

What is Puritanism and what did the Puritans believe?

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Question: "What is Puritanism and what did the Puritans believe?"

Answer: The Puritans were a widespread and diverse group of people who took a stand for religious purity in the 16th, 17th, and 18th centuries in Europe. Their rise was directly related to the increased knowledge that came to the common people in the Age of Enlightenment. As people learned to read and write, and as the Bible became more accessible to commoners, many began to read the Bible for themselves (a habit that was strongly discouraged in the established church). Some Puritans were connected with Anabaptist groups in continental Europe, but the majority were connected with the Church of England. The word *Puritan* was first coined in the 1560s as a derisive term for those who advocated more purity in worship and doctrine.

The English Puritans, who are the most familiar to Americans, believed that the English Reformation had not gone far enough and that the Church of England was still tolerating too many practices that were associated with the Church of Rome (such as hierarchical leadership, clerical vestments, and the various rituals of the church). Many Puritans advocated separation from all other Christian groups, but most were “non-separating” and desired to bring cleansing and change to the church from within. Holding a high view of Scripture, and deeming it as the only true law of God, Puritans believed that each individual, as well as each congregation, was directly responsible to God, rather than answering through a mediator such as a priest, bishop, etc. The Congregational Church in America is a descendant of the early Puritan settlers, and any group that advocates congregational rule and individual piety has been impacted in some way by Puritan teaching. Even today, theologians from many church backgrounds appreciate reading the works of the old Puritan divines, even if they differ in some points of doctrine.

Throughout their history, the Puritans were viewed and treated in a variety of ways by both civil and ecclesiastical authorities. Often, they were grudgingly tolerated, and at other times they were severely persecuted. Charles I of England made efforts to purge all Puritan influences from England, which resulted in the Great Migration to Europe and the American Colonies. The Pilgrims who formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony were separatist Puritans who had been forced out of England and Holland. Non-separatist Puritans who remained in England responded to this persecution with the English Civil War (1641-51), which led to the execution of Charles I, the exile of his son, Charles II, and the rise of Oliver Cromwell.

Both America and Great Britain owe a great debt to the Puritans for the foundations they laid that gave us the framework for our freedoms today. Philosophies such as the “divine right” of kings gave way to individual liberties and the recognition of the rights of the common man. The “Yankee work ethic” came about because of the belief that a man's work is done first for God's approval. The belief in public education comes from the Puritans, who founded the first school in America (Roxbury, 1635), as well as the first college (Harvard, 1639), so that people would be able to read the Bible for themselves. The moral foundations of the early United States came from the

emphasis on godly behavior by Puritan leaders. Even Alexis de Tocqueville, after studying America in the 1830s, declared that Puritanism was the primary foundation that gave rise to our democratic republic. Some well-known Puritans are John Bunyan (*The Pilgrim's Progress*), John Winthrop ("City upon a Hill" sermon), Cotton Mather, and John Foxe (*Foxe's Book of Martyrs*).

The Puritans traveled to America to escape religious persecution. Learn more about what daily life was like as a Puritan living in colonial times. Also find additional research topic ideas.

Life in the Colonies

The daily life of a Puritan in Colonial America New England during the 17th century was a busy one. Puritans believed that idle hands were the devil's playground! A typical day started at dawn and ended at dusk. Their lives focused on religion and following God's plan -- attending church was mandatory. Puritans focused on living simple and peaceful lives.

Where did the Puritans Come From?



In England in 1530, the English separated from the Roman Catholic Church and reformed their beliefs. The Church of England became the English Protestant Church.

After 1560, those who wanted to continue the "purification" of the church were called Puritans. If a practice or hierarchy was not in the Bible, the Puritans wanted to eliminate it. However, the Puritans could not agree on how far or to what degree to "purify." Those who wanted more purification broke away. A group came to America in 1620; the great migration to New England started in 1630.

Once the Puritans arrived, they worked in the New England Colonies and placed the church and God as the center of their lives. The ministers of the church were very influential people in these colonies.

Sunday School Worksheets

Ideas for Further Research

The following is a list of possible research topics for you to research. Very basic information is included in this article. However, you will need to complete additional research for a research paper or project. There is a list of resources/references at the end of this article where you can start your research.

Family Life: The family was very important to the Puritans and most were farming families. The average Puritans lived longer than their counterparts in England, and many lived long enough to be grandparents, which was not common. Many kept journals of their daily lives.

Clothing: The Puritans wanted simplicity in their clothing and many times wore dark clothing.

Homes: Early on, families lived in single room mud homes with thatched roofs.

Food: They farmed and fished. A feast may include fish (fresh or salted), meats, and a stew with vegetables from their gardens. For dessert, there might be custard or sugared almonds. And, surprisingly, they would drink wine and ale, just not to excess.

Female Roles: Women were not allowed to vote or make decisions in the church. They worked in the home and the garden.

Male Roles/Jobs: Men who followed the church and were "chosen" were allowed to vote. A male might have the occupation of minister, cooper, hunter, miller, tanner, furrier, surveyor, farmer, etc.

Education: The literacy rate amongst Puritans was rather high due to the fact that they wanted their children to be able to read the Bible. If a community in Massachusetts had 50 families or more, a school supported by taxes was mandatory.

Church: Puritans attended church at least two times a week. Government meetings would sometimes follow church meetings. All church members had to pay tithes to the church and attend regularly.

Punishment: Those who did not follow God's laws would be punished. The punishment was harsh, such as hanging, public whippings, cutting off ears, boring holes in tongues, stockades, etc.

Once you have chosen a topic and completed your research paper on Puritan daily life, you can share it with your teacher. Make sure to follow the proper format, such as MLA or APA style. And, edit and revise your work before typing or writing your final copy.

Resources/references:

Colonial America, <http://www.richmondancestry.org/colonial.shtml>

Daily Life of Puritans, <http://gtines1600puritans.weebly.com/process--daily-life.html>

Puritans, <http://www.sonofthesouth.net/revolutionary-war/pilgrims/puritans.htm>

Puritan Clothing, <http://www.fabrics-store.com/blog/2008/01/28/political-dissent-puritans-and-the-use-of-linen/>

Puritan Daily Life, <http://terpconnect.umd.edu/~jklumpp/comm460/lecture/ne.html>

Puritan Food,
http://www.boston.com/bostonglobe/ideas/articles/2007/11/18/so_what_did_the_puritans_eat/

Puritan Homes, <http://www.ctlibrary.com/ch/1994/issue41/4136.html>

Puritan Life, <http://www.ushistory.org/us/3d.asp>

The Puritans, http://academic.brooklyn.cuny.edu/english/melani/english2/puritans_intro.html