

Teaching a course in "Western Meditation" with a Jew and a Catholic has forced me to do some meditating about my third of the troika, "Protestantism," which was a protestant movement against Catholicism, which was a protest movement against wildly fissiparous early Christianity, which was a protest movement against Judaism, which was a protest.... You get the idea: our spiritual movement, which is latterly called "Western," is anti-establishmentarian and pro-"radical" [return/progress to the "roots"] from Israel's prophets onward. My four grandparents are splayed out over the "Protestant" terrain: a Lutheran, a European Calvinist ["Reformed"], an Anglican, and a wet Congregationalist ["Baptist," into which confession I was baptized as a confessor (after at age 12 having had less-water Methodist baptism) and ordained, and now have ordination standing, after Congregational-Christian standing, in the United Church of Christ, which is Congregational, "Christian" [Campbellite or "Disciple," a communion of American origin], Lutheran ["Evangelical"], and Calvinist ["Reformed," which in England was Puritan, which brings us to the tradition-focus of this thinksheet]). I have presented my spiritual pedigree not to credentialize myself for making a Puritan statement but to identify myself with the messy, glorious, shameful, hopeful stream of history-making behind and within "Puritanism," which is more my stream than is any of the other m-g-s-h human streams. *More than he's anything else, Willis is "a Puritan."*

Like all ways of seeing and living in the world Puritanism has its virtues and limitations, its life-releasing and its life-frustrating potentialities, its powers and its temptations, its Il Penseroso and its L'Allegro [meditative/active] versions and tensions. Known now, in the popular mind, in its degenerate forms--uptight moralism, insensitive legalism, rapacious capitalism, and self-styled benevolent imperialism--its roots are profoundly meditational, and it's this quality I'd like you to meditate on for the rest of this thinksheet on the original "Puritan vision and life-version." [Whoa! You might want to meditate on the greatness of Puritanism indirectly by meditating on the magnificence of its corruptions--its global hubris, the only Prometheanism on which "the sun never sets": greatness gone sour is still, though demonic, greatness, which is to say unbereft of the divine. We WASPs are going down proud as well as--some of us, including me--penitent, and in danger of being proud that we have more to repent of than "lesser breeds without the law"(our racism), and--in the case of us males (WASPMs)--than "the weaker sex" (our sexism). Ah, the mystery and complexity of good and evil!So here's my list of the characteristics of Puritanism, with attendant character, corruptions, and caricatures:

1
THEOCENTRIC GRATITUDE

We Americans, under the fervors and fevers of World War II, added "under God" to our Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag. No matter how embarrassing to pluralism, the addition signals the heart of Puritanism as the most influential strand in the original "American way of life." "Man will serve God or tyrants," said the founder of Pennsylvania: the American ethos is secondarily democratic [PEOPLE-ruling] not in the sense of egalitarian levelling [which is a secular misunderstanding and secular version of democracy] but specifically vis-a-vis its being theocratic [GOD-ruling], i.e. "under God," who is both sovereign (and therefore occasions ultimate faith) and gracious (and therefore occasions intimate trust). What overwhelms us Puritans in our daily meditation is the mood of gratitude to the biblical God, in whom converge nature and grace, the ultimate and the intimate, the lordly and the lowly. [Over my desk at the seminary is a huge rendition of Rouault's "The Robing of Christ" the servant-lord, a royal robe of power mockingly put on the shoulders of the Powerless One whose paradoxical power points more persuasively, for me, to the heart of reality and of the human condition than does any other power. And yesterday, after hearing a young preacher, I put in his pocket a 3x5

of which are temptations to Puritans, along with philistinism [esthetic insensitivity and censoriousness, with suspiciousness of beauty and of image (therefore, iconoclasm)], death-of-a-salesman successism, self-righteousness, left-brain dominance [intellectualism, rationalistic reductionism], mystery bad-mouthing, and tough over tender.

reading "Your sermon shows you perplexed about Jesus, but I would rather you be perplexed about him than clear about anybody else."] This note of grateful joy is, of course, not exclusively Puritan or even exclusively Christian. It permeates Jesus' favorite book, Second Isaiah, in which the complementary notes of immanence-servant-intimacy (chap.53) and transcendence-lord-ultimacy (chap. 55) are kept in creative tension. But Puritanism is intensely biblical in feeling and living this paradoxical joy in grace, to which joy in nature is subserviently complementary [the Apollonian in control of the Dionysiac]. Joyful response to God's coming to us in and as Jesus, who is victorious over all the life-denying forces, frees us to live with confidence in "providence" and therefore to labor with hope as we daily attend to the Word converging "the internal testimony" of Spirit, spirit, Scripture, history and the here-and-now action of God in heart and history. [Therefore, daily meditation on Scripture these 30 years in our home as couple-family; and, in my case, a third century of daily reading of Scripture in the original languages. No special virtue; just normal Puritan behavior.]

INTEGRITY

2

We Puritans see ourselves not obsequiously-superstitiously "under the gods" but rather "under [the biblical] God" of truth and love, who says in both Testaments "Be holy, for I am holy." This vision and commitment rejects the individual/social dichotomy: my heart and home and society all stand under the same blazing judgment of divine truth, demanding the rejection of the self-serving lie, the false image, and the pseudo-event--and insisting on reality against narcissistic fantasy, accuracy against duplicity, and independent judgment against conformism. The motive of zeal to glorify God is engined by the mood of gratitude to God for salvation in Jesus Christ, whom the lie killed, whose life and death and resurrection answer Pilate's question, "What is truth?" Here lies the root of English criticism [such as Wm. Law's influential classic A SERIOUS CALL TO A DEVOUT AND HOLY LIFE] and radicalism [e.g., that author's work with the poor, and the British Labor Party]. And here is the strongest encouragement given to the pursuit of knowledge both as experiment ["science"] and as education [the public school movement, and higher education: Harvard, Yale, Chicago, America's great private universities]. The so-called Founding Fathers should be scored for their spotty application of "freedom," but more remarkable is their personal adherence to the tough, costly values that cluster under the character-designation "integrity." In truth, the biblical lord-servant model gave them a resources range for facing the new.

RESPONSIBILITY

3

We Puritans "under God" are responsible to God for the way we treat his creation, including ourselves. He won't finally tolerate a Faustian incurvature of desire or a Promethean arrogance of power corrupting vision and therefore self and society and nature. When this "fear of God" is weak, confidence becomes self-made-man overconfidence: confidence of self/society in God degenerates into confidence in self/society [e.g., Laissez-faire and Marxism]. God's grace includes his grace-gifts ["charisms"] as well as nature-gifts ["talents"], and both are to be developed for his glory and the good of his creation: therefore, prayer, meditation, education, self-restraint, hard work ["the Puritan work ethic"], and reliability. The judgment overarching and completing this discipline is "accountability": God gives us gifts that make us lords and obligations to use them that should make us servants who, within the sphere of the gift of freedom, accept the burden of choice and the consequences of our decisions, balancing introspection and action and condemning greed, puristic withdrawal [evading politics with its necessary compromises], scribism [evading worldly ambiguity by imposing holy-book constructs], moralism, legalism, neurotic guilt detached from biblical forgiveness, repressive id [versus deferred gratification], the authoritarian personality, and self-justification--all