

## I

### *Who were the Puritans in Elizabethan England?*

Catholic revival under Queen Mary (1553-1558) drove many English Protestants to exile in the Rhineland and Switzerland, where they experienced Calvinist forms of worship. These they considered freer from Catholicism and thus more 'pure' than the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer*. With the accession of Elizabeth in 1558, exiles returned hoping to help create a church closer to continental models. A 'Presbyterian' understanding of church government also had earlier foundations in England itself.<sup>1</sup>

There was disappointment with Elizabeth's 1559 settlement of religion, which included her preference for a traditional diocesan episcopate and retained some allegedly 'impure' practices. Some wanted the settlement to be merely a step on the path to complete reformation.<sup>2</sup> A preference for 'purity' through rigorous eradication of alleged 'popery' gave its advocates the derogatory label of 'Puritan'. Despite potential for tension between the government and the more radical clergy, the urgent need for good Protestant preachers secured for the returning exiles a number of important church appointments.<sup>3</sup>

There were not large theological differences between the Puritans and their opponents - it was more a matter of emphasis. Both were strongly influenced by Calvinism, especially in the more important doctrines seen as essential to salvation. Thus Dickens argues against a firm distinction between 'Anglicans' and 'Puritans' for

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<sup>1</sup> It has been argued that Wycliffe and Tyndale were in essence 'Presbyterian'. English contact with continental reformers is evident from an early stage. Letters from Calvin, Beza, and disciples of Luther were widespread. In 1550, Polish reformer John A'Lasco was allowed by Parliament to organize a Congregation of Foreigners, in which as many as 5,000 continental exiles comprised the first church in England on Presbyterian lines. During Edward VI's reign, influential reformers were welcomed at Cambridge and Oxford. Martin Bucer's *De Regno Christi* (1551) proposed for England a three-fold ministry of "Doctrine, Discipline and Distribution" that was Presbyterian in character. Had not Bucer died in 1551, he may well have influenced the introduction of Presbyterian church government. [David W. Hall, "Evolution of Elizabethan ecclesiology, 1560-1590: a key to its later revival," *Premise*, 2(3) 5+, 27 March 1995. URL: <http://capo.org/premise/95/march/eliz.html>. Hall in turn depends on A. H. Drysdale, *History of the Presbyterians in England: their rise, decline, and revival*. - London: Publication Committee of the Presbyterian Church of England, 1889].

<sup>2</sup> See W.J. Sheils, *The English Reformation 1530-1570*. - London: Longman, 1989, pp. 61.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Edmund Grindal, Bishop of London (later Archbishop of Canterbury) who shared the hope of reform, appointed returned exiles to archdeaconries and the chancellorship of his diocese. [*Ibid.*, p. 62.]

most of the Elizabethan period, for this would imply theological division that probably did not exist.<sup>4</sup>

Alister McGrath suggests that, "puritanism is probably best understood as a version of reformed orthodoxy which laid particular emphasis on the experiential and pastoral effects of faith."<sup>5</sup> Later Puritan writers were to develop a distinct pastoral theology actualized in everyday Christian life.<sup>6</sup> The Bible was for Puritans the only definitive source of guidance on doctrine, liturgy, church government and personal faith. This made sound Biblical preaching important. Emphasis on reading and study of the Bible made Puritanism more attractive to the literate middle classes than to the illiterate. The Puritan preference for word to the exclusion of ritual was based on an understanding that gave priority to the individual over the community, to mind over body and to the conscious over the unconscious.<sup>7</sup>

H.F. Kearney adopts a wide description of Puritanism as a,

... circle of discontent both within and without the Established Church from the 1560s onwards. ... What was common to all [the critics]... was a vision of what the Church of Christ ought to be if it were stripped of externals and inessentials. Where they differed ... was in their view of what was external and inessential.<sup>8</sup>

G.R. Elton argues that the term 'Puritan' is comprehensive and includes at least three tendencies:

(a) Presbyterians or 'precisians' who wished to rebuild the English church on the model of Geneva, abolishing bishops and the royal supremacy;

(b) separatists or 'sectarians' who sought to dispense with a national church, allowing freedom of worship and government to individual congregations; and

(c) a larger group which, though critical of the compromises of the Settlement and aware of deficiencies in the church, sought reforms to ritual and worship without necessarily changing church government and structure.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A.G. Dickens, *The English Reformation*. - University Park: Pennsylvania State Uni. Pr., 1964, p. 313ff.

<sup>5</sup> Alister McGrath. - *Christian theology: an introduction*. - 2nd edn. - Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p. 79.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 77, 79.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Searle, "Ritual" in *The study of liturgy*. - Rev. edn / edited by Cheslyn Jones and others. - London: SPCK, 1992, pp. 51-8, at pp. 56-57.

<sup>8</sup> H.F. Kearney, "Puritanism and science: problems of definition", *Past and present*, 31:104ff, July 1965, cited in Alan G.R. Smith, *The emergence of a nation state: the commonwealth of England, 1529-1660*. - London: Longman, 1984, p. 147.

<sup>9</sup> G.R. Elton, *The Tudor constitution: documents and commentary*. - Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1960, p. 432.

"Among the clergy", Elton says, "... the fact that the precisians comprised the most ardent, the most learned, and often the most spiritual of the younger clergy exacted respect and tolerance... ." <sup>10</sup> Consequently the movement as whole leaned towards Presbyterianism. Puritanism also had a patriotic edge, resisting allegedly dangerous dallying with Rome and Popery. <sup>11</sup>

The Puritan movement was not monolithic and it was difficult for its members to remain in agreement. Puritans asserted the right of Christians to interpret the scripture for themselves. Particularly from the mid-1580s onwards, this readily led to the formation of splinter groups and sects that were open to isolation and persecution.

## II

*Did the agenda of the Elizabethan Puritans change?*

The Puritan movement's agenda in the 1560s was moderate and general. Its dominant tendency sought reforms within the church, particularly to liturgy, ritual and practical theology. Articles presented to the 1563 Canterbury convocation sought reforms to outward matters such as vestments and liturgy, but were defeated. <sup>12</sup> Controversy about 'popish' clergy vestments peaked in 1566. Though concerned with externals, this was a test of strength. The official view prevailed and from 1566 onwards Archbishop Parker vigorously attacked non-conformity. <sup>13</sup>

Unsuccessful in campaigning within the church, the Puritans resorted to Parliament. Bills sponsored by Puritan members in 1566 and 1571, seeking reforms within the Church of England, were defeated largely through the Queen's influence in the Lords. She regarded the Puritans as overly concerned with details and potentially subversive of her authority. <sup>14</sup>

Elton argues that a *second* phase of Elizabethan Puritanism began when, rather than focusing on externals and matters of worship, many Puritans turned their attention to church government and to "wholesale assault on the institution of episcopacy". <sup>15</sup> A Presbyterian form of church government was the only form

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> See "The Puritan articles in Convocation, 1593," Elton, *op.cit.*, doc. 202, p. 437.

<sup>13</sup> See J.H. Primus, *The vestements controversy*. - 1960.

<sup>14</sup> Elton, *op cit.*, p. 433.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.

acceptable to the leading Puritan faction.<sup>16</sup> J.E. Neale notes similarly that, from 1572 onwards, the clerical 'left-wing' of the reformist movement, with lay support, adopted a Calvinist or Presbyterian program in imitation of the Genevan, Huguenot, Dutch and Scottish reformed churches. This involved a revolutionary break with the 'catholic' past. In place of an episcopal hierarchy, Calvinists recognised only ministers, elders and deacons, with church discipline exercised through a pyramid of governing bodies.<sup>17</sup>

Elton suggests that this Presbyterian phase of Elizabethan Puritanism had three well-defined stages.<sup>18</sup>

(1) From 1569-1572, the Puritans attempted to abolish episcopal authority through action in Parliament and in the press. Legislative proposals failed (again due to action by the Queen), prompting the publication of critical writings, especially two *Admonitions to Parliament*.<sup>19</sup> Despite Puritan affirmations of loyalty, Elizabeth saw this as subversive and an implicit attack on her supremacy. The Puritans were attacking the established order and were therefore despised by many - hence the derogatory character of the name 'Puritan'. Opposition to the royal will made the movement increasingly revolutionary in character.<sup>20</sup>

(2) In the following years, Puritan clergy attempted to change the church by persuasion and example. There were meetings of the clergy to study and expound the Bible that became known as 'prophesyings'. Often senior clergy sanctioned these meetings. Again sensing subversion (rightly in Elton's view<sup>21</sup>), in 1577 Elizabeth instructed Archbishop Grindal to suppress the 'prophesyings',<sup>22</sup> suspending him when he refused.

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> The Puritans *Directory of church government*, prepared in the 1590s, provided for a consistory of ministers and elders for each congregation. Above that, there was to be a conference or *classis*, meeting at least once in six weeks and composed of the ministers and elders from about 12 ministry neighbouring churches. Above the *classes* were to be provincial synods and a national Synod. Huguenot experience had shown this to be an ideal structure for a revolutionary minority. [J.E. Neale, - *Elizabeth and her Parliaments: 1584-1601*. - London: Jonathan Cape, 1957, p. 18].

<sup>18</sup> Elton, *op.cit.*, p. 434.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, docs 203 and 204, pp. 439-441ff.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 434.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 435.

<sup>22</sup> "The Queen's letter suppressing prophesying, 1577", *ibid.*, doc. 206, pp. 443-444.

(3) The Presbyterian faction therefore began to create a truly subversive organisation, the so-called *classis* or 'synod' within each locality. In these assemblies, based on the Genevan model,<sup>23</sup> ministers and laity combined to reorganise local churches with elders and ministers. Walter Traver's *Book of discipline* (1574) was used in preference to the prayer book. The movement was 'underground' and is consequently not well documented. In the Elizabethan period, superior Presbyterian bodies do not appear to have functioned as planned - though there were number of general conferences.<sup>24</sup> The movement spread through much of England. "If the signal had been given by the queen or Parliament," Elton contends, "a Presbyterian Church of England would have been virtually ready to step forth."<sup>25</sup>

A general movement for further religious reform remained influential in Parliament. In 1584-85 both houses passed a bill to enforce stricter observance of the Sabbath, which was vetoed by the Queen.<sup>26</sup> Meanwhile, with the appointment in 1583 of John Whitgift as Archbishop of Canterbury, opposition to Puritanism had changed to persecution. With the full authority of the Queen, nonconforming clergy were expelled. No one was to be permitted to preach or perform any other church function without first (i) affirming the supreme authority, under God, of the monarch over the church, (ii) accepting and agreeing to use the *Book of Common Prayer*; and (iii) agreeing to the *Articles of Religion*.<sup>27</sup> This ignored a Puritan-inspired statute of 1571, which required subscription only to the Articles. Puritans were generally prepared to abide by the 1571 statute, but imposition of the *Book of Common Prayer* was unacceptable.<sup>28</sup>

In the face of Whitgift's campaign, the *classes* discussed tactics and policy. They took legal advice and raised complaints in the Privy Council, some members of

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<sup>23</sup> John Knox established an English-speaking Presbyterian congregation while in exile in Geneva in 1555. In 1556, this congregation adopted the *Book of Common Order*, which Elizabethan Presbyterian Puritans came to regard as their standard.

<sup>24</sup> Neale, *op. cit.*, p. 20. The first general conference or national synod of the party was held at Cambridge in October 1582, but evidence of what occurred is scanty. [*Ibid.*, p. 19.] Cambridge University was the intellectual heart of Elizabethan Puritanism. Thomas Cartwright, a leading Puritan, was for a time Professor of divinity at Cambridge.

<sup>25</sup> Elton, *op. cit.*, pp. 435-6.

<sup>26</sup> She may simply have wished to assert her authority over religious matters, "but there can also be little doubt that she preferred a Merry to a Puritan England". [Neale, *op. cit.*, p. 60]. A further attempt passed the Commons in 1601 but died in the Lords. [*Ibid.*, pp. 394-5].

<sup>27</sup> [Extract from] "Archbishop Whitgift's Articles, 1583". Elton, *op.cit.*, doc. 207, p, 444.

which were alarmed at attacks against anti-Catholics at a time when Protestantism was under foreign threat.<sup>29</sup> There were frequent protests in and out of Parliament, especially against the use of an *ex officio* oath<sup>30</sup> by the Court of High Commission in its examination of suspect ministers.

In December 1584, Parliament was presented with petitions, motivated by the Puritans complaining of the deplorable state of the clergy in some locations, while many good preachers were being restrained by Whitgift's policy. Despite a ban by the Queen on discussion of religion in Parliament, the Commons referred the petitions to a committee, which expressed displeasure with Whitgift's answers to questions.<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth was hotly critical of "intemperate and rash heads" in the Commons and its interference in religious matters.<sup>32</sup> She continued to support Whitgift's prosecutions and was unsympathetic to protests that some bishops were creating too many incompetent ministers.<sup>33</sup>

Though the Parliamentary efforts of the Puritans had stalled, the strength of their organisation had been demonstrated. In 1585, nonconforming ministers commenced preparation of a book of discipline, including a form of Presbyterian church government, to be subscribed by party members. Others preferred to continue working for reformation of the established church. This division of opinion was particularly sharp among the Puritans' parliamentary supporters.<sup>34</sup>

Puritan clergy apparently also attempted to influence the outcomes of elections to the parliament of 1586-1587. In 1587 the movement was sufficiently bold for a national Synod of ministers to meet to coordinate a program for parliamentary action. A bill presented to the Commons in February 1587 sought to void all existing law relating to the establishment of the church and its government. The bill proposed a new *Book of Common Prayer* based on the recently published Genevan prayer book

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<sup>28</sup> Neale, *op. cit.*, p. 21

<sup>29</sup> On 28 September 1584, for example, eight councillors signed a letter of protest to Whitgift, relating to the treatment of certain clergy.

<sup>30</sup> Persons appearing before the Commission were obliged to swear an oath to fully and truthfully answer questions, before being made aware of any charges against them. Refusal to take the oath could be punished as contempt.

<sup>31</sup> Neale, *op.cit.*, pp. 65ff.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 70-71, 74ff.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 145-6.

and incorporating a Presbyterian form of church constitution.<sup>35</sup> It was in effect a proposal of revolution, removing the Queen's authority in religious affairs. Apparently at Elizabeth's command, the proponents of the 'Bill and Book' were soon confined to the Tower. Not without protest, the Commons were forced by the Queen to abandon the legislation and refrain from debate on religious policy.<sup>36</sup> Persecution of nonconformist clergy continued. By the mid-1590s, the Elizabethan Puritan movement, though by no means extinguished, had been largely defeated.<sup>37</sup>

Peter Lake, comments as follows on change in the Puritans' reform program.

There is in all this a logical progression of rejection and withdrawal from the established church ... which reached its logical conclusion in separation. It was no accident that the final collapse of the classis movement in 1589/90 was accompanied by a resurgence of separatist activity in London ... they had become convinced of the complete corruption of the English church. ... [The] puritan movement ... was forced, by its own failure to capture the commanding heights of ecclesiastical power, to define itself against the ecclesiastical status quo.<sup>38</sup>

Elton concludes that all that remained of Puritanism at the end of Elizabeth's reign was a group within the established church that might be described as 'low church' - those who remained zealous for best standards of ministry and for removal of 'impurities' in doctrine and ritual.<sup>39</sup> Andrew Foster observes that, though the strength of Puritanism as clerical movement had faded by the end of Elizabeth's reign,

... Puritanism was potentially far more subversive insofar as it had become a social ethic. Concern over vestments and ceremonies remained, but issues like Sabatarianism, preaching and a godly lifestyle were now uppermost in the minds of a significant number of people and were used as a way of judging all things, including the royal Court.<sup>40</sup>

### III

#### *Summation*

The outward agenda of the Elizabethan Puritan movement was at first directed to further reform of the church that had been established by the Elizabethan settlement.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 149.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 157-165.

<sup>37</sup> In 1593 Parliament passed an Act, "For the preventing and avoiding of such great inconveniences and perils as might happen and grow by the wicked and dangerous practices of seditious sectaries and disloyal persons ..." [*An act to retain the Queen's subjects in obedience.* 35 Eliz. I, c.1 (1593), Elton, *op.cit.*, doc. 209, pp. 447ff.] The leaders of religious sects were identified as politically seditious and thus subject to severe punishment. A number were hanged. Steadily improving stability, intellectual integrity and pastoral ability in the established Church of England lessened the general appeal of the Puritan movement. By the early 1590s the *classes* were almost extinct and most clergy were conforming. Nevertheless, in 1590 there remained perhaps 500 Presbyterian ministers unknown to the authorities. [Hall, *op.cit.*, citing Drysdale, p. 192.]

<sup>38</sup> Peter Lake, *Moderate Puritans and the Elizabethan church.* - Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Pr, 1982, pp 1-2.

<sup>39</sup> Elton, *op. cit.*, p. 437

<sup>40</sup> Andrew Foster, *The Church of England 1570-1640.* - London: Longman, 1994, p.3.

This began with attempts to change church practices and doctrines, and was followed by proposals to amend radically the church's forms of government and order. From about 1572 onwards, the Puritans began to advocate complete replacement of the Church of England with a new Presbyterian structure. They worked from within, establishing local groups Presbyterian in character, and from outside the church, through (unsuccessful) political and parliamentary action.

In all this, there was a consistent underlying purpose - the creation of a church that the Puritan reformers believed to more biblical in form and practice. Nevertheless, the Puritan movement had several differing tendencies. Apparent changes in the Puritans' 'agenda' may have been as much due to changes in the relative ascendancy of differing 'factions' as to changes in the intentions of the movement as a whole.

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