

FAITHS OF OUR FATHERS
PART II – BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND GEORGE WASHINGTON
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I am inspired to look into the religious lives of our founding fathers for many reasons. First, because their religious beliefs, as in all of us, provided the framework for the kinds of bold actions they took and for the marvelous political system they built. Those great men of deep philosophical learning put into place the most humane and functional political system that had ever been devised. They brought to the debate their great learning, practical experience, skeptical thinking, and a willingness to work diligently for months and years to devise a system that they believed would best work toward the “pursuit of happiness” of the people they were representing. Underpinning this codification of the best of liberal ideas were their individual ideas about the religious questions that we all face. Not only did they bring their individual religious beliefs to the table – I say beliefs in plural because they were a diverse lot – but they carefully pondered what the role of religion should be in this new political system that would turn out to be a model for the world. They brought their beliefs, and they also brought their trust – and mistrust – of the role of religion in the political process.

And they did all this without benefit of the lavish support of lobbying groups and special interests.

The second reason I am inspired to look into the religious lives of our founding fathers is because they are being so used – and misused – by disingenuous zealots these days to justify their own narrow agendas. As an example, Tim LaHaye, best selling fundamentalist Christian author of the “last days” novels, wrote that “were George Washington living today, he would freely identify with the Bible-believing branch of evangelical Christianity... .” There is a powerful movement building across this country that would like to turn the U.S. political system into a theocracy – based on Dominion Theology – that would replace our liberal democratic governance with a theocratic elite which would govern according to a very literal interpretation of Biblical law. School-sponsored Christian prayers and teaching, placing Christian symbols in public places, outlawing abortion and homosexual relationships are but the first steps in the agenda of those who cite the founding fathers as founding the United States as a Christian nation.

For evidence of where these Christian zealots want to take us we need only look at the Texas Republican Party Platform of 2002:

“The Republican Party of Texas reaffirms the United States of America is a Christian Nation;” and, we “dispel the myth of separation of church and state.”

When born-again Christian George Bush decided to run for the presidency he called together a group of evangelical pastors and announced to them, “I have heard the call,” after which he received their “laying on of hands” as a divine ordination for his task ahead to win the presidency, to begin the rooting out of ‘evil,’ and to begin inserting the fundamentalist religious “faith-based” agenda into American social policy, and, as he stated on September 14, 2001, to begin to “rid the world of evil.”

As we observed last week, Jefferson and Adams had serious contempt for traditional Christian doctrines, beliefs, and practices though they held to *deist* ideas of a divine originator. My own survey indicates that this skepticism of traditional Christianity held true for most of the founding fathers.

We noted that Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were two very different men from different parts of the country with very different religious backgrounds and they came to hold very different political views. Yet we saw that what these men had in common was a great devotion to classical study and to taking a skeptical view of human institutions. During their lives they gradually converged in their religious thinking until, when they died almost simultaneously on Independence Day, 1826, they both professed a faith that rejected traditional Christianity but left them with faith in the ethical teachings of Jesus and a lukewarm belief in a benevolent deity. They both acknowledged that the Unitarians had become their faith model.

Today we will take a look at two other members of this founding fatherhood – Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. These men of courage, conviction and action played essential roles in leading the armed rebellion against the British crown; also, they were critical players in shaping our new political system and putting it into operation in the crucial early years.

Benjamin Franklin

First we will examine Benjamin Franklin's religion – in some respects a rather complex matter. In discussing freedom of religion Thomas Jefferson once wrote: "It does *me* no injury for my neighbor to say there are 20 gods or to say there are no gods." Well, during his lifetime Ben Franklin espoused both of those extremes.

Like Adams, he was a New Englander, born in 1706 in Boston, a bastion of conservatism and, in practical terms, a puritan theocracy. Those people had been rebels in Europe and suffered repression. But once in control in the New World they themselves persecuted those who believed differently.

Ben, the tenth child of Josiah Franklin, was a precocious boy. He learned to read very early, and by five he was reading everything he could get his hands on which was mainly the Bible, *Pilgrim's Progress*, and other religious works. An uncle, impressed with Ben, wrote: "If the buds are so precious, what may we expect when the fruit is ripe?" Ben's father, a religious man, began to think of this tenth child as his tithe to the church. He began to lecture the boy on the intricacies of Christianity and decided to encourage Ben to become a minister. But later it became clear that there was not enough money for such an education. By this time, Franklin, like we observed in Jefferson and Adams, was already deep into learning for its own sake. Ben read the great classics of antiquity as well as books of his time. His favorites were about the actions of the Greek and Roman heroes and thinkers. One of his favorite boyhood books was *Plutarch's Lives*. In such works he learned that some of the most renowned and virtuous actors of history had not been exposed to Judaism or Christianity. His bright and skeptical nature led him to conclude, at this early age, that God was a human invention. Some of us here can imagine how a budding atheist felt in the Massachusetts God-fearing theocracy.

As a youth, once he understood that he was not to receive a college education, he decided that he would educate himself. He became an apprentice to his older brother, James, who had a printing and publishing business in Boston. Young Ben was excited about this occupation because it brought him into contact with sources of literature of all kinds. Apparently skepticism ran in the family because brother James was bold enough to print articles that were sometimes critical of both clergy and government. Some of his wittiest articles had been received anonymously from – now we know – sixteen-year old Benjamin who slipped them under the editor’s door. Finally the authorities cracked down and brother James Franklin had to do a month in jail for his editorial criticism of Massachusetts officials. That led to trouble with the culprit, young Ben, who subsequently lost his apprenticeship.

In those strict days no one would hire such a young rebel so he headed off to New York and later to Philadelphia, the second largest English speaking city in the world. Compared to Boston, Philadelphia was intellectually diverse and stimulating for Ben. Philadelphian thinkers already were leading the way into the thinking of the Enlightenment which was sweeping Europe at the time. A key tenet of Enlightenment thinking was that Reason was a gift from God, if there was a God, and that Reason – not mysticism should be applied to the solution of human problems. This matched conclusions that Ben had already reached and he felt at home here.

By the age of twenty-two Ben had moved past his youthful atheism. After absorbing the ideas of Enlightenment writers and having pursued a vigorous study of science he worked out a more advanced theory – that there were many gods needed to operate this complex universe.

“When I stretch my imagination through and beyond our system of planets, beyond the visible fixed stars themselves, into that space that is every way infinite, and conceive it filled with suns like ours, each with a chorus of worlds forever moving round them, then this little ball on which we move seems, even in my narrow imagination, to be almost nothing, and myself less than nothing, and of no sort of consequence. ...

“I conceive then that the Infinite has created many Beings or Gods, vastly superior to Men, who can better conceive his perfections than we

“It may be that these created Gods are immortal, or it may be that, after many ages, they are changed, and others supply their places.

“Howbeit, I conceive that each of these is exceedingly wise, and good, and very powerful; and that each has made for himself one glorious sun, attended with a beautiful and admirable system of planets.

This concept of coexisting gods with differing powers was not unique to Franklin but can be found in Israel, Greece, and Rome and in many primitive tribes. Indeed the Bible refers to many sons of God and in some passages there are a variety of dark gods as well – Belial, Beelzebub, and Satan. But this polytheism was a big step from his Puritan roots.

As we all know, Benjamin Franklin went on to become one of the leading scientists of his time with pioneering works in electricity and optics. He was an inventor, a philosopher, a publisher and writer, a diplomat, and a national leader. Apart from his bold ideas about multiple deities he believed that people should build their own good character – not obtain it from religion. His creed, like Jesus’ and Buddha’s, was “not to be hurtful to others.” He developed a list of virtues and carried a little book with a page devoted to each virtue. At the end of each day he recorded on the appropriate page any infractions of these virtues. He listed:

Moderation	tranquility	humility	temperance	silence
order	resolution	sincerity	justice	cleanliness
frugality, and	chastity.			

Franklin carried this little book throughout his life. When a page was filled with violations he erased it and started again. After the pages wore out he substituted sheets of ivory for the fragile paper pages. We are told that the virtue of “chastity” gave him considerable trouble! But clearly, Franklin believed that it was each individual’s own responsibility to “save” one’s self – not the intervention of the shedding of Jesus blood, nor the intervention of a priest.

Benjamin Franklin sometimes did express a belief in immortality, and sometimes – as a scientist – he argued against it. But his belief in immortality was expressed more as a hope, not something he could prove. As an ardent proponent of the philosophy of utilitarianism, he thought that it might have a good effect on society if people believed in the immortality of the soul. His eclectic and practical approach to religion was such that John Adams observed of Franklin:

“The Catholics thought him almost a Catholic. The Church of England claimed him as one of them. The Presbyterians thought him half a Presbyterian, and the Friends believed him a wet Quaker.”

In line with his utilitarian approach to religion, he joined the project of an old friend to help revise the *Book of Common Prayer*. He felt that people would participate in their religion more if the services were shortened and made more relevant. He was concerned about old people: “whose age or infirmities will not suffer them to remain for hours in a cold church” and for young people who might “cheerfully attend divine service if they were not detained for so long at any one time.” So he revised the Christian service by reducing the Apostle’s Creed by more than half, condensing the redundant Psalms, and he even simplified and shortened the Lord’s Prayer by, for example, taking out the word “hallowed” because of its obsolescence and its implication of the ancient Jewish tradition of not speaking the name of God. Obviously these practical modifications didn’t stick.

After all of his exploration and experimentation with faith, where did he end up? He apparently reconciled, to his satisfaction, the implications of science with his inclination for believing in an over-arching deity. Near the end of his life he wrote to a friend about his view of God:

“When I observe that there is great frugality, as well as wisdom, in his works, since he has been evidently sparing both of labor and materials; for by the various wonderful inventions of propagation, he has provided for the continual peopleing his world with plants and animals, without being at the trouble of repeated new creations; and by the natural reduction of compound substances to their original elements, capable of being employed in new compositions, he has prevented the necessity of creating new matter; so that the earth, water, air, and perhaps, fire, ... return, and again become air, earth, fire, and water; I say, that, when I see nothing annihilated, and not even a drop of water wasted, I cannot suspect the annihilation of souls, or believe, that he will suffer the daily waste of millions of minds ready made that now exist, and put himself to the continual trouble of making new ones. Thus finding myself to exist in the World, I believe I shall, in some shape or other, always exist.”

George Washington

When we look into George Washington’s religious orientation we are a bit more challenged. Unlike Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, Washington was not one to discuss his religion. George was not given to philosophizing but was a great man of action. We have to infer from what he did and did not do what his religion was.

We do know that Washington, like Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, was very well educated. While he had little exposure to formal higher education, he was schooled by family and tutors. We can also note that like these other founding fathers he did not seek conformity but preferred to think for himself.

As a young man he was elected to the Anglican vestry although he was not formally a communicant in the Anglican church. This was unusual. But election to the vestry was more of a position of community leadership than a statement of being a devout Christian and it tells us more about the high regard in which he was held by his community than about his religious belief.

It is noteworthy that despite attending church on a fairly regular basis it was noted that he always declined to take communion. Some of his critics made it a point to note that his wife would take communion invariably but George Washington would not. Why? He never told us. Either he was skeptical of the Christian ritual or he considered himself unworthy. We can see in this his independent spirit and his reluctance to be a conformist just to be seen as proper. He let his actions and the way he lived his life speak for him. Like Albert Schweitzer, he was conveying the message: “I would make my life my argument. I would advocate the things I believed, in terms of the life I lived and what I did.”

Many myths were created about this wise and heroic man – and historians have classified them as just that – myths. There seemed to be a market for making this man – who already was larger than ordinary life – into something of a godlike figure. The main disseminator of such myths was his most widely read early biographer, Mason

Locke Weems. He invented the story about the cherry tree, for example. And the story that Washington knelt in the snow in prayer at Valley Forge. One writer, in his zeal to portray the General's "Christian" behavior wrote that when an American officer interrupted George Washington in his prayer at Valley Forge, Washington, "without rising from his knees," shot the man and "resumed his quiet devotions."

A more apt question is whether Washington ever prayed at all. Many of his associates were avowed Deists who considered praying a superstitious exercise and a waste of time.

There is evidence that Washington did believe in some kind of immortality of the soul. When his young stepdaughter died after years of epileptic torture, Washington declared his belief that she had gone to "a more happy and peaceful abode."

We can note in Washington's speeches and writing that he did often refer to a deity, usually in indirect terms. Without using the word "God," he did use such terms as "the will of heaven," "the Creator," "Providence," or "the all-wise disposer of events."

How do we put a name on George Washington's religion? He was sometimes referred to as a "warm deist;" that is, having not only a belief in an over-arching divine power but in one that sometimes intervened in earthly affairs. For example, he seemed to believe that a higher power could help men in battle. To look at the philosophical or religious perspective that best fit George Washington – Christian is less apt than to view him as an adherent to the Greek and Roman Stoic philosophy.

Also, it tells us something about Washington to note that whatever his personal belief he was not dogmatic. He did not – like a current President – indicate that the world was divided into good and evil, and those who believed differently were wrong. In fact he was of the opposite mind. Washington went out of his way to fight religious bigotry. He staunchly defended Jews and Catholics – the frequently disparaged minorities of his time. He remained firmly committed to religious freedom, freedom of conscience, and to separation of church and state.

As Washington slid painfully into death we note that he did not call for a clergyman or engage in religious utterances. He asked his physician to quit his ministrations and to let him go off quietly. He expressed his concern for his wife. He apologized for being trouble to the man who was moving him, and he repeatedly urged the faithful attendant at his bedside to sit down. His secretary, Tobias Lear, said, "He died as he lived."

There you have it. Of the four great founding fathers we have examined in these past two weeks, we can be inspired as much by what we do not find as what we do find. We do not find bigotry, intolerance, dogmatic faith, or even assured beliefs. And what we do find is skepticism, living as an example, tolerance, willingness to evolve, and humility. And, as far as I can tell, none have been a practitioner of the Christian creed.

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