
The Puritan Movement in England

Peter Golding

The Puritans were men whose minds had derived a peculiar interest from the daily contemplation of superior beings and eternal interests...Perhaps the most remarkable body of men which the world has ever produced.

Lord Macaulay

Wherever the religion, the language, or the free spirit of our country has forced its way, the Puritans of old have some memorial. They have moulded the character and shaped the laws of other lands, and tinged with their devout shades unnumbered congregations of Christian worshippers, even where no allegiance is professed, or willing homage done to their peculiarities. It is a party that has numbered in its ranks many of the best, and not a few of the greatest men that England has enrolled upon her history.

JB Marsden, *History of the Early Puritans*

The Puritans, as a body, have done more to elevate the national character than any class of Englishmen that ever lived.

Bishop JC Ryle of Liverpool

Puritanism entered our bone and sinew; it gave an immense strength and discipline to our nation in the days of its grandeur.

Professor AG Dickens, *The English Reformation*

According to the church historian, Thomas Fuller, "Puritanism" as a recognised descriptive term first came into use about the year 1564. But who were the Puritans, and what was Puritanism? Surprisingly perhaps, these questions are more easily asked than answered.

I. A confused issue

In the words of Dr John Brown, "Puritanism was not so much an organised system as a religious temper and a moral force".¹ This is clearly borne out in the history of the period under review, for the term was by no means confined to those who separated from the Church of England, but included many who remained within her pale. However, as a modern writer puts it, "the definitions of 'Puritan' and 'Puritanism' have been, since their earliest use in England, a matter of crowded debate and widespread confusion".² Ferguson puts it similarly: "The problem of defining the concept 'Puritan' in historical terms has been frequently and inconclusively discussed".³

That being the case, some consideration needs to be given at the very outset to an understanding of the Puritan ethos, and hopefully also to a working definition of Puritanism as an historical phenomenon. In doing so, one must not be influenced by a popular misconception "the assumption that the Puritans were primarily strict and dour moralists, kill-joys and even hypocrites." This is the most common modern sense of the word, but "to read it back into history is an error".⁴ As one of the greatest modern authorities in this field expresses it, "Puritanism...should be defined with respect to the Puritans, and not vice versa".⁵

The Methodists of the 18th century, and to some extent the Fundamentalists of the 20th, have both suffered from a similar misconception. No doubt there were some associated with the Puritan movement who fell into the above-mentioned categories, and the popular image dies hard, but to stigmatize Puritanism as a whole in that way simply will not stand up to historical investigation: and rigorous historical investigation above all is what is required here. For example, an article in the Daily Telegraph of 3 August 1991 describes the Puritans as those who “enjoyed smashing stained-glass windows”.⁶ An earlier report on the recent emphasis on physical health and fitness in the US referred to it as “the new Puritanism in the workplace,” and “the new Puritanism which is flaunted even within the White House”!⁷ “Puritan” may well have been used as a term of opprobrium during the period under investigation (as will be shown), but only by its opponents and enemies, who were hardly unbiased. Anyone seeking to grasp the nature of Puritanism, therefore, has to free his mind from popular prejudice and misunderstanding.

The fact of the matter is that, like Christianity itself, Puritanism is an historical phenomenon; and as such, “it must be investigated on the basis of historical evidence,” and “can be determined only by an examination of (its) beginnings...”.⁸

2. The problem of definition

How then do we define Puritanism? John Adair writes: “In fact, ‘Puritan’ was one of several names applied by contemporary critics and enemies to ‘the hotter sort of Protestants’”.⁹ But although indicative of their zeal, this gives little information as to their distinctive outlook and beliefs, the rationale by which they were motivated. “The hotter sort of protestants are called puritans”, explains the Elizabethan pamphleteer Percival Wiburn in his *A checke or reproofe of M. Howlet’s untimely schreeching*,¹⁰ – but he was “innocent of the sophistication of later discussions of the problem”.¹¹ In similar vein, GR Elton in his history of *England under the Tudors*, describes these men as “puritans” because they wanted “a religion ‘purified’ of all the works of Rome”.¹² This too is inadequate. It provides a good definition of “protestant”, but is too simplistic as a description of “puritan”. In his introduction to a study of the Puritan doctrine of Assurance, a recent contributor to the Westminster Theological Journal raises the issue thus:

What was it that defined English Puritanism? Was it essentially a theological movement, emphasizing covenant theology, predestination, and a reformed church service? Or was the heart of the matter political, asserting the inalienable rights of conscience before God, the rule of natural law over arbitrary prerogative courts, the dependency of the king in parliament, the foundation of state authority in the people? Some modern research has pointed to a third possibility, that the essence of Puritanism was its piety, a stress on conversion, on existential, heartfelt religion.¹³

No small testimony to the creativity and far-reaching influence of the Puritans lies in the fact that a steady stream of works exploring Puritan contributions in these three areas continues to be produced. The fact is that because the English Puritans engaged in such a diversity of effort, it is inevitable that scholarship should appear to present such a fragmented picture of them. For instance, Prof. John Fiske, “who has been ranked as one of the two greatest American historians”,¹⁴ says:

It is not too much to say that in the seventeenth century, the entire political future of mankind was staked upon the questions that were at issue in England. Had it not been

for the Puritans, political liberty would probably have disappeared from the world. If ever there were men who laid down their lives in the cause of all mankind, it was those grim old Ironsides, whose watch-words were texts of Holy Writ, whose battle-cries were hymns of praise.¹⁵

For more detailed consideration of the political aspect, (in the 17th century), William Haller's brilliant study *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* should be consulted.¹⁶ To some students of the period, if Oliver Cromwell and his secretary John Milton were Puritans, then Puritanism must have been a political movement. To others, if John Owen was a Puritan, then it must have been a theological movement. While to still others, if John Bunyan was a Puritan, then it must have been a pietistic movement. To this kind of approach, it is almost inconceivable that such disparate people should not only be identified with, but be organically related to one essential movement. But the thesis of this study is that this fissiparous tendency in Puritan scholarship needs to be countered with what it is hoped to establish as the unifying principle, the definitive core of Puritanism. In a paper delivered in 1990 entitled, *The Nature of Puritanism*, AA Davies expresses this desideratum somewhat humorously as follows: "Like the National Debt, inflation, and the girth of the middle-aged, the meaning of the term 'Puritan' has increased, is increasing and ought to be diminished!"¹⁷ Today, it is applied, usually with contempt, to people who are, or who are regarded as, "strict, precise, or scrupulous in religion or morals".¹⁸ John Adair speaks of "the Puritan within us", identifying five characteristics which he believes we have inherited from our Puritan forebears: the Puritan ethic of hard work (and virtually possessing redemptive value); the concept of marriage as a union of spirit, mind and body; cultural simplicity, whether of music, architecture, clothes, or preaching; the belief that scientific investigation is more important than traditional authority; and Puritan values such as involvement in public life, contractual responsibilities, political realism, and self-examination.¹⁹ Nor is this expansion of the term a modern phenomenon; it happened in the 17th century as well. For example, "Puritan" was used in a political sense of those who favoured the restricting of the power of the monarchy by parliament, or even those people "who opposed a Spanish foreign policy".²⁰ Archbishop Whitgift, James I, and even Prince Charles have been dubbed "Puritans"! When used religiously, the term included on the one hand "rigid Calvinists" who favoured the Synod of Dort (1618), and on the other any who sought, like Richard Baxter's father, to read the Bible when others were Morris-dancing etc. on the Sabbath, to pray at home, to reprove drunkards and swearers, and to speak sometimes a few words regarding the life to come.²¹

The truth is that, as Elizabethan society became more secular, affluent, and worldly, "the criteria for determining who was a Puritan became progressively weakened and widened so as to include most serious-minded Protestants who dared to question the freedom of Englishmen to say or do as they pleased on any day of the week".²² "He that has not every word on oath...they say he is a puritan, a precise fool, not fit to hold a gentleman company," wrote a certain Barnaby Rich.²³ By 1641, Henry Parker was complaining about people who enlarged the term to include "any civil, honest, Protestant", and then contracted it so that it was used of "none but monstrous abominable heretics and miscreants".²⁴ Such has been the inflation of the term that CH and K George have argued that the word "Puritan" is the *x* of a social equation: it has no meaning beyond that given it by the particular manipulator of an algebra of abuse.²⁵ However,

inflation needs to be brought under control, and we need to strip away subsequent accretions to the name in order to arrive at an accurate historical definition.

“Puritan” itself was an imprecise term of contemptuous abuse, which between 1564 and 1642 (these exact dates are given by Thomas Fuller and Richard Baxter²⁶) was applied to at least five overlapping groups of people: – first, to clergy who scrupled some Prayer Book ceremonies and phrasing; second, to advocates of the Presbyterian reform programme broached by Thomas Cartwright (Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity at Cambridge), and the 1572 *Admonition to the Parliament*; third, to clergy and laity, not necessarily non-conformists, who practised a serious Calvinistic piety; fourth, to “rigid Calvinists” who applauded the Synod of Dort, and were called doctrinal Puritans by other Anglicans who did not; fifth, to MPs, JPs, and other gentry who showed public respect for religion, the laws of England, and the rights of subjects.²⁷

The description of Puritans as “rigid Calvinists” first appeared in print in M Antonius de Dominis, *The Cause of his Return, out of England*.²⁸ The equation had already been made, however, in a private document drawn up by John Overall, Regius Professor of Divinity at Cambridge, some time between 1610 and 1619, in which Overall contrasts the tenets of “the Remonstrants or Arminians, and the counter-Remonstrants or Puritans”.²⁹

In reply to Professor and Mrs George, then, “there was a specific, though complex and many sided, reality to which all these uses of the ‘odious name’ really did pertain”. This was a clergy-led movement “which for more than a century was held together, and given a sense of identity too deep for differences of judgement on questions of polity and politics to destroy”.³⁰

The introductory references to Puritan greatness may seem an unwarranted exercise in hagiography. Pillorying the Puritans, in particular, has long been a popular pastime on both sides of the Atlantic. “Puritan” as a name was, in fact, mud from the start. Coined in the early 1560s, it was always a satirical smear word implying peevishness, censoriousness, conceit, and a measure of hypocrisy, over and above its basic implication of religiously motivated discontent with what was seen as Elizabeth’s Laodicean and compromising Church of England.

Later, the word gained the further, political connotation of being against the Stuart monarchy, and for some sort of republicanism; “its primary reference, however, was still to what was seen as an odd, furious, and ugly form of Protestant religion”.³¹ In England, anti-Puritan feeling was let loose at the time of the Restoration, and has flowed freely ever since. During the past half-century, however, a major reassessment of Puritanism has taken place in historical scholarship, “Fifty years ago the academic study of Puritanism went over a watershed with the discovery that there was such a thing as Puritan culture, and a rich culture at that, over and above Puritan reactions against certain facets of medieval and Renaissance culture”.³² In fact, North America has been in the van of this new assessment with four classic studies published within a period of only two years which ensured that Puritan studies could never be the same again. These were: William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (1938); ASP Woodhouse, *Puritanism and Liberty* (1938); MM Knappen, *Tudor Puritanism* (1939), described as “magisterial” by Professor Patrick Collinson, himself author of another, more recent classic, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (1991); and Perry Miller, *The New England Mind, Vol. I: The Seventeenth Century* (1939).³³

3. Recent reassessment

As a consequence, the conventional image has been radically revamped, and a plethora of more recent researchers have confirmed the view of Puritanism which these four volumes yielded. It is now generally acknowledged that the typical Puritans were not “wild men...religious fanatics and social extremists, but sober, conscientious, and cultured persons: persons of principle...excelling in the domestic virtues, and with no obvious shortcomings save a tendency to run to words when saying anything important”.³⁴ The great Puritan pastor-theologians (to go no further) – Owen, Baxter, Goodwin, Howe, Perkins, Sibbes, Brooks, Watson, Gurnall, Flavel, Bunyan, Manton, and others – “were men of outstanding intellectual power, as well as spiritual insight”.³⁵ “For more than two centuries, since Daniel Neal’s *History of the Puritans*, it has been usual to define the Puritan movement in terms of the power struggle that went on in church and state”;³⁶ and this, of course, is part of the truth, but it leaves the issue of Puritan motives unresolved. According to JI Packer, Dr Irvonwy Morgan supplies the vital clue. He writes:

The essential thing in understanding the Puritans was that they were preachers before they were anything else...Into whatever efforts they were led in their attempts to reform the world through the Church, and however these efforts were frustrated by the leaders of the Church, what bound them together, undergirded their striving, and gave them the dynamic to persist was their consciousness that they were called to preach the Gospel.³⁷

In other words, Puritanism was at heart a spiritual movement, passionately concerned with the glory of God and the life of godliness. It was this from its inception. So it was not, as William Haller often implies,³⁸ that the Puritan clergy turned to preaching and pastoral work as a means to the end of building-up a lay constituency strong enough to secure the reformation in church order which by 1570 they found was unattainable by direct action.

The truth is rather that, as Edward Dering’s John Knox-like sermon before Elizabeth in 1570 and the 1572 *Admonition* (to look no further) make plain, the end to which all church order, on the Puritan view, was a means, and for which everything superstitious, misleading and Spirit-quenching must be rooted out, was the glory of God in and through the salvation of sinners and the building up of lively congregations in which people met God.³⁹

The basis of this outlook was to be found in the Puritan view of Scripture as the “regulative principle” of doctrine and practice (and more especially of church worship and order – of which more anon). Puritanism, then, was in Packer’s words, “a movement for church reform, pastoral renewal and evangelism, and spiritual revival”.⁴⁰ In addition, and as an immediate expression of its zeal for the honour of God, it was a world-view, a total Christian philosophy and way of life. To summarise: the Puritan aim was to complete what the English Reformation had begun: to finish reshaping Anglican worship, to introduce effective church discipline into Anglican parishes, and to establish righteousness in the political, domestic, and socio-economic fields. So Prof. Basil Hall points out that we should use the term historically, as it was used by those who made it: i.e. of those “restlessly critical and occasionally rebellious members of the Church of England”,⁴¹ who desired the further purification of their Church, in membership, worship, and government.

4. The essential concern

Historically, then, the essential concern of Puritanism was that the Protestant Reformation begun in the reign of Henry VIII, and furthered under Edward VI, should be completed. Clearly, that is the way Thomas Fuller understood it in 1655 when, writing of the year 1564, he said that “Puritan” was an “odious” nickname of abuse thrown at those ministers who refused to subscribe to the liturgy, ceremonies, and discipline of the established Church urged upon them by the bishops.⁴² This understanding of the term was confirmed by John Geree in his *The Character of an old English Puritane, or Non-Conformist* (1646); by William Bradshaw in his *English Puritanism* (1605), and by Richard Baxter in his *Autobiography*.⁴³

If it is confined to this narrower sense, it will exclude the Separatists, who did not protest within but seceded from the national Church. However, “both Puritans and mainstream Separatists shared common ideas and ideals, and desired greater purity in the Churches and in the lives of their members”.⁴⁴ The difference between them was initially one of “strategy, patience, and timing.” The Puritans were patently much closer to the Separatists in a theological and spiritual sense than they were to the Roman Catholics, or even to the Anglicanism of Laud or Hooker. As Professor Hall admits: “perhaps nothing can now prevent most writers from describing Browne, Penry, Robinson, Milton, Cromwell, Bunyan as Puritans, alongside of Cartwright, Travers, Perkins, and Preston who were Puritans in fact”.⁴⁵

Considered from this dual standpoint, Dr DM Lloyd-Jones, a modern “Puritan”, was not self-contradictory in defining Puritanism in two different ways. On the one hand, “Essential Puritanism”, he argued, “was not primarily a preference for one form of church government rather than another; but it was that outlook and teaching which put its emphasis upon a life of spiritual, personal religion, an intense realization of the presence of God, a devotion of the entire being to Him”.⁴⁶ Elsewhere, in dealing with the perennial problem that people will persist in thinking of Puritanism as “just a narrow view of ethics, and of morality, and of conduct...as just a negative protest against pleasures, he adds:

But that is not Puritanism. The essence of Puritanism was a desire that the Reformation in the Church of England should be completed.⁴⁷

From this standpoint, Lord Macaulay gets to the nub of the issue. The Puritans, he says, were men “convinced that the reform which had been effected under King Edward (VI) had been far less searching and extensive than the interests of pure religion required”.⁴⁸ From its beginnings in the early days of Elizabeth’s reign (1558-1603), the Puritan movement had this clear objective. In the words of William Haller, one of the greatest modern authorities in this field, “The Puritans sought to push reform of government, worship, and discipline in the English Church beyond the limits fixed by the Elizabethan settlement”.⁴⁹ When Elizabeth came to the throne, “the Reformation was secure but not complete. It was the Puritans’ aim to make it complete”.⁵⁰

It is true that in this purpose they failed, “and if this had been all, Puritanism would never have become the revolutionary force it proved to be in the life of the English people, and of people within the English tradition throughout the world”.⁵¹ Certainly, Puritanism was much bigger than the desire to reconstitute the ecclesiastical organization of society. It was in fact “nothing but English Protestantism in its most dynamic form”,⁵²

and before it had run its course, “it had transfused in large measure the whole of English life”.⁵³ Hence the Puritan movement developed down to the outbreak of revolution in 1649 not only as a campaign for reorganizing the institutional structure of the church, but also as a concerted and sustained enterprise of preachers for setting forth in pulpit and press a conception of spiritual life and moral behaviour. In this sense, Puritanism was not incompatible with any given ecclesiastical system, episcopalian, presbyterian, or congregational, and in so being, “it changed the face of both church and nation far more radically than all their ecclesiastical and political planning could have done”.⁵⁴ However, the Puritans were all of one mind in this, whatever their other differences, that from the ecclesiastical standpoint, the Reformation of the Church of England had, because of political expediency, been stunted before it could be conformed to the primitive simplicity of the New Testament model. “Neither the civil nor ecclesiastical powers, they maintained, had the authority to add to, subtract from, or modify the sufficient, definitive teaching of the New Testament in its pattern of Church government and Church life”.⁵⁵ “In sum, all Puritans were against any priest or ceremony being interposed between the Christian soul and its Maker,” says Maurice Ashley in his *History of the Seventeenth Century*.⁵⁶ The whole discussion can be summed up by another modern authority on this period, MM Knappen:

The term “Puritan” is used...to designate the outlook of those English Protestants who actively favoured a reformation beyond that which the crown was willing to countenance and who yet stopped short of Anabaptism. It therefore includes both Presbyterians and Independents, Separatists and Non-Separatists. It also includes a number of Anglicans who accepted the episcopal system, but who nevertheless desired to model it and English Church life in general on the Continental Reformed pattern.⁵⁷

Such was the Puritan ethos as it developed under Elizabeth, James I, and Charles I, and blossomed in the Interregnum, before it withered in the dark tunnel of persecution between 1660 (Restoration) and 1689 (Toleration).

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