The curious case of the compassionate Puritan: the representation of the puritan world-view in modern discourse

Introduction

Strictly speaking, the term ‘Puritan’ refers to those late 16C Anglicans who wished to ‘purify’ the church, but the term more broadly refers to 16 and 17C Christians who emphasised the bible over authority, and experiential religion over mere observance. The Puritans were deeply influenced by the theology of John Calvin.

I will focus on two aspects of Puritans discourse:

1. firstly, their insistence that biblical thinking is authoritative in all of life;

1. secondly, their commitment to live with integrity. In 1622 John Yates defined true religion as ‘an Art to live well’.

But I am going to start, not with who they were, but with who people of our time think they were. I am going to begin with the familiar representation of them in the modern world. I will be arguing that the way Puritans are represented today is not neutral but is qualified by beliefs and world views.

Nowadays Puritans don’t get a good press. In fact, the very word has come to stand for hard-hearted repression and the hypocritical dislike of pleasure, especially other people’s pleasure. The spirit of Puritanism is said to be; ‘if you can’t enjoy it yourself, make sure no-one else can either’. Puritans, said H L Menchen, are people who have ‘the haunting fear that someone, somewhere, may be happy’.

In fact, the modern representation goes beyond a mere disapproval of pleasure. Puritans are believed to positively *delight* in disapproving pleasure. They hypocritically indulge in what is disapproved, even as they disapproves of it.

Now you remember that I suggested that there are two important aspects to Puritanism:

1. that biblical religion entails all of life; and
2. that Christians should live with integrity.

The modern representation of Puritanism transforms these two aspects.

1. The commitment to *living faithfully in all of life* is transformed into a narrow preoccupation with *disapproving of pleasure in all of life*, especially sexual pleasure.
2. A commitment to personal integrity is transformed into a hypocritical **lack** of personal integrity

Being a Puritan is represented as such a disagreeable thing, that no rational person would want to be one. Rather, we would want to be someone who lives and lets live; someone who is able to enjoy themselves without being haunted by religious guilt, someone who embraces science and progress, and is not stuck in outdated religious beliefs. In short, a liberal humanitarian, a product of the Enlightenment, a thoroughly modern person.

I will be arguing that these representations of the term Puritan, index modern beliefs about religion and modernity. Let’s take an example.

And animals

My research concerns the Puritan view of animals. To the modern mind, Puritans no more wanted animals to have a good time than they did people. But this presents a puzzle to scholars, because it has long been known that Puritans were opposed to cruel sports such as bear baiting. The 19C historian Lord Macaulay was well aware of this, so when he wrote about Puritans in his History of England, he had to explain the curious case of the compassionate Puritan. If the Puritans opposed bear baiting, it could not be because they wanted the bears to have a happier life; there must be another reason for it apart from disliking cruelty. Macaulay wrote:

‘Puritan antipathy to bearbaiting ‘had nothing in common with the feeling which has, in our own times, [resulted in laws].. protecting beasts against the wanton cruelty of men. The puritan hated bear baiting, not because it gave pain to the bear, but because it gave pleasure to the spectators. Indeed he generally contrived to enjoy the double pleasure of tormenting both spectators and bear’.

Now I hope I have said enough for you to recognise this as an example of the modern representation of Puritans as hating pleasure. Macaulay starts by contrasting the Puritan hatred of pleasure with the 19C laws which protected animals out of humanitarian concern. Macaulay was a staunch believer in Enlightenment progress; the victory of reason over religious superstition. He pictured the 19C as a liberal, enlightened time which had ethically progressed since the 17C. Puritans were products of 17C religion, and had not had the benefits of a liberal education. So he did not expect them to show Enlightenment humanitarianism. Viewed through these spectacles, any appearance of compassion is really only a dislike of pleasure. For Macaulay, then, the modern representation of Puritans is what we see through the spectacles of the Enlightenment. This vision had an impact on his scholarship: it prevented him from seeing that animal welfare reform began before Victorian law reform.

Macauay’s Enlightenment vision of Puritanism has been very influential on subsequent scholars. Antonia Fraser considered that it ‘best summed up the dark side of Puritanism'; cockfighting, she says, was condemned in 1654 because it led to gambling and disorder, not out of humanitarian concern about cruelty. Similarly the historian Arthur Moss considered that the Puritans abolished bear baiting 'not to save these creatures from suffering' but to avoid the bad effect on the common people. Scholarship in this area was dominated by this perception of Puritans until the late 20C.

Dix Harwood wrote an influential book called ‘Love for Animals’. Like Macaulay, he says that Puritans opposed blood sports because they were 'protestant moralists' who thought that bearbaiting was a ‘worldly pleasure'. But he faced a difficulty. Harwood was better informed than Macaulay, and knew that many Puritans said that animal cruelty was wrong because God hates cruelty, not because it gave pleasure. He wore the same Enlightenment spectacles as Macaulay, so he already knew that, as he says, '... humanitarianism... is not to be expected in the period before 1700'. So when Puritans express views which look a lot like humanitarianism, this cannot really be so, as humanitarianism did not exist before the Enlightenment which he notionally dates as beginning in 1700. Harwood regards those Puritans opposed to animal cruelty as 'the cranks and freaks of their day with virtually no influence'. He is arguing that the Puritans who appeared to be humanitarian before the Enlightenment, were in fact freakish exceptions which can be discounted from having had historical influence. Among these ‘cranks and freaks’ with no influence, Harwood includes William Perkins. Now it appears that Harwood did not know much about Perkins, and it is true that he is little known today. But he was very well known in the late 16C. He was, in fact, a distinguished Cambridge scholar with an international reputation, and a leader of Elizabethan Puritanism. Perkins’ pupils at Cambridge included William Ames, Thomas Draxe, and Richard Sibbes, all major and influential theologians of the 17C. Harwood, however, peering through his Enlightenment spectacles, sees only a ‘crank and freak of his day with virtually no influence'. A curious case of the compassionate Puritan, nothing more.

Harwood also knew that the 18C heir to the Puritans, William Cowper, despised animal cruelty. Cowper, however, lived after 1700, so Harwood finds it unsurprising that he shows humanitarian concern. But what of Cowper’s evangelical beliefs? These, says Harwood, gave his humanitarianism a gloss of the earlier Puritan moralism, but involved no genuine compassion for animals. Cowper’s evangelicalism, says Harwood, considered hunting to be a worldly vanity - like playing cards. It is perhaps worth recalling what Cowper said about hunting:

‘Detested sport,

That owes its pleasure to another's pain

That feeds upon the sobs and dying shrieks

Of harmless nature, dumb, but yet endued

With eloquence, that agonies inspire,

Of silent tears and heart distending sighs!

Vain tears, alas! and sighs, that never find

A corresponding tone in jovial souls’.

I don’t think Cowper was thinking of card games.

These are not isolated instances. In recent years, Linda Kalof and Brigitte Resl have edited a major 6 volume series on the Cultural History of Animals which draws on the work of major scholars in the field. It devotes a volume each to the Medieval period, the Renaissance and the Enlightenment. There is no volume on the Reformation and its heirs. The growth in compassion towards animals from the 16C is certainly recognised, but as ‘a distinctive product of the Renaissance’. They concede that it was ‘largely sectarian in nature’, but do not comment further on this, or mention that the majority of those cited are Puritans. The curious case, perhaps, of several compassionate Puritans. Here the very framework of scholarship has been formed in the image of what can be seen through modern spectacles.

There are exceptions. A few specialist scholars, aware of the overwhelming evidence, do note that Puritans and evangelicals were the drivers of reform. For example, in his seminal work *Man and the Natural World*, Keith Thomas was among the first to note that the campaign against animal cruelty ‘grew out of the minority Christian tradition that man should take care of God's creation'. 'Clerics’, he says, ‘were often ahead of lay opinion, and an essential role was played by Puritans, Dissenters, Quakers and Evangelicals...'; the ‘Old Testament, not classical works, was the authority most frequently cited’. But note Thomas’ comment that this was a ‘minority Christian tradition’. He is clear that the majority Christian view was cruel and exploitative, justifying the abuse of animals through an oppressive doctrine of dominion. He does not comment further on this peculiar minority tradition; nor does he note its reliance upon a Calvinistic reading of the bible for doctrine; nor the integrity of those concerned who were not content to stop at abstract doctrine but insisted on reform of life, including the way we treat God’s creatures. Most scholars, citing Thomas’ work, refer to the majority Christian tradition, not the strange case of the compassionate Puritans.

Scholars such as Harwood, who believed that humanitarian compassion for animals arose with the Enlightenment, wrote before the 2nd WW. The horrors of the late 20C have made us less confident about modernist progress. The Enlightenment spectacles worn by Macaulay and Harwood have become rather blurry. More recent commentators wear the spectacles of Darwinism rather than of Enlightenment progress. So the Puritanism they see looks a little different.

Rod Preece is a distinguished Canadian scholar in the field. He observes that most animal rights advocates believe that Darwin’s book ‘On the Origin of Species’ presaged ‘a revolution in human thinking about our relationship to other animals’. Specifically, they believe that Darwinism destroyed the arrogant Christian belief that humans are superior to animals, and fostered a more compassionate attitude towards our animal cousins. Now, I think that Preece accurately summarises the view through Darwinian spectacles. But is this view myopic?

Although animal rights advocates have embraced the rhetoric of Darwinism, it is not true that Darwin’s book resulted in more compassionate treatment of animals. Darwin himself opposed Frances Power Cobbe's anti-vivisection Bill, arguing that it was 'tenderness of heart' and a lesser capacity for reason which made women oppose vivisection.

In fact, Darwin’s book underwrote the exploitation and hunting of animals, not their protection. If humans were top of the tree in the survival of the fittest, eliminating lower species endorsed our superiority. In the early 20C, generals, politicians and film stars queued up to show their survival fitness by hunting animals, preferably large fierce ones.

Yet, both in the UK and US, the same period saw a continuing growth in animal welfare reform. How could this be, if Darwinian logic dictates otherwise? Preece laconically observes that, ‘fortunately for the animals’ the later nineteenth century saw the development of humane societies as a counterbalance to the Darwinian ideas of competition and survival of the fittest’. But these humane societies were not inspired by Darwinism. Rather, says Preece, they were ‘predicated predominantly on evangelical ideas’. The success of animal welfare legislation in Britain ‘stemmed directly from the humanitarian impulses which lay behind the evangelical Protestantism of the period’.

He writes that ‘almost all the publications and pamphlets put out by the early Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals… have a very strong evangelical Christian bent… Ironically, it was those who repudiated Darwin’s elevation of the status of animals who, in practice, did most to protect the interests of animals’.

But it is only ironic if we are looking through Darwinian spectacles. Take off the spectacles, and we see that the pamphlets have ‘a strong evangelical Christian bent’ because they were in a strong evangelical Christian tradition of mercy to animals. That evangelicals did most to protect the interests of animals followed naturally from the their biblical beliefs; it was not ironically in conflict with them. Their discourse and their behaviour arose from their religious beliefs. The Enlightenment and Darwinian spectacles that I have described arise from the religious beliefs of modern scholarship.

Evangelical beliefs

The time has come to say briefly what the Puritans and their evangelical followers actually believed about animals. I can only sketch this here; if anyone is interested, you will find further details in my publications. We can identify six core beliefs which predisposed Puritans and their evangelical followers to press for animal welfare reform:

**Creation**

1. Humans and animals were created for companionable relationship; in Eden they did not harm, kill or eat one-another.

**Fall**

1. Antipathy and carnivorousness are the result of sin. They should cause us to mourn, not rejoice.
2. Animal cruelty is wickedness deserving condign punishment, and is incompatible with living a righteous life.
3. When we are forced through hunger to eat animal flesh, we should remember the sin which has made this necessary and repent.

**Judgement and restoration**

1. We will have to give an account to God for our involvement in animal cruelty. God will condemn us as cruel people if we do not pity the animals.
2. At the restoration of all things in Christ, our relationship with animals, and a vegan diet, will be restored.

These beliefs were consistently held for more than 300 years by Magisterial Reformers, Puritans, Methodists, Dissenters, and Evangelicals. Moreover, they were held with sufficient clarity by a sufficient number to drive reform. Puritan inspired legislation ranged from the protection of farm animals to bans on cruel sports. Their evangelical followers were involved in founding organisations such the RSPCA and the Anti-vivisection society. Moreover, this was not done in a corner. Their compassion for animals was very widely known to their contemporaries. In 1743 a man had expressed doubts about hearing Wesley preach for fear he would 'say something against the fighting of cocks'. Horace Walpole is said to have remarked in 1760 that a certain man was known to be 'turning Methodist; for, in the middle of conversation, he rose, and opened the window to let out a moth'. In 1867, Spurgeon preached a sermon in which he said: 'It is frequently so sickening a sight to see poor tortured cattle in our thoroughfares, that it makes one long to fly from such brutality'.

It is remarkable that in a few short years at the turn of the 20C, all this changed. By the early 20C evangelicals had largely stopped believing these things about animals, and had certainly stopped their involvement in reform. Currently in England and the US, evangelicals are seen by animal welfare reformers as the main obstacles to progress, not its drivers. The beliefs of modern scholars are re-enforced when they look at contemporary evangelicals.

Why?

We have seen that the Puritans and their followers condemned animal cruelty as wickedness, and lived as though that were true. How does this compare with contemporary evangelicals?

Of course we no longer see cattle slaughtered in the streets, or angry people tearing the tongue out of their horse. The horrors of animal cruelty are now hidden behind the closed doors of factory farms and slaughterhouses. But we cannot pretend to be ignorant of it. The media regularly reports abuses, and animal rights groups secretly film in factory farms and slaughterhouses. Most of us have see such pictures on TV or in the high-street, unless we have deliberately turned away. There is little difference here from the 19C when many people walked by and preferred not to see the horse being beaten. Let me give you some examples.

In her book *Slaughterhouse,* Gail Eisnitz interviews slaughterhouse workers in one of the best regulated countries in the world - the US. She was horrified to learn that cows are regularly skinned alive because of a failure to stun them. It happens so often, they told her, that everybody gets used to it. One slaughterer described dragging live baby calves till their bones start breaking and their hide rip. Pigs freeze with terror and cause delays, so a meat hook is inserted in their anus and pulled with a winch. Sometimes it just rips out spilling intestines, so you ram it back in again.

If chickens and pigs are not stunned properly, they are not skinned alive like cattle; they are scalded to death. Both are routinely immersed in scalding water to make their flesh swell so that their feathers and bristles can be more easily pulled out. They are supposed to be dead but often aren’t. Secret videotape from an Iowa pork plant shows hogs squealing and kicking as they are being lowered into the water. One slaughter-man reported seeing them drop in the water while they are still alive… still hollering in the water… I actually seen a hog that wasn’t stuck right jump out of the tank with the steam still smoking off its body.’

Now these examples come from the United States, one of the best regulated countries in the world. Most meat eaten in the UK comes from far less well regulated countries. How about standards in the UK industry itself? It is sometimes claimed that the UK is different, but recent secret filming at British slaughterhouses by Animal Aid has shown hideous cruelty at the majority of them, leading to criminal convictions and imprisonment. Animals can be seen being beaten, burnt, stamped on, tortured with electric shocks across the abdomen and dismembered alive.

In the 19C the evangelicals did not walk on by when they saw cruelty. Today evangelicals have been overwhelmingly silent. The contrast with the Puritans and their followers could hardly be greater.

This raises an interesting question. Why? Why have evangelicals betrayed so rich a heritage? Why, in practice, have we largely put on Enlightenment and Darwinian spectacles?

Doubtless there are many reasons, but I suggest we can learn from the Puritans in two respects:

Firstly, I think it is uncontroversial to say that evangelical no longer believe that Jesus claims sovereignty over all of life. Most things are Caesar’s. But there is no neutral ground. If we no longer believe the truth, we will believe whatever the cultural junkyard around us teaches. For example, one survey in the US invited pastors to a discussion about faith and animal cruelty. Most declined, giving theological reasons not to be concerned about animals, including:

· "Animals do not have souls".
· "Humans have dominion".
·" Our focus is on souls".

· "You are excessive and a heretic".
· "Mercy does not apply to animals".
· "I feel no mandate concerning animals".

I don’t think the result would be much different in the UK. These pastors beliefs about animal theology owe little to their evangelical heritage, and fit rather well with the secular view that Christianity is part of the problem, not the solution. Christian scholars have a responsibility to the Church by recovering and developing its evangelical heritage. Jesus lays claim to all of life.

But if we take our cue from the Puritans, we cannot stop there. They passionately believed that scholarship cannot be separated from integrity of life. No amount of learning, can substitute for practicing the faith, for integrity of living. Without reformation of life, mere doctrine is vain. Take a small example. What are we going to eat here today? How does it look through the spectacles of the world? How would it look to Jesus?

My discussion of modern views of Puritanism is only one illustration of the way that characteristically Protestant beliefs, once occupying centre stage, have been sidelined in scholarship. But the Puritans and their followers wrote about many other areas of life, and were often influential on their contemporaries, not least because of their scholarship. From medicine to the novel, from law to sexuality, they developed distinctive views. These are now represented to us through the scholarly spectacles of the Enlightenment and Darwinism. What would hey look like if Christian scholars put on the biblical spectacles advocated by Calvin?