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Neo-Puritanism and Authoritarianism

From Paleo-Puritanism to Neo-Puritanism

Puritanism Déjà Vu

The preceding chapters mostly focus on English and American paleo- or proto-Puritanism creating Great Britain’s and New England’s Holy Commonwealths respectively, and its affinity and convergence with authoritarianism or totalitarianism. This chapter focuses on subsequent and contemporary American or neo-Puritanism, as a variation of what Weber describes as “Neo-Calvinism,” insofar as Puritanism or Calvinism in Great Britain has almost vanished as a major player on the social stage or been relegated into discredit, oblivion, and irrelevance by tempering or competing forces like Anglicanism and liberalism (Munch 2001).

“The old Puritanism is dead, long live the new Puritanism”—that is how America can be in essence described from the Great Awakenings during the eighteenth and nineteenth century to the formal disestablishment of New England’s Puritan theocracy in the 1830s and to the early twenty-first century.1 In short, to paraphrase Mark

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1 In a sense, Puritanism is just about everywhere, including politics (and economy) and civil society or culture alike, in modern America, North and South, East and West, “red” (more) and “blue” (less) states, at the start of the twenty-first century, just as has been before, since the seventeenth century. As expected, this particularly holds true of the South or former Confederacy, where Puritanism in its various old and new forms, names, stripes, and colors not only continues but even expands and reinforces its presence, salience, and dominance. Puritanism is virtually ever-present and dominant in Southern civil society or culture, including the most private life, not to mention politics. For example, paleo-Puritan (e.g., Presbyterian) and neo-Puritan (Baptist, Methodist) institutions, like private schools, universities, media, including television stations, hospitals, etc., are ubiquitous and ever-more powerful or influential, pervading and controlling nearly every part and aspect of modern life in the South and beyond (e.g., the “Wild West”). As a case in point, the Dallas area alone has three major private Puritan- or evangelical-based (Baptist and Methodist) universities, two main hospitals (Baptist and Presbyterian), several large radio–television stations, and dozens of smaller such institutions, not to mention hundreds of religious elementary and high schools. Hence, Puritan institutions as well as policies and ideas represent, to paraphrase Weber, the “most fateful,” if not fatal, authoritarian force or the new “fate” of Southerners and other Americans (e.g., the “red” states) in the early
Twain, the diagnoses, news, or rumors of the death of Puritanism (e.g., Foerster 1962) in America are premature or “greatly exaggerated.” Moreover, Puritanism continues to be what Weber would call the “most fateful force” in America’s modern life, from politics or government and economy to civil society or culture. Puritanism is “dead” as a term, name, or description in contemporary America and elsewhere, for or if virtually no major modern US and other religious groups describe themselves as “Puritan,” though some do as “Calvinist,” starting with the 1830s, which perhaps indicates the degree of discredit or out-of-date of the label even in American history and society. Yet, Puritanism as a concept, vision, and practice is “live and well,” constantly resurrected from what Mannheim calls the “dead past” through permanent awakenings, even becoming again salient and predominant in contemporary America, notably the South dominated, as critical observers (Mencken 1982) stress, by Baptism and Methodism as later-day names, variations, or proxies of neo-Puritanism. Moreover, in a sense Puritanism was never totally “dead,” “gone,” or “out,” though occasionally and temporarily “down” (the 1960s) in America, even following New England Puritan theocracy’s (Congregational Church’s) legal disestablishment in the 1830s. Generally, the above implies that the formal disestablishment or legal separation of Puritanism from state did not become a sufficient condition for its substantive, in Weber’s sense, demise, and disestablishing, or its sociological differentiation from politics and secular society. This thus reaffirms that the legal or constitutional separation of church and state is different from and not enough in itself for the sociological or societal differentiation between religion and politics, plus civil society, in America (Archer 2001; Munch 2001).

Rather, Puritanism has only changed its name, cloths, or colors, especially in the US South following the triumphant Great Awakenings that expanded, intensified, and perpetuated its mastery or dominance up to the twenty-first century. Thus, Puritanism changed its name and cloths into, first and foremost, Baptism and to a twenty-first century, just as were the old theocratic genesis and destiny for New Englanders during the seventeenth to nineteenth century.

Some contemporary extreme or fringe Protestant groups in America and elsewhere (e.g., Holland) still call themselves “Calvinist,” viz. the “Dutch Reformed Calvinists” (Smith 2000:13); curiously there is “Calvin College” in Michigan. Moreover, in the aftermath of the 2004 presidential and congressional elections dominated by neo-Puritans evangelicals or neo-conservatives, the Economist commented that “now, it seems, the conservative rural red-neck Calvinist vote has captured America,” while the New York Times lamented that a “fundamentalist Christian revival was in revolt against the traditions of the Enlightenment, on which the country is based.” Also, the Geneva-based “World Alliance of Reformed Churches,” self-described as a fellowship of almost 80 million “Reformed Christians” in more than 200 churches located in more than 100 countries, apparently has its roots in sixteenth century Calvinism. For example, its leader stated (during a visit to the Pope at the Vatican in early 2006) that these are “churches shaped by the Protestant Reformation and its values,” apparently referring to Switzerland’s own version in the face of John Calvin and his ideas. In retrospect, Weber also identifies what he calls (Dutch) Neo-Calvinism (e.g., of Kuyper) that “no longer dared to maintain the pure doctrine of predestined grace” by contrast to original Calvinism.