

Between Heaven and Hell

The Puritan Tradition

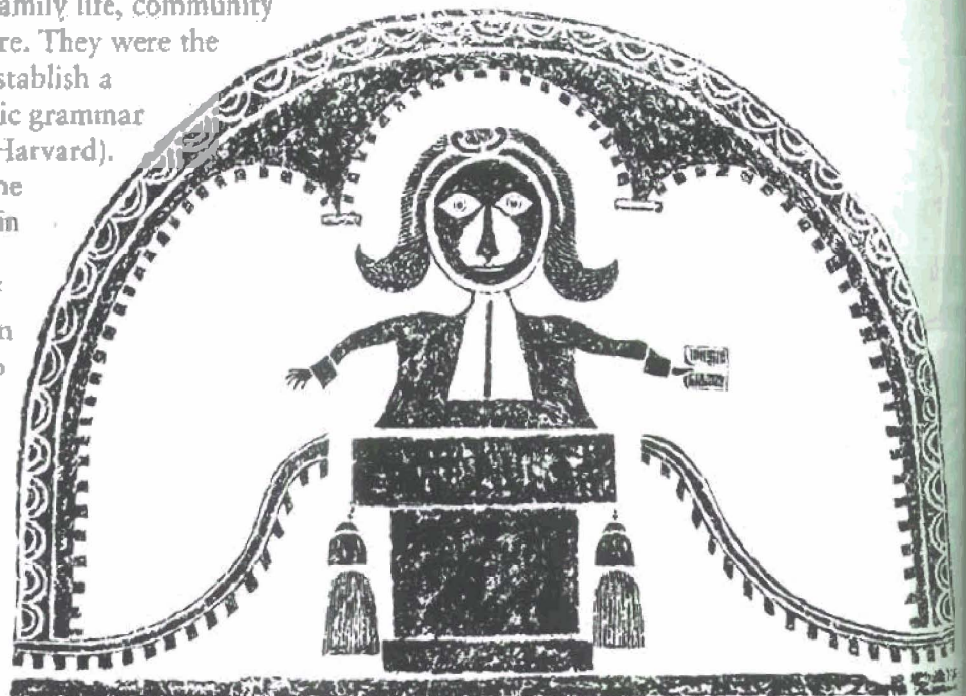
Puritans too often have the reputation of being black-clad moralists self-righteously proclaiming the values of thrift and hard work. According to the American writer and humorist H. L. Mencken, a Puritan is one who suspects that “somewhere someone is having a good time.” To call someone a puritan is usually not a compliment.

This negative image, however, is based on a stereotype of the 16th-century Puritans that, like most stereotypes, is full of half-truths and misconceptions. True, the Puritans did value hard work and self-sacrifice, but they also honored material success. Wealth was considered to be the reward of a virtuous life. Some Puritans, especially the early Pilgrims, wore severe black clothing because that was all they had. Those who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony after 1630, however, were better off financially. They could afford decorative and colorful clothing—when they could find it in the colony, that is. These Puritans were even known to drink beer and other alcoholic beverages on occasion.

Puritans also valued family life, community service, art, and literature. They were the first in the colonies to establish a printing press, free public grammar schools, and a college (Harvard).

On the other hand, the Puritans *were* arrogant in their religious faith and completely intolerant of viewpoints different from their own. Puritans who remained in England

Tombstone design
from Puritan
New England



Mrs. Freake and Baby Mary
(1674), unknown artist. The
Granger Collection, New York.

participated in a revolution that not only toppled the king but had him beheaded as well. Those who had come to North America had even freer rein for their beliefs. With supreme confidence and self-consciousness, they went about setting up their institutions as though not only God but the whole world were watching. "The eyes of all people are on us," proclaimed John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay



Puritan Beliefs

The key to the Puritan heart and soul is religious belief. What follows is a brief explanation of the Puritans' basic convictions: —

- *Human beings are inherently evil and so must struggle to overcome their sinful nature.* This belief in original sin was one of the first things a Puritan child learned. "In Adam's fall / We sinned all" is the hymn that teaches the letter A in *The New England Primer*.
- *Personal salvation depends solely on the grace of God, not on individual effort.* Puritans believed in predestination, the doctrine that only those people who are "elected" by God are saved and go to heaven. The only way an individual could know that he or she was saved was by directly experiencing God's grace in a religious conversion.
- *The Bible is the supreme authority on earth.* Puritans argued that the Bible was the sole guide not only in governing the moral and spiritual life but also in governing the church and society as a whole. One effect of this belief was to make Puritan churches more democratic, organized around their congregations rather than around ruling bishops. On the other hand, it led the Puritans to be more repressive in their political systems and more intolerant of others. For example, they used the Bible to justify their occupation of the land and their use of force against Native Americans: "Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation" (Romans 13:2). In short, the Puritans saw themselves as God's chosen people, like the "children of Israel" in the Old Testament.


from *The New England Primer*

The New England Primer is a famous American schoolbook that dates from before 1690. The sale of more than 2 million copies of the book during the 18th century is an indication of how widely the primer was used.

A		In <i>Adam's Fall</i> We Sinned all.
B		Thy <i>Life to Mend</i> Thy <i>Book Attend.</i>
C		The <i>Cat</i> doth play And after slay.
D		A <i>Dog</i> will bite A <i>Thief</i> at night.
E		An <i>Eagle's</i> flight Is out of sight.
F		The <i>Idle Fool</i> Is whipt at School.

N		<i>Nightingales</i> sing In <i>Time</i> of Spring.
O		The <i>Royal Oak</i> it was the <i>Tree</i> That sav'd His <i>Royal Majesty.</i>
P		<i>Peter</i> denies His <i>Lord</i> and cries
Q		Queen <i>Esther</i> comes in <i>Royal State</i> To Save the <i>JEWS</i> from dismal Fate
R		<i>Rachel</i> doth mourn For her first born.
S		<i>Samuel</i> anoints Whom <i>God</i> appoints:

G		As runs the <i>Glass</i> Mans <i>life</i> doth pass.
H		My <i>Book</i> and <i>Heart</i> Shall never part.
J		<i>Job</i> feels the <i>Rod</i> Yet blesses <i>GOD.</i>
K		Our <i>KING</i> the good No man of blood.
L		The <i>Lion</i> bold The <i>Lamb</i> doth hold.
M		The <i>Moon</i> gives light In <i>time</i> of night.

T		<i>Time</i> cuts down all Both great and small.
U		<i>Uriah's</i> beautiful <i>Wife</i> Made <i>David</i> seek his <i>Life.</i>
W		<i>Whales</i> in the <i>Sea</i> God's <i>Voice</i> obey.
X		<i>Xerxes</i> the great did die, And so mult you & I.
Y		<i>Youth</i> forward slips Death soonest nips.
Z		<i>Zachus</i> he Did climb the <i>Tree</i> His <i>Lord</i> to see.

Colony. And so it was that in New England during the 1600s Puritanism gained its fullest and perhaps purest development.

The selections in this part of Unit Two represent the Puritan tradition over a span of approximately 100 years. The poet Anne Bradstreet gives a sense of what ordinary Puritan lives were like. Her voice expresses the view of a heaven ruled by a just God—a goal to which all Puritans aspired. The grace of Bradstreet's voice is followed by the harshness of the judges' voices at the Salem witch trials, an example of the darker aspects of Puritanism. The last Puritan represented is the passionate minister Jonathan Edwards, threatening his congregation with the torments of hell in an excerpt from his famous sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God."

Traditions Across Time: Another Look at the Puritans

Many American writers have been fascinated by the Puritans. Nathaniel Hawthorne, one of whose ancestors had been a presiding judge at the Salem witch trials, set his novel *The Scarlet Letter* and many of his short stories in Puritan times to explore the psychological effects of sin and guilt.

In the 1950s, the playwright Arthur Miller dramatized the Salem witchcraft trials in *The Crucible*. The play was written partly in response to the anti-Communist "witch hunts" of the period. Miller's drama not only personalizes the events of Salem but also warns against similar injustices in our own time.



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