

# Benjamin franklin a man of the enlightenment era religion essay



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He and his fellow Deists ushered in a radical way of thinking, in which God was not spiteful, heaven and hell did not even exist, and all humans were not permanently afflicted with original sin. Franklin's adaptations to the Puritan's ideas embodied the spirit of the Enlightenment- his ideas were supported with reason, were supplemented by the idea that humans had the capacity for progress, and addressed the theological beliefs of the Puritans in a methodical, scientific method. The Puritan God was spiteful and constantly punished humans for their inherently evil ways, but Franklin and the Deists, prompted by the scientific Enlightenment, concluded that God was good and therefore His creation, humans, must have the potential for good as well.

Puritans believed human nature is inherently evil and still suffering from the ramifications of original sin. Dane, for example, was in a constant battle with his sinful longings. He was often frustrated with his corrupt state, claiming that he " could not serve God as [he] should" and constantly trying to compensate for his " wretched nature" by turning to God for answers (Dane, 6 and 3). Puritans believed that seeking God was the only redeeming action for man, for God was the sole aspect of life that was not tainted and corrupt. Dane attributed all his good qualities to God, but claimed the bad ones as his own. For example, the " goodness in God," not his own self-control, restrained him from pursuing lustful relationships, but the impure desires stemmed from his own character (Dane, 3). Rowlandson similarly believed that humans cannot trust their nature and must constantly be wary of straying off God's path. She asserted that people " must rely on God himself, and [their] whole dependence must be upon Him," for nothing righteous can be done without God's involvement (Rowlandson, 8). Both Rowlandson and

Dane believed the only way they could counterbalance their inherently corrupt core was through complete reliance on God.

Franklin and his fellow Deists, however, embody the Enlightenment idea of progress, believing that humans are essentially good because they have the capacity to improve their impure characteristics. Deists recognize that humans do not always act with morality, but assert that they have the ability to reach their personal righteousness by taking steps to change themselves without God's assistance. Franklin exemplifies this concept through his quest to embody his thirteen virtues. He sought to improve the same qualities that Puritans strived for, but had different motives for reaching them. Puritans had an extrinsic incentive to reach the same virtues, for God stimulates their need for improvement. Franklin desired to improve himself simply for his own personal gain, an intrinsic incentive. The contrasting motives for reaching for morality were a distinguishing factor between Deists and Puritans.

Because Puritans regarded human nature as inherently evil, they perceived God as powerful and spiteful and blindly trusted his judgment. They believed their task as humans was to live solely by His will and anticipated harsh punishment if they strayed from this path. Both Dane and Rowlandson experienced the wrath of God firsthand, which inclined them to reform their sinful ways. Throughout his youth, Dane lived in a state of immorality and was prompted to adjust his sinful lifestyle when a wasp stung him. This change of heart was prompted more by fear of God's power than Dane's intrinsic sense of morality, for Dane "dared to do no other" than God desired (Dane, 2). He was heavily dependent on God's assistance, relying on His "<https://assignbuster.com/benjamin-franklin-a-man-of-the-enlightenment-era-religion-essay/>

mercies.... that taketh care of us when we take no care of ourselves” (Dane, 3). Rowlandson, also a Puritan, had a similar perception of God. Before the Lord sent her a message to reform her depraved ways, she “ had walked evilly in God’s sight” (Rowlandson, 3). Because she firmly believed in God’s almighty will, she welcomed His harsh punishments, such as the brutal massacre of her village and the death of her children. In Rowlandson’s mind, she considered it “ good for me that I have been afflicted” with these tragedies because the Puritans welcomed punishment, believing it revealed God’s concern for the individual (Rowlandson, 20). The Puritans relied completely on their almighty God’s plan and feared the ramifications when their immoral ways led them off His righteous path.

The Deists did not agree with this Puritan portrayal of God as a harsh and punishing force. Instead, these radical thinkers viewed God as the fundamental source of goodness, who does not seek to punish bad behavior. Franklin argued that since God created humans, people must be fundamentally good. Since Puritans believed in this moral core, they therefore reasoned that humans did not require the constant punishment Puritans considered necessary to compensate for the evil in human nature. Deists did not believe that people should act righteous to simply please God and avoid his wrath, for they did not believe he was constantly trying to correct their erring ways. Franklin, through his attempt to master his thirteen virtues, was constantly trying to improve himself due in no part to intervention from God, but because he simply had a personal desire to strive for morality. Though they were endeavored for the same virtuous goals,

Puritans were acting out of fear of doing wrong, while the Deists were acting with a desire to do right.

Puritans have a heavy reliance on God's hand to change them, while the Deists took personal responsibility for making their own adaptations. Puritans believe that, through the original sin, humans have corrupted God's once-pure creation and live in a permanent state of wrongdoing. God must persistently punish them for their human errors and meddle in their lives to attempt to keep people in line. God acts like the overprotective parent who does not quite trust his children and feels the need to incessantly monitor their every move, ensuring that they obey the parent's rules. Deists, on the contrary, believe that God gave humans the tools they need to reach a virtuous state on their own, using methods such as science and self-discipline. He does not need to constantly punish them, but can allow them to regulate themselves. Deists perceive God as the parent who believes he provided his children with a good foundation, and they can therefore be raised with a 'hands off' approach. Though the children may make some mistakes, they will recognize these errors and reform on their own, without needing an outside force to punish them. Franklin exemplifies the way Deists can self-reform through his use of scientific methods to improve his virtues. Instead of depending on God to send him a message and change him, Franklin was self-sufficient and developed a structured way to improve his morals. Deists such as Franklin improved themselves using methodical methods of charts, while the Puritans opted for the mythical method of divine interference.

The different perceptions Puritans and Deists had about human nature influenced how each religion perceived the Bible and the afterlife. Because Puritans thought human nature was corrupt, they relied heavily on the words of the Bible to try and find redemption. Puritans such as Dane and Rowlandson turned to the Bible in times of doubt and insecurity. Rowlandson repeatedly thanked God for His “goodness in bringing to my hand so many comfortable and suitable Scriptures in my distress” and was constantly quoting this scripture when she found herself in trying situations (Rowlandson, 5). The Puritans were apprehensive about their own judgments, since they did not trust their corrupt selves. They believed that a deep understanding of God’s message in the Bible would aid them in finding salvation after death, since humans did not have the capacity to find this salvation without God’s guidance. Puritans were convinced they could not do anything to improve their moral standings in their present life and had to use the Bible to find mercy after death. Dane was constantly trying to avoid Earthly temptation due to the “promise of salvation” after death, and Rowlandson found comfort in the “mercy promised” after death if she “would turn to Him by repentance” (Dane, 5; Rowlandson, 5). Life, for these Puritans, was simply an obstacle to overcome with the help of the Bible to have a chance at salvation in the afterlife. On the other hand, Deists, who believed human nature was inherently good, saw no need for an afterlife and therefore did not rely on the Bible as a guidebook. They believed there was a balance between good and bad in the world, so “there is not.... any occasion for a future adjustment” after death (Franklin, 8). The Bible was considered a commendable set of moral stories and was essentially the equivalent of a modern day fable. Deists did not need to rely so completely on God’s words, <https://assignbuster.com/benjamin-franklin-a-man-of-the-enlightenment-era-religion-essay/>

for they found redeeming qualities in human nature and were therefore more confident in their personal judgments. Deists lived their lives for themselves; they sought for self-improvement. Puritans lived their lives for God and were only concerned with their standing after death.

Though Franklin was raised a Puritan, he completely redefined his religious beliefs before adulthood. He abandoned the pessimistic and self-condemning Puritan principles in favor of the radical and optimistic ways of the Deists. Franklin and the Deists ushered in a completely different type of religion: one in which God was not spiteful, and in which humans were not evil at the core and actually had the capacity to live righteously.