The American Puritans and the historians

Abstract

In 1964, intellectual historian Henry May announced in a now-famous essay the beginning of "The Recovery of American Religious History." May has since recalled that his claim was greeted with scepticism (66). The subsequent record, however, has proven him more than right. In hindsight it is fair to say that May's essay heralded only the first trickle of an on-going flood of research that continues to the present. Numerous new emphases and approaches, such as those on popular religion and social history, have flourished, and virtually no theme, movement, tradition, group, or era has escaped attention: revivalism, esoterica, civil religion, indigenous peoples, women, new religions, ethnic imports, and just about every denomination twice-over.
How to Cite

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Standard 3 Resource Puritan Values in American Society. Return to History Standard Three Teaching Tools Index. Benchmark Addressed: History 3 (Interpretation). Puritans played an important role in American history, but they no longer influenced American society after the seventeenth century. Although the Puritans came to the New World in search of religious toleration, a basic human right for which the United States is well-known, they refused to accept people who did not share their beliefs. Nor did the Puritans create the form of democracy used by the American government today. Grades 9-12: relate answers to the historians’ “choice of questions, use and choice of sources, perspectives, beliefs, and points of view.” (Back to top). To Winship, the Puritans were not necessarily the original American democrats, but they may well have been America’s first republicans (with a small ‘r’). It was not so much the love of liberty or belief in equality that drove them, but the fear of ecclesiastical and political tyranny. Puritans shared “the dread of the corrupting effects of power, the fear of one-man rule, the emphasis on the consent of the people, and on balanced government” with the proponents of classical republican thought made famous by historians such as Bernard Bailyn [The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution]...

Contemporary historians will undoubtedly continue to balk at oversimplified notions of the Puritan meetinghouse as a crucible of American democracy. In the early 17th century, thousands of English Puritans colonized North America, mainly in New England. Puritans were generally members of the Church of England who believed that the Church of England was insufficiently reformed, retaining too much of its Roman Catholic doctrinal roots, and who therefore opposed royal ecclesiastical policy under Elizabeth I of England, James I of England, and Charles I of England. Most Puritans were "non-separating Puritans", meaning that they did not advocate Puritans - Religious Freedom. The Puritans and the Pilgrims wanted religious freedom. The Pilgrim Fathers left England for America in 1620 looking for religious freedom. In 1630 another religious group left England in search of religious freedom. Puritans - Dissenters were people objected to the accepted doctrine of the established church. The Puritans were dissenters from the Church of England, or Anglican religion, who wanted to create and practise their religious beliefs in the colonies. The Puritans had migrated to America seeking religious freedom. The Puritans had a strong work ethic which enabled them to achieve a success not seen in other colonies - in comparison with some other colonies the Puritans had achieved their own Utopia - the New England Way. This ‘American Israel’ was culturally and psychologically armed to dominate the original inhabitants of this ‘American Canaan’. These ideas of American exceptionalism and divine calling became secularised in nineteenth-century claims regarding Manifest Destiny and the subjugation of native peoples.

ADVERTISEMENT. Martyn Whittock’s latest book, Trump and the Puritans (co-written with James Roberts, available June 2) traces the influence of US evangelicals to the seventeenth-century settlement of New England and examines its surprising legacy in the modern evangelical support for Donald Trump. He taught history for thirty-five years and has acted as an historical consultant to the British National Trust organization, the BBC and English Heritage.