Spirituality through the spectacles of Ben Franklin

Highland Views
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Guest columnist

Born in Boston in 1706, Benjamin Franklin wrote, invented and wise-cracked his way to fame that still resounds today. An accomplished printer, founder of post offices and libraries, he electrified the world around him throughout the 18th Century. In the Continental Congress, Franklin proposed the first Articles of Confederation to establish his place among the Founders of America. Before his death in 1790, he was elected President of the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery, a cause he and his protege, Thomas Paine, had championed for years.

In the autobiography he began writing in 1771, Franklin describes his early religious education in the Presbyterian church. Even as a young boy he found the dogmatism and doctrines of the church "unintelligible" and "doubtful," as he explains: "I early absented myself from the public assemblies of the sect, Sunday being my studying day." Yet, he was "never without some religious principles."

Franklin's principles included a belief in a "Deity" (Providence), that "the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man" and belief in a hereafter. "These I esteemed the essentials of every religion." He respected all traditions, "though with different degrees of respect." Franklin didn't have much respect for religious beliefs that didn't inspire a moral life but "served principally to divide us, and make us unfriendly with one another."

In 1739, the well-known preacher George Whitefield came to Philadelphia from Ireland. Most clergy didn't like his popular message and since local pulpits were closed to him, Whitefield preached in open fields ("the fields are white for harvest"). Thousands went out to hear him, and young Ben was in the crowd. He notes that many in the city were catching the fire of faith and "it seemed as if all the world were growing religious."

The new believers decided a meeting house should be built, so a large hall was constructed to hold the congregants. Ben was impressed that the new house

Ben Franklin made with 1,000 keys in Philadelphia.
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and property were opened "for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion" and "not to accommodate any particular sect, but the inhabitants in general; so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach [Islam] to us, he would find a pulpit at his service."

Quite a forward-thinking, inclusive outlook by Ben and his fellow Philadelphians.

Some years later, with the threat of war at hand, Franklin wrote in favor of a common defense of the people. The Quaker Assembly could not support war, but Franklin helped work out a plan whereby Quaker funds could purchase a "fire-engine" – a cannon for the defense of the city. Comparing the strictness of Quaker principles to another local group of believers, the Dunkers, Franklin found something he could respect. He suggested they print and publish their articles of belief but was told the Dunkers did not write down their principles because "some doctrines, which we once esteemed truths, were errors; and that others, which we had esteemed errors, were real truths." They believed that "from time to time God has been pleased to afford us farther [sic] light, and our principles have been improving, and our errors diminishing." Franklin was impressed to hear the explanation: "we fear that, if we should once print our confession of faith, we should feel ourselves as if bound and confined by it, and perhaps be unwilling to receive farther improvement."

Franklin admired the wisdom of that community: "This modesty in a sect is perhaps a singular instance in the history of mankind, every other sect supposing itself in possession of all truth, and that those who differ are so far in the wrong." He goes on to use an analogy of someone walking on a road in the fog. He sees people in the mist ahead and in the fields around him. Where he walks appears clear, "though in truth he is as much in the fog as any of them."

In 1749, Franklin presented a proposal for establishing an academy for youth in Pennsylvania. When he finally got enough people to support the school, they were looking for a suitable location and there it was: the old meeting-hall built during the days of George Whitefield. That academy eventually grew to become the University of Philadelphia.

The original meeting-hall was managed by trustees including Baptists, Moravians, Anglicans and Presbyterians. It wasn't going very well. That is, until "an honest man, of no sect at all," joined the board – Benjamin Franklin. He helped guide them to keep the building open for inter-religious speeches, but also "a free school for the instruction of poor children."

Franklin – more than a $100 face; more than a key on a kite.

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