THE IMPACT OF PURITANISM
ON AMERICAN CULTURE

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THE Puritans of colonial America are among the most-studied people in all history. Even more has been written about them than they wrote themselves—which was a lot. Probably the most important reason for this concentrated attention is that scholars have an invincible sense that in studying Puritanism they are uncovering the roots of American culture, "the origins of the American self." Any sound description of seventeenth-century Puritans would have to be careful to emphasize the many ways in which they were not like us. This article, however, is concerned with the aspects of Puritanism that have survived to help shape the culture of America.

Puritanism is so important that some scholars have treated it as a "consensus" within which all American civilization has taken shape. Puritanism, however, has always had to struggle to impose its cultural standards. At all times in American history there have been many who have considered themselves non-Puritans or anti-Puritans. Instead of constituting an all-pervading consensus, American Puritanism has typically been engaged in dialogue with one or more adversaries, such as Anglicanism, the Enlightenment, or southern slave power. Puritanism is not responsible for everything about America, but it was certainly one of the seminal cultural impulses from which America historically derived.

Americans of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have looked back upon the Puritans in a variety of ways, frequently projecting their own positive and negative feelings onto them. The Puritans have been Pilgrim Fathers to patriotic schoolteachers, courageous rebels to radical abolitionists, and prudish villains to H. L. Mencken and Hugh Hefner. Modern scholars have shown that many commonly received notions of the Puritans are misconceptions: they did not dress all in black or wear cone-shaped hats; they were not teetotalers; they were not especially repressive toward children or criminals by the standards of their age. Yet the scholars too have sometimes projected their own hopes, fears, aspirations, and aversions onto the Puritans. Sometimes they have treated them as defenders of an idealized pre-modern social order, sometimes as alienated intellectuals. Sometimes they have used Puritanism as a whipping boy and sometimes as a stick with which to beat the America of their own day. The emotion-charged quality of American attitudes toward Puritanism is, of course, testimony to its continuing cultural relevance.

Originally, Puritanism was a call for the reform (or "purifying") of Christianity in Tudor-Stuart England. An outlook on life rather than a united movement, Puritanism may be considered a religious revival. It addressed the individual lay believer and demanded his or her commitment to Christ through a conversion experience, without which a person was irretrievably lost in sin. The emphasis was on a reawakening of personal piety through private devotional practices, primarily Bible reading, and on the sermon in public worship. Sacraments and sacerdotalism were downgraded, liturgical formalism and ceremonies discouraged. The theology was in the Reformed, or Calvinistic, tradition, affirming predestination. Puritans espoused a wide variety of ecclesiological positions, reflecting disagreement among them on how much institutional restructuring would be necessary to accomplish the desired revival of piety; but the most characteristically Puritan polity, and the one that has been most influential in America, was Congregationalism.

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to defects, faults, errors, and manifold imperfections, should truly bind conscience as God’s laws do.” The Church of England, on the other hand, maintained the more conventional position that the laws of the state embodied God’s will and were morally binding. The great Anglican thinker Richard Hooker believed the Bible left many things “indifferent” with regard to religious and social practice. His position sounds very tolerant until we notice that he assigns to the king authority to decide whatever the Bible leaves indifferent. The Puritans, with their “precise” biblical literalism, were limiting royal discretion. When some of them decided that episcopacy had no warrant in the New Testament, they were threatening the king’s greatest source of patronage and influence. “No bishop, no king,” was James I’s apt comment.

It was the Puritans who confirmed in Anglo-American tradition the principle that the king is not above the law but is responsible to it. They also firmly established the right of revolution against the king when he failed to abide by the law. In this regard the American Revolution represents no advance over Puritan principles. In fact, the Roundheads who rebelled against the king in the 1640s went much further than the Glorious Revolutionaries of 1688 or the American Patriots of the 1770s had any need to go, for they put Charles I on trial and executed him. (After the Restoration, Puritans in New Haven, Connecticut, sheltered three of his judges from Charles II’s retaliation.) When the New England clergyman Jonathan Mayhew delivered his famous sermon against the doctrine of unlimited submission to royal authority in 1750, he was vindicating the Revolution of 1641 as well as anticipating that of 1776.

Probably any tradition of religious dissent, whether Calvinist Puritan or not, could have helped to establish a right of resistance. After all, Catholic theologians justified disobedience and tyrannicide in places where they were cast in opposition to the ruler. The distinctively Puritan contribution to the American tradition of limited government lies in the strong Calvinist emphasis on the sovereignty of God and the sufficiency of his revelation in Scripture, which implies that no earthly power can be absolute. The equally strong Calvinist emphasis on the sinfulness of man implies that even rulers cannot be altogether trusted. A good Calvinist would be suspicious of government not only when it was run by infidels, but even when it was in the hands of his fellows.

Individualism. At the time of America’s colonization what Protestants did not believe was every bit as important as what they believed. They did not believe in the ecclesiastical traditions that had grown up justifying sacerdotalism in all its ramifications: purgatory and indulgences; the invocation of saints and cults of relics; the sacrament of penance and absolution; the authority of the pope and his Cardinals, the right of the Church to interpret and supplement Scripture. By getting rid of this overlay of clericalism, Protestantism empowered the common lay person to assume control over his or her destiny in the next world—and eventually in this world as well. The name for this personal authority in Protestant theology was “the priesthood of all believers.” One of its important facets was the right of private judgment in the interpretation of Scripture. What this meant in the early modern world is well described by William Haller: “Without benefit of clergy, without the aid of scholastic logic, every man could find in the poetry of Scripture the mirror of his own thoughts and spiritual stirrings, could talk, argue, preach, and write about what he found there, could concoct his own Utopia by its aid” (“The Puritan Background of the First Amendment,” in Conyers Read, ed., The Constitution Reconsidered, 1938).

All Protestants accepted the right of the laity to read, study, and interpret the Bible for themselves. The Puritans who settled New England added another important aspect to this individualism. They admitted as members of their churches only those men and women who could testify to their firsthand experience of saving grace. In other words, they called upon each person not only to think for himself but also to feel for himself. Before the Reformation the ordinary Christian believer had all too often been merely a nonparticipant witness at a weekly miracle; Puritanism made him an activist. Since the conversion experience was open to everyone, regardless of social rank, sex, or even age, it served as a prototype of the merit-based egalitarianism that later came to characterize secular institutions.

To be sure, the conversion experience was caused by God’s grace, his reaching out to sinful humanity; according to Puritan theology it was
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society of persons, and even the most eminent Puritan divine had been ushered in on his freedom. The individual, freely chose to enter into a covenant relationship with God, his voluntary embrace of sanctification and moral renovation. The Puritans, through the influence of John Calvin, were determined to live up to the high standards of God's commandments. In their pursuit of holiness, they sought to strengthen their faith and devotion to Christ's kingdom. The church, with its members, was seen as a community of saints, and the individual was encouraged to live a life of faith and service to God. The Puritans were known for their strict moral codes and their commitment to the Bible as the ultimate authority in matters of faith and practice. Their influence on American culture cannot be overstated, as they laid the foundation for many of the values and institutions that characterize American society today.
eral Court; they came to function as the lower house of a colonial legislature. Any adult male church member was qualified for freemanship, a status that conferred certain responsibilities like jury duty in addition to the right to vote. In the early days of the colony a majority of men probably met the qualification of church membership; by the 1660s probably less than half. By seventeenth-century standards this was an extraordinarily broad franchise. Representative government in New England was abolished by the British Crown in 1684; when it was reestablished after the Glorious Revolution, the new Massachusetts charter provided for a property-based suffrage rather than a religiously based one. The Puritan experiment in government by the saints had come to an end, but its legacy proved very durable.

A Written Constitution. God had dealt with mankind through a series of covenants with Adam, Abraham, and Christ, according to the covenant (or “federal”) theologians whom the New England Puritans revered. And when they set up their churches in the wilderness, the Puritans did so through covenants with each other, according to terms they believed were prescribed in the Bible. The natural law of reason, Puritans felt, taught them the same respect for covenants in secular affairs. “It is evident by the light of nature that all civil relations are founded in covenant,” declared Boston’s leading minister, John Cotton. Some of the written agreements on which New England government was based were charters granted by the king. Even more interesting, however, were the ones drawn up among the colonists themselves, such as the Mayflower Compact of Plymouth Colony (1620), Connecticut’s Fundamental Orders (1638), or the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641). Most remarkable of all from the viewpoint of later America is the constitution for Providence Plantations drawn up in 1647, which took the radical step of calling its form of government democratic.

The Puritan practice of ordering all relationships, human and divine, through covenants formed the intellectual background for the political thought of John Locke in England. Locke, the son of a Puritan revolutionary army officer, became the key figure in the secularizing of social-compact theory. An analogous role was played on a smaller scale in the colonies by John Wise, minister of the little town of Ipswich, Massachusetts. In A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches (1717) Wise defended the Congregational polity by arguments drawn from the natural rights of man, relegating biblical arguments to a subordinate role. In the 1770s Wise’s work was reprinted by revolutionary patriots.

The Founding Fathers who met at Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 to write the Constitution of the United States included few men who could be called Puritans but many who were influenced by Puritan and Calvinist political thought. James Madison, the most influential of them, had received an orthodox Calvinist education at Princeton. Like almost all of the Puritans the Founding Fathers believed classical “mixed government,” that is, a balance among monarchical, aristocratic, and democratic elements, preferable to pure democracy. As John Winthrop had tried to balance these elements for Massachusetts Bay under the old charter, they carefully constructed their new constitution, in which only the House of Representatives was elected directly by the people. They relied on checks and balances to limit the amount of evil any one person could do, for they retained a Puritan sense of human selfishness, even though many of them no longer called it “original sin.” Horace White observed that the Constitution of the United States is “based upon the philosophy of Hobbes and the theology of Calvin” (quoted in Richard Hofstadter, The American Political Tradition, 1948: repr. 1958). Neither Hobbes nor Calvin believed the individual naturally virtuous, but both believed in the value of covenants to discipline and control him.

Separation of Church and State. The New England Puritans endorsed what they called separation of church and state, although outside Rhode Island it existed only in limited form. By this separation the Puritans meant that church and state would cooperate within their separate spheres, temporal and spiritual. The church was restricted to the spiritual sphere much more than in either Catholic or Anglican practice. New England churches owned no property (even the meetinghouses belonged to the towns), and their clergy were ineligible for political office—in contrast to Europe, where bishops sat in parliaments and prelates often became prime ministers. In England ecclesiastical courts had jurisdiction over probate, contract, and family law; in New
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The works of this period are seen as important in shaping the Puritan ethic of hard work, discipline, and self-improvement. This ethic has been passed down through generations and is still evident in American culture today. The Puritans believed in the importance of education and the study of the Bible, which helped to shape the intellectual and cultural landscape of the United States.

In addition to the impact on education, Puritanism had a significant influence on the development of American society. The Puritans believed in the importance of community and cooperation, which helped to create a sense of shared identity and purpose. This sense of community is still evident in modern American society, particularly in the context of voluntary associations and community organizations.

Overall, the impact of Puritanism on American culture is significant and continues to be felt today. From the influence on education and intellectual development to the impact on society and the development of a sense of community, the Puritans have left a lasting legacy on American culture.

Other relevant characteristics are the emphasis on hard work, community, and self-discipline. These values have persisted and shaped American culture over time.

In conclusion, the impact of Puritanism on American culture is significant and continues to be felt today. The Puritans' emphasis on hard work, community, and self-discipline has left a lasting legacy on American society, shaping the values and beliefs that continue to define the United States.

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beggars" who refused to work, but they also attacked the idle rich, the fawning courtiers, and the hordes of servants with little to do but display their masters' livery. Among the social evils the Puritans criticized in England, unemployment and conspicuous consumption were prominent. Within the middle ranks of society the lower middle class of artisans and small farmers had more reason to endorse the Puritan social ethic than the upper middle class, for the activities of merchants were dangerously close to the vices of "speculation" and "usury." In its purest form the Puritan work ethic was really an independent craftsman's ethic, a value system that made good sense out of his life and enabled him to disapprove of others. After large-scale industrialization in the nineteenth century it became necessary to adapt the work ethic to an emergent proletariat. Employers spared no pains to instill in their wage earners, who were often former peasants without a Puritan heritage, habits of punctuality and factory discipline. This new industrial work ethic could be either secular or religious. The appearance of an evangelical temperance movement in the nineteenth century, for the first time in the long history of Christianity, is often explained in terms of industry's need for a sober work force.

A characteristic of the work ethic in the forms we have been discussing is a preoccupation with the long term rather than the short term. This emphasis is related to a shift to urban living, for there are few ways in which a traditional peasant can plan beyond the next harvest. The "worldly ascetic" way of life was socially functional in a phase of modernization demanding great sacrifices and deferring gratification to future generations. But as wealth accumulated, Puritanism adapted.


Before capitalism could become the dominant economic system of Western civilization, economic activity had to achieve autonomy from many traditional restraints, ranging from the low prestige of earning money to restrictions on lending at interest. Puritanism helped it attain this autonomy, partly as a result of the individualism it encouraged in intellectual and political matters. The early Puritans were, of course, emphatic in their denunciations of selfish and mercenary behavior. However, they did seek to emancipate lay people from certain kinds of clerical control, including the jurisdiction of ecclesiastical courts over probate and contract law. They also objected to many religious festivals (including Christmas) observed by Catholics and Anglicans, complaining that these interfered with business. We have already discussed the importance the Puritans attached to covenants in religious relationships, and how it carried over into their political compacts. The covenant must have helped legitimate contractualism in economic life as well, though historians have investigated this implication much less. Whatever the intentions of the Puritans, the pluralism that came into English and (even more) American life as a result of the multiplication of sects weakened the ability of any religious group to control economic action. While this chain of events was preparing the way for capitalism, things were very different in many Catholic countries, where absolutist monarchies allied with the Counter-Reformation put down individualism and new ideas, in the process severely restricting not only heresy and dissent, but also science and economic progress.

Once economic activity had achieved autonomy, what capitalism most needed from religion was legitimation for financial gain. This, too, Puritanism was prepared to grant, though grudgingly. The early Puritans had been generally suspicious of too much money because it offered so many temptations. As time went by, however, Puritan spokesmen made their peace with prosperity. Other sins—mainly sins of the flesh—largely replaced avarice in their catalog of warnings, except during revivals and times of crisis. Leading Puritans of the late seventeenth century, like Richard Baxter in England and Cotton Mather in America, showed an increasing appreciation of business virtues like prudence and the welcome opportunities for philanthropy that come with profits. (Benjamin Franklin's famous list of business virtues grew out of his satire of Mather.) Using the concept of Christian stewardship, Puritans like Mather justified wealth that was consecrated to God and the community through generous charity.

Still another rationalization for prosperity connected it with the doctrine of election. A person whose honest toil had turned a profit must have been blessed by God; if one enjoyed God's favor in this life, was it not logical to suppose him among those elected for eternal life? This line of
Why Calvin's theology found a receptive audience in the hearts of many Puritans is a complex question. Calvin's emphasis on the sovereignty of God, the inevitable conformation of human wills to divine decree, and the necessity of the Church as the mediating institution between God and man, provided a framework that resonated with the Puritans' desire for a disciplined and ordered society. The Puritans were attracted to Calvin's teachings because they offered a solution to the spiritual and social problems they faced in their everyday lives.
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The impact of Puritanism is an elusive question, since it was not forcibly repressed in America as it was in so many parts of Europe. The answer would not seem to lie in any inadequacy on its part to answer the fundamental questions it addressed, but rather in long-range changes in its environment. Ironically, these were often changes that Calvinism itself had originally promoted. Calvinism helped win political rights, and when they got them, people felt more secure and less in need of assurance of God's election. Calvinism fostered intellectual activity, and beginning with the Enlightenment, intellectuals in Western civilization have tended to lose interest in systematic theologies such as Calvinism. Calvinism fostered economic development, and as people became more prosperous they often found the ascetic way of life irksome. Calvinism fostered individualism, and eventually people found more persuasive the Arminian doctrine that individuals could respond to God's grace of their own free will. A faith well suited to a particular historical phase, Calvinism gradually came to seem old-fashioned. On both sides of the Atlantic it lost adherents first among the urban, the prosperous, the cosmopolitan; it held on to them longest among the provincial lower middle class. The most persistent American defenders of Calvinist theology during its long slow decline were not Yankee Congregationalists but Scots-Irish Presbyterians, whose intellectual capital was Princeton but whose geographical distribution was chiefly in the hinterlands of the South and West.

Nationalism. The political dimension of Puritanism survived in the eighteenth century, carried on by a group of Dissenting intellectuals in Britain called the commonwealthmen. Their ideas were very influential in the colonies and in the young United States. This political Puritanism (if we may call it that) was marked by moral disapproval of aristocracy, suspicion of government, and a persistent fear of collusion between government and special interests at the expense of the ordinary person's rights. The commonwealthmen called this collusion "corruption" or "conspiracy." Given the prevailing practices of aristocratic government in eighteenth-century Britain, such attitudes were often quite justified. They provided a suitable climate of opinion for the growth of colonial dissatisfaction with British rule and continued to influence American forms of government set up after independence. The fullest American expression of this point of view is found in the writings of John Adams, but most of the colonial pamphleteers and protesters shared it in one way or another.

During the agitation leading up to the American Revolution the precepts of the Puritan rebels of 1641 were often invoked. Patriot leaders appealed not only to the political predispositions inherited from Puritanism but to Puritan economic prejudices as well. Programs to boycott British imports were justified as restoring America's hardy virtue and discouraging the growth of "luxury." In Britain commonwealthmen like Richard Price and Joseph Priestley sympathized with American grievances. When war came, the New England Congregational clergy was among its most enthusiastic supporters, nicknamed "the black regiment." They had been accustomed during the recurrent wars with the French to identifying the cause of Protestantism with that of political liberty and ready to substitute an American for a British patriotism. Of course, once independence was declared the Enlightenment ideology of natural rights to a large extent subsumed the more limited Puritan political ideology.

The early Puritan settlers had a strong sense of mission, which has carried over to color American nationalism even after independence. They did not carry out their "errand in the wilderness" simply to put the true model of Christianity into practice, but also to demonstrate it for the benefit of the rest of Christendom and the English church in particular. The classic expression of this sense of mission was given in a speech by John Winthrop called "A Model of Christian Charity," delivered aboard the ship Arberella en route to the New World, in which he told his fellow passengers to remember that "we shall be as a city upon a hill; the eyes of all people are upon us." Even after the ideals that America was demonstrating changed from congregational purity to democracy and human rights, the sense of mission, of being an example, remained. Abraham Lincoln expressed it well when he called America "the last best hope of earth." This sense of mission, originally Puritan, has helped infuse American patriotism with a loyalty to ideals transcending the nation-state itself. An example of these ideals—which the world has not lived up to—would be the Covenant of the League of Nations, drawn up by a devout Presbyterian of Calvinist heritage, Woodrow Wilson.
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and John L. Holaday, their communal creation of the World's Fair, their history of commerce and industry, and their pursuit of technological advancement. The resulting exhibition was a testament to the nation's progress in science, technology, and industry. The fair was a symbol of American ingenuity and the promise of a brighter future. The impact of Puritanism on American culture is evident in many ways. Intellectuals, scientists, and philosophers found inspiration in the Puritan tradition, which emphasized a disciplined, ordered, and rational approach to life. The Puritans' emphasis on education and self-improvement laid the foundation for the American educational system and influenced the development of the nation's intellectual climate. The Puritan legacy continues to shape American thought and culture, even today.