Dharma of the Founders: Buddhism within the Philosophies of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Elihu Palmer

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By

Ryan N. Aponte, B.A.

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ABSTRACT

Scholars have long recognized the significance of the Founding Fathers’ religious views and the teachings Buddhism, but never have they provided a comprehensive comparison. While some scholars continue to label these pivotal figures as fervent Christians, a more prevalent reflection is to assert the influence of deist and Enlightenment philosophy. However, such dichotomy fails to examine the Founders outside their assessment of Christianity. The interest in and connection with Eastern religions has been established among prominent Hellenistic and Enlightenment philosophers, yet such parallels have not been elaborated upon regarding the Founders they impacted. Buddhist literature often analyzes the affinity of the Dharma with the American intellectual landscape, but also provides insufficient reflection upon the figures so influential within the latter’s development. With modern emphasis on religious pluralism, questions emerge regarding the universality of the Founders’ philosophies. Essentially, this thesis argues that there is a strong connection between the Founders’ philosophies, fundamental American ideals, and Eastern religious traditions.

Analysis of the foundations and philosophies of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Elihu Palmer demonstrates their deviation from contemporary Christianity and correlation to Buddhism. Since the Founders regarded religion as a confidential matter, personal correspondence and private reflection establish parallels
with the Dharma. Any additional articles or publications provide supplementary insight into their individual sentiments. Of particular emphasis were the Founders’ views of God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, institutionalized religion, morality, suffering, impermanence, immortality, and death. Each reveals that both the Dharma and the Founders revered universal liberty, individual equality, social responsibility, interdependence, pragmatism, simplicity, tranquility, and the cultivation of happiness. In addition, they also denounced mysticism, supernaturalism, dogmatism, revelation, and predestination. Ultimately, analysis demonstrates that Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer followed a precedent established by ancient and Enlightenment intellectuals in which they cultivated interests in Eastern traditions and established parallels with Buddhist philosophy.
PREFACE

While analysis of the Founding Fathers has always held a firm grasp upon the interests of Americans, Buddhism has garnered increasingly significant consideration within the scholarly community and popular consciousness. As a student of both United States history and Eastern philosophy, the scope of the subsequent analysis arose from my own personal experience. I was first introduced to Buddhist literature and the story of Siddhārtha Gautama as an adolescent. I found myself immediately captivated and came to recognize the importance of the Dharma, which denominates an encapsulation of the teachings of the historical Buddha, the principles of the universe, and the conditions of existence. I continued such passions while earning a Bachelor of Arts degree in History at Davidson College, enrolling in nearly every course regarding Eastern philosophy. After beginning my professional career teaching about the early American republic, I focused much of my graduate study on the political, social, and cultural environment surrounding the Founding Fathers. Within one such course, I set out to research the religious philosophies of Thomas Jefferson and was astonished by the results. I found that Jefferson’s reconceptualization of Christianity and incorporation of deist and Enlightenment thought produced innumerable parallels with the teachings of Buddhism. Upon completing my research regarding Jefferson, I further inquired into the beliefs of Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Paine, and Elihu Palmer. Although not commonly recognized, Palmer was the champion of American deism and had a profound impact on the religious landscape of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Ultimately, I found that the more I read the writings of these Founders, the more I recognized the Dharma.
The subsequent analysis focuses particularly upon the figures of Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer. While consideration was originally given to Adams and Paine, both presented certain difficulties. Adams ultimately shared many of the same philosophies as Jefferson and was outspoken in his appreciation for the cultures and religions of Asia. However, remnants of the pessimism and supernaturalism ingrained through his Calvinist upbringing were quite divergent from Buddhism. Although Paine also demonstrated some fundamental similarities with Asian religions, he failed to provide a comprehensive philosophy. Focused more on obliterating contemporary institutions, Paine was also far more caustic than the sentiments found within Eastern thought. Therefore, the writings of Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer provided the foundation of the forthcoming analysis.

Despite their applicability, each Founder implemented also presented some challenges. Since none of the Founders provided a systematic theology, evidence of their religious philosophies is dispersed within innumerable writings and correspondence. Having received fervent condemnation from his only extensive publication *Notes on the State of Virginia*, Jefferson shared his views with a limited selection of family and friends. Franklin similarly recognized the potential backlash regarding publication and often implemented pseudonyms. As he sought to mask his views within his countless writings, Franklin’s religious philosophies remain elusive. Despite his significance within early American religion, Palmer proved the most difficult of the Founders. By far the youngest of the trio, he gained prominence only after the developments surrounding the American Revolution and Constitutional Convention. Due to such circumstances, as well as the controversial nature of his
publications, the majority of Palmer’s writings were not well preserved and only a limited few have survived. Therefore, analysis of Palmer focuses on his pinnacle treatise *Principles of Nature*. In addition to issues regarding the nature or accessibility of their writings, many of the Founders deviated throughout segments or extended periods of their lives. The sentiments that emerged within their adolescence and early adulthood might transform as they became public figures or as they declined in age and reflected upon death. Ultimately, what the Founders professed in one moment could transform in the next.

While the philosophies of many schools may be applied, emphasis has been placed upon the teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism and particularly the Japanese lineages of Zen. Practically speaking, many other schools include certain traditions or practices that are far less applicable. For instance, the naturalistic, pragmatic, and anti-ecclesiastical Founders would denounce the implementation of mysticism, supernaturalism, and guru devotion within Tibetan Buddhism. In addition, the adherence to monasticism and emphasis upon personal liberation within schools of Theravāda Buddhism would contradict the Founders’ belief in universal freedom and social consciousness. The teachings of Zen have also been recognized for their affinity with the fundamental intellectual currents of American thought. In order to accurately reflect such parallels, I implemented many of the most influential figures in expanding the Dharma within the United States. Of particular significance were the endeavors and writings of Japanese Zen teachers Soyen Shaku, Nyogen Senzaki, Shigetsu Sasaki, D.T. Suzuki, and Shunryu Suzuki. In addition to authoring many of the most influential Buddhist publications, these early pioneers also established immensely successful
centers and organizations. Another pivotal individual was the Vietnamese Zen monk Thich Nhat Hanh, who has emerged as one of the most widely read Buddhist authors throughout the West. While such monumental figures provide the foundation for the subsequent analysis, broader scholarly works are also implemented, especially when specific parallels with the Founders can be recognized throughout many schools of Buddhism.

Reflecting upon the journey undertaken, I would be remiss not to recognize the people and institutions that have aided in the completion of this work. Professor Charles E. Yonkers was most gracious in providing invaluable support and advice during the entirety of the process. In addition, Professor James H. Hershman, Jr. provided momentum during the initial conceptualization of the scope of this analysis. I have also been indebted to the literature surrounding the Founding Fathers, as well as the history and teachings of Buddhism. Emphasis should be placed upon those scholars who provided guidance and insight into my inquiries, specifically Donald McCown, Harry Oldmeadow, Stephen Batchelor, and Thomas A. Tweed. The research I conducted was made possible by the exceptional facilities at Georgetown University, Haverford College, Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, and the Library of Congress. Finally, I would like to express my appreciation for my family who encouraged my research, endured my preoccupations, and provided insight along the way.
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CHAPTER I

ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN EAST AND WEST

Even before Westerners began converting to Buddhism, the Enlightenment opened the minds of individual Westerners to the possibility that an Eastern religion might make a useful contribution."

—Richard H. Robinson, Willard L. Johnson, and Thanissaro Bhikkhu

Introduction

As integral figures within the political, social, and philosophical development of the United States, the religious views of the Founding Fathers warrant extensive examination. However, many Americans would be surprised to uncover how radical the Founders’ philosophies were considered within the context of religious thought during the early Republic. Deist and Enlightenment thought profoundly influenced many intellectuals throughout the West during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Incorporating within such intellectual currents was a fanatical fascination with and appreciation for the social, cultural, and religious traditions of Asia. As one historian reflected, “One of the unforeseen effects of the Enlightenment was its role in the introduction of Buddhism to the West.”2 Recognizing such Eastern influence among the figures of Voltaire, Diderot, Volney, and Hume, one may profess that it would be impossible for Enlightenment intellectuals “to carry on philosophical reflection apart from the influence of Buddhist thoughts.”3 As Europeans were immersed within a plethora of Asian traditions beginning as early as the sixteenth century, Buddhist


2 Ibid.

philosophies often emerged parallel to or embedded within the teachings of Confucianism and Hinduism.

American intellectuals, including many of the Founding Fathers, inherited the infatuation with and influence from Asian philosophy. As one historian characterized, “In eighteenth-century America the East was, paradoxically, a means of reinforcing the enlightenment values of the West.” Having exchanged extensive correspondence and cultivated enduring friendships with many of the aforementioned Europeans thinkers, Founders such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and John Adams shared their appreciation for the traditions of Asia. Many scholars have asserted the parallels between Buddhism and the principles and philosophies established by the Founders, in particular those emphasizing universal liberty, individual equality, social responsibility, pragmatism, naturalism, and the cultivation of happiness. As one religious historian professed, “Many elements of Buddhist philosophy accord perfectly with the American tenor of thought, including emphasis on experience over tradition, a results-oriented outlook, a belief in the equality of all persons, and tolerance for divergent beliefs.” Despite such connections, no comprehensive comparison between the beliefs of the Founders and Eastern philosophy has ever been produced.

The Founders emerged within a populace that supported, often vehemently, the doctrines of Calvinism. As one scholar characterized, “Church historians have estimated that over 80 percent of American Christians in the colonial period—from Anglicans on the right-center of the Christian spectrum to Quakers on the left—were significantly

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influenced by John Calvin’s teachings.” Through such doctrines, most eighteenth-century Americans agreed that mankind harbored original sin, was utterly corrupt, had no impact upon his own salvation, and that God indiscriminately chose whom to save and whom to condemn. Despite increased congregational expansion and colonial legislature supporting Christianity, countercultural currents began to flow by the American Revolution. One scholar asserted, “We might say that, on the surface, the pre-Revolutionary ‘colonial nation’ was nominally or even formally Christian. The law demanded adherence to a rudimentary Christianity and seven colonies established state churches. But these laws made sense precisely because actual Christian adherence in the population was relatively weak.” The religious environment essentially shifted due to the introduction of radical ideas from Europe, particularly among intellectual circles and college campuses. Supplementing the foundations of Greek and Roman classics, emerging Enlightenment philosophy questioned the doctrine and authority of the Church. Such developments ultimately prompted the expansion of deism, which had emerged within France and the United Kingdom.

By the early stages of the eighteenth century, American intellectuals were devouring the writings of prominent European deists. While such influence has most often been recognized within Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine, Enlightenment philosophies also had an impact on John Adams, George Washington, John Madison, James Monroe, and Alexander Hamilton. Elihu Palmer also belongs


among these prominent figures, “for no other single individual in the early Republic was as influential as he in disseminating the message of deism.”

Having deviated from contemporary Christianity, the philosophies adopted by these Founders emphasized reason and morality over supernaturalism and revelation. Within many eighteenth-century intellectual circles, “Deism offered a religious choice to those who could no longer follow the ‘corruptions’ and ‘superstitions’ of Christianity, especially the Calvinist brand that prevailed in America.” Among the concepts rejected by deists were the Holy Trinity, original sin, predestination, atonement, revelation, as well as the divinity, virgin birth, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As a nineteenth-century clergyman aptly characterized, “Deism is what is left of Christianity after casting off everything that is peculiar to it.”

For many religionists within the Founders’ era, the ideals of deist and Enlightenment philosophy were no different than those of the heathen, atheist, or infidel.

Analysis of the foundations and principles of the Founders’ religious philosophies demonstrates both their deviation from contemporary Christianity and correlation to Buddhism. Evidence originated within ancient Greece, where there emerged intellectual and physical interaction with the people and traditions of India. In addition, the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries brought a zealous fascination with and appreciation for the social, cultural, and religious traditions of Asia. Scholarly literature ultimately reveals that Buddhist philosophy may have impacted many of the classical and

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Enlightenment figures that influenced the Founders. Upon analyzing the religious beliefs of Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer, parallels with the Dharma emerge through the manner in which each Founder assessed Christianity and incorporated deist and Enlightenment thought. Of particular relevance were their views of God, Jesus Christ, the Bible, institutionalized religion, universal morality, suffering, impermanence, immortality, and death. In conclusion, subsequent analysis will demonstrate that Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer followed a precedent established by ancient and Enlightenment intellectuals in which they cultivated interests in Eastern traditions and established parallels with Buddhist philosophy.

Interactions between Ancient India and Greece

The history and philosophy of Buddhism emerged surrounding the life and teachings of Siddhārtha Gautama. Within his lifetime, Gautama emerged “as one of the first figures ever to be recorded in history as a real, recognizable human personality rather than as a two-dimensional character in a mythologized narrative.” While the exact dates of his life are uncertain, most contemporary scholars agree that he lived between 563 and 483 BCE. Emerging within a society that had begun questioning cultural and religious institutions, Gautama became a “critical and creative participant in a movement to synthesize the ancient, traditional worldviews that vied for the collective heart of India in his time.” Siddhārtha was born into a wealthy and powerful family within the Śākya clan, which accounts for him also being referred to as Śākyamuni. While he is often denominated as Buddha, the term is actually a title designating any

12 Ibid., 6.
being that is “awakened” or “enlightened.” Therefore, he is usually referred to by the aforementioned names until he experiences and attains enlightenment.

Although Gautama remained within the shelter and luxury of his home, he struggled between an attachment to his family and the attraction of a more spiritual life. As an adolescent, Siddhārtha left his palace and recognized what are referred to as the Four Sights. Within a series of excursions, Gautama witnessed an old man, a diseased man, a deceased man, and a religious hermit practicing meditation. Through the Four Sights, Siddhārtha recognized the impermanence of life and the pervasiveness of suffering. The experience festered within Gautama until the age of thirty, when he embarked upon a religious quest. After adhering to ascetic practices of self-mortification and starvation, Siddhārtha concluded that such efforts would not lead him to enlightenment. Instead, he focused on adopting a Middle Path that “on the one hand rejects the sensual indulgence he had enjoyed as a young man, and on the other hand it rejects the mortification of the flesh that he had practiced as an ascetic.”13 Siddhārtha continued his spiritual journey, eventually reaching the outskirts of Bodhgāya in northern India. At the age of thirty-five, after possibly weeks of meditation under the Bodhi tree, Gautama achieved his goal of attaining enlightenment. He described reaching a state of nirvāṇa, in which he obtained unremitting wisdom and consciousness, thereby transcending the ignorance and suffering of human existence. Reflecting upon the “inexpressibility of nirvāṇa and the difficulty of the path thereto,” Siddhārtha questioned whether he would be able to convey his experience.14 After weeks of reflection, Gautama


recognized that the five ascetics he had previously practiced with were most qualified to understand his awakening. Upon rejoining his companions at Sārnāth, Siddhārtha provided the foundation for the Dharma.

During the forty-five years after his initial sermon, Siddhārtha travelled across northern India sharing his philosophy. Eventually, Gautama’s lectures became increasingly attended by lay followers and wealthy practitioners, which lead to the emergence of a religious community (*saṅgha*). As Siddhārtha faced death at the age of eighty, he told his disciples, “Although I may die, you must not for that reason think that you are left without a leader. The teachings and precepts I have expounded to you shall be your leader.”

In the decades that followed, various factors developed within the *saṅgha* that cultivated diverging spiritual interpretations and practices. As one Buddhist historian reflected, “There are no Buddhist popes, no creeds, and, although there were councils in the early years, no attempts to impose uniformity of doctrine over the entire monastic, let alone lay, establishment.” Such sentiments were reflected in the development of many subsets of Buddhism within the two principal schools of Mahāyāna and Theravāda. Despite its expansion throughout much of Asia, by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries Buddhism was virtually extinct within the nation of its birth. Nevertheless, much of early Buddhist philosophy has remained integrated within Hinduism since “the two religions developed to maturity in constant contact, and they exerted considerable influence upon one another.”

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The extensive interaction between ancient India and Greece has emerged as a significant development within the study of religion and philosophy. Historians have asserted that “India was in more or less constant communication with the West” for roughly the thousand year period between the Persian invasion of Greece under Darius I during the sixth century BCE and the sack of Rome by the Visigoths during the fourth century CE.\(^\text{18}\) However, intellectual dissemination was not simply the product of extensive trade or an ambiguous cultural diffusion. As a renowned ancient Greek scholar reflected, the parallels and influences “go far beyond what can be accounted for from casual commercial contacts, even over many centuries. They presuppose situations in which Greeks and peoples of the East lived side by side for extended periods and communicated fluently in a shared language.”\(^\text{19}\) At the center of this interaction was the empire of Persia, particularly the northwestern territories of India. A meeting ground between Western and Eastern philosophies, Persia served as an intermediary environment and culture through which Greeks and Indians shared an extensive personal contact.

Through his campaigns within Persia and India during the fourth century BCE, Alexander the Great further established the physical and intellectual connections between the East and West. As one scholar asserted, “In the Hellenistic and early Roman imperial periods, the Greco-Roman presence in India was widespread, thriving, and specifically connected with Buddhism.”\(^\text{20}\) Recognizing that Buddhism was at the forefront of Indian


philosophy, the Greeks demonstrated measured respect for the religion. One of the most intriguing precedents revolves around the Indo-Greek king Menander, also referred to as Menandros or Milinda, who ruled during the first century BCE. Composed shortly after his reign, the Buddhist text Milinda Pañha (“Questions of Milinda”) disclosed a dialogue between the king and a monk within which Menander was described as having converted to Buddhism. Beginning with Menander and continuing with subsequent rulers, specific iconography and symbolism unique to Buddhism was incorporated on surviving coins. Such evidence has led to the conclusion that Buddhism was promoted and perhaps became the state religion within the northwestern Indo-Greek territories.²¹ Ancient Indian sources also reflect interaction between the East and West, in particular those surrounding Emperor Aśoka. After gaining power during the third century BCE, Aśoka converted to Buddhism, established it as the state religion, and developed an extensive series of inscriptions and pillars throughout his empire. The surviving artifacts describe the early history and expansion of Buddhism, including “wandering disseminators of Buddhist teaching” that were dispatched as far as the Hellenistic world.²² Aśoka’s missionaries specifically referenced reaching areas ruled by Antiochus II of Syria, Ptolemy II of Egypt, Antigonus II of Macedon, Magas of Cyrene, and Alexander II of Epirus.

**Parallels between Eastern and Hellenistic Philosophy**

Many of the prominent Hellenistic philosophers have provided evidence of interaction between India and the West. Analysis of such intellectual and cultural

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diffusion originates with Pythagoras, who was recognized for his interest in Eastern thought. While he may have first encountered Asian philosophy within Egypt or Persia, some contemporary Greek historians asserted that Pythagoras also travelled to India. One modern scholar suggested that Pythagoras actually received teachings directly from Siddhārtha Gautama. Such research attested that the Sanskrit translation of “Pythagoras” was “Buddha Gurus,” which would designate an individual “who has Buddha as his Guru or whose teacher is Buddha.”

While evidence remains circumstantial, the “legend of Pythagoras’ journey to India in search of the wisdom of the East may very well contain a grain of allegorical truth.” The resilience of the connection between Pythagoras and the East has been founded upon many paralleled philosophies. Having emphasized tranquility and introspection, within Pythagoras’ academy “practices like meditation seem to have been normal enough and were described as ‘silence.’” In addition to extolling teachings that resonated with the doctrine of karma, he also adhered to the practices of nonviolence and vegetarianism. Pythagoras also paralleled the Buddhist conceptualizations of reincarnation and the cyclical nature of life and death, having continually professed a belief in “the metempsychosis or transmigration of the souls of deceased men into other men as well as animals.”

In addition to Pythagoras, Eastern influence has also been recognized within the philosophies of Pyrrho. Among a group of philosophers who joined Alexander the

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Great’s expedition, Pyrrho remained within India for an extended period of time. There he encountered, and seemingly studied under, Indian religionists that would have included Buddhists, Hindus, and Jains. In response to such experiences, “not merely the life but the very thought of Pyrrho was completely transformed.” He then returned to Greece and spent the remainder of his life teaching a lineage that became known as Pyrrhonism or Skepticism. As Pyrrhonism was “very nearly identical with the outlook” of early Buddhism, they “can plausibly be read as two expressions of the same philosophical understanding and practice.” In particular, each cultivated similar reflections upon the nature of happiness, suffering, and the human condition. Recognizing the difficulty “to identify any significant difference between either the methods or the stated purpose of Pyrrhonist and [Mahāyāna] dialectic,” specific parallels have been acknowledged within the school of Zen. As one scholar professed, “those who knew Pyrrho well described him as a sort of Buddhist arhat, and that is doubtless how we should regard him.”

Significant parallels also emerged between Buddhist philosophy and the Hellenistic schools of Stoicism and Epicureanism. The most renowned connection regarding ancient Greek, Roman, and Indian philosophies revolves around the Stoics, in particular Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus. Similar to Buddhism, the Stoics reflected that suffering was founded upon an ignorance of impermanence and an attachment to worldly

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desires. Both philosophies recognized that happiness was ultimately dependent upon mental tranquility. In particular, Epictetus’ philosophies were “roughly parallel to the Buddhist Four Noble Truths” and have been characterized as “the West’s answer to Buddhism’s Dhammapada,” one of the most widely read texts within Buddhism.  

Many of the parallels recognized within Stoicism also emerged within the teachings of Epicurus, specifically the conceptualization of suffering, denunciation of supernaturalism, and adherence to mental disciple and introspection. Comparing the “self-observation” of the Hellenistic philosophers to meditation and mindfulness within Buddhism, one scholar asserted that they observe “the same basic structure of empiricism, causality, and interruption of the psychological process” and thereby “describe the process virtually identically.”

The aforementioned ancient philosophers had a profound impact upon the Founders’ views of morality, suffering, and human nature. In particular, Stoicism instilled them with “the solace necessary to face the numerous hardships of eighteenth-century life with courage” and led the Founders to associate virtue with “frugality, simplicity, temperance, fortitude, love of liberty, selflessness, and honor.” Jefferson specifically asserted his admiration for Seneca as “a fine moralist” and Epictetus for providing “what was good of the Stoics.” Palmer similarly recognized the teachings of


32 McEvilley, The Shape of Ancient Thought, 621,627.


Seneca as among “the correct, the elegant, the useful maxims” that “beautifully display its principles from the physical and moral organization of intelligent beings,” proclaiming that Stoic virtues “will rise far superior to the boasted morality of the Christian system.”

While Franklin cited many of the Stoics within his publications and personal writings, he also found inspiration for the daily assessment and recording of his own moral conduct from Pythagoras’ *Golden Verses.* As one scholar reflected, Franklin merged his emphasis upon deism and morality with “Pythagoreanism.” Jefferson also identified Pythagoras among “the most remarkeable of the antient philosophers,” but incorporated Epicurus as well. He professed, “I too am an Epicurean. I consider the genuine (not the imputed) doctrines of Epicurus as containing every thing rational in moral philosophy which Greece and Rome have left us.”

The significance of Pyrrho emerged through his parallels with Scottish philosopher David Hume, who was connected personally or intellectually to each Founder. Having had access to and cited directly from an English translation of Sextus Empiricus’ *Outlines of Pyrrhonism,* Hume has been characterized as “the complete Pyrrhonist.” Ultimately, the connections between Hellenistic

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philosophers and the Founders provide support for subsequent analysis regarding such parallels with Buddhism.

**Emergence of China within Western Thought**

While Buddhism was evolving within ancient India, the school of Mahāyāna eventually spread throughout much of Asia. Introduced to the Dharma during the first century, China became “crucially important in the spread of Buddhism, not only as a significant home of Mahāyāna Buddhism for many centuries, but also as the primary source from which this branch of Buddhism spread to Korea, Japan and Vietnam.”

Upon its arrival in China, the Dharma confronted prevalent traditions of Confucianism and Taoism. Although each philosophy asserted its distinctness, “in the end both absorbed much of Buddhism, as Hinduism did in India.”

In addition to impacting Confucianism and Taoism, Buddhism evolved within and adapted to the distinct environment and culture. In order to function within the Taoist values of harmony and nature, Buddhists emphasized simplicity, tranquility, and the interdependence of all livings things. In addition, the conceptualization of “Buddha-nature” in China was profoundly influenced by the Taoist philosophy that “people have an inner spirit of light that manifests the power of the Tao, the creative source of the universe.” Buddhists also confronted the Confucian values of human perfectibility and social responsibility by championing the path of the bodhisattva, one who has attained enlightenment for the purpose of assisting others in their own path.

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41 Reat, *Buddhism*, 133.
42 Ibid., 135.
Within the expansion of the school of Mahāyāna, the Chán lineage gained prominence and epitomized the interaction between Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taoism. More commonly known as Zen in Japan, the teachings of Chán were carried to China during the fifth century by an Indian monk named Bodhidharma. While much of the history surrounding Bodhidharma has been shrouded in legend, he was believed to have been taught under a monastic lineage that could trace its roots back to Siddhārtha Gautama. As with many Buddhist traditions in China, Chán was “deeply influenced by Taoist and Confucian traditions, resulting in a Zen that is both embedded in nature and active in human society.”

Through the efforts of Dōshō and Saichō between the seven and eight centuries, the teachings of Chán were firmly established within Japan. As Buddhism evolved within Japan, emphasis was placed on studying from the ancient teachers of China. Eisai and Dōgen, the founders of the two prominent schools of Zen, epitomized the influence of Chán Buddhism. Emerging within the Kamakura Period during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, both figures were ordained at Mount Hiei in Japan and spent extended periods in China studying within various Chán lineages.

Although limited interaction between Japan and the West occurred as early as the sixteenth century, the first substantial contact with Zen occurred within China. Through immigration, trade, and travel restrictions, Japan remained virtually inaccessible until the 1850s, when it was forced to abandon its isolationist policy.

Through the developments between the sixteenth and early nineteenth century, Asia emerged as a beacon of thought for many intellectuals within the West. Essentially,

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the rationalistic and naturalistic ideals of the Enlightenment “helped create an environment in which Asian traditions, *inter alia*, could become objects of reasoned analysis and study.”\(^{45}\) In addition, many deists “placed Oriental religion on an equal footing with Christianity.”\(^{46}\) Such sentiments were epitomized by the zealous, even fanatical, infatuation with China. During the eighteenth century there emerged “a wave of Sinophilia, if not Sinomania, flowing over Western Europe, particularly France.”\(^{47}\) As one scholar asserted, “Indian, Buddhist, and traditional Chinese ideas, in the process of synthesis over more than a thousand years in China, came into Europe with powerful impact upon the intellectual climate.”\(^{48}\) Such philosophical currents were founded upon the writings of missionaries, in particular the Jesuits, who travelled throughout Asia during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Of particular influence was *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus*, which was comprised of the teachings of Confucius and was “almost immediately retranslated into several vernacular tongues.”\(^{49}\) Through the efforts of the Jesuits and German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, the deist and Enlightenment intellectuals came to regard Confucius as “the Noble Sage, the philosopher who had discovered the laws of nature and morality and reason without


recourse to belief in Divine Revelation or ecclesiastical authority.” However, many were unaware that the Confucian they revered and exalted were actually “woven into an elaborate system of metaphysical philosophy that derived many of its elements from Buddhism.” Many of the common conceptualizations and identifications between Eastern philosophies were not initially recognized and often took centuries to fully develop. Ultimately, Leibniz and the Jesuits served as a “major vehicle for bringing Taoist, Confucian, and Buddhist ideas into the intellectual climate of Europe.”

**Eastern Philosophy and the Enlightenment**

Admiration for Eastern philosophy, especially Confucianism, was particularly evident within eighteenth century France. Among the most prominent and influential French philosophers were Voltaire, Volney, and Diderot. Beginning as early as the 1740s, Voltaire “began to examine the religions of the world, particularly those of ancient Asia.” Similar to many Enlightenment thinkers, he admired Chinese ideals advocating tolerance and humanism, as well as the departure from supernaturalism and revelation. Voltaire’s pinnacle work *Philosophical Dictionary* characterized Confucius as having “voiced the purest morality” and exalted China “as a land of the highest antiquity, surpassing any in Europe.” He asserted, “in the Orient was to be found the most ancient

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civilisation, the most ancient form of religion, and the cradle of all the arts, and it is therefore to the East that ‘the West owes everything.’”55 Having recognized many Asian philosophies, Voltaire reflected upon the teachings of Buddhism, referred to its origins in India, and identified its expansion within China, Japan, and Tibet.

The impact of Eastern thought was also revealed within the philosophy and literature of Volney. Having gained prominence through his influential work *The Ruins, or Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires*, Volney emerged as “possibly the most politically active and influential Orientalist of his time.”56 In addition to reflecting upon Confucianism and Shintoism, he provided specific insight into Buddhism. While Volney indicated that Buddhists were evident within China, Japan, Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Thailand, he aptly recognized their divergences regarding both doctrine and practice. In the years leading up to his death, Volney’s progress in editing and supplementing *The Ruins* “exhibit his continued research on Asian religions and growing interest in Buddhism.”57 Having studied Sanskrit, Volney also joined the exclusive Asiatick Society of Bengal. The Calcutta-based organization focused on disseminating Eastern philosophy and language, particularly through the publication of a widely influential journal entitled *Asiatick Researches*.

In addition to Voltaire and Volney, Diderot also emerged within the intellectual climate of France. As one of the “prominent representatives of the so-called ‘Radical Enlightenment,’” Diderot sought an Eastern philosophy and morality that would overtake

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57 Ibid., 461.
the traditional establishment within the West. He helped found and served as editor of *Encyclopédie*, which was profoundly influential in disseminating Enlightenment ideals. Throughout its publication, Diderot contributed numerous articles about Asian religions, including significant insight into Buddhism. He recognized that the “famous sect of contemplators” originally formed within India and had expanded to support distinct schools throughout China and Japan. He also provided an “account of the *interior* doctrine” of Buddhism, which encompassed the teachings of emptiness, reincarnation, interdependence of all sentient beings, and nonattachment to passions and desire.

Ultimately, Diderot’s writings on Buddhism “include information about its founder, his different datings in Southeast Asian and Sino-Japanese Buddhist traditions, clergy in various countries and their practices, some popular beliefs, and bits and pieces of Buddhist texts and philosophy.”

Interest in Eastern philosophy was not only evident within France, but also emerged within the Scottish Enlightenment. At the forefront of such connections was philosopher David Hume, who revered Chinese traditions for their similarities with deism. Such sentiments, as well as his connections with Pyrrho, formulate “strongcircumstantial evidence for supposing that he was actually influenced by Buddhist thought.” One scholar recognized significant parallels between Hume and one of the most influential monks within Chinese Buddhism. He professed, “Here is one of the great philosophers of the East, and one of the great philosophers of the West—in most

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60 Ibid., 184.

respects as different from each other as up from across—nevertheless demonstrating at certain points in their philosophies certain unmistakable formal similarities.”

The foundation of such connections may be identified with specific teachings. While some scholars reflect that both Hume and the Buddha shared similar advocacy for reason and aversion towards supernaturalism and traditional conceptualization of the divine, others have asserted parallels regarding their views of the human condition and the nature of the self or soul.

As with many of their contemporaries, the Founders were profoundly influenced by Enlightenment thought that emerged from France and Scotland. Of particular significance were the French philosophes, whose intellectual circles adopted both Franklin and Jefferson during their time abroad. Franklin’s most intimate connection developed with Voltaire, who recognized the former as his “spiritual heir.” Characterized as “soul mates,” their interactions were celebrated and publicized throughout Europe. Similar to Franklin, Jefferson emerged as “a true Enlightenment philosophe in every sense of the word” and was designated as “the Virginia Voltaire” by some of his contemporaries. Having cultivated a close friendship with Volney, Jefferson worked towards compiling an English translation of The Ruins and provided

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64 Faÿ and Imbs, *Bernard Faÿ's Franklin*, 440.


accommodations for the French intellectual amidst his journey to the United States. Jefferson also went to extraordinary lengths to obtain a copy of Diderot’s *Encyclopédie* and may have implemented the work while compiling *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Scholars have recognized similar influence from the Scottish Enlightenment, particularly regarding Hume’s philosophies on reason and supernaturalism. Jefferson articulated equivalent views and identified all of Hume’s publications when recommending books for his brother-in-law’s library. Hume also cultivated a lifelong friendship with Franklin, whom he professed was “the first philosopher, and indeed the first great man of letters for whom we are beholden to [America].” Despite lacking the diplomatic endeavors of Franklin and Jefferson, Palmer was similarly influenced by the French and Scottish philosophers. In addition to proclaiming Voltaire and Hume among the “moral luminaries” of the Europe, Palmer implemented lengthy excerpts from *The Ruins* and asserted that Volney deserved the “universal gratitude and applause of the human race.”

**British and American Interests in Asia**

While scholars often focus on figures of the French and Scottish Enlightenment, the influence of Eastern philosophy was evident within England and the United States. Many British intellectuals travelled to and studied within India, the most influential of

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which was Sir William “Oriental” Jones. A renowned philologist, Jones studied Sanskrit and gained a reputation for having a keen interest in Asian history and language. In 1783, Jones was appointed to the Supreme Court in Calcutta and subsequently founded the Asiatick Society of Bengal and organized the publication of *Asiatick Researches*. Through his knowledge of Sanskrit, Jones was able to study many ancient Indian texts. Within many of his letters and publications, he asserted that the language and philosophy of India equaled and even surpassed that of ancient Greece. Jones was also adamant that there was interaction between the two civilizations, asserting that Pythagoras had traveled throughout and derived much of his philosophy from the East. He was intrigued by Lord Monboddo’s hypothesis that human beings had originated within Asia and “obtained a small statue of Buddha, which [his wife] Anna later sent to Monboddo.”  

Jones also asserted that the doctrine or rebirth or reincarnation was “incomparably more rational, more pious, and more likely to deter men from vice, than the horrid opinions inculcated by Christians.” Reflected in his views of karma, he was described as being “Oriental in his sympathy for animal life” and having vehemently denounced “any form of cruelty to animals.” Jones remained in India for the remainder of his life and upon passing away was found “lying on his bed in a posture of meditation.”

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74 Lord Teignmouth, Quoted in Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 52.
While Sir William “Oriental” Jones has received much recognition, the British philosopher John “Walking” Stewart remains one of the most intriguing characters within Europe’s interest in and interaction with Eastern philosophy. At the age of sixteen, he joined the East India Company as a writer and subsequently spent much of his early life in India. By 1765, Stewart had obtained financial stability and began travelling across much of Asia and Persia on foot. He eventually returned to Britain during the 1790s and produced numerous publications reflecting upon his experiences within India and throughout the East. The influence of Asian thought emerged throughout Stewart’s philosophy and literature. Recognizing that suffering was produced by passions and desires, Stewart asserted that introspection and mindfulness would cultivate reason and dissolve deception, allowing mankind to “see and understand their true interests, and true happiness.” He presumably endorsed the practice of meditation, for his contemporaries reflected that Stewart was renowned for “the profundity of his sitting habits” and often “sat in trance-like reverie…pursuing his philosophic speculations.” In addition, he demonstrated influence from Eastern doctrines regarding impermanence, interdependence, karma, and rebirth. Asserting that an individual’s actions initiate a “concussion” or “vibration” that will impact “his present, and all future stages of his connection with nature,” Stewart advocated cultivating the highest proportion of universal good. Such reflections, along with his recognition of the interconnectedness of all sentient beings, led him to adhere to strictly vegetarian diet. As one scholar


77 John Stewart, Quoted in Koch, Religion of the American Enlightenment, 160.
asserted, all of Stewart’s aforementioned convictions were influenced “by what he may have picked up in youth of Eastern philosophy.”

Both Jones and Stewart had an impact on many Western intellectuals and developed particular connections with the Founders. Having first met Jones during his business endeavors in Britain, Franklin cultivated an enduring friendship with the philologist. He also proved integral in introducing Jefferson to Jones, having characterized the latter as “a particular Friend of mine, and a zealous one of our Cause and Country.” Jefferson shared such appreciation and obtained numerous copies of Jones’ publications. As one scholar reflected, “It was from Jones’s books, especially his translation of the Laws of Manu, and the essays in Asiatick Researches, that literate Americans, including Thomas Jefferson, drew their knowledge of Indian literature and comparative religion.”

Stewart also impacted the Founders and many Enlightenment thinkers through his literature, which circulated throughout Europe and the United States. Within his library, Jefferson included Stewart’s *Dawn of Sense*, as well as *The Moral or Intellectual Last Will and Testament of John Stewart*. After returning from his travels across Asia and Europe, Stewart embarked on multiple excursions to the United States and established personal connections with prominent American intellectuals. He was “particularly allied to Elihu Palmer and Thomas Paine,” both in terms of their association


80 Fields, *How the Swans Came to the Lake*, 55.

and the parallels within their religious sentiments.\textsuperscript{82} Palmer’s wife even asserted that Stewart helped write portions, or perhaps entire sections, of \textit{Principles of Nature}.\textsuperscript{83}

The study of Asian history and religion also emerged within the United States, particularly through the work of Hannah Adams. Having been “well known in New England during her lifetime,” Adams attracted “readers and admirers scattered throughout the United States and Great Britain.”\textsuperscript{84} Frustrated by the biased nature of the religious writings of her day, Adams sought to present an impartial and comprehensive analysis of the spiritual philosophies of the world. First published in 1784, Adams’ \textit{A Dictionary of All Religions} was monumental in being “the first work by an American author to offer a comprehensive account of Asian religions.”\textsuperscript{85} Of particular importance was the third edition of her treatise and its expanded thirty-page analysis that included references to Buddhism, Confucianism, Hinduism, Daoism, and Shintoism. While Adams failed to recognize the connections and common foundations of many Asian religions, she did reflect that Buddhism had roots in India and subsequently became prevalent within China, Japan, and Tibet. The precise extent of Hannah’s influence on Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer remains uncertain. However, it is important to recognize the connection to her distant cousin John Adams, who invited her to browse through his personal library, helped arrange funding for her research, and publically defended her

\textsuperscript{82} Koch, \textit{Religion of the American Enlightenment}, 157.

\textsuperscript{83} Richard Carlile, "Death of Stewart the Celebrated Traveller," \textit{The Republican} V, no. 11 (May 15, 1822): 325.


\textsuperscript{85} Weir, \textit{American Orient}, 43.
work. Such efforts did not go unnoticed, as Hannah dedicated an edition of *A Dictionary of All Religions* to her esteemed relative.

Reflecting their influence from ancient and Enlightenment thought, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Elihu Palmer each acknowledged the relevance of Eastern philosophy. Although the Founders recognized the religious traditions of India, they were particularly interested in the developments within China. Within a letter to his daughter Sarah, Franklin spoke in admiration for Chinese culture and reflected that China was “the most ancient, and from long Experience the wisest of Nations.” He admired Confucius as “the famous eastern reformer,” concluding that he had a “wonderful influence on mankind.” Franklin also included an excerpt from *The Great Learning* within a 1738 issue of *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, thereby becoming the first American to publish an English translation of the teachings of Confucius. As one scholar reflected, “many of the axioms in the Confucian texts suggest that the ancient Chinese philosopher and the early American philosophe had certain moral and political values in common.”

Jefferson also demonstrated an interest in Chinese culture and philosophy. Within his library he included a Confucian poem by Sir William “Oriental” Jones, as well as Robert Morison’s *Dialogues and Detached Sentences in the Chinese Language, with a Free and Verbal Translation in English and View of China for Philological Purposes*. Each of the works incorporated lessons in the Chinese language and provided significant insight into

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88 Benjamin Franklin to George Whitefield, 6 July 1749, in Lemay, *Writings*, 439.

Chinese culture.\textsuperscript{90} As a reflection of the parallels between the their philosophies, “the strong impression remains that Jefferson assimilated Confucian ideas into his own political thought.”\textsuperscript{91} In keeping with deist and Enlightenment ideals, Palmer also articulated reverence for Chinese culture and philosophy. He included Confucianism among “the correct, the elegant, the useful maxims,” reflecting that it “beautifully display its principles from the physical and moral organization of intelligent beings.” Palmer even asserted that Confucian virtues “will rise far superior to the boasted morality of the Christian system.”\textsuperscript{92} Ultimately, an examination of the lives of Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer is essential before reflecting upon each of their religious philosophies.

\textsuperscript{90} Kevin J. Hayes, \textit{The Road to Monticello: The Life and Mind of Thomas Jefferson} (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2008), 580.

\textsuperscript{91} Weir, \textit{American Orient}, 23.

\textsuperscript{92} Palmer, \textit{Principles of Nature}, 38.
CHAPTER II
EMERGENCE OF THE FOUNDERS

“It is not surprising that many of the period’s leading thinkers and statesmen were convinced deists as well as ardent patriots. In their minds, the two convictions were inseparable. The one threw off the chains of political bondage, the other struck away the shackles of ecclesiastical dominion.”

—Kerry S. Walters, Revolutionary Deists

Benjamin Franklin, the Introspective Philosopher

Born in Boston on January 17, 1706, Benjamin Franklin was raised within a society that essentially operated as a theocracy. Calvinism had become engrained within much of New England, permeating the social and political institutions. Franklin recalled that at an early age, his parent’s had “given me religious Impressions, and brought me through my Childhood piously.” He reflected that his father excelled in “sound Understanding, and solid Judgment in prudential Matters” and that during family gatherings “he turn’d our Attention to what was good, just, & prudent in the Conduct of Life.” An avid reader as a child, Franklin was sent to grammar school when he was eight years old. While such endeavors were founded upon his father’s intention to “tithe” him to “the Service of the Church,” Franklin’s formal education lasted less than two years and he thereby resolved not to join the priesthood. As one scholar recognized, he “preferred solitude for his intellectual work and quiet reflection…He was not one of those who must talk a great deal in order to think a little; on the contrary, he was always looking for a

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1 Walters, Revolutionary Deists, 42.

retired place where he could meditate, write and reflect in peace.” Ultimately, Franklin felt a strong association with the Enlightenment ideals of reason and introspection.

Despite proclaiming his respect, Franklin demonstrated some resentment towards his father and his Calvinist foundations. He expressed disappointment that his father’s library “consisted chiefly of Books in polemic Divinity,” regretting that “at a time when I had such a Thirst for Knowledge, more proper Books had not fallen in my Way.” Rather than embracing Christian scripture and theology, Franklin devoured sources of ancient and Enlightenment philosophy. Such writings ultimately served as “a reminder that virtuous careers had been pursued by some who had not known the blessings of either Judaism or Christianity.” The decisive moment within Franklin’s intellectual development came upon his discovery of deist philosophy. Having doubted the doctrine of revelation and subsequently embarked on his own research into the matter, he obtained books arguing against deism. Franklin professed, “It happened that they wrought an Effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them: For the Arguments of the Deists which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much Stronger than the Refutations. In short I soon became a thorough Deist.”

Franklin was eventually apprenticed to his brother James, who had founded the *New England Courant*. Recognized for being dissident and countercultural, the newspaper was viewed as the voice of “hidden deists against the ruling Puritan hierarchy

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3 Faÿ and Imbs, *Bernard Faÿ’s Franklin*, 38.


of New England.” By the age of sixteen, Franklin was already widely versed in philosophy and began writing for the newspaper. Adopting various pseudonyms, Franklin used his publications to “express his disgust with the moral and religious hypocrisy of Calvinist Boston.” He published a series of fourteen articles through the persona “Silence Dogood,” the defiant widow of an elite clergymen. Not only did Silence Dogood operate “against the social grain by calling conventional class and gender categories into question,” she also vehemently denounced the authority and intolerance surrounding institutionalized religion. Silence Dogood epitomized self-sufficiency and moral diligence, focusing on the role of the individual rather than looking to the church or divine inspiration. While Franklin continued to work under James for a number of years, he eventually sought refuge. Franklin had a tumultuous relationship with his brother and also recognized his emergence as a social pariah within Boston, which resulted in him being “pointed at with Horror by good People, as an Infidel or Atheist.” In September of 1723, Franklin escaped to Philadelphia, a city known for philosophical tolerance and religious pluralism. As one scholar characterized, “New England, especially Massachusetts, in those days lagged behind both the Middle Colonies and the South in the advancement of natural science and was decidedly less hospitable to free philosophical speculation.” However, before long Franklin was sent to London on a business endeavor.


8 Kerry S. Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 40.


Although his initial residence in Great Britain was short lived, it produced significant developments within Franklin’s religious philosophy. While in London, he wrote “A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain,” which was aptly described as “a radical Deist treatise.” Franklin produced “Dissertation” in response to William Wollaston’s *The Religion of Nature Delineated*. While he supported Wollaston’s conviction regarding a benevolent Creator, Franklin characterized such a Supreme Being as distant and impersonal. Demonstrating a profound divergence from many contemporary religionists, Franklin presented numerous radical theories and denounced “the central core of Christian theism.” In particular, he argued that pleasure and pain were distributed equally within one’s life, thereby negating the necessity of an afterlife. In supporting this assertion, Franklin concluded with an outright denial of an immortal soul. He reflected that the soul was merely another faculty, implemented to decipher stimuli and contemplate ideas. Franklin argued that it would ultimately perish along with the death of the body and mind. However, he also contemplated the possibility that the soul could re-attach to a new body and create a new being. Franklin later abandoned such theories, having deduced that they would not instill greater virtue within and may even overwhelm their audience. As he aptly reflected, “though it might be true, was not very useful.” Nevertheless, “Dissertation” provided insight into Franklin’s religious sentiments during the early stages of his life. In particular, it revealed Franklin’s

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12 Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 54.

philosophical clash with contemporary Christianity and his “fitful willingness to abandon Puritan theology.”

After two years in London, Franklin returned to the American colonies. During his voyage back to Philadelphia, Franklin outlined a plan for “regulating” his “future conduct in life.” Originally consisting of only four precepts, Franklin eventually expanded his plan of conduct to incorporate thirteen virtues. Ultimately, his ethical code included temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility. Concluding that one becomes benevolent by doing good, Franklin focused on one virtue each week and kept a daily checklist his actions. In order to remain concentrated and hopefully master each failing, he created a chart and would mark a black dot for any virtue that had been violated. Franklin reflected, “I was surpriz’d to find myself so much fuller of Faults than I had imagined, but I had the Satisfaction of seeing them diminish.” Franklin followed the checklist for a number of years, but was eventually forced by his public service to halt his progress. Nevertheless, he continued to keep the journal with him throughout his life. A prominent aspect within Franklin’s thirteen virtues was that the “complete absence of any religious sanction.” While he acknowledged that the utmost function of religion was the promotion of morality, Franklin asserted that virtue was not always synonymous with faith.

14 Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin, 46.
17 Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God, 48.
Upon returning to Philadelphia, Franklin established himself as a prominent writer and philosopher. Within two years he had acquired *The Pennsylvania Gazette* and began implementing the newspaper as a “Means of communication Instructions,” which included “Discourse on Self denial, showing that Virtue was not Secure, till its Practice became a Habitude, & was free from the Opposition of contrary Inclinations.”

In addition to authoring anonymous articles in *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, Franklin also comprised the profound religious treatise “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion.” Unlike “Dissertation,” Franklin implemented “Articles” as his own personal guide and never intended for its publication. Reflecting an attempt to decipher and articulate his religious philosophies, it emerged as one of the most revealing spiritual writings of his life. Within “Articles,” Franklin reiterated his belief in conceptualizing God as “immeasurably distant from human comprehension or accessibility.” However, Franklin also elaborated upon radical elements within his philosophy. He argued that an extensive hierarchy existed between all sentient beings and included a distinct realm of gods that served as intermediaries between mankind and the divine, between the physical and the metaphysical. Franklin acknowledged that such gods could be immortal or could also change and be supplanted over time. If taken literally, his analysis echoed support for polytheism. However, scholars have also analyzed his views in a figurative sense. Within such context, Franklin’s gods were symbolic representations of the divine. Such figures would be implemented for moral guidance and devotion, differing based upon social and

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19 Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 76.
cultural influences. Included among them would be Jesus Christ, Allah, Shiva, Jahweh, Buddha, and all subjects of worship.

In 1732, Franklin began publishing *Poor Richard’s Almanack*. Much like his previous publications, it served as a mode for Franklin to cultivate moral reform. Franklin reflected that he considered it “a proper Vehicle for conveying Instruction among the common People.”20 Through the character of “Poor Richard Saunders,” Franklin utilized proverbs and anecdotes to instill virtue, frugality, honesty, and industriousness. By focusing upon the passions, desires, and sufferings of everyday life, he established “a posture of nearly militant vigilance over the self.”21 The final edition of *Poor Richard’s Almanack* in 1758 served as a compilation of previous sayings and insights. Reprinted within the colonies and Europe as *The Way to Wealth*, it became one of the most revered and influential sources to emerge from colonial America. Such efforts also emerged through Franklin’s founding of the Junto, a utilitarian social club that organized a group of intellectuals “for the purpose of mutual aid and improvement and for the discussion of morals, politics, and natural philosophy.”22 In addition, he established an offshoot of the Junto, which later evolved into the American Philosophical Society. Ultimately, Franklin’s work within various social organizations and publications in Philadelphia characterized his religious philosophy, wherein he “adopted a creed that would last the rest of his life: a virtuous, morally fortified, and pragmatic version of deism.”23

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23 Isaacson, *Benjamin Franklin*, 85.
As one of the greatest diplomats in American history, Franklin spent much of his life abroad. In 1757, he returned to Great Britain as an agent for the Pennsylvania Assembly. Franklin quickly found himself revered by the deist and Enlightenment intellectuals of London. Through such associations, Franklin established “an embracing new set of friends and hangouts that replicated the joys of the Junto and provided him with a modest power base among the city’s intellectuals.”24 In 1759, Franklin visited Scotland and stayed at the home of Sir Alexander Dick, where he met Adam Smith, Lord Kames, and David Hume. Having shared many interests and philosophies with each figure, Franklin reflected on his time in Scotland as “Six Weeks of the densest Happiness I have met with in any Part of my Life.”25 Other than returning to Philadelphia between late 1762 and 1765, Franklin remained within Great Britain until the eve of the American Revolution. In December 1776, Franklin was dispatched as a commissioner to France and would remain there for nearly nine years. He was among various American figures to be sent to Paris, including John Adams and Thomas Jefferson. While his relationship with Adams was often caustic, Franklin and Jefferson were kindred spirits. During his time in France, Franklin epitomized the ideals of the philosophes. Focused on reason and morality over faith and spirituality, they similarly attacked contemporary political and religious institutions, condemning superstition, dogmatism, and intolerance. During his time in France, Franklin also joined a renowned Parisian group called the Lodge of the Nine Sisters. The group was comprised of many of the infamous philosophes, including Voltaire. For nearly two years after the latter’s death in 1779, Franklin lead the Lodge of

24 Ibid., 183.

25 Benjamin Franklin to Lord Kames, 3 January 1760, in Lemay, Writings, 762.

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the Nine Sisters as Grand Master. As one historian reflected, “The lodge provided Franklin with influential supporters and enjoyable evenings.”26 Recognizing the profound intellectual environment, as well as his unmitigated celebrity, Franklin embraced his experiences within France and the United Kingdom.

After decades of service abroad, Franklin officially returned to the United States in 1785. He subsequently served numerous positions within the state government of Pennsylvania and proved to be a voice of reason within the Constitutional Convention. During his closing address on September 17, 1787, Franklin recognized prevalent political and religious fractionalization and plead for compromise. Proclaiming that “Most men, indeed as well as most sects of religion, think themselves in possession of all truth, and that wherever others differ from them, it is so far error,” Franklin urged any dissenters to reflect upon their own prejudices, passions, and fallibility.27 His return also revived the American Philosophical Society, whose membership included Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, Benjamin Rush, and James Madison. As one historian aptly professed, Franklin was “the most accomplished American of his age and the most influential in inventing the type of society America would become.”28 Although he remained clandestine and introspective regarding his religious philosophies, Franklin epitomized the deist and Enlightenment thought that emerged among intellectuals during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

26 Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin: An American Life, 355.


28 Isaacson, Benjamin Franklin, 492.
Thomas Jefferson, the Religious Reformer

On April 14, 1743, Thomas Jefferson was born into a Virginian society whose foundations were firmly rooted within the Anglican Church. During the early stages of his life, he found himself under the tutelage of Reverend William Douglass. Despite many years of formal training, Douglass appeared to have little impact and Jefferson reflected dissatisfaction with his time spent under his care. After his father passed away, he abandoned the undesirable teaching of Douglass to attend a small school directed by Reverend James Maury. Jefferson characterized him as a gifted classical scholar and revered their time together as one of the utmost privileges that his father had bestowed upon him. Ultimately, it was through his time with Reverend Maury that his philosophical foundations were first established. Jefferson recalled questioning many fundamental elements within Christian doctrine at an early age and recognized that his views became increasing divergent from the perceived Anglican foundations of his childhood. In 1760, Jefferson left the tutelage of Reverend Maury to enroll at his teacher’s alma mater. While attending the College of William and Mary, Jefferson was profoundly influenced by Dr. William Small, the only one among eight faculty members who was not an Anglican clergyman. Small also introduced Jefferson to prominent figures within Williamsburg, the most notable of which were fellow professor George Wythe and lieutenant governor Francis Fauquier. As Jefferson reflected, the intellectual circle he shared with Small, Wythe, and Fauquier proved to be monumentally

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The group instilled Jefferson with the philosophies of ancient Greece and the Enlightenment, which he customarily collected and recorded. Consisting of extracts meticulously arranged between the ages of fifteen and thirty, his commonplace book remains “One of the few surviving documents from Jefferson’s formative years, and one that offers prime evidence of his early literary and philosophical interests.” Ultimately, the collection presents a unique view into Jefferson’s mind and provides insight into the writings and ideals that would have an impact throughout his life.

Significant indications of Jefferson’s religious mindset began to materialize in the years following his emergence as a philosophical and political leader. Jefferson spent much of the 1780s abroad, most notably as Benjamin Franklin’s replacement as minister to France. Jefferson quickly rekindled the intellectual kinship that had been cultivated with Franklin during the American Revolution. In addition, Jefferson also conversed with many prominent European philosophers, in particular Voltaire, Volney, and Diderot. In January 1786, while Jefferson was still serving in France, Virginia passed the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. Jefferson began composition of the bill in 1777 and its enactment was aided by the tireless efforts of James Madison. Jefferson proclaimed his elation that the insertion of specific reference to Jesus Christ or any overt support for Christianity “was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of its protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and

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Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination.”

His efforts regarding religious freedom and pluralism also emerged within Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson’s only extensive publication during his lifetime. Of most interest regarding his analysis was its enlightened and altruistic reflection upon spirituality. Jefferson professed, “it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” In addition, he overtly questioned religious tests and condemned intolerance within Christianity. While Jefferson asserted that his sentiments were in keeping with the ideals of reason and logic, his statements alarmed contemporary religionists and provided the ammunition for many of his critics.

Having returned from France in November 1789, the subsequent decade proved eventful for Jefferson. In particular, the emerging social and political hostilities had a profound impact upon his religious beliefs. Jefferson witnessed firsthand the increasing tensions within Philadelphia as the Democratic-Republicans and Federalists split into divergent political parties. As the leader of the Democratic-Republicans, Jefferson became the target of his Federalist counterparts during the presidential election of 1800. Focusing on his statements within Notes on the State of Virginia, detractors attacked Jefferson as an atheist, deist, and infidel. In addition, critics associated Jefferson’s ties to and appreciation for France to the religious radicalism of the French Revolution. Timothy Dwight, the president of Yale University, warned that the election of Jefferson would result in “the Bible cast into a bonfire, the vessels of the sacramental supper borne by an

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ass in public profession, and our children…uniting in chanting mockeries against
God…[to] the ruin of their religion and the loss of their souls.” As fear spread, others
warned that a victory for Jefferson would bring forth the wrath of God, destruction of
religion, dissemination of immorality, and emergence of anarchy. Having always felt that
one’s religious beliefs were a private matter, Jefferson never replied to such vehement
attacks.

Facing such tenuous political and philosophical environment, Jefferson was
profoundly influenced by his relationships with Joseph Priestley and Benjamin Rush.
Arguing that the Church had corrupted the originally simplistic teachings of Christianity,
Priestley rejected doctrines such as the Trinity, atonement, and original sin, as mysterious
and mythological creations. As one scholar deduced, “by presenting him with a
demystified form of Christianity that compared with his rationalistic world view, Priestly
made it possible for Jefferson to regard himself as a genuine Christian.” Rush similarly
helped cultivate Jefferson’s reassessment and recognition of the practicality of Christian
virtues. Faced with splintering social and political factions, Jefferson began to view
religion within the context of universal morality. Within a letter to Rush, Jefferson
enclosed what would be known as his “Syllabus.” In addition to acknowledging the
practicality of the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, the “Syllabus” compared such
doctrines with those of both classical and Judaic philosophers. Jefferson concluded that
the uncorrupted teachings of Jesus surpassed all others because they instilled “universal
philanthropy, not only to kindred and friends, to neighbors and countrymen, but to all

35 Timothy Dwight, Quoted in Gaustad, Sworn on the Altar of God, 91.
36 Eugene R. Sheridan, Jefferson and Religion (Charlottesville, VA: Thomas Jefferson Memorial
mankind.” He also targeted institutionalized Christianity, in particular the Church and priesthood, for the corruption of such genuine teachings of Jesus Christ. However, both Priestly and Rush objected to Jefferson’s claim that Jesus was neither divine nor divinely inspired. While Jefferson failed to recognize the radicalism of such professions, the extent to which he had reformed fundamental Christian doctrine was not lost on his theological peers.

Prompted by the positive responses to his “Syllabus,” Jefferson began a mission to extract the authentic teachings of Jesus Christ. Over the course of several years, Jefferson began cutting out passages from the Bible that he believed contained the “pure and unsophisticated doctrines” of Jesus. Known as “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth,” Jefferson only shared the composition with a chosen few and no copy of the work survived. Jefferson originally hoped to have Rush read the composition, but he replied that “unless it advances [Jesus Christ] to divinity and renders his death as well as his life necessary for the restoration of mankind, I shall not accord with its author.”

Despite their differing receptiveness to fundamental Christian doctrines, Rush served as an integral influence in Jefferson’s reassessment of the moral teachings of Jesus Christ. Of even greater significance, Rush was fundamental in reconnecting Jefferson with his longtime friend John Adams, as their relationship had been severed by the

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37 Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush, 21 April 1803, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 334.


aforementioned political polarization. Ultimately, it was Adams who became Jefferson’s most cherished philosophical confidant.

After Jefferson and Adams renewed their friendship in 1812, they commenced one of the most intriguing correspondences in history. As one historian characterized, “Though their styles still differed—Jefferson’s lapidary and stately, Adams’ cranky and whimsical—they found that they agreed on almost every subject.” While Adams was more pessimistic regarding human nature, hopeful about immortality and the existence of a future state, and conservative regarding the nature of God and divine intervention, he and Jefferson shared many views in common. Much like Jefferson’s experience at William and Mary, Adams was indoctrinated with ancient and Enlightenment philosophy while attending Harvard University. Adams shared an appreciation for “the most remarkable of the ancient philosophers,” of which he included Pythagoras, Socrates, Epicurus, Cicero, Seneca, and Epictetus. Such foundations led Adams to be equally adamant about the importance of reason and hostile towards mysticism. Despite his upbringing within the Calvinist bedrock of Massachusetts, Adams denounced institutionalized Christianity, attack the power of the clergy, and questioned the legitimacy of the Bible. Adams also shared similar views as Jefferson and other deists regarding the existence of a Creator and the human nature of Jesus Christ. Essentially, both Adams and Jefferson emphasized the supremacy of morality and reason over faith and supernaturalism.

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Perhaps the most notable development within the correspondence between Jefferson and Adams revolved around Eastern philosophy. Within their correspondence, Adams divulged that he had begun researching Asian religions and made specific reference to Hinduism, Brahmanism, and Buddhism. Upon trumpeting his disappointment that the ancient scriptures regarding such teachings were neither obtainable nor translated into any European language, Adams professed his desire for a comparison between the teachings of Jesus and Confucius. He also asserted the certainty of Pythagoras’ journey to India, concluding that it was in the East that the philosopher had learned the doctrine of transmigration. Within his analysis, Adams outlined the Buddhist conceptualization of rebirth and professed its influence upon ancient Greece. Interestingly, it was John Adam’s cousin Hannah who provided insight into many Eastern religions and philosophies.

Jefferson eventually sent Adams a copy of “Syllabus,” along with a description of “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth,” to which Adams responded with great admiration and the production of a more extensive volume. By 1820, Jefferson had completed the endeavor, entitling his modified composition as “The Life and Morals of Jesus.” While “The Life and Morals of Jesus” contained a similar enumeration of what Jefferson viewed as fundamental Christian morality, it also examined the life and actions of Jesus Christ. As one scholar reflected, “What he retained was a completely demystified Jesus…He excluded all references to miracles or to a Holy Spirit, all ascriptions to Jesus


of any special authority, and ended the biography with Jesus’ death (no resurrection).”

While Jefferson claimed himself to be a Christian, in the sense that he followed what he viewed were the genuine moral teachings of Jesus Christ, his rationalized reformation of the religion was ultimately divergent from contemporary Christianity.

**Elihu Palmer, the Radical Deist**

Elihu Palmer was born in Canterbury, Connecticut on August 7, 1764. Although much of his childhood remains a mystery, the Calvinist foundations of New England likely influenced his adolescence intellect. Following the conclusion of the American Revolution, Palmer enrolled at Dartmouth College. As Enlightenment thought and deist philosophy emerged within most contemporary colleges, Palmer was likely introduced to such ideals at Dartmouth. By the time of his graduation in 1787, Palmer had earned a reputation for “personal integrity and literary proficiency.”

Despite his upbringing within Calvinism and a desire to join the clergy, Palmer demonstrated revolutionary views early in his life. Shortly after graduating, he accepted a position at a Presbyterian church in Newtown, Long Island. While travelling, Palmer stopped to give a Thanksgiving Day sermon in Sheffield, Massachusetts. Rather than extolling traditional Calvinist doctrines, he “exhorted his hearers to spend the day joyfully in innocent festivity, and to render themselves as happy as possible.”

He raised similar alarm upon continuing his journey and providing another lecture in New York City. While the precise

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46 John Fellows, Quoted in Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 181.
content of his message remains uncertain, the host minister subsequently reprimanded Palmer and denounced the “liberalism” of Palmer’s sermon.47

The radicalism of Palmer’s religious philosophies was evident as he continued to preach his message. Predictably, his time at the Newtown congregation was short lived. While he “refrained from overt expressions of heterodoxy in his publics sermons,” Palmer excluded particular references to miracles and the supernatural.48 Having focused entirely upon morality and virtue, Palmer’s Enlightenment ideals were far too unorthodox for the parishioners. Despite his effort at observing a balance between humanism and Calvinism, the “Bible-reared congregation, accustomed to a meatier diet of fire-and-brimstone preaching, soon found itself unable to stomach these nonscriptural lectures.”49

In 1789, roughly six months after his arrival, Palmer gladly abandoned his efforts in Newtown. However, he only found more controversy upon seeking refuge in Philadelphia. He had hoped for a greater acceptance of his philosophies, but was soon alienated from the traditional congregations. Recognizing the opportunity to move away from Calvinism, Palmer joined the recently established Universal Society of Philadelphia. Soon after, Palmer advertised an upcoming sermon in which he sought to disprove the divinity of Jesus Christ. When the public backlash encompassed the entire organization, he was asked to cancel the sermon. Defiantly standing his ground, Palmer became the target of condemnation. When he arrived to deliver his lecture, the crowd refused to

47 Koch, Religion of the American Enlightenment, 38.


49 Walters, Revolutionary Deists, 182-183.
allow him to enter. Fearing physical harm, Palmer was “induced to quit the city somewhat in the style of the ancient apostles upon similar occasions.”

Through his experiences in Newtown and Philadelphia, Palmer recognized the need to sever his association with institutionalized Christianity. Upon fleeing with his wife and family to western Pennsylvania, Palmer began studying law with one of his brothers. However, he also immersed himself within the writings of deist and Enlightenment philosophers. Palmer returned to Philadelphia in the spring of 1793, by then a fervent deist. Within a speech on the Fourth of July, he attacked the clergy as “enemies to reason and liberty,” condemned the “pious alliance of church and state,” denounced superstition, and advocated for religious freedom. While his oration undoubtedly brought Palmer back into public scrutiny, it was overshadowed as yellow fever ravaged the city. The epidemic took the life of his wife and left Palmer blind. In reflection of contemporary Calvinist sentiments, many citizens concluded that such misfortune was actually divine retribution for his heresies.

With the loss of his eyesight, any prospect of a legal career was shattered and Palmer thereby embraced the role of a deist preacher. After about a year delivering sermons in Georgia, he headed back north and settled in New York City. Shortly after he arrived, Palmer organized a small organization called the Deistical Society. Among the fundamental principles within the society’s creed was the “destruction of superstition and fanaticism,” “development of the principles of a genuine natural morality,” “practice of a pure and uncorrupted virtue,” “cultivation of science and philosophy,” and “resurrection

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51 Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 185.
Implementing New York City as his headquarters, Palmer’s publicizing of deism expanded. In particular, his speech on Christmas Day of 1796 garnered widespread attention. Palmer attacked institutionalized Christianity, denounced the doctrines of original sin and atonement, questioned the conceptualization of faith as meritorious, and rejected the divinity and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He subsequently received invitations to speak throughout New England and the Mid-Atlantic. Accepting every offer he could, Palmer helped initiate deist organizations wherever he travelled.

Recognizing increased support, Palmer began publishing his philosophies. His first newspaper, entitled *The Temple of Reason*, appeared in November 1800. As expected, it trumpeted deist ideals, attacked institutionalized religion, and denounced supernaturalism religion. However, *The Temple of Reason* was doomed from the start with the final edition being issued less than one year later. Despite suffering from the failure of subscribers to pay their dues, it was “widely read and discussed” and spawned dissenting publications aimed at halting its progress.53 Always the proselytizer, Palmer refocused his efforts and was able to establish a second newspaper. First appearing in December 1803, *Prospect, or View of the Moral World* further extolled Palmer’s philosophy. While mirroring many of the arguments within *The Temple of Reason*, *Prospect* reflected even more upon ethical and utilitarian ideals. In addition, it often included selections from the writings of Voltaire and Volney. Despite also reaching a widespread audience, *Prospect* suffered from financial instability and the publication was terminated after just over a year.


During his efforts in New York, Palmer also composed the treatise for which he would be most remembered. Published in 1801, *Principles of Nature* served as a “distillation and refinement of the hundreds of speeches, tracts and newspaper articles Palmer had produced in earlier years.” However, it observed far greater acknowledgement than his previous endeavors. As one scholar characterized, it was “the first philosophical work of the early Republic to enjoy such widespread popularity.”

Among its readership was Thomas Jefferson, who received a copy of *Principles* directly from Palmer and subsequently obtained an edition of *Prospect*. Within their correspondence Palmer professed, “I know that the Book which I send you contains nothing new to you and furnishes only an evidence of sincere attachment to you and the Principles for which you have contented.” Such sentiments included the exaltation of reason and virtue, as well as the denunciation of supernaturalism and dogmatism.

However, Palmer also provided profound insight into morality. At the foundation of such ethical discussion was universal benevolence and “reciprocal justice,” which proclaimed the interdependence of all sentient beings. Such sentiments resonated influence from the renowned traveller and Eastern enthusiast John “Walking” Stewart. While Palmer’s *Principles of Nature* elicited reverberations among contemporary religionists, it also served as “the only comprehensive ethic to emerge from American deism.”

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54 Ibid., 14, 15.


57 Walters, *Revolutionary Deists*, 198.
In addition to his aforementioned connection with John “Walking” Stewart, Palmer also cultivated an enduring friendship with Thomas Paine. Unlike Franklin and Jefferson, who had known Paine during the American Revolution, Palmer’s relationship with Paine began following the publication of *The Age of Reason*. By the time he returned to the United States in 1802, Paine was “heartily in sympathy with Palmer’s activities in promoting the religion of deism in New York.” He was keenly impressed by *Principles of Nature*, within which Palmer proclaimed his profound respect for Paine. Upon asserting that his writings “bear the most striking relation to the immediate improvement and moral felicity of the intelligent world,” Palmer characterized Paine as “the most useful man that ever existed upon the face of the earth.” Having joined the Deistic Society after his arrival in New York City, Paine became a frequent contributor to *Prospect*. Recognizing a common mission, the two deist figures shared very similar philosophies. As one scholar reflected, “Thomas Paine and Elihu Palmer were intellectually *nouveaux riches*. Unable to accept all of the Christian tradition, they would have none of it.” Instead of theology, Paine and Palmer ultimately focused on science, reason, and morality.

During the year following the demise of *Prospect*, Palmer continued his philosophical mission. While his objective was to formulate deism into a popular movement ultimately failed, it was not due to a lack of influence. Most detrimental to Palmer’s efforts was the fact that American deists were political and religiously divided.


As one scholar reflected, “Between the old aristocratic and skeptical deism and the new republican and millennial variety there were all sorts of shadings and compromises.”

Palmer also suffered from having his sentiments associated with the French Revolution. Ultimately, he remains one of the most influential religionists of his era for he “served as the conscience of the nation, forcing people to reflect deeply and sometimes with agony about their traditional commitment to supernaturalist Christianity and their tolerance of social injustices.”

While Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson formulated their religious philosophies in privacy, Palmer served as the public embodiment and champion of his ideals.

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CHAPTER III

RELEVANCE OF RELIGION AND THE CHURCH

If, by religion, we are to understand Sectarian dogmas, in which no two of them agree, then your exclamation on that hypothesis is just, “that this would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it.”

—Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 5 May 1817

Reason, Science, and the Rejection of Supernaturalism

As was customary within the ideals of the Enlightenment, reason and science were always given precedent over faith and superstition. For many religious and social philosophers during the period, logic and rationality became the test of religion. From his reading of the European deists and Enlightenment philosophers, Jefferson concluded that spiritual doctrine based upon reason and science would ultimately exceed any of which was founded upon revelation. Within Notes on the State of Virginia, Jefferson declared, “Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation.”

He observed that the “life” and “essence” of religion “consists in the internal persuasion or belief of the mind,” and that anything in violation of such reflection would therefore be a “hypocrisy” or “impiety.” Ultimately, Jefferson

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professed that reason was “the only oracle which god has given us to determine between what really comes from him, and the phantasms of a disordered or deluded imagination.”

What has remained significant about Jefferson’s “Syllabus” and “The Life and Morals of Jesus” was his omission of any reference to the supernatural, angels, miracles, or divine revelation. In addition, he rejected the Resurrection and concluded the narrative with the death and burial of Jesus. Jefferson asserted that the Church and Plato were to blame for such supernaturalism and vilified both for their corruptions of Christianity. He denounced their “whimsies,” “puerilities,” “unintelligible jargon,” and “foggy mind,” concluding that the “doctrines which flowed from the lips of Jesus himself are within the comprehension of a child; but thousands of volumes have not yet explained the Platonisms engrafted on them.” The denunciation of mysticism and superstition within Christianity remained a common thread throughout Jefferson’s writings.

Palmer also believed that reason and science were of utmost importance. He emphasized that the “intellectual powers of man,” should serve as “the deposit and the guardian of the rights and happiness of human existence.” Similar to Jefferson, Palmer proclaimed that every institution needed to pass the test of reason. Regardless of whether its foundations were educational, political, or spiritual, no system was “excepted from the severest scrutiny of the human mind.” Palmer acknowledged that if religion or philosophy “be founded in truth, it will stand the test of every examination – it will stand the test of all future ages, and become immortal.” As with many deists, he denounced the

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4 Thomas Jefferson to Miles King, 26 September 1814, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 360.

doctrine of revelation. Particular doctrines and scriptures would be true if “the sentiments and the doctrines be consistent with the nature of things,” not from being revealed by a higher entity.⁶

Similar to Jefferson, Palmer discredited supernatural doctrines as fundamental violations of the harmony within human experience and essential foundations of religion. He reflected, “Miracles make it neither better nor worse; if it be false, miracles cannot make it true, and if it be true in its own nature, the working of miracles cannot make it more true.” Palmer argued that supernaturalism was therefore impossible, being inconsistent with the nature of the Creator. If one argued that God acted with divine omnipotence, then a miracle functioning for improvement of the human condition would be incompatible with providence. However, if God had not acted with such omniscience, then he would either be imperfect or malevolent. Palmer reflected, “in either of which cases, his character as God would be destroyed, and the perfection of his existence sacrificed upon the altar of human folly.” He also denounced the detrimental effect of supernaturalism upon morality, since it instilled fear and subverted self-sufficiency. As with Jefferson, Palmer rejected the implementation of “variegated groups of gods, devils, angels, ghosts, and witches” as irrational mysticisms.⁷ Recognizing institutionalized religion as the creator of such supernaturalism, Palmer attacked the Church for the subjugation of scientific, philosophical, and moral advancement.

While Franklin was less adamant than Jefferson and Palmer regarding the perfectibility of human reason, he was equally caustic toward theology and revelation.

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⁷ Ibid., 60, 62, 12-13.
Franklin was foremost a pragmatist, continually striving to cultivate the practical elements of religion and morality. Within an article extolling some of his spiritual philosophies, he certified that it presented “nothing but plain Reasoning, devoid of Art and Ornament; unsupported by the Authority of any Books or Men how sacred soever.” For he believed that “no Authority is more convincing to Men of Reason than the Authority of Reason itself.”8 Much like Jefferson and Palmer, Franklin rejected miracles and the metaphysical. Regarding the spiritual inquiries of his adolescence, Franklin reflected that the “great uncertainty I found in metaphysical reasonings disgusted me, and I quitted that kind of reading and study for others more satisfactory.”9 Always the utilitarian, Franklin focused on practicality rather than spirituality. During his final years, a town in Massachusetts was named in his honor and asked if he would donate a church bell on the occasion. Franklin told them to build a library rather than a steeple, sending “books instead of a bell, sense being preferable to sound.”10 One of our nation’s greatest scientific minds, Franklin considered the ideals of knowledge and virtue inseparable. He keenly implemented Poor Richard’s Almanac as a “scientific digest as well as a vehicle of moral education,” including discussion of advancements and prominent leaders within both fields.11 Ultimately, upon adhering to religion founded upon reason and science, Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer each vehemently denounced elements of mysticism and superstition.

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9 Benjamin Franklin to Benjamin Vaughan, 9 November 1779, in Lemay, Writings, 1016.

10 Benjamin Franklin to Richard Price, 18 March 1785, in Lemay, Writings, 1104.

11 Anderson, The Radical Enlightenments of Benjamin Franklin, 123.
Reverence for reason and science has been cultivated throughout Buddhism. Most aptly described as a “tolerant, scientifically minded (if not scientific) religion,” Buddhism “remains open to science and welcomes scientific progress.”\(^\text{12}\) Buddhism’s admiration for reason can be understood through its departure from revealed religion. Rather than being dogmatic, the Dharma is open to the observation of the intellect. The Buddhist precepts are designated as practical means for easing suffering and enhancing spiritual growth, not as the instructions or demands from a divine power. Recognizing the benefits of pragmatism and worldliness, “the Buddha said that one should not follow these steps simply because he taught them. One should try them in his or her own experience.”\(^\text{13}\) Emphasis is placed foremost upon reason and intellectual evaluation, especially within the teachings of Zen Buddhism. Reflecting upon religion, one is advised to “take it out in the broad daylight of science and subject it to an intellectual scrutiny.” The intellectual and practical nature of Buddhism allows it to “always ready to stand before the tribunal of science and let her pass a judgment upon its merits or demerits.” Those spiritual philosophies prone to “sentimentalism,” will produce “unwarranted mysticism” and the subjugation of reason.\(^\text{14}\) Any religion “must keep pace with science and human reasoning,” for its validity “should be judged by the brightness of its mirror of reason.” Its true character will be revealed through its ability to “satisfy the intellect of whoever studies it,” as well as “harmonize with actual life.”\(^\text{15}\) In emphasizing reason and

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\(^{13}\) Mitchell, *Buddhism*, 51.


worldliness, “Buddhists are always reluctant to give themselves away to personal authority or supernatural—which is, in fact, unnatural—revelation.” The Dharma can be discovered and implemented by “all self-conscious beings,” in fact its “rationality and matter-of-factness” serve as “one of its most characteristic and important features, distinguishing it from many other religions.” There is nothing that develops outside “natural law” and the “eternal law of cause and effect.” Miracles are impossible as the imply “the reversal of the fixed laws of nature.” Therefore, occurrences that appear the act of a divine or metaphysical power are actually “attributable to natural causes.” Within Buddhism and the Founders, the emphasis is always upon the practical and pragmatic.

**Denunciation of Dogmatism and Religious Conflict**

While the Founders rejected mysticism and superstition as violating reason, dogmatism was also condemned for subverting free thought and instilling intolerance. As Jefferson lamented, “On the dogmas of religion as distinguished from moral principles, all mankind, from the beginning of the world to this day, have been quarrelling, fighting, burning and torturing one another, for abstractions unintelligible to themselves and to all others, and absolutely beyond the comprehension of the human mind.” Jefferson understood that dogmatism would lend itself to self-righteousness, intolerance, and conflict. He proclaimed, “It is the refusing toleration to those of a different [opinion]

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17 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 88-89.

which has produced all the bustles and wars on account of religion.”

Jefferson was particularly caustic towards the Church and priesthood, vehemently denouncing the doctrines of the Holy Trinity, original sin, atonement, election, and predestination as perpetuating such schisms. He declared, “there would never have been an infidel, if there had never been a priest.”

Jefferson published his most scathing and overt condemnation within *Notes on the State of Virginia*. He lamented that “Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned.” Jefferson professed that such “coercion” had only produced “roguery and error all over the earth,” while making “one half the world fools, and the other half hypocrites.” He advised the abandonment of dogmatism and recognition that the world was “inhabited by a thousand different systems of religion,” within which Christianity was “but one of that thousand.”

Franklin similarly denounced the dogmatism and sectarianism of contemporary Christianity. He wrote to his parents, “a Man must have a good deal of Vanity who believes, and a good deal of Boldness who affirms, that all the Doctrines he holds, are true; and all he rejects, are false.” Franklin rejected the vast extent of “blind Zealots among every Denomination of Christians,” concluding that upon self-reflection “he will often find that what he calls a Zeal for his Religion, is either Pride, Interest or Ill-

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20 Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Bayard Smith, 6 August 1816, in Adams and Lester, *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*, 376.


22 Benjamin Franklin to Josiah and Abiah Franklin, 13 April 1738, in Lemay, *Writings*, 425.
nature.” He criticized the doctrines of revelation, predestination, atonement, and original sin as detrimental to virtue and happiness. As with Jefferson, Franklin concluded that such dogmas produce sectarianism and conflict. He professed, “If we look back into history for the character of present sects in Christianity, we shall find few that have not in their turns been persecutors, and complainers of persecution.” Franklin acknowledged that such hypocrisy was personified through the relationship between early Christians and the Pagans, as well as the collective interactions among contemporary Catholics, Protestants, and Puritans. In addition, he may have even served a direct role in ending the Inquisition. After hearing Franklin’s criticisms while in Philadelphia, a priest reiterated his condemnation upon returning to Spain. The priest was apparently present during deliberations regarding the termination of the Inquisition and even credited Franklin as his inspiration. Franklin also spoke out against conflicts emerging within the colonies and published an article condemning the religiously motivated massacre of a group of Native Americans. Franklin attacked the intolerance of those who “pretend to be Christians” and consider themselves to “exceed Heathens, Turks, Saracens, Moors, Negroes and Indians, in the Knowledge and Practice of what is right.” Ultimately, he condemned the murderers for disgracing both their country and religion.

Similar to Jefferson and Franklin, Palmer denounced dogmatism and revelation as detrimental to reason and universal benevolence. He believed that claims of “divine


26 Benjamin Franklin, “A Narrative of the Late Massacres, in Lancaster County, of a Number of Indian, Friends of this Province, by Person Unknown,” in Lemay, *Writings*, 547.
origin” were “among the most destructive causes by which life of man has been afflicted.” Palmer recognized that pretensions to revelation were pervasive throughout countless religions. He observed, “if the idea contended for by believers, were true, it is certain that more than five hundred religious sectaries, all different in the tenets which they hold, could instantly prove the sacredness of their theological opinions.” Palmer aptly recognized the impact that doctrines of revelation and dogmatism had upon religious conflict. He professed, “Man thus wishing to gratify his resentment against his neighbor, or an opposite religious opinion, has never failed to engage his God in his own quarrels.” However, Palmer recognized that each religion had its hand in prompting intolerance and violence. He acknowledged, “The Mahometan condemns the Christian, and the Christian condemns the Mahometan; their creeds are different, and in many respects contradictory; but they have both had martyrs without number; both systems have sacrificed millions upon the alter of theological fanaticism.” Nevertheless, his primary target was always Christianity. As with Franklin and Jefferson, Palmer denounced the dogmatism and intolerance within the Crusades. Reflecting upon the immense loss of life that resulted from the “awful effects of religious fanaticism presuming upon the aid of heaven,” Palmer concluded that it was during that period that “man lost all his dignity.”

Throughout the schools of Buddhism, there is an abandonment of dogmatism and denunciation of religious conflict. Within its development during the time of Siddhartha, the Dharma has denounced any sentiments towards its revelation. Therefore, Buddhism can “pass freely through the gates of the innumerable teachings of the world; it offers no

resistance and poses no threat, since its foundation is completely nondogmatic.”  

Many practitioners, particularly those within Zen, are encouraged to refrain from being sanctimonious. Students understand that “to be attached to any doctrine, even a Buddhist one, is to betray the Buddha. It is not words or concepts that are important. What is important is our insight into the nature of reality and our way of responding to reality.” A fundamental reflection within the Dharma is that when “we believe that ours is the only faith that contains truth, violence and suffering will surely be the result.” While such suffering can be internal, it most often is characterized by the fact that “People kill and are killed because they cling too tightly to their own beliefs and ideologies.”  

Unfortunately, such ignorance lends some practitioners to think that “truth loses its worth and verity when known by any other name than their own, and that they would fight even unto death in order to replace one set of superstitions with another.”  

An adherence to tolerance and non-violence can be observed throughout the history of Buddhism. When Islam expanded throughout India, many of their practitioners focused upon subjugating Buddhism. In addition to destroying scripture and statues, temples were attacked and many monks were killed. Rather than organizing an armed resistance, Buddhists collected all the scriptures they could and fled to Nepal. The monks may have been exiled from their spiritual homeland, but they “preserved the identity of Buddhism.” While launching a religious war “might have preserved something that is called Buddhism,”

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28 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 78.


what remained would have corrupted the Dharma and would “not be Buddhist at all in substance.”

**Condemnation of the Alliance between Church and State**

Upon castigating elements of Christianity for their supernatural and dogmatic tendencies, Jefferson condemned the power of the Church. Jefferson was particularly adamant in vilifying the priesthood, whom he described as corrupt and self-interested. He confessed, “I abuse the priests indeed, who have so much abused the pure and holy doctrines of their master…The genuine system of Jesus, and the artificial structures they have erected to make him the instrument of wealth, power, and preeminence to themselves are as distinct things in my view as light and darkness.”

Jefferson suggested to John Adams that mankind should embrace the sentiments of Quakerism and “live without an order of priests, moralise for ourselves, follow the oracle of conscience, and say nothing about what no man can understand, nor therefore believe.”

His perception of a corrupted priesthood ultimately led Jefferson to condemn the alliance between Church and State. Such sentiments were epitomized within Jefferson’s reply to the Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut. Recognizing Jefferson’s public advocacy for religious freedom, the organization expressed their hope that the First Amendment would be expanded to the state level. Jefferson professed his belief that “religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for

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his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions.” Reflecting upon his reverence for the First Amendment, Jefferson declared that it had been successful in “building a wall of separation between Church and State.”

Within his desire to demolish the ties between those two social institutions, Jefferson provided the phrase that has continued to this day.

Franklin also articulated concern over the power held by religious officials. He argued that distrust of the clergy was entirely justified, indicating their fallibility and temptation to “propagate publick Destruction for Personal Advantages and Security.” Franklin also contemplated whether a profane infidel would be more detrimental to society than a hypocritical priest. He concluded that while the former may harm himself or a few others, “a publick Hypocrite every day deceives his betters, and makes them the Ignorant Trumpeters of his supposed Godliness: They take him for a Saint, and pass him for one, without considering that they are (as it were) the Instruments of publick Mischief out of Conscince, and ruin their Country for God’s sake.”

Franklin’s distrust of clergymen resurfaced during the controversy surrounding Reverend Samuel Hemphill of Philadelphia. In response to the decision to expel Hemphill for preaching morality and reason rather than supernaturalism and faith, Franklin published numerous articles attacking the church hierarchy. Having characterized the “Rev. Asses” as “the Dirt and Filth of Hypocrisy, Falsehood and Impiety,” Franklin proclaimed that the clergymen


35 Benjamin Franklin, “Silence Dogood, No. 9,” in Lemay, Writings, 27.
“must be strangely muffled up with Phlegm, and their Brains, if they have any, *encompas’d with a Fence of a most impenetrable Thickness.*”\(^{36}\)

Palmer exhibited similar venom towards both the Church and its officials. However, his condemnation was particularly interesting due to his experience as a Calvinist priest. He characterized the clergy as “superstitious and deluded men,” proclaiming that they “believed in the grossest absurdities.” Ultimately, Palmer also recognized to danger of an alliance between church and state. Believing that “Political despotism and supernatural religion have done more to render the human race vicious and depraved, than all other causes conjointly combined,” Palmer looked towards reason for “the utter demolition of the ancient regimen of church and state.” He reflected, “If civil and ecclesiastical despotism were destroyed, knowledge would become universal, and its progress inconceivably accelerated. It would be impossible, in such a case, that moral virtue should fail of a correspondent acceleration, and the ultimate extirpation of vice would become an inevitable consequence.”\(^{37}\)

Within many schools of Buddhism, particularly among Zen lineages, reverence for priests is diminished as the importance lies within the Dharma and not within a religious hierarchy. If a monk fails to “embody the living values of a tradition,” then they will not accurately transmit the teachings. In the absence of the true ideals of Buddhism a monk “can only wear the outer garments and pass along the superficial forms,” resulting in a practice that is “lifeless, rigid, and even oppressive.”\(^{38}\) A lesson that should be shared


by all religious practitioners is that, “A teacher must have food in his own bowl to feed himself before he can teach anyone else.” Based upon such sentiments, the Buddhist community often formulates a far more egalitarian structure than other faiths. Although there may be specific terms to designate roles, a strict hierarchy is not important. Implementation of terms traditionally used to signify status, such as master, is often avoided. Zen students refer to advanced monks as roshi, which can be translated as “elder” or “teacher.” The community encompasses a “spiritual democracy which exists for the purpose of realizing a peaceful, harmonious way of life.” Therefore, “there is no place in it for the kind of autocratic authority implied by the term ‘master.’ If a man claims to be a master, he is not master at all. In our everyday activities, each of us is our own master of mind and body.” Many Buddhists also recognize the detrimental alliance between religion and government. Institutions and their practitioners inevitably seek protection from and influence on the state. However, through such endeavors “religious communities gradually lose their integrity and are linked to the machinery that causes oppression and injustice.” Within the Dharma and most Buddhist schools, monks are warned to avoid intermingling with government. For much of history, monks were the most educated individuals within their nation and were asked to advise political leaders. However, it was always stressed as a temporary solution and they would eventually “withdraw to their temples and live as monks again.”

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40 Senzaki, Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy, 106.

41 Hanh and Berrigan, The Raft is Not the Shore, 94-95.
Philosophical Parallels and Religious Freedom

The Founders’ advocacy for religious freedom and pluralism provided the foundation for their aversion towards dogmatism, sectarianism, religious violence, and the alliance between church and state. Always the advocate for tolerance, Franklin was amazed by core of common belief shared by all sects. One of the most poignant reflections Franklin made regarding religion was to close friend Madame Brillon. Franklin professed, “in each Religion there are some essential things, & others which are only Forms & Fashions; As a piece of Sugar which can be wrapped up in brown or white or blue Paper, & tied with flaxen or wool string, red or yellow; it is always the Sugar which is the essential thing.” Franklin professed an advocacy for religious pluralism and freedom throughout his writings. He published a parable about a wise man named Jacques Montrésor, who upon growing ill and facing death, had a dream that eased his mind. He described being at the “Gates of Paradise” among many others who hoped to enter. After St. Peter asked what religion they belonged to, he would tell each individual to enter and take their place amongst their denomination. Montrésor recalled, “Finally he asked me what my Religion was. ‘Alas!’ I replied, ‘unfortunately, poor Jacques Montrésor belongs to none at all.’ ‘That’s a pity,’ said the Saint. ‘I don’t know where to put you but come in anyway; just find a Place for yourself wherever you can.’” Just over a month before his death, Franklin provided an apt reflection of his life and the religious freedom instilled within Philadelphia. He proclaimed, “I have ever let others enjoy their religious Sentiments, without reflecting on them for those that appeared to me

42 Benjamin Franklin to Madame Brillon, April 1781, translated in Walters, Benjamin Franklin and His Gods, 132.

43 Benjamin Franklin, “A Tale,” in Lemay, Writings, 938.
unsupportable and even absurd. All Sects here, and we have a great Variety, have
experienced my good will in assisting them with Subscriptions for 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."44

Palmer also emphasized religious tolerance and vehemently attacked the
detrimental impact of institutionalized religion. He lamented that dogmatism and
supernaturalism led groups to “altercating superficially the reciprocal relation which their
respective doctrines bear to each other.” Through his own experiences, Palmer
undoubtedly recognized the detrimental impact of religious prejudices. He argued that
such intolerance had lead reason and humanity to become “perceptibly retrograde” and
had resulted in the “moral world” being left in “darkness instead of light.” However,
Palmer recognized universal morality found within all religions. He proclaimed that the
“doubts or differences upon this subject will be, in a high degree, removed, when stripped
of theological delusion.”45 In addition to abandoning supernaturalism and dogmatism,
Palmer recognized that philosophies parallels would emerge through contact between
different practitioners. Ultimately, Palmer supported religious freedom and pluralism as a
means to resolve conflict and sectarianism.

Similar to Franklin and Palmer, Jefferson recognized the parallels between
religious teachings, despite the subjugation of reason by dogmatism and revelation. He
confessed to John Adams, “I very much suspect that if thinking men would have the
courage to think for themselves, and to speak what they think, it would be found they do

44 Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, 9 March 1790, in Smyth, The Writings of Benjamin Franklin,
X:85.

not differ in religious opinions as much as is supposed.”\textsuperscript{46} Having observed that within all faiths “we see good men, and as many in one as another,” Jefferson made it a personal principle to “avoid disturbing the tranquility of others by the expression of any opinion on the innocent questions on which we schismatise.”\textsuperscript{47} He concluded that the fundamental virtues upon which all religions were founded demonstrated their cohesiveness. He proclaimed, “Let us not be uneasy then about the different roads we may pursue, as believing them the shortest, to that our last abode: but, following the guidance of a good conscience, let us be happy in the hope that, by these different paths, we shall all meet in the end.”\textsuperscript{48} Ultimately, Jefferson recognized the individual benefit and collective strength of pluralism, proclaiming that if he founded of a new denomination he would mimic a bee and “extract the honey of every sect.”\textsuperscript{49}

Within his advocacy for pluralism, Jefferson also was a vehement supporter of religious freedom. Along with James Madison, Jefferson tried harder than any other Founder to eliminate religious laws that had been established within the United States. At the foundation of such efforts were his belief in privacy and emphasis upon morality rather than spirituality. He publicized such support within \textit{Notes on the State of Virginia} by proclaiming, “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no

\textsuperscript{46} Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 22 August 1813, in Cappon, \textit{The Adams-Jefferson Letters}, 368.

\textsuperscript{47} Thomas Jefferson to James Fishback, 27 September 1809, in Adams and Lester, \textit{Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels}, 344.

\textsuperscript{48} Thomas Jefferson to Miles King, 26 September 1814, in Adams and Lester, \textit{Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels}, 361.

\textsuperscript{49} Thomas Jefferson to Thomas B. Parker, 15 May 1819, in Adams and Lester, \textit{Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels}, 386.
God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” As Jefferson professed later in life, “I never told my own religion, nor scrutinised that of another. I never attempted to make a convert, nor wished to change another’s creed.” He reflected that he only assessed the actions and not the philosophies of mankind, since “it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read.” Jefferson trumpeted the benefits of religious freedom throughout his life, vowing to fight “against all manoeuvres to bring about a legal ascendancy of one sect over another.” The importance of such sentiments can easily been seen through his efforts surrounding Virginia’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. His autobiography gleamed with pride as he proclaimed its enactment as proof of the equal protection of “every denomination,” including both Western and Eastern traditions.

Recognition of the parallels between and tolerance for differing religious philosophies has been instilled with Buddhism. An important ideal within many schools, especially those of Mahāyāna Buddhism, is the doctrine of “skillful means” (upaya). The principle of upaya “declares that the Dharma, while always one and the same, may be expressed differently to different people according to their situation and level of understanding.” Since its first inception, the Dharma has been “accommodated to each

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51 Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Bayard Smith, 6 August 1816, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels, 376.

52 Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 26 January 1799, in Koch and Peden, The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 499.


disciple’s particular temperament, and to each occasion’s particular circumstances.”

Every condition requires its own “special remedy,” within which there “should even be teachings other than those which were given by Buddha.” Interestingly enough, Benjamin Franklin’s analogy regarding wrapping paper can be found within Buddhism as well. Especially within Zen, there is an emphasis on avoiding traditional conceptualization that lends itself to othering and sectarianism. If one is able to “take off all the coverings or wrappers” from religious teachings, their true nature will emerge.

The Dharma is often more inclusive than many religions, a reflection of its departure from revelation and dogmatism. Since God and the divine are “known under various names among various peoples on earth, according to their culture, education, and environment,” the Dharma has “always borne in mind that however many avenues there may be to the summit of enlightenment, the position once gained will allow us all, regardless of racial and national variations, to see but one universal light of truth.”

Since the ideals of compassion and understanding are found within many traditions, there is a profound reverence for religious freedom. Rather than associating certain practices with a particular faith, one should recognize that “there is no need to worry about the difference between Buddhism and the religion you may believe in.”

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57 Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 103.

that if “you are cut off from your roots, you cannot be happy,” new Buddhists are often encouraged to preserve connections with their original religious philosophies.\(^{59}\)

CHAPTER IV

NATURE OF GOD AND THE DIVINE

“If a thousand Gods existed, or if nature existed independent of any, the moral
relation between man and man would remain exactly the same in either case.”
—Elihu Palmer, Principles of Nature

Existence and Characterization of God

The figure of God within the Founders’ philosophy more closely resembled the
indefinite Creator of deism than the Supreme Being of Christianity. They supported the
watchmaker analogy in which man can deduce upon discovering a watch that it was
created at some point and left to run on its own, but that some indications of its creator
may be revealed by examining it further. While Elihu Palmer proclaimed the “existence
of one perfect God, Creator and Preserver of the Universe,” he demonstrated uncertainty
regarding the true nature of such a Supreme Being. Palmer concluded that the “essence of
such a Being is inconceivable,” being that the human mind was “incompetent to the
discovery of mode, manner, or place of residence.” He also demonstrated skepticism
regarding the Christian concept of Creation, lamenting that within the Bible’s narrative,
“we are not told from what materials, or in what manner this work was performed.” He
ultimately supported the Eastern conceptualization of the “eternal duration of the earth, in
some form or other” and asserted that “whatever does exist must have existed from all
eternity, and must, from its very nature, continue to exist for ever.” Palmer also
denounced the characterization of a vengeful God within Christianity and Judaism. He
reflected that the God of the Bible was “a changeable, passionate, angry, unjust, and

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1 Palmer, Principles of Nature, 149.
revengeful being; infuriate in his wrath, capricious in his conduct, and destitute, in many respects, of those sublime and immutable properties which really belong to the Preserver of the universe.” Declaring that the worship and adoration of such an immoral God “will indubitably pervert the finest sensations of the human heart,” Palmer professed that it would be “far better that he had been destitute of all theological opinions.”

Thomas Jefferson disclosed less about his views of God than morality or the corruptions of institutionalized Christianity. However, he expressed belief in a Creator or Watchmaker God who remained uninvolved within a distant realm. Nevertheless, Jefferson vehemently rejected certain notions of the Supreme Being of Christianity, specifically those found within Calvinism that depicted God as a “daemon of malignant spirit.” He believed that the figure and nature of God was beyond human comprehension, reflecting that Jesus “told us only that god is good and perfect, but has not defined him.” Jefferson professed that if mankind recognized that “we have neither words nor ideas adequate to that definition” and left the subject of God as “undefinable,” then we would “all be of one sect, doers of good and eschewers of evil.” Ultimately, the characteristics and providence of the deity came second to reason and logic. Jefferson advised his nephew Peter Carr to “Fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear.” Recognizing the profundity of such advice, he told Peter not to fear the

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2 Ibid., 192, 7, 46, 47, 89, 8-9.


consequences of such inquiry. As Jefferson reflected, “If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you. If you find reason to believe there is a God, a consciousness that you are acting under his eye, and that he approves you, will be a vast additional incitement.”

Predictably, the pragmatic Franklin spent even less time contemplating the conceptualization of God. Throughout his life, Franklin accepted the existence of a Creator or Watchmaker God. Within his “Dissertation,” Franklin articulated his belief in a “First Mover, who is called God, Maker of the Universe” and who was “all-wise, all-good, all powerful.” Franklin also recognized that a personal God may be necessary for some people to find purpose or moral guidance. However, Franklin continually hesitated to define the true nature of the divine. Always the pragmatic moralist, he abandoned such metaphysical inquiries after his adolescence. Franklin concluded that God was unfathomable to human reason, arguing the impossibility to have “any positive clear Idea of that which is infinite and incomprehensible.” While Franklin recognized that mankind was prone to devotion and worship, he emphasized reason over faith. He concluded that the divine “requires no Worship or Praise from us, but that he is even INFINITELY ABOVE IT.”

Despite the Founders’ belief in a Creator or Watchmaker, their perception of the figure of God is not as divergent from Buddhism as it would initially appear. One of the

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5 Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, in Koch and Peden, The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 399, 400.


most common misconceptions regarding the Dharma revolves around the characterization of Buddhism as atheistic. While it does not acknowledge a deity similar to the Abrahamic religions, Buddhism also does not denounce the belief of a Supreme Being. Ultimately, “the Buddha did not formally deny that such a being could exist,” instead he “treated it as of no importance and impossible to know in any case.”\(^8\) While the “pious reader may be shocked” by such sentiments, they are best characterized as “neither denial nor affirmation.”\(^9\) The foundation of why Buddhists avoid recognizing and worshiping a Supreme Being parallels the sentiments expressed by the Founders. Despite acknowledging that reason and the human condition as incapable of deciphering the divine, the Founders retained their belief in such a deity. Buddhism implements the same reasoning, but reaches a different conclusion. Since it is “impossible to use our concepts and words to describe God,” it is therefore difficult to conceptualize the metaphysical world.\(^10\) Attempts to define the figure and nature of God would be akin to a “turtle telling a fish about life on dry land,” since the turtle “cannot describe dry land to a fish” nor would the fish ever comprehend “how one might be able to breathe without water.”\(^11\) Since the divine is beyond human perception, then one can neither accept nor reject the existence of such an entity. Therefore, belief in a Creator or Supreme Being “is not logically provable or experientially demonstrable,” but is “to be accepted only by faith.”\(^12\)

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\(^8\) Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 36.


Similar to the Founders denunciation of dogmatism and supernaturalism, the depreciation of God within Buddhism is founded within an emphasis on morality and virtue. Buddhists recognize that regardless of whatever “god or doctrine you believe in, if you become attached to it, your belief will be based more or less on a self-centered idea.” Therefore, it is essential to “believe in nothing,” or more aptly characterized as to “believe in something which has no form and no color—something which exists before all forms and colors appear.”

Understanding such a teaching will help one recognize that the Buddha was not atheistic, but was “only against notions of God that are mere mental constructions that do not correspond to reality, notions that prevent us from developing ourselves and touching ultimate reality.”

Similar to the Founders, Buddhism emphasizes the practical applications of religious philosophy. Such ideals are most poignantly expressed through a parable referencing an ancient monk who was particularly concerned with metaphysical inquiries. He asked the Buddha for answers regarding the creation of the world, the existence of God, and the form of the soul. He was so intent on resolving such conundrums that he even threatened to renounce his vows. The Buddha explained that if someone is focused entirely upon such questions, they will spend all their time thinking and not have time for actual practice. To emphasize his point, the Buddha used the analogy of a man who has been struck by a poison arrow. Rather than having the arrow promptly removed, the man is determined to first figure out the identity of his assailant, his occupation, his physical characteristics, as well as the particular components of both the bow and arrow. Ultimately, the man will surely die.

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without ever learning the details of which he inquired. Regardless of whatever answers one might obtain through metaphysical questions, “the dissatisfactory condition of ordinary, unenlightened life would remain like a poisoned arrow.” Therefore, any conceptualization of God or the divine is “not the best use of our energy.” Practice is of utmost importance for instilling understanding and mindfulness. Once we recognize such awareness within ourselves and others, “we touch God not as a concept but as a living reality.” Ultimately, reason is revered as the “inner life of all beings,” through which one can obtain a “realization in our finite minds of infinite divinity.”

**Naturalism and the Divine**

As a reflection of the Founders influence from deist and Enlightenment philosophies, each reflected upon the correlation between nature and the divine. Many of Franklin’s scientific experiments were vehemently condemned by religionists of his time for violating the providence of God. While John Adams applauded Franklin’s efforts studying lightning, he recognized such dissent within New England. Adams reflected that many individuals “consider Thunder, and Lightning as well as Earthquakes, only as Judgments, Punishments, Warnings &c. and have no Conception of any Uses they can serve in Nature.” Regarding Franklin’s implementation of the lightning rod, Adams stated that “some Persons of the highest Rank among us, say, that they really thought the Erection of Iron Points, was an impious attempt to robb the almighty of his Thunder, to

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wrest the Bolt of Vengeance out of his Hand.”

Throughout his studies, Franklin exhibited reverence for the natural world. Although Franklin concluded that the Creator was ultimately beyond the comprehension of human understanding, he recognized relevant elements within nature. He reflected that through the “highest and most exquisite human Reason,” one can recognize elements of the sublime when “we consider the heavenly Bodies, the Stars and Planets, and their wonderful regular Motions, or this Earth compounded of such an Excellent mixture of all Elements; or the admirable Structure of Animal Bodies or such infinite Variety, and yet every on adapted to its Nature, and the Way of Life it is to be placed in, whether on Earth, in the Air or in the Waters.”

Since Franklin professed that every occurrence was not necessarily a matter of providence, he asserted that insight into the nature of the divine was revealed within the physical world.

Similar to Franklin, Jefferson professed reverence for the physical world. Rather than praising the “transcendent Christian God” and his unmitigated providence, Jefferson “adopted a God of nature.” As with many deists, Jefferson’s admiration for science and reason incorporated a belief in the beauty and perfectibility of the physical world. He proclaimed that divine characteristics were exhibited within the “movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their course by the balance of centrifugal force and centripetal forces; the structure of our earth itself, with its distribution of lands, waters and atmosphere; animal and vegetable bodies, examined in all their minutest particles;
insects, mere atoms of life, yet as perfectly organized as man or mammoth.” However, Jefferson’s sentiments also served a practical purpose. Throughout his life, he reiterated his calculation that only a small percentage of the world followed Christianity. Since the remaining majority established various forms of monotheism and polytheism, they could not have been without knowledge of the existence of God. Therefore, Jefferson theorized that attributes of the divine were found within the natural world.

Within his reflection upon nature and the divine, Palmer exhibited an unrelenting rejection of providence. He argued that such a doctrine would be illogical and impossible, since “alterations or violations in any system or set of laws, argues imperfection and want of discernment.” Therefore, divine intervention would necessitate the imperfectability or immorality of the Creator. Palmer concluded that a “wonder-working God, who violates his own laws, and acts inconsistently with the principles which he himself has established, is no God at all.” He asserted that earthquakes, volcanoes, lightning, plagues, illnesses, and all individual and national calamities were “produced by the uniform operations of the laws of nature, and not by any special judgment from God.” While he undoubtedly agreed with the reverence Franklin and Jefferson held for nature, Palmer did not possess their stylistic prowess and was unable to provide as eloquent a reflection on the physical world.

As with the Founders, reverence for nature has been integrated within Buddhism for much of its history. The Dharma abandons doctrines of divine providence as “against the constitution of human reason” since mankind “cannot presume the duality of God and

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Instead, there emerges an appreciation for the correlation between nature and the divine. Such admiration is most emphasized within the Chán and Zen lineages, which were greatly influenced by the naturalistic spirituality of Taoism in China and Shinto in Japan. Epitomized within eighteenth century Chinese poet Han-Shan and Japanese haiku poet Basho, Zen has recognized that “nature was simply another unfolding of the Dharma.” The natural world “resonated vibrantly with the Buddha’s teaching,” leading practitioners to reflect that to “take refuge in nature was to take refuge in the Dharma itself.”

Regarding the divine, the physical world is “the expression or manifestation of this reason or spirit or life, whatever you may designate it.” While the character and nature of God cannot fully be disclosed, nature provides insight into certain attributes. Evidence can be traced within the “starry heavens with their grandeur,” throughout the “huge mass of inert matter on which mountains rise, oceans soar, and sentient beings walk,” and even down to the “most insignificant flower in the field.” Ultimately, one experiences feelings of “awe” and “admiration,” from the fact that it is “beyond our human intelligence to grasp thoroughly the scheme of God.”

Reconceptualization of Jesus Christ

While each of the Founders recognized the moral teachings within Christianity, they deviated from traditional conceptualizations of Jesus Christ. During his life, Jefferson wrote more regarding Jesus Christ than any other aspect of Christianity. As

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24 Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 266.


26 Ibid., 26.
demonstrated within “Syllabus” and “The Life and Morals of Jesus,” it was the human figure of Jesus that Jefferson associated himself with and not the dogma of Christian theology. He professed, “To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense in which he wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines.”27 Jefferson’s admiration for the moral teachings of Jesus Christ was declared throughout countless letters, but such support was not absolute. While Jefferson admired the “innocence of his character,” “purity and sublimity of his moral precepts,” and “eloquence of his inculcations,” he recognized that he was more a materialist and pragmatist than Jesus. Ultimately, Jefferson professed that he read the doctrines of Jesus as “those of other antient and modern moralists, with a mixture of approbation and dissent.”28

While Jefferson revered Jesus Christ as an invaluable teacher, sage, and moralist, he vehemently denounced claims of his divinity and inspiration. Within his letter to Peter Carr, Jefferson advised his nephew to examine the Bible and determine whether it was more probable that Jesus “was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven” or that he “was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law.”29 Jefferson removed all elements of


29 Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, in Koch and Peden, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 400.
supernatural within “The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth” and “The Life and Morals of Jesus,” including references to the power and influence of God, existence of angels, performance of miracles, and any other violation of reason and science. Jefferson concluded the narrative with Jesus’ crucifixion and death, being unable to accept the accounts of his resurrection. He professed that “the immaculate conception of Jesus, his deification, the creation of the world by him, his miraculous powers, his resurrection and visible ascension” were among the “artificial systems, invented by Ultra-Christian sects, unauthorised by a single word ever uttered by [Jesus].” Ultimately, Jefferson concluded that such elements not only violated reason, but their implementation by the Church and priesthood instigated religious intolerance and conflict.

Palmer similarly lamented the corruption of the human figure of Jesus by institutionalized Christianity. Having rejected the Bible as the true word of its founder, he regretted that Jesus “ought to have written a moral and theological treatise, in which the principles of his mission should have been elucidated in a manner intelligible to every living creature.” Instead, Palmer concluded that his true teachings remained uncertain and mankind was “left to depend on the opinions and declarations of others, who seem to have known but little of the matter.” Although he recognized some benefits of Christian morality, Palmer denounced any reference to the divinity of Jesus. Upon questioning how Jesus was “supernaturally begotten” as the son of God, he asserted that the “story of the virgin and the ghost, to say no more of it, does not wear the appearance of much religion.” In addition to rejecting the doctrine of resurrection and divine inspiration, Palmer also questioned the ability of Jesus to perform miracles. He argued that it violated

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30 Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels, 391.
reason for Jesus to be crucified amongst the same audience that would have witnessed his supernatural feats. Palmer concluded, “If the proofs of this celestial mission of Jesus had been clearly exhibited through the channel of miraculous operations, the Jews and all the surrounding multitude would have adored him as a God, and they would have been terrified at the very idea of laying violent hands upon one whose omnipotence could have instantly crushed them to atoms.” Nevertheless, Jesus was not alone in Palmer’s skepticism. He also challenged the exaltation of Moses, Muhammad, and Zoroaster, as well as the religions that they founded. Ultimately, Palmer reflected that any practitioner who claimed revealed doctrine and infallible morality would only be injuring their own cause.

While Jefferson and Palmer provided much insight into the figure of Jesus, Franklin spent far less attention on the founder of Christianity. He applauded the moral teachings of Jesus, but vehemently rejected the supposed superiority of faith over reason and virtue. Franklin concluded that Jesus “tho’t much less of these outward Appearances and Professions than many of his modern Disciples,” preferring the “Doers of the Word to the meer Hearers.” Similar to other deists, Franklin questioned the superiority of Jesus. In comprising the list of virtues that he spent much of his life striving towards, Franklin originally included only twelve. However, after a friend reflected that Franklin often succumb to his own pride, he added humility as the thirteenth virtue. Rather than adhering simply to Christian ideals, Franklin strove to “Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”

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32 Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Huey, 6 June 1753, in Lemay, Writings, 476.
Within a letter to Ezra Stiles just before his death, Franklin shared his views of Jesus Christ. He professed, “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.”\(^{34}\) However, Franklin did not see harm in believing in the divinity of Jesus, as long as such belief cultivated morality and virtue.

Reflecting its denunciation of dogmatism and intolerance, belief in Buddhism does not necessitate a rejection of the figure of Jesus Christ. Many Buddhists admire the human figure of Jesus and recognize the parallels between the Dharma and Christian morality, reflecting that if “the Buddha and the Christ changed their accidental places of birth, Gautama might have been a Christ in rising against the Jewish traditionalism, and Jesus a Buddha, perhaps propounding the doctrine of non-ego and Nirvāṇa and Dharmakāya.”\(^{35}\) In fact, many Buddhists would profess a view of Jesus that is remarkably similar to that of the Founders. Rather than emphasizing claims of divinity, Buddhists reflect upon religious figures more as “spiritual ancestors” which may vary by historical and cultural context. Therefore, even though one might not disclose themself as a Christian it “does not prevent Jesus from being one of your spiritual ancestors.”\(^{36}\)

Through such understanding, anyone can recognize that “the life of Jesus is His most basic teaching, more important than even faith in the resurrection or faith in eternity.”\(^{37}\)

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\(^{34}\) Benjamin Franklin to Ezra Stiles, 9 March 1790, in Smyth, *The Writings of Benjamin Franklin*, X:84.


\(^{36}\) Hanh, *Going Home*, 189.

Ultimately, it is the manner in which Jesus lived that provides moral lessons for all of mankind. As recognized by the Founders, miracles and the supernatural are not the integral aspects of the teachings of Jesus Christ, for they are irrelevant to the validity and principle of his message.

Throughout its history, Buddhists have attempted to humanize the Buddha in order to focus solely upon the Dharma. As he approached death the Buddha proclaimed to his disciples, “my physical body will not be here tomorrow, but my teaching body (Dharmakaya) will always be with you. Consider it to be the teacher who never leaves you. Be islands unto yourselves, and take refuge in the Dharma.”38 Rather than profess his divinity, the Buddha emphasized that the teaching itself was all that was needed. The term *buddha* can be most aptly described as any individual who has become enlightened or awakened, such as Siddhārtha Gautama. A unique characteristic within Mahāyāna teachings has been the doctrine of *tathāgatagarbha* (“Buddha-nature”), which reflects that all sentient beings have the potentiality for enlightenment. Buddhists profess, “we are all in possession of the Buddha-nature. The only difference between the Buddha and ourselves is that we are not yet enlightened, as we keep the Buddha-nature enveloped in defilements.”39 One can recognize that the Buddha “is not God nor the Son of God,” but is “a name of the condition of your mind” that arises when “you free yourself from delusions and suffering and have peace within yourself.”40 Zen has been particularly adamant about rejecting divinity and the supernatural in order to refrain from

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38 Siddhārtha Gautama, Quoted in Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 156.


40 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 142.
personifying the Buddha as separate from reality. Such sentiments are the foundation of the Zen mantra, “When you meet the Buddha, kill him!” Not to be taken in the literal sense, the teaching reflected that “the student should kill the Buddha-concept in order for him to experience the real Buddha directly.”\textsuperscript{41} By removing the duality of Buddha and oneself, one will recognize that the nature of what may be deemed divine actually emerges from within the physical world. Such reflection also avoids the “delusion of hero worship” and discloses the many “small buddhas” that have existed throughout history, which may include Jesus Christ, Confucius, Socrates, and Plato.\textsuperscript{42}

**Denunciation of Scripture and the Bible**

Reflecting their views of dogmatism and supernaturalism, the Founders vehemently denounced much within the Bible. Although some contemporary deists used scripture as a reference tool, such efforts were not demonstrations of faith. In particular, Franklin implemented the Bible “not because he believed it himself but because most of his readers did.”\textsuperscript{43} Franklin condemned what he viewed as the corruptions of the church, in particular anything that contradicted reason and science. Having rejected revelation, he also denounced the divinity of the Bible. Franklin professed that there were numerous elements within the scripture that were “impossible to be given by divine Inspiration.”\textsuperscript{44} He concluded that the Bible should be considered a source of history, not the word of God or Jesus. In addition, Franklin was not above testing adherents of the Bible. As

\textsuperscript{41} Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 149.

\textsuperscript{42} Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 112-113.

\textsuperscript{43} Aldridge, *Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God*, 203.

\textsuperscript{44} Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Priestley, 21 August 1784, in Lemay, *Writings*, 1103.
Joseph Priestley recalled, Franklin once addressed a worldly audience and appeared to be reading from scripture. However, he was actually presenting from memory his own work that was later published within *A Parable Against Persecution*. Upon receiving the praise of his audience, Franklin revealed that it was actually a hoax. He then read directly from the Bible, specifically from the Book of Job. When the audience questioned the authenticity of the passage, he again revealed the deception. Ultimately, Franklin viewed religious metaphors and symbols as “useful fictions,” dependent on social and cultural influences. Scripture served as “historical constructs, fashions and forms that reflect the aims and needs of the periods in which they arose” and therefore “each generation needs to rethink its religious imagery.”

Although Jefferson admired the moral teachings of Jesus Christ, he vehemently denounced much within the Bible. Having rejected anything that conflicted with reason, Jefferson described the scripture as “a ground work of vulgar ignorance, of things impossible, of superstitions, fanaticisms, and fabrications.” He also questioned the divinity and legitimacy of the Bible, since none of it was actually written by Jesus Christ. Jefferson reflected that the teachings were instead authored “by the most unlettered of men, by memory, long after they had heard them from him; when much was forgotten, much misunderstood, and presented in very paradoxical shapes.” Within his letter to Peter Carr, Jefferson advised his nephew to read the Bible as a source of history. While

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46 Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods*, 146.


the teachings “within the ordinary course of nature” may be believed “on the authority of
the writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus,” “those facts in the
Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a
variety of faces.” Jefferson proclaimed that one “must recur to the pretensions of the
writer to inspiration from God” and reflect upon “what evidence his pretensions are
founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more
improbable than a change in the laws of nature.”

Having abandoned his ministry, Palmer condemned the Bible with far more fervor
than Franklin and Jefferson. He reflected that the scripture “appears to be in many
respects discordant; the historical part has no accurate connection; the moral part is
distorted, deficient, or wicked; the doctrinal parts are either unintelligible, or contrary to
moral and philosophical truth.” The foundation of such sentiments was his belief that the
Bible was neither the writing of Jesus or Moses. Palmer concluded that the divinity of
scripture was ultimately uncertain and therefore should not be inferred. He argued that
even if the author was inspired by the words of God, such insight was intended only for
that individual and could not be communicable. Palmer lamented, “The idea of
transferring celestial information received by supernatural means, is absurd and
impossible.” Palmer reflected that regression would also occur upon translating the Bible
from its original language of Hebrew, Greek, or Latin. Subsequent readers would be left
to rest their belief “upon the knowledge and integrity of the translators alone” and could

49 Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, in Koch and Peden, The Life and Selected
Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 399.
never be assured “of the truth or validity of such translated doctrines.” As a result of such analysis, Palmer ultimately came to regard the Bible as “nothing more than a book.”

The teachings of Mahāyāna Buddhism, in particular those within Zen, demonstrate a similar reception toward religious literature. One of the quintessential Zen maxims has often been attributed to its founder Bodhidharma, although it was probably formulated later. Within the proverb, Zen was proclaimed as “a special transmission outside the scriptures, not founded upon words and letters; by pointing directly to [one’s] mind it lets one see into [one’s own true] nature and [thus] attain Buddhahood.” While Theravādins often attribute the scripture (sūtras) to the historical Buddha, Mahāyāna practitioners recognize that “many sutras were not in fact delivered by him, but were written considerably later” and therefore avoid viewing the sūtras “from a literalistic or fundamentalist point of view.” The importance of every teaching lies within the ideals it cultivates, rather than the identity of its author. Such emphasis must be sustained even when reflecting upon the most influential Buddhist writings, such as the Lotus Sūtra. In order to refrain from becoming attached to a particular doctrine, all claims of divinity and authorship must be avoided. Similar to the Founders, Zen emphasizes analyzing ancient scriptures and teachings within their historical and cultural context. Students must recognize the “history, the tradition, of each teaching; then you can use the teaching in its true sense and develop the teaching further.”

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52 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 192.

Buddha, Jesus, Moses, or Muhammad without “understanding the relationships between the speaker and his listeners,” they ultimately miss the objectives of each individual teaching.\textsuperscript{54} As a result of such sentiments, Zen has emphasized practice and virtue over faith and scripture. While religious literature may provide “food for your brain,” the “teaching which is written on paper is not the true teaching” as it is “more important to be yourself by practicing the right way of life.”\textsuperscript{55} Until one recognizes their own nature and secures their own spiritual development, “the teachings of the thousands of Mahāyāna books will be for you mere speculation.”\textsuperscript{56} Ultimately, the Founders’ rejection of scripture for an emphasis on reason and morality is “analogous to that of a Zen sage still belonging to Buddhism, to a particular sect, and using its terms, while teaching that its scriptures are of no use unless they help a man to see what life is everywhere to everyone.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{54} Hanh, \textit{Living Buddha, Living Christ}, 53.


\textsuperscript{56} Senzaki, \textit{Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy}, 68.

CHAPTER V

MORALITY AND THE FOUNDATIONS OF HAPPINESS

“The desire of happiness in general is so natural to us, that all the world are in pursuit of it; all have this one end in view, though they take such different methods to attain it, and are so much divided in their notions of it.”

—Benjamin Franklin, “On True Happiness”

Religion, Morality, and Human Nature

While the Founders acknowledged the parallels between religion and morality, they vehemently emphasized virtue over faith. Throughout his life, Thomas Jefferson reduced all religious belief to the study of morality. Having denounced supernaturalism and dogmatism, he asserted that individuals should be judged by “our good works which are within our power, and not by our faith which is not within our power.”

Jefferson professed, “say nothing of my religion; it is known to my god and myself alone. It’s evidence before the world is to be sought in my life. If that has been honest and dutiful to society, the religion which has regulated it cannot be a bad one.” While faith may aid some individuals in cultivating virtue, the two were not mutually dependent and morality ultimately superseded religion. Reflecting that Diderot, Condorcet, and other prominent atheists were “among the most virtuous of men,” Jefferson asserted that their morality

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1 Benjamin Franklin, “On True Happiness,” in Jared Sparks, ed. The Works of Benjamin Franklin (Boston, MA: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1844), II:70.

2 Thomas Jefferson to Thomas B. Parker, 15 May 1819, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 386.

3 Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson, 29 January 1817, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 384.
“must have had some other foundation than the love of god.”⁴ Such reflection led him to conclude that even religion and faith were only ancillary segments within morality.

Throughout his life, Jefferson asserted that man was governed by an innate moral sense. Such belief provided the foundation for his advocacy of religious pluralism and universal morality. Jefferson proclaimed, “nature hath implanted in our breasts a love of others, a sense of duty to them, a moral instinct in short, which prompts us irresistibly to feel and to succor their distresses.” He characterized such a moral sense as the “brightest gem with which the human character is studded.”⁵ However, Jefferson recognized that this innate faculty was not equal within every individual, much like ability of sight and hearing. Jefferson asserted, “The moral sense, or conscience, is as much a part of man as his leg or arm. It is given to all human beings in a stronger or weaker degree as force of members is given them in a greater or less degree.” Recognizing that it “may be strengthened by exercise, as may any particular limb of the body,” Jefferson emphasized the importance of education and reason rather than religion or faith.⁶ Through such sentiments, Jefferson demonstrated a belief in the fundamental morality and rationality of man.

While Elihu Palmer also recognized the possible correlation between religion and morality, he was even more adamant that virtue superseded theology. Within the preface of Principles of Nature, Palmer proclaimed his intention to “give to moral principle a basis as durable as time, and as immortal as the specific succession of human existence;

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⁴ Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson’s Extracts from the Gospels, 355-356.

⁵ Ibid., 356-357.

⁶ Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, 10 August 1787, in Koch and Peden, The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 398.
and to render the sentiment of virtue, as far as possible, independent of all the theological reveries of antiquity.” He condemned the detrimental effect of supernaturalism and dogmatism, in particular atonement and original sin, as both dangerous and impractical. He proclaimed that a philosophy based upon such doctrines “teaches man that his own virtues are insufficient for his felicity; that the cultivation of his faculties, and the discovery and practice of moral truth, can never lead to substantial happiness.” He asserted that theology forced mankind to look toward an external force, either God or the church, in resolving his suffering. Palmer concluded that all genuine morality would be “drawn from the nature and condition of rational beings,” formulated in order to “preserve and augment their happiness, to raise and extend the dignity and utility of social existence.” Influenced far more by Enlightenment thought than his Calvinist upbringing, Palmer ultimately viewed the morality of man with optimism. Having denounced the doctrines of atonement and original sin, He professed, “Every man is accountable for himself.”


8 Benjamin Franklin to Lord Kames, 3 May 1760, in Lemay, *Writings*, 766.
Christian morality, virtue for Franklin was always non-sectarian and faith alone was insufficient. He professed, “Morality or Virtue is the End, Faith only a Means to obtain that End: And if the End be obtained, it is no matter by what Means.” While Franklin acknowledged that “the hearing and reading of Sermons may be useful,” he lamented that “if Men rest in Hearing and Praying, as too many do, it is as if a Tree should value itself on being water’d and putting forth Leaves, tho’ it never produc’d any Fruit.” Franklin ultimately emphasized the superiority of morality over religion, as reflected within his plan of conduct and thirteen virtues. Franklin professed, “tho’ my Scheme was not wholly without Religion there was in it no Mark of any of the distinguishing Tenets of any particular Sect.—I had purposely avoided them.”

While Franklin’s Calvinist foundations left him less optimistic than Jefferson or Palmer, he retained hope for the virtue of mankind. He recognized that many individuals mistakenly focused on obtaining value and social esteem through wealth, appearance, and power. Franklin lamented, “If we were as industrious to become Good, as to make ourselves Great, we should become really Great by being Good.” He reflected that the desire publish his plan of conduct was for the benefit of universal morality. Franklin proclaimed, “Many People lead bad Lives that would gladly lead good ones, but know not how to make the Change. They have frequently resolv’d and endeavour’d it; but in vain, because their Endeavours have not been properly conducted.”

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10 Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Huey, 6 June 1753, in Lemay, Writings, 476.
12 Benjamin Franklin, “The Busy-Body, No. 3,” in Lemay, Writings, 98.
13 Benjamin Franklin to Lord Kames, 3 May 1760, in Lemay, Writings, 765-766.
that man could arrive at perfection within one’s life, Franklin asserted that training would be paramount in order for understanding and virtue to become habitual. He analogized that if an individual wants to be an architect or painter, it would not be enough that he be convinced or determined to be one. Therefore, Franklin considered daily practice and self-reflection to be the greatest contributor to morality. He professed, “in order to obtain a clear Sight and constant Sense of your Errors, you would set apart a Portion of every Day for the Purpose of Self-Examination” in which one would reflect upon the morality of their daily behavior. Franklin emphasized making such introspection habitual, believing that “contrary Habits must be broken and good Ones acquired and established, before we can have any Dependance on a steady uniform Rectitude of Conduct.” Ultimately, Franklin emphasized habitual self-reflection as the means to cultivate virtue and dissolve immorality.

Many Buddhist schools, especially within the Zen lineage, emphasize the practical implementation of morality rather than the spiritual or theological. Since the Dharma does not comprise a “revealed religion,” it teaches that compassion and virtue are “not derived from any supreme being.” Instead, Buddhists assert that mankind “must attain wisdom through our own striving, just as we obtain scientific and philosophical knowledge only by independent effort.” Through such sentiments, Buddhists recognize the simplicity and universality of morality as encompassing “nothing mysterious, nothing

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14 Benjamin Franklin, “A Letter from Father Abraham, to His Beloved Son,” in Lemay, Writings, 512.


16 Senzaki, Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy, 71.
superstitious, nothing idolatrous, nothing supernatural.”

The Dharma emphasizes that practice, not faith or worship, is the principle of morality. As the Buddha professed, “If someone is standing on one shore and wants to go to the other shore, he has to either use a boat or swim across. He cannot just pray, ‘Oh, other shore, please come over here for me to step across!’”

While religion may provide aid for some individuals, “those who are able to see the light and brilliance of true wisdom and everlasting loving-kindness do not worship any external God or Buddha at all; they attain real peace and happiness at home in their everyday lives, without needing to go to a church or temple.” Particularly within Zen, the Dharma may be recognized simply as the means rather than the ends. Ultimately, the objective of Buddhism is to reach “the point where we do not need Buddha’s teaching” wherein our fundamental morality cultivates “the right human life where there is no Buddhism.”

Similar to the Founders, the Dharma asserts the potential virtue and perfectibility of human beings. Within its early development emerged the doctrine of the “womb” or “embryo” (tathāgata-garbha) of the Buddha. This concept became particularly emphasized within Mahayana literature, which assert that every sentient being harbors the potentiality for Buddhahood. Innumerable defilements, in particular those of ignorance, hatred, greed, and delusion, cause such perfectibility to be concealed. This innate potentiality was elaborated upon through Buddhism’s emergence within China,

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17 Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 77.

18 Siddhartha Gautama, Quoted in Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 79.

19 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 94-95.

where it became described as “Buddha-nature.”\footnote{Mitchell, \textit{Buddhism}, 140.} Being that every sentient being possesses this seed, Buddhists profess that we are “all mothers of the Buddha because we are all pregnant with the potential for awakening.”\footnote{Hanh, \textit{Living Buddha, Living Christ}, 40.} Rather than focusing upon theological or supernatural factors, Buddhism emphasizes an individual’s role in cultivating understanding and compassion. Since the only way to live virtuously is to “use your own working mind as the precious key,” the Dharma asserts that mankind “worships nothing but the inner self of each and every one of us.”\footnote{Senzaki, \textit{Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy}, 75.}

Buddhism emphasizes one’s own diligence and practice as the means to counteract the defilements that may emerge within every sentient being. As asserted by the Founders, the Dharma recognizes that individuals must practice a habitual self-reflection or contemplation (\textit{dhyana}) in order to “make our consciousness realize the inner reason of the universe which abides in our minds.”\footnote{Shaku, \textit{Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot}, 143-144.} Although usually associated with the practice of meditation, such introspection may be understood literally as the pacification and examination of the mind. Recognizing that our “human nature is very sneaky,” the practices and precepts of Buddhism are established in order to “forget everything and try to find our-self in our everyday life.”\footnote{Shunryu Suzuki, Quoted in Chadwick, \textit{Crooked Cucumber}, 293.} Often misunderstood as involving intense metaphysical conceptualizations or supernatural trances, mediation is simply the means in which one may calm the defilements of the mind and cultivate
wisdom and compassion. Practitioners come to recognize that the “purpose of studying Buddhism is not to study Buddhism, but to study ourselves.”

Foundations of Morality and Virtue

The Founders aptly recognized that virtue was founded within the intention and effect of an individual’s behavior. Jefferson was confident in an innate moral sense, but he believed that such an instinct would vary depending upon environmental factors. While “utility” would serve as the “standard and test of virtue,” Jefferson reflected that individuals “living in different countries, under different circumstances, different habits, and regimens, may have different utilities.” Therefore, he asserted that an act “may be useful, and consequently virtuous, in one country, which is injurious and vicious in another differently circumstanced.” Recognizing such cultural variances, Jefferson emphasized causality as an integral aspect of morality. He denounced doctrines of original sin and atonement, as well as conventional conceptualizations of good and evil, as clouding mankind’s ability to cultivate his own virtue. Within his correspondence with John Adams, Jefferson surmised that “as the circumstances and opinions of different societies vary, so the acts which may do them right or wrong must vary also.” Such reflection led him to conclude that “virtue does not consist in the act we do, but in the end it is to effect.” Jefferson emphasized the assessment of an act must be understood through individual and societal impact. He concluded, “If it is to effect the happiness of him to whom it is directed, it is virtuous, while in a society under different circumstances and

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26 Suzuki, *Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind*, 76.

27 Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, in Adams and Lester, *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels*, 357.
opinions the same act might produce pain, and would be vicious.” In addition, Jefferson vehemently denounced morality founded upon self-interest. Much of his discussion regarding virtue focused upon its efficacy in cultivating social harmony. He described morality based upon self-interest as “the sole antagonist of virtue, leading us constantly by our own propensities to self-gratification in violation of our moral duties to others.” Jefferson recognized that if mankind could subdue such “selfish propensities” through contemplation and mindfulness, then he would have “nothing to seduce him from the practice of virtue.”

Palmer also recognized that the true foundation of morality rested within the impact of behavior. He similarly rejected the implementation of eternal damnation and the conceptualization of actions themselves as being harmful. Palmer emphasized universal benevolence, as well as the recognition that present actions inevitably affect future events. He reflected that an individual’s conduct “must have a strict reference to the causes which have produced it, and every effect must bear a proportion to its productive cause.” Palmer ultimately asserted that the virtue of mankind was dependent upon the effects of his behavior, proclaiming that actions would be denominated good if they were “conformable to the principles of justice and universal benevolence” and bad if they were “unjust, cruel, and destructive to sensitive and intellectual life.”

Having rejected predestination and original sin, Franklin similarly recognized that morality was dependent on the impact of one’s behavior. He professed, “In order to know


29 Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law, 13 June 1814, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 356.

which is best to be done, and which not, it is requisite that we should have at one View all the intricate Consequences of every Action with respect to the general Order and Scheme of the Universe, both present and future.”

Reason provided an individual with the capacity to decipher actions “not only as they are at present, but as they are in their whole nature and tendency.” By implementing such capabilities, mankind would be able to “assign to every Cause its proper Actions and Effects.” Franklin asserted the necessity “for every Person who desires to be a wise Man, to take particular Notice of HIS OWN Actions, and of HIS OWN Thoughts and Intentions which are the Original of his Actions.” He also denounced self-interest within the cultivation of morality, asserting that it was one’s intention that “makes the Agent morally Good or Bad.” Throughout his life, Franklin emphasized the necessity of selflessness. As one historian reflected, “silent, even secretive, benevolence was well established among the great and noble concepts to which Franklin turned for intellectual and spiritual nourishment.”

While Franklin undoubtedly benefited from his publications and political service, he denied profiting from any of his endeavors. Franklin professed, “as we enjoy great Advantages from the Inventions of others, we should be glad of an Opportunity to serve others by any Invention of ours, and this we should do freely and generously.”

33 Benjamin Franklin, “A Letter from Father Abraham, to His Beloved Son,” in Lemay, Writings, 515.
As with the Founders, Buddhism devotes much attention to the foundations of morality. Through emphasizing “skillful means” (upaya), the Dharma recognizes that cultural variances impact the nature of virtue and allows some flexibility regarding the interpretation of specific behavior. While the Buddha emphasized certain ethical rules, “some of the minor precepts were open to changes and even to being revoked if need be.” Within many schools of Mahāyāna, morality (shila) “is not absolute, but depends upon the changing conditions of the world.” The manner in which Buddhist teachings have evolved upon expanding into a new region and culture epitomizes such teachings. One particular Chinese parable compared the Dharma to water since it forms a “uniform substance,” yet also “takes on the shape of the container it is placed in.” Due to such sentiments within Buddhism, the effect of behavior is implemented in order to evaluate morality. Rather than conceptualizing certain actions as inherently good or evil, the Buddha focused upon differentiating them as wholesome (kuśala) and unwholesome (akūśala). While behavior which is “conducive to the immediate as well as the ultimate relief of suffering, both one’s own and that of others” would be considered wholesome, unwholesome conduct would conversely “cause suffering for oneself or others.” In addition to emphasizing effect as a determining factor of morality, Buddhism also reflects upon the importance of mental conditioning since actions manifest through positive or negative intention. For instance, the three roots of akuśala are greed (rāga), anger (dveṣa), and delusion or ignorance (moha). While such malevolent intention assuredly

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37 Mitchell, Buddhism, 25.
38 Morgan, The Buddhist Experience in America, 99.
39 Reat, Buddhism, 39-40.
produces unwholesome behavior, unintended or accidental actions may also produce suffering. Therefore, an individual’s intention is implemented to clarify where certain conduct falls within the scale of morality.

In addition to benevolent intention and positive impact, selflessness is considered an integral aspect of virtue. Within Buddhism, the ideals of charity and altruism are encompassed through doctrines of generosity (*dana*) and compassion (*karuna*). However, the Dharma teaches that “the idea of *selflessness* is not an ethical ideal at all; it’s a profound metaphysical truth.” One may reflect that, “When you hammer a nail into a board and accidentally strike your finger, you take care of the injury immediately. The right hand never says to the left hand, ‘I am doing charitable work for you.’” Such an analogy represents the “spirit of non-self,” through which Buddhists “do whatever we can to benefit others without seeing ourselves as helpers and the others as the helped.” As reflected through the sentiments of the Founders, “secret virtue” is recognized as “practising goodness without any thought of recognition by others.” Within the teachings of Zen in particular, “no traces of self-conceit or self-glorification are to be left behind even after the doing of good, much less the thought of recompense, even by God.”

Buddhists emphasize cultivating selflessness, even when practicing the Dharma or establishing a new spiritual center. If an individual harbors any “personal interest” or even the “slightest idea of self,” then they have lost touch with the teaching and “cannot see Buddha’s face.”

Nature of Suffering and Happiness

Upon recognizing the prevalence of suffering inherent within the human condition, the Founders emphasized attaining tranquility and happiness. Jefferson believed that human suffering was created when the innate morality and composure of mankind was corrupted by incorrect beliefs. He cited a passage from Cicero proclaiming that the “seeds of virtue are inborn in our dispositions and, if they were allowed to ripen, nature’s own hand would lead us on to happiness of life.” However, human beings inevitably “become infected with deceptions so varied that truth gives place to unreality and the voice of nature itself to fixed prepossessions.” The belief that the true nature of mankind had been corrupted by “deceptions” and “unreality” was echoed throughout stages of his life. In reflection of such sentiments, Jefferson attacked religious and political institutions for subjugating reason, science, morality, and compassion. He ultimately advocated the benefit of education on virtue and tranquility. As Jefferson proclaimed within his correspondence, “Enlighten the people generally, and tyranny and oppressions of body and mind will vanish.” He asserted that such efforts would cultivate happiness, which he considered the “aim of life.” While Jefferson recognized many ancient philosophies, he was particularly fascinated by Epicureanism. As he professed to John Adams, “The summum bonum with me is now truly Epicurean, ease of

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body and tranquility of mind; and to these I wish to consign my remaining days.”

Jefferson aptly contemplated the suffering and affliction inherent within life and proclaimed, “to fortify our minds against the attacks of these calamities and misfortunes should be one of the principal studies and endeavors of our lives.”

Palmer also reflected upon the nature and prevalence of suffering within the human condition. He professed, “man has been constantly the object of the most scurrilous abuse, and the most detestable invective, that his moral existence has been buried in the gulf of ignorance.” At the foundation of such subjugation was the “destructive influence of ancient institutions,” in particular those encompassing theology. He proclaimed that institutionalized religion, in particular Christianity, was “incompatible with the dignity and happiness of his nature.” Palmer ultimately believed that by resting power in God or the Church, individuals lost sight of their independence and self-sufficiency. In particular, he argued that the traditional conceptualization of hell and sin “serves only to detach the mind from the true and real source of moral evil.” Rather than look to the realm of the supernatural, human beings needed to recognize their own impact upon the suffering of themselves and others. As he proclaimed, “Man has created it, and man must destroy it.” Recognizing that the “highest intellectual joy consists in the discovery of truth,” Palmer asserted that eradicating ignorance and cultivating wisdom would ultimately “serve as the stable foundation of human happiness, the immortal guarantee of the felicity of the intelligent world.”

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Franklin reflected more upon the attainment of happiness and avoidance of pain than any other subject and exhibited a profound understanding of the prevalent and cyclical nature of suffering. He reflected, “We are first mov’d by Pain, and the whole succeeding Course of our Lives is but one continu’d Series of Action with a View to be freed from it. As fast as we have excluded one Uneasiness another appears.” Franklin acknowledged the benefit of pain or uneasiness in prompting action. Recognizing that happiness and suffering were “in their Nature inseparable,” Franklin asserted that the “highest Pleasure is only Consciousness of Freedom from the deepest Pain.” In order to demonstrate the inherent correlation between pleasure and pain, he implemented a parable involving a man whose house was in danger of collapsing. Upon recognizing the inevitable suffering he was about to endure, the man had two possible reactions. The first was to acknowledge his uneasiness and subsequent desire to escape it, which would result in him fleeing the house. Alternatively, he could accept the circumstances and submit to the house collapsing, thereby also freeing him from his suffering. Although he observed that suffering was an inevitable aspect of the human condition, Franklin asserted that happiness was the ultimate objective of life. As he expressed through his plan of conduct, Franklin recognized that understanding and tranquility provided the foundation for happiness. He ultimately defined wisdom as the “Knowledge of what will be best for us on all Occasions and of the best Ways of attaining it.” Franklin asserted that happiness was founded upon understanding the true nature of reality. He proclaimed, “read your


51 Benjamin Franklin, “Proposals and Queries to be Asked the Junto,” in Lemay, Writings, 210.
own Nature, and view the Relation which other Men stand in to you, and you to them; and you’ll immediately see what constitutes human Happiness.”

The prevalence and significance of suffering encompasses the central teachings of Buddhism, which are known as the Four Noble Truths. Within the Dharma, the First Noble Truth proclaims that the human condition is one of inherent suffering (duḥkha). Such discontent is not only associated with the intense anguish of loss or death, but is recognized as including “unease, worry, headaches and heartaches, regret, sorrow, apprehension, dissatisfaction, illness, desire, hatred, ignorance, envy, and anger.” While emphasizing the inherent suffering within life may appear pessimistic, the First Noble Truth is acknowledged as a realistic diagnosis of the ailment of mankind. As with the Founders, Buddhists recognize the correlation between suffering and happiness. By examining one’s suffering, an individual will “see the nature of suffering and the way out.” Through such reflection, the conditions of both pleasure and pain are viewed as interdependent. Ultimately, Buddhists understand that one must “know the suffering of being too cold to enjoy and appreciate being warm.”

Similar to the Founders, Buddhism asserts that the true nature and happiness of mankind has been corrupted and subjugated. Recognizing that our “original mind” is inherently pure and all encompassing, Buddhists reflect that an individual must retain their “self-sufficient state of mind.” In order to discern such sentiments, the Dharma


54 Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, 38.

often analogizes the mind with a mirror that has been clouded by dust and debris. While clear and luminous in its foundations, the mind has similarly been obscured by certain attitudes and deceptions. The ultimate objective within Buddhism is to “find the pure looking glass of your mind, though it is covered with filth.”\(^{56}\) Recognizing that much of our pain arises from an incorrect perception of our reality, Buddhism asserts the ability of mankind to inhibit suffering and cultivate happiness. The Dharma emphasizes the cultivation of the “perfection of wisdom” (prajñāpāramitā), which is interpreted as the “true understanding of reality.”\(^{57}\) Ultimately, such wisdom or understanding serves as “the key that can unlock the door to the prison of suffering.”\(^{58}\) By subjugating the incorrect attitudes and perceptions of the mind, one reveals the original nature of enlightenment. While this attainment is often translated as extinction (nirvāṇa), it literally means the “blowing out” or extinguishing of the fires of delusion and desire. Nirvāṇa is often misinterpreted as simply an “abstract concept” or “distant heaven,” but can also encompass a state of mind that human beings are capable of experiencing within their lifetime.\(^{59}\) In addition to being the “recognition of truth,” it entails “the eradication of all evil desires, of all passions, of all egotism, so that the flame of envy, hatred, and lust will have nothing to feed upon.”\(^{60}\) Ultimately, nirvāṇa serves as a Buddhist conceptualization of unmitigated happiness, a state that is only achieved through the wisdom of recognizing the true nature of reality.

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\(^{56}\) Sasaki, *Holding the Lotus to the Rock*, 222.

\(^{57}\) Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 314.

\(^{58}\) Hanh, *Living Buddha, Living Christ*, 84.

\(^{59}\) Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 185.

\(^{60}\) Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 112.
Fundamental Causes of Suffering

While the Founders recognized the hindrances established by outside forces, they also believed that human suffering was caused by internal factors. Jefferson admired the manner in which the sentiments of the ancient philosophers “went chiefly to the government of our passions, so far as respected ourselves, and the procuring our own tranquility.”61 Jefferson cited an extract in which Cicero stressed, “It is wholly in an idea that we find the cause not merely indeed of distress but of all other disturbances as well.”62 Jefferson acknowledged that an individual’s deviation from their innate morality and tranquility would be based upon ignorance and misperception. He proclaimed, “once surrendering his reason, man has no remaining guard against monstrous absurdities and, like a ship without a rudder, the mind becomes a wreck.”63 Jefferson ultimately recognized that in order to cultivate mental tranquility, “we must avoid desire and fear, the two principal diseases of the mind.”64

Palmer recognized that mankind’s suffering was founded within his own thought and perception, emphasizing that human beings were capable of finding happiness by dispelling the shackles of ignorance and superstition. He proclaimed, “Let intelligent man study his own nature, and the passions of his heart, let him observe his relative condition and the springs of his action, and he will soon discern the causes of his calamity.” Palmer

61 Thomas Jefferson to Edward Dowse, 19 April 1803, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 330.

62 Wilson, Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book, 60.

63 Thomas Jefferson to James Smith, 8 December 1822, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 409.

64 Thomas Jefferson to William Short, 31 October 1819, in Adams and Lester, Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels, 390.
asserted that an individual’s happiness was correlated with the tranquility of their mind. He recognized that through “constancy of intellectual inquiry,” mankind would discover that his suffering was the product of “the law of power in surrounding objects, and the law of sensation, by which his life was every moment modified.” Palmer reflected that it was “the nature of life to feel, to be sensible, to be capable of perception,” but that the misperception of reality would inevitably result in “pain, distress, or complete misery.” He professed, “It will, therefore, be for ever impossible wholly to prevent pain, unless you destroy the law of power in material nature, or the law of sensation in animal life.”

Essentially, training one’s mind and perception could diminish or even eradicate suffering.

As with Jefferson and Palmer, Franklin recognized the internal nature of suffering. Having concluded that happiness “springs immediately from the mind,” he asserted that suffering arose upon “judging without Proof, or false Proof.” Franklin supported the assertion by ancient philosophers that “Happiness depends more on the inward Disposition of Mind than on outward Circumstances.” As he wrote to his sister Jane, “One’s true Happiness depends more upon one’s own Judgement of one’s self, on a Consciousness of Rectitude in Action and Intention.” Franklin argued that the world was comprised of two types of people, those who were happy and those who were unhappy. He concluded that an individual’s state was founded entirely upon their

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68 Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, 1 March 1766, in Lemay, *Writings*, 817.
perception of themselves and their environment. Those who were content would focus upon “the Conveniences of Things, the pleasant Parts of Conversation, the well-dress’d & well-tasted Dishes, the Goodness of the Wines, the Fine Weather…and enjoy all with Cheerfulness,” while the malcontent would “think and speak only of the contraries.”

Recognition of the internal nature of suffering is also extolled within the foremost teachings of Buddhism. Similar to the Founders, the Second Noble Truth asserts that suffering has a fundamental cause (samudaya) that is discernable within human comprehension. The foundation of suffering is often associated with craving (trishna), which encompasses the desire to experience pleasures that we perceive bring happiness and the desire to avoid those which we perceive bring suffering. Recognizing that life is “a fabric interwoven with the woof of pain and the warp of pleasure,” Buddhists emphasize that happiness arises when one transcends the cyclical nature of pleasure and pain. By analyzing cravings and desires, mankind is capable of altering their perception of the human condition. Similar to the Founders, Buddhism asserts that happiness and suffering are subjective and are dependent “largely on the way you perceive.” The world is ultimately comprised of both contented and discontented individuals, each of whom evaluate life “from various points of view and color it with their own inner pigment.” Those who are “ignorant and selfish” will thusly interpret their reality, as well as those who are “simple-hearted and defilement-free.” As a Buddhist may aptly reflect, “We believe that only certain conditions will make us happy. But it is often our very idea...”

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69 Benjamin Franklin, “The Handsome and the Deformed Leg,” in Lemay, Writings, 950-951.
70 Shaku, Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot, 95-96.
71 Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, 123.
72 Shaku, Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot, 107.
of happiness that prevents us from being happy. We have to look deeply into our perceptions in order to become free of them.”\textsuperscript{73}

**Cessation of Suffering and the Cultivation of Happiness**

Upon recognizing the need to subvert ignorance and cultivate tranquility, the Founders emphasized controlling passions and desires. Jefferson greatly admired ancient philosophers for their insight into mastering one’s mind. He quoted Cicero’s assessment that a wise and happy man was one “whose soul is tranquilized by restraint and consistency and who is at peace with himself, so that he neither pines away in distress, nor is broken down by fear, nor consumed with a thirst of longing in pursuit of some ambition, nor maudlin in the exuberance of meaningless eagerness.”\textsuperscript{74} Recognizing that sensual desires ultimately cause greater suffering despite whatever momentary happiness they may seem to instill, Jefferson warned that an individual should not “bite at the bait of pleasure, till you know there is no hook beneath it.”\textsuperscript{75} Such sentiments were evident through his correspondence with his grandson. Jefferson professed, “be very select in the society you attach yourself to, avoid taverns, drinkers, smokers, idlers, and dissipated persons generally; for it is with such that broils and contentions arise; and you will find your path more easy and tranquil.”\textsuperscript{76}

\textsuperscript{73} Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 54.

\textsuperscript{74} Wilson, *Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book*, 61.

\textsuperscript{75} Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786, in Koch and Peden, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 372.

\textsuperscript{76} Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Jefferson Randolph, 24 November 1808, in Koch and Peden, *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 543.
In addition to denouncing psychological desire, Jefferson also condemned material ambition and wealth. Within his correspondence with John Adams, Jefferson reflected that every individual working within philosophical, social, and political endeavors would witness “the false colors under which passion sometimes dresses the actions and motives of others.”\textsuperscript{77} Recognizing the possible influence of wealth upon government, Jefferson previously warned Adams that society must be protected from the inevitable formation of an “artificial aristocracy, founded on wealth and birth.”\textsuperscript{78}

Jefferson often advocated simplicity as an invaluable means to procure happiness and tranquility. He reproduced numerous excerpts supporting such sentiments, many of which overtly denied the correlation between wealth and contentment. Jefferson cited Euripides’ poignant assessment that mankind had “no possessions of his own,” being that “Riches make no settled home, but are as transient as the day.”\textsuperscript{79}

Upon recognizing the necessity to obtain mental tranquility, Palmer similarly advocated controlling one’s passions and desires. He argued that the faculties of man, in particular “certain passions and propensities to actions” were naturally “subjected to control of reason.” Palmer ultimately believed that such self-discipline could be managed for individual improvement, as well as universal benevolence. Regarding the intellectual capabilities of discernment and introspection, Palmer advocated that “these powers should be developed, and their force directed to the discovery of direct principle, and the useful application of it to social life.” Similar to Jefferson, Palmer advocated strict

\textsuperscript{77} Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 12 October 1823, in Cappon, \textit{The Adams-Jefferson Letters}, 600.

\textsuperscript{78} Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 28 October 1813, in Cappon, \textit{The Adams-Jefferson Letters}, 388.

\textsuperscript{79} Wilson, \textit{Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book}, 72.
determination in overcoming vice, which he characterized as “the universal attachment of
the human race.” Unfortunately, he failed to elaborate on precisely what passions and
desires needed to be tamed. Nevertheless, Palmer emphasized that “Every deviation from
nature is the establishment of a cause which must sooner or later work ruin to his
sensations, or essentially disturb the tranquility of his mind.”

As with Jefferson and Palmer, Franklin emphasized that individuals must grasp
control of their passions and desires. He professed, “All our different Desires and
Passions proceed from and are reducible to this one Point, Uneasiness.” Franklin
asserted that when mankind is governed by passion “we are regardless of the future, and
are only affected with the present.” When passion takes precedence over reason, “the
happiness we have then is not the happiness of our rational nature, but the happiness only
of the inferior and sensual part of us, and consequently a very low and imperfect
happiness.” Franklin ultimately recommended non-attachment, which he described as “an
indifference to the things of this world,” in order to cultivate a composed and tranquil
mind. He reflected, “Many Vices and Follies resemble their opposite Virtues and
Prudence; they border upon, and seem to mix with each other; and therefore the exact
Line of Division betwixt them is hard to ascertain.” In addition condemning pride and
ambition, Franklin also denounced the craving for sensual desires. He proclaimed,
“Enjoyment is not to be found by Excess in any sensual Gratification; but on the contrary,

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the immoderate Cravings of the Voluptuary, are always succeeded with Loathing and a palled Appetite.”

Although progress would be difficult, he was optimistic in the ability of mankind to master passions and desires. Franklin proclaimed, “the more we strive against the Temptation to any Vice, and practice the contrary Virtue, the weaker will that Temptation be, and the stronger will be that Habit; ‘till at length the Temptation has no Force, or entirely vanishes.”

Franklin also aptly recognized the detrimental effects of material desire and continually exalted the ideals of frugality and simplicity. Similar to Jefferson, Franklin found much to admire regarding the lifestyle and perspective of Native Americans. He reflected how many Native Americans have only a few “natural wants,” which were easy to satisfy. However, Franklin recognized the opposite within colonial society. He lamented, “with us are infinite Artificial wants, no less craving than those of Nature, and much more difficult to satisfy.”

His most poignant insights were reflected in his assertion that mankind was enslaved by its admiration for “whistles.” Franklin recalled that as a young child, he collected all the money he had and visited a nearby toy store. Being so enamored with the sound of a whistle, he gave up everything in order to buy one. When Franklin arrived home, his siblings disclosed that he had paid four times what the whistle was worth. From that moment onward, the trinket lost its allure. Franklin reflected that many human beings similarly forfeit everything for ambition, power, wealth, appearance, or sensual desire. He professed, “I conceive that great part of the

86 Benjamin Franklin to Peter Collinson, 9 May 1753, in Lemay, Writings, 471.
miseries of mankind are brought upon them by the false estimates they have made of the value of things and by their giving too much for their whistles.’’  

Franklin ultimately recognized the ideal of simplicity as the “highest Happiness,” “highest Beauty of Nature,” and “greatest Ornament of Life.” Although his philosophy and plan of conduct focused primarily on the individual, Franklin asserted that virtue would benefit all of humanity. By recognizing and cultivating a truly perfect self, one could then impact society as a whole.

Similar to the Founders, Buddhism emphasizes controlling passions and desires in the attainment of wisdom and happiness. The Third Noble Truth asserts that the cessation (niruddha) of suffering will manifest upon the subjugation of detrimental perceptions and cravings. The Buddha extolled the Middle Way, which “avoids the pursuit of sensual pleasures on the one hand and the pursuit of ascetic self-torment on the other.”

Buddhism professes that human beings require inherent material necessities, similar to the “natural wants” discussed by Franklin. Recognizing that it would be “altogether irrational to wish our bodily existence to be free from all its constitutional wants,” the Dharma thereby teaches an individual “not to curb them and torture the body but to regulate them and prevent their going to self-destruction through wantonness.”

Ultimately, suffering arises from our craving and attachment (upādāna) to what we associate with pleasant sensations and feelings. While there are elements and experiences that cultivate a true happiness that will “benefit and nourish ourselves and others,” there

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89 Mitchell, Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience, 47.

90 Shaku, Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot, 86.
are also seeds of false happiness. As similarly recognized by the Founders, the Dharma warns that such vice and delusion “brings temporary pleasure and helps us forget our suffering, but is not of lasting benefit and can actually be harmful.”\(^{91}\) Recognizing the impermanent happiness that such sensuous desires bring, Buddhism emphasizes the doctrine of non-attachment.

Encompassed within the denunciation of craving and attachment is an assertion of the detrimental effects of material desire and ambition. While he recognized the “natural wants” of the human condition, the Buddha professed that mankind must “always be satisfied with bare necessities.”\(^{92}\) Recognizing that power, fame, and wealth are often “obstacles to our happiness,” Buddhists reflect that mankind must “cultivate the wish to be free of these things so we can enjoy the wonders of life that are always available.”\(^{93}\) Similar to Franklin’s assertion regarding “whistles,” the Dharma denounces attachment to material possessions as inevitably resulting in an individual being “no more master of himself, but an abject slave to his surroundings.”\(^{94}\) In order to cultivate one’s own happiness, as well as the happiness of all sentient beings, one must adhere to a disciplined temperance and simplicity. Reflecting upon its pragmatic sentiments, Buddhism recognizes that by practicing “the doctrine of self-sufficiency,” an individual will “have more time to work for your spiritual growth and for the sake of others.”\(^{95}\)

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\(^{91}\) Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 78.

\(^{92}\) Siddhārtha Gautama, Quoted in Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 150.

\(^{93}\) Hanh, *The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching*, 35.


\(^{95}\) Hanh and Berrigan, *The Raft is Not the Shore*, 110.
Lastly, the Buddha also taught a method for the cessation of suffering that parallels the Founders views of moral conduct. In culmination of the fundamental teachings of Buddhism, the Fourth Noble Truth expounds the path (mārga) toward cultivating wisdom, tranquility, and happiness. Recognized as the Eightfold Path, it encompasses specific precepts and virtues that are “all intended for the purification of the mind and the regulation of bodily desires.”96 The specific steps of the Eightfold Path are usually divided into three categories. Within “proper view” are included Right Understanding and Right Thought, which emphasize “‘knowledge and insight’ into the true nature of things,” as well as the “freedom from unwholesome states of mind like thoughts of greed, harm, violence, or ill will toward others.” The second category, often referred to as “proper conduct,” includes Right Speech, Right Action, and Right Livelihood. Whereas Right Speech condemns the utterance of “falsehood, slander, harsh words, and idle gossip,” Right Livelihood outlines the moral unsuitability of certain occupations. Right Action discloses the Five Precepts of Buddhism, which denounce killing, stealing, lying, as well as lack of temperance regarding sexual conduct and intoxication. The doctrines of Right Effort, Right Mindfulness, and Right Concentration encompass the final category of “proper practice.” Such teachings emphasize the resolution to practice the precepts and cultivate mental awareness and tranquility.97 One infamous Zen teacher recognized parallels with Franklin and upon imitating the Founder’s daily introspection, found himself similarly frustrated when his own notebook

96 Shaku, Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot, 87.

97 Mitchell, Buddhism, 52-60.
“became full of black dots.” Ultimately, both the Eightfold Path and the Founders’ ethical philosophies serve as practical methods to ease suffering and cultivate happiness.

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98 Nyogen Senzaki to Soyen Shaku, in Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 8.
CHAPTER VI
LIFE, DEATH, AND THE HUMAN CONDITION

“The component parts of which man is formed are all drawn from the great fountain of existence; they are essentially material in their nature, and destined to return to the source from which they sprang.”

—Elihu Palmer, *Principles of Nature*

**Interdependence of all Sentient Beings**

Within their promotion of reason, science, and morality, the Founders recognized the interdependence of all sentient beings. Regarding the role of humanity within all of existence, Benjamin Franklin stressed that man “is not the most perfect Being but One, rather that as there are many Degrees of Beings his Inferiors, so there are man Degrees of Beings superior to him.” In particular, Franklin denounced the vanity inherent in mankind’s professed superiority. He chided, “Whatever sooths our Pride, and tends to exalt our Species above the rest of the Creation, we are pleas’d with and easily believe.” Franklin asserted that after reflecting upon the human condition, every individual will recognize that “our Geese are but Geese tho’ we may think ’em Swans.” Such sentiments were reflected through his foray into vegetarianism. Having initiated the practice when he was around the age of sixteen, Franklin reflected that he became quite diligent. While he recognized that such efforts produced “greater Clearness of Head & quicker Apprehension,” Franklin also recognized the moral implications of vegetarianism. He compared the cod fishing off Boston to “a kind of unprovok’d Murder,

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since none of them had or ever could do us any Injury that might justify the Slaughter.”

He ultimately advocated the importance of moral and ethical conduct towards all sentient beings. Upon contemplating interdependence and proclaiming that “We are in this World mutual Hosts to each other,” Franklin stressed that mankind must be careful not to “harden our Hearts against the Distresses of our Fellow Creatures.”

Similar to Franklin, Thomas Jefferson acknowledged the inherent correlation between all living creatures. He supported a theory within which “nature may be viewed as an ascending progression of species, from the lowest plant to the highest animal, man.” Jefferson also excerpted Bolingbroke’s reflection upon the correlation between mankind and animals. Bolingbroke rejected the supposed superiority of man, asserting that “there is no pretence to say that we have any more right to complain of the evils which affect our state than our fellow creatures of the evils which affect theirs, or which are common to both.” He ultimately recognized the association “from animal beings imperceptible to us, for their minuteness, without the help of microscopes, and even with them, up to man.” As with many deists of the period, Jefferson often referred to the “equilibrium” within nature, focusing on laws of “cause and effect” and subsequent implications regarding morality. Unfortunately, Jefferson failed to elaborate upon the precise form and function of such interdependence.

5 Benjamin Franklin, “Appeal for the Hospital,” in Lemay, Writings, 363.
6 Miller, Jefferson and Nature, 52.
7 Wilson, Jefferson's Literary Commonplace Book, 43-44.
8 Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Robert Patterson, in Lipscomb, Bergh, and Johnston, The Writings of Thomas Jefferson, VIII:192.
Although each Founder extolled a philosophy of interdependence, Elihu Palmer provided far more insight into the relationship between sentient beings. Reflecting upon the state of a “high or low station in animal existence,” Palmer asserted that the universe consisted of “a vast assemblage of living creatures, whose relations are reciprocal and reciprocated under a thousand different forms, and supported by a thousand different ligaments of an imperceptible nature.” He believed that as an “associated being,” “man should consider himself as a unit in the totality of existence; as a part of a widely extended whole, bearing a relation to every other part, and every other part bearing a relation to his own modification of life.” Palmer advocated the “principle of causation,” lamenting that contemporary theologies had “never thrown a particle of light upon this most interesting inquiry.” Having concluded that all sentient beings were “alternatively affected by the wishes, the passions, and the conduct of each other,” Palmer lamented the detrimental influence of man. He argued that if mankind studied the principles of causation and interdependence, it would instill “a comprehensive view of the successive changes of his existence” and “teach him that the pain which he inflicts upon sensitive existence will return upon himself with interest.” Professing the need for man to recognize the law of causation and “live for the benefit of himself and his fellow creatures,” Palmer proclaimed that the principle of universal benevolence must be “extended to the whole animal world, so as to exclude acts of cruelty, and annihilate every species of injustice.” In particular, he recognized the detrimental impact of violence towards all sentient beings. Palmer proclaimed, “The child that is permitted in early life

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to run a pin through a fly, is already half prepared to run a dagger through the heart of his fellow creature!“\textsuperscript{10}

The principles extolled by the Founders regarding interdependence parallel the fundamental teachings of Buddhism. A reflection upon causation, or cause and effect, comprises the essential doctrine of karma. Unfortunately, many individuals have formulated a misconception of karma as a sort of reward or punishment for one’s behavior. Such sentiments reflect a belief in providence, that individuals receive discipline from a divine source. However, both the Buddha and the Founders rejected such intervention. Instead, the doctrine of karma emphasizes that “Every action brings its own result, in the moral as well as in the natural world.”\textsuperscript{11} Buddhists recognize that one’s actions will initiate innumerable causes and effects that may impact all sentient beings, including the individual. Similar to the conceptualization of the laws of nature, karma teaches that thoughts and actions “have an effect that reverberates throughout the life (and beyond) of the person who is responsible for them.”\textsuperscript{12} Such sentiments explain the Buddhist perspective regarding the human condition. Mankind is recognized as inhabiting a position surrounded by both superior and inferior beings, each of which is interdependent. In order to cultivate mindfulness and benevolence, mankind must “remove the notion of human as something that can survive by itself alone” and recognize that one exists “only with the survival of other species.”\textsuperscript{13} The interdependence of sentient beings ultimately provides the foundations of nonviolence, which pertains to

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 139, 156-157.

\textsuperscript{11} Senzaki, Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy, 89.

\textsuperscript{12} Morgan, The Buddhist Experience in America, 41.

\textsuperscript{13} Hanh, The Heart of the Buddha’s Teaching, 126-127.
all living creatures. While many schools permit the killing of animals if human lives are at stake, the Dharma emphasizes that such actions should be avoided at all costs. However, adherence to vegetarianism has become particularly disparate and often reflects upon one’s geographical and cultural environment. While it may be the ideal practice, it often is a matter of personal choice. Many Buddhists will refrain from all meat, others from all or certain animal products, and some may accept that which is served to them. What may be emphasized is not the devotion to vegetarianism itself, but the intention behind the consumption of any food. Essentially, emphasis is always placed upon diminishing the suffering of all sentient beings.

**Defense, Warfare, and Nonviolence**

Throughout each of their lives, the Founders reflected upon the nature and impact of warfare. Jefferson has been aptly characterized as a “half-way pacifist,” because although he fundamentally opposed war and sought all means to avoid it, he recognized that war was at times an inevitable evil.[^1] Jefferson was often supportive of defensive measures regarding national security, especially during the period surrounding his presidency. He asserted, “all men know that war is a losing game to both parties. But they know also that if they do not resist encroachment at some point, all will be taken from them.” Comparing war to “giving a part to save the whole, a limb to save life,” Jefferson lamented that is was the “melancholy law of human societies to be compelled sometimes to choose a great evil in order to ward off a greater.”[^2]


defensive warfare, Jefferson denounced the need for a standing army or navy. He professed, “I am for relying, for internal defence, on our militia solely, till actual invasion, and for such a naval force only as may protect our coasts and harbors from such depredations as we have experienced; and not for a standing army in time of peace, which may overawe the public sentiment; nor far a navy, which, by its own expenses and the eternal wars in which it will implicate us, will grind us with public burthens, and sink us under them.”\textsuperscript{16} During his presidency Jefferson advocated non-engagement in European conflicts and made every effort to steer the United States toward neutrality.

Despite his support for defensive warfare, Jefferson exhibited a spirit of nonviolence throughout his life. He often expressed shock by the malevolent and self-destructive acts of mankind. Jefferson professed, “I do not recollect in all the animal kingdom a single species but man which is eternally & systematically engaged in the destruction of its own species.”\textsuperscript{17} Within the final years of his life, Jefferson exclaimed to John Adams, “I hope we shall prove how much happier for man the Quaker policy is, and that the life of the feeder is better than that of the fighter.”\textsuperscript{18} His most notable dialogue was shared with Reverend Noah Worcester, the leader of a contemporary pacifist society of which Jefferson agreed to become a member. Jefferson proclaimed his “sincere wish” that Worcester’s writings and society “may have effect in lessening this greatest of

\textsuperscript{16} Thomas Jefferson to Elbridge Gerry, 26 January 1799, in Koch and Peden, \textit{The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson}, 499.

\textsuperscript{17} Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 1 January 1797, in Ford, \textit{The Works of Thomas Jefferson}, VIII:264.

\textsuperscript{18} Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, 1 June 1822, in Cappon, \textit{The Adams-Jefferson Letters}, 579.
human evils.”¹⁹ Within a subsequent letter, Jefferson confirmed to Worchester, “You have not been mistaken in supposing my views and feeling to be in favor of the abolition of war.” Although he expressed doubt that such peace could be maintained, Jefferson was hopeful that through the “inculcations of reason or religion,” “the perversities of our nature can be so far corrected as sometimes to prevent the necessity, either supposed or real, of an appeal to the blinder scourges of war, murder, and devastation.”²⁰

Similar to Jefferson, Franklin demonstrated philosophical opposition to armed conflict. He lamented that its prevalence resulted from insufficiencies within human nature, observing that human beings are “generally more easily provok’d than reconcil’d” and often exude “more Pride and even Pleasure in killing than in begetting one another.”²¹ While Franklin recognized the occasional need for defensive measures, he sought to prevent such situations from ever arising. By presenting the Albany Plan in 1754, Franklin hoped to manage colonial growth and avoid warfare. In particular, it was aimed at creating a united front and preventing future conflicts, especially regarding Native Americans. Franklin later reflected that the failure to enact the Albany Plan had a profound impact on the American Revolution. He concluded that the initiative would have prevented the French and Indian War by providing the colonies with sufficient negotiation and defensive measures. Thereby negating the necessity of British forces and

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²¹ Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Priestley, 7 June 1782, in Lemay, *Writings*, 1047-1048.
subsequent taxation, Franklin’s Albany Plan may have delayed or even prevented the American Revolution.\(^\text{22}\)

Although Franklin demonstrated an acceptance of defensive measures, he vehemently denounced warfare for any other end. Recognizing the advancements within natural and moral philosophy, Franklin proclaimed his hope that “Mankind will at length, as they call themselves reasonable Creatures, have Reason and Sense enough to settle their Differences without cutting Throats.” He asserted that mankind was often blind of the consequences of war and that even those deemed successful inevitably brought misfortune. As Franklin professed, “there never was a good War, or a bad Peace.”\(^\text{23}\)

Denouncing the “inhumanity” of warfare as contrary to “human prudence,” he also characterized the armed forces as “a devouring monster.” Franklin declared, “if statesmen had a little more [arithmetic], or were more accustomed to calculation, wars would be much less frequent.”\(^\text{24}\) In particular, he attacked the implementation of war for monetary or territorial benefit. Franklin professed, “To me it seems that neither the obtaining or retaining of any Trade, how valuable soever, is an Object for which Men may justly Spill each others Blood.” He concluded that “the profits of no Trade can ever be equal to the Expence of compelling it, and of holding it, by Fleets and Armies.”\(^\text{25}\)

Whereas Jefferson and Franklin recognized the necessary evil of defensive warfare, Palmer unequivocally denounced all conflict. He lamented that mankind’s


\(^{23}\) Benjamin Franklin to Sir Joseph Banks, 27 July 1783, in Lemay, *Writings*, 1073.


\(^{25}\) Benjamin Franklin to Lord Howe, 20 July 1776, in Lemay, *Writings*, 993, 994.
desires and passions have “excited sentiments of hostility between individuals and nations whose interests were the same, and whose duties ought to have been universally reciprocated.” Palmer professed, “The narrow prejudice which makes one man the enemy of another and one country the enemy of another, is not only disgraceful, but subversive of the best interests of human society.” While he recognized the natural impulse for an individual to ensure its survival, Palmer denounced the implementation of warfare. As with Jefferson and Franklin, he attacked the political and economic motives used as justification for conflict. Palmer proclaimed that it was the “iniquity of corrupt government which has perverted those sentiments of the human heart,” launching individuals and nations “in battle array against each other, without any good or substantial reason whatever.”

While the acceptance of defensive warfare by Jefferson and Franklin would appear divergent from the Dharma, Buddhists have also recognized complexities within conflicts. Although such instances have been rare throughout the history of Buddhism, there have been some situations in which Buddhist have engaged in war. Particular evidence can be seen within China during their expulsion of the Mongols, Japan during the imperialistic regimes, and Tibet in the continued attempt to free themselves from Chinese rule. While the vast majority of Buddhist teachers and scholars emphasize that any manner of killing must never be permitted, others recognize the possibility to engage in conflict as a means to prevent greater suffering. Such circumstances may justify action, but “it is emphasized that the doer must be acting from compassion only, such as to save

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the lives of innocents. It must not be done from motives of expediency or revenge."\(^{27}\)

Involvement within warfare may not be exclusively immoral if the intention is a “just and honorable cause,” such as the “maintenance and realization of noble ideals” and the “upholding of humanity and civilization.”\(^{28}\) As one Buddhist leader professed, “As we aspire to peace we cannot deny the possibility that each of us may be confronted with the need for wrathful intervention in order to prevent greater harm.”\(^{29}\)

Despite justification by some Buddhists regarding such rare instances, Buddhism generally denounces all violence. The Dharma stresses adherence to pacifism, instilling ideals similarly expressed by the Founders. Students are taught to recognize many of the false preconceptions of warfare, in particular those extolling sentiments of glory and patriotism. Upon avoiding such traps, one will ultimately recognize that war is the “most horrible evil of human life, that killing one another with whatever beautiful excuse is a proof of moral depravity, that our mission here under the sun is not to destroy life but to preserve and develop it.”\(^{30}\) The innumerable justifications implemented within conflicts are insufficient when weighed against the suffering extended to all sentient beings. Similar to the Founders, Buddhism proclaims the unparalleled importance of universal benevolence. The Dharma reflects the interdependence of both individuals and nations, rejecting traditional conceptualizations of enemies. The hostility that arises is a result of the fact that “we do not understand him or his environment.” However, by practicing compassion and mindfulness, “we realize that if we grew up like him, in his set of

\(^{27}\) Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 252.

\(^{28}\) Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 195.

\(^{29}\) Chagdud Tulku Rinpoche, Quoted in Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 253.

\(^{30}\) Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 190.
circumstances and having lived in his environment, we would be just like him.”\textsuperscript{31} Such reflection instills universal benevolence and nonviolence, thereby dissolving any fallacious justifications for warfare.

**Impermanence and the Inevitability of Death**

While each Founder recognized the benefits of the physical form, they also reflected upon its deficiencies. In particular, Franklin lamented the ills of human existence and the unequivocal impermanence of life. Having recognized that all individuals who “live a long Life and drink to the Bottom of the Cup must expect to meet some of the Dregs,” he acknowledged his fortune in escaping many of the “more terrible Maladies the human Body is liable to.”\textsuperscript{32} Franklin ultimately advocated securing tranquility in contemplating the nature of life and the inevitability of death. Reflecting upon those hopelessly lost within the perils of impermanence, Franklin observed that mankind often grasps to life as “a Child who laments that he cannot eat his Cake and have his Cake.” He concluded that it was wasted effort to pine over the passing of time and that one must find solace in enjoying every moment of life, akin to “eating Bread with Joy, and drinking Wine with a merry Heart.”\textsuperscript{33} As one historian aptly reflected, Franklin’s sentiments convey that “it’s not death that spoils life as we live it, it’s how we think about life that does. We have no control over death, but we do have some control

\textsuperscript{31} Hanh, *Going Home*, 34.


Franklin reflected that death served as the “kind and benevolent” manner in which individuals may rid themselves of their physical bodies when they lose their beneficial capacities. Franklin’s contemporaries reflected upon such stoicism shortly after his death, reporting that he had “successively passed in philosophic meditations” with the “serenity of a sage.” Reflecting the sentiments he harbored much of his life, Franklin was said to have repeated his preferred maxim that “a man is perfectly born only after his death.”

Jefferson also provided some insight into the impermanence of the human body and the inherent ills of aging. Reflecting that neither individuals nor their pleasures are immortal, Jefferson contemplated the nature of human experience. He professed, “We have no rose without its thorn; no pleasure without alloy. It is the law of our existence, and we must acquiesce.” Jefferson often proclaimed that he benefited from good health throughout his life. However, he asserted his “perfect resignation to the laws of decay,” which he acknowledged were inevitable for “all forms and combinations of matter.” Through his correspondence with John Adams, Jefferson reflected that upon aging, “the powers of life are sensibly on the wane, sight becomes dim, hearing dull, memory constantly enlarging it’s frightful blank and parting with all we have ever seen or known.

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34 Weinberger, Benjamin Franklin Unmasked, 127.

35 Louis Otto, Quoted in Aldridge, Benjamin Franklin and Nature's God, 267-268.

36 Thomas Jefferson to Maria Cosway, 12 October 1786, in Koch and Peden, The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson, 376.

spirits evaporate, bodily debility creeps on palsyng every limb, and so faculty after faculty quits us.”

Jefferson reflected upon the inevitability of death and recognized the benefit of tranquility in addressing the impermanent nature of life. He found much admiration for the ancient philosophers’ view of death and cited many of their passages. He incorporated an excerpt from Cicero, asserting that “the man who is afraid of the inevitable cannot live with a soul at peace; but the man who is without fear of death, not simply because it is unavoidable but also because it has no terrors for him, secures a valuable aid towards rendering life happy.” Jefferson also quoted from Horace, “Inasmuch as all creatures that live on earth have mortal souls, and for neither great nor small is there escape from death, therefore, good sir, while you may, live among happy joys; live mindful ever of how brief your time is!” Jefferson reaffirmed such sentiments throughout his life. As he reflected to John Adams, “There is a ripeness of time for death, regarding others as well as ourselves, when it is reasonable we should drop off, and make room for another growth.”

Palmer also recognized the law of impermanence and the inevitability of death. He advocated that mankind “ought to learn that change is the eternal order in the established arrangements of the world.” Palmer asserted that “disorganization or physical death” was simply “an unavoidable appendage of animal life.” Palmer proclaimed, “the

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40 Ibid., 83.

very construction of his nature insures the certainty of a subsequent derangement, and that the primary qualities of all sensitive beings gradually lead to dissolution.”

Nevertheless, Palmer was not pessimistic regarding the inevitability of death. In fact, he declared his intention to “reconcile man to his fate; to tranquilize his mind, and raise it above the superstitious fears of death.” Palmer presented a positive view of death by extolling its cyclical nature. He ultimately conceptualized death as a “change in the mode of existence” or a “dissolution of the combined modifications of animal life.” Reflecting upon his views of physical interdependence, Palmer believed that death was not finite. Professing that death was “as natural and necessary as life,” he advocated that mankind should “consider death as a necessary and justifiable appendage of the present modification of existence.” Having recognized the material construction of the physical body, he argued that individuals were “destined to return to the source from which they sprang.”

Ultimately, Palmer proclaimed that human beings would find tranquility upon understanding the true nature of life and death.

Much like the Founders, the Dharma emphasizes that transience is the inherent nature of existence. The law of impermanence (anicca) is a fundamental doctrine within all schools of Buddhism. The Dharma reflects that the physical body consists of the Five Aggregates (skandhas), which include matter or form (rupa), sensation or feeling (vedana), perception (samjna), mental formations (samskara), and consciousness (vijnana). Since each element is always in a constant state of flux, they are recognized as intrinsically impermanent. Essentially, the being that exists in one moment is

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fundamentally different from that which emerges in the next, ultimately culminating in the breakdown of each of our faculties. Buddhists assert that much of our suffering arises from our inability to accept the unequivocal “truth of transiency.” The Buddha imparted the teaching of impermanence as he faced his own impending death. Through his last words he professed, “Now, monks, I declare that all the conditioned things of the world are passing. Attain your liberation with diligence!” Such sentiments epitomize the reflection upon death and reverence for practice within Buddhism.

Similar to the Founders, Buddhism emphasizes obtaining tranquility when facing the inevitability of death. The Dharma has often been misinterpreted as fatalistic or nihilistic. However, such sentiments should be avoided just as diligently as attachments to life. A prominent parable within Zen regards an old monk who was meditating in a public venue. During his practice, the monk saw a woman frantically run by him. When her husband finally reached the monk and asked where his wife had gone, the monk replied that he had only seen a set of bones pass by. Ultimately, the monk’s perspective left him “unable either to rescue the woman or calm the husband.” Such nihilism is often criticized within many schools of Buddhism, for it lacks both compassion and wisdom. Rather than denouncing or neglecting the body, the Dharma strives to expound the true nature of life. By reflecting upon the doctrine of impermanence, one will recognize that death is an inherent condition of life and that without it life cannot be possible. Through such contemplation and understanding, an individual can “overcome all kinds of fear and

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46 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 96.
suffering, including the fear of death.” Once mankind has abandoned its attachment to life and the physical form, it will appreciate the true value of the human condition and thereby cultivate enduring happiness.

**Conceptualization of the Soul and Immortality**

The Founders’ reflections upon the nature of the soul were among the most complex that they extolled. Throughout Jefferson’s life, his view of immortality varied far more than any other philosophy as he spoke more about the afterlife as he grew older and approached death. Within much of his correspondence, Jefferson expressed hope that he would be reunited with loved ones and attempted to ease others’ grief by professing such sentiments. However, he never elaborated on the exact nature of his views and appeared to simply grasp to the hope of a future state. Despite such wavering during his later years, Jefferson questioned or even denied immortality at various times throughout his life. He cited Cicero’s deduction, “if the soul is the heart or blood or brain, then assuredly, since it is material, it will perish with the rest of the body; if it is breath it will perhaps be dispersed in space; if fire it will be quenched.” Within his correspondence with John Adams, Jefferson professed that metaphysical quandaries were beyond human understanding. He proclaimed, “To talk of immaterial existences, is to talk of nothings. To say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings, or that there is no god, no angels, no soul.” Asserting that his “creed of materialism” was supported by ancient and Enlightenment philosophers, Jefferson added that he was “satisfied, and sufficiently occupied with the things which are, without tormenting or

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troubling myself about those which may indeed be, but of which I have no evidence.”

Reflecting upon religious doctrines of immortality and those regarding the nature of the soul, Jefferson professed, “I think ignorance, in these cases, is truly the softest pillow on which I can lay my head.” In addition to recognizing that such quandaries were beyond human comprehension, Jefferson also denounced the ills effects of such beliefs. He admired how the Pythagoreans and Epicureans had taught in harmony alongside the religionists of ancient Greece, expressing his contempt that “a new sort of policy, which considers the future lives & happiness of men rather than the present, has taught to distress one another.”

Similar to Jefferson, Franklin demonstrated a varied perspective on immortality. Having retained some traditional Christian concepts of the soul, he became increasingly supportive of a future state as he grew older and faced his own death. However, he also expressed that heaven was not a physical realm, but “a State of Happiness, infinite in Degree.” Despite such sentiments, Franklin also argued that the soul was a mental faculty and would expire upon the death of body and mind. He proclaimed that it served to formulate reason and was implemented upon sensation as “a mere Power or Faculty of contemplating on, and comparing those Ideas when it has them.” Franklin concluded that “upon Death, and the Destruction of the Body, the Ideas contain’d in the Brain, (which are alone the Subjects of the Soul’s Action)” would likewise be destroyed. Since the soul


52 Benjamin Franklin to Joseph Huey, 6 June 1753, in Lemay, Writings, 475.
“must then necessarily cease to think or act, having nothing left to think or act upon” it would then be “reduc’d to its first inconscious State before it receiv’d any Ideas.”

Reflecting his refutation of immortality, Franklin declared that “to cease to think is but little different from ceasing to be.” Ultimately recognizing the controversial nature of such philosophies, Franklin reflected that his views would be met with indignation and condemnation.

Palmer was particularly caustic toward the traditional conceptualization of an immortal soul. In particular, he denounced the belief in future reward and punishments as “intellectually dishonest, archaic remnants of supernaturalism” that were entirely “inconsistent with the nature of human actions.” Palmer rejected the conceptualization of a distinct and independent soul, comparing it to “a kind of spiritual and celestial inhabitant of a mean and material tenement.” He argued that such doctrines violated reason and science, being founded solely within the desires of mankind. Reflecting that human beings “most ardently wish to continue their life here for ever,” Palmer compared hopes of immortality with the expectation that a “man should become immensely rich, because he wished to be so.” He concluded that upon death, “the essence of which man is composed” would ultimately “eternize its reciprocal relation with the vast fabric of material substance.”

Essentially, Palmer conveyed a level of materialism that paralleled Jefferson and Franklin.

Similar to the Founders, the Dharma questions the existence of a soul from both a theoretical and practical perspectives. One of the fundamental doctrines of Buddhism is

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that of no-self (*anattā*), which encompasses the denial of an independent or immortal soul. Since the Five Aggregates that encompass the human condition are impermanent, no permanent physical entity can be identified. Therefore, traditional identifications of “self” or “soul” are simply conventional conceptualizations of the “always changing collection of attributes, perceptions, and consciousness” comprising physical existence.\(^\text{55}\)

Within Buddhism, the analogy of a house is often implemented to discount sentiments of immortality. One may recognize the form of a house, as well as the elements it is composed of, but it is impermanent by nature. When the roof, floor, walls, windows, and all other materials are disassembled the house ceases to be since it “did not have any independent existence outside the material whose combination only in a certain form makes it possible.” Similar to the Founders, Buddhists reflect that those individuals who grasp in search of the soul will be “pursuing fata morgana that vanish into airy nothingness as you approach.”\(^\text{56}\) Despite such assertions against the existence of an independent soul, the Dharma has been equally denunciatory towards nihilism. Within the ancient texts, the Buddha “pointedly refuses to answer the metaphysical question as to whether or not there is a self.” Ultimately, both the unequivocal belief in a soul, as well as the vehement rejection of a soul, can be equally detrimental. While believing in a “permanent self” would inherently “deny the possibility of spiritual self-change,” abandoning such belief would “deny the worth of a moral or religious life.”\(^\text{57}\)

The Buddha recognized that many of his disciples became equally attached to non-self as they

\(^{55}\) Morgan, *The Buddhist Experience in America*, 38.

\(^{56}\) Shaku, *Sermons of a Buddhist Abbot*, 38, 50.

had been to an independent self, in effect confusing “the means and the end, the raft and the shore.” Ultimately, the Dharma emphasizes obtaining “freedom from the notions of both self and non-self.”

The conceptualization of the soul or self within Buddhism was always founded upon practical and moral applications. Within ancient India, the doctrine of self (ātman) was central to the spiritual beliefs and attachment to and worship of one’s independent identity had exacerbated social injustice. Such doctrines cultivated ignorance, producing the caste system, subjugation of the untouchables, and spiritual monopoly by the Brahmins. Therefore, the Buddha’s reflection upon the self should be recognized as a reaction to the egocentric culture of his time. Rather than the immortality of one’s soul, the Dharma emphasizes the immortality of one’s actions. Through the fundamental doctrine of karma, Buddhists observe that “what you wish to understand by the soul does not exist in the ego-entity but in the work you do, in the sentiment you feel, in the thought you think.” One may reflect on such sentiments through the analogy of a painting. Upon gazing at the work you may feel a profound connection with the artist through the concepts and feelings embodied within his work. While it remains uncertain whether “his soul has gone up to heaven and is enjoying celestial happiness,” it is obvious that he is “still living among ourselves, and is inspiring us to the higher ideals of life.” In essence, karma may be understood as the immortality of an individual through their action, thought, and impact.

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60 Senzaki, *Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy*, 152.
Contemplation of Transmigration and Rebirth

In addition to providing perspectives on immortality, the Founders also contemplated doctrines similar to rebirth. Within his correspondence with Jefferson, Reverend Isaac Story included a manuscript asserting the transmigration of the soul after death. Reverend Story’s analysis was similar to that of Pythagoras, whose teachings have drawn parallels with Buddhist philosophy. Jefferson responded that he was unable to “pronounce on the hypothesis you present of a transmigration of souls from one body to another in certain cases,” reflecting that the “laws of nature have withheld from us the means of physical knowledge of the country of spirits.” While he recalled being “fond of the speculations which seemed to promise some insight into that hidden country” during his youth, Jefferson professed that he had since “reposed my head on that pillow of ignorance” and focused instead on “nourishing the good passions, and controlling the bad.”

Although Jefferson did not proclaim his support for Story’s hypothesis, he failed to dismiss it as well. Within his conceptualization of material existence, Jefferson recognized the interdependence of all sentient beings. Regarding the physical body, he concluded that such elements inevitably decompose and become integrated into other beings. Jefferson reflected, “The dead are not even things. The particles of matter which composed their bodies, make part now of the bodies of other animals, vegetables, or minerals, of a thousand forms.” For most contemporary religionists, any conviction towards transmigration or rebirth would be met with vehement denunciation. The fact

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that Jefferson did not exhibit such a reaction, demonstrated that he was accepting of those who shared the philosophies of Reverend Story and Pythagoras. As always, Jefferson was far more concerned with reality and morality than the metaphysical world.

Upon questioning the true nature of the soul, Franklin discussed the possibility of transmigration. He suggested that following the death of its previous form, the soul would be “united to a new Body, and receive a new Set of Ideas.” However, its previous “Identity will be lost” since it would be “no longer that same Self but a new Being.” Franklin reiterated such sentiments throughout much of his life. Upon characterizing the soul as “an embrio state, a preparation for living,” he recognized the transition between physical forms and proclaimed that “a man is not completely born until he be dead.”

Franklin also discussed the theories of Elizabeth Ilive, one of his acquaintances during his time in London. Ilive published a doctrine remarkably similar to rebirth, asserting that our existence in this world was based upon actions in our previous forms. Franklin reflected positively upon Ilive’s philosophy, but concluded that such matters were beyond the scope of human understanding as there could be no recollection of an individual’s “pre-existent State.”

In addition to contemplating the metaphysical conceptualization of transmigration, Franklin also recognized the material analysis of rebirth considered by Jefferson. Franklin reflected that all sentient beings were “capable of being employ’d in new Compositions” based upon the “natural Reduction of compound Substances to their

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64 Benjamin Franklin to Elizabeth Hubbart, 22 February 1756, in Lemay, *Writings*, 481.

65 Benjamin Franklin to Jane Mecom, 30 December 1770, in Lemay, *Writings*, 864-865.
original Elements.” In order to illustrate his philosophy, Franklin implemented an analogy regarding wood. He asserted, “the Earth, Water, Air, and perhaps Fire, which being compounded form Wood, do, when the Wood is dissolved, return, and again become Air, Earth, Fire, and Water.” Franklin proclaimed, “when I see nothing annihilated, and not even a Drop of Water wasted, I cannot suspect the Annihilation of Souls.” Regarding his contemplation of rebirth, Franklin professed, “finding myself to exist in the World, I believe I shall, in some Shape or other, always exist.” Recognizing the innumerable “inconveniences human Life is liable to,” Franklin acknowledged that he “shall not object to a new Edition of mine,” but hoped that “the Errata of the last may be corrected.”

Similar to Jefferson and Franklin, Palmer provided insight into the doctrine of rebirth. While he recognized that the precise operations were beyond human comprehension, Palmer reflected that “Nature is every where periodical in her exertions and energies.” Although “its modification will vary throughout infinite space,” the “mass of existence must remain for ever the same.” Palmer believed that the “constant interchange of matter with matter” was a “primary and immutable law of nature.” In particular he emphasized the material interdependence of the physical body. He asserted that upon neglecting its connection with and reverence for nature, mankind had disregarded such a fundamental principle. Palmer professed, “The component parts of which man is formed are all drawn from the great fountain of existence; they are essentially material in their nature, and destined to return to the source from which they

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66 Benjamin Franklin to George Whatley, 23 May 1785, in Lemay, *Writings*, 1106.

sprang.” He elaborated that on Earth “all the different kinds of animals and all the individuals of each kind are seen in succession to die and dissolve into Nature.” Similar to Franklin, Palmer concluded that human beings “are composed of enduring elements which have in the past and will in the future combine and recombine.” However, he also recognized that there would be “nothing conscious or personal about this continued existence.”68 Through such sentiments, Palmer extolled a philosophy that paralleled the doctrines of transmigration and rebirth.

As with many Buddhist philosophies, the doctrine of reincarnation is profoundly complex and therefore often misinterpreted. While it encompassed a fundamental belief within ancient India and was generally accepted by his early disciples, the Buddha was “by no means uncritical.”69 When understood literally, the concept of reincarnation acknowledges the transmigration of the soul to another physical form. Such sentiments closely parallel those of Franklin, Reverend Isaac Story, and Elizabeth Ilive. While such literal interpretation affirms the impermanence of the body, the inherent conceptualization of an independent or personal soul becomes problematic. This has led many Buddhists, in particular those within the schools of Zen, to adopt a more material understanding of reincarnation. Reinterpreting the doctrine as rebirth, or more accurately as “manifestation” and “remanifestation,” such teachings focus upon the interdependence of sentient beings. As the Founders observed, the physical and material nature of life inevitably dissolves and is incorporated into subsequent forms of existence. Such insight into the teaching of rebirth is supported by reason and science. Although a flower may be


69 Reat, Buddhism, 36.
considered “born” when its conditions manifest, it has always existed within the essential components of “clouds, sunshine, seeds, soil, and many other elements.” While the same flower may be “dead” when its conditions deteriorate and it “ceases to manifest,” the components of the flower have “merely transformed themselves into other elements, like compost and soil.”\textsuperscript{70} Within a similar manner human beings emerge from the dissolution of physical matter and are “reborn” within all existence, thereby continuing in “a different manifestation” according to the evolution of nature.\textsuperscript{71} Through such reflection, the Dharma acknowledges the impermanent nature of the human condition and the interdependence of all sentient beings.

\textsuperscript{70} Hanh, \textit{Living Buddha, Living Christ}, 134 134, 135.

\textsuperscript{71} Senzaki, \textit{Like a Dream, Like a Fantasy}, 181.
CONCLUSION

Upon examining the religious beliefs of Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Elihu Palmer, parallels with the Dharma emerged through the manner in which each Founder assessed Christianity and incorporated deist and Enlightenment thought. Evidence first emerged through their reflections on institutionalized religion and the Church. As foremost pragmatists, the Founders viewed reason, science, and morality as the ultimate test of religion. Therefore, they vehemently denounced all aspects of supernaturalism and mysticism. In addition, the Founders rejected dogmatism as the foundation of intolerance and conflict. While attacking the Church for its involvement within religious violence, the Founders specifically targeted the doctrines of original sin, atonement, predestination, revelation, and the Holy Trinity. They similarly condemned the social and political power held by institutionalized religion and the priesthood. Having recognized fundamental parallels between all traditions, the Founders were passionate advocates of religious freedom and pluralism. Ultimately, such sentiments paralleled the Dharma’s emphasis upon naturalism, pragmatism, nonviolence, tolerance and inclusivity, as well as the egalitarian nature of the Buddhist community.

In addition to their reflections upon institutionalized religion, connections also developed surrounding the Founders’ views on God, Jesus Christ, and the Bible. Influenced by deist and Enlightenment thought, they recognized the divine as a distant Creator or “Watchmaker” and rejected the vengeful God conceptualized within many Abrahamic traditions. Nevertheless, the Founders believed that such a being was beyond human understanding and therefore focused more upon reason and morality. As with many Buddhists, they recognized the possible existence of God, but avoided falling into
the trap of the supernatural and metaphysical. The Founders demonstrated similar views when reflecting on the figure of Jesus Christ. While admiring him as an invaluable sage, moralist, and teacher, they vehemently denied that Jesus possessed any supernormal ability. Emphasizing the pragmatic, the Founders reconceptualized Jesus Christ by rejecting elements that regarded divinity, inspiration, resurrection, conception, and the miraculous. They similarly attacked the Bible, as well as the clergy, for perpetuating such fabrications. Recognizing that the scripture was written long after Jesus’ life and therefore suffered from misinterpretation, the Founders argued that the Bible should be read simply as another source of history. Essentially, such reflections parallel the practical implementation of religious texts and the humanized view of Siddhārtha Gautama within Buddhism.

Parallels between the Founders and Buddhism also emerged regarding the nature of morality, happiness, and suffering. Recognizing that reason and virtue superseded religion, the Founders viewed an individual’s conduct and not their faith as the test of character. Rather than focusing on an act itself, they emphasized the intention and impact of behavior. Therefore, anything that increased happiness would be virtuous and that which caused suffering would be immoral. Due to the deceptions created by political and religious institutions, mankind needed to uncover its true nature. When that had been achieved, an individual would recognize that they are in control and that the source of their happiness was within their own minds. Reflecting such philosophies, the Founders asserted that suffering was caused by ignorance of reality and an attachment to worldly pursuits. Having recognized that such craving disturbs the tranquility of the mind, they advocated diminishing passions, desires, and vices. The Founders also characterized the
ills of ambition and wealth, thereby championing the ideals of frugality and simplicity. Ultimately, the Founders views on morality and happiness closely echoed the fundamental Buddhist teachings, especially those expounded within the Four Noble Truths.

Lastly, the Founders’ reflections on life, death, and the nature of existence also mirrored sentiments emphasized within the Dharma. Recognizing that human beings live in correlation within all sentient beings, the Founders acknowledged the principles of cause and effect. They subsequently asserted that benevolence should be extended to all beings, leading some to consider vegetarianism. The Founders articulated similar sentiments upon their observations regarding national defense and armed conflict. Concluding that justifications for war were often fallacious and the consequences always produced suffering, they denounced the need for standing military forces, lamented the implementation of violence, and hoped that reason would cultivate pacifism. The Founders also reflected upon the impermanence of the physical body and the inevitability of death. Rather than simply being pessimistic, they acknowledged that death was a necessity of life and that such insight would help mankind find tranquility when facing their demise. In addition, the Founders articulated a radical conceptualization of the soul. While the hoped for a future state, they recognized that such immortality was inherently beyond human comprehension. Therefore, it would be equally plausible for the soul to perish along with the mind and body. Within such reflections, the Founders also contemplated that the self could be reincarnated into another form or be reintegrated into the physical elements of which it was comprised. Essentially, the Founders views
regarding life and death parallel the Buddhist doctrines of interdependence, karma, nonviolence, impermanence, and rebirth.

Analysis of the foundations and principles of the Founders’ religious philosophies ultimately demonstrated both their deviation from contemporary Christianity and correlation to Buddhism. Evidence originated within ancient Greece, where interaction with the people and traditions of India emerged as early as the time of Siddhārtha Gautama. Parallels first developed surrounding Pythagoras, who taught doctrines resembling meditation, karma, rebirth, and vegetarianism, all of which he may have learned during journeys to the East. Such connections also emerged with Pyrrho following his involvement with Alexander the Great’s excursions in northwestern India. Many of the Hellenistic philosophers, in particular those associated with Stoicism and Epicureanism, have also drawn parallels with the teachings of Buddhism. The appeal of and appreciation for the East became even more zealous during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Deist and Enlightenment intellectuals throughout the West, including Voltaire, Volney, and Diderot, championed their appreciation for the social, cultural, and religious traditions of Asia. Europeans who resided in and travelled to India supplemented such philosophical currents. In particular, both Sir William “Oriental” Jones and John “Walking” Stewart demonstrated influence from many Eastern doctrines. Evidence revealed that the Dharma may have impacted many of the figures that subsequently influenced the Founders. In conclusion, analysis demonstrated that Franklin, Jefferson, and Palmer followed a precedent established by ancient and Enlightenment intellectuals in which they cultivated interests in Eastern traditions and thereby established parallels with Buddhist philosophy.
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