

## HAPPY 300<sup>TH</sup> BIRTHDAY, BEN! BENJAMIN FRANKLIN AND RELIGIOUS LIBERALISM

For more on the religious views of the founders see this [link](#)

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790) was a leading disciple of the European Enlightenment and America's first Renaissance man. He was a person of complete versatility, who made original contributions in many areas of science, technology, and humanities. His inventions make for quite an interesting and surprising list: bifocals, swim fins, the odometer, the cast iron stove, fire insurance, daylight savings, the circulating library, the lightning rod, our first knowledge about electricity, and separate watertight compartments in ships' holds.

Franklin was one of America's greatest religious liberals. The Latin word *liberalis* means "pertaining to a free person," so a liberal arts education and liberal (=free market) economics each promote free and responsible human activity. The purpose of a liberal arts education is to prepare citizens for lives in a liberal democracy, a society in which freedom of belief and conscience are paramount. The religious liberal supports not only the believer's freedom of religion but also the atheist's freedom from religion.

Franklin had doubts about orthodox Christianity very early in life. "I was scarce fifteen," he states, "when, after doubting by turns of several points, as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself." He did not accept the Trinity or the deity of Christ. He thought, like many religious liberals, that Jesus was a great moral teacher. Preferring to study on Sundays, Franklin seldom went to church. When he did attend, he was generally disappointed, because, as he observed in his *Autobiography*, the preachers seemed more intent upon making people good Calvinists than good citizens. Franklin believed that humans were basically good, albeit fallible, and that they could lead a moral life with the aid of their own reason and with a minimum of divine intervention.

For Franklin a religious faith which was not productive of good works was worthless. In a letter to Joseph Huey, he states: "I mean real good works, works of kindness, charity, mercy, and public spirit; not holiday keeping, sermon reading or hearing, performing church ceremonies, or making long prayers, filled with flatteries and compliments, despised even by wise men, and much less capable of pleasing the Deity." Franklin did believe in God, whom he addressed in his modest prayers as "O powerful Goodness, bountiful Father, merciful Guide." He argued that every person has a natural inclination to acknowledge the "infinite power and Creator of nature." The worship of God should elevate one to "rational joy and pleasure" and to good works.

In the Pennsylvania Constitution of 1776, there were clauses concerning religion to which Franklin took strong exception. The document contained a general statement of religious freedom and tolerance, but it was the specific qualifications for office holders

that Franklin wanted removed. An official was compelled to affirm the following: "I do believe in one God, the Creator and Governor of the Universe, the rewarder of the good and the punisher of the wicked; and I do acknowledge the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament to be given by divine inspiration." Franklin lost this battle at the convention and had to be content with a compromise over the status of Roman Catholics.

In his writings, Franklin displayed the ultimate in religious tolerance. He used freely the term "God," but in his famous "Creed and Liturgy" there is no mention of Jesus Christ. He felt that the division of religion into many competing denominations was unfortunate. This state of affairs had divided people one against the other and had prevented them from confronting the real challenges of humankind.

There is a famous dictum by Franklin that shows the real core of his religious views. It reads: "... Vicious actions are not hurtful because they are forbidden, but forbidden because they are hurtful. ..." This is a fundamental criticism of religious legalism of all forms, be it Christian, Muslim, or Jewish. A person obeys the laws of God, not merely because they are commanded on authority alone, but because human reason sees the basic goodness and utility in following those laws.

Franklin's view on obedience to law is fundamental for the protection of human liberty, the main theme of the American Revolution. The American Constitution, with its provisions for a freely elected Congress and a system of checks and balances, eliminates the rule of an absolute sovereign who would force compliance to laws which were irrational and arbitrary. Franklin seems to imply the same for the rule and law of God. God was not an absolute sovereign and did not create humans so weak and so morally destitute that they would meekly submit to his arbitrary choices (e.g., predestination). No, God created us free, autonomous, and rational; and he made laws which are compatible with human reason.

Jonathan Edwards, the great American Calvinist, often used thunder and lightning as an example of God's arbitrary use of power. The contrasting image is Franklin, rationalist and scientist standing in a storm with a kite and a key on the string. Edwards' world was an irrational one in which people found themselves unfree, dependent, and humbled; but people were self-reliant, inquisitive, proud and eminently American in the world of Ben Franklin.