

Benjamin Franklin And The Changing World of 18th Century American Society

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It is my intention in this paper to present some aspects of the work and thoughts of Benjamin Franklin which reflect the Puritan tradition from which he sprang. In some of his literary production, Franklin mirrors the great changes that occurred in Puritanism, from an elevated theological level into a practical utilitarian approach of more popular nature.

Benjamin Franklin was born into a simple but hard-working family of Puritan stock. Proud of their being free (franklins) for many a generation, they endeavored to preserve their freedom in the best possible way — that of being useful to the community. This way of thinking and behaving was one of the Puritan tenets, which, along with industry, listed virtue, charity, frugality, education, and simplicity (not necessarily in that order), as some of the most important signs of election.¹

From the Puritan creed and theology, however, the great majority of people was only able to extract so much, and the popular interpretation of the sermons and essays which the preachers poured on them was often quite removed from the original intent of the ministers. It is also true that much of what was preached demanded too great a sacrifice, renunciation, and resignation on the part of the congregations. Most of the

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population of the colonies at this time (around the second quarter of the eighteenth century) was already quite prosperous compared to their forefathers, and the spiritual need that walks hand in hand with hardships and insecurity was changing its nature with the affluence of the colonists. This very affluence was for many the sure sign that the Grace of God was operating, hovering over the colonies, dropping here and there and allowing more and more people to grow prosperous. The constant doubt of election is replaced by a feeling of self-reliance which sprang from the certainty that if one did his job well and practiced the virtues he had been taught to value, he would be in the right path, and therefore should fear nothing. The idea that God gives plenty to those whom he loves gave assurance to those who had plenty. The consciousness of the responsibility of the virtuous steward who is made rich by God so that he can be charitable steadily became a tradition which would bear excellent results. (I would like to add, parenthetically, that this tradition still exists, and is often felt in the shape of providential gifts and donations to charity, artistic or educational institutions.)²

It is in this atmosphere that Benjamin Franklin grows up and develops his first tastes and tendencies. But sensitive as he is, he soon feels that the ties to the orthodox Puritanism still function as a kind of hindrance to any young man who wants to develop his own skills and expand and broaden his horizons. Therefore, the only alternative he sees is to leave home for a place which had already established its fame as a seat of liberty of creeds and religion. The young man must now struggle to survive, and the virtues which had been preached to him, and which he had assimilated to a great extent, prove to be useful to him, if only he put them into practice to suit the occasion.³

Benjamin Franklin's success story is the same success story of the **Pilgrim's Progress** retold in a new environment, and in the light of a new Gospel. The new pilgrim, a child of other pilgrims who had crossed the Atlantic in search of a New Jerusalem, has achieved a degree of enlightenment which, only a few years earlier, would have had the smell of heresy. He is capable of looking into God's nature and reinterpreting it, seeing in its phenomena not types or signs of premonitory nature; his "corolaries", to employ

one of Jonathan Edward's expressions, do not point towards the "lessons" God has to teach, but towards the practical use ~~man~~ may make of nature to better serve him, or how one can profit, materially, by the use and control of the natural elements. Thunder is no longer seen as the voice of an almighty, angry God, but is studied instead, and proven to be electricity.

However, Franklin does not dismiss the tradition that lies behind him completely, but sees in it one way through which he can profit, and make others profit as well.⁴ Here I do not mean profit in the strict sense of material gain only, but also in the sense that he sees in his experience and talents an opportunity to reach the common man, as well as the more sophisticated man of society, and bring them a bit of the wisdom and usefulness of the folk ways of life. He is undoubtedly a genius at doing that, for he speaks the language of his audience, whichever it may be, with a most perfect ease. He addresses the intelligentsia as easily as he does the farmer, and they all love him and praise him. The man who helps to write the draft for the Declaration of Independence is the same one who has written **Poor Richard's Almanack**. His pen reaches all the levels of society, not only in America, but in Europe as well. But is he a total innovator? Can we say that what he writes expresses the brand new ideas of a new kind of man?

Actually, Benjamin Franklin clearly relies on the matter that existed in the country, and only reinterprets the old Puritan tenets. The Puritan man is a practical man. His preaching about industry and his invectives against idleness are obviously utilitarian preachings to promote the material growth of the colony, as well as to keep the minds and hands of the colonists off the forbidden thoughts and actions that might lead them into sin and corruption. The very classical technique of the Puritan sermon can be said to be based on a utilitarian structure in which the first step is to frighten the congregation and then to offer them a way out of this state of fright and despair by pointing to the path to salvation granted by God's benevolent free gift of his redeeming Grace. Other instances, of more material and practical nature can be cited as examples of Puritan utilitarian expedients to draw people to church. Among

them, there is the episode in which Benjamin Franklin, on hearing the complaints of a Presbyterian Army preacher that the soldiers would not attend the church services, persuaded the chaplain to serve out the men's daily rations of rum just after the prayers. And Franklin assures us that the attendance grew immensely. The acceptance of his suggestion by the chaplain clearly denotes the preacher's practical spirit. I should add now, as a reminder, that one must not forget that one of the most profitable businesses run by the New England Puritans was the commerce of rum and slaves from the Caribbean Islands to the American colonies.

The very **Autobiography** is a gigantic example of Franklin's following a **tradition** that goes much further back in time. It is his own "Spiritual Autobiography" in the steps of Bunyan, Defoe, and others. The fictitious accounts of Robinson Crusoe's business became, in Franklin, awfully real as he tells in detail his dealings with the men people knew and respected, or else knew and disdained, or poked fun at after they were demystified by the greater genius of Franklin. His **Autobiography** is a genial 'exemplum', of which he clearly states the purpose at its opening:

"Having emerged from the poverty and obscurity in which I was born and bred, to a state of affluence and some degree of reputation in the world, and having gone so far through life with a considerable share of felicity, the conducting means I made use of, which with the blessing of God so well succeeded, my posterity may like to know, as they may find some of them suitable to their own situations, and therefore fit to be imitated."

But again, we must recognize here that another trend that is strongly upheld by the Puritan attitude comes into play: the importance of the outward appearance of grace. The importance of this outward appearance misled people all too often to assume an attitude that had more of pretention than of sincerity. The necessity of maintaining the appearance of a saint made men strive to acquire it, so that the outward looks originally thought as a visual sign of election become a pose, a rehearsed attitude that has, as its main objective, the acceptance of its bearer by the "in-crowd" of the church and society.⁵ It is this use of appearances that might have prompted Franklin into adopting the

several masks he uses throughout his work. But, as he bluntly states what his purpose and intent are, at the opening of his book, the common reader may easily accept this initial, outward declaration, as the true and only one.⁶ Over and over again we have the wise and successful old Ben telling his reader to avoid the appearance of idleness, to make it evident how industrious one is, so that he can get credit, be trusted, and so on. He sees and preaches again and again the usefulness of "innocent" deceit, and always excuses his practices by telling that he too was often deceived. Of course he does not use the word "deceit", but names his attitude "prudence", or the like, making of it a virtue. This is true mainly when he does it to someone who is about to trick him, as was the case of his employer Keimer.⁷

If his Autobiography is offered as a kind of 'exemplum' where one finds innumerable anecdotes that function almost like parables which conclude with "applications", so that no one will miss their point, Franklin's are sayings of Poor Richard, the epitome of the Puritan "wisdom" turned popular. While in the Autobiography one often finds examples of "virtue rewarded", the sayings and proverbs are much more direct and do not need to be put into a context to express all they have to say. The best set of sayings used caricaturally, but conveying through satire (on himself and on a certain class of his readers, as he wears two masks — old Abraham and Richard Saunders) is to be found in his "The Way to Health". There the reader has the ultimate example of the popular sage who speaks to a crowd by means of ready-made phrases and impresses the narrator, Richard Saunders himself, but does not quite convince his audience. This very fact is representative and significant in that it shows that the morality of the Puritanical Era has ended, and though it still remains physically present in the shape of the proverbs, it is not strong enough to move the general audience into believing and acting according to what is preached.

Even though they are not Franklin's in their totality, one cannot deny the importance of Poor Richard's Almanack and its sayings. They do represent the tradition of the industrious men who strove to survive, and on succeeding turned materialistic to a certain extent, and came to see themselves as the blessed

people in the promised land. The awareness of God's grace, of being God's chosen people, of being in the communion of the saints, led the common American into a state of self-reliance and optimism that gave birth to many an attitude that closely examined reveal positive aspects, such as the social work developed by the missionaries abroad, but also serious faults, such as the inability of seeing values in cultures other than their own. The certainty of being "right", leading to the feeling of self-righteousness and superiority, gave rise to many racist and prejudiced attitudes that have branded the whole nation as little tolerant towards any group who thinks, speaks, or has a cultural background that differs from the white Anglo-Saxon, Protestant norm. These echoes of the Puritan Intolerance have reached far into the twentieth century, and piety and charity melt away, or are self-consumed among the Sunday-school goers, and often result in projects to send aid to far-away countries, but fail to look into their own back-yard, where the Blacks, or the White-trash, or some other minority groups live and represent a squalid criticism that cries out, as the voice of conscience, accusing the existence of a fault or defect which the saints cannot quite understand, and consequently find in these people's condition the sure sign of the fallen men, whose fate is definitely sealed by God's eternal damnation.

To the successful man, all praise is due. He has worked his way through life, often from the bottom, out of poverty, being in a state of grace.

The self is the great moving force, and Benjamin Franklin its great prophet. As a prophet he cannot be imputed many of the faults mentioned above. Many of his followers, however, misread his sayings, misinterpreted his philosophy, and instead of apprehending the full extent of his interest in the welfare of his fellow countrymen, they blindly strive to secure their own place in the sun, forgetting that one must often share this place with someone else.

Benjamin Franklin was a practical man, and success, appearance, and self-interest, all played an important role in his life, but because he linked all of these to the world around him, to

the society in which he lived, he was able to achieve the place of honor in the hearts and minds of his people.

The popular image of Franklin flying a kite in the storm, or as the inventor of bi-focal glasses, or as the man who wrote **Poor Richard's Almanack** is but a faint shadow of the true stature of the man who epitomizes the transition of the whole American society from its Puritan mode of existence into the pragmatic, semi-sceptical, enlightened man of the self-made republic of the United States of America.

His tale of success is this day considered by many as the very tale of success of the country he helped to build, and his success, the stuff which the American dream is made of.

NOTES

¹The Seventeenth-Century **The New England Primer** introduced the letter "A" with the sentence: "In Adam's fall we sinned all". This line sums up the Puritan concept of the fallenness of man and his condition of utter despondency and dependence in the face of an almighty God. For the orthodox Calvinist man is incapable of virtue and cannot hope for salvation save through the operation of divine grace, which is God's free gift to man. The five basic tenets of Calvinism might be summarized as follows: 1. God elects individuals to be saved; 2. He designs complete redemption only for those elect; 3. Fallen man is incapable of true faith and repentance; 4. God's Grace is sufficient for the salvation of the elect; 5. A soul, once regenerated, is never ultimately lost.

²As the eighteenth century progressed, Rationalism and Deism acquired momentum and dislodged the center of the Puritan Theocracy, replacing religion by science and poetics. Human Reason replaced the Bible in a man-cultured world, and instead of Providence acting, the new man trusted the fixed laws of a machine-like, immutable universe. In the new era, all men were entitled to share in "the pursuit of happiness", as they no longer believed that only few men were to be the elect for salvation. The Deists saw God revealed in nature, not in the word (The Bible). Likewise, they believed that all men were created equal, and all evil resided in corrupt institutions, rather than in natural depravity. Education was a way to perfectibility, and that the most acceptable service of God is doing good to man.

³Parenthetically, it should be added that the **Autobiography** presents Benjamin Franklin's journey into the world of discovery, his initiation into the realities of his society, which is continually bordering mythical and archetypal situations. His

leaving his home in Boston for the new world of Philadelphia is described by the crossing of water. Another even more decisive passage is his trip to England, where he is faced with much more bitter realities; he arrives in England to find out that the letters of credit promised him by the Government of Philadelphia had never been written, leaving him stranded in a strange land, friendless and with limited financial resources. Though he is not purified by fire, his "baptisms" by water are quite significant and every time they signal the birth of a new man. The man who comes forth is to become the characteristic man of the American brave new world. The metamorphosis he undergoes transforms the old man, the colonial Englishman, into a new creature, the "modern" American colonist and patriot.

⁴An example of Benjamin Franklin's external acceptance of formal tradition is that he continued to attend the Presbyterian Church services though a professed Deist.

⁵He admits that it is useful to cultivate not only the reality, but the appearance of industry and humility. It was effective to carry his own paper stock through the streets in a wheelbarrow to be seen as a hard-working youth.

⁶Actually, we are presented to at least three different Benjamin Franklins in his *Autobiography*. It begins with the introduction of the young apprentice on his way to success, followed by the entrance of the diplomat, respected and admired, all presented by the benevolent old Father Figure who can laugh at himself in his different guises and ages.

⁷Keimer uses Benjamin Franklin to train his employees, so that he can dismiss Franklin. Franklin in the meantime is preparing to set a shop, which he ultimately does, and causes Keimer's bankruptcy.

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