

HAPPY 274TH BIRTHDAY, GEORGE!

For more on the religious views of the founders see this [link](#)

While many businesses will be using George Washington's portrait to sell their goods, I would rather talk about his religious views. Mason Locke Weems, an Anglican minister, was the inventor of the notorious cherry tree story and he was also responsible for many pious fables about Washington's religious life.

Washington was not an intellectual but a man of action. It was James Madison's opinion that Washington never "attended to the arguments for Christianity, and for the different systems of religion, [n]or in fact ... [had he] formed definite opinions on the subject."

There is virtually no evidence in Washington's writings to indicate a firm commitment to the Christian religion. Writing to Lafayette with regard to religious toleration, he states: "Being no bigot myself, I am disposed to indulge the professors of Christianity in the church with that road to Heaven, which to them shall seem the most direct, plainest, easiest, and least liable to exception."

Washington was a nominal Episcopalian who attended church irregularly (ceasing after his retirement) and who never participated in Communion. While president he was once openly criticized from the pulpit by his pastor, James Abercrombie, for setting a poor example by not kneeling in prayer and by not celebrating the Lord's Supper.

In all of his voluminous writing only once does he speak of Jesus Christ and this single incident, a speech to the Delaware Indians, was most likely penned by an aide more orthodox than Washington. On the manuscript of another speech to Indian leaders, we can clearly see the word God crossed out and the phrase "the Great Spirit above" in Washington's handwriting.

It is said that upon leaving office Washington met with a group of clergy who submitted a number of questions for him to answer. Since he had never made any public affirmation of Christianity, one of their questions was whether or not he was a Christian.

Washington very kindly answered all of the questions except that crucial one.

The tolerance that Washington showed for all Christian denominations was another sign of his religious liberalism. There is the famous incident when Washington prevented his soldiers from burning the pope in effigy on Guy Fawkes Day. When once looking for new servants, Washington emphasized that any good workmen would be acceptable, be they "Mohometans, Jews, Christians of any sect, or . . . atheists."

Washington firmly believed in the separation of church and state. Probably the most striking and controversial expression of this principle, in which Washington played a part, appears in the Treaty of Tripoli. Article Eleven of this treaty begins: "As the government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion. . ." President Washington approved treaty; it was ratified by the Senate in 1797 with no recorded debate; and it was signed by the second president John Adams.

In a recent biography of Washington Joseph J. Ellis describes the scene at Washington's death: "There were no ministers in the room, no prayers uttered, no Christian rituals offering the solace of everlasting life. . . . The historical evidence suggests that Washington did not think much about heaven or angels; the only place he knew his body was going was into the ground, and as for his soul, its ultimate location was unknowable. He died as a Roman Stoic rather than a Christian saint."

All in all, the evidence shows that George Washington was a religious liberal who believed in God as impersonal Providence. He probably did not believe in any of the doctrines of Christian orthodoxy. In a famous sermon delivered in 1831, Bird Wilson declared that Washington, along with all the other early presidents, was no more than a Unitarian. As a life long Unitarian I am pleased to be associated with this great American.