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The Story of the Puritans

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The word ‘puritan’ is one that we hear occasionally in our daily conversation in today’s society in Ireland and also elsewhere in the Western world. It has a negative connotation, of course, indicating very strict attitudes and practices in relation to morality and religion, ones that the speaker/s does/do not accept. One dictionary puts it like this: A puritan is ‘any person practising or advocating extreme strictness in conduct or religion, usually in a deprecating sense.’¹

Historians, however, don’t see the word like this. We may quote one historian: In an entry headed ‘puritanism’ the author says: ‘In popular usage ‘puritan’ is a term of mild abuse for an overly strict religious killjoy. Historians use it more neutrally to describe a group of ‘godly’ or ‘precise’ laity and clergy in England in the 16th and early 17th centuries who were unhappy at the lack of progress towards establishing a firmly Protestant Church of England, saw the Elizabethan religious settlement of 1559 as incomplete, and wanted to reform the Church of England along more ‘biblical’ lines.’²

Now, while we are conversant with the above popular understanding of the words ‘puritan’ and ‘puritanism’ in our society, it is quite likely that most of us are less well informed about the background to the interpretation of these words as Ford presents them. So here it will be worthwhile and, hopefully, illuminating, to look back and come to a fair and accurate understanding of the historical roots and reality of the movement we refer to as ‘puritanism’.

- 1 *The Cassell Concise Dictionary*, Special New Edition, London, 1997, p 1184.
- 2 Alan Ford in the *Oxford Companion to Irish History*. Edited by S.J.Connolly. Oxford University Press, 2002 & 2007, pp 493-4. Also Wikipedia, p 3. The longstanding debate about the definition of ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’ is studied in the following articles: Ian Hugh Clary, ‘Hot Protestants: A Taxonomy of English Puritanism’, *Puritan Reformed Journal*, 2010, pp 41-66. Brian H. Cosby, ‘Towards a Definition of ‘Puritan’ and ‘Puritanism’ – A Study in Puritan Historiography’ in *Biblical Studies.gospel Studies.org*. UK, 2008.

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THE STORY OF THE PURITANS

THE BEGINNINGS (16TH CENTURY)

It is true to say that puritanism is one of the least understood parts of America's – and Britain's – heritage.³ Puritanism began as a reform movement within the Protestant Church of England in the early 16th century.⁴ It had no one founder, no recognised leader and no [fully] agreed policy.⁵ In what follows it is hoped to outline its beliefs, attitudes, development and indeed decline in England and America in the 1500s and the 1600s.

In 1534 King Henry VIII broke with the Roman Catholic Church and declared himself Head of the Church in England, following the Pope's refusal to declare Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon invalid. Henry had requested Rome to grant this dissolution because he wanted to marry Anne Boleyn. From these developments the Church of England emerged as a Church in the Protestant tradition. But despite Henry's revolutionary move in declaring himself Head of the Church of England, he was not at all really radical in what he retained from the Catholic Church in terms of teaching and ceremonies. His daughter Elizabeth I, Queen from 1558 to 1603, was no more radical in the religious settlement she imposed on the Church in 1559 and, like her father, also kept the Church under royal control.⁶

THE EMERGENCE OF THE PURITANS

But this relative moderation on the part of the two monarchs in regard to the reform of Catholic doctrine and liturgy in the Church of England was precisely what gave rise to the movement we refer to as puritanism. One could say with Bremer, using the heading of his first chapter: what was being called for by some in the Church of England amounted to 'Reforming the English Reformation'. In other words, that were frequently used at the time and later, especially by opponents of the puritans, this new movement set out to 'purify' the Church of England of remnants of the Roman Catholic Church that the new reformers claimed were still to be found in the doctrine and especially in the liturgy of the Church of

3 Francis J. Bremer, *Puritanism: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, 2009, p 1. This 122 page book is the main source used in the present article. Hereafter referred to as *Introduction*.

4 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 4; Wikipedia, p 1.

5 N.H Keeble, 'Puritan Spirituality', in *A Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, Edited by Gordon S. Wakefield, SCM Press, London 1983, p 323. Hereafter referred to as Keeble.

6 Joseph F. Kelly, 'Puritans', in *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*. Edited by Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig. A Michael Glazier Book, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, 1994, p, 705. Hereafter referred to as *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*.

THE FURROW

England. And of course, from this use of the word ‘purify’ arose the names puritans and puritanism, designations that at first were used as terms of abuse pointing to extremist groups. But in time these names came to be accepted by the new independent groups themselves as appropriate labels.⁷ These labels were first used in 1564.⁸

THEIR MAIN CONCERNS

The central concerns of the new independent groups of reformers or puritans in the Church of England were in doctrine and especially in the liturgy of the Church of England. They set out to get rid of what they viewed as unacceptable elements from the Roman Catholic Church still present and operative in Church of England teaching and worship. Primary among their concerns was their insistence on the Scriptures as the sole foundation for and justification of church teaching and liturgy. They laid strong emphasis on the inerrancy of Scripture, or, more positively, the truth of the Bible, as each individual came to understand it. Consequent on the Puritans’ anti-Catholicism they tended to embrace a strong Calvinist understanding of the Church, its teaching and practices and this led to several of the main changes they called for in Church of England doctrine and worship. Their main focus of criticism was Cranmer’s 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* in which they found many objectionable features, chiefly in its liturgical provisions, which to them smacked of Roman Catholic teaching and practice. For the Puritans, then, especially in the reign of Elizabeth, there was a rejection of the Mass and an emphasis on preaching as ‘the only way in which Christians should in normal circumstances receive God’s truth.’⁹ In consequence they emphasised the central importance of the sermon in Church of England liturgy and established a variety of institutions in the Universities and outside them to provide a higher level of religious education for the clergy, so that their preaching would be of a higher standard and of a more informative and edifying character. In this context Puritans placed a major emphasis on the Holy Spirit, his role in our sanctification and spirituality and our need to be open to his inspirations. Related to this heavy emphasis on God’s word in the liturgy was strong criticism of the very idea of the episcopal office and the hierarchical nature of the Church of England. Many Puritans objected to this and

7 Randell C. Zackman, in *The Harpercollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. General Editor, Richard P. McBrien, Harpercollins Publishers, Inc., USA., p 1071. Hereafter referred to as *Encyclopedia*; also *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, p 705.

8 Wikipedia, ‘Puritans’, p 2.

9 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Reformation – Europe’s House Divided 1490-1700*. Penguin Books, London, 2009, p 383. Hereafter referred to as *Reformation*.

sought what MacCulloch calls ‘parity of ministry’ (p 383) and in effect a Presbyterian model of church.¹⁰ While these attitudes were widespread among the Puritans, the official Church of England remained strong in its commitment to the hierarchical priesthood and Queen Elizabeth ‘forced her bishops into disciplining clergy who would not conform to the details of her 1559 Settlement.’¹¹ Also in line with the general Protestant emphasis on sin and the sinfulness of all humanity Puritan theologians and preachers were strong on inculcating the teaching that all people were sinners and even addicted to sin.¹² This linked with the puritan teaching on predestination but also with the firm belief that God is merciful and in Christ gives salvation as a gift to those he chooses.¹³ Given their Calvinist beliefs, it is not surprising that Puritans tended to commit themselves to the doctrine of predestination; Puritans generally held that God predestined some to be saved and others to be lost.¹⁴

LITURGICAL AND MORAL REGULATIONS

Apart from preaching the Puritans sought reforms in the liturgy of the Church of England. Bremer summarises their demands: ‘Puritans wished to dispense with the elaborate clerical vestments that symbolised a priesthood of special powers. They wished clergy to officiate in simple black gowns ... Because they believed that kneeling at Communion symbolised a recognition of the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine being distributed (which they denied) they preferred to sit or stand to receive the Lord’s Supper. Puritans also objected to choral music and the use of musical instruments in church services, because they saw them as remnants of Roman Catholicism and as distractions from the service itself’. They also banned Christmas celebrations. They wished also to dispense with the signing of the cross over infants in baptism and the exchange of rings in matrimony, seeing both as Catholic symbols. Puritans tended also to rename the altar a Communion table, moving it from the chancel [the sanctuary] to the nave of the church for congregants to gather round. They objected to images and paintings representing God, because these tended to give people a potentially distorted understanding of the deity. They preferred their ministers to pray extemporaneously rather than use the set forms of the *Book of Common Prayer*. In

10 Wikipedia, p. 3.

11 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 383.

12 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 38.

13 Ibid, pp 42-43.

14 Ibid, pp 39-40; Paul Hurley, SVD, *The Word*, Dublin, September 2008 p.29; Helen Litton, *Oliver Cromwell – An Illustrated History*. Wolfhound Press, Ltd., Dublin 2000, p 15.

THE FURROW

addition, they insisted on removing prayers for the dead from the liturgy.¹⁵

We may note here too that the Puritans were all still within the Church of England and were regularly able to gather together in local groups and so nourish and strengthen their shared ideals and practices. They were able to continue in this way, because the bishops did not wish to challenge them. Hence, over some years especially in the reign of Elizabeth the Puritans achieved a significant place in English religious life.

Puritans felt called to live an exemplary Christian life following God's law as laid down in the Ten Commandments. Each Puritan sought to make him- or herself a shining light. Keeble says: 'Puritanism challenged everyman to become a Christian hero.' So they followed a strict moral code and were called to make prayer a regular feature of their day, along with Scripture reading. Puritans saw themselves, then, as 'godly', 'saints', God's children.¹⁶ In some areas in England (and America) informal groups would meet at regular intervals to share their religious experiences, reflect on the Bible and so nourish their faith. Despite what many in society today hold, people earlier held that Puritans did not show themselves as 'puritanical' in regard to drink, dress or even sexuality and sex. Where the label 'puritanical' does fit is in regard to leisure, sport and recreation. While Puritans saw an important and proper role for appropriate leisure and pastimes, they ruled out betting of any kind completely; they objected to blood sports like bearbaiting and cockfighting because of the injuries they inflicted on the animals involved. They rejected boxing and football, because they involved violence, and tennis too as it reminded them of the Roman Catholic monks who played it regularly. Bowling was suspect in the eyes of some and the theatre was condemned, because some plays inspired depravity. Puritans were vigorously opposed to any of these entertainments at any time and some others they judged unacceptable if they were indulged in on the Sabbath. They condemned mixed dancing as often leading to fornication, but not folk dancing where the partners were not in close contact. Card playing that involved gambling also met with condemnation. In making these rules and condemnations the Puritans 'developed a distinctive character' and as a result led to others in English society subjecting them to ridicule and abuse. Thus, arose the stereotype of Puritans that exists even today as 'sour, gloomy and intolerant killjoys'. But, according to Keeble: 'The main thrust of Puritan thought was that the way to perfection lay ... through right admission and moderate utilization of the world and the flesh. The

¹⁵ *Encyclopedia*, p 1071.

¹⁶ Wikipedia, p 2; Bremer, p 2.

THE STORY OF THE PURITANS

Puritan neither under-valued nor over-valued them: he sanctified them.'

THE PURITANS IN THE 17TH CENTURY

When the Stuart monarchs replaced the Tudors, the Puritans' situation declined.¹⁷ The two Stuart kings James I (1603-1625) and Charles I (1625-1649), had more negative views of Puritan theology and liturgy than Elizabeth I and so the movement was pressured into directions that weakened it.¹⁸ Nevertheless, it did develop an international dimension as many Puritans moved at first to the Netherlands and later to America to escape the negative royal influence at home and there set up a significant colony. In addition, the so-called Long Parliament of the 1640s and the influence of Oliver Cromwell in the 1650s made the Puritan movement powerful and part of the establishment for those years. However, with the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 under Charles II the movement splintered into Christian denominations – Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Baptist, etc., and effectively came to an end as a movement within the Church of England. Still its influence remained though diminished and remains in English and other Western societies even today. We can now elaborate briefly on this 17th century history of Puritanism.

DEVELOPMENTS IN ENGLAND

The Puritans had hopes that James I as king from 1603 would be more sympathetic to their cause than his predecessor and petitioned him to that effect.¹⁹ However, James, though himself a Calvinist, disappointed them and only in *one* regard met their expectations. This was in authorising a new translation of the Bible, which became known as the King James Bible, the Authorised Version of 1611.²⁰ In other matters, the king and his successor with the help of Bishop William Laud, later Archbishop of Canterbury, pursued an anti-Puritan policy, and leaned in a rather Catholic direction.²¹ They made some effort to force Puritans to conform to the rites in Cranmer's *Book of Common Prayer*. In this context some Puritans began to separate from the Church of England, the National Church, and to hold their own meetings for worship.²² In time some of these Puritans emigrated to the Protestant Netherlands where

17 *Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, p 705.

18 *Ibid*

19 Bremer, p 10; *Encyclopedia*, p 1071.

20 *Encyclopedia*, p 1071; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 514; Bremer, *Introduction*, p 10.

21 *Encyclopedia*, p 1071; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 517.

22 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 12.

they were free to worship as they wished.²³ In 1620 one group of these disaffected Puritans migrated to America, became known as the Pilgrim Fathers and settled in Plymouth, Massachusetts.²⁴

The Puritans were understandably very concerned about the spirituality of their members and took practical means to help them to live godly lives. As Keeble tells us: 'What defines Puritanism is commitment to the continuing process of spiritual enlightenment and development.' So pastors and lecturers devoted much time and effort to 'practical divinity', both in their preaching and in writing. Thus they provided significant spiritual and theological guidance to their followers. This was a marked feature of puritanism in England and it was hoped that this work would influence others in society and attract at least some to join the puritan community. From the moral point of view there were frequent sermons and writings on charity, marriage, government, discipline in the Christian life, covenant, war, etc.²⁵

Things got worse for the Puritans in the reign of King Charles I, (son of King James) which began in 1625. The monarch then, as already illustrated, had direct power to institute policies and make laws to govern the church and the religious aspects of life in his/her domain. So Charles with the aid of several local bishops, especially William Laud, the Archbishop of Canterbury, set about implementing policies that were significantly anti-puritan and sought to roll back puritan influence in England. These policies brought the Church of England closer to Roman Catholic practice and served to undermine Calvinist teachings and alienate the Puritans. Examples of these changes are: Altars were required to be railed [i.e., have a Communion rail], and communicants were instructed to kneel to receive the Sacrament. Churchgoers were expected to stand during the Creed, the Epistle and the Gospel. Wearing hats in church, a common practice [then], was forbidden ... Sports on the Sabbath were explicitly allowed. Lectureships, which gave Puritan clergy a pulpit to preach their views were subject to new controls. In addition, punishments for breaches of the new rules were instituted. These went beyond ruinous fines to the cropping of ears. The books of a highly respected puritan theologian were banned and even the custom of the time of bringing one's dog to church services was attempted to be ruled out.²⁶

23 Ibid p 12; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 534.

24 Diarmaid MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity – the First Three Thousand Years*. Penguin Books, London, 2010, pp 718-719; Hereafter referred to as *History*. MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 535; Bremer, p 12.

25 James Turner Johnson, 'Puritan Ethics', in *A New Dictionary of Christian Ethics*, Edited by John Macquarrie & James Childress. SCM Press Ltd., 1986; pp 519-522.

26 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, pp 517 and 520.

For most of the 1630s Charles seemed to have got his way in imposing his new religious policies. But his treatment of Scotland in regard to these policies led eventually to Charles's downfall. Violent protests erupted in Scotland in 1638 against the religious changes the king was proceeding to implement.²⁷ Charles's critics in England now began an unprecedented collaboration with the Scots and in consequence the whole kingdom united in rage against him.²⁸ The whole issue was now political and even military. Charles was defeated in Scotland and being forced to call both the Short Parliament (1640) and the Long Parliament (1642-1646), civil war began between the king and the forces of the Parliament. A significant element in this conflict was the Puritan dissatisfaction and even rage against Charles.

Some even referred to the longer struggle (1642-1646) as the Puritan Revolution.²⁹ Also significant in this conflict was the Irish rebellion of 1641 in which the Catholics sought to get revenge on the Protestants for their infringement of Catholics' rights. Many Protestants were killed but in England many believed greatly exaggerated estimates of the numbers of Protestants who met their deaths.³⁰ This aggravated the conflict between Charles and the Parliament. Emphasising the importance of the religious aspect of the forces representing the Parliament was the Synod of 1643 which produced a Confession of Faith which was very Calvinist and Presbyterian in form. This divided the Puritans as many were in favour of a Presbyterian church structure, while others strongly supported a looser format that came to be labelled Congregationalist.³¹ In fact in the 1640s and 1650s the Puritan movement in England was riven by emigration and inconsistent interpretations of Scripture as well as some political differences.³² The civil war ended in 1646 with the king's defeat and later after the second civil war he was executed in January 1649. This war saw the rise of Oliver Cromwell to the command of the parliamentary forces and to the promotion of the puritan cause in the 1650s in England.

THE PURITAN SETTLEMENTS IN AMERICA (1630S AND 1640S)

The religious policies of King James and King Charles I brought significant pressure to bear on the Puritans of England in the 1620s and 1630s. So much so that some Puritans felt they could

27 Bremer, *Introduction*, pp 22-23; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 521.

28 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 522.

29 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 24.

30 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p- 523.

31 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 24-5; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 523.

32 Wikipedia, p 4.

THE FURROW

no longer live in England as Puritans. The result was emigration. Many went to the Netherlands, a Protestant country, some in the 1620s and more in the 1630s. There they had freedom to practise their religion and they set up their churches with their own clergy.³³ However, due to political developments there in the 1630s this option became less attractive for the Puritans. The result was that those Puritans who felt they could no longer practise their religion in peace in England or in the Netherlands made the hard decision to travel the hazardous journey to America in the hope of settling on the east coast there and finding space and freedom there to be true Puritans. Hence, as many as 20,000 Puritans emigrated to the New World in the 1630s, so many in fact that the area around Boston soon got the name New England.³⁴ There these immigrant Puritans founded the new colony of Massachusetts with John Winthrop as its first governor. He had preached his famous sermon 'A Model of Christian Charity' as he and his companions embarked for America, thus urging unity among them as they entered a new covenant with each other and with God and set about making New England a 'City upon a Hill'.³⁵ It is important to note that the vast majority of the Puritans in America were not separatists as far as the Church of England was concerned.

They wanted a reformed Established Church, not a different Church, that would be an example for all to learn from.³⁶ Quite early on they founded a college for the training of new clergy. It was [and is] called Harvard in the town of Cambridge.³⁷ While printing was possible here, the colony ignored the *Book of Common Prayer* and continued to preach their covenant spirituality. In addition, each community was set up as independent and was run by local assemblies of the self-selected godly members. This was a Congregationalist church structure or polity and was quite different from the structure of the National Church back in England, which remained hierarchical with its bishops and priests.³⁸ Not all Puritans held to exactly the same theology and so disputes were likely to occur often aggravated by intolerance on one or even both sides.³⁹ One of the most notorious and divisive disputes involved a lady named Anne Hutchinson who felt free to believe as she wished and so clashed with the Congregation's clergy. She was banished from the colony and excommunicated from the Boston church. But she

33 Bremer, *Introduction*, 15-16; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 534.

34 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 535.

35 Bremer, *Introduction*, pp 18-20.

36 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 537.

37 Ibid p 536.

38 Ibid, p 537.

39 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 20.

moved to establish settlements in Rhode Island.⁴⁰ Another offshoot of the Massachusetts colony was the Connecticut colony.⁴¹

CROMWELL AND PURITANISM

Returning now to puritanism in England in the 1640s and 1650s, the main figure promoting this movement there was Oliver Cromwell, who was a fervent Puritan.⁴² He had come to the leadership of the parliamentary forces in the 1640s and was a key figure in defeating King Charles I, avenging the Irish Rebellion in 1649-50, and then setting up a Commonwealth that lasted till his death in 1658.⁴³ As a Puritan he was involved in their preaching regularly at house meetings and like all Puritans saw the Bible as the one true source of faith and morals and he believed in their doctrine of predestination.⁴⁴ Cromwell's regime established a Puritan rule. He attempted to advance moral reform and a culture of discipline by appointing Major Generals over the different parts of the country. He set up a regime called *The Protectorate* in 1653, basically a military dictatorship.⁴⁵ He allowed the return of the Jews to England for religious and economic reasons in 1653⁴⁶ and ensured that the Church of England was run on Presbyterian lines in his time.⁴⁷ Cromwell's Protectorate represented England's experiment in puritan rule.⁴⁸ After Cromwell's death in 1658 major changes took place and puritanism as a movement or religious group basically dissolved. King Charles II (1660-1685), son of Charles I, became king and there was, then, no room for Puritans in the re-established Church of England. As a result the nature of the Puritan movement in England changed radically, though it retained its character for a much longer time in New England.⁴⁹ In fact puritanism in England became 'dissent' or 'nonconformity' and divided into separate denominations, principally Congregationalism, Presbyterianism and Baptists.⁵⁰ Also at this time almost all puritan clergy, estimated at about 2,400, left the Church of England after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, and continued to practise their puritan faith in one or other of these non-conformist denominations.⁵¹ After this, puritan influence waned but continued to be felt in society

40 Ibid, pp 21 & 24.; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 539.

41 Ibid, pp 21-22.

42 Ibid, p 26; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 524.

43 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 524-525.

44 Paul Hurley, SVD, in *The Word*, Dublin, September 2008, p 29.

45 MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 525.

46 MacCulloch, *History*, pp 773-774; MacCulloch, *Reformation*, p 527.

47 Wikipedia, p 4.

48 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 27.

49 Wikipedia, p 1.

50 Bremer, *Introduction*, p 27.

51 Wikipedia, pp 1 & 4-5.

THE FURROW

especially through literary productions such as John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667) and John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678).⁵² However, from about the year 1700 the term puritan was rarely used, indicating clearly the decline of the movement.⁵³

PURITANISM IN NEW ENGLAND (1660 AND AFTER)

The restored monarchy of Charles II had a significant impact on the puritan movement in America. While the Puritans in New England supported Parliament and Cromwell in the hope of establishing a Kingdom of God in England, it is estimated that about a third of them returned to their motherland in the 1640s and 1650s.⁵⁴ Charles II's regime put some pressure on the colonists in regard to opening Communion to all Christians not just official church members, no longer limiting the franchise to church members, and limiting their use of capital punishment.⁵⁵ In addition, new immigrants, who arrived at this time had little interest in the puritan way of life and so devoted themselves more to exploiting the economic opportunities Massachusetts afforded them and practices the puritans objected to.⁵⁶ Still the puritan movement in New England lasted for some decades.⁵⁷

CONCLUSION

It has been said that the puritan efforts to reform the Church of England and the English and American societies basically failed. But in both areas the puritan movement did have important effects: it 'did shape attitudes towards personal responsibility, the individual's participation in government, and the importance of education,' attitudes that continue to define the culture of these countries.

It may be noted again that the stereotype of the puritan and of puritanism in Western societies today as 'sour, gloomy and intolerant killjoys' is precisely that, a stereotype, and is not a true description of the movement itself as it emerged in the 16th and 17th centuries nor of individuals who took part in it then or later. The preceding pages will, hopefully, go some way towards clarifying the true nature of the puritan movement, its spirituality and theology, and giving us a more realistic and truer understanding of the beliefs, religious and moral attitudes and practices of the people we refer to as puritans.

⁵² Bremer, *Introduction*, pp 27-28 and 97-98.

⁵³ Wikipedia, p 1.

⁵⁴ Bremer, *Introduction*, p 28.

⁵⁵ Ibid p 28.

⁵⁶ Ibid , p 29.

⁵⁷ Wikipedia, p 5.