

## BARBARY CAPTIVITY NARRATIVES IN PURITAN THEOLOGY

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**Abstract:** Barbary captivity narratives have been studied at length by many scholars of early American literature. In an attempt to bring some additional knowledge to this literary genre, instead of dealing with all early Americans' positions towards the accounts of the captives held in North Africa, we have restricted the field of our study by examining these narratives in relation to a particular Protestant congregation in New England, namely the Puritans, who played a key role in publishing these verbal accounts. The purpose of this article is to show how early American clergymen such as Cotton Mather subjoined these captives' personal experiences to a Puritan framework of typological hermeneutics for understanding the Bible, not only to fortify their community, but also to build up a cruel picture of North African and Ottoman Muslims as savage and primitive, and legitimize their desire to propagate the Christian faith to those "ignorant" of the "true" knowledge of God.

*Keywords:* Barbary captivity narratives, early American literature, Muslims, North Africa, Puritans, stereotypes

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## 1. Introduction

American Christian hostility toward Islam has become one of the topical interests in the United States of America in recent times. Many conservative American Christian leaders openly claim that they are against Muslims, as the latter are regarded as the “axis of evil.” It is naïve, however, to assume that this resentment toward Muslims is a new phenomenon in the United States. While many common people think that this virulent attitude toward Islam is resulted primarily from the terrorist attack on the Trade Center on September 11, 2001, historical research proves that the tension between the U.S and the Arab States of the Middle East and North Africa can be traced back to the early period of American history. In other words, many pieces of evidence show that the Islamic world had been the target of many American Christians since the first settlement of Europeans in the New World. Indeed, numerous early Americans excoriated Muslims as savage, gruesome, and brute people. To highlight their “uncivilized behaviour,” American writers instrumentalized the earlier Barbary captivity narratives. The accounts of those abductees in North Africa (Morocco, Algiers, Tunisia, and Tripoli) were so popularized to the point that politicians used them as propaganda to enhance the national sentiment, burgeoning before the American Revolution. Several studies have been conducted to demonstrate how many American political leaders have since early times tooled these captivity narratives in order to justify their animosity toward the Arab world.

This article falls under the continuity of all these studies, but from a different angle. Instead of addressing the issue in a general manner, we attempt to examine it more specifically. The main focus here is American Puritans and the views they produced, relying on the Barbary captivity literature, about Islam (and Arabs). Puritan ministers often essentialized and stereotyped Muslims. Indeed, to build up a cruel picture of Islam and its followers, the Puritans interweave the Barbary accounts with their theological beliefs. We try to examine how these early American Christians resorted to their Calvinistic theology to discuss the Barbary captivity accounts in order to present Muslims as one of the greatest enemies of God. To do so, we think it is first necessary to define the Barbary captivity genre and briefly provide some general background information about Puritans. Then we analyse how some famous Puritan figures used in their sermons the narratives of those who escaped the advancing Muslim armies of the Ottoman Turks to demonize these disciples of Muhammad, and, accordingly, legitimize efforts to conquer their countries.

## 2. General Overviews

### *2.1. Barbary Captivity Literature*

The enslavement of American sailors in “Barbary States” (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripoli ruled by the Ottomans in Istanbul) was one of the key historical events that highly contributed to shaping the American foreign policy. Thousands of slaves were taken hostages between the 16th and 18th centuries. In 1625, for example, a British/American ship was attacked from Salé, on Morocco’s Atlantic coast. The situation aggravated after the United States’ independence from Great Britain, when Americans were no longer protected by the British navy. The survivors of Mediterranean piracy, like Captain William Foster of Roxbury, Seth Southhall, and John Foss, later wrote and published their experiences. Besides recounting the culture and traditions of these North African regions, these former captives narrated the maltreatment they underwent at the hands of their barbarous masters. Although the captivity narrators often exaggerated in their description of the inhabitants of the “Barbary States,” their accounts, which were largely works of fiction, claim, Baepler, spread throughout the time the idea of Muslim as primitive and (Baepler, 1999) uncivilized.<sup>1</sup> These captive stories from the North African coast produced what we call Barbary captivity narratives, often considered one of the first genres of the early American literature.<sup>2</sup> This literary genre flourished particularly

in the United States in the early nineteenth century. Besides some very subjective sermons related to Islam, these narratives principally constituted the only source of information to Americans for understanding Muhammad and the Koran, for American contact with the Muslim world was very limited.

## 2.2 American Puritans

Tudors and Stuarts in England had played a key role in emerging the Puritan movement in America. King James I claimed clearly in the Hampton Court Conference (1604) those who refused to conform to the rites of the Established Church would be harried out of the land. The latter, known as Puritans, believed that they had a personal relationship with God and did not need king or his bishops. They advocated following the primitive Church or the Apostolic Church, by observing a purer form of worship without rituals and religious images. To do so, they refused to recognize legitimacy of the Official Church. Even worse, they came to regard it as “infected” by Roman Catholic Church’s superstitions. These zealous Protestants (whose followers were for the most part lowly and ordinary people) were seen offensive to the authorities and were persecuted. Hence, in 1620, they left their mother country to America so they could worship God according to their conscience. The members of this small congregation of Protestants were called Separatists, because they resolved to separate themselves completely from the National Church in order to establish a true Christian Church as the New Testament required. They were to be called later the Pilgrim Fathers.

As soon as Charles I, James's son, ruled alone in England (the Eleven Years Tyranny: 1629-1640), Archbishop William Laud took repressive measures against Puritans: he banned preaching about predestination, imposed *The Book of Common Prayer*, forbade observing the Sabbath, and he commended that *The Book of Sports* be read in the churches. Hence, the Puritans, known as moderate Puritans, who refused to leave England following the Separatist Puritans, felt it was urgent to find a solution. So, in 1630, they opted to migrate abroad, as it was stated by Jesus: “when they persecute you in this city, flee ye into another” (Matthew 10:23). John Winthrop, John Cotton, Thomas Hooker, Thomas Shepard, and other hundreds of Puritans set out for New England. Upon their arrival, they founded the Massachusetts Bay Colony, whose first governor was John Winthrop. It should be noted that Puritans, both Separatist and non-Separatist, regarded the Bible as the only source of faith (*Sola Scriptura*).

## 2.3. Puritans and Barbary Captivity Narratives

The relationship between Western Christianity and Oriental Islam had been highly strained since the early Middle Ages. Indeed, Islam's rapid growth after Muhammad's death in 632 both fascinated and frightened Christian authors in the medieval period. Those who feared that their Christian civilisation might overwhelmed wrote books to alert people to the danger. The Benedictine monk of the Abbey of Monte Cassino in southern Italy, Erchempert, declared in the eleventh century that Muslims had “all the appearance of a swarm of bees, but with the heavy hand ... they devastated everything” (Said 2003, p. 59). In *A Pastoral Letter to the English Captives in Africa* (1698), the famous American theologian Cotton Mather exhorted his fellow Christians not to apostatise under the pressure of “Mahometan Tempters” (Mather 1698, *Pastoral Letter*, 8). From the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the two religious worlds were in competition with one another for imperial domination. Europeans and Americans who fought to impose their culture upon the world saw their religion jeopardized by Islam. Thomas Kidd rightly points out that Islam posed a serious threat to Christendom. Indeed, Christians viewed Muslims as one of their major competitors, sometimes their primary competitors, for souls on the global stage (Kidd 2009, xii). The early modern Westerners were principally frightened by the dislocation of Christendom, due to the conversion of large numbers of Christians to Islam. In fact, in the late sixteenth and

seventeenth centuries, many Christian sailors who joined Barbary Corsairs for economic reasons were reported to have embraced Muhammad's religion. "Secretary Coke reported that many of the English sailors who had been enslaved by Muslim pirates had turned Turk. In the seventeenth century, conversion to Islam was a reality that many Englishmen had to accept" (Matar 1993, p. 490). Those renegades were perceived not only as traitors but also as a threat to the future of the Christian faith; they might convince other Christians to renounce their Christ for Mahometanism. It is noteworthy that English literature addressing the theme of Christians' conversion to Islam, commonly known as "turning Turk," flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. William Shakespeare's *Othello*, for example, is among the early modern works that discussed the phenomenon of "turning Turk." This phenomenon was, in Bergeron's words "a nightmare envisioned by Christians" (Bergeron 2010, p. 267), not only in Europe, but also in New England. Puritan ministers were seriously concerned with the threat posed by the tenacious Barbary corsairs who travelled thousands of miles to land close to home.

In the seventeenth century, as stated above, many Americans were taken as captives in the Barbary States, including Seth Southhall, who was held captive in North Africa in 1679. Paul Baepler writes "Just five years after William Bradford landed in Plymouth [1620], Moroccan corsairs ranged as near as Newfoundland, where they hijacked 40 ships," (2004, p. 218). The pious New England colonists were outraged at seeing the ships attacked and their American sailors enslaved by the Barbary people. Many churchgoers felt the duty to take action in the country in order to liberate their brethren from slavery, who were suffering from the ordeals undergone in the lands of the enemies of Christ. In fact, after having assiduously prayed to the Almighty, they were able to deliver some of them by paying ransoms. The Massachusetts sailor, Joshua Gee, for example, was ransomed and returned to Boston, after being captured and taken hostage in Algiers in the 1680s; he thereafter served as a minister alongside Cotton Mather in Boston's North Church. These survivors of Barbary captivity wrote and published stories recounting the infernal circumstances under which they were forced to live.

Scholars have long commented on the early American's hostility toward African piracy. Besides the fear of seeing the Christian faith overshadowed by the religious hegemony of Islam, the brutalization of the Americans reported by the Barbary captivity accounts was generally the motive advanced to explain this animosity. However, we think that the origin of the hatred toward Muslims (North Africans, Turks, and Arabs) by early American Christians, namely Puritans, could also be attributed to the fact that the Puritans always viewed the Bible as the (only) source of knowledge, the "only library in my writings," explained John Bunyan. The Barbary captivity accounts woven into Puritan biblical hermeneutics shaped the Puritans' attitude toward Muslims.

#### *2.4. Puritan Supremacy*

The Puritan ministers who believed themselves superior to others,<sup>3</sup> because they were the children of God, were deeply shocked to read the accounts of the American Christians who had become the prey of the Barbary corsairs. Indeed, the narratives of these captives, like Abraham Browne, Seth Southhall, Joshua Gee, James Riley, and others were so popularized that they became best-selling. The idea that a white man became a slave under the orders of "negro" boss captured the attention and pity of Puritan congregations. "I was dispised of ye most dispisedst people in the world," wrote Abraham Browne in his captivity narrative (Baepler 2004, p. 217). Interestingly, like many other narrators, Browne used the term "Christian" to refer systematically to the white person held captive.

No wonder that such harrowing testimonies would have overwhelmed the Puritan community, who believed in the Calvinist soteriological doctrine, an extreme extension of the Protestant tenet that only a few were saved. Puritans, who were more Calvinist than other Protestants, were persuaded that they had been chosen by God: they identified themselves with Moses and the Israelites who had fled Egypt to the Promised Land, and compared England (supposedly a totally sinful country) to the biblical nations that had been severely punished by God, and in various ways. Led by John Winthrop, these Puritans fled England and sailed for New England, convinced that God was going to destroy England, and had prepared the new land as a refuge for the elect. Winthrop openly set out to create a “City upon a Hill” in the New World, so that all Puritans would worship God according to their Calvinist belief. He insisted that this “City upon a Hill” should be the model for the world.

This identification with the biblical characters and events is called typological interpretation. Puritans were great believers in typology. They viewed life as loaded with meanings (providence). Indeed, typological hermeneutics was the core of American Puritanism. Scholars, such as Lincoln Konkle, point out that typology is the single most important aspect of New England Puritanism for the development of American culture in general and American literature in particular. They raised it to a superior position as a way to read the Bible, which led the New England Puritans to develop a conceptualization of history that is especially important for understanding American culture (2006, p. 43). Interestingly, Puritans used typological hermeneutics to read and interpret captivity narratives: they drew parallels between the plights of the Christian captives and the Babylonian captivity of the Old Testament, when King Nebuchadnezzar II conquered Jerusalem and enslaved its inhabitants in Babylon (2 Chron. 36:20). Like the Jews in Babylonia, the great suffering and the cultural pressure on the Christian captives in Africa were God's trial. Inspired by the tribulation of biblical key figures like Joseph, Job, Moses, Abraham, David, Samson, etc., ministers taught their disciples that God often tested the believers with extreme troubles. Henceforth, some American Puritans, who had been abducted away from their country, felt the sentiment that God was testing their faith by letting them live such an abominable situation.

Based on these typological hermeneutics, they thought that had they entered into a covenant with God. Like the Israelites, the Puritans regarded themselves as a “chosen nation”. They were elected by God for a great mission: restoring God's Kingdom. During his journey in 1630, Winthrop delivered what was to be one of the most important documents of American history: “A Modell of Christian Charitie”, in which he stressed some concepts which would become the core components of American Puritanism: such as the divine covenant, the City upon a Hill, and the idea of being a model for the world: “We are entered into covenant with Him for this work. We have taken out a commission. [...] We shall find that the God of Israel is among us [...] For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us” (1996, p. 9). While this doctrine, called the first covenant, was articulated in late sixteenth-century England only by a few Puritan theologians such as Dudley Fenner and William Perkins, it was much more elaborate in New England by Puritan leaders. Yet, unlike the Old Testament covenant, which put emphasis on works, the Puritans' covenant relied on grace. The covenant doctrine served the Puritans to legitimize their sense of irrational elitism toward any non-Christian.<sup>4</sup> If they allowed themselves to slaughter Native Americans (who were not mentioned explicitly in the Scripture) by typologizing Indians as Canaanites, their attitude would undoubtedly be much harsher toward Arabs, who were clearly cited in the Bible. The Arab is negatively referred to in the Old Testament, as seen for example in Isaiah 13:20 and in Jeremiah 3:2. As the American Episcopalian clergyman James Montgomery claims in *Arabia and the Bible*, most of the biblical references portray Arabs as nomads and mercenaries (1934, p. 61). And some stories in the Old Testament, like the

hostility between Isaac and Ishmael in Genesis which became a central theme in eschatological literature, deepened the gulf between Christians and Muslims<sup>5</sup>.

The pejorative reference to the Arabs in the Bible and their demonization in the Barbary captivity narratives gave right to Puritans to launch a virulent attack on the North Africans and the Muslim World in general. The ministers, who were excellent preachers, emphasized in their sermons the contrast between Christian civilization and the Muslim's savagery. Cotton Mather, the minister of Boston's North Church, who wrote many sermons commenting on the Barbary captivity accounts, illustrates well this bitter hostility when he wrote in 1702, "But in the midst of these deplorable things God hath given up several of our sons into the hands of the fierce monsters of Africa. Mahometan Turks, and Moors, and devils are at this day oppressing many of our sons" (Mather, *Magnalia*, p. 583). Mather was persuaded that Muslim aggressors would attempt to impose their religion on his brethren. In *A Pastoral Letter to the English Captives in Africa*, he explicitly advised his Christian fellows not to abandon their faith, and to retort that even the Koran certified Christ as the son of God.

The words of the Alcoran, (or Turkish BIBLE) are: The Spirit of God hath given Testimony, to CHRIST, the Son of Mary; He is the Messenger of the Spirit, and the Word of God: His Doctrine is perfect. And Mahomet, in this his Alcoran, calls the Gospel expresly, The Right way to Fear God; & says, That God sent the Gospel for no other end, but that they might obtain by it, the Love and Grace of God. Let the Mahometans now know, that you cannot forsake your Christ, because the Spirit of God hath given Testimony to Him; and that you cannot forsake His Doctrine, because it is perfect; and that you cannot forsake His Gospel. (Mather 1698, Pastoral Letter: 8)

When Mather mentioned the evidence of divine status of Jesus in the Koran, the purpose was not likely to debate with the captors; he remained convinced that the latter were "inhuman", unable to listen to "reason." Mather was much concerned about the possible conversion of his flock to Islam. Informing them that the Koran confirmed the veracity of the Gospels would certainly encourage them not to turn Turk. In his sermon *The Glory of Goodness* (1703), Mather, after pointing to the humiliation of the chosen white Christians at the hand of the "Black-a-moors," accentuates the bravery of the captives in the "wilderness;" not only did they survived the "barbaric" mistreatment of the "African Monsters," but they were able to stand stoically against the pressure of their masters who attempted to oblige them to renounce their faith. In the mind of Mather, if the captives did not succumb to the Satan's temptation, it was because Christians were the true soldiers of God, not like the "Filthy Disciples of Mahomet." Being always concerned for the edification of the community, the Puritan preachers also utilized the ordeal of the captives held in North Africa to call their flock to repent. The humiliation suffered at the hands of barbarous captors could be the result of wicked behaviour of colonists, who were lazy to observe the commandments of the Scripture. God had always warned, for example, those who refused to keep holy the Sabbath, as requested the Forth Commandment. Ministers urged in their sermons believers to meditate on God's wrath: Jews were captured in

Babylonia, and enslaved in Egypt, because they had become sinners. In this sense the theologian of Massachusetts Bay, John Cotton, penned "it was for the sinne of Rome that the Turk was advanced, a barbarous and beastly Enemy to punish a beastly religion: This was their admiration" (1655, 50). After denouncing the Roman Catholic Church as the mother of troubles within the realm of Christendom, Cotton explained that because of the sins of medieval Christians, God decided to punish them in delivering them to barbarous Turkey. In other words, Christians who had previously been the Children of God, were abandoned to monstrous and merciless people because of their sins.

This idea of superiority of Christianity to Islam was advocated by all Puritan divines. The great Puritan theologian Jonathan Edwards, to demonstrate the inferiority of Islam to Christianity, contrasts the parallel of both religions in his sermon *Mahometanism Compared with Christianity* by giving a series of dichotomies:

Christianity was first begun in place of great light, the greatest light with regard to religious knowledge then known [...] Wherease, Mahometanism was broached in a dark corner of the earth, Arabia; and the people among whom it first gained strength [...] were an ignorant and barbarous sort of people; such as the Saracens and Turks [...] Christianity was propagated by light, instruction and knowledge, reasoning and inquiry. These things were encouraged by the gospel; and by these means the gospel prevailed. But Mahometanism was not propagated by light and instruction, but by darkness; not by encouraging reasoning and search, but discouraging knowledge and learning; by shutting out those things, and forbidding inquiry; and so, in short, by blinding the eyes of mankind. - It was propagated by the power of the sword also. (Works V8: 262-263)

Muslims were presented in the Puritan tradition as bizarre and savage, killing systematically those who refused to convert to Mahometan's religion. This is how Muslims were portrayed in the Middle Ages and the early modern colonial America. Indeed, a closer examination of the sermons, which used the Barbary captivity narratives as a tool to discredit Muslims, suggests that the Puritan ministers' virulent rhetoric toward Mahometans by demonizing them "monsters" and "devil" was echoing that already used in the Middle Ages during the crusades. The discourse had often put the emphasis on the dichotomy: victimization of the Christian and the savagery of the non-Christian.

### 2.5. Puritan Millennialism

In the face of the aforesaid domination of African and Ottoman Muslims, Puritan ministers needed resort to eschatological interpretation of the Scripture to comfort the desperate people who felt as if they were abandoned by God. Influenced by some English eschatologists, like Thomas Brightman and Joseph Mede, Puritan American theologians launched in the late seventeenth century apocalyptical literature, claiming the end of the Ottoman Empire was so close at hand. Increase and Cotton Mather, for instance, argued in their sermons that the Turks were going to be destroyed by God, as prophesied by the Bible. In front of his Puritan fellows, Cotton Mather lengthily evoked, in his sermon in 1696, the situation of the American sailors held captive in North Africa. He wrote "I received and uttered, my Assurance that the Lord Jesus Christ, had some wonderful Thing, to do for the deliverance of some our of Captives." (*Diary* 1957, p. 197) This "Assurance," Timothy Marr explains, was Mather's belief that Turks, among whom he included the Barbary States, would shortly cease to afflict Christians (2006, p. 103).

Puritans were persuaded of the end of Islam was close at hand, because, in their view, the destruction of the Islamic empire had been foreshadowed in the Old and New Testaments. Along with the Mathers, many other famous and well-versed Puritans, like Jonathan Edwards, Goodwin, John Winthrop, John Gill, and John Brown of Haddington, who had all noted a certain decline of the Ottoman Empire, claimed that Muslims would be destroyed before the promised Millennium. According to these millennialists, the Muslim is typically the embodiment of the Antichrist, who was going to be destroyed by Christianity. In allegorical interpretation, they asserted that the triumph of the forces of good over evil in the great battle, known as Armageddon, prophesized the collapse of the Ottoman power in North Africa and Asia. They maintained that the defeat of the Turk was a sign of the millennium.

Interestingly, despite forbidding spiritualist interpretation of Scriptures, Protestants in general and Puritans in particular applied some evasive references in the New Testament to Islam. They were persuaded, for instance, that the “false prophets [...] in the desert” against whom Jesus warned in Matthew (24:24-26) were alluding to Muhammad. As they considered the Bible as the (only) source of knowledge and wisdom, Puritan writers and ministers made the acquaintance of the Arab and Muslim through the biblical texts. Indeed, as Marr clearly observes, early American understanding of Islam emerged neither from substantial comparative dialogue with Muslims nor from scholarly study of Islamic literature, but basically from investigation into what the Bible seemed to reveal prophetically about its existence and duration as a worldly challenge to the Christian Church (2006, p. 93). But Revelation remained the principal source for Puritans’ apocalyptic interpretation. The locusts with stings like scorpions in the first twelve verses of the ninth chapter of Revelation were largely interpreted by apocalyptic commentators as Muslims who persecuted Christians and imposed their poisonous doctrines. Also, the exegetes claimed that the destruction of Islamic power is foretold in the sixteenth chapter of Revelation: seven vials of God’s wrath were poured out upon the followers of Antichrist. The sixth vial of God’s wrath was the one who would destroy the Islamic power. Jonathan Edwards embodied well this eschatological philosophy when he applied the prophecy of Revelation to the Islamic forces:

The Church of Rome will probably be so overthrown, that they will have no more courage to rise up to make any open war with the church of Christ by themselves. But when they see other parts of the kingdom of Satan, those of his Mahometan and heathen kingdoms, rising up in other part of the world, their courage will be raised by it; and they will join in with them in another onset on the church. And then shall be their last overthrow; and with that overthrow, the millennium will begin.<sup>6</sup> (Vol 5, 1977, p. 176)

According to defenders of millennialism, Muslims (along with Catholics) would eventually be overthrown, either through their conversion to Christianity or by warfare. As Thomas Kidd notes (2009, p. 18), by the late eighteenth century, the idea of mass Muslim conversion had gained a prominent place in the American Protestant political imagination. Many Americans nurtured the hope that, in the final days, African and Turkish Muslims would turn to Christianity in large numbers. Even before missionaries such as Pliny Fisk and Levi Parsons were dispatched to the Barbary States to help realize this eschatological vision, American theologians had already depicted Muhammad as a false prophet and portrayed Muslims as instruments of Satan. Early American Protestants felt a strong obligation to bring the Gospel to the so-called “ignorant” Muslim populations. Consequently, new missionary movements emerged in the early nineteenth century, organizing themselves into powerful and structured institutions. The American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM) stands as a key example of the Puritan spirit and its theological legacy, committed to the goal of converting the Ottoman Empire and the Barbary States. Historian Charles Foster memorably described this wave of evangelical activism as a “world-conquest fever.”

The elitist doctrine, grounded in Calvinist interpretations of Scripture, served as the foundation for the strong belief that it was justifiable—even necessary—to wage holy war against all those who did not worship Christ, whether Muslims or non-Muslims. Puritans, believing themselves to be “Children of Light Walking in Darkness,” as Thomas Goodwin described them, regarded North African Muslims as ignorant and savage, figures consistent with biblical representations of the ungodly. By instrumentalizing the melodramatic captivity narratives of American captives held in Morocco, Algeria, Tripoli, and Tunisia, ministers proclaimed in their fervent sermons that Muslims represented the embodiment of the “Beast” and the “Antichrist.” In this theological framework, fighting those who refused to convert to Christianity became a spiritual obligation. Consequently, many early American missionaries,



acting on what they perceived as a divine mandate, set out for Islamic lands with the mission of “civilizing” Arab populations—viewed as savage not by nature, but because of their ignorance of Christ.

The ideology of the “Chosen People,” a distinct legacy of Puritan theology, has continued to shape American identity into the present day. There is little doubt that New England culture significantly influenced the foundational values of the United States. The notion of “a colony of chosen people,” to borrow the phrasing of Puritan theologian Cotton Mather, contributed to the enduring belief that the United States holds an exceptional status among nations and possesses a unique historical mission. This belief in a national divine calling laid the groundwork for the nineteenth-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny, articulated by John O’Sullivan, and later served as a justification for American expansionism and imperial ambition. The concept remains embedded in the political rhetoric of modern American presidents. As noted in *American Literature: A History*, Ronald Reagan claimed in his autobiography that Americans have always believed they carry a special responsibility to promote peace and democracy worldwide. George H. W. Bush referred to the United States as “the beacon of freedom,” and his son, George W. Bush, in his first address following the attacks of September 11, 2001, described the United States as “*the brightest beacon of freedom in this world*” (Bertens & D’haen 2014, p. 14).

### 3. Conclusion

To conclude, the idea of American exceptionalism—so often associated with modern political and religious discourse—finds some of its earliest roots in the Puritan imagination of the early seventeenth century. It was during this formative period that Puritan colonists began to construct Islam not merely as a foreign faith, but as a theological and cultural “enemy”—a foil against which Protestant identity could be asserted and purified. This distorted image of Islam, deeply shaped by eschatological fears and typological readings of Scripture, was more than a reflection of ignorance; it served an ideological purpose in defining the boundaries of the elect and the reprobate, the saved and the condemned. Far from disappearing with the colonial period, these perceptions persisted and evolved, continuing to shape certain strands of American religious thought. In particular, some modern Evangelical and Fundamentalist movements have inherited this worldview, viewing Arabs and Muslims not only as religious outsiders but as spiritual adversaries—people to be overcome not by dialogue, but by conversion. These groups, animated by missionary zeal and apocalyptic expectations, continue to reproduce the long-standing stereotypes about Muhammad and his followers, especially North Africans, which were first disseminated in Puritan sermons, captivity narratives, and eschatological tracts. Thus, the theological othering of Islam by early American Protestants did not remain confined to the seventeenth century; it became embedded in the cultural memory of American religious nationalism. In short, the Puritan construction of Islam as a religious and civilizational threat contributed to shaping the ideological foundations of American exceptionalism itself. The perception of Muslims as spiritually backward or divinely opposed became one element in the larger narrative through which the United States came to view itself as a chosen nation with a global mission. These early patterns of religious antagonism, forged at the intersection of theology, colonialism, and eschatology, helped shape not only the contours of American identity but also its enduring posture toward the Islamic world.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Mary Velnet's *The Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Mary Velnet, Who Was Seven Years a Slave in Tripoli* (1800) and Maria Martin's publication, *History of the Captivity and Sufferings of Mrs. Maria Martin who was six years a Slave in Algiers* (1806), for example, are categorized as fictitious. No evidence is found to prove that either Velnet or Martin had really existed in the American history.

<sup>2</sup> It is worth noting that the Barbary captivity narrative had been a popular literary genre in Europe since the sixteenth century. The novelist Miguel de Cervantes and the composer Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart contributed largely to popularize the genre. Cervantes wrote and published his experienced captivity in Algiers for five years in 1575, "The Tale of the Captive," in his monumental work *Don Quixote*; Mozart transformed the story of a European woman held captive in a Turkish harem into an opera, *Abduction from the Seraglio*; Thomas Davis immortalized in his poem "The Sack of Baltimore 1631" the raid of the Algerian sailors on the village of Baltimore in Ireland who abducted the entire hamlet. (The Irish poet Thomas Davis immortalized the event in "The Sack of Baltimore 1631" (1844):

From out their beds and to their doors rush maid and sire and dame,  
And meet upon the threshold stone the gleaming sabre's fall, And  
o'er each black and bearded face the while or crimson shawl.  
The yell of Allah breaks above the prayer and shriek and roar:  
Oh! Blessed God, the Algerine is Lord of Baltimore. (Scharbrodt 2015, p. 51)

<sup>3</sup> This superiority is reflected in their literature. The Puritan writer Daniel Defoe, for example, addresses this theme in his famous work *Robinson Crusoe*. One of the most significant aspects in the novel that a reader can notice is when Crusoe teaches Friday about Christian faith and exhorts him to complete submission to Christ without any objection or question. Many critics point to the implied ideology which maintains that Christianity and Western civilisation are superior to the "savages" religion. No wonder that the novel was highly used by the Evangelical missionary, and, accordingly, thousands of copies were published.

<sup>4</sup> Many Puritans advanced the covenant doctrine (man cannot be saved by deeds, but only by the grace of Christ) as a solid proof that their Protestant theology was better than Islam. Interestingly, when they came to denounce the latter, they often associated it with Catholicism, which advocated salvation through works. The anonymous author of *The Sad Estate of the Unconverted, Discussed and Laid Open, with Many Inferences Thereon, Offered to the Inhabitants of Sundry of His Majesty's Government in North America* (1736) emphasised the similarity between Islamic and Catholic soteriological theologies, because both relied on works. For the theme, see Kidd (2009), p. 14-15. It is worth mentioning that Puritans, when they wanted to discredit someone, regardless of his confession, would label him with words related to Islam. As puritans were strongly hostile to Quakers, because of their doctrine of Inner light, the famous Puritan Roger Williams (a Particular Baptist) qualified the leader of Quakers, George Fox, as "this new Mahomet."

<sup>5</sup> It is noteworthy that Ismael, the ascendant of the prophet Muhammed, is depicted in the Book of Genesis as "a wild man; his hand will be against every man" (16:12).

<sup>6</sup> For Jonathan Edwards' millennialism, see Kreider, 2004.