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Warrants for Colonization in Seventeenth
Century England

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‘Fill The Earth And Subdue It’: Biblical Warrants For Colonization In Seventeenth-Century England¹

By Peter Harrison

The importance of conceptions of natural law in early-modern debates about the legitimacy of colonization is well known. The role played by specific arguments drawn from Scripture is less recognized. In seventeenth-century England the biblical injunction to ‘fill the earth and subdue it’, along with the account of the exodus and the occupation of ‘the promised land’, informed debates about the origins of private property, and was directly relevant to developing conceptions of indigenous property rights and the legitimacy of dispossession. While there were powerful economic and evangelical incentives for the establishment of foreign plantations in the early modern period, these were strongly reinforced, in the English context at least, by particular readings of Old Testament narratives.

Introduction

‘Whether it bee lawfull, to send people, and to plant colonies’, observed puritan cleric George Walker in 1641, is a question ‘much controverted amongst godly and learned divines.’² Walker’s assertion of the controversial nature of foreign settlements was expressed against the background of England’s late arrival onto the colonial scene. Not until 1607 was England’s first successful colony established in Virginia. Over the course of the seventeenth century, however, there quickly followed settlements in New England, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. During this period the legitimacy and desirability of colonies became a matter of some contention. The seventeenth century witnessed considerable resistance to overseas plantations, and a strong body of opinion in England was firmly against settlements abroad. In this climate of controversy, the bible proved to be a rich source of moral, legal, and economic arguments for supporters of colonization. Biblical moral imperatives and historical

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¹ I wish to express my gratitude to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

² George Walker, *The History of the Creation* (London, 1641), 222.

precedents were adduced to show that there were neither moral nor legal impediments to foreign settlements. Indeed it some argued that such activities were positively enjoined upon the faithful as a specific religious duty.

It has often been suggested that the formal justifications for colonies were drawn primarily from notions of private property and international sovereignty, which such figures as Hugo Grotius (1583-1645) and John Locke (1632-1704) derived from natural law or *ius gentium*.³ Arguments about occupation and ownership of territory, on this view, were resolved by appeals to principles claimed to be universal and to which all civilized individuals would give rational assent. In this paper I shall suggest that there developed, particularly amongst Puritan supporters of settlements in England, an alternative set of justifications for colonization that was quite independent of notions of natural law. While scriptural precedents and principles might subsequently have informed natural law justifications, they were originally developed with a quite limited and specific application in mind.

Most important in biblically inspired arguments for colonies was the injunction delivered in the first chapter of Genesis: ‘Be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth and subdue it’ (Gen. 1:28). This verse has already gained considerable notoriety on account of the controversial thesis of Lynn White Jr., who attributes to the imperatives to subdue and have dominion the exploitative environmental attitudes of the modern West.⁴ Whatever the merits of the White thesis, it is clear that the same biblical imperative provided an important foundation for the legal sanctioning of occupation of lands thought to be either underpopulated or underutilised. It played a key role in the rhetoric of Puritan supporters of plantations and was subsequently incorporated into John Locke’s influential conception of private property. Other biblical episodes also feature in the argument: from the Old Testament, the calling of Abraham and the

³ See, e.g., Richard Wasawo, ‘The Formation of Natural Law to Justify Colonialism’, *New Literary History* 27 (1996): 743-59; Barbara Arneil, ‘The Wild Indian’s Venison: Locke’s Theory of Property and English Colonialism in America’, *Political Studies* 44 (1996): 60-74; Robert Williams Jr., *The American Indian in Western Legal Thought* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); J. H. Parry, *The Age of Reconnaissance* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966), 303-20; David Armitage, *The Ideological Origins of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), esp. 61-99.

⁴ Lyn White Jr., ‘The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis’, *Science*, 155 (1967): 1203-7. Major discussions of the thesis include *Western Man and Environmental Ethics: Attitudes towards Nature and Technology*, ed. Ian Barbour (Reading, Mass: Addison-Wesley, 1973); Robin Attfield, *The Ethics of Environmental Concern* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983); Jeremy Cohen, “Be Fertile and Increase, Fill the Earth and Master It”: *The Ancient and Medieval Career of a Biblical Text* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), 15-18; Peter Harrison, ‘Subduing the Earth: Genesis 1, Early Modern Science, and the Exploitation of Nature’, *The Journal of Religion* 79 (1999): 86-109.

settlement of the ancient Israelites in the promised land; from the New, Christ's commission to preach the gospel to all nations. These biblical references, however, implied a special commission issued to specific people for a unique purpose, and thus proved less suitable for incorporation into notions of natural law. Yet they too played an important role in the sanctioning of foreign settlements.

I 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations': Motives and Justifications

There were a number of reasons for England's late entrance onto to the colonial stage, some of which had little to do with moral or religious matters. First, were diplomatic considerations. The sixteenth century saw a growing awareness in England of the economic potential that lay in overseas settlements, not least because of the perceived successes of Spain and Portugal in the New World, Africa, and the Middle East. However, Spain and Portugal enjoyed something of a monopoly over new lands courtesy of the decree of Pope Alexander VI (1493), and the Treaty of Tordesillas (1494).⁵ Closely connected with these diplomatic considerations were economic and political arguments. In the court of Elizabeth I, the influential treasurer William Cecil, Lord Burghley, had opposed colonial expansion, believing that England's interests were better served by trade across the channel, and by the preservation of peace with Spain. Following the deterioration of relations between England and Spain in the late sixteenth century, however, such figures as Richard Hakluyt, best known for his compilation of voyages, and Sir Walter Raleigh, urged the English crown to sponsor settlements in the New World. Raleigh was directly involved in the first substantial English settlement on North America—the 'lost colony' on Roanoke Island (which disappeared virtually without trace some three years after it was founded in 1587).

Even with the removal of diplomatic impediments, there remained considerable resistance to overseas plantations throughout the seventeenth century. Sir William Coventry (1628?-86) articulated the widespread view that colonies were depriving mother England of the vigour and vitality of her youth—'the long continued directing of the Young and prolific People to the plantations' was the cause of England's decay,

⁵ 'Inter caetera', May 4, 1493; 'Treaty of Tordesillas between Spain and Portugal, 1494', both in Louis Wright and Elaine Fowler (eds.) *English Colonization of North America* (London: Edward Arnold, 1968), 8-11.

he wrote in an essay analyzing the loss of rental income to the gentry.⁶ John Evelyn, Secretary to the Royal Society and member of the council for foreign plantations, likewise complained about ‘ruinous numbers of our Men, daily flocking to the *American Plantations*, and from whence so few return.’⁷ It seems likely that the majority opinion during the century was against settlements abroad. Josiah Child, governor of the East India Company and outspoken advocate of colonization, was to write at the close of the century that ‘Where there is one man of my mind, there may be a thousand of the contrary.’⁸

Some arguments against the establishment of colonies rested on moral and religious grounds—hence George Walker’s observation that the issue of colonies was one that divided the learned divines.⁹ Proponents of colonization, for their part, were able to draw upon a number of powerful biblical arguments that seemed to give support to the policies of the colonizers. Biblical narratives and divine imperatives were cited to show that foreign settlements were legitimate, that they had been an integral part of the history of ancient Israel, and that under certain circumstances good Christians might be called to establish colonies abroad. While both biblical and classical precedents were used to show that colonization had been widely practiced in the past, given the status of scripture in Protestant England, and the increasing tendency to interpret it historically, biblical precedents now took on an unparalleled significance. The West country preacher Richard Eburne, author of one of the classic defences of colonization—*A Plaine Path-way to Plantations* (1624)—wrote that ‘my proofes and examples are mostly out the Bible and Sacred Histories’. The argument for colonization, Eburne insisted, ‘is so frequent in the Scriptures, that there is not any substantiall point thereabout, for, or of the which (Because the practice thereof was verie much in those times) there is not some, either precept or presedent [sic] to be found.’¹⁰

⁶ William Coventry, ‘Essay concerning the decay of rents and their remedies’, qu. in George Beer, *The Old Colonial System* (New York: Peter Smith, 1912), 21-22

⁷ John Evelyn, *Navigation and Commerce, their Original and Progress* (London, 1674), 112. Cf. Adolphus Speed, *Adam out of Eden* (London, 1659), To the Reader.

⁸ Qu. in Arneil, 60, n.1.

⁹ The Spanish colonial experience had led to famous disputes about the legitimacy of colonization, in which Bartholomé de las Casas and Francisco de Vitoria played significant roles. See, e.g., Tzvetan Todorov, *The Conquest of America: The Question of the Other*, tr. Richard Howard (New York: Harper and Rowe, 1984); Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982).

The most common argument drawn from Scripture, utilized by virtually all colonizers, was the commission to preach the gospel to all nations. In one of the earliest accounts of the conquest of the New World, the most plain-speaking of Cortés's captains, Bernal Díaz (1495-1583), announced that he had gone to the Indies 'to serve God and his Majesty, to give light to those who were in darkness, and to grow rich, as all men desire to do.'¹¹ While avarice rarely figured in more judicious defences of colonies, nonetheless these three justifications—political, religious, commercial—were, with variations in emphasis, common to most apologies for foreign settlements. In seventeenth-century England, similar motives, albeit less frankly expressed, were enumerated. The anonymous author of *A Trve and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation begun in Virginia* (1610) summed up three common justifications for plantations offered during the course of the seventeenth century. The principle end of plantations, he informs us, 'weare *first* to preach, & baptize into *Christian Religion*, and by propagation of that *Gospell*, to recouer out of the armies of the Diuell, a number of poore and miserable soules, wrapt vpp vnto death, in almost *inuincible ignorance*'. The second was 'to prouide and build vp for the publicke *Honour* and *safety* of our *Gratious King* and his *Estates*... by transplanting the ranknesse and multitude of increase in our people; of which there is no vent, but age.' And the third reason was for 'the appearance and assurance of *Priuate commodity* to the *particular undertakers*, by recouering and possessing to them-selues a fruitful land.' These inducements the author referred to, respectively, as 'Religious, Noble, and Feasible'.¹²

There is little doubt that in the ostensible justifications of foreign settlements, the first of these—the preaching of the Gospel to the heathen—figured predominantly, with explicit reference often made to the great commission of St Matthew's Gospel: 'Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost' (Mat. 28:19). As Puritan John Winthrop (1588-1649), first governor of Massachusetts, expressed it: 'the most considerable part of the English Colonies professe they came into these parts of the world with desire to

¹⁰ Richard Eburne, *A Plaine Path-way to Plantations* (London, 1624), 'To the Reader', Sig. B1v.

¹¹ Bernal Díaz de Castillo, *The True History and the Conquest of New Spain*, ed. and tr. A. P. Mausley, 5 vols., (London: Hackluyt Society, 1908), I, 81.

¹² Anonymous, *A Trve and Sincere Declaration of the Purpose and Ends of the Plantation begun in Virginia* (London, 1610), 2-4.

advance the kingdome of the Lord Jesus Christ.’¹³ Richard Eburne, author of *A Plaine Path-way to Plantations* (1624), similarly announced that: ‘That one proper, and principall end of Plantations, is, or should be, the enlargement of Christ’s Church on Earth; and the publishing of his Gospell to the Sons of Men.’ ‘All Sauages, Heathen, Infidels, Idolaters, &c.’, he continued, ‘may be drawne and induced and perswaded and brought to relinquish and renounce their owne Heathenismes, Idolatries. Blasphemies and Deuill worships.’¹⁴ The charters of most of the colonies expressly refer to the mission of converting the ‘infidell people’ of America to the worship of the true God.¹⁵ There was scarcely an apologist for foreign plantations who did not make Christ’s great commission a first port of call.¹⁶

It is important at this point to distinguish formal *justifications* for overseas settlements, the *motivations* of the relevant actors, and *interpretations* of the providential meanings of colonization. It is clear, for example, that the goal of evangelization was quite compatible with other motives and justifications, as Bernal Díaz’s frank admission clearly indicates. There is little doubt, moreover, that the changing social, political and economical conditions in seventeenth-century England gave rise to a variety of personal motivations, many of which had little to do with the elevated goal of bringing the Gospel to benighted natives. Among these were the quest for adventure, the desire to reunite with family and friends, the promise of land ownership, along with such negative economic incentives as a severely depressed textile industry. The accession of Charles I and the ascendancy of the Laudian party were also major factors in the puritan migrations of the 1620s and 1630s. It was easy for individuals to find providential messages in England’s silent looms and the swelling ranks of the idle, in increasingly vociferous arguments about religion, and in the power plays of absolutist politics.

¹³ John Winthrop, *A Declaration of Former Passages and Proceedings* (Cambridge, Mass, 1645), 1.

¹⁴ Eburne, ‘To the Reader’, Sig. B1v, 4

¹⁵ See James Axtell, *The Invasion Within: The Contest of Cultures in Colonial North America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 218, and *passim*.

¹⁶ See, e.g., John Cotton, *God’s Promise to his Plantations* (London, 1634), Sig. A2v; William Symonds, *Virginia. A Sermon Preached at White-Chappel* (London, 1609), Epistle Dedicatory, 9; William Loddington, *Plantation Work the work of this Generation*, (London, 1682), 8; Robert Gray, *A Good Speed to Virginia* (London, 1609), Epistle Dedicatory, Cf. Sig. C2v; Robert Cushman, *A Sermon Preached at Plimmoth in England* (London, 1622), Epistle Dedicatory; William Strachey, *For the Colony of Virginia in Brittainia: Laws Diuine, Morall, Martiall, &c* (London, 1612), Dedicatory Poem. See also Charles Webster, *The Great Instauration: Science, Medicine, and Reform, 1626-1660* (London: Duckworth, 1975), 45, 223.

As for the providential meanings of colonization, it was commonly argued, particularly amongst puritan preachers of settlements, that God was capable of orchestrating a variety of human motives to bring about a divine plan to evangelize the world. Thus, the varied motives of earthly agents—be it the quest for riches, political preferment, freedom from persecution, or rich mission fields—were nonetheless consistent with this single divine purpose. William Loddington wrote that: ‘God Almighty, by concealing so vast a Continent from so many foregoing Ages, and now by discovering it to these latter Ages and Generations, doth plainly signifie, that by his eternal Counsel he hath appointed these to spread the Beams of his Glory into these parts of his Creation.’¹⁷ According to Loddington, Columbus had been moved by a divine influence to search for the New World. The belated entry of the English onto the colonial stage was also part of the divine plan, for ‘although he was pleased to let the hard-hearted cruel *Spaniard* first get footing there’, this was an integral part of an intended preparatory exercise: ‘the Spanish Tyranny and Inquisition has been so far from hardening the *Indians* against the Truth, that it seems ... to have made them more pliable to receive it, they being more inquisitive after a better People to govern them.’¹⁸ Thus the base commercial and imperialist motives of the Spanish and Portuguese were encompassed within a broader divine purpose—the Christianization of the world.

Robert Cushman, a preacher who accompanied the first settlers to Plymouth, similarly argued that providence had a hand in foreign plantations, irrespective of the ostensive motives of settlers and traders. Even settlements abroad prompted by persecution at home were the work of Divine Providence. In much the same way that Christianity had been spread throughout the Roman Empire because of the persecution of the first Christians in Jerusalem, Cushman argued, so the bringing of the Gospel to the heathen of the New World was to be accomplished by the threat of persecution in the Old.¹⁹ Once again, the overriding divine purpose of plantations, considered from this larger historical perspective, was the preaching of the Gospel to the whole world. God’s

¹⁷ Loddington, 8.

¹⁸ Loddington, 8.

¹⁹ ‘... as by the dispersion of the Iewish Church thorow persecution, the Lord brought in the fulnesse of the Gentiles, so who knoweth whether now ... the kingdom of heaven be taken from them which now have it, and giuen to a people that shall bring forth the fruit of it...’ Cushman, Epistle Dedicatory. Cf. Cotton, 9.

ends were thus to be achieved through a variety of different, and somewhat surprising means.

Some commentators went so far as to suggest that God in his providence had moved the hearts of the native Americans to vacate land, or to sell it to the newcomers. Patrick Copeland spoke sanguinely of the special work of God that had rendered the Indians meek in their surrender of territory:

Let us therefore consider and weigh well the *wonderful workes* of the Lord: for, is it not a work of wonder... to mollifie the hearts of Saluages, and to make some of them voluntarily to remooue from their owne warme and well seated and peopled habitations, to giue place to Strangers, whom they had neuer before seene: as *Powhaten* at the first plantation of the English, to remoue from his owne station, and now of late the *Mattawambs* to depart from their cleared and rich grounds; and to make others of them (as *Opachaucano*) to sell to the English and their Governour Sir George Teardly, the right and title they had to their possessions.²⁰

If divine influence did not work on the minds of the dispossessed, it might, with more tragic consequences, work upon their bodies. Immediately prior to the main English settlement of New England, the indigenous population was decimated by a series of epidemics, introduced through contact with the earliest explorers and traders. Thomas Morton, one of the few non-puritan settlers in New England, spoke of ‘the hand of God’ at work in ‘a great mortality that happened amongst the Natives of New England and neere about the time, that the English came there to plant.’ He continued: ‘And by this meanes there is as yet but a small number of Salvages in New England to that, which hath beene in former time, and the place is made so much the more fitt, for the English Nation to inhabit in, and erect Temples to the glory of God.’²¹

The issue of ends and means prompted a further set of questions about the legitimacy of colonies in relation to the goal of evangelization. Preaching the gospel to the heathen did not of itself sanction the settlement of uninhabited or sparsely populated regions, for arguably this might as easily be accomplished by the use of itinerant missionaries. The Dominican theologian and jurist Francisco de Vitoria, famous for his objections to the practices of Spanish colonizers, had claimed that commerce was

²⁰ Patrick Copeland, *Virginia's God be Thanked* (London, 1622), 25-26.

²¹ Thomas Morton, *New English Canaan, or New Canaan* (London, 1632), 22, 23, 24. Alternatively, the Indian susceptibility to diseases to which colonizers were immune could provide the basis for the assertion of the European body. See Joyce Chaplin, *Subject Matter: Technology, the Body, and*

a more effective means of spreading the gospel than conquest. In dealings with aborigines, he wrote, ‘the prime consideration is that no obstacle should be placed in the way of the Gospel.’²² Spanish conquest and colonization, on Vitoria’s account, had actually hindered the preaching of the Christian message. English advocates of colonies, however, suggested that conversion of the Indians first required their reduction to a more ‘civilized’ state in which they would be more receptive to Christianity.²³ Not only would this take considerable time, but it called for the establishment of religious and educational institutions, and these in turn necessitated permanent English settlements.

There was, in short, only an indirect connection between the command to preach the gospel to all nations, and the establishment of colonies and the appropriation of territory. For more specific scriptural justifications, then, proponents of plantations tended to focus their discussion on Old Testament narratives. Indeed, the main theoretical burden for the sanctioning of settlements was to rest on the Old Testament.

II ‘Fill the earth, and subdue it’: Labour and Ownership

If the preaching of the Christian message was often the first listed priority of advocates of colonization, when it came to detailed discussions, considerably more emphasis was placed upon Old Testament narratives. The most frequently cited passages were the calling of Abraham out of Ur to found a new nation (Gen. 12:1), the story of the Exodus, in which the Jewish people enter the promised land, dispossessing its original inhabitants, and most common of all, the injunction delivered originally to Adam, and repeated to Noah: ‘Fill the earth and subdue it. (Gen. 1:28, 9:1)’²⁴ These biblical sources provided precedents both for colonization

Science on the Anglo-American Frontier, 1500–1676 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001).

²² Francisco de Vitoria, *Reflectiones de Indes* III, 12, appended in English translation to J. B. Scott, *The Spanish Origin of International Law* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1934). On Vitoria’s arguments see also Williams, 96-108; Antony Anghie, ‘Francisco de Vitoria and the Colonial Origins of International Law’, in *Laws of the Postcolonial*, ed. Eve Darian-Smith and Peter Fitzpatrick, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Pagden, 57-108.

²³ See Axtell, 131-178; Roy Pearce, *The Savages of America: A Study of the Indian and the Idea of Civilization* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1965); Chaplin, 41.

²⁴ See, e.g., Cotton, 4-5; Gray, Sig. B1v and *passim*; Morton, *passim*; Eburne, 17, 18; John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, II.v.36, ed. Peter Laslett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 292.

and for the treatment of indigenous populations who faced displacement from their native lands.

In his *Plaine Pathway*, Richard Eburne claimed that ‘it was God’s expresse commandement to *Adam*, *Gen* 1.28 that hee should *fill the earth, and subdue it*, By vertue of which *Charter*, hee, and his had the *Priuiledge* to spread themselues from place to place, and to *Haue, hold, occupie, and enjoy* any Region or Countrey whatsoever....’ Subsequently, Noah and his progeny ‘dispersed themselues, and inhabited, and replenished, first one Countrey, and then another, as wee see at this day. And this, upon the warrant of the Grant which Adam had, being renewed and confirmed vnto Noah, and his sonnes. *Replete terram*, Replenish yee the earth, or fill it vp againe.’²⁵ William Symonds, preacher and propagandist for the Virginia Company, extended the command from Noah to Abraham. (Gen. 12:1-3) ‘For the Lord said unto Abram, Get thee out of thy Countrey, and from thy kindred, and from the father’s house, unto the land that I will shew thee.’ God’s call to Abraham, Symonds argued, was part of the general imperative—‘that man should inhabite the earth and fill it’—and this imperative extended down to the present day.²⁶

These patriarchal precedents established not merely a pattern to be imitated, but a fundamental moral principle—in Eburne’s words, not merely ‘a precedent’, but ‘a precept’. John Cotton thus spoke of a ‘Principle in Nature’:

That in a vacant soyle, hee that taketh possession of it, and bestoweth culture and husbandry upon it, his Right it is. And the ground of this is from the grand Charter given to *Adam* and his posterity in Paradise, *Gen* 1.28. *Multiply, and replenish the earth and subdue it*. If therefore any Sonne of *Adam* come and find a place empty, he hath liberty to come, and fill, and subdue the earth there. This Charter was renewed to *Noah*, *Gen*. 9.1.²⁷

George Walker spoke similarly of God’s ‘ordinance and law given in the creation, that the Earth and every part of it should bee free for any man to possesse and inhabit it, untill it bee replenished with so many men as are able to subdue it by eating up the fruit thereof.’ This principle ‘serves to clear that doubt ... whether it bee lawfull, to send people, and to plant colonies in the vast cuntry of the west-Indies, which are

²⁵ Eburne, 16-18.

²⁶ Symonds, 6. On the writing of sermons in support of the policies of the Virginia Company see Armitage, 64.

²⁷ Cotton, 5.

not replenished with men able to *subdue the Earth*, and to till it.’²⁸ The subsequent narratives of settlement in the Pentateuch further established the naturalness of this precept. Thus, for Walker: ‘the cursed Canaanites acknowledged [it] by the light of nature, and therefore they suffered *Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob*, to sojourn in their Land, and there to live with all their families ... and were so farre from driving them out, while there was roome enough, and they lived peaceably among them.’²⁹

This was not simply the view of those promoting plantations. In his 1656 commentary on Genesis, exegete John White claimed that the divine imperative to subdue the earth ‘carries with it ... the force of a Command (as some men think) unto men, to disperse themselves abroad upon the face of the earth, till they have filled every habitable part thereof; at least it must be allowed, as a warrant unto them, so to do, as Occasions and Opportunities shall invite them thereunto.’ Subduing the earth, he went on to point out, could not be accomplished without the occupation of territory: ‘And indeed, how men should subdue the earth (which must be done by culture) without inhabiting it is hard to imagine.’³⁰ Subduing and replenishing the earth, inasmuch as it was a divine command, also provided the legal basis for property ownership: ‘we hold Lands from God, when we hold them by just Title, warranted by him; which may be either Naturall, or Civil. A Natural Title, men gain, by possessing and subduing any void portion of the Earth, which is the firmest and surest holding, in the World.’ ‘Civil’ titles, conferred by positive law, were based on inheritance, gift or purchase, from those who ultimately could trace back ownership to a natural title.³¹ Neither were these arguments solely the preserve of those with puritan inclinations. Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, whose more moderate theology represented a reaction against Puritanism, also argued for the naturalness of assuming underutilised property: ‘The Earth was at first, as a dish of meat at a Table, where every man might bit where him pleased; but when one had cut forth his piece and laid it on his trencher, it became private.’ The means by which land becomes private, Andrewes went on to say, is through the principle of *subjicite terram*—‘seising, keeping, and imploying of the Earth’. The application of this principle to plantations was obvious: ‘If we winne a Countrie, where no habitation hath been, or which hath not been habitable for [i.e.

²⁸ Walker, 223.

²⁹ Walker, 222.

³⁰ John White, *A Commentary upon the First Three Chapters of the First Book of Moses called Genesis* (London, 1656), Bk. 1, 113.

³¹ White, *Commentary upon Genesis*, Bk. 1, 113.

because of] wilde beasts, by chasing from thence the beasts, and by sduing that Countrie, it becometh our own by *subjjicite terram*.³² A number of natural law writers, including Samuel Pufendorf, were to use this example.³³

It is significant, however, that these readings of ‘be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it’ do not make their appearance in commentaries on Genesis until well into the seventeenth century.³⁴ The influential patristic interpretations of Augustine and Ambrose make no reference to principles of property ownership. This is in part because the literal sense of the passage was obscured by spiritual and moral meanings, as was usual given the predominance of allegory in the middle ages.³⁵ Moreover, there had been an understandable ambivalence about a divine imperative ‘to be fruitful’ that seemed to licence the very activity through which original sin was thought to have been engendered.³⁶ But these factors alone would not account for the absence of such readings in earlier Renaissance commentaries. The new tendency to read notions of private property into this ancient injunction may be plausibly related on the one hand to justifications of colonization and dispossession, and on the other to radical attempts in the revolutionary period to challenge traditional land ownership through appeals to the text of Genesis. The Levellers, so named for their levelling of enclosures, featured prominently amongst those who sought biblical endorsement of communist principles. The Diggers were another group committed to agrarian communism. Their leader, Gerrard Winstanley, wrote that in the beginning God had ‘made the earth to be a common treasury, to preserve beasts, birds, fishes and man’. Selfish imaginations, however, ‘did set up one man to teach and rule over another’ with the consequence that the earth ‘was hedged into enclosures by the teachers and

³² Lancelot Andrewes, *Apospasmata Sacra* (London, 1657), 103.

³³ Samuel Pufendorf, *De jure naturae et gentium* IV.iv.2. See Stephen Buckle, *Natural Law and the Theory of Property, Grotius to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), 95.

³⁴ For earlier English commentaries see, e.g., Gervase Babington, *Certaine plaine, briefe, and comfortable notes vpon euerie chapter of Genesis* (London, 1592); Andrew Willet, *Hexapla in Genesis* (Cambridge, 1605); Alexander Ross, *An Exposition on the Fovrteene first Chapters of Genesis* (London, 1626). George Williams has suggested in this context that the different approaches of the Spanish and Portuguese on the one hand, and the English on the other, were owing to the fact that former were motivated by the quest for a terrestrial paradise, while the latter sought to transform the colonial wilderness into a paradise through their own efforts. *Wilderness and Paradise in Christian Thought* (New York: Harper, 1962), 100-101.

³⁵ For the pre-modern history of interpretation of this text see Cohen, “*Be Fertile and Increase*”. On the early-modern shift to literal readings of Genesis, and their general significance, see Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge University Press, 1998), ch. 6.

³⁶ See, e.g., Augustine, *De Genesi contra Manichaeos*, I, 19-20.

rulers'.³⁷ The practices of hedging and enclosure were neither original nor natural, however. As Winstanley informed the Lords who enclosed the commons, 'the power of enclosing land and owning property was brought into creation by your ancestors by the sword' and that the basis of their land ownership was thus unlawful.³⁸ Crucially, much enclosed land was waste. By Winstanley's reckoning, one-half to two-thirds of England's land was not efficiently cultivated. If such land were properly manured and planted, England would become 'the richest, the strongest, and [most] flourishing land in the world.'³⁹ Common to the arguments of both orthodox and radical exegetes of the Genesis texts, however, was the principle that waste land was an affront to God, and was free to be appropriated by those who could put it to best use.

Part of what was at issue in the arguments of both radicals and proponents of private property was the question of what constituted unused or vacant land. 'Vacant' was most often understood in this context to mean 'unworked, untilled, in its natural condition', for Adam had been instructed not merely to 'fill the earth' but also to 'till the earth' (Gen. 2:15, 3:23). Subduing the earth, wrote John White, in his 1656 commentary on Genesis, 'is, by Culture and Husbandry, to Manure and make it fit to yield fruits and provision ... which is done by Planting, Earing, Sowing, and other works of Husbandry'.⁴⁰ Subduing the earth, agreed George Hughes, 'is by plowing, tilling, and making use of it'.⁴¹ That cultivation was the mark of use and occupation was the clear consensus among contemporary commentators.⁴² The obvious corollary, it need hardly be pointed out, was that if the original inhabitants had only partially subdued the land they occupied, they would have no justification for opposing its occupation by those better able to subdue it. John Winthrop wrote that the Indians had 'only a natural right to so much land as they had or could improve.'⁴³ George Walker likewise insisted that it was a 'great iniquity and injustice' for those 'in no way able to replenish and subdue ... by force to seek to keepe out all other people'.⁴⁴

³⁷ *The Works of Gerrard Winstanley*, ed. G. H. Sabine (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1941), 251.

See also Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1975), 132-9.

³⁸ Winstanley, 269.

³⁹ Winstanley, 200; Cf. Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 128-29

⁴⁰ White, *Commentary upon Genesis*, Bk. 1, 113-14.

⁴¹ George Hughes, *An Analytical Exposition of the First Book of Moses* (London, 1672),

⁴² See, e.g., John Pettus, *Volatiles from the History of Adam and Eve* (London, 1674), 83; 11;

Andrewes, 371; Walter Blith, *The English Improver Improved* (London, 1653), 4; White, *Commentary upon Genesis*, bk. 1, 5, cf. 114.

⁴³ John Winthrop, *Winthrop's Journal "History of New England" 1630-1649*, ed. James Hosmer, 2 vols., (New York 1908), I, 294.

⁴⁴ Walker, 223.

There is some evidence that in the earliest years of settlement the visitors regarded the Native Americans as their co-workers, jointly charged with the mission of subduing a recalcitrant nature. However, the tragic susceptibility of native populations to introduced disease and the 'Great Dying' that ensued meant that they came to be no longer regarded as equal participants in the struggle against an untamed nature. The inferiority of their bodies, it was thought, rendered them incapable of performing this task.⁴⁵ In time, to their putative physical deficiencies were added a range of moral defects. Increasingly it was argued that native peoples who had not subdued their original portion of land had slothfully squandered their divine grant. Even in his original estate, Adam had been destined to be a worker. 'God made man', wrote Lancelot Andrewes, 'to labour, not to be idle, and therefore *Adam*, in the state of his innocencie, was put into the garden of Eden that he might dresse it and keep it.'⁴⁶ Work was one of the ends for which human beings had been created. According to Stephen Blake, 'all things are so ordained that [they] shall be no way usefull without knowledge and labour'.⁴⁷ Uncultivated land was clear evidence of indolent inhabitants. Numerous observers commented upon the endemic idleness of the indigenous Americans. 'The sin of idleness is so rooted in them', complained Captain Goodkin in his report to the Commissioners of the United Colonies in 1664, 'that much patience and labour must be put forth and exercised before it can be expected to see the contrary vertue flourish among them.'⁴⁸ In a further indication of the natives' poor work-ethic the colonists' insistence that no work be conducted on the Sabbath day was received with great equanimity by the Narragansett and Massachusetts sachems, who reportedly responded that they had little to do on the other days, so this requirement would be easy to fulfil.⁴⁹ By the same token, considerable effort and exertion were to be expected from the colonists if they were to subdue the earth.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ See Chaplin, *passim*.

⁴⁶ Andrewes, 104. Cf. John Edwards, *A Discourse concerning the Authority, Stile, and Perfection of the Books of the Old and New Testaments*, 2 vols., (London, 1694), II, 111-12; Geneva Bible (1607 edn.), fol. 1v, n. f. On the work-ethic in Eden see Joseph Duncan, *Milton's Earthly Paradise: A Historical Study of Eden* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1972), 153.

⁴⁷ Stephen Blake, *The Compleat Gardeners Practice* (London, 1664), Epistle Dedicatory, Sig. A3.r.

⁴⁸ Nathaniel Shurtleff et al. (eds.), *Records of the Colony of New Plymouth in New England* 12 vols. (Boston, 1855-61), 10, 382 (August 27, 1664).

⁴⁹ Axtell, 149.

⁵⁰ See Peter Carroll, *Puritanism and the Wilderness* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1969), 52-59.

In a further calumny against the Americans, itinerancy, idolatry, and lawlessness were added to the list of their vices. This particular cluster of moral deficiencies was also attributed to wandering peoples on account of the Genesis narratives of human dispersion. The dubious lineage of the nomad was to be traced back the biblical figures of Cain and Ham. According to the Genesis narrative, Cain, having killed his brother Abel, was condemned to be ‘a fugitive and vagabond’ and his efforts at agriculture were doomed to perpetual failure (Gen. 4:12). In his *Historie of the World*, Sir Walter Raleigh rehearsed this tradition, noting that Cain and his descendents ‘had no set place of habitation’. Cain’s nomadic status led also to apostasy and idolatry, for he was also ‘a Vagabond or Wanderer in his cogitations’.⁵¹ This pattern of the wandering life and lapse into idolatry was repeated in Noah’s son Ham.⁵² The discovery of the New World brought with it speculation that the American Indians might have been the offspring of Ham. William Strachey, secretary of the Virginia Company, made this identification in his *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (1612): ‘Yt is observed that Cham, and his famely, were the only far Travellers, and Straglers into divers unknowne countries, searching, exploring and sitting down in the same.’ Wherever they settled, he continued, they brought with them ‘the Ignorance of the true worship of God’, accompanied by ‘the Inventions of Hethenisme, and the adoration of falce godes, and the Devill.’⁵³

For some, the Americans were regarded as living reminders of the degeneracy into a sub-human state, which could befall those who adopted a nomadic lifestyle and refused to cultivate the earth. The nomadic lifestyle might even lead to further degeneration into a mere animal existence.⁵⁴ This, in turn, would legitimate settlement and occupation, for such a course of action would be virtually equivalent to driving off wild beasts before enclosing land and making it useful. Robert Gray linked together the bestial nature of the inhabitants of Virginia, their lack of private property, their idleness and idolatry. ‘In Virginia’, he insisted, ‘the people are sauage and incredibly rude, they worship the diuell, offer their young children in sacrifice unto him, wander up and downe like beastes, and in manners and conditions, differ

⁵¹ Walter Raleigh, *Historie of the World in Five Bookes* (London, 1652), I.2.v; I.5.vii (61, 69).

⁵² Joannes Boemus, *Fardle of Façons* (London, 1555), fols. Biiiiir-Biiiiiv; Raleigh, I.6.2-3 (72).

⁵³ William Strachey, *The Historie of Travell into Virginia Britania* (London, 1612), 54-55.

⁵⁴ Once again, the precedent had been laid out in sacred history. Joseph Glanvill, English Platonist and Fellow of the Royal Society, thought that the wandering Ham might have fathered the race of apes. Joseph Glanvill, *Scepsis Scientifica*, ed. John Owen (London: Kegan Paul, 1885), 211. Cf. Meric Casaubon, *A Treatise of Vse and Cvstom* (London, 1638), 1.

very little from beastes, having no Arte, nor science, nor trade, to employ themselves....⁵⁵ These offences against natural law would alone provide additional justification for wars of conquest. But it was the lack of agriculture and absence of the notion of private property that were prime evidence of this bestial status. Gray suggested that ‘it is likely to be true, that these Sauages have no particular propriety in any part or parcell of that Countrey, but only a general recidence there, as wild beasts have in the forest ... so that if the whole land be taken from them, there is not a man that can complaine of any particular wrong done unto him.’⁵⁶ It followed that in no sense could they be owners of the land, and accordingly, they could be dispossessed with no qualms of conscience:

... although the Lord hath giuen the earth to the children of men, yet this earth which is mans free and simple by deede of gift from God, is the greater part of it possessed and wrongfully usurped by wild beasts, and unreasonable creatures, or by brutish sauages, which by reason of their Godless ignorance, & blasphemous idolatry, are worse than those beasts which are of most wilde & sauage nature.⁵⁷

‘Brutish sauages’, Gray concluded, have no interest in land and property, ‘because they participate rather of the nature of beastes then men.’⁵⁸

Such an impoverished condition of the American landscape was in stark contrast to the cultivated fields of Europe. The English naturalist John Ray spoke of God’s pleasure at the industry of Europeans, who through their settlements had ‘adorned’ the landscape. The vista of villages and cultivated fields was to be far preferred to ‘a Barbarous and Inhospitable *Scythia*, without Houses, without Plantations, without Corn-fields or Vineyards, where the roving *Hords* of the savage and truculent Inhabitants, transfer themselves from place to place in Wagons ... or a rude and unpolished *America*, peopled with slothful and naked *Indians*, instead of well-built Houses, living in pitiful Hutts and Cabans, made of Poles set endways.’⁵⁹ These reproaches were not restricted to the Americans. Ray has referred to the nomadic ‘Scythians’. Similar descriptions had frequently been applied to the Irish and other

⁵⁵ Gray, Sig. C3v.

⁵⁶ Gray, Sig. C4r.

⁵⁷ Gray, Sig. B1v.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.* Cf. Thomas Morton: ‘These Salvages are found to be without Religion, Law, and King’. 49. So too, Thomas Hobbes: ‘the savage people in many places of America, except the government of small families, the concord whereof dependeth on natural lust, have no government at all; and live at this day in that brutish manner, as I said before.’ In consequence: ‘The notions of right and wrong, justice and injustice have there no place. Where there is no common power, there is no law: where no law, no injustice.’ *Leviathan*, I.13, ed. C. B. Macpherson (Ringwood: Penguin, 1981), 187-88.

⁵⁹ John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (London, 1691), 117-18.

purportedly nomadic races.⁶⁰ Sir Thomas Smith, privy councillor and promoter of Irish colonization, condemned the ‘idle following of heards as the Tartarians, Arabians, and Irishe men doo’, while Edmund Spenser thought the Irish practice of transhumance was clear evidence of their Scythian origin (the ancient Scythians being notoriously primitive nomads).⁶¹ Barnaby Rich argued against those who thought the English treatment of the Irish too severe, observing that the Irish ‘live like beastes, voide of lawe and all good order’ and that they were ‘more uncivill, more uncleanly, more barbarous and more brutish in their customs and demeanures, then in any other part of the world that is known.’⁶² Thomas Morton observed that ‘The Natives of New England are accustomed to build them houses, much like the wild Irish, they gather poles in the woodes and put the great end of them in the ground.’⁶³ Owen Roe O’Neill claimed the converse, that the Irish were ‘little better in their ways than the most remote Indians.’⁶⁴ Thus the experience of colonialism in Ireland was to inform the rhetoric of American settlement.⁶⁵

Of course, England, too, had its quota of idle unemployed. However, this group had only come into existence on account of a surfeit of labour and industry. If, on the one hand, the idleness of the indigenous Americans legitimized their own dispossession, equally, it justified the transportation of idle English who, on account of overdevelopment in their own land, were unable to work. The English were idle because they could not labour; the Americans because they would not. This imbalance provided a rationale for the transportation of labourers from a region of surplus labour to one with a deficit. Hence the ‘noble’ or political justification of plantations was to do with ‘transplanting the ranknesse and multitude of increase in our people’.⁶⁶ The migratory imperative is, in any case, a clear implication of the principle of occupation. The earth, wrote George Walker, is free for any man to

⁶⁰ On the connection between settlement of Ireland and the Americas see David B. Quinn, *The Elizabethans and the Irish*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1966); Nicholas Canny, ‘The Ideology of English Colonization: From Ireland to America’, *William and Mary Quarterly* 30 (1973): 575-98, and *The Elizabethan Conquest of Ireland: A Pattern Established, 1565-76* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1986).

⁶¹ Both qu. in Canny, ‘Ideology of English Colonization’, 587. Scythia took in vast regions of Asiatic and European Russia.

⁶² Barnaby Rich, *Alarum to England* (London, 1578), Sig. D2r.

⁶³ Morton, 24.

⁶⁴ Christopher Hill, *The English Bible and the Seventeenth Century Revolution* (Ringwood: Penguin, 1994), 135.

⁶⁵ See Eburne, 115.

⁶⁶ Anonymous, *Trve and Sincere Declaration*, 3.

possesse and inhabit it, *untill it bee replenished with so many men as are able to subdue it by eating up the fruit thereof.*⁶⁷ Thereafter, it was clearly implied, they should seek settlement elsewhere.

Robert Gray developed this argument in detail, claiming that overpopulation in the home country was the cause of many social ills. Certainly there was some justification for his claims of overpopulation. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the population of England had witnessed something of an explosion, increasing from 3 million to 4 million between the years 1550-1600, and then again by another million between the fifty years 1600-1650.⁶⁸ John Cotton pointed out that England's predicament was similar to that of ancient Israel: 'Ephraim be too narrow for thee ... the Mountain will not be inough for vs, and all the Canaanites the dwell in the low countrey, haue chariots of Iron.' (Jos. 17:14).⁶⁹ Of England itself, Cotton observed that 'the Commonwealth is so full, that Tradesmen cannot live one by another, but eate up one another'.⁷⁰ Migration thus enjoyed 'a cleare warrant from God's word.'⁷¹ Richard Eburne also contended that 'the multitude and increase of the people' had led to idleness and a host of concomitant evils: 'filching and stealing, robbery and cousenage, adultery and incest, fornication and all kinde of wantonnesse and vncleanesse, beggery and rouguery, prophanenesse and idolatry.' The only cure was a 'diminuation of the people of the Land vnto a due and competant Number', this presumably to be achieved by exporting the 'filching, stealing, adulterous' classes to America.⁷² Eburne thus concluded that 'it is not impossible the idelnesse that is in our Land, to be notably cured and expelled: and that this may be done either onely, or at least no way so soundly, readily, and speedily, as by Plantations.'⁷³ Similar sentiments were later to inform the practice of transportation of criminals, and hence played a major role in the settlement of Australia. Certainly, the practice of plantations did alleviate the pressure of population growth to a degree. Over the

⁶⁷ Walker, 222. (my emphasis)

⁶⁸ *Encyclopaedia of the North American Colonies*, ed. Jacob Cooke (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1993), II, 304; Hill, *World Turned Upside Down*, 20, 40-41.

⁶⁹ Gray, Sigs.B1v, B4r.

⁷⁰ Cotton, 9. Cotton's text was 2 Sam. 7.10: 'Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israell, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their owne, and move no more.'

⁷¹ Cotton, 1; 'To the Christian Reader', Sig. A2r.

⁷² Eburne, 12.

⁷³ Eburne, 16.

course of the seventeenth century, it is estimated that almost half of million souls left England for the American colonies.⁷⁴

The argument for ownership based on use and subjugation could also be combined with the evangelical imperative. George Walker explained that the preaching of the Gospel confers a 'second right' of occupation: 'And much more may true Christians, who bring the Gospell of salvation and word of life amongst them, by a second right in Christ, settle themselves there, and maintaine their possession of these lands which they have replenished and subdued by culture and tillage, and so long as they doe their endeavour to convert them to Christ by preaching the Gospell.'⁷⁵ It was also claimed that the use of natural resources was itself a form of worship of God. Even in the absence of any overt preaching of the Gospel, God was glorified through the use of the things he had created. William Symonds asserted that the material objects in exotic lands could not serve their true functions while those lands were occupied by heathens: 'Now in diuers Countries God hath his diuers workes or hearbes, and trees, and beastes, and fishes, and fowles, and serpents, &c which (if the people of God come not there) cannot praise the Creator.... The implication is manifest, that his Saints must be witnesses of all his workes, in all Climates; for else they cannot blesse him in all his workes.'⁷⁶ John Evelyn also made explicit links between being genuinely human, subduing the earth, and praise of the Deity:

And though few things indeed are necessary for the Animal life; yet, has it not prerogative by that alone, above the more rational, which Man onely enjoys, and for whom the World was made; seeing the variety of Blessings that were ordained to serve him, proclaims his Dominion, and the vastness of Nature: Nor, had the great Creator himself be so Glorified, without an Intellectual Being, that could Contemplate, and make use of them.⁷⁷

In sum, the biblical imperative to fill the earth and subdue it provided one of the major theological justifications for the practice of plantations. In combination with the Protestant work ethic, it provided a powerful ideological support for colonization and

⁷⁴ *Encyclopaedia of the North American Colonies*, II, 303. (225,000 of these were destined for the Caribbean, 125,000 for the Southern colonies of Virginia and Maryland, and 40,000 for New England and the middle colonies.)

⁷⁵ Walker, 223

⁷⁶ Symonds, 7.

⁷⁷ Evelyn, 5-6.

dispossession, and carried with it implicit notions of what it was to be civilized and fully human.

III 'A Place of Their Own': Natural Law or Particular Providence?

It requires no great leap of imagination to see the ways in which the justifications of colonization that have been discussed above could undergird more formal notions of land ownership grounded in natural law. There are clear parallels between rhetoric based on Old Testament narratives and John Locke's classic statement of the origins of private property in *Two Treatises of Government* (1690):

God, when he gave the world in common to all mankind, commanded man also to labour, and the penury of his condition required it of him. God and his reason commanded him to subdue the earth, i.e. improve it for the benefit of life, and therein lay out something upon it that was his own, his labour. He that, in obedience to this command of God, subdued, tilled, and sowed any part of it, thereby annexed to it something that was his property, which another had no title to, nor could without injury take from him.⁷⁸

Locke's exegesis of the Genesis 1:28, articulated in the context of refutation of Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* (1680), neatly links dominion with subduing. Locke continued the argument: 'And hence subduing or cultivating the earth, and having dominion, we see are joined together. The one gave title to the other. So that God, by commanding to subdue, gave authority so far to appropriate: And the condition of human life, which requires labour and materials to work on, necessarily introduces private possessions.'⁷⁹

It was Locke's insistence, however, that the biblical command served merely to illustrate a universal principle that could be known through the exercise of reason. The authority of the 'use' argument was not a function of the special status of scripture. Rather, scripture merely provided the first illustration of the principle upon which all reasonable individuals would agree. Certainly there are occasions when the language of Protestant exegetes supports this interpretation. That ownership of land was intimately connected to its use was a 'principle in Nature' (John Cotton), an

⁷⁸ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.v.32 (290). Cf. Pufendorf: 'most things require labour and cultivation by men to produce them and make them fit for use. But in such cases it was improper that a man who had contributed no labour should have a right to things equal to his by whose industry a thing had been raised or rendered fit for service.' *De jure naturae et gentium libri octo* (1672) tr. C.H. and W.A. Oldfather (New York: Oceana, 1964), iv.4.6.

⁷⁹ Locke, *Two Treatises*, II.v.35 (292).

‘ordinance and law given in the creation’ (George Walker), a ‘natural title’ (John White). Lancelot Andrewes had similarly spoken of the principle of *subjicite terram*, while William Symonds regarded the commands given to Adam, Noah, and Abraham, as indicating a ‘general vocation’ and a ‘general law’.⁸⁰ These expressions clearly suggest something like natural law, or at the very least a *ius gentium*. The use of precedent similarly underscored the antiquity and universality of plantations and the assumption of land for cultivation. According to Eburne, for example, the practice of overseas plantations was ‘both vsuall and ancient’. ‘Humane histories’ he continued, ‘are full of such Narrations, and of them, aboue all the *Romane state*’.⁸¹

However, there are also indications in some of the literature of a quite different emphasis. A number of writers clearly imply that certain settlements were part of God’s providential plan and, moreover, related to his *special* rather than his *general* providence. It would follow that the relevant biblical justifications might not be universally applicable, but be relevant only in particular situations or for specific peoples. In this instance, they could not act as general precedents, nor could they be regarded as exemplifying a law of nations or a natural law. These arguments tended to rely not upon the Genesis imperatives to subdue the earth, nor upon the more general injunction to preach the Gospel, but appealed rather to quite direct commands relating to the specific occupation of particular territories. Most commonly cited in this context were the Exodus and the subsequent occupation of the promised land.

William Loddington, for example, described American Plantations as ‘a peculiar and special Work appointed for many in our day and Generation.’⁸² This implies that England had a unique divine commission, which was quite limited in its extent. This conviction meshed neatly with the narrative of the Exodus. The precedent of the Promised Land for the people of Israel did not have universal application, but was solely for those people who had a special status in God’s sight. England was accordingly referred to by Loddington as ‘God’s English Israel’.⁸³ The *idée fixe* of Thomas Morton’s *New English Canaan* (1637) was likewise that the English, and the

⁸⁰ Symonds, 6.

⁸¹ Eburne, 17.

⁸² Loddington, 8.

⁸³ Loddington, 13.

English alone, were the legitimate heirs to the lands of the appropriately named New England.

John Cotton's *God's Promise to his Plantations* (1634) was written from a similar perspective. Based on the text 2 Samuel 7:10—'Moreover I will appoint a place for my people Israell, and I will plant them, that they may dwell in a place of their owne, and move no more'—the logic was that of Loddington and Morton. 'The placing of a people in this or that Countrey is from the appointment of the Lord', he insisted.⁸⁴ If the country is already inhabited, three means of occupation are possible: First, when God 'casts out the enemies of a people before them, by lawfull warre with the inhabitants, which God calls them unto.'⁸⁵ However, in this case an extraordinary warrant was required: 'But this course of warring against others, & driving them out without provocation depends upon speciall Commission from God, or else it is not imitable.'⁸⁶ Alternatively, God may confer on the colonists 'favour in the eyes of the native people to come and sit down with them either by way of Purchase, as Abraham did obtaine the field of Machpelah; or else when they give it in courtesie, as Pharaoh did the land of Goshen unto the sons of Iacob.' Third, when hee makes a Countrey, though not altogether void of inhabitants, yet voyd in the place where they reside.⁸⁷ Where this is the case, there is liberty to reside, though the land is neither purchased nor permission sought to inhabit it. Thus Cotton, in spite of his concession that ownership was related to a 'principle in nature', nonetheless contended that the natural state of affairs might be over-ridden by special divine warrant.

The particularity of Old Testament precedents emerged with particular clarity in discussions of the legitimacy of warfare with native peoples. Robert Gray's piously expressed evangelical sentiments, for example, contained a menacing undertone. It is acceptable, he declared, 'to destroy idolaters whom God hateth.' Gray admitted that 'it is far more commendable, and out of doubt more acceptable unto God, to reclaim an Idolater', but he allowed that we may have 'a special commandement of God to the

⁸⁴ Cotton, 3.

⁸⁵ Cotton, 5. Cotton cites as his proof-text Ps. 44:2; 'You drove out the nations with your hand, But them you planted. How you afflicted the peoples and cast them out'

⁸⁶ Cotton, 4. Cf. John Winthrop, who wrote about Indian opposition to settlements in these terms: 'Satan may stir up & combine many of his instruments against the Churches of Christ: but their redeemer, the Lord of Hosts, the Mighty One in battel, all the shield[?] of the earth are in his hand, he can save by few & by weak means, as well as by many & great.' *A Declaration of Former Passages and Proceedings betwixt the English and the Narrowganset* (London, 1645), 1.

contrarie.’ He continues, ‘divastation and depopulation ought to be the last thing which Christians should put in practise, yet forasmuch as euerie example in the scripture as I said is a precept, we are warranted by this direction of Joshua, to destroy wilfull and convicted Idolaters, rather then to let them live, if by no other meanes they can be reclaimed.’⁸⁸ In a similar vein, George Walker ominously cited the book of Deuteronomy: ‘When the Lord your God brings you into the land which you are entering to take possession of it, and clears away many nations before you ... and you defeat them; then you must utterly destroy them; you shall make no covenant with them, and show no mercy to them.’ (7:1-2) Generally such actions were not acceptable, Walker insisted, unless ‘they have such commission and warrant as God gave the Israelites to expell the *Canaanites*.’⁸⁹ But Walker went on to clarify that in any case the normal restriction on dispossession of native peoples only applied to those lands that were ‘replenished with men *and subdued*.’⁹⁰

When we examine the vocabulary of these defences of violent occupation, we encounter common formulae: ‘Speciall commandment’ (Gray), ‘peculiar and special work’ (Loddington). Wars of dispossession required a ‘commission and warrant’ or ‘expresse warrant’ from God (Walker), or a ‘special commission’ (Cotton). On the one hand, such rhetoric acknowledges that there are human conventions that govern the relations between native peoples and colonizing powers. These guidelines forbid wars of conquest and the violent dispossession of native peoples. On the other hand, however, it also allows for such conventions to be overridden in the specific circumstances. These circumstances obtain when, for various reasons, a divine dispensation is thought to apply to a particular favoured people. The influence of notions of divine election—in which the Deity, confounding human conceptions of justice, elects some for eternal life, and others for eternal punishment—seems palpable. On a common seventeenth-century Protestant reading of history, God’s election of the nation of Israel had been transferred to ‘the New Israel’ the Christian

⁸⁷ Cotton, 5.

⁸⁸ Gray, Sig. C2v. Elsewhere Gray points out that ‘A Christian King may lawfullie make warre uppon barbarous and Sauage people, and such as live under no lawfull or warrantable government, and may make conquest of them, so that the warre bee undertaken to this ende, to reclaime and reduce those Sauages from their barabarous kinde of life.’ Sig. C4r.

⁸⁹ Walker, 223.

⁹⁰ Walker, 223 (my emphasis).

Church, and subsequently, in Calvin's theology, to an invisible elect.⁹¹ These groups were recipients of a special divine favour, from which others were excluded. The justification of human actions, on this view of history, is to be sought in God's revealed word, and not in fallible human legal constructions—hence the significance of scripture as a resource for determining the legitimacy of colonization. Eburne expressed the matter quite simply: *If humane reason satisfie not, (for some will make doubts in cases most clear) there is divine warrant for it that may.*⁹²

Such appeals to specific divine commands recorded in scripture reflect the tendency of some Protestants—Puritans in particular—to deny the efficacy of practical reason.⁹³ On this view, while God had originally engraved a moral law on human hearts, sin had almost completely effaced it. The sanguine assumptions of advocates of Thomist natural law—according to whom fallen human beings retain their ability to discover the precepts of natural law through the exercise of reason—were argued to be far too optimistic.⁹⁴ This failure of our moral powers meant that for knowledge of moral principles recourse must be had to the divine revelation contained in Scripture. As Calvin himself expressed it: 'the Lord has provided us with a written law to give us a clearer witness of what was too obscure in the natural law'.⁹⁵ It followed that any apparent lack of consistency between God's commands and the dictates of practical reason could be attributed to the inscrutability of the former and the fallibility of the latter.⁹⁶ Similar considerations, it may be argued, account for the apparent link between Puritanism and empirically-oriented science. In this instance speculative (rather than practical) reason is argued to be incompetent to arrive at truths about the natural world—hence the need for empirical investigation of God's other book,

⁹¹ Some historians have challenged the idea that the English could have considered themselves *the* elect nation, as opposed to *an* elect nation. See, e.g., Armitage, 78-79, 94

⁹² Eburne, 16.

⁹³ This position was by no means universal amongst Protestants, however. Thus it was strongly resisted in England by Cambridge Platonists and Latitudinarians. See Harrison, '*Religion*' and the *Religions in the English Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), ch. 2.

⁹⁴ Thomas's position was as follows: 'the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light. It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.' *Summa Theologiae* 1a2ae. 91, 2, tr. from the Blackfriars edn., 60 vols., ed. Thomas Gilby (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1964-76).

⁹⁵ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., tr. J. McNeill, (London: SCM, 1960), II.viii.1 (I, 368), cf. II.ii.24 (I, 283). Cf. Martin Luther, 'Sermon for Epiphany', *Sermons of Martin Luther*, 8 vols. ed. J. Lenker (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983), I, ii, 51; *Lectures on Genesis 1-5*, in *Luther's Works*, 55 vols., ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis, Concordia, 1955-75), 1, 167;

⁹⁶ Calvin, I.xvii.2 (I, 212).

nature, to determine precisely what natural laws he had instantiated in the physical world.⁹⁷

A related consideration here is the difference between voluntarist and intellectualist conceptions of moral obligation. For the voluntarist, God does not command actions because they are good: rather, what is good is good because God commands it. There can be no recourse to natural law, then, because goodness is not a function of reason—human or divine—but is dependent on the divine will. This position is often associated with Calvinism. According to the Thomist tradition, by way on contrast, God commanded particular acts because they were good. Moreover, the natural law implanted by God in the soul had retained its integrity after the Fall and could thus continue to serve as a guide in matters of law and morals.⁹⁸ Again, these divergent positions provide a partial explanation for the general tendency of Catholic nations to discuss colonization in the context of natural law, while Puritan colonizers pointed to specific biblical injunctions that were presumed to provide a more reliable indication of God’s intentions. The difference here is not between ‘religious’ (biblical) justifications and incipiently ‘secular’ (natural law) arguments, but rather between two competing conceptions of the religious basis of moral and legal obligation. To a degree, these different notions begin to merge in the late seventeenth century with the advent of theorists such as Locke who managed to reformulate natural law along voluntarist lines. It is for this reason that Locke is happy to invoke both natural law and specific divine injunctions recorded in Scripture.

Conclusion

The bible played a pivotal role in justifications of colonization in seventeenth-century England. A number of different texts were used in these discussions, but the command to ‘subdue the earth’—already identified by Lynn White Jr. and others as a significant determinant of Western attitudes to the natural environment—seems to have a central place in justifications for colonization. At the beginning of the seventeenth century such justifications had two distinct emphases. On the one hand, biblical precedents were cited to illustrate that the practice of plantations was ancient

⁹⁷ See Harrison, ‘Original Sin and the Problem of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 63 (2002): 239-59.

⁹⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1a2ae. 90, 2; 1a2ae. 94, 1.

and universal. The bible was thus used as an historical document, albeit one of unparalleled antiquity and authority. Relevant divine imperatives recorded in scripture were also cited to show that migration and settlements abroad had been commanded by God, in much the same way that other components of natural law—such as injunctions against murder or theft—had similarly been the subject of divine commands. In this way the bible could be regarded as embodying universal principles that governed the occupation of foreign territories and the treatment of indigenous peoples. Biblical precedents, on this understanding, exemplified the *ius gentium* or law of nations. On the other hand, Scripture could also be deployed to make a case for the exceptional nature of particular colonial practices. Thus it could be argued that the English, or particular groups within England, were uniquely called to colonizing activities in particular parts of the Americas. On this model, the treatment of indigenous peoples would not necessarily be governed by universal legal principles, but by specific examples derived from scripture assumed to be relevant only in special cases. In certain instances these exceptional precepts might over-ride the prescriptions of natural law. Furthermore, Puritans who mounted such arguments were inclined to be suspicious of the pretensions of natural law, premised as it was on optimistic assessments of the powers of practical reason.

The second half of the seventeenth century witnessed the beginnings of a blurring of the boundaries between these two approaches. In developing conceptions of private property and of the international conventions regarding ownership of territories, the particularities of the biblical narratives were increasingly incorporated into legal principles presumed to be of a universal validity. Thus while natural law theorists acknowledged that the relevant principles were exemplified in biblical imperatives, they also assumed that the content of natural law prescriptions could have been formulated independently of any input from revealed religion, and thus from the Christian Scriptures. Whether this was in fact the case now seems doubtful. It might reasonably be argued that significant elements of Locke's influential theory of private property were not derived from principles of reason or human nature—assuming for the moment that these latter notions are intelligible—but were inadvertently grounded in specific elements of the Judeo-Christian tradition. The tension between the particularities of biblical revelation and the universality of truths of reason was in any case particularly acute during this period when many claimed, in what was a parallel

argument, that the fundamental truths of revealed religion matched the content of a universal religion of reason.⁹⁹ It is not surprising, in this context, that Locke should have published a work entitled *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695).

It is interesting to observe that the same set of moral and religious arguments about the occupation of territory and dispossession of its inhabitants were operative into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. While it has been suggested—particularly in discussions of the settlement of Australia—that the legal notion of *terra nullius* informed debates about the legality of annexing occupied territories, in fact there is little evidence of any significant role for such a principle. The imperative to subdue the earth, however, seems to have retained at least some of its rhetorical and moral authority, and it is perhaps fitting to conclude with an example of the way in which this powerful biblical concept continued its influence into the nineteenth century. In an address to members of the Moreton Bay Friends of the Aborigines Society in 1856, John Dunmore Lang, a Presbyterian minister and prominent promoter of migration to Australia, rehearsed an argument that would not have been out of place in discussions conducted 200 years before:

God in making the earth never intended it should be occupied by men so incapable of appreciating its resources as the Aborigines of Australia. The white man had indeed only carried out the intention of the Creator in coming and settling down in the territory of the natives. God's first command to man was "Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth".¹⁰⁰

⁹⁹ Harrison, *'Religion' and the Religions*, 28-34, 157-72.

¹⁰⁰ Henry Reynolds, *Frontier: Aborigines, Settlers and Land* (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1987), 171.

