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PURITANISM

A Very Short Introduction

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Introduction

The relationship between religious faith and political culture has long been a staple of public discourse. “Puritans” and “puritanism” are terms likely to be invoked in such discussions, despite being references to centuries-old religious subjects. Nevertheless, puritanism is one of the least understood parts of America’s—and Britain’s—heritage. The word “puritan” is likely to be associated with “prudish,” “sexually repressed,” “prohibitionist,” “busybody snoops”—the types of things that led the twentieth-century social critic H. L. Mencken to define puritanism as “the fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” The image of puritans as theocrats, regicides, witch-burners, Indian killers, and bigoted heresy hunters has long been entrenched in popular culture. Most of these are distortions if not absolute falsehoods, but the stereotypes are deeply embedded.

The purpose of this *Very Short Introduction* is to present the puritans as they were, to provide a clear explanation of what they believed, how they worshipped, how they lived their everyday lives and interacted with their fellow believers and the broader world, and why the movement as such came to an end. But more fundamentally, it will help us to consider again some of the issues that the men and women of the seventeenth century took seriously—the proper relationship between religion and public life,

the limits of toleration, and the balance between individual rights and community obligations. It seeks to explain both the common elements of the movement and the distinct character it assumed in different times and places.

Among the most fundamental yet disputed aspects of the subject is the definition of puritanism. Whereas other religious movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—Lutheranism, Catholicism, Genevan Calvinism, among others—became institutionalized so that there were official statements of faith and formal membership in churches, puritanism never achieved that type of clear identity. It was a movement defined in part by the self-identification of men and women who referred to themselves as “godly” or “professors” and partly by their enemies, who scorned them as “precisians,” and “hypocrites.” The actual label “puritan” was originally a term of opprobrium used by their enemies, though eventually adopted by the members of the movement. Some scholars have come to look at puritanism as a temperament and to talk of the “puritan character.” Recent research points to the varieties of puritanism, pointing out that the experience, beliefs, and behavior of these believers was often uniquely shaped by particular circumstances they faced.

At the simplest level, puritans were those who sought to reform themselves and their society by purifying their churches of the remnants of Roman Catholic teachings and practice then found in post-Reformation England during the mid-sixteenth century, such as using clerical vestments and kneeling to receive the Lord’s Supper. They were particularly insistent that individual believers had access to the Scriptures, the Word of God, in their own language. They agitated for the placement of university-trained preachers in every parish. They believed that England as a political nation must be committed to opposing the forces of Rome throughout Christendom. While Englishmen who were not labeled puritans might support some or all of these objectives, those who

bore the label were seen as most committed and most fervent in advancing them.

At the heart of puritanism was the attempt to transform society by first using grace to make God's will one's own. By doing so the individual would lead an exemplary life that would persuade others—family, friends, and the broader community—to follow the path of right belief and behavior. When puritans achieved political power—in America in the colonies they established and in England following the Civil Wars of the 1640s—they were able to employ instruments of power as well as those of persuasion. The responsibilities that came with power brought new challenges but did not alter the puritan objective to make society a godly kingdom. Their understanding of God's will led them to promote education, to redefine marriage and other institutions, and to adopt participatory forms of government. While puritans as a specific group are no longer with us, the impact of those initiatives on America and England continues to be felt.

Chapter 1

Reforming the English Reformation

Puritanism did not begin as a distinct faith but as a reform movement within the Protestant Church of England in the sixteenth century. Puritans were Christian men and women who sought to shape their lives in accordance with God's will. They believed they were required by God to spread their belief and practice to others by word and example—to turn their families, their communities, and their larger societies into parts of the kingdom of God. From the first stirrings of the movement until the 1630s, puritan efforts took place within the established national church and were shaped by broader struggles to define that church.

The Church of England was shaped by Henry VIII's break from the Roman Catholic Church in 1534. The Church of England differed from the other Protestant churches of the time in that the reasons for its formation were political rather than spiritual. Henry VIII rejected the authority of the Roman Catholic Church because Pope Clement VII refused to annul his marriage to Catherine of Aragon. Yet Henry was far from convinced of the need to change Catholic teachings or worship. He would have been well content to have a new church with the intellectual and ceremonial furnishings of the old. But the men willing to run his church believed in many of the new ideas of the Reformation regarding decentralized church authority, the importance of faith as opposed to works in the pathway to salvation, and rejection of many of the traditional

sacraments. In Henry's reign a debate began over the nature of the new church that would continue for over a century.

Thomas Cromwell, Henry's principal lay advisor in matters concerning the church, persuaded the king to suppress many of the country's monasteries. In the process, considerable church lands and associated powers were transferred into lay hands, and many Englishmen obtained a financial stake in the new church. Cromwell also persuaded Henry to authorize an English Bible. Thomas Cranmer, holder of the Church of England's highest position as the archbishop of Canterbury, was an advocate of religious reform. He led those, referred to as evangelicals, who sought to persuade the king to accept the Protestant concept of justification by faith (as opposed to good works), to reject the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation (the belief that Christ is substantively present in the bread and wine of Communion), and to revise the liturgy. His success was limited by the king's own conservative instincts and the lobbying of other Englishmen who wanted as little change as possible.

The accession of the boy-king Edward VI in 1547 was a godsend for those seeking further reform. Tutored by men who were zealous advocates of evangelical reform, Edward gave his approval to various steps long favored by such men. Shrines that honored saints were closed, religious statues that Protestants believed promoted idolatry were destroyed or defaced, church wall paintings whitewashed, stained glass windows depicting religious scenes replaced, and musical instruments sold off, vandalized, or destroyed. Cranmer's reformed vernacular liturgy, the Book of Common Prayer, was approved. The archbishop installed the noted continental reformers Martin Bucer and Peter Martyr in theological chairs at Cambridge and Oxford, respectively, where they helped to shape the views of a new generation of clergy. A second Prayer Book, issued in 1552, reflected further progress toward bringing England into line with the Reformation in Europe.

Even under Edward, however, the pace of reform was insufficient for many. John Hooper was typical of such men. He initially turned down an appointment as Bishop of Gloucester because he believed the oath he would be required to take and the vestments he would be expected to wear were papist remnants. After he relented and was installed, he continued to lobby Cranmer for more thorough reformation. In the eyes of many, such individuals who remained in the national church but demanded a faster, more thorough purification of the church were the earliest puritans.

The failure of Cranmer and the king to go further in reforming the Church of England owed much to the opposition of those Englishmen who still retained an allegiance for the faith and practices of the old religion, sentiments that contributed to popular uprisings during the reigns of both Henry VIII and Edward VI. The strength of such sentiment became obvious when Edward died in 1553 and was succeeded by his sister, Mary Tudor. Mary, the daughter of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragon, was determined to restore England to the Roman Catholic Church. Nearly three hundred English men and women who refused to abandon their Protestant faith, including Cranmer and Hooper, were burned as heretics. Another eight hundred fled to centers of reform on the Continent, forming their own churches and engaging in dialogue with Protestant leaders in places such as Geneva, Zurich, Frankfurt, and Strasbourg. An undetermined number of Protestants stayed in England and sought to practice their reformed faith in underground gatherings.

Mary died in 1558 and was succeeded by her sister, Elizabeth, the last surviving child of Henry VIII, who restored Protestantism to the realm and, through her longevity, did much to assure its permanence. It was during the four decades of Elizabeth's reign that the puritan movement is generally regarded as achieving a significant place in English religious life. Recognizing the strength of conservative sentiment (much of it Catholic or pseudo-Catholic),

Elizabeth insisted on a religious settlement that was slightly more moderate than the state of the church at the death of Edward VI. This was a disappointment to those who had returned from exile eager to reproduce some of the practices they had observed on the Continent. Some of these men reluctantly accepted positions of authority in the Elizabethan church in the hope that they could use their power and influence to advocate further reform. Others, unwilling to accept the responsibility to enforce what they viewed as unscriptural practices, took lesser posts in the church as parish rectors or lecturers, where they might escape the attention of the authorities and institute reform on the local level.

The reform agenda during Elizabeth's reign focused on four major matters: doctrine, ceremonial practices, a preaching ministry, and opposition to Roman Catholic power. Underlying their position on these issues were two general emphases. The first was a belief in the inerrancy of the Scriptures, which led puritans more than most Protestants to seek scriptural warrant for all of their beliefs and practices. The second was anti-Catholicism. For the puritans, more than many of their fellow English Protestants, the papacy was the source of all doctrinal and ceremonial errors that had taken the church off the course initially set by Christ and his early disciples.

Calvinism—the system of beliefs that were developed by the Protestant John Calvin in Geneva—became the doctrinal preference of most English Protestants, and reformers were largely pleased with the incorporation of this viewpoint in the official pronouncements of the Elizabethan bishops and the curriculum of the English universities. Not until later in Elizabeth's reign were these teachings openly challenged in the universities, and even then the authorities remained committed to Calvinist doctrines.

The most notable division between what the church required and what the puritans desired came over the issue of ceremonies. Puritans wished to dispense with the elaborate clerical vestments that symbolized a priesthood of special powers. They wished clergy

to officiate in simple black gowns, a badge of their university training. Because they believed that kneeling at Communion symbolized a recognition of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine being distributed (which they denied), they preferred to sit or stand to receive the Lord's Supper. They wished to dispense with the signing of the cross over infants in baptism and the exchange of rings in matrimony, seeing both as Catholic symbols. Parishes with a strong puritan element were more likely to remove rood screens and rename the altar a Communion table, moving it from the chancel to the nave of the church for congregants to gather around. They preferred their minister to pray extemporaneously rather than use the set forms of the Book of Common Prayer. In regions of England where authorities were sympathetic or indifferent to such issues, puritans could often initiate such reforms with little fear of being corrected. One did not have to be a puritan to favor such changes.

Puritanism

Significant steps were taken in Elizabeth's reign to prepare an educated ministry. Emmanuel College at Cambridge was founded specifically to meet the demand for preaching clergy, but other colleges at Oxford and Cambridge also produced puritan clergy. When a local minister was unable to provide the spiritual nourishment puritans demanded, parishioners might engage in what was called sermon gadding, traveling to a nearby village to hear an effective preacher. Some communities funded lectureships, hiring a noted preacher to offer public sermons for those whose appetite for the Word seemed insatiable. Early in Elizabeth's reign many bishops organized or approved exercises called prophesyings. This was a means of upgrading the knowledge and skills of those ministers who had not received university training. Clergy in the region would gather to be instructed by a learned minister. Occasionally, laypeople were included in the sessions. While never denying the ideal of an educated ministry, Elizabeth had reservations about clergy who chose what to preach about and what to say, preferring that they read the homilies set forth in the officially provided Book of Homilies. Seeing prophesying as

potentially subversive, she ordered Archbishop of Canterbury Edmund Grindal to suppress the exercises and suspended him from his functions when he refused. Godly ministers responded to the suppression of prophesyings by organizing their own informal conferences to discuss and achieve consensus on how to interpret the Scriptures, how to respond to government indifference to further reform, and how to best regulate the affairs of their parishes.

Few puritans could fault Elizabeth on her opposition to Rome. She became known as “the Protestant Deborah” (after the Old Testament heroine) for her aggressively Protestant foreign policy. She supported the Protestant rebels in the Netherlands and encouraged English privateers to prey upon Catholic Spain’s treasure fleets and its American colonies. The simmering hostility between the two countries eventually led to Spain’s attempt to invade and subjugate England in 1588. When Elizabeth’s ships fought off the Armada, Englishmen saw their triumph as a sign of God’s favor.

Puritans were not necessarily opposed to government of the church by bishops and initially showed a willingness to cooperate with those bishops who were sympathetic to reform. But as time went on most bishops proved either unwilling to challenge the queen or eager to carry out her demands on such matters as the wearing of vestments. Puritan clergy began to organize their own informal associations or conferences to advance their positions and provide authorization for their views, such as the one formed in Dedham, in the Stour Valley borderland of Essex and Suffolk. Some members of these conferences suggested that the church be remodeled along Presbyterian lines such as were to be found in Scotland. Two London clergymen, John Field and Thomas Wilcox, led a campaign to persuade Parliament to institute such reforms, but Elizabeth denied Parliament’s right to change the church. Field also played a key role in trying to connect the various puritan clerical conferences through an informal national system. Walter

Travers prepared a *Book of Discipline*, which set forth a model for the type of reforms these men advocated. While generally referred to as a Presbyterian movement, the various conferences were all unofficial and thus were only advisory rather than having authority over their members.

By the time Elizabeth died, puritans had failed to persuade the nation's political and ecclesiastical governors to adopt the reforms they advocated, although they had attracted an increasing number of English men and women, spreading their message beyond themselves and their families. In some areas, such as the Stour Valley, the support of local authorities had allowed the creation of what some extolled as a "kingdom of God" in which puritanism was the hegemonic religious culture. In other areas, puritan strongholds were more tenuous, leading to sharper distinctions between the godly, gathered in what the historian Patrick Collinson has called "holy huddles," and their more worldly neighbors.

In 1603 the English throne passed to Elizabeth's kinsman, James Stuart, who had been king of Scotland. Scotland's church was Presbyterian, and puritans hoped that this would make the new monarch sympathetic to their proposed reforms. They gathered as many as a thousand signatures on a petition to the king, who responded by calling the Hampton Court Conference to consider the state of the English church. James had clashed with the Scottish church, which was independent of the crown, and he was attracted to the English system, which placed the monarch in charge. He rejected most of the puritan requests, though he did make provision for a new translation of the Bible—which became known as the Authorized Version, or the King James Bible. During the reign of Queen Elizabeth the distinction between the establishment and puritan reformers was not always clear since many bishops and key members of the Queen's Privy Council were sympathetic to further reforms in the church. Under James I and

A Puritan in England

In the village where I lived the reader read the Common Prayer briefly, and the rest of the day even till dark night almost, except eating-time, was spent in dancing under a maypole and a great tree not far from my father's door, where all the town did meet together. . . . We could not read the Scripture in our family without the great disturbance of the tabor and pipe and noise in the street. Many times my mind was inclined to be among them, and sometimes I broke loose from conscience and joined with them; and the more I did it the more I was inclined to it. But when I heard them call my father Puritan it did much to cure me and alienate me from them; for I considered that my father's exercise of reading the Scripture was better than theirs, and would surely be better thought on by all men at the last; and I considered what it was for that he and others were thus derided.

Source: N. H. Keeble, ed., *The Autobiography of Richard Baxter* (London: Dent, 1974).

his son and heir Charles I, friends of the puritans were less likely to be found at court or in bishops' palaces.

James, however, was more intent on asserting his right to make decisions than he was energetic in making sure those decisions were implemented. Archbishop Richard Bancroft did make efforts to force puritans to conform to the rites and ceremonies stipulated in the Prayer Book, and some puritan clergy were suspended for refusing to wear vestments or similar acts of nonconformity. But puritan clergy were often the most capable and zealous in a diocese, and this led many bishops to reach accommodations with them. Throughout the country privately funded church lectureships provided new opportunities for puritan preachers to nourish the faith of the godly and to reach out to those who still embraced error. Puritans continued to find little to complain about regarding the Calvinist foundations of the church. James was himself a Calvinist

and appointed the Calvinist George Abbot to replace Bancroft as archbishop of Canterbury. When the Calvinist authorities in the Netherlands convened an international synod at Dort in 1618 to examine the controversial teachings of Jacob Arminius (who argued that man did have a role in his own salvation), James sent a delegation that joined the majority in rejecting the views of Arminius and reaffirmed the key elements of Calvinism.

As long as they felt confident in the Calvinist foundations of the Church, most puritan clergy were willing to mute their public criticisms of ceremonies they disapproved of in order to maintain a common front against the Catholic threats to the Reformation. Pastors and lecturers devoted themselves to “practical divinity,” preaching and writing guidance to individual Christians to help them live godly lives. They hoped to reform their neighborhoods and the broader society by their example and their teachings. Works of practical divinity became emblematic of English puritanism and influenced Continental reformers in the Netherlands and as far away as Hungary.

Puritanism

Not all of the godly were willing to make compromises while waiting for the king to approve needed reforms. Some began to separate from the national church and hold their own meetings for worship. Because all Englishmen were required by law to attend parish services, by absenting themselves (as many Catholics also did), the Separatists left themselves open to prosecution. Some, such as Henry Barrow and John Greenwood, were executed. Separatists were critical of the puritans who refused to follow their way; puritans, responding to charges that separatism was the natural outcome of their own positions, attacked the Separatists in pulpit and print. Over time many Separatist groups migrated to the Netherlands, seeking there the freedom to worship as they pleased. One of these groups originated in the region of Scrooby, settled in Leiden, and then migrated to America in 1620, where they became known as the Pilgrims.

Puritans of all kinds were committed to the cause of international Protestantism and had concerns about King James's foreign policy. He had brought an end to England's war with Spain and showed a willingness to deal with the great Catholic powers. When the Thirty Years War broke out on the Continent in 1618, James refused to provide military aid to his son-in law Frederick, the proclaimed king of Bohemia, even though Frederick was the Protestant champion in a conflict many thought was the climactic struggle to determine the religious future of Europe. Puritans increasingly criticized the government's stand and, on their own initiative, raised funds to help Protestants dislocated by the conflict.

At the same time that the spirit of Separatism challenged traditional puritanism, a new cadre of churchmen came to prominence who sought their own changes in the national Church. Lancelot Andrewes, Richard Neile, and William Laud began to promote "the beauty of holiness," a program that included ceremonies such as kneeling to receive the Lord's Supper, the return of altars to the chancel, Communion rails, fine music in worship, and other elements that evoked memories of discarded Catholic practices. Some of these men, and their allies such as George Montagu and John Cosin, also sought to challenge the accepted teachings on predestination. Puritan concerns about an anti-Calvinist conspiracy to move England back toward Rome were accentuated when King James married his son and heir Charles to a French Catholic princess and bestowed on her the right to have open Catholic worship at the court. The more puritans questioned royal policy, the more James came to appreciate and promote men such as Neile, who were staunch advocates of royal authority. Puritan clergy such as John Preston, who had been favored by the king early in his reign, began to lose influence. This trend intensified after the accession of Charles I in 1625. The resultant challenges would force puritans to develop new strategies if they were to survive and advance God's kingdom.