



The Influence of Puritanism on the Shaping of Traditional American Values

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Abstract— *The Paper, starting from a study of Puritanism, tentatively explores the functions of Puritanism in conceiving American culture as a whole, and traditional American values in particular, and concludes that the traditional American values characterized by individual freedom and self-reliance, material wealth and hard work, respect for education and pioneering spirit are mostly credited to Puritanism.*

Keywords— *Puritanism, traditional American values, American culture.*

I. INTRODUCTION

To have a good command of a foreign language, one needs to learn the culture that nurtures the language, especially the rules, laws, values etc. governing the behavior and thought of the foreigners. Otherwise, one can't achieve an in-depth understanding of why the foreigners do what they do and think what they think, therefore can't conduct successful cross-cultural communication.

English is a global language and the official language in the USA as well. People across the world study English for different purposes at different times in history. Nowadays, many learners of English interact with the Americans in many fields. And an insight into American cultures can help them communicate smoothly.

America is a nation of immigrants. Historically there were two waves of immigration movements to the American continent. The first one occurred around 25000 years ago, while the second one happened following the discovery of the New World by Christopher Columbus. Those migrating to America from across the world brought

with them the customs and habits of their home countries and contributed to the making of the culture of their adopted country, which made the American society a "melting pot", or rather a "salad bowl". Therefore, from the very beginning of American history, there has been diversity. And most of the Americans viewed this diversity as a fact of life. The opportunities the early immigrants believed they would find in America and the experiences they virtually had when they settled down in America forged the American identity and nurtured traditional American values, some of which are still cherished today by the modern Americans.

Among the early settlers, the Puritans, though small in number, played a very significant role in the early days of the United States of America. Their pursuits of freedom, of material wealth, and of quality education, etc. left deep imprints on traditional American values. Although American values today deviate from the traditional ones to some extent, Puritanism as a basic attitude during the colonial period was too durable to be overestimated as a formative element of traditional American values.

II. BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO PURITANS AND PURITANISM

Puritanism started in England as a religious reform movement from the late sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Finding the newly founded Established Church, the Church of England, retained much of the religious practices of the Roman Catholic Church, the Puritans firstly tried to purify the Church (hence named), then tried to separate from it. They were consequently labeled as Separatists and persecuted by the Conformists. Some of them “had to escape to Holland, for there was no king. And they could worship as they pleased.” (1) Beginning in 1620, the Puritans began to immigrate to the New World in search of a “God City”, where they could realize their religious ideal. Firmly believing they were God’s chosen citizens, the moment they landed themselves in the New World, the Puritans set about carrying out their religious experiment: to build a city upon a hill, to found a new “Zion” in the wilderness. Whether one thinks Puritanism as bane or blessing, one thing is sure: no religious experiment in the New World had had a more enduring impact upon Americans’ belief in freedom, hard work, education, material wealth, sense of mission and on the formation of the new nation as a whole, all of which combined contributed to the making of the traditional American values.

III. INFLUENCES OF PURITANISM ON THE SHAPING OF TRADITIONAL AMERICAN VALUES

The Puritans who arrived in New England in 1620 were honored as the Pilgrim Fathers and the real forefathers of Americans. Together with the coming-up Puritans, they laid the foundation for the religious, intellectual, and social order of New England, leaving one of the most enduring influences on traditional American values.

1. Individual freedom and self-reliance

Individual freedom was and is the most basic of all American values, which means the desire and the ability to control one’s own destiny without any outside interference, and which was the most appealing force to pull the early immigrants to the New World during the colonial period.

The Americans’ unremitting pursuit of freedom owes largely to the Puritans who denied Pope’s authority. They

believed that the fate of individual souls was predetermined by God and each individual can communicate directly with God through his faith to Him rather than His representative, the Pope on earth. By reading the Bible, all individuals could enter a direct relationship with God. In other words, salvation was a personal matter between God and the ‘Elect’. As a result, they emancipated themselves from the rigid Roman Catholicism, separated themselves from the Established Church in England, set up their own church, chose their own leaders, and eliminated the hierarchical system in church. According to Puritanism, all men were equal in the eyes of God. “Puritans showed their democratic tendency from the first beginning. They protested any form of religious or political tyranny while respected the government with relatively loose power.” (2) And they developed a strong sense of self awareness and freedom from any outside control which paved the way for the development of individual freedom or individualism during colonial period, and later became one of the most important traditional American values.

Most Americans believe that in order to keep their individual freedom they have to pay a price: self-reliance. In fact, the strong belief in self-reliance is one of the most important aspects of the American culture which are also credited to the Puritans who risked their life to travel down untaken paths into perilous territory for religious freedom and better life.

The courage and the strength of this little group of puritans who boarded the Mayflower were unprecedented in history. When they eventually stood on the virgin land of the New World, they had to feed, shelter and protect themselves. With the belief that God help those who help themselves, and with their self-disciplined, strong-willed, well-organized and educated minds, the Puritans struggled to survive the first winter in New England and managed to adapt to the harsh conditions and toiled on the new land. For them, standing on their own two feet to control their destiny was the only way out for survival.

2. Material wealth and hard work

The predestination and the self-improvement valued by Puritanism were the basis of the Puritan ethic of pragmatic laboring and pursuing utility, which fostered love of hard work and love of material wealth among the

early settlers in America.

“Puritans believed human beings were predestined by God before they were born. And everyone was given a calling by God. The success of one’s work or the prosperity in his calling was the sign of being God’s elect”. (3) It’s natural for them to labor desperately in the wilderness in order to turn the natural resource into material wealth.

With the lapse of time, this kind of working attitude has gradually found its way in the shaping of traditional American values. In fact, “Hard work has been both necessary and rewarding for most Americans through their history.” (4) They came to see material possessions as the natural reward for their hard work. Consequently, each individual tries his best to work to the top in a society, where material wealth has traditionally been a widely accepted measure of social status, and where self-made men are much admired and desired.

The achievement of material possession by hard work is probably the most widely respected form of self-improvement in America which serves as an enduring driver to spur generations of individuals on their way to the realization of their dreams.

3. Respect for education

For centuries, education has been held by the Americans as the means by which the inequalities among individuals are to be wiped off and by which every desirable end is to be achieved. The Americans view their public school system as an educational ladder, rising from primary education to secondary education and eventually to higher education. Each individual makes great efforts to climb high and higher and even higher on the ladder of education in order to climb high and higher and even higher on the ladder of success.

Such a trait in American character can be extended back to the Puritans during the colonial times. Puritans worshiped the Bible as the sacrosanct word of God. In order to find God’s will and establish a direct contact with God, each individual must read the Bible, hence, their literacy rate was high, and the intensity of their devotional life could hardly be matched in American life. The Puritans, generally well-educated, pursued a dream of 100% literacy. Their practices of compulsory education for all children and public money for education are the

cornerstones for public schools in America today. In daily life, the Puritans built schools as instinctively as they set up churches in the New World. Harvard College, founded according to the pattern of Cambridge University by the Puritans in 1636, faithfully reflected the Puritans’ educational ideal.

4. Pioneering spirit

According to Collins dictionary, pioneering spirit means “the willingness to endure hardship in order to explore new places or try out new things.”

Throughout the American history, being ready to try something new has always been noticeable in American character, which could be found in the trait of the Puritans, too. Persecuted in England, the Puritans called Separatists by the Conformist, sold their houses and farms and went secretly to Holland. When they might not worship as they pleased, 47 of them signed the partnership paper and risked their lives to cross the Atlantic Ocean to accomplish their religious mission in the unknown New World. Faced with numerous uncertainties, difficulties and dangers, they showed great courage to take risks and readiness to challenge the impossible. They had to be innovative on the spot, figuring out how to build houses out of whatever they could find, how to find food and water, and how to deal with the natives. Their great courage, rugged individualism, self-reliance and independence, known as frontier spirit, can be best illustrated by Americans’ love of adventures today.

IV. CONCLUSION

Puritanism, born in England, was fused with the reality in New England soil. With the passage of time, it gradually became a way of being in the New World. Though Puritans are no longer in existence today, and the modern American values are not the same as the traditional ones, the influences of Puritanism can still be felt in American society today. An insight into Puritanism and its influences on traditional American values can help learners of English examine modern American values and achieve complete understanding of American culture.

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