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The Spice of Popery

Converging Christianities on an Early American Frontier

University of Notre Dame Press
Notre Dame, Indiana

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In the history of early Maine’s religious culture, few families stand out like the Wheelwrights. The first settlers to bear the name were dissenters, radical antinomian Puritans and associates of Anne Hutchinson who, unwelcome in Massachusetts Bay and having few other options, came to settle in the remote province in 1643. In Maine the Wheelwrights prospered and multiplied, and the family’s prestige grew in proportion to its size. For generations, they furthered the cause of godly society in northern New England as ministers, militia captains, and civic leaders. A few Wheelwrights, however, made their mark in less conventional ways. The intertwined stories of two of them begin in November 1753 when Nathaniel Wheelwright left Boston for French Canada on a mission to redeem captive Protestant children who had been seized in the most recent round of the violence that frequently wracked Maine’s English settlements. Two months later, this heir to New England Puritanism could be found in seemingly unlikely circumstances: drinking wine and eating sweets in the company of Soeur Esther Marie-Joseph de l’Enfant Jésus, a nun of the Ursuline convent in Quebec.
Figure 1. Nathaniel Wheelwright, by John Singleton Copley (ca. 1750). Courtesy of the Massachusetts Historical Society.
In eighteenth-century North America, such an encounter—between a Protestant man and a Catholic woman, a layman and a cloistered nun, a New Engander charged with saving fellow Protestants from popish captivity and a Canadian who embodied Catholicism’s extremes—was an unusual occurrence indeed. What brought these two together, however, was a consequence of the circumstances of religious life and culture in early American borderland communities. To Nathaniel Wheelwright, this cloistered nun was no random acquaintance. Named Esther at birth, she had been abducted from Maine as a child during Queen Anne’s War. When the opportunity arose, she refused to come back; instead, she took the vows and veil of the Ursuline order. In doing so, Soeur (later Mère) Esther made a conspicuous religious commitment to Catholicism, a form of Christianity that in most ways was considered the antithesis to the professed beliefs of both her antinomian ancestors and her living New England Protestant relatives. The latter included her nephew Nathaniel Wheelwright, whose father was Soeur Esther’s brother.

Soeur Esther’s transformation from Puritan girl to Catholic woman resulted from the Province of Maine’s unique status as both an outpost of New England culture and a crossroads for the cultures of others. Much of this cross-cultural contact was a consequence of violent frontier warfare involving English and French and Native American forces which devastated Maine’s frontier communities. The last years of the seventeenth century (termed decennium luctuosum, or “sorrowful decade,” by Cotton Mather) brought violence, death, and loss of family and property to Maine’s English settlements. These conditions persisted in varying degrees of intensity for three more decades, spanning 1688 to 1727. The destruction was more than physical: the conflicts with Catholic French and Indian forces also took a heavy toll on spiritual stability and orthodoxy.

This instability was exacerbated by Maine’s preexisting conditions. As an intercolonial crossroads, Maine had long been regarded as a “pagan skirt” of New England. The persistent violence of 1688 through 1727 reified this perception, as the forces of rival Christian visions curtailed efforts to create in Maine an extension of New England’s godly society.
Contemporary witnesses to the *decennium luctuosum* and beyond feared the consequences of converging Christianities in times of war. Writing from a Massachusetts threatened by the loss of its charter—a consequence of the ill-fated Dominion of New England and Glorious Revolution, and the aforementioned frontier conflicts—Increase Mather fretted that the influence of Catholicism had already seeped into English Protestantism. Mather called this spiritual contagion the “spice of popery,” and he warned that, if left unchecked, it would infect New England’s purer Protestant religious culture.

Both Mathers’ concerns were well placed. Decades of human movement and interaction, warfare, religious options, and discrete influences shaped a unique religious culture in Maine that reflected the province’s diverse Christian population. How this happened and the consequences of Maine’s position as a temporal and literal crossroads for converging Christianities are the subjects of this book.

Early Maine’s religious culture defies conventional perceptions of religious life in colonial New England. Its diverse people, variety of religious experience, propensity to encounter the religious “other,” geographical realities, and proximity to Wabanakia, French Canada, and Acadia render it an unconventional “artifact” of early American religion. Considering Maine on its own terms is a fairly recent phenomenon. For most of British North America’s colonial period, the province was claimed by Massachusetts. This led generations of scholars to assume unquestioningly a rough equivalency between Massachusetts colonists and those found in Maine. The common, often-unexplored assumption was that Maine and Massachusetts colonists were indistinguishable in their social arrangements, religion, and culture. A major trend in early American scholarship of the last three decades, however, stresses the complexity of movement and encounter among various peoples of both European and Native American origin, as well as the intrinsic qualities of and inherent differences between colonial frontiers and contrasting metropoles. *The Spice of Popery* contributes to this growing body of knowledge by arguing that, despite continued associations with conventional religious identities, Maine’s Christian religious culture was far more complex than straightforward associations of “Protestant” and “Catholic” suggest.
Few of Maine’s English settlers were the crypto-Catholics orthodox New England Puritans feared them to be. Nevertheless, significant differences in religious culture and experience separated them from conventional New World, and specifically New England, Protestants. These deviating characteristics were fostered in large part by the province’s proximity to settlements populated by rival Christians. In the more religiously stable areas of New England, Protestants rarely observed or interacted with self-identified Catholics. In contrast, Maine’s English settlers were prone to encounters—some fleeting, some sustained—with the religious “other.” A thinly populated and loosely controlled borderland between Protestant New England and Catholic New France and Acadia, Maine was home to a form of religious eclecticism that was found only where laws governing acceptable religious affiliations and behaviors, and the people needed to enforce those laws for keeping undesirable Christians from interacting with the local population, were ineffective. Maine’s religious culture reflected the influences of nearby religious “others” and, as a result, left a picture of early American Christian experience that confounds rigid sectarian classifications.

In his groundbreaking 1990 study of early American religious culture, *Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People*, Jon Butler challenged his fellow scholars to “open up the discussion . . . of the American religious experience by reconstructing a more complex religious past”—one specifically marked by religious eclecticism.\(^8\) He questioned the conventional idea that the seventeenth century was a golden age of religious orthodoxy and fidelity among Euro-American Christians and argued in its place that religious cultures were shaped by multiple and sometimes contradictory or conflicting traditions. In *The Spice of Popery* I apply a geographical perspective to Butler’s thesis to show how this eclecticism worked within an area of colonial North America that placed a high priority on establishing and enforcing an orthodox, Protestant religious culture. Conditions in the Province of Maine during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries provide rich examples of this complex religious past. For much of its colonial history, Maine, though claimed by Protestant New England, was contested ground for the various Euro-American...
Christians who lived in and around it, passed through it, and struggled to control it. As a result, the lived religion and religious culture of Maine's inhabitants was influenced by the competing forces Butler identifies. A complex culture resulted. The significance of this complexity lies in what it suggests about American frontiers and borderlands. Lacking in the traditional institutions and social tools that propagated and sustained orthodoxy, places like Maine actually harbored complex Atlantic World cultures. In describing the range of religious encounter and experience, *The Spice of Popery* defines one...
aspect of this culture, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of
the interior lives and varied experiences of people long believed to be
on colonial society’s margins.

To comprehend this complexity, one needs to identify the origins
and sources of Maine’s Christian eclecticism. This is no easy task, as
the volatile nature of the province’s frontier during the years covered
in this study took a heavy toll on source materials. For example, few
sermons—traditional repositories of religious culture—managed to
survive. If the consequences of frontier war did not destroy them,
time, poor preservation, and acts of nature did the job. I was therefore
forced to turn to less conventional sources partly as an act of neces-
sity, but partly out of the need to identify the way religion was lived
and expressed outside the predictable confines of meetinghouse and
church. I found my evidence in letters that describe seemingly mun-
dane matters; written descriptions of religious environments; records
that use religiously laden language to describe gestures, objects, and
people; colonial newspapers; and government records and correspon-
dence, in which officials frequently complained about the precariou-
ness of Maine’s defenses, both military and spiritual, and plotted how
to improve them.

I augmented these sources with the material culture of lived reli-
gion. Though subject to the same degradations of time and war that
plague paper records, objects were often composed of more durable
materials. Some were appropriated as war trophies or, as objects of
transcendent value, put to new purposes. My research also uncovered
a variety of forms of material culture that lacked explicitly religious
design and function but nevertheless proved valuable when appropri-
ated for religious purposes. The Spice of Popery’s historical actors re-
acted to religious objects in a variety of ways. Some scoffed at the real
and symbolic power invested in them by Catholics. Others came to
t value what more orthodox Protestants might have derided as “popish	rash.” Both groups, however, recognized religious material culture
when they saw it, suggesting that the size of the gap of understand-
ing and experience commonly attributed to New World Protestants
and Catholics varied according to time, place, and circumstance.
Eclecticism notwithstanding, Maine’s English settlers usually brought to the frontier an aversion to Catholicism that was a consistent ideological feature of almost all English New World societies. Recent scholarship on anti-Catholicism in New England has established its prevalence and function in building a cohesive identify among eighteenth-century Protestants. The New England colonies were places where Catholics were denied the rights of civil law and civic participation. At various times in colonial history, a Catholic priest faced possible execution for dwelling in a territory claimed by Protestant England. Catholic areas had similar restrictions, with Protestants forbidden from settling in French Catholic New France unless they disavowed their religious beliefs and transformed themselves into Catholic French subjects. In many parts of early North America, ideologies of anti-Catholicism and anti-Protestantism were commonplace. In the sense that Maine’s English settlers consistently employed the rhetoric of anti-Catholicism, they fit an established pattern. I argue, however, that this particular early American frontier was subject to many confounding variables that inhibited the successful rooting of any single comprehensive ideology. For one, the institutions that supported Protestant orthodoxy and its attendant ideology of anti-Catholicism were often missing from frontier societies, or were kept from functioning effectively because of the near-chronic state of war between New England and New France. In addition, Maine tended to attract settlers who were dissatisfied with or consistently failed to meet the demands of life in more established New World Protestant communities. Though hardly crypto-Catholics, these early American Christians found that settling on the Maine frontier took them away from the watchful eyes of orthodox Puritan neighbors. Their removes challenged the rigid applications of anti-Catholicism by creating situations in which Christian people encountered one another and, on occasion, sublimated their religious differences in order to address the need for frontier cooperation among European Christians.

This is not to suggest, however, that straightforward, traditional religious identifications should be disregarded or reformulated. On the contrary, they serve a critical purpose. In his book of the same
name, Thomas Kidd has identified the religious and ideological commonalities that formed “the Protestant interest,” brought about by New Englanders’ common hatred of Catholicism, their desire to play a role “in the eschatological destruction of Catholicism,” and their eagerness to take up arms in its cause. In *The Spice of Popery*, I write with the assumption that there were culturally dominant issues of theology, practice, politics, and very often ethnicity as well which bound Maine’s Christians together under the collective titles “Protestant” or “Catholic.” I use these titles of religious identification as freely as the colonists and Native Americans themselves would have. In this context, Protestant is used to describe anyone who adhered to any and all of the post-Reformation faiths that broke from communion with Rome. In early Maine, Protestant was used to describe peoples, settlements, and Christians who were not Catholic. For the most part, I apply the general title Protestant under the same circumstances. Nevertheless, adherents of multiple, often-competing Protestant denominations called the province home, and were sometimes in opposition to one another. I point out these denominational differences, and the societal fractures they reflected, when they apply directly to issues related to Maine’s complex religious culture.

Maine was located in a remote corner of the Atlantic World, but the roots of its religious eclecticism ran deep, reflecting the most pressing Christian theological debates of the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. The theological adjustments and spiritual expressions of the Protestant and Catholic Reformations, whose religious representatives moved these innovations from the realms of the theological and intellectual into the world of lived religion, touched and influenced this distant region of North America. Religious experimentation often accompanied reform which, in Maine’s case, created often unwelcome or suspect Christian subcultures. Protestant experimenters such as Quakers and Baptists often escaped persecution by fleeing to frontier regions like Maine. There they were likely to encounter new expressions of Catholicism, which had been reshaped by European religious conflicts and its self-identified need to reform, and had fostered new religious orders, missionary tactics, devotional societies, and culture of personal piety. In contrast, the Catholicism
that the settlers in Maine’s English settlements encountered was indeed vastly different from the late medieval Catholicism that the Protestant reformers sought to escape.

Religious expression in early America extended far beyond the parish church or mission chapel, the meetinghouse, a protocol of personal practices, or a particular day of the week. Like their European contemporaries, colonists viewed religion as a fully integrated daily reality, with applications reaching far beyond the circumscribed times and spaces for formal worship. It is in a broadly defined world of religious expression where one finds the most complex forms of New World Christian religious culture. This underscores religion’s capacity to shed light on the distinct cultures of American borderlands and frontiers, which, in Alan Taylor’s words, are most useful to scholars when regarded as “invitations rather than walls.”

I do not suggest that Maine’s English settlers were eager to embrace a heterodox, tolerant world of religious experience. For most of them, zealous Catholics were almost always unwelcome, and at times of war, incredibly dangerous. But English Protestant settlers found themselves in an environment that underscored the limits of religious identity and the need for coexistence—if only for the benefits of war-time enterprise or peaceful initiatives—with the Christian “other” who shared the land.

Maine’s religious eclecticism was influenced by numerous factors that transcended belief or theology. When I began to research borderland religious culture, I worked on the assumption that religious identities were clearly defined among New England’s frontier dwellers. That quickly changed as I applied new historiographical perspectives that challenge the metanarrative of English colonial conquest and expansion. Ultimately this led to a book that argues that early Maine’s religious culture was informed and shaped by intertwined and dependent, versus parallel, communities. The Spice of Popery thus became a contribution to “entangled history,” a historiographical perspective described by Eliga Gould in his work on the English-speaking
Atlantic as a periphery of the larger Spanish New World empire. In “Entangled Histories, Entangled Worlds: The English-Speaking Atlantic as a Spanish Periphery,” Gould describes how seemingly distinct colonial peoples can best be understood as part of the same “hemispheric system or community,” a framework that encourages scholars to consider “mutual influencing . . . reciprocal and asymmetric perceptions . . . [and the] intertwined processes of constituting one another.” The shifting perspective of entangled history re-focused my line of inquiry away from the narrative of English spread, settlement, and colonial consolidation. In its place emerged the complicated religious culture and equally complex religious people fostered by the borderland experience. Further support for this perspective comes from Claudio Saunt, who suggests that scholars of early America “might do well to plot a new course west” and move away from historiographical frameworks that reflect “the habit of conflating the vast territory stretching from the Bering Sea to the Gulf of Mexico with Britain’s colonial toehold on the continent’s easternmost edge.” While The Spice of Popery focuses on a landmass linked to colonies that were English and Protestant in origin, it supports the idea that peripheries like the Province of Maine, as Alan Taylor has argued, thrived on the “exchange of peoples, goods, and identities” natural to an early American “international crossroads” and were also spaces that “[drew] people together, rather than keeping them apart.” In Taylor’s analysis, Maine becomes “more representative of North American history than those artificially homogeneous towns of colonial Massachusetts.” My focus on religious culture supports this assertion. With major Indian and French Catholic players, Maine’s early religious culture draws attention to the crossroads component, urging readers to focus on different contexts and cultural priorities. And while The Spice of Popery starts with an examination of the people living under the protection (such as it was) of the English colonial system, it rejects the foregone conclusion that the English (through population, weapons, and trade) would eventually bring the province under full cultural control. For one, the persistence of Catholicism among the region’s Wabanakis long after the French had left the continent
subverted efforts to make a holistically Protestant region out of Maine and prolonged the sense of a shared religious space, despite the conquest of the neighboring Euro-American Catholic colonies.

Maine’s geographical entanglement was no doubt a curse for many of the inhabitants of the English settlements. What was challenging for settlers, however, is a blessing for historians of comparative early American social history. For one, the province produced a significant number of cross-cultural travelers compared with most areas of North America claimed by England or populated by Euro-American Protestant women and men. These travelers lived in, learned about, became part of, or relied on understanding another culture to interact productively with other borderland dwellers. While a good number of the people discussed in this book were captives, who moved among cultures involuntarily, others were in control of their religious destinies and made their living by negotiating multiple early American Christian cultures. Some were frontier diplomats whose encounters were by-products of their skills used in negotiating ransom for captives, trade relations and peace treaties with local Native Americans, and recognition of colonial boundaries. Some were even clergy, who at times sought to engage rival Christians in debate and shape their religious futures. These culture brokers often described their work in religious terms, using religious rhetoric to reinforce their positions, deride the beliefs of their enemies, or seek signs of God’s blessing for their work. Their use of religious language, symbols, and behaviors further demonstrated the fact that they were acting in symbolic ways that their observers, who were otherwise considered cultural outsiders, could understand.

Such intermingling suggests that, though they believed that an actual religious conquest of the land was ideal, some of Maine’s English settlers resigned themselves to the possible persistence of religious others who, if peace were established and maintained, might prove to be useful neighbors despite their different faith. Certainly Maine’s Protestant settlers observed, with some degree of regularity, behaviors that reinforced this idea. In Maine, syncretically Catholic Indians and, on occasion, their priests and canadien friends visited the English settlements for peaceful, even social reasons. Maine’s English
merchants traded willingly with the French Catholics of Acadia and Terre Neuve. Settlers born in heavily Catholic areas of Europe, such as Ireland and Portugal, lived among Protestants in English settlements like Pemaquid and Salmon Falls. French-speaking Channel Islanders who settled on the northern frontiers were also a religiously diverse lot, a fact so universally known that, during the witchcraft crisis of 1692, Mainers and other New Englanders suspected them of being crypto-Catholics and secret allies of the French. As early as 1645, a French Jesuit traveled from his mission on the Kennebec to make social calls at Cushnoc, a trading post on the Penobscot Bay affiliated with the Puritan Plymouth Colony, and as late as 1716, another Jesuit made regular visits for medical treatments to a Puritan minister and doctor who had set up shop at an English settlement on Arrowsic Island. While such stories might appear anecdotal, they do serve to illustrate Maine’s entangled nature as an early American crossroads. They also challenge us to reconsider the unyielding religious biases so often ascribed to early American people and supported by contemporary rhetoric.

The parameters of these encounters suggest that English Protestants in the northern New England borderlands succeeded less in reinforcing the differences between their own form of professed Christianity and one their ancestors and contemporaries rejected and reviled, and more in demonstrating the complex commonalities they shared with other New World Christians. Colonists who ventured forth from the protection of the established regions of Protestant New England were perceived by generations of scholars to be the vanguard of continental expansion by Euro-Americans, paving the way for the spread of Protestant Christianity and democracy throughout every corner of the future United States. I suggest that the migrants who moved north into Maine actually had more in common with their comrades back in Europe, where members of suspect religious minorities often lived side by side with the religiously orthodox. In doing so, they defied simplistic religious stereotypes. In this sense, the frontier dwellers of early Maine were just as likely to live amid a religious culture that reflected backward in time, toward the religiously polyglot communities of many parts of western Europe. In turn, the religious culture
of this corner of America also manifested some aspects of late medi-

deval Catholicism that the Reformation and transatlantic migration
had supposedly swept away. Though converging Christianities rarely
resulted in accommodation and tolerance, they introduced into reli-
gious life elements of religious culture that could easily be dismissed
as either popish or heretical in the colonial metropoles, where con-
solidated religious ideologies were more pronounced, specific, and
uniform.

This is not to suggest that Maine’s English settlements did not
experience the same centrality of religion that marked the lives of
other New Englanders. Protestant borderland dwellers were indeed
religious minded people. Maine deviates from conventional New
England patterns, however, because it tended to attract settlers who
were prone to experiment with new religious beliefs and practices.
Following the precedent of the great waves of religious experimenta-
tion that flooded England during the Commonwealth, many of these
people were attracted to extremely radical interpretations of the Di-
vine, human power, the soul, and society.25 Thus, at least one histo-
rian has recently concluded that many Maine settlers were already
“half way out the door” of Protestant orthodoxy, or at least averse to a
heavy-handed implementation of Massachusetts Bay versions of Pu-
ritanism in the colony.26 As suggestive case in point, many of the fami-
lies who would later produce acculturated captives had during the
province’s early years participated in anti-Massachusetts agitation or
dabbled in Protestantism other than Puritanism. Others came from
families or regions in Europe where memories of late medieval Ca-
tholicism persisted. These influences lingered in memory, practice,
and religious lore, even in the New World.

The entangled Christianities I describe in these pages were often
produced by the Province of Maine’s chimerical geographical defin-
tion and the near-chronic state of tension between the New World
French and English.27 Throughout the seventeenth century, French
Catholics of Quebec and Acadia, their Native American allies, and
even Anglicans, Quakers, and Baptists watched anxiously and some-
times angrily as New Englanders, inspired by new waves of Puritan

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fervor, pushed up into Maine and ever closer to Canada. This movement challenged a fragile religious status quo in the region. Like almost all New Englanders, the first generations of Puritan Mainers despised Catholicism in principle and, like their contemporaries in England, feared its influence. These fears were not without cause, as the influence of Catholicism and its defenders, especially among Maine’s Wabanaki peoples, extended beyond the French-settled St. Lawrence Valley. Catholicism was manifest in countless borderland spaces that surrounded early Maine: in the missions that operated in contested New England territory, in the French-controlled trading posts that extended up the contested Maine coast toward the Bay of Fundy, in Canada and Acadia (French colonies almost as close to Maine as Massachusetts), and in the coastal waters. When war came to Maine, the proximity of these rival Christians lent itself to perceptions of conflict couched in religious terms.28

A critical issue affecting Maine’s geographical definition was the fact that long before the arrival of Europeans, as well as long after, it continued to be Wabanakia, home to the People of the Dawnland, the North American people who were first every day to witness the rising of the sun. Many Wabanaki groups and allied native peoples of eastern Maine and Nova Scotia (collectively labeled “Eastern Indians” by English contemporaries) integrated some form of Catholic Christianity into their religious lives. The Wabanakis’ interest in Catholicism was the result of religious realities on a hemispheric scale. Throughout seventeenth-century Europe, both Catholic and Protestant theologians and religious leaders grappled with the implications of introducing and sustaining Christianity among indigenous peoples. On the other side of the Atlantic in North America, the objects of these theological ponderings struggled to reimagine, rebuild, and maintain communities decimated by disease, warfare, and dislocation. For the survivors of this first wave of affliction, Catholicism as imparted by French missionaries provided a flexible spiritual framework for processing tragedy and, perhaps more importantly, fashioning a future with European allies around a common religious culture.29 Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, also provided the Eastern
Indians with an opportunity to blend “old and new ways in a world transformed by the Columbian encounter.” In the Wabanakia of the late seventeenth century, the contours of this encounter were already well established. But Catholicism’s importance to the Wabanakis was an independent reality. By 1727 France’s waning political influence meant it could do little to sustain the religious culture of the Wabanakis who professed Catholicism. Yet the Wabanakis’ syncretic Catholic culture and faith communities persisted as geographically based reminders of the convergence of Christianities on the Maine frontier long after those built by and for the French were reduced to ashes or dust.

Native Americans frequently used elements of Christian rhetoric or worship to improve or enhance conditions that predated their encounters with Europeans. In this way, Indians who accepted or adapted to their own beliefs parts of Christianity developed their own post-contact religious culture. Such uses of Christianity were often misinterpreted or misunderstood by contemporary European observers. One example is the common assumption that Indians allied themselves with Europeans for the simple reason that they had come to love Christianity. For centuries, historians accepted this interpretation at face value. The scholarship of the past several decades, however, suggests numerous alternative explanations for religious solidarity and its implications for active participation in borderland warfare. These explanations take into account Native American ethnohistory, political structure and protocols, and longstanding relationships with other indigenous groups—factors that often eluded contemporary Euro-American observers. They also provide more evidence that pushes the concept of religious culture beyond the church, chapel, or meetinghouse.

The “spice of popery” made its way into Maine through war between Protestant and Catholic people. I chose to focus on this violent time in the province’s history mainly because it produced historical evidence describing, in unusual detail, the lives and habits of ordinary colonists...
who became pawns in imperial political struggles. Few borderland dwellers produced as many records as frontier captives—the women, children, and men who were seized by allied Indians and French during King William’s, Queen Anne’s, and Dummer’s wars. Though many returned to New England to tell of their experiences, many others did not, and eventually took on all the cultural trappings, including religion, of their captors.

Because these convergences between Protestantism and Catholicism were born of exceptional—and, in Maine’s case, frequently traumatic—circumstances, they impelled early modern Christians to appeal to traditional forms of comfort for consolation and guidance. These appeals appear most often in the records of captivity left by captives, their families, or others who found in them useful religious lessons. The mostly Christian captors also had agendas for their captives that ranged from ritualized torture to ransom. For the most part, however, they wanted to keep their captives by binding them tightly to the captor culture, Indian or French. Using the common (and commonly understood) appeals of Christianity, captors tried to entice or coerce captives into converting to Catholicism. When purely religious arguments or threats failed to produce the desired result, captors attempted to promote overtly religious bonds (for Catholics, the sacrament of marriage or religious vows) to entice New Englanders to remain. Such techniques worked at converting a surprising percentage of New Englanders. For Maine families, a member who had converted to Catholicism while detained among enemy Indians or French blurred the line of God-ordained familial authority, placing children in the care of others who claimed the prerogatives of parental authority, and introducing to women (as seen with Esther Wheelwright) new paradigms for the role of religion in adulthood. These religiously redefined family members were not merely reminders of the Catholicism that Protestantism inherently rejected; they also functioned as the Christian encounter of the future, grafting Catholic branches permanently to Protestant family trees. These ties remained intact long after French political power had been swept from Canada and Acadia.
By the middle of the eighteenth century, the frontier Province of Maine moved toward a mature colonial existence proportional with other English North American colonies. Protestant settlers who survived the early wars of empire and returned to the province quickly learned to turn frontier challenges into strengths. Some, like the Wheelwrights, continued to prosper. Their children left the frontier settlements and moved to established colonial merchant cities such as Boston and Portsmouth. This is precisely what happened when members of the Wheelwright family of Nathaniel and Esther left a life of uncertainty in Maine for the greater economic promise and physical security of Boston.

It was also during this time that the colonists in Maine’s English communities developed a more unified identity as Protestants on territory claimed and defended in the name of Britain. This was the result of several trends that emerged from the sorrowful decades. For one, the Maine frontier continued to push northward, extending the geographical buffer for the older settlements to the Eastward and enhancing security through increased population for the badly battered southern coastal settlements. In addition, New Englanders in general grew more adept at protecting themselves, gaining the upper hand in frontier warfare and, on occasion, forming alliances with the indigenous population who for years had cast their lot with the French.  

Though the lack of a formal definition for the American colonial border between New England and New France continued to cause severe friction, a better-defined New England Protestantism took a firmer hold, and worked toward ending the circumstances that contributed to interfaith encounter on the Maine frontier. A telling piece of evidence exists in the increased number of interdenominational squabbles among Protestants themselves, who now had the luxury of debating points of theology, as well as more worldly principles, that might have hitherto undermined the frontier unity they so desperately needed. Equally telling, however, was the persistence of Catholicism among the Wabanakis and within the families established by Catholic ex-captives, who were now subjects of the French Crown. Such factors suggest that, while borders could be defined and Protestant or Catho -
lic spheres of influence established and supported by law, the Province of Maine’s religious culture was sufficiently rich and intricate to exist independently. Traditional and popular culture tell us that American frontiers and borderlands are places of innovation and Whiggish foresight, born of conflict, challenge, and ultimately, triumph. This study argues that this assessment is subject to place, time, circumstance, and perspective.

Monarchs, theologians, and philosophers all spoke of the potential of New World settlements to become New Jerusalems, blessedly free of the interfaith warfare that convulsed western Europe and spilled the blood of countless professed Christians. Though the religious differences of the colonial world appear to be simple and obvious, a far more complex story lies beyond the basic dichotomies of English and French, Protestant and Catholic, European and Native American. The peripheries of the colonial world presented opportunities to break down and reformulate these categories. The Spice of Popery uses conflict and coexistence on an early American frontier to examine the complex dichotomies between Protestant and Catholic, godly and ungodly, civilized and savage, heretical and popish. But elements of this story also suggest that the Maine settlers who endured these trying times became more pragmatic—and less rigidly defensive of the righteousness of their own religious views—when faced with the basic humanity of rival Christians.

Nathaniel Wheelwright, a direct heir to the religious legacy of the decennium luctuosum and its aftermath, experienced this firsthand when one of his companions, a young New Yorker named Nicholas Lydius, lost his life to a high fever while the men were temporarily residing in Quebec. Already saddened by the loss of his friend, Wheelwright was further dismayed to learn that, in Catholic French Canada, the remains of deceased non-Catholics were “carried without the city & buried, as though the person had been a thief or a murderer.” Such treatment of Protestant bodies was not inconsistent with colonial laws that clung to rigidly defined categories of religion and punished, even in death, those who deviated from explicit religious norms. However, Wheelwright found that the behavior of these fellow Christians...
contrasted sharply with the colony’s official policies and legal realities. Before the ignominious burial could take place, a kindly French Catholic habitant, without regard for the traditional tensions between rival Christianities, offered to bury the young Protestant with dignity in his garden.38 Though Nathaniel Wheelwright was no stranger to the anti-Catholic rhetoric of his Boston home, it took encounters with living Catholics, fostered by volatile frontiers, to introduce him to the basic humanity of the religious “other.” In this sense, he was following a pattern established within his own Maine family that had already existed for decades.