

FROM EDWARDS TO EMERSON

Perry Miller

To our minds, no longer at home in the fine distinctions of theology, it might seem that from the Calvinist doctrine of regeneration, from the theory that a regenerate soul receives an influx of divine spirit, and is joined to God by a direct infusion of His grace, we might deduce the possibility of receiving all instruction immediately from the in-dwelling spirit, through an inward communication which is essentially mystical.

Such was exactly the deduction of Mistress Anne Hutchinson, for which she was expelled into Rhode Island. It was exactly the conclusion of the Quakers, who added that every man was naturally susceptible to this inward communication, that he did not need a special and supernatural dispensation. Quakers also were cast into Rhode Island or, if they refused to stay there, hanged on Boston Common. Emerson, descendant of Puritans, found the descendants of Quakers "a sublime class of speculators"...But his ancestors had held that while the soul does indeed have an access to God, it receives from the spirit no verdict upon any question, only a dutiful disposition to accept the verdict confirmed by Scripture, by authority, and by logic....

The New England tradition commenced with a clear understanding that both mysticism and pantheism were heretical, and also with a frank admission that such ideas were dangerous to society, that men who imbibed noxious errors from an inner voice or from the presence of God in the natural landscape would reel and stagger through the streets of Boston and disturb the civil peace....Take away the theology, remove [the] overlying stone of dogma from the wellsprings of Puritan conviction, and both Nature and man become divine....Unitarianism rolled away the heavy stone of dogma that had sealed up the mystical springs in the New England character...

Ralph Waldo Emerson believed that every man has an inward and immediate access to that Being for whom he found the word "God" inadequate and whom he preferred to designate as the "Over-Soul." He believed that this Over-Soul, this...universal essence, which is beauty, love, wisdom, and power all in one, is present in Nature and throughout Nature....A pantheist holds that the universe itself is God, or that God is the combined forces and laws manifested in the existing universe...

The ecstasy and the vision which Calvinists knew only in the moment of vocation, the passing of which left them agonizingly aware of depravity and sin, could become the permanent joy of those who had put aside the conception of depravity, and the moments between could be filled no longer with self-accusation but with praise and wonder. Unitarianism had stripped off the dogmas, and Emerson was free to celebrate purely and simply the presence of God in the soul and in Nature, the pure metaphysical essence of the New England tradition....

Elizabeth Peabody [Transcendentalist, radical Feminist, and sister-in-law of Hawthorne] was so entirely subjective as to walk straight into a tree because "I saw it, but I did not realize it."

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