

RESEARCH ARTICLE

BENJAMIN FRANKLIN'S RELIGIOUS VIEWS MANIFESTED IN HIS AUTOBIOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (hereafter referred to as *Autobiography*) by Benjamin Franklin is really recognized as an American spiritual book that highlights the struggle course of the American dream and shows meaningful moral truths. Within the work, Franklin's unique experiences towards RELIGION and his deep reflections on it are surly "on display". By a close reading of his *Autobiography*, this paper delves into and analyzes those religious statements contained in it, trying to help readers sort out Franklin's complex religious complex. By paying special attention to certain narrative strategies used by Franklin, the present paper believes that Franklin's religious, moral and ethical thoughts are full of contradictions and conflicts. However, Franklin's organic absorption of puritanism, dialectical use of deism, and rational speculations of all religions enable him to form kind and tolerant religious ideas, and rational moral values, thus realizing the self-consummation of moral under religious philosophy.

KEYWORDS

Benjamin Franklin, religious views, puritan culture, deism, moral values

1. INTRODUCTION

Benjamin Franklin, the very jack-of-all-trades, almost becomes everything, a printer, essayist, scientist, ambassador and so on. His claim to a place in literature rests mainly on his *Poor Richard's Almanac* and *The Autobiography*. In *Poor Richard's Almanac*, he skillfully puts in lots of adages and mottoes, many of which have become household words, and thus makes it play a dual role in both teaching and amusement. *The Autobiography* written by himself from 1771 to 1790, as his masterpiece, despite its hard publication courses, can be said one of the not least influential examples of an autobiography which is ever written in literature. William Dean Howells once highly praised that, "Franklin's is one of the greatest autobiographies in literature, and towers over other autobiographies as Franklin towered over other men" (qtd. in Franklin 237). F. W. Pine also wrote that the work provided the "most remarkable of all the remarkable histories of our self-made men" (Pine, Introduction to *The Autobiography* vii). Consisting of four parts written at different times, it relatively faithfully records how American's first self-made man rises from a state of poverty to wealth and fame.

As a versatile great man who grew up in the 18th century, Franklin has all the characteristics of that era. He is deeply influenced by the puritan culture, but he is not a real puritan; he once criticized the views of deism, but he also claimed himself as a deist. Some critics believe that Franklin does not have any religious beliefs of his own, while several scholars hold that Franklin embraces religious characteristics of all religious groups. All of these above make his religious, moral and ethical thoughts intricately intertwined, and be full of contradictions, confrontations and conflicts. What are Franklin's true feelings towards puritanism and deism? Is Franklin a thorough deist? How should readers understand his such complicated and even contradictory stances? This paper, by detailed

analysis of Franklin's statements on religion in his *Autobiography*, aims to interpret his attitudes towards puritan culture and deism, thus helping readers figure out Franklin's "special feelings" towards them; and then with a special attention to the thirteen virtues listed in *Autobiography*, the paper makes a final conclusion of his religious views manifested in it.

2. THE HIGHLY CONTROVERSIAL PURITAN IDENTITY

Growing up in Boston where puritan culture plays dominant roles, Franklin has been deeply influenced by Calvinism since childhood. His parents believe too much in puritan creeds and highly worship the puritan system, and he himself has also been baptized by Samuel Willard, one of New England's best priest (Thayer 13). To use his own words, "I had been religiously educated as a Presbyterian" (Franklin 158). It is these backgrounds that have led many critics to believe that Franklin's *Autobiography* and life represent the main features of New England puritanism.

The critic A. Whitney Griswold in his article juxtaposes Benjamin Franklin with Cotton Mather and Timothy Dwight, acclaiming them as "Three Puritans of Prosperity" (Griswold 475); The biographer James Pardon in mid-19th century more directly considered Franklin as "the noblest Christ, the one who aims to restore religion which tended to exalt, refine, unite, assure, and calm the anxious sons of men" (Parton 558). However, Karl J. Weintraub states that, "and it certainly is not possible to think of Franklin as a religiously driven man. Yet he makes such a Puritan impression...He is the Puritan personality without the Puritan motivation and the Puritan objective" (231). Indeed, even Franklin himself in his *Autobiography* shows readers his almost contradictory understanding of puritan culture. On one hand, as for "the common attendance on public worship", indeed

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he still thought it as a duty (Franklin 16), and in his timetable, the first thing (after getting up and do washings) of his everyday life is to “address Powerful Goodness” (Franklin 74); While, on the other hand, he says “the preachers’ discourses were chiefly either polemic arguments, or explications of the peculiar doctrines of our sect, and were all to me very dry, uninteresting, and unedifying their aim seeming to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good citizens” (Franklin 67).

Then obviously there comes a question, in his *Autobiography*, why does Franklin show such two kinds of opposing views of puritan culture? As readers, how can they have a good grasp of Franklin’s ambiguous and contradictory views of puritanism? What is the connection between Franklin and puritanism on earth? In fact, in the *Autobiography*, Franklin has in an underlying way to express his attitudes towards puritan culture, indeed. Before a detailed reading of the texts, an idea which exists in academia should be first reexamined and rethought. Elizabeth E. Dunn holds that, because Franklin aims to picture himself as a good example of a self-made man for Americans to behold, the *Autobiography* can hardly reveal his own inner spiritual life of emotions, convictions, or beliefs. “The book reinforces a recognition of the lack of inward revelation in nearly everything Franklin wrote and a complementary emphasis on exteriors and appearances” (Dunn 504). As for Dunn’s ideas, he points out a very key point of appreciating the literary work: *The Autobiography* is a literary product which Franklin himself self-consciously constructs, which undoubtedly helps readers understand this work more comprehensively. However, does that mean any statement related to Franklin’s personal inner world including narrations on Franklin’s religious feelings are all unreal? If really so, how could such an unreal self-made man truly be a quintessential American? Actually, here actually lies a not least significant point which is always neglected by scholars, that is, Franklin’s narrative tactics in his *Autobiography*. In other words, the reason why in Franklin’s *Autobiography* are full of inconsistent or diversified statements about his attitudes towards puritan culture lies in that, in the process of his narration, Franklin intentionally takes certain narrative strategies to prevent himself from conveying his real beliefs towards religion directly and explicitly. Such narrative strategies, by which Franklin aims to make his *Autobiography* free from didactic sermons but meanwhile enable his religious views to be expressed implicitly, endows his *Autobiography* with certain properties of literary works (This point will be further detailly discussed later).

In the *Autobiography*, when he crosses a bay, Franklin unexpectedly picks up the book *Pilgrim’s Progress* by his beloved writer John Bunyan because of his kindness to save somebody from water. After receiving the book, he thinks, “I have since found that it has been translated into most of the languages of Europe, and suppose it has been more generally read than any other book, except perhaps the Bible” (Franklin 21). He further explains to readers his reason for loving the book, “Honest John was the first that I know of who mix’d narration and dialogue; a method of writing very engaging to the reader, who in the most interesting parts finds himself, as it were, brought into the company and present at the discourse” (Franklin 21). On the surface, he shows that it was due to the book’s narration and dialogue that he loves this book; However, it may be reasonable to infer that, his admiration for this book should have other more important reasons. As is known to readers, John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* is a holy book with the very religious atmosphere just as the Bible. John Bunyan in his book doesn’t take the form of direct preaching, but resorts to fables to convey his religious beliefs. And it is by no means accident that here Franklin refers to both the Bible and *Pilgrim’s Progress*. Charles L. Sanford once profoundly stated that, “his *Autobiography* is a great moral fable pursuing on a secular level the theme of John Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*” (306). That can be true, indeed. By claiming his love for *Pilgrim’s Progress*, such a holy puritan book, Franklin actually makes his intensive beliefs for puritan culture stand out. There is another example in *Autobiography* that may further illustrate this point. In the process of his dealing with Dr. Brown, Franklin finds Dr. Brown “much of an unbeliever, and wickedly undertook, some years after, to travestie the Bible in doggerel verse, as Cotton had done Virgil” (Franklin 22).

Then Franklin says, “By this means he set many of the facts in a very ridiculous light and might have hurt weak minds if his work had been published; but it never was” (Franklin 23). Evidently, he is greatly against Dr. Brown’s badly falsifying the Bible, because he manages to show his true feelings towards the Bible: to safeguard the holiness and solemnity of the Bible. Here he once again doesn’t clearly show his true feelings, instead he in an implicit way makes his inner hearts approached by readers.

On one hand, such an underlying narrative strategy is employed by Franklin to implicitly show his positive attitudes towards puritan culture and the Bible. While, on the other hand, he conveys directly his “other

attitudes” towards them through another narrative strategy. In the very beginning of his *Autobiography*, while acknowledging “public worship” (Franklin 16) as his necessary duty which means that he embraces the holiness and authority of the Bible, he states that, “I contrived to be in the printing-house alone, evading as much as I could the common attendance on public worship” (Franklin 16). Moreover, he further questions the Bible about its authority:

Revelation had indeed no weight with me, as such; but I entertain’d an opinion that, though certain actions might not be bad because they were forbidden by it, or good because it commanded them, yet probably these actions might be forbidden because they were bad for us, or commanded because they were beneficial to us, in their own natures, all the circumstances of things considered (Franklin 49)

Compared with his attitudes towards puritan culture mentioned above, Franklin in this paragraph conveys his almost opposite ideas towards the Bible. Here, another narrative strategy needs readers’ attention, that is, Franklin tends to appear less devout in his narration and differs from those pious puritans in many aspects. Franklin seems to deny the Bible’s equivalent status with the God. He embraces the omnipotent God but considers the sacredness of the Bible unreliable. And from this excerpt, it can be easily felt by readers that what Franklin accepts is religions with truth, sincerity and good virtues.

By means of these two narrative strategies, Franklin exposes readers to his contradictory attitudes towards puritan culture. At least, a preliminary conclusion can be achieved: Franklin can’t be an unadulterated or a typical puritan, but doubtless, the positive influences of the puritan atmosphere surely lay the foundation for Franklin’s complex religious consciousness and rational morality.

3. THE TOLERANT DEIST

Although born out of the puritan environment, Franklin is not a typical puritan. And E. Christopher Reyes in his book speaks of Franklin, “Benjamin Franklin, a deist and a freethinker” (Reyes 242). In discussions of his attitudes towards deism, Franklin tells readers, since childhood, he has read many books including those which were used to criticize deism, yet these works play an opposite role. As is said in his *Autobiography*, “for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist” (Franklin 49). Judging merely from this sentence, it is no doubt that he is a deist. However, it should be noted that his universally accepted identity as a deist should be further defined. As mentioned earlier, in his *Autobiography*, he implicitly conveys his faith in the puritan God which is precisely one of the key tenets of Calvin. By use of his ambiguous and almost contradictory statements of his attitudes towards deism within the book, Franklin once again pushes readers into a confused state. But unlike too much his narration on puritan culture, he indeed gives readers a further clarification.

I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that he made the world, and govern’d it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteem’d the essentials of every religion; and, being to be found in all the religions we had in our country, I respected them all, tho’ with different degrees of respect, as I found them more or less mix’d with other articles, which, without any tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm morality, serv’d principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly to one another. This respect to all, with an opinion that the worst had some good effects... (Franklin 67)

From this excerpt, Franklin frankly admits that he has learned a lot of theoretical ideas in the process of his pursuing creeds in his young age. He believes that, there is a God who creates all things and operates his authority to manage this world. The God desires to be worshipped, respected, prayed, and thanked. Doing good to human beings is the God’s most acceptable behavior, and the God will reward virtues and punish sins sooner or later. Here, it can be seen that, Franklin is largely a deist but not a complete deist.

Franklin has repeatedly pointed out that he believes in the principle of religious tolerance. Obviously, there are good reasons to call him a deist, even though he makes a special transformation of it. He not only shows his tolerance and encouragement for all religious beliefs, but also thinks that all religions have secular values.

This shows that although Franklin has had a large number of views on religious beliefs when young, and he has not stay away from the deist theories he has held since childhood, accompanied by certain Calvinist views. Franklin is by no means an orthodox Christian in his adulthood. Although he argues that God should be worshipped, he doesn't care for those specific rituals for most of his life. But that doesn't mean Franklin is hostile to Christianity, because in his eyes, Christianity has led many Americans to become good citizens, and their beliefs have given them comfort and strength in times of crisis. On the other hand, Franklin believes that all religions, including Islam, Hinduism, and other religions, have the same effect on their followers. In his view, all religions regardless of their sects are all good-oriented, because to a large extent, they all play their own positive roles in society.

4. RATIONALISTIC MORALS

From puritan ethics to deism, Franklin thus forms a kind of complicated attitude towards religion. Further, it is his tolerant attitudes towards deism that makes him explore the common values shared by all religion, the result of which contributes to his deep thoughts on various virtues within human beings. Superficially, Franklin's *Autobiography* exposes the essence of a self-made man from rags to rich: individualism and materialism, yet behind this essence are actually much more moral meanings endowed by Franklin. Throughout the work, it has always instilled virtues derived from actual life, subtly inspiring readers' understanding of various ethics and good deeds. The thirteen virtues listed by Franklin certainly call for readers' attention.

In his *Autobiography*, he writes many times that because he cannot be capable of restraining himself, he makes series of mistakes again and again and causes great harm to himself: conflicting and breaking contract with his brother James; misappropriating Vernon's money; and even ask his friend's wife for more than his due. These errors are all caused by his failing to do self-control, according to him. Therefore, he lists TEMPERANCE the first virtue, regarding it as his most important life principle, and believing that temperance is the fundamental manifestation of all virtues. If temperance is the most important in Franklin's virtues, then INDUSTRY and FRUGALITY are virtues most talked about in his *Autobiography* and are also his fundamental principles for achieving self-perfection and career success. "I mention this industry the more particularly and the more freely...that those of my posterity, who shall read it, may know the use of that virtue, when they see its effects in my favour throughout this relation" (Franklin 52). From a poor apprentice to a great man who has achieved fame, the main thing Franklin relies on is diligence.

Franklin himself has become a model of diligence, and industrious, hard-working rich are precisely the great American spirits he embodies. Constantly emphasizing the virtues of diligence and thrifty, Franklin has shaped a model for future generations. Besides, as for other virtues like SINCERITY, JUSTICE, CHASTITY and so on, Franklin also keeps cultivating them in his life, "I grew convinc'd that truth, sincerity and integrity in dealings between man and man were of the utmost importance to the felicity of life; and I form'd written resolutions, which still remain in my journal book, to practice them ever while I lived" (Franklin 49). The cultivation of thirteen virtues has benefited Franklin for life. In *Autobiography*, Franklin relies on the daily self-examination of thirteen virtues to continuously perfect his moral cultivation personality. The continuous growth of personality is the foundation of Franklin's *Autobiography*.

Steven Forde points out that, "One way to get at Franklin's own moral outlook is by asking what in his view justifies a new moral tolerance. In the *Autobiography*, this tolerance is grounded partially in a distinctive notion of reasonableness" (Forde 360). Indeed, just combining with Franklin's the 18th era background, the Age of reason, it is reasonable to think that Franklin should certainly be influenced by rationalism. Franklin himself once referred to his understanding of RATIONAL ACTIVITIES, "By rational activities, I think it means those activities for human beings that naturally contribute to their true and pure happiness" (qtd. in Adams 179). And in Forde's article, he also states that "It is reasonableness, as much as wealth or virtue, that accounts for Franklin's happiness and the pleasing character of his example" (Forde 360). In his descriptions of ways of cultivating these thirteen virtues, Franklin explains in great detail how he attempts to live by them, "I made a little book, in which I allotted a page for each of the virtues. I rul'd each page with red ink, so as to have seven columns, one for each...I might mark, by a little black spot, every fault I found upon examination to have been committed respecting that virtue upon that day" (Franklin 70-71). Franklin resorts his knowledge and own unique ways to instruct both himself and readers how to live by pure virtues. Also, he uses

an orderly thinking pattern to try to live by the virtues he set for himself. "I determined to give a week's strict attention to each of the virtues successively. Thus, in the first week, my great guard was to avoid every the least offence against Temperance, leaving the other virtues to their ordinary chance, only marking every evening the faults of the day" (Franklin 71). In Franklin's mind, logical thinking and reasons are of great necessity to help make the best decisions.

Thus, it can be seen that, Franklin attaches great importance to rational activities in human beings' moral lives. From this sense, Franklin's thirteen virtues, besides being the criteria for achieving moral perfection, also build his rationalist moral outlook.

5. CONCLUSION

Before coming to a final conclusion for Franklin's religious views in his *Autobiography*, a question first remains to be solved. As mentioned before, in his *Autobiography*, Franklin resorts to certain narrative strategies to self-consciously construct his book: he manages to make his *Autobiography* free from didactic sermons but meanwhile enable his religious views to be expressed implicitly. Then why? And when writing his *Autobiography*, how does he deal with the relationship between his innermost feelings and those words open to the public? It is a matter about a writer's own religious faith and the receptions of readers to whom his book is open. As T. S. Eliot once conveyed that, "Faith, especially a writer's, is probably an unsolvable problem...It is impossible to measure the extent to which people really believe what they claim to believe" (qtd. in Asher 62). Indeed, any great work is based on the recognition from the general public. A piece of literary work, especially serving as a model for future generations, will be sure to suffer from readers' disgust and indifference if purely out of didactic purposes of religion instead of more concerns for artistic techniques and values. Therefore, if a devout Christian writer can change the original religious background and weaken the religious preaching during his creation, he or she may make his or her work more powerful.

However, the key reason, this paper thinks, should be attributed to that era and social reality in which Franklin lives. In his later years, Franklin is not only a businessman, but also an important politician. To politicians at that time, religion is a very sensitive issue, which could easily lead to disputes if not handled properly. In fact, in his *Autobiography*, Franklin has many times expressed his concerns about strife within churches in many parts of the *Autobiography*. For example, when building the house of the church and electing someone as the member of trustees, Franklin prudently takes the very egalitarian way, in order that "a predominancy should not be given to any sect, lest in time that predominancy might be a means of appropriating the whole to the use of such sect, contrary to the original intention" (Franklin 99).

What's more, when he was young, Franklin had found endless conflicts within denominations, "confuting one another, which disputatious turn, by the way, is apt to become a very bad habit...besides souring and spoiling the conversation, is productive of disgusts and, perhaps enmities where you may have occasion for friendship" (Franklin 15). Although religious sermons in Franklin's time are very strict, the religious atmosphere is very free and active. Because of this, various denominations stand, and struggles and confrontations between them are also relatively serious. Franklin is wise and cautious and considers every little thing very carefully. Naturally, he will not take it lightly on religious issues, leaving himself open to charges from his opponents and dissidents.

Obviously, when writing his *Autobiography*, Franklin chooses to deliberately weaken his Christian identity, intending to avoid readers' dislike and misunderstanding of the book's complex ethical preachings as well as certain unnecessary disputes. Therefore, Franklin has to adopt a vague, even contradictory approach to deal with his attitudes towards religion.

With those further clarifications above, the final conclusion of this paper will be easily perceived by readers. Even though Franklin himself elaborately contrives a wonderful "feast" in his *Autobiography* for readers, through deep reading of the texts, readers can still go into Franklin's inner religious world and find out his true religious views in it: Franklin's religious, moral and ethical thoughts are full of contradictions, confrontations and conflicts. However, Franklin's organic absorption of puritanism, dialectical use of deism, and rational speculation of all religions enable him to form industrious and thrifty virtues, kind and tolerant religious ideas, and rational moral values, thus realizing the self-consummation of moral under religious philosophy.

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