

This essay seeks to discuss the issues surrounding the use of the term “Puritan”, its origins as a negative label provided by its detractors, the diverse movement to which it was initially applied, and the ultimate diffusion of the tradition in many different, and often conflicting directions. Note is also made of the difficulty moderns have of understanding a 17th century movement which did not survive in its original form.

It will be argued that one of the defining characteristics of “Puritanism” is the sabbatarian impulse, and that this trajectory can be traced to Adventism.

It will also be argued to define Puritan belief and practice as a zealous version of “mere protestantism”¹ is to oversimplify. References will be made in this section to Lutheran sources.

Before engaging these issues we need to ask how possible it is to define a movement that Patrick Collinson suggests “had no content beyond what was attributed to it by its opponents.”²

It was of course an insult, a slur-word; no one would have claimed it for himself and its meaning was shifting, sometimes applied to extremists, sometimes to what was clearly the moral majority of Jacobean England. Puritanism, in short, was in the eye of the beholder.³

Generalisations seem unavoidable in any brief discussion, and in every case exceptions are likely to exist. This diversity is evident in the contrast between the pacifism of the Quakers, regarded by Catholic historian Bernard Lambert as “the extreme evolution of Puritan principles,”⁴ and the rhetoric of Stephen Marshall in 1642, paraphrasing Psalm 137:9, “he is a blessed man that takes and dashes the little one against the stones.”⁵ That any such advice was seen as more than metaphor is clear from the cover illustration of Diane Purkiss' history of the English Civil War.⁶ This is a very long way from Quaker

1 Patrick Collinson, *The Godly: Essays on English Protestantism and Puritanism* (London: Hambledon Press, 1983), 1.

2 Patrick Collinson, *The Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), cited in William G. Naphy, *The Protestant Revolution: From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King Jr.* (London: BBC Books, 2007), 125.

3 Adam Nicolson, *Power and Glory: Jacobean England and the Making of the King James Bible* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), 121.

4 Bernard Lambert, *Ecumenism: Theology and History* (London: Burns & Oates, 1967), 289.

5 John Spurr, *English Puritanism 1603-1689* (Houndmills, Palgrave Macmillan, 1998), 101.

6 Diane Purkiss, *The English Civil War: A People's History* (London: Harper Perennial, 2006)

artist Edward Hicks' irenic vision of the Peaceable Kingdom.⁷

It is important to note that the Puritan movement began as a tendency within the Church of England, and is a phenomenon of the English-speaking world.⁸ The Puritans were bound together in their desire to bring the English church within the orbit of the Geneva reformation, drawing particular inspiration from the writings of John Calvin.

In the 1580s Geneva became for the Elizabethan Puritans what Moscow was to British communism in the 1930s – a symbol of their aspirations, and a source of the ideas and support that might bring them about.⁹

The mindset of the times is difficult for post-Enlightenment people to identify with. Another century was to go by before the *Aufklärung* swept Europe. The spirit of the age, valuing stability and continuity rather than progress, was summed up in an English context by the motto of Elizabeth I's reign, *Semper eadem* (always the same.)¹⁰ The Anglican bishop Lancelot Andrewes discerned in the thirst for change a direct cause of the plague that struck London in 1602-1603:

Plague was a sign of God's wrath provoked by men's 'own inventions', the taste for novelty, for specious newness, which was so widespread in the world... Newness was the sin and novelty was damnable.¹¹

This provided Andrewes with an opportunity to indulge in polemic against what he saw as Puritan innovations: “new tricks, opinions and fashions, fresh and newly taken up, which their fathers never knew of,”¹² while archbishop William Laud saw in Puritanism the root of “all schism and sauciness in the country.”¹³ However Puritans like Henry Clapham also saw the plague as God's judgment, and those who demurred from this view he labelled “atheistes, mere naturians and other ignorant persones.”¹⁴ In an age obsessed with authority the Puritan upheaval was “a conflict of different visions of authority.”¹⁵

7 However Campbell notes that prior to 1660 “Quakers were definitely not pacifists...” Jeremy Campbell, *The Many Faces of God: Science's 400-Year Quest for Images of the Divine* (New York: Norton, 2006), 115.

8 The influence of the godly varied by region. At the outbreak of the English Civil War comparatively little headway had been made in Cornwall or Wales, both areas where English was not unchallenged as a language. Cf. Purkiss, *The English Civil War*, 159-161.

9 Alister McGrath, *In the Beginning: The Story of the King James Bible and How it Changed a Nation, a Language and a Culture* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2001), 134.

10 Nicolson, *Power and Glory*, 2.

11 Ibid., 30

12 Ibid., 30

13 Campbell, *The Many Faces of God*, 101.

14 Nicolson, *Power and Glory*, 24

15 Ibid, 124

The Puritan heritage was to be carried forward by new movements, each with its own particular emphasis.

[T]he range of puritanisms which came to prominence in the later 1640s almost defies comprehension... The cross currents were complex... It was as if with each new issue the puritan kaleidoscope changed pattern.¹⁶

The mantle was not passed on to any one group, but to a “patchwork of denominations that all draw their inheritance from Puritanism.”¹⁷ An approach that attempts to identify just one of those many strands emerging from the Puritan matrix is attempted below.

However, in seeking to understand what it meant to be a Puritan, it may be helpful first to separate out the distinctive elements from those of the pre-Calvinist Reformation, which had a very different tenor.¹⁸ Justification by faith, the priesthood of all believers, *sola scriptura*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, are among those indicators that need to be set to one side.

Practical reform was less important for Luther than doctrinal reform. Human traditions could be seen “as good *adaiphora* serving the mission of the gospel.”¹⁹

In the final analysis... nothing must be done to be right with God... the church is free to do its mission in the world as best as it can be done.²⁰

Among many Puritans this priority was reversed. Puritanism “laid particular emphasis on the experimental and pastoral aspects of faith.”²¹ The distinction between essentials and non-essentials (*adaiphora*) fades in a context where those things not expressly

16 Spurr, *English Puritanism 1603-1689*, 110

17 Naphy, *The Protestant Revolution*, 127

18 “Few [in England], however, embraced with full force Luther's view that *sola fides* contradicts the native human sense of good and evil, his sometimes starkly drawn and dialectical distinctions between gospel and law, his relegation of the law's disciplinary purposes to a secondary category below its penitential function, his affirmation of a rare but real situational liberty to transcend positive law, his conception of Christian obedience as an unconstrained overflow, his softening of the traditional ascetic ideal, his conception of the Bible as a *Trostbuch* (book of consolation) and not a lawbook, his rejection of belief that Christ and Moses were lawgivers for Christians, his exclusion of the secular commonwealth from the realm of Christian renewal, or his dismissal of the covenantal and Deuteronomic theology of the Old Testament.” Theodore Dwight Bozeman, *The Precisionist Strain: Disciplinary Religion and Antinomian Backlash in Puritanism to 1638* (Chapel Hill, NC; University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 13

19 Eric W. Gritsch, *Fortress Introduction to Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 137.

20 Eric W. Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 139.

21 Alister McGrath, *Historical Theology: An Introduction to the History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 174.

prescribed in the Bible fall under suspicion and, for some like Henry Barrow,²² required nothing less than radical excision.²³ Not only was the sign of the cross to be eliminated (a devotional practice warmly commended in Luther's *Small Catechism*)²⁴ but even Christmas, with its “pagan” associations.²⁵ For the godly, “Christmas was just the pagan festival of Saturnalia and... customs like Yule games and carols were relics of that pagan rite.”²⁶ Puritanism seemed to find little to value in paradox and ambiguity.²⁷

The Puritans, then, rather than being simply “hot protestants” of a generic kind, stood specifically within the Geneva tradition, a position that stands at some distance to that of Wittenberg and other centres, with clear lines of tension.²⁸

While more obvious candidates might exist, the Adventist family of churches nevertheless presents an interesting study in Puritan inheritance. Modern sabbatarianism, understood as strict Sunday observance, first flourished among the Puritans,²⁹ and is therefore a genuine distinctive of the movement.³⁰ A number of writers have explored this sabbatarian connection in recent years,³¹ making possible the modest goal of isolating at least one of the enduring indicators associated with the Puritan mindset.

22 Nicolson, *Power and Glory*, 123

23 W. H. Van de Pol, *World Protestantism* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1964), 277

24 Theodore G. Tappert (trans. ed.), *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 337.

25 A parliamentary committee led by Robert Harley “agreed that only the Lord’s own day, Sunday, was a special day requiring special attention.” While removing Christmas and claiming that “all days are alike God’s creatures,” Sunday became hallowed to new levels. Under Harley’s reformation all “commerce, travel, labour, wakes, ales, dances and all pastimes whatever were to be banned on the Lord’s day...” Purkiss, *The English Civil War*, 232, 237, 238.

26 Purkiss, *The English Civil War*, 240.

27 “Lutheranism is adept at holding opposite ideas in a balance... Calvinism, by contrast, lacks the strange and somewhat consoling idea of the world as deeply and richly ambiguous. It holds accurate knowledge in high esteem, whereas Lutherans prefer a certain seat-of-the-pants approach.” (Campbell, *The Many Faces of God*, 199.)

28 Despite dissimilarities, however, connections existed between Puritans and Pietists. Cotton Mather engaged in correspondence with August Hermann Francke at Halle. (Gritsch, *A History of Lutheranism*, 147.)

29 Ralph Orr, “From Sunday to Sabbath: The Puritan Origins of Modern Seventh-day Sabbatarianism” (Pasadena: Worldwide Church of God, 1994) <<http://www.wcg.org/lit/law/sabbath/sun-sabl.htm>> (2 February 2008)

30 Willard Swartley outlines a characteristic approach to the Puritan Sabbath. Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women*, (Scottsdale, Pa: Herald Press, 1983), 73-78.

31 A study by Bryan W. Ball, *The Seventh-Day Men* (Oxford, 1994), currently out of print, documents this link in depth.

Sabbatarian concerns, specifically the profanation of the Lord's Day (Sunday) by amusements,³² arose in the Millenary Petition presented to James I as he moved south to take the throne of England. While a high view of Sunday predated the Puritans, Ralph Orr argues that the basis of strict Sunday observance in earlier times was grounded “in church tradition and authority, not in biblical law.”³³ Reformed theology gave sabbatarianism a new, biblical foundation and legitimacy, partly through an emphasis on the “third use of the law.”

The Sabbath or Lord's Day is to be sanctified by an holy resting day, not only from such works as are at all times sinful, but even from such worldly employments and recreations as are on other days lawful; [we make] it our delight to spend the whole time... in the public and private exercises of God's worship.³⁴

In contrast, while the *Formula of Concord* acknowledged such a role for the law,³⁵ the Lutheran emphasis was primarily on the first use,³⁶ a perspective conveyed in William Tyndale's comments “To the Reder” in his 1526 New Testament.³⁷ Unlike Luther, who saw discontinuity between old and new covenants, Calvin believed that “in reality the two are actually one and the same,” and this view was carried forward into the *Westminster Confession*.³⁸

Calvinists saw the Old Testament law as pointing sinners to their need for Christ. Once converted, the law also guided Christians in holy living. Furthermore, it assured those living by the law, particularly the Ten Commandments, that they had received God's grace.³⁹

The mutation from First Day sanctity to Seventh Day sanctity among a small number of Puritans followed the logic of sabbatarianism to its natural terminus. Sabbath observers, following the Puritan precedent of working for reform within existing structures, tended to worship among Sunday Baptists at first. Orr contends that connections to European Anabaptist roots are unsupported by the historical evidence. “In every case, those individuals whose backgrounds historians have uncovered lived first

32 Brian Moynahan, *The Faith: A History of Christianity* (London: Pimlico, 2002), 465.

33 Orr, “From Sunday to Sabbath.”

34 Westminster Larger Catechism (Question 117), cited in Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women*, 66.

35 Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 479.

36 “However, the chief function or power of the law is to make original sin manifest and show man to what utter depths his nature has fallen and how corrupt it has become.” Smalcald Articles 3:2. (Tappert, *Book of Concord*, 303.)

37 William Tyndale (trans.) *The New Testament, 1526*. (London: The British Library, 2000), 553

38 Marcus Braybrooke, “Covenant,” *Christianity: The Complete Guide*, ed. John Bowden (London: Continuum, 2005), 294

39 Orr, “From Sunday to Sabbath.”

as Baptists before becoming seventh-day sabbatarians.”⁴⁰ English Baptists, including Seventh Day Baptists, were inheritors of the Puritan meme. In the nineteenth century Seventh-day Adventism and the smaller Church of God (Seventh Day) drew on Seventh Day Baptist antecedents.⁴¹ The Worldwide Church of God,⁴² especially pre-1995,⁴³ despite heterodox teachings and a rigid hierarchical structure, displayed a wide range of Puritan characteristics apart from sabbatarianism.⁴⁴

In summary, Puritan influence has reached far beyond Anglican, Presbyterian and Congregational beginnings, and can be identified in many subsequent non-conformist traditions.⁴⁵ A movement that originally emphasised godliness with a concomitant adherence to biblical law has been a source of massive energy, creativity and diversity in subsequent centuries, especially in North America.

We can also say that, while the issues surrounding Puritan identity in the seventeenth century are complex, Puritans stand in clear continuity with the particular emphases of the Geneva wing of the Reformation, and it is not possible to extend this relationship to Protestantism more broadly without significant qualification.

While there may be no normative definition possible, a cluster of characteristics (of which sabbatarianism is one among several) provide useful indicators.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 The Worldwide Church of God was established by Herbert Armstrong, a schismatic minister of the Church of God (Seventh Day), in the 1930s.

43 The Worldwide Church of God in the United States was accepted into the National Association of Evangelicals in the 1990s.

44 These included, in the writer's experience, use of psalms modelled on the Scottish Psalter in hymnody, use of rented halls in preference to church buildings, emphasis on preaching with a one hour sermon following a twenty minute “sermonette”, notetaking during sermons, a rejection of all things sacerdotal, rejection of “pagan” observances such as Christmas and birthdays, and millennialism.

45 Not excluding groups like Sydney Anglicans. Cf. References to Puritans by Peter Jensen, “Why I Am a Reformed Christian.” <<http://www.theologian.org.uk/church/WhyIamReformed.mp3>> (1 March 2008)

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