

Who was benjamin franklin religion essay



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Benjamin Franklin's ideas on God and human nature were significantly different from the puritan norm at the time. While Franklin saw God as a good and wise creator, the puritans feared Him as an almighty being. The puritans saw human nature as the ultimate conduit for sin, while Franklin believed that humans as products of God were good at heart. Franklin believed in a God discrete from both man's activity on earth and the puritan ideal of who He was, and in humans not as slaves to sin and redemption, but as masters of their own destiny.

Puritanism was a very widely held belief system in the early colonies. A direct descendant of Calvinism, Puritanism had strong roots among a vast number of the colonists throughout early American settlements. As a sect of Christianity, they believed in the bible as the word of God, and Jesus as God's son. It was common for puritans of the time to fear God and look at all misfortune that befell them as punishment for their sins. " And as it struck my hand, so it struck my heart; for I suddenly rose up and went into a wood; and there I cried bitterly, and now concluded that God, God had found me out. (Dane, 4)" The puritan God can almost be seen as a tyrannical leader; one who strikes fear into the hearts of His subjects, yet demands their love and respect.

Franklin's semi-present creator-God was distinctly different from that of the punishing overseer of the puritans. Franklin was one of few deists at the time. It is said that had he published his deism tract thirty years earlier, he would have risked imprisonment and execution in the British Empire. The norms of the time, the puritans, were an overwhelming majority. The puritan God was always there, always watching over his creations. As John Dane

repeated from his mother, "...Go where you will, God he will find you out. (Dane, 2)" The puritans spent their lives with the ever present notion of God's wrath hanging over their shoulders. Franklin's God was not the same entity. He was the creator, and that to Franklin was as far as His relationship with man went. God did not inspire man to write the books of the bible, nor did he send His Son to die on a cross for man's sin. "...after doubting by turns of several points... I began to doubt of Revelation itself. (Franklin, 5)" Franklin's God gave man life and free will, and then gave him the reigns to control his own destiny.

The puritan conception of human nature was based on the idea of original sin. Original sin is a term used to describe the bible's story of Adam and Eve eating the fruit from the tree of good and evil under temptation of Satan. Puritans believed that because of this original sin, humans are all inherently corrupt and impure of mind; because man is born into sin, it is impossible for him to escape it. "Your best duties are tainted, poisoned, and mingled with some sin, and therefore are most odious in the eyes of a holy God. (Wigglesworth, 4)" In the eyes of the church, the only redeeming quality of human nature was that they themselves were made by God. They were obedient to God and His word because they were afraid of his punishment. The only hope the puritans had in life was that they might be chosen in God's eyes as worthy of redemption.

Franklin saw the nature of humans in a very different light. While he did look to God for wisdom and insight, he believed that man could be good without God. He came to this conclusion not with religion, but with intellect and logic. He created a list of thirteen virtues that he believed could bring a man to

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moral perfection. These too were not created with any particular religious sect in mind, but rather with the idea that all people could better themselves through them. "...that vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful, the nature of man alone considered... (Franklin, 15)" He believed that evil or morally wrong actions were wrong, not because God said so, but because they were hurtful to humanity. Human nature by itself was not corrupt, and it was possible for a man to be truly good.

Franklin's beliefs on human nature were different in many ways than that of the puritans. While the puritans saw man as essentially evil from conception, Franklin saw man as able to create his own destiny. While both parties believed in God as being important to the life of men, Franklin saw his importance as more of a guide, and less as a strict path like that of the puritans. The Puritans had only one way to achieve completion in life; to earn God's redemption. Franklin believed that as man tried to be a better person, he was achieving his destiny in life. "...tho' I never arrived at the perfection I had been so ambitious of obtaining... I was, by the endeavor, a better and happier man than I otherwise should have been if I had not attempted it... (Franklin, 14)" The puritans did not believe this was the case, as good works to them meant nothing if God did not give favor. "Your good duties cannot save you, yet your bad works will damn you. (Wigglesworth, 4)"

The separate parties' idea of human nature was directly affected by their respective ideas of God. The puritans believed in a God that was almighty and all encompassing. They thought of themselves as unworthy beasts without purpose, and only with the favor of God did they have any chance of

happiness on this earth or after it. "...everyone sinned in Adam and everyone deserves eternal death... (Wigglesworth, 4)" Franklin saw a God that was less involved in the lives of men. He put much more emphasis on the worth of a person's works and endeavors, and less on whether or not this person had been chosen by God. "...there was in [my scheme] no mark of any of the distinguishing tenants of any particular sect. I had purposely avoided them... that it might be serviceable to people of all religions... (Franklin, 15)" Both group's ideals were founded in belief, and were distinctly different because of the differences in the belief of each respective God.

As much as the puritan ideals were similar to that of the deist Benjamin Franklin, the differences of each faith is what defines them. Franklin believed in a God based in logic, while the puritans' God was founded in faith and tradition. From this belief in separate Gods, separate belief in human nature arose; the puritans believing in Human nature as evil and Franklin believing in it as independent and just. Franklin found that the path to righteousness could be obtained through good works that bettered humanity; while the puritans believed that only strict adherence to the guidelines set forth by God could bring salvation. Each point of view has its own foundations and each gives historians a different yet equally relevant perspective on life in the early American colonies.