

Review of *Essays on Puritans and Puritanism*, by Leon Howard (Univ. of New Mexico Press, 1986) xii, 221 pages, index.

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What had Hamlet been studying in college? According to Leon Howard it was the logic of Peter Ramus, the Puritan's favorite rhetorician. This posthumous collection of writings gauges the Puritan influence on literature. The book has three parts. Part One is his unfinished historical introduction to Puritanism; Part Two explores the different directions Puritanism took in England and America (Congregationalism was radical in England but in America developed as a profoundly conservative force); the third section explores Ramist logic in Shakespeare's speeches, in Milton, and in Puritan exegesis.

Howard recounts the development of the Puritanism in light of the key events separating the English from the continental Reformers and the Puritans from the Establishment reformers. From a wide reading of early Puritan works he achieves a largely fair, balanced and sympathetic treatment, with only an occasional lapse into a supercilious tone. He chooses decisive and revealing moments, avoiding a mere narration of passing events, to bring out the essential goals of the factions and actors.

The English lacked a common model for church reform. Before the reign of Bloody Mary, German and Dutch congregations in London under the superintendency of John à Lasco were the first Presbyterians in England, and they were imitated by some of the underground congregations during Mary's reign. Other influences came from the Marian exiles. One fourth of them were in Geneva, and learned its four office model of pastors, teachers, elders, and deacons, and its pastors' association.

The most telling incident Howard considers to be the church struggle of the exile congregation in Frankfurt. "For there, in miniature and in the short space of two weeks, they had uncovered the issues which were eventually to divide English protestantism into two warring camps, Anglican and Puritan, and later destroy the Puritan movement by splitting it into Presbyterian and Independent factions." (p. 32)

The congregation was founded by French exiles, first in England, then in Germany to escape Mary's persecution. They agreed to share their church with later arriving English refugees. The Frankfurt authorities required that the English accept the French

Confession, order of service, and church order. One of the ministers was John Knox. Then, new exiles led by Richard Cox arrived, demanding “the face of an English church” with congregational liturgical participation. Knox, for once, was accommodating, and allowed the new group to become members, whereupon they voted him out of office and took over. When the Puritan side appealed to the city authorities the Anglicans applied pressure by accusing Knox of treason to the Emperor. Knox was ordered out of town and the Anglicans had the church.

The affair at Frankfurt is of unusual interest because it brings into view the three conceptions of a church organization which were to trouble England for a century. When Cox and his followers arrived, the organization consisted of a voluntary gathering of the Elect, each convinced of his justification and capable of enduring a rigorous examination on the purity of his doctrine and morals. If it had been kept so, as a majority of the congregation apparently wished, some of the newcomers would not have been admitted because of an unwillingness to sign the discipline or pass the doctrinal test. But Knox wanted a more comprehensive church which would be territorial in the sense that it would include the whole community of believers although it would be international inasmuch as he believed that Christ's true church would have the same face in every territory. And he was willing—perhaps influenced, at Frankfurt, by a combination of generosity and overconfidence—to modify the severity of its membership requirements in order to achieve it. The newcomers wanted a national church which would preserve its national peculiarities in a distinctive ceremony of worship. They were to have their way in England but struggle long with people of other views. John Knox was to have his way in Scotland, completely and rather soon. But two generations were to pass before the founders' way became the establishment of Massachusetts. (pp. 34-35)

At times Howard loses sympathy for his subject. Like the Anglicans he studies he deplores the theonomy of Thomas Cartwright, for “in his dependence upon the Scriptures he turned away from the course of the Reformation by placing too much emphasis upon the ruthless legalism of the Old Testament”. (p. 47) Howard reports Cartwright's Ramist exposition of the commandment against adultery, “And children begotten in horrible incest were to be burnt or slaine in their mothers wombe”, but the ruthless legalism, so oddly at one with modern feminism, is that of Cartwright, not the Old Testament.¹

Puritanism was heavily colored by its reliance on the analysis, misleadingly called logic, of the French Protestant martyr Peter Ramus. For example, William Perkins, in *The Art of Prophecy* taught that Scripture should be interpreted “by the helpe of the nine arguments, that is, of the causes, effects, subjects, adjuncts, dissentanies, comparatives, names, distribution, and definition.”² The result was a Puritan habit of interrogating

1 Howard, *Essays on Puritans and Puritanism*, p. 143. He cites *A Treatise on Christian Divinity* (London, 1616), pp. 146-147.

2 Published in Latin in 1592, and in English by Thomas Tuke in 1606. Howard, p. 79.

Scripture according to the demands of rhetorical analysis, instead of opening themselves to the leading of the text. Here is Cartwright's Ramist exegesis of the seventh commandment.

[A]dultery could be either “inward, of the heart”, or “outward” with regard to the body, or in “itself”. Among the things belonging to the body were external apparel (ranging from that appropriate to the opposite sex to that which was merely “new-fangled”) and internally consumed meat and drink which might be sinful in quality (“too much daintiness”, etc.) or quantity. The body itself could be abused either in its parts or adjuncts (tongue, eyes, ears, etc., by filthy talk or wanton glances and listening) or as a whole, either “by himself” (“as in idleness” as well as sexually) and “with others”. Abuse with others was subdivided to consist of unlawful “conjunction”, which might be “natural” (as in either fornication or adultery) or “unnatural” with one's “own kind” or with “other kind”, or (as the opposite of “conjunction”) in unlawful “separation” which might exist when husband and wife were together but “when due benevolence is not yielded” or when they were separated by prolonged travels, imprisonment, “mislike”, or illegal separation imposed by magistrates. To a Puritan who followed Cartwright's system the indulgence in a choice bit of meat, a new bonnet in the latest style, or the relaxation of a lazy day (or even the thought of such things “of the heart”) was against the Word.... That this particular Word should be the commandment against adultery...is a tribute to the far-reaching powers of extension made possible by the subtleties of Ramist logic. (pp. 80-81)

Sumptuary laws, therefore, fall under the government's obligation to suppress adultery. There is no limit to what can be proved with this type of exegesis, and it may be a factor in the delay until the nineteenth century of the development of the discipline of biblical theology.

Finally, Howard tries to understand the emergence of New England's distinctive Middle Way of Independency and its divergence from English Puritanism. This New England Way

assumed the existence of a weak state which could be the instrument of a restricted church.... England, throughout the reign of the Tudors, had been a strong state in which the church was a national institution and an instrument of political policy. The New England Way assumed that orthodoxy could be maintained by persuasion and the removal of stubborn dissenters from the body politic. The body politic of England was made up of religious dissenters who had passed beyond the power of persuasion and were already engaged in a mortal struggle for power. The New England Way was based upon a belief in the constitutional authority of the written word, as dictated by the Holy Ghost and interpreted by skilled divines. England believed in the authority of principle, precedent, and political power. (p. 109)

To understand the New England Way one must grasp two key elements: the foundation of society on the Word of God, and the distinctive New England doctrine of conscience. It is expressed in John Cotton's frequent phrase "'conscience rightly informed'". It is "informed", Howard tells us, "by the Word of God rightly interpreted by the best gifts granted to a community of Saints rather than by the meteoric flash of an individual's own vagrant thoughts." (pp. 107-108) The elders were to bring the errant conscience under conviction and the person who then continued to rebel did so against his own conscience which had been supplied with better understanding.

The New England effort to achieve discipline...had produced what we might now call a theory of judicial review of the individual conscience under the written authority of the Scriptures. This was the essential - but, as a theory of government, still undefined—characteristic of the New England Way between the legislative authority of assemblies which was characteristic of Presbyterianism and the lack of all authority characteristic of sectarian Independency. And it was the famed Middle Way which the New Englanders and their English sympathizers tried to urge upon an uncomprehending mother country throughout the entire period of the Long Parliament and the Commonwealth. (pp. 108-109)

The church stood as a quasi-judicial body, independent of the state because in New England society was to be constructed on the Word of God, which the Church interpreted.

[T]he absolute supremacy of biblical law was the prevailing belief among the American Puritans who based their first attempts at the codification of civil law upon the judicials of Moses, and, as we shall see later, it provided the basis for their sincere denial of any affiliation with the independent sects of England and for their consistent advocacy of the New England Way as a "middle way" in church government between that of Presbyterianism and Independency. (p. 98)

It was to this characteristic that Roger Williams objected immediately upon his arrival in New England. The magistrates enforced the first table of the law, which Williams saw as religious, not moral. His concept of freedom of conscience required their disconnection.

Essays on Puritans and Puritanism stimulates illuminating reflection on the problems of church and society. This was not the author's intention; he was pursuing academic scholarship. The usefulness of the book for broader purposes is one measure of its depth of scholarly penetration.