Chapter Twelve

Twisting the Gospel

Pocahontas and Jesus—what a tangled web!

And Alexander Whitaker. A key player in Pocahontas's conversion, Whitaker was a sincere Christian and a theologically trained Anglican missionary. A conscientious seeker for truth, Whitaker earnestly wanted to ground Pocahontas in the Christian faith. He did his best to genuinely introduce the young woman to Jesus, as we have seen.

But like most missionaries, Whitaker faced prickly obstacles. How could he help Pocahontas understand the gospel and truly meet Jesus under such culturally odd circumstances? Could he make Pocahontas understand that what went under the name of *church* and *Christianity* in Jamestown was oceans apart from the Christian faith of the earliest Christians? How much was Whitaker himself aware of the disparity?

It was a twisted gospel Pocahontas received. This chapter shows how, in three critical ways, the gospel Pocahontas came to embrace was a distortion of the biblical good news.

Actually, some of Pocahontas's native understandings and values were closer to Jesus' good news than was the gospel she saw played out before her in Jamestown and then in London.

KINGDOM OF GOD OR BRITISH IMPERIALISM?

The most obvious problem was that in Anglicanism, the kingdom of God, and the British Empire were conjoined. Church and state were firmly wedded, all bound up together.

This church-state alliance is often called Constantinianism, referring to the Roman Emperor Constantine of 1,300 years earlier.

Constantine, ruler of the Roman Empire, converted to the Christian faith in 312 AD. This was a big tipping point. By 300 AD the early Christians had so multiplied throughout the empire that they could not be ignored. The conversion of the Emperor Constantine (c. 272–337) brought sudden and historically critical shifts. Christianity moved from a despised minority to the favored religion. The Christian Church had conquered the Roman Empire, people said.

Constantine's conversion and official endorsement of the Christian faith soon afterwards eased the lives of most Christians. But over time, church and state became so intertwined that in practical terms they were indistinguishable. The result was Medieval Christianity—Christendom—with all its pluses and minuses; its pageantry and superstition; all its myths and mystics and relics, its great monastic orders and massive, soaring cathedrals.[1]

The toxic problem was the mixing together of faith dynamics and raw state power. Faith could be, and was, backed up by force—armies, police, courts, judges. The cross enforced by the sword; the sword (or noose, or fire, or water) the enforcer of faith.

Things changed in England, of course, when King Henry VIII broke with Rome and established (in both senses) his new Church of England. But it was still Christendom. If anything, the fusion of church and state was stronger since king, not pope, now headed the church.

The Church of England was still a new thing in Pocahontas's day. She was born just fifty years after Henry VIII died. Streams of reform from the Continent were stirring in England. Though Henry's break with Rome was personal and political, it helped spark the English Reformation and later the rise of the Puritans and other reform movements.

Evangelical currents were churning the English Church. Exhibit number one was that great achievement, the *Book of Common Prayer*, first issued

1. See the discussion in Snyder and Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed,* chapters 1–2.

in 1549. Anglican reformers sought a *via media,* a middle path between Roman Catholicism and Continental Protestantism. They hoped to ground the church in the "Anglican triad" of Scripture, reason, and tradition.

In Europe, church and state had of course been firmly wedded centuries before, and they were not unwedded in England. The Church of England was the state church. If you were English, you were Anglican—or under suspicion if you weren't.

Various dissenting groups protested. The church should be a community of believers, a counterculture distinct from the state, with undivided loyalty to Jesus Christ, many said. Baptists got their start in England in the early 1600s, arguing for church-state separation, religious freedom, and liberty of conscience. The pioneering Baptist leader Roger Williams (c. 1603–1683) was Pocahontas's contemporary; George Fox (1624–1691), founder of the Society of Friends (Quakers), was born less than a decade after Pocahontas's death.

Baptists, Quakers, and other dissenting or "free church" groups would shortly make a big impact in America. But Virginia in the early 1600s was firmly Anglican. So far as Pocahontas could see, to be British meant to be part of the Church of England (however nominally). The kingdom of God and the British Empire were functionally one.[2]

This picture was vastly different from the church's first three centuries, when Christians firmly proclaimed that Jesus, not Caesar, was Lord and that his kingdom in nature and character were not of this world. It was unthinkable that the king or emperor could ever be head of the church!

So in the Pocahontas story, here was *the first distortion*—one that neither British colonists nor Pocahontas could clearly perceive.

CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY OR CIVIL SOCIETY?

Given the reigning state-church marriage, Anglicanism was of course woven into the fabric of the Virginia Colony. The church embodied the religious dimension of British existence in America, all intermixed with economics and politics. There was no separate Christian community, hence no way to distinguish Christian ethics and discipleship from British citizenship and loyalty to the crown.

2. Many theological and political struggles were of course going on, which can be framed as conflicting concepts of the kingdom of God. See Snyder, *Models of the Kingdom*.

Contrast this with New Testament teachings. Here the church is pictured as a community of disciples radically following Jesus. Christian community was the center of believers' lives. Christians were "members of the household of God," Christ Jesus himself "the cornerstone"; "a holy temple," "a dwelling place for God" (Eph 2:19–22). In contrast with surrounding society, the church was "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people," called to "proclaim the mighty acts" of the one who had now made them such a distinct people (1 Pet 2:9–10). The church was a one-another community based on mutual love and care—living in the world, yet as "aliens and exiles" (1 Pet 2:11).

Further, the New Testament church welcomed all believers as brothers and sisters, equal members of the same family—no longer slave or free, male or female, rich or poor, but all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28). Even if this was imperfectly embodied, it was real enough to impress first-century pagans. Now in the seventeenth century, such radical community stood in sharp contrast to the laddered class structure of Anglican Christianity.

Pocahontas could in no way have seen the church in Virginia as such a radical community. Whatever Alexander Whitaker taught her about the church was filtered through official Anglican interpretations and reinforced by the on-the-ground realities of the Church of England in Virginia as Pocahontas experienced it.

Pocahontas had read the New Testament—how much, we don't know. Perhaps she came to perceive the contrasts between the early church and official Anglican Christianity in Virginia and later in London. She was more astute than people realized and saw more than she let on. She must have puzzled over the disparities between contemporary Anglicanism and the Christianity Alexander Whitaker taught her.

Pocahontas was open-hearted, and God's Spirit speaks to open hearts. In her heart of hearts, Pocahontas may have developed a more intimate communion with Jesus than anyone knew. It would not be surprising, given her inquisitive personality, her cultural perceptiveness, her seeking heart. She may have come to a deep, intimate love for Jesus and felt this reciprocated by the great Lover who laid down his life for his sheep, including those "not of this fold" (John 10:16). Once an Anglican, perhaps Pocahontas was also nurtured by the church's liturgy, sacraments, and *Book of Common Prayer* and grew in grace.

We don't really know. More likely, Pocahontas simply accepted the Anglican Church as the embodiment of what the Christian faith really

should be. Centuries of layers of tradition obscured and partly distorted the reality of the good news of Jesus Christ.

HARMONY WITH CREATION OR WAR AGAINST NATURE?

The third distortion, if more subtle, is equally significant. Pocahontas was a child of the forest. She knew animals and plants and trees and rivers. She had an intimate practical (if not theoretical) knowledge of Virginia's ecology, which the British clearly lacked. She knew not only how to survive but thrive, living in harmony with creation.

In other words, Pocahontas knew life in harmony with the land as pictured and promised throughout the Old Testament.

Things were different in England. Enlightenment thought was shifting the accepted world view. Increasingly humans were pictured as struggling against nature, seeking to dominate and control wild threatening forces. Despite some countercurrents, this was the reigning world view carried by British explorers and colonists who sailed to America. It was the vision that accompanied and undergirded rising British power and would buttress emerging Western capitalism. The capstone came in 1776: Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations*.

Man against nature, with its common parallel: civilized man against uncivilized savage.

Anglican Christians had little sense of what it meant to live in harmony with the created order, to prize creation—both to enjoy and to nurture "the garden" God planted. God's "everlasting covenant" with the earth (Genesis 9) and the biblical theme of living in caring harmony with the land, a stewardly relationship, was largely absent from British and Anglican sensibilities.

True, many English enjoyed gardens or tended small farms. They shared wisdom, accumulated over centuries, about the land and how to care for it. But by the 1600s this ancient wisdom was being eclipsed by rising urban and capitalist culture—currents that ushered in the Industrial Revolution in the late 1700s.

The unhappy result was filled with irony: When the Romantic Movement arose two centuries later, it valued "nature" for itself, but the culture largely lost the sense of stewardship. Enlightenment thought had replaced a personal God with human reason. Now Romanticism hymned the creature but lost sight of the Creator who lovingly had provided the natural world in covenant relationship with his people who were to enjoy, benefit from, and

care for the land and its creatures. *Nature* became an *aesthetic* reality, not an *ecological* one. Romanticism appreciated and valued nature, but the sense of stewardly responsibility to the Creator had been lost.

Pocahontas however knew the land and its creatures. She understood them experientially and through the lens of the Powhatan religious world view.

This was not the biblical world view, of course. But the dominant Native American world view with its sensitivity to the created order was much closer to the biblical view in this respect than was the Enlightenment, even in its Christian forms, which increasingly dominated Europe.

Cherokee author Randy Woodley helps us here. In *Shalom and the Community of Creation: An Indigenous Vision*, Woodley shows that most Native American peoples had a deeper intuitive sense of what the Bible calls *shalom* than did Western Christians. *Shalom*: often translated "peace," but in the Old Testament carrying the deeper sense of well-being, proper relationship, and the flourishing of all life under the blessing of God.

Shalom, together with the themes of people, land, and covenant, is in fact a key Old Testament theme—a deeply ecological, holistic truth. As an essential strand in the biblical teaching of salvation, it colors how *peace, reconciliation,* and *community* (*koinonia*) are understood in the New Testament. Occurring more than 500 times in the Old Testament, *shalom* signifies peace and harmony in the broadest terms. As Woodley points out, *shalom* incorporates dimensions of "order, relationships, stewardship, beauty and rhythm," the whole picture of "the way God designed the universe to be."[3]

Woodley describes "a Native American harmony ethic," as he calls it, "a shared life-concept . . . related to well-being, or, to living and viewing life in harmony and balance"—a view "widespread among Native Americans." Woodley calls this the Harmony Way.[4]

Woodley argues, "In their nature as constructs, shalom and the Native American Harmony Way have much in common. Shalom, like Harmony Way, is made up of numerous notions and values, with the *whole* being much greater than the sum of its parts. They both set forth practical steps included within a vision for living. They both require specific action when the harmony or shalom is broken. They both have justice, restoration, and

3. Woodley, *Shalom,* 9–10. The words quoted are those of Terry McGonigal, in ibid., 10.

4. Ibid., xiii.

continuous right living as their goal. And, perhaps most importantly, they both originate as *the* right path for living, being viewed as a gift from the Creator."[5]

Pocahontas's passionate response to John Smith just weeks before she died, quoted in the previous chapter, clearly reflects this understanding of and commitment to the Harmony Way. And—importantly—this is the vision and these the values that Pocahontas could have contributed to Anglican Christianity, to its deepening and enriching, had she ever had the chance.

God's kingdom versus empire. Community versus social hierarchy and status. *Shalom* versus exploitation of the earth. These dynamics were at stake as Pocahontas embraced the Christian faith and tried to make sense of the good news of Jesus Christ.

But the gospel Pocahontas received and sincerely professed was a twisted version of the good news that Jesus taught and embodied. Pocahontas's faith seems to have been genuine and sincere. Perhaps it was deep. But it was severely compromised by the mixing of Christian faith with the expansionism, motives, and armed might of British empire.[6]

WILLIAM SYMONDS'S SERMON

Is this critique overdrawn? Well, consider the sermon of the Reverend William Symonds to the "Adventurers and Planters" headed for Virginia in 1609, which we looked at earlier. Symonds preached at Whitechapel on April 25 that year, with John Rolfe and many others present. (See chapter 9). Symonds's sermon embodies precisely the distortions we've just traced.

The service at which Symonds preached had a very practical purpose. When interest and investment in the Virginia venture dropped sharply after the string of depressing news from Jamestown, King James told Anglican clergy to promote the venture and to encourage potential colonists to sign up. They would be rewarded.

In his book *Religion and Empire*, Louis Wright elaborates:

5. Ibid., xv.

6. Susan Kingsbury, who carefully edited the records of the Virginia Company, noted the company's stated high purposes but added, "the theory that the chief motive of the enterprise was religious is not supported either by the spirit or by the data of the records" (Kingsbury, *Records of The Virginia Company,* 1:98).

> Eager as were the ministers to commend English expansion into the New World, the burst of pulpit oratory in 1609 in praise of Virginia was not all spontaneous. Sir Thomas Smythe [Virginia Company treasurer and chief publicist] and his fellow officers were directly responsible. They chose certain popular ministers to preach before the shareholders and then printed their sermons as quickly as possible so that they might reach a wider audience. [In other words, state-sponsored propaganda.]
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> The choice for the first official sermon fell upon William Symonds, preacher at Saint Savior's, Southwark, and a former fellow of Magdalen College, Oxford, Symonds had confuted the papists and won a reputation for deep learning with the publication of *Pisgah Evangelica* (1605), his commentary on the Book of Revelation.[7]

Enthused support for the Virginia colony now poured forth from many Anglican pulpits. As Grace Steele Woodward notes, "The planting of a Protestant colony [in Virginia] was one of the most fervent wishes" of clergymen such as William Symonds, John Donne, and the Bishop of London, John King. Colonization could be an effective missionary strategy, at the same time staving off Roman Catholic incursions from France and Spain. For some time "English clergy had supported the idea" of abducting Indian children in order to raise them as Christians "largely because of their interest in converting the Indians."[8]

Symonds's sermon thus was typical, not unique. It breathes the spirit of many influential British leaders of his day. John Donne, dean of St. Paul's Cathedral, had similarly preached to the departing Virginia adventurers, "Your principal end is not gain, nor glory, but to gain souls to the glory of God."[9] Given the church-state alliance, every sermon was inescapably political.

Symonds himself had toyed with sailing off to Virginia. Did he really believe what he preached, or was he mainly at pains to stay on the king's good side? Either way, he was pushing a political agenda. Though a clergyman of Puritan leanings, he conformed to King James's order in 1606 that Anglican clergy must stick strictly to Church of England beliefs and practices.

7. Wright, *Religion and Empire*, 90.
8. Woodward, *Pocahontas*, 170, 152.
9. Fischer, *Albion's Seed,* 232. Donne was referring primarily to the Indians.

Symonds's sermon embodies the three distortions described above. Wright notes, "By a casuistry easy for a theologian, particularly one who had recently interpreted the prophecies of Revelation, Symonds transferred [the covenant] promise [in Genesis 12:1–3] from Abraham to the English." Symonds thus baptized a view that soon was "a cardinal point of doctrine among preachers and laymen alike—that the English were divinely appointed as another chosen people to establish themselves in the promised lands of the New World." America was "a Western Canaan reserved for England."[10] Thus for the Virginia colonists, as for their pious backers in London, "promised land" could be applied as easily to North America as it was to the standard imagery of heaven.

First: *Kingdom of God or British Empire?* In Symonds's mind, the two were practically one, at least so far as British interests in Virginia were concerned. Symonds's basic argument assumes that, since England is a Christian nation (given the union of church and state), biblical pictures and promises of the conquest of God's people over pagan nations can be applied directly to the British Empire. A replay of the book of Joshua would be legitimate. Symonds mines the Old Testament for support. His sermon directly equates Old Testament Israel with the British Empire.

Symonds' text is Genesis 12:1–3, God's call and covenant promise to Abraham: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed." So it shall be, Symonds says, with "the right noble and worthy Advancers of the Standard of Christ among the Gentiles, the Adventurers for the Plantation of Virginia." In time nations will bless them and be blessed by them.[11]

10. Wright, *Religion and Empire,* 91, 84. Wright notes, "From its foundation in 1606 until its dissolution in 1624, the Virginia Company employed preachers to deliver sermons before the shareholders on stated occasions. It printed these sermons at the expense of the company and distributed them widely. It also rewarded the preachers with payments in cash, and, in some instances, by giving them stock in the company. Dr. John Donne, dean of St. Paul's, was the most distinguished cleric in its pay, but there were many others almost as well known in their time. Moreover, among the shareholders themselves were many clergymen, some of them high in the church, who looked upon the Virginia Company as an enterprise especially ordained to carry out the divine plan. As a result, English pulpits rang with praise of the infant colony on the banks of the James" (87–88).

11. Symonds, "Sermon Preached at White-Chappel" (language modernized). All

There can be no doubt, Symonds boldly asserts, "that the Lord that called *Abraham* into another country also by the same holy hand calls you [the Virginia Adventurers] to carry the Gospel to a Nation that never heard of Christ."

Working through the Old Testament, Symonds identifies King Solomon as the "true type of Christ" and notes that Solomon was equipped with sword and arrows and was sent in God's name to do "dread deeds" (Ps 45:3–5).

Symonds explicitly identifies the British Empire and its king as authorized agents of the kingdom of God on earth. King James I embodies "the spirit of his great Ancestor, [Emperor] Constantine the pacifier of the world, and planter of the Gospel in places most remote."

Old Testament prophets get similar treatment. Symonds largely bypasses the New Testament, except to imply that the church established by Jesus Christ is now the rightful heir to this Old Testament understanding. Symonds uses heavy sarcasm to put down "Anabaptists" and others who disagree with this interpretation.

Second: *Christian community or hierarchical civil society?* Symonds actually says little about the church or Jesus' teachings. His assumption of church-state union meant that the present form of the Anglican Church was the unquestioned status quo in the homeland and would also be normative in Virginia. His sermon breathes not a whiff of church as counterculture or as a distinct community that lives by the teachings of Jesus in the power of the Spirit. The assumption rather is that what is, is what should be. This is God's will; God's hand.

Given this world view, Pocahontas under Alexander Whitaker's tutelage would have no way to comprehend New Testament Christian community. Neither would she have no way to perceive the kinship between New Testament ethics and what she was taught and experienced as a Powhatan.

Symonds assumes that British society with all its hierarchy, stratified classes, and exploitation, is truly Christian. This is how things are now (by God's good providence), whatever the situation might have been in the early church.

Symonds skips over the New Testament picture of the church as distinct community, a fellowship of Jesus' disciples living in conscious tension with the Roman Empire. Instead he directly equates British monarchy with

quotations following from Symonds come from this source.

Israel's Old Testament monarchy—with all that means for status, power, and social roles.

Result: What Pocahontas learned from the English about the Christian faith was really a superficially Christianized version of the old covenant, not the radical freshness and dynamism of the new covenant in Jesus' blood—the new people of God.

Third: *Harmony with creation or war against nature?* Pocahontas knew much more about biblical *shalom* than did the British—even though the British were the ones with the Scriptures and Pocahontas wouldn't have known the word *shalom*. The British had the Book of God, but Pocahontas had God's Book of Nature.[12]

Rev. Symonds's sermon embodies British views of the time. It was shaped by the early British Enlightenment, Britain's growing power, and its competition with other expanding European powers.

In Symonds's view, North America was "over there," across the Atlantic, just waiting and wanting to be exploited—by God's good providence. Abraham's call, and even Jesus' Great Commission, are cited in support. Jesus' commission in Matthew 28:19 was not for the first apostles only, Symonds suggests, but may be extended to contemporary England. Masterfully conflating the call of Abraham, Jesus' commission, and England's desire for new colonies, Symonds explains: "Seeing that, thanks be to God, we are thronged [in England] with multitudes; the Lord of hosts himself has given us the calling of his children to seek for room, and a place to dwell in."

Virginia was named for Queen Elizabeth, "The Virgin Queen." Elizabeth had died just six years earlier. To Symonds, now the land of Virginia was itself a "virgin" worthy to be "married" to virtuous England. Symonds prays, "Lord, finish this good work thou hast begun; and marry this land, a pure Virgin to thy Kingly son Christ Jesus; so shall thy name be magnified; and we shall have a Virgin or Maiden Britain [as] a comfortable addition to our Great Britain." Symonds's whole sermon is in fact about "Virgin Britain"—that is, the land of Virginia.

Symonds does confess one small problem. Virginia is already inhabited. Several opponents of colonization had raised this "scruple," pointing out that (in Symonds's words) the land the English were now calling

12. Western Christian theologians had spoken of the "Book of Nature," referring to God's self-disclosure in the created order, as parallel but subsidiary to the Bible. Among Protestants since the Reformation, the term was used by Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758) and John Wesley (1703–1791), among others.

Virginia "is possessed by owners that rule and govern it in their own right." So "with what conscience and equity can we thrust them, by violence, out of their inheritances?"

Symonds has a ready answer. First, in a rather contorted interpretation of Genesis, he argues that God wills his people to "replenish" and rule over *all* the earth. North America's native inhabitants however are not truly God's people, so they have no abiding right to the land.

Symonds points to Israel's armed conquest of Canaan under Joshua, and to the later Hebrew kings, David and Solomon. Symonds quotes Psalm 45:3–5, "Gird your sword on your thigh, O mighty one, in your glory and majesty. . . . Ride on victoriously for the cause of truth and to defend the right. . . . The peoples fall under you." With no sense of irony, Symonds applies this passage to British conquest in America. Messianic passages like Psalm 72:8 now apply to Great Britain: "May he have dominion from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth." Symonds also appropriates Jesus' words in Luke 14:23, "compel them to come in."

True, Symonds notes, it is impossible for the British to conquer other lands without "much lamentable effusion of blood," as some objectors had pointed out. But "if these objectors had any brains in their head," Symonds says modestly, they would see the vast "difference between a bloody invasion and the planting of a peaceable Colony in a waste country where the people" live in scattered small groups like herds of deer. In any case, such people are naked savages, slaves of the devil who practice child sacrifice, unlike those of "noble Saxon blood."

Anyway, the natives' weapons are primitive, no match for British arms, Symonds assures his hearers. And God will miraculously help. As he brought Israel out of Egypt, making "the raging waves of the sea to stand in heaps" like "strong walls," So God will miraculously aid the British adventurers. "God puts away all the ungodly of the earth like dross," says Symonds. Colonists, take courage!

Symonds concludes with this hopeful challenge to the new Virginia colonists, the "Adventurers and Planters": "Therefore, seeing we are content when the King calls us out to war, to go we know not where, nor under whom," with the single aim "to fight with a mighty enemy: Let us be cheerful to go to the place that God will show us to possess in peace and plenty, a land more like the Garden of Eden, which the Lord planted, then any part else of all the earth."

This is what John Rolfe and his companions heard as they were about to sail for Virginia. Pocahontas was still in her teens. She had befriended John Smith and was making occasional journeys back and forth between her Powhatan town of Werowocomoco and Jamestown, an emissary between Chief Powhatan and the English.

Symonds's sermon was not only an opportunistic and distorting use of the biblical gospel. He put the good news of God's kingdom to political, empire-building use. His sermon was in fact a massive *inversion* of sound biblical hermeneutics. Symonds actually turns numerous biblical texts on their heads.

For example, Symonds notes that in Old Testament days a captive Hebrew girl was God's instrument in curing the pagan general Naaman of his leprosy, through the prophet Elisha (2 Kgs 5). He then jumps to Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:27, "God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong." Application: in Virginia the British can capture young Indians, raise them as Christians, and use them to evangelize their people. This inverts the meaning of both biblical texts, since it was God's people (Israel in the Old Testament and the vulnerable young church in the New) that was "weak," and the pagan and later Roman empires that were "strong."

One of the more glaring ironies of Symonds's linking Great Britain with Old Testament Israel was his skipping over Israel's prophets. Prophets from Isaiah to Malachi denounced Israel's unfaithfulness—its idolatries, injustices, and oppression of aliens and the poor. Few Englishmen who transferred to England the biblical promises made to Israel paid any attention to the warnings and denunciations pronounced by Israel's great prophets. The prophets repeatedly warned Israel that they would be God's people and enjoy peace, prosperity, and the land's abundance *only* if they were faithful to God's covenant. By "parity of reason" (one of John Wesley's phrases), transferring the promises requires transferring also the warnings. In fact the Old Testament is as full of promises of judgment as of blessing; of destruction as of flourishing.

Some Puritan and other British writers such as John Wesley did make this point, warning England of judgment. But these were largely ignored.

THE CONTINUING IRONY OF AMERICAN HISTORY

So irony piles upon irony like ice floes at the end of winter. Just four years later Pocahontas would be kidnapped by the British, and not for motives

of evangelism. Within five years of hearing Symonds's sermon, John Rolfe, having survived the tempest of his disastrous Atlantic crossing and the death of his wife and daughter, would marry Pocahontas.

One wonders whether, later, Rolfe ever recalled or reflected on Symonds's words about the "pure Virgin" colony in America being married to England. Did he realize the symbolic potency of his own marriage?

Jamestown and the story of Pocahontas is a case study in how the gospel of Jesus Christ time and again gets twisted in the course of Christian history and missionary endeavor. Pocahontas casts a long shadow.

In his now classic work *The Irony of American History* (1952), Reinhold Niebuhr argued that American national identity is a blend of "the two great religious-moral traditions which informed our early life—New England Calvinism and Virginian Deism" (as expressed especially in the thought of Thomas Jefferson, 1743–1826). Niebuhr states that Calvinism, despite its pessimism about human nature, "in its conceptions of American destiny and its appreciation of American virtue finally arrived at conclusions strikingly similar to those of Deism."[13]

Niebuhr elaborates:

> Whether our nation interprets its spiritual heritage through Massachusetts or Virginia, we came into existence with the sense of being a "separated" nation, which God was using to make a new beginning for mankind. We had renounced the evils of European feudalism. We had escaped from the evils of European religious bigotry. We had found broad spaces for the satisfaction of human desire in place of the crowded Europe. Whether, as in the case of the New England theocrats, our forefathers thought of our "experiment" as primarily the creation of a new and purer church, or, as in the case of Jefferson and his coterie, they thought primarily of a new political community, they believed in either case that we had been called out by God to create a new humanity. We were God's "American Israel."[14] Our pretensions of innocency there-

13. Niebuhr, *Irony*, 24. See also Eddy, *Kingdom of God and the American Dream*.

14. The Puritan Edward Johnson wrote in 1650 that New England was the place "where the Lord would create a new heaven and a new earth, new churches and a new commonwealth together." In the 1780s Yale University President Ezra Stiles preached a sermon titled "The United States elevated to glory and honor" in which he described the new nation as "God's American Israel." Similarly the Jeffersonian poet Philip Freneau (1752–1832), though not an orthodox Christian, wrote that the United States would be "A new Jerusalem sent down from heaven [to] grace our happy earth" (Niebuhr, *Irony,* 25, 27).

> fore heightened the whole concept of a virtuous humanity which characterizes the culture of our era [i.e., the 1950s]; and involve us in the ironic incongruity between our illusions and the realities which we experience. We find it almost as difficult as the communists to believe that anyone could think ill of us, since we are as persuaded as they that our society is so essentially virtuous that only malice could prompt criticism of any of our actions.[15]

This view is still remarkably prominent, perhaps dominant, in much of the United States and in her churches.

Niebuhr showed how New England Puritans saw their church as "purer than any church of Christendom." He noted, "Practically every Puritan tract contained the conviction that the Protestant Reformation reached its final culmination here [in America]. While the emphasis lay primarily upon the new purity [as in "Puritanism"] of the church, even the Puritans envisaged a new and perfect society." Jefferson's view, in contrast, "was not informed by the Biblical symbolism" of the Puritans, but was shaped rather by the European Enlightenment. Yet Jefferson felt that "nature's God had a very special purpose in founding" this new nation that had "broken with tyranny" and now had "wide economic opportunities" that "would prevent the emergence of those vices which characterized" an overcrowded Europe.[16]

Broken with tyranny? No vices? Pocahontas and many African slaves would surely have seen right through this!

Niebuhr puts his finger precisely on the sore spot of US history. The Virginia colonists and their descendants (with a few exceptions) could not see this. But Pocahontas and her father Chief Powhatan certainly could.[17]

But what of Pocahontas herself? Physically she died in 1617. Yet she acquired new and expanding life as myth. She died as historical actor and was reborn as useful metaphor. Her true identity was vague enough and pliable enough and short enough to energize and fertilize the flowering of mythic images. In the next chapters we look at the many faces of Pocahontas. Then we'll see Pocahontas in heaven and, finally, hear her speak.

15. Ibid., 24–25. Niebuhr also demolishes the potent myth that violence can purge away evil (11–16).

16. Ibid., 25–26. The words quoted are those of Niebuhr. Niebuhr fails to note however that the Puritan stream was present (though not as dominant) in Virginia as well, through people like Alexander Whitaker, John Rolfe, and others.

17. Niebuhr does not mention William Symonds's sermon, and of course Niebuhr was looking back 300 years, rather than ahead to Jamestown, as Symonds was, and so had a broader perspective.