Were the Puritans Puritanical?

CARL N. DEGLER

The original Puritans were sixteenth-century English Christians who sought to "purify" the Anglican church, England's sole established church, by forcing it to adopt the tenets of Calvinism (see the glossary in selection 2). Some Puritans, called Separatists, defied English law and formed their own churches in order to worship as they wished. Because they were ruthlessy persecuted, were imprisoned, and even put to death, many Puritans sought refuge in North America. One Separatist group settled in Virginia. Another — the celebrated Pilgrims — came over on the Mayflower in 1620 and established Plymouth Plantation just north of present-day Cape Cod. Ten years later, a third Puritan group founded Massachusetts Bay Colony, comprising most of what is now Massachusetts and New Hampshire.

Led by even-tempered John Winthrop, their first governor, the Massachusetts Puritans sought to create a model Christian commonwealth — "a city on a hill" — that would stand as a beacon of inspiration for others to emulate. Each town had its own congregation and its own minister, whose sermons rang with Calvinist precepts. The system of local congregations that selected their ministers and ran their own affairs became known as the Congregational church. In their wilderness Zion, ministers and government officials worked together to maintain holiness, purity, and order. Only church members — the elect — could vote and hold political office. The government, in turn, protected the church by levying taxes to support it on members and nonmembers alike and by making church attendance compulsory. The Puritans, as Edmund S. Morgan said, "not only endeavored themselves to live a 'smooth, honest, civil life,' but tried to force everyone within their power to do likewise."
The Puritans were pious, sedate folk, but were they puritanical? Alas for them, they have received a bad rap in American popular culture. In Playboy some years ago, Hugh Hefner summed up the popular misconception, referring to the Puritans as grim bigots who hated pleasure in any form and who turned America into a land of rigid sexual repression, censorship, and conformity. As do many others, Hefner confused the Puritans with the custodians of the Victorian moral code of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were the ones who forbade discussion of sexual matters. They were the ones who cringed at the very notion of sex for pleasure and demanded that it be restricted to the marriage bed solely for purposes of procreation. Those who subscribed to the Victorian moral code were so prudish that they referred to piano legs as limbs, because the word legs was too licentious for them.

In the selection that follows, Carl N. Degler, an eminent social historian, sets the record straight as far as the Puritans were concerned. As he points out, they prescribed excesses of enjoyment, not enjoyment itself. What was more, Puritan Massachusetts had the highest educational standard in the English colonies. Bay Colony Puritans were the first to attempt public-supported and -controlled local schools, and their innovation, as Degler says, was “the American prototype of a proper system of popular education.”

GLOSSARY

ANABAPTISTS Widely persecuted Christian sects that opposed infant baptism, holding that only believers should be baptized.

COMSTOCK, ANTHONY American moral crusader of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who organized the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice and secured federal laws against obscene material.

COTTON, JOHN Puritan clergyman and leader in Massachusetts who played a part in the expulsion of Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson.

HUTCHINSON, ANNE Brilliant Puritan who emigrated to Massachusetts Bay in 1634, she was branded a heretic and expelled for preaching what the religious and secular authorities deemed unorthodox doctrine.


MASSACHUSETTS CODE OF 1648 Puritan measure requiring that children be taught to read.

MENCKEN, H. L. Baltimore journalist, author, and social critic, 1880–1956, who lampooned middle-class complacency.

MORISON, SAMUEL ELIOT Twentieth-century Harvard historian who wrote a history of the institution.

REFORMATION Sixteenth-century religious revolution in Western Europe, which began as a movement to reform the Roman Catholic Church and led to the rise of Protestantism.

WILLIAMS, ROGER Puritan minister who was banished from Massachusetts Bay in 1633 for asserting that the king of England had no authority
to seize Indian land without paying for it, Williams went on to found the colony of Rhode Island, where he established the separation of church and state and welcomed religious dissenters.

WINTHROP, JOHN  Principal lay leader of Massachusetts Bay, he served as its first governor for ten years and as deputy governor for nine; he presided over Anne Hutchinson’s trial and approved of her expulsion.

WINTHROP, MARGARET  The governor’s wife, “a very gracious woman” who “epitomized the Puritan mortal ideal.”

To most Americans—and to most europeans, for that matter—the core of the Puritan social heritage has been summed up in [English historian Thomas Babington] Macaulay’s well-known dictum that the Puritans prohibited bearbaiting not because of torture to the bear, but because of the pleasure it afforded the spectators. And a late as 1925, H. L. Mencken defined Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” Before this chapter is out, much will be said about the somber and even grim nature of the Puritan view of life, but quips like those of Macaulay and Mencken distort rather than illumine the essential character of the Puritans. Simply because the word “Puritan” has become encrusted with a good man barnacles, it is worth while to try to scrape them off; we wish to gain an understanding of the Puritan heritage. Though this process is essentially a negative one, sometimes it is clarifying to set forth what an influence is not as well as what it is.

Fundamental to any appreciation of the Puritan mind on matters of pleasure must be the recognition that the typical, godly Puritan was a worker in this world. Puritanism, like Protestantism in general, resolutely and definitely rejected the ascetic and monastic ideals of medieval Catholicism. Pleasures of the body were not to be eschewed by the Puritan, for, as Calvin reasoned, God “intended to provide not only for our necessity, but likewise for our pleasure and delight.” It is obvious, he wrote in his famous Institute, that “the Lord have endow’d flowers with such beauty . . . with such sweetness of smell” in order to impress our senses; therefore, to enjoy them is not contrary to God’s intentions. “In a word,” he concluded, “hath He not made many things worthy of our estimation independent of any necessary use?”

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cautions and legislated. “The wine is from God,” Increase Mather warned, “but the Drunkard is from the Devil.” The Cambridge Platform of the Church of 1680 prohibited games of cards or dice because of the amount of time they consumed and the encouragement they offered to idleness, but the ministers of Boston in 1699 found no difficulty in condoning public lotteries. They were like a public tax, the ministers said, since they took only what the “government might have demanded, with a more general imposition . . . and it employs for the welfare of the public, all that is raised by the lottery.” Though Cotton Mather at the end of the century condemned mixed dancing, he did not object to dancing as such; and his grandfather, John Cotton, at the beginning saw little to object to in dancing between the sexes so long as it did not become lascivious. It was this same John Cotton, incidentally, who successfully contended against Roger Williams’ argument that women should wear veils in church.

In matters of dress, it is true that the Massachusetts colony endeavored to restrict the wearing of “some new and immodest fashion” that was coming in from England, but often these efforts were frustrated by the pillars of the church themselves. [John] Winthrop reported in his History, for example, that though the General Court instructed the elders of the various churches to reduce the ostentation in dress by urging it upon the consciences of their people,” little change was effected, “for divers of the elders’
wives, etc., were in some measure partners in this general disorder."

We also know now that Puritan dress — not that made "historical" by Saint-Gaudens' celebrated statue — was the opposite of severe, being rather in the English Renaissance style. Most restrictions on dress that were imposed were for purposes of class differentiation rather than for ascetic reasons. Thus long hair was acceptable on an upper-class Puritan like [Oliver] Cromwell or Winthrop, but on the head of a person of lower social status it was a sign of vanity. In 1651 the legislature of Massachusetts called attention to that "excess of Apparel" which has "crept in upon us, and especially amongst people of mean condition, to the dishonor of God, the scandal of our profession, the consumption of Estates, and altogether unsuitable to our poverty." The law declared "our utter detestation and dislike, that men and women of mean condition, should take upon them the garb of Gentlemen, by wearing Gold or Silver Lace, or Buttons, or Points at their sleeves, or to walk in great Boots; or Women of the same rank to wear Silk or Tiffany hoods, or Scarfs, which the allowable to persons of greater Estates, or more liberal education, is intolerable in people of low condition." By implication, this law affords a clear description of what the well-dressed Puritan of good estate would wear.

If the Puritans are to be saved from the canard of severity of dress, it is also worth while to soften the charge that they were opposed to music and art. It is perfectly true that the Puritans insisted that organs be removed from the churches and that in England some church organs were smashed by zealots. But it was not music or organs as such which they opposed, only music in the meetinghouse. Well-known American and English Puritans, like Samuel Sewall, John Milton, and Cromwell, were sincere lovers of music. Moreover, it should be remembered that it was under Puritan rule that opera was introduced into England — and without protest, either. The first English dramatic production entirely in music — The Siege of Rhodes was presented in 1656, four years before the Restoration. Just before the end of Puritan rule, John Evelyn noted in his diary that he went "to see a new opera, after the Italian way, in recitative music and scenes. . . ." Furthermore, as Percy Scholes points out, in all the voluminous contemporary literature attacking the Puritans for every conceivable narrow-mindedness, none asserts that they opposed music, so long as it was performed outside the church.

The weight of the evidence is much the same in the realm of art. Though King Charles's art collection was dispersed by the incoming Commonwealth, it is significant that Cromwell and other Puritans bought several of the items. We also know that the Protector's garden at Hampton Court was beautified by nude statues. Furthermore, it is now possible to say that the Puritan closing of the theaters was as much a matter of objection to their degenerate lewdness by the 1640's as an objection to the drama as such. As far as American Puritans are concerned, it is not possible to say very much about their interest in art since there was so little in the seventeenth century. At least it can be said that the Puritans, unlike the Quakers, had no objection to portrait painting.

Some modern writers have professed to find in Puritanism, particularly the New England brand, evidence of sexual repression and inhibition. Though it would certainly be false to suggest that the Puritans did not subscribe to the canon of simple chastity, it is equally erroneous to think that their sexual lives were crabbed or that sex was abhorrent to them. Marriage to the Puritan was something more than an alternative to "burning," as the Pauline doctrine of the Catholic church would have it. Marriage was enjoined upon the righteous Christian; celibacy was not a sign of merit. With un concealed disapprobation, John Cotton told a recently married couple the story of a pair "who immediately upon marriage, without ever approaching the Nuptial Bed," agreed to live apart from the rest of the world, "and afterwards from one another, too. . . ." But, Cotton advised, such behavior was "no other than an effort of blind zeal, for they are the dictates of a blind mind they follow therein and
not of the Holy Spirit which saith, *It is not good that man should be alone.*" Cotton set himself against not only Catholic asceticism but also the view that women were the "unclean vessel," the tempters of men. Women, rather than being "a necessary Evil are a necessary Good," he wrote. "Without them there is no comfortable Living for Man . . . ."

Because, as another divine said, "the Use of the Marriage Bed" is "found in man's Nature" the realistic Puritans required that married men unaccompanied by wives should leave the colony or bring their wives over forthwith. The Puritan settlements encouraged marriages satisfactory to the participants by permitting divorces for those whose spouses were impotent, too long absent, or cruel. Indeed, the divorce laws of New England were the easiest in Christendom at a time when the eloquence of a Milton was unable to loosen the bonds of matrimony in England.

Samuel Elliot Morison in his history of Harvard has collected a number of examples of the healthy interest of Puritan boys in the opposite sex. Commonplace books, for example, indicate that Herrick's poem beginning "Gather ye rosebuds while ye may" and amorous lines from Shakespeare, as well as more erotic and even scatological verse, were esteemed by young Puritan men. For a gentleman to present his affianced with a pair of garders, one letter of a Harvard graduate tells us, was considered neither immoral nor improper.

It is also difficult to reconcile the usual view of the stiffness of Puritans with the literally hundreds of confessions to premarital sexual relations in the extant church records. It should be understood, moreover, that these confessions were made by the saints or saints-to-be, not by the unregenerate. That the common practice of the congregation was to accept such sinners into church membership without further punishment is in itself revealing. The civil law, it is true, punished such transgressions when detected among the regenerates of the nonchurch members, but this was also true of contemporary non-Puritan Virginia. "It will be seen," writes historian Philip A. Bruce regarding Virginia, "from the various instances given relating to the profanation of Sunday, drunkenness, swearing, defamation, and sexual immorality, that, not only were the grand juries and vestries extremely vigilant in reporting these offenses, but the courts were equally prompt in inflicting punishment; and that the penalty ranged from a heavy fine to a shameful exposure in the stocks . . . and from such an exposure to a very severe flogging at the country whipping post." In short, strict moral surveillance by the public authorities was a seventeenth-century rather than a Puritan attitude.

Relations between the sexes in Puritan society were often much more loving and tender than the mythmakers would have us believe. Since it was the Puritan view that marriage was eminently desirable in the sight of God and man, it is not difficult to find evidence of deep and abiding love between a husband and wife. John Cotton, it is true, sometimes used the Biblical phrase "comfortable yoke mate" in addressing his wife, but other Puritan husbands come closer to our romantic conventions. Certainly John Winthrop's letters to his beloved Margaret indicate the depth of attachment of which the good Puritan was capable. "My good wife . . . My sweet wife," he called her. Anticipating his return home, he writes, "So . . . we shall now enjoy each other again, as we desire . . . . It is now bed time; but I must lie alone; therefore I make less haste. Yet I must kiss my sweet wife; and so, with my blessing to our children . . . I commend thee to the grace and blessing of the lord, and rest . . . ."

Anne Bradstreet wrote a number of poems devoted to her love for her husband in which the sentiments and figures are distinctly romantic.

To my Dear and loving Husband
I prize thy love more than whole Mines
of gold
Or all the riches that the East doth hold.
My love is such that Rivers cannot quench,
Nor ought but love from thee give recompense.
THE FIRST CENTURY

In another poem her spouse is apostrophized as

My head, my heart, mine Eyes, my life: nay more
My joy, my Magazine of earthly store

and she asks:

If thou be one, as surely thou and I,
How stayest thou there, whilst I at Ipswich lie?

Addressing John as "my most sweet Husband,"
Margarit Winthrop perhaps epitomized the Puritan marital ideal when she wrote, "I have many reasons to make me love thee, whereof I will name two: First, because thou lovest God and, secondly, because thou lovest me. If these two were wanting," she added, "all the rest would be eclipsed."

It would be a mistake, however, to try to make these serious, dedicated men and women into rakes of the Renaissance. They were sober if human folk, deeply concerned about their ultimate salvation and intent upon living up to God's commands as they understood them, despite their acknowledgment of complete depravity and unworthiness. "God sent you not into this world as a Play-House, but a Work-house," one minister told his congregation. To the Puritan this was a world drenched in evil, and, because it truly is, they were essentially realistic in their judgments. Because the Puritan expected nothing, Perry Miller has remarked, a disillusioned one was almost impossible to find. This is probably an exaggeration, for they were also human beings; when the Commonwealth fell, it was a Puritan, after all, who said, "God has spit in our faces." But Professor Miller's generalization has much truth in it. Only a man convinced of the inevitable and eternal character of evil could fight it so hard and so unceasingly.

The Puritan at his best, Ralph Barton Perry has said, was a "moral athlete." More than most men, the Puritan strove with himself and with his fellow man to attain a moral standard higher than was rightfully to be expected of so depraved a creature. Hence the diaries and autobiographies of Puritans are filled with the most tortuous probing of the soul and inward seeking. Convinced of the utter desirability of salvation on the one hand, and equally cognizant of the total depravity of man's nature on the other, the Puritan was caught in an impossible dilemma which permitted him no respite short of the grave. Yet with such a spring coiled within him, the Puritan drove himself and his society to tremendous heights of achievement both material and spiritual.

Such intense concern for the actualization of the will of God had a less pleasant side to it, also. If the belief that "I am my brother's keeper" is the breeding ground of heightened social conscience and expresses itself in the reform movements so indigenous to Boston and its environs, it also could and did lead to self-righteousness, intolerance, and narrow-mindedness, as exemplified in another product of Boston: Anthony Comstock. But this fruit of the loins of Puritanism is less typical of the earthy seventeenth-century New Englander than H. L. Mencken would have us think. The Sabbatarian, antiliquor, and antinex attitudes usually attributed to the Puritans are a nineteenth-century addition to the much more moderate and essentially wholesome view of life's evils held by the early settlers of New England.

To realize how different Puritans could be, one needs only to contrast Roger Williams and his unwavering opponent John Cotton. But despite the range of differences among Puritans, they all were linked by at least one characteristic. That was their belief in themselves, in their morality and in their mission to the world. For this reason, Puritanism was intellectual and social dynamite in the seventeenth century; its power disrupted churches, defied tyrants, overthrew governments, and beheaded kings.

The Reformation laid an awesome burden on the souls of those who broke with the Roman Church. Proclaiming the priesthood of all believers, Protestantism made each man's relationship to God his own terrifying responsibility. No one else could save him; therefore no one must presume to try. More con-
were filled with an inward conviction of the necessity of salvation. The Puritans, with such a drive for self-achivement and the reformation of the Church, were led to self-centeredness. The Puritan was compelled, for the sake of his immortal soul, to be a fearless individualist.

It was the force of this conviction which produced the Great Migration of 1630-40 and made Massachusetts a flourishing colony in the span of a decade. It was also, ironically, the force which impelled Roger Williams to threaten the very legal and social foundations of the Puritan Commonwealth in Massachusetts because he thought the oligarchy wrong and himself right. And so it would always be. For try as the rulers of Massachusetts might to make men conform to their dogma, their own rebellious example always stood as a guide to those who felt the truth was being denied. Such individualism, we would call it today, was flesh and bone of the religion which the Puritans passed on.

Though the theocracy soon withered and died, its harsh voice softened down to the balmy breath of Unitarianism, the belief in self and the dogged resistance to suppression or untruth which Puritanism taught never died. Insofar as Americans today can be said to be individualistic, it is to the Puritan heritage that we must turn for some of the principal sources.

In his ceaseless striving for signs of salvation and knowledge of God's intentions for man, the Puritan placed great reliance upon the human intellect, even though for him, as for all Christians, faith was the bedrock of his belief. "Faith doth not relinquish or cast out reason," wrote the American Puritan Samuel Willard, "for there is nothing in Religion contrary to it, tho' there are many things that do transcend and must captivate it." Richard Baxter, the English Puritan, insisted that "the most Religious, are the most truly, and nobly rational." Religion and reason were complementary to the Puritan, not antithetical as they were to many evangelical sects of the time.

Always the more emotion of religion was to be controlled by reason. Because of this, the university-trained Puritan clergy prided themselves on the lucidity and rationality of their sermons. Almost rigorously their sermons followed the logical sequence of "doctrine," "reasons," and "uses." Conscientiously they shunned the meandering and rhetorical flourishes so beloved by Laudian preachers like John Donne, and in the process facilitated the taking of notes by their eager listeners. One of the unforgivable crimes of Mistress Anne Hutchinson was her assertion that one could "feel" one's salvation, that one was "filled with God" after conversion, that it was unnecessary, in order to be saved, to be learned in the Bible or in the Puritan writers. It was not that the Puritans were cold to the Word — far from it. A saint was required to testify to an intense religious experience — almost by definition emotional in character — before he could attain full membership in the Church. But it was always important to the Puritans that mere emotion — whether it be the anarchistic activities of the Anabaptists or the quaking of the Friends — should not be mistaken for righteousness or proper religious conduct. Here, as in so many things, the Puritans attempted to walk the middle path — in this instance, between the excessive legalism and formalism of the Catholics and Episcopalians and the flaming, intuitive evangelism of the Baptists and Quakers.

Convinced of reason's great worth, it was natural that the Puritans should also value education. "Ignorance is the mother (not of Devotion but of Heresy)," one Puritan divine declared. And a remarkably well-educated ministry testified to the Puritan belief that learning and scholarship were necessary for a proper understanding of the Word of God. More than a hundred graduates of Cambridge and Oxford Universities settled in New England before 1640, most of them ministers. At the same date not five men in all of Virginia could lay claim to such an educational background. Since Cambridge University, situated on the edge of Puritan East Anglia, supplied most of the graduates in America, it was natural that Newtown, the site of New England's own college, would soon be renamed in honor of the Alma Mater. "After God had carried us safe to New-England," said a well-known tract, some of its words now immortalized in metal in Harvard Yard, "one of the next things we longed and looked after, was to advance learning, and
perpetuate it to posterity, dreading to leave an illiterate ministry to the churches, when the present ministers shall lie in the dust." "The College," founded in 1636, soon to be named Harvard, was destined to remain the only institution of higher learning in America during almost all the years of the seventeenth century. Though it attracted students from as far away as Virginia, it remained, as it began, the fountainhead of Puritan learning in the New World.

Doubt as one may Samuel Eliot Morison's claims for the secular origins of Harvard, his evidence of the typically Renaissance secular education which was available at the Puritan college in New England is both impressive and convincing. The Latin and Greek secular writers of antiquity dominated the curriculum, for this was a liberal arts training such as the leaders had received at Cambridge in England. To the Puritans the education of ministers could be nothing less than the best learning of the day. So important did education at Harvard seem to the New Haven colony in 1644 that the legislature ordered each town to appoint two men to be responsible for the collection of contributions from each family for "the maintenance of scholars at Cambridge, . . ."

If there was to be a college, preparatory schools had to be provided for the training of those who were expected to enter the university. Furthermore, in a society dedicated to the reading of the Bible, elementary education was indispensable. "It being one chief project of that old deluder Satan to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures" began the first school laws of Massachusetts (1647) and Connecticut (1650). But the Puritans supported education for secular as well as religious reasons. The Massachusetts Code of 1648, for instance, required children to be taught to read inasmuch "as the good education of children is of singular behoof and benefit to any Commonwealth."

The early New England school laws provided that each town of fifty families or more was to hire a teacher for the instruction of its young; towns of one hundred families or more were also directed to provide grammar schools, "the master thereof being able to instruct youths so far as they may be fitted for the University." Though parents were not obliged to send their children to these schools, if they did not they were required to teach their children to read. From the evidence of court cases and the high level of literacy in seventeenth-century New England, it would appear that these first attempts at publicly supported and public-controlled education were both enforced and fruitful.

No other colony in the seventeenth century imposed such a high educational standard upon its simple farming people as the Puritans did. It is true, of course, that Old England in this period could boast of grammar schools, some of which were free. But primary schools were almost nonexistent there, and toward the end of the seventeenth century the free schools in England became increasingly tuition schools. Moreover, it was not until well into the nineteenth century that the English government did anything to support schools. Primary and secondary education in England, in contrast with the New England example, was a private or church affair.

Unlike the Puritans, the Quakers exhibited little impulse toward popular education in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Because of their accent on the Inner Light and the doctrine of universal salvation, the religious motivation of the [Quakers] for learning was wanting. Furthermore, the Quakers did not look to education, as such, with the same reverence as the Puritans. William Penn, for example, advised his children that "reading many books is but a taking off the mind too much from meditation." No Puritan would have said that.

Virginia in the seventeenth century, it should be said, was also interested in education. Several times in the course of the century plans were well advanced for establishing a university in the colony. Free schools also existed in Virginia during the seventeenth century, though the lack of village communities made them inaccessible for any great numbers of children. But, in contrast with New England, there were no
publicly supported schools in Virginia; the funds for the field schools of Virginia, like those for free schools in contemporary England, came from private or ecclesiastical endowment. Nor was Virginia able to bring its several plans for a college into reality until William and Mary was founded at the very end of the century.

Though the line which runs from the early New England schools to the distinctly American system of free public schools today is not always progressively upward or uniformly clear, the connection is undeniable. The Puritan innovation of public support and control on a local level was the American prototype of a proper system of popular education.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. Discuss the reality of the widely held belief that Puritan society was grim, colorless, bigoted, and repressed. How would Degler respond to H. L. Mencken’s 1925 definition of Puritanism as “the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy”? How did Puritan social and moral standards and ideals compare with those of Catholics, Quakers, and others in the seventeenth century?

2. What does Degler mean by saying the Puritan at his or her best was a “moral athlete”? How did Puritanism and Quakerism embody the bourgeois spirit that historian Max Weber called the “Protestant Ethic”? Was this ethic merely a religious justification for ruthless materialism, or was it something more? How was the Protestant ethic transformed into the American work ethic?

3. How did the Puritans’ belief in their duty to God influence their view of the responsibility of individuals to themselves and to society? What have been the lasting influences of this view on American attitudes as they have developed since the seventeenth century?

4. What was the Puritan position on the traditional juxtaposition of emotion and reason? How did they compare in this matter with their contemporaries of different religions?

5. What was the educational background of the Puritans who settled in New England, and how did it compare with that of the Virginians? What did the New England Puritans see as the role and importance of education in society? How did they go about realizing their ideal, and how did their achievements compare with those of England and Virginia? What has been their lasting influence on the American educational ideal and system?