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Bailey's "Race and redemption in puritan New England" (critical book review)

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Critical Reviews



Bailey, R. A. (2011). *Race and redemption in puritan New England*. New York: Oxford University Press. 226 pp. \$24.95. ISBN 9780199377824

Religion played a significant role in the establishment of the New World colonies, and these religious ideologies would influence the manner in which the new society would take shape. For colonists the idealized notion of converting the native population proved to be misguided, and participation of the colonies in the African slave trade complicated their utopian dream. In the midst of a rapidly changing landscape, a tenuous balance was established that allowed puritan New Englanders to cohabit with people of Native American and African descent in such a way that while they were afforded redemptive salvation they were denied social equality. The desire of these puritans to solve “the problem of doing right in a world that does wrong” (p. 25) proved difficult for them to realize. Exhibited attitudes toward race within the confines of puritan thought could be described as contradictory at best, and at times transparently hypocritical.

Richard A. Bailey, associate professor of history at Canisius College in Buffalo, New York provides in *Race and Redemption in Puritan New England* a unique perspective on the sociological landscape of colonial America and explores race and religion through the filter of puritan dogma. Using historical narrative and established research, Bailey’s purpose is to intersect the religious climate of colonial New England with the racial constraints implemented by European settlers. Specifically, how the New England puritans “socially, culturally, intellectually, legally, and theologically” (p. 7) regulated and therefore controlled people of color within their community. In this process, colonists found themselves reconstructing the way they viewed the puritan theological system to make sense of a changing cultural and societal landscape. The author examines specific ways in which the New England puritan utilized their theological system to justify contradiction created by the reality of racial division. He does so by examining the causes of this division and how race was constructed by white colonists in New England. Namely the way colonists identified each other solely by skin color using the descriptors white, black and red. Finally, Bailey looks at the issue of redemption and argues that puritans “constructed race from the spiritual freedom found in the redemption being offered by puritans of all persuasions, tying race and redemption even closer together” (p. 14). It is through the concept of redemption that New England puritans find deliverance from their contradictory treatment of others and that people of color find equality in Christ.

Bailey uses historical narrative to form the basis for much of this book as he traces race relations from 1620 to the late eighteenth century. Building upon first person accounts of puritan life through the analysis of letters, diaries, court testimony, and sermons he sets the foundation for his assertions. He draws heavily upon the writings of puritan clergy including Jonathan Edwards, Stephen Williams, Cotton Mather, and James MacSparan. Additionally, he employs writings of puritan missionaries to the Native American population such as John Eliot, and Thomas Mayhew and puritan leaders like Governor John Winthrop. The author reinforces his argument throughout the course of five chapters each of which correlates to points addressed in the purpose of the work. In the introduction the author makes use of five brief historical vignettes setting the scene of the social climate in various geographical areas of the colonies. He also begins a concentrated effort to establish the premise of the book and outlines the points that will be explored in the forthcoming chapters.

To elaborate on the intersection of religion and race Bailey in chapter one looks at the way race was established in the colonies by the white colonists. Insight is given to how the societal landscape evolved through population statistics showing that the white population grew quickly in the emerging colonies and with it the increase of African slaves imported to be sold as human property. Native American populations decreased through the introduction of European disease and systematic extermination in an effort to secure available land. The ideological concept that the white European settlers would come, convert the native population and live in communal peace proved to be unattainable and whites quickly established their dominance in the multicultural landscape. This changing population also brought the dilemma of how the races interacted together and served to create the framework for the contradictory relationships that were to plague puritan society.

In this new diverse society New Englanders began to delineate the races by attaching certain attributes to people of color as explored in chapter two. The author uses the description of the colonists “coloring the New England landscape” (p. 40) because it was at this point that they began to clearly classify members of the community by the color of their skin and attributing meanings to those colors. To begin with, assumptions were made as to the spiritual state of Native American and Africans in that they were characterized as “devil worshipers” and assumed to be “dissolute, lewd and disorderly” (p. 44) because they were not Christians. Therefore their status as community members was marginalized because in the mind of puritans they were savages. Cotton Mather even went so far as to associate the black skin of Africans with the blackness of sin claiming that he hoped their skin that was blackened by the sun of Africa could be healed by the Sun of Righteousness (p. 45). Additionally, the puritans marginalized their counterparts of color through the process of infantilization, essentially giving these individuals the attributes of children and in doing so assigning them intellectual limitations and reducing their

status in the societal structure. Evidence of this is given in accounts of black slaves being catechized with white children. Finally in this chapter the author notes that particularly in the case of black slaves these people were not looked upon as human beings but human property treated in the same respect as non-human livestock. Slaves were bought and sold at will. It is within these confines that we see further contradictions because even though these slaves are given the opportunity for salvation and rights to redemption as non-property they were still considered within the puritan community as property of their white owners.

Chapter three continues to explore the interaction between the races as it looks at what the author describes as “ventriloquism” on the part of white puritans in recording the words of people of color. Bailey argues that it is difficult to assess what was actually said by the Native Americans and Africans as recorded by the white penmen. He asserts that to further complicate the connection of religion and race we may not have accurate records to draw from of conversion experiences, testimonies and death declarations of people of color claiming that the white writers essentially “put words in the mouths” of their converts. It is conceivable that this could be the case especially in reports of missionaries eager to show progress in their work with the Native Americans however it is also plausible that people surrounded by puritan theology and rhetoric could have been truly converted and used the language that they were exposed to in expressing their spiritual thoughts.

An overarching theme of the book deals with the way white New Englanders attempted and succeeded in controlling those society members of different race. They accomplished this in many ways as outlined in previous chapters however chapter four discussed the measures taken when submission was not given readily. It was not beyond white slave owners, even clergy, to deal harshly with unyielding slaves. Because of their status as property, slaves were often forced into submission in cruel and dehumanizing ways including physical assault and confinement. Furthermore, if these measures proved unsuccessful, white New Englanders could engage the church, the only place where people of color were treated on equal footing, and the court system to assist in securing control. Again they encountered contradiction; the puritans believed that God was sovereign and had ordained these different roles in society having confidence that the institution of slavery must be part of God’s plan for redemption however “as they strived for redemption, they too often created raced identities that denigrated and racialized the very persons they hoped to redeem” (p. 114).

In the final chapter of the book Bailey comes to apex of his work asserting that puritans in their desire for redemption in others found redemption for themselves. Even in the disjointed contradictory manner in which they racialized New England

the author argues that the puritans genuinely “believed in the salvation offered in the Christian gospel” (p. 132) and desired this salvation to be extended to all people. It is difficult to understand the paradoxical nature of their desire for universal salvation in light of their treatment and control of other human beings. However, Bailey concedes noting the realization that “in their striving for redemption, they fell short and were once again forced to wait for the promised paradise” (p. 133)

Race and Redemption in Puritan New England is a well-written and systematically researched work that is challenging and stimulating. Bailey does a masterful job of exploring complicated subject matter in a scholastic yet unintimidating manner that is engaging and promotes multifaceted evaluation of human behavior.

Many strengths are recognizable in this work the first of which is the balanced examination of historical narrative. Bailey’s use of research that crosses a variety of disciplines adds credence to his arguments and shows scholastic responsibility. The scope of material and the way it is handled causes the reader to think beyond pre-conceived notions of puritan society and promotes deeper analysis.

The author’s easy manner of writing makes this scholarly topic accessible to the general public. The approachability achieved by Bailey encourages further exploration of the topic as does the inclusion of substantial endnotes which provide supplementary resources.

In contrast there are some areas of weakness to this work as well, the most significant being the brevity of the work. It may be due to this factor that some arguments are not fully developed leaving the reader without a definitive understanding of what the author is trying to communicate. Additionally, there are portions of the book that are overly repetitive and again this may be due to the author’s inability to completely develop his thought. Because of the author’s tendency to repeat his points in several ways, the work does not have an easy fluidity from one point to the next. It should also be noted that this book uses extensive geographical references without the benefit of visual representation in the form of maps. Therefore, a reputable historic atlas would be an advantageous supplement to the reading of this work.

Race and Redemption in Puritan New England serves as an important contribution to the area of religious and historical academia as it connects areas of historical and sociological analysis that has not been heavily studied and offers opportunity for further discovery. It would be useful to scholars of puritan clergy including Jonathan Edwards and Cotton Mather. Bailey makes notable use of Edwards and Mather as historical references and cites their writings as significant to his development of puritan thought.

Bailey's work is thought-provoking and challenges the reader to examine their own thoughts on redemption. Had the puritans been able to offer the same social equality that they provided spiritually they may have been able to indeed realize the vision of paradise on earth they desired. As it stands, their inability to do so marked their lives with uncertainty, contradiction and guilt. As Christians we can find comfort in knowing that all people regardless of the color of their skin find freedom and equality in Christ. We are reminded of Christ's words in John 8:34b-36 "truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed."

Reviewer

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