

Orv Breitreutz
Dr. Peter Gibbon
NEH George Washington and His Legacy: Myths, Symbols & Reality
August 9, 2009

Latitudinarian Influence on the Religious Beliefs and Practices of George Washington

Several of the articles and books that were included in our assigned readings in the last three weeks have included allusions to George Washington's religious beliefs, or lack thereof. We have learned that a variety of religious groups have claimed Washington's allegiance, especially among the evangelical groups that became prominent in the nineteenth century. I recall, when visiting Freedom's Foundation at Valley Forge a number of years ago, being impressed by the large statue of George Washington kneeling in prayer, apparently based upon Parson Weems's dubious story so popular in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Even in the twenty-first century, television evangelists like Dr. James Kennedy and Timothy LaHaye (author of the *Left Behind* books) have claimed the General as a devout evangelical Christian. However, historians such as Peter Henriques call Washington a "theistic rationalist" who followed a "hybrid belief system mixing elements of natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism, with elements of rationalism being the predominant element." Our astute historian Frank Grizzard, who has worked with the organizing and digitizing of Washington's works for years, characterizes his religious beliefs as a mix of principles common to Stoicism, Freemasonry, and Christianity, in which Providence was conceived of as an " 'omnipotent,' 'benign,' and 'beneficent' Being that by 'invisible workings' in 'infinite wisdom' dispensed justice in the affairs of mankind. Astonishment and gratitude were

owed this Being.” Many have expressed a bit of frustration because Washington seemed so reticent and reluctant to write down exactly what he believed concerning religion. In a famous letter to Dr. James Anderson (24 December 1795), we have evidence that he viewed his religious beliefs as “few and simple”:

For in politics, as in religion my tenets are few and simple: the leading one of which, and indeed that which embraces most others, is to be honest and just ourselves, and to exact it from others; meddling as little as possible in their affairs where our own are not involved. If this maxim was generally adopted Wars would cease, and our swords would soon be converted into reap-hooks, and our harvests be more abundant, peaceful, and happy.

It is the intent of this short paper to show that George Washington, when placed into the context of the religious thought and the political setting of his day, was really not much different than most of his Virginia neighbors, and that his religious beliefs and practices were not all that different from the so-called Latitudinarians common within the Anglican Church of the late seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth centuries.

Latitudinarianism has been defined by Frank Grizzard ([143 Questions and Answers about George Washington](#)) as “a stream of eighteenth-century episcopatism that dominated the Church of England and the Episcopal Church in America. Latitudinarians conformed to official Anglican practices but felt that matters of doctrine, organization, and observance are ultimately of little consequence and hence beliefs about them are more or less a matter of one’s personal preference” (Grizzard 53). Other authors comment:

Latitudinarianism grew out of a weariness and disgust with the religious conflicts that had rocked Europe for almost 150 years and culminated in the barbarities of the Thirty Years’ War and the English Civil War. Proponents of this movement emphasized the ‘reasonableness’ of Christianity, striving for balance between the contending ideas of the various Protestant denominations and claims for infallibility on the part of

Catholic tradition. The Latitudinarians also limited Christian doctrine to a few beliefs, which they considered to be fundamental and had to be accepted as vital to the Christian faith. They were quite accepting, or “allowed for latitude,” on other teachings and practices, which they felt were not critical, stressing that the doctrinal differences between Protestant Christians were less important than the beliefs they shared (Thompson 4-5).

Only by permitting diversity over matters not essential to the core of belief could Englishmen extricate themselves from the chaos of civil war (Spellman 24).

Margaret C. Jacob (The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720)

writes:

Latitudinarian moderation dramatically contrasted with the circumstances within which it was conceived. Civil war, sectarianism, political radicalism, and Catholic dominance on the Continent confronted the churchmen who forged Latitudinarianism (Jacob 35).

D. F. Wright writes that the Latitudinarians

displayed a high regard for the authority of reason and a tolerant, antidogmatic temper ("gentlemen of a wide swallow").... [T]hey became prominent churchmen. They included John Tillotson, Archbishop of Canterbury; Edward Stillingfleet, Bishop of Worcester; Simon Patrick, Bishop of Chichester and Ely; Gilbert Burnet, Reformation historian and Bishop of Salisbury; and Thomas Tenison, Archbishop of Canterbury. They reacted against the Calvinism of the Puritans and were broadly Arminian in outlook. They aligned themselves with progressive and liberal movements in the contemporary intellectual world....

Their comprehensiveness allowed only a narrow core of fundamentals in religion. They resisted the Laudian or High Church insistence on conformity in nonessentials such as church order and liturgy. Stillingfleet's Irenicum advocated "comprehension" between Anglicans and Presbyterians; Burnet tried to incorporate Nonconformists into the Church of England. They approved "that vertuous mediocrity which our Church observes between the meretricious gaudiness of the Church of Rome, and the squalid sluttery of Fanatick conventicles" (Patrick). Above all they held that "true philosophy can never hurt sound divinity," which in practice normally meant harmonizing Scripture and the fathers with the

light of reason. Theologically vague and spiritually insubstantial, their religion was strongly moralistic (<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/latitudi.htm>).

Another influence on the beliefs and teachings of the Latitudinarians were the scientific discoveries of the previous several centuries. Explorers had found fascinating new lands and cultures and had proven heliocentricity. Those who studied the native cultures of the newly “discovered” peoples found many similarities in their religious beliefs, and began to conclude that God could be found in the “inner voice” of nature; that “God” could be discovered through “reason” rather than through revelation. It seems that the same factors that led to the Deism of a Thomas Jefferson played into the “Christian” Latitudinarians’ conclusion that God is the rational creator of a logical and ordered universe.

D. F. Wright writes:

Hostile to scholasticism and Aristotelianism, they drew inspiration more from Descartes's new "mechanical" philosophy. Respect for "the theatre of nature" led them to support scientific developments such as the Royal Society. Thomas Sprat, Bishop of Rochester, was its historian, and Joseph Glanvill was a fellow of the Society as well as rector of Bath and the author of The Vanity of Dogmatizing and The Agreement of Reason and Religion. The new mathematics of Isaac Barrow and Isaac Newton they hailed as signs of a new age of light (<http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/latitudi.htm>).

By 1690, Latitudinarians controlled most of the ecclesiastical offices in the Anglican Church. It is likely that these ideas were transported to the Anglican Church that was dominant in the Virginia into which George Washington was born. According to Margaret Jacob, a summary of this philosophy/religion would go something like this:

The ordered, providentially guided, mathematically regulated universe of Newton gave a model for a stable and prosperous polity, ruled by the self-

interest of men.... It allowed them to imagine that nature was on their side; they could have laws of motion and keep God; spiritual forces could work in the universe; matter could be controlled and dominated by God and men. Stability was possible without constant divine intervention; the spiritual order could be maintained; the church was necessary and essential; yet at the same time men could pursue their worldly interests....

[Newton's] new mechanical philosophy served as the foundation for a social ideology with a dual purpose: to secure and legitimize church and state against the threats posed by radicals, enthusiasts, and atheists and...to provide for religious peace in such a society by instilling their version of liberal Protestantism....

[The Latitudinarians] addressed themselves primarily to the public actions of the Christians; they seldom discussed the nature of inner spirituality or private communication with the creator. Public piety interested the Latitudinarians, particularly as it influenced the decisions taken by the prosperous in their pursuit of virtue and interest....

Success in this world as well as in the next rested not on any imagined predestination, but on an act of individual will.... Man must win salvation from a just and providential deity who would never ruthlessly close the contest before it had begun (Jacob 18-50).

Within such a system, core religious beliefs could be kept to a minimum. One early proponent is said to have reduced the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church to five: "That God exists, that he should be worshiped, that man should order his faculties as the principal part of divine worship, that everyone is duty bound to repent his sins, and that rewards and punishments will follow our brief passage here" (Thompson 5).

It is into a church heavily influenced by the Latitudinarian view that George Washington was born in 1732. His great-great grandfather Lawrence had felt the sting of religious discord when he was removed from his position of rector in 1643 by Cromwell's Puritans for having supported the Loyalists. That may have induced great-grandfather John to emigrate in 1652 after his father died. Nevertheless, we see a record of both the great-grandfather and grandfather remaining within the Anglican Church in

Virginia, and leaving behind wills that contained powerful statements of their Christian faith. By the late 1600's, the Latitudinarian message of toleration was reaching Virginia through published sermons and religious texts.

Also impacting the religious life of the young Washington were factors peculiar to Virginia. Mary Thompson summarizes these factors as:

Including the lack of a bishop to provide leadership and see that children were properly catechized and brought into the church at the appropriate age, a shortage of ministers, and the scattered, rural pattern of land settlement, which meant that parishes tended to be large and pastors were forced to rotate between their flocks.... The logistical problems facing the church in Virginia meant that church attendance, while important, was emphasized less than private devotions, which could be done at home (Thompson 5).

If George Washington's church attendance seems sporadic to us, it might be argued that regular services were not being held, and that it would have taken nearly two hours each way just to get to church (the nearest church being seven miles from Mt. Vernon.) If his communion attendance seems even more sporadic, it might be pointed out that it was offered only three or four times a year, and does not seem to have received much emphasis as a sacrament whereby one's faith was strengthened. Again, Mary Thompson:

The colonial church saw its purpose as a practical one of providing spiritual sustenance and teaching to individual members, as opposed to a more intellectual involvement in theological and philosophical theorizing or a more emotional regard for "mysteries," such as miracles. There was an emphasis on "low-key piety," which, while it was a deep and pervasive element in the life of an individual, "was given to order rather than to passion or ecstasy." A typical Virginia Anglican at this period saw religion as one of life's duties and believed that the proper response to God's love was obedience. As played out in daily life, this duty was manifested by a "well-ordered life of prayer and obedience to God's laws." Eminently practical, a believer's faith would reveal itself through actions, such as prayer and the reading of devotional literature, including the Bible, the

Book of Common Prayer, and numerous others. In the words of one historian, “Doing one’s duty was a statement of faith and the product of a sincere devotional life” (Thompson 15).

George Washington was baptized, married, and eulogized upon his death by Anglican/Episcopal ministers. He remained a member of the post-Revolution Protestant Episcopal Church, which had significant organizational problems of its own, until his death. He had served as vestryman and churchwarden for a number of years, both positions that oversaw the mundane outward responsibilities like paying the pastor’s salary, keeping up the church buildings, taking care of the poor and needy, and providing for the bread and wine used in communion services. He also served as godfather for at least eight children. His letters and account books demonstrate that he ordered religious books and devotions to be used for the instruction of his stepchildren. Unquestionably, both sources show that he gave money to support the church and to offer charity to all sorts of needy people. As President, he apparently felt it his duty to model more regular church attendance, and did so both in New York and Philadelphia. I conclude that he, through his personal conduct and actions at least, was a member in good standing of the Episcopal Church; however, it was a church heavily influenced by the Latitudinarians. A number of examples may serve to illustrate this point.

He often refers to God as “Supreme Rule,” “Providence,” “Great Ruler of Events,” “The Invisible Hand,” etc. But that seems to be the language of seventeenth century Deists and others who wanted to acknowledge that God was at work in ways that were wise, inscrutable, and irresistible. To Burwell Bassett (1773), Washington wrote:

The way of Providence being inscrutable, and the justice of it not to be scanned by the shallow eye of humanity, not to be counteracted by the

utmost efforts of human power or wisdom, resignation, and as far as the strength of our reason and religion can carry us, a cheerful acquiescence to the Divine Will, is what we are to aim.

That Providence is active in the events of history and our lives was evident in a letter to Thomas Nelson in August of 1778:

After two years of Manœuvring and undergoing the strangest vicissitudes that perhaps ever attended any one contest since the creation both Armies are brought back to the very point they set out from and, that that, which was the offending party in the beginning is now reduced to the use of the spade and pick axe for defence. The hand of Providence has been so conspicuous in all this, that he must be worse than an infidel that lacks faith, and more than wicked, that has not gratitude enough to acknowledge his obligations.

That man is responsible for living a moral and virtuous life deserving divine Providence's favor is evident in his letter to Thomas Nelson in March of 1779:

Unanimity in our Councils, disinterestedness in our pursuits, and steady perseverance in our national duty, are the only means to avoid misfortunes; if they come upon us after these we shall have the consolation of knowing that we have done our best, the rest in with the Gods.

Even as the Latitudinarians would have combined Nature, Reason, a benevolent Providence, and Scripture to progress toward a better society, so does Washington in his Circular to State Governments (1783):

The foundation of our Empire was not laid in the gloomy age of Ignorance and Superstition, but at an Epoque when the rights of mankind were better understood and more clearly defined, than at any former period, the researches of the human mind, after social happiness, have been carried to a great extent, the Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labours of Philosophers, Sages and Legislatures, through a long succession of years, are laid open for our use, and their collected wisdom may be happily applied in the Establishment of our forms of Government; the free cultivation of Letters, the unbounded extension of Commerce, the

progressive refinement of Manners, the growing liberality of sentiment, and above all, the pure and benign light of Revelation, have had a meliorating influence on mankind and increased the blessings of Society. At this auspicious period, the United States came into existence as a Nation, and if their Citizens should not be completely free and happy, the fault will be entirely their own.

Washington recognized the necessity for religion for the support of good social order and republican government, but speaks about its utility in very Latitudinarian terms in his Farewell Address (1796):

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great Pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and citizens. The mere Politician, equally with the pious man ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the Oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? 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.

If the Latitudinarians had been concerned about renewed religious strife among factions, then it is obvious that George Washington feared the same:

Of all the animosities which have existed among mankind, those which are caused by a difference of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and ought most to be deprecated (to Edward Newenham, 1792).

Therefore, while supporting the practice of religion, and even speaking in favor of imposing a tax for the support of churches, he wished there to be religious freedom as a right, not simply toleration:

No man's sentiments are more opposed to any kind of restraint upon religious principles than mine are (to George Mason, 1785).

Every man, conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience (to Baptists, 1789).

The liberty enjoyed by the people of these states of worshipping almighty God agreeable to their consciences is not only among the choicest of their blessings, but also of their rights (to Quakers, 1789).

The government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support (to Jews, 1793).

In the Latitudinarian tradition of viewing religion as being necessary to good social order, it is interesting to note that Washington felt the need for his army to have Chaplains, who were to be paid for their services. We are also informed that only about ten percent of the chaplains who served were of the Anglican persuasion, with many more from the Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Lutheran, Dutch Reformed, and Roman Catholic churches. One was even a Unitarian. Again, one can see the impact of Latitudinarian tolerance evident here. He ordered troops to attend religious services, and issued Thanksgiving proclamations, such as this one from 18November1775:

The Honorable the Legislature of this Colony having thought fit to set apart Thursday the 23rd of November Instant, as a day of public thanksgiving "to offer up our praises, and prayers to Almighty God, the Source and Benevolent Bestower of all good; That he would be pleased graciously to continue, to smile upon our Endeavours, to restore peace, preserve our Rights, and Privileges, to the latest posterity; prosper the American Arms, preserve and strengthen the Harmony of the United Colonies, and avert the Calamities of a civil war." The General therefore commands that day to be observed with all the Solemnity directed by the

Legislative Proclamation, and all Officers, Soldiers and others, are hereby directed, with the most unfeigned Devotion, to obey the same.

We are aware of only one or two references to Jesus Christ in all of the extant letters and documents. One was in an address to Delaware Indian Chiefs in May of 1779:

You would do well to wish to learn our arts and ways of life, and above all, the religion of Jesus Christ. These will make you a greater and happier people than you are.

The other public reference was in his Circular Letters to the States in 1783, where he prayed that God would

most graciously be pleased to dispose us all, to do Justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with that Charity, humility and pacific temper of mind, which were the characteristics of the Divine Author of our blessed Religion, and without an humble imitation of whose example in these things, we can never hope to be a happy Nation.

He seemed to have believed in an afterlife, but historians disagree on whether he viewed it with dread or anticipation. Some have pointed to his membership in the Freemasons as proof that he was not a Christian. However, given the minimal faith requirements of the Latitudinarians, it would not be out of bounds for one to belong to the Freemasons, whose “true principles” were fraternity, universal love, morality, acts of benevolence, and loyalty to civic laws and values. In addition, Washington was reported to have said that he did not attend more than a few meetings in the last thirty years of his life.

For those seeking a definitive answer to whether George Washington had more detail to his religious beliefs, they are confronted with a dilemma. While he was willing to make general statements about religion in his public proclamations, while he saw a need for it in public life to preserve both military and social order, he seldom wrote anything about it in his private letters. While it seems that he subscribed to Latitudinarian beliefs within the Anglican/Episcopal tradition, specific questions about his “Christianity” are not addressed except by his personally moral and virtuous deeds and life. If we were to find more personal notes on his private religious beliefs, we might suppose that he would have included them in confidence to that person with whom he shared hearth and home so many years, his wife. But Martha, as well as the wife of favorite cousin Lund, both destroyed personal correspondence from the one whose religious tenets were “few and simple.”

Works Cited

- Grizzard, Frank E. Jr. 143 Questions & Answers about George Washington. Buena Vista, VA: Mariner Publishing, 2009.
- Henriques, Peter R. Realistic Visionary: A Portrait of George Washington. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2006.
- Jacob, Margaret C. The Newtonians and the English Revolution 1689-1720. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1976.
- Spellman, W.M. The Latitudinarians and the Church of England 1660-1700. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- Thompson, Mary. In the Hands of a Good Providence: Religion in the Life of George Washington. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.
- Wright, D.F. "Latitudinarianism" <http://mb-soft.com/believe/txn/latitudi.htm>. Accessed August 6, 2009.