

Saints, Sinners and Schools in Colonial New England: The Puritan Conception of Education

(and Some Thoughts on Twentieth Century America)

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It is not so much the tenets of Puritan theology that interest modern man, as evidences of their pervasiveness in the day-to-day Puritan existence. Practically every Puritan kept a diary, "not so much because he was infatuated with himself but because he needed a strict account of God's dealings with him, so that at any moment, and above all at the moment of death, he could review the long transaction."¹ Week-old babes were carried to the meeting house for baptism, and many a winter baby died of being baptised.² Yet to imagine, as many modern men do, that Puritans were grim and sour religious fanatics is to oversimplify their complexity. Contemporary records show that the society permitted heavy drinking at funerals and merry-making at weddings, Judge Sewall's grandson to play idle tricks on April first, and tender letteres to pass between John and Margaret Winthrop. Puritans were men and women with interests and beliefs, difficulties and weaknesses. In a word, they were very much like other contemporary Englishmen. Both Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson suggest that, perhaps, 90% of their intellectual life, scientific knowledge, morality, manners and customs, notions and prejudices, was that of all Englishmen.

They hated Spain like poison, and France only a little less. In their eyes, as in those of Anglicans, the most important issue in the Western world was the struggle between Catholicism and Protestantism. They were not unique or extreme in thinking that religion was the primary and all-engrossing business of man, or that all human thought and action should tend to the glory of God.³

Puritans struggled with the religious issue, as Americans recently struggled with Vietnam and Watergate, because of pressing historical events. If one could feel the chaos of the seventeenth century—the squabbling among Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Independents, and Separatists, the fighting for political power between the monarchy and Cromwell, and between Cromwell and other Protestant factions—it would not be difficult, even for those who contend that “God is dead,” to understand how paramount and vital religion was to the Puritans who fled England.⁴

The 10% ideological breach between the Puritans and their fellow Englishman grew wide enough, however, to drive them out of Massachusetts Bay in 1630. Rather than see their religion hampered by the existing power structure in England or tainted by the foreign culture of Holland, they went into the wilderness to build “The City of God”. Ralph Barton Perry, a distinguished student of Puritanism, describes the essential doctrine of Puritanism as “theocratic, congregational-presbyterian, Calvinistic, protestant, medieval Christianity... [composing] an orderly succession in which each in turn qualifies its predecessor.”⁵ The Medieval Church affirmed the supremacy of religion. Protestantism sought to eliminate the intermediaries—historical, theological, dogmatic, metaphysical, ecclesiastical or liturgical—that arose between man and God, to heighten the sense of human dependence and to emphasize the individual religious consciousness. Calvinism demanded rigorous adherence to scripture and belief in (1) unconditional predestination, (2) the limited atonement of Christ only for

the Elect, (3) man's inability to save himself, (4) the irresistibility of grace, and (5) the perseverance of the Saints. Within itself, Calvinism embraced the whole civil and economic life of the community. In New England this harsh doctrine was softened by reason and conscience. Though supreme, God was a reasonable, constitutional ruler, rather than a capricious tyrant. And being so, God would not decree salvation without the antecedents of salvation— diligence, industry, prosperity and success.

Presbyterianism and Congregationalism held that ecclesiastical authority sprang from the body of believers and denied the priestly hierarchy of the Catholic and Anglican churches; there was to be lay representation in all governing ecclesiastical bodies and such authorities would be chosen and be responsible to a body of believers equal before God. Presbyterianism and Congregationalism parted company over the authority of the individual church. The former believed that the individual congregation should be governed by a higher authority, a general assembly representing the various provinces; the latter believed that the individual congregations should be the highest authorities. Although the Pilgrims were Congregationalists as well, the Puritans tried very hard to make clear the difference between them. The Pilgrims officially severed all ties with the Church of England, and were therefore persecuted by the Crown, whereas the Puritans hoped, at least in theory, eventually to transform the Anglican church to their point of view. In practice, however, they set out to build a theocracy in the wilderness that would succeed. Their religious stance was intolerant of other creeds; in this it resembled its God who, though merciful, was not tolerant. Piety required constant effort and exhortation, and secularism was its enemy. "The theocratic state must, then, be perpetually engaged in crushing sectarian rivals and in negating the natural ways of man."⁶

This, then, in summary is the position of Ralph Barton Perry which is extremely useful, not only because the important tenets

of each church are clearly explained, but also because the reader can clearly see the continuity of history, the flow of beliefs to which the Puritans fell heir. It is, however, only the writings of the Puritans themselves that can convey the fervor of their beliefs, their sense of righteousness and mission, their superb rhetorical powers. For example, Increase Mather thundered

I say, God is not bound to give sinners Grace: He is an absolute sovereign, and may give Grace or deny Grace to whom he pleaseth. Shall the thing formed, say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus? Has not the Potter power over the Clay, to make one vessel unto honour, and another to dishonour? The glorious God has a greater power over his Creatures, than the Potter has over the Clay.⁷

Or John Winthrop's contention that

If you stand for your natural corrupt liberties, and will do what is good in your own eyes, you will not endure the least weight of authority, but will murmur, and will oppose, and be always striving to shake off that yoke; but if you will be satisfied to enjoy such civil and lawful liberties, such as Christ allows you, then will you quietly and cheerfully submit unto that authority which is set over you, in all the administrations of it, for your own good.⁸

The Puritans, however, seemed not only severely restricted in their civil lives, but also in their personal ones; indeed, to a twentieth-century man or woman it might seem that they had no personal lives at all. To insure that they increased and multiplied, it was ordered in Eastham, Massachusetts in 1695 that "Every unmarried man in the township shall kill six blackbirds or three crows while he remains single; as a penalty for not doing it, shall not be married until he obeys this order."⁹ Fines, imprisonment, or the whipping-post awaited the man who "inveigle [d] the

affections of any maide or maide servant' by making love to her without proper authority."¹⁰ Increase Mather warned his neighbors that "The Catechism which wicked men teach their Children is to Dance and Sing."¹¹ "[A] gainst such sports or games as fostered gambling, rows, immorality, drunkenness, or Sabbath-breaking strong voice was raised, and penalties enacted."¹² Because of complaints of injury, Boston passed a law in 1657 fining anyone found playing rugby twenty shillings.¹³

Still, as was usually the case, there were ways to circumvent the laws. "When one Jacob Murline was brought to court for kissing Sarah Tuttle for one-half hour in front of witnesses, he escaped severe punishment when Sarah told the court that he had not "inveigled" her. The baffled and outraged court fined Sarah and gave her a tongue-lashing, but at the end of two years her fine was still unpaid and half of it was remitted.¹⁴ Throughout New England, there were large liquor bills at many a funeral and wedding. The mortuary expenses of David Porter of Hartford, in 1678, were £2 18s for wine, cider and liquor, 12s for the coffin, 18s for the winding sheet.¹⁵ The sole midweek gathering of the early colonial days, the Thursday religious lecture, was seized upon by the young people "as a pretext and a means for enjoyable communion, and attended in such numbers that the hospitality shown in providing food for the visiting lecture-lovers seemed to be in danger of becoming a burdensome expense."¹⁶

How could such a society, generally repressive, exist for as long as it did? For one thing, the Puritans forced such deviants as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson to leave Massachusetts Bay. But the mainstay of the Puritan society was its educational system. Going through the learning process, few grew up to deviate from the Christian mainstream and the Puritan theology. An example of the product of Puritan education was Judge Sewall's daughter Betty.

Betty comes into me as soon as I was up and tells me the disquiet she had when she wak'd ; told me she was afraid she should go to hell, was like Spira, not Elected. Asked her what I should pray for, she said that God would pardon her Sin and give her a new heart. I answer'd her Fears as well as I could and pray'd with many Tears on either part. Hope God heard us.¹⁷

II

The ultimate purpose of Puritan education, as Edmund Morgan reminds us, was salvation.¹⁸ Heirs to Adam's fall, children were born evil and ignorant. As Cotton Mather warned parents, "There is a corrupt nature in thy children, which is a fountain of all wickedness and confusion."¹⁹ But God, a rational, constitutional, not quite Calvinistic God, made a covenant with the believer and his seed. Though his children's salvation was not guaranteed, still they had a better chance to attain this goal than other children, through proper upbringing and education. By education the habit of righteousness might be partially restored, more in some children, less in others, but all could benefit from education. Evil could be trained into good, if the process started early enough. If good habits did not furnish grace, they were the main channel through which grace could flow. There was no attempt to develop children's personalities, to draw out any desirable traits, for no children could, by nature, possess desirable qualities. Good had to come from the outside, from elders and parents, from education. Ingenuity and initiative in religion usually meant heresy. "Let him therefore memorize catechism and leave originality to the devil."²⁰

To insure every child's education (some families and towns could ill afford the expense), the General Court of Massachusetts in 1642 ordered that selectmen should have the power to take account of all parents and masters for their children's education and employment, on penalty of twenty shillings for neglect of duty. They were to be able to read, understand the principles of religion and

capital laws, and be put to useful work. In the revision of the Massachusetts Bay Colony laws of 1648 this act became more educational in purpose— “Forasmuch as the good education of children is of singular behoof and benefit to any Common-wealth.”²¹ Samuel Eliot Morison does not believe that the purpose of these acts was to impose the Puritan creed on all children or to exploit their labor.

When a small, homogeneous group of men in a colonial legislature declares that education is of singular benefit to the commonwealth, and that it fits children for future service in church or state; and when they enforce these injections by suitable administrative regulations, pains and penalties (as these acts did), it may be supposed without undue charity that they mean what they say, and that education was conceived of as a training for citizenship and service in a civilized state, rather than as a vehicle for sectarian propoganda, or “caste” dominance.²²

Yet Morison does not take the Puritans at their word in the law of 1647, often referred to as “that Old Deluder, Satan” law.

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times keeping them in an unknown tongue, so in these later times by persuading from the use of Tongues, that so at least the true sense and meaning of the Originall might be clowded with false glosses of Saint-seeming-deceivers; and that Learning may not be buried in the graves of our forefathers in Church and Commonwealth, the Lord assisting our indeavors.²³

This law, he claims, was merely a religious sanction for a social obligation which poor people were unwilling to assume. The essence of the bill was civil and social. Every Massachusetts town of fifty families was required to employ a common school-master to teach reading and writing, his wages to be paid by either the

parents or the town; every town of a hundred families or more should set up a grammar school to prepare pupils for the university. Still, whether one emphasizes the religious objective as Morgan does, or the civil as Morison does, it appears unlikely that the Puritans made a distinction between the two. For to uphold the Puritan religion and the Puritan theocracy was one and the same.

Even without the pressure of these laws, parents seemed to begin instilling religious piety (concomitant as well were filial, social, civil piety) into their children quite early. Barely four years old, Phebe Bartlett passed through an amazing conversion, mainly as an example of religious precocity. Jane Turell could relate many stories from the Scriptures before she was two years old and would show off her knowledge at the dinner table.

Before she was four years old she could say the greater part of the Assembly's Catechism, many of the Psalms, read distinctly and make pertinent remarks on many things she read. She asked many astonishing questions about divine mysteries.²⁴

There is a certain gentleness, perhaps even a sweetness, in the way Cotton Mather proposed to educate his children.

VII.... The first *Chastisement*, which I inflict for an ordinary fault, is, to lett the Child see and hear me in an Astonishment, and hardly able to beleeve that the Child could do so *base* a Thing, but beleaving that they will never do it again.

I would never come, to give a child a *Blow*; except in the case of *Obstinancy*; or some gross Enormity-

To be chased for a while out of *my Presence*, I would make to be look'd upon, as the sorest Punishment in the Family.

.....I Would have them come to propound and expect, at this rate, *I have done well, and now I will go to my*

Father ; He will teach me some curious Thing for it. I must have them count it a Priviledge, to be taught ; and I somethimes manage the Matter so, that my Refusing to teach them Something, is their Punishment.

The slavish way of Education, carried on with raving and kicking and kicking and scourging (in Schools as well as Families,) tis abominable ; and a dreadful Judgement of God upon the World.²⁵

It is doubtful that most modern educators would find serious fault with Mather's general approach to education, one which hoped to instill a love of learning and religion through the gentle example and discipline of the teacher rather than harsh punishment. Edmund Morgan explains that the relationship between the child and parent was one due to distance, filial reverence, awe and love. And yet the parent had to be close enough to understand each of his children, his individual personality and weaknesses, in order to know how to teach and save him.²⁶

If parents could teach their children to read at home, they were under no lawful obligation to send their children to school. Parents who could afford the expense, however, hoped their children would climb the educational ladder—elementary school, and more important, grammar school and eventually Harvard for the boys. At an early age boys and girls were sent to dame schools, where they were taught to read, write and spell. And if the girls were not taught much “book learning,” they were carefully instructed in the domestic arts. Every child began with a hornbook, a printed alphabet sheet with a few words of one syllable and the Lord's Prayer. Other books used were a spelling book, a primer and a catechism.

There were a multiplicity of catechisms and primers in existence, but the ones most used became incorporated in the New England Primer.²⁷ Every Primer begin with the letters of the alphabet, with various repetitions making clear the distinctions between

vowels, consonants, double letters, italics and capitals. Then came the syllabarium, "Easy Syllables for Children," beginning with easy combinations as "ab, eb, ib, ob, ub," and increasing the number of syllables up to six. Usually next was "An Alphabet of Lessons for Youth," moral and instructive sentences from the Bible arranged so that the beginning twenty-four letters of the paragraphs were in alphabetical order from A to Z. The sole exception was X, for which the compiler could not find a word and had to settle for "eXort one another daily." The Lord's Prayer and the Apostles' Creed were included in every edition, and though their positions varied, they commonly followed the alphabet. Coming after were twenty-four little pictures with alphabetical rhymes, from "In Adam's Fall/We sinned All" to "Zaccheus he/Did Climb the Tree,/ Our Lord to see." The rhymes sometimes changed as the reigns of monarchs and the fervor in religion and patriotism changed. "Great Washington Brave/His country did save," for example, replaced "Whales in the sea/God's voice obey" in some editions after the American Revolution. Even more famous than the rhymed alphabet was the poem of John Rogers, a false story of martyrdom that produced pity in many a reader. More important, though far less popular, was the Catechism which usually followed the poem. In the eighteenth century Primers examined, this was either Westminster Assembly's "Shorter Catechism" or John Cotton's "Milk for Babes, Drawn Out of the Breasts of Both Testaments Chiefly, for the Spirituall Nourishment of Boston Babes in Either England." The last integral piece of the Primer was "A Dialogue between Christ, Youth and the Devil," in which a youth, despite the warnings of the Redeemer, succumbs to the Tempter and exits into Hell. "With the primer so constantly used in church, school and home, the people could not help but be saturated with its doctrines, and no book save the Bible did more to form New England character."²⁸

Boys began to attend grammar school at about seven or eight to

prepare for college. Morison describes Boston Latin School's curriculum of 1712:

The first three years were spent in learning by heart an "Accidence," as beginning Latin books were then called, together with the *Nomenclator*, a Latin-English phrase-book, and vocabulary called *Sententiae Pueriles*. For construing and parsing, the *Distichia* attributed to Dionysius Cato, a collection of maxims popular since the early Christian era, was used. Corderius' *Colloquies* and Aesop's *Fables* were also read, in Latin. Fourth year began Erasmus' *Colloquies*, continued Aesop, studied Latin grammar, and read Ovid *de Tristibus*. Fifth year continued Erasmus and Ovid, including the *Metamorphoses*, and began Cicero's *Epistolae*, Latin prosody, and Latin composition with Garretson' *English Exercises for School-Boys to Translate*. Sixth year scholars began Cicero *de Officiis*, Lucius Florus, Virgil's *Aeneid*, and Thomas Godwyn's excellent English treatise on Roman history and antiquities, which had been used at the University of Cambridge in John Harvard's day; they continued the *Metamorphoses*, made Latin verse, dialogues and letters, and began Greek and Rhetoric. During the seventh and last year, the boys now fourteen to sixteen years old, began Cicero's *Orations*, Justin, Virgil, Horace, Juvenal, and Persius, made Latin dialogues, and turned "a Psalm or something Divine" into Latin verse, with a Latin theme every fortnight. For Greek, they read Homer, Isocrates, Hesiod, and the New Testament.²⁹

As Morison emphasizes, there is nothing strictly Puritan or religious about such a curriculum. It is a classical education, similar to one given by an English school.

In no way is the Puritan belief in education more strongly shown than in their establishment of a college so soon after they settled

in the New World. The founders of Harvard did propose to train their ministers there, but they assumed ministers should have the same liberal education as any other scholar. Morison is quick to point out Harvard's broad commitment to higher education, as found in the 1650 charter—"The advancement of all good literature, artes and Sciences," and "all other necessary provisions that may conduce to the education of the English and Indian youth of this Country in knowledge: and godliness."³⁰

Less than half the alumni of seventeenth-century Harvard entered the sacred calling. All students, whether or not candidates for the pulpit, took a prescribed course in six of the traditional Seven Arts (Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, and Astronomy), in the Three Philosophies (Metaphysics, Ethics, and Natural Science), and in Greek, Hebrew and Ancient History.... It was a very similar program to that which many founders of New England had studied at Old Cambridge, containing the same three elements: the medieval arts and philosophies, founded largely on the works of Aristotle; the more serious Renaissance study of Greek and Hebrew; and lighter Renaissance study of classical belle-lettres. All these subjects were considered essential to a gentleman's education.³¹

Morison fails to note, however, that the proportional emphases in the Harvard and Cambridge curricula were not the same, and the lighter Renaissance study of classical belle-lettres was more restricted at Harvard. But still, Harvard did teach more than just the Scriptures.

III

Despite all that has been said, however, one must still confront the crucial question: "What were the Puritans *really* like"? First, any answer must be prefaced by the caveat that it is both difficult and dangerous to attempt to "label" any society. It is true that the Puritans possessed a religious fervor that shaped their lives,

but it is also true that their religion could be gentle, perhaps even jolly at times, as well as harsh and denying. Between church-going and Bible-reading, there was also some time for merry-making, children playing, spouses mating.

Second, and more important, one sees that the problems education presented to the Puritans in the seventeenth century are with us today, but more confusing and urgent. Since an educational system, primitive or sophisticated, is universally used to induct the young into the society, every society in history is confronted with the problems of *what* to teach and *how* to teach it. For the Puritans it was relatively easy to decide upon a curriculum, for the majority was of the same mind and the minority was too weak. As Lawrence Cremin has written in a slightly different context, public education "has succeeded [when] it has functioned as part of a large configuration of institutions, including families, churches, Sunday schools, and reform schools, committed to essentially complementary values."³² In Puritan New England there were the Bible, the *New England Primer*, the sermons and various other exemplary materials to teach religious and civil piety. Latin, Greek and Hebrew, the Classics, philosophy, mathematics and the sciences were necessary to produce an educated Renaissance man. In modern American society institutional values are less complementary than in the past resulting into little agreement among either the public or educators. Also, Latin, Greek and the Classics are widely thought too irrelevant to the society. "Relevance" is now the popular measuring stick, but few attempt to answer the question, "relevant to whom or what?", when educational needs and desires of students in the public school system are so diverse.

How to teach was also relatively simple for the Puritans to decide. Since children were evil and could not have anything original or new to tell the teacher, the teacher gave and explained the Catechism, and the pupils read, memorized and repeated. Whips, canes, sticks, thimbles were frequent teaching aids, though

some like Cotton Mather preferred a gentler approach. Bombarded by theories from the Enlightenment, Rousseau, Freud, Skinner, A. S. Neil and others, twentieth-century Americans are no longer sure they know what human nature is and, therefore, cannot decide upon the way to shape its growth and learning. There are some who still maintain, as the Puritans did, that man is evil and education should teach him to curb his lusts and learn to live with others. Or if not that, that man at birth has a *tabula rasa* to be written upon by the teacher. Others are convinced that man is good and has something to contribute to the world, and that education should allow him to "do his own thing". Children are being taught in the schools day after day, but the conflicting philosophies guiding the educational process are often hidden, usually unknown to the students, parents, administrators and, sadly, even to the teachers who are guided by them.

The unsolved question, then, is this—is there a need for a single philosophy of education? Does a society, especially just beginning to form, need this unity of purpose in order to build public schools, or even just to educate its children? Rhode Island permitted religious freedom, and therefore had minorities constantly disagreeing with one another. Rhode Island also sent only one boy to Harvard in the seventeenth century, so far as the records indicate.³³ It is not certain whether the former caused the latter, but there does appear to be a correlation between a strong, united belief in education and its purposes, and a strong educational system. Perhaps the Puritans, struggling for survival in the wilderness, could not afford the luxury of freedom, of divergent and conflicting opinions. When their unity and homogeneity grew weak and died, their educational system also lost its original fervor and effectiveness.

Few would disagree that in the last decade the frontiers of freedom in the United States have been pushed back quite dramatically. By the same token few would disagree that the quality of

American education has fallen sharply in the recent past. It is my judgment that the former has been a healthy development, but the question must be raised, "Has the former caused the latter?" It is, of course, a question subject to debate, but it is a question that must be confronted by all intellectually honest people.

Footnotes

- 1 Perry Miller (ed), *The American Puritans*, New York : Anchor Books, 1956, page 226.
- 2 Alice M. Earle, *Customs and Fashions in Early New England*, New York : Charles Scribner's Sons, 1893, page 2.
- 3 Perry Miller and Thomas Johnson (eds), *The Puritans*, New York : American Book Company, 1938, page 8.
- 4 In *Puritanism in Old and New England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), Alan Simpson explains the differences among the Protestant factions, and traces the struggles of the Puritans who left England and those who stayed.
- 5 Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy*, New York : Harper Torchback, 1944, page 82.
- 6 Miller, *The American Puritans*, page 116.
- 7 Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, pages 335-336.
- 8 *Ibid.*, page 207.
- 9 Earle, *Customs and Fashions*, page 37.
- 10 *Ibid.*, page 40.
- 11 Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, page 412.
- 12 *Ibid.*, page 392.
- 13 Earle, *Customs and Fashions*, page 18.
- 14 *Ibid.*, page 42-43.
- 15 *Ibid.*, page 370.
- 16 *Ibid.*, page 235.
- 17 *Ibid.*, page 11.
- 18 See Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, New York : Harper and Row, 1966, page 1-108.
- 19 Clarence J. Karier, *Man, Society and Education*, Chicago : Scott Foresman and Company, 1967, page 14.

- 20 Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, page 98.
- 21 Samuel Eliot Morison, *The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England*, New York : University Press, 1956, page 66.
- 22 *Ibid.*, page 67.
- 23 *Ibid.*, page 67-68.
- 24 Earle, *Customs and Fashions*, page 13.
- 25 Miller and Johnson, *The Puritans*, page 724-727.
- 26 Morgan, *The Puritan Family*, pages 107-108.
- 27 Paul L. Ford (ed), *The New England Primer*, New York : Dodd, Mead and Company, 1897, pages 23-45.
- 28 Clifton Johnson, *Old Time Schools and School-Books* New York : The Macmillan Company, 1917, page 99.
- 29 Samuel Eliot Morison, *Harvard College in the Seventeenth Century*, Cambridge : Harvard University Press, 1936, pages 105-106.
- 30 *Ibid.*, 32.
- 31 *Ibid.*, page 42.
- 32 Lawrence A. Cremin, "Public Education and the Education of the Public," *Teachers College Record*, Volume 77, Number 1, September, 1975, page 7.
- 33 Morison, *Harvard College*, page 70.