

The New York Times

## Idea of the Day

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### How Puritans Turned Capitalist

*Today's idea: When Boston's dour Puritan preachers embraced markets as a moral good three and a half centuries ago, it was a watershed in the formation of the American economy and the national character.*

**History** | You certainly won't find Rev. Samuel Willard on the list of Founding Fathers, but his role in shaping the nation was considerable, according to "[Heavenly Merchandize](#)," a new book by Mark Valeri, professor of church history at Union Theological Seminary in Richmond, Va. Mr. Valeri's book, subtitled "How Religion Shaped Commerce in Puritan America," explains how a series of catastrophes in the mid-17th century turned Puritan preachers like Willard from disdain for the market to praise for it as morally necessary, for economic growth and hence the social order:

[He] preached during a period when Boston merchants believed that their occupation was essential to the commonweal—to England's prosperity and therefore to Protestantism and liberty. Their strategies to convey goods, credit, and power throughout the British Atlantic proved them to be patrons of the empire. Many moralists, Willard included, valorized them in such terms. His successors, leading Boston pastors of the 1710s, 1720s, and 1730s, went further. They, along with their parishioners, sanctioned the practices that guaranteed economic success as moral mandates, and the rules that governed commercial exchange as natural and divine laws. Their convictions informed a market culture that, by many accounts, came to maturity by 1750 and provided motives for rebellion against the British Empire after the cessation of war with France. [["Heavenly Merchandize"](#) (introduction); author interview, [The Boston Globe](#)]

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