

## INTRODUCTION: THE PURITANS

**Perry Miller and Thomas H. Johnson, *The Puritans: A Sourcebook of Their Writings*, I**

Puritanism may perhaps best be described as that point of view, that philosophy of life, that code of values, which was carried to New England by the first settlers in the early seventeenth century. Beginning thus, it has become one of the continuous factors in American life and American thought. Any inventory of the elements that have gone into the making of the "American mind" would have to commence with Puritanism. It is, indeed, only one among many: if we should attempt to enumerate these traditions, we should certainly have to mention such philosophies, such "isms," as the rational liberalism of Jeffersonian democracy, the Hamiltonian conception of conservatism and government, the Southern theory of racial aristocracy, the Transcendentalism of nineteenth-century New England, and what is generally spoken of as frontier individualism. Among these factors Puritanism has been perhaps the most conspicuous, the most sustained, and the most fecund. Its role in American thought has been almost the dominant one, for the descendants of Puritans have carved at least some habits of the Puritan mind into a variety of pursuits, have spread across the country, and in many fields of activity have played a leading part. The force of Puritanism, further-more, has been accentuated because it was the first of these traditions to be fully articulated, and because it has inspired certain traits which have persisted long after the vanishing of the original creed. Without some understanding of Puritanism, it may safely be said, there is no understanding of America.

### Historical Background of the Puritans in England

In 1530, England separated from the Roman Catholic church and the pope. The English eliminated corrupt practices in the church; reformed ritual, beliefs, and prayers; and disbanded monasteries. (The resulting English Protestant church is called the Church of England, the Anglican Church, and English Catholicism.) By 1560, those who wished to continue purifying the Church of England were called Puritans. The Puritans wanted to re-establish the original simplicity of the church by eliminating practices and church hierarchy which were not mentioned in the Bible.

However, the Puritans did not agree among themselves on how far the reform should be carried and exactly what should be changed and how:. The Presbyterians and Congregationalists insisted that they were members of the Church of England; the Separatists broke away, to the distress of the other Puritans.

â€¢ The *Presbyterians* supported a national church, universal membership with mandatory attendance, a church hierarchy consisting of a national representative assembly or synod, a presbytery or classis, composed of ministers and elders in a region, and local individual parish churches governed by minister and elders

â€¢ The *Congregationalists* (e.g., Puritans of Massachusetts Bay) wanted each church to be individual and self-governing (there was to be no hierarchy); each congregation elected its own minister; membership was limited to the "visible saints" after publicly professing faith, presenting convincing evidence of conversion and accepting the covenant. Church attendance was to be mandatory.

â€¢ The *Separatists* (e.g., Pilgrims of Plymouth) broke away from the Church of England to establish their own communities for worship and some fled to Holland. Since the Church of England was the established or national church, their flight was regarded generally as disloyal, if not quite treason.

### The Puritans: Stereotype and Reality

*Stereotype:* The Puritans were reactionaries. *Reality:* Yes and no. The Puritans were also revolutionaries who fought a Civil War from 1642-49, executed Charles I and the Archbishop of Canterbury in 1649, and established a Commonwealth, which lasted until 1660, when the monarchy was restored with Charles II.

*Stereotype:* The Puritans wore dark, drab clothing, and the men wore black stovepipe hats. *Reality:* They wore clothing in every color and hue, and the men wore no such hats.

*Stereotype:* The Puritans were killjoys who condemned alcohol and smoking. *Reality:* They enjoyed both drinking and smoking; what they objected to was excess. As Increase Mather informed his congregation in a sermon, “Drink is in it self a good creature of God, and to be received with thankfulness, but the abuse of drink is from Satan; the wine is from God, but the Drunkard is from the Devil.”

## **The Pilgrims and Puritans in New England: Historical Overview**

1620: The Pilgrims landed at Plymouth

1628: An advance party of Puritans began to prepare Massachusetts Bay for settlement.

1630: The Great Migration began; an estimated 3,000 persons migrated to Massachusetts Bay.

1630-40: An estimated 20,000 immigrants sailed for Massachusetts Bay

1631: Citizenship was limited to membership in the churches. (This meant that about one in five adult males could vote. Each spring, the citizens or their representatives met in Boston to elect the governor, other officials, and members of the General Court. Before the vote, a minister gave an election sermon.)

1636: Harvard was founded, primarily to produce an educated ministry.

1639: The first printing press in English settlements was set up in Cambridge

1647: The law required every town of 100 families or more to provide free elementary instruction, whether through private or public school. A humanistic curriculum was followed.

1692: Plymouth Colony was absorbed into Massachusetts Bay, by royal charter. The Charter of 1692 also appointed the governor and gave the right to vote to male property holders. Consequently, the Puritans began to lose their political stranglehold on the colony, and the church and state were being separated. Accelerating this trend was the tendency of subsequent generations to lack the fervor and commitment of the first generation of Puritans, and the increasing number of non-Puritan immigrants. Gradually, Massachusetts Bay ceased to be a theocracy [*theocracy*: (1) government dominated by priests/clerics who rule in the name of God, (2) a country ruled by priests/clerics claiming divine authority].

## **Purpose of the Puritan Immigration**

The Puritans immigrated to establish God's commonwealth on earth, a community of “visible saints” following the Bible, and to found churches on the Congregational model. The King gave his permission for the migration in order for England to acquire raw materials, to check the power of Spain, to find a new route to the Orient, and to convert the Indians.

## **Covenant Theology, also Federal Theology**

The Puritans saw in the Bible a rational and consistent doctrine, the covenant, which set forth rules and regulations which covered every aspect of life [*covenant*: (1) a binding and solemn

agreement by 2 or more people, parties, etc. to do or not do a specified thing; a compact, (2) the promises made by God to man, as recorded in the Bible].

## **Government and Subordination**

The Fall made government necessary, so God created government. Though the form of government was not specified in the Bible, it was clear to the Puritans that men and women should live in communities under a government with the power to direct their lives and to punish evil-doing. Noted John Cotton: Society in all sorts of humane affairs is better than Solitariness. The Bible did specifically accept subordination of individuals and classes.

Therefore, government was formed by the consent of the governed to God's law of justice and of subordination to superiors. Government depended on the compact or agreement of the governed, whose willing and active participation created society. In other words, society was one unit and members were subordinated to its purpose; the holy and regenerate (i.e., the saved or visible saints) ruled.

## **The Human Condition: Natural Depravity and Reason**

With the Fall of Adam and Eve, human nature and reason fell too, so that they were corrupted, i.e., perverted or depraved. As a consequence human beings distorted the truth, even God's revealed truth. For this reason, Samuel Mather (1643-1671) attributed all sin and misery to a hearkening to reason against Institution. Nevertheless, men of learning could use *right* reason to interpret the Bible and to direct others. As Uriah Oakes explained: "Wisdom lies in the Rational Application of general rules of Scripture to ourselves and our own conditions, and in the introduction of particulars, and due Reasoning from it."

## **Predestination and Election**

Christians generally accept the position that God predestines or elects the good to salvation; the fate of sinners regarding salvation and damnation is an open issue. The Puritans, however, accepted Calvin's belief in double predestination:

By predestination we mean the eternal decree of God, by which he determined with himself whatever he wished to happen with regard to every person. All are not created on equal terms, but some are preordained to eternal life, others to eternal damnation. (*Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1599)

In other words, God predetermines who is to be damned (also called reprobation) and elects who is to be saved (also called regeneration).

## **Grace**

Salvation can come only through grace, and grace comes only from God. No human effort can achieve or guarantee God's grace. Grace elevates reason so that it better perceives and apprehends the divine order, the unity, and the reasonableness of the world. Solomon Stoddard (1643-1729) explained: "Spiritual Light received in Conversion, strengthens the reason of men, and makes the law of nature more intelligible." Grace is compatible with *right* reason, but not corrupt reason.

## **Church Membership and Ordination**

To become a member of a church or congregation, an individual had to apply and to prove spiritual worthiness by giving evidence of having received divine grace. Though not all residents of the Colony were church members, all residents had to attend services and pay taxes to support the church. A minister was ordained by a congregation or individual church.

## **Ramean Reasoning or Logic**

Pierre Ramee or Petrus Ramus (1515-1572) challenged Aristotelean logic (the tripartite syllogism) and introduced a reasoning based on disjunction and hypothesis. In Ramean logic, a choice of alternatives was presented: is this or the opposite true? An inner guide (right reason) recognized which of two alternatives was true. The Puritans relied on Ramean logic, though they used Aristotelean syllogisms as well. Here is a sample of a composite syllogism or Puritan argument:

- Was the world created or not?
- If not, it has no purpose or meaning; this is ridiculous. Therefore, the world was created.
- But created by God or by itself?
- It cannot have created itself (so reason tells us). Therefore, God created the world.

## **The Puritan Ideal**

While living in this world, the individual should be fixed on or committed to the next world. In the words of John Cotton, "There is another combination of virtues strangely mixed in every lively holy Christian, And that is, Diligence in worldly businesses, and yet deadness to the world; such a mystery as none can read, but they that know it." The Puritan should "bestir himself for profit" and yet "bee a man dead-hearted to the world."

## **Daily Life**

For the Puritan, every day life was exciting, because human beings were engaged in the conflict between God and the Devil, Heaven and Hell, a struggle sometimes called the Puritan drama of the soul. Every moment, every action, every occurrence had meaning, significant meaning. In an effort to read its moral and spiritual significance, Puritans commonly kept journals in which they recorded occurrences in their lives and communities.

## **Business**

The Puritans believed that the government had a right to fix prices and that the individual's profits should be subordinated to the welfare of the community. For example John Cotton called buying cheap and selling dear a false principle and one merchant was fined £200 for making too large a profit.

## **Puritanism and Democracy**

The Puritans did not believe in democracy or freedom and liberty; nevertheless, Puritanism and democracy do share some beliefs: both

- respect the dignity of the individual, regardless of social status,
- are egalitarian (for the Puritans salvation was dependent on individual merit or grace, not wealth, class, or ability),
- stress the importance of education,
- base government on the principle of contract or covenant (e.g., our Constitution and Bill of Rights),
- are committed to principles rather than to individuals or institutions,
- reject tyranny.

## **Food for Thought**

How different are Puritan beliefs from our beliefs? For example, does their belief in predestination have a modern equivalent in the debate of nature versus nurture, i.e., the belief

that heredity or childhood experience determines a person's nature and life, or in Freud's belief that anatomy is destined?

[http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/english2/puritans\\_intro.html](http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/english2/puritans_intro.html)