

# Consenting fathers: benjamin franklin and thomas jefferson essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Though Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were contemporaries, their views, backgrounds and modes of influence were very different. Benjamin Franklin was born of a large and poor family and rose to become a model of the emerging bourgeois classes in the American Colonies. Throughout his long and life, Franklin succeeded in business, science, and excellent statesmanship. Thomas Jefferson, however, rose out of an affluent family to become the second President of the United States. These two seemingly separate lives nevertheless overlapped each other on many occasions. Jefferson succeeded Benjamin Franklin as the minister to France in 1785, and both men were present and influential in founding the basis for the constitution and the fledgling government.

Indeed, the accomplishments of both men and the importance that has been credited to each throughout the annals of history have melded these two men and their contemporaries into a single vision as the “ Founding Fathers” of the United States of America. However, examination of the writings that both of these men left behind for all of posterity reveal that these men had consenting and dissenting views on a variety of subjects. Autobiography, by Benjamin Franklin, and the Selected Writings of Jefferson, shows the distinctive and similar viewpoints that the respected authors had towards religion and education.

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson shared similar viewpoints in respect to religion. While neither of the men were radical atheists in the vein of Thomas Paine, both of these men were pronounced Deists. Benjamin Franklin, in his Autobiography, writes frequently about his beliefs. At the age of 15, Franklin happened upon books against Deism which he read and found

<https://assignbuster.com/consenting-fathers-benjamin-franklin-and-thomas-jefferson-essay-sample/>

that the argument for Deism was much better than the argument against it. “ It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Argument of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutation” (Norton, 574). From this young age, Franklin seemed to become a very liberal Deist. Franklin later writes about a minister friend of his who convinced him to attend his sermons. Franklin did so, but was disappointed due to the fact that the minister did not care to expound on the virtues exhibited in the Bible, but instead just made examples of these virtues to support the Presbyterian religion.

Ben Franklin’s Deism is basically a way for him to spiritually live out the great virtues that he sees as important to living a good life. Although the reader is never made aware of the explicit nature of Thomas Jefferson’s Deism, one can infer his spirituality from the works that he created. The opening passage of the Declaration of Independence has Jefferson speaking of “ the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” (Selected Writings Jefferson, 8). Thomas Jefferson was a staunch supporter of the separation of church and state that was to be an integral part of the new government of the colonies. Jefferson did not hate religion as such, although he later remarked that the real enemy toward which the Declaration of Independence was written to are the chains of “ monkish ignorance and superstition” (Selected Writings Jefferson, xiii). Jefferson, like Franklin, was a spiritual person, but he found that the effects of organized religion upon the state were devastating and unnecessary. While seemingly of a like mind in regards to religion, Franklin and Jefferson did not hold similar views towards the idea of education.

The backgrounds of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson dictated the different views that each had with regards to the education of the peoples of the colonies and newly formed confederacy. Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography catalogues his poor background and the way that he learned to educate himself. Because of his background, Franklin was most concerned with introducing a work ethic among the younger generation that stresses not only hard work in one's job, but also a dedication to improve oneself by reading and applying the learned knowledge to oneself. To this end, Franklin provides a thorough account of the society he created for him and his peers called Junto. This group was dedicated to the studying and understanding of all the arts, philosophy, and science. This interaction, coupled with his own reading time, becomes the best model of education that Benjamin Franklin can provide.

Thomas Jefferson, however, is more interested in a formal education which is certainly what he received as a member of an aristocratic family. Jefferson details a multi-tiered plan for education in the new United States that involves free primary public education to all, with the best and the brightest students moving up through college education. This rigorously structured plan does share one thing in common with Franklin's ideas; it allows for a hardworking son of a poor farmer to achieve at the same level as a child of a rich family. Jefferson understands that great students and minds appear in every class of society, not just in the aristocratic families that are historically responsible for producing academia.

His plan "prescribes the selection of the youths of genius from among the classes of the poor... ..to avail the state of those talents which nature has

<https://assignbuster.com/consenting-fathers-benjamin-franklin-and-thomas-jefferson-essay-sample/>

sown as liberally among the poor as the rich, but which perish without use, if not sought for and cultivated” (Selected Writings Jefferson, 45). Jefferson also concurs with the view of Franklin that instead of putting the Bible into the hands of youths during primary instruction, these children should be instructed in the “ first elements of morality” (Selected Writings Jefferson, 44). In lieu of teaching religious values, moral lessons and the importance of virtue would be presented. Though Franklin and Jefferson have different ideas about education, they seem to arrive at the same general conclusion in regards to the effect that education is to have on the young.

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson grew out of very different backgrounds to emerge as eminent statesmen in the same fold. Upon reading their respected works, each man forms disparate theories and conjectures that nevertheless seem to converge at a certain point with the other man’s views. The ideas of religion and education, although only two of a wide variety of topics these men focus on, provide an insight into the minds of each man and a method of determining that the minds of two eighteenth century men could often meet on many different levels.

#### Works Cited

Franklin, Benjamin. “ Autobiography.” Norton Anthology of American Literature. Ed Nina Baym. New York: Norton, 2003. 538-609.

Mansfield, Harvey Jr., ed. Thomas Jefferson Selected Writings. Wheeling: Harlan Davidson, 1979.