



## PURITANISM: THE REFLECTION OF AMERICAN CHARACTER

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### Abstract

The term *Puritanism* can be defined as religious movement that was happened in England in about 1620. The main goal of this movement is to purify The Church of England, the official British religion, and to strengthen the daily practice of religion. Puritanism is one of religious movements which can be used to explain the American character for, Puritanism itself has contributed many aspects of American life. It also brought a great impact toward the development of culture, economy, history, education and politics of the United States.

**Keywords:** religious movement, culture, American character, Economic development.

### I. INTRODUCTION

Puritanism was a reform movement within the Church of England that emerged in the nineteenth century. The basis goal of the movement was to purify the Church of England and to strengthen the daily practice of religion. There are two kinds of their program of reform. One was basically derived from John Calvin and the Calvinists tradition in which Calvin's theology explained that it was God who controlled all events according to his eternal arbitrary purpose. The other was based on the Holy Bible in which they wanted the Christian church to be restored to its original condition, as described in Scripture.

Olmstead states that, " The Puritans had a strong belief that the church should be restored to the simplicity and purity of the first century fellowship" (1961 : 3 ). The Puritans wanted to set up a kind of holy city in the New World. In this model of society, everyone would live according to the teachings of the Puritan church.

The Puritan leaders wanted to establish a *Bible Commonwealth* in which the scriptures served as the guide for every aspect of live. John Winthrop had warned the Puritans on the voyage to the New World that the "Lord will expect a strict performance from us" (Todd, 1972 : 29).

The Puritan church was strong in all parts of the British Colonies, but it was particularly powerful in Massachusetts and Connecticut. Puritan believed that they were definitely selected for salvation, and their clergy dominated political offices.

### II. THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF PURITANISM

As already mentioned above that Puritanism was essentially and primarily a religious movement. In a broader sense, Puritanism was a passion for righteousness; the desire to know and do God's will (Morrison, 1965 : 61). The puritans want to purify the Anglican Church, England's Official Protestant Church. To puritans, the rituals of this church seemed too much like those of the Roman Catholic service, which Henry VIII had abolished in the 1500s.

In general, the puritans follow the teachings of John Calvin, here some of Calvin's and the puritans' most important belief.

Puritanism was responsible for the settlement of New England; and as the Congregational, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Unitarian, Quaker, and other Protestant sects of The United States.

Puritan believed in the original sin. The first Bible tells about the sin of Adam and Eve, the parents of all the people, who disobeyed God by eating the forbidden fruit. The puritans believed that all human being inherited the same sinful character. Since sinful people deserved to be damned to hell after death, it was a sign of God's mercy that He had decided to save anyone at all.

The puritans agreed on what was wrong with the Church of England, but they disagreed on what should be done about it. Some thought they should remain to the church and try to reform it from within. Others did not think that was possible, so they formed independent congregations with their own ministers. They were called separatists.

In 1608, one congregation of separatists decided to flee from England to Holland, where the authorities were very tolerant in religious matters. Finally, they decided to migrate to New World, America, because they are sure that they could live better in a New World as an independent religious congregation. They get a grant of land in the northern part of Virginia.

In 1620, the ship Mayflower sailed from English port of Plymouth, carried a small group families and those people were called themselves Pilgrims, and they found a spot in the inner shore of Cape Cod Bay, and named for it for the town from which they had sailed Plymouth. They were helped by the Indians when they first arrived. One of the Indians could speak English and he became the interpreter and the guide for the Pilgrims. Therefore, for thanking God, in November 1621 they had their first Thanksgiving, after the long starving, and then later, they build the Plymouth Plantation.

### III. PURITANISM IN AMERICAN RELIGIONS

When the pilgrims first landed in Cape Cod Bay, now Province town, the leaders of the expedition : Brewster, William Bradford, Winslow, Standish, and the adult men on the ship, drew up the famous "Mayflower Compact", where they formed a "civil body politics", and promised "all due submission and obedience" to such "just equal laws". They had to make this treaty because in the colonies of other European nations the will of the prince or his representative, was supreme.

Originally, puritan was an independent religion which guaranteed the freedom of its followers. But in reality, the puritans forced the people to follow their regulations, and they would be punished if they tried to act against the regulations. For example : Anne Hutchinson, the witchcraft in Salem, and Mary Dyer ( Gaustad, 1982 : 132-6).

The pilgrims and puritans hoped to set up in America a Commonwealth, ideal according to their essentially Calvinistic Theology. The chief points of puritans theology are :

1. Absolute sovereignty of God
2. Predestination : An omniscient Deity knows from the beginning who will be saved.
3. Providence : God directly intervenes in the world. For example, God was responsible when mice ate Anglican prayer book but not the New Testament.
4. Natural depravity : since Adam's fall, all men are born in sin and deserve damnation.
5. Election : Through God's mercy, a few are saved, but by grace alone not by their own efforts.
6. Evil in inner : Man needs reform of himself, rather than of institutions.
7. God is revealed in the Holy Bible.

The relation between Puritanism and success in worldly affairs, had been touched upon earlier. Work was one of the major puritan virtues, and working hard is one of their aims to glorify God. Their belief made them work hard and accepted the richness as the only way to Heaven. By this way of thinking, puritan spirits are well-known as the symbol of pioneer, struggle, and innovation.

Beside working hard, the American people nowadays are still inheriting the old spirit of puritan, that is voluntarism. We know that United States of America is one of the important centre of the religion's spreading and also the centre of funding to assist the third world countries. There are many non-profit foundations such as Rockefeller or Ford Foundations which helped many countries in developing their communities.

In short, we can say that Puritanism is one of the important factors in the development of America. Its spirit still exist everywhere in the country, and although America is not a Puritan country anymore, the people still inherited the spirit of Puritanism until now.

#### **IV. PURITANISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE**

Defining the American character is a difficult, but an interesting activity. People who argue that defining the American character is difficult or even impossible generally base their argument on the premise that the United States of America is a great country and the nation is continental in scale and enormously diverse in its people.

In this simple writing, we would like to talk Puritanism, in order to explain the American character. Following the Puritanism, the beginning of the American nation were accomplished with the active assistance of the Almighty God. The puritans or the pilgrims who came to America and firstly landed at Plymouth in 1620 claimed that God blessed and saved them from the dangerous journey across the Atlantic. Often contrasted with the settlers of Virginia, the Southern part of America, the puritans had religious and idealistic motivations as to regard America as the New Jerusalem, the promised land, and "the shinning city on a hill" to become a model for older and more sinful Europe.

The puritans who settled the northeastern religion of The United States (New England), could be divided into two groups, they are :

1. The one who wanted to reform the Church of England, and
2. The one who wanted to establish an entirely new church.

These two groups combined in Massachusetts and they tried to develop a theocratic society in New England – at present, New England consists of six states : Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Connecticut.

The puritans are usually credited with having given the people of America "the protestant work ethic", which laid moral basis for America's economic growth. It is often said that the puritans built a way of life that was in harmony with their somber religion, one that stressed on hard work, thrift, piety, and sobriety. Even up to this time, the people of New England are still known for "Yankee ingenuity", their independence, industriousness, shrewdness, and frugality.

Puritanism brought a great impact or influence to the development of culture, literature, economy, history, education and politics in the United States. As the first example, historians have noted that almost from the beginning, as the English settled along the Atlantic coast of America, there were important differences between the Southern and Northern colonies. In the South, enormous farms or plantations used the labor of black slaves to grow crops, especially tobacco. The rich and powerful plantation owners were slow to develop a literature of their own, American literature. In contrast, in New England, the puritan settlers had come to the New World in order to form or redeem a society based on strict Christian beliefs. According to Puritanism, a society should be based on the laws of God. Therefore, the New England settlers had a far stronger sense of unity and of a "shared purpose". This was one of the reasons why culture and literature developed much faster in New England (in the North) than in the South ( High, 1984).

The second example, it is often argued that the founding of the city of Boston and Harvard University in New England becomes a great evidence for all people living inside or outside the United States about the great impact of Puritanism in America. Culturally, Boston used to be the first intellectual and cultural leader of the Americans because of several reasons, they are :

1. Boston has many prestigious universities such as Harvard University and The Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Harvard University was founded in 1636; it is the oldest Institution of higher learning and one of the most prestigious Universities in the United States. In the mean time, The Massachusetts Institute of Technology is one of the most prestigious scientific and engineering institution in the United States; it also offers programs combining work in the social studies and humanities with study in selected fields and engineering.
2. Boston had produced great writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, and Oliver Wendell Holmes. Those writers had lifted the American literature to a place where it could seriously rival the work of Europe's finest writers (Moore, 1981).
3. Chronologically, the position of New York as the first business and cultural centre in the United States came after Boston.

The third example, people noted that Puritanism had served both as a religion and a way of thinking. According to Puritanism, people were essentially sinful since they were born; they could be regenerated or saved only by the grace of God. Only certain people or the elect would receive God's grace. A person's fate, according to Puritanism, was fore ordained, for God must know in advance the future of every soul. However, life was not without hope; one must never give up seeking salvation. What seems to be interesting to note is that in Puritanism, there is a close relationship between God's blessings or grace and success. It was often mentioned that God's blessings being material as well as spiritual success in the accumulation of worldly goods was an indication (not a guarantee) of salvation. In the long run, people believed that richness or wealth was to be pursued and when some people became very rich they thought that God has blessed them. Seeing that many Americans have gone to the wrong direction, Mark Twain criticized them by saying that the Americans had entered the Gilded Age. Mark Twain's criticism

towards the sinful people could be seen in his works *The Man That Corrupted Hadleyburg*, (1900), *To The Person Sitting in Darkness* (1901), and *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916).

The last example, in the puritan world view, American heroes have a long tradition of serving as the Redeemer. For the puritans, the wilderness of their "chosen land" was inhabited by devils, and these devils could be driven out only by the strongest and worthiest of men. Following this world view, the puritans developed a theocracy, a combination of state and religious power whose function was to keep the community together, and to prevent any kind of disunity that might open it to destruction by material or ideological enemies. All organizations were and must be grounded on the idea of exclusion and prohibition. In negative sense, Puritanism was often considered to be too intense, too inhibiting, or too smug by many Americans as seen in Arthur Miller's *The Crucible* (1953). In positive sense, the puritan world view which states that all conflicts—both external and internal conflict—with the "howling wilderness", with "the savages" who inhabit that wilderness, within the soul concerning worldly temptation can be reduced to an elemental struggle between good and evil, has inspired many American leaders in making political speeches. The speech of Winston Churchill, leading an embattled Great Britain against Nazi Europe in the darkest days of World War II, showed the mission for he called upon "the new world to come to rescue of the old".

The mission or Puritanism could also be seen in The Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776), in Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address (November 19, 1863), in Woodrow Wilson's First Inaugural Address (March 4, 1913), in John F. Kennedy's Inaugural Address (January 20, 1961), and in Ronald Reagan's acceptance speech at the 1980 Republican National Convention and his televised debate with John Anderson.

Puritanism has clearly given inspiration to American leaders to carry out America's duty to serve an ideal for all humankind. In addition, Gabriel (1974 : 41) mentions that "The eighteen-century man was like climber making his way at dawn up a

mountain flank through the ground fog at the base until suddenly he found himself in the clean air and clear light of early morning. He felt that he had left superstition behind and below him. He was convinced that reason was an instrument that would ultimately enable men to discover the inmost mind of God, conceived of as a Great Engineer and as the Author of Nature”.

#### **V. CONCLUSIONS**

To end this analysis, the writer would like to conclude that defining the American character is a hard but interesting activity. There are many ways that can be used to define or explain the American character.

Puritanism is one of the terms to be used to explain the American character for, Puritanism has permitted many aspects of American life. Yet, Puritanism brought a great impact or influence to the development of culture, literature, economy, history, education, and politics in the United States.

Shortly, we can say that Puritanism is one of the important factors in the development of America. Its spirit still exist everywhere in the country, and although America is not a Puritan Country anymore, the people still inherited the spirit of Puritanism up to this present.

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