

American Puritanism



The Puritan by Augustus Saint-Gaudens (1887)
Brookgreen Gardens, South Carolina

I. Key Puritan Beliefs and Values

A. Godly people were sober, hardworking, and responsible. English society had been corrupted by foreign influences and by disorder and needed to be purified.

B. Catholicism had undermined the relationship between God and the individual

1. Rituals and sacraments administered by a powerful and complicated hierarchy
2. Insistence on Latin as the only language of religion
3. Confession only through the priest and the confessional booth

C. Election & predestination--God chooses who is saved and who is damned. No one can earn salvation through works. Yet the saints are responsible for their actions.

D. The congregation of saints chooses its members, hires and fires its ministers, and recognizes no other religious authority.

E. Worship should be plain, lack mystery, and be focused on God, No stained glass, instrumental music, or art.

C. Value of education

1. The Bible should be read by everyone. New England in the 17th century was the most literate place in the world (probably 70% literacy)
2. Publicly supported schools needed to oppose Satan ("Old Deluder" laws).

Each town with 50 families was required to support a teacher. 3

3. Harvard founded in 1636 to train ministers

D. Intolerance--error must be opposed and driven out

1. Persecution and expulsion of Anne Hutchinson (1638)

- a) Criticized ministers for not preaching covenant of grace
- b) Held religious meetings in her home
- c) Challenged the political and religious leadership of Massachusetts Bay.

2. Roger Williams expelled for "new and dangerous opinions" ((1638)

- a) Preached complete separation of church and state--the state should have no influence over a person's conscience
- b) Religious groups should be supported by voluntary tithes, not taxes
- c) Indians should be paid for lands.
- d) Settled Rhode Island and established complete freedom of religion (including Jews, Catholics, and Quakers)

3. Puritans persecuted and expelled Baptists (opposed to child baptism) and killed Quakers (such as Mary Dyer) for preaching "inner light" doctrines and opposing any religious authority (no ministers or sermons).

II. Puritan Political Life

A. Freemen (adult male heads of families) ruled in church meetings and town meetings.

B. Blurring of political and religious authority--theocracy, not democracy was the goal. Winthrop's vision of a "City Upon a Hill."

C. Halfway Covenant developed to allow unbaptized members (children of Puritans) to vote and thus preserve influence of Puritan authorities.

III. Salem Witchcraft Crisis (1692)

A. Group of girls accused fellow villagers of witchcraft

B. Trials (featuring "spectral evidence" and body searches for birthmarks) resulted in convictions of many and executions of 20 people and 2 dogs.

C. Goal was restoration of the disciplined community. No confessed witches were hanged or burned.

C. Reaction resulted in anti-Puritan sentiment, weakening of Puritan authority, and apologies from some religious leaders

IV. Puritan Contributions

- A. Self-government and community responsibility
 - 1) Democracy in church rule led to democracy in town meeting
 - 2) All community members responsible for conduct of citizens
 - B. Education critical for individual and community success
 - C. Hard work and thrift demanded of all
 - D. High standards of moral excellence and conscience
 - E. The family is the central element of the community
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