

FRANKLIN
*and
his*
Gods

a lecture by

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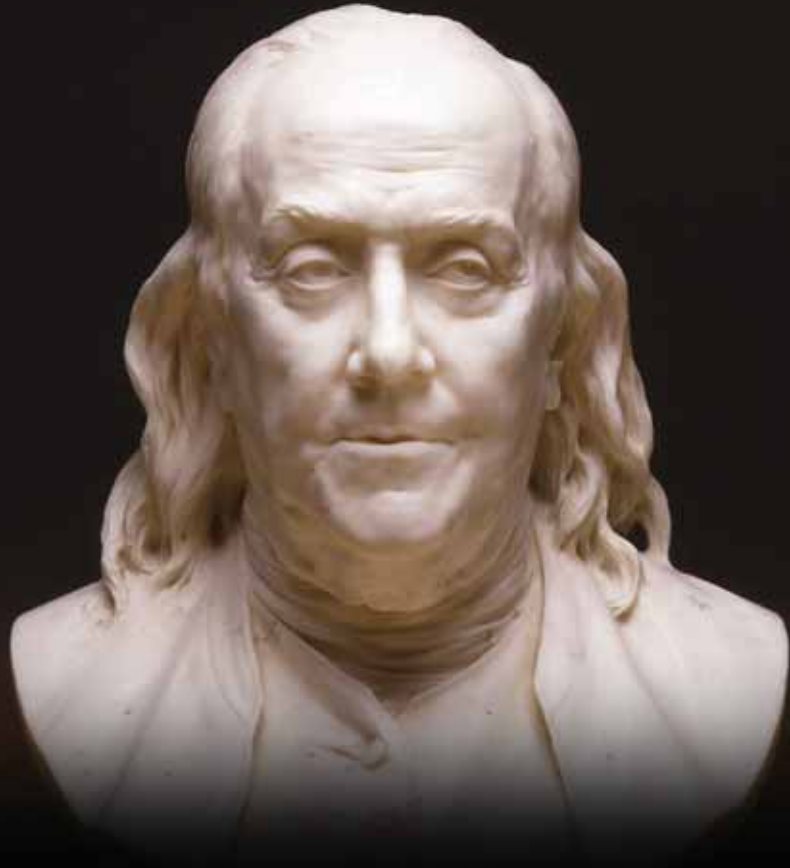


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Christ Church, Philadelphia
March 22, 2006

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FRANKLIN
and
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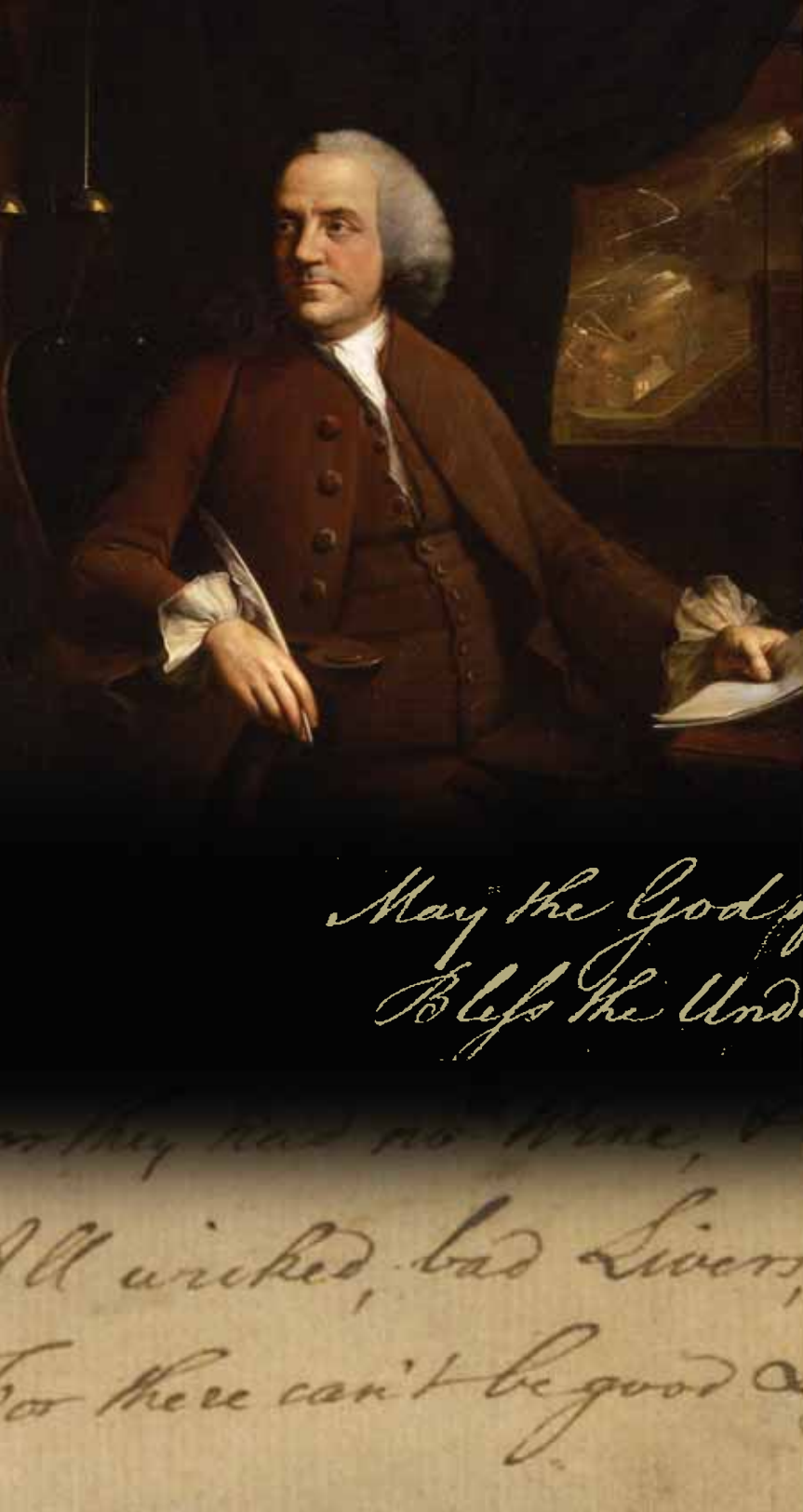
Gods

Philadelphia, April 30, 1788

A commemorative booklet to accompany a lecture by Kerry Walters,
William Bittinger Professor of Philosophy and Philosophy
Department Chair at Gettysburg College, given at Christ Church,
Philadelphia, on March 22, 2006, as part of the celebrations
surrounding the 300th anniversary of Benjamin Franklin's birth.

Made possible through the support of the
John Templeton Foundation

For the Relief of the Sick and Miserable
May the God of Mercies
Bless the Undertaking!



May the God of Mercies
Bless the Undertaking!

...they had no wine,
All wretched, bad Livers,
For there can't be good &

...was honest old Noah first planted the vine,

Excerpts from
FRANKLIN'S WRITINGS
ON THE SUBJECT

*From The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787
(Farrand's Records, Volume 1, from the Library of Congress online at www.loc.gov)*

June 28, 1787

Mr. President,

THE SMALL PROGRESS WE HAVE MADE AFTER 4 OR FIVE WEEKS CLOSE ATTENDANCE & CONTINUAL REASONINGS WITH EACH OTHER – our different sentiments on almost every question, several of the last producing as many noes as Ays, is methinks a melancholy proof of the imperfection of the Human Understanding. We indeed seem to feel our own want of political wisdom, since we have been running all about in search of it. We have gone back to ancient history for models of Government, and examined the different forms of those Republics which having been originally formed with the seeds of their own dissolution now no longer exist. And we have view'd Modern States all round Europe, but find none of their Constitutions suitable to our Circumstances.

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the Contest with G. Britain, when we were sensible of danger, we had daily prayer in this room for the divine protection–

Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously answered. All of us who were engaged in the struggle, must have observed frequent instances of a Superintending providence in our favor. To that kind providence we owe this happy opportunity of consulting in peace on the means of establishing our future national Felicity. And have we now forgotten that powerful friend? or do we imagine we no longer need his assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see 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? We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that "except the Lord build the House they labor in vain that build it." I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without his concurring aid we shall succeed in this political Building no

I have lived, Sir, a long time and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth, That God governs in the affairs of men!

better than the Builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests, our projects will be confounded and we ourselves shall become a reproach and a byword down to future Ages. And what is worse, Mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance, despair of establishing Governments by Human Wisdom and leave it to chance, war, and conquest.

I therefore beg leave to move – that henceforth prayers, imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations, be held in this Assembly every morning before we proceed to business, and that one or more of the Clergy of this City be requested to officiate in that Service."

NOTE BY DR. FRANKLIN

The Convention, except three or four Persons, thought Prayers unnecessary.

*From John Bigelow, ed., The Works of Benjamin Franklin
(New York: Putnam's, 1904)*

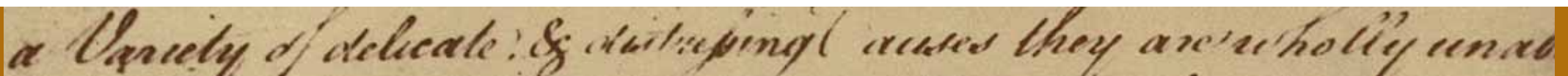
Excerpts from a letter from Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, Philadelphia, March 9, 1790, (Franklin was to die aged 84 on April 17, 1790.) Ezra Stiles (1727-1795) was a scholar and clergyman, elected to the American Philosophical Society in 1768, and President of Yale from 1778 until his death.

"You desire to know something of my Religion. It is the first time I have been questioned upon it: But I cannot take your Curiosity amiss, and shall endeavor in a few Words to gratify it. Here is my Creed: I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them.

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity: though it is a Question I do not dogmatise upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm however in its being believed, if that Belief has the good Consequence, as it

*That the most acceptable Service
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probably has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed, especially as I do not perceive that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Believers, in his Government of the World, with any particular Marks of his Displeasure. I shall only add respecting myself, that having experienced the Goodness of that Being, in conducting me prosperously through a long Life, I have no doubt of its Continuance in the next, though without the smallest Conceit of meriting such Goodness."





FRANKLIN *and his* Gods

a lecture by
KERRY WALTERS

“I have made to myself a god”

— Benjamin Franklin’s Search for the Divine

A Few Preliminaries

THE NAME “BENJAMIN FRANKLIN” EVOKES ANY NUMBER OF ASSOCIATIONS: PRINTING, JOURNALISM, INVENTING, ENTREPRENEURSHIP, DIPLOMACY, NATURAL SCIENCE, CRACKER-BARREL PHILOSOPHY. But chances are good that what doesn’t come to mind when we hear Franklin’s name is the word “religion.” We just don’t think of Franklin in that way—or, if we do, we usually associate him with the abstract and rather bloodless rational religion touted by eighteenth-century Enlightenment thinkers, and leave it at that.

My hope is to persuade you that it’s worthwhile to be more interested in Franklin’s religious worldview than we typically are. I have two reasons for wanting to do this. The first is that his religious beliefs are intrinsically interesting; this alone, I think, is a good enough reason to explore them. But secondly and more importantly, I believe that Franklin’s eighteenth-century search for God just might have something relevant to say to those of us today who find ourselves likewise searching for God. The struggle that Franklin went through to reconcile his heart’s need for God with his head’s skepticism has a very contemporary ring indeed. Some parts of Franklin’s thought haven’t aged well, and come across today as quaint. But his religious reflections have retained their vitality. There are several preliminary points that need to be made before trying to navigate Ben Franklin’s religious beliefs. Let me spell them out.

The first thing that needs to be said is that Franklin was no theologian. He would’ve been the first to repudiate the label—whether he would have done so laughingly or indignantly

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...was honest and Noah first planted the vine,

would've depended, I suspect, on his mood. He wasn't formally trained in metaphysics or divinity—truth to tell, he wasn't formally trained in much of anything except the printing trade—even though as a precocious autodidact he'd read a fair share of the going theology of his day. He never had much good to say about any of it.

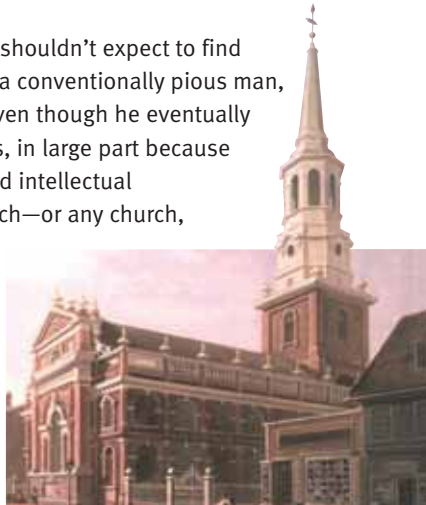
So Franklin made no claims to being a theologian, and we shouldn't expect to find systematic theological arguments in his writings. He wasn't a conventionally pious man, either. He was never more than a lukewarm church-goer. Even though he eventually decided that he preferred Anglican to Presbyterian services, in large part because he thought Anglicanism taught a “liberal, sophisticated and intellectual Christianity,”ⁱⁱⁱ his attendance at Philadelphia's Christ Church—or any church, for that matter—was something less than regular.

The second point that ought to be kept in mind is that we'd do well to resist slapping some simple religious label onto Franklin. All religious beliefs, regardless of whether they're shallow or profound, are more complicated than the names we attach to them might suggest. The standard labels we attach to religious beliefs—Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Sikh, and so on—aren't particularly helpful except to situate us in a very general and usually rather vague way. Textbook descriptions of these religious families may make them sound very precise in doctrine and practice, but those of us who live in the real world know better. We know that personal faith—the way in which religious traditions actually get lived out by individuals in particular communities at discrete historical periods—is a frequently bewildering intersection of multiple factors and influences, personal as well as social, that defy easy labeling. If you doubt this, just examine your own religious sensibilities. My guess is that you'll discover that they're profoundly complicated, layered like a medieval palimpsest, likely inconsistent in places, and richer rather than poorer because of the messiness.

That complex nature of religious belief is especially important to keep in mind when considering Franklin's, because the temptation among interpreters has generally been to squeeze him into one neatly wrapped box or another.

The most common label tied around Franklin's neck is that of “deist.” Franklin, defenders of this view say, was a believer in the impersonal, First-Cause God of reason defended by Enlightenment thinkers. Many of Franklin's contemporaries put him in this camp, some approvingly, others not so approvingly. Thomas Jefferson, for example, approved. But John Adams (whose personal loathing of Franklin might lead one to doubt his objectivity) sneered that Franklin belonged in the ranks of “Deists and Libertines”—a strange reproof from Adams, who seems to have had decidedly deistic leanings himself.ⁱⁱ We will see, however, that the “deist” label doesn't fit comfortably. Franklin went through a deistic period, and retained strong elements from it his entire life. But except for a very short time in his youth, his deism was never conventional.

Others have concluded that Franklin was in fact a worldly materialist who, in cynical pursuit of his own interests, posed sometimes as a Presbyterian and sometimes as an Anglican, but who in fact had no real belief in God whatsoever. Ernest Renan, the nineteenth-century religious biographer who himself was hardly a paragon of orthodoxy, spoke for many when he condemned Franklin as an infidel “beyond whom there are none in the world more atheistic.”ⁱⁱⁱ The problem with this label is that there's simply no evidence for it. Nowhere in Franklin's private papers do we find an overt denial of God's existence. It's true that Franklin's concept of God isn't orthodox, and it's also true that his interest in religion waxed and waned throughout his life. But if these are characteristics of atheism, there are many more atheists in the world than one might suspect.



...to claim Franklin was in any sense a Christian pretty much empties the term of meaning.

Still other commentators—although, thankfully, not too many others—go the opposite direction by trying to transform Franklin into a Christian saint. One nineteenth-century biographer astonishingly called Franklin the “consummate Christian.” “Indeed,” this same author enthused, “I do not know who, of any time, has exhibited more of the spirit of Christ.”^{iv} What an utterly extraordinary claim! Franklin grew up in a Calvinist household

whose atmosphere of piety soured him on Christianity his entire life. As I've already indicated, he sporadically attended both Presbyterian and Anglican churches, and sincerely admired certain Christian sects, such as the Dunkers and the Quakers. But to claim Franklin was in any sense a Christian pretty much empties the term of meaning.

Perhaps the most startling attempt to label Franklin's religious beliefs is the claim, seriously entertained by most Franklin scholars during the second half of the twentieth century, that Franklin was actually a polytheist.^v Until quite recently, in fact, this interpretation more or less ruled the day. It had the virtue of taking seriously certain passages in his writing that seem to suggest polytheism, passages which the majority of commentators, out of embarrassment or confusion, had long ignored. But the polytheism interpretation, as we'll see in more detail later, suffers from one obvious disadvantage. It simply stretches credulity to assume that Franklin believed in a literal pantheon of gods. So Franklin can no more be classified as a polytheist than as a deist, atheist, or Christian.

In addition to remembering that Franklin isn't a theologian and that neither his nor anyone else's religious beliefs lend themselves to easy labels, there's one final point that I ask you to keep in mind: Franklin doesn't go out of his way to help us get a handle on his religious sensibilities. His religious writings are, at times, especially obscure—yet another reason, I suspect, why so many interpreters of them, pushed to the point of desperation, frantically search for a way to classify and be done with them.



There are two explanations for the obscurity of Franklin’s religious writings. The first is that he seems to have been a remarkably private man. In spite of the facts that he was a public celebrity in his own lifetime and that he penned what is arguably this country’s most famous autobiography, Franklin is really pretty circumspect when it comes to talking or writing about his personal life and deepest held beliefs. So it’s not surprising that he would be cautious in documenting, even in private papers, his religious views.

The second reason why Franklin’s religious writings are vague—and this, admittedly, is conjecture on my part—is because he never quite came to the point in his life where he was able to completely articulate to himself his own intuitions about God. In reading Franklin on religion—and here I mean his private writings, the ones that come across as more authentic than his public and usually pretty conventional utterances—one gets the

impression of tentativeness, ambivalence, honest uncertainty, and sometimes outright bewilderment. One gets the impression, in other words, of a man whose religion is better thought of as process or journey than doctrine or destination. So it’s up to us, who after all have a vantage point on Franklin that he himself did not, to read between the lines and try to see where he meant to go, even if he couldn’t quite get there himself.

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The Search Begins: Youthful Iconoclasm

So: by reading both what Franklin actually says, what he merely insinuates, and what he fails to say, what sense can we make of his beliefs about things divine? As a general observation, my impression is that Franklin was a conflicted man when it came to religious belief. He seems to have wanted to believe in God; why else would he return to the subject again and again throughout his long life? But he also seems to have been inhibited from easily doing so because of unpleasant memories of the fire-and-brimstone Calvinism into which he was born, as well as by his adult suspicion, sometimes peripheral and sometimes overpowering, that a rational account of the physical world doesn’t especially need the God-hypothesis.^v The struggle to believe remained with Franklin all his life. True, it lay dormant for long stretches of time. But, intermittently, it flared up and raged, sometimes at a white heat. You can begin to see, I hope, why I think Franklin’s religious journey has contemporary relevance. How many of us haven’t felt similar battles in our own souls between our longing for God and our anxiety that God-belief is wishful thinking?

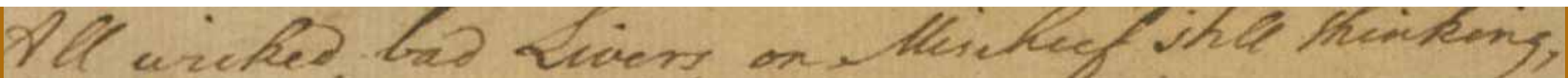
The Boston that Franklin grew up in was still very much a town dominated by the Mathers, father and son, who preached and enforced a stern, no-nonsense Calvinism. Franklin’s parents, Josiah and Abiah, were covenanted members of Old South Church

who took their religion seriously. The two of them tried to rear their son piously,^{vii} but the combination of jeremiad-style sermonizing at church and quaint piety at home soon set young Benjamin’s teeth on edge. Like many precocious adolescents before and since, Franklin felt the need to rebel against parental authority and, given the centrality of religion in his household, this necessarily meant rebelling against his parents’ faith. By the time he was fifteen and apprenticed to his printer brother James, Franklin had taken, as he tells us, to “evading as much as I could the common Attendance on publick Worship, which my Father used to exact of me when I was under his care.”^{viii} It wasn’t long before he immersed himself in the writings of British deists such as Lord Shaftesbury, Anthony Collins, and John Toland. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin tells us that he first read these free-thinkers with the intent of disputing their claims and thereby strengthening his own never robust fidelity to Calvinism, but that as he progressed he was unexpectedly converted to rational religion. But this is almost certainly one of those charming conceits with which the *Autobiography* is liberally sprinkled. Franklin confesses that he was a pugnacious youth who delighted in arguing with all and sundry about religion. It’s pretty clear that he was already a convinced iconoclast by the time he started reading the British deists, and that he in fact did so in order to gather more darts to fling at Boston’s faithful.

So from a childhood background of strict (although, by his own admission, not unusually oppressive) Calvinism, Franklin the youthful rebel shook the Christian dust off his feet and set off for what he took to be the purer land of deism.

This isn’t the place to launch into an elaborate discussion of eighteenth century deism—although, given the great amount of nonsense that’s been written about it, it’s tempting to do so. Deism, at least in the American colonies and early Republic, was neither as widespread nor as uniform in doctrine as many subsequent commentators—including, alas, myself at one point in my career—have supposed. But there are some basic fundamentals. Deism is a natural or rational religion, so called because it utterly rejects “supernatural” phenomena such as miracles, grace, and divine revelation. The God of deism is more abstract metaphysical principle than personal deity, a First-Cause that creates a clockwork universe defined by uniform natural laws, inhabits it with humans whose rational faculties are capable of completely understanding those natural laws, and then withdraws to let the cosmic clock run on its own without any kind of divine meddling. Deists in Franklin’s day rejected almost everything in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures as superstitious rigmarole. So far as they were concerned, about the only thing worth salvaging from them was a handful of carefully pruned moral principles. Deists were big on virtue, claiming that its exercise is the best way of honoring God, although exactly what counted as a virtue for them is a bit hazy.^{ix}

This is the “religion,” if religion it actually be, embraced by Franklin the adolescent rebel. When he was sixteen, he took his deism to the streets by publishing a series of provocative essays under the pen name of “Silence Dogood” in his brother James’ paper, the *New-England Courant*. The very name “Silence Dogood” was a mischievous jab at Boston’s Calvinist behemoth Cotton Mather, who just a few weeks earlier had delivered a



sermon entitled “Silentiarius: The Silent Sufferer.” Any readers who might’ve missed Franklin’s not-so-subtle play on Mather’s sermon title couldn’t possibly have missed the glee with which the young Franklin week-by-week skewered Boston’s religious Brahmins for what he took to be their moral and religious hypocrisy. He clearly had great fun writing the essays, which even today are great fun to read. Although in his *Autobiography* he claims to have wanted to keep his identity secret, both his vanity and his sheer delight in being a thorn in the religious establishment’s side ensured that all of Boston quickly discovered who was behind the Silence Dogood essays. In short order, as he tells us, “my indiscrete Disputations about Religion began to make me pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist.”^x

The Search Stalls: Going Too Far

Life plays funny tricks. Just three years after the Dogood essays, Franklin’s zeal for deism took on a turn that horrified even himself. It happened like this.

In 1725, while living in London, Franklin wrote and published a pamphlet with the somewhat ponderous title *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain*. In it, he pushed the fundamental principles of deism to their logical limits, and what he found there scared him to death.

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The *Dissertation* is really an extraordinary document—not so much for originality or insight (Franklin, by his own admission, was no more metaphysician than theologian), as for sheer destructiveness. For in it, Franklin stumbled across what other deists of greater notoriety seemed either incapable of recognizing or unable to admit: that the deist model of a clockwork-like, mechanistic universe controlled by immutable natural laws necessarily led to the absolute denial of free will and ethical responsibility. After all, in such a universe humans must be as bound—as inescapably determined—by natural law as inanimate objects. The upshot was that the reason and virtue so fervently praised by deists were illusions. You could accept a mechanistic universe, or you could accept free will. But not both.

Franklin knew that this conclusion was unsettling, and ended his *Dissertation* with a patronizing admonition to those who might be upset by it: “to use a Piece of *common Sense*, our *Geese* are but *Geese* tho’ we think ‘em *Swans*; and Truth will be Truth tho’ it sometimes prove mortifying and distasteful.”^{xi} But it appears that Franklin was trying to reassure himself as much as his readers, for he deeply regretted the publication of his pamphlet almost as soon as it left the press. He realized that his argument reduced humans to soulless cogs in a dead and determined universe, reduced reason to nothing

more than brain chemistry (as we might say today), and reduced virtue to conditioned behavior. Any belief system that postulated such a world, concluded Franklin, was intolerable. Even if it was true, it ought not to be publicized, for doing so would destroy the human spirit. Humans needed—*he* needed—something more than an absentee God and a clockwork-world.

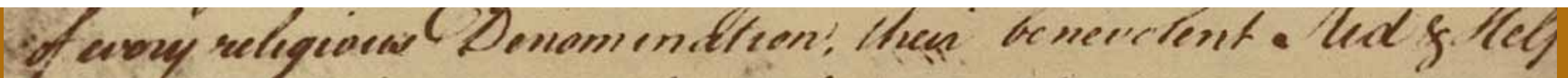
Franklin tried to snatch up and destroy all the printed copies of his pamphlet to spare the public his “horrible Errors,” and he nearly succeeded.^{xii} (Thankfully for us, a handful of copies survived.) Then he hunkered down for a few years to do some serious thinking and soul-searching about God. The faith of his childhood he still found impossibly off-putting. Franklin just couldn’t accept that God was as close and personal as Christianity preached. So that way was closed to him. Deism’s denial of free will, as well as its understanding of God as an aloof First-Cause, was profoundly unsatisfying to a youth who was rediscovering in himself the need for a quite different kind of God. So that way was closed to him too. At the tender age of nineteen, Benjamin Franklin found himself marooned in a religious wasteland.

The Search Resumes: The New Synthesis

The next couple of years were spiritually rough for Franklin, a bleak period of self-doubt and religious confusion. It’s not difficult to see this period in Franklin’s life as one of those existential low points in which ego questions itself and worldviews grow fragile.

This kind of vulnerability invites either collapse or insight. In Franklin’s case, it birthed insight. In a lesser person, Franklin’s soured zeal for natural religion, his visceral dislike of Calvinist Christianity, his dread of a universe bereft of reason, virtue, and purpose, and his increasingly felt personal need for a providential and personal deity coupled with his honest inability to imagine God as anything but the deistic distant First-Cause, would’ve led to a hopeless religious impasse. But Franklin’s genius managed to synthesize these disparate elements into a religious insight that set the direction of his religious journey for the rest of his life. The document that records this break-through was written in 1728. Franklin entitled it “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion.”

The “Articles and Acts” is exactly what it sounds like: a creed and litany that summarize Franklin’s new religious insight. The litany is eclectic, combining deistic hymns to reason and virtue with fervent and a few vaguely Christian-sounding petitions for divine guidance. But it’s the creedal half of the document that’s particularly interesting and holds the key to understanding Franklin’s religious position. As you’ll be able to see in just a minute, it’s also the document that inspired the judgment of some commentators that Franklin was a polytheist.



The most pertinent passage in the “Articles” creed is worth quoting at length.

I Believe there is one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves.

For I believe that Man is not the most perfect Being but One, rather that as there are many Degrees of Beings his Inferiors, so there are many Degrees of Beings superior to him.

I Believe there is one Supreme most perfect Being, Author and Father of the Gods themselves.

Also, when I stretch my imagination thro’ and beyond our System of Planets, beyond the visible fix’d Stars themselves, into that Space that is every Way infinite, and conceive it fill’d with Suns like ours, each with a Chorus of Worlds for ever moving round

him, then this little Ball on which we move, seems, even in my narrow Imagination, to be almost Nothing, and my self less than nothing...

When I think thus, I imagine it great Vanity in me to suppose that the *Supremely Perfect*, does in the least regard such an inconsiderable Nothing as Man... He, *the infinite Father*, expects or requires no Worship or Praise from us, but ...is INFINITELY ABOVE IT.

...But... there is in all Men something like a natural Principle which enclines them to DEVOTION or the Worship of some unseen Power...

I CONCEIVE then, that the INFINITE has created many Beings or Gods, vastly Superior to Man, who can better conceive his Perfections than we, and return him a more rational and glorious Praise...

It may be that these created Gods, are immortal, or it may be that after many Ages, they are changed, and Others supply their Places.^{xiii}

Franklin goes on to describe the “created God” that he chooses to worship as a benevolent and wise “Being” who has made a good world and desires humans to be happy. “Let me then not fail to praise my God continually,” he concludes, “for it is his Due, and it is all I can return for his many Favours and great goodness to me; and let me resolve to be virtuous, that I may be happy, that I may please Him, who is delighted to see me happy. Amen.”

What are we to make of this intriguing document? There are two obvious interpretations. One is that it’s patent nonsense, a theological spoof scribbled by a young man already notorious for his iconoclastic grandstanding. The other is that it’s a sincere statement of belief in the literal existence of multiple deities, with an over-God, whose being is absolutely inaccessible to humans, mediated through a second level of lesser but accessible deities. This two-storied model of divinity, with a dark, primordial Creator known only indirectly and dimly through the revelations of its lesser offspring, is not at all uncommon in human religious thought. There is, for example, God the Father and God the son; Brahman and

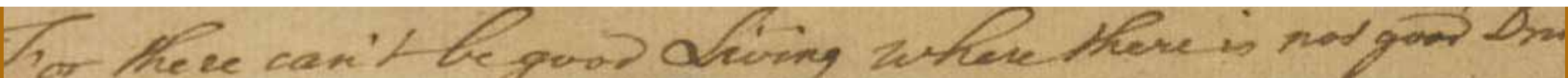
the Hindu gods; the Tao which cannot be named and local gods who can; mysterious Kronos and the Olympian deities spawned by him; Plato’s Demiurge and intermediate gods; the unknowable *Ein Sof* of the Jewish Kabbalah and the manifestations that flow out of it; and so on.

But, in my judgment, neither the spoof nor the polytheism reading of Franklin’s “Articles” hold up. There’s no indication or evidence whatsoever that Franklin intended the “Articles” as spoof or satire. On the contrary, the entire document exudes a deeply personal conviction and heartfelt seriousness not apparent in his earlier writings, including the *Dissertation*. Moreover, Franklin’s obscure allusions to multiple gods are echoed in later efforts throughout his life to find words to express his religious sensibilities. So there’s very good reason to presume that the principles expressed in “Articles and Acts” serve as touchstones for Franklin’s religious worldview from 1728 onwards. They will be revisited, re-expressed, massaged, nuanced, and occasionally—but not too often—forgotten, in his later religious writings. They will serve as his spiritual center of gravity for the rest of his life.

At the same time, there’s no good reason to think that Franklin is espousing a literal polytheism in the “Articles and Acts.” He was, after all, a man of his time. Although he backed away in alarm from the thorough-going mechanism which eighteenth-century deism ultimately endorsed, he also irremediably imbibed the Enlightenment ideal of reason and its suspicion of anything that smacked of superstition. Given this, it just doesn’t make sense to conclude that Franklin, a man who couldn’t even bring himself to take the Christian doctrine of the Trinity seriously, would find a polytheistic mythos either rationally acceptable or morally salutary.

So we must search for a different interpretation, one that accepts the central importance of the “Articles and Acts” without taking their talk about gods literally, which acknowledges the deistic strands and Christian scraps that remained present in Franklin’s religious thought, and which recognizes that his emotional need to relate to something greater than himself continuously battled with his rational suspicion that the need couldn’t be met in any conventional religious way. You may recall that I earlier observed that one’s personal religious beliefs are intricately latticed structures woven from a bewildering multitude of influences. What Franklin achieved in his “Articles and Acts” is a powerful illustration of this point.

So: just what is this achievement? At the core of Franklin’s religious insight is the willingness to embrace disparate and even paradoxical elements as all somehow gesturing at the reality of God. There is here a bold embrace of both-and inclusivity that



abandons a much more comfortable either-or slicing away of troublesome paradox and mystery. The effort to hold disparate elements in a creative both-and tension makes for a messy and murky religious worldview. But it also, I would suggest, makes for one that's loyal to the human experience of the divine.

What are the elements Franklin tries to hold in tension in his "Articles and Acts"? On the one hand, there's the rock-bottom conviction that the universe must have a divine First-Cause. This belief is a holdover from his youthful deism, but it's also, for Franklin, a simple matter of reason: only a divine power is forceful enough to give rise to reality itself. But Franklin, unlike conventional deists, no longer believes that reason can reveal anything about this divine First-Cause other than that it must exist for anything else to exist. Wisdom, goodness, love—none of these qualities can be either attributed to it or denied of it. Human reason simply does not, cannot, stretch that far. "[I]t is impossible," writes Franklin, "to have any positive clear Idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible." This may seem like an obvious observation. But for someone who was once steeped in deism, such an acknowledgement of the limits of human reason is a very big step indeed.

On the other hand, Franklin feels a pressing personal need for contact with a deity who is wise, benevolent, good, and loving. Moreover, he believes that all humans feel the same need—"there is in all Men," he writes, "something like a natural Principle which enclines them to DEVOTION or ... Worship." And so, in order to meet this fundamental need, humanity, quite without any conscious awareness of what it's doing, invents intermediary "created Gods" that provide the emotional support persons crave but will never receive from the unknowable, unapproachable First-Cause. These "created Gods," venerated by the faithful of all the major world religions, are fictions. They don't exist as independent beings. They are artifacts born from the human longing for God. They are projections which, while assuaging a universal human need, nonetheless inevitably reflect in their specifics the historical place and time from which they arise. That's why Franklin says that the "created Gods" come and go, changing identity and character to fit shifting times.

Yet to say that these gods are fictional isn't to say that they aren't real in a functional sense or psychologically and socially valuable. The perspectival gods that we fearful and needy humans create for ourselves shed light on certain essential facts about the sorts of creatures we are; these gods give us a reason for getting out of bed in the morning by providing us with a sense of direction and purpose in life; they comfort us when we're miserable, and they invite us to worship with joy and thanksgiving; and they provide us with a foundation for moral direction and social stability.

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The great both-and of Franklin's synthesis is to value and embrace the benefits that "worship" of the "created Gods" bring, while at the same time acknowledging that the gods are only perspectives, relativistic attempts to put names and faces on the First-Cause who remains forever hidden from us. Our "created Gods," whether we call them Odin or Zeus or Jupiter—or, for that matter, Allah or Jesus or Yahweh—are all noble fruits of the human yearning for God. Of course they fall woefully short of the mark; how can finite creatures possibly hope to fathom the Infinite? But they're better than nothing. They're the only gods we humans can ever have, at least on this side of death.

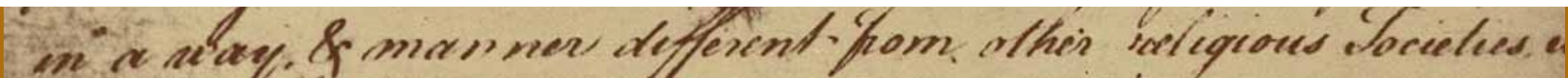
Now, a philosopher may come to the point where he or she sees through religious claims and realizes that all gods except the inaccessible First-Cause are fictions. But the great mass of humanity is clueless. For the most part, people imagine their gods to be objectively, independently existent. This misconception is generally a happy one, so far as Franklin is concerned, because he's convinced that traditional religious faith's promise to reward virtue and punish vice in an afterlife provides a socially needed check on

behavior. Thus religious faith, he writes, "will [always] be a Powerful Regulator of our Actions, give us Peace and Tranquility within our Minds, and render us Benevolent, Useful and Beneficial to others."^{xiv} In a less cheery tone, he elsewhere underscores the importance of traditional faith as a regulator of human behavior by rhetorically asking: "If men are so wicked as we now see them with religion, what would they be if without it[?]"^{xv}

For someone like Franklin, though, ... traditional faith is no longer an option.

For someone like Franklin, though, who has recognized the "created Gods" for the artifacts they are and yet who needs an intimate relationship with the cosmos just as much as any other person, a simple, traditional faith is no longer an option. What's needed in order to live with the knowledge that our "gods" are really just murky efforts to name the mysterious First-Cause is what the philosopher Richard Rorty, in a different context, refers to as "ironic commitment"—the ability to commit wholeheartedly to a belief that one knows is merely provisional and can never be anything but provisional.^{xvi} In the context of Franklin's religion, what is needed is the ability to simultaneously confess that the gods one worships are fictions, but to nonetheless dedicate oneself body, mind, and spirit to them as if they were actual. It is the capacity, as Franklin says at one point, for the worshipper simultaneously to acknowledge, "I have made to myself a God," and sincerely to confess that this god "abideth always[s] in mine House, and provideth me with all Things."^{xvii}

Some may call this position psychologically impossible, although I very much doubt that it is. I suspect that you and I, in both our personal and our public lives, are ironically committed to any number of beliefs, traditions, and persons. Others may call Franklin's religion hypocritical, a kind of pretend-faith, although the charge of hypocrisy seems both uncompassionate and irrelevant here. Still others may call it a cowardly clinging to traditional God-belief in an age that increasingly considers such belief irrational and childish. I can appreciate this charge, and I imagine that most people here tonight can as well,



although we may disagree as to whether the clinging is cowardly. For we live, after all, in a climate where the skeptical naturalism of the hard sciences and the asinine dogmatism of religious fundamentalism have conspired to make God-belief difficult. Those who feel the need for God—and if Franklin is correct, such a need is a natural inclination—may indeed find themselves uncomfortably clinging to what they can no longer accept with childlike trust, recognizing that it falls short of what they once believed but unwilling to entirely forsake it.

But from his perspective of ironic commitment Franklin, who after all is in exactly the same boat, believes that such a position can bestow meaning and purpose to a life. A religious sensibility that acknowledges the perspectival nature of gods and the ironic nature of faith in them not only accepts personal limitations in one's ability to know reality—a confession that's always good for the soul—but also encourages a humble tolerance of divergent religious perspectives. It's not at all surprising that throughout his long life, Franklin could explore with appreciative pleasure different sectarian perspectives and find something good in all of them—even Calvinism, his personal bete noir.

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The first is found in the Hindu *Bhagavad-Gita*, in the chapter where Lord Krishna unforgettably unfolds before the youth Arjuna to reveal the staggering, mind-boggling majesty of God. “Suppose a thousand suns should rise together into the sky,” writes the author of the *Bhagavad-Gita*. “Such is the glory of the Shape of Infinite God.” Arjuna, speechless at the sheer incomprehensibility of the vision and “overcome with wonder..., bow[s] low before God in adoration.”^{xviii}

The second example is found in the Hebrew Bible's story of Job who, after famously demanding to understand the whats and whys of human suffering, is silenced by a God who tells him that his limited, finite mind is incapable of fathoming answers even if they could be given. “Where were you,” God pointedly asks Job, “when I laid the foundation of the earth? Tell me, if you have understanding!” (Job 38:4; NRSV) And Job, filled with awe at the terrible and wonderful mystery that is God, likewise bows, confessing that he has tried to understand what is beyond him.

I don't know if Franklin ever experienced an epiphanous moment in which was struck dumb by a revelation of the absolute incomprehensibility of God. To be honest, I doubt it.

My guess is that Franklin arrived at his own acknowledgment of the mystery of God in a less dramatic, more cerebral way, and that it came to him between his 1725 “Dissertation” and his 1728 “Articles and Acts.” But this I do know: sometime during that three year period, Franklin, like Arjuna and Job, submitted to the absolute otherness of the First-Cause and tried to content himself with more accessible “created Gods.” We may disagree with or perhaps even disapprove of Franklin's position. But it's not hard to sympathize with his predicament.

Franklin and the Mystery of God

When you think about it, Franklin's position isn't quite as unorthodox as it might appear on the surface. If we cut through his sometimes eloquent and sometimes awkward attempts to express his religious intuitions, what Franklin seems to be saying is what all religious traditions properly affirm: that God is infinitely more than our minds and our words will ever be able to capture. We will never, at least in this life, know God. At best, we can only hope that the masks of God we fashion are in some tiny way revelatory of the divine mystery, and that they in some sense succeed in comforting us in our loneliness.

This inability on our part to fathom God can, I suppose, be looked at with gloom and despair. But it can also be seen—and more appropriately so, I believe—as an occasion for awe and veneration in the face of a mystery that overwhelmingly points to an indescribable depth of being. Such a viewpoint is recorded time and again in the world's religious literature. Let me close by mentioning just two well-known examples.

ⁱ Or so Melvin Buxbaum states in his insightful *Benjamin Franklin and the Zealous Presbyterians* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1975), p. 156.

ⁱⁱ *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams*, ed. L. H. Butterfield (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1961), vol. 2, p. 391.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ernest Renan, *Oeuvres complètes*, ed. Henriette Pschari (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1947), vol. 3, p. 981.

^{iv} James Parton, *Life and Times of Benjamin Franklin* (New York: Mason Brothers, 1964), vol. 2, p. 646.

^v The first and most systematic defense of the polytheism thesis is Alfred Owen Aldridge's *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1967).

^{vi} The allusion here, of course, is to the astronomer Laplace's famous reply to the Emperor Napoleon who, upon reading Laplace's “history” of the universe, asked the savant why there was no mention of a divine Creator in it.

“Because, your majesty,” Laplace supposedly said, “I had no need of that hypothesis.” This quip was beloved by adherents of rational religion throughout the nineteenth century. Using it to describe Franklin’s position is historically anachronistic but conceptually fitting.

^{vii} For more on Franklin’s childhood and religious upbringing, see my *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), chapter 1.

^{viii} *The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree, Ralph L. Ketcham, Helen C. Boatfield, and Helene H. Fineman (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964), p. 63. Hereafter cited as *Autobiography*.

^{ix} I’ve tried, with varying degrees of success, to make sense of deism in my *Rational Infidels: The American Deists* (Durango, CO: Longwood Academic, 1992), *The American Deists: Voices of Reason and Dissent in the Early Republic* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1992), and chapters 1-2 of *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*.

^x *Autobiography*, p. 71.

^{xi} Franklin’s *Dissertation* can be found in *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, ed. Leonard W. Labaree et al. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1959-), vol. 1, pp. 57-71. Hereafter cited as *Papers*. The “Geese” quote is on p. 71. I’ve reprinted and commented on the *Dissertation* in my *The American Deists*, pp. 55-66.

^{xii} *Papers*, vol. 3, pp. 88-89, letter to Thomas Hopkinson (?), 16 October 1746.

^{xiii} “Articles of Faith and Acts of Religion,” *Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 102-108. All subsequent citations from the “Articles and Acts” are from this source.

^{xiv} “On the Providence of God in the Government of the World,” *Papers*, vol. 1, p. 269.

^{xv} *Papers*, vol. 7, p. 295, letter to Thomas Paine (?), 1786.

^{xvi} Rorty discusses “ironic commitment” in his *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

^{xvii} “A Parable Against Persecution,” in *Papers*, vol. 6, p. 123.

^{xviii} Lord Krishna’s revelation is found in Chapter XI of the Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood translation of the *Bhagavad-Gita* (New York: New American Library, 1972).

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The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary, a non-profit organization supported by a lead grant of \$4 million from The Pew Charitable Trusts, was established to mark the 300-year anniversary of Benjamin Franklin’s birth (1706-2006) with a celebration dedicated to educating the public about his enduring legacy and inspiring renewed appreciation of the values he embodied. The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary was founded in 2000 by consortium of five Philadelphia cultural institutions: the American Philosophical Society, The Franklin Institute, the Library Company of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the University of Pennsylvania. In addition, an Act of Congress in 2002 created the Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary Commission, a panel of fifteen outstanding Americans chosen to study and recommend programs to celebrate Franklin’s 300th birthday. The Benjamin Franklin Tercentenary can be found online at www.benfranklin300.org.



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- Sir John Templeton

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