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Ralph Waldo Emerson at 200: Still Shaping the American Mind

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Born May 25, 1803, Emerson became a paladin of New England culture in the young republic. Within his own lifetime, he would be acknowledged as the preeminent scribe and preacher of America's increasingly secular philosophy—a worldview based upon the solitary self—a self freed from all traditions, authority, and claims to truth.

Literary critic Harold Bloom declared, "Emerson is closer to us than ever on his 200th birthday." Bloom, an ardent agnostic, also claims that Emerson "remains the central figure in American culture and informs our politics, as well as our unofficial religion, which I regard as more Emersonian than Christian, despite nearly all received opinion on this matter."

Emerson began his career as a Unitarian preacher and his intellectual formation was rooted in Harvard University and its Unitarian culture. Nevertheless, Emerson was later to reject even the heretical faith of Unitarianism for his own philosophy, based in the rejection of Christianity and the embrace of the self as source of all truth and knowledge.

In "Self-Reliance," his most famous essay, Emerson declared: "There is a time in every man's education when he arrives at the conviction that envy is ignorance; that imitation is suicide; that he must take himself for better, for worse, as his portion; that though the wide universe is full of good, no kernel of nourishing corn can come to him but through his toil bestowed on that plot of ground which is given him to till." Conformity, consistency, and tradition are specifically excluded as enemies of the mind. As Emerson famously quipped, "A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds, adored by little statesmen and philosophers and divines. With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." Despite this dismissal of consistency, Emerson's thought followed a rather consistent pattern of development.

Postmodern academics can point to Emerson as the fountainhead of their radical concept of academic freedom. In "The American Scholar," an address originally delivered to the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Harvard in 1837, Emerson demanded that the scholar must be absolutely free and unfettered by external authority. "Free should the scholar be—free and brave." Most particularly, Emerson accused American academics of being all together too dependent on European philosophy. "We have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe. The spirit of the American freeman is already suspected to be timid, imitative, tame. Public and private avarice make the air we breathe thick and fat. The scholar is decent, indolent, complaisant. See already the tragic consequence. The mind of this country, taught to aim at low objects, eats upon itself."

Emerson was determined to reverse this course. Speaking to his enthralled audience at Harvard, he beckoned them to a new intellectual age and presented the image of the American scholar as a new species of thinker on the earth. "We will walk on our own feet; we will work with our own hands; we will speak our own minds. The study of letters shall be no longer a name for pity, for doubt, and for sensual indulgence. The dread of man and the love of man shall be a wall of defense and a wreath of joy around all. A nation of men will for the first time exist, because each believes himself inspired by the Divine Soul, which also inspires all men."

Transcendentalism, the intellectual movement identified with Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and other figures, was a return to primitive nature-worship combined with a form of pantheism. As should be clear by now, historic Christianity is a part of the tradition Emerson called on the American Scholar to leave behind. Christianity is a shackle upon the mind and a prison of the soul. In "Self-Reliance," Emerson summarized his dismissal of Christianity: "As men's prayers are a disease of the will, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect."

Emerson's most notorious address was delivered before the senior class of the Divinity College at Harvard in 1838. Speaking to the young ministers-in-training, Emerson declared them each "a newborn bard of the Holy Ghost," and implored them to "cast behind you all conformity, and acquaint men at firsthand with Deity."

According to Emerson, the greatest threat to knowledge of the Deity is Christianity or any form of organized religion. Christianity's first error is its insistence that Jesus of Nazareth is the central figure of history. "Historical Christianity has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion. As it appears to us, and as it has appeared for ages, it is not the doctrine of the soul, but an exaggeration of the personal, the positive, the ritual. It has dwelt, it dwells, with noxious exaggeration about the person of Jesus."

In Emerson's view, Jesus must have been an original thinker and should best be understood as a prophet for his own time. Christianity has turned Christ into an object of worship, and Emerson was out to strip Christianity of its dogmas—including its affirmation of the deity of Christ.

"Christianity has surrounded Christ with expressions, which were once sallies of admiration and love, but are now petrified into official titles," Emerson argued. This imprisons the self in a framework of doctrinal truth, and thus "kills all generous sympathy and liking." In other words, Emerson was content to reflect upon the Christ of his imagination, but cared nothing for the historical Christ and biblical revelation.

Emerson exhorted preachers to dismiss the very idea of revelation, for all claims of revelation immediately turn into restrictions on imagination and intellect. As Emerson argued, "Men have come to speak of the revelation as somewhat long ago given and done, as if God were dead. The injury to faith throttles the preacher; and the goodliest of institutions becomes an uncertain and inarticulate voice."

As would be expected, Emerson rejected orthodox Christianity and aimed his special hatred at the Puritans and the historic Christian churches. Looking at the state of faith in the New Republic, Emerson saw the influence of the churches in decline. "I think no man can go with his thoughts about him, into one of our churches, without feeling, that what hold the public worship had on men is gone, or going. It has lost its grasp on the affection of the good, and the fear of the bad. In the country, neighborhoods, half parishes are signing off—to use the local term. It is already beginning to indicate character and religion to withdraw from the religious meetings."

Orthodox Christianity has led to "a decaying church and a wasting unbelief." The church must be rejected in order that the soul may be liberated. Emerson pointed within for the hope of salvation: "In the Soul, then, let the redemption be sought. Wherever a man comes, there comes revolution. The old is for slaves. When a man comes, all books are legible, all things transparent, all religions are forms. He is religious. Man is the wonderworker. He has seen amid miracles. All men bless and curse. He saith yea and nay, only. The stationariness of religion; the assumption that the age of inspiration is past, that the Bible is closed; the fear of degrading the character of Jesus by representing Him as a man; indicate with sufficient clearness the falsehood of our theology."

Emerson demanded that these "newborn bards of the Holy Ghost" take the bandages of doctrine off of their eyes and "live with the privilege of the immeasurable mind." All too many preachers have followed his advice.

According to Emerson's bold vision, Americans should simply trust themselves, look within, and gain their confidence in the originality of their thinking. They must put behind themselves the "soul-destroying slavery to habit," and all concern for consistency and conformity. As Emerson advised, the thinker need not be concerned that his own thought be connected even with his own memory. Memory is a "corpse" that violates self-trust. According to Emerson's thought, the individual is not only free to create himself anew in his generation, but to create himself anew each day.

Harold Bloom is no doubt correct in identifying Ralph Waldo Emerson as "the dominant sage of the American

imagination.” No other philosopher or writer has left such an indelible mark on the American mind. No writer or philosopher rivals Emerson in terms of influence and lasting impact.

Emerson’s influence is seen in the enduring cast of the American mind against all authority. This is evident in the abdication of truth and tradition at the heart of modern secular philosophy and liberal theology. Nevertheless, Emerson’s greatest influence may be detected in the shape of the worldview shared by the vast majority of Americans—a worldview based, knowingly or not, on Emerson’s notion of self-reliance and the authority of the self. His influence can be traced even to the anti-theological tendency of American evangelicalism and the “do-it-yourself religion” of popular culture.

Furthermore, Emerson and his intellectual peers sought to replace the doctrine of Original Sin with the concept of humanity reborn in every individual. The only constraints upon the goodness and emergence of this individual would be the constraints placed upon him and accepted by him from without. This view of humanity—not the biblical doctrine—would become the dominant view in modern America.

Emerson demanded to stand alone, rest on his own two feet, and look only to the god within. In this sense, Harold Bloom is undoubtedly correct that the “unofficial religion” of America is far more Emersonian than Christian. Two hundred years after Emerson’s birth, America has become a nation of Emersonians.

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