

Why Do the Puritans Matter Today?

Welcome to the lecture “Why do the Puritans Matter Today?” in the course “How to Communicate with a New England Puritan”! You might be wondering this very question, in fact: “Why DO the Puritans matter today?” The New England Puritans have gained a reputation for being solemn, extremely religious, and judgmental. At least, this may have come to us through works like Arthur Miller’s play *The Crucible*, about the Salem witch trials, or Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, about the ostracization of a Puritan woman who had committed adultery. And of course, H.L. Mencken famously defined Puritanism as “The haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy.” So scathing a quote as this might lead some away from digging into who the Puritans were. But I think that they still matter and can help us reflect on American society today. Indeed, a number of scholars have been presenting and investigating the Puritans from all sorts of refreshing angles. The learning goal for this lecture is for you to be able to explain and reflect on at least one of the reasons that I give. Here are my answers to the question “Why do the Puritans matter today?”

The first way that the Puritans still matter is that their history makes us critically examine the idea of American exceptionalism- the idea that America is somehow different from other countries and tasked with a special mission. This sense of American exceptionalism has some roots in a particular understanding of the Puritans in New England. Some scholars of the Puritans have viewed their beliefs and motives as they settled in the New England area as the seed of a distinctive American identity, a kind of “Americanness” that still impacts the country today. For example, prominent scholar of the Puritans, Perry Miller, discusses how the Puritans’ crafting a grand narrative about themselves was the beginning of an American identity. Specifically, their developing the story that they were creating a renewed society in another land shows how America began.

Another way in which the Puritans have been used to express American exceptionalism is seen in John Winthrop’s “city on a hill” sermon. His sermon, called “A Modell of Christian Charitie,” supposedly given aboard the *Arabella* ship as it crossed the Atlantic in 1630 from England to America, discusses how people might form a community of members that give and lend freely to each other and which is “knit” together by the “bond of love.” The sermon expounds at length upon various points and subpoints of its main idea, but is most famous for the very last section with the phrase “city on a hill.” Winthrop says, “For wee must consider that wee shall be as a *citty upon a hill*. The eies of all people are upon us. Soe that if wee shall deale falsely with our God in this worke wee have undertaken, and soe cause him to withdrawe his present help from us, wee shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.” This sermon is the basis for future speeches that proclaim America as a “city on a hill.” Ronald Reagan and Obama have used this phrase in their speeches. Sometimes they mean that America is meant to be a place which provides many opportunities (albeit unequally). Scholar Abram Van Engen has written a book tracing how this phrase has been used and has created a digital archive where users can explore all the ways this phrase has been used. I’ll link this archive in the episode description. The Puritans have often been interpreted as generating a distinctive American identity, whether it is from specific sermons or overall themes in writings. When we know about their history we can analyze it for ourselves to consider how distinct they really were, or how American they might have been.

The second way that the Puritans can still matter today is because of the impact of their jeremiad sermons. Jeremiads are a kind of lament of societal sins and are named after the

Hebrew prophet Jeremiah, who pointed out the errors of the Israelites in his speeches. Several Puritan writings and sermons can be considered jeremiads. The jeremiad form also appears throughout American history and even today. One example of a Puritan jeremiad is a sermon by the minister Increase Mather called “The Day of Trouble is Near,” from 1673. This sermon discusses the causes and signs of a “day of trouble,” which comes from Ezekiel chapter 7. However, it also points out various sins in Puritan society, including loose conversation, pride, and contention, as signs of an impending day of doom. Another example is Samuel Danforth’s sermon “A Brief Recognition of New England’s Errand Into the Wilderness,” in which he discusses the Puritans’ special mission to represent God in New England, but also chastises those who have forgotten this mission and turned to other goals. Also, some Puritan works have features of jeremiads, have some kind of castigation of individual and communal ills. For example, John Winthrop’s famous “City on a Hill” sermon discusses what might happen if the colonists do not maintain the bonds of love they are called to, consequences which involve various humiliations and other negative results.

The jeremiad form comes up at various points later in American history, including in African-American history. Frederick Douglass’ speech “What to the slave is the fourth of July?” castigates those who promote independence yet refuse it for slaves. In the appendix to his 1845 autobiography, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Douglass denounces the hypocrisy of people who claim to follow Christian tenets and yet treat slaves cruelly. Some scholars view Martin Luther King, jr’s speeches as jeremiads, as well. Other examples are Al Gore’s *Inconvenient Truth* or Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*, which point out negative actions of humans upon the environment and attempt to rouse people to action. One of the foremost scholars of the Puritans, Sacvan Bercovitch, focuses specifically on the jeremiad form in his book *American Jeremiad*, showing how Puritan jeremiads actually had a distinct note of jarring optimism, in addition to the despair they express. Understanding jeremiads from the Puritans can help us to understand the tradition of later American jeremiads.

The third way the Puritans still matter today is that several of the oldest and most influential American universities find their roots in Puritan New England. A prime example is, of course, Harvard University. Harvard was founded in 1636 by Puritans in Massachusetts. The first presidents were basically Puritans; Increase Mather, whose works I discuss heavily in this course, was one of them. It was only a few years after the English Puritans came to New England that Harvard college was founded. In 1636 the General Court of the Massachusetts Colony made a decision to give 400 pounds for the founding of an educational institution (Bush 11). The school was supposed to be for educating men to go into ministry. Initially the location wasn’t decided, but eventually people chose Newtown, which was later called Cambridge (Bush 12). In fact, several of the Puritans who came to America went to Cambridge University in England. John Harvard was one of these people. It was his willing his money and books to the college after his death that really spurred things on. After Harvard’s bequest the school was named after him and started operating more vigorously. John Harvard was a Puritan minister who came to New England and occasionally preached in Charlestown (Bush 13). He arrived in America in 1637; however, he died in 1638. He left half of his estate and his library of 320 books to the college (14). Most the graduates of the college became ministers: “...during the first half-century nearly or quite half [of the graduates] entered the ministry, many of whom attained to high positions in the church” (Bush 63). President Henry Dunster resided during the writing of a charter for the college which is still in use today (“Harvard Charter”). The beginning of the

charter indicates that English and Indian students are to be educated with “knowledge and godliness” at Harvard College (“Harvard Charter”).

It is not just Harvard, but other ivy league schools like Yale and Dartmouth that were founded by Puritan ministers or their successors. For example, Yale was founded by religious leaders in New Haven Colony. In 1700, ten ministers met together to found the college, each giving several books. The Governor and General Assembly eventually passed an act that led to further organization of the college (Schiff).

This matters because, for better or for worse, some of America’s oldest schools were founded in a distinct context of religious education—religious motives began the systems of higher education that we have today. Schools have gone through many changes, of course, but one of the most prestigious schools in America today, whether seen fondly or with disdain, stemmed from Puritan ideals and a particular Puritan mission. It was obvious to the Puritans that they needed a school for people to develop and grow into a kind of Puritan ideal minister, someone who with extensive knowledge, faith, godliness, and the ability to explain the Bible. While I am not implying that Harvard should impose mandatory theology classes for every student, its origin and influence still might affect it today. The charter of 1650 for Harvard is basically the same charter—it hasn’t changed. It was modified only in 2010 to increase the number of people in the Harvard corporation and specify other managerial matters (“Harvard Charter”). It still has as its purpose something like the “education of English and Indian youth of this country in knowledge and godliness,” at least on paper. Several Harvard buildings or spaces are named after ministers: Dunster House and Mather House. And the mascot for the university is apparently the pilgrim John Harvard. Perhaps the Puritan dedication to teaching and to learning still drive, in some way, the energy of the community today.

In this episode I described three ways that the Puritans still matter today. The three ways I gave are one, that knowing the Puritans’ history helps us to examine the idea of American exceptionalism ourselves; two, that understanding Puritan jeremiads helps us to examine current-day jeremiads; and three, that the schools they founded still exist and influence society. This lecture should give you some inspiration to learn the material in the rest of the course and pique your interest in studying the Puritans further. I will be referring again to some ideas I have mentioned here throughout the course, including the notion of a distinct American identity and Perry Miller’s works.

Discussion question 1: Go to the City on a Hill archive site (<https://sites.wustl.edu/americanexceptionalism/>) and explore the “data” section (link in the top header ribbon). To what does “city on a hill” most commonly refer to, and in what genre? Choose three examples of how this phrase is used under “citations” for a certain referent, and analyze how the referent is portrayed using this phrase.

Discussion question 2: Choose the idea of American exceptionalism, jeremiads, or Puritan-founded schools, and expand on how knowing about the Puritan context can deepen our understanding of that idea. Then choose an example of one of these things from the contemporary or recent times and explain how knowing about the Puritans helps us to understand it.

Additional Reading and Works Cited

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