

1: Race and Redemption in Puritan New England | Journal of American History | Oxford Academic

In Race and Redemption in Puritan New England, Richard A. Bailey investigates the ways that colonial New Englanders used, constructed, and re-constructed their puritanism to make sense of their new realities. As they did so, they created more than a tenuous existence together.

Over the last few years the reality that these great men of the faith were in fact also slave owners has hit me. Despite the many frustrations I have with his book Richard A. Bailey, this idea actually caught me off guard initially. My approach to racism among the Puritans was to try to draw out an explanation for how they could hold to their theology and yet also hold to their racism. But Bailey actually posits that it was to some degree their theology that allowed them to hold to their racism. These two doctrines, examined from different vantage points, helped to formulate Puritan racism, according to Bailey. Bailey notes, in this work, several ways in which the Puritans utilized formulated theological beliefs along the borders of racial identity. Over time these differences began to be utilized to construct a theological framework for thinking about these other New Englanders. Blackness of skin, then, was translated into blackness of soul. And the imago Dei in Natives and Africans was limited and diminished. When they focused on the subject of redemption too they tended to racialize their evangelistic theology. Bailey exposes in all its unsettling nature the language of the Puritans, and a language grounded in a theology. It should not, however, be assumed that this book is flawless in its presentation of this information. While I found the concepts of Race and Redemption in Puritan New England extremely important there were moments where the development of this content was less than impressive. Bailey, at times, does not seem to understand Puritanism. In chapter one he seeks to explain the theological framework that led to Puritan racism by basically describing a series of contradictions within Calvinism. What he calls contradictions, however, are more precisely known as antinomies or tensions. There are moments in this chapter where Bailey seems to suggest that the Puritans had simply settled themselves to a life of inconsistency and as such were more than able to embrace racial prejudice while holding to the imago Dei. Such a view, even overlooking his misunderstandings of Puritan theology, is simply too simplistic. He attempts to correct this at times, noting that the Puritans saw all non-Christians this way. He views their efforts at evangelism as condescending and arrogant, when in reality they are simply part and parcel of a whole Christian worldview, not rooted in racial bias. In order to ground all of this in reality of course the author has to demonstrate the racism from the colonial literature. In general Bailey does a great job of this, but at times his use of quotations is sketchy. He quotes single words or phrases from literature but with little to no context. He gives us glimpses into their writing but not full pictures. Sometimes he even takes the liberty to suggest what the scene was like with no historical documentation. In these cases he makes clear that he is suggesting what may have happened but it certainly leaves an impression of realism on the reader. Overall I think this is an important book for students of the Puritans to read. It exposes us to the life of these great heroes of the faith that too many ignore or are simply ignorant of. We need to consider carefully failures not only in their morality but more pointedly in their theological expressions. How might their theology have been abused to defend their racism? We may learn from our Puritan forebears in more ways than one, and in the area of racial prejudice I believe we need to learn from their failures.

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Race and Redemption in Puritan New England attempts to draw connections between the theological beliefs and the racial abuse found among the colonists. This idea actually caught me off guard initially.

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