

Unity in Diversity: English Puritans and the Puritan Reformation, 1603–1689.

Randall J. Pederson.

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The question of how historians might accurately define Puritanism has been the cause of significant angst in studies of early modern religion. While it may not offer the definitive answer, Pederson's book makes an important contribution to answering this vexed

historiographical question. Recently, a number of historians have suggested that the term Puritanism be abandoned in favor of discussing a range of Puritanisms. This book attempts to rebut this position, and instead argues for the continued viability of speaking about Puritanism as a cohesive movement marked by “unity in diversity.”

The title of the book highlights the main feature of Pederson’s argument. While Puritanism was not monolithic (so it cannot, for example, be reduced to ideas of the centrality of the covenant or predestination), it was cohesive enough to be a recognizable form of orthodoxy. This orthodoxy is defined around a series of theological strands, focused on the doctrine of God, predestination, the covenants of work and grace, justification and sanctification, law and gospel, and the importance of personal piety. While not all Puritans agreed upon everything in these categories, Pederson argues for a general consensus that could accept some diversity within it.

In developing this thesis, Pederson attempts to trace this consensus not just in those who wrote full systematic theologies (such as William Perkins), but in divines who worked across a range of genres and topics. This guides his focus on figures who often appear in examinations of Puritanism, but have rarely been made the center of scholars’ attention: the precisianist John Downname (1571–1652), the Parliamentarian mystic Francis Rous (1580/81–1659), and the antinomian preacher Tobias Crisp (1600–42/43). With each figure, Pederson presents detailed case studies highlighting the social, political, and theological contexts of their preaching and writing, before tracing their theological concerns through his six categories. While this reveals some differences between the figures on specific doctrines (especially concerning the way in which believers should gain assurance), it also persuasively presents a wider theological consensus and suggests that Puritans were more tolerant of internal disagreement than their critics might suggest. His reiteration of the importance of a godly life for Puritans, something that was considered as important by the antinomian Crisp as by Downname, is a particularly helpful reminder of a core feature of seventeenth-century Protestantism.

Pederson’s thesis is persuasive, and the book represents a conscious attempt to move the field of Puritan studies forward while retaining a consistency of definition in identifying its central object. The fashion for talking of Puritanisms is rightly seen as opening the subject to the danger of putting individual figures above the wider society they were located within, as if there were no mainstream and fringe. Yet as persuasive as this book is, a central tension remains unresolved. While Pederson criticizes those scholars who have taken a certain doctrine as a baseline for orthodoxy, his categories nonetheless presume the need for some sort of a priori standard of Puritan theology to be established before definition can be made. He makes it clear that this basis should be the Westminster Assembly and its attempts to clarify orthodox doctrine. While this allows Pederson to emphasize the importance of opposition to Arminianism and anti-Trinitarianism in his definition, at times it produces difficulties; for example, when he admits that the assembly recommended Crisp’s sermons be burned after his death (211). Likewise, the question of those who have generally been viewed as Puritans but do not fit into this template leads to some clouding of his definition by the book’s end.

John Goodwin is seen as a “hybrid” Puritan, and John Milton and Joseph Hall are discussed in terms of “puritan phases” (302–03). This appears to suggest that the conclusion Pederson reaches is not quite as clear as he suggests, although he does recognize the inherent difficulty in categorizing those on the “edges” of Puritanism (305).

Nonetheless, this book represents an interesting and provocative approach to a historiographical question that continues to be of central importance to those working on seventeenth-century religion. That it also provides excellent studies of underexamined figures such as Rous and Crisp only adds to its value.

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