**Puritan Theocracy**

**by**

**Thomas J. Wertenbaker**

Puritanism found its truest expression, not in England, but in New England.

So it is to New England we must turn if we are to study the true Puritan State with all its distinctive features. Those basic features include the idea of church congregations whose autonomy was derived from a covenant with God, a civil government in which only Church members participated, an educational system designed to buttress the orthodox religion, a rigid code of morals, the suppression of heresy. In fact, New England may be considered a laboratory of Puritan civilization.

The founders of the Massachusetts Bible State confidently expected it to endure forever. To them it was no social and religious experiment, but the carrying out of God's commands. Yet they had been in America but five or six years and were still struggling to clear the forests, lay out their meager crops and build their houses, when only a few decades later, the ministers were bewailing the general decline of godliness, were searching their souls for the cause of the general "decay," were warning the people that God was unhappy with them. Before the end of the seventeenth century it was apparent to all that the Puritan experiment had failed. Puritan leaders sadly pointed out that there was constant swearing and drinking to excess, the Sabbath day had been broken, parents had been lax with their children, and Christian education was being neglected.

But they failed to see that these things were symptoms rather than causes. Had they looked deeper they would have found behind them all human nature itself - man's natural desire to acquire the good things of this world, and his instinctive dislike of restraint, whether of his personal conduct or his freedom of thought or his conscience, or his right to have a voice in the conduct of the state. In short, the human desire for freedom.

There is no reason to doubt the sincere belief of Puritan leaders like John Winthrop that their Bible State was shaped according to God's direction and that in consequence it was as near perfect as man could make it, a civil and religious Utopia. To those who complained that this structure was undemocratic, they replied that it was intended to be so. But they would have been indignant had one stigmatized it as a tyranny. Yet in some respects a tyranny it was, a tyranny over men's minds, a restriction upon one's right to think, imposed by sermons, laws against heresy and the control of education and the press. In early Massachusetts one disagreed with the minister at one's peril.

The ministers and magistrates, of course, would have been even more indignant at the accusation that the structure of Church and State was designed with the end of bestowing upon them special privilege and power. Nonetheless special privilege and power it did give them. And though the ministers spoke of themselves as "God's poor servants," they valued their influence to the full and battled fiercely to retain it.

But the power of the elite over the many, whether exercised by an aristocracy or a plutocracy or a theocracy, always is vulnerable to attack, and in New England the Puritan leaders, ministers and government officials carried the germs of failure with them, and before five decades had passed, their utopia lay in ruins.

The temple of American Puritanism fell because it was built on the sands of human nature. When the pillars of the structure - political autonomy, the close alliance of Church and State, the control of education, orthodoxy, the stern code of morals, isolation - one after another began to sag, it was not so much the pillars themselves as the sand which caused the trouble. It was from beneath that came the succession of shocks, which threatened the whole structure - the Roger Williams heresy, the Anne Hutchinson heresy, the Halfway Covenant, the demand for a wider franchise, and the witchcraft prosecutions,

In bringing to the New World a society, which was largely the product of Medieval thought and defending it there against change in a changing world, the Puritans attempted the impossible. As the decades of the seventeenth century passed, men's minds expanded to keep pace with new scientific discoveries, with new ideals of human rights, with new conceptions of man's relation to God. While they were vainly trying to crystallize the Puritan spirit of the time of Winthrop and Cotton, the tide of a new civilization swept over and past them.

But failure did not bring immediate destruction. Certain features of the Puritan State survived not only the loss of the charter, the Glorious Revolution, the advance of rationalism, the weakening of the moral code, but even the American Revolution and the creation of a Federal Union. When the nineteenth century dawned New England society was still undemocratic; the clergy and the moneyed classes were still entrenched behind a barrier of statutes, patronage, election devices and traditions. In Massachusetts no atheist, no Jew no man of meager income could be Governor. To be eligible for the Upper House in Massachusetts one must have a freehold of $300 or personal property valued at $600; in New Hampshire, a freehold of $200. "We have lived in a State which exhibits to the world a democratic exterior, " one New Englander remarked, "but which actually practices all the arts of an organized aristocracy under the management of the old firm of Moses and Aaron."

It was this remnant of the Puritan oligarchy, which Thomas Jefferson and his New England supporters of the Democratic-Republican Party attacked so fiercely in the early decades of the nineteenth century. In Connecticut he denounced the old Puritan ideas upon which the government based its authority. "Let us sweep it away and put in its place a Constitution based on the will of the people," he said. Jefferson and his reformers denounced the Old Puritan clergy as a pack of privileged reactionaries who strutted around with queues and cocked hats and prated about government by the wisest and best.

Despite the failure of the Puritan experiment it is a widely accepted belief that it was largely instrumental in molding the character not only of modern New England, but of the entire United States. Plymouth is spoken of as the birthplace of the nation; the Puritans, it is claimed, came to America as the champions of religious freedom, they founded American democracy, they gave us the public school system, they lit the torch of learning to shine in every corner of the country, they contributed an element of stern morality.

Obviously this rests more upon fiction than reality. Plymouth was not the birthplace of the nation, for the nation was founded neither upon the ideals and institutions of the Pilgrims nor of the Puritans who followed them to New England. In fact, the use of the world "birthplace" as a metaphor to explain the origin of the country is quite misleading. When the English colonized America they established not just one beachhead on the coast, but a half dozen or more. And it was form each of these beachheads that European civilization swept westward or northwestward or southwestward to create what later became the United States. The founders of St. Mary's, Charleston, and Philadelphia were as truly founders of this nation as those of Jamestown and Plymouth.

The belief that the Puritans came to the New World in the cause of religious freedom is, of course, completely erroneous. The battle for toleration in this country was won in the face of their bitter opposition, and it would seem that Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams should win applause as champions of religious freedom.

Nor did American democracy have its origin in New England. American democracy was born in England, it was defended and enlarged in Westminster Hall and upon many an English battlefield, it was brought to America by the settlers and there given a new expression, a new growth under the influence of frontier conditions. There were noble men in England, as in other colonies, who fought the good fight for democracy, but they were rebels against the old Puritan order, not its defenders.

No truthful historian will withhold from New England the credit do her for her part in the creation and molding of the nation. Her sons were among the most active in winning independence, they did their full share in shaping the Constitution, they were pioneers in opening western New York, northern Pennsylvania and the Great Lakes region, they gave the country its first American literature, they made noble contributions in the fields of invention, science, art, architecture. But most of the contributions were made after the fall of the Puritan oligarchy, and the men to whom the chief credit is due were not its supporters, but, on the contrary, those who rebelled against it.

**Pragmatic Puritans**

**by**

**Daniel J. Boorstin**

The Arbella, a ship of three hundred and fifty tons, twenty-eight guns, and a crew of fifty-two, during the spring of 1630 was carrying westward across the Atlantic the future leaders of Massachusetts Bay Colony. The ship had sailed from Cowes in the Isle of Wight, on March 29, and was not to reach America till late June. Among the several ways of passing the time, of cementing the community and of propitiating God, perhaps the most popular was the sermon. The leader of the new community, John Winthrop, while preaching to his fellow-passengers, struck the keynote of American history. "Wee shall be, " Winthrop prophesied, "as a Citty upon a hill, the eyes of all people are upon us; so that if wee shall deal falsely with our God in these works we have undertaken and so cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world." No one writing after the fact, three hundred years later, could better have expressed the American sense of destiny. In describing the Puritan experience we will see how this sense of destiny came into being, and what prevented it from becoming fanatical or utopian. The Puritan beacon for misguided mankind was to be neither a book nor a theory. It was to be the community itself. America had something to teach all men : not by precept but by example...

Never was a people more sure that it was on the right track. "That which is our greatest comfort, and means of defense above all others, " Francis Higginson wrote in the earliest days, in New England's Plantation, “is, that we have here the true Religion and holy Ordinances of Almightie god taught among us ... thus we doubt not but God will be with us, and if God be with us, who can be against us?" But their orthodoxy had a peculiar character. Compared with Americans of the 18th or the 19th century, the Puritans surely were theology-minded. The doctrines of the Fall of Man, of Sin, of Salvation, Predestination, Election, and Conversion were their meat and drink. Yet what really distinguished them in their day was that they were less interested in theology itself than in the application of theology to everyday life, and especially to society. From the 17th-century point of view their interest in theology was practical. They were less concerned with perfecting their formulation of the Truth than with making their society in America embody the Truth they already knew. Puritan New England was a noble experiment in applied theology.

The Puritans in the Wilderness--away from Old World centers of learning, far from great university libraries, threatened daily by the thousand and one hardships and perils of a savage America --were poorly situated for elaborating a theology and disputing its fine points. For such an enterprise John Calvin in Switzerland or William Ames in Holland was much better located. But for testing a theology, for seeing whether Zion could be rebuilt if men abandoned the false foundations of the centuries since Jesus, for this New England offered a rare opportunity. So it was that although the Puritans in the New World made the Calvinist theology their point of departure, they made it precisely that and nothing else. From it they departed at once into the practical life. Down to the middle of the 18th century, there was hardly an important work of speculative theology produced in New England.

It was not that the writing of books was impossible in the new world. Rather, it was that theological speculation was not what interested the new Americans. Instead, there came from the New England presses and from the pens of New England authors who sent their works to England an abundance of sermons, textual commentaries, collection of "providences," statutes, and remarkable works of history. With the possible exception of Roger Williams, who was out of the stream of New England orthodoxy anyway, Massachusetts Bay did not produce a major figure in theology until the days of Jonathan Edwards in the mid-18th century. And by then Puritanism was all but dead.

During the great days of New England Puritanism there was not a single important dispute which was primarily theological. There were, to be sure, crises over who should rule New England, whether John Winthrop or Thomas Dudley or Harry Vane should be governor, whether the power of representation of different classes in the community should be changed, whether the child Petition should be accepted, whether penalties for crime should be fixed by statute, whether the assistants should have a veto, whether outlying towns should have more representatives in the General Court. Even the disputes with Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams primarily concerned the qualifications, power and prestige of the rulers. If, indeed, the Puritans were theology-minded...they argued about institutions.

One gets the same impression in looking for evidences of political speculation, for philosophical inquiry into the nature of community and the function of government. Nothing in Puritanism itself was uncongenial to such speculation. Puritans in England at the time were discussing the fine points of their theory: What was the true nature of liberty? When should a true Puritan resist a corrupt civil government? When should diversity be tolerated? And we need not look only to giants like John Milton. The debates among the officers in Cromwell's Puritan Army between 1647 and 1649 reveal how different their intellectual atmosphere was from that of New England. They were not professional intellectuals, but soldiers and men of action; yet even they stopped to argue the theory of revolution and the philosophy of sovereignty ...

Seventeenth-century America had none of the speculative vigor of English Puritanism. For Massachusetts Bay possessed an orthodoxy. During the classic age of the first generation, at least, it was a community of self-selected conformists. In 1637 the General Court passed an order prohibiting anyone from settling within the colony without first having his orthodoxy approved by the magistrates. Perhaps never again, until the McCarran Act, were our immigrants required to be so aseptic. John Winthrop was bold and clear in defense of the order. Here was a community formed by free consent of its members. Why should they not exclude dangerous men, or men with dangerous thoughts? What right had supporter s of a subversive Mr. Wheelwright to claim entrance to the colony? "If we conceive and find by sadd experiments his opinions are such, as by his own profession cannot stand with external peace, may we not provide for our peace, by keeping off such as would strengthen him and infect others with such dangerous tenets?"

In the eyes of Puritans this was the peculiar opportunity of New England. Why not for once see what true orthodoxy could accomplish? Why not in one unspoiled corner of the world declare a truce on doubts, on theological bickering? Here at last men could devote their full energy to applying Christianity - not to clarifying doctrine, but to building Zion ... The Puritans in New England were surprisingly successful for some years at keeping their community orthodox. In doing so, they also made it sterile of speculative thought.

In New England the critics, doubters, and dissenters were expelled form the community; in England the Puritans had to find ways of living with them. It was in England, therefore, that a modern theory of toleration began to develop. Milton and his less famous and less reflective contemporaries were willing to debate, as if it were an open question, "whether the magistrate have, or ought to have, any compulsive and restrictive power in matters of religion." Such was the current of European liberal thought in which Roger Williams found himself. But Williams was banished form Massachusetts Bay Colony and became a by-word of heterodoxy and rebellion. He died in Poverty,, an outcast form that colony. If his little Providence eventually prospered, it was never to be more tan a satellite of the powerful orthodox mother-colony.

What actually distinguished that mother-colony in the great age of New England Puritanism was its refusal, for reasons of its own, to develop a theory of toleration. In mid-17th-century England we not a growing fear that attempts to suppress error would inevitably suppress truth, a fear that magistrates' power over religion might give them tyranny over conscience. "I know there is but one truth," wrote the author of one of the many English pamphlets on liberty of conscience in 1645, "But this truth cannot be so easily brought forth without this liberty; and a general restraint, though intended but for errors, yet through the unskilfulness of men, may fall upon the truth. And better many errors of some kind suffered than one useful truth be obstructed or destroyed." In contrast, the impregnable view of New England Puritanism was expressed in the words of John Cotton: The Apostle directeth, Tit. 3.10 and giveth the Reason, that in fundamentall and principall points of Doctrine or Worship, the Word of God in such things is so cleare, that hee cannot be bee convinced in conscience of the dangerous Errour of his way, after once of twice Admonition, wisely and faithfully dispensed. And then if any one persist, it is not out of conscience, but against his conscience, as the Apostle saith, vers”. He is subverted and sinneth, being condemned of Himselfe, that is of his owne Conscience. So that if such a Man after such Admonition shall still persist in the Errour of his way, and be there fore punished; He is not persecuted for Cause of conscience, but for sinning against his Owne conscience.”

The leaders of Massachusetts Bay colony enjoyed the luxury, no longer feasible in 17th-century England, of a pure and simple orthodoxy. The failure of New England Puritans to develop a theory of toleration, or even freely to examine the question, was not in all ways a weakness. It made their literature less rich and gave much of their writing a quaint and crabbed sound, but for a time at least, it was a source of strength. Theirs was not a philosophic enterprise: which their English contemporaries gave to sharpening the distinctions between "compulsive" and "restrictive" powers in religion, between "matters essential" and "matters indifferent" and to a host of other questions, which have never ceased not bother reflective students of political theory, the American Puritans were giving to marking off the boundaries of their new towns, to enforcing their criminal laws, and to fighting the menace orthodoxy strengthened their practical bent.

American Puritans were hardly more distracted form their practical tasks by theology and metaphysics than we are today. They transcended theological preoccupation precisely because they had no doubts and allowed no dissent. Had they spent as much of their energy in debating with each other as did their English contemporaries, they might have lacked the single-mindedness needs to overcome the dark, unpredictable perils of a wilderness. They might have merited praise as precursors of modern liberalism, but they might never have helped found a nation.

The New England meeting-house, like the synagogue on which it was consciously modeled, was primarily a place of instruction. Here the community learned its duties. Here men found their separate paths to conversion, so they could better build their Zion in the wilderness, a city upon a Hill to which other men might in their turn look for instruction. As the meeting-house. The sermon was as important a ritual as the occasions on which ancient Mesopotamians learned from their priests the dooms passed in the legislature of their Gods. In New England the ministers , in their own words "opening" the texts of the Bible by which they had to live and build their society. The sermons were thoroughly theological and yet thoroughly practical: based on common acceptance of a theology, which left to the minister only the discovery of its "uses" for converting saints and building Zion.

The occasions of the sermon, most of which have been too easily forgotten, bear witness to its central place in the life of early New England. There were two sermons on the Sabbath, and usually a lecture-sermon on Thursday. Attendance was required by law; absence was punishable by fine (an Act of 1646 fixed five shillings for each offense). The laws described the Sabbath ritual as "the publick ministry of the word." There was hardly a public even of which the most memorable feature was not the sermon. Most distinctive, perhaps, were the election-day sermons, by which the clergy affected the course of political events and which remained a New England institution through the American Revolution. These explained the meaning of the orthodox theology for the choices before the voters, described the character of a good ruler and the mutual duties of the people and their governors. The artillery sermons, which were delivered on the occasion of the muster of their militia and their election of officers, began in about 1659. In addition, the numerous (10 in Massachusetts Bay in 1639; 50 in 1675;76) Fast and Thanksgiving Days were focused on the sermon, which explained to the people why God was humbling or rewarding them ...

If attendance at the sermon was compulsory, it was expected to be anything but perfunctory. The scarcity of books and the significance of the subjects induced many listeners to bring notebooks. A minister, commonly settled in a parish for his lifetime, did not look for a larger or more wealth congregation. Moreover, his audience was, for that age, remarkably literate and attentive, and he could not hope to amuse or divert them by "book reviews, " by concert artists, or outside speakers. All these circumstances served to hold the early New England preacher to a high intellectual standard and encouraged him to make his performances merit their central place. The New England sermon, then, was the communal ceremony which brought a strong orthodoxy to bear on the minutiae of life - the drowning of a boy while skating on the Charles, an earthquake, a plague of locusts, the arrival of a ship, the election of a magistrate, or the mustering of militia. Theology was an instrument for building Zion in America.

To the Puritans and to many who came here after them, the American Destiny was inseparable from the missions of community building. For hardly a moment in the history of this civilization would men turn from the perfection of their institutions to the improvement of their doctrine. Like many later generations of Americans, the Puritans were more interested in institutions that functioned than in generalities that glittered. . . .

Of course, crucial in importance to the Puritans was the Bible. If there was any codification of Puritan beliefs, it was in the Word of God. The Puritans wished to be "guided by one rule, even the Word of the most high." More perhaps than for any other Christians of their age, the Bible was their guide. Through it, they explained in the Cambridge Platform, every man could find the design of life and the shape of the Truth...

But to try to live by the Bible was vastly different from trying to live by the Laws of the Medes and the Persians, by the Athanasian Creed, or even by the Westminster confession. For the Bible was actually neither a codification nor a credo; it was a narrative. From this simple fact came much of the special character of the Puritan approach to experience. There were, of course, parts of the Bible which contained an explicit code of laws; the Puritans were attracted to these simply because the commands were so clear. The Ten Commandments were, of course, in the foreground of their thinking, but the Bible as a whole was the law of their life. For answers to their problems they drew as readily on Exodus, Kings, or Romans, as on the less narrative portions of the bible. Their peculiar circumstances and their flair for the dramatic led them to see special significance in these narrative passages. The basic reality in their life was the analogy with the children of Israel. They conceived that by going out into the Wilderness they were reliving the story of Exodus and not merely obeying an explicit command to g into the wilderness. For them the Bible was less a body of legislation than a set of binding precedents.

The result was that these Puritans were preoccupied with the similarities in pairs of situations: the situation described in a Bible story and that in which they found themselves. "Thou shalt not kill" was accepted with out discussion. What interested them and what became the subject of their debate was whether, and how and why, an episode in the Bible was like one in their own lives. The "great and terrible Earthquake" of June 1,1638, and the one of January 14, 1639, "which happened much about the time the Lordly Prelates were preparing their injunctions for...roared from Zion, (as in the dayes of the Prophet Amos)." Almost every page of early New England literature provides an example. " The rule that directeth the choice of supreme governors, " wrote John Cotton, "is of like acquitie and weight in all magistrates, that one of their brethren (not a stranger) should be set over them, Deut. 17.15 and Jethroes be set over the people, should be men fearing god, Exod, 18.21, and Solomon maketh it the joy of a commonwealth, when the righteous are in authority, and their mourning when the wicked rule, Prov. 20.21 Job 34.30"

What the Puritans had developed in America was a practical common-law orthodoxy. Their heavy reliance on the Bible, and their preoccupation with platforms, programs of action, and schemes of confederation- rather than with religious dogma- fixed the temper of their society, and foreshadowed American political life for centuries.