PURITANISM AND ITS LEGACY

Puritans Going To Church
Puritanism

• Puritans were English Protestants who sought to “purify” the Anglican Church of its Catholic rituals and traditions.

• The Puritans hoped to form a pure, godly church in rigid conformity with their belief system.

• The Puritans’ ideological commitment distinguished them from the colonists of Virginia. They were driven by a spiritual vision of creating a Christian utopia that would serve as a model for the rest of the world.
Transformation

• Traditional feudal society in England was changing into a modern social order.
  – Overturning of traditional church
  – Growth of cities
  – Enclosure of land
  – Increase in trade and acquisitive instincts

• Puritans sought to restore equilibrium and community to their own society.
  – Industriousness
  – Observance of hierarchy or “place” in society
  – Formed congregations committed to community and personal perfection in one’s calling
  – “Elect” or “visible saints” would govern to avoid the chaos of an evil world
The Puritans who established Massachusetts Bay Colony wished to inspire people everywhere to continue the great work of religious reform.

The first settlers of each Puritan community freely created a covenant with God.

The Great Migration brought 12,000 Puritans to New England (1630-1640).
- Settled in families
- Many colonists from the “lesser” gentry or “middling sort” in England
- Quickly developed a viable colonial enterprise and economy
- Gained valuable experience in self-government
**Covenant**

- In the Puritan mind all social relationships were envisioned in terms of a covenant or contract.
- In 1630 John Winthrop composed his famous essay, “A Modell of Christian Charity,” aboard the *Arabella* during his passage to New England. Winthrop proclaims that the Puritans made a covenant with God to establish a pure Christian community in which the wealthy were to show charity and avoid exploiting their neighbors while the poor were to work diligently and abide by the authority of the “visible saints.” If the Puritans upheld the covenant God would reward them and make them an example for the world. But if the colonists broke the covenant, God would unleash His wrath upon the entire community.
Winthrop asserted that in every society “some must be rich, some poor, some high and eminent in power ... others mean and in subjection.” Winthrop envisioned a stable community comprised of tightly-knit communities and families: “... we must be knit together, in this work, as one man. We must delight in each other; make other’s condition our own;... So shall we keep the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace.... We shall find that the God of Israel is among us, and ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies.... For we must consider that we shall be like a City upon a Hill; the eyes of all people are on us...."
Puritan Concept of Liberty

• Puritans found the sight of individuals breaking free of traditional restraints terrifying, except in religion, because it attempted to place the individual in a more direct relationship with God. Puritans deplored individualism in other areas of life because it left people to their own devices, where they acted out the worst possible fantasies of social anarchy. Social order, respect for authority, and morality all seemed to be crumbling amidst the new social and economic order. Puritans harbored fears of “idle and masterless men.” The notion of “every man alone” haunted the Puritans with frightening images of chaos. In the Puritan mind, individualism endangered the community and the Puritans’ special covenant with God.

• The Puritans of New England created a government that limited political power to recognized church members. The government enforced Puritan religious orthodoxy. The Puritans believed in “publick liberty.” Most Puritans willingly accepted restraints on individual freedom because to them liberty was collective, something that belonged to the entire community. In essence, citizens acted together in making social rules that all community had the duty to obey without question.

• New England Puritans were generally intolerant of diversity and dissension. There were two basic ranks in New England—gentlemen and freeholders. Puritans also divided their society into two groups—the elect and the nonelect. “The elect” were expected to resist the temptation to let conscience alone be their guide. Political and religious leaders feared liberty of conscience because they believed individualistic impulses could destroy the Puritan commonwealth.

• To the Puritans freedom meant one’s right and obligation to sacrifice self-interest for the common good of the community. “Christian liberty” required submission to God and secular authority. Restrictions on freedom of speech, religion, movement, and personal behavior were for the improvement of their “common weal.” “Natural rights” as conceived by the framers of the U.S. Constitution would be considered anarchy to the Puritans. In 1636 John Cotton, for instance, stated: “Democracy, I do not conceive that ever God did ordain as a fit government either for church or commonwealth.” Similarly, in 1645, John Winthrop asserted: “Liberty is maintained and exercised in a way of subjection to authority.”
In the Puritan mind, God punished His chosen people when they violated His covenant. Puritans considered any sort of trouble or misfortune as “evidence that God hath a controversy with his people.”

Historians define a “jeremiad” as “a formulaic statement of concern by Puritan ministers or magistrates that the colony had fallen into a pattern of declining piety.” Unless Puritans reformed their sinful behavior, the worse was yet to come.

Jeremiads arose out of Puritan anxiety over tension between religious ideals and social reality. Contradictions abounded.

The jeremiad produced by the synod of 1679 revealed distress over sins, such as “a great and visible decay of the power of Godliness” among many, excessive pride, inappropriate dress and displays of wealth, “Sabbath-breaking,” drinking, debauchery, adultery, fornication, dancing, gaming, idleness, greedy business practices, “heats and hatreds,” declining public schools, and even soaring lawsuits. Ministers placed much of the blame on the failure of family government, which they claimed resulted in spoiled children, rebellious servants and a decline in religious fervor. Families were expected to be central institutions, “little commonwealths.”

In 1637 John Winthrop wrote, “A family is a little commonwealth.”
Tensions

- God created a hierarchical society, and people are supposed to mind their place. Yet some were breaking ranks by engaging in behaviors such as seeking advancement, charging “excessive rates,” moving away from the town center, or even wearing flashy clothing.
- Another dilemma existed in that Puritans were expected to work hard and make the most their talents. Yet diligence often resulted in social mobility. “Saints” could rise and fall.
- Each community was to be based on deference, “mutual love” and “ordered liberty.” Yet conflicting interests often led to political, economic and religious disputes.
- There was a clear divide between utopian visions and social reality. But many Puritans held on to the vision of future glory and pursued “the errand in the wilderness” with great fervor.
- Jeremiads attempted to reconcile the struggle between forces of stability and change. Evangelical fervor influenced religious revivals, reform movements and political events, such as the Great Awakening, abolitionism, the American Revolution and Civil War. Leaders would refer back to and reinvent the “city upon a hill” theme.

John Cotton
Conversion Experience

• Only those who could demonstrate evidence of grace and being among the elect could receive salvation and full church membership. Divisions arose over convictions of grace and standards of salvation and church membership.

• Congregations maintained their autonomy but did not tolerate diversity from within. Tensions frequently exploded over the conflict between communal autonomy and central authority.

• By the second generation spiritual decline occurred. By the 1660s a shortage of church members haunted the Puritan leadership. The synod of 1662 advocated the “half way covenant,” which meant that the “half way” members of the second generation could baptize their children but not share in communion or vote for church officials. But again, churches continued to divide over the issue of membership. Increasingly, church leaders united in an attempt to keep their authority over the people.

• Puritans faced another dilemma in forming government. They feared arbitrary power but also a loss of control.

In Puritan Massachusetts, religious non-conformists suffered this fate—and much worse. (An 1892 lithograph from the Library of Congress print collection.)

Puritan form of punishment
Church members voted for religious and political leaders. Ministers did not hold public office. Freemen began voting for governor in 1632. Each town sent representatives to the legislature, the General Court. But the magistrates struggled to control the General Court and exercised a veto power over the body. Broad suffrage and deference to authority became tricky to balance.

The General Court developed into a rancorous institution filled with petitions, debates, suits and charges.

New England elites were attempting to transform their faith from what had been a means of protest and reform into the official faith of the ruling class establishment. The so-called “New England Way” demanded loyalty, obedience, discipline and commitment to the community. Puritan elites employed the institutions of church and state in an effort to secure their vision and power.

Conversely, Anne Hutchinson and her followers sought to reestablish an evangelical ministry and the highly intense personal experience of the older version of Puritanism. They wanted to feel the Holy Ghost in their souls without the cumbersome constraints of the conversion relation. To Puritan leaders this sentiment was a revolutionary form of individualism or what historian Edmund S. Morgan called “the seventeenth-century equivalent of nihilism.” Hutchinson’s older, evangelical faith clashed with the new orthodoxy of the Puritan elite. Political scientist James Morone described the conflict as a battle between “the urge to abandon oneself entirely in the overwhelming power of God” and “the striving toward heaven through the human struggle to live a moral life.”
Us and Them

• The Puritans found enemies in heretics, Indians and witches.

• According to the Calvinist doctrine of predestination, God had already selected those who would be saved and those who would be damned to hell. This created a dilemma for Puritan society. If some had already been elected, they did not necessarily have to follow laws made by church or state to assure their salvation. Moreover, since most were damned to hell, they had no reason to behave well. Ministers responded by preaching that all had a responsibility to prepare for God’s grace, even if only a few had been saved. They admitted that God might not reward all who led virtuous lives, but they argued that it was a greater certainty that God would punish sinners. Some ministers even asserted that God offered his grace to all who were willing to receive it. Boston minister, John Cotton, objected to this teaching because he believed it went too far.

• Cotton preached that God’s grace was free and absolute. He argued that those who were saved would do good works, but this was because God’s spirit resided in them. Neither of Boston’s ministers, Wilson nor Cotton believed that good works could help save a person. Cotton deemphasized preparation. The difference was a matter of emphasis.
Antinomian Controversy

Many Puritan leaders believed that Cotton’s teachings were dangerous because they freed individuals of the duty to obey the law. Most Puritan leaders considered the belief that good works could not influence whether or not one was chosen to be saved and that those selected for salvation need not be bound by laws of church and state a form of heresy known as Antinomianism. In other words, an antinomian would be someone who was “spiritually reborn and placed above law, morality, and all other restraints.” Puritan orthodoxy rejected Antinomianism. They believed man and God would work together toward salvation. Only God could offer grace, but His people had to be fully prepared to receive it. Election could happen at any moment.

One of Cotton’s followers, Anne Hutchinson began arguing that local ministers overemphasized the role of works in achieving salvation. Hutchinson challenged the Boston clergy and its theology as well as the role of women in Puritan society when she charged ministers with preaching a covenant of works, the idea that good works alone could win admission into heaven. Puritans rejected this idea, associating it with Anglican doctrine.
Jezebel

- Puritans expected women to be “weak, submissive, charitable, virtuous, and modest.” Hutchinson’s resistance gave discontent women an outlet through which they could express dissatisfaction with theology as well as prescribed gender roles in Puritan society. Many women identified with Hutchinson’s bold intellectual resistance and aggressive challenge.
- Antinomians believed that salvation could only be demonstrated by the individual experiencing God’s grace from within. Most Puritan ministers attempted to maintain a middle ground between the covenant of grace and the covenant of works. Cotton preached that person could feel and become conscious of the Holy Spirit dwelling within one’s soul. Church elders called on Cotton to clarify his views and feared that “all things are turned upside down among us.” Rebels could use the covenant of grace to challenge rightful authority.
- Hutchinson spread her teachings to others through her role as a midwife as well as in the biweekly meetings she organized at her home.
Women Rebels

- Historian Lyle Koehler concludes that many women identified with Antonomianism because its emphasis on the individual’s inability to achieve salvation mirrored the inability of women to gain equality with men on a sociopolitical level in Puritan society. According to Kohler women rebels found Antonomianism appealing because its ideology claimed that “all power ... emanated from God, raw and pure, respecting no sex, rather than from male authority figures striving to interpret Divine Word.” Koehler explains: “Fortified by a consciousness of the Holy Spirit’s inward dwelling, the Antinomians could rest secure and self-confident in the belief that they were mystic participants in transcendent power of the Almighty, a power far beyond anything mere magistrates and ministers might muster. Antinomianism could not secure for women such practical earthly powers as sizable estates, professional success, and participation in the church and civil government, but it provided compensation by reducing the significance of these powers for men. Viewed from this perspective, Antinomianism extended the feminine experience of humility to both sexes, which in turn paradoxically created the possibility of feminine pride, as Anne Hutchinson’s dynamic example in her examinations and trials amply demonstrated.... For Anne Hutchinson and her female associates Antinomianism was simply an ideology through which the resentments they intuitively felt could be focused and actively expressed.”

- Hutchinson’s meetings grew in popularity as men and women attended in large numbers. Hutchinson began to charge Wilson and all other ministers, except for Cotton and Wheelwright with preaching a covenant of works at her meetings. She articulately maintained that salvation could only be achieved through the mystical experience of grace. Hutchinson denounced those who did not radically separate the covenant of grace from the covenant of works.
Antinomianism

- The magistrates and clergy charged Hutchinson with Antinomianism, looking inward for inspiration and guidance rather than toward the institutions of church and state. The issue was not over religious liberty because Hutchinson was just as intolerant as her opponents. It was a battle of competing views. She even questioned whether or not the ministers were in fact saved. Her challenge led to a narrowing of views and hardening of positions. Hutchinson’s supporters formed a majority of the Boston church, and the Hutchinsonians tried to reform the church by making John Wheelwright a second minister. Winthrop, however, blocked the appointment. For a time, Governor Vane was able to prevent government intervention in the crisis, but Winthrop was able to win the office of governor in the general elections of 1637. Vane fled to England.

- Having captured control of the government, Hutchinson’s opponents moved against her supporters. The synod of 1637 produced a list of 82 errors that should be prevented. The synod also sought to discourage the Hutchinson’s private religious meetings and to forbid harsh criticism of the clergy. The General Court disenfranchised and banished John Wheelwright for his fast-day sermon. The body also passed a law prohibiting more Antinomians from settling Massachusetts. The clerical establishment won a sweeping victory for “preparation.”

Anne Hutchinson
Crack Down

- The General Court also disenfranchised John Coggeshall and banished William Aspinwall.
- John Cotton successfully moderated his position to avoid a conviction for heresy.
- Though Hutchinson defended herself quite well against the magistrates during her trial, she eventually faltered by claiming to have received direct personal revelations from God. This contention gave the court the opportunity to convict and ultimately banish Hutchinson on charges of sedition and heresy.
- During the trial, Winthrop condemned Hutchinson for behavior unfit for her gender and charged her with supporting the Vane faction and “seducing simple souls.” The critical moment came when an exhausted and pregnant Hutchinson said, “Now if you do condemn me for speaking what in my conscience I know to be truth I must commit myself unto the Lord.” When the magistrates questioned her as to the possibility of an immediate revelation, Hutchinson replied that she received the revelation “by the voice of his own spirit to my soul.”
- Governor Winthrop delivered the verdict on the grounds that Hutchinson was a woman “unfit for our society” because of the “troublesomeness of her spirit and the danger of her course amongst us.” In other words, Hutchinson was perceived as a threat to the established order and stability of the colony.
- Other supporters were disenfranchised. Some were forced to admit their errors or else face a suspension of the right to bear arms. Coddington and Coggeshall followed Hutchinson to Rhode Island. Wheelwright settled in New Hampshire.

John Endicott
“Instruments of Seduction”

- As historian Sandra VanBurkleo argues, “At issue were Puritan teachings about ‘godly relations’ between husband and wife, minister and church member, and magistrate and subject... On one side, women were potential Saints equal to men in God’s eyes; on the other side, they were Eve-like temptresses, peculiarly susceptible to Satanic temptation. In addition, Puritan responses to fallen or treacherous women in courtrooms lay bare the essential masculinity of many freedoms—among them, the right to command one’s own body, the right to locomotion, liberty of speech (especially in public), the right to bring witnesses and otherwise engage in self-defense, and the privilege against self-incrimination...” Unlike Wheelwright, Hutchinson lacked the right to call witnesses, offer testimony, and remain silent. During her trial, Hutchinson challenged the weakness of the evidence against her, particularly the notes Wilson had taken during a private conversation at her home. The magistrates accused Hutchinson of violating the Fifth Commandment. Instead of censuring Hutchinson, the magistrates chose to demonize and banish her because they feared rebellion. Before her sentencing, Hutchinson asserted, “You have power over my body but the Lord Jesus hath power over my body and soul, and assure yourselves thus much, you do as much as in you lies to put the Lord Jesus Christ from you, and if you go on in this course you begin you will bring a curse upon you and your posterity,...” The magistrates breathed a sigh of relief as Hutchinson seemed to admit to Antonomianism. The magistrates jailed Hutchinson in a house for the winter. While in detention Hutchinson’s health deteriorated. At a proceeding in March of 1638, several church leaders accused her of heresy, most notably sympathy with Familism, a “notorious ‘family of love’ sect in which members collectively married Jesus and dispensed with ordinary matrimony.” Hutchinson recanted several “errors” and vehemently denied the accusation of advocating Familism. Even John Cotton condemned Hutchinson as a woman with “dayngerous principles.” John Wilson presented evidence of “errors” and dubbed her a “dayngerous Instrument of the Divell.” One church elder stated: “[Y]ou have stept out of our place. You have rather bine a Husband than a Wife and a preacher than a Hearer, and a Magistrate than a Subject.” The elders sentenced her to excommunication and exile. When members objected to punishment for individual conscience, Cotton turned to Bible for justification for excommunication, and she was cast out “as a Leper.” Hutchinson later delivered a “monstrous” child, an event Winthrop saw as further confirmation of Hutchinson’s guilt. In the 1640s Hutchinson moved to New York where Indians killed the entire Hutchinson family except for one child. The event provided Winthrop with even more evidence that God had made an example of “this wofull woman.” The clerical establishment moved to end female ministries largely because they believed Hutchinson to be an incarnation of an Eve-like figure, who seduced the people into abandoning all self-control and led them toward moral anarchy.

- Winthrop judged Mary Dyer, Hutchinson’s friend and follower, to be “of very proud spirit” and “much addicted to revelations.” Even though Dyer defended herself valiantly against Winthrop’s examinations, she followed Hutchinson to Rhode Island. When Winthrop learned of Dyer’s stillborn “monstrous” child, he saw further evidence of God’s wrath. Perhaps he suspected both women as being witches. After Dyer returned from Boston she was executed for Quakerism in 1660. Dyer’s own midwife, Jane Hawkins, another follower of Hutchinson, was banished for witchcraft in 1641.
Devil In The Shape Of A Woman

- Puritan leaders demonized other women as well. Winthrop accused Mary Oliver, a poor Salem calenderer’s wife, of possessing the “dangerous” opinion that anyone professing faith in Christ ought to be admitted as church members. The magistrates examined her six times between 1638 and 1650 for critical comments she made about Puritan leaders. She was judged to surpass Hutchinson “for ability of speech, and appearance of zeal and devotion.” Winthrop claimed that Oliver might “have done hurt, but that she was poor and had little acquaintance [with theology].” She suffered the stocks, whippings, the placement of a cleft stick on her tongue, and imprisonment. In 1650 she fled Massachusetts with the reputation of a witch.

- Another Bostonian, Ann Hibbens developed a cantankerous reputation after strongly disputing a joiner’s unjust price for a bedstead. In 1640 magistrates examined Hibbens for “lying” about her neighbor, the carpenter, (felony) and “scolding” (crime punished by dunking). The charges stemmed from her refusal to accept male mediation in the dispute. She defiantly remained silent when the court demanded testimony, stood when the court ordered her to sit, and smirked at her accusers. Although her husband accepted the joiner’s price, Hibbens insisted that she could better deal with the issue than her husband. When Hibbens refused to disavow her sins, the judges excommunicated her. After her husband died, the colony executed her for witchcraft in 1656.

- As VanBurkleo argues, “Submissiveness guaranteed nothing, but unruly or aggressive women triggered fears of the Anti-Christ.... Defiance increased the odds of unmitigated punishment, and often lent credence to suspicions of witchcraft. ... For women accused of treachery, public displays of courage, honesty, erudition, and physical autonomy were altogether foolhardy.”

Mary Dyer en route to her execution
Dissent And Discord

• To the Puritan establishment the covenant meant that the entire community must follow God’s laws as interpreted by orthodox Puritan leaders. People had to subordinate their individual desires to the interests of the community. Dissent and discord ultimately resulted in the breakdown of community solidarity and cohesion.

• Non-Puritans who migrated to Massachusetts needed to attend the Puritan church even though they could not become members or vote in either church or civil elections. Puritans who were not “saints” had to obey the same rules even though they could not be church members or vote. Anyone who refused to abide by these regulations would be banished from the colony. A hierarchy controlled both the colony’s church and government. Despite this Puritan leaders experienced difficulty securing complete consensus and conformity. The dividing line between church and state has been an issue since colonial times.

• Roger Williams settled in Massachusetts as a Puritan clergyman but eventually broke with the establishment over theological differences and the treatment of Native Americans. When Puritan leaders banished him, he fled to Rhode Island and established a community based on tenets of religious freedom.

Roger Williams
Liberty of Conscience

• As historian Glenn LaFantasie writes, “Williams waged a one-man battle for what would become a fundamental right for all Americans: the freedom to worship without government intrusion.” Williams fought for “soul liberty.” Williams asserted, “Forced worship stinks in God’s nostrils.” A religious radical, Williams straightaway rejected strict policies of religious conformity.

• When Williams landed in Boston in 1631 he embarked on a career of agitation. He flatly refused an offer to teach in Boston’s church because the community failed to completely separate from the corrupt Anglican Church. Williams’ separatism and independence haunted the Puritan establishment. After Williams accepted a position as minister in Salem, leaders of the Boston Church pressured Salem authorities. Williams next moved to Plymouth outside the jurisdiction of Massachusetts Bay Colony. In Plymouth he found a truly independent church, and he began activities as a trader and missionary among the Wampanoags of Cape Cod.

Title page of Williams’ The Bloudy Tenet of Persecution
Land Rights

- Although he failed to convert significant numbers of natives to Christianity, Williams learned much about Wampanoag language and culture as he became a fairly successful trader. Williams learned that the Wampanoags objected to white expansion and encroachment upon their lands and way of life. The vast majority of Europeans believed that Christian sovereigns possessed the divine right to claim ownership of any lands they settled so long as the native people living there were not Christians themselves. From the European perspective, “the right of discovery” as well as the precedent of “vacuum domicilium” gave the colonists a right to settle lands that Indians possessed and used for centuries. Williams strongly contended that the religion of any king or people should have anything to do with land ownership. He claimed that title to land was a civil matter that should remain separate from religion. Williams reasoned that the only way colonists could rightfully acquire land was to purchase it from the Indians or otherwise sign a treaty with them. Williams considered the Pilgrims and Puritans invaders, and his arguments challenged the right of the colonies to exist all. Governor William Bradford and Massachusetts Bay Colony authorities found Williams’ ideas about land rights to be “strange” and quite disturbing. As a result, they began to more closely examine his religious views. Controversy drove him from Plymouth back to Salem.

- Not only did Williams question the validity of royal land patents, he began preaching against oaths of submission to the colony and the right of the magistrates to punish violations of God’s first four commandments.
Williams persisted in his demand that churches completely separate from the Anglican Church and purge the institutions of any remaining Catholic traditions and rituals. Williams fervently preached that religious and civil affairs ought to be kept separate. The church should not interfere with civil matters, and the state must not have control over any man’s faith. The Pilgrims and Puritans wanted a government that would protect and support their kind of church. Neither group allowed churches except their own to exist in their communities. Leaders in both colonies found Williams’ doctrines threatening to the order and stability.

After several unsuccessful attempts to silence Williams, the General Court voted to banish him from Massachusetts in October of 1635: “Whereas Mr. Roger Williams … hath broached & dyvulg'd dyvers newe & dangerous opinions, against the authoritie of magistrates, as also writt l[ett]res of defamacon, both of magistrates & churches here, & that before any conviccon, & yet maintaihet the same without retraccon, it is therefore ordered, that the said Mr. Williams shall dep[ar]te out of this jurisdiction within sixe weekes nowe nexte ensuing, wch if he neglect to p[er]forme, it shalbe lawfull for the Govnr & two of the magistrates to send him to some place out of this jurisdiction, not to returne any more without license from the Court.”
Freedom of Religion

- Not even this order could silence Williams. Soon after returning to Salem, he continued to assert his views. Williams, however, contracted a serious illness; so, the court did not enforce its sentence until the following January. When the magistrates sent a sheriff to apprehend Williams and send him back to England, Winthrop warned the dissident and suggested that he flee to Indian country. Despite his illness and a fierce blizzard, Williams fled into the “wilderness” surrounding Narragansett Bay. He spent the winter with Massasoit and the Wampanoags. Using his skills as a linguist, ethnographer and trader, Williams acquired a gift of land from Narragansett sachems Canonicus and Miantonomo and began erecting a settlement named “Providence Plantations” at the headwaters of Narragansett Bay. Williams demanded that settlers purchase land in equal-sized tracts because the titles originated with the Indians. He also insisted upon separation of church and state. The colony of Rhode Island became an experiment in religious freedom. Any adult male could vote if he owned land and headed a family. No minister benefited from state support. People worshiped with the assurances of liberty of conscience. The colony became a haven for Separatists, Baptists, Antinomians, Jews, Quakers and many other dissidents.

- Williams aided the English in a war against the Pequots by convincing the Narragansetts to join forces with the whites. He also provided essential intelligence about the enemy.
Peaceful Coexistence

- Williams maintained friendly and equitable relations with the Narragansetts because he strongly believed in the need for peaceful coexistence as well as toleration. He argued: “Nature knows no difference between European and American [Indian] in blood, birth, bodies, etc.” Williams wrote *A Key into the Language of America* (1643), which provided a dictionary of the Narragansett language in addition to knowledge of Indian culture of Southern New England.

- After growing tired of separatism, Williams helped to found the Baptist church. A few months later he began worshipping alone with his wife Mary. Despite his views on freedom religion, Williams’ toleration had its limits. His own wife remained illiterate, and he contended that all women should wear veils in church. Williams often exercised his right to religious liberty by speaking against the doctrines of those he disagreed with, such as the Quakers. To his credit, however, Williams continued to uphold his belief in freedom of religion. In his *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution* (1644) Williams criticized the intolerance of Massachusetts.

- To ensure the survival of his small, rancorous colony of dissidents, Williams journeyed to England to secure a patent. He served as chief officer of the colony for three years until internal dissension and the growth of factions threatened the stability. Much to the dismay of those who believed in representative government, William Coddington acquired a parliamentary commission to become governor for life.
Rhode Island

- In 1651 Williams embarked on a second mission to England to challenge Coddington’s claim and to obtain confirmation of the 1644 patent. Although English authorities overturned Coddington’s commission, Williams failed to win official sanction of the 1644 patent.
- Williams became president of Providence Plantations, but the colony was in turmoil as a result of competing factions and special interests. In a letter to Providence, Williams defended liberty of conscience but also acknowledged the need to restrain individualism for the public good. Dissension and disputes over land and policy persisted in any case.
- Finally in 1663 Rhode Island and Providence Plantations won a charter that clearly granted “soul liberty” to inhabitants: “No person within said colony at any time hereafter, shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted, or called into question, for any differences in opinion in matters of religion.” With the rise of Quaker influence in Rhode Island, Williams played less and less of a role in politics.
- Williams established a profitable trading post at the head of Narragansett Bay and maintained peaceful relations with the Narragansetts and other Indian peoples. He also raised livestock.
- Relations with the Indians, including the Narragansetts, deteriorated in the 1670s as white expansion threatened the autonomy and traditional culture of native peoples. When King Philip’s War ravaged New England, Williams could not prevent the Narragansetts from entering the conflict against the English and their allies. As the war ravaged New England, Williams eventually enlisted in the militia.
- In old age, Williams remained outspoken but was considered by many to be dogmatic and self-absorbed. He died in 1683 and was buried with military honors. For years he was largely a “forgotten hero” until the American Revolution revived interest in religious liberty. Glen LaFantasie captures Williams’ legacy: “He showed his fellow Rhode Islanders how to prosper without the fetters of conformity or coercion, and he led them into an unchartered territory where church and state were divided by a strict ‘wall of separation.’ Thomas Jefferson borrowed this phrase in his 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, and it has become the definition of the Bill of Rights’ Establishment Clause: ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ Williams is not well remembered as an American hero. His greatest causes—the separation of church and state and the necessity of individual religious freedom—remain controversial and spark emotional, rather than rational, responses by Americans, just as they did in Williams’ time.” The separation of church and state was a way of combating tyranny. In part because of Williams’ example, the principle would be embedded into the U.S. Constitution. In the end, Williams and religious freedom in Rhode Island did much to increase the liberty of all Americans.
Puritan Legacy

- Much of the Puritan legacy stems from the human condition itself.
- Sense of mission and exceptionalism
- Religious fervor and revivalism
  - Utopian quest for close-knit communities inspired by God
- Clash between the orthodox and progressive factions as well as the establishment and the rebellious
- Protestant work ethic
- Some egalitarian influences (e.g. education, town meetings)
- Blaming political and socio-economic tensions or misfortunes on scapegoats in the form of immoral villains (us vs. them)
- Witch-hunt logic persists in American politics and social relations
  - Witch-hunt takes social and economic tensions and transforms them into a moral crisis
  - Old vs. new; rural and traditional (orthodox) vs. urban and modernist
  - Jeremiad response endured as a political reflex; urge to interpret socioeconomic forces as moral failures
  - Gender bias against women (vulnerable)
  - Fears that hierarchy and deference slipping away
  - Fears of loss of control and social disorder; attempt to restore traditional order in face of chaos
  - Search for invisible enemies within community
  - Normal standards of justice and civil liberties trampled

Salem witch trials
Born Again

• The Great Awakening that swept through the colonies in the 1730s and 1740s revived the sense of mission and fervor. Americans renewed their faith, changed the institutional framework, redefined social relationships, and promoted causes of liberty. Some call the movement an “early surge of American populism” that moved the colonies toward the Revolution. It led to the formation of new churches and schools as well as new political relationships with some traces of self-interest and individualism. The Great Awakening led to political and social change. Although, rebels and reactionaries alike invoked the name of God. The movement helped to undermine traditional authority attracted the poor, landless and politically unconnected. People of all ranks achieved salvation. Some claimed that revivalism promoted “republican and mobbish principles and practices.” The Great Awakening posed a threat to the established order.

• James Morone identifies a recurring pattern in American history: “… moral unrest shakes up the old order and introduces a new one. The quest for salvation remakes politics and society.”

• New Lights: revivalists who emphasized God’s grace and the ability to feel the Holy Spirit within their souls. Old Lights: rejected evangelism and promoted traditional alternatives such as Bible study, preparation, hard work, piety and reason.
Hellfire

- Traditional authority figures feared a loss of control. Revivals obliterated the older, traditional communities founded on covenants. Congregations split. Conflicts between Old Lights and New Lights carried over into politics. Revivals changed communal boundaries and shaped colonial politics. Resistance to authority continued on through the Revolution.

- “Each generation invents its jeremiad,” writes Morone.

- American populism and radicalism grew as people challenged the established order. But at the same time, colonial populism tended to follow the course of least institutional resistance.

- Authorities tried to assert their control. In 1741 some blamed the slave riots of New York on Whitefield because he preached to the Africans.

- Religious conviction inspired social reform movements.

- Winthrop’s example represents religion for the sake of order, stability, control, and deference to authority. Hutchinson typifies the rebel who fights the system in the name of religion and God.


