
THE TRUTH ABOUT PURITANS

BY KATE MONTRESSOR

Puritans, rooted in Calvinism, staunchly opposed the Church of England, Catholics, and others. They believed in the sovereignty of God and the Bible's ultimate authority. Their repression in England only fueled their determination, viewing themselves as martyrs. Rejecting materialism and emphasizing the direct accountability to God, they thought salvation came through preaching and church attendance.

Puritans were often seen as challenging neighbors, earning a reputation as spiritually haughty and morally self-righteous meddlers by many of their peers. They were perceived as intolerant and meddlesome individuals whose mere presence sparked tension, discord, frustration, and bitterness. Their unsociable tendencies eroded community bonds and strained relations with those around them.

WHAT THEY BELIEVED

- Puritans opposed the Church of England, Catholics, Quakers, and everyone else who wasn't a Puritan. Puritanism was derived from Calvinism, which stressed the sovereignty of God (instead of the King) and the authority of the Bible (no matter how out-dated).
- The Church of England tried to repress Puritanism, which made the Puritans more determined as they saw themselves as martyrs.
- Puritans believed they were God's chosen people.
- Puritans believed the road to salvation was from preaching and going to church.
- The Bible was the ultimate source of truth and the only true law of God, Puritans believed that each person, as well as each congregation, was directly responsible to God, rather than answering through a mediator such as a priest or bishop.
- Puritans rejected materialism (in theory, anyway), including dancing and singing on the Sabbath.
- Puritans loved to preach to others, hand out pamphlets, and were generally a nuisance to anyone not in their group. They were in turn persecuted and driven out of England. Some went to Holland, where they continued their obnoxious behavior. Eventually, they were driven out of Holland. They went to America because no one could persecute them there, and because they thought they could create a utopian society based on their beliefs.
- In America, Puritans designed their government around the church. Only the elect could vote and rule. When the first generation began to age out, they allowed baptized, moral, and orthodox people to share privileges. The effect was to concentrate power and wealth among a few families.
- Puritanism, a rigorous way of life, emphasized self-discipline and inner reflection. It held the belief that everyone possessed inherent sinfulness, but salvation and a heavenly destination were attainable through prayer and fervent preaching, with the ultimate outcome resting in God's hands. In their worldview, unseen forces, such as witches and Satan, constantly tempted individuals to deviate from the righteous path. The Puritans chose to bypass the narrative of

Jesus' sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins, rendering Easter as "The Devil's Holiday" and expressing discomfort with Christmas. This divergence in holiday observance created tensions with the Pilgrims, who had come to America for non-religious pursuits like farming, craftsmanship, or escaping their life in England.

- The Puritans were staunchly against all holidays, asserting that they had their roots in the pagan practices of ancient Rome (a point they weren't entirely wrong about). Anyone caught celebrating Christmas, whether by making or indulging in mincemeat pie, figgy pudding, singing festive songs, throwing parties, engaging in amorous activities, or imbibing alcohol on that day, risked a hefty fine of five shillings.
- The only holidays Puritans recognized were Election Day, Commencement Day (Harvard College), Thanksgiving Day (periodically scheduled on a Wednesday or Thursday), and Training Day (to prepare the men for military service).

This was the world of the Puritans. Everyone believed in the devil and that Satan was out to capture their soul. If you weren't a Puritan, you were an instrument of the devil. That applied to Catholics, Quakers, Indians, everyone. Their thinking was very binary: everything was good or bad, as judged by authorities.

Because of their black and white thinking, Puritanism only effectively lasted one generation in the new world. It was too restrictive, too punitive, and too unforgiving. Their "my way or the highway" attitude led to conflicts with each other, with the Indians, and with everyone else. They weren't held in high regard except among themselves. The clash between Puritan convictions and alternative ways of life brought a distinctive and contentious element to early American society.

THE CONTRADICTIONS OF PURITANISM

- They believed that acts of charity and religious devotion (known as the Doctrine of Elect) could secure a place in heaven, but they also thought that whether you were saved or damned was determined by God at birth. What was the point of "correct" behavior if your fate was already sealed?
- In their perspective, God was often seen as wrathful and unyielding, yet the Puritans aimed to gain His favor by adhering to their interpretation of the Bible. Despite their efforts, they believed that nothing they did could fully satisfy God.
- While the Puritans opposed the oppression they had experienced in Europe, they didn't extend the same freedoms to others in the new world.
- Even though one's destiny was thought to be predetermined, they sometimes coerced confessions from individuals in a bid to save their souls. What was the significance of such actions, except a justification for subjecting individuals to torture.
- They preached about charity, but looked down on the needy, hurling insults and false accusations. Orphans were farmed out to families, and privileged families were given money for taking them in. Few examples of charity are found in the records. Was this their version of tough love?

On one hand, they valued close-knit families and kinship. However, women who were captured and raped by Indians were treated with disdain.

Small wonder these conflicting values and strict doctrine caused issues among people. What did it feel like to be in constant fear of invisible forces? What was it like to be harshly judged for small transgressions, such as being put into stocks for calling someone an offensive name? (Obviously, the punishment didn't stop the crime.) Some call this crazy making. The kindest interpretation is that this repressive behavior results in increased levels of anxiety, depression, and hypervigilance. Is this why those girls acted out during the Salem Witch Trials?

CONCLUSION

Their rigid thinking and lack of tolerance sealed the fate of their religion, consigning it to history. Unfortunately, many people today continue to harbor these attitudes and behaviors, and the legacy of the Puritans endures.