**Puritanism in America**

Introduction:   
I don’t expect you to become a Puritan, but I’d like to put them in context. Remember these folks began the settlement of a vast, largely unknown continent. There were very few of them to begin with (and even fewer after the first winter). They had no one and nothing else to rely on. Even after the first few years had passed and life was less precarious, it was no less difficult. There was little time for nonessentials, like frills and leisure activities, but that doesn’t mean there weren’t *any*. Society had to have strictness to it or the settlers wouldn’t have survived. *The Scarlet Letter* does for the Puritans of early New England what *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* does for the antebellum South. It presents a caricature, an exaggeration of the real circumstances.

They were not anti-scientific: Of those Americans who were admitted into the scientific "Royal Society of London," the vast majority were New England Puritans.

Quotes:

From a modern vantage point the intolerance entailed by a unified view of society has harmed the Puritans' reputation. From a more disinterested perspective it is possible also to see great advantages. The Puritans succeeded in bursting the bonds of mere religiosity in their efforts to serve God. Puritanism was one of the moving forces in the rise of the English Parliament in the early seventeenth century. For good and for ill, it provided a foundation for the first great political revolution in modern times. It gave immigrants to Massachusetts a social vision whose comprehensively Christian character has never been matched in America. And, for such a putatively uncreative movement, it liberated vast energies in literature as well.   
[Puritanism, Puritans: <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/puritani.htm>]  
  
The large number of people who ascribed to the lifestyle of the Puritans did much to firmly establish a presence on American soil. Bound together, they established a community that maintained a healthy economy, established a school system, and focused an efficient eye on political concerns. The moral character of England and America were shaped in part by the words and actions of this strong group of Christian believers called the Puritans.   
[Puritans: <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/puritans.html>]

The Puritans either participated in or led the charges that transformed the political climate of England and North America (and thereby the world). They wrote poetry, fiction, and theology prolifically and still claim two of the most widely read English texts ever written–*Paradise Lost* and *Pilgrim’s Progress.*In the early 1700′s Jonathan Edwards stood at the helm of the first great awakening, during which enormous spiritual transformation swept across America (and even England, with fiery speakers like George Whitfield).  
[<http://veritasmizzou.wordpress.com/2010/03/24/whypuritansinsultus/>]

**Early history (in Europe)**

The English Puritans were known at first for their extremely critical attitude regarding the religious compromises made during the reign of Elizabeth I (d. 1603). The writings and ideas of John Calvin, a leader in the Reformation, gave rise to Protestantism and were pivotal to the Christian revolt. Many of the Puritans were graduates of Cambridge University and became Anglican priests to make changes in their local churches. They encouraged direct personal religious experience, sincere moral conduct, and simple worship services.

[C.S. Lewis](http://www.theopedia.com/C._S._Lewis) said of them, "We must picture these Puritans as the very opposite of those who bear that name today: as young, fierce, progressive intellectuals, very fashionable and up-to-date. They were not teetotalers; bishops, not beer, were their special aversion..." For many generations, these Puritans were the "young bucks" who wanted to go all the way with God and the Bible.

If ever a group of Christians sought to glorify God in everything, it was the Puritans. Although the term "Puritan" has often been used as an insult, the Puritans themselves were simply Christians who wanted to honor God in their worship and doctrine. Richard Baxter, himself a leading Puritan pastor, defined them as "religious persons that used to talk of God, and heaven, and Scripture, and holiness." Their worldview is perhaps best encapsulated in the first answer in the [Westminster Shorter Catechism](http://www.theopedia.com/Westminster_Confession_of_Faith): "Man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever."  
[<http://www.puritanhead.com/2008/04/applying-puritan-worldview-in-21st.html>]

There were essentially two groups of puritans: reformers and separatists; those who wanted to reform the church from within and those who believed the church was too far gone to reform and wanted to start a new church – many eventually became Congregationalists.

After James I became king of England in 1603, Puritan leaders asked him to grant several reforms. At the Hampton Court Conference (1604), however, he rejected most of their proposals, which included abolition of bishops. Between 1630 and 1641, the "eleven years' tyranny", Charles I tried to rule England without a Parliament. The government and the church hierarchy, especially under Archbishop of Canterbury William Laud, became increasingly repressive. Economic and social chaos occurred across England, which worsened in East Anglia, the home of thousands of Puritans when the Archbishop decided to deal with the upheaval by stepping up persecution of the region's Puritan “heretics.” During those 11 years alone, over 80,000 Puritans pulled up stakes and moved on. One-quarter of these eventually landed in the new Puritan colony of Massachusetts, safely beyond the reach of the Anglican persecution. Those who remained formed a powerful element within the parliamentarian party, led by Oliver Cromwell, who eventually defeated Charles I in the English Civil War (1642-1651). After Cromwell’s death (1658), the people of England asked the son of Charles I to return, which marked the collapse of organized Puritanism in England. More repression of “Nonconformists” followed which resulted in more emigration. From 1620, when Puritans first arrived in the North America to 1640 there were 17,800 immigrants. That number increased to 106,000 in 1700.

[Puritanism, Puritans: <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txc/puritani.htm>]  
[Puritans, <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/puritans.html>]

**American History**

The majority of immigrants were not Puritans, but they were the leaders. Richard Mather and John Cotton provided clerical leadership in the dominant Puritan colony planted on Massachusetts Bay.

Though Puritanism waned on the Continent (because of persecution), it persisted for much longer as a vital force in those parts of British North America colonized by two groups of Puritans who gradually cut their ties to the Church of England and formed separate denominations. One group, the Congregationalists, settled Plymouth in the 1620s and then Massachusetts Bay, Connecticut, and Rhode Island in the 1630s. Another group, the Presbyterians, who quickly came to dominate the religious life of Scotland and later migrated in large numbers to Northern Ireland, also settled many communities in New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania during the late seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth century.

Puritans in both Britain and British North America sought to cleanse the culture of what they regarded as corrupt, sinful practices. They believed that the civil government should strictly enforce public morality by prohibiting vices like drunkenness, gambling, ostentatious dress, swearing, and Sabbath-breaking. They also wished to purge churches of every vestige of Roman Catholic ritual and practice—the ruling hierarchies of bishops and cardinals, the elaborate ceremonies in which the clergy wore ornate vestments and repeated prayers from a prescribed liturgy. Accordingly, New England’s Congregational churches were self-governing bodies, answerable to no higher authority; mid-Atlantic Presbyterian churches enjoyed somewhat less autonomy because a hierarchy of “presbyteries” and “synods” made up of leading laymen and clergymen set policy for individual congregations. But both Congregationalist and Presbyterian worship services were simple, even austere, and dominated by long, learned sermons in which their clergy expounded passages from the Bible. Perhaps most important, membership in both churches was limited to the “visibly godly,” meaning those men and women who lead sober and upright lives. New England Congregationalists adopted even stricter standards for admission to their churches—the requirement that each person applying for membership testify publicly to his or her experience of “conversion.” (Many Presbyterians also regarded conversion as central to being a Christian, but they did not restrict their membership to those who could profess such an experience.) [<http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/eighteen/ekeyinfo/puritan.htm>]

**Beliefs [Overarching: The absolute authority of the Bible]**

1. The sovereignty of God
2. The total depravity of man
3. The complete dependence of human beings on Divine grace for salvation
4. Importance of personal religious experience

Each individual is responsible for his/her own spiritual condition

1. Our way or the highway (thrown out of the colony), but “our way” included

* Women: were considered partners in their husband's businesses, explicitly entitled to love and respect, and legally protected from spousal abuse. Marriages were contractual agreements entered into after long courtships, and women had a lot of freedom to negotiate their side of these arrangements. Inheritances were typically divided in ways that ensured every child, male and female, got something.
* Children: born wicked, and raising them meant breaking their will until they were able to sublimate their own desires to those of the family and community
* Elders (men): viewed as cherished saints, entitled by their wisdom to govern
* Education: Three English diversions were banned in their New England colonies; drama, religious music and erotic poetry. The first and last of these led to immorality. Music in worship created a "dreamy" state which was not conducive in listening to God. Since the people were not spending their time idly indulged in trivialities, they were left with two godly diversions.   
    
  The Bible stimulated their corporate intellect by promoting discussions of literature. Greek classics of Cicero, Virgil, Terence and Ovid were taught, as well as poetry and Latin verse. They were encouraged to create their own poetry, always religious in content.   
    
  For the first time in history, free schooling was offered for all children. Puritans formed the first formal school in 1635, called the Roxbury Latin School. Four years later, the first American College was established; Harvard in Cambridge. Children aged 6-8 attended a "Dame school" where the teacher, who was usually a widow, taught reading. "Ciphering" (math) and writing were low on the academic agenda.   
  [Puritans: <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/puritans.html>]
* Rights: Individuals could only have privileges. Rights belonged to institutions and governments -- and chief among them was the right of the institution to do what it must to maintain civil order and see to it that people met their responsibilities. While that attitude led to excesses like witchburnings and shunnings, it also gave the Puritans a strong sense of obligation to take care of the weakest among them, and see to it that nobody went without. [Albion's Seed I: The Puritans 1620-1640: <http://dneiwert.blogspot.com/2007/09/albions-seed-i-puritans-1620-1640.html>]
* Bible: The Puritans believed that the Bible was God's true law, and that it provided a plan for living. The established church of the day described access to God as monastic and possible only within the confines of "church authority". Puritans stripped away the traditional trappings and formalities of Christianity which had been slowly building throughout the previous 1500 years. Theirs was an attempt to "purify" the church and their own lives. [Puritans: <http://www.nd.edu/~rbarger/www7/puritans.html>]

**Values**

Ken and Will Hopper write in *Puritan Gift: Triumph and Decline of American Dream*, that there were four constant values throughout the evolved ideology of Puritanism: “a conviction that the purpose of life, however vaguely conceived, was to establish the Kingdom of Heaven on Earth; an aptitude for the exercise of mechanical skills; a moral outlook that subordinated the interests of the individual to the group; and an ability to assemble, galvanize and marshal financial, material and human resources to a single purpose and on a massive, or a lesser, scale.” [Hopper, Ken; Hopper, Will. D.. Puritan Gift : Triumph and Decline of an American Dream. London, , GBR: I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited, 2007. p 3. http://site.ebrary.com/lib/andover/Doc?id=10209742&ppg=19. Copyright © 2007. I. B. Tauris & Company, Limited. All rights reserved.]

1. Need to establish God’s Kingdom on Earth

Puritans were interested in freedom of religion only as far as their religion was concerned. They wanted to be free from having to be under the religious leadership of England – remember they had had friends and family killed for being “Nonconformists” and “Separatists”. Puritans were not all that tolerant of other religions. They were right and if you wanted to live in their colony, you were going to do it their way, or leave.

Civil and religious leadership were one and the same. It’s not that the church controlled the state, the church *was* the state.

[Roger Williams, Anne Hutchinson were among those who chose to disagree. Williams was convinced that the control of civil law and the church should be separated – the government should not be passing or enforcing laws that deal with religion. He was, incidentally, a Baptist. Ultimately he was exiled from Massachusetts and eventually founded Rhode Island where the concept of “Freedom of Religion” was born.]

1. Get your hands dirty: “an aptitude for the exercise of mechanical skills”

Hard physical labor is a good thing.

1. “We” not “me”: “a moral outlook that subordinated the interests of the individual to the group”

My purpose in life is fulfilled as a part of society, as a part of a family unit. Society does not owe me anything, I owe society. My family does not owe me anything, I owe my family.

1. We can do it

Barn raising, road building, canal digging, etc – you name it and we can do it.