

The Concept Of Self-Reliant Individualism Of Benjamin Franklin And Thomas Paine

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Abstrak

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine have been known in history as American Enlightenment thinkers. They were enlightened in that they believed that man was the source of moral good; that man was sanctified. This roseate view of man was opposed to the pre-Enlightenment ecclesiastical concept that man was depraved and sinful. Franklin as the "person who epitomized the Enlightenment" rejected this latter dogma; instead, he advocated the notion of self-reliant individualism in religion. In his autobiography, he stated that religiosity did not bind any person to a particular church; man should rely on his own judgment of what was good or bad for himself. Furthermore, religion to Franklin simply meant "doing good to others", and "loving mankind".

Like Franklin, Thomas Paine viewed religion not so much as one's adherence to church membership as the belief in one's instinct and conscience to decide his religious faith. Paine maintained the sanctity of the individual in that he considered the individual as the source of moral value, competent to judge the effects of his own actions. Paine wrote in his book "The Age of Reason, ... my own, mind is my own church...".

Self-reliant individualism was central in most of Franklin's and Paine's writings. Franklin's autobiography not only emphasized the idea but it also helped Americans cultivate their own sense of self-reliance. To Franklin, to be self-reliant was to have self-discipline, work hard and above all, not depend on others because the individual had great potential to develop himself materially as well as intellectually. Like Franklin, Paine also advocated the concept of self-reliant individualism and its cultivation in man. According to Paine, as stated in *The Age of Reason*, the objective of his writings was to give man an elevated sense of his own character and dignity. Through his conscience and moral virtue, Paine contended, man could guide himself to good deeds. Equally important in the writings of these great American thinkers was the fact that through their adherence to the sanctity of the individual, they made many 18th century Americans realize that they were capable of ruling themselves.

At the American Studies Center, University of Indonesia, Franklin's and Paine's writings have been extensively discussed in the "Introduction to American Literature," "History of, American Thought," and "Introduction to American Studies" courses. This was how I became acquainted with these two great American philosopher