

Puritans believed that
all people were
corrupt religion essay



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John Winthrop once proclaimed to the Massachusetts bay colony that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us...Therefore let us choose life" (Winthrop, City Upon a Hill). Winthrop was part of a group of Protestants that separated from the Church of England in order to begin a new life of religious freedom in the New World, and they deemed that God should be central to their existence. Benjamin Franklin, however, viewed God as peripheral and did not orient his life around religion. These fundamental religious differences manifested themselves through alternate ways of thinking and living, and their opposing conceptions of God and humanity elicited specific views of government, relationships, suffering, and Scripture.

First, the Puritans believed that all people were corrupt and inherently evil while God embodied perfection. They thought that their sin enslaved them and that the only way to be free was to submit to God (Winthrop 1). In their minds, God was authoritative and demanded submission to his laws.

Therefore, they viewed man as inherently evil, and they viewed God as the restraining force that kept them in check (Winthrop 1). This interaction between God and the Puritans influenced the way that they governed the colony. For example, the governor John Winthrop explains to his citizens that they have a natural liberty, which is absolutely corrupt, and a civil liberty, which can only exist in subjection to authority (Winthrop 1). Winthrop also states that, " we shall govern you and judge your causes by the rules of God's laws" (Winthrop 1). In comparison, Franklin thought that humanity was inherently good and could improve, and he believed that " truth, sincerity, and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life" (Franklin 29). He thought that God was

peripheral and not directly involved in man's life, and this led him to believe that men were responsible for improving the state of their existence. These views helped form Franklin's ideas about the role government, which included promoting human improvement. When he is elected to office he hoped that "becoming a member would enlarge my power of doing good" (Franklin 42). Franklin's faith in man looking out for the public good was contrary to the Puritan's view that leaders were evil and wanted to enslave their subjects, and their very different religious differences precipitated these views.

The Puritans also concluded that Christ was the exclusive way to obtain salvation, and everyone who did not trust in Christ was going to hell (Wigglesworth 3). This belief about God's exclusive offer of salvation and human's inherent sin interacted to affect their interpersonal relationships because they wanted their family and friends to be saved. Most interpersonal relationships had some spiritual focus. For example, Dane recounts that he was "educated under godly parents" and that "my conscience was very apt to tell me of evils that I should not do" (Dane 6). People also comforted each other with the promise of salvation, like when Rowlandson and her son Joseph read the Bible together during their captivity (Rowlandson 18). Franklin, however, had strikingly opposing views than the Puritans because his religion had "no mark of any of the distinguishing tenets of any particular sect" (Franklin 35). Therefore, in his relationships with others, virtue is the central theme, because he concludes, "the importance of virtue did not depend on Christian dogma or the rewards and punishments of the

afterlife” (Franklin 29). Therefore, in his interactions with people, he focuses on acting virtuously while avoiding specific tenets of religion (Franklin 35).

In addition, the Puritans concluded that God intimately involved Himself in the details of human lives, while Ben Franklin believed that God existed as a peripheral figure. This belief in God’s omnipresence led the Puritans to have complex, spiritual interpretations for all events. John Dane’s account supports this idea in that he often credits God for good things. For example, John Dane returned some lost gold he had found, and credited “ God’s goodness in then giving me restraining grace to preserve me from such a temptation” (Dane 7). He also sees something as small as a wasp stinging his thumb as a chastening from God, and he proclaims that, “ God had found me out” (Dane 9). Since the Puritans believed that God was omnipresent in every aspect of their lives, their interpretations of even small occurrences had considerable spiritual meaning, and it was up to them to interpret these occurrences correctly. Contrary to these views, Franklin was a thorough deist in that he thought God was very separate and detached from human lives (Franklin 26). He did not believe in the Bible or in the Christian God (Franklin 25), so he voiced that humans were responsible for directing their own lives and improving their circumstances (Franklin 37). He exerts a confidence in his control over his own life by using phrases such as “ I would conquer,” “ I conceived,” “ I considered,” and “ my circumstances” (Franklin 32). He does not used the Bible to guide his decisions, and he does not interpret events as if God was somehow involved, which is very different than how the Puritans lived. These differences in their fundamental beliefs about God led to antithetic techniques for interpreting life circumstances.

Also, The Puritan's idea that sin led humans astray and needed God's discipline interacted to affect their perception of hardship (Rowlandson 20). In comparison, Ben Franklin posited that pain and pleasure existed in equal proportion in the world and was not controlled by God (Franklin 27). This idea caused them to attribute difficult circumstances to independent (outside their control) variables, such as God dispensing hardship. Therefore the Puritans often rejoiced in the midst of difficulty because it meant that God still cared about them. Mary Rowlandson exclaims at one point in her narrative that when she saw others "under many trials and afflictions...I should sometimes be jealous" (Rowlandson 20). Rowlandson was thankful for the Indian raid, because Hebrews 6 says that "Whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth." The way that Rowlandson interprets events in her life coincides with the hopeful way that the Puritans approached hardship, and it reflected their core spiritual beliefs. Ben Franklin, on the other hand, believed that pain and pleasure happened in equal proportion during a person's life, and states in his dissertation that "this uneasiness...produces desire to be freed from it, great in exact proportion to the uneasiness" (Franklin 27). Franklin is proposing that pain is just a natural part of life, and is dispelled by actively seeking pleasure, because "pleasure is the satisfaction...which is caused by the accomplishment of our desires, and those desires being...caused by pain" (Franklin 27).

The inerrancy of Scripture was another integral tenet of the Puritan's religion that diverged from Franklin's beliefs. The Puritans thought that the sinful nature misguided humans and that they needed the Bible to show them the truth, and these views interacted to produce total trust in the Scripture for

guidance. Mary Rowlandson often peppers her account with Scriptures that she deems appropriate for a situation. In Mary's extreme suffering, she refreshes herself with passages from the Psalms recounting God helping his people in their time of need (Rowlandson 18). Another example of this is when Dane decides to depart to the New World when he tells his father, "if where I opened my Bible there met with anything either to encourage or discourage that should settle me" (Dane 11). These accounts exemplify the way in which the Puritans viewed Scripture relative to their lives. Franklin, however, regarded the Bible as "mostly fables" (Franklin 26), and did not recognize it as a divine authority. His opinion about the Bible produced skepticism toward the Scriptures that the Puritans lacked. As a young boy he found the Scripture "disputed in the different books I read...and I began to doubt of Revelation itself" (Franklin 25). As a result, he dismissed the bible as divine and instead used the stories about Jesus as a moral guide (Franklin 33).

In conclusion, the Puritan's Christianity differed significantly from Ben Franklin's deism. The colonists conducted all manners of affairs with regard to the religious implications it would have, and all of their decisions were made in light of the faith that was central to their existence. Unlike the Puritans, Ben Franklin's philosophy of God and humanity was deistic in nature, and he had a much more hopeful outlook on humanity because he thought that they were capable of living morally without the Christian God. The Puritan's and Franklin's worldviews shaped their thinking in early colonial New England, and their alternate views resulted in divergent interpretations of the world at large.