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Unity in diversity : English puritans and the puritan reformation, 1603-1689

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Chapter 8

Conclusion

The study of English Puritanism remains a vibrant, rewarding, if not utterly frustrating, endeavor for historians of early modern English religious culture. While scholarship has made significant strides over the past sixty or so years, there are still several issues within the literature that need to be addressed and nuanced; they, a veritable quagmire, have to do with how Puritans and Puritanism are best identified, defined, and understood, and how this, in turn, relates to their desire for greater reform.

While books continue to be published on this subject, and have explored various facets of Puritan religion and practice, there is within scholarship not only pessimism in being able to define or identify Puritanism, but emerging reference to *Puritanisms*, as though there were numerous competing systems of thought and practice to the exclusion of a confessional tradition. While it is possible to speak of *Puritanisms* to highlight its varieties, as between “orthodox” and “radical” Puritanism, this deconstruction seems to compromise the greater intellectual and social unities among members of not only confessionally mined Puritans, but among the more radical sectaries, in their combined pursuit for a further Puritan Reformation. *Puritanisms* suggest that there was more or greater diversity than harmony and unity; or that *diversitas* was more of a guiding force than *unitas*. The aim of this study, therefore, has been to address this issue and consider whether three uncontested Puritans, representative of vying strains and trajectories within Puritanism were so diverse that hardly any discernable unity could be identified, or whether there was indeed some sort of theological identity, and, if so, to what extent this *unitas* contributed to the “ethos” of Puritanism itself. Put another way, if there was a *sensus unitatis* within Puritanism, then, given its diversity, there must be a *unitas* within *diversitas*.

This study has shown that though Puritans were diverse and expressed, at times, competing ideas, there was still significant unity among them, both historically, in that they were clearly progenitors of a movement for further reform, and theologically, in that they exemplified a distinct style of divinity and piety. Indeed, any study of the writers of the seventeenth century has to take into consideration the various historical and intellectual forces then converging together. The challenges of studying religion in this period will not be overcome until we develop competency in various cognate disciplines; indeed, as historians, we need greater communication across our fields in order to provide more holistic portraits of early modern Puritanism. While I have focused on theological identity, and have incorporated insights from the social sciences, wherever possible, as, for instance, from Norbert Elias, this is not a book of social research; more work will need to be done on how this Puritan identity relates to the other concerns of the Puritan Reformation.

Thus, in sum, the findings of this research is fivefold:

First, it argues to retain “Puritan” and “Puritanism” as helpful, even essential, designations. For the past sixty-five years historians have postulated with varying degrees of optimism over how to define and identify Puritanism. Some of the more critical

historians, such as C. H. George or Conrad Russell, have suggested abandoning the term because of its “obfuscating” nature, though very few, if any, have actually, over the long term, consistently dropped its use. The terms *Puritan* and *Puritanism* have been employed since the sixteenth century to describe a certain stream within the English Church, and there is no sign that they are going away. This study thus contributes to this ongoing academic discussion and suggests that both terms, though hotly contested, should continue to be used when discussing this fiery brand of early modern English Protestantism. While other terms such as the *Godly* or *Reformed orthodox* will undoubtedly continue to be used to refer to Puritans, they should not supplant *Puritan* and *Puritanism*, but rather complement them because the terms suggest something unique and distinctive, perceptions that date to the 1560s, if not earlier, and continue to this day. While these terms are often interchangeable, they are not always so, nor is it always easy to identify those thinkers on the fringes of the movement. Moreover, Puritanism should further be understood as a rather broad conglomerate of tendencies and trajectories, such as precisianism, mysticism, antinomism, and neonomianism, and *Familienähnlichkeit*.

This broader approach to Puritanism concedes to *diversitas* within Reformed orthodoxy itself, and indicates that Puritanism could possibly be classified as a unique subtype of that orthodoxy, at least in its mainline expression, which, as it expressed itself within an English Reformed context adapted to its own challenges, patterns, and currents. This hypothesis is suggested in that these vying strains, as depicted in Rous and Crisp, for instance, despite accusations, never actually pushed past confessional bounds, and so their emphases were never unequivocally regarded as a “heresy.” While there were those thinkers who could be classified as “Puritan” more generally, but who were neither “mainstream” nor “Reformed orthodox,” such as John Goodwin, John Milton, John Eaton, Lodowick Muggleton, among others, they do not seem to have formed a consensus on the scale of those who were confessionally minded. It is perhaps better to see these religious thinkers as proponents of a radicalized Puritanism, which was even more varied than those who were confessionally minded, but which nonetheless remain within its trajectories by magnifying the themes depicted in Rous and Crisp. Does this mean there are two or more *Puritanisms*? While one could see the evidence this way, and many historians have suggested this, the evidence does not necessarily mandates this interpretation. Research suggests that “radical” Puritanism arose in response to and out of frustration with mainstream Puritanism, especially on the issue of attaining assurance and comforting the afflicted conscience. Rous’s bridal mysticism was as much a response to his own perceived absence of “boxes of this precious oyntment,” as Crisp’s antinomism was to what the latter believed to be insurmountable pastoral issues arising from “navel gazing.” As we have seen, Crisp criticized the precisianists for their seeming overemphasis on works to, what he believed, was a denial of the doctrine of free justification by faith. But even within his “radicalism,” there were strong affinities to the mainstream, further evidenced by Samuel Crisp’s placing of his father within the tradition of Perkins, Jacomb, Twisse, Manton, among others (See 5.3.1). In this sense, Bozeman is essentially correct in seeing the antinomian strain as a “backlash” within Puritanism that sometimes did cross over confessional lines and received doctrine. The mystical strain, as evidenced in Rous, could be seen as a trajectory within Puritanism, which not only had the potential to cross

over confessional lines, but would also do so in many radicals of the English Revolution (See 4.5).

Thus, within Puritanism, there was a confessional tradition (*unitas*), which in itself was varied in its emphasis (*diversitas*), but nonetheless was bound by a confessional standard (*unitas in diversitate*). Further, the distinctive traits of mainline Puritanism, in its emphasis on practical divinity, and the unique way in which it embraced or rejected social customs and manners, came to be appreciated by other groups and sectaries during the English Revolution, but even here their appropriation of elements from the mainstream do not nullify the merits of seeing that tradition as a collective of belief and practice. Thus, the question of *Puritanism* and *Puritanisms* is an important one because, unlike that of the Reformation, English Puritanism produced one major confessional standard to which the mainstay of “the godly” subscribed as accurately reflecting their theological and social inheritance. This Puritan and Reformed orthodoxy is evidenced in the numerous divinity books, catechisms, and casuist works produced and disseminated among “the godly,” since its very beginning in the sixteenth century (e.g. Richard Greenham’s catechism) through its era of codification (e.g. Westminster Standards, London Confession) and long afterwards (e.g. Samuel Willard’s *Body of Compleat Divinity*). This Puritan-Reformed tradition allowed for sufficient variance of emphases and doctrinal plasticity. Moreover, the codifiers at Westminster did not see themselves as innovating new theology; they were simply confessionalizing what they believed to be their inheritance from the originators, heirs, and proponents of Puritanism from its inception through to their time. Those radicals and revolutionaries who challenged the confessional mainstream, and arguably, at times, moved beyond its borders, were so splintered and fractured that they never achieved the consensus reached at Westminster, but they nonetheless stood in relation to it.

Second, all three Puritans discussed in this work have, for the most part, hitherto been much neglected. While recent studies have focused on John Owen, Thomas Goodwin, Cotton Mather, Peter Sterry, and Jonathan Edwards, among others, this is the first major attempt, in English, to assess Downname’s contributions to Reformed theology, Rous’s contributions to mystical piety, and Crisp’s contributions to theologically high Calvinism within their historical, theological, and mainline contexts. Taken together, they show the unity that existed among widely diverse Puritans in the era of orthodoxy, and how their writings promoted a Puritan Reformation of self, church, and state. The strong theological identity of these authors is significant precisely because none of them wrote systematic works of divinity, but promulgated the writing of *practical divinity* or “lived theology,” in which they drew from their theological inheritance, and advised readers, for instance, how to dress oneself, how frequently to attend church, how to observe the Sabbath, how to avoid the theater and the appearance of evil, how to cultivate a good conscience, cut one’s hair short (for men), and abstain from wearing whigs in daily living. These morals and manners, however, were inseparable from their theological identity, and were deduced from their understanding of such doctrinal themes as the doctrine of God and humanity, predestination and assurance, justification and sanctification, covenant of works and grace, and their view of the Christian life. This convergence between *dogma* and *praxis* is what William Ames called “the Doctrine according to godliness.”¹

¹ William Ames, *Conscience with the Power and Cases Thereof* (London, 1643), Sig. A2.

Third, this work has shown that in order to begin to assess the distinctive qualities of Puritanism, so as to distinguish them from other forms of early modern religious identities, one has to first assess the Puritans themselves, in their immediate social and intellectual contexts, and then their standing within the greater narrative or meta-narrative of the Puritan Reformation. The more diverse the Puritans, the more one can get at the Puritan “ethos.” This approach combines, in parts, Collinson and Lake’s attempt at defining Puritanism, and allows for a richly diversified understanding of Puritanism, while at the same time retaining its core semblance as a distinctive *style* of divinity and piety, and especially in the way these two interact and coalesce to form an English *practical divinity*. It also confirms Nuttall’s work in that it sees similarities of style and expression across the radical Puritan spectrum. It avoids the opposite pitfalls of being too narrow, and thus excluding Separatists or Baptists, and too wide which would nullify any significant meaning. It suggests that there was an “orthodox” or “mainstream” Puritanism, and a more “radical” Puritanism, which, though distinct, are nonetheless related and indicative of a magnification of the trajectories seen in Rous and Crisp. It further identifies Puritanism as a discernable movement within the English Church, and corrects notions that Puritanism was a “hardly discernable” core within the Calvinist bedrock. Further, it suggests that when looking at Puritanism, historians have to do more than see its *pietism*, strictly speaking, and give due consideration to its theological identity and homogeny.

Fourth, this work shows that continuity existed, not only among Puritans of various persuasions, but also between the Reformation and Post-Reformation eras; thus, it confirms Muller’s work that there was not as an intense break between the theologians of these periods as some historians have suggested. Rather, the Reformed theology of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries had considerable continuity and confluence, and exhibited within it a strong *sensus unitatis*. This greater *unitas* among these Puritans, however, does not suggest that Puritanism, as a whole, was monolithic, or that Puritans were cast from one stone, or that Calvin, for instance, was their only or chief source, but that it was a *unitas* within *diversitas*. Far from being meaningless, *Puritan* and *Puritanism* have rich and vibrant connotations; the terms suggest an immense devotion and interest in Reformed piety, and a strong adherence, with some flexibility, to Reformed orthodoxy, woven into a distinctive style of lived or applied theology, which often resulted in unique or seemingly odd customs and manners. Thus, Lake is essentially correct in wanting to see Puritanism as a style that is distinct from its ceremonial Anglican counterpart; and Collinson is correct in that there is a discernable reform movement at work in which Puritans, depending on ecclesiastical and political pressures, varied in its degree of hotness and intensity. Cohen is correct in identifying a large reliance within Puritanism on the experience of conversion, and of personally clinging to God; and many of the other “definitions” proposed to date are all partially correct in that they tap into the Puritan “ethos,” but only present a partial, and not holistic, portrait. None of these identities, when considered atomically, render someone a Puritan. It is only when they are considered together, as a style that weaved *dogma* and *praxis*, as a *cluster* of attitudes and expressions, as a movement for further reform of morals and manners, as a desire to renovate the state for God’s glory, as a continuance of an earlier tradition which came into its own, does one begin to get a sense of who a Puritan really is.

Fifth and finally, this study emphasizes the importance of intellectual history in the study of early modern religion, as well as the importance of society and social interactions. While the English Reformation has largely been the field of social historians, this study suggests the need for more communication among experts in a broader spectrum of disciplines, such that will illuminate the English Reformation's intellectual and spiritual origins and ramifications among a thinking people. Social histories should neither ignore nor minimize the greater intellectual continuity within the tradition, nor should intellectual histories suggest the absence of diversity by identifying one feature where there is not one but many. Social histories provide the contexts in which ideas were circulated and advanced. I have attempted to see the immediate social and intellectual contexts in which Downname, Rous, and Crisp, lived and ministered. Admittedly, my focus has largely been on intellectual identity, and while I have tried to incorporate insights from both fields, much more work needs to be done.

In sum, the three Puritans in this study show *diversitas* and *unitas* within seventeenth-century Puritanism. They show that the identity of Puritans as strangers and pilgrims on earth was inseparable from their vision of the Puritan Reformation. John Downname was chiefly concerned with promoting precisianism. He did this through advocating Reformed divinity through a series of works, which, in turn, fostered a distinctive Puritan piety. His *Christian Warfare* and *Guide to Godliness* are clear examples of the way in which Puritans explained the "doctrine according to godliness." Francis Rous, whose political career spanned generations, was a writer of mystical devotional works, and champion for spiritual reform. His *Mystical Marriage*, arguably his chief and most important work, shows how important union and communion with Christ was to Puritan piety, and how it can be seen as a central feature of the Puritan Reformation. Tobias Crisp, who advanced an alternative to precisianist introspection, was concerned with his parishioners' assurance of faith and devotion to piety in his *Christ Alone Exalted*, again reiterating a distinct yet harmonious emphasis on faith and its experience among "the godly." All three authors were connected together with a common *style* of experimental divinity and piety, were perceived as orthodox Puritans by their peers, and had a profound influence on the "Puritan" ethos. They reflect the broad confessional atmosphere of the Reformed orthodox, and attest to its *unitas in diversitate*. In the very least, they show much more plasticity to confessional orthodoxy than more modern notions of a "rigid orthodoxy" sometimes allow.

Thus English Puritanism should be thought of as a discernable and distinct style of divinity and piety, shared among its members across a specific period of time and in concert with a reform of morals and manners. Their distinctiveness is seen in their experiential weaving of the doctrine of God and humanity, predestination and assurance, covenant of works and grace, justification and sanctification, law and gospel, and the Christian life, which, when considered as a whole, suggest a distinctly Puritan way of reasoning from the Bible and received tradition. Though diverse, it is better to speak of *Puritanism* in its mainstream expression rather than *Puritanisms*, while conceding that those "radical" Puritans who contested the confessionality of that mainstream stood within relation to it, and progressed in an amplification of the mystical and antinomian strains.

Notions of *Puritanisms*, not properly qualified, compromises the theological identity of confessionally minded Puritans shared across cultures and time, in that they fail to properly account for its strong confessional impetus and harmony since accusations first rose within the English Reformation; nor, in my view, does it reflect the strong *sensus unitatis* among those divines who codified their tradition at Westminster, or those founding fathers of American Puritanism who continued to teach the “doctrine according to godliness.”

Admittedly, given its limited focus, this book is not the final word on identifying Puritanism in the early modern period. It is a contribution to the ongoing muskeg of Puritan Reformation studies. Due to space restrictions this study was not able to consider the work of Richard Baxter, John Goodwin, John Eaton, John Milton, Lodowick Muggleton, Gerrard Winstanley, Laurence Clarkson, and other “Puritans” to any great extent. It is believed, however, that future studies of these individuals will not only further tap into the Puritan “ethos” as a distinctive style that wove divinity with piety, but will also emanate the *plasticity* of confessional adherence, the social and theological ramifications for the transgressing of those bounds, and serve to heighten the importance that most Puritans placed on theological identity and solidarity. In the very least, this study has shown that *unitas* and *diversitas* are not conflicting ideas, and that there are strong theological semblances across Puritans of diverse backgrounds. While the discoveries of this research require a broader approach to understanding confessionally minded Puritans, more work will need to be done on how Puritanism’s unity in diversity relates to those “radical” Puritans who were neither “Reformed” nor “orthodox.”