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Book review

November 22, 1991

HST 325

Dr. Miller

A Critique of Samuel Eliot Morison's The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England (New York: New York University Press, 1936).

Puritanism's dominance in colonial New England and its subsequent influence on American character and institutions both has been praised and condemned by historians, depending on their personal views on how good or bad such influences were--or are. Samuel Eliot Morison in The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England,[1] while willing to admit to their errors, takes a highly positive view of them. While Morison's book here is fairly objective, in some cases a subtle bias creeps in that causes him to fail to point out Puritanism's weaknesses enough.

Morison was a Harvard historian who appears to have worked very hard in his field, and was fairly conservative politically: he strongly supported the Cold War, condemned moral relativism, and zealously condemned Charles Beard's anti-interventionism during and after World War II. He worked for the U.S. government as an official historian right after World War II. He also, being influenced by Ulrich Phillips's work on slavery, bought into a fairly racist view of ~~the~~ blacks who labored under the "peculiar institution."[2] Fortunately, since blacks composed only a very small part of 17th century New England's population, the latter bias isn't of much concern here.[3]

Morison in this work describes the intellectual institutions and vehicles by which the Puritans promoted their theology in New England colonies of the 17th century. Since Puritanism was a highly intellectual form of Christianity, it created educational institutions to propogate its beliefs much as scholasticism created such institutions in the Middle Ages. Morison's emphasis is (p. 5) on those Puritans born and/or raised in New England, as opposed to those who came over as adults in the first generation. For instance, the earliest poetry (p. 212), history (p. 177-178), and sermon-making prose (p. 153) was considered by Morison to be really more by

should be placed at the end of sentence

[1]Samuel Eliot Morison, The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England (New York: New York University Press, 1936).

[2]See Peter Novick, That Noble Dream The "Objectivity Question" and the American Historical Profession (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 182, 229, 290, 292, 302, 315-316, 350.

[3]The slavery issue doesn't concern him much here, since the book is on intellectual institutions, although the slavery that did exist in this place and time gets more attention elsewhere. Thomas Jefferson Wertenbaker, The Puritan Oligarchy (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1947) mentions how Cotton Mather approved of being given a slave by his congregation (p. 198). This latter work shall pose as what book I will compare Morison's with.

so they don't get too much coverage here.
transplanted Englishmen, and not by New Englanders proper, ^ He describes such educational institutions as Harvard College, the "grammar" (secondary) schools, and the elementary schools, including their background in English schools (which contained many valuable insights on this connection--the New England schools didn't pop up out of a prior cultural void), how extensive literacy really was, and the Puritans' motives for establishing their educational efforts. He then goes through the means by which the Puritans expressed themselves in print, first ^ after noting their deprecation of the theatre and instrumental church music, he describes their output and purchase of books, their libraries and what books were in them, their methods of sermon-making and prose-writing, their poetry, and their interest in science. Interestingly, he omits the subject of architecture, or rather the Puritans' lack of it, which Wertenbaker (p. 106-127) covers in depth. He covers Puritanism's ideas as expressed in these institutions and vehicles more or less in passing as the latter get analyzed after the initial English religious background gets described in chapter one. Thus, Morison has written a broad work that tries to cover a lot of subjects about colonial New England's society's basic intellectual institutions and practices.

This sentence is too long. The ideas might need to be broken up for better clarity.

This interrupts the thought pattern.

Morison displays a broad sympathy for the Puritan's throughout his work here. Perhaps the best indicator of this is he doesn't mention their intolerance concerning other religions much. The only really pointed criticism along this line is on p. 173: "Seventeenth-century puritan parsons were not tolerant. They regarded heresy as a poison and were continually exhorting magistrates to silence or punish the Quakers and Baptists . . ." He even points out, when their intolerence was criticized by J. Truslow Adams for being a cause of intellectual stagnation, that other colonies that were more tolerant (Rhodes Island and Maryland) were much more intellectually barren than Massachusetts (p. 153-154). Morison also quotes the minister John Davenport, who was in ^ the rare mode of toleration for once, concerning a student promulgating Galileo's sun-centered theories, and adds

perhaps this kind of thing should be done in a content note (footnote)

Again, this confuses the reader when you use sentence interruptions like this one.

the comment (p. 247): "Now, I wish to rub this in! Much has been written about the bigotry of the New England clergy . . ." Evidently, Morison has the view that intolerance and bigotry are only some of the vices men can have (compared to greed, pride, envy, vanity, selfishness,laziness, etc.), and since all humans have their vices, we shouldn't condemn the Puritans for having these particular ones. While I'll grant this premise, it still would make for a more balanced presentation to mention Puritanism's intolerance more, as Wertenbaker, for example, justly devotes a whole chapter to the subject.[4]

What's your point?

The evidence for Morison's objectivity comes how he sometimes (at least twice) mention two extreme, opposing sides'descriptions of a historical situation before telling the reader what he thinks, and by mentioning the lack of data on certain subjects. For instance, when describing New England's school system, he mentions the one side that says everyone could read and every town had a school (p. 56-57), versus the other side that maintains the 17th century school system didn't have much success (p. 58). He then carefully goes over the various educational acts put through by the Puritans, emphasizing the ones prior to the "old deluder" law of 1647 to show the Puritans had non-religious motives for promoting education also (p. 66-68). To check how successful these laws were, he examines how often towns were punished by the courts for lacking schools, noting even Indian raids didn't justify a frontier town (Haverhill) for lacking a school (p. 72). He also cites statistics collected from large numbers of court records of how many people could write their names instead of placing marks on petitions, addresses, deeds, etc., with the percentages of men being around 90% (p. 83-84), and women roughly 40-60% (p. 83) who could write. Thus, when he draws the conclusion both extremes mentioned above were wrong (p. 82), he has ample evidence to justify doing so.

Now Morison's theses do agree with what other authors have written about the Puritans, but it seems he was frequently combatting negative things others had written about the Puritans'in his work. For instance, he attacks

[4]See Ibid., p. 208-251. True, for example Morison does mention Puritan censorship (p. 122-123, 128). But his mention of how the Quakers were persecuted (p. 184, 226-227)

one point J. Truslow Adams makes with the statement (p. 154): "At this point I split off from an agreement with Mr. Adam's so rare that I would make the most of it." Or, he attacks Charles M. Andrews's and E. W. Knight's statements (p. 58) that the New England school laws weren't very effective in promoting literacy. Compared to Wertenbaker, he is considerably more positive about Puritanism's contributions, though they often agree. On the other hand, Wertenbaker does not appear to be anywhere near as critical of the Puritans as J. Truslow Adam's was. For an example of Morison and Wertenbaker agreeing, both Wertenbaker (p. 345) and Morison (p. 272-274) agree that Puritanism kept the flame of classical learning and science alive in the often primitive conditions of early New England. Wertenbaker (p. 93, 261) and Morison (p. 25, 272-273) both note the constant backbreaking work and harsh struggle for survival in a primitive wilderness would keep New England from creating great art, poetry, or (Wertenbaker specifically adds this) scientific discoveries. Both Wertenbaker (p. 289) and Morison (p. 265) deny there was a major power structure change ("the downfall of the Massachusetts 'theocracy'," as Wertenbaker puts it) after the Salem witchcraft trial disaster. Thus, while Morison is often attacking established views of the Puritans, as he says in the preface (p. v) to the second edition, there are others who agree with him as Wertenbaker often does.

But sometimes Morison tries to paint the Puritans in somewhat too rosy of a hue. For instance, his coverage of the Salem witchcraft disaster omits certain important details that show the leading clergy were often fully supportive of the trials. Wertenberger reports how Cotton Mather was fully in favor of the trials (p. 275, 279), which Morison glosses over by emphasizing instead how the leading clergy knew better, but didn't speak out as they should have (p. 260) in condemnation. He overemphasizes Cotton Mather's attempts to stop the judges from using "spectral evidence" (accusations alone) (p. 260, 261) and to avoid trials to begin with (p. 258). While Wertenbaker may be overemphasizing himself the motive of the clergy to destroy "Saducceeism" and

rationalism to maintain power (p. 269-270) (since, after all, they didn't see a conflict between science and religion), Morison ignores this motive almost entirely (but see p. 259). However, Morison by no means is totally kind to Cotton Mather, who gets condemned for his vanity and publicity-seeking (p. 258) and trying to justify the trials (p. 263). Morison also puts a very different, much more positive spin on the Margaret Rule case of witchcraft that occurred after the Salem craze was over concerning Cotton Mather's actions (p. 263-264) than Wertenbaker does (p. 283-284), with both omitting facts the other mentions. Thus, as Morison describes the Salem witchcraft hysteria, his pro-Puritanism bias is subtly manifest.

Morison uses many primary sources, such as Cotton Mather's diary (p. 264), Wiggleworth's poetry (p. 215-218), Gershom Bulkey's defense of the Andros regime called "Will and Doom" (p. 200-205), Mather's defense of the revolution against Andros (p. 198-199), Edward Taylor's (p. 235-240) and Ann Bradstreet's (p. 218-222) poetry. He also uses original sources with statistical techniques applied, such as how many people may have owned books or libraries is at least partially indicated from what is mentioned in dozens of old wills kept in courtroom archives (p. 142), or counting how many government documents had full names written on them, as compared to marks, to get a bearing on New England's literacy rate (p. 83-84). Morison also shows a strong familiarity with the secondary sources, though many of the ones he mentioned contain points he is trying to refute (for instance, p. 58, 154, 241). Thus, Morison appears to be very well informed and have many valuable sources to draw upon for his book.

Morison's book is admirable for having a sense of literary style that makes it interesting to read, and avoiding the use of a vocabulary that requires frequent visits to a dictionary. To show his style isn't dry, he shows wit by quoting from a sermon warning that Christ might soon punish the colony, then adding: "And within two years, the Bay Colony lost her precious charter. Don't say we clergy didn't warn you!" (p. 175). Or, he says, as

quoted before above concerning the minister Davenport being tolerant (for once): "Now, I wish to rub this in! Much has been written about the bigotry of the New England clergy . . ." (p. 247). Commenting on the fact that the Calvinism of the New England Puritans didn't stress predestination, he says: "John Cotton indeed was wont to 'sweeten his mouth with a bit of Calvin' before retiring (rather a sour bedtime confection one would think), but . . ." (p. 11). Other examples of interesting writing can be found elsewhere (p. 242, 154 (quoted above)). The book, while designed for an academic audience as the subject would indicate, it is still accessible to much of the general public because of its readable style and not too broad vocabulary.[5]

Morison (p. 272-274) also seems to have had influence on Wertenbaker (p. 345, note especially the footnote referring to Morison's book on p. 142), for the latter's book, though it is normally more negative about the Puritans, praises them just as highly nonetheless for keeping the light of higher learning and science alive in the North American wilderness. Wertenbaker's book was published eleven years after Morison's, which makes such influence possible. Morison's book was one of the earliest books defending Puritanism after the very anti-Puritan 1920's, whose attitudes against them are personified by the writings of H.L. Mencken. Morison points out that Puritanism created the "frame" or institutions by which intellectual life could survive and be maintained in the English colonies because of their emphasis on learning, education, and even science. This latter idea is this book's best synthesizing idea and contribution to the histographical literature on the Puritans, which judging from the secondary sources Morison so often attacks, must have been quite negative about them. His triumphal tone on p. 272-274 drives home this point, though Wertenbaker properly points out the narrow religious orthodoxy imposed on these same institutions limited their effectiveness until removed by more liberal Puritans (and others) later (p. 156-158, 340, 345). After all, if the German

[5] I say the latter point is true because I didn't have to consult my dictionary much at all while reading it, and because I didn't have to reread the author's

social historian Troeltsch said Puritanism was an enemy of science (Morison, p. 241), but in fact it wasn't, judging from such things as Cotton Mather's defense of innoculation against a very hostile majority of Bostonians (p. 271-272),

then such misimpressions need to be corrected. Thus, although it goes too easy on the Puritans sometimes, it is a valuable book well worth reading if you have an interest in the subject of early American Puritanism.

Samuel Eliot Morison's The Intellectual Life of Colonial New England is a valuable book for correcting many of the false views about Puritanism. Although in some places it overlooks the negative aspects of Puritanism too much, such as by de-emphasizing its intolerance too much and by letting the leading clergy off somewhat too easily for their role in the witchcraft hysteria disaster (certainly, Cotton Mather was let off too easily by him), its uses of original sources is fairly judicious overall. Such a book helps to correct such overkill statements such as the following by D.H. Lawrence: "To the Puritan, all things are impure, as somebody[6] says."

- You have obviously looked at a great number of sources in trying to make sense of the subject at hand - the problem is you have not done a good job of displaying it for your reader. Perhaps you need to go back through your paper and rethink them for the sake of your reader - as good writers must do.

- You did not attach your bibliography list

(I had trouble with what you were citing in your paper at some points —

[6] H.L. Mencken?