

Puritanism Has A Long Global History.
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It has always been a mystery to me why at various points in history, religions have gone puritanical, viciously hostile to any vestige of pleasure. This is not to say that puritanism is only nasty; it can also promote such good human values as self-control, industriousness, and honesty.

American puritanism in the 1600s was one such movement, a movement responsible for the American Protestant Ethic, and it produced a dynamic civilization. But it also had a dark underbelly in its zeal to eradicate pleasures. For example, even America's first woman poet, Anne Bradstreet, was fined for being seen kissing her husband on their doorstep. Puritanism is always obsessed with sex and love as particularly dangerous feminine powers.

I recently revisited the movie Hawaii, in which early 19th century New England missionaries set out for Hawaii to save pagan souls. This undoubtedly well-intentioned venture did irreparable harm to a society that worked quite well without their help. The good Christian values they brought did include saving babies born with birthmarks or defects from death, a fate that was determined by Hawaiian cultural values. But unfortunately the missionaries brought with them a fear and dread of sexuality, even within marriage (fear that such love detracted from love of God) and an utter abhorrence of the Hawaiians' joyous and sexually-permissive culture.

England went through a phase of puritanism in the 17th century religious wars, and actually went so far as to replace the monarchy with a Puritan dictator, Oliver Cromwell. The British put up with this for ten years, after which, when Cromwell died, they brought back their king from exile and became even wilder in the pursuit of pleasure.

Geneva had a horrible ten year period of puritanism under John Calvin, strictures that were somewhat removed after Calvin's death. But the Swiss still have a taint of puritanism about them at times. Christian puritanism had a particularly horrible affect on small children, who were reared with visions of hellfire and eternal pain, punishments from a fearsome God. Generations lived in fear of hell, a blight on their lives.

Today, sexual puritanism seems to have vanished, surviving only in a few fringe religious groups who regard women as temptresses to be put down. Islam, which for centuries was known for its lusty sexuality (what else are harems for?) and obsession with all kinds of sex (pederasty wide spread), is going through a contemporary fit of puritanism. Joy is not to be part of the human experience under these strict fanatics, and death threats (and assassinations) show that they mean it!

In Kashmir, an all-girl rock band, joyously singing but primly dressed, including proper head-scarfs, gave one concert to the delight of the audience, but not to the delight of Muslim clerics. To them, women are never to be seen in public and must never be heard (particularly singing). The rock band disbanded after serious death threats.

In Tunisia, once one of the more advanced and secular Arab states, an opposition politician complained about the growing Islamization of the newly elected government. His complaints were answered by assassination. One cannot criticize Muslim fanatics with impunity.

Iran, a country with an old culture of pleasure (wine, women, song) is temperamentally unsuited to puritanical Shiite Islam. The late Ayatollah Khomeini once said that a home should have no furniture; people should sit on the floor and one meal a day was enough for them. He could not quite maintain that view when he actually had to rule Iran, but his successor Ayatollahs have so destroyed the country's economy that one meal a day may indeed come to be.

Khomeini tried to stop the celebration of the ancient Persian New Year, Nowruz, an old pre-Islamic holiday celebrated much as the Chinese celebrate their new year. It is a holiday of festive food, gifts, music, poetry, and love. Iranians refused to give it up.

The danger is that too much puritanism can be followed by equally damaging total license. The Golden Mean is better.

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