

Puritan Beliefs



Time Line overview

- 1560 • The complete Geneva Bible is published in English.
- 1603 • Queen Elizabeth I of England dies. James I of England named heir.
- 1606 • Virginia Company of London is granted royal charter; sends 120 colonists to VA.
- 1607 • Jamestown, first English settlement on American mainland is founded.
 - William Bradford and other Separatists move to the Netherlands.
- 1609 • Publication of *Shake-speares Sonnets: Never Before Imprinted*
- 1611 • Publication of the *King James Version of the Bible*
- 1620 • The Mayflower leaves England and reaches Cape Cod after 64 days
 - Signing of the Mayflower Compact
- 1621 • William Bradford becomes leader of Plymouth Colony
- 1628 • Thomas Taylor publishes book-length sermon, *Meditations from the Creatures*.
- 1649 • Charles I of England beheaded
 - England declared a Commonwealth
- 1650 • First coffee house opens in England.

Colonial Puritan Beliefs

- The books of the Bible were history, both Old and New Testament.
- Individual words, like images, are a tool to gain an understanding of God.
- The works of the Bible are physical evidence of God's laws and ideas.
- God spoke through the prophets and through Christ—not metaphorically, but in a realistic sense.
- The Puritan migration to the New World was sanctioned by *church and God*.
- Oftentimes they would interpret the Bible in order to sanctify their actions.
- They would look for symbols in the text to justify their actions.
- This is similar to the religious doctrine of **typology** — reading an Old Testament passage to show how it predicts an event in the New Testament.
- In the Puritans case, they would use the Bible as a means of foreshadowing their own experiences in the New World. They considered New England as the New Jerusalem, the Promised Land. By reading and re-reading the Bible, they sought **symbols** and **analogies** of the presence of God, and applied these to the existing world around them.

Colonial Puritan Beliefs > Nature

- The Natural World was meant to show spiritual teachings.
- God provided lessons everywhere in the Material World.
- Hierarchies in nature compliment hierarchies of human condition and predict the consequences waiting them in Heaven.
- God made Nature to mirror Heaven, the world itself is a metaphor.
- Humanity needed to keep this in mind on a daily basis.
- With the Bible as a model, the Puritans wanted to create a perfect society and church—on their terms.
- By manipulating the images in the Bible in their own unique translation the Puritans could establish a sense of order to a traditional chaotic system of Nature. The world itself was a text, a language on to itself.
- Since God created Nature then a sense of understanding and order should be achievable within the wilderness.

William Shakespeare || Sonnet 126

O thou, my lovely boy, who in thy power
Dost hold Time's fickle glass, his fickle hour;
Who hast by waning grown, and therein show'st
Thy lovers withering, as thy sweet self grow'st.

If Nature, sovereign mistress over wrack,
As thou goest onwards, still will pluck thee back,
She keeps thee to this purpose, that her skill
May time disgrace and wretched minutes kill.
Yet fear her, O thou minion of her pleasure!
She may detain, but not still keep, her treasure:
Her audit (though delayed) answered must be,
And her quietus is to render thee.

Meditations from the Creatures

To show a Puritan example, **Thomas Taylor**, a Minister, published in London a book-length sermon titled *Meditations from the Creatures*.

- A full version of this sermon is available on the class web-site.
- This sermon is based on his meditations of a translation of Psalms 8:3:

When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the star,
which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and that
thou visitest him?

Meditations from the Creatures

In the opening sentences Taylor states:

Considering with myself of the benefit of meditation, together with the difficulty of it, which hath almost worn it out of use amongst Christians, I thought fit to afford a little helpe, to lead up careful Christians into this mount of Meditations: in which mount God will be seene... Who can discern the darkness of his mind, and not open his windowes, and hereby let in some light into his dark house? Now as the Lord himself, his Words and Decrees, are the principall object of Ordinary Meditation: so are his workes and execution of his decrees fit object for extraordinary (meditation). Whereby wee have not onely a sensuall use of the Creatures, as the brut beast: but a spirituall; and profit not onely our bodies, but our soules by them.

Meditations from the Creatures

When Taylor uses the word sensual, he does not mean the modern connotation pertaining to a sense of irreligious, somewhat materialistic emotion—*rather* he means:

- all animals are of the earth
- they are physical evidence to our senses of God's work
- they offer humans both a physical as well as spiritual use.

Taylor insists that good Christians should meditate on the benefits of all creatures, one by one, in order to find a stronger connection with God.

Meditations from the Creatures

He also states:

The voice of God is in all creatures and by them all speaketh unto us always and everywhere.

- Meditation on the physical world lifted one to the thoughts of God and to His affections —not *denying* the physical, but *reflecting* on it to better the self, *and* the soul.

Prayer as Meditation

- Prayer was encouraged as a spiritual exercise.
- The Puritan writings avoided worship of images, but expected the individual to transcend the images, to seek out a higher purpose for the image.
- Looking back on what we discussed regarding the First Americans and ordinary man-made objects having spirits, the Puritans of course would have looked on this as idolatry, as a pagan ideology.
- These beliefs of course are mirrored in all of their literary work.