members” (Parkman Family Papers, Box 2, Folder 1).

Warrin, Persis	(Nov. 30, 1752)
Warrin, Moses	(Nov. 30, 1752)
Rice, Eunice	(Oct. 5, 1755)
Forbush, Lucy	(Oct. 5, 1755)
Bowman, Joseph	(Aug. 28, 1757)
Chase, Mary	June 15, 1760
Rice, Adam	(May 1, 1763)
Rice, Lois	(May 1, 1763)
Fay, Deliverance	(May 29, 1763)
Rice, Priscilla	(June 19, 1763)
Metcalf, Pelatiah	(July 27, 1763)
Hardy, Constantine	Nov. 27, 1763
Grout, Hannah	(Feb. 5, 1764)
Grout, Jonathan	(Feb. 5, 1764)

Hardy, Jeminma	(Feb. 12, 1764)
How, Martha	(Feb. 12, 1764)
Beals, Elizabeth	Mar. 11, 1764
Miller, Isaac	(May 27, 1764)
Rice, Hannah	(Aug. 12, 1764)
Wood, Martha	Feb. 3, 1765
Wood, John	Feb. 3, 1765
Sever, Lucy	(Mar. 16, 1766)
Miller, Mary	(Sept. 28, 1766)
Whipple, Francis, Jr.	(Oct. 19, 1766)
Smith, Ezekiel	(Oct. 19, 1766)
Smith, Ruth	(Oct. 19, 1766)
Harrington, Joseph	(Nov. 1, 1767)
Harrington, Ruth	(Nov. 1, 1767)
Whitney, Eli	Dec. 6, 1767
Whitney, Elizabeth	Dec. 6, 1767
Chamberlain, Edmund	May 1, 1768
Chamberlain, Ruth	May 1, 1768
Bond, Lydia	(May 21, 1769)
Bond, Thomas	(May 21, 1769)
Snow, Hannah	July 16, 1769
Snow, Jabez, Jr.	July 16, 1769
McAllester, Mary	Apr. 29, 1770
Rice, Prudence	(July 29, 1770)
Bathrick, Abigail	(Mar. 17, 1771)
Bathrick, Jonathan	(Mar. 17, 1771)
Kenney, Abigail	Feb. 20, 1774
Brigham, Antipas	Oct. 16, 1785

Note: Antipas Brigham's relation, not part of the Parkman Family Papers, is printed in Heman Packard DeForest and Edward Craig Bates, *The History of Westborough, Massachusetts* (Westborough, 1891), 205-06.

In addition to these relations, the Parkman Family Papers (Box 3, Folder 1) contain a letter from Eli Forbush to Ebenezer Parkman, c. 1744, "to declare to you My beloved Teacher what (I hope) God has done for my Soul."

**Appendix II**  
**Location and Publication of the Diary of Ebenezer Parkman**

**Location of Extant Portions of Parkman's Diary**

1723-1728 (Jan. 1723-Sept. 1728): American Antiquarian Society (hereafter: AAS)  
 1736 Jan. 8-Dec. 31): AAS  
 1737 (Feb., Mar., Apr., Oct., Nov.): Published by the Westborough Historical Society  
 1738-1740: AAS  
 1742 Jan. 1-Dec. 19): AAS  
 1742 (Dec. 21-31): Massachusetts Historical Society (hereafter: MHS)  
 1743-1748: AAS  
 1749: MHS  
 1750-1754: AAS  
 1755: MHS  
 1756-1761 (Jan. 1756-May 1761): AAS  
 1764-1769 (June 1764-1767): AAS  
 1771-1772 (Aug. 1771-Nov. 21, 1772): MHS  
 1772 (Nov. 10-21): AAS  
 1772-1773 (Nov. 1772-June 1773): MHS  
 1773-1778 (June 1773 - Oct. 1778): AAS  
 1778-1780: (Nov. 1778 - Dec. 1780): Published by the Westborough Historical Society  
 1781-1782: MHS

**Publication History**

The diary for 1723-1755, with the exception of 1736 and 1742 and the excerpts from Jan. 7 to Dec. 18, 1742, was edited by Francis G. Walett and published in the *Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 71-76 (1961-1966). The same years were subsequently reprinted in *The Dairy of Ebenezer Parkman, 1703-1782: First Part, Three Volumes in One, 1719-1755* (Worcester, Massachusetts, 1974). Walett also included Parkman's birthday meditations, the "Natalitia." The years 1736 and 1742 were acquired by AAS in 1985.

Harriette M. Forbes, ed., *The Diary of Rev. Ebenezer Parkman, of Westborough, Mass., for the Months of Feb., Mar., Apr., Oct. and Nov., 1737, Nov. and Dec. of 1778, and the Years of 1779 and 1780* ([Westborough,] 1899). These portions of the diary are not known to be extant.

Excerpts for the period Jan. 7-Dec. 18, 1742 were published in Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening: A History of the Revival of Religion in the Time of Edwards and Whitefield* (Boston, 1845), 204-12.

**Appendix III, Table 1**  
**Westborough Relations by Year and Gender**

Year	Total	Male	Female
1736	1	0	1
1738	1	0	1
1739	1	0	1
1740	1	0	1
1741	3	2	1
1743	1	1	0
1747	2	1	1
1748	1	1	0
1749	5	1	4
1751	3	1	2
1752	2	1	1
1755	2	0	2
1757	1	1	0
1760	1	0	1
1763	6	3	3
1764	7	2	5
1765	2	1	1
1766	5	2	3
1767	4	2	2
1768	2	1	1
1769	4	2	2
1770	2	0	2
1771	2	1	1
1774	1	0	1
Totals	60	23	37

**Appendix III, Table 2**  
**Marital Status of First-Time Communicants**  
**Westborough, Massachusetts, 1724-1782)**

	Males	Females
Married	93 (76.2%)	144 (74.6%)
Single	17 (13.9%)	37 (19.2%)
Widowed	0	2 (1.0%)
Unknown	12 (9.8%)	10 (5.2%)
Totals	122	193

**Appendix III, Table 3**  
**Marital Status of First-Time Communicants**  
**Whose Status Is Known**  
**Westborough, Massachusetts, 1724-1782**

Marital Status	Men Number (%)	Women Number (%)
Married	93 (84.5%)	144 (78.7%)
Single	17 (15.5%)	37 (20.2%)
Widowed	0	2 (1.1%)
Totals	110 (100%)	183 (100%)

**Appendix III, Table 4**  
**Marital Status of Those Whose Relations Survive**  
**Westborough, Massachusetts**

	Married	Single	Unknown
Men	20	2	1
Women	28	7	2
Total	48	9	3