

Comparing the faiths of deism and puritanism philosophy essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The 18th century and the age of the enlightenment was a period in American history which saw a proliferation of many new scientific ideas as well as an increase in religious tolerance. During this time many intellectuals explored new possibilities and interpretations of religion that were sometimes quite contradictory to the Puritanism that had been the standard religious practice since Puritans first settled the New England region. Deism, which was quite radical in contrast to the Puritan faith, came about during this time, and Benjamin Franklin, a famous enlightenment figure and a founding father of America, was one of its first spokespersons. The Deist doctrine he wrote as a 19 year old preaches a starkly different message from the writings of famous Puritans such as Mary Rowlandson, Michael Wigglesworth, and John Winthrop. While their works paint a portrait of God as a severe, demanding creator and man as a sinful, wild beast who must be restricted in his actions, Franklin's piece on Deism portrays a more benevolent God who has released man into the universe to pursue his own goals without fear of God's interference and wrath. It is these ideas of God's intent and the nature of man which set these two religious philosophies and their writings apart.

The Puritan understanding of God as a vengeful and commanding ruler of men is one that dominates the writings of all of the most famous and widely read Puritan authors of the 17th and 18th centuries. Michael Wigglesworth's poem "The Day of Doom" is particularly useful in highlighting this belief as its content focuses on Christ's return to earth on Judgement day and how he deals with the sinners. He opens the poem with the quotes "The Mountains smook, the Hills are shook, the Earth is rent and torn," and "Straightaway appears (they see't with tears) the Son of God most dread," (Wigglesworth,

3.) From the first lines of the poem there is a sense of helplessness and despair in the face of an angry God who is going to judge and punish his subjects on his terms. The descriptions of God's destruction of the physical earth demonstrates his awesome power, and the use of the word "dread" to describe people's perception of God is very telling of the Puritan belief. Even though they dread his second coming and his vengeance, they have a profound respect for his power and submit themselves to his will. The poem goes on to describe who is going to hell and why, and this passage serves to demonstrate the strict qualifications for getting into heaven that the Puritan's believe God employs in his judgement of souls. Children who are too young to read the bible, Native Americans, and the mentally challenged are all unworthy of heaven in the eyes of God because they lack the ability to understand the Puritan faith (Wigglesworth, 4.) Along with these people unwelcome in God's kingdom are all non-believers, sinners, and anyone who is simply not predestined to be saved by God. These harsh qualifications preached by Wigglesworth and other Puritans to a very accepting public are all strong testaments to the harsh nature of the Puritan's God.

In contrast to the harsh God of Puritanism, Deism preaches that God is a benevolent, all knowing creator who does not find evil to punish in the world of men and can for the most part leave them to their own devices. Franklin outlines this idea at the beginning of his doctrine on Deism, "A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain," with the idea that "If [God] 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.) This

statement is radically different from the Puritan system of belief because it eliminates the existence of evil and therefore demonstrates a more pleasant interpretation of God. Rather than stressing the need for God's constant exertion of authority over humankind and its evils through interference and punishment, Franklin asserts that since God made everything and knows everything, there is no reason for him to even bother with the trivial affairs of humans, much less reprimand them. This is a very Deist concept of a God who is less involved in the daily business of man. The common Deist perception of God, which embodies this image of a wise and somewhat removed God, is often illustrated by the image of God as a clockmaker who has set the universe into motion to play out without his influence.

The idea of God's constant interference in the lives of men, which Franklin refutes as unnecessary because God's has already predetermined the fate of the entire universe and its inhabitants, is another cornerstone of the Puritan belief system. One of the best examples of this idea in Puritan writing is Mary Rowlandson's "A Narrative of the Captivity and Restoration of Mrs. Mary Rowlandson" which describes the destruction of her town at the hands of a band of Native Americans and her subsequent captivity among them. This work gives a slightly more benevolent description of God as her protector through these hardships, but her easy acceptance and rationalization of the massacre as God's will and punishment still alludes to the harsh nature of God and highlights his interferences in the lives of Puritans. One of the most telling quotes of the account, which Rowlandson uses to sum up her beliefs, comes in the final paragraph when she says, "yet I see when God calls a person to any thing, and through never so many difficulties, yet he is fully

able to carry them through, and make them see and say they have been gainers thereby," (Rowlandson, 20.) Rowlandson cites God's hand throughout the piece in every aspect of her captivity, and in this conclusion she makes it quite clear that it was God who put her through the terrors of these tribulations. The idea of God " carrying her through" her troubles and " making her see and say" that she is better for the experience not only indicates that God is responsible for what happened, but that he was actively focused on her for every instant of her captivity.

The nature of man is another key point of disagreement between the two religious beliefs, and the Puritan stance views man as a beastly creature whose primitive instincts must be controlled by the authority of God. John Winthrop's famous essay " On Political Authority and Liberty", which is both a description of God's intent of how the people should be ruled and a pitch to be reelected as governor, gives examples of this belief in man's unruly nature. Winthrop makes a point of driving home exactly how God feels about man's more primal, natural liberties when he says, " This [kind of liberty] is that great enemy of truth and peace, that wild beast, which all of the ordinances of God are bent against, to restrain and subdue it." (Winthrop 1.) The kind of liberty that he is alluding to is man's freedom in nature to do whatever he wants. According to Winthrop, this freedom, which man shares with all " beasts and other creatures" leads to chaos and must be controlled. This concept of the natural evil in men and the fact that God must constantly " restrain" men pervades Puritan doctrine and directly carries over to the Puritan style of governing that stresses adherence to authority figures.

Unlike the Puritan idea of man's evil nature and his need to be controlled, Deism states that man's nature is inherently good and that control over his actions is unnecessary. Franklin's writings illustrate this idea when he says, "If a Creature is made by God, it must depend upon God, and receive all its Power from Him; with which Power the Creature can do nothing contrary to the Will of God because God is Almighty; what is not contrary to [God's] Will, must be agreeable to it; what is agreeable to it, must be good, because He is good; therefore a Creature can do nothing but what is good," (Franklin, 27.) In this quote Franklin asserts his belief that since the all-good and almighty creator made man and gave him his nature and abilities, man must be naturally good. He also makes the point that all of man's actions are actions of which God made him able; therefore, man can make no natural action which is not inherently good. This idea of man as good from the start clearly breaks from the general Christian and especially Puritan belief of "original sin", and this stark difference demonstrates the progressive nature of Deism's. The idea that man is inherently good removes the need for overbearing authority and allows for man to rule himself.

The overwhelming differences in the beliefs of Deism and Puritanism on the subjects of God and the nature of man illustrate a clear break in the religious ideas of 18th century America. The contrast between Franklin's writings and those of his Puritan predecessors demonstrates the shift from the nearly uniform belief in religion of the 17th century to a more progressive atmosphere in the time which Franklin writes. The Deist beliefs of the goodness in God and man explore an alternative to the strict Puritan faith,

and in both Franklin's time and today they serve as a mode of beliefs which fit the understanding of many religious Americans.