Puritanism

Puritanism, a movement arising within the Church of England in the latter part of the 16th century, which sought to carry the reformation of that church beyond the point represented by the Elizabethan settlement (1559), an attempt to establish a middle course between Roman Catholicism and the ideas of the Protestant reformers (see Church of England). It had a continuous life within the church until the Stuart Restoration (1660).

The term Puritanism is also used in a broader sense to refer to attitudes and values considered characteristic of the Puritans. Thus, the Separatists in the 16th century, the Quakers (see Friends, Society of) in the 17th century, and Nonconformists after the Restoration may be called Puritans, although they were no longer part of the established church. The founders of New England, for whom immigration to the New World was in fact if not in avowed intent withdrawal from the mother church, are also commonly called Puritans.

Finally, the word puritanism has often been used as a term of abuse in a way that does scant justice to historical Puritanism—for instance, when a rigid moralism, or the condemnation of innocent pleasure, or religious narrowness, is stigmatized as puritanical.

Even within the Church of England, a precise definition of Puritanism is elusive. The leading Puritan clergyman in Elizabeth's reign was Thomas Cartwright (1535- 1603), who denied he was one. He is particularly remembered for his advocacy of presbyterian polity; but Puritanism cannot be identified with presbyterianism, because a major segment of the movement eventually adopted congregationalism. A doctrinal distinction might be made between the Calvinistic theology of the Puritans and the Arminianism of Archbishop William Laud, their chief antagonist in the time of King Charles I, but in practice the line between Calvinist and Arminian was blurred. The essence of Puritanism is in the intensity of the Puritan's commitment to a morality, a form of worship, and a civil society strictly conforming to God's commandments.

Puritan theology is a version of Calvinism. It asserts the basic sinfulness of humankind; but it also declares that by an eternal decree God has determined that some will be saved through the righteousness of Christ despite their sins. No one can be certain in this life what his or her eternal destiny will be. Nevertheless, the experience of conversion, in which the soul is touched by the Holy Spirit, so that the inward bias of the heart is turned from sinfulness to holiness, is at least some indication that one is of the elect.

The experience of conversion was therefore central to Puritan spirituality. Much of Puritan preaching was concerned with it: why not everyone will be converted; how conversion comes about—whether in a blinding flash as with St. Paul on the road to Dimashq, or following well- defined stages of preparation; how one can distinguish the real thing from the counterfeit. Puritan spiritual life stressed self-discipline and introspection, through which one sought to determine whether particular spiritual strivings were genuine marks of sainthood. Although full assurance might never be attained, the conviction of having been chosen by God fortified the Puritans to contend

with what they regarded as wantonness in society and faithfulness in the church, and to endure the hardships involved in trying to create a Christian commonwealth in the New World.

Puritanism was not static and unchanging. At first it simply stood for further reform of worship, but soon it began to attack episcopacy as unscriptural. At times the difference between the Puritans and the Anglicans seems to have been as much a matter of differing cultural values as of differing theological opinions, as when their Sabbatarianism (insistence on strict observance of the Sabbath) came into conflict with King James I's defense of sports and games on Sunday. Puritanism became a political as well as a religious movement when the parliamentary protest against Stuart despotism became entwined with the religious protest against Archbishop Laud's policy of enforced conformity (see English Revolution). Both in England during the Commonwealth (1649-60), and in 17th- century New England, Puritanism meant the direction and control of civil authority.

Nor was Puritanism a wholly cohesive movement. In the 1580s, the Separatists were bitterly condemned by other Puritans. When the Westminster Assembly (1643) sought to define doctrine and polity, the differences between Presbyterians and Independents (congregationalists) were manifest. In the turbulence of the 1640s, a number of small sects appeared, emphasizing that part of Puritan doctrine which acknowledges the work of the Holy Spirit in the soul of the believer to the neglect of that part which stands for social order and authority.

With the Stuart Restoration, many Puritans accepted the Book of Common Prayer and rule by bishops; others were forced into permanent nonconformity. In one sense, therefore, Puritanism failed. Its influence has persisted, however, entering into Methodism in the 18th century and evangelicalism in the 19th. Furthermore, in America, Puritan moralism and its sense of an elect people in covenant with God deeply affected the national character.