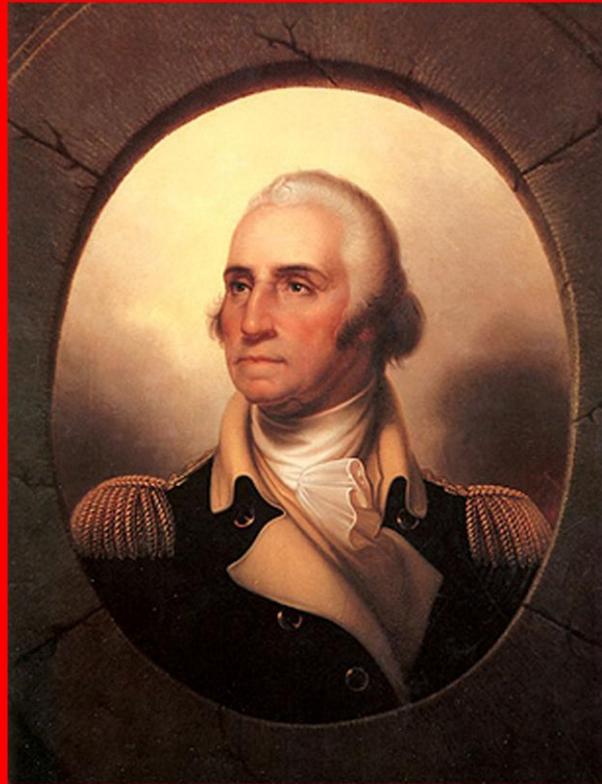


George Washington and Deism



by Bob Johnson

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Introduction

History is important as it tells us who we are and where we came from as well as providing us with real lessons of inspirational examples of overcoming adversity. The heroes of history give us inspiration to work and struggle to make the world a much better place. The revelation that the hero of the Christian right and pseudo-historian David Barton, who also works as an “expert” for reviewing social studies textbooks for the state Board of Education in Texas, had his book, *The Jefferson Lies*, pulled by his Christian publisher due to the fact that it contains too many factual errors, has brought forward the fact that early American history is the target of many religious zealots with resources and influence coupled with a religious agenda who distort it for religious and political purposes. George Washington is an important figure from early American history who has fallen victim to lies and distortions about his religious beliefs.

Barton gave a speech to Congressmen at a Capitol prayer event. Here is a [link](#) to a short clip of fast talking Barton telling a tale of George Washington praying at Valley Forge. The particular yarn he picked to share with the politicians has no basis in facts. It is merely the handed down hearsay ramblings of an Anglican minister named Mason Locke Weems. Weems included this undocumented myth in his biography on George Washington, *The Life of Washington*, which he wrote and published in 1800 after the death of Washington. Also included in this book is the myth in which George Washington as a little boy chopped down a cherry tree and was honest with his father when his father asked him who cut down the cherry tree. This myth of Washington on his knees praying at Valley Forge lacks substantiation to the point that in 1918 the Valley Forge Park Commission refused to erect a monument to the alleged Washington prayer! Since Barton and the religious right believe in the hearsay religion of Christianity it should not be too surprising that they also believe in hearsay history

This eBooklet will show that George Washington was in fact **NOT** a Christian and can best be described as someone who embraced Deism. Deism is belief in God (which also means Washington was not an Atheist or Agnostic) based on the application of our reason on the laws and designs in Nature. Deists believe these designs point us to our Designer. Deists also strongly reject all unreasonable claims, even those made by the various “revealed”/hearsay religions. Washington's Deism, because it is a belief in God, is too often twisted and used by the religious right to mislead people into thinking that Washington was a Christian. Hopefully this eBooklet will help to correct this harmful and disingenuous act by the religious right.

This eBooklet will also shed light on the rich Deistic roots of the American Republic and show why if George Washington or anyone who took part in the American Revolution was a Christian and took the Bible seriously they never would have taken part in the Revolution. Washington was not alone among the founders in his Deism. Founders such as Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin and Thomas Paine were Deists. It's therefore not surprising that Deism is found in the Declaration of Independence and in the complete rejection by the Declaration of Independence, the Bill of Rights and the US Constitution of the type of clergy dependent government promoted in the Bible.

Hopefully, as more and more people are made aware of the blatant lies of the religious right in painting

a false picture of America as being founded as a Christian nation, as well as being made aware of the existence of the religious/spiritual philosophy of Deism which was so important to many of America's key founders, the revolution in religion the American founder and Deist Thomas Paine called for in his monumental book on God, Deism and religion, [The Age of Reason, The Complete Edition](#) (for Kindle edition click [here](#)), will become a life improving and world improving reality.

Progress!

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Was George Washington a Christian?

Before we can answer the question of George Washington being a Christian or not, we must define what a Christian is and what Christianity is.

Thomas Paine made a great point in *The Age of Reason, The Complete Edition* when he wrote, "The Calvinist, who damns children of a span long to hell to burn forever for the glory of God (and this is called Christianity), and the Universalist who preaches that all shall be saved and none shall be damned (and this also is called Christianity), boasts alike of their holy [revealed] religion and their Christian faith."

As Paine made clear by the above quote, a precise definition of what Christianity is and what a Christian is seems to be lacking. People who consider themselves to be Christians cover the entire spectrum of those who believe in predestination as Calvinists do, as well as Universalists who believe the opposite of Calvinists. There are also other requirements which some Christians hold to be vitally important while other Christians virtually ignore them. Requirements of whether baptism is required and, and if it is, whether baptism by submersion is necessary or whether just a sprinkling of water will do the trick. These differences in opinion of what constitutes Christianity and a true Christian have historically been taken deadly serious by Christians. For example, the 30 Years War saw Christians who disagreed with each other slaughter so many of one another that they actually reduced the population of Germany by 30 percent!

Many Christians today seem to think that a Christian is someone who believes that Jesus is the only son of God who died on the cross to wash away their sins so they can enjoy a blissful eternal life. And they believe this because they believe that is what is written in a book which they believe is the word of God, the Christian Bible. Using this most basic of definitions of what a Christian is, we can easily see by his own acts and writings that George Washington did not satisfy even this most rudimentary definition of a Christian.

George Washington was born into a Church of England family. As an infant he was baptized into the Church of England. At that time the Church of England was the state religion of the British colony of Virginia with the British monarch as the Supreme Governor of the Church of England. The fact that his parents had him baptized as an infant does not by any means indicate that when he reached the age of reason he embraced Christianity.

In early America, particularly in pre-revolutionary America, you had to belong to the dominant government approved church if you wanted to have influence in society, as is illustrated by the following taken from *Old Churches, Ministers and Families of Virginia*, by Bishop William Meade, I, p 191. "Even Mr. Jefferson, and George Wythe, who did not conceal their disbelief in Christianity, took their parts in the duties of vestrymen, the one at Williamsburg, the other at Albermarle; for they wished to be men of influence." George Washington was in the same boat as Wythe and Jefferson. When the religious right and Barton talk about Washington attending church services and holding office in a Christian church, this is the reason for it. It was, in the final analysis, a necessary evil of his day.

Washington knew the damage warring religious sects can do to a people and a nation. He went out of his way to show toleration for all religions. For example, the Protestants observed Pope's Day in which the effigy of the pope was burned in a public anti-Catholic display. George Washington knew acts like

this would inspire religious hatred and violence so he wrote an order stopping the observance of Pope's Day within the Continental Army.

While traveling when he was president Washington would often visit different churches and synagogues, not because he believed what they were preaching, but to show toleration of differing religious beliefs. As we see with the out of control religious violence in the Middle East and other areas of the globe, hind-sight indicates that Washington and the other founders who were Deists should have marched shoulder to shoulder with more outspoken Deists like Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen exposing the nonsense and violence producing superstitions and myths promoted by the various "revealed"/hearsay religions. Now that we are in a nuclear age we can no longer afford to turn a blind eye to violence promoting "revealed"/hearsay religions. As the Deist Albert Einstein pointed out (for Einstein's Deism read *Einstein* by Walter Isaacson) if humanity wants to survive in a nuclear age we must develop a new way of thinking. Deism is that new way of thinking that will save humanity from destroying itself.

To show that merely attending church services, especially by someone in politics, does not in any sense mean that they endorse the religious teachings of the church they are attending, on page 82 of the outstanding book by Paul F. Boller, Jr., *George Washington and Religion*, we learn that a Presbyterian minister, Arthur B. Bradford, who was an associate of Ashbel Green another Presbyterian minister who had known George Washington personally wrote that Green, "often said in my hearing, though very sorrowfully, of course, that while Washington was very deferential to religion and its ceremonies, like nearly all the founders of the Republic, he was not a Christian, but a Deist."

George Washington did not take part in the Christian sacrament of communion. Dr. James Abercrombie was the assistant rector of Christ Church in Philadelphia when Washington was President. He said that if Washington was attending services on a day when communion was offered Washington would leave the church prior to the sacrament being given. When Abercrombie gave a sermon about how important it is, especially for people in powerful positions "who invariably turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord's Supper" to give an example to others, Washington ceased attending church all together when he knew communion was going to be a part of the religious service. This strongly indicates that George Washington did not buy into the story of the "Lord's Supper" or the Christian sacrament of communion.

One little known Bible teaching that George Washington would have followed if he truly believed the Bible was the word of God and if he really was a Christian is found at Roman 13:1-7. This Bible teaching instructs, "Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers. For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God. Whosoever therefore resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation. For rulers are not a terror to good works, but to the evil. Wilt thou then not be afraid of the power? do that which is good, and thou shalt have praise of the same: For he is the minister of God to thee for good. But if thou do that which is evil, be afraid; for he beareth not the sword in vain: for he is the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil. Wherefore ye must needs be subject, not only for wrath, but also for conscience sake. For for this cause pay ye tribute also: for they are God's ministers, attending continually upon this very thing. Render therefore to all their dues: tribute to whom tribute is due; custom to whom custom; fear to whom fear; honour to whom honour." Not only did George Washington resist the powers that be, he lead a very violent revolution against them! Based on this Biblical nonsense George Washington and everyone involved in the American Revolution is suffering "damnation."

The biggest selling point of Christianity is salvation. As the pitch goes, if you believe Jesus is the only son of God and that he died for you on the cross then you get eternal life in heaven. And if you don't believe that, then you burn for eternity in hell. It would be strange indeed if someone who was a Christian did not at least mention this Bible promise while on their death bed.

Preacher Weems (the originator of the George Washington and the cherry tree mythology) has written that on Washington's death bed, "Washington folded his arms decently on his breast, then breathing out 'Father of mercies, take me to thyself,' - he fell asleep." Like almost all of what the Christian fundamentalists have written about Washington, this is not true.

George Washington not only did not request a Christian clergyman, he did not even mention Jesus, Christianity, the Bible or the eternal life they promise.

Tobias Lear, Washington's secretary, was with him when he died. The following is his account of Washington's death found on page 113 of *The Religious Life of George Washington*: "About ten o'clk he made several attempts to speak to me before he could effect it, at length he said, '-I am just going. Have me decently buried; and do not let my body be put into the vault in less than three days after I am dead.' I bowed assent, for I could not speak. He then looked at me again and said, 'Do you understand me?' I replied, 'Yes.' 'Tis well,' said he.

"About ten minutes before he expired (which was between ten and eleven o'clk) his breathing became easier; he lay quietly; - he withdrew his hand from mine, and felt his own pulse. I saw his countenance change. I spoke to Dr. Craik who sat by the fire; - he came to the bed side. The General's hand fell from his wrist - I took it in mine and put it into my bosom. Dr. Craik put his hands over his eyes and he expired without a struggle or a sigh!"

Like other Deists such as Paine, Jefferson, Voltaire, Franklin, and Allen, Washington did not fear death but looked at it as just another part of nature, as another design of the Designer. Though he didn't speculate much on an after-life, he was comfortable to look at his own death as part of God's design.

Many of America's founders greatly admired and appreciated the ancient Greeks and Romans. In fact, the American Republic is modeled after the Roman Republic. A very beneficial idea of the ancient Greeks and Romans was the philosophy of Stoicism. Stoicism teaches that the most important goal in life is to live in accordance with Nature and it holds a Deistic idea of God. Zeno of Citium is the Greek philosopher credited with being the founder of Stoicism. The Roman Cicero brought Stoicism to Rome and George Washington was an admirer of Cicero. In a letter written by Washington in 1788 to Annis Boudinot Stockton Washington wrote regarding an after-life that he agreed with Cicero "respecting his belief in the immortality of the Soul" and he went on to write, "if I am in a grateful delusion, it is an innocent one, and I am willing to remain under its influence." This does not at all sound like something a Christian would believe or say.

George Washington the Deist

The definition of Deism is often obscured by people blindly taking the definition most often promoted by Christians and other “revealed”/hearsay religionists. They usually define Deism as belief in God based on reason and that God never intervenes in human affairs. They usually also claim that Deists do not believe in an after-life. The motive for this very narrow inaccurate definition is often an attempt to eliminate many important historical people like George Washington from being defined as a Deist.

If you read what leading Deists such as Thomas Paine have written you'll quickly realize that this very narrow definition of Deism is lacking and not very accurate. For example, Paine wrote in *The Age of Reason, The Complete Edition*, “I trouble not myself about the manner of future existence. I content myself with believing, even to positive conviction, that the Power that gave me existence is able to continue it, in any form and manner he pleases, either with or without this body; and it appears more probable to me that I shall continue to exist hereafter, than that I should have had existence, as I now have, before that existence began.” He also wrote that God is under no obligation to continue someone's existence.

The bottom line is that in spite of countless **BELIEFS**, no one **KNOWS** what, if anything, happens to us when we die. Unlike the “revealed”/hearsay religions, Deism teaches that instead of focusing on a hear-after that may not even exist, we have a duty to focus our minds and energy and resources on the here-and-now in order to make the world a much better place. One of the great qualities of Deism is its lack of dogma. This is made evident when we realize that some Deists believe there is a continuation of existence after our body dies while some Deists do not.

Regarding the belief in an “absentee landlord” God, some Deists do and some do not hold this belief about God. A great example of a Deist who believes God may intervene through Providence is George Washington which his letter to Brigadier General Thomas Nelson makes clear. He wrote the letter after the rebel defeat at Germantown in November, 1777. Washington wrote, “We must endeavour to deserve better of Providence, and, I am persuaded, she will smile on us.” If Washington was a Christian he would have written something on the order of, “We must have more faith in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and he will grant us victory over our enemies.” Not only did he not write such a thing to General Nelson, an examination of all of Washington's correspondence shows he never wrote such things to anyone. (Here's a [link](#) to the University of Virginia's digital collection of all of George Washington's papers.)

The definition of Deism found on our site at http://www.deism.com/deism_defined.htm makes the most sense when writings from actual Deists are taken into consideration. The World Union of Deists definition is: “Deism is the recognition of a universal creative force greater than that demonstrated by mankind, supported by personal observation of laws and designs in nature and the universe, perpetuated and validated by the innate ability of human reason coupled with the rejection of claims made by individuals and organized religions of having received special divine revelation.” Based on this definition of Deism and of the writings and actions of George Washington himself it is evident that George Washington was a Deist.

In *Washington and Religion* by Paul F. Boller, Jr., we read on page 92, “Washington was no infidel, if by infidel is meant unbeliever. Washington had an unquestioning faith in Providence and, as we have seen, he voiced this faith publicly on numerous occasions. That this was no mere rhetorical flourish on his part, designed for public consumption, is apparent from his constant allusions to Providence in his

personal letters. There is every reason to believe, from a careful analysis of religious references in his private correspondence, that Washington's reliance upon a Grand Designer along Deist lines was as deep-seated and meaningful for his life as, say, Ralph Waldo Emerson's serene confidence in a Universal Spirit permeating the ever shifting appearances of the everyday world."

Another point that gives credence to George Washington's Deism is the *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary*. Article XI of this treaty which was started in the administration of George Washington and which was ratified in the administration of John Adams reads, "As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion . . ." Although Washington was not President when this treaty was ratified the person who was responsible for the treaty was David Humphreys. Mr. Humphreys was an old friend and colleague of George Washington and it was Washington who appointed him to the position of Commissioner Plenipotentiary of the United States which enabled him to create and secure the treaty. Not only that, but Washington was alive when the treaty was ratified and did not voice any opposition to it as he surely would have if he had been a Christian and intended the United States of America to be a Christian nation as David Barton and the religious right falsely claim.

Like many of America's Deist founders, Washington thought that "revealed"/hearsay religions were necessary for a happy and peaceful society. In his Farewell Address he makes this point by saying, "And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle." Deists like Benjamin Franklin also held this belief that without the carrot and stick of the "revealed"/hearsay religions there could not be any social harmony. However, Deists like Thomas Paine and Elihu Palmer believed that people could be good to one another without the fear of hell or the desire for a reward in heaven. In his book [Principles of Nature](#) (for Kindle version click [here](#)) Palmer wrote, "Deism also declares, that the practice of a pure, natural, and uncorrupted virtue, is the essential duty, and constitutes the highest dignity of man; that the powers of man are competent to all the great purposes of human existence; that science, virtue, and happiness, are the great objects which ought to awake the mental energies, and draw forth the moral affections of the human race."

The lack of evidence that George Washington took seriously Christianity's essential beliefs of the divinity of Jesus, the redemption of human souls through belief in Jesus and that the Bible is the word of God together with his strong and profound belief in God as Divine Providence, the Almighty Architect of the Universe, the great and glorious Being, etc., and his reliance on hard work coupled with trust in Providence makes it easy to see that George Washington was a Deist.

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