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Chapter 7

Defining Puritans and Puritanism: Narrative and Metanarrative

7.1 Introduction

While a sufficient definition of English Puritanism continues to elude historians, this has not stayed the use of the terms Puritan and Puritanism.¹ In the first chapter we saw, briefly, how various historians have attempted to define Puritanism.² We also saw that some leading historians, given the sheer difficulty of identifying a definition that is encompassing enough, are now referring to Puritanisms.³ This shift is not too different


² In his essay, “Defining Puritanism—Again?,” Peter Lake writes that “the definition of Puritanism is an issue which has been both addressed and avoided to great profit by many scholars. The result is that it is not a subject upon which there is anything new to say.” Lake, “Defining Puritanism—Again?,” in Puritanism: Transatlantic Perspectives in a Seventeenth-Century Anglo-American Faith, ed. Francis J. Bremer (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993), 3. I agree with Lake’s tempered optimism, but would note that while there may not be much new to say, there is indeed the possibility of reappraising what scholars are currently saying and of addressing tendencies towards deconstruction, which is gaining momentum; indeed, Patrick Collinson has long agonized over the subject. See Alexandra Walsham and John Morrill, "Preface," in Richard Bancroft and Anti-Puritanism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), ix-xvi. See also Patrick Collinson, Godly People: Essays on English Protestantism (London: The Hambledon Press, 1983); Collinson, The Puritan Character: Polemics and Polarities in Early Seventeenth-Century English Culture (Los Angeles: Clark Memorial Library, 1989); Collinson, “Ecclesiastical Vitriol: Religious Satire in the 1590s and the Invention of Puritanism,” in The Reign of Elizabeth I: Court and Culture in the Last Decade, ed. John Guy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

³ Michael P. Winship writes, “It has recently been suggested, somewhat hyperbolically, that it is more useful to talk of ‘puritanisms’ rather than ‘puritanism,’ for there were almost as many puritanisms as there were puritans.” Winship, Making Heretics: Militant Protestantism and Free Grace in Massachusetts, 1636-1641 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 3. Here Winship has in mind Ann Hughes’s influential essay, “Anglo-American Puritanisms,” Journal of British Studies 39 (2000): 1-7, which is a brief assessment of Lake’s and David R. Como’s work on the subject. As early as 1974, H. J. Kearney wrote that there were as many “puritanisms” as “socialisms.” See Kearney, “Puritanism and Science: Problems of Definitions,” in The Intellectual Revolution of the Seventeenth Century, ed. Charles Webster (New York: Routledge, 1974), 255.
from recent trends in Reformation historiography that speak of the Reformations. The ideas behind this are simple: there is simply too much diversity within Puritanism (and even more so within the Reformation) to write of monolithicism; the various theologies and expressions are too different and any collective term does not give due weight to the various overtones of sixteenth and seventeenth-century religious history; any attempt to classify Puritanism by its piety minimalizes the piety of other Reformed writers; the phenomena, it seems, especially within an English context, are too loose and disconnected. But the lingering question is whether this deconstruction compromises something. With respect to the Reformations, Scott H. Hendrix believes so and has argued for a plurality of agendas within the Reformation rather than a plurality of Reformations. The united vision of the Lutheran and Reformed were to “recultivate the vineyard” or promote Christianization; further, all the various branches of the Reformation shared a common patristic and medieval spring from which they drew. Though there were many Reformation “orthodoxies,” they were united in a common vision for the Reformation of the known world.

What of Puritanism? Is there more unity or more diversity within the tradition? Were the Puritans united in a greater vision of Puritan Reformation? Is it possible to write of Puritanism when discussing the more pious factions of early modern Protestant religion? Or, given the immense diversity of the religious groups associated with the tradition, especially during the English Revolution and afterwards, is it better to abandon Puritan and Puritanism altogether and come up with alternatives, such as Reformed, Calvinists, Separatists, Radicals, Evangelicals, the “Godly,” or simply Reformed orthodox? Or, was Margo Todd correct when she said, “a puritan by any other name is still a puritan.” Indeed, there are prominent historians on either side of the question; some have suggested abandoning “Puritan” and “Puritanism” while others have vigorously defended them; and still others have chosen other, seeming more appropriate terms, as just noted. All concede, however, to the immense historical and historiographical problems arising from their use. Should the terms be retained, how are we to understand them? Is there a

8 Perhaps the most comprehensive criticism of “Puritan” and “Puritanism” is C. H. George, “Puritanism as History and Historiography,” Past and Present 41 (1968): 77-104. The best defense of its use is
way of defining Puritanism that acknowledges both the unities and diversities within the tradition without having to abandon the term altogether or resigning to alternatives which have their own historiographical issues? Is it possible to distinguish between a confessionally minded tradition within Puritanism, and its more radical expressions? I believe so.

In this chapter, I will attempt to answer these questions and suggest that Puritan and Puritanism should be retained in scholarly use.9 This conclusion is based on the findings of this thesis and on a careful assessment of the massive body of literature on this subject.10 First, I will present a nuanced agenda for defining Puritanism. Second, I will present a case for metanarrative or the idea that one must consider Puritanism as a whole in order to understand its various parts. Third, I will conclude the chapter with observations on how Puritan and Puritanism should be applied when referring to sixteenth and seventeenth-century individuals. In short, I will criticize the use of Puritanisms while also conceding that Puritanism was by no means a monolithic movement, at least not in the sense of Puritans being centered on the notion of the covenant, but rather that there was within Puritanism a majority of confessionally minded Puritans.11 This method, it is hoped, will set the course for future studies in that it reiterates the need for both narrative and metanarrative when looking at early modern intellectual and social history, and, by definition, requires consonance across various cognate disciplines. It suggests that Norbert Elias was correct when he observed that the individual should not be considered above his society, which in itself would tend to Puritanisms, but


9 I am not aware of any recent historian who has actually, in practice, abandoned the term altogether, except Conrad Russell who opts for the synonym “the godly.” Conrad Russell, The Causes of the English Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 85. It should be noted, however, that any term used to supplant “Puritan” or “Puritanism” will have equal, if not greater, historiographical issues, as is the case with “Calvinist,” “Reformed,” and other like terms.


11 I am here indebted to Janice Knight’s Orthodoxies in Massachusetts: Rereading American Puritanism (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994). Knight correctly sees certain polarities within Puritanism and questions Perry Miller’s idea of monolithicism, but goes too far, I think, in seeing multiple “orthodoxies.” While there were indeed multiple confessions in the seventeenth century, there was nonetheless great harmony and agreement on most topics, as is seen in widespread confessional consensus and such harmonies as the English adaptation of the Geneva Harmonia confessionum fidei in 1586 and the publication of An Harmony of the Confessions of the Christian and Reformed Churches (1643). Thus, while Knight’s classifications of “Intellectual Fathers” and “Spiritual Brethren” helps to illuminate various emphases within Puritanism, they should not be seen as rigid distinctions between opposing groups, nor, contra Knight, should orthodoxy be seen as a battleground. Indeed, Knight’s major neglect in her work on “orthodoxies” is that she does not give due consideration to the flexibility of confessional boundaries or the overly charged rhetoric of the period’s polemical works. Furthermore, disagreements among leading clergy do not suggest vying orthodoxies, but rather the various ways in which doctrines could be understood and restated within an orthodox sense. Cf. Stephen Foster, “New England and the Challenge of Heresy, 1630-1660: The Puritan Crisis in Transatlantic Perspective,” The William and Mary Quarterly, Third Series, Vol. 38, No. 4 (Oct, 1981): 624-60.
rather within and belonging to a society or plurality of persons who interacted with each
other; and that Wittgenstein ideas of *Familienähnlichkeit* is further helpful in
understanding both *unitas* and *diversitas* within Puritanism.

7.2 Defining Puritanism

As we saw before, defining Puritanism is wrought with difficulties, and has often led
historians to give up the enterprise in utter frustration. This is not only because the
literature of the subject is immense, but also because historically there are many gray areas
and often it is impossible to tell when and where the line should be drawn, as, for instance,
between Puritanism and a moderate Calvinist consensus within the English church, or
between its majority expression and its more radical developments, as seen in such figures
as Giles Randall, John Milton, and Walter Craddock. Defining Puritanism is further
complicated in that the use of the term is heuristic and its usage has changed over the
course of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Though the use of the term "Puritan"
was initially pejorative, it nonetheless was an attempt to describe and react to something

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12 For studies of the problems and approaches associated with the definition of Puritanism, see
Michael G. Finlayson, *Historians, Puritanism and the English Revolution: The Religious Factor in English
Politics Before and After the Interregnum* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1983); Basil Hill, "Puritanism:
Collection of Contemporary Sources, 1589-1646* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989), 1-27;
John Morgan, *Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560-1640*
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9-22; Patrick Collinson, "A Comment: Concerning the Name
Anglicans, Puritans, and the Two Tables, 1620-1670* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 1-14; John Coffey,
"Puritanism, Evangelicalism, and the Evangelical Protestant Tradition," in *Advent of Evangelicalism: Exploring

13 Michael P. Winship, "Defining Puritanism in Restoration England: Richard Baxter and Others
Respond to 'A Friendly Debate,'" *The Historical Journal* 54:3 (2011): 689; David R. Como, "Puritans,
Predestination and the Construction of Orthodoxy in Early Seventeenth-Century England," in *Conformity
and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c.1560-1660*, ed. Peter Lake and Michael C. Questier (Woodbridge: The
Boydell Press, 2000), 64-87; Anthony Milton, *Catholic and Reformed: The Roman and Protestant Churches in
English Protestant Thought, 1660-1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 12. Indeed, Collinson
and Tyacke have tended to view puritans as a "hardly-distinguishable" element among the Elizabethan
church's Calvinistic consensus. Others, such as Fincham, Lake, and Webster see a more distinct group within
(Berkeley: The University of California Press, 1967); Collinson, *The Religion of the Protestants: The Church In
Puritanism—Again?"; Lake, "Moving the Goal Posts? Modified Subscription and the Construction of
Conformity in the Early Stuart Church," in *Conformity and Orthodoxy in the English Church, c. 1560-1660* (Woodbridge, 2000), 179-205; and Webster, *Godly Clergy in Early Stuart England.*
real within the Established church;\(^{14}\) it is undeniable that its initial use was descriptive of a “hotter-sort” of Protestantism characterized by its zeal that was preoccupied with wanting simplicity in worship, and removing its various perceived “popish” ceremonies in an attempt to “ostracize all Catholics.”\(^{15}\) Some historians have aptly described this Puritan motif as “discontents.”\(^{16}\) This perceived discontentedness is the earliest use and connotation of the word “Puritan.” Indeed, this early status or connotation of Puritanism as a “movement” for ecclesial reform has led scholars to describe Puritanism chiefly within political terms, and coterminous with such environments. In other words, Puritanism is seen as one half of a stressful relationship within a particular set of circumstances. Where this overt tension does not exist, there is no Puritanism.\(^{17}\) Thus Collinson and Foster, among others, favor a more nominalist approach to defining Puritanism as a “movement” within the English church as opposed to more realist intellectual constructs, though Collinson has also defined Puritanism as a “strenuous search for salvation according to Calvinist understandings.”\(^{18}\) But, as said before, Puritanism cannot simply be defined in

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\(^{14}\) Collinson notes that though the label “Puritan” first arose as “stereotypical stigma” that it was “a badge soon accepted by the so-called Puritans themselves.” Patrick Collinson, *From Cranmer to Sancroft* (London: Hambledon Continuum, 2006), xiii-xiv.


\(^{18}\) Morgan, *Godly Learning*, 20; John Coffey, “The Problem of ‘Scottish Puritanism’, 1590-1628,” 68; Collinson, *Elizabethan Puritan Movement* (London; Jonathan Cape, 1967), 33. I am here indebted to Morgan and Coffey for distinguishing between “nominalist” and “realist” approaches in the definition of Puritanism. Intriguingly, Primus calls Lake’s approach “nominalist,” which suggests, as Coffey has observed with Collinson, that various historians have different “modes” which teeter between nominalism and realism. My own approach is a convergence of the two. Primus, *Richard Greenham*, 4; Morgan, *Godly Learning*, 17. See
terms of its piety, or desire for salvation; were that the case, the whole of Christendom could be classified as "Puritan."

Though there are generally two sides to the definitions problem; that is, those who question its usefulness (C. H. George, Basil Hall, Michael Finlayson, and Paul Christianson) and those who show more optimism (Patrick Collinson, Ian Breward, Peter Lake, John Coffey, David Como, among others), there exists a wide spectrum of ideas in between. Some have suggested that Puritanism had "no static spiritual or moral essence," that it was a protean phenomenon. Indeed, over the past sixty-five years "great effort has been expended on the attempt to devise a universally acceptable definition of 'Puritan' and 'Puritanism.'" Various historians, at different times, have suggested different defining features of Puritanism, such as the covenant, experimental predestinarianism, millenarianism, assurance of faith, affective Biblicism, or even iconoclasm. For Sprunger, "the essence of Puritanism was a balanced combination of Calvinist theology and intense personal piety;" thus Puritanism is essentially to be identified as a highly experiential or "hot" English Reformed theology. John Spurr claimed that Puritans "were simply more intensely protestant than their protestant neighbors or even the Church of England." Others, as said before, prefer to define Puritanism chiefly within its political contexts. The major flaw in this last approach, however, is that it suggests the "collapse of Puritanism into the Calvinist mainstream" when there was not a strong overt "agitation for


C. H. George preferred “the Protestant mind” over “Puritan” but the former is too inclusivist in that a robust Anglican ceremonialism and thoroughbred Arminianism could equally be included in the term. In 1972, Breward predicted, “It is my conviction, that far from leading to the abolition of ‘puritanism,’ further study will lead to its reinstatement as an important factor in the causation of the civil war and the search for a new basis for church and society that marked the interregnum.” Breward, “The Abolition of Puritanism,” The Journal of Religious History, Vol. 7, No. 1 (1972), 34. I applaud Breward’s optimism because he rightly sees this fierier brand of Protestant religious experience as a causative force in the period’s society and politics. Cf. John Morgan, Godly Learning: Puritan Attitudes Towards Reason, Learning and Education, 1560-1640 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 9.

Martin, Milton among the Puritans, 32.

Morgan, Godly Learning, 9.


Spurr, English Puritanism, 4.

further reformation.” This view essentially challenges distinctive characteristics within Puritanism, and should either be dismissed (for those who would define Puritanism solely as a political movement), or nuanced to allow for a distinctive style of piety and divinity. Lake and Como have suggested that the various internal Puritan tensions within Puritanism and its competing strands have, at times, had the potential to threaten the social order and its religious unity. Arnold Hunt sees preference for the spoken word as distinguishing puritan culture. Others have focused on various aspects of piety, the pious life, or “reformation of morals and manners.” N. H. Keeble wrote that though “it is impossible to offer a precise definition of Puritanism in ecclesiological, doctrinal, or political terms, there is not, in practice, much difficulty in recognizing the puritan spirit.” Thus, there is a certain intuition on what Puritanism is, though there has never been, and possibly never will be, a consensus on how to understand it. This intuition has, perhaps, most often identified Puritanism as a distinct forms of religious experience, which centers on divine love, both in the soul and in the life of the community, and an extreme sense of self-sinfulness. William A. Dryness sees within Puritanism a distinct approach to visual

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26 Lake, “Introduction,” 6 (n. 15); on Haigh and Walsham’s views on the internal tensions, see Lake, “Introduction: Puritanism, Arminianism and Nicholas Tyacke,” in Religious Politics in Post Reformation England: Essays in Honor of Nicholas Tyacke, edited by Kenneth Fincham and Peter Lake (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2006), 13 (n. 40). Foster criticizes this view when he states, “Frequent points of contacts...never added up to wholesale congruence, and it has become too easy to dissolve the Puritan movement in the larger culture of which it was a subspecies.” Foster, The Long Argument, 76.


culture, which centered on attitudes toward popular culture, within a strict biblical framework, for which the Bible “was not a straightjacket, but a ‘rich and infinitely varied source of imagination and formal inspiration.’”

While there are merits in the many approaches to definition just mentioned, they are either too negative or isolationist. They either deny the heuristic use of the term or suggest a defining feature of Puritanism where there is none; thus, John Stachniewski sees English Puritanism as an impulse driven by intense predestinarian convictions, which lead to and are interwoven with religious despair. R. T. Kendall’s notion of “experimental Calvinism,” which is again tied to predestination, does little to alleviate the problem, because while Puritanism was that, it was much more. Indeed, predestination was a central and commanding influence among Puritans, but it was not the *sine qua non* of Puritanism because there were varieties of opinion on how it should be understood; further, it was a common doctrine among Catholics, Reformed, and Arminians. Though predestination should not be seen as the defining feature of Puritanism, or of the Reformed more broadly, this is not to minimize the strong predestinarian convictions that the Puritans generally shared; indeed, as I have shown in prior chapters, predestination and assurance were often inseparable from the Puritan conscience, and great effort was expended in order to resolve the pastoral issues that it inevitably raised, especially as the movement grew in maturity and came into its own in the seventeenth century.

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Defining Puritanism in more realist terms as a particular style within English divinity, which expressed itself in varying degrees of hotness or intensity, as the times dictated, over the course of its theological, historical, and social existence, can ameliorate these difficulties. Understanding Puritanism as a consisting of Familienähnlichkeit, co-existing in relation to earlier Elizabethan Puritanism, is not only essential to allow for diversitas among Puritans, but also to give due weight to their remarkable unitas and theological identity. This "style" or Puritan "ethos" was not so much the existence of any particular doctrines, which could not be seen in other religious circles, as, in fact, they were, but the way in which these doctrines were interwoven into something unique. Thus Puritanism should be seen as a cluster of attitudes and priorities that worked within but were not absorbed by "the wider bodies of Reformed thought and feeling" which dominated "the Elizabethan and Jacobean theological and ecclesiastical establishments." The unities found within Downname, Rous, and Crisp, as discussed in Chapter 6, confirm this approach to definition; indeed, this broader definition allows for variance among its adherents as well as for both synchronic and diachronic unity. Puritanism defined too narrowly would exclude those dissenters who characterized the movement in the latter half of the seventeenth century, while making Puritanism too broad so as to include all of the most radical sects of the English Revolution would, to some degree, compromise any meaningful designation. In short, Puritanism should be defined diachronically in looking at how it changed or evolved from its earliest political and religious ambitions in the sixteenth century, to its more mature expression and confessionalization in the seventeenth; and synchronically in the lives and theologies of its particular adherents. In other words, Puritanism should be assessed in its narrative and metanarrative.

The benefit of this approach is seen, partly, in Lake's work on the subject. In his Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church (1982), Lake examines the life and work of Laurence Chaderton, the "pope of Cambridge puritanism," and contrasts that to other noted "puritans" of the time: Edward Dering, Thomas Cartwright, William Whitaker, and William Bradshaw. Lake sees a distinctive approach to divinity in these pastors and a common thread or style among them. Further, in his "Defining Puritanism—Again" (1993), Lake outlines his approach to defining Puritanism by combining two distinct paths:

I would wish to see Puritanism as a distinctive style of piety and divinity, made up not so much of distinctively Puritan component parts, the mere presence of
which in a person's thought or practice rendered them definitely a Puritan, as a synthesis made of strands most or many of which taken individually could be found in non-Puritan as well as Puritan contexts, but which taken together formed a distinctively Puritan synthesis or style.\(^4^2\)

This approach prevents historians from seeing distinctive traits where there are none; it also allows for a variance of expression within Puritanism over the course of its existence. Thus, for instance, predestination should be seen not as a distinctive Puritan trait in the sense that were one to adhere to it that would classify them as a Puritan, but rather predestination woven with an English Reformed symbiosis of doctrine and practice, generally operating within confessional sensibilities, and united in common understandings of God, covenant, justification, sanctification, the Christian life, morals and manners, among others, within a specific historical context.\(^4^3\) Affinities to other Reformed expressions, such as that of Dutch precisianism, or the experiential theology of Johannes Cocceius, for instance, were as influenced by English Puritanism, as they were independent from it.\(^4^4\) This is seen not only in their direct relationships with many English Puritans, but also through the existence of English churches in the continent, rogue Puritan presses overseas, and the distribution of “canonic” English Puritan sources.\(^4^5\)

While I favor Lake's more realist approach to defining Puritanism, especially in that it posits Puritanism as a more distinguishable group among the “Calvinist bedrock” within the English Church,\(^4^6\) I cannot deny the merits of Collinson's nominalist approach. Puritans not only had a distinct way of doing things, a distinct way of thinking about the Christian life and the Christian's place within this world, they were also involved in


\(^{4^4}\) Voetius's reliance on English Puritanism is well known. Cocceius was a student of William Ames at the University of Franeker when the latter was in exile there. See Keith L. Sprunger, The Learned Doctor William Ames: Dutch Backgrounds of English and American Puritanism (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1972).

\(^{4^5}\) See Sprunger, Dutch Puritanism, 13-42; Sprunger, Trumpets from the Tower: English Puritan Printing in the Netherlands, 1600-1640 (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 1-27; 84-169. By “canonic,” I refer to the growing body of divinity and piety endorsed or recommended in popular Puritan treatises. For instance, for the study of divinity, Cotton Mather recommends Wollebius's Manusuctio ad Theologian, Ames's Medulla Theologiae, Markus Friedrich Wendelin's Compendium Theologiae Christianae (1646), the Synopsis Purioris Theologiae Christianae of the Leiden divines (1642), Ussher's Body of Divinity (1645), as well as the works of Alting, Tuckney, Heningius, Aretius, Edwards, Witsius, Mastricht, Gerhard, Voetius, Owen, Perkins, Scudder, Bolton, Dyke (Jeremiah and Daniel), Sibbes, Capel, Fenner, Burroughs, Gurnall, and Baxter, among others of that “good old puritan divinity.” Cotton Mather, Manusuctio ad Ministerium (Boston, 1726), 84-89, 100-1.

Though Mather prefers Mastricht's Theoretico-Practica Theologia above all, he does say of Calvin, “You might wonder at me, if I should forget Calvin’s Institutions, to which the concurrent opinion of them that wished well to the reformed religion assigned a preference before all the writings that the church of God has enjoyed since the apostolical...” Idem, Manusuctio ad Ministerium, 84-5. Puritanism itself was an eclectic symbiosis of English and continental sources.

\(^{4^6}\) Cambers, Godly Reading, 11.
something greater: an agenda for the reformation of their society. They were involved in a Puritan Reformation, which thought of the ideal Christian life as one of precise living. Given the profundity of positive Puritan “character literature” within the 1640s, and earlier, those Puritans who embraced the term were accustomed to look back on the good “old English Puritan” with nostalgia and respect. This longing became an integral aspect of their kinship with Elizabethan Puritanism.47

In addition, this view coincides with the more recent advances in the social sciences proposed by Norbert Elias, who argued that people should be understood within their context of society; being interdependent on one another, and reacting in response to various processes for change, Elias’s concept of “configuration” seeks to see the “web of independences formed among human beings and which connects them; that is to say, a structure of mutually oriented and dependent persons.”48 It avoids older sociological notions that would put “the individual above society” and “society above the individual,” as though individuals and societies were distinct and operated in isolation from the other.49 This “web” of connections and interdependencies within Puritanism, in its reliance on other forms of thought and “canonical” texts, which were shared across continents, should overturn notions that Puritans were independent from the greater society to which they belonged. At the same time, their reliance on society, as such, should not be seen as an eradication of the individual, or denial of variances in the way thoughts and ideas were expressed, so long as they coalesced with the social and intellectual status of that tradition. It is in this sense that unitas in diversitate can help to sort out some of these issues, in that it accounts for diversity and distinction on an individual level, but also for unity in shared social experiences, belief, and familienähnlichkeit. Seeing Puritanism as a cluster of attitudes and priorities, which exist in relation to each other, and are interdependent on the society and intellectual milieu of the time can provide immense fruition in ongoing studies of how to see and understand Puritanism.50 It confirms Coffey’s observation that “the godly were often at odds with each other in matters theological, and such doctrinal consensus as existed did not come easily.”51

Thus, in sum, Puritanism, though fissiparous in nature, should be seen as a collective cluster of attitudes and ideas shared among its members within an English Reformed context of dissent, and characterized by its degree of hotness or intensity in piety. It cannot be understood only in terms of thought or behavior, but in the way


thought and behavior intersect into something unique, a *medulla divinitatis* or *theologiae.* It was promulgated from the pulpit and presses by members of the “Puritan church militant,” and infected a wider body of Calvinists and others to varying degrees. But this simple definition is not enough; due weight must to be given to the greater aims of individual and collective Puritans as they sought to reform their lives, church, and nation. Just as individual Puritans had often unique, though complimentary, ways of discussing the theology to which they subscribed, they were part of something greater. We will now turn to narrative and metanarrative as useful concepts to understand Puritanism.

### 7.3 Narrative and Metanarrative

In his book *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church,* Lake suggests that the proper way to come to a definition or understanding of Puritanism is to do so by its characters; that is, by first studying and examining the puritans who by any definition make up the movement. We thus define Puritanism by Puritans. He suggests that to define Puritanism too early in a study might create an exercise in circular reasoning; for instance, a definition too narrow brings the danger that “the results of the entire enterprise would be determined by the initial point of reference.” Thus he urges scholars to take a more inductive approach and suggests that the concept of Puritanism “should only emerge from a study of the activities of particular men [and women] in particular contexts, acting and reacting to events over a period.” Lake has done this in his work on Chaderton and Stephen Dennison. Others have done this on Heywood, Wallington, Baxter, Prynne, the Newdigates, or the Harleys. While Lake used Chaderton, a Puritan by any definition, to

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52 Thus, Ames’s “*theologia est doctrina Deo vivendi.*” Cf. John Gill’s *A Complete Body of Doctrinal and Practical Divinity, Vol. 1* (London, 1796), x, where Gill remarks that the use of “divinity” is peculiar to the English in contrast to “foreign writers who never entitle their works of this kind...”


56 Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan Church,* 11.


contrast Cartwright and Whitaker to come up with a spectrum of ideas within Elizabethan Puritanism, I have strived to do this with the Stuart Puritans Downname, Rous, and Crisp, which more clearly shows the spectrum, continuity, and unity of Puritans across widely diversified beliefs. The findings of these studies confirm that Puritanism should be seen as a cluster of attitudes and ideas which results in a distinct expression of Reformed dogma and praxis, and which was shared across a specific time, and connected by overlapping similarities. The strains of Puritanism discussed in this book (precisianist, mystical, antinomian) depict internal tendencies inherent within Puritanism.

It is not enough, however, to examine individual lives or narratives of Puritans because they lived within specific social, cultural, economic, political, and religious contexts. Their lives must also be seen as part of the greater context or narrative of the Puritan Reformation. This Puritan Reformation began sometime in the 1550s with a desire for further ecclesial reform, and spread into the seventeenth century with its distinctive experiential piety, and grew to maturation in the codification of that tradition at the Westminster Assembly. This tradition was challenged during the English Revolution, as its inherent tendencies became more radicalized, and then slowly dissipated towards the end of the seventeenth and into the eighteenth centuries. What were the chief concerns of this Puritan Reformation, or how should we see it? In short, the Puritan Reformation was a movement characterized by an insistence on correct doctrine and godly conduct in concert with a further reformation of society. This “doctrine according to godliness” consists of a distinct approach to personal reformation which wove self-examination and assurance with experimental predestinarianism, stressed the binding covenant that God had with his elect, endorsed justification by faith alone as distinct but inseparable from the sanctifying effects of the Spirit, and all within the rubric of anti-papery, millenarianism, sabbatarianism, and other refinements of morals and manners. This blend or cluster of ideas and attitudes expressed within sixteenth and seventeenth century British contexts formed the Puritan ethos, and this is what historians have intuited since the seventeenth century. Indeed, I agree with Jacob Bronowski and Bruce Mazlish when they stated, in 1962, "Alongside or in place of the Elizabethan spirit arose a new ethos, the Puritan ethos. It was the Puritan ethos which served as the English counterpart to the displacement of the Italian Renaissance by the Reformation." In other words, the Puritan

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Reformation is distinct from the Protestant Reformation, and even the English Reformation from which it grew, and came into its own identity and ethos over the course of its existence.

Thus, Downname, Rous, and Crisp, were members of the Puritan Reformation. Their narratives should be seen as part of the greater narrative of English Puritanism as a whole; that is, an overarching agenda to for reformation, which, in turn, expressed differently as it adapted to and evolved with the society around them, but which nonetheless show a natural progression and development. Not only were these Puritans influenced by the writings of earlier Puritans from the sixteenth century, their own writings contributed to the existence and promulgation of the Puritan Reformation throughout the seventeenth century. This contribution is attested to not only in that their writings were often republished, but also when, where, and how often they were disseminated across cultures. Thus, in short, these Puritans should be seen as contributors to a cultivation of their own English vineyard, as members of the Puritan Reformation of the seventeenth century, which had its roots and impetus in Elizabethan Puritanism, but which came its own formal identity at Westminster. Though distinct, they should not be seen as members of different Puritanisms, which suggests irreconcilable diversity, but rather as members of a richly diversified Puritanism, united not only in their social contexts and theologies, but also in their vision of the Christian life. But how do we identify Puritans? Let us briefly turn to that question, draw some conclusions, and then conclude this book.

7.4 Identifying Puritans

Given the general pattern of Puritanism as a distinctive style of divinity and piety, and as a form of “hot” and “intense” Protestantism, which generally related to Reformed orthodoxy, how are we to understand or apply this term to such controversial figures as John Goodwin, Joseph Hall, John Eaton, Lodowick Muggleton, Thomas Adams, and John Milton, among others? Were they Puritans? For Goodwin, historians Coffey, Webster, and Spurr allow for the existence of Arminian or Arminian-like Puritans. While I am reticent to follow suit, given the immense anti-Arminianism of Puritanism in general, and consequently its status as a “heresy” in the seventeenth century, perhaps the best way is to assess Goodwin and those like him as forms of “hybrid” or “radical” Puritanism, or those Puritans who stood close to the mainstream and had its characteristic theological and pietist structures, but who digressed significantly from its orthodoxy, had more “radical” leanings, or that possibly metamorphosed into something other, being influenced by competing theological currents and crossing confessional boundaries (e.g. Muggletonians, Ranters, Family of Love). As Glenn Burgess observed, “historians are much more concerned with origins and causes than they are with consequences, effects or

This broader definition would allow room for Goodwin and Baxter, both of who offered competing ideas about justification and predestination, but who were undoubtedly “Puritan” with respect to the hotness of their piety, overall theology, and recognition as such by contemporaries. Though Baxter did digress from Reformed orthodoxy in his formulation of justification, he nonetheless should be seen as being within its borders, advancing both precisianist and neonomian strains. Thus, there is some plasticity within the confessional boundaries of confessionally minded Puritanism, which has been shown in the case studies of Downman, Rous, and Crisp.

This broader approach would allow qualified use for the “puritan phases” of Joseph Hall, who, though being born to Puritan parents and imbied with Puritanism at Emmanuel College, Cambridge, came to defended episcopacy by divine right, but whose Meditations (1606), and other devotional works were favored among the Puritans; and John Milton, who seems to defy Puritan classification because of his Socinian and quasi-Arian tendencies, as members of the greater narrative, though definitely on the fringes and not orthodox Reformed. Indeed, Coffey remarks that English religion should be seen


In his book on Milton, David Loewenstein distinguishes between “orthodox” and “radical” Puritanism, which in itself is a helpful distinction in that it bifurcates between the mainstream of Puritan thought and those branches that significantly stretched beyond it. He writes, “Puritanism itself harbored contradictory impulses: its tendencies towards liberty of conscience and towards discipline, towards
as a continuum whose positions were often blurred at the edges; this should allow for some flexibility when determining “Puritan” classifications. Scholars should also take into account that various conformist divines either inclined towards puritanism (e.g. James Ussher) or had phases when they were more sympathetic to Puritan intensity (e.g. Lancelot Andrewes, Joseph Hall). Identifying Puritans within the seventeenth century is based, in part, on intuition, and on the evidence of historical inquiry. This intuitive sense dates to the seventeenth century, and continues to this day; however, evidence should guard intuition. By examining thinkers within their theological and social contexts, and especially in relating them to the consensus reached at Westminster and embodied within the devotional corpus of its members, one can get a sense of whether “Puritan” really applies in any given case, or at any given time in a person’s maturation.

But how can one be excluded from being a Puritan? Those thinkers who endorsed strict ceremonial forms of worship, or who allowed for the use of images within personal or corporate devotion, who deviated significantly from the teachings espoused at

spiritual individualism and towards building a godly community.” David Loewenstein, Representing Revolution in Milton and His Contemporaries: Religion, Politics, and Polemics in Radical Puritanism (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 6, 8, 20, 65, 95, 178, 183, 190, 238-9. Other than Milton, Loewenstein’s “radicals” include Gerrard Winstanley, Abiezer Coppe, George Fox, and William Dell. There is indeed a spectrum of dogma and praxis within Puritanism.


Westminster, and who criticized “the godly” for their reformation of morals and manners can, to a large degree, be seen as being outside the confessionally minded fold.\(^7\) They represent the class of society to which Puritans were reacting.\(^7\) But even here one needs nuancing. There are those ceremonial Anglicans, such as Lancelot Andrewes, who was renowned for his promotion of a deeply devotional and personal faith, who were exposed to Puritanism in their formative years. Indeed, Andrewes carried with him elements of the Puritan ethos, which he had been exposed to in his youth, well into adulthood.\(^7\) Further, those Puritans who deviated from the greater theological consensus, but who nonetheless retained aspects of its practice and theology, can, with qualified use, be understood to stand within relation to that consensus, as members of the greater Puritan Reformation, because that is the society from which they emerged, and, in some ways, never left.

Daniel Featley is another interesting case because he was a confessionally minded Calvinist who advocated episcopacy, but was nonetheless invited to and did attend the Westminster Assembly. He was “Calvinist” and “Reformed,” but not necessarily “Puritan,” seen, perhaps, in the severe way in which Parliament imprisoned him later in life. He did, however, have a reputation as a controversialist and refuter of Arminianism, and in this sense he found common ground with the assembly’s hatred of “free-will” doctrine. Moreover, it is possible his invitation to sit at Westminster and confer on the debates was politically motivated. Regardless, Alec Ryrie opines that Featley was both a “patron of puritanism” and a “contented conformist,” and adds, “As Julia Merritt has pointed out, while historians are naturally attracted to ‘cantankerous, divisive, and controversial figures,’ we should not ignore ‘emollient, unifying, pastorally sensitive puritan clergymen.’”\(^7\)

Peter Heylyn, who wrote approvingly of iconoclasm, and praised Thomas Cartwright’s critique of the Rhemish Testament, and had numerous Puritan connections, evidences some approval of Puritan attitudes, but as Anthony Milton points out, “Heylyn’s

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\(^7\) As, for instance, in allowing images of the Incarnation to be produced. See William Perkins, *A Reformed Catholike* (London, 1597), 169-82. David J. Davis elaborates on Perkins’s general disdain for image use within devotion, in contrast to Vermigli’s permitting that the humanity of Christ could, like all other physical subjects, be depicted and painted. Davis, *Seeing Faith, Printing Pictures: Religious Identity During the English Reformation* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 59-60, 107, 159-60.

\(^7\) See, for instance, William Ames, *A Fresh Svit Against Human Ceremonies in God’s Worship* (s.l., 1623). See also David Cressy, *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual, Religion, and Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 197-98, where Cressy comments on the “sensitive” and “opaque areas of early modern culture” as they relate to the further Reformation of ceremonies as reforming “allegedly Jewish, popish, or superstitious practices.”


opinions were convention ones for his time. While not overtly ‘godly,’ they nonetheless displayed none of the divisive attitudes and reservations of a new breed of ‘avant-garde conformist’ such as Lancelot Andrews, John Buckeridge, William Laud or Richard Montagu.”

Perhaps much confusion within this enterprise of identifying and defining Puritans rests in the symbiotic nature of religious belief within the English Church itself. Further, while Puritans generally sided with Parliament during the English Civil Wars, this was not always the case, as the historical events surrounding the execution of the Puritan Christopher Love point out. This points again to diversity of opinion in how to achieve the Puritan Reformation.

In sum, classifications are not always easy and require careful contextualization, if, for no other reason, than because human beings are complicated, contradictory, and defy neat categories. Classifications are based on evidence and intuition, but the former should outweigh the latter. Moreover, consideration must be given to the society in which an individual belonged. Individuals are not above society, nor are societies merely the ideations of an individual. Distinctions could, and perhaps should, be made between identifiable “mainstream” Puritanism, and non-mainstream “Radical Puritanism,” the former having strong confessional commitments and sensibilities, and the latter that, at times, moved beyond the former, but even here one must concede to the strong ties between “radicals” and their confessionally minded counterparts.

7.5 Conclusion

Since the sixteenth century, “the terms Puritan” and “Puritanism” have had a robust industry of use. Historians have attempted, with varying degrees of success, to come to some sort of consensus as to their precise meaning. There are generally two perspectives with a wide spectrum between. On one end are those who have questioned the historical validity of these terms as useful designations because of their seeming inability to be applied evenly and accurately within various contexts. Those of the other side have defended its use to varying degrees and projected more optimistic outcomes of historical inquiry. Within this latter group there are those who prefer either more nominalist or realist approaches. Those advancing nominalism generally see Puritanism as a movement for reform, and those of the realist persuasion focus on identifying Puritanism as a distinctive way of weaving doctrine with piety. Puritanism cannot be understood only in terms of its behavior or thought, both of which could be seen in wider groups of the.

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75 In 1649, Love became involved in a plot to assist Scottish covenanters to bring back the exiled Charles II to the English throne. He was executed in 1651 after being found guilty of treason by the High Court. See Christopher Love, A Cleare and Necessary Vindication of the Principles and Practices of Me Christopher Love, Since my Tryall Before and Condemnation by, the High Court of Justice, whereby It is Manifested, That a Close Prison, a Long Sword, a High Court, and a Bloody Scaffold, Have Not in the Least Altered My Judgment (London, 1651), 9-11; Blair Worden, The Rump Parliament, 1648-53 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 244.
seventeenth century, but in its style; that is, in the way thought and behavior intersect to form a medulla divinitatis.

To account for diversitas among Puritans, some historians have begun to speak of Puritanisms as preferable to Puritanism in the singular. This deconstruction is not unlike that of the Reformation versus Reformations debate in that both fields are trying to account for both unitas and diversitas. However, the matter is more important in Post-Reformation England because Puritanisms suggests that there was greater or irreconcilable diversity among “the godly,” as opposed to a more unifying standard to which they generally subscribed. To address this lacuna, Ludwig Wittgenstein’s Familienähnlichkeit offers valuable and insightful ways to begin to sort out the definitions problem.

There is not one single defining feature of Puritanism. Rather, Puritanism was a cluster of attitudes and priorities that centered on a distinctive style that combined divinity with the practice of piety, characterized by its degree of hotness or intensity. Drawing insight from Norbert Elias’s formative work on the society of individuals, the simple narrative of a thinker is not enough to enrich our understanding of Puritanism. The individual must be understood to exist within relation to their society, being intimately connected to its sages and pariahs. Therefore, the concept of narrative and metanarrative is a useful, even essential, way of understanding the collective identity of Puritans cultivating their own English vineyard for greater reform of not only their own lives, but other members of the English Church and nation.

Identifying Puritans in the seventeenth century is a difficult enterprise and needs nuancing. However, given Puritanism’s strong theological identity, and its production of a confessional standard, one can employ both evidence and intuition to assess whether an individual advanced the Puritan Reformation and whether they were the objects of that reforming society.

Thus, Puritans and Puritanism should be seen as a cohesive though varied movement and network of individuals connected by overlapping similarities and representing distinct though often-complementary strains. Notions of Puritanisms, while helpful in distinguishing between different polarities within English Puritanism, do not ultimately allow for or recognize the undeniable continuity existing within Puritanism; it inadvertently places too much attention on the individual being above the society to which they belonged, and does not sufficiently account for the relatedness and interdependence of confessionally minded Puritans, or adequately concede that “radical” Puritans as often emerged from the shadows of their mainstream counterparts, as they were innovators of something new.