

BOOK REVIEW

THE PURITANS: A
TRANSATLANTIC HISTORY

***The Puritans: A Transatlantic History.*
By David Hall. Princeton Univ. Press,
Princeton, NJ 2019. 517 pp. \$35.**

The troubles with this fiercely learned and astonishingly detailed book might be said to begin with its jacket. Note that Hall, a professor emeritus of American Religious history at Harvard Divinity School, is *not* covering the whole gigantic polymorphous phenomenon labeled with the usually pejorative, if not sneering, term “Puritanism.” He is addressing the theological and political vicissitudes of a Reform movement in England, Scotland, and last of all America, from roughly the latter part of the reign of Henry VIII (d. 1547) to 1662, shortly after the Restoration of James II, when the Church of England ejected some 1,600 non-conforming ministers, who would forever afterwards be known as the Dissenters. This is still a vast stretch of territory; and one can think of all sorts of world-historical figures, who might have graced Hall’s cover: Calvin? Cromwell? Milton? Instead we get only a clipped-in-half reproduction showing the lower half of the nose, the wispy van dyke mustache, and mouth of one Edward Winslow.

Who was Edward Winslow (1595–1655), you ask? Well, he was a Separatist (from the C. of E.) and at one time governor of Plymouth colony, who later

created a small stir by defending the work of John Eliot’s evangelizing among the Algonquian Indians. Hall tells us next to nothing about him otherwise; and so he becomes just another officer in the vast army of preaching, pamphleteering, hyperactive, but generally colorless and faceless divines we meet here who laid the foundations and built the formidable intellectual structures of Puritanism. This isn’t, strictly speaking, Hall’s fault. He doesn’t have the time or space to fill out a three-dimensional social and cultural picture of his subject. (And there already is a formidable literature on that subject, e.g., in the *Cambridge Companion to Puritanism*, 2008). What he aims at and succeeds in presenting, though in a narrative devoid of vivid scenes, is a vigorous defense of Puritanism as a noble body of thought, as opposed to some sort of mass neurosis.

Though fair-minded and objective, there’s no doubt how warmly Hall feels about a group of Christians whose language he often borrows in straightforwardly referring to them as “the godly.” The passion infusing this apologia seems to be fueled by two obvious negative facts: (1) the Puritans have, from the earliest days, been doused with withering caricatures that have long outlasted their original targets. We remember Ben Jonson’s Tribulation Wholesome and Zeal-of-the-Land Busy (from *The Alchemist*) and, before that, Sir Toby Belch’s famous harpooning of Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* (“Dost thou

think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?") Later characters like Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth of Dickens' Scrooge offer ammunition for H.L. Mencken's immortal definition of Puritanism as the "haunting fear that someone, somewhere may be happy." (2) The second motive behind Hall's argument is the dissolution, beginning in the eighteenth century, of the in-depth, philosophically serious (though admittedly severe) Puritan teachings and their replacement by more or less Arminian popular evangelism ("preparation for salvation") or merely humanistic Unitarianism, both of which Hall firmly disavows. The great documents of Puritanism, like The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) are now by and large a dead letter, as are Calvinism and classic Presbyterianism. And so a great tradition has been dissipated.

However one feels about this, and however reasonably one may accuse Hall of underestimating some of the aesthetic deficits of Puritanism (what, endless psalm-singing, and no *Missa Papae Marcelli* or *Spem in alium*? No Bach chorales or Handel oratorios? No spectacular Baroque and Rococo churches? None of the treasures of sacred art from Giotto to Michelangelo to El Greco and beyond?) Hall certainly provides an exhaustive, coherent exposition of what Puritanism, in its prime, was all about. It meant, in no specific order, a grand ensemble of themes, including

1. The rejection of "idolatry," which spanned a vast spectrum of mainly Catholic practices and rituals

(condemning even apparently trivial customs like wearing a surplice) and all sorts of behavior from venerating sacred images to pub-crawling;

2. A keen sense of the omnipresence of sin (thanks, Augustine!), the corruptibility and decadence of human nature, and the permanent dangers they posed to the church and society;

3. The belief that God's law bound civil society as well as the church, and so there could be no Jeffersonian wall separating church and state. (No surprise there, since Jefferson's shortened New Testament, "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," completely excluded the supernatural);

4. Adding "the judicial laws of Moses," e.g., with reference to the Sabbath and the condemnation of adultery, to British law. By contrast, all the old feast days (no more pagan-flavored Christmas!), saints' days, and other church festivities had to go (and again Hall underestimates the cultural loss this might amount to);

5. Demanding that both civil governments and monarchs uphold "wholesome Lawes" of all sorts and publicly rebuking offenders against them. (But Puritans could never unanimously agree on the precise limits of royal authority);

6. Reliance on a "Word-based" rather than sacramental ministry to transform the faithful. This could be cynically dismissed as no more than a lot of long sermons; but the Reformers were keenly aware of how ill-trained many Catholic priests had been and thus incapable of actually proclaiming the message of the Gospel;

7. Stressing repentance and subsequent “sanctification.” The consciousness that one was “walking uprightly before the Lord” provided assurance of personal salvation for those wrestling with the often traumatic issue of predestination;

8. Insisting on discipline as a mark of the true church, which meant elders keeping a sharp eye on the actual behavior of local parishioners, and in many cases waging war on the “unbridled license of ungodly living;”

9. Restricting access to baptism and Holy Communion to those judged worthy of grasping their significance and living in accordance with their prerequisites;

10. A vision of the unique relationship uniting “the godly” in their identity as the Body of Christ. One English minister described the ideal Christian community as follows: “There is, or can be, the like love to another, the like care for one another; the like spiritual watchfulness one over another; the like union and communion of members in one mystical body, in a sympathy of affections ...” (What non-Puritan believer could quarrel with that?)

11. Linking “a reformation of manners to the workings of divine providence,” aka Providentialism, or reading individual and communal experiences (both blessings and tribulations) as divine judgments. Obviously, this approach was not limited to the Puritans and could prompt all sorts of quirky subjective responses to daily events;

12. Encouraging literacy among lay people, so as to advance the knowledge

of Scripture and divine law: a movement that also had enormous, long-term non-religious consequences;

13. Regarding social injustice and pauperization as sinful and attempting to undo them (a colossal and highly laudable endeavor, to be sure);

14. In a similar vein, equating “equity” and “justice” as righteousness, and hence calling for changes in civil and criminal law;

15. Accepting the power of the civil state and the church to coerce as a necessary part of comprehensive reform, even while hoping for voluntary participation in such domination;

16. Calling for control of “appetites for worldly goods.” This led to the condemnation to popular customs such as card-playing and dancing. Female sexuality and clothing came, as is well known, under particular scrutiny here (but one could find the same bias far back as the third chapter of 1 Peter);

Hall treads lightly when it comes to aspects of Puritanism that have been scathingly criticized for ages. He praises Calvin, but never mentions his burning of Michael Servetus at the stake. He writes edifying pages about John Knox but says nothing about his most notorious work, *The First Blast Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (1558). He doesn’t consider that phenomena like the War on Drugs might be considered belated (and worse than futile) after-effects of Puritanism. He is painfully sensitive about the Enlightenment’s success in tarring and feathering Puritanism in the secular mind, and so is wholly intent on righting the balance.

St. Paul in 1 Cor. 5 and elsewhere bade his followers expel from the Christian community and shun openly immoral believers, and the Puritans often tried to do the same. Thanks to original sin and human nature, establishing an ideal, “purified” body of worshipers, in some ways akin to a monastery, was bound to fall short (as if anticipating Nietzsche’s acidulous remark that he might have believed in the Redeemer if his followers *looked* more redeemed (*Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Part II, “The Priests”).

Another insoluble problem—and something the conservative Hall doesn’t go near—is the very nature of the first Christian community. Most scholarly commentators agree that Matthew’s foundational logion in 16.18, “You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church” is a later addition, like making the Holy Spirit part of the Trinity (in Mt. 28.19). To put it bluntly, there is no specific evidence that Jesus ever intended to found the kind of institution we call a church; and the often bitter arguments between Paul and his ideological adversaries about the nature of the Church in Acts and the Letters show fluid and contested the structure of the Church was in the first century. The Puritan insistence on *sola Scriptura* didn’t have enough information to work with.

So, Puritan theologians hunting for eternally valid proof texts to justify their own denominational alterations of Catholicism were in some ways on a wild goose chase. They were right to maintain that the modest New

Testament Greek word later translated as bishop, *episkopos* (=overseer), had little in common with the remit of the powerful ecclesiastical lords of the Catholic Middle Ages; but expanding a few verses in 1 Cor.13, for example, about the various roles of ministers in the primitive Church into a sort of timeless Platonic blueprint of the perfect Jesus-based community was impossible. And even if the ecclesial arrangements found in Scripture had presented a clear cut, wholly coherent picture, where did the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Puritan “originalists” derive their certainty that there was no room for evolution or alteration in the Christian modes of self-government during the ages to come? The Church fathers had little trouble in eliminating the active role of female “ministers” mentioned in some of Paul’s letters and “the apostle Junia” in Rom. 16.7 (though, of course he condemned women to silence in church assemblies; see 1 Cor. 14.34).

One of the most interesting, if ultimately incalculable, aspects of Hall’s history is the contribution made by the Puritans to both civil and churchly democracy. In their rage against “priestcraft,” their demolition of the lofty pyramid of clerical offices, their championing of the individual conscience, and openness to liberated reading of Scripture, in fashions sometimes plain and direct and sometimes wildly idiosyncratic (denouncing the papacy as the Whore of Babylon and the pope as the Anti-Christ, or the sign of the cross or kneeling to receive the Eucharist as

abominations), Puritans were carrying out a “leveling” operation. But they were not necessarily champions of human rights: many of them heartily supported trials for witchcraft and savagely attacked Quakers. Still, they undoubtedly gave individuals (i.e., men) a larger role to play in church administration and activities than the Catholic Church, which remains a monarchy to this date.

The Puritans is a formidable achievement; but its greatest strength has a dark shadow. Hall cites many scores of now forgotten (except by academic historians) theological writers and their vast outpouring of treatises and controversial writings; but he never suggests that they may have earned their oblivion. Particularly when it comes to the doctrine of double predestination, he doesn’t seem to acknowledge its inhuman irrationality and how frequently traumatic its impact could be. In fact, he mourns the loss of the Puritan ideal of a “church composed of the worthy few.” Predestination did have a scriptural foundation of sorts: Matthew 7. 14: “Strait is the gate, and narrow the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it.” And Paul wrote in Romans 8.28-29 that “for whom (i.e., those who love God), he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the things of his Son”). But that did nothing to explain the part played by free will in becoming one of the chosen, apart from the “many” who were “called.”

And, crucially because “the law” convicted the soul of sin without erasing the guilt incurred, there was no

way to be confident of salvation except—though only imperfectly—by the evidence of a virtuous life. Good works in themselves were no guarantee of anything. Unmerited grace was everything; You could not earn entrance to heaven. Again, Hall won’t concede the possibility that this dogma might be flawed, that, despite the anathemas heaped on his head, Pelagius might have been right in his assessment of the intrinsic power of human goodness, and that Augustine’s view of original sin might have been intolerably harsh. Puritans preached about divine love a lot more than is usually recognized, but there is no discounting their emphasis on what Paul in Philippians 2.12 famously called “fear and trembling.” Hall admits that, “The ministers and poplar writers who brandished the weapon of terror took for granted the merits of doing so.”

The mass of English, Scottish, and American Puritans Hall quotes knew exactly what they wanted, a church composed of “visible Saints.” They thought that however difficult, the ideal wasn’t hopelessly utopian. The institutional framework they build for it has broken down; but who knows, perhaps they succeeded here or there to some unquantifiable degree. (And that goal is still shared by the large group of Americans formerly known as Mormons.) One verse from the Sermon on the Mount that one practically never hears these days is “Be ye therefore perfect, even as your father which is in heaven is perfect” (Mt. 5.49). Apart from the President, most of us are leery of “perfection”; but not the Puritans,

and for all the mixed results of their efforts, they deserve a certain basic respect. Hall concludes by stressing “the vitality of Puritan-style politics and social ethics at a moment in our national history when democracy is

failing and a social ethics of ‘community’ is being jeopardized.” To which one is tempted to utter, if not a full-throated, a least a quietly sympathetic *touché*!

David Nirenberg. *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*. Norton, 2013. 610pp. \$35

The history of anti-Semitism (i.e., Jew-hatred) has been more or less written, from the semi-legendary Second Book of Maccabees to the meticulous scholarship of writers like Leon Poliakov, Raul Hilberg or Saul Friedländer. But any reader of its dismal, horrific pages will have wondered: how did this poisonous plant manage to grow in so many places—England after 1290, 14th century France, post-1492 Spain, Reformation Germany, and so on—where there were so few actual Jews? (Even in the Third Reich, Jews made up <0.75% of the population.)

Clearly, we are dealing here with something much more complex and elusive, if not perverse, than ordinary ethnic hostility. Why, for example, was the damning label "Jewish" pinned on Castilian Christian poets (1391–1430) by one another, on Catholics by Lutherans, by Protestant regicides on King Charles I, on Kant by Hegel, and on American capitalism by sociologist Werner Sombart (d. 1941)? What's going on?

The answer, according to David Nirenberg, a professor of Medieval History and Social Thought at the University of Chicago, is the pestilential spread of what he calls "anti-Judaism." Though its effects could be seen in 1st and 2nd century Alexandria, whose Greek citizens and Roman legions savaged and finally eliminated most of the Jewish "foreigners," its most crucial roots lie in early Christianity. For Paul

and all the evangelists (in varying degrees), the Jewish majority that rejected Jesus represented stubbornness, (deliberate) blindness, bad faith, hypocrisy, fixation of the Law (as opposed to freedom), on the letter (as opposed to the "spirit"), on justice (as opposed to mercy), on materialism (as opposed to Christian otherworldliness), on wealth (as opposed to Christian renunciation), and so forth.

The anti-Judaism of the New Testament is acknowledged by all serious students of the Bible. But, of course, that didn't end when Judaism and its "daughter" religion went their separate ways after 70 CE. Christians made supersessionism an essential feature of their faith, and so it would remain for Justin Martyr, Eusebius, Ambrose, Jerome, and the bloodthirsty John Chrysostom, all the way to Thomas Aquinas, canonized rabble-rouser like Vincent Ferrer and popes like Pius IX. Amid all this unfettered bigotry, St. Augustine's position looks almost benign. Yes, God had condemned the Jews to be outcasts, but "to the end of ... time the continued preservation of the Jews will be a proof to believing Christians of the subjection merited by those who ... put the Lord to death." So Jews shouldn't be killed, but left to serve as living reminders of their own dreadful mistake. If only that demeaning view had become the norm!

In any case, anti-Judaism expanded far beyond the Church. When the Enlightenment began replacing religious paradigms with secular ones, unbelievers (Hobbes, Spinoza,

D'Holbach, Voltaire, et al.) and their heirs (Kant, Schopenhauer, Fichte, Marx) borrowed it for their own purposes and, as Christians had before them, used it to attack their (mostly gentile) enemies. If in the process, they also vilified living Jews (and they did), that was a minor downside to the advantage of employing such a time-honored, effective, and widely accepted calumny. The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and the Nuremberg Race Laws were waiting in the wings.

Nirenberg, however, doesn't argue for any simplistic causality, linking, say, Luther's "On the Jews and Their Lies" to the gates of Auschwitz. This is history of ideas; and, given the over-determined nature of human behavior, Nirenberg would never claim the thoughts and writings, however twisted, mean, and careless, of however many intellectuals, shaped the course of events all by themselves. But the extraordinary persistence and virulence of anti-Judaism (once can find it in 19th century New England and contemporary Japan) is, to say the least, deeply unsettling.

Nirenberg's coverage of this tale of near-insanity is vast and comprehensive. He discusses Egyptian violence against Jews in the 5th century BCE (Egyptians on the island of Elephantine were angry at the feast of Passover, claiming it celebrated their destruction. He explains how Muhammad and early Islamic tradition drew upon anti-Judaism ("O you who believe! If you obey a party of the People of the Book, they will make you disbelievers after your

belief" Q 3:100) both to define and exalt Islam and combat its enemies, Jewish and otherwise. He offers brilliant interpretation of that subtle anti-Judaic masterpiece, *The Merchant of Venice* ("the Christian triumph over Judaism consists in knowing not how to keep the oath and its symbolic forms but when, in the interests of love, to let them go"). He examines texts both familiar (Marx's "Bruno Bauer: The Jewish Question") and obscure (a virulent sermon by one Father Antoine-Pascal-Hyacinthe Sermet to a gathering near Toulouse in 1790). He is at home in the original languages (Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Arabic, German, etc.) of all the material he cites; and his own style is clear and lively, vigorous and measured.

One issue Nirenberg barely touches on is the possible link between the Hebrew Bible and anti-Judaism. The prophets (and that would include Moses and Joshua) are forever fulminating about the sins of Israel, especially idolatry, and threatening bitter retribution. (One study reported that 75% of all prophetic oracles were negative. Christians certainly made hay with such unsparing attacks, the notion of the "remnant," etc. So did the Jews unwittingly hand the world a deadly weapon it could wield against them? It's worth noting that, unlike Christianity, Judaism lost patience with the whole institution of prophecy, whence the famous blast in Zechariah 13: 2-3: "I will remove from the land the prophets and the unclean spirit. And if any one again appears as a prophet, his

father and mother who bore him will say to him, 'You shall not live, for you speak lies in the name of the LORD'; and his father and mother who bore him shall pierce him through when he prophesies."

Prophets were almost by definition adversaries of their people and all too prone to poetic exaggeration. The Tanakh is surely the most self-critical Scripture anywhere.

—Peter Heinegg