

THE SPIRIT OF TRANSCENDENTALISM AND INDIVIDUALISM AS SEEN IN EMERSON'S *SELF-RELIANCE*

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Abstract

The article discusses transcendentalism and individualism as reflected from an essay "Self Reliance" written by Emmerson in 1841. In the American history, the writer is a big thinker with a dominant role in the development of intellectuality and spirituality. While reforming the religious system of American society that ignoring an intuition, his thought also indirectly inspires the concept of separation between state and church. With an interdisciplinary approach, it is found out that transendetalism of Emerson is a resistance to the morals of Christianity. It is also proved that the Individualism Emerson emphasized is caused by the condition of American society that had not shown their identity as a nation with freedom in all aspects of life.

Key words : *transcendentalism, individualism, freedom*

Introduction

America is known as "a nation of nations" or a nation of immigrants since in America there are various groups of ethnics coming from all over the world. According to Thomas Sowell as quoted by James Danandjaja in his "*Folklor Amerika: Cermin Multikultural yang Manunggal*", the history of how American people were shaped was a great drama in all human history because of three factors with respect to the length of time, the number of immigrants, and the heterogeneity as well.

Terbentuknya penduduk Amerika Serikat merupakan suatu drama besar dalam seluruh sejarah manusia. Selama bertahun-tahun, suatu arus perpindahan manusia secara besar-besaran – 45 juta orang menyeberangi lautan dan benua untuk mencapai Amerika Serikat – datang mewakili berbagai suku bangsa, ras, agama, dan kebudayaan, serta dengan membawa bahasa ibu masing-masing (2003:2).

(The process of how American people were shaped was a great drama in all human history. For years, a wave of people movement in a massive scale—45 million people crossed the ocean and the continent to reach the United States of America—coming to

represent various ethnics, race, religions, and culture, including their own languages)

One factor that urges many people with different background to come to America is American Dream—an expectation of betterment in any field. Thus, America can be regarded as the dreamland because the immigrants' coming is based on their intention to achieve their dreams there.

One of the immigrants' dream is a religious freedom as sought by the Puritans—a group of people who wanted to practice their religious beliefs freely by leaving their homeland in England. Another reason was they wanted to make a kind of reform as told by God.

The founders of Massachusetts wanted freedom to practice their religious beliefs. Leaving England at a time when Charles I seemed completely in control, they believed that their only chance for freedom lay in moving elsewhere. In their view, the Church of England was a true Church. Leaving England was simply their means of avoiding a conflict between their loyalty to the king and their loyalty to Puritanism.

Another reason for leaving England was their belief that God was about to punish the nation for refusing to obey his commands to reform. It seems particularly true that the final day of judgment was near. They would take refuge in New England, they reasoned, and waited for Christ to return and restore his kingdom (David D. Hall in *Encyclopedia Americana*, 2004:22-23).

Their spiritual passage then inspired the growth of various denominations—religious bodies with norms, such as Quakerism, Methodism, Universalism, Unitarianism, etc. The variety of denominations in America can be regarded as American pluralism in religious field.

The founders of most American colonies brought with them their European habits, and in nine of thirteen colonies they established a single church as late as the time of independence. But the interaction people in colonies, and later states, the growth of mobility, the rise of many new denominations in the face of religious freedom, and the arrival of wave upon wave of immigrants served to compromise and almost kill the old idea of territorialism (Marty p. 51).

The second phase of Puritan's spiritual passage happened when some American intellectuals, like Emerson and Thoreau—the descendants of the Puritan's family, formed a movement called Transcendentalism. The movement can be assumed as the continuation of previous passage since it was greatly influenced by the Puritan.

The religious evolution of New England from the period of the Puritan theocracy to the beginning of the nineteenth century is on the whole, with a certain change of scale and retardation of movement, strikingly similar to the religious development during the same period abroad, a fact with, at the outset, renders futile any hope to estimate with exactness how far the movements are parallel, how far the one was influenced by the other (Doren et al., 1972:328).

Transcendentalism

Transcendentalism was a group of new ideas in literature, religion, culture, and philosophy that emerged in New England in the early to middle 19th century. It is sometimes called American Transcendentalism to distinguish it from other uses of the word transcendental (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism/>).

Politically and religiously it meant the overthrow of feudal and ecclesiastical tyrannies and customs, and the setting up of liberal forms of government and belief as instruments for testing the new social doctrine. Philosophically it meant the contention, in the face of existing rationalisms and skepticisms, that man's practical and imaginative faculties play a part in his apprehension of the truth. In the realm of art and literature it meant the shattering of pseudo-classic rules and forms in favor of a spirit of freedom, the creation of works filled with the new passion for nature and common humanity and incarnating a fresh sense of the wonder, promise, and romance of life. In the scientific and industrial worlds it meant those fundamental and far reaching changes which came with the constantly fuller recognition and adoption of the scientific method (Doren et al., 1972: 326).

Transcendentalism began as a protest against the general state of culture and society at the time, and in particular, the state of intellectualism at Harvard and the doctrine of the Unitarian church which was taught at Harvard Divinity School. Among Transcendentalists' core beliefs was an ideal spiritual state that 'transcends' the physical and empirical and is only realized through the individual's intuition, rather than through the doctrines of established religions (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Transcendentalism/>).

The most prominent Transcendentalism figures were Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, Margaret Fuller, as well as Dany Alcott, Orestes Brownson, William Ellery Channing, Frederick Henry Hedge, Theodore Parker, George Putnam, and Christine Peabody, the wife of Nathaniel Hawthorne (*ibid*).

Individualism

The concept of individualism appeared first in France after the French Revolution, when the word individualism began to be used by socialists, liberals, and also reactionaries to describe what they regarded as the evil, antisocial impulses of self-interest. In its first appearances on English, "individualism" referred to the egalitarian social philosophy exemplified in the United States. Probably the first use of the word in English was in an essay by Ralph Waldo Emerson written in 1835. The Frenchman Alexis de Tocqueville used the word in *America* (English translation, 1840) in a pejorative sense, implying a threat to society akin to selfishness (egoisme). Emerson and other Americans, however, intended it in a positive sense, to mean an optimistic faith in the primacy of the individual (John William Ward in *Encyclopedia Americana*, 2004:69).

The ideal definition of individualism is a doctrine that asserts the supreme value of the individual and sees society as only a means to the satisfaction of individual ends (*ibid*). This definition is a similar to the definition of individualism in *Webster New World: College Dictionary* that defines individualism the doctrine that self-interest is the proper goal of all human actions; egoism (Agnes and Guralnik, 2002:728).

Analysis

Emerson, a great American philosopher and writer, was an important figure in the process of American character building whose ideas are still relevant up to the present. He was born in Boston, on 25 May 1803 and the son of Reverend William Emerson, a Unitarian minister who was a member of an old Puritan family. After his father's death, he was raised by his mother and an aunt, Mary Moody Emerson, who influenced Emerson's critical thinking (Hart p. 227).

In 1817, Emerson entered Harvard College, and in due course of time graduated. Then, after teaching for a while in his brother's school in Boston, he returned to Cambridge to study for the ministry, and was in the autumn of 1826 licensed to preach. Three years later he was called,

first as assistant to Henry Ware, to the second Church of Boston. His ministrations there were quietly successful, but brief. In 1832, he gave up his charge on the ground that he could not conscientiously celebrate the Communion as a general, regular observance because he did not believe that Christ had intended it as a general, regular observance (Atkinson p. xii).

One of his magnificent works is an essay entitled *Self-Reliance* written in 1841. It contains his brilliant ideas that can be classified into two groups: Emerson's renunciation toward established religion and his stress on intuition and Emerson's stress on individualism.

The Spirit of Transcendentalism: The Form of Emerson's Renunciation toward Established Religion and His Stress on Intuition

His renunciation toward established religion, Christianity, is based on his deep contemplation and observation that it just poisons the people's mind. As men's prayers are disease of the will, he said, so are their creeds a disease of the intellect (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 364). Furthermore, it is based on his belief that God has transcended into one's intuition.

According to Emerson, intuition is very important for everyone because it can guide one's life. He emphasizes on the significance of intuition as in his mind many Americans have neglected this precious gift. The slavery was an example of how American people had cheated their own intuition. Although it is against the Christianity that teaches love and affection to the other people regardless of their race, their religion, and their nationality, in practice, it was sustained by the religion either directly or indirectly.

The direct support is the Bible interpretation that the blacks are the curse. This perspective had led to the legitimacy of the slavery practice. Indirect support was the attitude of many American people who did not care with this human crime. It shows that even though they were religious people, their attitude seemed to neglect their intuition. As a result, they could not distinguish between good and evil.

Another thing that became Emerson's concern was the deception in politics field. Many politicians used any means just to get what they want. They competed in the field not to elevate the people's prosperity but their chief goal was to collect as much as money. If this condition lasted for a long time, America as a new nation would go bankrupt.

The other problem was the country's betrayal toward the Indians. Initially, the whites and the Indians were in harmony. The harmony was

seen when the Indians helped the whites when they suffered from a lot of diseases and ran out the food stocks. The Indians could not let this poor condition. They helped the whites by giving them foods and teaching them how to grow plants. In the harvest time, the whites invited the Indians to show their gratitude for the Indians' generosity and familiarity.

This harmonious relationship ended when the number of the whites was getting bigger and bigger. They assumed the Indians as the barrier of their destinations. In achieving their goals, they committed the tricks as well as the ethnic genocide. The former was conducted by giving false promises that the whites would buy their land. The latter could be either physically by killing as many as the Indians or culturally by teaching them the western values in order to cut off their traditional values. The whites' bad actions made the Indians think that the whites were their enemies. Another whites' crime was the forced removal of the Cherokee Indians from their home in Georgia that killed around 4,000 tribes. This event was then called The Trail of Tears to memorize the pains and sufferings that the Indians got during the unwanted trip.

There were reasons enough for despair in his day. Politics were corrupt. Materialism possessed the hearts and souls of men. The country was still betraying the Indians. The Mexican war violated every just man's notions of decency. One of Emerson's idols, Daniel Webster, turned traitor to one of Emerson's causes. The great tragedy of the Civil War, when citizens of the same country killed one another, cut straight across Emerson's career. And the appalling pillage of the South after the war by opportunistic politicians and beady-eyed swindlers represented the low point in our national ethics. Ignorance and evil drew black line through the life of America in Emerson's time and many of his contemporaries were filled with melancholy (Atkinson p. xxiv).

The conditions above happened because the American people had forgotten the God's gift. Emerson says that when a person feels that God has transcended into his/her intuition he/she will always do the goodness. Besides, he/she will be more alert in his/her life since God is within him/her and watches his/her behavior. When a man lives with God, his voice shall be as well as the murmur of the brook and the rustle of the corn (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 361).

Furthermore, the sense of togetherness with God will keep him/her from being the beggar. He/she usually asks something from God because he/she does not feel His presence or he/she feels far from Him. Therefore, in communicating with God, he/she

uses the means to make Him close with him/her and gives what he/she asks for. If he/she is sure that God is within his/her soul, he/she does not need to beg Him by certain kinds of means, like prayers.

As soon as the man is at one with God, he will not beg. He will then see prayer in all action. The prayer of the farmer kneeling in his field to weed it, the prayer of the rower kneeling with the stroke of his oar, are true prayers heard through out nature, though for cheap ends (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 364).

Although he proposed an idea that was against the mainstream at his time, now his ideas pay off. The separation between the state and church is the example of how his idea is applied in the religious life in America. The self-reliance in this matter derives from an assumption that this matter is a very private one and from this place the state has no right to intervene it

The Spirit of Individualism

American individualism is different from selfishness or egoism. It means that the stress on individual's values does not mean that every individual can do whatever they want to do without considering the others' interests. The high appreciation on the individual is based on the belief that everyone has the uniqueness that can distinguish them from the others.

Through the essay, Emerson wants to convince every American that they have to believe in themselves and never try to imitate other people. By saying "Imitation is suicide" (Emerson in Hollinger and Chapper, 2001:354), he wants to remind his fellow citizens that releasing from the British influence in all aspects of life is a must for every American since the process will strengthen their character and lift their dignity as a new born nation. Besides, it can make them different from the British who once colonized them.

Moreover, he suggests that everybody has to be ready not to compromise with the society. The society here is the society that only hinders their advance both psychologically and spiritually. Hindering them psychologically means that the society gives bad influence to their character, while hindering them spiritually means that in spiritual life they just follow the society's accepted religion without trying to ask themselves whether it is they who determine the right religion for them or the society. In another word, it can be said that their spirituality is not

based on their own principle but dictated by their parents, their friends, or the books they read.

The objection to conforming usages that have become dead to you, is that it scatters your force. It loses your time and blurs the impression of your character. If you maintain a dead church, contribute to a dead Bible-Society, vote with a great party either for the Government or against it, spread your table like base housekeepers,--under all these screens, I have difficulty to detect the precise man you are.

This conformity makes them not false in few particulars, authors of a few lies, but false in all particulars. Their every truth is not quite true. Their two is not the real two, their four is not the real four: so that every word they say chagrins us, and he/she know not where to begin to set them right (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 357).

However, as a nonconformist he/she must be ready to take any risks, including losing job, friends, and sympathy as Emerson says: For nonconformity the world whips you with its displeasure (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001:357). Because of his nonconformity principle, Emerson had to quit from his job as he did not like the rituals.

In 1832, he gave up his charge on the ground that he could not conscientiously celebrate the Communion, even in the symbolic form customary among the Unitarians. He was for the moment much adrift, his occupation gone, his health broken, his wife lost after a short of happiness (Doren et al., 1972:350).

Besides his criticism on conformity, Emerson also criticizes those who never make any reformation in their spirituality. They are consistent with their ancestors' tradition. He motivates his readers to be ready and brave to be reformist especially in spiritual life.

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. He may as well concern himself with his shadow on the wall. Out upon your guarded lips! Sew them up with packthread, do. Else if you would be a man speak what you think today in words as hard as cannon balls, and to-morrow speak what to-morrow thinks in hard words again, though it contradict

everything you said today (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 358).

By being a nonconformist, actually he/she will be a fortunate person because he/she will listen to his own voice more intensively. He/she will not turn to the other's voice easily since he/she strongly believe that it is the universal truth that is based on his/her intuition not public's judgment.

To believe your own thought, to believe what is true for you in your private heart is true for all ~~men~~ that is genius. Speak your own latent conviction, and it shall be the universal sense; for always the inmost becomes the outmost—and our first thought is rendered back to us by the trumpets of the Last Judgment (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 354).

Actually, believing in his/her intuition will give him/her purity both spiritually and psychologically. The former has something to do with the originality of his/her faith. It means that his/her belief in God is based on his/her own principle not dictated by our parents, our friends, or books. While the latter is related to the originality of his/her character that means if he/she listens to his/her intuition, his/her character will not be polluted by the others' influence.

You will soon love what is dictated by your nature as well as mine, if we follow the truth it will bring us our safe at last. –But so may you give these friends pain. Yes, but I cannot sell my liberty and my power, to save their sensibility. Besides, all persons have their moments of reason, when they look out into the region of absolute truth; then they will justify me and do the same thing (Emerson in Hollinger and Capper, 2001: 362).

Conclusion

Transcendentalism and individualism proposed by Emerson through his essay is a form of Emerson's protest and criticism toward American people who were still British oriented spiritually and socially. At that time their primary concerns were their reason and external factors instead of their intuition in finding the sources of their spiritual life. Realizing this situation, Emerson tried to offer a new kind of reformation in spirituality—believing in God without embracing a formal religion and believing in the supremacy of individual values.

Moreover, he also believes that the absolute truth is within one's intuition. It is impossible someone will be a strong person psychologically and spiritually if he/she neglects his/her intuition. God

will not come to him/her directly if he/she depends more on the external factors. As a result, he/she will lose his/her own character. Besides, his/her pure relation with God will decrease since he/she neglects the God's gift.

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