

How Puritanical Were the Puritans? by Richard Kezirian

For most present-day Americans, mere mention of the Puritans conjures up a vivid and negative image. We imagine militant Protestants rigidly disciplined in their belief in predestination and unflinching in the idea that God's grace had placed them above and apart from the rest of humanity. We see them in the chilly confines of colonial New England, and picture them dressed in severe clothes of black. We associate them with extreme asceticism and abhorrence of the pleasures of the body, with neurotic sexual inhibitions, and with hostility to the enjoyment of art and music. We believe they were fanatically repressive in their political views. Indeed, the term "puritanical" has come to mean rigidly austere, narrow-minded, and self-righteous.

The great nineteenth century British historian, Thomas Macaulay, concurred with this image when he gibed: "The Puritan hated bear beating, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators." Macaulay's American contemporary, Nathaniel Hawthorne, added credibility to the stereotype of the Puritans in his classic novel, *The Scarlet Letter*. Its heroine was condemned to wear the scarlet letter "A" (Adulteress) upon her dress for the rest of her life, while the secret father of her child, a prominent young minister in colonial Boston, went through the agonies of guilt and remorse. The novel was replete with images of rigidities and repression, and it portrayed a somber people in an inhibiting environment. In the twentieth century, the caustic American critic, H.L. Mencken, continued the gloomy portrayal when he wrote: "Puritanism is the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy."

Historians in the early decades of the twentieth century went along with these popular images. During the years after World War I, Americans were turning away somewhat from Europe, and subconsciously many of America's scholars were busy deriding the European influence in our national past, and with it the English Puritans who first came to settle here. Further, these were the years of Prohibition; and intellectuals saw in the self-righteous prohibitionist a twentieth-century Puritan. Indeed, not just an ordinary Puritan was visualized, but one with a blue-tipped nose, and perhaps a hatchet, who invaded the privacy of ordinary citizens in his search for immoral behavior and caches of liquor.

Lately, however, historians have been more sympathetic in their portrayal of the Puritans. Each of the stereotyped characteristics mentioned has been restudied and the harsher aspects of the above portrait have been softened. First of all, the image of the righteous masochist rejecting all bodily pleasures has been clarified. For, as Protestants, Puritans never accepted the ascetic and monastic ideals of medieval Catholicism. Puritans typically saw themselves as workers in the world, and did not idealize the isolation and seclusion of monasticism. Further, Puritans did not totally reject pleasures of the body. Their attitude toward liquor is just one example. None other than the devoted Puritan leader and minister, Increase Mather, admitted that "wine is from God." A look at the immense quantities of alcohol and wine that colonial Puritans consumed can serve as verification that Puritans heartily relished God's munificence in this regard.

Similarly, Puritan attitudes towards sex are no longer associated with the inhibitions and hushed voices of this stereotype. Puritans were open and frank about the importance of sex in a happy and healthy marriage, and it is simply incorrect to talk of them as sexually inhibited or characterized by sexually repressive attitudes. One prominent Puritan minister, Samuel Willard,

more than once expressed his disapproval of “that Popish conceit of the Excellency of Virginity.”

Equally exaggerated is the image of Puritans somberly clad in black. True, the vegetable dyes of those days limited the range of colors available. Nonetheless, the Puritans did not restrict themselves to black. Their clothing inventories show that “russet,” or various shades of orange-brown were among their favorites, along with many items of red, blue, green, yellow, purple, and so forth. Nor were the Puritans opposed to music and art per se. What they objected to was their display in the meetinghouse. Outside the church, however, art and music were often highly esteemed.

It is even more of a mistake to characterize the Puritans as intellectually repressive. Though faith was, of course, the bedrock of their beliefs, Puritans also set great value on the idea that a person’s intellect and reasoning had to be finely cultivated for a true understanding of God’s Word. Their sermons, for instance, were noted for their high intellectual caliber, and their ministers were often among the best-educated people in the New World. More than 100 graduates of Oxford and Cambridge settled in New England before 1640, most of them ministers, while all of Virginia could not claim even five men with a similar background. The high value Puritans placed on education was exemplified by their founding of “The College” in 1636, later named Harvard University. Other religious sects soon followed suit. By the time of the American Revolution, there were nine colleges in the English colonies, only one which was not founded under the auspices of a church. It is interesting to note that England did not establish its third university until the end of the nineteenth century.

One must not go too far in the reversal of the Puritan stereotype, however. While destroying one myth, I do not mean to create another. These people, after all, did not call themselves “Puritans” for nothing. I surely do not want to turn the Puritans into “rakes of the Renaissance” with one arm lustfully cuddling Priscilla, and the other hoisting a tankard of ale. Though the traditional stereotype went too far, the Puritans were a serious lot. Puritan society was not one in which twentieth-century Americans would feel comfortable. Though Increase Mather might say that “wine is from God,” he also remarked that “the Drunkard is from the Devil.” And albeit one might learn that “repression” was not directed against the expression of sexual impulses as strongly as formerly thought, there was “repression” directed against the expression of anger. Further, the whole of the Puritan community was concerned, in a way which Americans today would consider extremely conservative and repressive, about the morals and virtues of each of its members.

It is no wonder, then, that depending on the current modes and trends in American values, at various times in our history Puritans have either been revered or reviled. As we have seen, the more rollicking Twenties condemn them, and the more serious Thirties began their rehabilitation. Because of this tendency, historians today are trying to get away from judging Puritans by contemporary standards. We are trying to rise above our tendency toward “present mindedness,” to show how Puritan attitudes fit in with the economic and political circumstances of the middle classes in the seventeenth century, and to understand why Puritan attitudes were reasonably appropriate to the needs of those classes in their time.

With this approach, some penetrating insights have emerged. The first comes from the historian Samuel Eliot Morison. In 1956 Morison argued that the alternative to a Puritanically-controlled intellectual life, given the conditions of the seventeenth-century America, was not cool rationalism or vibrant humanism, but an intellectual vacuum. Morrison writes:

A humanist New England would doubtless have provided a pleasanter dwelling place, and a more sweet and wholesome stream to swell the American flood than a puritan New England. But...the mere physical labor of getting a living in a virgin country is so great as to exhaust and stultify the human spirit unless it has some great emotional drive... The intellectual alternatives for New England were not puritanism *or* humanism, but puritanism *or* overwhelming materialism.

Another particularly cogent insight emerges when contrasting the seventeenth-century Puritan family with its twentieth-century American counterpart. The Puritan family was at the same time a business, a school, a vocational institute, a church, a house of correction, and a welfare institution. Under those circumstances it was necessary, in the interest of a smoothly-running society, for Puritan governmental institutions to supervise and get involved with what we today would consider private matters. In the twentieth century, the factory, the government, the school, the cinema, etc., have taken over functions that were once consigned to the nuclear family; in our day, corresponding governmental "interference" would naturally seem too confining.

In conclusion, whether or not one believes that the Puritans were too inhibited and somber for comfortable living, it is still important to recognize their significance in American history. Their spiritual dedication, their intellectual vitality, and their sense of mission have become part of the "national character" of our middle classes. At its best, the Puritan legacy, as Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, prompts Americans toward "the pursuit of the vast, the beautiful, and the unattainable."