AWESOME stories

PURITANS and RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE

0. PURITANS and RELIGIOUS INTOLERANCE - Story Preface

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Harkening back to the days of the Puritans, John Hailer created and published this illustration, circa 1862. Maintained by the Library of Congress, this lithograph appears in "The Puritan Ethics." Library-of-Congress curators provide this summary: "Print shows people taking the road to a good life and people taking the road to an evil life." Click on the image for a full-page view.

John Winthrop, largely ignored in modern scholarship as a founding father of American life, was first and foremost a Puritan. He, and his fellow believers, approached *all* of life from a religious perspective.

Despite their desire to live by Biblical principals, Winthrop and his fellow settlers seemed not to grasp the true meaning of the New Testament and its two important commandments:

> *Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself.*

Looking back, with 21st-century eyes, we sense an absence of neighborly love. We think Puritans held each other to unattainable standards of behavior, meting out punishment instead of forgiveness, intolerance instead of understanding.

Writers in the 19th century had the same observations. A few months after the end of the American Civil War, the August 1865 edition of *The Old Guard* ran an article entitled "Puritanism against Liberty." At page 367, we read:

> [W]*e gave a brief history of the origin of Puritanism, and showed that, whether in England, Scotland, Zurich, Holland, or America, it ever secured its ascendancy by trampling upon the civil and religious rights of others. There is no where to be found an exception.*

> *Everywhere liberty was trampled under its feet...Puritanism has always been a political religion. It has always been at war with the Constitution of the United States, because that was in the way of its greed of despotic power.*

One month before, in the July 1865 issue of *The Old Guard*, the author (at page 292) was even more scathing in his criticism of British and American Puritanism:

> *These horrible beings* [the Puritans] *still pretend it was love for civil and religious liberty that brought them to this country; but it was the same kind of civil and religious liberty which the free-booter seeks, to do as he will with the lives and property of all who have no power to resist him.*

> *Alas! their conduct here soon testified that Puritanism and mercy can never amalgamate in the human breast.*

Some years later, in November 1888, *The New Englander* and *Yale Review* published a critique of George Ellis' book, *The Puritan Age in Massachusetts*. Slightly more sympathetic to the actions of Puritan leaders, the reviewer notes (at pages 365-366) that "it was the inspiration of duty, not a grasping for power" which propelled men like Winthrop as they led their followers to America's eastern shore:

> *They were themselves subject to the stern and iron rule of their own principles. They were not restful, or, as we say, happy in themselves. They were perplexed and tormented by vexations of their own invention.*

> *Nor were the clergy any more responsible for this system than were the laity. The Bible, supremely valued and trusted, was the only infallible guide. That was in the hands of the people as well as of the minister. To its authority, interpreted by themselves, all alike bowed submissive. The only advantage which the minister enjoyed was his greater skill in making apt quotations and in applying passages of Scripture to the exigencies of each particular case.*

> *It was in their estimate and use of the Bible that they made, thinks Dr. Ellis, their great mistake. This it was which led directly to much of their intolerance and cruelty, until at last their Biblical Commonwealth had run its allotted course and had fallen a victim to its own impracticable claims.*

One could argue that current criticism stems from turning modern eyes on seventheenth-century people. Perhaps we fail to accurately comprehend the Puritan's perspective, or world view. Rather than imposing *their* way on others, those Massachusetts settlers believed that *God's* way, as set forth in their interpretation of the Bible, was the only *right* way to conduct oneself.

As such, *all* Puritans - including the *leaders* - had to subordinate themselves to God's will.

Maybe the demands which Puritans placed on each other stemmed not from haughty attempts to control every aspect of another person's life but from a sincere concern for the well-being of their neighbor's souls. Although *we* find legalism throughout Puritan society, those seventeenth-century colonists believed that obeying the moral law of God was the best way to live.

Far from being uneducated, Boston's early settlers included some of the most eminent scholars of the time. Their scholarship led them to conclude that all human beings had to carefully live their lives to the glory of God in every aspect of life.

We look at their efforts and accuse the Puritans of intolerance. But if they were able to come back to the country they helped to create, how would they view Americans of today?

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Media Stream

The Way of Good and Evil - Puritan Ethics
Published in: "The Puritan ethics," in American dream: A history of the United States / [Lew Smith] Lee Floren. 2nd ed. Glenview, Ill. : Scott, Foresman, c1983, p. 33, John Hailer. Online via the Library of Congress. Public Domain.
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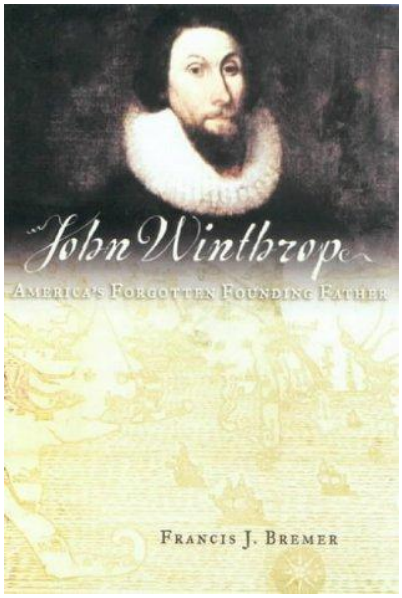

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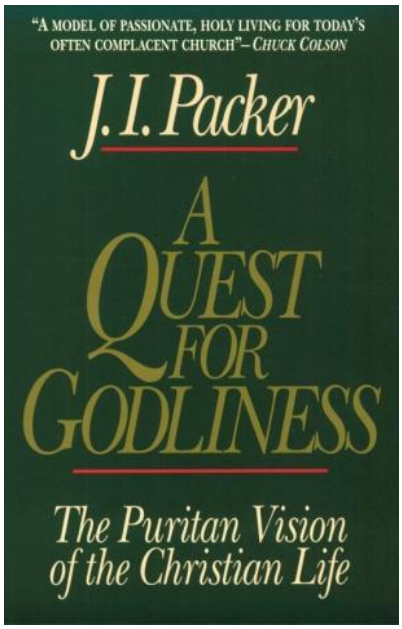

A Quest for Godliness - by J.I. Packer

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