

## Deism of Madison, Washington, Adams, Franklin and Allen

The publicly espoused Deism of Thomas Jefferson is discussed in the essay on Foundational Documents of the United States. Thomas Paine's lack of belief is discussed in the main document on government.

James Madison is often called the "Father of the Constitution." He was the primary author of the Virginia Constitution and he was heavily involved with the drafting of the federal Constitution at the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia. He was one of the three authors of the Federalist Papers used to sell the Constitution to the existing states. Madison spoke eloquently and often about the need for a wall of separation between church and state. He was somewhat less public about his personal distrust of Christian religion but there is ample explicit historical proof of his position:

SECULARISM: Exclusion of religion from public affairs - Religion and religious bodies should have no part in political or civic affairs or in running public institutions. Rejection of religion or its exclusion from a philosophical or moral system.

"Ref: Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999"

"Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprize.."  
-- James Madison, in a letter to William Bradford, April 1, 1774

"Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity in exclusion of all other religions may establish, with the same ease, any particular sect of Christians in exclusion of all other sects? That the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute threepence only of his property for the support of any one establishment may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?"  
-- James Madison, *A Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, addressed to the Virginia General Assembly, June 20, 1785

It should be noted that questionable quotes have a life of their own in modern media. A "Christian Nation" propagandist David Barton admitted in 1996 that he had been using twelve quotes that were either false or questionable. (1) Does this mean that they are no longer used? No! consider just two of these

"We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves ... according to the Ten Commandments of God."  
-- James Madison

This quote was admitted to be false but it is now referenced in over 1,000 locations on the web, in most cases with the complete presumption that it is true.

"It is impossible to rightly govern the world without God and the Bible."  
-- George Washington

This highly questionable quote now appears over 500 times on the web according to Google. I am not sure that anyone even knows where or when this is supposed to have been said.

Back to reality, George Washington was quite reticent about his religious views in public. As with all Deists he would freely use “God” or “Providence” on occasion where appropriate in communication both public and private. However, his non-Christianity became painfully visible with his refusal to ever take communion. When excoriated about this in a sermon he then ceased to come to church on any communion Sunday. This did not go unnoticed. The rector of the church Washington attended noted this and fully accepted that he was a Deist.

Two quotes from Reverend Doctor James Abercrombie:

“With respect to the inquiry you make, I can only state the following facts: . . . he had received a very just rebuke from the pulpit for always leaving the church before the administration of the sacrament; . . . Accordingly, he never afterwards came on the morning of sacrament Sunday, though at other times he was a constant attendant in the morning.”

and:

“Sir, Washington was a Deist.”

to The Reverend Bird Wilson, an Episcopal minister in Albany, New York, upon Wilson’s having inquired of Abercrombie regarding Washington’s religious beliefs. (2)

“In regard to the subject of your inquiry, truth requires me to say that General Washington never received the communion in the churches of which I am the parochial minister. Mrs. Washington was an habitual communicant. I have been written to by many on that point, and have been obliged to answer them as I now do you.”

-- The Right Reverend William White, the first bishop of Pennsylvania, friend of Washington and bishop of Christ’s Church in Philadelphia, which Washington attend for about 25 years when he happened to be in that city, in a letter to Colonel Mercer of Fredericksberg, Virginia, on August 15, 1835 (3)

The Library of Congress has 65,000 documents in its George Washington Papers collection complete with transcriptions. This includes his personal diaries. A text search for explicitly Christian words such as Jesus, Christ, Bible or redeemer shows not one case where Washington was explicitly endorsing or even personally referencing Christianity.

There is one quote that is sometimes cited on Christian web sites to document that Washington actively promoted Christianity. That quote, said to have been made to the Delaware Indian Chiefs in May 12, 1779, is, “What students would learn in American schools above all is the religion of Jesus Christ.” The Library of Congress has sixteen other documents written by George Washington on this date. An address to the Delaware Indian Chiefs is not included in the on-line text for any date. The total absence of references to “Jesus” or “Christ” in the Library of Congress on-line record is not consistent with the theory that he was an active promoter of Christianity in any general sense. If this quote is valid it must be considered to be an unusual event in response to an unusual circumstance. It might have been composed by a subordinate as many of his documents were. If this document is valid, why is it not included in the on-line record when such a mass of other material is included?

Washington was a member of the Freemasons. He was an Acting Grand Master in full Masonic garb at the ceremony laying the cornerstone of the Capital building. He was the charter Master of Alexandria Lodge no 22 when it was created in 1788 and unanimously reelected later that year. He received Masonic rites from that lodge when he was buried at Mt. Vernon on December 18, 1799. (4)

Masonry is a fraternal order derived from the stone mason guilds of old Europe. It is pan-religious in that

any belief in God is acceptable. A Jew, a Moslem or a Deist could each join a lodge on an equal basis. Prayers are offered in a lodge but never to Jesus Christ. That would offend members that were not Christian. Masonic teaching recognizes Jesus as a moral leader but not as divinity. A militant Christian would condemn the Freemasons as non-Christian for all of these reasons. The similarity to classical Deism is obvious and could easily explain the absence of specific Christian references in George Washington's record.

## **John Adams**

John Adams seemed to have a genuine fondness for Christianity while rejecting the divinity of Jesus the person and miracles in general. This means that both freethinkers and Christians claim Adams as one of their own. The truth is much more complex. He did want to found the nation on reason and not on religion. There are many famous and well documented quotes from Adams concerning his desire for a nation based on reason and the non-miraculous:

“The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles?” --letter to Thomas Jefferson, June 20, 1815

He also said, “The United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of governments erected on the simple principles of nature; and if men are now sufficiently enlightened to disabuse themselves of artifice, imposture, hypocrisy, and superstition, they will consider this event as an era in their history.” (5)

“Thirteen governments [of the original states] thus founded on the natural authority of the people alone, without a pretence of miracle or mystery, and which are destined to spread over the northern part of that whole quarter of the globe, are a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind.” (6)

“As I understand the Christian religion, it was, and is, a revelation. But how has it happened that millions of fables, tales, legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation that have made them the most bloody religion that ever existed?” Letter to F. A. Van der Kamp, December 27, 1816.

Adams explicitly confirmed that the United States was not founded as a Christian nation when he signed the Treaty of Tripoli: “As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion ....” Article 11, Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary.

It should be noted that a printed copy of this treaty was given to each Senator, it was read aloud and it was passed by a unanimous vote on June 10, 1797. This was only the third unanimous vote in the first 339 recorded votes of the Senate. This demonstrates that the consensus of the nation at that time was that the United States was not founded as a Christian nation. (7)

The Library of Congress has an essay on “Religion and the Founding of the American Republic.” It is in general an essay that disproportionately emphasizes the positive role of religion. However it includes this in reference to John Adams:

“Another religious movement that was the antithesis of evangelicalism made its appearance in the eighteenth century. Deism, which emphasized morality and rejected the orthodox Christian view of the divinity of Christ, found advocates among upper-class Americans. Conspicuous among them were Thomas Jefferson and John Adams.”

It would not be fair to say that Adams' acceptance and promotion of Deistic and Enlightenment Era values meant that he was not a Christian. He was a member of a Unitarian Church and could have been personally comfortable calling himself a Christian. It is just that his freethinking approach to the meaning of the word and his Deistic thinking in general would be much different than that assumed by militant Christians who attempt to use Adams to support their cause.

## **Benjamin Franklin**

Ben Franklin was along with Jefferson and Adams one of the people charged with writing the Declaration of Independence. Franklin did not go out of his way to emphasize his Deism in public but he chose to be quite open about it in his autobiography.

In chapter 2 he writes, “.and farther, that my indiscrete disputations about religion began to make me pointed at with horror by good people as an infidel or atheist.”

In chapter 6, “But I was scarce fifteen, 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. Some books against Deism fell into my hands...It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quote to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations, in short, I soon became a thorough Deist.”

Later in the same paragraph he said, “.I was sometimes in among strangers, remote from the eye and advice of my father, without any willful gross immorality or injustice, that might have been expected from my want of religion.”

As with all Deists Franklin said things that could be interpreted as classically religious. In most cases they were not. There are some that appear to be more supportive of Christianity. Franklin worked on his autobiography near the end of his life. Virtually all quotes that can be taken to imply a Christian belief occurred between the age of fifteen when he became a Deist and the writing of his autobiography when he clearly stated his unbelief. Ben Franklin seems to have felt that it was acceptable for the upper class to understand the truth but that the less educated classes needed religion in order to be moral people. This is not very honest but it appears to be what he may have done.

## **Ethan Allen**

Ethan Allan was the organizer and leader of a Vermont militia group called the “Green Mountain Boys.” Along with men from militia groups in Massachusetts and Connecticut, Ethan Allen and his men captured Fort Ticonderoga from the British on May 10, 1775. This was a major inspiration for the Revolutionary War.

Ethan Allan was very open and proud of his Deism. He wrote “Reason, The Only Oracle of Man.” The second paragraph of the Preface of that book starts, “In the circle of my acquaintance, (which has not been small,) I have generally been denominated a Deist, the reality of which I never disputed, being conscious I am no Christian,...” His views are quite explicit. He has a Section IV titled, “THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD DOES NOT INTERFERE WITH THE AGENCY OF MAN.” Another quote from that book, “While we are under the tyranny of Priests [...] it will ever be their interest, to invalidate the law of nature and reason, in order to establish systems incompatible therewith.”

## Conclusion

Among the leaders of the Revolutionary War period we find a range of beliefs including a mixture of freethinking distrust of religion combined with Deistic antipathy to superstition to a hard and uncompromising disbelief in religion. This characterized most of the well known and important leaders of the Revolutionary War period.

### References:

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  - (4) George Washington's Masonic Life - A Chronology  
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  - (5) John Adams, A Defence of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America
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  - (7) The Barbary Treaties :  
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