

# Religion traditions and democracy in america assignment



It seems odd that Puritans would have much to teach Europeans (or Americans today) about democracy. Destructive in fact outlines how vastly different the New England towns were from what we would call democratic. The leaders who made these laws were intent on enforcing good morals by using the most extreme enforcement. There is virtually no conception of a right to personal privacy. Their laws were based on a literal reading of the Old Testament and were extremely harsh.

For example, in Connecticut, blasphemy, witchcraft, adultery and rape are punished with death. It is a capital crime for a son to say anything disrespectful of his parents. Destructive wants us to focus not on these laws, which he calls “bizarre and tyrannical” (Destructive, 27). Instead, he points out that these tyrannical laws were passed with the “free, active participation of all the interested parties themselves, and that the morals were even more austere and puritan than the laws” (Destructive 27).

It is the fact that these communities were self-governing and independent, with relatively high levels of popular participation in the making of laws, historicalness finds interesting. Even more importantly, Destructive points out that it is the strict morals of the people in New England that made these high levels of political participation Seibel in the first place. In New England, communities combined “the spirit of religion” with “the spirit of liberty” (Destructive 31).

More people could take part in governing society because they could govern their own personal moral lives. They had radical reforms in the way they ran their towns, but would always stop before making radical changes in their

moral values (Destructive, 32). The dilemma emerges when we consider whether this example is relevant today. We live in a multicultural democracy where there is very little agreement on questions of religion. We have Christians, Jews, Muslims and Buddhists and many more religions.

What kind of moral consensus can we have here that will prevent chaos and conflict? Wouldn't a society like ours need to conceive of democracy in less participatory and less moralistic terms than the small New England societies? Probably. Nevertheless, Destructive makes the interesting point that the traditions of the New Englanders, and the political institutions they created, tend to survive for a long time. Often this means that bizarre laws last for centuries (as in the example discussed in class where until recently it was legal for women to go into bars).

But also, there are traditions of civil liberties and democratic political procedures that have lasted a long time too. Often these are adapted to an increasingly individualistic and multi-cultural society. The U. S. Has increased the amount of private liberty and allowed more personal vices to exist than the Puritans would have tolerated. Yet the Puritan traditions like the town hall meeting and local government still play important roles here, and they can offer people a chance to learn and develop skills of governing, while maintaining a stable civil society.