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Social Ethics and Social Practice in Puritan New England: A Reconsideration

A Conversation with David Hall, Harvard Divinity School

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OCTOBER 18, 2011

OWENS: I want to start with the very simple question that I think a lot of Americans have uncertainty about: What is the distinction between the Puritans and the Pilgrims?

HALL: “Pilgrim” came into special use in the 19th century. It’s a spiritual word, as in John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*, that denotes an aspect of the devotional life. It is a figure taken from scripture.

But in the 19th century in New England a fierce debate, a contest arose between Unitarians and Congregationalists. The Unitarians, knowing that they were not orthodox and could not claim as their antecedents the more orthodox figures, went looking for softer, gentler types of people and thought they found them in the Pilgrims. So they constructed an image of the Pilgrims as not persecuting witches, not persecuting anybody, as a people coming here for liberty of conscience. In the First Unitarian Church in Plymouth, there is a stained glass window of the Pilgrim pastor John Robinson, who formed a group in England. Underneath, there is an accurate phrase from his work: “Truth and light will break out.” Of course then the Unitarians said, *well, we are the fervor of light that broke out*. That’s of course a complete misreading of this eschatological phrase that Robinson intended.

So the formal distinction between Pilgrim and Puritan is really a false distinction, constructed at an historical moment, and then it got reified in various ways.

OWENS: So you would eschew the term Pilgrim and stick with Puritan?

HALL: Yes.

OWENS: You write in the preface to your book that you're seeking a reevaluation of the Puritans on their own terms, as 17th century English colonists in America. What's at stake in that endeavor to reevaluate them on their own terms, both historically and historiographically?

HALL: Historically, it's the highest hill we have to climb. How does one move back from the present, which is always shaping how we understand the past, and to enter into the language world, the world of social practices, the world of unspokens—there is a lot of unspokenness in any culture, in political or religious context—and to acknowledge or even recognize the unspokens? The challenge of doing so is endemic to the historical profession and it's amazing the speed with which it emerges. The 1960s are already terra incognita and difficult terrain.

The Puritans were a people who were just leaving the Middle Ages, often seen as on the cusp of modernity but not really there yet. They are caught or situated in a very complex linguistic, political, religious situation, where you have Catholic elements, extreme Protestant elements, moderate Protestant elements, and all kinds of different views of what legitimate government consists of. It's a rich stew in which they exist.

My new book (like my previous book *Worlds of Wonder*) tries to acknowledge that rich context and to present them as Elizabethans, closer to Shakespeare than to us. The Puritans that I present are a classic example of the struggle to recover the complexities of this linguistic world. Their use of words like *equal* or *liberty* was quite different than ours; liberty, for example, meant subordination to the good. If the Puritans had traveled three centuries ahead in time and read Emerson's *Self Reliance*, they would not have known what it meant; they literally would not have understood it.

So you have to break through a lot of stuff to get back even just a few years, but with the 17th and 16th centuries there is a lot of terrain. Then the question is, given that you can't deal with everything, what do you need to bring in? Because this is a book about politics in the broadest sense, I found myself reading Tudor Stuart political texts of the standard and anthologized kind, which I'd never read before, and looking for matters of language, practice and expectations.

The novelty of the book, in one sense, is how explicitly it locates the colonists' political thought in the context of Tudor Stuart political thought. Not that I'm a full-blown political historian or a political theorist, but I think one of the novelties of the book is that it shows that Charles I and the colonists use the same, whether you think it has the same meaning or not. I wanted to root such words in a quite specific context.

OWENS: Can you highlight the most important reforms Puritans made in American ecclesiastical and civil institutions?

HALL:

In civil matters, the short list would include accountability, consent and sovereignty. Accountability meant a short term of office; no one holds office for more than a year, so there are annual elections. This is just staggering in relation to the English practice at the time, when parliaments met infrequently and the monarch was unaccountable. The rule of consent is also crucial, but there are two forms of consent. There's a weak form, in which you merely wave and cheer. Then there's the much more vigorous form of consent, which is what the colonists insist upon. Then the principle of consent leads to the question: where does sovereignty initially lie? I quote Roger Williams saying it lies originally with the people, which is quite unusual because there are alternative theories of sovereignty floating around in England at the time and in continental Europe as well.

When you turn to religion, the central ideas the Puritans implemented are: the two-kingdom theory and the notion of Godly rule. The two-kingdom theory of church and state is very often misunderstood and misrepresented. Basically, the notion is that the church is weak and suffers at the hands of an oppressive state. So how do you protect the church from the state? The paradox is that this is coupled with lingering notions of the magistracy as ordained by God to defend good religion. So the colonists are trying to walk this very careful path between these two different positions, which makes for a lot of tension: When is the magistrate imposing on a weak church? When is the weak church asking more of the magistrate than the magistrate wants to do or is capable of doing? It's not a clear-cut situation. Rather than a ministry that feels empowered and triumphing, it's a different theological framework based on the Book of Revelation.

The key political text is really John Calvin's sermons on Revelation where he talks about the relentless urge for power and how you guard against that. He says it is a tiger, constantly feeding on whatever it can and always growing. So a lot of Puritan political theory is aimed in terms of the church, where they have a high level of congregational participation and an order in the congregation to decide all kinds of things. Again, this aroused tremendous anger on the part of the conservatives.

The other key religious idea is the notion of power in the saints or what is referred to as godly rule, a term I took from another historian. In all of these political systems of the early modern period, the legitimacy of the government had to be based on the recognition of a group, whether it's the aristocracy or the landholders—so who in do you recognize? What is the basis of legitimacy? Some of the colonists think that if they're going to have this religious experiment, then the religiously committed should be the ones who are politically empowered, namely the visible saints, the male church members. Women were not, of course, included in citizenship in this regard.

The book then tells the story of how that didn't work out, and there's a marvelous parallel here of Oliver Cromwell, who was ruling without a parliament in England when he first became Lord Protector. He knew that this could not persist; his legitimacy depended on there being a parliament, but then on what basis to have a parliament? He knew that in an election, he would lose; people like him would

never stand a chance. So he created a nominated parliament, the Barebones Parliament, and he greeted it with this eschatological fervor: *We're going to do great things for England and we're all here together, we all agree, we all think the same way.* Then he dissolved it three months later when it was completely tied in knots and had done nothing at all.

It's not quite as acute on this side of the water, but the key point is that the colonists had the terrific political wisdom never to link landholding to church membership. I actually sharply dispute the argument that they empowered these few people and in doing so created an oligarchic society. All key political fights in some sense are about land and/or economic resources, as they are today. Yet the Puritans explicitly say that the saints are not deciding how you get your land. That's done in towns and is broadly participatory. This political wisdom spared them what would have been a series of bitter struggles.

OWENS: Could you discuss the complex church state relationship in New England that persisted for 200 years? What is the Puritan heritage there?

HALL: The Puritan heritage, strictly speaking, ends in the early 18th century. In 1727, Massachusetts—more or less followed by other colonies in New England—fully acknowledged the capacity of non-Congregationalist groups to set up their own churches without having to pay taxes to the official church. Theoretically, this was already established in 1691 or 1692, but it took a while to implement. You have the same situation as in England, where there is both a state church and toleration, which is a hybrid that we find hard to understand because we don't really have that.

OWENS: Weren't the tax revenues given to multiple churches?

HALL: You could designate the church that you wanted it to be given to, but it was a contentious measure. It had to be an organized church that had achieved a certain public status and it wasn't always easy to get the town to agree to this signing off because it raised the cost of running the other church. By the early 18th century, you have Baptists, Quakers, Anglicans and Presbyterians, but predominantly Congregationalists.

The argument behind state, church *and* toleration was incorporated into the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 in an article written presumably by John Adams: civil society depends upon morality. Further, the churches are the best vehicles of morality and for teaching virtue, so the civil society's health is greatly benefitted by a viable, flourishing church sector. It is in the interest of the state to endorse the use of tax revenues for support of ministry and other church affairs rather than one established church, as in a Catholic model.

By the way, I would not identify that as a particularly Puritan idea. Presbyterians, wherever they turn up—in Pennsylvania, in Virginia—have the same idea. They came out of a state church in Scotland, and that’s the same principle. We could call them Puritans too, because they’re part of the Reformed tradition. Wherever the Reformed Church is, you get this magisterial perspective. It’s only the left wing Anabaptist tradition that ends up dissenting from this completely.

Going back to the Unitarian and Congregationalist schism, the way the Unitarians seized church properties in the 1820s so angered the Congregationalists that they said, *enough is enough* and voted to end this system. This is in 1832 or 1833, but the legacy lives on to this day. It’s very widespread. How is virtue sustained? Where are moral standards still taught? It lives in another notion that there ought to be a kind of constructive path back and forth between the religious and the secular, or the religious and the civil.

I wrote a little essay recently in which I recall my third and fourth grade classroom in my Virginia elementary school, which had a color print of George Washington kneeling in the snow at Valley Forge, praying. No one thought twice about this, it was just what you did. It happened to be the town that he lived in, but it was also a print that was very widely reproduced. There is this notion that there is a seamless, constructive flow back and forth; even though no one wanted the church to be telling the state what to do. My local church had an American flag on the podium, Congress had chaplains, and this was all thought to be good. Of course the unspoken premise was that there was a Protestant establishment to which Catholics were gradually being admitted, very gradually, and then certain kinds of Jews were also being admitted. Then when the Supreme Court began to unwind that de facto establishment, that’s when our current troubles began.

OWENS: There are many people in the past 30 years who draw different trajectories from the Puritans—from the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence to bicentennial celebrations, or from the alleged sexual Puritanism, something we see as closed-mindedness. Where do you see things today in our understanding of the Puritans, of who they were and how they relate to us?

HALL: Well, you make a terrific point, which we could paraphrase using an expression of the late anthropologist Roy Rappaport: “pigs are good to think.” In the 1920s it was—and still to this day—popular to beat the Puritans with the stick of “Puritanical,” in the sense of various mores. What people or historians write about the actual sexual practices or patterns of these people doesn’t matter at all.

OWENS: Needless to say, the historians aren’t driving public conversation about this.

HALL: No, not at all. Historically what happened is that in the middle of the 19th century, there arose what we call Victorianism, with a very heightened ideology of self-

control. The good husband went upstairs to bed and his wife said *No, I have a headache* and he said, *OK, you've got a headache*. Or when going to the ballet the husband puts his hands over his eyes and watches through his fingers. That sort of thing.

It's also true that modernism in the early 20th century brought with it a notion of art that ceases to be representative or to have an explicitly moral framework. This shattered two millennia—from Aristotle forward—of how we understand art and culture and the workings thereof. But when those people formed an enemy and then someone calls it Puritanism, it's really high Victorianism that he's revolting against.

You could certainly find in Puritanism a critique of plays, of theater, of a simplified music, etc., but privately it's a different story. There's always the vast slippage between profession and practice, and that's true in the 17th century as well as today.

On the democratic side you have the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration of Independence. However, in reference to my book, my colleague James Kloppenberg at Harvard (who has a big book on democracy coming out and is using the colonists) says, *You didn't make the argument strong enough that the Puritans were the forerunners of American democracy*—an argument I explicitly repudiate in the beginning of the book.

My new book will be read as both favoring that view but also hesitating. The reason I hesitate is that Puritans don't adopt what we regard as the full-blown premises of a democratic society. Things such as consent and accountability are of course building blocks in a democratic society, but they have other premises that don't fit that model so well.

So again, it's been very, very useful for people who wanted to construct a history to go back to the Mayflower Compact. The Declaration has none of that; it's written by Jefferson and draws on a completely different vocabulary.

OWENS: It seems to me that there are easy lines drawn today by those who want to claim a religious-democratic conflation that really didn't happen.

HALL: Right.

OWENS: And the same conflation in reverse is later claimed of the Declaration of Independence?

HALL: Yes. And what that does, then, is lead to a failure to recognize some of the complexities of our current situation, because democracy is a complicated thing. There's the populist side of democracy, which a lot of people are made uneasy by.

OWENS: Thank you very much for your time.

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