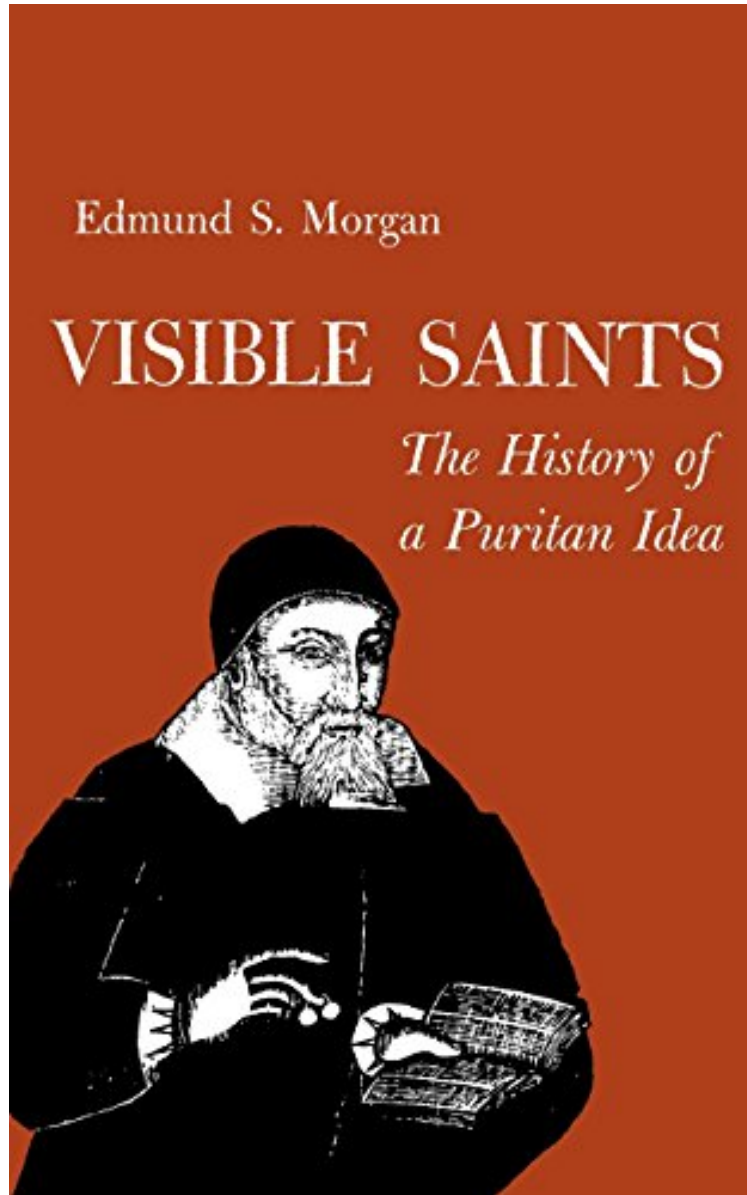


[Free read ebook] Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea

Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea

Edmund S. Morgan

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Edmund S. Morgan : Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Visible Saints: The History of a Puritan Idea:

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful. Fundamental reading on American Puritanism By Stephen Roop In just a few bold strokes, Morgan manages to outline how American Puritanism is embedded in English Puritanism and how, nonetheless, it also differs. Some readers may consider this difference as progress, others may not. But it is well,

decades after this book first came out, to remember the embedding. Americans studying the Puritans (and the Pilgrims, for that matter) are far too prone to view the subsequent American Revolution as the magnetic pole organizing all phenomena. Morgan's book helps one see this is anachronistic. 6 of 7 people found the following review helpful. The Puritans of Old and New England By Frank Bellizzi In this book, Edmund Morgan traces the history of the Puritans from their beginnings in sixteenth-century England through developments in seventeenth-century New England. He gives special attention to their quest to purify the church so that its membership would more closely approximate the true and perfect church of Christ. Morgan tells us that his title, *Visible Saints*, is a term that occurs frequently in the writings of the Puritans. More than that, quoting Geoffrey Nuttall, he asserts that this phrase "was undoubtedly their controlling idea and provides the key to what they were after" (vii-viii). Morgan explains that the fundamental question the Puritans raised actually goes back at least as far as the ancient church and the Donatist schism. The Donatists tried to relieve the tension between the ideal and the real by establishing and maintaining what they asserted were "holy" Christian communities. Famously, Augustine responded by insisting that there are at all times, in fact, two churches: one is pure, unmixed, but invisible, while the other is visible, but mixed and impure. In other words, although the Lord knows those who are his, the church doesn't. With a few radical exceptions, says Morgan, the Puritans "never repudiated St. Augustine's distinction between the visible and invisible church. They all insisted on the impossibility of a church without blemish in this world" (33). They nevertheless carried out a unique attempt to further the reformation of the visible church so that it would more closely resemble the invisible. Eventually, there emerged among the Puritans two distinct groups: nonseparatists, who sought ecclesiastical reform while retaining membership in the Church of England, and separatists, who believed that their national church was hopelessly corrupt and that, above all, it lacked the essential quality of the true visible church: namely, the capacity of a congregation to discipline itself under the Word of God. Among separatists, one question in particular naturally arose: who is worthy to belong to the church? What should be the terms of membership? At first, the conditions of membership appear to be a simple renunciation of the English Church and a promise not to attend the parish congregation. However, although all Puritans assumed that the invisible church was made up precisely of those people who had experienced the saving grace of God, early separatists made no attempt to determine the religious experiences of prospective members. The standards of membership were orthodox faith, voluntary submission to the discipline of the congregation, and the absence of obvious, gross sin. In time, all Puritans eventually developed an ideal and practice of church membership which tested every candidate's experience of saving grace. The author notes that historians have typically believed that this practice was followed by the separatists who fled to Holland, and that it came in 1620 with the Pilgrims who, in turn, influenced later arrivals. Morgan's thesis disagrees with this traditional account: My contention is that the practice came, not from Plymouth to Massachusetts as initially supposed, nor from England or Holland as presently assumed, but that it originated in Massachusetts among the nonseparating Puritans there and spread from Massachusetts to Plymouth, Connecticut, New Haven, and back to England (65-66). Regarding Puritanism in America, Morgan says that in the 1620s and even the 1630s, membership in both separatist and nonseparatist churches did not require a description and test of a prospective member's experience of saving grace. Yet, around 1640 and afterwards, this procedure was the norm. If the new system was well established in the 1640s, but was not known in 1629, how did it come to be? Morgan suggests that the idea was likely developed by George Phillips, minister at Watertown who came to America with John Winthrop in 1630. At any rate, within a few years the practice was forcefully advocated by John Cotton so that, by 1635, it was the norm in New England. There, churches "held it a duty to exclude from the church everyone who failed to persuade them in speech or writing that he possessed saving grace" (93). Morgan points out how his thesis helps to explain other developments in the history of early New England Puritanism. For example, the uniquely-American movements and episodes associated with Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were radical extensions of the emergent New England religion. Hutchinson and her followers believed that God had granted them the ability to judge perfectly the professions offered by candidates for membership so that, in their community, the visible and invisible churches were one and the same. The development of the so-called "the halfway covenant" can also be traced back to the standards of membership first recognized in New England. Morgan explains: The absence of ties between the unregenerate part of the community and the church gave the latter an unprecedented purity, but it also placed the very life of the church in jeopardy. The members of the New England churches had themselves come from imperfect churches, in which they had learned the doctrines of Christianity, had taken the sacraments and received the experience of grace that qualified them for membership in the proper churches of New England. But how would the mass of men who had come to New England unqualified for membership ever become qualified? (122). What ultimately forced the question of the church's responsibility to outsiders was the next generation, the children of New England Puritans. They had grown up baptized members of the church. But according to the new standards developed in America, many of them lacked the experience that would qualify them for membership. And what of their children, the grandchildren of founding members? "The Puritans had in fact moved the church so far from the world that it would no longer fit the biological facts of life" (128). A 1662 synod attempted to remedy the problem. The proceedings from the synod said that church members' adult children who had not experienced saving grace should continue to be regarded as members of the church, and that they could bring their own children to be baptized, provided that the

family did not live an outwardly scandalous life. Such members could not, however, vote. Nor could they participate in the Lord's Supper. This odd arrangement, generated by Puritan commitment to both infant baptism and a church made up entirely of saints, epitomized and reinforced a tension in American Puritanism that, as late as the mid-eighteenth century, lacked any real resolution. In the "Preface," Morgan explains that his book "originated as the Anson G. Phelps Lectures, delivered at New York University, in February and March, 1962" (viii). From beginning to end, *Visible Saints* retains a good bit of the engaging style of a fine set of lectures. Occasional comments in the text as well as footnoted sources indicate that Morgan conducted extensive and, in many cases, exhaustive research in the relevant primary sources available to him. The result of his careful and logical analysis is a convincing and delightful little book that has apparently become a classic in Puritan studies. 11 of 12 people found the following review helpful. A truly illuminating work

By Gordon Adams

Instead of trying to cover the totality of Puritan experience, the author focuses on a few crucial topics. What motivated the Puritans? What were they trying to accomplish? He illuminates the differences between the different branches of Puritanism: Separatists (the Pilgrims), who believed that each and every church should stand alone; Congregationalists (the majority of those who settled the rest of Massachusetts and formed the Massachusetts Bay Colony), who believed in a loose affiliation of churches, and Presbyterians, who wanted a rigid church hierarchy. He also illustrates how the beliefs and practices of each group evolved over time. If you want to really understand some of our most famous ancestors, this relatively slender volume is a must read.

Through a richly detailed account of the genesis, flowering, and decline of the Puritan ideal of a church of the elect in England and America, Professor Morgan offers an important reinterpretation of a pivotal era in New England history. Historians have generally supposed that the main outlines of the Puritan church were determined in England and Holland and transplanted to the new world. The author convincingly suggests, instead, that the distinguishing characteristic of the New England churches—the ideal of a church composed exclusively of true and tested saints—developed fully only in the 1630's and 1640's, some time after the first settlers arrived in New England. He also examines the influence of the Separatist colony at Plymouth on the later settlers of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, and follows the difficulties created by a definition of the religious community so selective that the New England churches nearly expired for lack of saints to fill them.

"Although he does not pretend to deal 'exhaustively' with the subject, Professor Morgan leaves few aspects untouched. Throughout, we are presented with thoughtful, original scholarship and with a skillful reinterpretation of a Puritan idea." *New England Quarterly*

About the Author

Born in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Edmund Morgan spent most of his youth in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and was educated at the Belmont Hill School, Harvard, and the London School of Economics. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1942 and three years later began his teaching career at the University of Chicago. From there he moved first to Brown University and then to Yale, where he became Sterling Professor in 1965 and emeritus in 1986. Morgan's historical writings greatly enhance our understanding of such complex aspects of the American experience as Puritanism, the Revolution, and the relationship between slavery and racism. At the same time, they captivate readers in the classroom and beyond. His work is a felicitous blend of rigorous scholarship, imaginative analysis, and graceful presentation. Although sometimes characterized as the quintessential Whig historian, in reality Morgan transcends simplistic categorization and has done more, perhaps, than any other historian to open new and creative paths of inquiry into the meaning of the early American experience.