

ARTICLE

# Benjamin Franklin and the Reasonableness of Christianity

Kevin Slack

Department of Politics, Hillsdale College, Hillsdale, Michigan, USA  
Corresponding author. E-mail: [kslack@hillsdale.edu](mailto:kslack@hillsdale.edu)

## Abstract

While much has been written on Benjamin Franklin's view of religion, less has been written on his Christian theology. This article first situates Franklin as an important figure in the religious Enlightenment, connecting his own view of philosophy to his teachings on Christian revelation. Providing historical context on the subscription debates, it then gives a comprehensive treatment of Franklin's Christian theology in the 1735 Hemphill affair. New scholarship on Franklin's transatlantic sources confirms that, far from attempting to undermine Christianity, he appealed to popular European writers in an attempt to bend it to reasonable ends. Moreover, Franklin's own views on church polity and liturgy developed over time. As he rose from a middling artisan to political power, he saw both the need for religious appeals and the threat that competing sects posed to political unity. His focus shifted from religious freedoms in private associations to institutionalizing elements of Christian teachings in education, charity, commerce, and defense. His experiences with rigid Presbyterian orthodoxy and chaotic New Light enthusiasm also awakened him to the need for more reasonable forms of worship, and he set to the task of experimenting with Christian liturgies to achieve both the tranquility of parishioners' minds and social unity.

Benjamin Franklin, writes J. A. Leo Lemay, “retained an interest in theology all his life” and “wrote more theological essays than any other American layman of the colonial period.”<sup>1</sup> Scholars have written much on Franklin's views on religion, bringing them into the historically turbulent political questions of Franklin's deism or atheism, yet they have paid considerably less attention to his actual teachings on Christianity.<sup>2</sup> This article situates Franklin as an important figure in the religious Enlightenment, connecting his famous deist creed to his Christian theology. Providing new attributions to the Franklin canon, it then reassesses his lengthy and oft-neglected Christian

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<sup>1</sup>J. A. Leo Lemay, *The Life of Benjamin Franklin*, 3 vols. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006–2009), 1:8.

<sup>2</sup>Carla J. Mulford, “Benjamin Franklin, Virtue, and the Good Life,” *College Literature* 46, no. 3 (Summer 2019): 741–743.

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theological writings in the 1735 Hemphill affair. Finally, it traces the important developments of his religious ideas in his subsequent political life.

### I. Franklin and Religious Enlightenment

While scholars debate the nature of young Franklin's "thorough Deis[m]," most agree that there was some sort of change upon his 1726 return to Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> From 1728 to 1731, he constructed his own worship service, penned and printed articles on providence and "primitive Christianity," and wrote a deist creed, which taught that an infinite creator both decreed general laws of nature and providentially interfered in those laws.<sup>4</sup> Many scholars argue that Franklin sincerely believed the creed; others, that he abandoned it for a secular substitute (faith in progress) or rejected it altogether for radical skepticism or atheism.<sup>5</sup> Scholars also debate how Franklin's creed related to his teachings on Christianity, especially in the 1735 Hemphill affair. Melvin Buxbaum argues that Franklin's secular animosity toward the "zealous Presbyterians" was part of his larger war against superstition.<sup>6</sup> Thomas Kidd presents Franklin's Christianity as a secular, self-help variant of lapsed Calvinism, preserved by his exposure to George Whitefield, while for Joseph Waligore, Franklin gave up "his unorthodox deism" and became a "Christian deist": he "believed in miracles" and embraced Jesus's teaching of piety and morality.<sup>7</sup>

There are problems with these interpretations. Lemay, Alfred Owen Aldridge, and Elizabeth Dunn have argued that claims that Franklin believed in particular providence must account for his avowed skepticism as well as the logical distinctions that he made between reason and revelation (Christian or deist) and God as nature or lawgiver.<sup>8</sup> The

<sup>3</sup>Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography*, ed. Leonard Labaree (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1964), 114; and on Franklin's change, see Lemay, *Life*, 1:3–4, 289–290.

<sup>4</sup>Benjamin Franklin, "Doctrine to be Preached," *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard Labaree et al., 43 vols. to date (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959–), 1:212–213; and Franklin, *Autobiography*, 162.

<sup>5</sup>On Franklin's sincere belief in the creed, Thomas Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin: The Religious Life of a Founding Father* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2017), 109, 236; Benjamin E. Park, "Benjamin Franklin, Richard Price, and the Division of Sacred and Secular in the Age of Revolutions," in *Benjamin Franklin's Intellectual World*, ed. Paul E. Kerry and Matthew S. Holland (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 119–133, argues that Franklin was a secularist opposed to a Christian worldview and that his ideal democracy would focus on the increase of pleasure and the eradication of pain, 127; on progress, Ralph Lerner, "The Gospel according to the Apostle Ben," *American Political Thought* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2012): 129–148; on Pyrrhonism, Lemay, *Life*, 2:238, 295–299, 547–548; and Jerry Weinberger, "Benjamin Franklin Unmasked," in *Benjamin Franklin's Intellectual World*, ed. Paul E. Kerry and Matthew S. Holland (Madison, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2012), 20, calls Franklin a "stone cold atheist."

<sup>6</sup>Melvin Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), 51, 76–77, 220–221.

<sup>7</sup>Kidd, *Benjamin Franklin*, 44, 47, 79, 108, 224; on secular Calvinism, see David T. Morgan, "A Most Unlikely Friendship—Benjamin Franklin and George Whitefield," *The Historian* 47, no. 2 (February 1985): 213; and Joseph Waligore, "The Christian Deist Writings of Benjamin Franklin," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 140, no. 1 (January 2016): 7, 9, 12, 26.

<sup>8</sup>Lemay, *Life*, 2:295–299; Alfred Owen Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1967), 5–6; Alfred Owen Aldridge, "Franklin's Experimental Religion," in *Meet Dr. Franklin*, ed. Roy Lokken (Philadelphia, Penn.: Franklin Institute Press, 1981), 106–107; and Elizabeth Dunn, "From a Bold Youth to a Reflective Sage," *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 111, no. 4 (October 1987): 501–524.

claim of Franklin's *Christian* deism is problematic in that his 1728 "Articles" and deist creeds say nothing of Christ, while Lemay and Dunn argue that Franklin's Pyrrhonism undercut his own rhetorical arguments for design, including Aldridge's narrative of Franklin's conversion from scientific to humanitarian deism.<sup>9</sup> Privately, Franklin appears either to reject all religious and metaphysical arguments for a secularist, self-interested calculation (though its grounding and content remain unclear) or to rely upon moral habits that he realized he could not rationally defend.<sup>10</sup> Yet, as Carla Mulford points out, the description of Franklin as secularist ignores "the full range of Franklin's expressions, Franklin's own 'political truth': Franklin frequently referenced religion, and Christianity in particular, in an age before scientific method was divorced from philosophy."<sup>11</sup> While Franklin's name is synonymous with Enlightenment, his religious writings were part of that identity.

Against the above views of Franklin as secularist or Pyrrhonist, this article argues that the key to understanding Franklin's religious teachings is that his religious ideas shaped his Enlightenment values. Situating him as an important figure within what David Sorkin calls the "religious enlightenment," Franklin took part in a broad historical effort to "harmonize faith and reason."<sup>12</sup> Moreover, he provided a thoughtful treatment of Christian theology, all the more striking given his private critiques of revelatory knowledge. Throughout his life, he promoted the "Cause of Christian Liberty,"<sup>13</sup> an alliance between reason and revelation that embraced a middle way between faith and works, orthodoxy and enthusiasm. The religious enlightenment was a transatlantic, not just a European, movement. Franklin's ideas about faith and Christianity arose through his reading of European writers, to whom he appealed in concrete disputes over theology and polity.

Franklin viewed himself foremost as a philosopher, or "Lover of Truth," that is, one who reflects upon experience to formulate rules that best explain the natural order and shape human behavior to achieve happiness.<sup>14</sup> According to Franklin's "First Principles" of religion, the search for a first cause, God, was born of a well-ordered soul.<sup>15</sup> Philosophy, for Franklin, was not antithetical to, but was the fulfillment of, religious sentiment: it presumed an order to be discovered while recognizing the limits of the tentative systems that reason builds to approximate it. He contrasted "true Religion" (the pursuit of causes) with "Superstition and Enthusiasm," which, from ignorance, fear, and ambition, attribute good or evil fortune to invisible powers.<sup>16</sup> As infinite

<sup>9</sup>Dunn, "From a Bold Youth," 502, 518, 522; and Aldridge, "Franklin's Experimental Religion," 104, agrees as to Franklin's view on the limits of reason.

<sup>10</sup>Dunn, "From a Bold Youth," 523–524; and on Franklin's Pascalian wager, Lemay, *Life*, 1:360–371, 2:257, 267.

<sup>11</sup>Carla J. Mulford, "Benjamin Franklin, Virtue's Ethics, and 'Political Truth'," in *Resistance to Tyrants, Obedience to God: Reason, Religion, and Republicanism at the American Founding*, ed. Dustin Gish and Daniel Klinghard (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2013), 101, 86, 100; and Carla J. Mulford, "Franklin, Modernity, and Themes of Dissent in the Early Modern Era," *Modern Language Studies* 28, no. 2 (Spring 1998): 20–27.

<sup>12</sup>David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008), 6.

<sup>13</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:66.

<sup>14</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:68, 1:259; and Benjamin Franklin, *Benjamin Franklin: Writings*, ed. Lemay (New York: The Library of America, 1987), 253 (hereafter Lemay, *Writings*).

<sup>15</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:102, 2:119; and Lemay, *Writings*, 54–55.

<sup>16</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:128.

God is “incomprehensible” and above understanding, Franklin focused on proximate causes rather than defining God’s nature as incorporeal and then calling it unintelligible.<sup>17</sup> The central conflict was between knowledge by reason or by revelation, and “Revelation had . . . no weight with [him].”<sup>18</sup> Natural religion was philosophy, and it could not admit of miracles, revealed truths, or creeds.

Thus, Franklin critiqued the creeds of both Christianity *and* deism (if by that word we mean the infinite, providential God of Franklin’s own deist creed). He had been “religiously educated as a Presbyterian” in “the Dogmas of . . . the Eternal Decrees of God, Election, [and] Reprobation” and concluded that some appeared “unintelligible, others doubtful.”<sup>19</sup> As a young writer in Boston, Franklin lampooned Christian teachings on marriage, baptism, original sin, and the very possibility of heresy.<sup>20</sup> He rejected the divinity of Christ, placing Christianity alongside other religions. Some did not need Christ to achieve moral perfection.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, his critique of revealed religion’s claims to authority in miracles, scripture, and dogma extended to *all* such claims, including those of his own revelatory deist “Creed”: God’s infinite attributes, particular providence, rewards in an afterlife, and the immortal soul.<sup>22</sup> Franklin sought rational explanations for supernatural claims, whether in natural science or psychology. Miracles were effects of whose causes he was ignorant, whether strange noises, plant growth, or political revolutions.<sup>23</sup> Religions, he noted, reinterpreted their dogmas by necessity and according to advancements in human knowledge.<sup>24</sup>

Franklin rejected and distanced himself from his youthful atheism, reflecting a broader turn from what Jonathan Israel calls the “radical” to the “moderate mainstream enlightenment.”<sup>25</sup> Franklin often concealed his views with ambiguous language: natural revelation meant human reason; God meant a first cause; providence meant a general order of the world; worship meant gratitude and virtue, with earthly consequences; and soul meant a principle of motion.<sup>26</sup> This caution came from Franklin’s desire for society and his assessment of both the variation in human capacities (some possessed

<sup>17</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:102.

<sup>18</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 114–115.

<sup>19</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 145.

<sup>20</sup>See Lemay, *Life*, 1:172–206; and Kevin Slack, *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2017), 14–23.

<sup>21</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:30, 4:506, 9:17, 105.

<sup>22</sup>On Franklin’s critique of miracles, Lemay, *Writings*, 145–148; of scripture, *Papers*, 1:169–170, 19:31, 43:41; and Lemay, *Writings*, 155–157; of God’s infinite attributes, Franklin, *Papers*, 1:102; of particular providence, Lemay, *Writings*, 216–218, and Franklin, *Papers*, 7:90–91, 3:26–27, 135–139, 16:192; of rewards in an afterlife and the immortal soul, Franklin, *Papers*, 1:68–70, 4:505; and on the authority of scripture, the revealed infinite God of the creed, and the logical impossibility of, and psychological origins of belief in, the immortal soul and afterlife, Benjamin Franklin, “The Religion of the Indian Natives of America,” *The American Magazine* 1 (March 1741), 90–93; and see Lemay, *Life*, 2:550–554.

<sup>23</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 7:90–91; 4:58; 16:109; 25:100–102.

<sup>24</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 190–191.

<sup>25</sup>Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 3–4. Radicals “despise[d] Revelation, the Church, and Christian morality.” Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 29.

<sup>26</sup>On natural revelation, Franklin, *Papers*, 2:106, 120; on God as first cause, Franklin, *Papers*, 1:59, 102; on worship as gratitude and virtue, Franklin, *Papers*, 1:103, 2:50–1, 105, 122–123; and *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Albert Henry Smyth, 10 vols. (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1905–1907), 10:117 (hereafter Smyth, *Writings*); and on the soul, Franklin, *Papers*, 1:63–64.

“weak minds”) and the political role of religion.<sup>27</sup> He recounts those like his brother James or William Lyons who were imprisoned, their reputations destroyed, for challenging the civil authorities or public ministers.<sup>28</sup> But he also questioned the motives, efficacy, and prudence of both radical skeptics and atheists who zealously battled religion. In private, by embracing a world of chance,<sup>29</sup> they eroded the scientific search for causes (atheism had become an unquestioning dogma);<sup>30</sup> in public, they undermined the morals of those who believed in rewards and punishments in an afterlife.<sup>31</sup> If rightly conducted, religion aided moral and civic virtue, providing conditions for liberal education and public tranquility. Religious sentiment was natural—it could never be eradicated<sup>32</sup>—but it rarely achieved its highest private ends and often threatened public unity. Franklin considered the variety of religious sects and the moral and political effects of their doctrines. For example, the Christian’s loyalty was divided between an earthly and heavenly kingdom, dissipating public spirit and disuniting citizens.

Despite his private reservations, Franklin often gave two public teachings. In the first, he used a revelatory deist moral creed containing “the Essentials of every Religion” to resolve the conflicting claims to authority and unite “all the Religions we had in our Country.”<sup>33</sup> While supporting religion generally, it offered “different degrees of Respect” to each sect as it tended “to inspire, promote or confirm Morality.”<sup>34</sup> Thus, he made morality, which united the political community, the “End” of religious association.<sup>35</sup> In the second, Franklin formulated a Christian theology that could be made compatible with his deist creed. Calling himself a Dissenter, he defended the reasonableness of Christianity to harmonize, as best as possible, the God of the Bible with nature’s God.<sup>36</sup>

The popular “Essays of Primitive Christianity” in the 1730 *Gazette* contained his deist creed.<sup>37</sup> The “Christian Religion” was “excellen[t] . . . above all others antient or modern” because it taught Christ as a universal “Lawgiver” who enforced natural law.<sup>38</sup> All religions use fear of the gods to teach morality,<sup>39</sup> but Christianity added judgments in an afterlife—“new and stronger Motives than either the Light of Nature or the Jewish Religion could furnish us with”<sup>40</sup>—and was particularly suited to support scientific pursuits, charity, toleration, and virtues for a commercial republic. Franklin sought

<sup>27</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 74; Franklin, *Papers*, 16:193; Lemay, *Life*, 2:250–251; and Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature’s God*, 8.

<sup>28</sup>On charges against James, see *The New England Courant*, January 21, 1723, 2; on the imprisonment of William Lyons, see J. Lyons, *Infallibility of Human Judgment*, 5th ed. (London: J. Brotherton, 1725), 249; and Franklin, *Autobiography*, 97; and on the persecution of Samuel Hemphill, see Franklin, *Papers*, 2:55, 82.

<sup>29</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:268.

<sup>30</sup>*The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 5, 1730, 1–2, quoting *Spectator*, no. 185.

<sup>31</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 150–151; and Franklin, *Papers*, 7:294–295.

<sup>32</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:102.

<sup>33</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 146, 162; Franklin, *Papers*, 1:213; and Lemay, *Writings*, 1179.

<sup>34</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 146.

<sup>35</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:30, 104, 9:105; and see Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature’s God*, 165–166.

<sup>36</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1179–1180; and see Mulford, “Franklin, Modernity, and Themes of Dissent in the Early Modern Era,” 20–27.

<sup>37</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:187.

<sup>38</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:413, 2:56, 70, 72. On the grounds of natural law, see Franklin, *Papers*, 2:105; and Slack, *Benjamin Franklin*, 123–124.

<sup>39</sup>See Franklin, *Papers*, 11:56–62.

<sup>40</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:51; *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, July 16, 1730; and Franklin, *Papers*, 10:83, was no stickler on eternity of punishments.

to harmonize the Protestant love of truth (in scripture) with scientific love of truth (in nature) in the virtue of sincerity, subjecting speculative points to rational inquiry in both religion and “natural Philosophy.”<sup>41</sup> Christian religious toleration, which had only become moral practice with the growth of dissenting sects,<sup>42</sup> befriended philosophic inquiry in the virtue of humility: “Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”<sup>43</sup> Christian humility (a concealed form of pride) deflects open pride, providing a foundation for modern civility.<sup>44</sup>

Franklin also participated in the moderate enlightenment effort to resolve disputes over religious polity. “The burning issue,” writes Sorkin, “was how to establish the toleration, common morality, and shared political allegiance needed to sustain a multiconfessional polity.”<sup>45</sup> In his teachings on polity, Franklin was a thorough Dissenter, uniting Latitudinarian theology with radical New England Congregationalism. While theologically similar to Scots-Irish Presbyterians, Congregationalists supported neither the rule of elders nor hierarchical courts.<sup>46</sup> Mulford shows that Franklin’s earliest opinions were likely formed by the Reverend John Wise (whom Lemay calls “the hero of [Franklin’s] boyhood”), who opposed the Mathers’ attempt to form an association of ministers.<sup>47</sup> In what Perry Miller called “breath-taking radicalism,” Wise connected his teaching on church polity to Whig republican principles of natural law.<sup>48</sup> Identifying with the popular party, Wise argued that the people ought to be self-governing in both their churches and legislature. Against the Mathers and many of the clergy, he promoted the land bank scheme, paper currency, and public works—policies that Franklin later supported.

## II. The Subscription Debate and the Hemphill Affair

The religious Enlightenment was a transatlantic affair. Franklin wrote his lengthiest theological essays to defend his Presbyterian minister Samuel Hemphill, who was removed for heresy. The Hemphill affair was rooted in the doctrinal disputes between English Latitudinarians and Scots-Irish Presbyterians, which had led to the subscription debates in Northern Ireland. In 1689, the Synod of Ulster, fearing the influence of Dissenters who stressed the faculty of reason and tended to an Arminian universalism, required that all ministerial candidates subscribe to the Westminster Confession. When

<sup>41</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:85.

<sup>42</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 19:164.

<sup>43</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 150.

<sup>44</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:194–195.

<sup>45</sup>Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*, 6.

<sup>46</sup>See Charles Scott Sealy, *Church Authority and Non-Subscription Controversies in Early 18th Century Presbyterianism* (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2010), 18–23; Ian R. McBride, *Scripture Politics: Ulster Presbyterians and Irish Radicalism in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), 144–145; C. Gordon Bolam et al., *The English Presbyterians* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1968), 104, 111; on divisions over polity, Henry Jones Ford, *The Scotch Irish in America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1915), 221–248, 338–359; and Rankin Sherling, *The Invisible Irish: Finding Protestants in the Nineteenth-Century Migrations to America* (London: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2016), 109, 125–130.

<sup>47</sup>Lemay, *Life*, 2:160; 1:74–78; and Carla J. Mulford, *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 48–74.

<sup>48</sup>Perry Miller, introduction to *A Vindication of the Government of New England Churches*, by John Wise (Gainesville, Fla.: Scholars’ Facsimiles & Reprints, 1958), vi.

Dublin minister Thomas Emlyn published *A humble Inquiry* (1702), which denied the doctrine of the Trinity, he was tried for blasphemy. The synod condemned Emlyn and tightened its subscription policy, and some congregations instituted pledges to the Confession. In response, a New Light party rose up to oppose the new requirements. They formed the Belfast Society around John Abernathy, minister at Antrim, who preached against subscription as a requisite for ordainment and communion. Between Old and New Light factions there was a third party, including Emlyn's colleague Joseph Boyse (one of Franklin's sources), who held orthodox views but supported the New Lights' freedom of conscience. These moderates successfully passed the 1720 Pacific Act, resolving that a ministerial candidate must subscribe to the Confession but allowing him to "scruple" with any article. A scruple might disqualify one for the ministry, depending on whether the presbytery judged it to be essential to the faith. Still dissatisfied, many New Lights left the synod to form a separate congregation at Antrim in 1725. The subscription debate was renewed when Abernathy's student and Antrim replacement, non-subscriber James Duchal (another of Franklin's sources), debated William Holmes in several pamphlets in 1732.

The subscription dispute spread to American colonial churches, which faced a shortage of ministers, lax clergy, and theological and cultural differences that shaped immigration patterns.<sup>49</sup> In Pennsylvania, missionaries like Jedediah Andrews worked to incorporate new presbyteries into a growing network, fed by new ministers from Ireland. The Synod of the Trinity first met in Philadelphia in 1717. Concerned about a lack of ministerial discipline, in 1727, John Thomson proposed to adopt subscription in order to stop the "spreading of dangerous Errors."<sup>50</sup> He believed that the Pacific Act had failed to stop the growth of "Arminianism, Socinianism, Deism, [and] Free-thinking," so the church must fortify itself against assaults, especially from "secret Bosom Enemies," immigrant New Light ministers who "do not openly . . . oppose the Truth" but secretly undermine the doctrines of election, reprobation, and predestination.<sup>51</sup> Thomson warned that the synod, an "organiz'd body politick," was a "City without Walls" in that it lacked a defense of its truths.<sup>52</sup> He proposed that candidates subscribe to the Confession and Catechisms or "promise not to preach . . . contrary to it."<sup>53</sup> The synod considered Thomson's proposal in 1729. Andrews, fearing a subscription battle, worried the motion would divide the synod "to a man" between English-Welsh and Scots-Irish members.<sup>54</sup>

Weighing protests by New England Congregationalist Jonathan Dickinson, who warned of Irish sectarianism, the synod passed the 1729 Adopting Act, modeled on the Irish Pacific Act, to reconcile its factions.<sup>55</sup> The act "disclaim[ed] all legislative power and authority in the Church" and did not pretend to "authority of imposing

<sup>49</sup>See *Records of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1841), 7–8, 10–11, 60–61, 68–70, 74.

<sup>50</sup>John Thomson, *An Overture Presented to the Reverend Synod* (Philadelphia, 1729), 25.

<sup>51</sup>Thomson, *Overture*, 30.

<sup>52</sup>Thomson, *Overture*, 26, 28.

<sup>53</sup>Thomson, *Overture*, 32.

<sup>54</sup>Charles Augustus Briggs, *American Presbyterianism: Its Origin and Early History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1885), 214.

<sup>55</sup>See Jonathan Dickinson, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (Boston: Kneeland and Green, 1732); Bryan Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson and the Formative Years of American Presbyterianism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1997), 89–90; Sealy, *Church Authority*, 173; and Briggs, *American Presbyterianism*, 212–213.

our faith upon other men's consciences."<sup>56</sup> Yet, to defend the faith, it required that all ministers "declare their . . . approbation of the Confession of Faith with the Larger and Shorter Catechisms." A candidate who scrupled could be denied "ministerial communion" if it was judged by the synod or presbytery to be over "essential and necessary" articles. Samuel Hemphill, sent from Ireland at Andrews's request for an assistant, subscribed under this act in September 1734.<sup>57</sup> As a heterodox subscriber, he was precisely what Thomson had feared.<sup>58</sup>

Franklin uneasily observed the seeds of Calvinist orthodoxy in Philadelphia. Though he "seldom attended any Public Worship," he saw "its Propriety, and . . . Utility when rightly conducted" and so subscribed to the Presbyterian Church, which lay closest to his upbringing and political sympathies.<sup>59</sup> Andrews, wrote Franklin, "us'd to visit me sometimes as a Friend, and admonish me to attend." But Franklin, who believed the end of faith was good morals, had two complaints, the first speculative and the second political, about Andrews's "very dry" sermons. They "were chiefly either polemic Arguments, or Explications of the peculiar Doctrines of our Sect," and their "Aim seem[ed] to be rather to make us Presbyterians than good Citizens." To Franklin's delight, Hemphill's passionate sermons both "inculcated strongly the practice of virtue" and united Christians with "Freethinkers, Deists, and Nothings."<sup>60</sup> Because Hemphill emphasized "Good Works" with little dogma, "orthodox Presbyterians . . . arraign'd him of heterodoxy."<sup>61</sup>

When Hemphill was charged, Franklin "became his zealous partisan, and contributed all [he] could to raise a party in his favour."<sup>62</sup> Finding that Hemphill was "a poor writer," Franklin anonymously "lent him [his] pen," first in a dialogue in the *Gazette* one week before the commission met. Franklin's goal in a city of 8,000 people, with fewer than 400 pew-paying Presbyterians, was not to persuade the commission but to pressure it by shaping opinion both within the church and without.<sup>63</sup> He wore the persona of Presbyterian Dissenter, citing Boyse and William Wishart.<sup>64</sup> For a while, Hemphill's party "combated . . . with some hopes of success" to exonerate him, but the commission, meeting April 17–26, found him guilty and sent his case to the synod. In May, it published the *Extract* of its minutes, to which Franklin replied in his popular July *Observations*. Dickinson, who now supported subscription, responded critically with *A Vindication* in September, the month of the synodical meeting.<sup>65</sup> His sermons discovered to have been plagiarized from "open Arian[s]," Hemphill did not attend, but in a letter he said that he would soon publish a reply and, "despis[ing]

<sup>56</sup>*Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 92.

<sup>57</sup>*Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 107.

<sup>58</sup>See Sherling, *Invisible Irish*, 152.

<sup>59</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 147.

<sup>60</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 167; and Franklin, *Papers*, 2:27.

<sup>61</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 167.

<sup>62</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 167.

<sup>63</sup>Merton A. Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial: Deism Versus Presbyterian Orthodoxy," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 10, no. 3 (July 1953): 424n6.

<sup>64</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:107–110; and Patrick Griffin, *The People With No Name* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 121. William Wishart, *Charity the End of the Commandment* (London, 1731), 4, is the unknown source at Franklin, *Papers*, 2:103; and Lemay, *Life*, 1:262, suggests Franklin may have gone to hear Wishart in London.

<sup>65</sup>Jonathan Dickinson, *A Vindication of the Reverend Commission* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1735); and Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 52–56, 102.



the Synod's Claim of Authority," he wished to be excommunicated.<sup>66</sup> The synod deposed him and authorized the commission to publish responses to Hemphill "or his friends."<sup>67</sup> Franklin's September *Letter* and vitriolic October *Defense* not only ended Hemphill's career but attempted to create a schism, to divide the church as at Antrim. The trial changed American Presbyterianism: the synod stopped the immigration of Scots-Irish New Light ministers and later would divide in the schism of 1741.<sup>68</sup>

### III. Franklin's Christian Theology

Franklin's 1735 theological essays, referenced in his *Autobiography*, constitute a serious treatment and defense of Christianity. Adopting a Dissenter persona, his aim was to promote a more reasonable Christianity, which could be wed to, and even be a foundation for, the morals and politics of liberalism.<sup>69</sup> He also sought to discredit Calvinist doctrines that "serv'd principally to divide us and make us unfriendly to one another."<sup>70</sup> Franklin retried Hemphill, and prosecuted orthodoxy, before the court of his readers.<sup>71</sup> He accused the commission of failing in both Christian and "human" duty, the common ground of justice contained in the Golden Rule.<sup>72</sup> For example, the commission unjustly demanded that Hemphill provide his sermons as an "Accusation against himself," a violation of the "common Rights of Mankind," and denied him an adequate defense.<sup>73</sup> Franklin's responses to the six articles of heresy sought to both "fill the Mind of every candid Reader with Horror" at orthodoxy and to teach a reasonable Christianity.<sup>74</sup>

In its first article of heresy, the commission first accused Hemphill of teaching Christianity as an "Illustration and Improvement of the Law of Nature."<sup>75</sup> The underlying question was that of authority. Franklin dismissed appeals to any authority—creed, tradition, or minister—other than scripture. But this raises the question of *how* one interprets scripture when it is unclear or seems contradictory. Three possibilities are *implied* by Franklin here. First, orthodoxy grounds Christian revelation in an omnipotent God's arbitrary commands: because of the Fall, man's reason leads away from saving faith, thus scripture is interpreted by creed, clergy, or tradition. The second position, and Franklin's private view, rejects scriptural authority for the judgments of unaided reason. But Franklin preached a third middling position: Christianity is consistent with the conclusions of reason. It is universal, accessible to all, and agreeable to human nature: the "Saviour's Sermons upon the Mount . . . are so very plain, that every impartial Man who reads 'em, may easily reconcile to his Reason, as being wisely

<sup>66</sup>Obadiah Jenkins, *Remarks Upon the Defence of the Reverend Mr. Hemphill's Observations* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1735), 18.

<sup>67</sup>*Records of the Presbyterian Church*, 115.

<sup>68</sup>Sherling, *Invisible Irish*, 155, shows that none came until 1763.

<sup>69</sup>Lemay, *Life*, 2:233, 238, disagrees, calling Franklin's passionate essays "among his errors" and a "mistake."

<sup>70</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 146.

<sup>71</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:38, 46–47, 57; and Peter Charles Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend Whitfield* (Baltimore, Md.: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 19.

<sup>72</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:39.

<sup>73</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:44; on presumed innocence, 2:47; adequate defense, 2:51, 39, 45–46, 49, 93, 98, 101, 125; solidarity outweighing truth, 2:64, 58; and faulty evidence, 2:92, 107, 45, 51–52, 57.

<sup>74</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:45.

<sup>75</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:106.

calculated to serve that noble End of Man's Happiness."<sup>76</sup> Christianity agrees with the "Laws of our Nature," which have "such a natural Tendency to our present Ease and Quiet, that they carry their own Reward, tho' there were nothing to reward our Obedience or punish our Disobedience in another Life."<sup>77</sup>

The *rationalist* Franklin teaches that God *reveals* man's duty in two revelations. The first enlightens human reason to the infinite God of Franklin's deist creed.<sup>78</sup> God is good, merciful, and just. He wishes happiness for his creatures, forgives the contrite heart for violations of his moral law, holds man accountable for that which he understands, and punishes man for willful transgressions. The second revelation is Christ's laws in scripture, which cannot contradict reason or make demands without "Foundation in Nature."<sup>79</sup> Christ's "design" is intelligible: to aid man in the fulfillment of his duty by two additional positive laws, baptism and the Lord's Supper, which are inaccessible to the "Light of Nature" but agree with God's original law.<sup>80</sup> Even where scripture is unclear, its end concerning man's duty always is to "promote the Practice of Piety, Goodness, Virtue, and Universal Righteousness among Mankind."<sup>81</sup> Miraculous and "extra-essential" teachings should facilitate a search "for a Sense agreeable to Reason and the known Perfections of God."<sup>82</sup> False doctrines, like reprobation, conflict with the goodness of God or man's duty.

The "persecuting Spirit" of the clergy proceeds from opposing claims to authority: tradition and consensus.<sup>83</sup> In truth, writes Franklin, they are moved by ambition and with "crafty Malice" invent creeds (thus heresies) to secure submission and thus attain honor and power.<sup>84</sup> The "first Cause" of the injustice to Hemphill was envy.<sup>85</sup> Some ministers desired his fame and resented his unconventional interpretations of the creed. But Franklin, as the commission recognized, drove a wedge between Christianity and orthodoxy with his teaching of nature.<sup>86</sup> Orthodoxy claims to worship a rational God, the author of nature, but then denies nature in any meaningful sense, thereby destroying God's perfection and goodness.<sup>87</sup> The orthodox mind, he concluded, is disturbed by appeals to reason or good works because it champions an irrational God to satisfy its desire for arbitrary power, manifest in the commission's lawless and dishonest proceedings.

If Christ is lawgiver, then a Christian is one who obeys Christ's laws. But the commission, in its second article of heresy, attacked Hemphill's denial of "the

<sup>76</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:51.

<sup>77</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:105, 50–51.

<sup>78</sup>According to Franklin, *Papers*, 1:377, he read and sold Thomas Beaven's *An Essay Concerning the Restoration of Primitive Christianity*, 2nd ed. (London, 1729), which distinguished between the "Faculty of Reason" and the "Light . . . from Heaven," arguing that reason must be aided by revelation and the "Influences of the divine Spirit." Beaven, *Concerning the Restoration of Primitive Christianity*, vi, x–xi.

<sup>79</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:114.

<sup>80</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:50–51.

<sup>81</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:105.

<sup>82</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:52, 120, 114.

<sup>83</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:40, 59, 94.

<sup>84</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:48.

<sup>85</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:38.

<sup>86</sup>See Dickinson, *Vindication*, 20: "It's surprising to us that the Gentleman should thus change the Question. . . . Who ever doubted that Christianity has a natural tendency to our Happiness, or that it's agreeable to our Nature?"

<sup>87</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:50–51, 111–112.

Necessity of conversion to those that are born in the Church, and are not degenerated into vitious Practice.”<sup>88</sup> Franklin defended Hemphill by interpreting the ambiguous scriptural references to the “new Creature” in light of Christ’s design, moral reform, and a reasonable view of habituation: “Men don’t become very good or very bad in an Instant, both vicious and virtuous Habits being acquired by Length of Time and repeated Acts.”<sup>89</sup> Converts are “those who either never heard of the Gospel of Christ, or never firmly believed and practiced it”; thus they must be distinguished from those who have “all along had the Happiness of a christian and virtuous Education” and “sincerely endeavour’d to practise the Laws of the Gospel.”<sup>90</sup> The only evidence of conversion for one born into a Christian family could be fearful “Pangs and Convulsions,” which in turn only *point to* the need for “Holiness and Virtue.”<sup>91</sup>

For Franklin, the throes of conversion embarrass the orthodox, but they originate in their own doctrine of original sin. Once one agrees that man’s “State by Nature” has been undone by “Father Adam’s first Guilt,” conversion becomes a magical switch that immediately alters one’s motives, only after which his desire to follow Christ is vindicated and until which his obedience to Christ is irrelevant.<sup>92</sup> Though all are sinners,<sup>93</sup> Franklin rejects original sin as both unscriptural and absurd. One cannot be guilty for a sin he did not commit, transferred from one to another as unwitting accessories: “To suppose a Man liable to Punishment upon account of the Guilt of another, is unreasonable; and actually to punish him for it, is unjust and cruel.”<sup>94</sup> Because one educated to virtue has no need of conversion, the orthodox must invent an unpayable debt to command his submission: “Tis a Notion invented, a Bugbear set up by Priests (whether *Popish* or *Presbyterian* I know not) to fright and scare an unthinking Populace. . . to answer the little selfish Ends of the Inventors.”<sup>95</sup>

All of this begs the role of Christ. The commission, in its third article of heresy, accused Hemphill of teaching Christ only as lawgiver and not savior. But the two, Franklin argued, were inseparable: “The ultimate End and Design of Christ’s Death, of our Redemption by his Blood, &c. was to lead us to the Practice of all Holiness, Piety and Virtue, and by these Means to deliver us from future Pain and Punishment, and lead us to the Happiness of Heaven.”<sup>96</sup> God sent Christ to help teach man his duty, thereby saving him from sin: “We are not to preach up Christ so as to dishonour God the Father, nor are we to make such undue Reliances upon his Merits, as to neglect Good Works; but we are to look upon him in both Characters of Saviour and Lawgiver; that if we expect he has atoned for our Sins, we must sincerely endeavour to obey his Laws.”<sup>97</sup> Christ’s death and suffering purchased the terms of acceptance with God, faith and repentance, which requires behavioral change: Christ’s death did not atone sins “wilfully and obstinately persisted in.”<sup>98</sup>

<sup>88</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:52.

<sup>89</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:52, 53.

<sup>90</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:53, 113.

<sup>91</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:113.

<sup>92</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:114.

<sup>93</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:117.

<sup>94</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:114.

<sup>95</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:114.

<sup>96</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:116; and see 2:29, 30.

<sup>97</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:57.

<sup>98</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:116.

Against a view of Christ that demands rigorous satisfaction in obedience, orthodoxy uses Christ's death to teach an incomprehensible, schizophrenic god. God the Father is neither good nor just but cruel, arbitrary, and unmerciful, demanding absolute perfection. Christ is the "kind condescending Saviour," an incomprehensible pagan "Charm" that, if one agrees to the Creed, secures one's salvation and frees him from moral obligation.<sup>99</sup> The one is unforgiving; the other is all-forgiving. Neither looks to the merit or demerit of man. Christ's love is the orthodox image of itself to the world, benevolent to those who assent to the Creed. But it is also the foundation of cruelty: unrequited, it damns three-quarters of the world, and it torments and tyrannizes over private thoughts to achieve submission to its arbitrary judgments on earth.

In its fourth article of heresy, the commission rejected this view of Christ. Hemphill, it was said, made Christianity "an Assent to . . . the Gospel upon rational Grounds," followed by good works, thus reducing faith to "naked assent" and equating it to obedience to Christ's laws.<sup>100</sup> Franklin ridicules this "Enthusiastick Cant" as mere "Sorcery." No one can make choices without using his reason nor mislead listeners by teaching that saving faith always accompanies works. Hemphill was accused of saying, "The only End of Faith is Obedience." Franklin asks, "What is the End of it . . . Disobedience?" The commission makes an irrational distinction between faith and obedience, which are inseparable, that allows it to sever communion based upon assent to the Creed.

Thus anyone, according to Franklin, can be saved. Hemphill suggested the admission of Christianity to "all honest Heathens," and the commission, in its fifth article of heresy, accused him of rejecting "the Necessity of Divine Revelation."<sup>101</sup> But Franklin replied that Hemphill did no such thing: rather, the light of reason leads one to good works, which may render him acceptable to God, who grants salvation by "farther Revelation of his Will."<sup>102</sup> Conversely, damning the heathen is a projection of the orthodox mind: only those who "form their Ideas of the great Governor of the Universe, by reflecting upon their own cruel, unjust and barbarous Tempers" could "imagine that our good God . . . will eternally damn the Heathen World for not obeying a Law they never heard of; that is, damn them for not doing an Impossibility."<sup>103</sup> Rather, "Promulgation . . . of a Law must be allow'd necessary, before Disobedience to it can be accounted criminal." If Christ's mission and merits only benefitted a few, they would be a curse to most of mankind: when the heathen could have attained earthly happiness through the light of nature, God would have unjustly imposed an unknown law, the Gospel, sealing their eternal fate.

In its final article of heresy, the commission accused Hemphill of denying justification, or teaching conversion only as the decision to turn from vice. But Hemphill, Franklin argued, had only tried to explain justification as faith that saves by absolving the convert of all sins committed *before an awareness of his duty*. New Testament Christians, like Native Americans, required justification because none had been "educated and instructed in the Christian Religion."<sup>104</sup> Justification cannot apply to those already educated in Christian duty, nor can one's "bare Faith" without obeying

<sup>99</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:56, 115.

<sup>100</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:121.

<sup>101</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:122, 60.

<sup>102</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:61, 122.

<sup>103</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:119.

<sup>104</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:124.

Christ's laws be imputed for righteousness.<sup>105</sup> The orthodox teach that God transfers the merits of Christ to men, tending to the view that "Christ's Merits and Satisfaction will save us, without our performing Good Works."<sup>106</sup> Franklin calls this "abominably ridiculous and absurd in itself," abhorrent to scripture: it promotes immorality and tends to the "the utter Subversion of Religion in general, and Christianity in particular."<sup>107</sup> The commission argues: "God hath no Regard to any thing but Mens inward Merit and Desert."<sup>108</sup> But inward and outward merit, Franklin argues, are inseparable: "To say that God regards Men for any thing else besides Goodness and Virtue . . . makes all Men both virtuous and vicious capable of being equally regarded by him, and consequently there is no Difference between Virtue and Vice."<sup>109</sup> Franklin suggests a reasonable interpretation of justification. Doctrinally, Christians must obey Christ's laws of baptism and the Lord's Supper, whose speculative meanings are open to interpretation; morally, the means of justification is "a sincere Endeavour to conform to all the Laws of true Goodness, Piety, Virtue, and universal Righteousness, or the Laws of Morality both with respect to God and Man."<sup>110</sup>

Christianity is reasonable because, if rooted in the "Laws of our Nature," it moves the primary "Springs" of human behavior—love, then hope and fear—to the end of happiness.<sup>111</sup> Franklin's teaching that the essence of Christianity is charity, unmoored from faulty speculative systems,<sup>112</sup> required that he invert its three core virtues: faith, hope, and charity. In a 1758 letter to his sister Jane, he sent and analyzed a poem written by their Uncle Benjamin: "Raise Faith and Hope three Stories higher, And let Christ's endless Love to thee // N-ere cease to make thy Love Aspire."<sup>113</sup> "Our Author," Franklin explained, "liken[s] Religion to a Building" with three stories of "Faith, Hope and Charity" and whose improvement is adding more stories to the ground floors.<sup>114</sup> But Franklin tells his sister, "I wish the House was turn'd upside down." He explains, "*Hope* and *Faith* may be more firmly built on *Charity*, than *Charity* upon *Faith* and *Hope*." If one raises faith three stories higher, the "Winds and Storms" of life will batter hope and love, and the "Foundation will hardly bear them." Like "Straw and Stubble," mere faith "won't stand Fire"; it is a poor foundation for morals because it is easily separated from works in dogma, thus becoming a mere "Confession" or an "Idol" without effect.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, *hope* for eternity must be built upon the experience or "Practice of the Moral Virtues." Otherwise: "He that lives

<sup>105</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:124, 62, 29.

<sup>106</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:56.

<sup>107</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:107.

<sup>108</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:59.

<sup>109</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:59.

<sup>110</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:123.

<sup>111</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:105, 109–110.

<sup>112</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:104, explains: "Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of Mankind" teaches the "main End and Design of the christian Scheme, when he says, *thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy Soul, and with all thy Mind, and thy Neighbour, as thyself*. . . . These are what Nature and eternal Reason teach us; and these are the two great moral Precepts, which the Revelations the Almighty has made to Mankind, are design'd to explain and enforce.' . . . Moreover St. Paul . . . expressly tells us, that the *End of the Commandment*, (i.e. of the christian Institution) is *Charity* . . . Love to God, and Love to Mankind." On speculative systems, see Franklin, *Papers*, 4:336.

<sup>113</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:153.

<sup>114</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:154.

<sup>115</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:111.

upon Hope, dies farting.”<sup>116</sup> Charity is the foundation for hope, which secures the superstructure of faith; faith should not be diminished, but charity strengthened.<sup>117</sup>

Uncle Benjamin concludes of the house, “Kindness of Heart by Words express,” but Franklin amends, “Stricke out *Words* and put in *Deeds*.” He adds, “Compliments . . . are the rank Growth of every Soil, and Choak the good Plants of Benevolence and Benificence.”<sup>118</sup> Christians forsake the proper end, praising “pious Discourses instead of Humane Benevolent Actions.”<sup>119</sup> They call “Morality *rotten Morality*, Righteousness, *ragged Righteousness* and even *filthy Rags*; and when you mention *Virtue*, they pucker up their Noses as if they smelt a Stink; at the same time that they eagerly snuff up an empty canting Harangue. . . . So they have inverted the good old Verse, and say now: A Man of Deeds and not of Words[,] Is like a Garden full of [Turds].”<sup>120</sup> Thus Franklin could argue that heretics or even atheists (he called David Hume an “excellent Christian” for his morals) are better Christians than those merely professing faith.<sup>121</sup>

#### IV. A Letter to a Friend in the Country

Franklin added to his doctrinal teaching a political defense of Christianity against orthodoxy, which “not only tends to subvert the Doctrines of the Gospel, but the Happiness and Welfare of human Society.”<sup>122</sup> Thus true Christians should “disapprove and discourage [its] Propagation” and instead embrace the Whig cause of liberty.<sup>123</sup> Leading scholars, questioning the *Papers* editors’ tentative attribution, have attributed the *Letter* in its entirety to Franklin.<sup>124</sup> But the editors were correct. As with his reference to Boyse, Franklin selected from New Light minister James Duchal; this fact

<sup>116</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:124, 138.

<sup>117</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 10:104–105, distinguished *charity*—the Christian teaching of selflessness, which Franklin, in Lemay, *Writings*, 200–203, thought was impossible—from *benevolence* (for those without faith). In his deistic teaching, benevolence is the proper foundation, followed by hope in an afterlife, tied to experience, with no need for faith (see Franklin, *Papers*, 11:241, 231). Franklin put it in his own words: “To lead a virtuous Life, my Friends, and get to Heaven in Season, You’ve just so much more Need of *Faith*, as you have less of *Reason*.” Franklin, *Papers*, 3:249; and see 2:30. Joseph Priestley lamented to Benjamin Rush that Franklin often privately led interlocutors from the Christian to the deistic teaching. Benjamin Rush, *A Memorial containing Travels Through Life or Sundry Incidents in the Life of Dr. Benjamin Rush*, (Philadelphia: Louis Alexander Biddle, 1905), 148. *Memoirs of Dr. Joseph Priestley: to the year 1795*, 2 vols. (Northumberland: John Binns, 1806), 1:90: “It is much to be lamented, that a man of Dr. Franklin’s general good character, and great influence, should have been an unbeliever in Christianity, and also have done so much as he did to make others unbelievers.” See Franklin, *Papers*, 9:264–265.

<sup>118</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:154.

<sup>119</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:155.

<sup>120</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:155.

<sup>121</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 18:236.

<sup>122</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:110.

<sup>123</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:110. Franklin, *Papers*, 2:82n7, quotes from John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *The Independent Whig; or, A Defence of Primitive Christianity*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (London: Peele), 2:35.

<sup>124</sup>Christensen, “Franklin on the Hemphill Trial,” 434; Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 234n140; William S. Barker, “Benjamin Franklin and Subscription to the Westminster Confession,” *American Presbyterians* 69, no. 4 (Winter 1991): 248; Lemay, *Life*, 2:247, 561; and Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 57, 201n25, who argues Franklin wrote a secular preface to Hemphill’s own work.

challenges the views that Franklin's *Letter* was "anti-Presbyterian," secular, or Pyrrhonian.<sup>125</sup> Rather, as Aldridge argued, Franklin's purpose was not to undermine religion as such but rather to bend it to reasonable ends.<sup>126</sup> Thus, it is anti-clerical and teaches a civic religion that harmonizes the Christian polity with political liberalism.

Franklin had evaluated the effects of three possible relations of religion to politics; here, he forwards a fourth. The ancient state unified citizens in one dogma; God was a jealous, vindictive deity of the tribe or state, which was ordered to conquest by "cruelty and blood."<sup>127</sup> The second, primitive Christianity, was persecuted by paganism and established a spiritual kingdom apart from the political. Teaching "Love your Neighbour as your Self," a doctrine intelligible to all, it was "consequently destructive of priestcraft."<sup>128</sup> However, commanding Christians to love their enemies, it was pacifist and refused to use violence; praising humility, it failed to judge vice.<sup>129</sup> Making a virtue of resignation, it tended to an ascetic life-denial, a dying to self and happiness.<sup>130</sup> In the third, Christianity became an earthly despotism under a visible leader, solidifying its power: "The Pope took the Bible out of the Hands of the Laity," and different denominations "cooked up Systems of their own Inventions," leading to "infinite Wrangling," each sect using the Bible to support its own principles.<sup>131</sup> Confusing the kingdom of heaven for the church on earth, it competed with civil laws over jurisdiction.<sup>132</sup> Dividing citizens, it was both intolerant and cruel.<sup>133</sup> Only recently had Dissenters restored Christianity to its "genuine Sense," reviving "the Religion of Nature."<sup>134</sup> Thus, Franklin teaches "natural Rights": subjects of different sects consent to a "civil Society,"<sup>135</sup> whose sovereign teaches a moral, deistic creed that includes one's charity for and duty to others as well as freedom of conscience and toleration for speculative differences.

The *Letter* consists of three parts: (1) Franklin's "Preface"; (2) Franklin's edits to a Hemphill sermon borrowed from Duchal's *Letter*; and (3) a *Postscript*, excerpted from Duchal's *Plain Reasons*.<sup>136</sup> Franklin's "Preface" lays out his strategy. Writing as a layman, he exhorts his brethren to "shake off all . . . Prejudice. . . ."[T]is a Privilege common to Mankind; 'tis the only way to promote the Interests of Truth and Liberty in the World."<sup>137</sup> But the laity are again in danger of enslavement to the clergy, "Lovers of Dominion and Darkness," who have "sinister Designs" to hinder "free

<sup>125</sup>Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 105; Christensen, "Franklin on the Hemphill Trial," 422; and Lemay, *Life*, 2:254.

<sup>126</sup>Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 8, 101–102.

<sup>127</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:251, 16:109, 11:56–57, 15:303, 20:348.

<sup>128</sup>Franklin, "The Religion of the Indian Natives," 91.

<sup>129</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:243–244n6, 4:194–5, 20:348.

<sup>130</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 103; and Lemay, *Writings*, 53–54.

<sup>131</sup>Franklin, "The Religion of the Indian Natives," 91.

<sup>132</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:68, 75.

<sup>133</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 19:164; 2:114, 119.

<sup>134</sup>Franklin, "The Religion of the Indian Natives," 91.

<sup>135</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:66, 72.

<sup>136</sup>James Duchal, *A LETTER From a GENTLEMAN to his Friend, a Subscribing Minister in the North of IRELAND* (Dublin, 1731); and James Duchal, *Plain Reason's against joining with the NONSUBSCRIBERS in their unlimited Scheme of Religious Communion: BEING AN ANSWER TO A LETTER From a GENTLEMAN to a Subscribing Minister* (Belfast, 1732), 25–28.

<sup>137</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:66.

impartial Enquiry.” Rallying his brethren to take up the “glorious Cause of Christian Liberty,” he shows *how* to humble the clergy’s pride. They must first unite to assert their “natural Rights and Liberties in Opposition to [the clergy’s] unrighteous Claims.” Rejecting the temptation to brand others heretics, they will find greater power in sound argument. They can also undermine the clergy’s claim to rule by exposing its ambition for “fine Titles” and “temporal Interests.” Here, Franklin is ironic: the layman teaches this cause as glorious (an appeal to pride). Also, “Christian Liberty” is not liberty *per se*—Christians must still submit themselves to crusade for *both religious and political freedoms*. This noble defense of liberty is also *useful*: Christians are good citizens who bring national prosperity. They “preserve and maintain Truth, Common Sense, universal Charity, and brotherly Love, Peace and Tranquility, as recommended in the Gospel of Jesus, in this our infant and growing Nation.”<sup>138</sup>

Parts of the *Reverend’s Letter*, while heavily edited, are drawn from Duchal’s *Letter*.<sup>139</sup> Franklin may have used Hemphill’s notes, but, possessing the original pamphlets, he likely wrote it himself. It also suggests that Franklin, who exaggerated the role of Hemphill’s plagiarism in the trial, was aware of it before it became public. Franklin’s reverend blames the Hemphill scandal on the clergy’s ambition: defending their “Claims to Power and Authority,” they seek to “command the civil Sword,” then use calumny, and finally censorship and fear mongering.<sup>140</sup> He recommends public shame, that the persecutors be “publicly pray’d for every Sabbath.”<sup>141</sup> His sermon, taking aim at orthodoxy, asks whether it is “lawful” to limit the terms of “Christian and Ministerial Communion” to anything but belief in scripture.<sup>142</sup> As a “Lover of Truth and Christian Liberty,” he weighs and rejects four arguments for subscription.<sup>143</sup>

According to the first argument, a Christian may sever communion with one who disagrees with common doctrine but claims to believe the scriptures. The reverend rejects the authority of “Antiquity” and “Unanimity” and looks only to scripture, which always supports the “Cause of LIBERTY” in the service of truth.<sup>144</sup> Christ and his apostles omitted metaphysical speculation in their teachings to impede future imposters from making creeds. They insisted only that one acknowledge Jesus as Messiah and obey his laws. The Christians at Pentecost practiced no rituals, and, in the first two or three centuries, there were no confessions of faith or tests of orthodoxy.<sup>145</sup> The Apostles’ Creed was intentionally ambiguous to allow for differences within the church. The Catholic Church was a result of corruption, and Protestantism is in similar danger.

The second argument takes issue with the idea that “every Society . . . has a Right to make such Laws as seem necessary for its Support and Welfare. . . [to prevent] the Intrusion of Adversaries.”<sup>146</sup> The reverend disagrees: the rules of political and even

<sup>138</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:67.

<sup>139</sup>The reverend’s central question (and method), present in Franklin, *Papers*, 2:69, are drawn from Duchal, *Letter From a Gentleman*, 3. While here a cross-textual treatment is impossible, one finds parallels in argument, and even phrases, of Duchal, *Letter From a Gentleman*, 3, with Franklin, *Papers*, 2:69; of 4 with 2:78; of 5 with 2:74, 78–79; of 6 with 2:78–79, 74; of 7 with 2:80, 79; of 8 with 2:84–85; of 9 with 2:77, 79; of 10 with 2:80; of 11 with 2:83; of 12 with 2:85; and of 13 with 2:84.

<sup>140</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:68, 75.

<sup>141</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:68.

<sup>142</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:69.

<sup>143</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:68.

<sup>144</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:70.

<sup>145</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:71.

<sup>146</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:72.



private societies do not apply to Christ's kingdom. Unlike a "civil Society" ruled by "Consent of the Plurality," "a christian Society" has no right to make laws that infringe upon those made by "our common King Jesus" or upon "the Rights and Privileges of his Subjects." Jesus is absent and has appointed no vicegerent. None may preempt his sovereign authority by claiming "Legislative Authority" or "impos[ing] those Laws as Terms of Communion."<sup>147</sup> All Christian subjects, those who confess Christ's law, possess equal right, under command to the "most sacred Laws of christian Charity," to fellowship.<sup>148</sup> If there is one in the church who is well-behaved and "professes to believe the holy Scriptures" but disagrees with the form of worship or the creed, then he ought to be left alone.<sup>149</sup> Conversely, one who rejects scripture or Christ has no right to communion because he "does not at all pretend to Communion. . . . We don't exclude him, he excludes himself."<sup>150</sup> Christ's laws demand toleration because of human uncertainty in speculative matters that cannot be resolved by majority vote.<sup>151</sup> As Christ provided neither infallible interpreters of scripture nor a creed as a term of communion, Christians must tolerate dissent because inquiry into scripture is essential to their duty to seek truth. Else the only purpose for the faith is servile indoctrination.<sup>152</sup>

According to the third argument, the right to private judgment includes choosing ministers and withholding communion from those that hold "erroneous Notions" on essential points.<sup>153</sup> The reverend agrees that some must hold ministerial office, but rather than judge candidates by their creed, he proposes candidates with "Learning and good Sense" who facilitate inquiry into the scriptures and with "Discretion, Good Nature, and an exemplary Life" in following Christ's laws.<sup>154</sup> Ideally, the people would gather to discuss scripture with learned Christians who have flourished in the community. Abandoning the word *heretic*, they must allow the lone dissenter to dissent, even to minister, for he may be right. As God is the author of our understanding, one should not fear "dangerous doctrines" but "trust" in providence: "Sincerity is the Touchstone. 'Tis that will decide our future Condition."<sup>155</sup> The sincere love and search for truth, and "the Good of our Fellow-Creatures" is what we can know, while our conclusions we may never be sure of.

The fourth argument for severing communion with dissenters is that jarring and confusing opinions would destroy the church by disordering its tenets and form. Distinguishing between order and form, the reverend argues that scripture commands "that Things be done decently and in order" with "Respect and Civility" to those appointed to teach.<sup>156</sup> A majority or its appointed delegates must agree on essential or useful rituals and "Speculative Points," but it cannot expel a dissenter, who must in turn tolerate what he thinks are insignificant rites.<sup>157</sup> If a minority believes it must practice certain rituals, it is free to leave. The desire for *form*, the reverend warns, is caused by the desire for unity of inward opinion, and it is "the Spring of all those

<sup>147</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:73, 74.

<sup>148</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:73.

<sup>149</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:75.

<sup>150</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:77.

<sup>151</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:78, 32.

<sup>152</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:78, 80–83.

<sup>153</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:76.

<sup>154</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:80–81.

<sup>155</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:79.

<sup>156</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:76.

<sup>157</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:73.

tyrannical Pretences which occasion the Dispute before us.”<sup>158</sup> But this desire, governed by the spirit of pride and love of power, divides Christians over worship and in metaphysical disputes. Creeds not only have been the greatest cause of schisms in the Catholic Church but they have also failed to unify dozens of sects, and thousands of private opinions, in Philadelphia. As there can be no true unity in “secret Thoughts and Sentiments,” creeds only “propagate Falshood, Superstition, Absurdity, [and] Cruelty.”<sup>159</sup> The reverend offers his own “Method of promoting the Interests of Truth”—namely, “mutual Love and Forbearance.”<sup>160</sup> He argues for the toleration of any sect, and Franklin elsewhere included Islam, that does not reject the moral law: “There would be among Christians a full Liberty of declaring their Minds or Opinions to one another both in publick and private.”<sup>161</sup> This “Diversity of Opinion” will in turn promote “universal Peace” and unity: “We might peaceably . . . differ in our religious Speculations as we do in Astronomy or any other Part of natural Philosophy.”

The postscript, an excerpt from Duchal, contrasts two ways of thinking, and, contrary to previous scholarship, it shows how Franklin appealed to revealed authority for his public teaching of toleration.<sup>162</sup> “Creed-Imposers” believe that “even where the religious Rights of others are affected by our private Judgments, we must judge for our selves, and are in so doing only maintaining our own just Rights.”<sup>163</sup> The opposite view is that “where the religious Rights of others are affected, we ought to rest in the express Decisions of Scripture.” If the first, then “where shall we stop?” Subscribers confuse the right and rule of judgment, and thus they falsely make their right to privately judge for themselves “a Rule of Action” to judge for others. The problem is that “this Rule must equally direct Men, whether they are really in the Right, or only *think* themselves so.”<sup>164</sup> On this basis, Protestant orthodoxy must ever aspire to “Popish Usurpation,” because true religion comes through persuasion alone.<sup>165</sup> The solution to speculative differences is to *defer to scripture*, which rejects orthodox creeds by affirming the individual’s right to *sincerely* pursue truth, as well as the rule of *humble* toleration toward others.

Dickinson’s able response (quoting Locke) to Franklin’s *Letter* was that the synod only claimed the right to private association, including expulsion. Hemphill, he reminded, had freely subscribed, submitting himself to the church’s rules.<sup>166</sup> But this overlooks the importance of Franklin’s Dissenter persona: he did not deny the *political* right of association (or expulsion);<sup>167</sup> rather, he attempted, using *theological* argument,

<sup>158</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:74.

<sup>159</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:74, 85.

<sup>160</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:85.

<sup>161</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:85. On Islam, see Franklin, *Papers*, 2:32, 11:58–59; Franklin, *Autobiography*, 176; and Lemay, *Life*, 3:461–466.

<sup>162</sup>Lemay, *Life*, 2:253–254, 295–299, uses this excerpt to suggest Franklin’s Pyrrhonism, yet Franklin, *Papers*, 2:95, references it not to argue the impossibility of discovering truth but to oppose the clergy’s “unlimited Power of discouraging and oppressing Truth it self, when it happens to clash with their private Judgment and mercenary Selfish Views.”

<sup>163</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:86.

<sup>164</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:87, 19:164.

<sup>165</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:86, 78–79.

<sup>166</sup>Dickinson, *REMARKS upon a Pamphlet, Entitled, A LETTER to a Friend in the Country* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1735), 2–4, 11, 15; Lemay, *Life*, 2:259–260; and Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 53–56.

<sup>167</sup>See Franklin, *Papers*, 1:232–233.

to shape the association from within. He explained his opposition to orthodoxy in his 1738 defense of the Freemasons from alleged heresy and sedition. Repeating Duchal's argument, he admitted that he "Doubtless" possessed "erroneous Opinions": considering "the natural Weakness and Imperfection of Human Understanding," one must be vain to believe, and bold to profess, that "all the Doctrines he holds, are true; and all he rejects, are false."<sup>168</sup> This applied to "every Sect, Church and Society of men when they assume to themselves that Infallibility which they deny to the Popes and Councils."<sup>169</sup> Franklin concluded: "Since it is no more in a Man's Power to *think* than to *look* like another, methinks all that should be expected from me is to keep my Mind open to Conviction, to hear patiently and examine attentively whatever is offered me for that end." Judging opinions by their effects, whether they make the individual or society "less Virtuous or more vicious," the Masons were "very harmless," having "no principles or Practices that are inconsistent with Religion or good Manners."<sup>170</sup> These were the grounds upon which Franklin indicted orthodoxy.

#### V. The Reasonableness of Christianity

Befitting his definition of *reasonable* as a tension between principle and inclination,<sup>171</sup> Franklin's teachings on Christianity changed over time. In the 1730s, as a rising citizen of Philadelphia, he used his press and membership in social clubs like the Junto to promote the free exchange of religious and philosophical ideas. He joined the Freemasons, a "worshipful fraternity," for both social advancement and improvement. According to *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons*, which he printed in 1734 (the year he was elected Grand Master), man is "created after the Image of God, *the great Architect of the Universe*," and Jesus is the "great Architect of the Church" who "laid the World quiet, by proclaiming universal Peace."<sup>172</sup> The Masons were a party of virtue, uniting men across national boundaries and languages to build a better world. As an equal and free society, it grounded rewards "upon real Worth and personal Merit only," admitted new members by unanimous vote, and passed decisions by a majority.<sup>173</sup> For a rising middle class, Franklin taught the Masonic myth of God the Great Mechanic, who is worshipped by ordering nature and who blesses industry.<sup>174</sup> He judged religions by how well they secured both moral virtue and political rights, such as freedom of the press and conscience. Suspecting organized religion, he frequently praised the Quaker principle of religious freedom. The March 30, 1738, *Gazette* warned of "an ignorant vicious Clergy" who aimed to found a state church, which "strike[s] deep at the very root of our Charter."<sup>175</sup> But Franklin's experience with the Great Awakening gave him a new perspective.

Franklin's friendship with Whitefield was more than just a means to sell books. He initially saw in the revivals a possibility for a moral, ecumenical Christianity removed from church hierarchy. Sensing the underlying divisions between subscribers,

<sup>168</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:202–203.

<sup>169</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:203.

<sup>170</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:204.

<sup>171</sup> Franklin, *Autobiography*, 148.

<sup>172</sup> James Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (Philadelphia: Franklin, 1734), 7.

<sup>173</sup> Anderson, *The Constitution of the Free-Masons*, 50.

<sup>174</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:303, 41:608; and Smyth, *Writings*, 10:116–117.

<sup>175</sup> *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 20, 1738, 2.

moderates, and awakeners, he promoted Whitefield and the New Side Presbyterians to weaken Presbyterian orthodoxy.<sup>176</sup> In 1737, the Philadelphia Synod had passed the Itinerant Minister Act, which protected church polity by forbidding ministers of different presbyteries from preaching without a formal invitation.<sup>177</sup> It attacked the source of itinerancy, the Tennents' Log College, by resolving that ministerial candidates must either graduate from an approved European or New England college or be approved by the synod. Gilbert Tennent's New Brunswick Presbytery ignored this requirement, and in March 1739 Tennent preached "The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry," which attacked the majority of ministers as hypocrites, having the mere form of godliness without its power. Whitefield joined in the condemnation.<sup>178</sup> Following protests, Tennent walked out of the 1741 synodical meeting, beginning a seventeen-year schism.

Franklin supported Whitefield for reasons of doctrine and order. Doctrinally, he believed that "vital Religion has always suffer'd, when Orthodoxy is more regarded than Virtue."<sup>179</sup> Whitefield's appeal to conscience and conversion, rather than creedal conformity, seemed to direct religious energy toward moral and social improvement, like the orphanage or "Negroe School."<sup>180</sup> Refusing to "imagine that all God's Ministers and People are coop'd up within . . . one particular Denomination," itinerants tended to ecumenicism.<sup>181</sup> Tennent claimed each presbytery had the right to examine candidates, ordain ministers, and weigh the synod's decrees with its own interpretation of scripture.<sup>182</sup> Franklin also connected clerical orthodoxy to aristocratic pretensions. In 1740, when a group of gentlemen established a dancing club, proposing that "no mechanic or mechanic's wife or daughter should be admitted," Franklin, as Obadiah Plainman, defended the "meaner Sort" that supported Whitefield against the "Better Sort" that condemned the revivals.<sup>183</sup> The rules, he argued, would exclude even "God Almighty," who is "the greatest mechanic in the universe; having as the Scripture testifies, made all things. . . by weight and measure."<sup>184</sup> He cited republicans Cicero, Algernon Sidney, and John Trenchard, who distinguished not by class but between virtue and vice; the people were not a "stupid Herd, in whom the Light of Reason is extinguished."<sup>185</sup>

<sup>176</sup>Buxbaum, *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians*, 140–143, pointing to a change in the *Gazette's* coverage after the schism, argues that Franklin's "hatred of Calvinism" fed his design to split the Presbyterian Church; and Morgan, "A Most Unlikely Friendship," 208–209, argues, against Buxbaum, that Franklin's printing reflected Whitefield's declining popularity after June 1741.

<sup>177</sup>Gilbert Tennent, *Remarks Upon A Protestation Presented To The Synod Of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741* (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1741), 13.

<sup>178</sup>Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend*, 57.

<sup>179</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:203.

<sup>180</sup>See Lemay, *Life*, 3:280, 578, 289.

<sup>181</sup>Tennent, *Remarks*, 21, 27; Lemay, *Life*, 2:424; and Albert David Belden, *George Whitefield, The Awakener: A Modern Study of the Evangelical Revival* (London: Rockliff, 1953), 240.

<sup>182</sup>Tennent, *Remarks*, 14–20; and Gilbert Tennent, "The Apology of the Presbytery Of New-Brunswick, &c, in Remarks Upon A Protestation Presented To The Synod Of Philadelphia, June 1, 1741" (Philadelphia: B. Franklin, 1741), 48, 50–52.

<sup>183</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 277.

<sup>184</sup>*Memoirs of the Life and Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. William Temple Franklin, 3 vols. (London: Printed for Henry Colburn, 1818), 1:448; Aldridge, *Nature's God*, 41; and Franklin, *Papers*, 42:602.

<sup>185</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 278.

But Franklin soon observed the Log College's tendency to enthusiasm, superstition, and lawlessness.<sup>186</sup> Whitefield, like a general "haranguing. . . Armies,"<sup>187</sup> could briefly control vast crowds, but those under his spell who pledged to change soon reverted to their old ways. In the fall of 1741, lay preachers led chaotic revivals, culminating in James Davenport's 1743 book burning. Despite early cooperation with pietistic sects, and even touting an "experimental knowledge" and tolerance, both Whitefield and Tennent, when threatened by competing doctrines, reverted to Calvinistic dogmas.<sup>188</sup> Like the subscribers, they built up a "Guard and Defence about their [own] sacred Truths" and attacked the "dangerous Heresies" of the Moravians, Socinians, and Arminians.<sup>189</sup> Tennent was now a "High Priest" designing "to be *father Confessor*."<sup>190</sup> The Awakening also exposed the province's religious and ethnic divisions: English set against Scots-Irish settlers, and both suspect of German pietists, who were themselves divided over Moravian revivalist techniques.<sup>191</sup> Franklin "absolutely refus'd" to help Tennent's subscription drive for a new Presbyterian church, and he later adjusted his anti-creedal theology.<sup>192</sup>

As he grew older, Franklin left off participation in the Junto and Freemasons for scientific experimentation and political life—the first a form of worship in the study of causes,<sup>193</sup> and the second the godlike activity of using that wisdom to "mend the scheme of Providence" for human good.<sup>194</sup> In a demographically changing province, Franklin supported a free market of religious sects and worked with any when it promoted the interest of the province.<sup>195</sup> He contributed to churches and synagogues, observed Anglican rites (such as communion and lent), and took Pennsylvania's religious oath of office.<sup>196</sup> Political prudence always determined his alliances: he celebrated Quaker religious freedom but worked against its pacifism, and he condemned Presbyterian orthodoxy while celebrating its republican spirit.<sup>197</sup> What he came to

<sup>186</sup>Le Beau, *Jonathan Dickinson*, 132–134; and Milton J. Coalter, Jr., *Gilbert Tennent, Son of Thunder: A Case Study of Continental Pietism's Impact on the First Great Awakening in the Middle Colonies* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1986), 93.

<sup>187</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 179.

<sup>188</sup>Gilbert Tennent, *Twenty-Three Sermons Upon the Chief end of Man* (Philadelphia: Bradford, 1744), 116, 142; Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend*, 48, 60, 62, 64, 66–70; Coalter, *Gilbert Tennent*, 133, 97; Gilbert Tennent, *The Necessity of Holding Fast the Truth* (Boston: Kneeland & Green, 1743), 4, 10; and George Whitefield to Jonathan Wesley, September 25, 1740, in George Whitefield, *The Works*, 8 vols. (London, 1771), 1:181–182, 210–212.

<sup>189</sup>Tennent, *Necessity*, iii. On the Moravians, Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend*, 69; and Dietmar Rothermund, "Political Factions and the Great Awakening," *Pennsylvania History* 26, no. 4 (October 1959): 324–325.

<sup>190</sup>John Hancock, *The examiner, or Gilbert against Tennent* (Boston; Printed for S. Eliot, 1743), 3.

<sup>191</sup>Rothermund, "Political Factions," 317: "Denominations served the purpose of pressure groups and parties, and many a clergyman or elder assumed the role of political boss."

<sup>192</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 201.

<sup>193</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:12.

<sup>194</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:480.

<sup>195</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:41–42.

<sup>196</sup>Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 158, 205 (contributions), 193 (lent), 189–190 (communion); he concluded, at 191, that Franklin was "motivated by considerations of public relations and political expediency"; and Aldridge also notes, at 158 and 189, that Franklin's greatest political conflicts were with those in his own church.

<sup>197</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 2:49. On Franklin's motives, see Lemay, "Review: Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians by Melvin H. Buxbaum," *Early American Literature* 10, no. 2 (Fall 1975): 222–226.

understand was that political ends, such as natural law, were inherently religious because they presupposed a common conception of right. Religious principles and public acts of devotion could be used to transcend sectarian, ethnic, and class differences. With his growing political influence, Franklin moved away from teaching simple religious liberty to civic duty, to *institutionalize* a reasonable Christianity in public defense, education, charity, and imperial expansion, both to reduce sectarian faction and to challenge the religious establishments that encouraged it.

During King George's War, Franklin divided the younger moderate Quakers against the older Quaker establishment to gain support for the military Association. He compared pacifism, which he called "mistaken Principles of Religion," to "the Man, who sat down and prayed his Gods to lift his Cart out of the Mire."<sup>198</sup> "Conscience," he wrote, "enjoins it as a DUTY . . . on every Man . . . to defend [his] Country . . . Friends . . . aged Parents . . . Wives, and helpless Children."<sup>199</sup> One must not "desert *the Tender and Helpless, by Providence committed to [his] Charge.*"<sup>200</sup> God has provided man with prudence to do what is right, if he would but unite the "Force of Reason, Duty, and Religion."<sup>201</sup> Promoting a social contract, Franklin exhorted the Scots-Irish and "*brave and steady GERMANS*" to "unite with us in Defence of. . . Liberty and Property."<sup>202</sup> Using scripture to persuade Christians of their duty to fight, he gave the benediction, "*May the GOD of WISDOM, STRENGTH and POWER, the Lord of the Armies of Israel, inspire us with Prudence in this Time of DANGER.*"<sup>203</sup> He wrote the Council's proclamation for "a Day of Fasting and Prayer" in order to give "the clergy of the different Sects an Opportunity of Influencing their Congregations to join in the Association."<sup>204</sup> Franklin, Lemay shows, designed the emblems and mottos for the battle flags, including one showing the union of three classes in Pennsylvania and another proclaiming, "IN GOD WE TRUST."<sup>205</sup> But Franklin *also* pitted some races and religions against others, warning of "Irish Catholicks, under a bigotted Popish King," French soldiers who would take "Pride in deflouring Quaker Girls," and the "unbridled Rage, Rapine and Lust, of Negroes, Molattoes, and . . . the vilest and most abandoned of Mankind."<sup>206</sup>

Franklin's 1749 *Proposals* on education argued for an institutional Christianity to educate the varieties of religious sentiment to science, liberal political principles, and public service. He balanced the beautiful and the useful to both channel the student's religious and patriotic affections into zeal for the public good while tempering enthusiasm with calculative appeals to interest. The study of history would show "the Necessity of a *Publick Religion*, from its Usefulness to the Publick; the Advantage of a Religious Character among private Persons; the Mischiefs of Superstition, &c. and

<sup>198</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:201; and Lemay, *Writings*, 224.

<sup>199</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:201.

<sup>200</sup>*The Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 19, 1747, 1.

<sup>201</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:201.

<sup>202</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:203.

<sup>203</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:204. Hoffer, *When Benjamin Franklin Met the Reverend*, 82–83, calls it "a political soteriology as dire as any that Whitefield advanced."

<sup>204</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:228; and Franklin, *Autobiography*, 185.

<sup>205</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 318–319; and Lemay, *Life*, 3:41–344, the three classes being gentlemen, merchants, and laborers.

<sup>206</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 3:202, 198; and Lemay, *Writings*, 224. On Franklin's Irish slurs, David Waldstreicher, *Runaway America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2005), 112–114; and on Jewish slurs, Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 204–205.

the Excellency of the Christian Religion above all others antient or modern.”<sup>207</sup> Spurning doctrinal disputes (Whitefield wanted more theology), Franklin united the study of theology with “natural history,” which would be useful for “Divines” to “strengthen [their discourses] by new Proofs of Divine Providence.”<sup>208</sup> He cited George Turnbull on the “excellence of the Christian revelation” and its harmony with reason. According to Turnbull, God’s “immutable perfections” logically demonstrated moral law, which was enforced by the “glorious hopes” or “suffering in a future state” and led to useful public service.<sup>209</sup>

In the building of Pennsylvania Hospital, Franklin worked to institutionalize both charity—which he called “essential to the true Spirit of Christianity”—and the Golden Rule—that one’s duty to God is doing good to others.<sup>210</sup> While all humans were susceptible to diseases and reversals of fortune, collectively individuals could multiply the good they do to help the sick and the poor.<sup>211</sup> Franklin noted that hospitals were a uniquely Christian political institution, unknown among the ancients: “In all well-regulated States where Christians obtain’d sufficient Influence, publick Funds and private Charities have been appropriated to the building of Hospitals.”<sup>212</sup> He described this form of public charity as a civil conversion: “The Stranger is taken in, the Ignorant instructed, and the Bad reclaimed . . . [and] it is also the Means of feeding the Hungry and cloathing the Naked.”<sup>213</sup>

In his political ambition to “settle a Colony on the Ohio,” Franklin connected English Protestant industry to immigration and citizenship.<sup>214</sup> The 1751 *Observations* argued for a reasonable religion that teaches “Frugality and Industry as religious Duties,” which increase a nation, especially in its “remote Settlements.”<sup>215</sup> Protestantism secured virtue by teaching self-reliance, or labor in preparation for old age and sickness.<sup>216</sup> Its view of providence, “God helps them that help themselves,” habituates citizens to prudence and independence, and the right to private judgment makes the Christian citizen responsible for his destiny both in heaven and on earth.<sup>217</sup> One is “accountable for his Belief to Christ alone” and will be judged for his deeds, not his stated intentions.<sup>218</sup> Because “one Man’s Salvation does not interfere with the Salvation of another Man . . . every Man is to be left at Liberty to work it out by what Method he thinks best.”<sup>219</sup> Catholicism, he argued, educated citizens to dependence, breeding laziness. Franklin praised the industry of German pietists, but he attacked their lawlessness and pacifism, comparing their disregard for the clergy to

<sup>207</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 3:413.

<sup>208</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 3:416; and on Whitefield and theology, Franklin, *Papers*, 3:467–469.

<sup>209</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 3:413n; and George Turnbull, *Observations upon Liberal Education* (London: Printed for A. Millar, 1742), 386–387. Turnbull argued that, upon seeing the excellence of Christianity, one must “assent to the external evidence it offers of its divine authority.” Turnbull, *Observations*, 388.

<sup>210</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 4:149; and Franklin, *Autobiography*, 146.

<sup>211</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 4:150.

<sup>212</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 4:151.

<sup>213</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 5:325–326.

<sup>214</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 6:468.

<sup>215</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 4:232, 2:303; and Smyth, *Writings*, 9:626.

<sup>216</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 13:515.

<sup>217</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:140.

<sup>218</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:29. Franklin liked to quote Matthew 7:21. See Franklin, *Papers*, 2:30, 2:204, 4:506.

<sup>219</sup> Franklin, *Papers*, 2:73.

Hottentots who beat their own mothers.<sup>220</sup> He recommended “excluding all Blacks and Tawneys” (German “Palatine Boors”) from America and “increasing the lovely White and Red.”<sup>221</sup>

Franklin’s use of religion and ethnicity for political solidarity backfired. As a leader of the new Quaker Party, he challenged the Proprietary Party over defense, an issue affecting the Scots-Irish and Germans, whose numbers had each grown to one-third of the population. During the French and Indian War, the proprietaries stoked religious faction with a petition to the king to change the oath of office to bar Quakers.<sup>222</sup> Seizing on the chaos of Pontiac’s Rebellion and the Paxton massacres, they renewed the sectarian divide in 1764 to strong-arm the assembly. Claiming that it violated proprietary rights, Governor John Penn returned the £50,000 supply bill that would raise the 1,000 troops necessary to defend the frontier from attacks. In what Franklin called a sinister alliance, the proprietaries turned the Scots-Irish Presbyterians and German pietists against the Quakers.<sup>223</sup> Franklin had fought the proprietary and British policies that had exposed the frontier and affirmed the settlers’ grievance about lack of representation in the assembly,<sup>224</sup> but he was outraged when Presbyterian ministers like John Elder and John Ewing failed to condemn, and even condoned, the Conestoga and Lancaster massacres.<sup>225</sup>

In his *Narrative of the Late Massacres*, Franklin opposed the toxic blend of religious sect with race (that he himself had encouraged) that had justified the murders and culminated “in Defiance of Government, of all Laws human and divine.”<sup>226</sup> “Religious Bigots,” he argued, were “of all Savages the most brutish.”<sup>227</sup> They zealously invoked God’s justice to make war upon an entire race. “If it be right to kill Men for such a Reason,” Franklin countered, then the same applied to “killing all the freckled red-haired Men, Women and Children.”<sup>228</sup> He decried the “horrid Perversion of Scripture and of Religion! to father the worst of Crimes on the God of Peace and Love!”<sup>229</sup> This was a burlesque of true Christianity, which ought to excel all other religions in “the Knowledge and Practice of what is right.” Franklin provided examples of the sacred law of hospitality espoused by all religions and races: a “Pagan Negroe” was more humane than the “CHRISTIAN[] WHITE SAVAGES of Peckstang and Donegall.”<sup>230</sup> If Christians fail to see “that JUSTICE may be done, the Wicked punished, and the Innocent protected,” then God’s justice will be exacted upon them in haunted consciences, shame upon faith and country, retribution in further massacres of settlers by wrathful Indians, and finally, alluding to the book of Judges, collapse into the Hobbesian state of nature: “We can, as a People, expect no Blessing from Heaven, there will be no Security for our Persons or Properties; Anarchy and Confusion will prevail over all, and Violence, without Judgment.”<sup>231</sup>

<sup>220</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:484.

<sup>221</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 4:234.

<sup>222</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 8:400n8.

<sup>223</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:107, 121–122.

<sup>224</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:161.

<sup>225</sup>Kevin Kenny, *Peaceable Kingdom Lost* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 143–144.

<sup>226</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:53.

<sup>227</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:434.

<sup>228</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:55.

<sup>229</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:56.

<sup>230</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:66.

<sup>231</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:68.



Franklin, unlike Joseph Galloway or Thomas Wharton, seldom categorically condemned the Presbyterians—they were a political group in his eyes. In his polemic, he praised the Royal Highlanders who transcended racial hatred to protect the innocent Conestogas. In *Cool Thoughts*, he downplayed animosity between Presbyterians and Quakers: “Religion has happily nothing to do with our present Differences, tho’ great Pains is taken to lug it into the Squabble.”<sup>232</sup> He argued at length that a royal government would protect “Liberty of Conscience and the Privileges of Dissenters” and again appealed to unity among English, Irish, and German Pennsylvanians.<sup>233</sup> Upon his arrival in England, his dear friends included current and former Presbyterian ministers (and radical Whigs) Richard Price and Joseph Priestley. Franklin’s long friendship with Charles Thomson, devout Presbyterian and biblical scholar, helped to persuade him to side with the republican “Presbyterian Party” against the Quakers in the years leading into the American Revolution.<sup>234</sup> It was in England that he returned to reforming Christian liturgy.

Throughout his life, Franklin mused over and even constructed liturgies for the education of his theology, which connected “Articles of Belief” with the “Acts of Religion” or good works that were the correlate to achieving a good conscience.<sup>235</sup> “Thro’ the Depravity of human Nature,” he concluded, “Mankind is vastly more prone to Vice than to the Pursuit of Virtue. Therefore as they cannot avoid Reflection, they cannot help Perceiving their Guilt. The Apprehension of future Punishment gives them a continual Anxieties.”<sup>236</sup> Organized religion, he believed, played a vital role for most people, who could neither rationally discern their long-term good nor by unaided reason habituate themselves to the moral virtues that would bring tranquility of mind. Opposite orthodoxy, which preyed upon this anxiety, were the convulsions of evangelical sects, which might prod worshippers to virtue but also disrupt the social order. Thus, Franklin tried his hand at a traditional ceremony for a middling audience.

The importance of liturgy, he concluded, was nether dogma nor preaching but certain rituals and “Acts of Devotion” that “mend[ed] the Heart” or achieved certain sentiments. He instructed his daughter Sally, “Go constantly to Church whoever preaches” and “never miss the Prayer Days”—and this not just as a duty to protect his reputation from his enemies.<sup>237</sup> “The Acts of Devotion in the common Prayer Book,” he argued, “if properly attended to, will do more towards mending the Heart than Sermons generally can do. For they were composed by Men of much greater Piety and Wisdom.” Franklin’s revision of the Lord’s Prayer and contributions to Lord Le Despencer’s 1773 Abridgment to the Common Prayer Book, excising one-half of the liturgy, have been explained as scholarly endeavors or hoaxes.<sup>238</sup> But Franklin also wanted to reconnect worship to the proper ends of the catechism, that is, one’s duties “towards God, and . . . towards our neighbours,” which had been lost in history and language. He

<sup>232</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:161.

<sup>233</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:162, 172–173.

<sup>234</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 21:602; 29:612. See Fred S. Rolater, “Charles Thomson, ‘Prime Minister’ of the United States,” *The Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 101, no. 3 (July 1977): 323.

<sup>235</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 1:101–109; and Franklin, *Autobiography*, 88. Franklin wrote to Ezra Stiles on “the Writings of Zoroaster”: “I have cast my Eye over the Religious Part; it seems to contain a nice Morality, mix’d with abundance of Prayers, Ceremonies, and Observations.” Franklin, *Papers*, 19:30–31.

<sup>236</sup>Franklin, “The Religion of the Indian Natives,” 91.

<sup>237</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 11:449–450.

<sup>238</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 15:299–303.

believed it must be updated for a modern audience<sup>239</sup> and shorn of Old Testament barbarisms.<sup>240</sup> Rather, the purpose of Christian worship is humility, to strip away the worshippers' pretensions (especially in speculative matters), inspire gratitude, and remind them to depend upon the "daily Bounty of their Creator."<sup>241</sup> This humility, recognizing equality under God, leads them to charity and unity through a form of worship. He selected from the Psalms, pairing them with the desired collective emotions—awe, contrition, resolve, exhortation, intercession, confidence, dejection, public distress, elation, thanksgiving, and "longing for a better World"—to have a therapeutic effect on the participants.<sup>242</sup>

To unify the many and the few, a liturgy must consider the tradesmen who would attend services were they shorter and more relevant. Religious practice loses efficacy when it becomes too lengthy, boring, and repetitive—Franklin said that he had not the time for "attending the long tedious services of the church."<sup>243</sup> But it must also appeal to the intellectual few: founded on "indisputable principles," excluding all "Sentiments and Doctrines but those of piety and morality," and motivated by "the duties, laws, and pleasures of society."<sup>244</sup> Franklin's earliest and last liturgies stemmed from his criticism of freethinking and atheism.<sup>245</sup> Rather than a secularist attempting to destroy Christianity or religion, he thought that the Enlightenment, separating natural philosophy from religion, had become an atheistic dogma, which, like Christian orthodoxy, disconnected the respective objects of philosophy and religion: truth and moral virtue.<sup>246</sup> Making truth the object of private inquiry, intellectuals deserted public worship, eroding both public spirit and the habituation of youth to virtue. Thus a "Rational Christianity" was needed to align interpretations of scripture with reason.<sup>247</sup>

Franklin's close friends, the liberal ministers of the Club of Honest Whigs, Priestley, Price, and Theophilus Lindsey, also amended the liturgy in the founding of Unitarianism, or "Christianity on the rational plan," which rejected the "polytheism" of the Trinity.<sup>248</sup> Franklin and Le Despencer attended Lindsey's first sermon at the Essex House Chapel, where Lindsey incorporated his own Book of Common Prayer according to the "Reformed Liturgy" of Samuel Clarke.<sup>249</sup> Christians, he argued, were

<sup>239</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 15:301–303, 20:348, 38:520–522.

<sup>240</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 43:41. Franklin either disregarded the Old Testament in liturgy or reinterpreted it for a modern audience: Franklin, *Papers*, 20:347–348; and Lemay, *Writings*, 933–935.

<sup>241</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 15:302.

<sup>242</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 20:352.

<sup>243</sup>Thomas Morris, "A General View of the Life and Writings of the Rev. David Williams," *The Edinburgh Magazine, or, Literary Miscellany* (January 1793): 40.

<sup>244</sup>David Williams, *Essays on Public Worship, Patriotism, and Projects of Reformation, etc.*, 2nd ed. (London: Printed for T. Payne, 1774), 62, 64; and David Williams, *A Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality* (London: Printed for the Author, 1776), viii.

<sup>245</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 114.

<sup>246</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, vii.

<sup>247</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 19:303.

<sup>248</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 19:310. Priestley rejected the Trinity, atonement, and original sin and taught Socinianism, a return to Unitarian Christianity. According to Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Early Opinions Concerning Jesus Christ*, 4 vols. (Birmingham: Pearson and Rollason, 1786), 1:10–11, the apostles "represent[ed] the Father as the only true God, and as Christ as a man, the servant of God, who raised him from the dead, and gave him all the power of which he is possessed, as a reward of his obedience." The doctrine of the immaterial soul, a "personification of the logos," was borrowed from pagan Platonism: Priestley, *History*, 1:86, 114, 398.

<sup>249</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 21:195–197. Theophilus Lindsey, *The Book of Common Prayer Reformed According to the Plan of the Late Dr. Samuel Clarke* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1774), based his changes on

“distinguished from all other men” by an “agreement in charity, and not so much in religious opinions.”<sup>250</sup> Charity was “the way to peace and unity,” not common opinions (except “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God”) or even practice, “for our opinions are not in our own power. They depend upon the light and evidence with which truth is presented to our minds.”<sup>251</sup> Rejecting the idea that God designed that Christians should form one great church, there should be different sects and churches, with the many and the rational few unified by moral precepts.<sup>252</sup> Multiplying sects alleviates social disturbances, so long as the state does not encourage any, even by oaths of office.<sup>253</sup> Even those who reject worship altogether “demonstrate themselves good citizens and useful subjects of the state” if they “keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”<sup>254</sup> The various Christian sects, far from undermining the “public worship” of God, monitor and improve one another to the same collective end.<sup>255</sup>

Suspecting that Franklin did not believe his own deist creed, Priestley sent him a copy of David Hartley’s *Observations on Man* as well as his own *Institutes*, which chronicled God’s providence in the miracles of scripture beginning with the Old Testament and completed through Christ’s “miraculous conception.”<sup>256</sup> Human consciousness had progressed in different historical dispensations, and by this revelatory knowledge the “meanest Christian” is “superior to other men” in his own happiness and promoting that of others.<sup>257</sup> Thus, Priestley later condemned Clarke’s Arian liturgy. But Franklin disagreed with both scriptural inspiration and the primacy of Christian dogma. Private pride should be rechanneled for public good: a universal religion in the Christian world must find common ground for all faiths instead of demanding conversion.

As a member of the Thirteen Club, Franklin helped David Williams construct *A Liturgy on the Universal Principles of Religion and Morality* in 1773–1774.<sup>258</sup> Franklin told Williams that he “never passed a Church, during Public Service, without regretting that he could not join it honestly and cordially,” and he wished to revive a “rational form of devotion,” like that of Shaftesbury’s deism, for freethinkers.<sup>259</sup> Church attendance had declined, and there was no alternative to the liturgy of the

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Clarke’s own private changes to his common Prayer Book, kept in the British Museum, which excised or altered prayers to Christ or the Holy Spirit, and not to God.

<sup>250</sup>Theophilus Lindsey, *A Sermon Preached at the OPENING of the CHAPEL in ESSEX-HOUSE [. . .] on SUNDAY, APRIL 17, 1774*, 3rd ed. (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1774), 5–6.

<sup>251</sup>Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 10, 11–12.

<sup>252</sup>Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 13. Lindsey, citing Locke, wrote: “The use of reason in religion is not to be denied to any part of mankind; and how far all are capable of it.” Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 15n\*.

<sup>253</sup>Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 18–19.

<sup>254</sup>Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 21.

<sup>255</sup>Lindsey, *A Sermon*, 21–22.

<sup>256</sup>On Franklin’s lack of belief in a future state, Rush, *Memorial*, 148; and Priestley, *History*, 1:48, 61, 68, 73–83, who also opposed the polytheistic teaching of the “Arian logos, the maker and governor of all things under the supreme God,” at 61. On Christ’s miraculous birth, Priestley, *History*, 1:xvii, 25.

<sup>257</sup>Joseph Priestley, *Discourses on the Evidence of Revealed Religion* (London: Printed for J. Johnson, 1794), 12, 4; and at 5, 7, he argued: “Unbelievers in revealed religion” are plagued by “mean selfishness”—disconnecting them from neighbors, country, and nature—and a “tormenting anxiety.”

<sup>258</sup>Morris, “A General View,” 39–40. The Thirteen Club first met at Franklin’s lodgings: David Williams, “More Light on Franklin’s Religious Ideas,” *The American Historical Review* 43, no. 4 (July 1938): 803–813; and Aldridge, *Nature’s God*, 212–221.

<sup>259</sup>Williams, “More Light,” 810, 811; Morris, “A General View,” 40; and, on freethinking, Williams, *Essays*, 22–34.

Book of Common Prayer or Dissenter enthusiasm.<sup>260</sup> He “thought it a reproach to Philosophy that it had not a Liturgy and that it skulked from the public Profession of its Principles,” and he lamented the loss of “that pleasure, which all virtuous minds have in a public acknowledgement of their duties.”<sup>261</sup> A liturgy was needed to preach the general principles of a common creed: “All disputed opinions should be excluded public-worship; and that all honest, pious men, Calvinists, Arians, Socinians, Jews, Turks, and Infidels, might and ought to worship God together in spirit and in truth.”<sup>262</sup> Thus the liturgy invited the many of all faiths to join in a common creed constructed for a select “Party of Virtue.”<sup>263</sup>

Scholars have noted the *Liturgy*'s universalism, but they omit that it is mostly a pastiche from the Dissenter *A Form of Prayer* (1763) with the marks of Franklin's editorial eye.<sup>264</sup> A comparison of the *Liturgy*'s original passages confirms Aldridge's assessment that Franklin included the metaphysics and hymns from his 1728 “Articles.” While directing adoration to “the universal spirit” or “the fountain of being,”<sup>265</sup> the liturgy's purpose was moral and political, “to promote *Universal piety and Benevolence*,” “virtue and happiness,” and “that state of manly liberty, and that habit of self-government, which will effectually promote the attainment of wisdom and virtue, and the tranquility and true enjoyment of life.”<sup>266</sup> Franklin even smuggled in his beloved Cicero: “We are born, not for ourselves only, but for our friends, our country, and for all mankind.”<sup>267</sup> Virtue required channeling guilt, in light of God's “perfections,” to “humility, sorrow, and resolutions of amendment,” that the “painful reflections we now make on our former follies, be an effectual restraint on our future conduct.”<sup>268</sup> Franklin even wanted to distribute his “Art of Virtue” with the *Liturgy*.<sup>269</sup> The *Liturgy* concluded, “May no difference of sects, parties, or opinions, lessen that brotherly affection we owe to all men,” adding (tellingly in 1776), “We would rejoice in the subversion of tyranny, oppression, and every thing unfriendly to the liberties of the world. May a spirit of order, harmony, and peace, go forth among the nations.”<sup>270</sup>

The press lampooned Franklin's participation in the liturgy as well as the fact that it, a proclaimed religion of nature, borrowed revelatory insights from Christian and English tradition.<sup>271</sup> Thus, it overlooked Franklin's intention to evolve and not break from tradition by rooting the liturgy in the Bible, Book of Common Prayer, and

<sup>260</sup>See Williams, *Liturgy*, ix; and Williams, *Essays*, 6.

<sup>261</sup>Williams, “More Light,” 810; and Williams, *Liturgy*, viii–ix. Williams, *Liturgy*, viii, refers to Franklin as “some philosophers of the first character.”

<sup>262</sup>Williams, *Essays*, 20–21. See Williams, *Liturgy*, xi.

<sup>263</sup>Franklin, *Autobiography*, 161–162, 176; and Williams, *Essays*, 31–32.

<sup>264</sup>*A Form of Prayer, and a New Collection of Psalms, for the Use of a Congregation of Protestant Dissenters in Liverpool* (Liverpool: Printed for the Society, 1763). Compare Williams, *Liturgy*, 1 with *A Form of Prayer*, 39; 2 with 2; 4 with 45–46; 6 with 49; 7 with 49–50; 8 with 18, 53, 18; 9 with 18, 80, 53, 55; 10 with 55; 11 with 59; 12 with 60; 15 with 39; 16 with 8; 17 with 8–9; 18 with 9–11; 19 with 11, 47; 20 with 48, 74–75; 21 with 75–76; 22 with 76, 18; 23 with 18; and 28 with 37.

<sup>265</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, 16, 3.

<sup>266</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, xii, 11.

<sup>267</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, 10.

<sup>268</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, 9.

<sup>269</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 27:355; and Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 216–219.

<sup>270</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, 24–25, 26.

<sup>271</sup>*Orpheus, Priest of Nature, and Prophet of Infidelity; or, the Eleusinian Mysteries Revived* (London: Printed for J. Stockdale, 1781); and “Williams's Sermon and Liturgy,” *The Critical Review, Or, Annals of Literature* 42 (October 1776): 272, 277–278.

English classics—Milton, Thomson, Addison, and Watts—retaining Jesus as an example of universal benevolence, humility, and piety.<sup>272</sup> Thus, the *Liturgy* became a fore-runner to French atheistic religions, and Williams lamented that Franklin's early departure for America had prevented the reconciliation between the deistic and atheistic factions that splintered the group.<sup>273</sup> The schism occurred over evidences of a future state, to which, we will see, Franklin had an answer.

Having learned lessons from racial and religious strife, Franklin reapplied his religious principles to legitimize revolution and the American political order. Teaching that "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God," he recommended this motto for the Great Seal of the United States.<sup>274</sup> The Revolution, he preached, was a miracle (even fulfilling prophecy), the victory of a far inferior power against a greater, and divine retribution upon George III (whom hell awaited) for his wicked orders to slaughter Americans.<sup>275</sup> This miracle included the unifications of races and sects and had produced governments and laws, "which for wisdom and justice, are the admiration of all the wise and thinking men in Europe."<sup>276</sup> Understanding that "our future safety will depend upon our Union and our Virtue," he stressed racial and religious unity.<sup>277</sup> He praised the Irish immigrants that held a majority of the Pennsylvania legislature and opposed African American slavery, which would draw the "displeasure of the great and impartial Ruler of the Universe upon our country."<sup>278</sup> He supported the promotion of liberal Protestant and Catholic ministers and, when politically feasible, opposed religious tests and state-supported churches.<sup>279</sup> He urged his colleagues at the Constitutional Convention to shake off their sentiments of infallibility, which he likened to Old World religious orthodoxy.<sup>280</sup> In his recommendation for prayer (even calling for "the Clergy of this city . . . to officiate"), Franklin, quoting Jesus, preached that the Revolution had convinced him of "this Truth, *that GOD governs in the Affairs of Men*. And if a Sparrow cannot fall to the Ground without his Notice, is it probable that an Empire can rise without his Aid?"<sup>281</sup> Warning his colleagues not to imitate the "Builders of Babel," he reminded them that every political community required some common belief—in his own teaching, the "self-evident" truths of "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."<sup>282</sup> Franklin even likened the Founders to Moses, who faced the grumblings of the "thirteen Tribes" that desired a return to British slavery

<sup>272</sup>Williams, *Liturgy*, 1, opens with a quote from Psalms 49:1, 69:34, 30:4, 62:8. On the "religion of Christ," see Williams, *Essays*, 3. On inclusion of scripture and English classics, see "Books: Williams's Sermon and Liturgy," *The Scots Magazine* 38 (September 1776): 490.

<sup>273</sup>Williams, "More Light," 807–808.

<sup>274</sup>Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin: Philosopher and Man* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1965), 257; and Mulford, *Benjamin Franklin and the Ends of Empire*, 279–281.

<sup>275</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 25:100–102; 37:586–588; 43:29; and Lemay, *Writings*, 1144–1148.

<sup>276</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 25:102.

<sup>277</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 42:244.

<sup>278</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1170.

<sup>279</sup>On Franklin's support for a doctorate for Ezra Stiles, see Franklin, *Papers*, 12:195–196; on a bishopric for John Carroll, see Franklin, *Papers*, 42:366; on his support of episcopal bishops, see Aldridge, *Franklin and Nature's God*, 180–94; on his opposition to state churches, see Franklin, *Papers*, 33:389–390; and on his concession to an oath affirming the "divine Inspiration" of scripture and his support of a clause "that no further or more extended Profession of Faith should ever be exacted," see Franklin, *Papers*, 43:41.

<sup>280</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1140. Franklin, *Autobiography*, 190–191, reserved his lone sectarian praise for the Dunkers, who refused to pronounce a creed.

<sup>281</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1138–1139.

<sup>282</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1139.

or idolatrous anarchy.<sup>283</sup> The Americans were a chosen people (the next “city on a hill”) anointed by God, whose blessings awaited if they would follow his laws.<sup>284</sup>

Franklin’s final attempt to teach the reasonableness of Christianity was in the promotion of “perpetual peace.” This was neither Christian eternal rest nor *pax* but the application of knowledge to channel human instincts, which are in perpetual motion, toward conflict resolution. Yet it spoke to Christians who used the Enlightenment language of government as a “grand machine” whose proper planning would bring human happiness.<sup>285</sup> Noting the folly of “repeated Wars,” Franklin wrote to David Hartley in 1783, “America . . . could be the means of uniting in perpetual peace her father and her husband,” England and France.<sup>286</sup> But, he argued, only the liberal principles of equality, liberty, and independence could produce such a “family compact”: “Learn to be quiet & to respect each others rights. You are all Christians. One is the most Christian King, and the other defender of the faith. Manifest the propriety of these titles by your future conduct. By this says Christ shall all men know that ye are my Disciples if ye Love one another. Seek peace and ensue it.”<sup>287</sup> Internationally, the effect would be to spend the money used for war “to promote the internal welfare of each Country”: “Bridges roads canals and other usefull public works, and institutions tending to the common felicity.”<sup>288</sup>

At the end of his life, Franklin affirmed that he was not a Christian, yet he maintained the pieties of his deist creed, which, he repeated, affirmed Jesus’s system of morality.<sup>289</sup> While he believed that virtue and vice “carry their own Reward,” he still continued to preach rewards and punishments in an afterlife, the source of the aforementioned schism between deists and atheists. Considering the psychological longing for heaven, Franklin taught his own myth of eternal recurrence: his corruptible body would return to its constituent elements, a perfect initial happy state, where matter acts unobstructed to what it is and thereby experiences infinite pleasure, unmixed with pain.<sup>290</sup> Washed in the River Lethe, the concern for glory in human memory would be over, every particle pure action. Franklin’s myth of eternal recurrence is neither the ancients’ Elysium nor the Christian heaven, but he did not disabuse others of the notion as long as it led to moral action in life. Franklin’s own courage in the face of death stemmed from his rational approach to life. He tempered his desire for glory with reflections upon the ephemerality of human things, his lamentations on pain with humor and gratitude for pleasure, and his indignation at the indifference of nature with admiration for nature’s order and the meaning that humans provided to it.

**Kevin Slack** teaches political theory at Hillsdale College. He is the author of *Benjamin Franklin, Natural Right, and the Art of Virtue* (Rochester, N.Y.: University of Rochester Press, 2017).

<sup>283</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1145.

<sup>284</sup>*The Pennsylvania Packet, or, The General Advertiser*, April 22, 1783, 3.

<sup>285</sup>Smyth, *Writings*, 10:392.

<sup>286</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 41:107–108.

<sup>287</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 41:108.

<sup>288</sup>Franklin, *Papers*, 41:108.

<sup>289</sup>Lemay, *Writings*, 1179–1180.

<sup>290</sup>On reincarnation and “perfect pleasure,” see Franklin, *Papers*, 4:505. On the “party of pleasure—that is to last forever,” see Franklin, *Papers*, 6:406–407; and, as Franklin wrote, in Smyth, *Writings*, 9:334: “Thus finding myself to exist in the world, I believe I shall in some shape or other always exist.” Also, Franklin, *Papers*, 15:154–155, tells of an Iroquois myth of reincarnation.

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