

# Benjamin Franklin: Deist or not?

by Pamela Hernandez Chavez

Many movements in history have transcended country boundaries, among those movements is the eighteenth-century Enlightenment (also known as the Age of Reason). Having its origins in Europe, the Enlightenment was important in society's cultural assimilation of the scientific revolution. According to D.H. Meyer's *The Uniqueness of the American Enlightenment*, many intellectuals wanted to apply the "study of nature by means of the scientific...method of reasoning...to other areas, areas of more immediate concern-society, morality, religion, the human mind itself. This effort to expand the province of science was...changing western society and its traditional systems of secular and religious authority."<sup>1</sup> American Enlightenment brought about the rise of deism, the philosophical position that in the universe there is a supreme being who does not intervene with matters of the world, which opposed the orthodox view of God as intervening in the Atlantic colonies. In the words of Thomas Paine, "[deism] believes in God, and there it rests."<sup>2</sup> Five distinguishing elements of deism include the belief that God created the universe and therefore exists, the ability to reason was given to human beings by God, a rejection of religious literary texts revealing the word of God, a rejection of religious manipulation often termed demagoguery, and skepticism of miracles and holy mysteries.<sup>3</sup> Influential among the elite in Europe, deism spread among the top intellectuals in the North American colonies. Among those influenced was one of the Founding Fathers and esteemed polymath, Benjamin Franklin.

Franklin's parents were both Puritans who escaped to Massachusetts because of religious persecution and, of course, had their son baptized as a Puritan. Growing up, Franklin had the religious influence of leaders, such as the minister Cotton Mather and Hemphill, however, his religion was never clearly defined or consistent throughout his lifetime as exemplified in his various publications, letters, and autobiography. Therefore, in order to attain a better understanding of Benjamin Franklin's religion, an examination of his religious background and a comparison between fundamental deist beliefs and Franklin's own published beliefs is necessary. This essay will attempt to describe deism and compare Benjamin Franklin's beliefs to those of Puritanism, deism, and polytheism to demonstrate that Franklin's religion was truly his own.

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<sup>1</sup> D. H. Meyer, *The Uniqueness of the American Enlightenment* (American Quarterly 28, no. 2, 1976), 167.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas Paine, *Of Religion of Deism Compared With the Christian Religion* (From World Union of Deists).

<sup>3</sup> Christopher Grasso, *Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution* (The Journal of American History 95, no. 1, 2008), 44.

## Benjamin Franklin

On January 17, 1706, Franklin was born to Josiah and Abiah Franklin in the city of Boston. American historians Louis P. Masur and Ernest R May's summary on *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* it is stated that Franklin was the youngest of seventeen children and, although his father was a mere candle and soap maker, he had great aspirations for his son. Josiah Franklin wanted his son to become a minister and therefore sent him to grammar school but, due to the humble lifestyle they lived, this dream was no longer a possibility. Instead Franklin attended schools of writing and arithmetic before eventually taking an apprenticeship with his brother's printing press in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1723.<sup>4</sup> His apprenticeship introduced him to the world of literature with which he educated himself and paved his way to become the owner of his own printing press. In fact, Franklin recalls being inspired by Cotton Mather's *Essays to Do Good* (1710), saying it had "an Influence on some of the principle Events of [his] Life" evident in his Silence Dogood essays where he critiqued the established church's role in people's lives.<sup>5</sup>

However, his leaving Boston also meant he was leaving behind the Puritan lifestyle he grew up in. Masur and Ernest stated that "The Puritan settlement of New England...centered on the creation of a covenanted community, a community bound to God." Franklin never fully let go of all the community's doctrine.<sup>6</sup> He used the social values of Puritan theology to incorporate self-improvement techniques and reflect on his moral earnestness. Despite this, he rejected institutional control which led to the integration of deistic principles in his beliefs. Along with this, Franklin's dislike for Christianity surfaced. This is reflected in the following statement he made in his *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*: "My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. 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."<sup>7</sup> These thoughts hint at the start of Franklin's journey toward deism.

## Deism

English deism appeared in the seventeenth century in the writings of Lord Edward Herbert of Cherbury, a prominent English statesman and thinker. He laid

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<sup>4</sup> Louis P Maur and Ernest R May, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), 2.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, Meyer and Ernest, 1993), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Louis P Maur and Ernest R May, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 1993), 3

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, Meyer and Ernest, 1993), 45.

down five articles English Deists followed in his work *De Veritate* (Paris, 1624): belief in the existence of a supreme Deity, the obligation to worship said Deity, that virtue combined with piety is an important part of divine worship, that humans should repent and abandon sin, and that reward and punishment come from the goodness and justice of God in both the living world and afterlife.<sup>8</sup> Cherbury argued that these principles were the pure, uncorrupted basis upon which all religions derived. Due to this approach to religion, Cherbury is one of the first with a systematic approach to religion. His hope was that deism would settle the ongoing strife that was sparked after the Reformation by offering rational insight. However, it did not spread and was not developed further by other until years later.

In *Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution*, Christopher Grasso, professor of history at the College of William and Mary, stated “Deism is usually associated with belief in a noninterventionist Creator, reliance on what reason can discern in the natural world, and skepticism about miracles, the scriptures as divine revelation, and the divinity of Christ.”<sup>9</sup> This philosophical belief supported the idea that God does not intervene in the lives of human beings and that reason should be used to make sense of the world. In addition, it dismissed the services provided by clerics such as mass, religious texts, and even the idea of the holy trinity. When looking into deism, political activist and philosopher, Thomas Paine can be consulted to explain his version of what it was. In his work *Of The Religion of Deism Compared With the Christian Religion*, he stated that “Every person, of whatever religious denomination he may be, is a DEIST in the first article of his Creed” for deism is a belief in God.<sup>10</sup> He explains the concept of Deism by criticizing faults in Christianity and outright claiming it to be above all other religions because it focuses on God and how his works can be observed by all. His criticism highlights deist beliefs which include: a belief in a non-intervening God, the divine gift of reason, avoidance of books feigning revelation or any man-made religious invention, and disbelief in the reverence of miracles.<sup>11</sup> Thereby, Paine praises concepts of deism all while damning those established by Christianity.

### **Deism in Franklin’s writings**

Benjamin Franklin admits in his *Autobiography* to have come across some deist writings in his youth and agreed with their contents. At the age of fifteen he states he came across books against deism: “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

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<sup>8</sup> Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/deismeng/>.

<sup>9</sup> Christopher Grasso, *Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution* (The Journal of American History 95, no. 1, 2008), s44

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Paine, *Of Religion of Deism Compared With the Christian Religion* {From World Union of Deists}.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist."<sup>12</sup> As previously stated, he struggled from a young age to fully accept Puritan Christianity in its entirety, and here we see him declaring his alignment with deism.

In his writings, one of the most commonly used principles is the design argument which was used to support the existence of God and therefore the intelligent design of the universe; a common analogy for this is that of a watchmaker. The argument states that just as a perfect design implies the existence of a designer, the existence of the universe implies God's existence and its perfect design allows it to run without intervention.<sup>13</sup> To further Franklin's belief that God created the universe and therefore exists we have his 1728 publication *Articles of Belief and Acts Religion*. In this source, Franklin expresses his view on religion. He states God's wisdom, power and goodness as being "in the Air and in the Water, in the Heavens and on the Earth" all of which are workings of the natural world that exist because of His design<sup>14</sup>.

In further exploring Franklin's view on God his *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*, reasons that God, the maker of the universe, is all-wise, all-good, and all-powerful. Therefore, everything He does is justified in these three descriptions so much that nothing can exist or be done without his agreement therefore everything is good because he is good and there is no evil except what society deems so. Franklin then furthers this argument when stating that because everything done is done so through God's consent the existence of free-will to do anything is non-existent so there was no distinction between virtue and vice. These principles were often stressed in Christianity such as that of the Puritans and Calvinist theology in which virtue is pursued and vice avoided; this reflected Franklin's willingness to abandon these doctrines of blind faith and God's grace for that of reason and the study of nature.<sup>15</sup> In coming up with this argument, Franklin alludes to the existence of a God who used reason in the creation of the universe which is comparable to the use of rationality in the mind of an intellectual. This then supports the deistic belief stating the ability to reason was given to human beings by God, along with his mention that "By [God's] Wisdom hast thou formed all Things, Thou hast created Man, bestowing Life and Reason, and plac'd him in Dignity superior to thy other earthly Creatures. Praised be thy Name forever."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, Meyer and Ernest, 1993), 77.

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Dunn, *From a Bold Youth to a Reflective Sage: A Reevaluation of Benjamin Franklin's Religion* (The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 111, no. 4, 1987), 506-507.

<sup>14</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Articles of Belief & Acts of Religion* (United States: Reprint Services, 1992).

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, Meyer and Ernest, 1993), *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity*.

<sup>16</sup> Franklin, Benjamin. *Articles of Belief & Acts of Religion*. United States: Reprint Services, 1992.

The next principle of deism that Franklin adopted was the rejection of religious literary texts revealing the word of God and the rejection of popular religious manipulation, or demagoguery. In *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World* Franklin is reflecting on what role his religious views play in religious thought. Within the text he declares that he intends to offer the reader “nothing but plain Reasoning, devoid of Art and Ornament; unsupported by the Authority of any Books or Men how sacred soever; because [he knew] that no Authority is more convincing to Men of Reason than the Authority of Reason itself.” Within that quote alone he is restating his belief in the role of reason in religion and rejecting the Bible as well as the popular church a form of religious authority offering revelation.<sup>17</sup> Lastly, Deism offers skepticism towards the existence and importance of miracles. As discussed in his *Autobiography*, Franklin had skeptic thoughts over miracles, the scriptures as divine revelation, and the divinity of Christ even at the young age of fifteen.

Benjamin Franklin has a significant amount of evidence of the deistic ideology in his publications, including his *Autobiography*, *Articles of Belief & Acts of Religion*, *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity* and *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World*. However, Franklin’s religion impacted not only himself, but those around him who could be influenced for he was driven by pragmatism.<sup>18</sup> In fact, Franklin even formed a small club in 1727 called the Junto. According to Water Isaacson, a professor of History at Tulane University, “There they discussed issues of the day, debated philosophical topics, decided schemes for self-improvement, and formed a network...of their own careers.”<sup>19</sup> The formation of this club and Franklin’s view of religion as performing a positive service to society provide further evidence of his dedication to pragmatism. For example, in the *Providence of God* publication, Franklin expresses his belief that deism benefits society by stating that “this Religion will be a Powerful Regulator of our Actions, give us Peace and Tranquility within our own Minds, and render us Benevolent, Useful and Beneficial to others.”<sup>20</sup> Furthermore, Franklin’s defense of Samuel Hemphill, a Presbyterian minister accused of teaching impure doctrine by subverting opinions, in *A Defense of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill’s Observations* because of Hemphill’s teachings emphasizing the practice of morality and virtue that promoted good works.<sup>21</sup>

### Maybe he isn’t a deist?

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<sup>17</sup> Revealed religious truth through some type of communication with a deity or deities.

<sup>18</sup> Pragmatism involves the process of assessing theories through their practical application.

<sup>19</sup> Water Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 55.

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin: With Related Documents* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, Meyer and Ernest, 1993), *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World*.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* *A Defense of the Rev. Mr. Hemphill’s Observations*.

Now that Franklin's religious beliefs have been compared to those of deism, a look at how his beliefs differed from it is also necessary. Keeping in mind that his religion was never consistent, Franklin still had several ties to his Puritan roots and often later rejected the stances on deism he concludes in his *Dissertation*; among those stances was his use of reason and lack of distinction between virtue and vice. One of Franklin's publications that stressed the importance of promoting positive morality among the public was *Poor Richard's Almanack*. At the time, almanacs were the second most popular publications in the colonies following the Bible as they provided lists of aphorisms, statistical and astronomical data and proved to be Franklin's tool for spreading his message to the lower classes in colonial America. In the almanac, he urged the readers to be virtuous and diligent in order to achieve success; characteristics that often are typically associated with Christianity. Franklin attempted to communicate his belief that good faiths bring about good works in life by encouraging readers to be virtuous and avoid vices such as sloth and drinking. Take for example his aphorisms that exemplify his intolerance for the two vices: "All things are easy to industry, all things difficult to sloth" and "Drunkenness, that worst of evils, makes some men fools, some beasts, some devils."<sup>22</sup>

Another characteristic of Franklin's religion that set him apart from Deism and even Christianity was the disregard in the belief of one God. Instead, he argued that there was a group of lesser gods who may or may not be mortal that help control the universe.<sup>23</sup> This polytheistic view placed him outside the realms of both the Puritans and Deism. Furthermore, he later denounced his conclusions on reason in his *Dissertation* labeling reason as susceptible to error. Elizabeth Dunn, dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences and professor of history at Indiana University South Bend, takes note of this in quoting, "I doubted whether some Error had not insinuated itself unperceiv'd into my argument, so as to infect all that follow'd, as is common in metaphysical Reasonings."<sup>24</sup> As far as Deism is concerned in Franklin's writings, he appears to be extremely careful in what he publishes privately and publicly. It seems that although Franklin is generally thought to be a deist, his writings reflect contrary in some instances; while in others he argues in favor of deism's principles.

### **His own religion**

Thus, with the emergence of the Enlightenment influencing the elite and intellectuals of the American colonies a new kind of religion was available—deism. Deism offered a simpler explanation for the existence of God and the universe by

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<sup>22</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Poor Richard's Almanack: Being the Choicest Morsels of Wisdom* (Mount Vernon, NY: Distributed for Blackwell North America by Kampmann, 1994), 12, 20.

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin Franklin, *Articles of Belief & Acts of Religion* (United States: Reprint Services, 1992).

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth Dunn, *From a Bold Youth to a Reflective Sage: A Reevaluation of Benjamin Franklin's Religion* (The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography 111, no. 4, 1987), 508.

simply acknowledging that because natural works such as water, plants and stars exist there has to be a creator. This creator does not intervene in the affairs of man, the believers are thought to have been given the gift of reason by God and reject the Bible, established church and miracles found in established religion. While Benjamin franklin certainly does fit these descriptions as noted in his publications, he was also able to incorporate both polytheism and Puritan beliefs into his religion. In the end, what can be concluded is that Benjamin Franklin held beliefs that aligned with deist principles, however, Franklin's true religion was his own.