

# Puritanism In Seventeenth Century Virginia or, Puritan Anglicanism

By CHARLES E. WYNES\*

There are at bottom but two possible religions—[1] that which rises in the moral nature of man, and which takes shape in moral commandments, and [2] that which grows out of the observation of the material energies which operate in the external universe.<sup>1</sup>

**B**OUND by the letter of Anglican ritual and intellectually dominated by a Puritan regard for the keeping of the outward manifestations of Anglicanism, seventeenth century Virginians knew neither of Froude's concepts of what constituted the basis of religion. It remained for the evangelicals of the second and third quarters of the eighteenth century to lead them to see the relationship between a moral life and a good life, and that of a religious life. It was simply unfortunate that there the emotions played such a large role and that true intelligence was usually insulted in the process. As for the latter, religion outside the realm of the Trinity, Virginians, as did the masses in all the colonies, had to wait for the preachings of William E. Channing in the early nineteenth century.

Religion in seventeenth century Virginia was a serious business, and only in the area of non-toleration of other Protestant sects did the Puritanical zeal of Puritan New England exceed that of Anglican Virginia. Few, if any historians who have made a study of religion in colonial America, will deny that very loose discipline existed in the Anglican Church in the colonies. However, apparently but little attention has been paid to learning—or acknowledging—to what extent loose discipline permitted Puritan ideals to become an accepted part of Anglicanism as practiced in early Virginia.

To what degree the leaders of the London and Virginia Companies were motivated by the desire to Christianize the Indians, we are not yet certain; but there is no doubt about their zealotry, and that of those sent out to govern Virginia, in regard to seeing

\*Mr. Wynes, a native of Harrisonburg, Virginia, attended Marshal High School, Marshal, Virginia, before obtaining a B.S. in education from Madison College. At present he is a candidate for a M.A. in history at the University of Virginia.



that the colonists themselves rigidly adhered to a spiritual code of Puritan severity enforced by martial law if necessary.

Any attempt to accurately measure the influence of a single factor or group of factors upon a society or culture is a hazardous undertaking; but if one examines the laws emanating from civil authorities in Virginia's first century, he cannot but be impressed by their Spartan or even Puritan-like severity, and by the early establishment in Virginia of codes pertaining to observation of the Sabbath e. g., that England apparently did not adopt till the time of the Puritan Commonwealth.

From the earliest settlement prayer services were held twice daily at Jamestown, while Sundays were graced with two sermons, at which *all* the inhabitants were in attendance, though their church consisted of but an awning hung between four trees, with rails for walls, unhewed trees for seats, and a pulpit for Minister Hunt made by fastening a bar of wood between two trees. Minister Hunt must have been a good and pious man, because John Smith, who had so little good to say for any of the Jamestown leaders or for the lesser inhabitants, said that he was, ". . . an honest, religious, and courageous Divine; during whose life our factions were oft qualified, our wants and greatest extremities so comforted, that they seemed ease in comparison of what we endured after his memorable death."<sup>2</sup> And un-Christianlike as Smith was in his dealing with the Indians, he could nevertheless record while on one of his exploring expeditions up the Chesapeake Bay in July, 1608, that, ". . . our order was dayly, to have prayer, with a psalm. . ."<sup>3</sup>

In spite of the fact that as early as 1609-10, Thomas Gates and George Somers were having their troubles with nonconformists on the island of Bermuda where the *Sea Venture* had run aground, in the persons of Nicholas Bennett, John Want, and Stephen Hopkins, all of whom were tried for nonconformism,<sup>4</sup> Virginia might easily have known the Christian toleration of the later colonies of Rhode Island and Maryland—and in the case of Rhode Island, complete religious toleration. For instance, the administration of the Virginia Company under Sir Thomas Smythe, ". . . did not exclude any Protestant body from the new nation. . .," and the Company under Sir Edwin Sandys, ". . . wishing especially to lay the foundation on the basis of civil and religious liberty [was] evidently anxious to welcome all Protestants."<sup>5</sup> Largely through the influence of Sandys, who was a liberal in his religious thinking as well as in his political ideas, and who was an old friend of William Brewster, the Puritan leader,<sup>6</sup> the Separatists in 1619 were granted a patent to settle



within the boundaries of Virginia.<sup>7</sup> Two years later, in 1621, the Virginia Company recommended to the King that the request of sixty French and Walloon families to be permitted to settle in Virginia, be granted. The King was informed that the would-be settlers had already expressed their willingness to conform to the Anglican faith,<sup>8</sup> but apparently the request was denied.

In spite of these indications of genuine liberalism and toleration, the spiritual tone set in 1607 continued. Lieutenant Governor Thomas Gates arrived in Virginia in 1610 bearing instructions which directed him to see that God's word was preached according to the practice of the Church of England and that all atheism, profanity, popery, and schism be promptly punished.<sup>9</sup> The two sermons on Sunday were continued, as were the twice daily public prayers. Under Lord Delaware a Thursday sermon was added and twice daily public prayer was enforced even when it meant marching the men in to church from their labors of growing corn or other necessary endeavors.<sup>10</sup> Lord Delaware is also supposed to have decreed the death penalty for a third unexcused absence from church, although there is no evidence that this decree was ever enforced by him. However, it might well have been put to use by the at least more Puritan in his views, High Marshall and Acting Governor, Thomas Dale, who soon followed Delaware, and who made Holy Communion a monthly instead of a quarterly occurrence and set aside one day of the year as a general fast day.<sup>11</sup> Captain Samuel Argall, who was acting governor 1617-1619, instituted a form of punishment for failure to attend church that could more readily and frequently be enforced. The first offense resulted in spending the following night lying "neck and heels in the Corp de Guard." A second such offense meant a month in the Corp de Guard, and for a third one might be placed there for a year and a day.<sup>12</sup>

When the first representative assembly in the New World met at Jamestown in 1619, among the first laws it passed were several dealing with the keeping of the Anglican faith and the proper observance of the Sabbath by church attendance. More lenient than Dale or Argall, the Burgesses contented themselves by passing a law whereby one was to be fined three shillings for each offense of failing to attend church. Servants, who made up a considerable part of the population, were to be bodily punished. For immorality persisting after two warnings from the churchwardens, the General Assembly decreed that the errant one might be suspended from the church for a time. During this period of temporary excommunica-



tion he was supposed to reform, and if he did not he was to be excommunicated completely and to have his goods seized on a warrant from the Governor. The Assembly then went on to pass a law requiring all clergymen in the colony to meet at Jamestown at least once every quarter to, in ecclesiastical court fashion, decide who should be excommunicated. The names of those decided against were then to be submitted to the Governor,<sup>13</sup> supposedly for his approval and legal execution.

In 1629 the penalty of three shillings for failure to attend church was changed to one pound of tobacco for each offense and fifty pounds for a month's absence.<sup>14</sup> In 1632 the Assembly ordered all churchwardens to diligently enforce the laws pertaining to failure to attend church, and the wardens proceeded to keep the county courts busy trying these breaches of the Sabbath.<sup>15</sup>

To forbid all travel whatsoever on the Sabbath, except that involved in traveling to and from church or that necessitated by sickness, seems unduly puritannical even in such a Puritan age; but that is exactly what the Assembly proceeded to do in 1629, when the first of such laws was passed.<sup>16</sup> In 1642, 'taking a voyage,' other than to church, or one which was not absolutely necessary, was made punishable by a fine of twenty pounds of tobacco.<sup>17</sup> In 1657 the fine was raised to one hundred pounds of tobacco, with the alternative of imprisonment in the stocks for any who profaned the Sabbath by traveling, loading boats, or shooting.<sup>18</sup> As late as 1691 another such law was passed, whereby one could be punished by imposition of a fine of twenty shillings for traveling or working on Sunday.<sup>19</sup>

To forbid a people living in such rural isolation from visiting with their relatives and friends, who often lived many miles away and who, by reason of the necessity for spending the regular week days tending crops of tobacco or foods for home consumption, might be visited at no other times, was indeed Puritanism of a most unreasonable nature. English law and Anglican custom afforded no precedent for it; but in the England of the later Puritan Commonwealth we do find such laws. Under Puritan administration Parliament passed an act in 1650 forbidding all travel after midnight Saturday and prior to one a.m. Monday, upon pain of a fine of ten shillings for each offense. The same act also forbade public congregations for the purpose of witnessing any sport on Sunday.<sup>20</sup> By this time the people of Virginia had long since become accustomed to doing nothing on Sunday but praying and listening to



preaching, lest they be brought before the magistrates for profanation of the Sabbath.

Just how strong was Puritanism in seventeenth century Virginia and how great was its influence upon the laws and customs of that day, will undoubtedly never be settled to the satisfaction of all parties; but one thing is certain. And that is that Virginia in the seventeenth century afforded a rich area for the development of Puritanism. That it was so favorably adapted for the inception and development of Puritanism was largely due to the ineffective organization of the Anglican Church in the colony and to the poor calibre of the clergy sent out from England. One scarcely has a right to expect to find the civil code sprinkled with laws requiring the ministers to be in their pulpits on Sunday mornings—even where church and state are one; and even if one should accept as natural the passage of a single such law, only the continued necessity for these laws could result in their repeated passage. In 1623 the Assembly adopted a measure whereby ministers who absented themselves from their churches for two months were to forfeit half of their annual salaries; for a four months absence the entire annual salary was to be denied.<sup>21</sup> In 1644 another law was passed, whereby for failure of a minister to preach on Sunday and catechize on Sunday afternoon, he could be fined five hundred pounds of tobacco.<sup>22</sup> In 1661 the Assembly again admonished the ministers to preach every Sunday and hold Communion at least twice yearly.<sup>23</sup> In spite of such measures as exemption from all taxes, designed to encourage ministers to come to Virginia—a measure first passed in 1655<sup>24</sup>—few competent and conscientious ones came. Those who came, whether good or otherwise, because their salaries were paid in tobacco, tended to settle only where the quality of tobacco was best. Colonists of the strongest Puritan views simply sacrificed material ends and congregated elsewhere.<sup>25</sup> It thus followed that those who later wrote of Anglican Church history in the colony wrote about the areas where the Established Church was strongest, and hence by no means gave a true account of the strength of Puritanism in Virginia. Campbell says of the years immediately following the Restoration, that, "not more than one fifth of the parishes were supplied with ministers."<sup>26</sup> And even of the very late seventeenth century, he says, "There were not half as many ministers in Virginia as parishes."<sup>27</sup>

With administration of the Virginia area of the Established Church under the Bishop of London, and with not even a commissary or supervisory minister in the colony till very late in the



seventeenth century, effective organization and administration of church government was as impossible an undertaking as that of attempting to supply all the ministers from England. By the late seventeenth century, in both England and Virginia, religion enjoyed a less favored estate than it had before the tumultuous mid-century and organizationally disruptive years following the Restoration. In Virginia,

. . . religion slumbered in the languor of moral lectures, the maxims of Socrates and Seneca, and the stereotyped routine of accustomed forms. Altercations between minister and people were not infrequent; the parson was a favorite butt for aristocratic ridicule. Sometimes a pastor more exemplary than the rest was removed . . . on account of a faithful discharge of his duties. More frequently the unfit were retained by popular indifference. . . . The church in Virginia was destitute of an effective discipline.<sup>28</sup>

Undoubtedly one of the reasons why few qualified and sincere ministers came to the colony lay in the narrow and oligarchical congregationalism of the parish vestry. The vestrymen were usually the most important men in the parish by social and economic standards, of course—or at least were representative of that group. However, they by no means could be said to always be the most high-minded and morally qualified individuals for church government that the colony could afford. But so long as the body of vestrymen was democratically chosen by the parishioners the system could at least be justified. After Sir William Berkeley's restoration though, in 1662, when the vestry became a self-perpetuating oligarchy, one is hard put to justify even its existence, let alone its actions. In a document entitled, *An Account of the Present State and Government of Virginia*, signed by Henry Hartwell, James Blair, and E. Chilton, it was reported in 1697, that some parishes chose to remain without a minister so that the vestrymen could pocket the minister's dues. The signers of this document went on to relate how ministers had to tread lightly when in the course of their sermons they preached against sins that some of the church vestrymen might be addicted to, lest they be turned out of their charge for "overdiligence" in performance of their duties.<sup>29</sup> Throughout the century it was customary for the vestry alone to decide upon and "hire" the minister instead of merely presenting him to the governor for him to appoint. Thus, church government was in practice congregational and not episcopal as theory had it.<sup>30</sup>

The seventeenth century was not noted for tolerance in religion, although the seeds for Protestant reform and democratic



church government were sown in that century, to sprout and blossom in the eighteenth. Still, for all the oligarchic power exercised by the vestry, and in spite of the State Church and the passage of puritannical blue-laws, Virginia was far ahead of the mother country and her New England sisters, excepting Rhode Island, in the area of religious toleration. The holding of Quaker meetings e. g., might be forbidden, and Quakers might be fined for holding them and even banished from the colony for a third such offense; a member of the House of Burgesses might be expelled for consorting with Quakers, as was done in 1663,<sup>31</sup> but none was banished simply for being a Quaker, nor could they be legally hanged for holding meetings, as was the case in New England. As for Puritans, apparently little fetish was made over Puritanism till Sir William Berkeley's regime beginning in 1642. Sir Thomas Dale himself was reputed to have been a Puritan. This is a matter of long dispute, but some of the moral regulations in his *Code* certainly indicate that he might well have been. Of the minister whom Dale took with him to his new settlement of Henrico, the Reverend Alexander Whittaker, there is far less room for doubt. There is some doubt pertaining to Christopher Lawne, who, in 1619, settled in the area that later became the county of Isle of Wight. But of the brothers Robert and Richard Bennett, who settled in the same area in 1621, there is no doubt about their being Puritans. Also, there are Nathaniel Basse, Isle of Wight, 1622, and Daniel Gookin, 1621, at Newport News and later of Nansemond county. All were apparently unmolested and not actively discouraged.<sup>32</sup> According to Father Biard, one of the Jesuit priests who was at Port Royal when Captain Samuel Argall burned it in November, 1619, Argall was also a Puritan,<sup>33</sup> as well as a rascal and a thief. More generally known, of course, is the settlement of Puritans along the Nansemond River, from which, in 1649, some three hundred persons moved to Maryland upon the invitation of Governor William Stone and founded the settlement of Providence, later to become Annapolis.<sup>34</sup>

During the Commonwealth Period—understandably, however—there were three Puritan governors: Richard Bennett, Edward Digges, and Samuel Matthews, who were nevertheless *elected* by the Burgesses, the representatives of the people.

Following the Act of Toleration, issued in 1689, the spirit of religious amity increased. Dissenters could now openly meet and worship as they chose, so long as they continued to support the Anglican Church by their tithes, registered their meeting places,



and their ministers purchased a civil license. But these dissenters, whose numbers were restricted to two or three meetings of Quakers and less than that of Presbyterians, are not to be confused with the spirit of Puritanism that pervaded the Established Church. The "blue laws" were kept on the books, and even added to, but no longer in such stringent fashion. It was still common practice to indict and fine those who profaned the Sabbath by hiring out a horse, sending a servant to a tannery with a hide, shelling corn, going to get back a pair of shoes left with the cobbler, or by hunting or fishing.<sup>35</sup> But by 1699 persons of twenty-one or over were fined for failure to attend church only if they attended less than at least once every two months. The fine was five shillings or fifty pounds of tobacco, which dissenters too, had to pay if they did not attend the church of their choice at least once every two months.<sup>36</sup>

Puritanism in seventeenth century Virginia is hardly recognizable as such so long as we define Puritanism only in the Separatist or Puritan Massachusetts sense. The Bennetts of Nansemond county afford us perfect examples of outright Puritans; but they and the Alexander Whittakers, the Christopher Lawnes, and the Daniel Gookins, are inconsequential beside the pervasive Puritanism which was within and a part of the Anglican religion in Virginia, and which influenced her moral and social thinking and placed a distinct stamp upon her civil code, which in turn further shaped the moral and social mores. One writer recorded that, ". . . a spirit of moderate Puritanism continued [after the Restoration] to dominate both the clergy and laity of the Episcopal [Anglican] Church. . . ." <sup>37</sup> He might have written with no less accuracy, "A spirit of [at least] moderate Puritanism dominated the Anglican Church *throughout* the seventeenth century."

1. James Anthony Froude, "Calvinism", *Short Studies on Great Subjects*, second series (London, 1871).
2. John Smith, *Travels and Works of Captain John Smith*, edited by Edward Arber (Edinburgh, 1910), II, 957-958.
3. *Ibid.*, I, 118.
4. Alexander Brown, *The First Republic in America* (Boston and New York, 1898), 116.
5. *Ibid.*, 558.
6. *Ibid.*, 262, 265, 530.
7. John H. Latane, *The Early Relations Between Maryland and Virginia* (Baltimore, 1895), 36.
8. *The Records of the Virginia Company of London—Documents*, edited by Susan Myra Kingsburg (Washington, 1933-1935), III, 491.
9. *Ibid.*, 14.
10. Philip Alexander Bruce, *Institutional History of Virginia in the Seventeenth Century* (New York and London, 1910), I, 11-12.
11. *Ibid.*, 11-2.
12. *Ibid.*, 28.
13. *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, edited by H. R. McIlwaine (Richmond) 1619-1658/59, 13-14.
14. *Ibid.*, 54.



15. Bruce, *Institutional History*, I, 29.
16. *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 1619-1658/59, 54.
17. Hening's *Statutes at Large*, I, 261.
18. *Ibid.*, I, 434.
19. *Ibid.*, III, 73.
20. "An Additional Act for the Better Observation of the Lord's Day," (Great Britain) *Acts and Ordinances 1648-1652*, 809 ff.
21. Hening's *Statutes*, I, 123.
22. *Ibid.*, I, 290.
23. Hening's *Statutes*, II, 42.
24. *Journals of the House of Burgesses*, 1619-1658/59, 100.
25. Latane, *Relations Between Maryland and Virginia*, 33.
26. Charles Campbell, *History of the Colony and Ancient Dominion of Virginia* (Philadelphia, 1860), 255.
27. *Ibid.*, 354.
28. *Ibid.*, 374.
29. *Calendar of State Paper, Colonial Series*, edited by Willaim Noel Sainsbury (London, 1860), XV, 662-664.
30. Latane, *Relations Between Maryland and Virginia*, 32.
31. Hening's *Statutes*, II, 198.
32. Latane, *Relations Between Maryland and Virginia*, 35-38.
33. Brown, *First Republic*, 193.
34. Latane, *Relations Between Maryland and Virginia*, 47.
35. Bruce, *Institutional History*, I, 35-36.
36. Campbell, *History of Virginia*, 373. also Hening's *Statutes*, III, 171.
37. Latane, *Relations Between Maryland and Virginia*, 63.