“over-introduce” and simplify the traditions they examine. Others, in particular Hall’s second contribution on Buddhist tourism, can appear to shift between examination of tourist phenomena and personal expression of belief. Additionally, the editors’ comment in their conclusion that “how religions borrow elements of traditional faith systems or how various sects borrow from each other . . . heretofore has not been a major area of study” is simply not true. However, these are small points in what is an excellent gathering of essays.

While there is nothing especially new in here, what makes this an important volume is its collection of excellent essays, seemingly on disparate matters, in such a way as to “kick-off” discussion within this important field. This is, indeed, the book’s most critical point, that in its various chapters we see not only the variety in the subject itself, but also its potential as an access point for wider social exploration.

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David Weir, a teacher of history, examines the manner in which the first New England settlers created necessary forms of ecclesiastical and civil society by means of binding covenants. He set himself a monumental task in planning this analysis of both civil and ecclesiastical covenants of early New England. Born of his research for an earlier book, his informative and interesting monograph was intended to increase present day understanding of colonial American history and its influence on America’s place in world history. He examined the formation of every religious and civil organisation prior to 1708 for which records exist. He examined charters, church and civil covenants and confessional covenants. His persistent quest was in finding the location of original sources. Despite the loss of many records, usually by means of fire, but in one case taken by a pastor, his success is astonishingly impressive.

The origins of the ecclesiastical organisation adopted by the settlers were firmly based in the parochial order of Europe and Old England, as were the structures of some civil organisations. Many of those early Puritans relied upon the Bible for guidance in regulation and governance of the church, but the matter of civil government was an entirely different matter. The Bible did not foresee such eventualities as strongly Christianised groups of people settling in faraway lands without established government or civil structure. Christians had been a minority in the Roman Empire so provided no specific principles to guide these early colonists who had to improvise as best they could when formalising positions of power and authority. When the Mosaic laws of the Old Testament were written, they were in the context of the Israelites’ hegemony over the inhabitants of their geographical territory and many of their dictates applied to civil law.

The early settlers were making a completely fresh start in having to administer not only church, but also civic matters down to mundane considerations such as fencing and hunting rights. The Bible had taught that all individuals had a right to tame the land and be dominant over other forms of earthly life. As separate colonies became established, new covenants had to be formed to ensure recognition of the rights of all. Covenants formed the basis for new towns, new rules and future problems, their conditions affecting heirs, successors, and assignees. As time went by, the ideals and expected adherence to individual covenants faltered. The wording of the covenant of
the Salem Village First Church admitted that within their ranks there might exist a “Judas” or “Judases.” It was clear to the foundation members that there most likely did.

As Weir so ably points out, the theme of covenant is evident throughout both the Old and New Testaments. The early settlers of New England took with them to their new home across the sea an existing covenant rooted in the Bible and Reformed Protestant theology. Once arrived, they formed new communities, or societies, which required covenants as mechanisms of formation, rather than as agents of reform. It was soon realised that the covenants they had formed were not adequate to cover incidents of dissent or discontent, and, in time, they became instruments of reformation. Weir notes that, as time passed, the language of the covenants became less religious in nature.

Self-sufficiency moved into a new phase of interdependency with the formation of the Confederation of New England. The reason for Confederation did not stop with the original idea of furtherance of the Kingdom of God; it became necessary as a united strategy of defence against indigenous raiders. The wording of the covenants went beyond defence to a mutual agreement, where necessary, of being coalesced in offence. The Confederation also included such things as a defence budget and spoils of war, concerns far removed from the ideals of most of the first European settlers in the New World. It must be noted that not all settlers were Puritan idealists.

Weir’s monumental contribution to the history of the early religious and civil polities of the founding communities, together with his fine bibliographic essay, chronology and documentary details, provides students of the history of early American religion and/or civil society with a solid foundation upon which to build their research. Best viewed as a work of reference, he has opened the way to vast avenues waiting to be explored.

Hazel Burgess
Independent Scholar


This welcome book brings together eight of Patrick Wormald’s classic articles on Anglo-Saxon society. It is divided into two parts: four essays on the ideals and social environments which surrounded the Venerable Bede (d. 735), and four “sequels” examining the development of these areas up to the end of the first millennium. Despite being written over nearly thirty years (1976–2004) for a variety of publications, the essays hang together superbly to present a coherent vision a world shaped by the complex interaction between “Germanic” aristocratic culture and Christian — particularly monastic — values. One of Wormald’s favourite hooks was Bede’s Epistola ad Ecgberhti (see chapters 2, 4, 6, and 8), in which an aging Bede lamented the intrusion of secular lords and lax Christians into church and monastic life. It provided a critique of society against which non-historical sources such as Beowulf or charters could be shown to be important reflections of other (not entirely opposed) ideals.

The first chapter focuses on Bede’s portrayal of Benedict Biscop, the aristocratic founder of Wearmouth-Jarrow whose extensive travels and learning shaped the horizons of Bede’s imagination. Like its “sequel,” a systematic comparison of Benedictine reforms in England and on the continent (chapter 5), Wormald sought to give the Anglo-Saxons a European context. This is a great strength of many of the essays and
The idea of covenant was at the heart of early New England society. In this singular book David Weir explores the origins and development of covenant thought in America by analyzing the town and church documents written and signed by seventeenth-century New Englanders. Unmatched in the breadth of its scope, this study takes into account all of the surviving covenants in all.