

# Enlightened perspectives on religion and righteousness: franklin's autobiography ...



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Two of the most profoundly influential and respected figures of the American Revolution are Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin. Both held views about religion and morality that defied orthodoxy, giving rise to the new emphasis on the individual's quest for virtue and the rationalism characteristic of the Enlightenment. They preferred a personal approach to faith, and each of their spiritual ambitions centered primarily around human decency along with basic monotheistic principles. To Franklin, religious institutions could become problematic when their focus shifted from moral instruction to sectarian arguments. He saw potential for edification in all common denominations, refusing to criticize the beliefs of another. Conversely, Paine decried all organized religion as inherently corrupt and illegitimate. In regard to morals, he recognized the contributions of some religious leaders, but accredited them no prophetic value. No hesitation was given by either to the censure of tradition, but each took a very different approach to the radical theological ideas of the Enlightenment. Franklin envisioned churches as tools for empowerment, while Paine imagined them as institutions of fraud.

Franklin and Paine maintained similarly unsophisticated belief systems, neither subscribing to a particular denomination but having faith in a singular almighty God who looks favorably to the selfless. Franklin elaborates his "Religious Principles" in his Autobiography, writing:

"I never doubted the Existence of the Deity, that he made the World, and govern'd it by his Providence; that the most acceptable Service of God was the doing Good to man; that our Souls are immortal; and that all Crime will be punished and Virtue rewarded either here or hereafter..."

In this simple summary, Franklin's religion is expressed mainly as an impetus to practice humanitarianism and virtue. In *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine presents a comparable "Profession of Faith":

"I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy".

Both thinkers demonstrate a deep connection between religion and morality. More specifically, they describe religion as the practice of benevolence toward others, defining the betterment of the world as an exclusively human responsibility. This idea is a manifestation of the Enlightenment's departure from belief in an interventionist God. It bestows upon individuals the power and obligation to push society further on the path of morality.

The two maintain different viewpoints concerning the doctrines of major religions. Franklin sees potential for edification in all forms of spirituality. His personal tenants of faith are those he "esteem'd the Essentials of every Religion," and he treated every group of faith with respect, acknowledging that "even the worst had some good Effects." This universal benignity seems to stem from his belief that everyone should work to improve their virtue. Religious principles, to him, are a pathway to the instruction of morals, and the end is more important than the journey. Paine, on the other hand, more decisively separates the concepts of religious and moral teachings. Referring to the commandments related by Moses to the Israelites, he says, "They contain some good moral precepts such as any

man qualified to be a lawgiver or a legislator could produce himself, without having recourse to supernatural intervention.” “ The character of Jesus Christ,” he describes as “ a virtuous and amiable man,” comparing his moral instruction to that of Confucius and some Greek philosophers. Paine’s position is that spiritual leaders are not sources of divine knowledge but can be helpful in the discovery of virtue.

Concerning organized religion, Franklin and Paine have varying degrees of disdain, but they share a preference for the independent study of faith. Franklin appreciates the opportunity for enrichment through any religious denomination, but he thought of the different sects with “ varying degrees of Respect as [he] found them more or less mix’d with other Articles which without any Tendency to inspire, promote, or confirm Morality, serv’d principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another.” Franklin was disgusted by a Presbyterian Minister in whose sermons “ not a single moral Principle was inculcated or enforc’d,” with their purpose being to solidify the congregation’s faith in Presbyterianism rather than their moral strength. Franklin did not regularly attend any public service, opting to spend his personal time in pursuit of his own spiritual inspiration. Paine completely discards any notion of merit in organized religions:

“ Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals... as if the way to God was not open to every man alike.”

He maintains that churches are corrupt institutions, relying on “ hearsay” and “ perjury.” He promotes, like Franklin, the personal quest for religious

truth, proclaiming, “ I do not believe in the creed professed... by any church I know of. My own mind is my own church.” His ideas align perfectly with the philosophy of the Enlightenment, stressing the removal of power from established institutions and allowing the individual to relinquish his dependencies.

Franklin’s accepting view of all religions and emphasis on moral development gave him a widespread appeal, while Paine’s defamation of religious organizations made a radical case against these institutions’ authority. These men were great figures of the Age of Enlightenment, and, though pointedly different, their thoughts on religion, morality, and the relationship between the two left their marks on American culture. The crucial principles of religious tolerance and secular government emerged from their Enlightened philosophies and have not left their positions of high importance since the nation’s founding.