

**GEORGE WASHINGTON'S RELIGION REVISITED:
He was Not an Orthodox Trinitarian Christian**

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Note: Complete references will be added soon.

As a fellow minister in Peter Lillback's denomination [conservative Presbyterian], I can tell you that a large number of us are embarrassed by his poor historical methodology.

--Anonymous posting to a review of Lillback's *Sacred Fire*

Being no bigot myself, I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity in the church with that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem the most direct, plainest, easiest, and least liable to exception.

—George Washington in a letter to Lafayette (August 15, 1787)

Rather than scoring points in the culture wars against liberals, Lillback's argument boomerangs on everyone who thinks that taking religion seriously applies only to the "other" side.

—Old Life Theological Society (Presbyterian)

Religion was one sturdy pillar of the temple of government Washington helped design and construct, but Christ, about whom he was deafeningly silent, was absent from the temple's architecture.

—Forrest Church, *So Help Me God*, p. 7

Thanks to Glenn Beck's fawning promotion, an obscure self-published book on George Washington's religion has become a best seller among conservatives. On his show Beck enthused: "It so discredits all of the scholars and it's amazing. It's the best book on faith and the founding I think I've ever read."

Did Beck actually read this huge tome? Running almost 1,200 pages with 500 pages of endnotes and 10 indices, conservative Presbyterian minister Peter Lillback's *George Washington's Sacred Fire* certainly gives the impression of thorough scholarship. The book is indeed thorough but far too repetitive, and Lillback does score some points against previous scholars who have produced insufficient evidence for some of their claims.

Washington and Communion

Lillback's strongest argument is an alternative explanation of why Washington refused to take Communion at two churches while he was president. The reasons that he adduces have to do with church politics, plus the fact that the Rev. James Abercrombie once criticized him harshly from the pulpit about his refusal to celebrate the Eucharist. If it were a matter of conscience and principle that Washington didn't commune, why didn't he insist that his wife Martha also leave as the sacrament was being prepared? His granddaughter Nelly Custis wrote that she and her grandfather would always leave and then send the carriage back for her grandmother, who always took the sacrament. In any case, the fact that a person takes Communion is not a definite sign that they are orthodox Christians.

The following observation by Bishop William White, who never saw Washington take Communion, is significant: "Within a few days of his leaving the presidential chair, our vestry waited on him with an address prepared and delivered by me. In his answer he was pleased to express himself gratified by what he heard from our pulpit; but there was nothing that committed him relatively to religious theory." Lillback argues that Washington was in fact at odds with what he had heard from White's pulpit, but what is significant is that the former president was silent with regard to religious doctrine and his confession thereof.

Washington Was Not A Deist

On the question of Washington's alleged deism, I came to the same conclusion that Lillback did nearly 40 years ago when I first researched the religion of the founders. Using standard definitions of deism, none of the major American thinkers at that time—except Thomas Paine, Elihu Palmer, and Ethan Allen—could be called deists. When referring to his own religious views, Jefferson uses the word "deism" as the simple Latin homologue of theism, and he claims that it means Unitarianism. In his famous correspondence with Adams he refers favorably to the "deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth" (Letter to John Adams, May 5, 1817).

Washington and Jefferson: Both Nominal Anglicans

Lillback really has to stretch the evidence and indulge in a lot speculation to make Washington an orthodox, trinitarian Christian. Lillback likes to use syllogistic reasoning to refute previous Washington scholars. Here is the essence of his argument in the form of a syllogism: major premise: Anglicans are orthodox Christians; minor premise: Washington was an Anglican; therefore, Washington was an orthodox Christian.

Thomas Jefferson was also a vestryman in the Anglican church and attended church regularly throughout his life, but Lillback would never draw the conclusion that Jefferson was an orthodox Christian. (Lillback's claim that Washington was somehow more serious in his church duties simply does not persuade.) This fact leads us to believe that the major premise is obviously false. Lillback surely must know that 12 million

people in the United Kingdom are members of the Anglican Church but only half them bother to attend. (But 8 percent do attend weekly, which is more than Washington ever did). According to a Guardian/CM poll, 63 percent of those surveyed in the UK reported that they were not religious.

Washington was a nominal Episcopalian (renamed after the Revolution) who attended church irregularly, ceasing after his retirement. His diaries show that he frequently dishonored the Sabbath. We learn from one entry that he would have collected his rents on Sundays, but he declined because the people living on his land were "apparently very religious" (Quoted in P. L. Ford, *George Washington*, p. 79).

This is the real "honest George," making no pretenses about being pious. Lillback counters that pretending to be a Christian would make Washington a hypocrite, which of course many politicians definitely are, but certainly not the father of our country. Washington was indeed a man of sterling virtue, but this claim comes dangerously close to cherry tree story. It is clear that from what we know of him, he would always want to present the most proper face to the world.

No Evidence for Belief in the Trinity or the Deity of Christ

The weakest arguments in the book are the ones devoted to proving that Washington believed in the deity of Christ and the Trinity. (Oddly enough, the book does not have an entry for "Trinity" in its index.) In all of his voluminous writing only once does he speak of Jesus and this single incident, a speech to the Delaware Indians. On the manuscript of another speech to Indian leaders, we can clearly see the word "God" crossed out and the phrase "Great Spirit" written in Washington's own hand. Church historian Forrest Church states that on the question of his belief in Christ Washington was "deafeningly silent" (*So Help Me God*, p. 7).

I will be referring to Thomas Jefferson frequently throughout this essay, so let us do a comparative search of both men's writings for three terms: Jesus, Christ, Trinity, and Christianity. For the Unitarian Jefferson the results are 28 for Jesus, 15 for Christ, 7 for Trinity, and 23 for Christianity. For the alleged orthodox Christian the numbers are one for Jesus, none for Christ, none for Trinity, and 7 for Christianity, including one in a catalogue of books and five regarding the Christian mission to the Indians (see below).

With so little evidence to work with, Lillback is forced to make some very indirect and dubious inferences. For example, he thinks that Jesus is the referent in phrases such as "divine author of our blessed religion," when in fact it most likely means God the Father. Lillback tries to draw the conclusion that Washington believed in a divine Jesus because he did not take the Lord's name in vain (p. 56). He quotes a long passage from Washington's General Orders as Commander of the Revolutionary Army in which he is shocked at the swearing of his soldiers. His argument is that a Deist or Unitarian who believed in a human Jesus would have no such scruples.

There are at least two problems with this hypothesis. First, H. S. Randall states that “no person ever heard Jefferson utter a word of profanity” (*The Life of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 3, p. 555); and second, Washington’s cabinet, which included Jefferson, was aghast at the many times that the great president swore (J. T. Flexner, *George Washington and the New Nation*, p. 28). Again we see that Lillback overplays the presumed virtues of his subject and the theological implications of any of them. I am a Unitarian, I believe that Jesus was a great human being, and I hate swearing.

The only argument that Lillbeck can make that Washington believed in a triune deity is that as an Anglican he would have affirmed church creeds, which contain that doctrine, and he would have read from the trinitarian Common Book of Prayer. Incredibly enough, he maintains that the general aura of “Virginia’s Trinitarian faith” would have made Washington an orthodox Christian (p. 57), but of course that would have made everyone in Virginia one, including Unitarians such as Thomas Jefferson. Does that mean that everyone who crossed the state line became a trinitarian in an instant? Methinks the good pastor presses his points a tad too hard.

Lillback somehow believes that it is theologically significant that Washington recorded his daily notes in copies of the *Virginia Almanack* (p. 57). The volumes were always headed with the “Year of Our Lord God 17. .” not just “Lord,” which Lillback takes to have deeper trinitarian implications. I can imagine, however, citizens of all religious persuasions routinely using their own copies of this book. If Lillback really wants to go this route, I offer the fact that Jefferson added something really interesting to the dates on his presidential decrees: “In the year of our Lord Christ” (<http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=22345>). (Lillback has the audacity Jefferson had a “casual” view of Jesus [p. 53].) We Unitarians should be concerned: Lillback is unwittingly making our theological hero into an orthodox, trinitarian Christian!

Washington’s Poor Church Attendance

Jefferson attended church more often than Washington did, and he, too, would have joined the congregation in reciting the trinitarian creeds. Witnesses also noticed that he always put his prayer book in his pocket as he rode off to church. In stark contrast to Washington, Jefferson, after his retirement, rode all the way to Charlottesville to church (Randall, vol. 3, p. 555). He contributed a large amount of money to the construction of the Episcopal Church, and there he “joined in the responses and prayers of the congregation” (ibid.).

For the 16 years that I could get diary evidence (periodic from 1760 to 1791), Washington attended church on average only 10 times a year (<http://candst.tripod.com/GeoWchurchchart.html>). Scholars at Mt. Vernon state: “Washington’s diaries show no church attendance by anyone in the family after they returned to Mount Vernon at the end of his presidency” (www.mountvernon.org/files/Religion-Appendix_1.pdf). Washington obviously did follow his own advice to his soldiers when he commanded: “See that the men regularly attend divine worship” (quoted in Lillback, p. 19).

When Washington became president his attendance went up dramatically. He did not note his activities for every day, but for those he did, he went to church only 4 percent of recorded Sundays in 1788, rising to 68 percent in 1789, dropping to 61 percent, then down to 21 percent in 1791, and finally no attendance after his retirement in 1797. These facts do not necessarily make him a hypocrite, but it does pose serious problems for Lillback's hypothesis that Washington was a dedicated churchman and would never do anything just to show that he was religious. While he was president Jefferson was insistent—most likely because he also wanted to appear pious—that everyone attend church every Sunday in the House of Representatives.

Lillback's response to Washington's failure to attend church during his last three years is intellectually dishonest. His claim that "he was consistently in church throughout his life" is simply false (p. 259). And his statement that his sacred sabbatical was only a year (p. 265) contradicts the evidence from Mt. Vernon above that there were no church visits at all. Lillback's reasons for Washington's serious lapse of religious duty are lame. First, he says that the president must have been too busy; second, the two churches in Pohich (7 miles) and Alexandria (9 miles) were too far away; and third, Washington was too old and weary to go and preferred to enjoy "the vine and fig tree" Mt. Vernon. (This sounds like the young man who also stayed home on Sundays.) Church describes Washington as "working harder than ever, plunging into the daily grind" (p. 110), so ill health was not the reason. But the man whom Lillback said did not take his church duties seriously—Jefferson in his 70s and 80s —was still riding to church in Charlottesville 3 miles away.

Both Presidents Received All Sermons Warmly

Lillback makes a point of the fact that Washington responded favorably to sermons that pastors sent him, but that also included those from churches that were not orthodox. In his travels Washington made a point to attend services in all denominations, including Jewish synagogues. President Jefferson was also delighted to receive to sermons from pastors of many different denominations. In a letter date March 11, 1801, Jefferson congratulated the Rev. John Hargrove on the consecration of the New Jerusalem Church in Baltimore. Using neutral theological language typical of Washington, Jefferson concluded his letter: "Commending your endeavors to the Being, in whose hands we are, I beg you to accept assurances of my perfect consideration and respect." Later Jefferson invited Hargrove to give a sermon on the second coming of Christ to both houses of Congress. See http://www.oakarbor.org/why_oakarbor/jefferson.html

Lillback's response to my using Jefferson as a counter to his argument is that we know from their writings that as Unitarians Jefferson and John Adams rejected the deity of Christ and the Trinity. As we have no similar denial from Washington, Lillback believes we can somehow assume that he was completely orthodox in his faith. After they put their political differences aside, Jefferson and Adams enjoyed theological debates for years, but there is no evidence that Washington engaged in any deep intellectual activity. His silence in this regard does not indicate orthodoxy at all; it only

shows that he was not particularly interested in philosophy and theology. James Madison reports that Washington “never attended to the arguments for Christianity, and for the different systems of religion, nor in fact had he formed definite opinions on the subject” (Quoted in Paul F. Boller, Jr., *George Washington and Religion*, p. 89). Lillback himself appears to support this view: “His private life as a Virginia gentleman in a distinctively Anglican historical context did not require him as a non-theologian to be overtly expressive of his faith” (history net)

Both Washington and Jefferson Supported Mission to the Indians

Pastor Lillback admits that one could never say that Washington was an evangelical Christian, but he did once rise to the level of evangelism when he supported the Anglican mission to the Indians (p. 27). But that would make Jefferson a Christian evangelist as well, because he signed bills from 1802-04 supporting the building of churches and the sending of missionaries to the Indian tribes. No doubt Jefferson saw Christianity as the best way to instill morality in these people. As Jefferson proclaimed: “The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man” (James Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, p. 96). As we are dealing with an author who would be tempted to draw this conclusion, please note that just because a person praises Christianity does not mean that he is an orthodox Christian.

Washington’s “Prayers” and their Theological Insignificance

The Rev. Abercrombie criticized him from the pulpit not only for not taking Communion, but also he once remarked that he never saw him kneel in prayer, another Anglican requirement. A slave in Washington’s home reported that while he witnessed his wife praying, he never saw his master in that pose. The huge mural in the Capitol’s Rotunda depicting Washington kneeling in prayer in Valley Forge is based on very flimsy evidence. I’m pleased that Lillback agrees that the incident cannot be satisfactorily validated.

The Federalists were very keen on national days of prayer and fasting, and the Federalist and Unitarian John Adams proclaimed many of them during his presidency. Surprisingly, enough they caused lots of controversy, primarily because the Jeffersonian Republicans wanted a stricter separation of church and state. Church historian Forrest Church writes that Adams’ national “fasts divided the electorate. He later claimed that they cost him the election of 1800.” (I can’t imagine that being an issue today!) Again the fact that presidents support and participate in national days of prayer does not in any way indicate that they are orthodox Christians.

In Appendix Three entitled “Washington’s Written Prayers” Lillback scours his writings for anything with “pray” or “prayer” in it, including his will, which begins with a formulaic “In the name of God, Amen.” (A google search showed hundreds of 18th Century wills starting with this boilerplate.) This obviously does not count as a prayer or an indication of orthodox belief. I suspect that many other examples Lillback cites do not

count as prayers either, especially since the word “pray” is many times used as simply “to wish.”

With regard to those examples that are indeed prayers, Lillback admits, much to the detriment of his argument, that some of them were written for the president, and one of the authors was none other than that sly Unitarian Thomas Jefferson (p. 361). I was especially struck by the “prayer” to the “God of Armies” that Lillback quotes (p. 398) that ends with the following phrase “the most fervent prayer [=wish] of my soul.”

Once again I admire Lillback’s intellectual honesty in confessing that the authenticity of the so-called “Daily Sacrifice Prayers” cannot be attested. Sometimes called the “Spurious Prayers,” Worthington C. Ford and Rupert Hughes have conclusively proved that these prayers, not found among Washington’s possessions, are a clumsy forgery. Washington’s handwriting and spelling was known to be atrocious, but this particular hand is elegant and spell-perfect. The prayers also have a very strong resemblance to the Episcopal Book of Prayer.(36b) As final proof of the hoax, the Smithsonian Institution rejected the book as genuine Washingtonian memorabilia.

Lillback undermines his scholarly credibility more by including the spurious prayers in Appendix Four. The fact that they are there in their false glory allows one to compare them with Washington’s “written” prayers. None of the former are dedicated in Jesus’ name; in fact, they do not mention Christ at all. The forgeries of course are completely orthodox, except for the fact that there is no mention of the Holy Spirit. This is actually not that uncommon. In my own research on the Trinity I was surprised to find how often even the most fervent Trinitarian Christians elide the Third Person of the Trinity. Once again we find that Lillback’s arguments for Washington’s orthodoxy are not only embarrassing for their desperate overreaching but of course fail for lack of sufficient evidence.

Washington’s Condemnation of Thomas Paine

Lillback praises Washington for refusing to have anything to do with Thomas Paine after the publication of his controversial *Age of Reason*, in which he ridicules orthodox Christianity. But he surely cannot draw any theological significance from this because Paine was shunned by everyone, including liberally religious Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin. (His own Quakers refuse to bury him.) The fact that Paine was ostracized is not cause for praise but shame on the early American Republic for being so uncivil and hostile to its great patriot. (The fact that Paine himself was uncivil was not a reason for Christians not taking a higher moral ground.) It is significant and praiseworthy that Barack Obama is the only president of whom I’m aware who mentioned unbelievers in his inaugural address. I must back up! I myself fell into the trap of implying a deist is an unbeliever.

My interest in the religion of the founders was first sparked by learning that Theodore Roosevelt called Paine “that dirty little atheist,” and a hint of this distaste is found in Lillback’s satisfaction that his hero rejected Paine. I’m please that some

conservative Presybetarians see this intolerance in Lillback. The Old Life Theological Society has this comment about Lillback on its website: "Rather than scoring points in the culture wars against liberals, Lillback's argument boomerangs on everyone who thinks that taking religion seriously applies only to the 'other' side." Paine, Jefferson, and Adams took theology very seriously and they devoted a lot of deep thought to the subject. Washington appeared to be much more committed to the form of religion rather than its substance.

Washington's Death: No Minister and No Prayers

In a recent biography of Washington Joseph J. Ellis describes the scene at Washington's death: "There were no ministers in the room, no prayers uttered, no Christian rituals offering the solace of everlasting life." (34a) Although Lillback takes issue with Ellis' claim that the great president did not believe in an afterlife, he cannot deny that there was no minister and no prayers, except for those uttered privately by his wife Martha. The excuse that Washington died quickly and there was no time to call a minister simply does not persuade.

The fact that Washington's fellow Masons dominated his funeral procession back to Mt. Vernon leads us to consider the claim made by many scholars that Washington was a better Mason than he was a Christian. Lillback's response is once again an impressive scholarly retort (chapter 25). He shows that the Masons of Washington's earlier years were much more orthodox than those even of his later years. From the fact that Washington was less inclined to maintain his Masonic duties later in life, Lillback infers that he withdrew because of their lack of orthodoxy. Lillback's argument backfires a bit when we notice that the language that he quotes from the Christian Masons is much more orthodox than Washington own general theism.

Conclusions

Dr. Benjamin Rush, medical scientist and friend of Franklin, reported to Thomas Jefferson that upon leaving office Washington met with a group of clergy who submitted a number of questions for Washington to answer. Since he had never made any public affirmation of Christianity, one of their questions was whether or not he was a Christian. Washington very kindly answered all of the questions except that crucial one.

As Paul Boller concludes: "If Washington was a Christian, he was surely a Protestant of the most liberal persuasion." He would have fit Adam's definition of a Christian very well: "I believe all the honest men among you are Christians, in my sense of the word."

Postscript: Lillback was a keynote speaker at Moscow's own Trinity Festival sponsored by Doug Wilson's Christ Church. I wrote to Lillback warning him that he risked his reputation associating with a pastor who had written a discredited book defending Southern slavery. He answered saying that this was no reason for him to cancel his trip. Now that I have read Lillback's book I can say that was right in my

warning: Pastor Lillback is a much better scholar than Pastor Wilson, but still he utterly fails to prove that Washington was an orthodox, trinitarian Christian.