

David Robbins, thesis opponent

Thesis evaluation

Petra Holubova

The Puritan View of Death: Attitudes toward Death and Dying in Puritan New England

This thesis examines New England Puritan attitudes, doctrines, literature, rituals, and iconography relating to death and dying in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Throughout her consideration of these subjects, Ms. Holubova demonstrates a thorough knowledge and balanced use of the most relevant primary and secondary sources; and she employs references to and quotations from them very effectively at helpful critical and illustrative junctures in her exposition.

In her thesis, Ms. Holubova does a number of things knowledgeably, competently, and even exemplarily. For example, she handles very well the Puritan conception of time in the world as service to and glorification of God. She does well in juxtaposing everyday experience to doctrinal emphasis in accounting for the preoccupation of Puritans of all ages with death. She intelligently and sensitively tweaks Aries's concept of children as "small adults" as it applies to New England Puritan culture. Furthermore, Ms. Holubova subtly raises the question of whether hagiographical conventions precede or follow reality; she grasps the fundamental importance of changes (shifts) in emphasis in intellectual and cultural history; and, reflecting this, she presents a nicely nuanced commentary on generational changes in New England Puritan funerary ritual and iconography and their variations from contemporary counterparts in Old England.

Her excellent study does, for me, raise some concerns around the following issues, reference to none of which is intended to devalue either the quality of the background fabric she has accumulated or her presentation of what are, by any account, complicated and controversial matters:

1) Even from the foundation of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630, Puritans formed only a minority of the residents, and the percentage that they constituted diminished steadily from then on, until by 1680 they constituted less than a third of the population. To what extent does any study of Puritan culture reflect the attitudes and lives of the majority of New Englanders in the seventeenth, let alone the eighteenth, century?

2) The concept of "Predestination" as presented here may represent a somewhat oversimplified and over-generalized version of even John Calvin's view of it, not to mention that of many other Calvinists and "Puritans." Likewise, the binary distinction between "Puritans" and "Arminians" may well suffer from the same defects, since numerous "Arminian" tendencies, especially on the interpretation of "Predestination," are to be found among respected theologians in England and New England whom contemporary "Puritans" would have regarded as having unimpeachable "Puritan" credentials.

3) Comparing the process of self-examination, as employed in Puritan self-observation and its written products, to Catholic confession as an example of the Foucaultian process of deploying political and religious power, patriarchy, and authoritarianism, seems easily overstated. While there is an element here of subjectivizing external authority structures, Puritan self-observation and its products were not, in general, subject to the close scrutiny and personal review by clergy in the way that confession routinely and inevitably was. Likewise, Puritan ministers had a very different role attributed to them, spiritually and ritually speaking, than did Catholic priests, leaving the relationship between the Puritan believer and God in a much more independent, personal, and autonomous sphere.

4) Finally, the dualistic decision suggested for Puritan believers between the "Adamic" (flawed, self-deceiving) self and the "Christic" (negation of self) self seems, to many, to imply a (third) competent, autonomous self by which such a choice might authentically be made; and since there was no distinction in this regard, in Puritan theology, between ministers and believers, there is no basis for ministers to provide more "authoritative" guidance on this matter than could come from the direct conversation of the individual believer's competent/autonomous self with the Deity.

All of this said, Ms. Holubova has produced a master's thesis of very high quality, and I commend her on the overall result of her efforts.

Thesis evaluation: "1, vyborne"

Signed:

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