The Puritan and Enlightenment Elements in the Mindset of Main Ideologists of American Revolution

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Abstract

For years, there have been different views regarding the nature of ideology preceding the American Revolution: one of those asserted that Puritanism was the main ideological source pre-conditioning the Revolution, while another stated that it was religion-neutral Enlightenment, which prepared minds of people for the great changes. Both of these ideas were in different ways reflected in the mindset of leading intellectuals of colonial America, who played the crucial role in preparation of national American consciousness. The article sets its task to discuss which stream – Puritanism or Enlightenment – was more important for these intellectuals and public figures in shaping collective pre-revolutionary American consciousness. Or, was it that both of these elements had equal share in the success of the objective they had set.

Keywords: American Revolution, Enlightenment, Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, Puritanism

Introduction

In American scholarship, there is no consensus regarding historical role of the Enlightenment ideology. Many recent historical and philosophic studies, concerning spiritual situation in pre-Revolutionary America, contain the idea that the Puritan ethical-sociological ideas played the main part in stimulating the Revolution spiritually. According to these views, Puritanism not only armed the patriots spiritually, but also bore the whole burden of propaganda activities for uniting them ideologically in their fight for independence. Sociological lectures could not give the same effect as mass prayers (the Great Awakening); the patriots were attracted by the fulfillment of the will of God and salvation of their souls, and not realization of political doctrines (Samoxvalov, 1971).

Another point of view is that the victorious American Revolution is the triumph of the ideology of Enlightenment, and not of Puritanism. Among the important gains of the Revolution are important legislative measures on secularization of civil institutions, first of all – separation of the state and church, and constitutional guarantees of religious freedom. Certain factor in the realization of these measures was that there was no dominant religion in the country. However, the main factor of secularization was the victory of bourgeois-democratic direction, signifying spiritual and political collapse of Puritan theocracy (Karimsky, 1976).

Franklin and the Enlightenment

The leader of American Enlightenment, Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), was one of its most outstanding and versatile representatives – philosopher, naturalist, economist, writer and political figure.

When he got 17, Franklin left the house of his father and went to Philadelphia. Here he worked as a typesetter, then he traveled to England, where he mastered the art of typography. Having returned after several years to Philadelphia, Franklin became the most popular person of this city. He established the first enlightenment circle – The Junta – to promote enlightenment ideas and knowledge. His publishing activities served these purposes even more energetically. He started issuing his own newspaper in Pennsylvania (the biggest one on Pennsylvania), then the “Almanac of Poor Richard”, promoting new moral, new views of life, as opposed to feudal mores.

In the 1740s, Franklin experimented with natural sciences, and in the 1750-51 carried out his famous experiments on exploring atmospheric electricity, which resulted in the discovery of lightning protector. The contemporaries glorified the inventor as the “new Prometheus”, who snatched the lightning from the hands of the gods.

This deed of Franklin the scientist was complemented by the deed of Franklin the political figure, who, as they would say in Europe, “snatched the scepter from the hands of tyrants”. The matter concerns his active participation in the American Revolution. The 1750s-60s are the years of laborious political activity of Franklin. He was sent to England as solicitor from Pennsylvania and other colonies. He was the best candidacy for the fulfillment of this mission. Philosopher, economist, eminent enlightener, Franklin struggled hard with English government, courageously disclosing corruption and violence of royal representatives in America, energetically defended the interests of American colonies.

In 1775, on the eve of the Independence War, Franklin returned to America to take direct part in the started revolutionary struggle against England. As one of the leading members of the Congress, Franklin was the member of the Commission for Editing of the Declaration of Independence. The new government, using the diplomatic talent of Franklin, appointed him Ambassador in France. Franklin achieved

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the military union with France, and, thus, expanded anti-English coalition, which helped American colonies to win the war. He used his personal authority to attract the sympathies of global community towards the new nation, fighting against tyranny. In his last years, Franklin worked on his Autobiography, which was published posthumously, in 1791 (Samoxvalov, 1971).

Franklin and Puritanism

Most colonists, Cotton Mather among them, considered work as critical for a Christian, as the only virtuous way of life. At the same time, to Mather and his fellow colonists, a Christian's work was praised by God if it followed certain moral principles. Finally, they believed that such work would be rewarded with success. However, it depended only on God whether a Christian achieved material success (wealth).

These ideas were repeated in a rather different manner by Franklin. Although Franklin was not a practicing Protestant, he came from a Puritan background, so his famous precepts for material success, formulated in his works Advice to a Young Tradesman, Poor Richard's Almanac, and Autobiography did not differ much from Cotton Mather's. According to Franklin, a man should work hard and to succeed. However, just like for Mather, for Franklin there was both a moral and immoral way to success. First and foremost, Franklin praised "*industry*" and "*frugality*". Still, the welfare of the community was of equal importance for him. Franklin also warned against excessive pride, over-consumption, and hedonism. Just like Mather, Franklin warned his fellow citizens that it was God, and not man, who would determine his success or failure; and God's decision would be based on the person's moral and spiritual goodness.

By his religious convictions, Franklin was Deist, which reflected well both of his sides: religious and secular. One of his friends noted about him that with the Presbyterians Franklin was a good Presbyterian, with the Episcopalians he was Episcopal, with the Congregationalists he was Congregationalist, and with the Quakers he was Quaker.

While writing ***Poor Richard's Almanack*** (1732-1758), Franklin promoted the new moral for 25 years. He developed the American tradition of Almanacs, adding to it and expanding the section containing aphorisms and little essays, creating some sort of advice section demonstrating his philosophy of economic and moral individualism. These writings were eventually brought together in the treatise The Way to Wealth (1758), in which Franklin praises diligence, moderation, frugality, condemns idleness, laziness, and extravagance. *"Diligence is the mother of good luck"*, says one proverb. *"Plough deep, while sluggards sleep"*, says another, *"and you shall have corn to sell and keep"*. Later these virtues were restated in his Autobiography.

This approach was interpreted differently by different philosophic schools. Let us give just two examples:

1. Materialist philosophy, for example, considers that Franklin the Enlightener, although being an ideologist of the emerging capitalist class, had nothing in common with petty bourgeois moral connected with mercenariness, money grubbing, and self-interest. Arguing the advantages of frugality and diligence, Franklin put the different objectives. His aphorisms were directed against the moral of feudal aristocratic world, against dissoluteness, extravagance, idleness of the nobility. He was defending the moral of people of the third class – farmers, artisans, merchants – praising industriousness, thriftiness, and prudence. Besides, Franklin several times mentions the social obligation of a human, the necessity of doing good to one's neighbor.
1. Idealistic school of philosophy, considers the aphorisms of Poor Richard the product of Puritan/Quaker spirit of piety, dry practicality, religious spirit of teaching.

In other words, Franklin personified the new spirit of America, emerging partly out of Puritanism and partly out of the Enlightenment, which was going to dominate the new culture.

Another key figure of American Enlightenment, Thomas Paine (1737-1809) became the primary propagandist for the American Revolution. (Lemay, 1988). Being imprisoned in 1793 in France, but still remaining a supporter of the French Revolution, Paine wrote the second part of his battle pamphlet The Age of Reason. In this work, he attacked Christianity, approaching Deism. Calling himself *"a pure Deist"*, i.e. acknowledging formally the existence of God, Paine dedicated his treatise to (in his opinion) the disclosure of the lies created by the church.

> *"I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.*
>
> *I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.*
>
> *But, lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not believing them.*
>
> *I do not believe in the creed professed... by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.*
>
> *All national institutions of churches... appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit.*
>
> *I do not mean by this declaration to condemn those who believe otherwise; they have the same right to their belief as I have to mine. But it is necessary to the happiness of man that he be mentally faithful to himself. Infidelity does not consist in believing, or in disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe."*[1]

While most of the European Enlighteners were following anti-clerical propaganda and disputed not theological

1. Paine, Thomas. The Age of Reason. Part First, Section 1. http://www.ushistory.org/paine/reason/reason1.htm Retrieved on 7 December, 2016.

dogmas (e.g. immaculate conception of the Holy Virgin), but their distortion by Catholic church, Paine stood for more radical positions. Calling himself Deist, he criticized religious perceptions about the world creation. He admits the role of the God as a creator of the universe as a hypothesis, and not a proved fact. Even more skeptical is Paine towards the existence of the hereafter. He does not agree with any argument of the clergymen. Rejecting all the miracles ostensibly performed by the prophets and saints, the American Enlightener declares that everything in the world is natural, everything is fulfilled by the rules of nature. There are no "*wonders*", but there are the laws of electricity, magnetism, etc. Having learned these laws, the author predicts prophetically, people will learn to fly like birds. In his opinion, the Age of Ignorance should step back before the Age of Reason (Samoxvalov, 1971).

The position of the third great American Enlightener, ***Thomas Jefferson*** (1743-1826) with regard to religious vs. secular outlook is reflected in the Declaration of Independence (1776) is the first and greatest American state paper, written in a very good style making it a fine work of literature. It is the fundamental American statement of equality and the basis of America's political beliefs (Lemay, 1988).

> *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with inherent and inalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it, and to institute new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness."*
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> *Declaration of Independence as originally written by Thomas Jefferson, 1776 (Quoted from Kral, 1995, p.14)*

In other words, Jefferson admits the supremacy of the Omnipotent, but states that He created people absolutely free, having endowed them with special and unquestionable rights. Having challenged Locke's third component in his philosophic triad – Property – by *"Pursuit of Happiness"*, he aligns with French Enlighteners, and even encroaches upon the taken-for-granted institution of slavery, which had been justified through the prism of biblical *"Curse of Ham"*. That resulted in writing of so-called Jefferson's Bible, from where all the supernatural and miraculous events and phenomena were withdrawn, and there appeared the Bible of the Age of Reason.

Conclusion

Thus, it can be concluded that there were two distinctive sources of American Revolution – Puritanism and Enlightenment. It cannot be said, though, which of these sources played the dominant, decisive part for ideological justification of America's fight for independence.

At the same time, it is certain that these two forces – Puritanism and Enlightenment – influenced greatly the pre-Revolutionary Anglo-American thought. In many ways, these two movements were very different. Puritanism centered on revival of spirituality and faith, while the Enlightenment stimulated development of human intellect. Puritanism stressed the experiential, the Enlightenment the rational. Puritanism glorified the power of God, the Enlightenment the potential of human. Puritanism flourished among the lower and middle classes, while the Enlightenment touched the colonial elite and well-off people. At the same time, these movements were surprisingly similar. Both of them based their ideas from Europe. Both sought harmony between people but caused conflict. Both challenged existing institutions and aimed at better, more ideal society. Both appealed to the individualism within Anglo-American culture. And, most important of all, both Puritanism and the Enlightenment formulated concepts about God, man, and society that reinforced America's specific Protestant vision of its past and future. That was the chief fact that contributed to the striving of the colonies for independence in the 1770s.

It is certain, though, that, through the outlook of the main ideologists of American Revolution, these two sources paved the way for two traditions in American national psyche: one based on traditional, conservative values; and another, rejecting established authority and relying on reason and common sense. History will show whether one of these trends gains the upper hand, or both of them will remain there to sustain both orthodoxy and progressiveness of American civilization.

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