Book Review in Educational Studies

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Puritans settled in North America in the early to mid-seventeenth century. They were not the first immigrants to travel to North America, or the largest group. Nonetheless, at the time of their immigration they were a distinct population. They believed that they were to create a model religious commonwealth in the wilderness (Spring 1994, 5); they were to create a city on a hill, a good society, which would win God’s approval. Gradually, a diverse array of New England settlements and colonies, such as Plymouth Colony, were established and governed by the Puritans. John Higginson (1853), who wrote an attestation to Cotton Mather’s Magnalia Christi Americana: The Ecclesiastical History of New England, From Its First Planting, in the Year 1620, Unto the Year of Our Lord 1698, summarized this undertaking, albeit in the sacred and celebratory approach that was more common at that time:

It hath been deservedly esteemed one of the great and wonderful works of God in this last age, that the Lord stirred up the spirits of so many thousands of his servants, to leave the pleasant land of England, the land of their nativity, and to transport themselves, and families, over ocean sea, into a desert land in America, at the distance of a thousand leagues from their own country; and this merely on the account of pure and undefiled Religion, not knowing how they should have their daily bread, but trusting in God for that, in the way of seeking first the
kingdom of God, and the righteousness thereof: And that the Lord was pleased to grant such a gracious presence of his with them, and such a blessing upon their undertakings, that within a few years, a wilderness was subdued before them, and so many colonies planted, Towns erected, and Churches settled. (13)

From the beginning of their arrival in America, the Puritans were highly educated and literate (15). Puritans, at times, were prolific writers; likewise, were concerned with living a Godly life. Thus, education and schooling were of significant importance for the Puritans and hence possessed a “decisively religious tone” (2). Although different interpretations have been offered regarding how the education of Puritan children unfolded, it often is suggested that children were taught to read and write so they could obey the laws of God and the state (Spring 1994). For the Puritans, study and prayer were connected to the idea of individuals finding grace and God’s salvation. They likewise resulted in the desired moral behavior (25). These religious connections often are the primary linkages made to the Puritans by educational historians.

In Schooling, the Puritan Imperative, and the Molding of an American Identity: Education’s “Errand Into the Wilderness,” Douglas McKnight also suggests that, beyond religious ramifications, Puritan practices had a profound effect on the developing American consciousness. This is ironic because, over time, Puritans came to be viewed as fanatical radicals by some Americans (13). Books such as The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1965) have provided unflattering portraits of the Puritans. Nonetheless, a central theme in McKnight’s writing is the lack of any in-depth analysis of the colonial Puritans’ place within American practices (including educational practices), beyond a generalized conception that Puritans read the Bible and that their educational and schooling experiences were motivated by authority and religion, rather than a quest for democracy. In contrast, McKnight argues that Puritans ardently believed that they needed to “enter into, participate, and be successful in the world in a way that would help fulfill the greater corporate mission of America, that of becoming a ‘city on a hill’” (2). Puritans subsequently inscribed on America a symbolic narrative of undertaking an “errand into the wilderness” and becoming a “city on a hill.” McKnight suggests that this was the Puritan gift to America. The gift contained a lesson about how to go about living one’s life for the benefit of the individual as well as for the larger society. This gift also functioned as a control mechanism, in which Puritan moral beliefs and goals were imposed on others. McKnight noted that the symbolic “errand’s success depended on the morality of each individual and how that morality expressed itself in some coherent fashion within the community” (28).

Eventually, although the language of the Puritan’s errand shifted from America being God’s chosen place to America leading a free world, the inclination that was first expressed by Puritans subsequently shaped national consciousness. A fascinating insight offered by McKnight is that this impulse continued through the Puri-
tan *jeremiad*, a literary work or speech expressing lament. The term *jeremiad* is rooted in the Bible, specifically connected to the prophet Jeremiah. In Jeremiah’s writings there is tension, also embodied by the Puritans, between what would likely occur in the world and what was hoped for. McKnight suggests that “for Jeremiah, as for the colonial Puritans, the concern and question was how to do right in a world that had fallen into iniquity” (36). During the period of the Puritans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the jeremiad often was expressed during a time of crisis, such as when it was felt that the great mission of becoming a “city on a hill” was threatened. These times of crisis and tension were viewed as an opportunity for Puritans to engage in moral contemplation and to seek purpose and reason.

A key idea suggested by McKnight is that the use of the jeremiad continued after Puritanism had dispersed into denominationalism, although the language changed from a religious focus to a language focused on democracy, economic status, and military power. Documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution have come to define America. McKnight suggests that the jeremiad, likewise, continues in the contemporary context in the United States. Historians such as Arthur Schlesinger Sr., Arthur Schlesinger Jr., Mary Beard, and Edmund Moran, who have analyzed persistent social ills that shape America, are identified by McKnight as the modern jeremiad writers. In educational settings in particular, schools are bestowed the responsibility of instructing students about the historical mission of America and about morality. Such an education, a function of the jeremiad, helps Americans connect to the idea that the nation’s purpose is to function as “the light of the world,” although McKnight suggests that this story has fragmented in recent decades.

McKnight believes that the Puritan jeremiad was connected with, and structured in accordance to, the Ramus construct of pedagogy, an encyclopedic-like approach to ordering and transmitting knowledge. Puritans studied and prayed to locate God’s reason and wisdom, and then they charted it. Examples of this ordered approach to religious study are articulated in Cotton Mather’s personal diaries. For example, in discussing his daily religious study, Mather ([1681] 1911) wrote, “Yea, I went over many Portions and Chapters of the Bible in these morning Exercises; and I herein handled Mulititudes of Cases referring to the most important Points of Christianitie” (30). Another example is found in the intense study of the Bible that resulted in the development and publication of a detailed concordance to the Bible in the seventeenth century by the Rev. Samuel Newman, a Puritan of Rehoboth, Massachusetts (Newman 1860). With Ramism, there was a distinct move away from dialogue and a move toward participating in a determined direction of study and reason. Puritan ministers, who often were educated in university settings, at times passed out Ramist diagrams to help the congregation follow their sermons. Schooling, another step in the road toward godliness, also was structured in Ramism. McKnight notes that when schools expanded in the nineteenth century,
the Ramus construct of pedagogy was applied. The Puritan’s errand into the wilderness was preserved, as education still was seen as a means to salvation, although this was later translated to a nontheological focus on social salvation.

It is reasonable to question how the Puritans’ symbolic errand expanded into and beyond the nineteenth century and shaped national identity. During this time, there was increased urbanization, industrialization, and immigration. Family structure altered; the function of a community-based, extended family of relatives and friends diminished. Fathers increasingly worked longer hours in factories or offices, and mothers had an increased variety of daily roles. Cultural coherency was no longer sensed in America. Change clearly occurred, yet McKnight suggests that community members, specifically middle-class Protestants with roots in the early towns and farms in America, were eager to socialize immigrants in the ways of the Puritan errand. The symbolic legacy of the Puritans was still appreciated. McKnight argues that the old Puritan vigor took hold during this time. The Protestant middle class shared a sense that the cities, specifically those in the Northeast, were theirs to protect. Some viewed them to hold utopian promise. Katz ([1968] 2001), in his study of educational reform in the nineteenth century, noted that the city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, located on a strip of land by the Merrimack River, was the “deliberate creation of men who had a utopian vision” (93). To help protect these cities—and, perhaps more important, to continue a prescribed morality—massive expansion of public schooling was subsequently undertaken. Educational historians such as Katz argue that such expansion was controversial and at times not welcomed.

McKnight suggests that whereas Puritans initially had participated in schooling to instruct the individual to find God’s grace, middle-class Protestants used schools for the purpose of providing instruction on a much larger scale. Jeremiads were used no longer to threaten God’s wrath but instead functioned to warn of a loss of power and standing in the material world by the nation of America. It was believed (by some) that mass public schooling should propagate morality and a particular cultural mission. For example, McKnight notes that William Torrey Harris, an esteemed nineteenth-century teacher, former U.S. Commissioner of Education, and prolific writer, advocated the generation of morality in schools. During this period, schooling provided a tentative cure for the uncertainty felt over the future of America; subsequently, compulsory school laws gradually were enacted, which McKnight suggests forced children to be educated in the symbolic ways of the Puritan’s errand into the wilderness.

Schooling, the Puritan Imperative, and the Molding of an American Identity provides a rich analysis of how the Puritans’ symbolic errand into the wilderness and efforts to shape a city on a hill subsequently shaped American identity. It compels readers to move away from the somewhat common assumption that the educational connections that may be made to the Puritans rest solely with the reading of the Bible and religious authoritarianism. This book offers a wealth of information
for those interested in studying the history of U.S. education, particularly as it was shaped by the seventeenth-century Puritans and beyond. The book is also useful for those who wish to explore and consider some possible foundations of contemporary educational practices. This is a scholarly book full of insight that calls for careful reading, contemplation, reflection, and questioning.

Inevitably, readers develop questions for authors regarding ideas presented in their books, or about ideas that are related to presented topics. I myself, for example, am interested in learning more about how the process of colonization interfaced with Puritan practices and the molding of a national identity. Likewise, I am interested to know how, if at all, Puritan practices might have shaped identity and consciousness in locales outside of the United States, such as England. McKnight wrote that Puritans hoped for America to function as a light unto the world. What were some of the initial occurrences with regard to this goal, particularly during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? How were Puritan writings published and distributed outside of America? In addition, I continue to contemplate how the national identity that McKnight argues was shaped by the colonial Puritans took hold. McKnight offers insight into this area of questioning, particularly in his discussion of how a seamless plot of the American story seemed to exist at some level, a plot that at one time shaped identity but has since fragmented.

As the twenty-first century unfolds, public schooling in the United States continues to be orchestrated to provide educational experiences for children. For many, schooling is coordinated during a time of profound national and international crisis. Children are growing and developing during a period in which wars are fought, inequities exist, and misunderstandings are fostered. Questions are frequently asked and circulated regarding how we will move forward to a more peaceful and equitable time. Jeremiads still ring forth, although some of the symbolism has been lost. After reading McKnight’s book, one is encouraged to contemplate if the historic Puritan symbols of undertaking an “errand into the wilderness” and becoming a “city on a hill” may indeed be replaced with new symbols connected to new notable contexts.

References