

Introduction

First published in 1976, Francis J. Bremer's *The Puritan Experiment* presents a concise overview of New England's early history. Bremer's survey begins in 16th century England and traces the origins and growth of Puritanism across the Atlantic Ocean to Massachusetts Bay where John Winthrop established his "City on a Hill."

The Puritan Experiment explores 17th century life in Connecticut, Rhode Island as well as Massachusetts. Throughout the book, Bremer describes the evolution of religion, society, and government in Puritan New England. He even evaluates the relationship between Puritans, Indians, and African-Americans while also acknowledging the contributions of Puritans to the fields of art and science. Finally, Bremer concludes his well-researched introduction to American Puritanism with an account of its decline and the emergence of the 18th century Enlightenment and Great Awakening.

In addition to *The Puritan Experiment*, Francis Bremer has written or edited over a dozen books dealing with Puritan New England and John Winthrop. He has served as Professor of History at Millersville University for almost thirty years.

Summary

Bremer's in-depth study of the "Puritan Experiment" begins with a discussion of the origins and growth of the Puritan movement. Puritanism emerged in England during the rule of King Henry VIII in 1509. King Henry triggered the English version of the Protestant Reformation when he broke from the Roman Catholic Church and made himself the Head of a new Church of England. Henry's problem with the Catholic Church involved his desire to get a divorce: the decision was not motivated by any interest in reforming ecclesiastical abuses. Unlike King Henry, English Puritans believed that the Church of England had not been adequately purged of the theology and worship of

Roman Catholicism. They wanted to purify the Church. Bremer identifies this need for reform as the “earliest and most constant characteristic of Puritanism.”

Following the death of Henry VIII, Thomas Cranmer, who served as the Archbishop of Canterbury, instituted new policies which “ensured that future generations of English clergy would reflect a Protestant theological orientation.” Clerical marriage was approved, and the *Book of Common Prayer* was published.

After a brief discussion of the reign of Queen Mary Tudor, who made life difficult for those committed to Protestantism such as the Puritans, Bremer concludes the first chapter with a focus on the reign of Queen Elizabeth. She was known as the “Protestant Deborah.” Although Elizabeth often disappointed the Puritans’ hope for reform, she stood firm against the Counter-Reformation of the Catholic Church.

Bremer’s second chapter concentrates on the essence and attraction of the English to Puritanism. By 1630, Puritanism had developed into a complex theological system with “discernible central thrusts but with variations that often differed from individual to individual.” Some believers, both in England and America, were attracted to these “central thrusts.” A focus on the Bible was one example.

Puritans believed that the Bible was the only divinely inspired Word of God. Consequently, the Bible was the basis for all of life. All Puritan beliefs concerning worship and codes of behavior could be traced to their reading of the Old and New Testaments. Bremer describes Puritan beliefs in a benevolent God, the covenant of salvation (Calvinism), and their emphasis on conversion. They viewed conversion as more of a process than a single experience. Regarding behavior, Bremer also debunks the myth that Puritans were prudes. Although insisting upon moderation, Puritans dressed as “befitted their social class,” participated in lotteries, drank alcohol, and approached sex as more than a means of procreation.

The English also found Puritanism appealing because it offered assurances and hope during a period of instability which saw England being transformed from a feudal to a modern society. Due to its emphasis on the importance of studying Scripture, Puritanism was more popular with and accessible to the educated than the working class.

The reign of King Charles I was frustrating for the Puritans. His desire for conformity and uniformity hindered their struggle for ecclesiastical reform. Some Puritans came to believe that the Church of England was against the will of God, and was not going to ever be reformed. Consequently, these more radical Puritans left the Anglican Church and established their own separate congregations. To escape persecution, many separatists fled abroad to locations such as Amsterdam.

In 1620, a group of 100 men and women known as the Pilgrims set sail on the Mayflower and later settled in Plymouth (modern day Massachusetts). As the first governor, William Bradford oversaw great achievement during the colony's first decade. Bradford himself brokered a treaty with Wampanoag chieftain Masasoit that brought the Pilgrims more than fifty years of relief from Indian warfare. Despite their success in establishing a politically and economically stable colony, Plymouth has taken a back seat to the Massachusetts Bay Puritans in history books. According to Bremer, the founding of the Puritan's Massachusetts colony had a dramatic impact on the Pilgrims economically, politically, and religiously. Eventually, little distinction could be seen between the Massachusetts Puritans and the Plymouth Pilgrims.

Unlike many historians, Bremer holds that no single reason existed as to why the Puritans followed John Winthrop to the New World. Many who emigrated did mention their "apprehension for England's future and their sense of their own place in God's providential design." However, all who made the journey to the New World accepted the terms of a covenant with God to live properly

and maintain a true faith. Nonetheless, over 21,000 men, women, and children made this "Great Migration" to the Puritan colonies during the 1630s.

In chapter four, Bremer shifts the focus solely to the Puritans efforts to create a Christian Community modeled after John Winthrop's personal utopia of a "City On A Hill." Although most of the men who journeyed to the New World had little experience in governing, the Puritans over time succeeded in shaping distinctive political and ecclesiastical institutions. The Church adopted a form of Congregationalism which allowed each congregation to ordain its own ministers and adopt its own church covenant.

Puritans often debated how far the church had to depart from Anglican forms of worship to achieve purity. However, Puritans did not tolerate those they considered unorthodox. Before being banished from the Massachusetts Bay colony, Roger Williams argued that the civil magistrate did not have any right to become involved in the spiritual affairs of the Church. Williams also asserted that the civil magistrate is without the power to punish breaches of the first table of the 10 Commandments, thus effectively denying the Puritans the right to protect the "true faith." Williams' desire for a pluralistic state was antithetical to the Puritan leadership's dream of a "City on a Hill." Consequently, he was eventually expelled from the colony.

The Puritan establishment was also threatened by Anne Hutchinson who believed that the Church was emphasizing salvation through works rather than salvation by grace. Bremer notes that the rise of Hutchinson indicated that the doctrinal structure of Puritanism was too loose and that it "allowed too much freedom to untrained minds which might easily fall in error." In the end, the reins were tightened and the range of views that were tolerated was narrowed. Like Roger Williams, Hutchinson was excommunicated from the Massachusetts Bay colony and fled to Rhode Island. Despite internal and external threats such as with Williams and Hutchinson, the Puritans were able to united and guard their "city on a hill."

In chapter five, Bremer takes a look at other New England colonies established in the middle of the 17th century such as Connecticut, New Haven, and Rhode Island. Connecticut and New Haven, which also had colonists who yearned for church reform, functioned as sister colonies to Massachusetts Bay and Plymouth. By 1636, nearly 1,000 colonists had migrated from Massachusetts to the Connecticut settlements of Hartford, Windsor, and Wethersfield. These communities were almost exclusively agricultural.

According to Bremer, New Haven was the most “territorially ambitious” of the Puritan colonies and the Bible Commonwealth most dedicated to Winthrop’s “City on a Hill.” Known for its religious zeal, New Haven closely regulated the lives of its people. Many colonists were censured or excommunicated from the church for moral error.

Unlike the other colonies, Rhode Island was a safe haven for unorthodox exiles from Massachusetts Bay. Here, secular government did not meddle in religious matters. At the urging of Roger Williams, all Rhode Islanders pledged to abide by the decisions of the majority in secular affairs. During this time period, the colonists of Rhode Island were regarded with fear and suspicion by their neighbors.

By the 1640s, the colonists of the Bible Commonwealths had developed a uniquely structured society that reflected common assumptions and beliefs. Scholars refer to this phenomenon as the “New England Way.” At the center of every Puritan society was a social covenant such as Plymouth’s Mayflower Compact that implicitly or explicitly bound citizens together with common goals. American Puritans relied on a strong and active government to serve as the morality police.

Bremer notes that the assumption of earlier historians that the Bible Commonwealths were theocracies “still clouds our understanding.” The men who founded the Bible Commonwealths believed that only one true faith existed with only one true way to worship God. Consequently, it

was the duty of the civil magistrates to punish those with unorthodox views and moral shortcomings. However, the Puritans reached this view based on their belief in “separate spheres of church and state.” Thus, the state was only empowered to use “secular weapons” to discipline or take action against “public expressions of heresy.” Although these spheres closely cooperated with one another, those who held office in the church were prohibited from holding a civil position of authority. Civil officers obviously had to be orthodox Puritans.

In chapter seven, Bremer discusses the invaluable role played by the community in the Bible Commonwealths. Local institutions such as towns, churches, families and schools are credited with passing down from generation to generation Puritan beliefs and values which remained influential for years after the close of the 17th century.

Within the community, Puritans used written covenants as the political framework of their towns. Town meetings were held to decide how affairs were to be managed, and broad participation was allowed. The community of believers selected a group of seven men known as the pillars of the church. The task of these pillars was to adopt a church covenant while the congregation was responsible for ordaining one or two university trained clergymen. Often, one lay office (i.e., deacon) was also maintained. While each Puritan congregation was technically autonomous, this autonomy was often limited by authoritarian pastors and powerful neighboring churches.

As a “little commonwealth,” the Puritan family was responsible for providing economic production, emotional strength, and social indoctrination. It served as an important instrument of acculturation. According to Bremer, the New England family was the “first in a series of educational institutions that culminated in Harvard and Yale colleges.” American Puritans believed that God revealed himself in nature, history, and Scriptures; thus, it was man’s duty to receive an education.

In chapter eight, Bremer points out that the first American Revolution against England was not in 1776, but in New England in the 1640s. In the previous decade much friction existed between Charles I and his English Puritan subjects. The English Civil Wars (i.e., a Puritan Revolution) of the 1640s led the colonial American Puritans to support the rebel Parliament and the emerging regime of Oliver Cromwell.

The American Puritans prayed continuously for English ecclesiastical reform. Many colonists felt praying was alone not sufficient, and chose to return to England to engage actively in the struggle. Referred to as the “guiding spirit of the Great Migration,” John Winthrop died in 1649, and John Endicott succeeded him as Governor of Massachusetts.

The Puritan triumph in England boosted the confidence and aggressiveness of American Puritans. Led by Massachusetts Governor Endicott, they developed an unprecedented close relationship with Oliver Cromwell’s English Parliament. While increasing their involvement in foreign affairs, American Puritans were forced to defend congregationalism in the midst of an increasing number of popular sectarian groups.

According to Bremer, the dismantling of the Anglican Church, the breakdown of authority during the Puritan Revolution, and the conflict between English Presbyterians and Congregationalists resulted in the emergence of numerous religious groups during the 1640s. These groups were considered heretical by the Puritan leadership. Due to the spread of Baptist views, the General Court of Massachusetts in 1644 passed legislation against the dissemination of viewpoints which challenged the validity of infant baptism. Despite the threat posed to New England by the fragmentation of English Puritanism into Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Baptists, and Quakers, Bremer stressed that the 1640s and 1650s were decades of confidence and progress in New England. For the time being, the “City on a Hill” was being followed and the future seemed safe.

Bremer focuses on the decline and fall of the English Puritan State and its effects on New England in chapter ten. Upon the death of Oliver Cromwell in 1658, the exiled son of Charles I was invited back to England to resume the throne. The English monarchy was restored and the Church of England was purged of Puritan dissent. The English Restoration put the very survival of the Bible Commonwealths in jeopardy.

Attempts by the new King to regulate the empire caused three distinct factions to develop in Massachusetts. On one hand, there was a group of royalists such as merchant Thomas Breedon who had little sympathy for the goals of New England. On the other hand, an extreme group led by Governor John Endicott asserted that Massachusetts' charter had been a contract between the colony and the Crown whereby the colony became a virtually autonomous commonwealth. Holding the middle ground was a group of moderates who wished to see the colony left to pursue its own ends, but at the same time, believed that the main cause of royal interference in those pursuits was the colony's assertion of its independence.

Ultimately, the moderates led by John Norton and Simon Bradstreet prevailed, and King Charles II confirmed Massachusetts' charter. However, Governor Endicott ignored the King's requests to repeal all laws derogatory to the monarchy. Although Massachusetts never seemed to accept the changes brought by the Restoration, other colonies such as Rhode Island and Connecticut chose to make peace quickly with the Royal Crown. Without a doubt, the effects of the Restoration began to shatter the utopian dreams of a "City on a Hill."

In the eleventh chapter, Bremer turns his focus towards the threat of pluralism and declension. After the collapse of the English Puritan State, American Puritans became more divided in their attitudes towards those who expressed unorthodox beliefs. In past years, dissenters such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were merely exiled from New England. However, religious dissenters in the 1660s were often subjected to imprisonment, whipped, or even executed.

The Quakers were the first group of dissenters to experience the wrath of Puritan magistrates. One scholar argued that “the Puritans had not sought out the Quakers in order to punish them; the Quakers had come in quest of punishment.” In an effort to draw attention to themselves and their beliefs, these Quakers or Friends interrupted Puritan services by running naked up and down the aisles. However, outside of Massachusetts Bay, Quakers tended to fare better and were not punished as harshly.

Meanwhile, Puritan clergy engaged in internal debates over the nature of baptism. After the Cambridge Assembly decided to limit baptism to the children of the elect in 1648, Richard Mather and others argued loudly that baptismal privileges should be extended. Finally, a solution was reached with the Half Way Covenant of 1662. Children of any baptized individual were allowed to be baptized regardless of whether either parent had been admitted to full communion in their local congregation. Although many churches adopted the Half Way Covenant, its opponents were able to block its adoption in all major congregations. Bremer notes that the English Restoration, the debate over baptism, the spread of Quaker and Baptist influence, and other “misfortunes” were viewed by the Puritans as “punishment for the shortcomings of the covenanted people.”

Chapter twelve focuses on three major civic conflicts which New Englanders faced during the Post-Restoration period. For example, the first conflict was an Indian uprising which resulted in King Philip’s War. Historically, Puritans had a good relationship with area Indians. However, a disgruntled chieftain known as Metacum (King Philip) began a war which ended in his defeat and his death. The war caused staggering economic loss and the death of over five hundred colonists.

Another conflict involved the infamous Salem Witch Trials. Many Salem residents became convinced that their neighbors and other respectable citizens were witches. As these alleged witches were executed, the number of accusations multiplied. Bremer acknowledged that some person played a role in producing the evidence of the occult that so terrified the Salem community.

He also noted that many viewed the witch trials as further evidence of God's displeasure with his people.

In chapter thirteen, Bremer discusses art and science in colonial New England. Puritans took pride in their intellectual heritage and valued education immensely. Bremer notes that separation from the "stimulus and criticism" of Stuart England would limit American authors' "opportunities to develop their thoughts and modes of expression along conventional English lines." However, the American Puritans' commitment to the goals of the Bible Commonwealths likely stimulated many to "articulate goals and beliefs to an extent that would not have been possible in England."

In religious New England, the most important literary form was the sermon. Puritans produced visual arts solely for functional purposes rather than to convey aesthetic pleasure. Among these surviving artistic trophies include furniture, silverware, and architecture. The Puritans rejected "physical ornamentation" in their meeting houses in order not to distract the worshipper's attention from God. They also prohibited musical accompaniment to the singing of psalms.

According to Bremer, English university graduates of the 16th and 17th centuries, which included both Puritans and Anglicans, saw no incompatibility between science and religion. Puritan men who sought to achieve advancements in the field of science were doing so to glorify God. In their studies, Puritans were exposed to subjects such as arithmetic, geometry, physics, astronomy and botany. Despite being removed from European centers of scientific activity, Puritans were successful in making contributions to different fields of science.

In chapter fourteen, Bremer assesses the relationship between the races in Puritan New England. The Puritans were surrounded by regional tribes of Indians who set up semi-permanent campsites throughout the colonies. Indians were not regarded as a separate race by the colonists. Roger Williams, a close observer of Indian life, held firmly to the belief that these natives were born

white and bronzed as they aged due to exposure to the sun and the “repeated application of stains for ceremonial purposes.” Puritans found the Indian to be both courteous and hospitable, but also lazy and prone to drunkenness.

The natives were quite useful as they taught the Puritans how to plant corn and other vegetables, where to fish and hunt, and other life lessons that contributed to the prosperity of New England. Some tribes even submitted by treaty to the protection of the Puritan colonies and thereby became subject to colonial laws. According to Bremer, the colonists viewed the Indian as culturally inferior not racially inferior. Many natives resented the Puritan attempts to proselytize them. Bremer notes that 23 percent of the native population nominally adopted Puritanism because of missionaries such as John Eliot who translated the Bible into the Algonquian language.

Historians view King Philip’s War as a turning point in relations between the Puritans and the Indians. In the eyes of the colonists, it was a race war that threatened the very existence of Puritan New England. After the war, racism emerged based on fear of the natives and Puritans began to view the Indians as a distinct and separate race.

John Winthrop’s journal notes that the first African-Americans arrived in New England during the late 1630s and by 1700 over one thousand blacks made their home in New England. Bremer points out that no stigma was attached to Puritan participation in the slave trade and many of the great Boston and Newport fortunes were based on it. However, slavery was not popular in the colonies. Many farms operated without the use of outside labor.

In 1641, Massachusetts passed a law which guaranteed to slave “all the liberties and Christian usages which the law of God established in Israel doth morally require.” Thus, slaves in Puritan New England received the same protection against maltreatment as did white servants. Slaves also had a right to trial by jury and could legally marry. Despite the protections ensured to

slaves, most Puritans such as John Eliot and Cotton Mather failed to even criticize the evils of the institution of slavery.

The fifteenth chapter focuses on what Bremer labels as the “neglected decades.” According to him, the fifty years following the Salem Witch Trials and the Glorious Revolution of England are the “most neglected period in the history of colonial New England.” He believes that the first half of the 18th century has not been given enough attention to by scholars. Actually, this period was a time of growth, prosperity, and adjustment. Bremer points out that each colony moved in its own direction, redefined its political institutions, and made further economic progress.

During these decades of readjustment (1692-1742), the Puritans were involved in countless border disputes. The colonists also faced new challenges to their religious practices. Orthodox leaders of Puritanism were forced to defend the faith of their fathers against men like Solomon Stoddard who repudiated the concepts of limited membership and limited communion. Stoddard encouraged the colonists to “avail themselves” of the ordinances of baptism, the Scriptures, preaching, private prayer, and the Lord’s Supper. Many leaders believed Stoddard to be leading a western movement for Presbyterianism.

Unlike Massachusetts, Connecticut was free from the control of a royal governor and functioned autonomously. In an effort to revive the faith and protect orthodoxy, the Connecticut magistrates chartered a new Puritan college known as Yale. While Connecticut experienced independence, Rhode Island and New Hampshire faced decades of frontier warfare with the native population. In conclusion, Bremer notes that despite the internal factionalism dealt with by each colony, the wars against the French and their Indian allies “served to promote a degree of regional unity” between the colonies.

In his final chapter, Bremer discusses the effects that the English Enlightenment had on American Puritanism. By 1708, Connecticut had adopted the English Toleration Act of 1708 which

classified Anglicans as dissenters. This law paved the way for similar Puritan concessions for Baptists and Quakers.

Due to the influence of the Enlightenment, a growing emphasis on man and morality spread throughout New England. As religion became more rational, more and more preachers began to move away from Calvinism toward free will. Others like Jonathan Edwards began to speak out against these Arminian tendencies. In what is now called the Great Awakening, men such as George Whitfield, John and Charles Wesley, Gilbert Tennent, and others began to preach revivals emphasizing the importance of conversion. These revivals were met with remarkable success. Like the English Puritans of the 16th and early 17th centuries, the revivalists responded to the needs of the people for reassurance and direction in their lives. Not all received the Awakening well, and as a result, many congregations split. However, the Awakening did weaken the strength of the Puritan establishment and increase support for religious freedom. Bremer believes that the revivals likely did improve the moral tone of 18th century society and recalled the memories of the Puritan “city on a hill.”

Assessment

Francis Bremer has provided a thorough survey of Puritan history in England and Colonial America. Bremer’s account of Puritanism offers the reader a perceptive glimpse into life in New England during the 17th century. Throughout the book, Bremer debunks myths and misconceptions concerning the 17th century Puritans. For instance, Bremer attacks the common myth that Puritans were prudes. He quickly pointed out that Puritans gambled, drank alcohol, dressed according to their social class, and had sex for reasons other than just procreation.

I found the similarities between the Puritans and many modern-day conservative evangelicals to be very interesting. Like the Puritans, many find evangelicalism appealing due to its emphasis on hope and security through the covenant of salvation. The Bible as the only inspired

Word of God and a focus on a conversion experience are also central to conservative evangelicalism.

The Puritans applied the Bible to all of life; however, their Bible Commonwealths were an illustration of how the union of church and state treated dissent. Nonconformists such as Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were banned from the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The Puritan leaders did not allow colonists to stray from their orthodox beliefs. In similar fashion, some evangelicals today have begun to criticize the idea of a separation between church and state. These evangelicals desire government favoritism towards their specific interpretation of Christianity. They want the 10 Commandments posted on state property and demand state-sponsored school prayer. In certain ways, they seem to wish for a return to the Bible Commonwealths of 17th century New England where religious dissent was suppressed and orthodox beliefs were championed as the only true faith. The desire to be the “city on a hill” is still strong.

Bremer's writing was a successful overview of Puritan history. Given the importance of Puritan thought to American history, students will continue to rely on Bremer for an entrance into the world some of America's earliest important figures.