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# English Puritanism as represented by John Milton

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English Puritanism marks an important era in the history of the English people, an era of awakening in the theological and political life. "The spirit, of which this movement is the symbol," has colored the literature, deepened the religious and patriotic sentiment, and infused new power into the national life. Hence the modern civilization of this people cannot be understood and appreciated without a clear conception of that important element in its composition, Puritanism.

In England, it stands as a monument of the general awakening that came to Germany, France,

and other nations of Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

However, unlike that on the continent, the Reformation in England had no such great agitators as a Luther in Germany, or a Zwingli and a Calvin in Switzerland to lead the people out of the darkness of tyranny, superstition and legalism into the light and freedom of "justification by faith." Nevertheless, England was not devoid of the elements of reform. Among these may be mentioned three as influential in accomplishing a change in the national religion. First, there were the Lollards, or remnant of the Wycliffite movement. While they no doubt cast odium on the

Reform, because of their known sympathy and alliance with it, still, they "supplied to the Reformation a means of entrance to the humbler ranks." Another incentive more powerful than the first, was the Greek Testament of Erasmus, with its new Latin annotations and translations. This spirit of light entered Oxford and Cambridge, giving to the movement a blast, Bilney, Latimer and Tyndal who presented to the people, the Bible in the English language.

In addition to these factors, was a third - the government.

Henry VIII was angry at the Pope because of his delay in granting him a divorce from Catherine his wife, in order that he might marry Anne Boleyn. Thus from "the defender of the faith" he became

an enemy of the Pope. He took the matter into his own hands, appealing to the university and ecclesiastics for the sanction of his wish.

He resolved to be his own Pope. And certainly the situation was favorable. For Cardinal Wolsey had been centering the power of the church in the sovereign.

On the deposition of Wolsey, Henry was not slow to seize this power. He remodeled the church as far as possible making it Anglo-Catholic "with the English sovereign for its supreme head in place of the Pope".

During the reign of Edward VI a radical Protestant creed, one in advance of popular belief, was given to England.

But under Mary, Catholicism was restored.

And thus, when Elizabeth came to the throne, she found a strong Roman party, disposed to make her trouble. However, she did not take the other extreme and favor the Puritans; for she hated them almost as much as she hated the Papists. She took a middle course with a leaning toward Catholic ceremonialism. This naturally led to dissatisfaction on the part of both extremes. We will consider the Puritan in his relation to the Queen. The controversy concerning vestments seems to be but the continuation of the one begun during the reign of Edward VI, when Hooper, on being appointed to the see of Gloucester, refused to be inducted in the customary robes of the Roman priesthood then in use. A compromise was effected

but forces that were ultimately to dethrone ecclesiastical and political despotism had been put in operation.

English Puritanism has its beginning in a controversy disturbing but a small portion of the theological world. But new elements were added by the dissatisfaction felt by the fugitives of the Marian persecution, on their return from the Continent, as they perceived the conservative cast assumed by the Reformation under the supervision of Elizabeth. This feeling was especially keen, as they compared the development, with that in Geneva, Strasburg and Zurich; and realized that in England it was failing to reach its true goal. And whenever consider that the Puritans were persecuted for -



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for their belief; that the "Act of Uniformity"  
was given them for spiritual food; and  
that a return to the Church order of  
the second year of Edward's reign was  
advocated, we are not surprised  
that the movement developed very  
rapidly. For the Puritan, on the other  
hand, fearing that this Crown Con-  
stituted Church, so similar to the  
Romish, would lead to Catholicism,  
strenuously opposed the action of  
the authorities.

An advance was made in  
the controversy. "It was no longer  
merely the accessories of worship  
that were in dispute, but the  
subjects of church government  
and authority in themselves."

Cartwright, for the Puritans, con-  
tended for the reduction of the  
English hierarchy to the Presbyterian  
pattern of scriptural simplicity.

While Whitgift, in behalf of the Episcopacy, maintained that "scripture was not designed as a standard for ecclesiastical polity; that the polity, on the contrary, was a fair subject for arrangement on the part of the state and the superior of the church." "The Churchman occupied the ground of expediency --- the Non conformist urged the argument of divine right" ---

Thus stood the controversy at the close of Elizabeth's reign. ---

On the accession of James, the Puritans hoped for a change for the better. But in this they were disappointed; for the king, not only did not favor them, but on the contrary, he so far forgot his Puritan training as to give himself completely to the servile Roman party, doing all in his power to.

crush the opposition. Therefore the persecution of the previous reign was continued. In fact, in some respects, it became more unbearable because it was recommended to indulge in sports after services on Sunday. Thus, in accordance with this advice, the May Pole and the Sunday dance were among the recreations enjoyed.

During this reign, the breach between the two parties was widened by the fact that Churchmen no longer held the doctrine of expediency in church offices, but in its stead opposed the divine right of the bishop to the Puritan divine right of the Presbytery. The former held that "episcopacy and ceremonialism were not merely defensible, but they were stamped

with hereditary divine sanction. The one was of "Apostolical Succession", the other was a part of the beauty of holiness. The external worship of the Church of England became in the hands of those in power a positive divine institution, just as the Geneva discipline had been to the Puritans the handiwork of God - the very pattern of things shown in the Mount. Extreme as usual called forth extreme.

The King approved of the extreme position taken by the Episcopacy as it harmonized with his own claims for royalty - the divine right of the King. This idea naturally led him to usurp authority, especially that of Parliament, and thus brought him into controversy with that body. For he would convene it only when in need of funds.

or when some other exigency made it necessary.

These controversies naturally developed in the members of Parliament a spirit of opposition to the king. And many of these men were Puritans, for we have not only those ecclesiastical Puritans whose leading interest was in the government and worship of the church, but also these political Puritans who were desirous of gaining a victory for Parliament over the king.

This spirit of opposition would naturally lead these two elements with their common interests and sympathies to unite in the one movement making it double headed. Puritanism has now become a power.

The condition of affairs was not benefited by the accession of Charles to the throne. For he had his father's lofty conception of the

of the royal prerogatives. Two Parliaments were called and quickly dismissed because that in the first case instead of granting money to the King, it persisted in inquiring into public grievances, and <sup>that</sup> in the second, the Duke of Buckingham could only be saved from impeachment by this means. The third granted him money on his signing the "Petition of Right." After reigning eleven years without parliament, the king again called one to supply him with money, with which to raise an army to defeat the Scottish Troops. Instead of doing this, matters of grievance were considered, for which parliament was dissolved.

But with the Scottish Troops on his border, Charles was again compelled to summon parliament, known, because of its duration, as

as the Long Parliament. It was composed of men determined to check the despotic career of the king.

The old contest was renewed. Charles undertook to frighten and coerce parliament by attempting to arrest five of its members. This action aroused the whole nation, and compelled the king to leave the city.

Arbitration was carried on for some time between the two parties, but the demands made upon the sovereign could hardly be granted were he to remain upon the throne. <sup>Now</sup> the only way in which the trouble could be settled was by an appeal to arms. Raising his standard the king called upon all loyal subjects to rally around his banner and parliament did the same.

Thus began the civil war in 1642. For six years the people suffered all

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the honors of our intestines was simply because he who ought to have had their best interests at heart, desired to usurp authority and to tyrannize over his subjects. And, as is always the case with despotism, he found willing agents to gratify his most exorbitant demands. Among these persons were two very notable ones. Thomas Wentworth "who devoted himself to establishing the royal despotism in civil matters"; and Laud Archbishop of Canterbury who strove to make the king the head (supreme) of the Anglican church.

The action of Charles urged <sup>on</sup> the Puritan movement: so that it was no longer a question of ceremonialism and anti-ceremonialism but of "Protestant freedom and popular rights against popery in the church and absolutism in



the state". It was the political element mingling with the ecclesiastical that carried the movement to the height to which it attained. ---

In the meantime, parliament was carrying on the revolution. Early in its organization it accomplished the downfall of Strafford and Laud. Men could now avail themselves of liberty of speech and of action. Among the first to break the silence was he who was to be the great defender of Puritanism in the world of letters - John Milton. His nature was strong, fond of liberty, well fitted to be one of the pillars of the cause. ---

Born in Bread street, London, December 9, 1608, his early influences were such as to develop the naturally strong ---

mental powers and at the same time to beautify the character. That he inherited good traits can be seen from the fact that his father was a talented man, taking high rank as a composer of music, while his mother was a very estimable woman, noted for her charitable deeds.

At fifteen Milton was sent to Christ's college, Cambridge. While there, in his twentieth year, Laud was appointed bishop of London and the high handed way in which he accomplished his more catholic re-modeling of the church seems to have disgusted the student from entering the ministry. He quotes his own words. "By the intention of my parents I was desired of as child to the service of the church, and in my own resolutions.

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Still coming to some maturity of years and perceiving what tyranny had invaded the church, that he who would take orders must subscribe slaves and take an oath withal, which unless he took with a conscience that he would relish, he must either straight persevere or split his faith, I thought better to prefer a blameless silence before the sacred office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing."

After his graduation from Cambridge he spent five years in quiet study and work at Horton. During this period, his writings "bear evidence of a calm and cheerful frame of mind, and yet one in which Puritan elements manifestly enter."

In the spring following his mother's death, Milton left England

for the Continent, where he spent fifteen months in traveling.

On his return, he opened a school, but had scarcely begun his work before he felt called to other and more important duties. For he could see the coming storm; he understood the hidden forces at work; and this knowledge became a burden to him. He realized that God had given him power, and that the obligation lay on him to use them in speaking what he knew. He felt that the ecclesiastical clique had influenced the king, and that it was responsible for all these troubles. At length his convictions became so strong, that he knew he could not endure the reproach that would come to him if he did not help the "Church of God" in her struggles with her enemies.

Under the influence of such feelings Milton prepared himself for the polemical writings that were to largely occupy his time for the next twenty years.

In 1641, he published a bulky work entitled "Reformatio in Anglia and causes that hitherto have hindered it." This is a vehement attack upon prelacy as unscriptural and unprimitive. He states that stone pillars and crucifixes now have the honor and abuse due to Christ's loving members. He condemns the separation of the communion from the (so-called) profane touch of the laity, "while the obscene and surfeited priest scruples not to paw and manure the sacred bread as familiarly as his tavern biscuit."

Bishop Hall published a reply to this, and was in turn answered

by five Puritan ministers conjointly. Whereupon archbishop Usher championed the cause of Bishop Hall. Milton then wrote two works. In the second of these his design is to show that prelacy opposed the reason and end of the gospel in its outward form by its pomp and magnificence in its numerous vain and useless ceremonies, and in its cruel and insolent jurisdiction. Milton's antiprelatical bitterness is manifested in the following words. "They are a tyrannical crew and a corporation of impostors that have blinded and abused the world so long." Again he says, "a man shall commonly find more savory knowledge in one layman than in a dozen cathedral prelates." "This course

vehemence of tone, whenever the  
 image of the well endowed prelacy  
 crossed his argument, can only  
 be understood or at all excused,  
 when we remember that it was  
 prelacy that seemed to Milton, more  
 than anything else, to have filled  
 the land with confusion and  
 violence. The liturgy did not  
 escape his attack.

In summing up Milton's  
 prose writings of this period,  
 Tulloch says. The earlier writings  
 of Milton ----- are grand specimens  
 of Puritanical argument -----  
 Puritanical ----- in the style of  
 their reasoning, in the intensity  
 of their feeling, in the harsh bit-  
 terness of their assaults upon  
 the Catholic forms of the church  
 ----- in their almost total want  
 of historical appreciation, in

everything, save, perhaps, the magnificent luxuriance and swell of style with gleams of the old Horton radiance in it.

In 1644, he published his "Areopagitica" or speech for the liberty of unlicensed printing. It was a plea against such a censorship of the press as advocated by the Presbyterians. In this treatise, speaking of some Protestants and professors in his day, the author says: "They live and die in as errant and implicit a faith as any lay Papist of Louth." There are men who can <sup>not</sup> say that their religion is within them, but that it comes and goes according as that good man (to whom they trust all their religious interests) is present or absent. Nowhere are the



principles of Protestant freedom "more fully and eloquently expounded; and even the germ of all that is really just and good in the most recent discussions of liberty will be found in it."

But while Milton was engaged in championing the interests of Puritanism with his pen, parliament was in mortal combat with the king. For a time the royal troops were victorious, but when all seemed lost, victory perched upon the parliamentary banner, and Charles was defeated. He was made a prisoner, and after Pride's Purge, was tried, notwithstanding his denial of the power of the authorities to bring him to justice; and was condemned as a tyrant,

traitor murderer and enemy of his country. His execution took place a few days later - Jan'y 30, 1649, much to the honor of many of his subjects.

Early in 1649, Milton was engaged on his first treatise regarding the king, which opens the third series of his controversial writings. Bearing on the position and fate of Charles it was published a week or two after his execution. Its title was "The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, proving that it is lawful and hath been held so thro' all ages for any who <sup>have</sup> the power to call to account a tyrant, or wicked king, and, after due conviction, to depose, and put him to death, if the ordinary magistrates have neglected or denied to do it; and

they who of late so much blame  
 deposing (i.e. the Presbyterians)  
 are the men that did it  
 themselves". This work shows  
 how completely had Milton iden-  
 tified himself with the radical  
 wing of the parliamentary party  
 and how great was his disgust  
 with the more conservative  
 or Presbyterian wing, which  
 would have saved the king.

To him as to the great leader  
 of the movement, the course of  
 affairs was their justification.

He argues the theses from  
 two points of view: "first from  
 the nature of the kingly office  
 as being only derivative, trans-  
 ferred, and committed to the  
 holder in trust, from the people  
 to the common good of them  
 all, in whom the power

yet remains fundamentally, and cannot be taken from them without violation of their natural birthright; and secondly from such historical examples as seemed to him to justify it."

"This treatise had but little effect in its intended direction of composing the minds of the people. But it certainly influenced his appointment as Latin Secy. of the Council of State. Mch. 18, 1649.

Despite the blindness with which he was afflicted in 1653 he held this position during the Protectorate of Cromwell, the short rule of his son Richard, and also in the name of the restored parliament that succeeded Richard. During this period, Milton's prose writings, at least the more important of them

are directly connected with his office and grew out of it."

In a way these were national documents for he stands as the grand exponent of the government in that he deals with the great principles involved; and at the same time excuses the excesses to which these are carried. He posits himself as the representative of the people, yet makes no effort to learn their desires or ideas.

He looks into his own heart and gives utterance to what he sees therein, as though it were the voice of the people. He is on a higher level than the common people and cannot sympathize with them nor feel for them.

He cannot appreciate the change of feeling on the part of the people, from a position

of high resentment against the king because of his tyranny to one of sympathy.

In his "Scolioasts" written as an answer to a treatise entitled Eikon Basilike in which a description of the king in his sufferings is given, Milton is harsh and cruel, exciting pity for the king rather than convincing the judgement of the righteousness of his fate. He also criticises his religion, his family relations, his rigor of Sunday Chapel, the licentious remissness of his Sunday theatre etc. In short he attempts to crush the friends of the king by the mere force of abuse.

In his answer to Salmasius, who openly held to the divine right of the king, and his accountability to God alone, Milton put

forth his "First and Second Defenses for the People of England."

In them he deals with the king's deposition and death, more on the broad and general grounds of the first elements of government.

The force of this defense was almost universally acknowledged.

He himself says that he received the congratulations of all the foreign ministers in London.

Thus Milton had no sympathy with monarchy. He was a Republican; and even to the last wrote in high commendation of the Commonwealth.

It was for a government of the wisest that he cared, and not for that of the people. This is the ground taken by him in his "Defensio Secunda" in which he defends Cromwell.

For with all his love for freedom and hatred of tyranny and usurpation, Milton approved the "Protectorate, considering it not in the light of usurpation but only as a necessary means of consolidating the liberties which England had achieved for herself." ... His last official document was, <sup>dated</sup> May 15, 1649.

During the last months of his official life, "his apprehensions in regard to religious liberty and the purity of the church were all renewed. And he addressed parliament at length on both subjects."

He wrote on religious liberty, in a "Treatise of civil liberty in ecclesiastical causes showing that it is not lawful for any person on earth to compel in matters of religion". "This is an exposition



of the fundamental principles of Protestantism and the doctrine of toleration which arises out of them

He also shows that the persecuting Protestant, holding as he does that no church is the standard of authority for the scriptures has far less ground for his course than has the Papist who puts forth such a claim.

His apprehensions in regard to ecclesiastical purity are set forth in "Considerations touching the likeliest means to remove hirelings out of the church, wherein is also discourse of tithes, church fees, and church revenues, and whether any maintenance of ministers can be settled by law". In this treatise, in which he vindicates the separation of the church and state, Milton's

Protestantism reached its highest development. He would have the ministry no longer dependent upon the state for its support. That he contends should come from the offerings of a grateful people.

- In 1659, seeing that the public feeling was changing in favor of monarchy, he published a pamphlet on "the ready and easy way to establish a Free Commonwealth, and the excellence thereof, compared with the inconveniencies and changes of readmitting Kingship into this nation." He shows the evils of a return to loyalty. He points the difference between "a commonwealth sowed by its greatest men at their own cost and charge, who live soberly in families, walk

the streets as other men, may be spoken to freely, familiarly, friendly without adoration; and a Kingdom whose king must be adored like a demi-god, with a dissolute and haughty court about him, of vast expence and luxury, masks and revels, to the debauchery of the prime gentry". He recommended that "the supreme power should be vested in a perpetual grand council of the ablest men chosen by the people to consult of affairs for public good." The model was in part that of the Jewish Sanhedrin.

But it was not to be. The people were tired of the commonwealth. With anarchy threatening the nation, with so much change and so many dangers, there was

begotten a desire for a return  
 to the old form of government.  
 So a representative from the army  
 and one from parliament hastened  
 to Charles in Holland, to invite  
 him to ascend the throne made  
 vacant at the death of his father.  
 Charles gladly returned to England  
 being received with almost uni-  
 versal rejoicing.

This practically closed the con-  
 troversial period of Milton's life.  
 He had stood, without a peer, as the  
 literary defender of the movement.  
 He had done his work as only a  
 man who believes in the justice  
 of his cause can. But notwith-  
 standing the fact that his con-  
 troversial pen is laid aside, the  
 old ideals haunt him. For when  
 in the quiet of that later life,  
 his muse again sings, and his

ambition to create a classic in the English language, is realized in his "Paradise Lost," even then, the principles for which he strove must color his production. For it "Puritan in its thought and Puritan in its scheme." It is the conflict of good and evil, according to a pre-arranged plan in the Divine Mind.

The last years of his life were spent quietly in the preparation of his various books until the eighth day of November 1674 when he passed so quietly away that those near him hardly knew when the last breath was taken.

That life had been a stormy one. It had its full share of sorrow and affliction; and yet he seems to live as ever in his great Testaments; eye. Like the rocky cliff against

whose base the sea beats in vain,  
 he stood unmoved by the surges  
 of temptation, domestic infelicity,  
 affliction and persecution. . . .

Well may this stern, strong  
 man typify the Puritan  
 movement. In early life  
 his whole matured rose against  
 the tyranny of a Law; in the  
 strength of his manhood, he  
 stood as the grand exponent of  
 religious and political freedom,  
 while he spent his last years  
 in quietness, passing away  
 gently and peaceably unmoved,  
 yet leaving behind him an  
 influence that is strong for  
 truth. The Puritan movement  
 began with a controversy over a  
 narrow religious requirement.  
 As it advanced it gathered strength,  
 new principles were added, until

the thrones of Europe. Trampled, and usurpation and tyranny in England were ruined.

In the Restoration all seemed to be lost. Like a mighty wave that has reached its height, thundered on the shore and then quietly receded into the sea, so Puritanism has reached its culmination, and has receded into the sea of influences entering the national life. But it is still powerful, for nothing that was "really worth the work of Puritanism was ever done in the restoration." The revels of Whitehall, the scepticism and debauchery of courtiers, the corruption of statesmen, left the mass of Englishmen what Puritanism had made them, serious, earnest, sober.

in life and conduct, firm in  
their love of Protestantism  
and freedom. The influence  
of this movement has been  
a very important factor in  
placing England where she  
stands to-day, honored and  
respected by all the world.

And we as well have felt  
the power of this revolution.  
For upon its principles our  
New England colonies were founded,  
its spirit breathed life into  
our Declaration of Independ-  
ence and made it possible;  
it has influenced us in favor  
of religious tolerance; it shot  
the nation of to-day with its  
love of freedom and hatred of  
tyranny roots upon the base  
laid broad and deep by the  
men who fought and suffered,



who consecrated their all  
to the principles of English  
Puritanism.