

# The Pilgrimage and Progress of George Bailey: Puritanism, *It's a Wonderful Life*, and the Language of Community in America

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Since Robert Bellah and his colleagues published their famous study, *Habits of the Heart* over a decade ago, there has been extensive debate about how public virtue and private interest are reconciled in the United States.<sup>1</sup> With the growth of ideas of multiculturalism and the ensuing culture wars in academia, this debate has become one of signal significance. Critics of contemporary American culture lament the dominance of a liberal individualism that undermines the civic virtues of a republican community.<sup>2</sup> Taking their cue from historians of ideas who have debated the relative liberalism or republicanism of the generation of the revolution, these critics assert that a republican consensus of civic responsibility has declined, and an amoral individualism has taken its place, rendering an American community untenable.<sup>3</sup> Recent work on the origins of American political culture suggests that the liberal-republican dichotomy may be overemphasized. Reading the revolutionary generation as steeped in Calvinist Protestantism, some analysts argue that it may be less important whether the founders sought virtue or liberty than how they used Puritanism to reconcile and articulate these two values.<sup>4</sup>

Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that there is a rhetoric of consensus that is remarkably consistent in American culture from the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries and suggests that it may still be of relevance today.<sup>5</sup> Following Bercovitch, this paper argues this rhetoric still has meaning for Americans, although social and political changes of the last fifty years may have

weakened its appeal. This rhetoric provides a means of articulating private interest and public virtue, the individual and the community, in ways that permit us to reconcile what have frequently been perceived as exclusive elements of the American identity. To demonstrate the possibility of the continued relevance of this language, I will explore its usage in Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Although poorly received at the box office upon its release in 1946, *It's a Wonderful Life* has achieved the status of cultural icon.<sup>6</sup> It has become a piece of Americana shared by most citizens, a cultural touchstone used for advertisement, comedy, and political satire, and its annual television broadcast has become a ritual. There is clearly something in the film that resonates with Americans. Capra saw himself as making a defining film about American culture, most significantly about the American individual.<sup>7</sup> But the film does more than exalt the individual. No matter how much we focus on the protagonist, George Bailey, we cannot ignore the community of Bedford Falls. Capra nested George in a community, showed how vital he was to it, yet also how vital that community was to him. Capra does not pose the now trite opposition of individual and community, but nests one within the other, linking them inextricably at the core of his idea of America. In doing so, Capra employs (not necessarily consciously) elements of a rhetoric that derives from seventeenth-century Puritanism. Viewing *It's a Wonderful Life* through the lenses of this rhetoric, I believe that we can achieve a better understanding of the film and possibly of a language of community that most Americans can, to some degree, share.

While analysts of *It's a Wonderful Life* have offered divergent interpretations of the central message of the film, they frequently conclude that it requires a choice between individual and community. For instance, Frank Striker sees the film as favoring libertarian individualism over a class-based society.<sup>8</sup> Robert Schultz claims that Capra chooses republican values of community, family, and home over liberal values of individual success.<sup>9</sup> This tendency to see the film as requiring a choice between individual and community even appears in Raymond Carney's challenging and insightful reading of the film.<sup>10</sup> Carney interprets the film as a conflict between the mundane, banal reality of Bedford Falls and the liberating, imaginative expression of George's anonymity during his sojourn with the angel, Clarence. While providing an insightful and useful way of thinking about the film, the role of fantasy within it and the way fantasy and reality, individual expression and community existence are articulated, Carney must ultimately deny their articulation and argue that Capra clearly is advocating the superiority of the imaginative individual. For Carney, George is a solitary individual at the end of the film,

. . . his social integration has never been less perfect or his imaginative distance from it greater than at that moment. . . in short, at the moment when the movie most appears to be celebrating the possibility of a blandly homogenous, small-town

community of interest and shared understanding, Capra is driving a wedge between the consciousness of George, on the one side, and the putative community of sympathy and understanding rendered by the film, on the other.<sup>11</sup>

While providing a provocative reading of the film as a treatment of American alienation, Carney must ultimately argue the dichotomy between the imaginative individual and the “blandly homogenous” community. His suggestion that George stands alone at the end of the film, wryly smiling because of a new found power in his imaginative isolation seems to undercut much of the experience of George during the period of his nonexistence. George’s growing alarm, for Carney, becomes nothing more than a confrontation with the extremity of his alienation, and the sequence receives, in fact, scant discussion by Carney.<sup>12</sup>

Readings of the film that stress the tension between the autonomous individual and the repressive community, whether that repression be class based or a repressive banality, offer little that is new to readings of American culture. Even noting, as does Carney, that this tension is dynamic and irreducible does not take us very far. Enough, however, has not been said about *how* individual and community are articulated in American culture. It is here, in demonstrating the interactions between these two elements that the rhetoric of the film becomes a critical moment in cultural analysis.

Other scholars have seen the film as critical of the opposition between individual and community. Robert Ray sees the film as providing a reconciliation of several contradictions—adventure and domesticity, individual and community, worldly success and ordinary life. He argues that these reconciliations challenge a central tendency of Hollywood cinema to celebrate the individual. Focusing on both narrative and cinematic styles, Ray offers a reading that challenges the tendency to opt for one side of the individual-community dichotomy, but he does not delve into the rhetoric of the film to identify *how* the elements are articulated in their reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> The articulation of individual and community is also the theme for Lorraine Mortimer, who sees George Bailey as a modern individual “. . . embedded in a particular, flawed local community.”<sup>14</sup>

Following Ray and Mortimer, I argue that what gives the film its “grim enchantment” is its reconciliation of individual and community. In telling the tale of the American individual Frank Capra placed him inseparably in a community. The message of *It's a Wonderful Life* does not require the audience to choose between these two elements, but instead demonstrates their inseparability, and offers a language that permits them to be articulated. Mortimer argues that the power of Capra’s moralism in the film rests on the realistic portrayal of the citizens of Bedford Falls. While not challenging her conclusion that Capra’s realistic story telling lends the film power, I focus instead on how individual and community are reconciled, and contend that Capra does this through the use of a rhetoric of community that derives from seventeenth-century Puritanism. A

Puritan reading of the film suggests not opposition between individual and community, material success and moral virtue, but instead a synthesis of the two values. If a Puritan reading of this cultural artifact offers a means of reconciling the tensions between individual and community within it, we can begin to establish that a Puritan-based reading of the discourse of popular culture may still be of relevance.<sup>15</sup>

### Puritanism and the Rhetoric of Consensus

Sacvan Bercovitch has argued that a rhetoric of consensus derived from seventeenth-century Puritanism provides a common mode of cultural discourse in nineteenth century America. This rhetoric derives from the Puritan errand into the wilderness and consists of three elements: the rational *preparation* of the visible saint for a revelation of grace; the *pilgrimage* of the saints, which consists of the sifting of the population and their geographic migration on an errand of institutional reform; and the moral *progress* of the community toward perfection.<sup>16</sup> These three elements comprise a rhetoric that reconciles a strong individualism with a strong community.

Puritan individualism derives from Calvinist notions of predestination. Salvation for Calvin was a product of God's sovereign will. As such, saving grace could not be won through human exertions, nor could it ever be truly known by humans. The only knowledge humans could have of their own salvation would come from a personal revelation of God, an epiphany of God's grace in their lives. In this way, individuals were separated from one another, each alone before eternity. The bonds of church as agent of salvation were broken, and the Christian community became a collection of sanctified individuals with the community playing no role in the sanctification of its members. Unsure of his/her own salvation, and with no means of affecting it, the Puritan individual was isolated in the most precarious area of life: one's own salvation.<sup>17</sup>

This individualism in the face of eternity appears to preclude a meaningful role for the community. Puritans, however, believed that the sanctified had a duty to come together in a true church of "visible saints." The purpose of this community was twofold. First, the Puritans believed that they were active agents in the second coming of Christ; they were charged with preparing the world for the millennium.<sup>18</sup> Building the earthly community of visible saints, or the "visible church" was necessary to facilitate the second coming when the "invisible church" of true saints would be realized.<sup>19</sup> Second, the Puritan community would sustain the sanctified individuals in their moments of doubt. Absent either a means to petition the Lord for salvation or an institution that could assure that salvation, the individual, alone before God, needed a strong, like-minded community to sustain his/her faith.<sup>20</sup> These twin aims of community generated a strong sense of civic and moral responsibility, both to the community and to each individual member of it. Because of the individualism produced by the belief in

predestination, a community of saints was necessary to maintain stability and focus in the project of making ready the millennium.

Transplanted into the wilderness of the new world, the reconciliation of individual and community became increasingly strained. Controversy over doctrine would arise within the first two decades of the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, including the Antinomian controversy surrounding Mistress Anne Hutchinson and the half-way covenant. The major tenets of the Puritan synthesis, however, continued to dominate New England thought for a century, and became a major influence on later social and political thought in America.

In a series of works exploring Puritan rhetoric and its legacy, Bercovitch argues that this rhetoric provides a ritual of consensus to subsequent American culture.<sup>21</sup> His emphasis is on the nineteenth century, where he argues that the idea of pilgrimage links nationalism and moralism in American culture. This ritual of consensus is hegemonic, absorbing, co-opting, and delegitimizing alternative visions of America, creating a cultural homogeneity that extends, he argues, from John Winthrop to Abraham Lincoln to Edward Bellamy and, he suggests, into the 1960s.

The Puritan rhetoric and its component elements pervade American cultural discourse in a variety of ways. The moral and geographic pilgrimage, as Bercovitch points out, links the growth of American influence and power with a mission of institutional reform often seen as having divine dispensation. America could not merely extend its reach across the continent, but had to be destined manifestly to do so. Americans could not simply acquire colonies, even for the moral mission of uplift as did the British, without President McKinley getting a personal revelation of God. America could not enter World Wars I and II merely to defend its strategic interests, but only for the moral mission of making the world safe for democracy. Nor could America extend its reach around the world in the post-war era without entering into a Cold War, frequently seen as a sacred activity, a conflict between “freedom under God, and ruthless, godless tyranny.”<sup>22</sup>

This rhetoric of mission has also been used by those who seem to be challenging the community. Bercovitch notes that nineteenth century feminists such as Catherine Beecher and Elizabeth Cady Stanton claimed to be fighting for principles “cherished by all Americans,” to be “agents in accomplishing the greatest work ever entrusted to human responsibility;” he also finds this language of mission in the antislavery movement.<sup>23</sup> We can see the use of this language of mission in Martin Luther King’s dream of integration of blacks and whites in a progressive society. “We will win our freedom because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands.”<sup>24</sup>

This rhetoric has informed economic theories, linking the moral and material progress of the individual and the community. Hence the Republican free soil argument clearly linked the development of the independent entrepreneur with a period of moral preparation as wage laborer and the growth of a moral and wealthy nation.<sup>25</sup> The link between moral preparation and worldly success has

been noted from Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* to Horatio Alger's *Ragged Dick*.<sup>26</sup> In both of these cases, the resemblance to the Puritan Preparation tale is clear; the stories end as the public life of the subject begins. This rhetoric also informs such potentially subversive voices as Malcolm X; Alex Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* follows the same form—the sinner who becomes aware of his total depravity has an epiphany that begins his moral education.

The dark side to a hegemonic ritual of consensus is easy enough to see today: Silencing dissent, co-opting alternatives, labeling as Un-American or subversive any voice that dares challenge the consensus. There is, however, a positive side to the consensus that is often ignored today. Bercovitch notes that where European cultures link place and identity in an ethno-nationalism, American culture is less restrictive:

Genealogy, boundaries, and a certain form of religion were precisely what American nationhood has *not* meant. American genealogy was simply the idea of mission brought up to date. As a community, New Israel was the heir of the ages; its representative citizen was independent, unbound by any public or personal ties, except the ties of culture that require him to be self-made. (51)

The absence of geographic exclusion permits American culture to accept and adopt a diverse set of cultures into its body, as long as there is some basic acceptance of the political culture, the idea of America. This does not necessarily mean accepting a set of essentially Anglo-liberal ideas as suggested by Arthur Schlesinger.<sup>27</sup> Drawing on the ideas of Horace Kallen, Michael Walzer suggests that the lack of ethno-nationalism in the United States permits the development of a truly multi-cultural society, in which we all, in some way, are hyphenated Americans, who have the ability to live on either side of the hyphen.

. . . the United States is not a “nation of nationalities” or a “social union of social unions.” At least, the singular nation or union is not constituted by, it is not a combination or fastening together of, the plural nationalities or unions. In some sense, it includes them; it provides a framework for their coexistence. . . . The parts [that make up the United States] are individual men and women. . . . The people are American only by virtue of having come together. And whatever identity they had before becoming Americans, they retain (or better, they are free to retain) afterward. . . . [O]n the pluralist view, Americans are allowed to remember who they were and to insist, also, on *what else they are*.<sup>28</sup>

Walzer sees this opportunity for a tolerant, multi-cultural community emerging from the anonymity of the American identity. He notes, however, that as that anonymous identity overtakes grounding in ethnic groupings, as the America side of the hyphen becomes more meaningful than the ethnic side, the building blocks of social order may be weakened. Linking Bercovitch and Walzer, I would suggest that in conjunction with the anonymity of American identity, the assent to the rhetoric of consensus—of moral preparation for the progressive mission of the pilgrim community—has served to tie the various groups together. This rhetoric permits an openness and tolerance (not always realized) to American culture that may be impossible in other societies. I do not mean to imply that America has been ever tolerant; it is possible, and historically obvious that the ritual of consensus has been used to oppress voices considered dissident and has permitted bigotry and racism to persist. Yet I agree with Walzer that tolerance has been the cultural norm (if not always the fact) in American society.

This rhetoric may seem less powerful today than in the past. While the appeal to a special mission was a means of a means promoting private sacrifice for the public progress up through the mid-twentieth century, it may be that it has lost some of its appeal. In the wake of challenges to the American mission in the last half century—Vietnam, Watergate—and the rise of a self-conscious cultural pluralism, the ritual of consensus appears to be fragmenting. Walzer notes that the decline in support for consensus has led to a politics of groups in which “the population lacks cohesion, cultural life lacks coherence.” (399). Yet in the ritual of consensus lies a language of coherence that is still understood by most Americans, a call to a nationality of tolerance, a progressive, inclusive community that recognizes the moral worth of the individual, and the community’s commitment to enhancing that moral worth. A reinvigorated politics of consensus is possible, the language exists, a rhetoric that is inclusive and accepting, not exclusive and intolerant. Ironically, a rhetoric deriving from one of the most exclusionary and controlling communities in history might well provide a language of consensus to reinvigorate the ideal of the American progressive mission. It is this rhetoric that is expressed so eloquently in *It's a Wonderful Life*, imbuing that film with a cultural significance far beyond its initial box office appeal.

*It's a Wonderful Life* uses elements of this Puritan rhetoric to articulate individual and community, material success and public virtue. While grounded in an open-ended material reality rather than the spiritual teleology of the Puritans, the film emphasizes George Bailey’s rational *preparation* to accept his moral worth, the sifting of the population and its *pilgrimage* to build a moral community, and the linkage of moral and material *progress* that binds the individual and community together.

*It's a Wonderful Life* is the story of George Bailey, the president of a building and loan association in the small town of Bedford Falls. As the film opens, we hear people praying for George, who is in financial trouble and contemplating suicide.

George will be saved from his fate through divine intervention, but only after the agent of that intervention, Clarence Oddbody, Angel Second Class, and the audience are educated about George's life. In true Capra fashion, neither George nor his guardian angel, Clarence, are remarkable characters. Neither does anything that would gain them fame or fortune. Clarence has no aspirations other than to win his wings, to become an Angel First Class. George, however, dreams of being a famous architect, of building bridges and skyscrapers and of traveling the world. Yet he will never leave the small town. Through a series of crises and continual conflicts with the banker, Henry Potter, George will be increasingly tied to Bedford Falls. The main development in George's character is the realization that his efforts in Bedford Falls, which yield him neither fame nor fortune, build something bigger and more important than skyscrapers; George builds a moral community.

### Preparation and Grace

Seeing the revelation of God's grace as a process of rational discovery, Puritans believed that one must be prepared to recognize grace, that one's sanctity did not unfold all at once, but became apparent over time.<sup>29</sup> This does not mean that one can choose grace, as Arminian Protestantism would later suggest. For the seventeenth-century Puritan, predestination precluded such volunteerism. Truly sanctified, virtuous individuals would pass through a series of stages in which they would become increasingly aware of their grace. This was the process of preparation. Different versions of the process were offered, delineating various stages of readiness. Nevertheless, each vision of the preparation moves from an awareness of one's own depravity, a true sight of sin, to a preparation for grace, an apprehension of true beauty. For God's grace to be recognized in the moment of revelation, the saint must have passed through a series of ". . . hints, of interpretable suggestions: Apprehensions of beauty, feelings of renewal, but above all for the preparationist, a new capacity for self control."<sup>30</sup> This self control served as a fundamental element of the social order, linking the individual relationship with God to the public responsibilities of the community.

*It's a Wonderful Life* can be seen as the story of George Bailey's preparation. Most of the film is told in flashback as the angels ready themselves to intervene on George's behalf. This flashback proceeds through a series of crises in George's life, a progression of points where he must choose between his own desires and his responsibilities to his family and community.

In the first scenes of the flashback George saves his younger brother, Harry, from drowning, becoming so ill from the effort that he loses the hearing in his left ear. When he regains his health, he returns to his job at Mr. Gower's drug store. Two young girls, Mary Hatch and Violet Bick, are seated at the soda fountain. Violet flirts shamelessly with George, while Mary is more demure. After Violet leaves, George tells Mary of his desire to travel the world and build buildings. As he bends over to scoop out the ice cream, she whispers into his unhearing ear that

she will love him “. . . ‘til the day she dies.” George discovers that Mr. Gower, distraught over the death of his son, has inadvertently poisoned the medication of a child. Asked to deliver the medication by an unheeding Gower, George goes to his father’s office at the Building and Loan to seek advice. There he finds his father, Peter Bailey, arguing with the banker, Henry Potter, over the poor financial condition of the Building and Loan. As Potter’s demands become personal attacks on Peter Bailey, George comes to his father’s defense. His father ushers him out of the room before he can ask about the medication. When he returns to the drug store, he is violently beaten by Gower for failing to deliver the medicine. Mary Hatch, still sitting at the counter, watches, cringing but unable to intervene. In the midst of the beating George convinces Gower of his mistake. Mr. Gower, contrite, falls to his knees and embraces George, who promises never to tell anyone about the incident.

Several of the key themes elaborated later in the film are present in this scene. First is the constancy of George’s moral choice even at considerable personal cost. He saves his brother, but loses his hearing. He stops the poisoning, but is beaten until his ear bleeds. Second, these choices are made by George alone. He does not get advice from his father; Mary Hatch does not intervene between George and Mr. Gower. When a moral choice must be made, it is the individual who must make it; there is no intercessor. Finally, the presence in this scene of both Potter and Mary Hatch is significant. They will be present in every sequence of the flashback, representing the two elements of George’s personality: his desire for fame, fortune, and far travel (Potter), and his commitment to building a moral community (Mary).

The rest of the flashback elaborates on these themes as the audience watches George make choices at various crises in his life. As a young adult, George meets Mary at his brother’s high school prom and begins to court her the night his father dies. In the wake of his father’s death, George must choose between going to college or taking over the Building and Loan, which Potter wants to dissolve. During the depression, a run on the bank forces him to choose between his own honeymoon with Mary and saving the Building and Loan from Potter; this requires him to use his life savings to keep the institution open. Interestingly, in this scene it is Mary who offers the money, but only after George has made the decision to forgo the honeymoon. In a later scene, George must choose between prosperity by working for Potter or maintaining the Building and Loan when Potter offers him a job. After rejecting the offer, he returns home to Mary, who announces that she is pregnant. At the end of the flashback, when his business partner, Uncle Billy, has lost \$8000, which Potter has found and kept, George turns to both Mary and Potter, but neither can help. George alone must choose between a life of scandal and jail, or suicide.

The narrative of the film follows the form of a tale of moral preparation, and is heavy with religious imagery. The story is narrated by angels as they prepare to reveal themselves to George, and this divine intervention is a constant presence

in the film.<sup>31</sup> The towns' prayers that open the film ask for heavenly intervention, but the angels always knew that this would happen. "Tonight is his crucial night," the unnamed angel says. We know from this point that George merits special attention from God, not because of the town's prayers, but because he has always merited special attention. We are always aware of George's moral worth (even if he is not), not only because he constantly chooses the right thing to do for the community, but because the narrative style has informed us from the beginning that George merits special divine attention. The foreknowledge given to the audience by the flashback suggests predestination.<sup>32</sup>

The flashback sequence does not represent George's increasing willingness to *choose* virtue, but instead his growing doubt over his own moral worth. The growing anxiety we witness in George, and which Carney explores so well, is similar to that of the Puritan preparation tale, where those who believe themselves sanctified continually face an uncertain eternity, knowing themselves to be powerless sinners. George's dilemma is grounded in a worldly morality; he does not agonize over the condition of his immortal soul. His moral crisis is nonetheless critical, and his moral preparation to recognize his true worth nonetheless necessary. As the flashback ends, George, alone, comes to believe that his moral worth is negligible, that he is ". . . worth more dead than alive." He is prepared, morally and rationally for an epiphany.

George's preparation is similar to the two stages common to Puritan thought: the acquisition of a true sight of sin; and the apprehension of true beauty, which is the true understanding of grace.<sup>33</sup> Henry Potter, "the richest and meanest man in the county," personifies immorality and evil. George's awareness of what Potter represents begins to emerge early, in the first scenes of the film when George as a child defends his father from Potter's insults. As an adult, George again defends his father and the Building and Loan from Potter's attempt to dissolve the institution after Peter Bailey's death, and again during the run on the bank. Through each of these crises, George sees Potter as merely a "warped, frustrated old man," and has yet to gauge the depth of Potter's evil. This comes when Potter seeks to corrupt George by offering him a long-term, high wage job. Clearly tempted, George shakes Potter's hand. As he does so, he seems to come to some kind of realization, as if touching Potter revealed something to him. At this moment, he becomes aware of the evil, recognizing that Potter is not merely a man, but a manipulating force, a "scurvy spider." It is at this point (the last extended episode of the flashback) that George has recognized true evil in the world.

The apprehension of true beauty is represented by Mary Hatch Bailey. She offers George unconditional love as a child, prefiguring their marriage and family. Mary is described as having "all the answers," which include her commitment to Bedford Falls and to George. She is the only younger character in the film who never wants to leave the community. After their wedding, Mary's primary activity is turning the "Old Granville House" into a home for George;

where George builds homes for others, Mary builds George a home and a family. On the day of Harry's return from college and George's realization that he will never leave Bedford Falls, George visits Mary and lashes out at her in frustration. Yet his frustration turns into a profession of love; Mary helps George turn his temporal frustrations into an apprehension of true beauty.

Mary is absent from George's temptation by Potter. She is present in the scenes that bracket the temptation, assuring him prior to it that she is satisfied with their life, and subsequently informing him that she is pregnant. This resembles the Puritan idea of the saintly community sustaining an individual in faith, yet unable to intervene between the individual and God. This is also evident in Mary's inability to intercede during George's beating by Gower, and by her offer of their honeymoon money only *after* George has decided to stay during the run on the bank. Most importantly, she is unable to help George make a choice on the night of the lost \$8,000. After coming home fearful and angry, George raves at his family. As his rage dissipates, he looks pleadingly to Mary and calls her name. She replies in anger, "Why don't you just . . ." leaving him alone in his crisis. He next turns to Potter, asking for a loan, but Potter threatens to have him arrested. George is left bereft, facing the future with no hope and no ability to control his fate. Throughout the flashback, George becomes increasingly anxious, questioning the choices that have tied him to Bedford Falls and his own value, until the night of the final crisis, Christmas Eve. Much as the Puritan was considered prepared for grace when he recognized his own total depravity, as George stands on the bridge, preparing to jump, his preparation is complete.<sup>34</sup>

It bears repeating that George is not given the opportunity to choose virtue; the special attention from the angels and the constancy of his moral choices all point to a fixed moral value. His moral worth is not something that comes gradually. The process of preparation that constitutes the flashback is George's growing readiness to accept his moral worth, not a change in that worth. As the Puritans' revelation of God transformed their sense of salvation but did not alter their predestined future, so too, the epiphany that awaits George will transform what he values, but not his moral value. He is an individual, possessed of free will, who must come to accept or deny his moral worth. The synthesis of predestination and free will, the underpinnings of the Puritan preparation, are evident in George Bailey's life.<sup>35</sup>

### **Pilgrimage and the Errand into the Wilderness**

The Puritans believed that they were historically charged with creating the conditions for the second coming of Christ. Their role as agents of the millennium was to *sift* the population, to identify as best as possible those who were sanctified, and to join together with them in a visible church of the regenerate, the better to set the conditions for the realization of the invisible church of the saints. Their trek from England to Holland and later North America was a pilgrimage in performance of this errand.<sup>36</sup>

The opportunity to build a new society in America became or them a goal analogous to building a new Jerusalem, a place where their church and community could co-exist, serving as an example of the coming millennium. They equated their errand into the wilderness with Abraham's covenant with God, Moses leading his children from their Egyptian captivity and Nehemiah rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem.<sup>37</sup>

The Puritan pilgrimage linked the individual's preparation for grace with the community's preparation for the millennium. In this City on a Hill, the regenerate population, sifted out of the broader population, would build a community to sustain their faith. Through their efforts at creating a moral community, patterned after the examples of moral dissenters and reformers found in the bible, they would offer an institutional setting to help bring the millennium to fruition. The moral community, built by visible saints, would sustain each of the saints in moments of unbelief, guiding them toward perfection; they, in turn, would support the community, bringing it toward perfection. Such a project required temporal autonomy to link their polity with their church. Hence, the pilgrimage from England was an essential act, a part of the Puritan cosmology that would give them scope to prepare themselves for grace and their community for progress.<sup>38</sup>

This notion of pilgrimage—sifting the population, reforming institutions to create a moral community and geographic relocation—is a central theme in George Bailey's life. The sifting of the population is a result of the activities of George and the Building and Loan Association. Those to whom it lends money are sifted out of the general population of Bedford Falls and geographically moved from "Potter's slums" into the Building and Loan's development area, Bailey Park, which is clearly identified as a wilderness in the film ("Why, I used to hunt rabbits there myself," says Potter's bill collector). This sifting is done by other than worldly, material criteria, as seen in George's defense of the loan to the cabdriver, Ernie Bishop. After the death of George's father, Potter tries to convince the board of directors to close the Building and Loan. As evidence of improper business practices, he challenges the loan to Ernie Bishop, claiming that the bank had turned it down for lack of assets. George argues that the material evidence of the loan is in the paperwork, and that "I can personally vouch for his character." A moral sifting is occurring, creating a geographically separate population, removed from the immoral world of oppression controlled by Potter. Bailey Park is physically separated from the rest of the town, with a single entrance, bounded by trees and a gate, ending in cul de sacs; an enclosed environment, it is separated from the immorality of Potter's world. Entrance to Bailey Park is accompanied by rituals, as in the scene where Mr. Martini moves into his new house. George and Mary lead the residents of Bailey Park in a ritual of welcome, offering bread, wine, and salt. We see both a moral sifting of the population and a removal of them into the wilderness to build the community anew, along moral lines.

Geography is also significant for George Bailey, who never leaves Bedford Falls despite his own desires. George must make a personal pilgrimage in the film,

coming to realize, as does his father before him, that building the moral community in Bedford Falls is more important than building big things for the immoral world outside. His pilgrimage to the wilderness that becomes Bailey Park is intimately linked to his own moral preparation. At each step as he substitutes for his own dreams the need to build this community, he envisions more exotic locales to visit. He is going to Europe the night his father dies; to Alaska or Venezuela when Harry returns from college; his honeymoon is to be to the Caribbean, his wedding night adorned with posters of the South Seas.

He has kept a part of himself outside of Bedford Falls throughout the film. The fantasies of travel represented by the posters are matched by his fantasies of building big things, represented by the models of bridges and skyscrapers he has built in his living room. These fantasies, too, will escape him on the night of his final crisis. Raging in the face of jail and scandal over the loss of the \$8,000, George threatens Uncle Billy with jail, yells at his children and Mary and questions her: "why do we have to have so many kids?" Having pushed away his family, he strikes out physically in his home, destroying the models that he has built of the bridges and skyscrapers he has dreamed of building. He is now alone, with neither real family nor fantasy to sustain him.<sup>39</sup> He has repudiated his temporal dreams, clearing the last of the brush from his own moral wilderness. His internal pilgrimage is complete, and he is located in Bedford Falls for all time, physically and morally.<sup>40</sup>

The film evokes the errand into the wilderness. The Building and Loan becomes the agent of community, sifting the population based on moral character such that Bailey Park becomes a community only of the virtuous. Bailey Park itself is located in the wilderness, separate from the rest of Bedford Falls. Where once was untamed land, now there are "... dozens and dozens of the prettiest little homes you've ever seen, each worth twice what it cost the Building and Loan to build them." This is not a sifting based on material worth, but on moral grounds. In the immoral world of Potter, the residents of Bailey Park are "cattle," and "garlic eaters,"<sup>41</sup> but to George and his father they are people worthy of respect and in need of an avenue out of oppression. Their pilgrimage to Bailey Park is the creation of a moral community, akin to the Puritan's desire to build a New Jerusalem. George's own internal pilgrimage nests his personal preparation within the community's pilgrimage, linking his moral development to the moral progress of the community.

### **The Progress of George Bailey and Bedford Falls**

As Calvinists, Puritans believed in predestination; sanctification came from God's grace and not from the good works of his creations. Nonetheless, good works were essential. Sanctification was made visible by an approach to life characterized by rational pursuit of a vocation.<sup>42</sup> It was this linkage between economic rationality and sanctification that led Max Weber to find in Calvinism the cultural sources of capitalist behavior.<sup>43</sup> The moral progress of the individual

and the community would be demonstrated, in part, by the rational economic behavior and progress of the community and its members.

The calling was a central element linking the capacity for self control, which grew as one became increasingly prepared for grace, with the maintenance of the social order. It also led to a revision of classical republican visions of the community. Where republicans saw all communities suffering moral declension over time, the premillenarianism of the Puritans added a vision of the progressive community, something more akin to ideas of liberal progress. Thus Puritan ideology revised classical republicanism by substituting a belief in millenarian progress for that of moral declension and emphasizing the individual's role in the community through preparation and congregationalism, suggesting that the civil community, while still superior to the individual will, is *not* prior to the individual will.<sup>44</sup> In this way it foreshadows liberalism's emphasis on progress (rather than declension) and individual consent (rather than public good), while nesting these proto-liberal elements in a republican context of public virtue.

The vision of moral progress offered in *It's a Wonderful Life* differs significantly from that of the Puritans. The Puritans saw themselves engaged in a teleological project, active agents in bringing about the millennium. The citizens of Bailey Park have a more open-ended project: maintaining a moral community. Good does not triumph over evil in the film. Potter is not punished.<sup>45</sup> Bedford Falls and George Bailey are not part of a history with an end, but an on-going project of institutional reform and moral progress.

George is an important agent in the economic well-being of Bedford Falls.<sup>46</sup> It is George who convinces his friend, Sam Wainwright, to locate his father's plastics factory in Bedford Falls, bringing jobs to the community and helping found an industry that is identified as central to the defeat of the Axis powers in World War II.<sup>47</sup> George, 4-F on account of his ear, does not go to war, but runs much of the war effort within the town. This permits other members of the community to fight, and they are portrayed as having been instrumental in each of the major turning points of the war: D-Day, the North African campaign, the taking of the Remagen Bridge and the final assaults of the Pacific campaign. Thus the economic prosperity of Bedford Falls becomes a central element in ridding the world of the threat of Nazi totalitarianism.

The connection of economic and moral progress is also evident in the scene where George attempts to keep the people from panicking during the run on the bank. With the bank closed, the members of the Building and Loan Association fear losing their money. Potter has offered to buy their shares at half their face value. George cautions the members emphatically that if they panic and run to Potter, “. . . there will never be another decent house built in this town. Potter's not selling, he's buying, because we're panicking and he's not.” George argues that they should remain rational and self-controlled, withdrawing only what they need until the bank reopens. George tries to talk Tom out of removing all of his money. Failing, he does not let Tom close his account, refusing to lose a single

person to Potter. The others accept George's counsel, and the Building and Loan is saved. The economic and moral progress of the community is sustained by the self control of its members whom George reminds of their responsibility.

The progress of the community is most apparent in the contrast between the irrational, oppressive and immoral prosperity of Potter, and the rational, moral prosperity of Bailey Park. George's impassioned speech in defense of his father and the Building and Loan after his father's death links economic and moral progress clearly. George asks the board if living in "a couple of decent rooms and bath," does not "make them [the workers] better customers, better citizens?" The denizens of Bailey Park are identified as more economically rational and moral than those who live in Potter's slums.

In the final scene of the flashback, Christmas Eve, facing arrest, jail, and scandal, George decides to kill himself, but is stopped at the last minute by the intervention of his guardian angel, Clarence Oddbody. Significantly, Clarence stops George by appearing to be drowning himself; again George chooses to save another rather than to help himself. Still cynical and self-involved, George tells Clarence that he wishes he had never been born. Clarence gives him that chance, to see Bedford Falls as if George Bailey had never existed.

In the George-less world, Bedford Falls has become Pottersville. Here economic progress is not apparent. There is nothing produced in Pottersville; all the economic activity caters to the basest of human instincts: The movie house in Bedford Falls that is showing "The Bells of Saint Mary's" has become a strip show; The Bedford Falls' Emporium a pawn shop; and the Building and Loan a brothel. Even home is turned into a commercial nexus; the home of George's parents becomes Ma Bailey's boarding house. The absence of economic progress has destroyed the underpinnings of community. We find that Ernie Bishop, whose character George has vouchsafed, now lives in Potter's slums and that his wife has left him, taking their child and destroying their family. Martini's bar, which had been a place of community where anyone who violated the rules of conduct was ousted, has become Nick's, a loud, garish, and violent speakeasy. Most important, the city on the hill, Bailey Park, has become a potter's field, where the paupers and nameless are buried. In this graveyard, George finds his brother's tombstone and is informed that since he was not there to save his brother in 1919, his brother did not become a Navy flying ace and save hundreds of lives in World War II. Without George to help develop a moral Bedford Falls, then a moral America could not defend against the immoral Nazis. No moral community, no tamed wilderness, no progress is seen, merely the exploitation of the most carnal instincts of humanity. Irrational economics and immoral activities are intimately related. In this world, moral progress is impossible because no one has been morally prepared to make the pilgrimage out of Potter's slums.

Moral development and rational economics are linked throughout *It's a Wonderful Life*. The moral progress of the community is portrayed expansively, an essential component of the progress of the American community. Absent the

moral individual to help construct the moral community, the world becomes darker, more exploitative, less productive, incapable of producing moral behavior. Without the institutional reform of the pilgrimage, there can be no progress. Without the maintenance of the local moral community of Bedford Falls, the wider American community is at risk.

### **The Justification of the American Individual in the American Community**

While the moral dilemma of George Bailey and Bedford Falls is grounded in the material world, the rhetoric of *It's a Wonderful Life* bears a striking resemblance to Puritanism. It is the divine intervention of the guardian angel, Clarence, that gives George an understanding of his moral worth. It is the retelling of George's predestined life by angels, the tale of his moral preparation, that gives narrative form to the story. Significantly, the chief heavenly actor we see is unnamed, but labeled in the script as Ben Franklin.<sup>48</sup> It is at the moment of his greatest crisis that George prays to God, noting that he "is not a praying man," yet at that moment he has become prepared for the epiphany of Clarence. It is the battle between George and the personification of evil, Potter, that is the principle antagonism in the film. Significantly, Potter is not portrayed as Satan, but as a corrupt man. Behind Potter, always to his left, is a silent force, his butler, who occasionally whispers in Potter's ear (the devil always speaks in the left ear, in which, significantly, George is deaf). The battle between the agents of Satan and God is a battle of this world, guided by unworldly actors. Free will is maintained within the context of predestination.

The narrative of the film resembles a Puritan preparation ritual: George must be prepared to recognize his worth, and only when that preparation is complete will the angels intervene. Through his own internal pilgrimage to the wilderness of Bailey Park, George comes to recognize immorality both in others and himself, and to apprehend true beauty. He thus prepares himself for grace and creates the conditions for the denizens of Bedford Falls to carry out their own errand of institutional reform in the world of Bailey Park. This links the individual's preparation with the community's progress, developing the moral community and its inhabitants to the perfection of rational economic and moral progress.

The moral of the tale illustrates the power of the Puritan rhetoric of consensus. It is the activity of George Bailey, we are told at the end of the film, that has made possible the community and its endeavors to improve the world at large. George is directly responsible not merely for Bailey Park, but for maintaining the moral center of Bedford Falls, for the lives of every man on the transports that were saved by Harry Bailey's heroism, and indirectly responsible for the victory of the allies over Nazi Germany and the maintenance of a moral center of Americanism.

George Bailey is an individual. He repeatedly stands alone at the critical moments of choice. He gets no advice from his father about the poisoning of the

child. Mary cannot intercede during his beating by Gower. Only he can keep the Building and Loan open after his father's death and during the run on the bank. He is alone with Potter (and his butler) when tempted by the job. Even Mary seems to have separated herself from him when the \$8,000 is lost. When he returns home after his divine encounter, Uncle Billy tells him, "Mary did it;" Mary mobilized the community of Bailey Park to raise the funds and prayers to offset George's loss, but only *after* George, alone, faced his own crisis and recognized his moral value. At every critical juncture, George must decide for himself, with no intercessor. George is the exemplary American individual, essential to maintain the moral American community, and possessing the free will to accept his role or deny it.

The individualism of George Bailey, however, is possible only in the strong community of Bailey Park. The moral community that George has helped create and maintain will sustain him through their prayers and material sacrifice. While Potter will challenge and tempt George throughout the film, Mary will always be nearby to reassure and sustain him. In the final moments of his nonexistence, George desperately asks Clarence, "where's Mary?" When he finds her and she screams in unrecognizing fear, he is at the end of his rope and has come to understand not merely the immorality of others, but of himself. When George's desperate pleas to be reborn are answered he runs giddily through Bedford Falls. Returning home, he is greeted by his children, his wife, and a parade of residents of Bailey Park, each of whom speaks a line as they contribute their savings to offset the lost \$8,000. Sam Wainwright, the distant capitalist, wires a letter of credit to George, whose suggestions made Sam a fortune. Even Tom, who panicked during the run on the bank, contributes, suggesting that George's refusal to close his account had kept him from moral degeneracy. This parade of characters from each of George's crises reminds us of his responsible actions to preserve the moral community; but such actions, it suggests, are possible only within a moral community that is willing to take on responsibility to sustain each individual member.

It is this coming together of the community at the end of the film that saves George from bankruptcy, jail, and scandal, but only after he alone has come to accept his membership in that community. It is the example of this moral community taking responsibility for its members that leads the bank examiner and sheriff to forego their arrest of George and join in the singing of Christmas carols. It is the moral Clarence leaves for George, that no man is poor who has friends. The justified, moral individual is indispensable to sustain the community's progress, but the responsible and moral community is equally responsible to the progress of the individual.

## Conclusion

The Puritan rhetoric of consensus links the individual to the community through the self-discipline of preparation, the pilgrimage of institutional reform,

and the moral and material progress of the community. The community is necessary to sustain the individual and the individual is necessary to build and sustain the community. Bercovitch sees this rhetoric as a common mode of discourse in the nineteenth century, and I have suggested that it still resonates with Americans, at least as employed in *It's a Wonderful Life*.

Whether or not this rhetoric can still be an effective discourse for American political culture remains a question. Bercovitch clearly identifies it as a rhetoric of mission, and it seems that the sacrifices of preparation and pilgrimage are legitimated by the belief in the special project of the American community. While the Puritans saw this project as a teleological millenarianism, according the community a special divine dispensation, *It's a Wonderful Life* offers a more open-ended notion of progress. While still linking moral and material progress, the rhetoric of the film offers a worldly morality. Can moral progress in the contemporary world sustain a rhetoric of consensus?

In his last extended work, Christopher Lasch argued that the idea of progress has been delegitimated in twentieth-century America.<sup>49</sup> With the closure of the frontier, the end of the Cold War, and the loss of faith in the American mission that followed the war in Vietnam and Watergate, it may be difficult to redefine a sense of purpose that can make the rhetoric of consensus real again. Americans may be attracted to the message of the film because it provides an illusion that self interest and social good can be reconciled in contemporary America. On the other hand, the loss of legitimacy of the simple consensus of the Cold War and the melting pot could also be an opportunity to create a reinvigorated politics of consensus, informed by the growing sensitivity to a multicultural America, an understanding of the special dispensation *and* responsibility that wealth and power bring, with a progressive vision of the American role in the world. The continued resonance of the moral of *It's a Wonderful Life* suggests that this rhetoric of consensus is still relevant, still motivating. Whether that consensus is nostalgic fantasy or a potential source for a new, sophisticated political consensus as suggested by Walzer, remains to be seen. Until then, we look to George Bailey, forever embedded in the mundane world of Bedford Falls, sustained and sustaining, a moral individual in a moral community.

## Notes

The idea for this paper began over a decade ago in discussions with Bruce Byers at the University of North Carolina. Several colleagues at Saint Xavier University have read and commented on it, including Kathleen Alaimo, John Gutowsky, Nelson Hathcock, Judith Hiltner and Jack Montgomery. Several classes of students in my American Political Thought course had to suffer through several versions of the paper, helping me refine my ideas. An earlier version was delivered at the 1997 meeting of the National Association of humanities Educators in Provo, Utah. The editors and three anonymous reviewers from *American Studies* have made invaluable comment and criticism, helping make this paper much better. Any faults, however, are my own.

1. Robert Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart* (New York, 1985).

2. See, for instance, Bellah, et al, *Habits of the Heart*; Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* (New York, 1987); Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven*, (New York, 1991); Robert Putnam, "The Strange Disappearance of Civic America," *The American Prospect*, no. 24 (Winter 1996), 34-50.

3. Russell Hanson, *The Democratic Imagination in America* (Princeton, 1985) sees liberalism eclipsing republicanism in the later nineteenth century; Michael Sandel, *Democracy's Discontents* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996) sees it happening after the second world war. The debate between the consensus liberals and consensus republicans has raged for over thirty years. Some of the most important works for liberalism are Richard Hofstadter, *The American Political Tradition and the Men who Made It* (New York, 1948); Daniel Boorstin, *The Genius of American Politics*, (Chicago, 1953); Louis Hartz, *The Liberal Tradition in America* (New York, 1955); a more recent and less encompassing argument is offered by Joyce Appleby, *Liberalism and Republicanism in the Historical Imagination* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); and David Ericson, *The Shaping of American Liberalism* (Chicago, 1993). On the republican side see Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968); Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969); Lance Banning, *The Jeffersonian Persuasion* (Ithaca, 1978); Michael Lienisch, *New Order of the Ages* (Princeton, 1988).

4. See particularly John Diggins, *The Lost Soul of American Politics*, (New York, 1984); Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic: Millennial Themes in American Thought, 1756-1800*, (New York, 1985); Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought*, (Princeton, 1994); Joshua Foa Dienstag, "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American political Thought," *American Political Science Review*, 90 no. 3, (1996), 497-512; and James Young, *Reconsidering American Liberalism*, (Boulder, 1996).

5. Sacvan Bercovitch, "The Ritual of Consensus," in *Rites of Assent: Transformations in the Symbolic Construction of America* (New York and London, 1993), 29-68.

6. For a history of the film, see "The Many Lives of *It's a Wonderful Life*," in Basinger, *The It's a Wonderful Life Book* pp. 3-76. Robert Schultz argues that the film was a success based on the number of letters Capra received and the response of critics in "Celluloid History: Postwar Society in Postwar Popular Culture," *American Studies*, 31(Spring, 1990), 41-63. This, however, does not counter the film's relatively dismal showing at the box office, where it barely broke even. The darkness of the film and its hurried release are frequently blamed for its failure to draw audiences immediately after the war. More significant is the role of the film as contemporary cultural icon. Its continuing popularity over the years suggests that it does more than embody a dominant ideology of the postwar moment, instead speaking to something less ephemeral in popular American political culture.

7. Capra writes: "*It's a Wonderful Life* sums up my philosophy of film making. First to exalt the worth of the individual. Second, to champion *man*—plead his causes, protest any degradation of his dignity, spirit, or divinity. And third, to dramatize the viability of the individual—as in the theme of the film itself." "From Frank Capra," in Jeanine Basinger (ed.) *The It's a Wonderful Life Book*, ix.

8. Frank Striker, "Repressing the Working Class: Individualism and the Masses in Frank Capra's Films," *Labor History*, 31 (1990), 454-467. Louis Ganetti, *Masters of the American Cinema*, (Engelwood Cliffs, 1981) also sees Capra as advocating liberal individualism.

9. Robert Schultz, "Celluloid History." See Also Wes Gehring, *Populism and the Capra Legacy* (Westport, Conn.) 1995, who argues a similar point, although identifying Capra as a populist.

10. Raymond Carney, *American Vision: The Films of Frank Capra* (London and New York, 1986).

11. Carney, *American Vision*, 420.

12. Carney treats the sequence in *American Vision*, 429-431, most of which is taken up with a discussion of George Kateb's reading of modernism.

13. Robert Ray, *A Certain Tendency of the Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1980* (Princeton, 1985), 179-215.

14. Lorraine Mortimer, "The Grim Enchantment of *It's a Wonderful Life*," *Massachusetts Review*, 36 (1995/96), 659. Italics are in the original.

15. Robert Schultz, "Celluloid History," has offered a succinct and compelling justification for studying popular films as texts for popular culture:

Popular films, as other historical artifacts and documents, are created under specific historical conditions and they embody aspects of those conditions. In contrast to other cultural texts, however, popular films are created to make money from ticket sales to diverse audiences. To do so, they must speak to the social experiences and concerns of those audiences. The commercialism of the film, then, makes the medium a significant index of ideas extant in mass discourse, and the dominant ideologies encoded in popular films reveal large scale social patterns. (43)

16. Bercovitch, "Ritual," 32-34. He identifies the three elements as the *migration* from an immoral Old World to a New Canaan; the moral *pilgrimage* of the soul to heaven which rests on Puritan preparation rituals; and the moral *progress* of the community toward the millennium. Bercovitch distinguishes the physical migration from the spiritual pilgrimage, which disciplines the

individual. Puritans, however, saw the individual's preparation for grace as logically prior to physical migration into the community, which would suggest a greater sense of geography to the notion of pilgrimage than Bercovitch implies. Hence, I prefer to conceive of these elements as the *preparation* of the individual for grace, the sifting and movement of the population as the *pilgrimage*, and the *progress* of the community toward the millennium.

17. For an exposition of this among American Puritans, see Increase Mather, *Predestination and Human Exertions* (1710) and *Man Knows not His Time* (1697), and Samuel Willard, *Saints Not known by Externals* (1700). For an interpretation of the relation of predestination to individualism, see Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.

18. Edward Johnson (1654) tells his history of the Puritan migration, *Wonder-Working Providence*, entirely in terms of making the world ready for the second coming and the fall of the "papist Antichrist." "... hath not the Lord said, *Come out of her my people* Etc., surely there is a little space left for this, and now is the time, seeing the Lord hath set up his standard of resort, now, *Come forth of her, and be not partakers of her sins*: now is the time, when the Lord hath assembled his saints together, now the Lord will come and not tarry," (160-161). Unless otherwise noted, all page references for Puritan primary texts are from Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (eds.) *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*, 1 (New York, 1965).

19. See Edmund Morgan, *Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea*, (Ithaca, 1963), particularly 25-34; Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic*, 3-22.

20. Thomas Hooker notes the importance of the community and the minister in this regard in *Repentant Sinners and Their Ministers* (1659); see also Increase Mather, *Predestination and Human Exertions*.

21. See particularly "Ritual of Consensus," and *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, (New Haven, 1975).

22. From a campaign speech by John F. Kennedy delivered in Salt Lake City in September, 1960, quoted in James T. Patterson, *Great Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York, 1996), 486.

23. Bercovitch, "Ritual of Consensus," 48-50.

24. Martin Luther King, (1963) "Letter from a Birmingham Jail," reprinted in David Hollinger and Charles Capper (eds.) *The American Intellectual Tradition*, vol. 2, (New York, 1993), 333.

25. See Abraham Lincoln's 1859 Address before the Wisconsin State Agricultural Society, in *Speeches and Writings 1859-1865*, (New York, 1989), 90-101.

26. Bercovitch, "Ritual of Consensus," 46-47.

27. *The Disuniting of America*.

28. Michael Walzer, "What Does it Mean to be An 'American'," reprinted in David Hollinger and Charles Capper (eds.) *The American Intellectual Tradition* vol. 2, (New York, 1993), 389-90.

29. Increase Mather, for instance, claimed that while God gave grace to men by his own design, the unregenerate were also at fault for failing to provide a fertile ground for the revelation of that grace. In *Predestination and Human Exertions*, he claims "Men say that they desire Grace, and yet their hands refuse to Labour, they will be at no pains to obtain it." (337). If they forsake sin and associate with good companions, they might open the door to revelation. Most importantly, though, they must reflect on their own lives and sins to prepare themselves for grace: "Once more, Serious thinking and Consideration on Spiritual and Eternal things is oftentimes blessed unto Conversion. This is what God has given men the power to do, if they will use that power. They ought seriously to think what they have done, and what they are, and what their end is like to be. If they would do so, it may be Repentance would be the effect of it." (339). This echoes Thomas Hooker, who argues in a sermon on *Meditation* that reflection on one's sins and life are essential to the transformation of the soul: "Application laies the Oyl of the Word that is searching and savory, Meditation chafeth it, that it may soften and humble the hard and stony heart," (304).

30. Andrew Delbanco. *The Puritan Ordeal* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), 51.

31. Carney (*American Vision*, 1986) treats the presence of the angels as merely a fantasy sequence, rather than as evoking a religious idea. Given the prominence of the religious imagery in the film, treating the angels as a fantasy element seems to underemphasize Capra's message. Robert Sklar (1981) examines in depth the manner in which the heavenly presence is evoked throughout the film in "God and Man in Bedford Falls: Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*," in Sam Girgus (ed.) *The American Self* (Albuquerque, 1981), 211-220.

32. Raymond Carney (*American Vision*, 1986) notes the significance of the flashback narrative style as highlighting moral conflicts within the film and relates this to the story-telling techniques of (significantly) Hawthorne, Emerson and James, although he does not draw the connection to Puritanism. See 391-392.

33. See Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal*, 49. The precedence of the revelation of sin to the apprehension of beauty is suggested by Thomas Hooker. In *A True Sight of Sin*, Hooker notes that all men are sinners and recognition of this precedes the revelation of grace: "It's one thing to say sin is thus and thus, another thing to see it to be such; we must look wis[e]ly and steadily upon our distempers, look sin in the face, and discern it the full; the want whereof is the cause of our mistaking our estates, and not redressing our hearts and our waies," (262). Sin, for Hooker, is an absence of God,

whose presence is required to make life good. "Now herein lyes the unconceivable heinousness of the hellish nature of sin, it would jostle the Almighty out of the Throne of his Glorious Sovereignty, and indeed be above him," (293). God's sovereignty brings with it the "supremacy of his just will," "a fulness of wisdom," and a sufficiency "to content and guide us." Since sin displaces God from his sovereign position, acts that do not begin with a true apprehension of sin will result in a situation where "... there is not authority and power there to govern, nor wisdom to guide, nor good to content me, but I will be swayed by mine own will and led by mine own deluded reason and satisfied with mine own lusts. This is the guise of every graceless heart in the commission of sin," (294). Absence of this first stage of preparation "... brings an incapability in regard to myself to receive good, and an impossibility in regard to God himself to work my spiritual good, while my sin Continues, and I Continue to be impenitent in it. An incapability of spiritual blessing. . ." (297).

34. A further element suggesting the Puritan interpretation is the presence of water at every major event in George's life: saving his brother from drowning, falling into the pool on the night his father dies, the rainstorm during the run on the bank and the snowstorm and plunge into the river on Christmas Eve. The immersions in water suggest baptism, one of the two principle sacraments in Puritan theology. For a discussion of the significance of baptism see Scobey, "Revising the Errand." Immersion is a central metaphor of the Puritan concept of preparation, suggesting a total giving of self to grace. John Cotton is perhaps the most significant user of this metaphor in his lecture *Wading in Grace*: "... but yet a man that wades but to his knees, his loynes are not drenched, for nothing is healed but what was in the water," (318). In each case where water is present, George is immersed, either by falling rain or by diving into the lake, pool or river. The constancy of these immersions, from the first scenes of his childhood to the final crisis on Christmas Eve, suggest the constancy of his grace, irrespective of his actions or knowledge of it. This is consistent with a predestinarian interpretation.

35. Raymond Carney (*American Vision*, 1986) echoes this interpretation, although with a different focus. The synthesis of predestination and free will render the subject of grace an ambivalent narrative hero. While clearly sanctified, George Bailey is also prone to frustrations, sexual thoughts (of both Violet Bick and Mary) and temporal ambition. Carney's reading of the film is largely psychologistic, treating the religious imagery as merely a fantasy element; he thus attributes this contradiction to Capra's psychological ambivalence, suggesting that "Capra imagines the possibility of a life that cannot escape or repress these conflicting imaginative tendencies, but must live within their contradictions," (388). Because the religious imagery is so pervasive in the film, and the Puritan impulse so pronounced, I would suggest that the contradiction is as much a product of the tensions within Puritanism as it is of Capra's psychological ambivalence.

36. The literature on the "errand into the wilderness" is extensive, beginning with Perry Miller; see his *The New England Mind: From Colony to Province* (Cambridge, Mass., 1956). For recent discussions of the errand see Andrew Delbanco, *The Puritan Ordeal*; David Scobey, "Revising the Errand: New England's Ways and the Puritan Sense of the Past," *William and Mary Quarterly*, series three, 41 (Jan., 1984), 3-31; Sacvan Bercovitch "The Ritual of Consensus."

37. Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson, "Introduction," in Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (eds.) *The Puritans: A sourcebook of Their Writings*, 1 (New York, 1938), 41-55; Edward Morgan, *Visible Saints*.

38. The tale of the Puritan exodus was a formative myth for the New England colonists. It evokes Old Testament stories of the Jewish captivities for Puritan writers of histories and sermons. The vision of the pilgrimage is seen in William Bradford's *History of Plymouth Plantation*, in Jonathan Mitchell's comparison of the Puritan in New England to the rebuilding of the wall of Jerusalem after the Babylonian captivity in *Nehemiah on the Wall*, to Cotton Mather's equation of John Winthrop and Nehemiah. The link is perhaps most clearly drawn by Winthrop himself in *A Modell of Christian Charity*, where he claims that God has made with the Puritan emigrants a special covenant to bring the new millennium to fruition: "for wee must Consider that if wee shall be as a City upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; soe that wee shall deale falsely with our god in this worke wee have undertaken and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world, wee shall open the mouthes of enemies to speake evill of the wayes of god and all professours for Gods sake," (199).

39. The destruction of the models, a repudiation of his fantasy life, seems to challenge Carney's reading of the film. He claims that George has been embedded in reality throughout the movie, but is liberated from reality by the fantasy sequence, which permits him to retreat into a realm of imaginative individualism by the film's end: "[H]e embodies a principle of imaginative yearning that, no matter where he is or what he is doing, is always gesturing elsewhere, to a possibility that can never be realized in the practical forms of expressive life," *American Vision*, 412. Throughout the film, however, George has been "gesturing elsewhere." It is only by rejecting the fantasies that have continued to draw him away from Bedford Falls, to make him susceptible to Potter's temptation, that George becomes prepared for the epiphany to come. This suggests that it might not be Carney's eternal imaginative "gesturing elsewhere," but instead Mortimer's interpretation, that it is the embeddedness of George Bailey in the reality of Bedford Falls that gives the film power.

40. Bercovitch, "Ritual of Consensus," particularly 32-34. See also, Delbanco, *Puritan Ordeal*, 48-53; Scobey, "Revising the Errand," 4-7.

41. Here we see some of the inclusionary potential of the rhetoric of consensus. To the immoral capitalist, immigrants are objects of disdain. To George and the Building and Loan, however, they are worth equal consideration with others, whether they be of Italian descent or not. The film does not challenge deeper issues of cultural concern such as race or gender relations. The only women in Bedford Falls who work are Violet Bick, whose morality is questionable, and Annie, the Bailey's maid (the only black character in the film, another significant failure to challenge exclusions). Mary represents a much more traditional vision of female domesticity.

42. The rational pursuit of a calling is a constant theme in much Puritan writing. John Cotton's *Christian Calling* (1641) argues that "A true beleiving Christian, a justified person, tree lives in his vocation by faith," (319). Faith in God and rational economic activity are linked here, underpinning the Puritan idea of progress: "Faith draws the heart of a Christian to live in some warrantable calling: as soone as ever a man begin to looke towards God, and the wayes of his grace, he will not rest, till he find out some warrantable Calling and employment," (319). Two of the central elements of this warrantable calling are service to the public good and rational restraint: "We live by faith in our vocations, in that faith *in serving God, serves men, and in serving men, serves God...*" (322) and that "it [a man's vocation] takes *all successes* that befall him in his calling with moderation, tree equally beares good and evil successes as God shall dispense to him (324). The primacy of justification underlying good works in a rational calling is also made clear by Cotton Mather in *Bonifacious* (Gainesville, FL: Scholars' Facsimiles and Reprints, 1967) where he claims that "Indeed no Good Works can be done by any man until he be justified," (34).

43. Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, 1948).

44. This is an aspect of Puritan ideology perhaps best exemplified by John Winthrop (1630) in *A Modell of Christian Charity*.

45. Capra apparently wrote several different endings to the film in which Potter does get his come-uppance, but felt that none of them worked. See "An Interview with Frank Capra," in Jeanine Basinger, (ed.) *The It's a Wonderful Life Book*.

46. There is much debate concerning Capra's vision of the economic culture of America, particularly the role of class. Robert Schultz see George Bailey as middle class, defending the working class of Bailey Park from Potter, suggesting that the petty bourgeoisie mediates between the working class and capitalists ("Celluloid History," 45-47). Conversely, Frank Stricker sees the absence of working class institution as evidence that Capra saw small businessmen as heroes, but in need of support from undifferentiated masses, who were incapable of giving meaningful support. While I believe both of these views have some merit, the search for class dynamics may be the wrong quest. George Bailey is clearly not working class, but neither are all the denizens of Bailey Park; of the two residents we know live there, one is working class (the cabdriver, Ernie bishop), the other is a business owner (the restaurateur, Martini). From a Puritan perspective, we would look not for class dynamics but rational economic activity in pursuit of a vocation, a moral producerist ideology which links republican and liberal visions by emphasizing the moral worth of labor (republicanism) with an equal emphasis on individual achievement (liberalism). This is suggested by Foa Dienstag, "Serving God and Mammon," 499-502. A similar reading of the film is given by Mortimer, "Grim Enchantment," 677.

47. Ray claims in *A Certain Tendency*, 179-180, that Bedford Falls is an unchanging small town, patterned after the Andy Hardy movies. This might suggest, as Schultz implies in "Celluloid History," that the film is essentially anti-progress. While the core of the town does retain its pre-war, small town flavor, there seems ample evidence that a good deal of progress is going on. The coming of the plastics factory indicates a futuristic industry for the 1940s. The houses in Bailey Park are bungalows and split levels, contemporary to the period. Instead of seeing the film as anti-progress, the maintenance of the small town center with progressive development around it might imply that as long as the moral center is preserved, material progress need not threaten community virtue.

48. Jeanine Basinger, (ed.) *The It's a Wonderful Life Book*.

49. Christopher Lasch. *The True and Only Heaven* (New York, 1991).