

THE WORKS
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN.
VOL. X.

THE
WORKS
OF
BENJAMIN FRANKLIN;

CONTAINING

SEVERAL POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL TRACTS

NOT INCLUDED IN ANY FORMER EDITION,

AND

MANY LETTERS OFFICIAL AND PRIVATE

NOT HITHERTO PUBLISHED;

WITH

NOTES

AND

A LIFE OF THE AUTHOR.

BY JARED SPARKS.

VOLUME X.

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C O N T E N T S

OF

V O L U M E T E N T H .

C O R R E S P O N D E N C E .

P A R T T H I R D ;

COMPRISING LETTERS, PRIVATE AND OFFICIAL, FROM
THE BEGINNING OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION TO
THE END OF THE AUTHOR'S MISSION TO FRANCE.
1775—1785.

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**CORRESPONDENCE,
PART THIRD;**

COMPRISING

LETTERS PRIVATE AND OFFICIAL,

FROM

THE BEGINNING OF THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION

TO

THE END OF THE AUTHOR'S MISSION TO FRANCE.

1775—1785.

(CONTINUED.)

TO THOMAS PAINE.*

Dissuading him from publishing a Work of an irreligious Tendency.

[Date uncertain.]

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 subtile, 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

* This letter was first published by William Temple Franklin, but without the name of the person to whom it was directed. He probably transcribed it from a rough draft, in which the name was not mentioned. It is supposed to have been written to Thomas Paine, and the circumstances are such as to render this supposition in the highest degree probable. In the early part of the Revolution, Paine was in the habit of consulting Dr. Franklin about his political writings, and the latter is understood to have aided Paine, at least by his suggestions and advice, in preparing some of his celebrated political essays. Paine was in America when Dr. Franklin returned from France, and often consulted him respecting his private affairs; and, when he went to Europe with his model of a newly invented bridge, in which he thought he had made essential improvements upon former inventions in the art of building bridges, Dr. Franklin gave him letters of introduction to the Duke de la Rochefoucauld, M. le Veillard, and some of his other friends in Paris. It may be added, moreover, that the remarks in the above letter are strictly applicable to the deistical writings, which Paine afterwards published.

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. FRANKLIN.

be proper to have the case tried in some of the West India islands, and the petition made in consequence of a determination against us. I have the honor to be, &c.

B. FRANKLIN.

FROM EZRA STILES, PRESIDENT OF YALE COLLEGE,
TO B. FRANKLIN.

*Requesting a Portrait of Dr. Franklin for Yale College.
— Inquiry respecting his religious Sentiments.*

Yale College, 28 January, 1790.

SIR,

We have lately received Governor Yale's portrait from his family in London, and deposited it in the College Library, where is also deposited one of Governor Saltonstall's. I have also long wished that we might be honored with that of Dr. Franklin. In the course of your long life, you may probably have become possessed of several portraits of yourself. Shall I take too great a liberty in humbly asking a donation of one of them to Yale College? You obliged me with a mezzotinto picture of yourself many years ago, which I often view with pleasure. But the canvass is more permanent. We wish to be possessed of the durable resemblance of the American Patriot and Philosopher. You have merited and received all the honors of the republic of letters; and are going to a world, where all sublunary glories will be lost in the glories of immortality. Should you shine throughout the intellectual and stellary universe, with the eminence and distinguished lustre, with which you have appeared in this little detached part of the creation, you would be, what I most fervently wish to you, Sir, whatever may be my fate in eternity. The grand climacteric, in which

I now am, reminds me of the interesting scenes of futurity.

You know, Sir, that I am a Christian, and would to Heaven all others were such as I am, except my imperfections and deficiencies of moral character. As much as I know of Dr. Franklin, I have not an idea of his religious sentiments. I wish to know the opinion of my venerable friend concerning Jesus of Nazareth. He will not impute this to impertinence or improper curiosity, in one, who for so many years has continued to love, estimate, and reverence his abilities and literary character, with an ardor and affection bordering on adoration. If I have said too much, let the request be blotted out, and be no more; and yet I shall never cease to wish you that happy immortality, which I believe Jesus alone has purchased for the virtuous and truly good of every religious denomination in Christendom, and for those of every age, nation, and mythology, who reverence the Deity, are filled with integrity, righteousness, and benevolence. Wishing you every blessing, I am, dear Sir, your most obedient servant,
EZRA STILES.

TO EZRA STILES.

Consents to have his Portrait taken. — Explains his Sentiments on Religious Subjects.

Philadelphia, 9 March, 1790.

REVEREND AND DEAR SIR,

I received your kind letter of January 28th, and am glad you have at length received the portrait of Governor Yale from his family, and deposited it in the College Library. He was a great and good man, and had the merit of doing infinite service to your country by his munificence to that institution. The honor you

propose doing me by placing mine in the same room with his, is much too great for my deserts; but you always had a partiality for me, and to that it must be ascribed. I am however too much obliged to Yale College, the first learned society that took notice of me and adorned me with its honors, to refuse a request that comes from it through so esteemed a friend. But I do not think any one of the portraits you mention, as in my possession, worthy of the situation and company you propose to place it in. You have an excellent artist lately arrived. If he will undertake to make one for you, I shall cheerfully pay the expense; but he must not delay setting about it, or I may slip through his fingers, for I am now in my eighty-fifth year, and very infirm.

I send with this a very learned work, as it seems to me, on the ancient Samaritan Coins, lately printed in Spain, and at least curious for the beauty of the impression. Please to accept it for your College Library. I have subscribed for the Encyclopædia now printing here, with the intention of presenting it to the College. I shall probably depart before the work is finished, but shall leave directions for its continuance to the end. With this you will receive some of the first numbers.

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 endeavour in a few words to gratify it. Here is my creed. I believe in one God, the creator of the universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we 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 his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is like 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 dogmatize 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 probably it has, of making his doctrines more respected and more observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any peculiar 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. My sentiments on this head you will see in the copy of an old letter enclosed,* which I wrote in answer to one from an old religionist, whom I had relieved in a paralytic case by electricity, and who, being afraid I should grow proud upon it, sent me his serious though rather impertinent caution. I send you also the copy of another letter,† which will show something of my dispo-

* Probably the letter said to have been written to Whitefield. See Vol. VII. p. 74.

† It is uncertain what letter is here alluded to, but probably the one supposed to have been written to Thomas Paine. See above, p. 281. See also Vol. VII. pp. 6, 8, 113, 261, 267.

sition relating to religion. With great and sincere esteem and affection, I am, &c.

B. FRANKLIN.

P. S. Had not your College some present of books from the King of France? Please to let me know, if you had an expectation given you of more, and the nature of that expectation? I have a reason for the inquiry.

I confide, that you will not expose me to criticisms and censures by publishing any part of this communication to you. I have ever let others enjoy their religious sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me unsupportable or even absurd. All sects here, and we have a great variety, have experienced my good will in assisting them with subscriptions for the building their new places of worship; and, as I have never opposed any of their doctrines, I hope to go out of the world in peace with them all.

TO MRS. JANE MECOM.

Philadelphia, 24 March, 1790.

MY DEAR SISTER,

I received your kind letter by your good neighbour, Captain Rich. The information it contained, that you continue well, gave me, as usual, great pleasure. As to myself, I have been quite free from pain for near three weeks past; and therefore not being obliged to take any laudanum, my appetite has returned, and I have recovered some part of my strength. Thus I continue to live on, while all the friends of my youth have left me, and gone to join the majority. I have, however, the pleasure of continued friendship and con-