

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Introduction

JOHN COFFEY AND PAUL C. H. LIM

LOCATING PURITANISM

In 1564, or thereabouts, the English discovered a new term of abuse – ‘Puritan’. Initially, it was an insult launched at nonconformist clergy within the newly reformed Elizabethan church, zealous Protestants who refused to wear prescribed liturgical vestments, particularly the white surplice, and who gained a reputation as ‘opposers of the hierarchy and church-service’. But soon the nickname was taken up by ‘profane mouths’, who deployed it rather indiscriminately ‘to abuse pious people’.¹ ‘Puritan’ became a handy smear word for bishops angered by clerical nonconformity, metropolitan playwrights provoked by censorious moralism, and villagers driven to distraction by assaults on traditional festive culture. By the early seventeenth century, Patrick Collinson explains, ‘Puritanism’ had become ‘the brand name for a certain kind of Protestant religiosity, social conduct and politics’.²

The polemical origins of the term have troubled historians, and led some to call for the abolition of Puritanism as a historical category. Yet for most scholars of early modern England and New England, the concept has proved indispensable. As the American historian Michael Winship explains, Puritanism is ‘an extremely convenient shorthand term’, but one that ‘is unavoidably a contextual, imprecise term, not an objective one, a term to use carefully but not take too seriously in itself’.³

Defining Puritanism has become a favourite parlour game for early modern historians. Some readers will be familiar with the discussion, but others may appreciate some basic orientation. The chapters in this collection offer different perspectives and approaches to the problem of definition, and together they build up a multifaceted picture of our subject. But we can begin by locating Puritans on the map of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European Christianity. Puritanism is the name we give to a distinctive and particularly intense variety of early modern Reformed Protestantism which originated within the unique context of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)2 *John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim*

the Church of England but spilled out beyond it, branching off into divergent dissenting streams, and overflowing into other lands and foreign churches.

That statement needs unpacking, and we can start with the most basic point. Firstly, Puritanism was a variety of Protestantism, and Puritans were heirs of the Reformation inaugurated by Martin Luther's seminal re-reading of Christianity's foundational texts. Puritans affirmed the great slogans of Luther's Reformation – *sola fide, sola gratia, sola scriptura*; faith alone, grace alone, scripture alone – though there was disagreement over exactly what these slogans entailed. Like Luther, they were intensely preoccupied with personal salvation, and convinced that God pardoned sinners in response to simple faith in Christ's redeeming sacrifice on the Cross. Following the Reformer, they repudiated the penitential system of Roman Catholicism – the mass, confession, absolution, penance, indulgences, pilgrimage, prayer to the saints, prayer for the dead, and purgatory. Indeed, most Puritans shared Luther's conviction that the Papacy was the Antichrist predicted in the Book of Revelation, though in the course of the seventeenth century the notion of the Antichrist acquired far wider applications.⁴ Anti-popery was a staple of post-Reformation Protestantism, and Puritan anti-popery was particularly intense.⁵ In rejecting papal authority, Puritans affirmed Luther's teaching that the Bible was the Christian's only infallible authority. Puritan religion was religion of the Word, and the preaching and reading of the Bible were central to their faith.⁶ John Bunyan's fictional pilgrim, depicted so vividly by William Blake in the illustration on our cover, was a man fleeing the wrath of God and the City of Destruction, weighed down by the burden of sin and guilt, engrossed in the Bible, and asking the question: 'What must I do to be saved?'

Secondly, Puritanism was a variety of Reformed Protestantism, aligned with the continental Calvinist churches rather than with the Lutherans.⁷ Calvin, Bucer, Bullinger and other Reformed divines had promoted a second (more radical) wave of the Reformation, one which broke upon English shores from the 1540s onwards, and came to define English Protestantism.⁸ With the Reformed, Puritans believed that the Lutheran church remained too 'popish' in its liturgy, its sacramental theology and its church government. As Reformed Protestants, they favoured simplicity in worship, and recoiled with iconophobic horror from images and elaborate rituals.⁹ What Puritans sought was a thorough-going Reformation, though exactly how far that Reformation needed to go became a matter of bitter controversy. They often displayed a characteristically Reformed concern for divinely ordained forms of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 3

church government and discipline, though they rarely had the chance to implement their ideas, and there was an antiformalist counter-current within English Puritanism.¹⁰ Like Calvin and other Reformed theologians, Puritans laid much stress on the doctrine of unconditional predestination, and in the seventeenth century they became embroiled in intra-Reformed controversies over election, free will, and the scope of Christ's atonement.¹¹ And like the Reformed, they typically qualified Luther's antithesis between law and gospel, emphasising the role of God's law within the Christian life and the local community, and trying (sometimes with conspicuous success) to recreate godly Genevas in England and America. This legalism provoked an 'antinomian backlash' from within, but even when radical Puritans rejected orthodox Reformed ideas about the moral law or predestination or infant baptism, they still defined themselves in relation to the Reformed tradition.¹²

Thirdly, however, Puritanism was a distinctive and particularly intense variety of early modern Reformed Protestantism which originated within the Church of England, and was a product of that unique environment and its tensions. Under Elizabeth I, the Church of England was widely regarded as a Reformed church, but it was anomalous in retaining certain features of late medieval Catholicism, including cathedrals (and their choirs), a formal liturgy, traditional clerical vestments and an elaborate hierarchy headed by bishops and archbishops. For Puritans, this Protestant church still contained too much of the old popery. Complaining that it was but 'halfly reformed', many lobbied for 'further reformation', aiming to bring the Church of England into closer alignment with other Reformed churches. This campaign enjoyed limited success, and by the 1590s Puritan reformers seemed to have been defeated.¹³ But the tensions generated by the Elizabethan Puritan movement helped to forge the language of 'Puritanism' and to consolidate godly identity. As Collinson has repeatedly emphasised, Puritanism 'was not a thing identifiable in itself, but one half of a stressful relationship'. The 'ecclesiastical vitriol' heaped on zealous Protestants in the Elizabethan decades contributed to the 'invention' of Puritanism.¹⁴ Under attack, the self-styled godly rapidly evolved an embattled sense of identity. Their critics saw them as a readily identifiable group, and a threat to the status quo; equally, the godly themselves learned to recognise each other, and created their own networks.¹⁵

Ironically, attacks on the godly intensified in the 1590s just as many leading Puritans were coming to terms with the episcopal Church of England and increasing their influence within it. The bleak prospects for wholesale ecclesiastical reformation forced English Puritans to invest

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)4 *John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim*

their energies elsewhere – in the development of a new style of Reformed devotion.¹⁶ Despite sharing much common ground with other Protestants, the godly cut a distinctive profile, both within the Church of England and across Reformed Europe, where they gained a reputation for their affective piety and practical divinity. English Puritan divines like Richard Greenham, Richard Rogers, William Perkins and Richard Sibbes became renowned as ‘physicians of the soul’. They took the Reformed doctrine of election to heart, fostering an ‘experimental predestinarianism’ that encouraged the believer to seek assurance that they were chosen by God for salvation. In contrast to Calvin and many continental Reformed churches, these English Puritans insisted on a strict sabbatarianism, centred on sermon attendance at church followed by godly exercises in families. They prescribed a demanding regime of personal devotions, including godly reading, psalm-singing, prayer, fasting and spiritual meditation. They recommended practices of self-discipline, including keeping a spiritual diary and private covenanting. And in works of casuistry, they set out an immensely exacting moral code. It can be no coincidence that this ‘first Protestant pietism’ arose within a half-Reformed church that lacked the usual Calvinist mechanisms of church discipline and often failed to satisfy the Reformed appetite for pure worship. It was a religious style tailored to suit voluntary Christians, who frequently gathered outside the parish structures.¹⁷

The sheer intensity of this spiritual praxis set the godly apart. Collinson has famously (and loosely) defined Puritans as ‘the hotter sort of Protestants’ (a phrase borrowed from an Elizabethan source).¹⁸ Distinguished by the zeal and intensity of their evangelical Protestantism, they were different in degree rather than in kind from the conformist Calvinists who held the best bishoprics and deaneries in England until the ascendancy of Archbishop Laud in the 1630s. Puritans were ‘forward Protestants’, ‘super-Protestants’, ‘perfect Protestants’, ‘the militant tendency’ of English Protestantism.¹⁹

Under Elizabeth and James, this hot Protestantism flourished *within* the established church, and it is misleading to think of a Puritan opposition at loggerheads with an ‘Anglican’ establishment. As historians of the period regularly remind each other, ‘Anglicanism’ is an anachronistic nineteenth-century term, and its use tends to obscure the firmly Reformed character of the Church of England before the rise of the Laudians. Whilst radical Puritans attacked bishops, and sometimes separated altogether from the national church, moderate Puritans were active participants in the Protestant mainstream.²⁰ As Patrick Collinson

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 5

observes in chapter 1, ‘increasingly so-called “Puritanism” represented not so much an insurgency against the Reformed Church of England as a vigorous and growing tendency within it’. Puritans had emerged as a subset of English Reformed Protestants, and Puritanism can be located as ‘a set of positions’ on the spectrum of the English Church, a spectrum that ranged from church papists and high churchmen, through conformist Calvinists, to moderate Puritans and radical Puritans.²¹

Fourthly, Puritanism ultimately proved to be a uniquely fissiparous variety of Reformed Protestantism – while it originated within the Church of England, it spilled out beyond it, branching off into divergent dissenting streams. Before 1660, the vast majority of the godly in England remained within the national church. Yet for a religion of discipline, Puritanism proved to be remarkably fluid. Under Elizabeth and James, a minority of Puritans severed their connections with the Church of England and defined themselves against it, forming separatist and Baptist congregations outside the parish system. The most famous separatists (‘the Pilgrim Fathers’) left Scrooby in Nottinghamshire for Leiden in the Netherlands, before sailing the Atlantic to found the Plymouth Colony in 1620. During the English Revolution of the 1640s, when Puritans spearheaded the parliamentary revolt under godly political leaders like the earl of Warwick, John Pym and Oliver Cromwell, their fragmentation only accelerated. The mainstream Puritans divided between Presbyterians and Congregationalists, and many thousands left parish churches to join ‘gathered’ churches composed purely of the godly. Some went further, becoming Seekers, Quakers, Muggletonians or Ranters.²²

Historians still debate whether the sects should be deemed Puritan or not.²³ Whilst they emerged from a Puritan milieu, some at least left the mainstream godly community far behind. Others, however, maintained links with godly brethren within the parishes, and can be usefully described as radical Puritans. Calvinistic Baptists, for example, were widely recognised as orthodox and pious, and the Puritan national church of the Cromwellian era incorporated some Baptists alongside Presbyterians and Congregationalists. Quakers, by contrast, were usually considered beyond the pale, accused of downgrading the authority of the Bible, the preaching of the Word and the centrality of Christ’s atonement. The so-called Ranters were universally excoriated. Yet even these radicals were driving certain Puritan ideas to extreme conclusions. The boundaries of the Puritan community were drawn in different ways by different people. Oliver Cromwell had a more capacious conception of godly fellowship than the Presbyterian

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)6 *John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim*

heresiographer Thomas Edwards, one that could (at times) embrace even the Quaker leader, George Fox. What is clear is that, by the 1650s, a substantial minority of those we can reasonably call Puritans met in gathered churches outside the parochial system of the national church. After the Restoration, the majority of Puritan clergy – mainly Presbyterians like the prolific divine Richard Baxter – were also excluded from the Church of England. But they left with great reluctance, forced out by returning incumbents or parliamentary legislation. Many continued to attend parish services, and longed for the day when they could be comprehended within the established church.²⁴ Their persistent attachment to the Church of England reminds us that throughout the seventeenth century, most Puritans were not sectarians.

Finally, Puritanism spilled out beyond the boundaries of England, overflowing into other lands and foreign churches. Surging into Ireland, Wales and North America, it met with mixed success. In Ireland and Wales, Puritans were a tiny minority who made few inroads into the majority populations (though in Wales they did lay the groundwork for later Dissent).²⁵ In the Caribbean, ambitious Puritan colonisation projects failed, and in Virginia Puritans were thin on the ground.²⁶ In New England, by contrast, the godly would rule the roost, with the Puritan colonies of Plymouth, Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Haven and (especially) Rhode Island reflecting significant variations within Puritanism.²⁷ Aspects of English Puritanism were also exported to other Reformed churches. In Scotland, godly people were avid consumers of English Puritan practical divinity, and charges of 'Puritanism' abounded from the 1590s onwards, as James VI and then Charles I tried to bring the Church of Scotland more into line with its southern sister.²⁸ In the Netherlands, there was great demand for translations of devotional works by Puritan divines, and leading Dutch divines advocated Puritan innovations, such as strict sabbatarianism, conventicles and an introspective quest for assurance of election. In Hungary and Transylvania, some Reformed ministers were accused of being Puritans because they had promoted English practical divinity and the reform of church services. Other parts of the Reformed world were less receptive to English Puritan influence, a fact that highlights the distinctiveness of Puritanism within the broader Reformed tradition.²⁹ But if Puritanism was formed within the Church of England, it was not contained within it. It was a style of Reformed Protestantism that travelled far.

It also lasted long. Conventionally, historians date the end of Puritanism to the late seventeenth century (in England) or the 1730s (in North America) – and this volume happily accepts these conventions.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 7

But Puritanism had an enduring legacy, one that fed into Protestant Dissent and Evangelicalism. In fact, many have argued that it left a lasting impression on the culture of the English-speaking world.³⁰

INTERPRETING PURITANISM

The dynamism and impact of Puritanism helps to explain why it has attracted so much attention from historians. The secondary literature on the subject is now so vast that compiling a comprehensive bibliography of modern scholarship is an almost impossible task. The 'Further Reading' at the end of each chapter in this *Companion* is just for starters. Puritanism has attracted attention for very different reasons. Various kinds of scholar have approached the subject from different locations and disciplines and with divergent questions and purposes.

For historians of Tudor and Stuart England – from S. R. Gardiner and Christopher Hill to Patrick Collinson and Peter Lake – understanding Puritanism has been part of a larger project of understanding the politics, religion and culture of early modern England. Most of these historians have worked within British (or American) universities. Puritanism has mattered to them because it helps to clarify the dynamics of church and state in the Elizabethan and early Stuart era, the upheavals of the English Revolution and the divisions of the Restoration. Indeed, it is generally accepted that one cannot explain the origins of the English Civil War without substantial reference to the godly. And in recent years, social and cultural historians have joined political historians in making major contributions to the field.³¹ As Peter Lake observes in his chapter, 'To review the historiography of Puritanism is to review the history of early modern England.'³²

Historians of colonial America have contributed as much to the study of Puritanism as their English counterparts. Indeed, the Puritan colonies of seventeenth-century New England have perhaps been studied more intensively than any comparable settlements in human history. As a consequence, we possess an enormously rich body of scholarship that illuminates every aspect of life in the seventeenth-century Bible commonwealths.³³ To some extent, this is because of the region's major educational establishments headed by Harvard and Yale, which trace their origins back to the Puritan era. Leading historians of New England Puritanism, like Samuel Eliot Morison, Perry Miller and Edmund Morgan, were ensconced in New England's great universities. Yet the New England Puritans also mattered because they were widely regarded as 'founders' or 'shapers' of American culture. Perry Miller (himself a

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)8 *John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim*

convinced atheist) turned to the study of Puritanism to fulfil 'the mission of expounding what I took to be the innermost propulsion of the United States'.³⁴ Many others have followed in his footsteps, believing that Puritan New England held the key to American identity.

For some social theorists, Puritanism had an even wider significance, for it could help to explain the emergence of modernity itself. The seminal work in this tradition was Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1904–5), which gave pride of place to the Puritans. Weber argued that Puritan anxiety over predestination produced ascetic habits of hard work and self-discipline – a 'Protestant ethic' which inadvertently fostered 'the spirit of capitalism'. His argument met with a mixed reception among historians, but inspired many imitators. During the course of the twentieth century, Puritanism was invoked to explain everything from England's scientific revolution to the rise of democracy. And while the impetus to connect Puritanism and modernity has been running out of steam, grand theorists have forced historians to think more deeply about the cultural impact of religion.³⁵

Modernity theorists tended to work in departments of social science, but another significant group of scholars was located in departments of English and American literature. Two Puritan writers have long held a place within the canon of English literature: John Milton and John Bunyan. Miltonists from William Haller to Sharon Achinstein have made important contributions to the study of Puritanism and the Puritan Revolution. Beginning with Milton and Bunyan, literary scholars have branched out to consider a much wider range of texts. The manuscript writings of New England poets like Anne Bradstreet and Edward Taylor have been recovered, and are now well established as major works of colonial American literature. And in recent years there has been a rediscovery of the writings of radical Puritans and of Puritan women like Lucy Hutchinson and Mary Rowlandson.³⁶

Finally, much important scholarship on Puritanism has been produced by confessional scholars. Many seminary or church historians have worked within what North Americans would call 'mainline' denominations. While they did not share the Calvinist theology of their subjects, they looked back to Puritans as progenitors of their own ecclesiastical traditions, and sought to write for the church as well as the academy. The most distinguished historian of this kind is the Congregationalist Geoffrey Nuttall, whose many articles and books remain essential guides to Puritanism.³⁷ Other confessional scholars have identified far more closely with the Calvinist orthodoxy of the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction* 9

mainstream Puritans. Conservative Reformed authors (mainly pastors and theologians) often write semi-popular books for religious publishers, designed to edify a Christian audience, and sometimes tending towards hagiography. But Reformed scholars have also published substantial studies of Puritan thought.³⁸ The grand old man of this school, J.I. Packer, wrote an Oxford D. Phil. thesis on the theology of Richard Baxter in the 1950s (supervised by Geoffrey Nuttall) that still stands as one of the finest works on a Puritan theologian.³⁹

Puritanism, then, has attracted a wide variety of scholars who together have made this a particularly busy field of historical enquiry. Iconic Puritan figures – Milton, Cromwell, Bunyan, Baxter, Williams – are the subjects of a steady stream of books (in Milton's case, a veritable torrent).⁴⁰ And if studies published since 2001 are any indication, Puritanism continues to inspire groundbreaking work. Exciting new research has lifted the lid on acute tensions within early Stuart Puritanism, tracing the emergence of antinomianism in England and New England, and shedding new light on the fracturing of the godly community.⁴¹ Another important breakthrough has been the transcription of the entire minutes of the Westminster Assembly, the great synod of Puritan divines called by the Long Parliament in the 1640s to reform the national church. Chad van Dixhoorn and his team are currently preparing a critical edition of these minutes, and their labours will greatly enrich our understanding of English Puritanism in the mid-seventeenth century.⁴² Meanwhile, another group of historians led by Mark Goldie has transcribed and edited the 'Entering Book' of the Presbyterian Roger Morrice, a major document that transforms our view of later Stuart Puritanism.⁴³ Scholars of early modern witchcraft have explored Puritan demonology, and explained how in particular sets of circumstances godly paranoia stimulated witch trials, including the unique witch-hunts in East Anglia during the English Civil War and around Salem in 1692.⁴⁴ And there has been fascinating work on Puritans and Native Americans in New England, including monographs on the Puritan missionary John Eliot, the Praying Indians of Martha's Vineyard, and the tragedy of King Philip's War.⁴⁵ As this work amply demonstrates, the study of Puritanism is still flourishing.

SURVEYING PURITANISM

This *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism* is not exhaustive, but it is designed to offer a rounded introduction to the subject.⁴⁶ It should serve a variety of different audiences: specialists and non-specialists;

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-86088-8 - The Cambridge Companion to Puritanism

Edited by John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim

Excerpt

[More information](#)

10 *John Coffey and Paul C. H. Lim*

academics, students and general readers; the secular and the religious. It brings together historians of Puritanism from both sides of the Atlantic, including younger scholars alongside some of the leading names in the field. And it ranges widely, both geographically and thematically.

Part One provides an overview of the history of English Puritanism, from its emergence as a polemical construct in the 1560s to its transmutation into Dissent in the later seventeenth century. It opens with a chapter on 'Antipuritanism' by Patrick Collinson, the doyen of historians of Puritanism. Collinson analyses 'the invention of Puritanism' by polemicists in the last decades of the sixteenth century – what he calls 'a defining moment in English culture'. As in earlier writings, he usefully problematises the concept of Puritanism, while highlighting its importance. There follow four chapters on Elizabethan Puritanism (John Craig), the early Stuart era (Tom Webster), 'the Puritan Revolution' (John Morrill) and the later Stuart period (John Spurr). Together these chapters constitute a concise narrative history of English Puritanism, one that introduces us to the key religious developments, the wider impact of the godly, and the major interpretive issues.

Part Two moves beyond England. Anthony Milton reminds us that Puritans were far from Anglocentric. They saw themselves as part of the wider Reformed tradition, and he examines the interchanges between Puritanism and the continental Reformed churches. Francis Bremer and David Hall tell the story of New England from the 1620s to 1720s, tracing the continuities and discontinuities between the Puritanism of the earliest settlers and that of their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. Their chapters summarise a rich and complex story, and distil the findings of an immense secondary literature. Later chapters also contain discussions of New England, but Part Two endeavours to broaden what has often been an exclusive focus on English and American Puritanism. New England has perhaps loomed larger in the minds of modern historians than it did in seventeenth-century imaginations, and the impact of Puritanism outside England and America has been rather neglected. There are signs that this is changing, and this volume reinforces the trend towards a more comparative and international approach to the subject. Crawford Gribben draws on recent scholarship to gauge the success of attempts to export English Puritanism to Ireland and Wales, arguing that these countries remained 'sites of anxiety' for the godly. Scotland was very different, for it had its own distinct Protestant tradition, quite independent of the Church of England. Margo Todd shows that Puritan-style hot Protestantism was alive and well