Putting Down the Puritans


Starting in 1933 with the publication of Orthodoxy in Massachusetts, 1630–1650, and continuing with such classics as the two-volume The New England Mind (1939–53), historian Perry Miller put the Puritans of 17th-century New England on the scholarly map. Without quite intending to do so, Miller turned them into the archetypal Americans, the elect of God with a special mission to create a New Jerusalem. In recent years, however, historians stressing the varieties of colonial religious experience have challenged the idea that the Puritans were all that important.

"In Miller’s tale,” notes Cohen, a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, “the New England saints designed an impressive intellectual edifice grounded on the covenanted relationship between themselves and God only to lament its buckling as succeeding generations failed to reproduce the founders’ piety. [Jonathan] Edwards [1703–58] salvaged the scheme by modernizing an outmoded metaphysics with the enlightened harmonies of Isaac Newton and John Locke, and revivalists spread the Puritan dynamic of sin and redemption to south and west. By the Revolution, the New England mind had become America’s.”
The Puritans claimed a pre-eminent place in historians’ thinking in part because colonial New England left an unmatched abundance of literary materials. But revisionist historians—proponents of the new social history, written from the “bottom up”—are not content with such “elitist” testimony. Borrowing techniques from the behavioral sciences, they have used data from sources such as court depositions and inventories to paint a picture of the unlettered multitudes.

Challenging Puritanism’s significance, the revisionists portray the middle or southern colonies “as somehow more typical of subsequent American social and institutional evolution,” Cohen writes. They even question the Puritans’ influence in New England, suggesting that the region’s “social arrangements derived more from inherited patterns of English agriculture, law, or custom than from religious or ecclesiastical practice.” And they point out that there were other religious forces at work in colonial America: Anglicans, Lutheran pietists, Jesuit missionaries, and a variety of sectarians.

Summarizing what he calls the “post-Puritan paradigm,” Cohen says there is agreement that a turning point in American life came around 1680, after a period of declining piety. But then “the most enduring American religious patterns coalesced, not in the pious sobriety of Puritan New England . . . but in the earnest if stolid fabrication of ecclesiastical institutions throughout Anglo-America” between 1680 and 1820. The two leading revisionist historians—Jon Butler, author of Awash in a Sea of Faith (1990), and Patricia U. Bonomi, author of Under the Cope of Heaven (1986)—differ on the pace of America’s “Christianization.” Bonomi contends that churches and churchgoing grew steadily during the 18th century, Cohen says. Butler sees 18th- and 19th-century Americans as less pious—and more open to occult practices.

Though the revisionists have shown that the Puritans of New England were far from being the whole story, Cohen concludes, they go too far in minimizing their importance. A coherent, comprehensive portrayal of early American religious life has yet to emerge.

The Lord’s Judgment


The English historian Lord Acton (1834–1902) is today best remembered for his dictum, “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.” Behind those famous words, though, argues Zagorin, an emeritus professor of history at the University of Rochester, was a conception of the historian’s duty so stern, and a moral code so absolute, that few historians have been able to go along with him.

John Emerich Edward Dalberg Acton was both a lifelong Roman Catholic and a lifelong liberal (in the 19th-century sense of the term), who feared the state as the chief threat