
Puritans

Members of a religious and social movement

~1500 - ~1600

Puritans were members of a religious and social movement of the 1500's and 1600's. The movement began in England and spread to America where it greatly influenced social, political, and religious institutions. Such religious denominations as Congregationalism and Unitarianism developed from Puritan beliefs.

Puritan beliefs developed from the teachings of religious reformers, such as John Wycliffe and John Calvin. Wycliffe was a famous professor of philosophy at Oxford University during the 1300's. Calvin was a leader of the Reformation, the religious movement of the 1500's that gave rise to Protestantism.

The Puritans considered the Bible as the true law of God that provided guidelines for church government. They wished to shape the Church of England to meet their ideals. They called for a less priestly church that emphasized preaching. Puritans believed that all Christian churches should be organized through councils called presbyteries or church courts rather than under bishops, as in the Church of England. Some Puritans believed that each congregation was a complete church in itself and should have total control of its own affairs.

The Puritans emphasized Bible reading, prayer, and preaching in worship services. They simplified the ritual of the sacraments. They also wanted more personal and fewer prescribed prayers. The Puritans stressed grace, devotion, prayer, and self-examination to achieve religious virtue.

The term Puritan was first used in the late 1500's to identify a party within the Church of England, the national church. The party sought to make further changes in the church than had been brought about by Protestant reforms during the reigns of King Henry VIII, King Edward VI, and [Queen Elizabeth I](#). Defenders of these reforms called the party members Puritans because of their proposals to "purify" the church.

As early as the 1520's, English Protestant leaders had demanded reforms along the lines that were later called Puritan. In the 1520's and 1530's, William Tyndale published pamphlets and English translations of the Old Testament and New Testament designed to encourage such reforms. Hugh Latimer, who became an important Protestant bishop, also had raised such protests to purify the church.

Many English Christians agreed with the demands of Tyndale and Latimer that the church and the government be operated according to the Bible. These Christians believed that the Bible governed all human affairs. John Wycliffe had taught this doctrine at Oxford in the 1300's. Under King Edward VI and Queen Elizabeth I, these teachings received support from English clergymen who followed Calvin's doctrine that the New Testament described how the church should be run.

During the 1600's, the Puritans increasingly opposed the political and religious policies of the Stuart rulers, King James I and his son, King Charles I. In 1604, James I called the Hampton Court Conference to settle disagreements within the Church of England. However, James refused to bring about the reforms the Puritans sought, except for a new translation of the Bible, now called the King James Version.

The Puritans gained in strength in Parliament, and repeatedly introduced legislation against the Crown's policies. In 1642, civil war broke out between the Crown forces, called Royalists or Cavaliers, and the Puritans, called Roundheads. They received this name because they cut their hair short. This English Civil War is also called the Puritan Revolution.

The Puritans, led by Oliver Cromwell, won a series of victories and took control of the government in 1649. The Puritans closed theaters and passed other unpopular measures. Their political power ended after Cromwell died in 1658. In 1660, the Stuart dynasty returned to the throne.

Political aspects of the Puritan movement lived on in the policies of the Whig Party in England. Puritan religious ideals were revived in the rise of the Methodist Church in the 1700's.

During the 1600's, some Puritan groups believed that reform of the Church of England was impossible and departed to settle in North America. They founded settlements in Virginia and along the New England coast, especially in Massachusetts Bay Colony and Connecticut.

The Puritans shaped religion, social life, and government in North America to their ideals. Their strong belief in education led them to establish Harvard and Yale as colleges and to require a system of grammar schools in the colonies. The Puritans organized their government according to the teachings that they found in the Bible and on the basis of their English experience.

Late in the 1500's, some Puritans separated from the Church of England and set up their own congregations. Such groups were called Separatists. A group of English Separatists first went to Holland and then founded [Plymouth Colony](#) in what is now Massachusetts in 1620. This group of Puritans is better known as Pilgrims. Some Separatists moved to Rhode Island and became Baptists. Others joined the Massachusetts Bay Puritans and became Congregationalists. Thus, while the Puritan movement in England died down, it influenced Protestant denominations in England and America.

Puritan influence also shaped political and social institutions in England and the American Colonies. In England, the Puritan Revolution led to a greater emphasis on limited or constitutional monarchy, in which a constitution, legislature, or both limit the power of a ruler. The Puritans' belief in government by contract from the governed influenced the development of American democratic principles.

Over time, the term puritan has broadened to mean a strictness in morals or religious matters. The term is commonly applied to cultural traits found in the literature of and social attitudes shared by, the New England Colonies. Such traits include an emphasis on education and the glorification of hard work.

The word puritan has also been used to describe reforming attitudes and activities that were not part of the culture of the Puritans. For example, prohibition, the forbidding of the sale or manufacture of alcoholic beverages, and temperance, the avoidance of alcohol, are often called puritan movements. However, the Puritans did not disapprove of the use of alcohol. The term puritan has also come to describe moral attitudes and values that characterize modern movements for rapid social change that require discipline and hard work.

Many social scientists have studied the role of the Puritans in the development of modern social patterns. The German sociologist Max Weber associated the Puritan belief in hard work with the rise of the free enterprise system. Others emphasize the connection between the behaviors and beliefs of the Puritans and those of modern revolutionaries.