

The Guardian of the Gathered: Covenant and Community in the Career of George Philips

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“Not only the Common Sign-Posts of every Town, but also some famous Orders of Knighthood in the most famous Nations of Europe, have entertained us with Traditions of a certain Champion, by the Name of St. GEORGE, dignified and distinguished,” wrote the Congregationalist minister Cotton Mather in 1702. However, Mather’s tribute was not ultimately directed at the legendary slayer of dragons; instead, the Boston minister believed he had found a greater and more worthy hero within the annals of Massachusetts’s own history. Thus, Mather sought to honor the “one George who was indeed among the first Saints of New-England! And that Excellent Man of our Land was Mr. George Philips.”¹

George Philips served as pastor of the Puritan church at Watertown, Massachusetts, from 1630 until his death in 1644. But while Mather would have later generations believe that Philips was a stalwart defender of Puritan orthodoxy, in reality Philips’s tenure at Watertown was far more controversial. Indeed, the most puzzling aspect of Philips’s career is how easily he moved between the role of dissenter and respected authority figure. On two separate occasions during the early 1630s, Philips shocked the leaders of Massachusetts by engaging in religious dissent and staunchly criticizing the Bay colony’s government. In 1631, Philips declared Roman Catholicism to be a true form of Christianity. The following year, he attacked the Massachusetts General Court’s taxation policy. In both cases, the colonial leadership rebuked him. However, unlike his contemporaries Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson, he never faced formal

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charges or the threat of banishment. In fact, Philips remained concerned enough about the colony’s social cohesion and the proper exercise of authority within Massachusetts Bay that, despite his own history of dissent, in 1637, he joined the prosecution against fellow dissident Anne Hutchinson. Even in death, Philips lashed out against doctrines he considered heretical. In 1645, a manuscript by Philips was posthumously published wherein the Watertown pastor attacked a number of Baptist doctrines then current in England — a debate which in many ways anticipated the coming antagonism between Puritans and Baptists in New England during the 1650s. And three generations after his death, his reputation remained so strongly intact that Mather could still lionize him as one of the larger-than-life heroes of the Bay colony.

However, the paradoxes that surround Philips’s career can be resolved. For Philips, the reality of communi...

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