

Benjamin Franklin's Letter to Thomas Paine

Written By: Benjamin Franklin

Background:

Benjamin Franklin (1706-90) was a printer, author, inventor, scientist, philanthropist, statesman, diplomat, and public official. He was the first president of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery (1774); a member of the Continental Congress (1775-76) where he signed the Declaration of Independence (1776); a negotiator and signer of the final treaty of peace with Great Britain (1783); and a delegate to the Constitutional Convention where he signed the federal Constitution (1787); Franklin was one of only six men who signed both the Declaration and the Constitution. He wrote his own epitaph, which declared: "The body of Benjamin Franklin, printer, like the cover of an old book, its contents torn out, stripped of its lettering, and gilding, lies here, food for worms. But the work shall not be lost; for it will, as he believed, appear once more in a new and more elegant edition, revised and corrected by the Author."

Benjamin Franklin was frequently consulted by Thomas Paine for advice and suggestions regarding his political writings, and Franklin assisted Paine with some of his famous essays. This letter is Franklin's response to a manuscript Paine sent him that advocated against the concept of a providential God.

Letter to [Thomas Paine?]

[*Reason and Religion*]

TO THOMAS PAINE.

[PHILA. July 3, 1786 (?)]

DEAR SIR,

I have read your manuscript with some attention. By the argument it contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For without the belief of a Providence, that takes cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection. I will not enter into any discussion of your principles, though you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my opinion, that, though your reasonings are subtle and may prevail with some readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general sentiments of mankind on that subject, and the consequence of printing this piece will be, a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others. He that spits against the wind, spits in his own face.

But, were you to succeed, do you imagine any good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life, without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantages of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing a strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common temptations. But think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes habitual, which is the great point for its security. And perhaps you are indebted to her originally, that is, to your religious education, for the habits of virtue upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors. For among us it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots, that a youth, to be raised into the company of men, should prove his manhood by beating his mother.

I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person; whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you, and perhaps a good deal of regret and repentance. If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be if without it. I intend this letter itself as a proof of my friendship, and therefore add no professions to it; but subscribe simply yours,

B. F.