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Why We Need the Puritan

By Preston Slosson

EVERY age considers itself decadent and invokes the spirit of its predecessors to redeem it from moral laxity. The Pilgrim tercentenary has called forth many comparisons, only partially justified, of the rigid ethical code of the Puritan age with the self-indulgent and worldly manners and morals of the twentieth century. It is true that we have introduced new fashions in dress, that we no longer experience the old dread of the theater, that we are less strict in attending church on Sunday, and that we devote more time and energy to "worldly amusements" than the Puritans would have approved. But in some respects we are more puritanic than the Puritans. We have, for example, placed an absolute ban on intoxicants, which the men of 1620 never dreamed of doing. We have shortened the sermon, but we have elaborated the church service. Our views on divorce are more conservative than those of Milton. If the modern world has accepted the theater and the novel it has at the same time made them vehicles for moralizing. The "problem plays" of Galsworthy and Shaw and the novels of Winston Churchill and Mrs. Ward are far more like seventeenth century sermons than they are like the plays and romances against which the Puritans protested. If America of 1920 has fallen off from the ideals of Plymouth Rock it is at least immeasurably more moral, in every reasonable meaning of the word, than was the England from which the Pilgrims fled.

But there is a sense in which the Puritan is needed now and needed very badly. The United States is no sink of iniquity; it is a community consisting mainly of very prosperous, well-behaved and kindly people. In the negative sense of the word we are as virtuous a commonwealth as has ever existed. But it cannot be denied that the moral overstrain of the Great War has left our national morale in a certain state of shell shock. Our stock of idealism has temporarily run low and a mood of cynicism has replaced the devoted enthusiasm of 1918. We wish harm to no people in the world, but we will not exert ourselves to help. Poland and Austria are as hungry today as Belgium was five years ago, but we are less concerned about it. The Turks are still killing Armenians, but it no longer keeps us awake nights. We are no longer willing to act the part of the Good Samaritan for the rest of the world; the rôle of Priest or Levite suits us well enough for the moment. In our domestic affairs the same moral slump is evident. The great moral wave of 1912 which created a political party overnight and introduced a new vision of social justice, is now at a low ebb. Mark Hannaism and the good old days of 1896 seem to satisfy the demand of the American soul.

Well, this is nothing to worry about in the long run. Nearly every great war or revolution causes a reaction, and this reaction always passes away when some new spurt of enthusiasm comes to urge civilization forward once more. The licentiousness of the Stuart restoration after the downfall of Cromwell's Commonwealth, the moral disintegration of Germany in the latter part of the Thirty Years' War, the corruption of the Directorate in France after the strenuous days of the Revolution, the scandals which marked the political life of the decade after the supreme effort of our own Civil War—all these historical phenomena are essentially the same thing that troubles us today.

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We need a new school of prophets to restock our batteries of moral energy. We need the Puritans.

The Puritan was essentially the earnest man. The Greenwich Village legend that Puritanism is a lazy, comfortable, "bourgeois" way of taking life is glaringly the opposite of the truth. The Puritan's theology was not a traditional creed accepted from mere habit. He was a rebel against the traditional creeds; a persecuted exile because of this rebellion. His theology burned in him night and day like a consuming flame, and if it made him uncomfortable to himself, to his family and to his neighbors, it also enabled him to conquer a wilderness and to found a commonwealth. The spirit of creation dwelt in him; he felt he could not die until he had made the world other than he found it. So millions of contemporary Europeans worked and played away their lives and left no impress in history because they had no vital, original faith, while a few score Englishmen voyaging in the "Mayflower" made a new world.

IT matters much what we believe; but it matters infinitely more how much we believe it. Whole generations of men regretted slavery, then came along a few fanatical abolitionists who would not let themselves or anyone else rest until it was abolished. Many a European nation grumbled at the misrule of its kings and nobles; grumbled and then turned its attention to the bull fight, the wool market or the village inn. But mighty empires were shaken to pieces when a few poor, hot-headed young students began to take seriously the new ideals of nationality and political democracy.

Even when the creed is an imperfect one it can work miracles if it wins the earnest conviction of determined men. Mormonism, with all its absurdities of doctrine and ecclesiastical discipline, succeeded in turning a desert into the prosperous and progressive commonwealth of Utah. Mohammed, in spite of his ignorance and errors, created a religion which spread from Spain to Java with the speed of a prairie fire. All the theoretical weaknesses of Marxian Socialism from the economic standpoint have not availed to check its spread, because the Socialists have been twice as energetic in spreading their propaganda as anyone else has been in counteracting it.

An indifferent America, content to plod in the beaten path and repeat the "maxims of the Fathers" with no living faith in their meaning, will make no more impression on the world than the teeming millions of China. We must again become what Jefferson and Lincoln and Roosevelt thought us—a chosen people, a people with a positive and creative faith in its institutions, the bearers of a message to the whole world. Without enthusiasm nothing worth while is ever done, and thus in the long run the idealist is the only practical man. The mood of cynicism, of indifference, of "don't care" is the mood of death; it is literally the work of Mephistophcles, the Spirit of Denial. We must lift it from America.