

Ralph Waldo Emerson between a Priest and a Poet

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Abstract

Ralph Waldo Emerson is a Unitarian Minister, an essayist, a poet, and the father of transcendentalism. His early life was deeply religious in which he became a pastor of the Unitarian Minister of the Second Church. However, after an ideological struggle between being a priest and a poet, Emerson declared his resignation from priesthood and decided to be a poet. Although he abandoned priesthood formally, it seems from his later writings that he remained a priest informally. Consequently, Emerson attained the status of a wise essayist solely through his role as a religious sage, became a speaker exclusively as a religious oracle, emerged as a philosopher only as a prophet, and was recognised as a poet only as a priest.

Hence, this paper aims at showing Emerson's early religious environment that he lives in and how it constitutes his early religious life which leads him to be a priest. It also aims at presenting Emerson's struggle between being a priest and a poet and the main reasons beyond such a conflict. Moreover, this research aims at showing how Emerson's early religious conception of Deity affects his lately transcendental conception of Beauty, and the advantages and disadvantages of such an effect.

Keywords: (Ralph Waldo Emerson, priest, poet).

رالف والدو إيمرسون بين الكاهن والشاعر

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الملخص

رالف والدو إيمرسون قس موحد، وكاتب مقالات، وشاعر، ومؤسس الفلسفة المتعالية. اتسمت حياته المبكرة بطابع ديني عميق، حيث أصبح راعياً لكنيسة الموحدين الثانية. إلا أنه بعد صراع فكري بين كونه كاهناً وشاعراً، أعلن إيمرسون استقالته من الكهنوت وقرر أن يصبح شاعراً. ورغم أنه تخلى عن الكهنوت رسمياً، إلا أنه يبدو من كتاباته اللاحقة أنه ظل كاهناً بشكل غير رسمي. ونتيجة لذلك، نال إيمرسون مكانة كاتب المقالات الحكيم من خلال

دوره كحكيم ديني، وأصبح خطيباً من خلال دوره كمرشد ديني، وبرز كفيلسوف من خلال دوره ككاهن، واعترف به كشاعر من خلال دوره ككاهن.

لذا، تهدف هذه الورقة إلى إظهار البيئة الدينية التي عاش فيها إيمرسون في بداياته، وكيف شكلت هذه البيئة حياته الدينية المبكرة التي قادته إلى أن يصبح كاهناً. يهدف هذا البحث أيضاً إلى عرض صراع إيمرسون بين كونه كاهناً وشاعراً، والأسباب الرئيسية الكامنة وراء هذا الصراع. علاوة على ذلك، يسعى البحث إلى توضيح كيف أثر مفهوم إيمرسون الديني المبكر عن الألوهية على مفهومه المتعالي للجمال في مراحل اللاحقة، وما يترتب على هذا التأثير من مزايا وعيوب .

الكلمات المفتاحية: (رالف والدو إيمرسون، الكاهن، الشاعر).

1.1 Emerson the Priest

Ralph Waldo Emerson, publisher, lecturer, Unitarian Minister, essayist, poet, and father of transcendentalism was born in Boston, Massachusetts in (1803) to the pious widow, Ruth Haskins Emerson, and the Reverend William Emerson, Pastor of the First Church in Boston. William and Ruth Emerson were cautious in their careful observation of their children's intellectual and religious development. Their sons are encouraged to look for religious devotion and scholarship. (Wilson 50-51).

Emerson's education began in Boston. He had the chance to attend the best schools and exceptional education accessible to an intelligent young English man, and in 1817 he entered Harvard College. During his Harvard days, Emerson's interest in the Hindu philosophy of the East began and continued throughout his life (Goodman 625). He read the Hindu scriptures and was profoundly influenced by the concept of "selfhood" and "fundamental unity" which indicates that the cosmic whole (God) is identifiable with the central essence of one's self or (Brahma) in which all Beings is one Being (Tilak 6).

Emerson demonstrated his interest in religious matters as the son of a Unitarian minister, who was himself came from a family of Unitarian ministers. In November 1822, Emerson issued his initial piece of writing, "Thoughts on the Religion of the Middle Ages," in the Christian Disciple and Theological Review magazine, immediately following his graduation

from Harvard. Emerson enrolled in the Harvard School of Divinity, which had recently been founded in 1825. In 1826, he was granted permission to preach, and he delivered his first official sermon in Waltham. It was apparent that the adolescent Emerson, who preferred to be referred to as Waldo, was predestined for the pulpit and sermons in (Robinson 8).

Emerson declared his intent to devote himself to the ministry, and by 1829, he had been appointed rector of the Unitarian Second Church of Boston. Emerson explored ministry in the same manner as his father. He was generally appreciated by his community, who appreciated the weekly sermons he delivered with ease and clarity. (Wilson 53).

During these regular sermons, he was able to produce many religious ideas that gained the interest of people in which they used them as quotes in their speeches and writings. One of his sayings is "The religion of one age is the literary entertainment of the next." He also said that "The religions of the world are the ejaculations of a few imaginative man." And on his definition of religion he said: "Religion is to do right. It is to love, it is to serve, it is to think, it is to be humble." He expressed in his sermons his love for God and Churches, " God builds his temple in the heart on the ruins of churches & religions." And he delivered his belief on the importance of religion to bring about a moral society, " The fatal trait of the times is the divorce between religion and morality" (Cromphout 33).

1.2 Emerson's Struggle

It does not get too much time for Emerson to discover that he gets entangled in the duty of conducting communion services on a regular schedule. Emerson does not find the act of communion to be personally meaningful, as he is interested in a genuine, personal experience of the essential that does not accommodate ritual for the sake of ritual. "Historical Christianity", he says, " has fallen into the error that corrupts all attempts to communicate religion". He also finds himself restricted to produce weekly sermons. Hence, the relevance of consistently producing sermons, accompanied with the act of communion creates a certain emotional

aloofness inside Emerson (Beland and Mishra). He expresses: "I like the silent church before the service begins, better than any preaching".

Emerson finds that the institutional rituals and dogmas of religion are only an outward show and they have nothing to do with the spiritual purity. In his essay "The Over-Soul", he writes: " The faith that stands on authority is not faith". Emerson believes that inward purity of the soul is separated from these institutional rituals (Tilak 201). He finds that the church restricts him in worshiping God Whom he thinks he can find everywhere. He differs in his conviction that Christianity is established on human nature, not on the Bible. He states: "They call it Christianity. I call it consciousness".

Hence, Emerson does not find the profession satisfying and his conscience does not permit him to continue (Tilak 202). That is why, he suffers from an ideological conflict raging within his mind and his heart as whether to continue serving the church in regularly preaching and restrictively worshiping God, or to leave priesthood and express freely his spiritual philosophy through his poetry. Thus, the struggle becomes a matter of being a priest or a poet.

In his poem "The Problem", Emerson rises his own problem, expressing the contradictions in his thoughts and feelings. he states that he loves the church, as well as the churchmen, but he never likes to be a churchman. He equally loves and admires the dress of the priest, he is attracted by his vest but he cannot himself wear it.

I like a church, I like a cowl,
I love a prophet of the soul,
And on my heart monastic aisles
Fall like sweet strains or pensive smiles;
Yet not for all his faith can see,
Would I that cowed churchman be.
Why should the vest on him allure,
Which I could not on me endure? (1-8).

Emerson argues that he can find the Divine Spirit everywhere because the spirit which inspires the architects to build the church is as natural as that which grows the grass. The same divine spirit that planned the temple is also the same spirit that inspires people to worship in this temple and it is the same divine spirit of God that "inspires the heart of the priest with the oracles" (Tilak 200), which are inscribed "on tables" that "yet unbroken".

These temples grew as grows the grass,
Art might obey but not surpass.
The passive Master lent his hand
To the vast soul that o'er him planned,
And the same power that reared the shrine,
Bestrode the tribes that knelt within.
And through the priest the mind inspires.
The word unto the prophet spoken
Was writ on tables yet unbroken. (45-55).

Emerson argues that his problem is that he cannot be a good priest despite his love and faith in the Christian religion. " And yet for all his faith could see, / I would not the good bishop be" (71-72).

In 1852, Emerson undermines the foundations of established religion by giving his Divinity School address at Harvard, urging the graduating class to pursue self-determination, reject esteemed models—even those considered sacred—and to love God directly, without intermediaries or obfuscation. This was, in fact, his final confrontation with institutional religion. In 1867, Emerson joined a collective of religious liberals that established the Free Religious Association. In his address at the organization's inception, he asserts that churches have been rendered obsolete, that attendance has declined, and that a technical theology is no longer applicable. (Wilson 55).

1.3 Emerson the Poet

Being a poet is to take the concept of beauty and nature as the basis for constructing poetry. While being a priest and a poet is to observe beauty

and nature in a religious perspective. This is certainly the case with Emerson. Although he declares his resignation from priesthood, Emerson remains deeply religious and this affects his poetry magnificently. Emerson asserts his conception of Deity which is a religious faith with the conception of beauty which is an aesthetic conviction. As a result, Emerson's writings start to have a sort of an aesthetic faith.

Emerson argues that beauty is not only a significant trait of the divine, but also a significant aspect of God's creation (nature). Emerson asserts that "all is beautiful" in nature (368). This implies that the terms 'Deity' and 'Nature' are nearly synonymous in Emerson's mind.

Emerson employs the term "Nature" in its deistic connotation, which denotes God. He views nature to be the source and model of beauty (Metzger 67). Such an identification of Beauty and Nature with Deity gives him some advantages and disadvantages.

Such identification turns the ex-minister to be a protestant aesthician who in his investigation of beauty is investigating Deity. By this, Emerson maintains his status as a religious protestant (Hudson 303). Additionally, by adopting the forms of nature, which are created by the hands of God, as his guidelines for the conception of beauty rather than the formal forms of ancient art, Emerson is endowed with a wider range of natural objects to develop and, as a result, an increasing legitimated notion of beauty than that established by the "custodians" of neoclassic aesthetic notions.

Hence, Emerson's notion of Beauty becomes superior to that of the neoclassicist. In "Rhodora", for example, he uses this simple flower that is hidden among the stones as a material for his poem. He celebrates the simplest things in nature and uses them as an aesthetic source that grows by God naturally.

On being asked, whence is the flower.
In May, when sea-winds pierced our solitudes,
I found the fresh Rhodora in the woods,
Spreading its leafless blooms in a damp nook,

To please the desert and the sluggish brook.

The purple petals fallen in the pool

Made the black water with their beauty gay. (1-7).

The addition in kind is a more significant advantage than the sheer increase in the number of objects included within Emerson's conception of Beauty. Whereas the neoclassicist concentrated primarily on the objects of ancient art (e.g: architecture, sculpture, painting) in order to develop his concept of beauty, these objects were almost entirely inanimate. In contrast, Emerson's objects of nature (e.g.: animals, plants, rocks) include both inanimate and organic or animate objects.

In "The Humble Bee", for example, Emerson uses this small insect as an aspect of God's handiwork and celebrates it with other aspects of nature:

Insect lover of the sun,
Joy of thy dominion!
Sailor of the atmosphere,
Swimmer through the waves of air,
Voyager of light and noon,
Epicurean of June. (11-16)

Actually, in deriving a major part of his total conception of beauty from his observation of animate objects, which are the embodiment of God's skill, Emerson's aesthetic conception becomes of a high level. The distinction between witnessing the statue of a man and observing the man himself is equivalent to the distinction between formulating a static aesthetic conception and formulating a dynamic one (Metzger 68). He asserts that beauty is the moment of transition, as if the form were poised to transition into other forms ("Beauty" 292). This dynamic conception is shown clearly in his poem "Concord Hymn".

Emerson in this religious song uses an inanimate object from nature which is static (the stone) and gives it an animate traits in which the statue itself participates in celebrating the heroes as part of nature.

On this green bank, by this soft stream,

We set to-day a votive stone;
That memory may their deed redeem,
When, like our sires, our sons are gone. (9-12)

Emerson's direct appeal to phenomenal nature in articulating his notion of Beauty is a dynamic and economical assertion. This claim expands the static notions of balance and proportion that defined the neoclassical aesthetic into additional dynamic aesthetic concepts. According to Emerson, beauty is founded on fundamentals. The line of beauty arises from optimal economy (294).

Ultimately, the result of such an aesthetic dynamic conception is a revolutionary implication. For by such an extension, Emerson transforms the slender expanse of New England aesthetics into broad new areas seldom touched upon before (Metzger 69).

Nevertheless, in addition to these practical benefits, Emerson's broadened conception of Deity and Beauty also presents certain disadvantages. For while the merits of associating Deity with the primary terms in one's conceptual vocabulary are substantial, they may be readily overlooked in the midst of the vastness of the concepts they enhance. The concept of a cosmos in which all main aspects are identical to the One may be a sound theological premise; however, it is a flawed semantics (69).

In a semantic sense, it is exceedingly hazardous to associate all or nearly all of the primary terms in the lexicon with Deity, as this would imply that the terms are interchangeable. As a consequence, they eventually imply the same thing, namely God, and the reasons for their distinct identities tend to dissolve. For instance, Emerson incorporated a multitude of fundamentally distinct meanings into the term "nature" as he broadened his understanding of it. Therefore, Emerson employed the term "nature" in a variety of contexts, including the following: man, not-man, not-society, out-of-doors, essence, universe, and God (69-70).

All are needed by each one;
Nothing is fair or good alone. [...]

The rolling river, the morning bird; —

Beauty through my senses stole;

I yielded myself to the perfect whole. ("Each and All", lines 11-12, 46-50).

Emerson not only widened his conception but also complicated its discussion by failing to differentiate between his one use of the term and another. He reinforces his aesthetic protest by associating God and nature, the Spirit and the form, in order to demonstrate a fundamental conflict between his comprehension of the ideal and his understanding of the actual. Emerson affirms his belief in the possibility of a oneness or unity within God's universe as a Unitarian and a religious protestant. Nevertheless, he contends that the process of understanding God's truth requires the examination of the diverse aspects of God's essence, as a pantheist at large and a more or less objective observer (Metzger 70). As a result, the unity of God's universe is not easily discernible in the diverse manifestations of God's essence. Consequently, Emerson's appealing toward nature fails to verify the essential assertion of religious faith that was anticipated. This idea of unity, microcosm and macrocosm, where God is part of the universe and the universe is part of God is too much emphasized in Emerson's writings and which constitutes his fundamental transcendentalist concept: Shadow and sunlight are the same/ The vanished gods to me appear ("Brahma", lines 5-8).

To solve the problem of confusion, Emerson utilises the sole argumentative resource at his command: He turns to the mind, which perceives both unity and diversity and incorporates both religious and scientific conceptions. He contends in his Journal that the mind's invincible propensity to unite is to be observed. It is a constitutional requirement that we refrain from splitting matters without making an attempt to assemble them according with established data and allocate them to the same legislation (115). Therefore, Emerson contends that the mind's conception of unity is a representation of God's plans with regard to the mind, as it is the mind's distinctive identification with order and unity that are essentially

inherent to God's creation, namely nature. As consequence, Emerson establishes a regard for the wide range of facts in God's creation as the fundamental substance with which cognition functions. Emerson posits that the Mind must contemplate by means of matter; it must identify the methods and conditions of its thought and manifestation in matter or nature (236). All the facts in nature, he maintains, are the objects of the intellect in an additional section of his essay on Beauty (304). As a result, Emerson begins to regard the claims of his own Unitarian doctrine as intellectual techniques within their psychological functions an

Ultimately, one can say that Emerson's expansive Unitarian assertion is essential to the whole body of his argument, regarding specifically Emerson's aesthetic protest. For this assertion constitutes the core body of his notion of Beauty. It constitutes, in effect, the positive aspect of Emerson's aesthetic faith. And as a result of this intellectual Unitarian assertion, the concept of unity becomes a threefold conception: one is static, one dynamic, and the last, cosmic.

Conclusion

One may conclude that Emerson's decision of abandoning priesthood, which comes after his undergoing through an ideological struggle between his mind and his heart, is not apt. For he leaves priesthood formally, but he remains a priest informally. Religion infused every aspect of Emerson's thoughts and actions; it was not merely a facet of his soul, but rather his fundamental essence. Emerson was an essayist in the capacity of a religious sage, a lecturer as a religious adviser, a philosopher as a prophet, and a poet as a priest.

He integrates his Unitarian notion of Deity into his understanding of beauty and nature, perceiving these three concepts as identical. He is too devout to refute the legitimacy of his Unitarian claim. Simultaneously, he cannot adequately disregard the unsolved conflict among the essential elements of his religious-aesthetic framework. If he proceeds in this manner, he will create a significant void in his philosophical stance, as

relinquishing his broad Unitarian conceptual framework would equate to discarding his entire argument. Through this understanding of wholeness and Beauty, Emerson is able, in later arguments, to connect Art with Nature and Deity, elevating the genuine artist and poet to the status of the deity and priest.

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