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Calvinism and Literary Culture

Horton Davies

John R. Knott, *The Sword of the Spirit: Puritan Responses to the Bible* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1980), 194 pp. $18.00.

Charles E. Hambrick-Stowe, *The Practice of Piety: Puritan Devotional Disciplines in Seventeenth-Century New England* (Chapel Hill: Univ. of North Carolina Press for the Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1982), 298 pp. $28.00.

Hugh M. Richmond, *Puritans and Libertines: Anglo-French Literary Relations in the Reformation* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 401 pp. $27.50.

At the outset it is worth observing that the English and the Americans take a very different attitude towards the Puritans, which is reflected both in seventeenth-century literature and in history. For Shakespeare the Puritans of his day were mean, malicious, pretentious hypocrites, as satirized in Malvolio and represented by the censure "Dost thou think, because thou art virtuous, there shall be no more cakes and ale?" Ben Jonson had no higher opinion of them, deeming them interfering busybodies, as the title of his Puritan in *Bartholomew Fair*, indicates, namely, "Zeal-of-the-land-Busy." Two centuries later Lord Macaulay in his popular *History of England* stated that "The Puritan hated bear-baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators." To the English the Puritans have always seemed to be crabbed and censorious, even fanatical fideists, and they have never been forgiven for beheading Charles I. They are the precursors of Dissent from the established Church of England.

By contrast, for the Americans they were the daring and godly immigrants who from the Mayflower onwards braved the Atlantic and the Indians in order to worship God in freedom. They founded the two earliest American universities, Harvard and Yale. They were the pioneers of the Anglo-Saxon invasions, the founders of a country that has always believed itself to be a select nation. And in twentieth-century studies, largely as a result of the impact of Perry Miller and his pupils and successors, they are recognized to have cultivated the mind as well as the heart and the will. England may still (Collinson and Christopher Hill are the great exceptions) regard them as pygmies, but America considers them giants.

It is no wonder, then, that there are three books all published by distinguished university presses and all written by American scholars on different aspects of the contribution of the sons and daughters of John Calvin in England and New England, which deserve a detailed review. Each of these works deals with an important and hitherto neglected aspect of Puritan belief and practice. Knott's slim volume traces the impact of distinctively Puritan approaches to the Bible and suggests how the sacred Christian text could become the basic source of language and argument for a wide variety of both mainstream and marginal religious movements in seventeenth-century England. Hambrick-Stowe's work is a solid, thorough, and detailed piece of historical scholarship that provides a needed corrective to other studies of Puritanism that stress chiefly its theological and intellectual positions. Seeking to describe the worship life and experience of New England Puritans, it is important for students of English religious and cultural life because it explores the sixteenth-century origins of the church created by Puritans when they were at last free of the constraints imposed by the Church of England. Richmond's study of Anglo-French literary relations in the Reformation period is the most ambitious and thus the most problematic of these studies. Richmond seeks nothing less than a rewriting of our sense of the origins of English religious thought in the sixteenth century. As a result, he is often provocative, but seems frequently to make claims his evidence does not support.

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Knott's title is taken from Ephesians 6:17—"And take the helmet of salvation, and the sword of the Spirit which is the word of God." It also recalls the Epistle to the Hebrews 4:12—"For the word of God is quick and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and

spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." This dynamic or "kinetic view" (as our author calls it) of the transforming impact of Scripture distinguishes the Puritan or Calvinist approach to Scripture from that of Erasmus and the humanist Catholics who regarded Scripture rather as a teacher speaking to human reason (which allowed full play to human guesswork and the use of ingenious allegorizing). The convincement of Scripture was effected, according to Calvin, not by reason, but by the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit. Professor Knott, who teaches English at the University of Michigan, is impressed by the impact of the Biblical images on five different Puritans using five distinct genres.

He is as convinced that there is an English Puritan imagination as Sacvan Berkovitch is of the American variety. He defines his task as analyzing "attitudes taken towards the Bible and uses of Scripture in the work of a group of writers who taken together represent strength and diversity of Puritan prose in seventeenth-century England." He is not primarily concerned with Puritan hermeneutics, or the use of typology in particular writers, but "rather with the images and patterns of thought . . . that shaped Puritan spiritual life and Puritan visions of a reformed society." This emphasis on the absolute priority of Scripture over tradition is the mark that distinguishes Puritans from Lutherans and Anglicans. The two latter groups argued that what was not forbidden by the Scriptures might be employed in church life, as in the summary, *Quod non vetat, iubet*. Such was the obedience of Puritans to the Word of God as their marching orders that they insisted upon finding a Biblical justification for every practice. Otherwise they would be impudent and arrogant and disobedient, dishonoring God and implying that original sin had no hold on them. Their spiritual journey had taken them to Greece and Rome, but the priority of citizenship was given to Jerusalem.

Each of the writers Professor Knott examines so carefully uses a different genre: Sibbes the sermon, Baxter the devotional meditation, Winstanley the radical political tract, Milton polemical prose, and Bunyan spiritual autobiography. Some readers may find that the term is too indiscriminately used to classify all five as Puritans. Sibbes is the only member of the quintet who would be readily accepted by the Puritan brotherhood as one of their members in good standing, and this is the most serious criticism that can be made of an otherwise admirable book. For Baxter was an Arminian not a predestinarian. Bunyan was a Baptist. Milton

was a probable Arian in his Christology, and Winstanley was a revolutionary Digger.

One of the values of this well-researched book is its demonstration that the Puritan plain ideal in oral and written communication did not prevent these authors from exploiting to the full the figurative language of the Bible. The Puritans' sense of belonging to God's elect makes them identify with old Israel as members of the new Israel, visualizing the spiritual life as a continuous battle of the Christian soldiers against internal temptations or external worldly foes of their society. Similarly, all except Winstanley use the Biblical image of the pilgrimage towards the heavenly Jerusalem, with the promise of the Sabbath rest—*The Saint's Everlasting Rest* of Baxter's title—at its conclusion. These are dynamic categories and intensely vivid images.

Sibbes emerges as a preacher of assurance, using the Bible to provide an analysis of spiritual states in order to quiet fear and overcome doubt, and to inculcate a faith that will lead to serenity and rest. Baxter, too, is eager for the rest of the soul which God offers to his faithful pilgrims in heaven, but he also stresses the urgency of accepting the gospel from the scenes of carnage and incineration in his wartime experience as a chaplain with Cromwell's army. For him crisis and deliverance are crucial. He does not emphasize the role of the Spirit as Sibbes does, because his Quaker opponents did so to the diminution of the authority of Scripture. Instead Baxter goes to the Bible for doctrine and moral examples, but chiefly for its promise of glory and rest. This rest is where the cacophony of competing "Anabaptist or Pseudo-baptist, Brownist, Separatist, Independent, Presbyterian, Episcopal" will be replaced by "the blessed concord" of "one melodious Quire."

Winstanley and his fellow Diggers looked forward to a land of Righteousness in which private property would be done away with and the land and its fruits would be shared by all. His digging was an eschatological sign, probably using the example of Ezekiel. As a millenarian he used the Scripture allegorically in a way that would have shocked both Sibbes and Baxter. The authority of the Spirit was primary, that of the Scripture secondary, with the result that it was but a short step from the inner light to the outer darkness. Doctrine and history in the Bible were ignored generally in favor of futuristic predictions of the Spirit proclaiming a victory on earth and not in heaven.

Milton in his polemical writings uses Scripture as the iconoclastic hammer of tradition and as the mirror of the apostolic and

pure church of the first century, which is contrasted with corrupt Patristic and Tridentine traditions. Furthermore, Milton uses the convenient notion that all Scripture leads to charity, when arguing his own point of view on divorce being made easier. His later understanding of the Spirit as reason and conscience in the individual became almost solipsistic, and certainly subjective. For him the enemy was the forcing of the individual by the "carnal power" of a dominating church with its prescriptive forms of worship.

Bunyan's figures have an extraordinary vividness, but he is unwilling—like the regular Puritans—to reduce Biblical images and metaphors to doctrine. On the contrary, he asserts that God's truth is best expressed by similitude. He would have approved Donne's statement that "the Holy Ghost in penning the Scriptures delights himself . . . with height of Metaphors, and other figures, which may work greater impressions upon the readers . . ." (*Sermons* 6:55). His concern is chiefly to express the joyful illumination of the path of pilgrimage in the journey of faith from the City of Destruction to the new Jerusalem. It is both the way for the individual as well as for all Christians. *The Holy War*, rightly highly regarded by John R. Knott, makes even fuller use of Bunyan's inventive powers in explicating the second great interpretative image for the Christian life—warfare.

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Puritans, in conformity with their conviction that God's Word prescribed all God's ordinances for worship and for corporate and individual devotion, rejected a liturgy—which they saw as an engine of soul-control. Romans 8:26 was their proof-text for regarding read prayers as a "quenching of the Spirit" for "the Spirit helpeth our infirmities for we know not what to pray for as we ought"—so the Scripture taught. The value of Charles Hambrick-Stowe's excellent book is that, by a study of the sermons, diaries, autobiographies and biographies of the American Puritans, he has delineated in great detail the devotional disciplines of the Puritans on this side of the Atlantic. It is a study parallel to Gordon Wakefield's on the English side. Hambrick-Stowe is an United Church of Christ pastor whose book gained the Jamestown Prize for Early American History for 1980. As an ordained man in the Puritan tradition, he has an existential concern for the spiritual life; yet his training under such experts in the Puritan tradition as John von Rohr, A. D. Hall and Norman Pettit, coupled with his own brilliance as an analyst, mean that this book has also the objectivity of the historian.

His claim is that Puritanism has long been treated as an intellectual or a social movement, yet it is at heart "a devotional movement rooted in religious experience." He insists that the Puritan techniques of spirituality are not, as Perry Miller and Louis Martz imply, a late development, but are basic from the beginning of the movement; nor, as is often supposed, did they concentrate exclusively on conversion. In fact, he insists, they dealt chiefly with the post-conversion experience of the growth in grace in the pilgrimage towards heaven. (The pilgrimage motif appears again as central to Puritanism, as it is in Christianity itself.) Our author's conclusion after these rigorously analytical studies is that we can now accurately speak of the Puritan "contemplative" as well as the Puritan "active."

Even in examining the devotional regimen of Cotton Mather, Hambrick-Stowe shatters the stereotype of Puritan devotional life. It was neither crippling in its intense self-anxiety, nor merely mechanical. It lifted Mather from self-abasement to ecstasy. However rational the theology of Puritanism was, and its sermons modelled on doctrine, reason, and use, devotional exercises reached the affections. Further, as the examples of Thomas Shepard, Anne Bradstreet, and Cotton Mather demonstrate, their devotions led to mystic unity with Christ and to rapture. It was not because, as in Catholicism, the mystic activated the spark of God in the soul or climbed up the secret inner stairway through asceticism and contemplation, but it was the conviction that God the Holy Spirit raised the soul to Christ.

Perhaps the most important contribution of this remarkably well-researched volume is the demonstration of the relative unanimity among Puritans, whether they use a pilgrimage image, or a horticultural figure, in describing the Pauline stages on the pilgrimage of the Christian life. This is well exemplified, we are informed, by Thomas Hooker's comment on Romans 8:30: "Christ by the vertue of his Resurrection, and the power of his Spirit, he doth rescue the soul, and humble him, and call him, and justifie him, and sanctifie him, and glorifie him, and then deliver him up to the Father at the great day." Hambrick-Stowe contends that the ten stages or steps of the Puritan pilgrimage are as clearly seen in the Elizabethan Perkins as in Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* published almost a century later.

It is refreshing to see the stress put upon the Puritans' enjoyment of the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, held from six to twelve times a year, with large attendance. Although prepared for

by careful introspection, it was a happy means of grace. Shepard and many like him found the receiving of the bread and wine "were not only seals to assure me that Christ's word should be made good to me believing, but also that Christ by sacramental union was given to me." The delight in the Sacrament was a very significant experience to Shepard, Cotton Mather, and the minister-poet, Edward Taylor. The author's concluding sentence, as much else in this book, is worth quoting: "The Puritan contemplative demonstrates the rigorous culmination of a pervasive spirituality in which the entire populace participated."

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Hugh M. Richmond's book relates religion much more directly with literature, and he shows that the impact of the Reformation, especially in its Calvinist and Huguenot manifestation in the French royal family and the courtiers, was an ambiguous one indeed. *Puritans and Libertines* demonstrates that it could inspire the Puritans in France or Navarre to a determination to purify the Church and their morals, while the iconoclasm of other supposed Protestants could lead them to a convenient antinomianism and skepticism.

He proceeds from the claim that the Italian influence on English literature has been grossly exaggerated, so that the impact of French manners and French thought on English writers has been profoundly undervalued. He substantiates this claim by such general considerations as the greater proximity of France (as compared with Italy) to England, and the greater knowledge on the part of some English courtiers of French than Italian. He also rightly insists that the intense and extraordinary vigor of French intellectual life was promoted by the intense religious struggles between Catholics and Calvinists in France, which even reached the royal family during the reigns of Francois I and Henry IV, and was manifest splendidly in the court of Navarre under Queen Marguerite of *Heptameron* fame—a court where Marot and even Calvin for a while found asylum from religious persecution. Richmond is intrigued by the astonishing parity in the status of men and women in that court presided over by a woman of courage and high independence, where almost every kind of opinion was offered, especially in sexual matters. It showed also a curious ambivalence, as the *Heptameron* indicates, where at the same time marriage was praised for its fidelity and as the strong basis of society—a marriage further that was to be discussed by parents

before ventured on—yet it was to be defended in the struggle between men and women by dubious devices.

The fullest space in this learned volume is reserved for the impact of the French court on the English court and the writers of the English nation. Anne Boleyn, daughter of the English ambassador in Paris, was a striking representative of the newly sophisticated "dark lady" of the court whose courage and independence and intelligence won Henry VIII's passion, but also proved her downfall. Moreover, in his last play, *Henry VIII*, Shakespeare painted her portrait, as in his early *Love's Labour's Lost* he had depicted the fascinating court of Navarre.

The rest of this intriguing book shows in great detail the impact of French writers on English literature, as seen in the challenge to conventional Petrarchan modes of love poetry by French poets like Ronsard (a Catholic), and the Protestants turned libertines, Théophile de Viau and his friend Marc-Antoine de St. Amant, which influenced many English poets. Furthermore, he documents the effect on Spenser and Milton of the revolt of the Huguenot poets, Du Bartas and d'Aubigné, against pagan and sensual classicism. Finally, he insists that the profound ethical and psychological discussions of marriage among the emancipated ladies of the court of Navarre are mirrored in the attitudes of a series of Shakespearian heroines from Beatrice to Cleopatra, and in the women of Chapman and Webster among Jacobean writers.

This work certainly corrects the over-attribution of Italian influence on sixteenth-century English literature. But it may also overstate its own case. It is one thing to trace the source of ideas to a country, France; it is quite another to trace them to written sources, and even to argue that specific citations come from a particular source because of a similarity of thought. Still, this is an exhilarating work of scholarship (even if this appropriate adjective is misspelled on p. 130) in the light of Richmond's evaluation: "Humanism became elitist, backward looking, and conformist, while Reform became popular, radical, and iconoclastic."

Princeton University