Introduction to the English Puritans

A BRIEF HISTORY

English Puritanism began as a reform movement in the early years of Queen Elizabeth's reign. Having been driven out of England under the Catholic Queen Mary, Protestant exiles returned to an atmosphere of political, cultural, and spiritual reform. These Protestants sought further reformation of government and of church liturgy, earning the derogatory epithet "Puritan."

However, while not inflexible, Elizabeth was modest with her reformist ideas. Her religious settlements consisted of The Acts of Uniformity and Supremacy and *The Prayer Book* in 1559 and the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563. She was content with the climate of British Protestantism and strove to subdue dissident voices. Those who fought too much for change were persecuted and deprived of their livings. Thomas Cartwright, for instance, was formally censured because he demanded the removal of episcopacy in favor of Presbyterian polity.

Not until 1603, when James VI of Scotland succeeded as James I of England, did Puritan hopes for national reform revive. But James' program of reform was not what the most idealistic Puritans expected. It was true; James was more tolerant than Elizabeth, and he did grant a hearing of Puritan disputes at the Hampton Court Conference of 1604, but ultimately reformation efforts amounted to little. At the conference, Bishops portrayed the Puritans as "schismatic scholars," and James, for the most part, accepted this assessment.

Nevertheless, one of the Puritans at the conference gained James' ear with his simple and eloquent request: "May your Majesty be pleased that the Bible be new translated?" In some respects, the suggestion from John Reynolds attacked the standard Elizabethan Bible, "The Bishop's Bible." Even so, James agreed to the petition, but stated that no marginal notes be inserted, a reference to the extensive and interpretive notations of the Geneva Bible that Puritans had used for half a century. The finished work issued in 1611 as the Authorized, or King James Bible.

After James' death in 1625, succession fell to his twenty-five year old son Charles. The young monarch inherited a kingdom fraught with severe financial stress. Parliament, which in the past had served the monarchy with respect, refused to raise funds for a king who neglected the

wishes of his nobility. Increasingly Puritan in their persuasions, the nobles felt suspicious of Charles' ability to manage the nation well. When he decided to marry Henrietta Maria, the Catholic daughter of France's King Henry IV, Puritans and Parliament became incensed. They viewed the new Queen as a meddling woman, who preferred the welfare of her Catholic friends over the well-being of her Protestant realm.

In October 1636, Charles fueled the controversy by attempting to force use of the Anglican Prayer Book on Scotland. A year later, three Puritans—Prynne, Burton, and Bastwick—were publicly mutilated for criticizing the Church of England under the leadership of Archbishop William Laud. There followed a riot against the new prayer book in St. Giles Cathedral, Edinburgh, and in February 1638, the Scottish church drafted the Scottish National Covenant, a document rallying for defense against the inroads of Anglicanism. Charles, however, considered the document a symbol of national rebellion and sent troops to Scotland in May of the succeeding year. This precarious situation forced him to summon Parliament because he was unable to financially sustain his army. At first Parliament refused to support Charles, but concessions were eventually made that allowed Parliament to impeach Laud for high treason in 1640.

Just when things seemed to be agreed upon between Charles, Parliament, and the Scots, Ireland erupted in rebellion. Charles returned to Parliament for aid, but instead Parliament issued a "grand remonstrance," detailing all of Charles' political and religious abuses. Four months later, Parliament raised a military force and the following August (1642), with Charles' call for all loyal subjects to support him, the English Civil War ensued.

Throughout the war, the Long Parliament, deriving its name from its twenty-year tenure, continued to meet under the leadership of Oliver Cromwell. In 1643, it gathered a company of theologians to propose reforms for the Church of England. Known as the Westminster Assembly because it met in Westminster Abbey over the next decade, this group drafted three major documents, *The Larger and Shorter Catechisms, Westminster Confession,* and *Directory of Public Worship.* While predominantly Presbyterian, the Assembly did allow Erastians, Episcopalians, and Independents to voice their opinions. Its final documents stand as a synthesis of British Puritan theology.

Oliver Cromwell eventually defeated Charles's forces and was instrumental in ending the royalist threat. He supported the army's belief that Charles should stand for his crimes against the English. Not surprisingly, Charles refused to acknowledge the authority of those who charged him. He was convicted of high treason and executed in 1649. Among his last words were, "I go from a corruptible to an incorruptible crown, where no disturbance can be, no disturbance in the world." For the first time in British history, a reigning monarch was executed by his own people.

Cromwell, on the other hand, was elected Lord Protector over all Britain. Averse to the concept of supreme power, he sought to work with and through a Council of State and to meet Parliament regularly. He

committed to a wide measure of religious liberty for those who did not threaten the general liberty, though Roman Catholics were suppressed. There was a state church under Cromwell, but attendance was optional. It was during this time of toleration that a number of radical religious groups emerged, including the Levelers, the Diggers, Fifth Monarchy Men, and the Quakers.

When Cromwell's health steadily declined in 1658, the demise of the English Commonwealth seemed to loom. Cromwell died on September 3, 1658, and was buried in Westminster Abbey. His son and chosen successor, Richard, served as Lord Protector for less a year. In May of 1659, the Rump Parliament, a reinstated version of the Long Parliament, forced him to abdicate, and he fled to France to escape creditors. There he lived for a time as John Clarke, returning to England in 1680 to live out the remainder of his life in seclusion.

After Richard Cromwell's departure, Parliament officially invited Charles II to return from exile. He did so, promising religious toleration for dissenters. When Charles arrived in London on his birthday, May 20, 1660, crowds roared with applause. Charles, who favored his mother's Catholicism, wanted to pursue toleration for Catholics among others, but the new Parliament still held the majority of power and passed the Clarendon Code, a series of acts that ensured Anglicanism as the state religion and persecuted religious dissidents. The most famous of these acts, the Act of Uniformity, was enforced on St. Bartholomew's Day, 1662, and resulted in the expulsion of over two-thousand nonconforming clergy, mostly Puritans, from the Church. Puritanism as an ecclesiastical reform movement ended. As a cultural and spiritual force, it lasted well into the eighteenth century, only bowing to changing political and cultural climates with the entrance of the Enlightenment.

PURITAN LIFE AND PRACTICE

The Puritans were more than a political party in the Church of England. They were also a major cultural and spiritual force. Puritan life and practice in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was important in several ways.

First, the Puritans were *simple* people. In contrast to the more elegant Anglican churches, which often contained huge pipe organs and stained-glass windows portraying biblical events, they strove to worship in unadorned churches. Common Puritan objections to Anglican worship included the use of clerical vestments (particularly the surplice, a white wide-sleeved gown worn to officiate in church services), making the sign of the cross at baptism, kneeling to receive communion, bowing at the name of Jesus, the use of wedding rings in marriage services, and church bells. Puritans also held to a strict Sabbatarian view, demanding that members cease from unnecessary labor on the Christian Sabbath.

Second, the Puritans were a *working* people. The modern distinction between the sacred and the secular held no sway in the Puritan

worldview. For them, all of life was sacred, and especially the field of work. John Dod and Robert Cleaver, for instance, wrote that "the great and reverend God despiseth no honest trade . . . but crowneth it with his blessing."

Third, the Puritans were a *familial* people. Great emphasis was placed on the family as "a little church," in which the father was to act as minister. Preachers admonished Puritan men to love their wives as Christ had loved the church, and the women, in turn, were told to reverence their husbands. In his *Christian Directory,* Richard Baxter confessed, "It is a mercy to have a faithful friend that loveth you entirely . . . whom you may open your mind and communicate your affairs."

Fourth, the Puritans were a people of the *Word*. Early in the 1550s, preaching the Scripture became central to the Puritan cause. Perceived to be the primary means of God's working in the individual heart, Puritan sermons tended to address the mundane, everyday occurrences of daily living and avoided the more philosophical discourses of Anglican divines.

No introduction to the Puritans would be complete, however, without mentioning their faults. At times, Puritans could be an intolerant and fearful people. Dissenting voices were often either exiled or oppressed, and practices such as the witch trials still mar the Puritan past. However, not every Puritan condoned harsh methods. Ministers like Samuel Willard publicly detested them. Others like Roger Williams opposed them in spite of the consequent persecution. Even judges like Samuel Sewall, who was prominent in the trials, later repented of their involvement.

Yet in spite of the careful studies and correctives of modern historians—secular as well as religious—the word Puritan is still employed to stand for harshness, rigidity, superstition, blindness to the beauty of the world, and various psychological abnormalities. While it is true that they lived strict lives, they nevertheless had a profound sense of God's mercy and forgiveness. What the Puritans disdained was worldly thinking, living as though time and eternity were insignificant to the human soul. However, the classic picture of the Puritan as the *pilgrim* or *traveler to Zion* is only a partial view. The Puritans blended otherworldly aspiration with this-worldly usefulness. Each one strove to be the best husband, the best wife, the best son, the best daughter, the best worker. In short, each one strove to be the best citizen of both worlds.

FOR FURTHER READING

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