

In the context of the years 1558-1660 to further the english reformation?

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In studies of Puritanism as a movement from 1558-1660, historians have debated over the definition of the word 'puritan' because of the changing nature of the movement as it responded to various political, social and religious developments. The conventional historical interpretation shared by historians Christianson and Wrightson is that 'Puritan' more narrowly referred to the 'hotter sort of protestants' who, although theologically indistinguishable from their Anglican counter-parts, actively sought reform of the established church from within whilst maintaining some doctrinal reservations.

This definition encompasses the understanding that Puritanism was a distinct movement to further the English reformation, yet does not account for the greater circle of puritanical separatists who wished to leave the church altogether. Therefore it is best to adopt the widest description offered by Kearney in defining Puritanism as the "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". This interpretation more accurately allows for Puritanism to be understood in light of its constantly evolving 'vision' and 'set of values' through the years, which manifested in forms such as Presbyterianism in the 1580s and the political backbone of the Parliamentary force during the Civil War as interpreted by many a historian, including revisionist and Marxist historians. Wrightson argues that in 1558, to the Puritans, the church was "... half reformed.

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They were anxious to push ahead... to move urgently towards 'further reformation'" of the Elizabethan settlement. Whilst relieved by the succession of a protestant monarch, many Puritans were urgent to pursue moderate reform of the settlement, to purge it of the 'rags of Rome', specifically from within the hierarchy of the Church of England. Edmund Grindal's career as Archbishop is an example of moderate Puritanism acting as a force to further the reformation from within the established church.

Indeed, Grindal's swift promotion by the influential hand of Burghley and an anonymous letter sent to Grindal by a member of the Privy Council upon his appointment, strongly suggests there was an inter-governmental campaign by those of significantly higher office to promote Puritan leaders. It is clear that their intention was that "If reform was to come from within the establishment, there would never be a more favourable opportunity [to advance Puritanism]".

Supported by Collinson, this shows of how "progressive bishops [were] acting as catspaws for nervous courtiers in promoting moderate reform". For moderate Puritans, the desire to pursue the reformation over-shadowed the controversy of accepting Episcopal office. Through laying stresses on the churches pastoral rather than disciplinary aspects, it seemed that an alliance between hierarchy and Puritans might be possibly on the basis of a shared desire for moderate church reform.

Therefore, among the first generation of Elizabethan bishops, Puritanism was set apart as a religious force within the national church that "tarry[ied] with the magistrate" to achieve a reformation of the national church. However, evidence suggests that many Puritans who had accepted preferment into the <https://assignbuster.com/in-the-context-of-the-years-1558-1660-to-further-the-english-reformation/>

hierarchy of the church neglected furthering a national reformation to pursue a reformation within the localities. As parliamentary reform was stunted in 1576, and Elizabeth I actively opposed activities such as prophesyings "... younger generation of [Calvinist] clergy and academics...[became] disillusioned by the failure of the bishops to continue the process of reformation" and instead devoted themselves to itinerant preaching as a means of reconstituting the church from among the localities. This local activism changed the dynamic of Puritanism from pursuing a top-down structural reformation of the church through parliament, to one of localised grass-roots evangelisation. Indeed, activities such as 'prophesying' led by men such as Thomas Lever were not a part of the official programme of the established church.

Instead Puritans sought to establish an alternative form of ministry in response to the dissatisfaction with the biblically ignorant clergy; they had the intent on promoting a unity of belief based on assent rather than on ecclesiastical authority, a form of reformation which distinctly encouraged non-conformity to the church hierarchy. Increasingly, as Acheson has argued, Puritanism was becoming a force to further the reformation through the education and communication of the word of God, in defiance of the ecclesiastical authorities, sharing similarities with radical spiritual movements that had appeared on the continent.

Additionally, Hill has argued that among the localities, Puritanism acted as a social force in undermining the educational functions of the established church. The social impact of the preaching of the word, with its increased popularity revealed the monopoly of control the established church had over

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the formation of opinion. This understanding is clear from the 1580s through to the 1640s as in 1587 the high commission persecuted Bishop Cooper of Winchester for preaching. State censoring of the printing press elevated the importance of preaching as the only accessible means of via communication to the illiterate masses. ... preaching... fulfilled the religious function of a confessional - it became a source of guidance on moral and economic conduct". The issues of church and state were indeed closely parallel. The bishops tried to maintain a monopoly over the production of opinion, driving unlicensed competitors away by the power of the state while many Puritans evolved a theoretical justification of free trade in ideas in order to raise the educational and disciplinary level of all churchgoers.

To the hierarchy, this pursuit had explosive anarchic possibilities that threatened state authority. Puritanism had started to become a force of social and spiritual enlightenment so that when the state deprived ministers of their licenses and lodgings, many of the average educated laymen sympathized with the Puritans, resulting in the beginnings of what Hill has interpreted as class resistance to the hierarchy.

However, the focus of Puritanism from parliament as the vehicle for reformation to the localities meant Puritanism took the form as a grassroots Presbyterian movement, an extension of the hierarchical Puritansstresson the parishes for communal reformation, radicalising and decentralising the focus of reformation away from state institutions and to the ' godly minority'.

The nature of this dissatisfied ' classis' movement, meant that the Puritan campaign for ' further reformation' uniquely advocated a return to an apostolic ideal that sought the establishment of a church through <https://assignbuster.com/in-the-context-of-the-years-1558-1660-to-further-the-english-reformation/>

conference, with an independent Confession of Faith and form of discipline. The consequence of such gatherings, led by men such as Laurence Thomson was the intensification of a separatist mentality that abandoned trust in the church establishment in favour of freely associating congregations, reflecting the disestablishmentarian qualities that would develop into separatism.

Spurr has therefore argued that Elizabethan Puritanism cannot be described as a single force to further a single view of reformation. Instead, " It is a set of values and aspirations which gets re-defined... in response to different circumstances". By the late 16th century separatism became a pursuit of " reformation without tarrying for any". The dashed hopes of Puritans in furthering the reformation through parliament meant it necessarily became a movement of spiritual intensity " advocating preaching...pursuing a moral reformation".

Puritanism was a reactionary movement that necessarily re-defined itself during the Elizabethan era according to the achievability of its goals, determined by the changing sympathies of those in power, particularly the monarch. Disaffected by the failure to achieve substantial godly reform, Elizabethan Puritanism and its momentum had been halted until Elizabeth's death. The pursuit of reformation by Jacobean Puritans from 1603 has been described as one fighting " false doctrine, corrupted sinful human influence and superstitious practice"; a reformation based upon furthering individual biblical piety.

Those of puritan inclination had begun to be the most conscientious and active in the task of evangelizing the people, a task that confronted Puritan evangelists with the reality of the state of popular religion; a faith of "
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formality and devotion" reliant upon repetitious, ritualistic prayer. Theologically the Jacobean church was broadly Calvinistic and instead it was the application of godly living to 'superstitious cultural practices' that was the focus of the Puritan pursuit for reformation.

Consequentially, the pursuit for communal reformation, in the early 17th Century, meant Puritan moral and spiritual values had begun to transform communities, especially in market towns. A study by Hutton shows a correlation between the gradual disappearance of traditional festivities and the activism of local Puritan groups who imposed sabbatarianism and punished any 'ungodly' activities according to their impulses for reformation. For example, the arrest book in the town of Dorchester which was dominated by a Puritan group from 1610 onwards recalls numerous arrests on market day for swearing or getting drunk.

Supported by Underdown, these popular cultural activities deeply concerned Puritans as a strict morality was essential as a sign of an individual's 'elect' status. The vigorous and sometimes violent activism therefore was a fundamentally religiously motivated practice, aimed at a moral and spiritual reformation. However, by the 1630s Acheson argues that Puritan pursuits for reformation among the localities became reactionary to Lauds policies, leading to the growth of separatism. Puritanical separatists represented a religiously disaffected minority which could shape Puritanism to be a dangerous political movement, a future cause of the English Civil War by bringing "disparate religious forces in a common opposition to episcopacy". The monopoly of power held by the Arminians over church policy meant there was strong Puritan opposition in Parliament to semi-catholic activities

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made lawful under Charles I. Between 1630 and 1640 66 members of the Canterbury diocese went elsewhere for sermons as opposed to just four in the years 1620-1629.

Wrightson has argued, “ the Arminian victory in the church...shattered the Jacobean Consensus within which Puritan evangelists in the localities had been able to shelter”. Consequently, Puritanism contributed to a broader popular revolt of opinion to the prevailing Government and the Arminian claims to hold a monopoly on truth. This created a climate of intolerance, one that made attending church services an activity that was intolerable to a large minority of people. This isolation of a Catholic fearing, Calvinistic majority strengthened the political and spiritual urgency for Puritan action that would define the parliamentary movement in 1640.

Contrastingly, Wrightson has argued that renewed parliamentary, particularly religious opposition to Charles I, re-shaped Puritanism from being concerned with matters of church governance, to matters of royal prerogative and divine rule. Whilst opposition to Arminianism defined much opposition to Charles I, it was the inability of the commons to direct religious affairs with an unsympathetic monarch that was cause of the parliamentary, Puritan frustration. In the commons, by 1629, charges of heterodoxy were made against Laud and speeches were being made linking Arminianism and Catholicism with Spanish Tyranny.

This mindset is best reflected in Sir Benjamin Rudyard’s Long Parliament speech where he said that the Arminian “...masterpiece now, is to make all those of the religion the suspected party of the Kingdom”. Puritanism had started to become, through the House of Commons, the direct, vocal

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opposition to Arminianism. There was a greater and renewed depth to the Puritan opposition by equating Arminianism with Catholic tyranny and the destruction of ancient constitutional liberties. Puritan concerns became nationalised being now centred on a Monarch perceived to be the 'capital enemy to the... Commonwealth' on both constitutional and religious grounds. Puritanism, as expressed by the Commons, was now an anti-monarchic force, a movement of national political as well as religious dissent.

Marxist historian Hill has argued that Puritanism was a revolutionary social force which, because of its promotion of practical devotion and godliness, provided a new social ethic which converged with the needs of 16th and 17th Century bourgeoisie. Hill argues that Puritanical labour values fulfilled an economic function which benefited agricultural and industrial production as the hiring of cheap labour became a form of 'poor relief'.

Puritanism had the effect of promoting a body of ideas that encouraged dignity in labour for its own sake, providing smaller artisans and merchants with an excuse to exploit the poor as cheap labour. This economic desperation led to Puritans to devote their preaching to promoting employment. Most notably, when a congregation of merchants gathered at the annual Stourbridge Fair to listen to the divine William Perkins, the list of towns represented are all notorious Puritan centres.

The evidence would suggest that the complimenting values of cheap labour and Puritanism meant it was not solely a force that pursued any kind of reformation, whether that is moral or individual. Instead it became a social force "to root out idleness" with a special emphasis on the duty of working hard, for extolling the dignity of labour. Alternatively, Collinson has argued <https://assignbuster.com/in-the-context-of-the-years-1558-1660-to-further-the-english-reformation/>

that Hill's interpretation fails to note of Puritanism's most spectacular successes were in converting elements of the 'feudal' class that Marxist historians have said it was trying to destroy; suggesting Puritanism was not a force for social revolution.

Collinson argues that because "the [Puritan] propaganda...stood in as much need of noble protection...success belonged to those with their hands on the strongest levers". Consequently, through commanding the sympathies of upper class gentry such as Leicester until 1588 and the Earl of Bedford on the eve of the civil war, Puritanism was able to achieve further reformation as a result of hierarchical support. These powerful individuals "served to render effective a vigilant... puritan policy" which would be more important to the Puritan cause of furthering the reformation in its public consequences.

Therefore, Puritanism was not a social revolutionary force which sought to destroy the Gentry classes but instead united the classes as a force that throughout 1558-1640 pursued the reformation by providing a safe social environment within the localities for Puritans to operate. Contrastingly, evidence suggests that support for Puritanism from among the merchant classes was more to do with reducing 'popish idleness' and therefore working towards a more 'godly' and reformed society. Puritans perceived issues of vagabondage and idleness as social consequences of Catholicism.

For example, there was great disapproval over monks and nuns because "for all they do nothing" they nevertheless "riot lavishly of other folks' labours". They were parasitic rentiers - and these perceptions of idleness, to Puritans, had invaded the thought of the 'sinful beggar'. Therefore, whilst

many lower-middle class merchants were motivated by economic reasons to
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encourage Puritanism, it is too simplistic of Marxist historians to identify Puritanism as a force to manipulate class tensions.

In fact, the over-riding motivational factor was the belief that they were serving God's purposes by hiring the idle poor; they believed they were furthering the Godly reformation of both the 'commonwealth' and of the 'reprobate'. Alternatively, Hill has argued that the secret victory of Puritanism was in fact the cultural acceptance of Puritan values that was the result of a "strenuous intellectual effort". Jeremy Collier was a Puritan who finally led to victory Puritanism's battle against immorality of the stage.

The social aspects of his attitude: "... [the divulging] of poets only tends to debauch mankind and...of civil life" was the cause and effect of those views. Particularly, the restoration of sexualised theatre was attacked vigorously by Puritans such as Thomas Gouge. Arguably, the revival of an established preaching ministry post-1630s marks a significant transformation in how Puritanism contributed to a revolution of 'social thought'.

Puritanism had successfully influenced the culture in a way as to make their intellectual and social considerations mainstream within the established church. Puritanism had succeeded in acting as a force to promote a set of culturally impacting practices which was to then reflect onto the opinions of the people to transform England's society, through impacting the culture. During the civil war, Marxist historians have interpreted the role of Puritanism as a unique social revolutionary force.

Hill has highlighted that Puritanism was among the "flowering of radical, democratic and egalitarian notions among the common people" which he

argues was part of an inevitable class struggle which defined the years 1642-1660 as a time of 'revolution'. However, revisionist historians such as Dow have accustomed to the idea that in the 1640s and 1650s Puritanism was not a force confined to the struggle of one social group in an attempt to reshape the social or political order. Instead, he has argued that England "...witnessed... radical religious groups whose... concern was to attack the notion of a disciplined, established national church". Ignited by decades of religious oppression Puritanism had a renewed spiritual intensity that for the first time in 100 years was united in the pursuit of one common goal; the reformation of the established national church centred on opposition to the royal supremacy. Historical debate therefore centres on whether Puritanism was a 'revolutionary force' against the crown preceding and during the Civil War.

Revisionist, Collinson has argued that from 1635-1640 and the opening of the long parliament, Puritanism acted as a stabilising conservative force in preserving the true Protestant Religion upon which the throne and God's favour was predicated. Indeed, Puritanism, whilst substantially growing pre-1640, was hardly a revolutionary force dissent was expressed in lawful, peaceful means of the King-in-Parliament via ordered national days of prayer and fasting. However, the sharp rise in frequency of prayer and fasting days in the 1640s which reached a total of 24 in 1643 suggests that this activity reflected instead a 'spiritual revolution'.

What made Puritanism a revolutionary force was a perception among the Godly that they had to choose between two masters; to seek truth by obeying God or, to obey earthly authority. They chose the former. Charles I and Laud had created the very Puritanism that they dreaded, changing

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Puritanism from being a lawful conservative movement to one of forced religious and political radicalism founded upon unshakeable spiritual conviction. What Gardiner called 'the puritan revolution' had begun.

Supported by McGiffert, this radicalised movement was an extension of the pursuit of a further reformation through the re-establishment of a national covenant. The Protestation that was introduced into the Commons on 3 May 1641 demanded that the swearer promise to defend "the true reformed religion... against all...popish innovation in this realm". A covenant of the Solemn League in 1643 bound England and Scotland together "to... the reformation of the Church of England". These national covenants were a direct attempt by Puritans to impose a spiritual reformation upon all the subscribers to the covenants.

The advocates of these covenants thus saw themselves as fighting a war between against the ungodly and believed that they were holding the King accountable for breaking his covenant to defend the faith. It is important to recognise the great paradigm shift that took place within the English political establishment by 1646. Puritanism had embarked on flights ten times more daring than the Elizabethan agitation for 'further reformation', and a hundred times more devastating in its political consequences.

The dynamic of the Puritan movement during the 'Puritan Revolution' is evidence that, as a force in the pursuit of a 'godly reformation', Puritanism demanded the spiritual renewal of an entire people that shook the English political establishment forever. In conclusion, Puritanism as a force between the years 1558-1660 to further the English reformation cannot be assessed as a singular movement united under one pursuit at any period. There is no <https://assignbuster.com/in-the-context-of-the-years-1558-1660-to-further-the-english-reformation/>

doubt that Puritanism was born out of a sense of religious and spiritual dissatisfaction centred on the lack of progress of a 'godly reformation'.

It did however have a significantly broader social impact on England that surpassed simply religious reform. As Hill interpreted, Puritanism, most significantly in post-Elizabethan England prevailed as a force to impact upon the practices of the individuals, transforming social attitudes and the national conscience concerning labour and the national church. By acting as a force that sought to transform the culture, via popular opinion, Puritanism was able to make the religious and political advancements by the 1660s that they'd battled for decades.

However, revisionist historian Patrick Collinson has rightly observed that whilst Puritanism was additionally a force for the promotion of distinct social thought "... [it] was merely an outward expression of the aroused inner conscience". After 1590 Puritanism as a political force had temporarily subsided and as there was a profound alteration in religious culture, the desires and aspirations for the pursuit of a godly reformation became internalised and 'reformation' had become an act of continual and deliberate submission to the divine will and purpose.

It is within this understanding of the Puritan conscience that one can conclude the very identity of Puritanism as a force in the years 1558-1660 as of one in the direct pursuit of furthering the reformation. The first generation of Elizabethan bishops shared the Puritanical fervour for the encouragement of prophesyings and individual piety. This internal pursuit and conviction, from which Puritan action was born continued in spite of changing circumstances. The separatism of the 1630s and even the 'Puritan
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Revolution' in the 1640s was the result of this internalised fiery Puritan spirituality in which covenanting with God within either an individual, local or national context was the central and fundamental pursuit of Puritanism as a force to further the reformation.

1. Elizabeth I and Religion by Susan Doran 1994
2. The Emergence of a Nation State: The Commonwealth of England 1529-1660, Ch. 18, pg 147 ' The challenge to the Church: Puritan opposition and Catholic threat' by Alan G. R. Smith
3. Lecture 10 - Early Modern England: Politics, Religion, and Society under the Tudors and Stuarts - chapter 3 - Protestants
4. The Elizabethan Puritan Movement by Patrick Collinson - Moderate Courses - Grindal pg 160
5. The Elizabethan Puritan Movement by Patrick Collinson - pg 161 - ' Anonymous Letter' " It is greatly hoped for by the godly and well-affected of this realm that your lordship will prove a profitable instrument in that calling; especially in removing the corruptions in the court" It is suggested that either Walsingham or Mildmay wrote this letter, but scholars are uncertain.
6. Elizabeth I and Religion 1558-1603 by Susan Doran - Puritans pg 34
7. The Elizabethan Puritan Movement by Patrick Collinson - The Beginnings of a Party pg 51 - Thomas Lever was Archdeacon of Coventry
8. Society and Puritanism in pre-revolutionary England - The preaching of the word by Christopher Hill

9. Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England by Christopher Hill
- 'The Preaching of the Word'
10. Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England by Christopher Hill - 'The Preaching of the Word'
11. The Elizabethan Puritan movement by Patrick Collinson 'The Early Presbyterian movement'
12. The Elizabethan Puritan Movement by Patrick Collinson - 'The Early Presbyterian Movement' pg 135.
13. Lecture 18 - Street Wars of Religion: Puritans and Arminians - Professor Wrightson of Yale University
14. Lecture 18 - Street Wars of Religion: Puritans and Arminians - '38 Puritans were severely punished by Laud acting from the Star Chamber - they were pilloried and had their ears slit off'.
15. Radical Puritans in England 1550-1660 - 'The Two Smoking Firebrands': Laud and the Growth of Religious Separatism - pg 36 - Table 2: Presentments for religious offences in the diocese of Canterbury, 1590-1640
16. In 1634 Lathrop and 30 members of his congregation left for America following the growing pressures of the authorities.
17. The Early Stuarts 1603-1640 by Katherine Brice Chapter 6, Religion, 1603-1640.
18. English Puritanism - 'Jacobean Puritanism: Gestation And Rebirth' - Sir Benjamin Rudyards speech to the Long Parliament "They have brought it to pass that under the name of Puritans all our religion is branded...whosoever squares his actions by any rule either divine or

human is a puritan; whosoever would be governed by the king's law, he is a Puritan...their masterpiece now, is to make all those of the religion the suspected party of the Kingdom".

19. English Puritanism - Puritanism and Society: Towns include: King's Lynn, Norwich, Ipswich, Colchester, Coventry, Northampton and Leicester
20. Puritanism & Revolution by Christopher Hill - ' William Perkins and the Poor'
21. Society and Puritanism in Pre-Revolutionary England by Christopher Hill - ' Conclusion'