

Anglo-American Puritanisms

Introduction

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Early in 1646 the Presbyterian polemicist Thomas Edwards bemoaned the spread of religious error and separatist congregations:

If some of those godly Ministers who were famous in their time, should rise out of their graves and come now among us, as Mr. Perkins, Greenham, Hildersham, Dr. Preston, Dr. Sibbs etc, they would wonder to see things come to this passe in England, and to meet with such Books for Toleration of all religions, and Books in defence of Arminian, Antinomian Errors; what would they thinke when they should meet with such Ministers and Christians whom they judged godly and sound, now to plead for a Liberty of all consciences, there to meet with one of their acquaintance turned Anabaptist, another turned Seeker, a third Familist, a fourth Antiscripturist.¹

For this alarmed defender of “orthodoxy” the religious radicalism of the 1640s was a perversion of mainstream Puritan traditions, yet, troublingly, many of its proponents were persons familiar and once dear to the “godly.” The articles here by Peter Lake and David Como and by Michael Winship address the crucial issue of continuity or rupture within English and New English Puritanism. Judgments on the degree of continuity in both time (before and after 1640) and place (in old and New England), are of course inextricably connected with assessments of the nature of Puritanism itself, one of the most perennial and wide-ranging preoccupations of early modern Anglo-American historiography.² The stakes here are very high: Puritanism, variously defined, but usually in-

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¹ Thomas Edwards, *Gangraena* (1646), pt. 1, p. 145. (All references are from the facsimile edition published by the Rota and the University of Exeter, 1977.)

² For a very useful survey, see Peter Lake, “Defining Puritanism—Again?” in *Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives on a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith*, ed. Francis J. Bremer (Boston, 1993), pp. 3–29.

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volving a zealous, experiential Protestantism, has been seen as central to constructions of the individual self, to the causes of the English Civil War, and to the formation of the modern capitalist, liberal world.³

Whereas it was once assumed that an English Puritan movement formed an opposition to the established church and to authoritarian tendencies in the monarchy from 1559 to the 1640s, it is now more commonly argued that it is difficult and perhaps also fruitless to distinguish much of what historians call Puritanism from the mainstream ecclesiastical and political establishment in England. Puritans, if we wish to use the label, were those whose commitment to the conventional attitudes and values of English Protestantism was particularly intense. Their internalized predestinarian theology, and support for a preaching ministry and for broad campaigns of godly reformation, were broadly shared among English elites and amounted to a consensual commitment to order and authority. The contemporary image of Puritans as an intrusive minority of subversive troublemakers—such as Jonson's "Zeal of the Land Busy"—was largely created by satirists and dramatists.⁴ In this account the crucial rupture is the rise of a distinctive ecclesiastical establishment hostile to evangelical Calvinism, backed by Charles I, and dubbed variously Laudian or Arminian. The victory of anti-Calvinism in the 1630s forced a naturally conservative Puritanism into opposition and resistance, with ultimately dramatic consequences.⁵ If pre-Civil War Puritanism was an oppositional movement driving individual resistance and broader campaigns for political and religious change, then the effervescence of radical ideas and congregations after 1640 was a natural development. It is much harder, however, to explain how a more conservative and establishment Puritanism might have contributed to the radicalization of the 1640s. Indeed, many historians have argued that radical ideas owed much to underground, largely plebeian traditions.⁶

The articles here represent recent, exciting work that refuses these

³ For a recent introduction to some of these debates, see William Lamont, *Puritanism and Historical Controversy* (London, 1996).

⁴ The earlier view of an oppositional Puritan movement is presented in William Haller, *The Rise of Puritanism* (New York, 1935), and *Liberty and Reformation in the Puritan Revolution* (New York, 1955). For Puritanism as part of the mainstream of English Protestantism, see Patrick Collinson, *The Religion of Protestants* (Oxford, 1982). For the "invention" of the stage Puritan, see Patrick Collinson, "Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism," in *The Reign of Elizabeth*, ed. John Guy (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 150–70.

⁵ Nicholas Tyacke, "Puritanism, Arminianism and Counter-Revolution," in *The Origins of the English Civil War*, ed. Conrad Russell (New York, 1973), pp. 119–43, has formed the inspiration for most of the arguments here.

⁶ See, in particular, Christopher Hill, *The World Turned Upside Down: Radical Ideas during the English Revolution* (London, 1972).

sharp polarities between a radical and an establishment Puritanism. The stress on complexity is indeed signaled by the title “Puritanisms.” In all three articles, the nature of zealous Protestantism is not fixed or given, but emerges in particular contexts and through specific conflicts and debate. As one of the authors has insisted elsewhere: “Puritanism could be moderate, hierarchical, repressive and orthodox, but it could also be divisive, extreme and heterodox.”⁷ The Puritans’ self-image was as “paragons of peace, order and obedience,” and they blamed the resistance of their ungodly opponents for any trouble caused by Puritan campaigns. But their zeal and “social activism” made them look decidedly immoderate to the unconvinced. Puritan identity formation developed from the complex interplay between the stereotyping of the hostile and the deliberate activities of the godly as individuals or in communities: hence the label “Puritan” for the godly became “an insult that they were proud to own.”⁸

Lake and Como show how the potentially contradictory tendencies within Puritanism could be held in a fragile balance in England until the 1640s, and Winship reveals the restoration of a precarious balance even after the “antinomian controversy” in Boston. In the process, both articles suggest more fruitful connections between the world before and the world after 1640 than those based either on a radical Puritan movement from Queen Elizabeth to Oliver Cromwell or on a view of 1640s Puritans as alarmed and bewildered conservatives. The accounts of disputes in London and in Boston show how any Puritan consensus was complex and transitory, in need of continual recreation and reinforcement, ideally through private conference and admonition, sometimes through more open debate. For Lake and Como, disagreements over doctrine were at the heart of London disputes, provoking further cleavages over power, status, and religious style. Winship stresses that doctrine underlay definitions of the true church and the community of the godly, but he also shows that religious harmony or consensus was often maintained through more general elements in the religious culture. Tactful refusals to highlight tacit disagreements, the charisma of individual godly ministers such as John Cotton, and shared millennial expectations were the basis of religious peace, not common assent to theological definitions of how salvation could be achieved.

Looking more specifically at old England, it was not that the rise

⁷ Peter Lake, “‘A Charitable Christian Hatred’: The Godly and Their Enemies in the 1630s,” in *The Culture of English Puritanism, 1560–1700*, ed. Christopher Durston and Jacqueline Eales (Basingstoke, 1996), pp. 145–83, quote at p. 183.

⁸ Lake, “‘A Charitable Christian Hatred,’” pp. 154, 157, and “Defining Puritanism,” p. 10.

of Laudianism radicalized a previously conformist, consensual Puritanism but that it made it much more difficult for the inherently complex and potentially radical Puritan communities described by Lake and Como to police themselves in the absence of support from an establishment itself sympathetic to evangelical Calvinism. In the conflicts in both London and Boston we can clearly discern the seeds of the radical ideas and organizational forms that flourished in old England after 1642. Semi-formal meetings of laypeople and ministers for religious discussion facilitated the growth of independent and separatist congregations after 1640; the extended critiques of conventional Puritan “legalism,” derived variously from a particular slant on Calvinist positions on election and assurance, and from long-standing mystical and perfectionist trends within the radical reformation, also bore a variety of fruit in the ecstatic speculations of the revolutionary decades.

Both Winship and Lake and Como suggest that besides divisions over doctrine there were conflicts over what should be done about such divisions. The dominant impulse toward containment, avoidance, or settlement—in London or Boston—was opposed by those who sought to define and impose a unity based on agreed truths. Thomas Shepard, Stephen Denison, and George Walker were Puritanism’s “own Lauds,” in Winship’s telling phrase. Before the 1620s, English Puritans had close links with sympathetic members of the ecclesiastical establishment, as is demonstrated through the involvement of Bishop of London Henry King in the attempted arbitration between George Walker and Anthony Wotton. But they had little hope of achieving complete control over the reformation of the church or the definition of its proper organization and doctrine. Such hope was raised by the calling of the Long Parliament in 1640 and the Parliament’s summoning of the Westminster Assembly to oversee reformation. It is the New England of the 1630s that offers particularly fruitful parallels with the 1640s in England, bridging what Winship calls the “interpretative chasm” between civil war studies and the period before. In Massachusetts, Puritans had “the possibility of ideological control unimaginable in England” and could attempt to achieve “a previously theoretical commitment to uniformity through state power” (pp. 87, 96). In 1640s London, orthodox Puritans—Presbyterians—like Thomas Edwards and William Prynne, with their bitter fears that a godly reformation, long contended for, was being sabotaged by an arrogant radical minority, were the true heirs of Denison, Walker, and especially of Thomas Shepard, albeit that they regarded this last figure as an unsound “Independent,” whose church organization inevitably generated heresy and separation. In an atmosphere of organizational freedom hitherto the stuff only of dreams or nightmares, the networks that

had (usually) served to minimize conflict in the 1620s split asunder, and indeed previous contacts might be used against men who were now bitter enemies. Some radicals were, apparently, bewildered by the transformation. Why, asked John Saltmarsh, were “Divines more jealous of conscientious and inoffensive liberty now that the Government is coming into their own hands, then when it was in their predecessors?”⁹

Como and Lake describe a tendency to “insiderness,” an insistence on common membership of a group, rather than on the issues that divided particular individuals. In Boston, this was also John Cotton’s inclination, but Thomas Shepard, probably consciously, foregrounded the radicalism he was determined to crush. Thomas Edwards, similarly, stressed divisions—especially between Presbyterians and Congregationalists or “Independents.” In both cases the polemic became something of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Once John Cotton had been accused of familism he came to resent all attacks on familists as coded challenges to himself. Edwards’s identification of Independents with more radical sectaries led indeed to some broad alliances against Presbyterian assaults. John Goodwin, in many ways the heir of Anthony Wotton as an educated, ordained London minister “unsound” on soteriology, was a prime object of the wrath of Edwards and Prynne. In replying to *Gangraena*, Goodwin defended not only his own position but also many other radicals, ministers, and laymen, such as William Kiffin, William Walwyn, Jeremiah Burroughs, Hugh Peter, Samuel Eaton, and Robert Cosens (accused of startling blasphemies in Rochester). Goodwin was not necessarily in agreement with these men, or even personally acquainted with them—their unity derived from their common featuring in Presbyterian polemic.¹⁰ The alarm of men like Prynne or Edwards was thus matched by the increasing radicalization of their opponents. As in the New England controversies provoked by Shepard, there was a polarizing and escalating rhetoric on both sides. Calls for the death penalty against heretics and blasphemers, contrast, as John Coffey has recently shown, with pleas from “anti-formalist puritans” such as Saltmarsh for the toleration of false religions.¹¹ By the 1640s then we have reached a religious culture where differences are by no means minimized but accepted or even magnified.

Thomas Freeman’s contribution provides a vivid account of a neglected aspect of the defining moment of early zealous Protestantism in England by exploring the dynamics of Marian martyrdom through a fo-

⁹ John Saltmarsh, *Groanes for Liberty* (London, 1646), p. 5.

¹⁰ John Goodwin, *Cretensis or A Briefe Answer to an Ulcerous Treatise, Lately Published by Mr Thomas Edwards* (London, 1646).

¹¹ John Coffey, “Puritanism and Liberty Revisited: The Case for Toleration in the English Revolution,” *Historical Journal* 41, no. 4 (1998): 961–85.

cus on the female sustainers rather than the martyrs themselves. As the seventeenth-century articles also show, lay activism is central to any conception of Puritanism as a movement.¹² All three articles also reveal the problematic and complex implications of lay support. It was often a crucial means of legitimating clerical authority. The poignant ties between martyrs and female sustainers pioneered the intense, and often dependent, relationships between ministers and laypeople that were to characterize English Puritanism in later generations. But as Freeman also shows, the propensity of laypeople to develop an alarming independence was also characteristic of zealous Protestantism from the beginning. Pastoral initiatives were often taken by laywomen rather than ministers, and some of these same women engaged in vigorous debate over the central theological issue of free will. The unease this generated among the godly establishment is highlighted through Freeman's meticulous contrasts between the manuscript accounts of female activity and the more anodyne versions that made it into print. There are connections here, of course, with the problematic initiatives of Anne Hutchinson, Henry Vane, or John Ethington.

If it was an idolatry akin to adultery for a woman to attend the mass, yet sinful for a woman to disobey a husband or father, Marian protestant women and their pastoral guides faced insoluble dilemmas. Freeman's account of "patriarchy challenged by godliness" highlights a further long-term, troubling theme within Anglo-American Puritanism. As Foxe was sensitive to Catholic jibes about the prominence of women within Protestant congregations, so orthodox commentators sought to discredit the radical sects of the 1640s and 1650s, who "lead captive silly women" (2 Tim. 3:6).

The often contradictory encounter between gender hierarchies and religious commitment, and the profoundly important question of how salvation was attained, lead us to the role of Puritan spirituality in the construction of the self. Predestinarian theology could involve the intense self-scrutiny of daily behavior as described by Winship or, in a different kind of introspection, a mystical identification with the risen Christ. Freeman shows how a predestinarian bias among women sustainers helped develop a strongly confident sense of the individual self working in cooperation with god's purposes. This was as characteristic as the more familiar "female soteriological despair," which led women to seek reassur-

¹² For important work that bridges the gaps between the mid-sixteenth century and the 1620s, stressing the importance of lay-clerical networks, see Nicholas Tyacke, *The Fortunes of English Puritanism, 1603–1640* (London, 1990); and Jacqueline Eales, "A Road to Revolution: The Continuity of Puritanism, 1559–1642," in Durston and Eales, eds., *Culture of English Puritanisms*, pp. 184–209.

ance from a male cleric who could be a substitute for the other male authority figures—fathers and husbands—who had been challenged for the sake of true religion.¹³

Finally, all three articles demonstrate the shift in Puritan studies from economics to politics. Where Puritanism was once seen as promoting a capitalist spirit, it is now more often identified with the emergence of a “public sphere.”¹⁴ Como and Lake describe London Puritan networks as part semilegal “underground,” part public sphere within which reputations were made or broken, debates won, lost, or compromised. Within this “public sphere” many different forms of communication were used and counterposed: talk, writing, and print were all mobilized in presentations of the martyrs, as in disputes over salvation in Boston and London. The importance of print is highlighted in Freeman’s careful accounts of Foxe’s re-presentations of his manuscript sources, a process given added point by the later evidence for the popularity of Foxe’s work, not least among pious women. The caution about revealing intra-Puritan disputes in the completely public realm of print was retrospectively justified by the traumatic breaches of the 1640s, when such squeamishness was widely resisted. Here we return to the paradoxes and complexities of Puritan traditions, for “authoritarian” or “conservative” figures such as Prynne or Edwards were as committed to competition for support in a public realm as their radical opponents. The Presbyterian attack on sectarianism involved dynamic, populist campaigning on the streets of London as well as aggressive preaching and the printed word. *Gangraena* itself was intended as “a manual that might be for every one’s reading,” for Edwards, “took a resolution in the entrance of this worke, not to be too large that so the more might both buy and read it.”¹⁵

¹³ For further discussion, see Elspeth Graham, “Authority, Resistance and Loss: Gendered Difference in the Writings of John Bunyan and Hannah Allen,” in *John Bunyan and His England, 1628–88*, ed. Anne Laurence, W. Robert Owens, and Stuart Sim (Ronceverte, W.Va., 1990), pp. 115–30; Tom Webster, “Writing to Redundancy: Approaches to Spiritual Journals and Early Modern Spirituality,” *Historical Journal* 39, no. 1 (1996): 33–56.

¹⁴ For an attempt to reinvigorate the “Weber thesis” in a British context, see Gordon Marshall, *Presbyteries and Profits: Calvinism and the Development of Capitalism in Scotland* (Oxford, 1980); for skepticism, see Paul Seaver, “The Puritan Work Ethic Revisited,” *Journal of British Studies* 19 (1980): 35–53. Craig Calhoun, ed., *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1992), deals with the role of religion in the development of a public sphere.

¹⁵ Edwards, *Gangraena*, pp. 8, 41–42.