

Differing views of the puritans and benjamin franklin philosophy essay



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The Puritans and Franklin had very different points of view on God and human nature and the interaction between the two. While the Puritans saw God as an existent creator who was interested in all human affairs and doings, the deist Franklin had the same perceptions of an overall creator but didn't think He was concerned or interested in the affairs of men. The puritans had their total belief in one God- Providence, who gave them salvation. They also felt they owed it a duty to praise and worship Him and in return, He either blessed or punished them according to their deeds whether good or bad. Deists on the other hand, such as Franklin, did not see the creator as a Christian God. They revered Him but believed that He just created the world and let it be and that He had nothing to do with human deeds or punishment. To them, Jesus was regarded as a wise man. Puritans believed in predestination by God and existence of an afterlife while Deists believed in freewill given to all mankind on earth and no afterlife. In other words, the puritans saw God as the center of their lives and that everything they did or stood for was centered on Him while the deist Franklin saw God as a creator who was not involved in the lives of mankind but rather, virtues and moral perfection shaped the behavior and destiny of man.

Puritans were a group of Protestants who believed in predestination, justification and providence. They believed in one Supreme Being-God, who right from creation had predestined humans to salvation or doom. " But all effort is ultimately futile if it does not come from the grace that God gives to those He wishes to save and to no one else" (Wigglesworth, 2).

Predestination inferred that God had set aside specific people who He wanted to save. Hence, whether the " chosen ones" do wrong or right, they

were guaranteed heaven. On the other hand, those who have not been predestined unto salvation could not rescue themselves from this cataclysmic doom. Instead, they would have to resign to fate. Puritans believed so much in predestination to the extent that they said even babies who had not been predestined unto salvation would get the “ easiest room in hell” (Wigglesworth, 4). They saw nothing unfair about this doctrine or belief. Franklin on the other hand did not even believe that God controlled the affairs of men on earth. He said that there was an “ all wise, all wise-powerful and all good God” who created the heavens and the earth. “ If He is all powerful, there can be nothing either existing or acting in the universe against or without His consent and what He consents to must be good because He is good, therefore evil doth not exist” (Franklin, 26). By this, Franklin buttresses his point that undoubtedly and undisputedly, there is a God who is the creator but He does not interfere in the affairs of men or their final destiny. This deist belief contradicts the idea of predestination that the puritans believe in.

Even though Franklin was a 19 year-old when he wrote his pamphlet on “ A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain”, it can be inferred that he was convinced in what he was talking about without any iota of doubt. Even though he was raised as a strict Calvinist, he matured to an extent where he weighed puritanism and deism and decided to opt for deism. To him, deism proved to be more truthful and realistic. Franklin wrote in his pamphlet about the freewill given to mankind by the creator. “ If there is no such thing as freewill in creatures, there can be neither merit nor demerit in creatures” (Franklin 27). What this seeks to do is to further refute

the puritan claim of predestination. By this Franklin was trying to convey that there was nothing like being predestined unto salvation or doom, but instead, humans were at liberty and had been given freewill on earth “ and therefore, every creature must be equally esteemed by the creator” (Franklin, 27).

Furthermore, with regards to the puritan point of view about the interaction between God and human nature, Puritans believed that God was interested in all the affairs of men on earth even politically “ the covenant between God and man, in the moral law and the politic covenants...” (Winthrop, 1). They also believed that he was responsible for all the circumstances whether good or bad that befell them. A good example of this can be seen in the story of Mary Rowlandson where she says “ For whom the Lord loveth, He chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receivedth, but now I see the Lord had his time to scourge and chasten me” (Rowlandson, 20). This shows that she believed that all the ill- treatment, loss, torture and disgrace that she went through was from God. Another example of this is the story of John Dane who believed that he was punished by God for not attending church one fateful Sunday and instead, chose to go to a friend’s house. “ And so I went into an Orchard and sat down in an arbor, and as before, on the same finger, and on the same place, I was stricken as before” (Dane, 9). This further buttresses the punishments that puritans believed they got from God whenever they disobeyed Him or perpetuated a wrong doing. This was however in contradiction to the deist thoughts of Franklin who said that God was not responsible for whatever situations befell us on earth and that we are architects of our own destiny. He basically said that if you wanted to lead

a happy, healthy and successful life, it was up to you and that if you also wanted to lead a sorrowful, wretched and unorganized life, it was up to you as well. He said that doing what was either good or bad depended on the morals adopted by the individual.

To the puritans, God was everything even to the aspect of provision. And as such, they also referred to God as Providence. John Dane tells of a time when he and his family were in want and they had nothing to survive on. But then, to him, God pulled a miracle " And my sister...laying her hand on the ground o rise up, there lay a shilling under her hand. She brought it in. I, being a little boy, asked her where she found it. She showed me. I went and scabbled with my fingers in the place and found another...and I doubt not but it made good improvement thereof" (Dane, 6). This incident tells that the puritan God is very merciful to his subjects and takes care of them as well. To the deist Franklin, this incident would probably be termed as one of luck and not providence because to him the Creator had nothing to do in the affairs of man.

Another difference between the Puritans and the deist Franklin's view of the conception of God by human nature was in the afterlife. Puritans believed that there was an afterlife and it entailed of God's goodness and everlasting splendor. This would happen when Jesus came back to earth a second time to judge the living and the dead and send them to their final destinations which was either heaven or hell. " The Son of God most dread; who with His train comes on amain, to judge both quick and dead..." (Wigglesworth 3). On this note, the puritans believed an afterlife existed after death and the

judgment that would take place was seen as " the puritan sense of God's
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awful majesty and wrath in popular form" (pg 3). Franklin the deist on the other hand did not agree with this and in his pamphlet, he explained why he thought the puritan concept of the existence of an afterlife was wrong. He said that " pain is evenly balanced by pleasure and that therefore, there is no need to imagine an afterlife. Even if there is an afterlife, there could be no memory of earthly existence, so it could make no difference to us" (Franklin, 27). What this solely means when explained further was the fact that humans are not conscious of themselves at birth until uneasiness arises. When this happens, there is the desire to quench this pain or uneasiness. When this desire is satisfied, it brings about pleasure and hence, the equation is that the desire is equal to the uneasiness. For this reason, Franklin said that there was no afterlife and even if there were, the pain on earth balances out with the pleasure in the afterlife and this would make no difference to us.

Puritans indulged in righteous practices because they believed that that was what God wanted from them and that if they disobeyed, they would be punished. They also believed that if God did not bless them or see to their needs, there was nowhere else they could go to seek for help. The deist Franklin on the other hand did not view it this way. He believed that virtues maketh man and said that everyone who desired success should strive to achieve moral perfection. He emphasized the " importance of virtue that did not depend on Christian dogma or the rewards and punishments of the afterlife." (Franklin, 29). He also said that the kind of behavior exhibited by an individual depended on whether the individual thought it to be " beneficial or harmful in itself" (pg 29) " yet probably, these actions might be

forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in all natures, all things are to be considered” (Franklin 29). This meant that your behavior should not be dictated by your optimism to get into heaven just as the puritans thought but rather, your behavior should be dictated by doing what you thought was beneficial to you.

In conclusion, the puritans and the deist Franklin had very different views on God the creator and His interaction with human nature. While the Puritans believed that God was interested and was involved in every move they made, Franklin believed the opposite that God was not concerned about the affairs of human nature and that was why he provided mankind with the freewill to do whatsoever he deemed right to his own benefit. Puritans viewed God as providence who always provided for their needs and at the same time punish them if they disobeyed him. They also believed in the concept of predestination and an afterlife after judgment. The deist Franklin did not believe in this but rather said that there was nothing like predestination or an afterlife and that whatsoever fate befalls an individual in life was as a result of morality or immorality. He encouraged moral perfection and urged everyone to inculcate virtues into their daily lifestyle if they truly desired success.