

Historical Revisionism at Moscow's Trinity Festival

by Nick Gier

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The Trinity Festival (August 8-10, 2005) sponsored by Moscow's Christ Church is bringing conservative Christians from all over the country.

I studied theology with Christian Trinitarians in graduate school, and I've taught with many of them as well. My Lutheran colleagues in the theological faculties at Heidelberg, Århus, and Copenhagen were fervent Trinitarians, and I respected their belief in divine threeness as much as they respected my affirmation of divine unity. None of these fine Christians used the Trinity as a club to hit me over the head and to tell me that I, as a Unitarian, could be nothing but a conformist or a power hungry, humorless rapist. But this is exactly what these Moscow Trinitarians are saying about both religious and secular people who do not follow their narrow version of Christianity. They claim that their theology will bring beauty to the world, but what I've seen so far is pretty ugly.

Moscow's Trinity Festival continues the annual "history" conference that Douglas Wilson's church has held in Moscow since 1994. I set off "history" with quotation marks because the conference speakers have made a mockery of the academic study of history. Wilson's 1994 "history" conference led to the publication of the now infamous *Southern Slavery As It Was*, which has been roundly condemned by real historians, including a civil war expert in Wilson's mission church in Seattle. In addition, 20 percent of the text was copied from another controversial book on slavery.

This year's topic is the American Revolution, and Wilson, Steven Wilkins (Wilson's co-author on the slavery booklet), and Peter A. Lillback, all conservative Presbyterian pastors, will present papers. Wilson says that all rebellion is sin, so how could he possibly have anything good to say about our noble American rebels? In 1994 Wilson and Wilkins told their audience that the Civil War was unnecessary and that antebellum South was the most harmonious multiracial society in human history, and now Pastor Lillback is prepared to claim that George Washington, the least religious of the early presidents, was in fact an orthodox Christian.

Lillback has been generous enough to share some of his views with me, and I do hope that professional historians have a chance to review his methods and evidence before he publishes his book. To his credit Lillback has conceded that there is no historical evidence for Washington praying in Valley Forge (the subject of a famous painting that hangs in the nation's capitol), and there was no evidence that an alleged prayer diary comes from Washington's hand. The text is perfectly spelled (Washington was a horrible speller) and reads very much like the Common Book of Prayer. The Smithsonian Institution has rejected it as a forgery.

Lillback claims to have evidence from several pastors who attested to Washington's Christian devotion, but many more Christian ministers claimed just the opposite. Here are some items that count heavily against Lillback's thesis:

- At least three ministers testified that they never saw Washington kneeling in prayer or taking Communion, an absolute necessity for being an Anglican Christian. After being criticized for not taking this sacrament, Washington stopped attending church on Communion Sunday. After his retirement he did not go to church at all, preferring to collect his land rent instead.
- The day he left the presidency he was happy to answer many questions, but he refused to answer the question "Are you a Christian?" If Lillback's thesis is correct, this issue would have been long settled in people's minds.
- It was James Madison's opinion that Washington never "attended to the arguments for Christianity, and for the different systems of religion, [n]or in fact ... [had he] formed definite opinions on the subject."
- In 1831 Episcopal priest Bird Wilson proclaimed that "among all our presidents from Washington downward, not one was a professor of religion, at least not of more than Unitarianism."
- Article Eleven of Treaty of Tripoli states that "the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." Washington introduced this treaty to the Senate, the Senate ratified it without recorded debate, and it was signed by President John Adams, a person with much stronger Christian credentials than Washington.
- At Washington's death no pastor was called, no scriptures were read, no prayers were said, and no rituals were performed.

I asked Lillback if he really wanted to share the stage with speakers who have been so thoroughly discredited. His response was that Christian charity compelled him not to judge them until he personally appraises their performance in Moscow. I reminded him that the evidence of plagiarism and response of critics are already well documented at www.NotOnThePalouse.com, but he appears determined to join the swelling ranks of Christian revisionist "historians."

Addendum for 2006 Trinity Festival

The Trinity Festival (Aug. 7-9) sponsored by Moscow's Christ Church continues the annual "history" conference that Doug Wilson's church has held in Moscow since 1994. I set off "history" in quotation marks because the conference speakers have, over the years, made a mockery of the academic study of history.

This year's topic is "Secular Jihad in America: War on the Constitution," and Wilson, Steven Wilkins (Wilson's co-author on the slavery booklet), and Peter A. Lillback, all

conservative Calvinist pastors, will present papers. In 1994 Wilson and Wilkins told their audience that the antebellum South slavery was the most harmonious multiracial society in human history. Wilkins is founding director of the League of the South, which has been declared a hate group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

At last year's conference Lillback declared that George Washington, contrary to 74 years of scholarly consensus, was in fact an orthodox Christian. Lillback was kind enough to share some of his main points with me, and I encouraged him to have professional historians review his manuscript before he published his book. Sadly, the good pastor chose to publish with Providence Forum, an organization of which he is president. Wilson also publishes most of his books at his own Canon Press in Moscow.

I have not received my copy of Lillback's book, but I have learned about a few more claims that I would like to dispute. It is said as a vestryman in his church, Washington would have signed an oath of office affirming the Trinity and the divinity of Christ. Being a vestryman was a sign of political power and prestige. It said very little about religious beliefs, let alone guaranteeing their orthodoxy. Thomas Jefferson was a vestryman at his Episcopal church, and even though he called himself a Christian, he rejected both the Trinity and the deity of Jesus.

As a student at Harvard, John Adams faithfully attended daily prayers in the campus chapel. As an adult he regularly attended Sunday services and continued daily Bible readings. Nevertheless, by the age of 21 Adams had rejected Christ's divinity, and in letters to Jefferson he expressed his dislike for Calvinists and his distaste for the Trinity.

Lillback also claims that he has evidence that Washington received Communion on at least two occasions, but Nellie Lewis, his own granddaughter, did not witness it: "On Communion Sundays, he left the Church with me [without taking Communion] . . . and returned home, and we sent the carriage back after my grandmother." Washington's pastor James Abercrombie and two other Episcopalian ministers complained that they never saw him take the sacrament. After his death Abercrombie was asked about Washington's religion, and he declared: "Sir, Washington was a deist." I would rather have said "Christian humanist," because I agree with Lillback that the only deist among the major founding thinkers was Thomas Paine.