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

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English Summary

The central thesis of this study is that within seventeenth-century English Puritanism there is a *unitas* and a *diversitas* that, when considered together, suggest a *unitas in diversitate* that warrants the use of term “Puritanism,” in the singular, and is preferable to more deconstructionist notions of *Puritanisms*, which would seem to undermine confessional sensibilities of most Puritans. In order to investigate this thesis, three English Puritans (John Downname, Sir Francis Rous, and Tobias Crisp) were chosen not only because of their status as being uncontested Puritans within the literature, but also because they represent vying strains within what has historically been identified as “Puritanism.”

The first chapter of this dissertation (1) reveals the significance of this discussion within current literature, its irradiant confusion on coming to terms with how to understand Puritanism’s complexity, and the tendencies towards deconstructionism, which have been proposed not only as an attempt to “solve” the *diversitas* question, but also arising from competing ideas in identifying the one defining feature of Puritanism. This chapter suggests a fresh approach to the definitions problem by focusing both on *unitas* and *diversitas*, and placing these concepts within the context of the Puritan Reformation. It suggests that sociologist Norbert Elias was essentially correct in seeing a *society* of individuals, who, though diverse and expressive of, at times, vying interests, were nonetheless interrelated, and dependent upon one another. It also proposes that Ludwig Wittgenstein’s theory of *Familienähnlichkeit* may serve as a helpful tool in our understanding of Puritanism’s diversity and unity. It discusses, briefly, the difficulty in employing such terms as “Reformed,” “Calvinist,” and, “Reformed orthodox,” to individual English Puritans since, as a whole, there was variety within the movement. These terms are often overlapping, but not always so, as can be seen when they are applied to John Downname, John Goodwin, and John Milton. However, that there was something of a “normative tradition” within Puritanism is clearly evidenced in the assembly and consensus of divines at Westminster (1643-1649), and consequently this “consensus” has consistently been identified as “mainstream,” “mainline,” or “orthodox” Puritanism.

Chapter two (2) provides an overview of seventeenth-century background, which places the three case studies within their greater historical, intellectual, and social contexts, and introduces the reader to the precisianist, mystical, antinomian, and neonomian strains present within identifiable Puritanism. The seventeenth century was a dramatic time of change for British society, and witnessed change from a royal monarchy to an English Commonwealth, in a move that “turned the world upside down.” Studies of thinkers and writers of this era, therefore, need to take into consideration the various political, cultural, social, and religious currents then converging together. While Puritanism arose during the Elizabethan era, there were traces of “proto-Puritanism” earlier in the evangelical mindset of English reformers under Edward VI. Puritanism’s roots can possibly be traced earlier to Lollardy, though more work will need to be done to assess this possibility. “Mainstream” or “mainline” Puritanism was a conglomerate of internal tendencies and strains, which had the possibility to, and sometimes would, cross

confessional boundaries. These strains consisted of precisianism, mysticism, antinomism, and neonomianism.

These two chapters provide the necessary background for Chapters three through five (3-5), Part I, which provides detailed contextual and theological analyses of the three case studies.

Chapter three (3) introduces John Downname (1571-1652), as a Puritan clergyman ministering in London, who advocated the precisianist strain within Puritanism, and shows that within his “affective” divinity there is a strong adherence to Reformed orthodoxy, and a promoting of the “consensus” typified at the Westminster Assembly. Further, it reveals how Puritans typically combined both *dogma* and *praxis*, and applied it to the various cases burdening the Puritan conscience. His two most important works, *Christian Warfare* and *A Guide to Godliness*, exemplified the precisianist strain by focusing on the implications that doctrine had for practice, and especially that relates to resolving the issue of assurance of faith. Downname’s emphasis on the doctrine of predestination further reflects how important this doctrine was for precisianist Puritans, but it was not the only doctrine that Downname elaborated on; rather, his writings indicate a world and life view bathed within orthodox structures.

Chapter four (4) presents the more “radical” Francis Rous (1579-1659), who while still operating within confessional bounds developed a form of bridal mysticism, which went beyond most of the precisianists in its emphasis on immediate experience with the divine. Rous’s mysticism gives further evidence to an internal mystical trajectory within Puritanism that had the potential to cross confessional lines, and which, at times, would do so in the “prophets” of the English Revolution. Further, it shows that though his chief contribution centered on mystical themes, as in his views on education, he nonetheless was versed in Reformed orthodoxy, and strongly identified with it.

Chapter five (5) places Tobias Crisp (1600-1642/3) within his seventeenth-century context of controversy, and suggests that the antinomian strain was reactionary, and a “backlash,” to precisianist notions of piety, or what has been called “navel gazing.” This chapter indicates that while Crisp’s status as an “orthodox” divine was contested, his views never crossed confessional bounds, as seen not only in the way he theologically identified himself with the orthodox tradition, but in the way “orthodox” Puritans defended his work. That his son, Samuel Crisp, defended his father’s teachings by appealing to William Perkins, Thomas Jacomb, Thomas Manton, and others, further suggests a broadening of our understanding of the Reformed orthodoxy to which Crisp undoubtedly belonged, and thus to possibly see it as a subtype of the greater Reformed orthodox tradition, as it was expressed in the continent, with its own concerns, patterns, and directions.

These three case studies pave the way to Part II of the dissertation, leading with Chapter six (6), which looks more deeply into the question of *unitas* within *diversitas*, and contrasts the different, but complementary, ways in which these Puritans expressed their theological identity. While there were differences of opinion in how received doctrine should be applied, neither Rous nor Crisp departed significantly from the confessional mores of the normative tradition, in spite of accusations, in the case of Crisp, to the contrary.

This evidence, then, gives weight to Chapter seven (7), which coalesces the research to suggest how these findings give consideration to a working definition of

Puritanism, indicating the need for some revising of deconstructionist and revisionist tendencies within the literature that overly fragment the phenomenon. It is proposed that Puritanism should be seen as a rather diverse conglomerate of tendencies with vying attitudes and priorities. In this sense, Ludwig Wittgenstein's theory of *familienähnlichkeit* is suggested as a helpful way to address the definitions problem, and provide a better working definition for Puritanism, which allows for *unitas* and *diversitas* within the movement. Further, it confirms an earlier hypothesis that the concepts of narrative and metanarrative are indeed useful aids in understanding the phenomenon that has been consistently identified as "Puritanism." By seeing Puritans in their own individual contexts, within their own *diversitas*, we can get a better sense of what themes bind Puritans together in *unitas*, and what makes them different. Seeing English Puritans as members of a greater movement for reform, the Puritan Reformation, shows that Puritans were united not only many of their shared beliefs, as, for instance, in their understanding of who God is and his relation to humanity, but in their zeal for a further reform of godly conduct, and their promotion of the *praxis pietatis*. It also suggests that greater nuance needs to be exercised in identifying Puritans, allowing for various "puritan phases" of such individuals as Lancelot Andrewes, Joseph Hall, John Milton, and others.

Chapter eight (8) summarizes the book's contents by noting five ways in which this work contributes to a further, more nuanced, understanding of the "thorny problem" of English Puritan identity. The findings of this study show that *unitas* and *diversitas* are not competing ideas, that there are strong theological semblances across Puritans of diverse backgrounds, and that inherent within Puritanism are certain trajectories which had the potential to cross confessional lines, and would do so among its more "radical" advocates. It suggests that more work will need to be done on the "radical" Puritanism of the English Revolution, especially in how it relates to the confessionally minded tradition set forth in these case studies.