

Pilgrim's progress: Spiritual adventures

by [Carol Zaleski](#) in the [March 9, 2010](#) issue

Having lived in the town of Jonathan Edwards and his grandfather Solomon Stoddard for some 20 years, I've come to feel a kinship to the 17th- and 18th-century Puritan divines—as if they were relatives who somehow got left off my family tree. When I walk past Stoddard's Manse or the gothic First Churches on the site of Edwards's original meeting house, I can't help thinking that a hidden stream of the old religion still runs below the surface of Northampton, Massachusetts, our hip, spiritually polymorphic city-on-a-hill. I may not be able to pull up the sidewalk to locate the underground stream, but at least I can perform that most Puritan of exercises: I can read. I can read myself halfway if not wholly back to the pietist past and see in the everyday streets the emblems of sin and salvation.

It is astonishing that a small group of plain-speaking sectarians equaled the greatest English writers in capturing in one frame the beauty of creation, the goodness of common things, and the deformity of the human heart. As Étienne Gilson said of the medieval Cistercians, the Puritans and Non conformists gave up everything except the art of writing well—and, like the medieval Cistercians, they wrote allegory. Although they were loath to interpret the Bible in other than its literal or typological sense, they had no hesitation about interpreting the visible world as a realm of images and shadows that, come the millennium, would give way to the transcendent realities they represented. To depict spiritual regeneration they used allegorical conceits at once biblical and natural: the knight of faith clothed in the whole armor of God, the perilous quest, the long pilgrimage—images that are stirring, martial and exuberant. Viewed thus, life with its inevitable sorrows and anxieties becomes a spiritual adventure rather than an incalculable series of buffetings.

That's why I'm rereading *The Pilgrim's Progress*—I know no better antidote to spiritual lethargy than this allegorical dream-vision of John Bunyan. I suppose this makes me one of the millions of Bunyan lovers who, since they don't subscribe to his strict Calvinist covenant theology, struggle to articulate exactly what it is they so

passionately admire. For Samuel Coleridge, Bunyan's "piety was baffled by his genius." For the literary critic F. R. Leavis, the moral significance of Bunyan's classic—he calls it a masterpiece in the "art of social living"—overrides its particular theology. As Bunyan scholar Roger Sharrock sees it, "a 17th-century Calvinist sat down to write a tract, and produced a folk-epic of the universal religious imagination."

But I rather think that Bunyan produced not a universal but a uniquely Christian myth. It is universal only in fulfilling the mandate to carry the gospel to the ends of the earth, which it certainly has done. The most widely disseminated Christian book after the Bible, *The Pilgrim's Progress* has been translated into more than 30 European and 130 non-European languages and has shed much of its "Englishness" and some of its Calvinism in the passage to India, Africa, East Asia and Oceania. I have a copy rendered in Inuktitut in the 1950s by an Anglican missionary to Baffin Island; the pictures show Bunyan's characters in Inuit caribou parkas. The burden on Christian's back looks like a whaler's chest, and the House of the Interpreter is an igloo. But the gospel is plain enough.

Unfortunately it's no longer the case that, as Lord Macaulay put it, "in every nursery the Pilgrim's Progress is a greater favourite than Jack the Giant Killer" or that "there is no ascent, no declivity, no resting-place, no turnstile, with which we are not perfectly acquainted. The wicket gate, and the desolate swamp . . . the valley of Humiliation . . . are as well known to us as the sights of our own street." Even 20th-century Scottish writer and politician John Buchan was so shaped by childhood sabbaths spent reading *The Pilgrim's Progress* that he felt he could reconstruct it from memory. It colored the surrounding woodlands for him, giving him "the Wicket-gate at the back of the colliery . . . the Hill Difficulty . . . Doubting Castle—a disused gravel-pit" and a permanent conviction, embodied in his spy thrillers and military histories, that life is a hard and exhilarating pilgrimage. In *Mr. Standfast*, the third Richard Hannay novel (after *The Thirty-nine Steps* and *Greenmantle*), Buchan's heroes read *The Pilgrim's Progress* for diversion, deploy it as a code book behind enemy lines, and use it to interpret their most harrowing trials and intervals of "sweet refreshment." Though I'm not normally one for boys' adventure yarns, I find *Mr. Standfast*, taken with *The Pilgrim's Progress*, an elixir of fortitude and hope.

There are other allegorical maps of the road from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Many a child has found a Narnian lantern in her backyard or stumbled upon the Dead Marshes in an abandoned industrial waste stream. But nothing beats

the Slough of Despond, the Wicket-gate, the Interpreter's House and the Delectable Mountains for those times when Evangelist catches me forgetting my directions.