

An Undeceptions Podcast.

EPISODE 115: THE PURITANS

FILM EXCERPT: Studio C, Awkward moment with Puritan Roommate

Link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nc9HTPI1vDE&t=28s&themeRefresh=1>

[00:00:12] Dog, that party was off the chain, man! Okay, first of all, never say off the chain again. And second, keep your voice down. My roommate hates it when I stay out past midnight. What, are we in middle school? What roommate sets a curfew? A God-fearing Puritan roommate! And where were you? Going about the devil's business, no doubt.

[00:00:32] Who is this guy? Jedediah Diligence Breckenridge the Third. And what is your name, you misbegotten spawn of the underworld? Steve. Named after pagan deities, no doubt. No, after my dad, actually. The dad of lies, no doubt. Calm down, Jedediah. I'm sorry I'm late, but it's the weekend. Cut me some slack. Yeah, it was just a party, man.

[00:00:55] Aha! A fiendish festivity that included the offspring of the Serpent of Old, no doubt. Offspring of the Serpent of Old? It's what he calls women. With their flaxen hair and...

INTRODUCTION

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

That's a clip from sketch comedy group Studio C. Depicting a stereotypical Puritan. With his traditional dress, big hat, casual misogyny, and determination to be pious and a killjoy.

[00:01:22] Jedediah Diligence Breckenridge III (which is the kind of name they gave Puritans) is an example of everything that's wrong about Puritans. The clip is a great family friendly take on how many people today view the Puritans. Jedediah is judgmental, mean spirited, and like the rest of his Puritan buddies, he hates having fun.

[00:01:54] The Puritans were a religious splinter group that emerged from the English Reformation in the [00:02:00] 1500s, though they're mostly associated now with the early settlers of mainland America. They colonized New England in the 17th century, and they founded the city of Boston in 1630. Nowadays, the

Puritans are viewed as Christian extremists, with strict rules around speech, work, holidays, culture, and sex, of course.

[00:02:23] They're viewed as a cautionary tale of what a Christian society, if you take Christianity too seriously, [00:02:30] will look like. They've become a byword, really, calling someone Puritanical. is a dreadful insult. Even the American Festival of Thanksgiving, a celebration strongly, but not entirely correctly, associated with the Puritans, is undergoing a cultural re evaluation, with some people suggesting it should be abandoned altogether, because the Puritans harmed First Nations people.

[00:02:56] Our expert today tells us that some of this [00:03:00] bad reputation is deserved. Many of the retellings of the story of the Puritans are more parable than history. It turns out that the Puritans not only had a lot more fun than people think, they were, in fact, the brains behind some of the most treasured aspects of modern secular America.

[00:03:23] Three cheers for the Puritans, I say. Maybe two.

I'm John Dickson, and this is Undeceptions.

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Each episode here at Undeceptions, we explore some aspect of life, faith, philosophy, history, science, culture, or ethics that's either much misunderstood or mostly forgotten.

[00:04:15] And with the help of people who know what they're talking about, we're trying to undeceive ourselves and let the truth out.[00:04:30]

INTERVIEW BEGINS

[00:04:30] I want to begin with the obvious. Broad question, especially for those in my audience who haven't got a clue who the Puritans were. Who were they? Can you give us?

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

[00:04:48] I'm speaking with David Hall, the renowned historian and retired Bartlett Professor of New England Church History at Harvard University. Of course, Harvard was founded by the [00:05:00] Puritans. Professor Hall is the author of the staggeringly comprehensive brick of a book, *The Puritans: A transatlantic history*.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

So when the English Reformation began, and of course it went through stages, and then with Elizabeth became more assuredly Protestant.

[00:05:20] But Elizabeth was a conservative Protestant. She wanted to retain some of the Catholic apparatus. She had a crucifix on her private altar. So within the state [00:05:30] church, within the Church of England, there was a division of opinion about To put it simply, how far the Reformation should go. And those who became known as Puritans, that name was emerging very early in her regime, wanted a thorough Reformation or a further Reformation.

[00:05:48] So they were within the Church of England, a party within the Church of England. But in the Elizabethan period and on through the first two Stuarts, they're a party within the Church of England who say, [00:06:00] Hey, let's... You know, get rid of all idolatry, whatever they characterize as idolatry, so on and so forth.

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

[00:06:13] The Reformation played out differently in England compared to the rest of Europe. King Henry VIII, the one with all those wives, was on the throne when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to a door in Germany. sending shockwaves through Europe. Those [00:06:30] waves made it across the channel to England, where eventually Protestantism would become the official religion.

[00:06:36] As we saw in our Reformation episodes though, Protestantism isn't a monolith, not even in Luther's Germany. A number of Protestant splinter groups soon emerged, including... The Puritans. Puritans reckoned the new Protestant Church of England didn't go far enough in its reforming efforts to abolish signs of Catholic worship.[00:07:00]

[00:07:00] Most Protestants in England had the view that Roman Catholics weren't 100 percent wrong. Many of the creeds and prayers and liturgies of the Catholic Church did retain the truth of Christianity. After all, these things went

back almost to the beginning of the faith. If traditions point people to the grace of Christ, we might as well keep them as emblems of our belonging to the historic Church.

[00:07:25] A minority, though, wasn't convinced. They were so [00:07:30] down on the Catholic Church, they agitated for more and more reforms. A purer Protestantism that signaled a genuine break from the Roman Church. These uber reformers - The Puritans, as they were called - became a thorn in the side of Elizabeth I, as she sought to keep the peace in England between Catholics and Protestants after years of conflict in the late 16th century.

[00:07:57] Researcher AI has written an [00:08:00] explainer of this turbulent period in British history. It's on our website, so check it out. It's why we pay him. We've also linked to an awesome video on the topic, it's all in the show notes. The point becomes pretty clear. There was little separation between church and state in the early modern world, and these religious purifiers in England were seen as a political movement as much as a spiritual one.

[00:08:27] And the whole thing would lead [00:08:30] to dramatic changes in the world. It would lead to the founding of a new world across the Atlantic.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:08:42] We always have to remember the Reformation, the Protestant Reformation, divided into three great branches. The Lutheran, the Anabaptist, and the Reformed or Calvinist. And basically the Puritans are the English and Scottish version of the Calvinist tradition. And eventually in England there rose a fourth version called [00:09:00] Anglicanism.

[00:09:00] What were some of the things they thought were Catholic hangovers? That, uh, brother John Calvin hadn't quite dealt with. The, uh, key issue is the altar and how the whole, the sacrament of the Lord's supper, holy community is celebrated. So they don't believe in altars because that's altar is synonymous with them.

[00:09:22] With the Catholic version of association and the priestly role in consecrating the elements. So [00:09:30] they want to sit around a table and eat bread and wine communally. So that's a very, very different understanding of that sacrament. And another is how ministers are created. Are they created by bishops through ordination and the apostolic succession, or are they elected in some manner by their congregations, their, their parishes, and then confirmed by other ministers?

[00:09:55] So in the Reformed tradition, all ministers hold the same rank, the principle of parity. So [00:10:00] you do away with So that's another issue. And then there's the clothes that the minister wears. And in Geneva, you probably know, many of yours know, that the black gown, the scholar's black gown became the alternative to all those very colorful, seasonal, sacramental, etc.

[00:10:16] robes of the priests. And that became the dress in New England and then New England as well. So those are some of the quick things. One more that most people may not be aware of is that the Puritans on the whole [00:10:30] sanctioned free form prayer. Whereas the Church of England used the Book of Common Prayer, all the prayers are already laid out.

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

[00:10:40] The Book of Common Prayer, which I'm actually holding in my hands right now, was a particular sticking point for the Puritans. They saw that book of prayers and creeds and church services as a ritual hangover from Catholicism. They reckoned set prayers, the [00:11:00] kind that were repeated by the whole church week after week, were a hindrance to true spirituality.

[00:11:06] They lulled people into boredom and quenched the individual's personal communion with God. The prayer book has been the very heart and soul of my own spiritual life for years. But I can sort of see where they were coming from. Familiarity can breed contempt. Repetition is no [00:11:30] replacement for devotion. Anyway, the Puritans tried to significantly revise or even abolish this book of common prayer.

[00:11:39] And when King Charles I attempted to force Scottish churches to use the prayer book, the Puritans inspired an uprising.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

They didn't call themselves Puritans at first. How did the term And did they ever end up owning it? It developed because there are two major or two or [00:12:00] three major sources of it developing.

[00:12:01] And then what the alternatives are fairly clear, English Catholics still hoping to get closer to Elizabeth in the 1560s. began to disparage the more intensely Protestant, and they introduced the word Puritan. And it goes back to linking them with a heresy, a fourth, fourth century heresy. I won't go into that.

[00:12:21] They had no, they had no connection to that at all. It's just completely arbitrary. Are you talking about the Donatists? Yes, right. Oh, right. They compared them to the Donatists, did they? [00:12:30] Yeah, yeah, yeah. The Donatists were a group of hardliners way back in the fourth and fifth centuries, mainly around North Africa.

[00:12:38] They argued that if people hadn't stayed true to Christ during the great Roman persecutions, if, for example, a believer had denied Christ to escape torture or execution, such believers could never Be real Christians, even if they repented their little heart out afterwards. The majority of the church, though, had a [00:13:00] more merciful view, and they called the Donatists Puritans.

[00:13:05] So, calling the 16th century Puritans Puritans. Was an insult with a big history and then what they were they used for themselves was the word the godly We're the godly. Of course, that's a obviously a divisive word And then but by the 1620s some of them are embracing the word Puritan So you see it in titles of [00:13:30] books written by godly people the Puritan this the Puritan that I wanted to ask you, why were they so disliked?

[00:13:37] You know, well, the, so that's a canard in part, a canard promoted in the 19th century by Anglicans who were really bothered by the fact that about a third of the people in England were members of Methodism or Congregationalism or Baptists and so forth and so on. But going back to this, to the early 17th century, just to qualify your question, A [00:14:00] bit.

[00:14:00] So on the one hand, there's a political context of, of antagonism, but actually the, if you go into Southeastern England, for example, almost all the villages and towns are dominated by Puritan style ministers. And there's a, uh, a large chunk of the aristocracy or higher level of landowners who are supporting them.

[00:14:21] I mean, providing money for them and so forth and so on. And Cambridge is very heavily dominated by Puritans. Oxford was always less. So. [00:14:30] The notion that they were unacceptable is, is not the case. I mean, and again, it's a movement with a spectrum of people. There are moderates who get in parliament, get along with people who aren't Puritans.

[00:14:44] I mean, there's a lot of very typical things that are waning in the states these days. Very typical compromises being made at local, local levels.

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

So, King Charles didn't like the Puritans, and the Puritans returned the favour. [00:15:00] When Charles married a Catholic French princess and then appointed an archbishop who liked formality in worship, the Puritans began to dream of a place where they could worship freely without having to use that dastardly prayer book.

[00:15:15] For a time, they went underground, but when they couldn't stand it any longer. They decided to leave England altogether. In 1607, some of these separatist Puritans set sail for the Netherlands. [00:15:30] They settled there for almost 10 years, but they didn't like it very much, so they left again. This time with 103 people.

[00:15:38] On a ship called the Mayflower, they were heading for the new world. Americans now call them the Pilgrim Fathers. They established the second English settlement in America in 1620. That's the famous Plymouth Colony. So, after the break, we're following the Puritans and heading to America.[00:16:00]

ADVERTISING BREAK

FILM CLIP: The Mayflower, 1979

[00:16:02] I see some of you who have sailed with me before. You will remember my Mayflower. Sweet ship to this voyage. She will be sweet ship no longer. Because this time I'm not running taffeta and satins from Hamburg, or hats and hemp to Norway, or wine and cognac from France. No. When this voyage is over and done, the Mayflower will stink, and you will stink with her.

[00:16:24] Sir, may we know the cargo and the destination? Yes, the cargo is Pilgrims. [00:16:30] And the destination is America. Church people, sir. That's right. Church people. Bible thumpers and psalm singers. Doesn't it make you wish to vomit?

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

That's a clip from the 1979 TV movie Mayflower, The Pilgrim's Adventure, starring none other than Anthony Hopkins as the captain of the ship,

[00:16:52] The Mayflower. The movie takes liberties with the history and probably isn't worth your time. I've taken my own [00:17:00] advice, actually the advice of producer Kaley, and not watched it, even though director Mark

says he loved it. But the movie does give a hint of the strangeness of that first crossing with those church people.

[00:17:15] That said, we're more interested in another group of Puritans who arrive 10 years later. This time in Massachusetts, a revolution was afoot in England and more English Puritans were looking to [00:17:30] get out. So, during this revolutionary period in England, Puritans have already started to cross the Atlantic.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:17:38] 1630s? 1630, yes. They start their journeys? Yeah. What prompted them? To say goodbye to the motherland and, uh, head to the new world. Well, they, they, they'd come to the not unaccurate decision that getting around Charles the first was going to be impossible and that the new world beckoned would give them what they wanted, the [00:18:00] chance to practice true religion, what they wanted.

[00:18:03] It wasn't really an economic decision. It was an ideological or religious decision. In fact, it was very hard going economically for quite a while. I mean, all those colonial adventurers lost money in the first decade or so. And theirs lost money in the first decade or so. So they, they were very, very, they came over.

[00:18:20] It was in my book I published a few years ago, I quote them at some length, just how exciting it was to be out from underneath the authority of the crown [00:18:30] to organize churches of a certain kind, ministers of a certain kind. A lot of ministers came over. It was just, I mean, it's hard for us to, you know, but like the excitement in, in parts of Germany in 1520s or 30s, getting out from underneath a Catholic system that had become corrupted or How many Puritans in that, in those early decades?

[00:18:54] Yeah, they're hegemonic. They're really dominant. They had their hegemonic. They're it. Are we talking [00:19:00] 50, 000? How many Puritans went there? We don't know the exact number, but the estimate is by the end of the 30s there were 15, 000 people. But the death rate of children was sharply lower than in England, because the water was clean, not polluted, no cities, everybody's living on, you know, patches of land that are not germ infected, no disease, no bubonic plague, ever.

[00:19:21] So the demography is phenomenal. I mean, children, children died, but, uh, not in the raids they did in England and, you know, all these big

families. And so by [00:19:30] the end of the century, there's a hundred thousand. And was their goal to build a Christian nation? Did they really think of that colony as being a new nation?

[00:19:38] Yeah, a commonwealth. No, we have to think, we have to get nationalism out of our heads. Okay. Yep. Nationalism is a 19th century thing or a late 18th century thing. I'm being anachronistic. Yes, thank you. Yes, yes. So godly commonwealth, absolutely.

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

Professor Hall is adamant. The Puritan idea of a godly commonwealth isn't the [00:20:00] same as Christian nationalism.

[00:20:02] It's a good lesson in not reading contemporary ideas back into history. Take this 1630 lay sermon preached by John Winthrop, who would be the future governor of Massachusetts.

We shall find that the God of Israel is among us. When ten of us shall be able to resist a thousand of our enemies. When he shall make us a praise and glory, that men shall say of succeeding [00:20:30] plantations, May the Lord make it like that of New England.

[00:20:35] For we must consider, that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us. So that if we shall deal falsely with our God in this work we have undertaken, and so cause Him to withdraw His present help from us, we shall be made a story and a byword through the world. We shall open the mouths of enemies to speak evil of the [00:21:00] ways of God, and all professors for God's sake.

[00:21:04] We shall shame the faces of many of God's worthy servants, and cause their prayers to be turned into curses upon us. Till we be consumed out of the good land whither we are going.

This Winthrop sermon has been called the most famous lay sermon in American history. And the phrase, city on a hill, has today taken on a mainly political meaning.[00:21:30]

[00:21:30] But that's not exactly what Winthrop himself meant. It's certainly not what the person who coined that expression meant. City on a Hill comes originally from Jesus.

FIVE MINUTE JESUS, JOHN DICKSON

[00:21:44] So, let's press pause. I've got a five minute Jesus for you. The governor of Massachusetts, John Winthrop, put the expression City on a Hill into the American political lexicon. It sort of refers to American exceptionalism.

[00:22:00] The aspiration that America will be a kind of guide to freedom and democracy throughout the world.

[00:22:06] Australia has its own version, actually. In 1949, Labor Prime Minister Ben Chifley gave a famous speech where he riffed on the same topic. I try to think of the Labor movement not as putting an extra sixpence into somebody's pocket or making somebody prime minister or premier, but as a movement, bringing something better to the people, better standards of living, [00:22:30] greater happiness to the masses of the people, we have a great.

[00:22:34] Objective, the light on the hill, which we aim to reach by working for the betterment of mankind. And you'll still hear Labor politicians in Australia talk about the light on the hill, just as you hear US politicians talk about their city on a hill. But it all comes from Jesus, from the introduction to the famous sermon on Mount.

[00:22:58] He opens that [00:23:00] sermon with the famous words, blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called the children of God. And on it goes like this. And then he tells his disciples that their meekness, peacemaking and all that.

[00:23:20] Will be like great light a city on a hill. Here's the text It's at the front of Matthew chapter 5 if you're interested [00:23:30] You are the light of the world a city on a hill cannot be hidden Neither do people light a lamp and put it under a bowl Instead they put it on its stand and it gives light to everyone in the house in the same way Let your light shine before others

[00:23:55] This theme of a great light for the whole world was [00:24:00] already famous before Jesus said these things. Centuries earlier in the Old Testament prophet Isaiah, we read lines like this, I will also make you a light for the nations that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth. That's Isaiah 49. But the line is repeated twice.

[00:24:20] more in the book. The common interpretation among Jews just before Jesus was that this light of the nations [00:24:30] was the city of Jerusalem. People would one day flock to this city, they believe, this city on a

hill, and they would see the light and experience salvation. Anyway, Jesus takes all this background and applies it not to Jerusalem, But to his peasant students, they will be the city on a hill.

[00:24:54] They will be the great light of the nations, and they'll do so
[00:25:00] through their good deeds. Jesus said, You are the light of the world. Actually, this is the plural. You's or y'all are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden and so on. Let your light shine before others that they may see your Good deeds and glorify your father in heaven.

[00:25:20] It is a historical miracle that these nobody Galilean disciples did become a light on a hill for the [00:25:30] whole world. Not just through their preaching, but through their good deeds, the kind of good deeds that Jesus insisted on in the Sermon on the Mount. We know that Christians were responsible for the very first international aid project.

[00:25:46] They were the first. to attempt to free slaves. They were the first to found public hospitals. They were the first to offer free education for all, and much more. The [00:26:00] original Puritans knew all of this well. Their idea of a city on a hill wasn't about a political takeover. It was about a form of community life that pursued meekness, peacemaking, and love.

[00:26:15] They didn't always achieve it, of course. The Puritans are a microcosm. of all of church history. They're mixed. But like broader Christianity, the Puritans did have a lasting positive impact on the world.[00:26:30]

END – FIVE MINUTE JESUS

[00:26:41] When the Puritans arrived in New England, they set about laying the groundwork for some of the fundamental systems Americans now take for granted. I love how Professor Hall put it in his New York Times article on the Puritans. He writes,[00:27:00]

[00:27:02] *The colonists wanted to keep their new leaders on a short leash.*

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

The most progressive thing they did was to reform the legal system. So they, the first printed code of laws in English addressed to a popular readership with an index that you could look up, published in quantities sufficient for a number of,

quite a number of people in Massachusetts to own copies, was printed in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1648.[00:27:30]

[00:27:30] It's, it's, it's quite an astonishing book and it also is a book which does away with law of French. It turns theft into the, uh, restitution is what you, you're not hanged if you, in England, thousands of people were hanged for theft. Or sent to Australia. Or sent to Australia later on, exactly. There's the number of quote unquote liberties, liberty to petition, guaranteed everyone.

[00:27:52] Men and women. So it's a quite a remarkable, it's even a radical document. Law reform in England was stymied [00:28:00] by the barristers who never wanted law reform. Cromwell had to get law, tried to get law reform and couldn't, couldn't get it. In England, and probably to this day, there's still Aspects of English law that would look strange from a New England point of view.

[00:28:14] But the most astonishing thing is the land was all held freehold. Massachusetts Bay Company was given charter and it never sent it out for rent. Never sent it out for rent. So the English system of only a small number of people having freeholds and everybody else being a renter. [00:28:30] Instantly you create a, let's, let's use a term that's not appropriate, a middle class, a middle class society.

[00:28:37] You know, everyone, everyone has a farm. And do they have voting systems for, for leadership positions? Yeah, and the, so the, so the leadership is interesting. So in, in Connecticut, which was founded almost at the same time by people who left Massachusetts, no governor is going to secede himself. It's only a one year term.

[00:28:53] So it's a rotation in office is seen as immensely important. Actually, after a while, they give that up because they had a very good leader. They [00:29:00] kept him in power for a while. But again, there's a debate among us about how many people could vote. Men could vote. Women, of course, couldn't. But on the whole, it's a fairly broad, probably 40 percent of the men could vote.

[00:29:11] And then when you go to the towns, very quickly, this new structure called a town emerged. And the towns were the ones that had the land. and made the decisions about how to distribute the land. And that's where the franchise became basically universal. Every householder [00:29:30] had a chance to vote in towns, town affairs.

[00:29:33] It was very complicated because there were no fences that we could start off with. So the town records of which I've read endless pages are full of rampaging pigs and, you know, destroying gardens. A pig on the loose will destroy a garden and... no time at all. And then no roads. So somebody has to enforce fences, pigs being ringed, [00:30:00] the thing through their nose, cattle being driven out to a pasture rather than running loose, taxes to cover the cost of all that, paying for a church building built.

[00:30:09] So it's a deeply local culture in many ways.

READING – The Fornicator, Robert Burns

[00:30:16] Before the congregation wide, I passed the muster fairly. My handsome Betsy by my side, we get our ditty rarely. But my downcast eye, by chance did spy, [00:30:30] what made my lips to water. Those limbs so clean were I between. Commenced a fornicator.

That's part of the 1784 poem by Scotsman Robert Burns. It's called, of course, The Fornicator.

[00:30:48] Burns wrote it after he got into trouble. with the church for having an affair with a servant girl named Elizabeth Patton, or Betsy. The local church court, known as the Kirk [00:31:00] Session, could discipline locals for various sins like drunkenness, fornication, oppressing the poor, and so on. When Burns refers to being before the congregation wide, he's referring to the stool of repentance or Cuttystool, where someone found guilty of immoral behavior would sit at the front of church for public shaming. For sex out of wedlock fornication, you also paid a fine called a buttockmail. [00:31:30] Buttock was slang for a prostitute. Burns had to pay it, but he didn't seem to have taken the whole thing very seriously, the way a good Puritan would have wanted him to.

With rueful face and signs of grace, I paid the buttock hire. The night was dark and through the park, I could not but convoy her. A parting kiss, what could I less? My vows began to scatter. My Betsy [00:32:00] fell, la dee dal, la la. I am a fornicator.

“Puritanical” The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as characterized by strictness or austerity in religious or moral behavior. The Cambridge Dictionary adds the belief that pleasure is wrong or unnecessary.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

They've become a byword. To call someone puritanical is a rich insult. It's, it's like being called medieval. [00:32:30] So before we defend the Puritans, is this negative reputation at all deserved? Were the Puritans puritanical? Well, they had a very, very strong view of, and I, as a chapter in my book on, the famous example is the Scottish Kirk Sessions, where people were brought and sat on a stool of repentance and were shamed before the whole congregation.

[00:32:52] And that's a, And, and I extend the word Puritan to the Scottish culture, Scottish religious culture, which is legitimate. But there's what I [00:33:00] call the peeping Tom version. That is to say that people were looking into the windows of every house, looking to see if X, Y, or Z were reading their Bibles or saying their prayers.

[00:33:08] And that's simply a misnomer. So, you know, Samuel Sewall has a famous. kept a diary. We know about it because he kept a diary. He was a wealthy man. He goes on a wonderful picnic and drinks wine and, you know, alcohol beverages were there from the start. It was, we have, we can't read prohibition back into, into the Puritan culture.

[00:33:27] So there's always some slack in this [00:33:30] system. So the Puritan image is really a 19th century creation when it was seen that the 19th century gave rise to anti alcohol crusades in the United States and in England, temperance prohibition gave rise to attacks on the theater. You know, that's really where that image dates from, is from the 19th century and then read back, read back into the 17th century.

[00:33:51] So, there are a couple of these confusions. One is that they were too rigorous in doctrine. Another is that they were too rigorous in behavior. Then there was the old [00:34:00] charge they were intolerant.

FILM EXCERPT: The Crucible

This is a new time, a precise time. We live no longer in the dusky afternoon, when evil mixed itself with good and befuddled the world.

[00:34:21] Now, by God's grace, the good folk and the evil entirely separate.

That's a clip from Sir Nicholas Heitner's film [00:34:30] adaption of Arthur Miller's play, The Crucible, starring Winona Ryder and Daniel Day Lewis, the greatest actor of this generation. The play is based on the awful events of the Salem Witch Trials, 1692-93, which saw 200 people accused of witchcraft and 20 executions, all in the space of just 12 months. The Salem witch trials are

proof for many that the Puritans were paranoid, [00:35:00] superstitious, and deeply misogynistic. They were hell bent on oppressing women. As David tells us though, the horrors of Salem were highly unusual, even by Puritan standards. And it was, after all, the Puritans who corrected the horrors.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:35:17] I know for a fact because, you know, I've read and seen the Crucible that Puritans killed witches in the hundreds and thousands. No, no, no, no, no. Oh, tell me the [00:35:30] truth then. Yeah, so everyone has heard because of Arthur Miller and movies and of the Salem witch hunt of 1692, that's completely unlike the tradition of witch hunting prior.

[00:35:43] So Fifteen people had died as witches in Connecticut and Massachusetts prior to 1692. And mostly they're misfits. Three of them are women who were actually convicted of infanticide, killing a baby. So it's adopt their, that's [00:36:00] really what their cause for their executions. There's no true witch hunt when we come to Salem.

[00:36:06] So compared to the Scottish, I mean, dozens of people were accused, but the remarkable thing is that they could file suits for defamation. There are more suits for defamation that are successful than trials for witch hunting. I've edited the records of all the witch cases before 1692, so I do know something about what I'm talking about here.

[00:36:24] Uh, and I've read about Salem a little bit. So Salem is such a freak [00:36:30] thing. Probably the smartest book on it is by Stacy Schiff, a very well known writer. And she puzzled and puzzled over it, and it's the judges. The judges overrode all the common law rules that were in place. in Massachusetts in terms of this kind of court.

[00:36:47] It was a special court. And, and then you had these girls who were accusing so many people, just really rampant with accusations. So it's a completely bizarre thing and it rose and then [00:37:00] it fell, you know, it rose like a, like a souffle April of April and May of 1692 and by October it was over and then people were, people knew almost immediately that innocent people had been been executed.

HOST, JOHN DICKSON

[00:37:16] There's no denying that what happened in Salem was abhorrent. And yes, we'll be doing a whole episode on witchcraft and witch trials sometime in

the future. For now, researcher AI has linked to an article in the show notes which gives [00:37:30] a rundown of the history of the witch hunts through the Middle Ages.

[00:37:33] And there's also a great clip there about the Salem witch trials from the documentary I worked on with the Center for Public Christianity.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

It became a great weapon in the hands of the... Ultraliberal Protestants in the 19th century, the Unitarians, all of whom ancestors have been Puritans, to prove why they were better than the Puritans.

[00:37:52] Look at, look at Salem, you know, look at Salem. And it's been a weapon in the hands of anti Puritans ever since.[00:38:00]

READING – Children's book *The First Thanksgiving*

[00:38:08] In the fall, the fields are full of good things to eat. It is a time of plenty for the pilgrims. How thankful they are they have food and shelter and new friends. The Indians. The pilgrims decide to invite the Indians to a Thanksgiving feast. Mesoia promises to come. What a surprise! [00:38:30] Mesoia arrives with 90 Indians.

[00:38:39] That's a reading from a children's book called The First Thanksgiving. If only the reality was as rosy as the picture book. Thanksgiving is huge in America. I had no idea how big it was until I moved here. But a lot of people are beginning to question the tradition because of its links with colonialism and the Puritans [00:39:00] treatment of Native Americans.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:39:02] I should say, just so your viewers are up to speed here, the current complaint is that they were Indian killers. And how, and how true is that? Well, it's not true that the, that the colonists in New England came to have any kind of harm done to the, to the Indians. So, the Indian societies in New England were completely different from the Spanish.

[00:39:25] The Spanish had to, they conquered an existing kingdom. You know, the [00:39:30] Aztecs or the Incas or, you know, those, you know, that's all well known. In New England, you just had some scattered tribes with very weak leadership. Not in alliances with each other, typically sparring with each other.

So there was no center to go to and say, we're, you know, we we're gonna make a treaty with you, or we're gonna push you back, or whatever.

[00:39:51] First Indian uprising was in 1675, and then sadly, war broke out. And of course, the Indians were ultimately not, [00:40:00] by the way, Indians fought on the side of the colonists as well as against the colonists. So, it's, it's too complicated to go into because it's so loaded right now with the question of an alternative culture that was not regarded as an authentic culture by the colonists, that's true.

[00:40:15] They wanted to Christianize the Indians, replaced the Indian native culture with the Christian culture, and that itself is seen as a form of violence. So that's killing the Indian, not physically, but in another way. [00:40:30] So it's got to be a, it's a stacked, a stacked question right now. And then there's the Quakers, a new group of Christians who arrived in New England, wanting to preach their own version of the faith.

[00:40:44] This was not okay with the Puritan majority. They viewed the Quakers as dangerous heretics who could disrupt the public order. Yet the Quakers influence grew. So, Puritan leaders banished Quaker leaders.

[00:41:00] And sadly, They even killed four Quakers. It's not quite the cliché one thinks of. Not if we were to count the number who died in England because of being Quakers, we'd be seeing it.

[00:41:09] You know, it runs into the several hundreds.

HOST JOHN DICKSON

It's hard to assess all of this at our historical distance. If we lived in the 17th century, we probably would have found the Puritans more tolerant of religious differences than most people back in the old world of Europe and England. On the other hand, That's maybe not [00:41:30] saying very much.

[00:41:31] So I don't know what to do with that. I do know I feel this way about most historical periods that I've studied, and it all makes me wonder what people will say of our culture 300 years from now.

ADVERTISING BREAK

TAPE – Robin Williams comedy tour 2002

Because you have to realize, Episcopal is basically Church of England, which was Henry VIII breaking away from the Catholic Church, going, I'm the f-ing Pope now!

[00:41:55] Ha ha ha! He broke away, and then people broke away from that church. There were [00:42:00] Calvinists. They found him to be too loose. And then there were the people who broke away from the Calvinists. There were the Puritans, our ancestors. People are so uptight, the English kick them out. How f-ing anal do you have to be for the English to go, Get the f out!

[00:42:15] No, take your pimp shoes and go!

HOST JOHN DICKSON

That's the late, great Robin Williams, in full flight in his Live on Broadway 2002 comedy special. Williams takes special aim at religion throughout the special. A [00:42:30] lot of it is tongue in cheek, but most of us probably feel there's a ring of truth to it. That's how comedy really works.

[00:42:36] The Puritans are well known today for being super uptight. American journalist H. L. Mencken once defined puritanism as the haunting fear that someone somewhere may be happy. Ouch. And it may have started from birth. Puritans gave their kids names based on [00:43:00] Christian virtues and religious slogans. I kid you not, here are some doozies from the parish records of 17th century Puritans.

[00:43:09] Praise God bare bone. Make peace Heaton. Be faithful Joyner. Fight the good fight of faith white. And my personal favourite, Kill Sin Pimble. Fantastic, unless you were the poor kid who got the name Kill Sin. [00:43:30] Then there's Christmas. The Puritans cancelled it. In 1659, the Massachusetts Bay Colony enacted the Penalty for keeping Christmas law.

[00:43:42] They thought Christmas was a rebadged pagan festival with no biblical basis. So for the next 22 years, anyone found celebrating Chrissy was fined five shillings, about 50 today.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

You have written the [00:44:00] most popular misconception about the Puritans is that they were a dour, love that word, crabbed, cranky, mean spirited people.

[00:44:09] And then you say they actually weren't. So tell me why they actually weren't. Yeah, well, my graduate school teacher, Eben Morgan, wrote an article in circa 1940. Did the Puritans have sex? And the answer was no. They seem to have had a lot of sex because they had a lot of kids. [00:44:30] And no one in the 17th century writes about, you know, what it's like to have sex, but there's a lot of affectionate poetry.

[00:44:37] You know, like Anne Bradshaw wrote a love odes to her husband.

READING – ANNE BRADSHAW POETRY

[00:44:44] If ever two were one. Then surely we, if ever man were loved by wife, then thee, if ever wife was happy in a man, compare with me, ye women, if you can. I prize [00:45:00] thy love more than whole mines of gold, of all the riches that the east doth hold. My love is such that rivers cannot quench, nor ought but love from thee give recompense.

[00:45:15] Thy love is such I can no way repay, the heavens reward thee. Manifold, I pray, and while we live in love, let's so persevere that when we live no more, [00:45:30] we may live ever. To my dear and loving husband, Anne Bradstreet, 1678.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

So let's start with, with love. And if we, if we move from some sexual love to the notion that the highest obligation of the Christian is to love each other.

[00:45:51] And, and love means, they use the old word charity, translates as, you know, love, and, and the highest obligation is to look [00:46:00] after others. Not, not be selfish, but look after others. That's not crabbed at all. That's a, that's a sentiment that is in scare supply the United States today. A sense of, it's actually based on one John 14, love of the brethren, as well as all of Jesus's, uh, the great commandment, of course.

[00:46:19] So, you know, we know that they had moments of humor. The humor in this Puritan is a, is a stereotype. Do we have any Puritan joke books? No, no. [00:46:30] Has anyone gone through line by line all the sermons? Are there any jokes in sermons? I can't think of any. The um... But you assure me that they had joy, do you? And when just books were imported from England, just books, by the end of the century they were, they were imported, they were for sale.

[00:46:47] But not too widely read, let's put it that way. Yeah, so jokes. Jokes would be, uh. And that's a poor test of joy. But do you, do you find, um, evidence of joy in their literature, in their [00:47:00] letters and so on? Yeah, yeah, there is. I mean, that's what, going back to the, uh, what I was saying a few minutes ago about the devotional exercises.

[00:47:07] Devotional exercises are not dreary things. So we have to take, accept. You know, there's a long Catholic tradition of meditation, and, in fact, the period's appropriated some of that very tradition, that the greatest joy is to actually feel oneness with Christ, that he's within you. So most people say it comes [00:47:30] and goes as a feeling, I mean, in the journals that we have are the narratives of people's lives that they have, it comes and goes, but it's always there as a possibility.

[00:47:38] And it's always something that's transcending, it transcends all sufferings and pains and so forth and so on. So, that lives on in some nooks and crannies of the Christian world, that sense of suffering can mutate into joy and love. So, you know, [00:48:00] that, that's, that's there. And, and as I say, it's been increasingly recovered in part because women are often the carriers of that.

[00:48:07] And so women's historians have been, have done a great job of recovering that aspect of Puritan piety.

HOST JOHN DICKSON

[00:48:18] Although I'm a little grumpy with the Puritans over their opposition to the Anglican prayer book, as I said earlier, the truth is. There's a lot to admire in Puritan [00:48:30] spirituality. They were devout, not in the grouchy, dark, ominous way, but in an exuberant, Christ filled way. Just google famous Puritan prayers and you'll see what I mean.

[00:48:44] If you're a little skeptical of Christianity, you might find the Puritans too intense. But there is a deep sincerity that's hard not to appreciate, even at a distance. How's this one? Give me the sweet results of [00:49:00] faith. says one Puritan. In my secret character and in my public life, cast cords of love around my heart.

[00:49:10] Then hold me and never let me go. May the Savior's wounds sway me more than the scepter of princes. Let me love thee in a love that covers and swallows up all. They were also big nerds, in a good way, [00:49:30] not that there's a bad way. There's a reason Puritans founded the Ivy League institutions of Harvard and Yale universities.

[00:49:39] Their motivations for doing so were largely religious, but not in the narrow sense. I mean, their idea of a religious education was steeped in the classical model where you integrated all the liberal arts in service of God and his world. Harvard and Yale aren't Christian institutions any longer, of course, but [00:50:00] the gravitas of these universities, the seriousness with which they pursue knowledge was one of the gifts of the Puritans.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:50:08] So tell me about the demise of the Puritans. Yeah, well it takes two very different trajectories, one in New England and in America in general, and one in England and Scotland. So the movement never had a head. It was nobody who was like, you know, numero uno, a Puritan. So once Charles II came to the throne in the Restoration, [00:50:30] 1662, 1660, the Puritans had to leave the Church of England, they became outcasts in the Church of England.

[00:50:37] They were very disparaged, they couldn't attend a university, they, a lot of, a lot of rules about them, some in jail. And then with William III, there was toleration, but they're still a kind of outcast group. So basically, the Restoration ends. Brings, it brings to an end Puritanism as an organized movement with significant support in England.

[00:50:59] So in New [00:51:00] England it, it never took that route. It continuity. Harvard, Yale, a lot of continuities. And then finally the enlightenment hits about after 1740 and. And the other, and then it's paired with, uh, revivalism of a, of a very new kind. And they, the revivalists and the newly enlightened are like this at odds.

[00:51:23] They can't agree on anything. So a great schism emerges by early 19th century and the Unitarian [00:51:30] church in Massachusetts and, and in, and Connecticut and Rhode Island is born out of that. revolt against the traditional version of puritanism. And then puritanism adapts, it adapts. It ceases to be so, so Calvinistic itself.

[00:51:51] A lot of that is abandoned, becomes more moderate, uh, in lots of different ways. So, so then you [00:52:00] have the beginnings of a great industry, which goes on to this day.

[00:52:15] So Puritanism didn't suddenly die or even fail, it adapted, absorbed, and was absorbed by the growing broader Christian market of Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, and so on. [00:52:30] I asked David what he thinks is

the most enduring legacy of the Puritans. Well, the strongest, from my point of view, personal point of view, the strongest one is separation of church and state.

[00:52:41] So the Puritans arrived with a very strong sense that the state should not dictate doctrine, or who was a church member, or who was a minister, or anything at all. The one thing, the only responsibility the state had was to protect True religion. [00:53:00] So in a sense, in a sense, you had a, an established church, but only in a very limited sense because you know, the, the government sitting in Boston or Hartford or wherever couldn't rule on doctrine or couldn't rule on who was administered.

[00:53:15] None of that stuff was subject to civil jurisdictions. So when the, when the revolution came along and And all these, uh, states began to abolish, uh, any state support for religion, it was pretty easy to [00:53:30] do. It wasn't a crisis. I want to ask you a question on behalf of my skeptical listeners, of which I have many, who, for whom Puritans represent all that is worst about Christianity.

[00:53:45] Legalism. judgmentalism, ritualism, Christian nationalism. I know you're going to bristle at all of that, but can you help my skeptical listener appreciate Something about the [00:54:00] Puritans, despite this reputation. Well, I'm going to unpack just a tiny bit before I do that. Let me just unpack. So Christian nationalism, which is rampant in the United States at this moment, all those books, articles, proclamations, begin with the Puritans.

[00:54:16] They are reappropriating the Puritans as the founders of their tradition. And that's actually... They're, they're very poor historians. That's actually not true of the Puritans. They were not, they were so far, [00:54:30] they, they didn't think they were coming here to enact the millennium. That's one of the oldest tropes that's completely wrong.

[00:54:37] You can have a godly society, but the millennium is something that only God knows is going to, you know, that's, that's, that's out there. You know, somewhere, but who knows?

HOST JOHN DICKSON

The millennium, by the way, is a concept based on a reading of the last book of the Bible, Revelation, which suggests in picture language, in my view, that Christ will come to reign on earth for a [00:55:00] thousand years before the end of all things.

[00:55:02] Check out episode 97 for the details about Revelation. That episode's called The Apocalypse. Anyway, some claim that the Puritans wanted to establish this reign of Christ on earth. on Earth, that they were the new nation of Israel and so on. David says, nah, that's not what they were doing.

INTERVIEW CONTINUES

[00:55:24] So they were not that kind of person. They didn't think of themselves as a chosen people in the way that the Northern Irish came to think of themselves, the Northern people in the area or the Boers in South Africa did. They were not that kind of people. So the Christian nationalists were really out to lunch in terms of their, I mean, they have a chip on their shoulder, but the Puritans.

[00:55:46] It's painful to read their books, I'll put it that way, because they're just off base. So, the other side of the story, there's actually a historian in America named John, John Witt, who teaches at Emory. And he writes about human rights [00:56:00] and religion. And he argues that the Puritans were actually among the leaders in the creating of human rights.

[00:56:07] Now, he can go a little too far with that evidence, in my, my view. But I, but I go back to the law book that I was mentioning earlier. If, if, if you're, you're a Puritan despising or a Puritan... Well, Christianity despising. Yeah. Person. I just want to, I'll just tell you a story here about myself. So I was asked in 2010 by the New York Times, [00:56:30] when I used to run, it still runs op ed pieces, but I was asked if I would write one.

[00:56:34] So I began with a story about giving a lecture about the first Thanksgiving. And at the end of it, a hand went up and, uh, I was much younger then, it was 1971. And the person said, well, did they eat turkey the first Thanksgiving? And, uh, to say this was not a question, this was a question I had not anticipated would be an understatement.

[00:56:55] So my credibility vanished instantly. So I began with that. [00:57:00] And then I went on to, I was just finishing a book on pure social ethics, which I talked about equity and love and so forth and so on. And I summarized that book and I Said Hawthorne got it all wrong and the witch hunt people get it all wrong.

[00:57:16] So it was published and I opened up my email and I didn't realize that people got up at 5am to read the New York Times online and much less respond to op ed pieces. I had all these [00:57:30] dozens and dozens of emails.

About a, about a quarter of which were, Oh, thank God somebody is saying nice things about the Puritans.

[00:57:39] The other three quarters were, you know, of the kind that you have just sketched here. So there was a window into how deep this runs in our culture at the moment. I will put it, I'll mention one thing most of your listeners will not know. Harvard has an official hymn, which is only sung at commencements.[00:58:00]

[00:58:00] Most of us couldn't sing it. It's so rare that we sing, but the last stanza had the word Puritans in it. Puritans founded Harvard. I mean, it would not be a Harvard. This word has now been taken out of the hymn. Oh, what? Well, we, for the show, when we edit it out, we're going to track down a version of that hymn that has the word Puritan in it.

[00:58:25] Absolutely.[00:58:30]

[00:58:48] Can you end, David, with just a brief word of what you think one could recover from the Puritans to our benefit? Yeah. Two things. One is, [00:59:00] so when they, when churches were formed, congregations, new congregations were formed, they all wrote covenants. You know, we, we agreed to do this and that. And these are, and I quote several of them in my most recent book, and they're very readily available in various places.

[00:59:14] These are the most astonishingly forthright ethical assertions, you know, we will not We, we, we promise to do all these good things. I mean, it's a long list and love, of course, is foremost amongst them, love in [00:59:30] the sense not of carnal love, but charity, charitable love, looking after people. And so that's, that's, it's quite, it's, it's, it's, I have to say it stirs me to this day when I read these things.

[00:59:43] I know, I know that the day after they were signed or enacted, people began to depart from them. That's just human nature. And the second thing is, if you're interested in spiritual meditation, if you're a Christian and wanting to practice meditation, [01:00:00] if that's, you know, prayer or meditation, there's some terrific stuff there, actually.

[01:00:05] I hesitate to mention a particular source, but you could start with Anne Bradstreet. She wrote a book of meditations for her children, and it's easy to come across. And it's very, very well done and very to the point and very alert to sensibilities and very alert to quandaries. And so I, I would say that

everyone experienced [01:00:30] quandaries, death, sickness, troubles, ups and downs.

[01:00:34] And Puritanism is not an answer for all of those, all of them. But it, it has a wisdom about how life is going to not be just an absolute. You know, you know, there'll be rainstorms as well as sunshine. That's their worldview. And it's, it's a very healthy, and that, for me personally, it's been a very healthy, I don't, I'm not a peer at Instructions, of course, obviously, [01:01:00] but it's been a very healthy worldview to live with as a historian.

END, JOHN DICKSON

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