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Community: The Thread that Holds Individuals Together

Abstract

This article discusses the importance of community to both the Puritan and Enlightenment ideologies, which were otherwise opposites in many respects.

Community: The Thread that Holds Individuals Together

Angela Skeggs

Early American intellectuals struggled to reconcile the personal ambitions of the individual versus the welfare of the community. During the Puritan (mid to late 1600s) and enlightenment (1700s) eras there were many philosophers who attempted to create some sort of balance between the two. The Puritan ideology was centered around the importance of community. Assertive individualism threatened the delicate strings that held the community together. People like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams, who voiced their contrary opinions, were ostracized by the Puritan community. The Puritan emphasis on a cohesive community remained, but evolved to allow for a certain degree of individuality. During the enlightenment there was still much concern about the welfare of the community, but expressing individuality became more acceptable. Whether it was through exploring virtue, championing education, or creating new theories of just governments, people were encouraged to use their individual talents in order to improve society. A main component of the emerging American ideology, from the Puritan age through the enlightenment, was focused on keeping the community united, while trying to find a proper place for individual expression.

Early American thought was dominated by Puritanical beliefs. One of the most important characteristics of the Puritan ideology was the need for community involvement in the church. The people had to show an unswerving devotion to the church and put aside their own opinions (and thoughts) sometimes. The church asked so much because its beliefs were derived from the theory that not all souls are saved. Only a chosen few, called the elect, were destined to go to heaven. If one was of the elect, they showed it by doing good works and obeying the church. However, performing good works, like charity, would not lead a person to salvation. The elect were supposed to perform good works in order to show their natural grace. Many who hoped to be in the elect did charitable and volunteer work in order to show that they were saved. Their efforts in these endeavors benefitted the community. Important Puritan theologians believed that the individual was merely a servant to the community's welfare, and everyone had to work together as a whole. John Winthrop used the analogy that all Christians were sown together into the body of Christ: "Wee must be knitt together in this worke as one man...mourne together, labour, and suffer together, always haveing before our eyes our Commission and Community in the worke, our Community as members of the same body."¹ Winthrop used this analogy of being part of one body to show the interconnectedness of all the members of the community. If one part of the community was ill, then the entire community would suffer. Individuals were

accountable for their actions, because it could affect the entire community. A person could not do sinful things without harming the community.

Though the Puritans had originally come to the colonies to escape religious persecution and practice their own religion, which could be seen as an individualistic act, they did not tolerate dissident opinions within the church. Those who deviated from the norm were not only frowned upon, but were threatened with banishment from the community. The Puritans felt that conformity was essential to keeping the community together. The banishments of Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams proved that nonconformity would not go unpunished. Anne Hutchinson was banished for her criticism of the church, and because she believed God had directly given her revelations (not revelation through a minister.) The perceived threat to the community can be seen through the testimony of one of Hutchinson's accusers: "...but the ground work of her revelations is the immediate revelation of the spirit and not by the ministry of the word, and that is the means by which she hath very much abused the country that they shall look for revelations and are not bound to the ministry of the word, but God will teach them by immediate revelations and this hath been the ground of all these tumults and troubles."² Hutchinson's *individual* revelation threatened the desired religious conformity of the community. The community could not remain cohesive if dissenting voices like Hutchinson were not silenced.

Another example of anti-individualistic beliefs in the Puritan society was the banishment of Roger Williams. He too held beliefs that differed greatly from those of the Puritan church elders. Williams preached for religious toleration within the colonies and believed that forced conversion of Native Americans was wrong. In short, Williams believed that individuals should have the liberty to choose their own religion. According to Williams, being forced into Christianity did a disservice to the individual, and to God. Eventually Williams was exiled to the mostly unsettled colony of New Jersey. Ousting such individual thinkers like Williams and Hutchinson demonstrated how strongly the Puritan leaders demanded religious conformity. The community could not thrive if too many independent thinkers attempted to change the religious power structure of the community. Individual beliefs and liberties would have to be sacrificed in order to promote a strongly linked community.

The Puritan idea of placing special emphasis on the unity of the community continued to exist in American thought, but the role of the individual evolved. Eventually, the individual was perceived as an important asset, and not as a threat. Many of these perceptions arose during the enlightenment and revolutionary eras (1700s) in the United States. Though the individual enjoyed rising prominence, the idea of community welfare was not entirely abandoned. Rather, there was an emphasis on individuals using their unique abilities to better the community. The editors of the *American Intellectual Tradition* boiled

down the basic ideologies of the enlightenment into two main ideas: "that it was possible to understand the universe through the use of human faculties and that such understanding could be put to use to make society more rational and humane."³ Unique ideas were needed in order to help communities evolve with the times. This is why individualism was not only tolerated, but encouraged during the enlightenment.

Benjamin Franklin was one of the foremost thinkers of the enlightenment. He believed that people should seek high personal standards in order to improve their community. Franklin, along with other thinkers of his time, believed that the pursuit of virtue would benefit all of mankind. The pursuit of virtue was a very individualistic notion. It was a very private, almost meditative practice of self-improvement. The end result, though, would benefit the community. In his autobiography Franklin wrote that, "it was therefore every one's interest to be virtuous, who wish'd to be happy even in this world."⁴ Franklin appealed to the individual happiness, but he makes other arguments that show the benefits of virtue for the community: "There seems to me at present to be great occasion for raising an United Party for Virtue, by forming the virtuous and good men of all nations into a regular body, to be govern'd by suitable and wise rules..."⁵ The entire society would benefit by forming a government that was composed of virtuous people. Those like Franklin believed that individuality should be expressed by the pursuit of virtue and self-enlightenment.

Most of the great thinkers of the American enlightenment were also the "Founding Fathers" of the United States. Many of these great advocates of liberty prescribed to the notion that individualism is good for the well-being of the community. John Adams spoke about this issue in his *Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law*. Adams believed that Canon and feudal law were oppressive because they did not allow people to question authority. To help end this oppressive ignorance, Adams encouraged everyone to gain some sort of education. Knowledge among the populace is especially important to Adams because "liberty cannot be preserved without a general knowledge among the people, who have a right from the frame of their nature, to knowledge."⁶ Instead of working all day, citizens were encouraged to pursue the more individualistic goal of education. Through education members of the community could rise to prominence. Overall, the public would be better informed and create a stronger electorate. Though taking people away from their work for awhile could harm a community in the short-run, it would ultimately benefit by having an educated populace. Again, an individualistic notion was proposed that would help keep the community strong.

Though individualism became more acceptable in the 1700s, there were still limits to an individual's strength and power. People were still expected to be involved in the community, and to check selfish self-liberty. James Madison warned of the danger of absolute individualism in Federalist Paper Number 10.

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Madison believed that the principle threat to freedom was faction. He wrote that factions will ultimately destroy the government and do harm to the people. Madison did not want oppressive interests to injure the community. In Federalist Paper Number 51 he wrote: "It is of great importance in a republic, not only to guard the society against the oppression of its rulers; but to guard one part of the society against the injustice of the other part."⁷ Though people should have the right to individual ideas and opinions, their actions should not infringe upon the rights of others. There is a delicate balance between expressing individuality and hurting another member of the community.

Puritan thought and American Enlightenment thought are different in many ways. A thread that holds these two eras together is the importance of community. During the Puritan era individualism was suppressed in order to keep the delicate community together, and to assert the power of the church. Dissenters like Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams were thrown out of society in order to maintain Puritan leadership and loyalty. As the colonies grew and prospered, new ideas began to arise. Some individualistic thoughts and ideas were seen as important and necessary to the growth of the community. While individualism was celebrated there was still an emphasis on community. People were encouraged to express their individuality as a way of benefitting the community. The primary puzzle of both the Puritan and Enlightenment eras was how to balance individualistic expression with the welfare of the community.

Endnotes

1. John Winthrop, "A Modell of Christian Charity," in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 3rd edition. eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 15.
2. Anne Hutchinson, "The Examination of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson at the Court at Newton," in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 2nd edition. eds. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 37.
3. David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper, eds., *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 89.
4. Benjamin Franklin, "Selection from *The Autobiography*," in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 3rd edition. eds., David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 103.
5. *Ibid.*, 104.
6. John Adams, "A Dissertation on the Canon and Feudal Law," in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 3rd edition. eds., David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 113.
7. James Madison, "*The Federalist*, Number 51," in *The American Intellectual Tradition*, 3rd edition. eds., David A. Hollinger and Charles Capper. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 145.