

George Washington's Anglicanism:

The Belief System of One of the Greatest Founding Fathers

By [Michael Streich](#), Feb 12, 2010, Suite101.com Insightful writers. Informed Readers, at <http://www.suite101.com/content/george-washingtons-anglicanism-a201357#ixzz1BXy6iGfo>

Although Washington regularly attended church and even visited Quaker meeting houses and the sanctuaries of other faith traditions, he was also a Freemason and, as Shorto correctly stated, “Steeped in an Enlightenment rationalism...” At best it can be said that Washington was an Enlightenment Christian whose view of the Creator was strong but transcendent. Washington’s primary religious experiences were tied to Anglicanism and the “high church” tradition that developed alongside the more fervent and emotional revivalist approaches of cyclical evangelicalism.

Washington’s belief system was also strongly influenced by the **Stoicism** of classical Rome. Historian Henry Wiencek notes Washington’s keen interest in Addison’s 1713 play *Cato*, which highlighted Cato the Younger’s devotion to republican virtue. Wiencek also notes the influence of Seneca on Washington. “All of this was not veneer,” Wiencek writes, “but the struts and trusses of Washington’s frame of mind.” Washington’s Anglicanism cannot be separated from the impact of these strong challenges that, “Profoundly influenced Washington’s generation.”

Stoicism (Greek *Στοά*) was a school of Hellenistic philosophy founded in Athens by Zeno of Citium in the early 3rd century BC. The Stoics considered destructive emotions to be the result of errors in judgment, and that a sage, or person of "moral and intellectual perfection," would not suffer such emotions. Stoics were concerned with the active relationship between cosmic determinism and human freedom, and the belief that it is virtuous to maintain a will (called *prohairesis*) that is in accord with nature. Because of this, the Stoics presented their philosophy as a way of life, and they thought that the best indication of an individual's philosophy was not what a person said but how he behaved. Later Stoics, such as Seneca and Epictetus, emphasized that because "virtue is sufficient for happiness," a sage was immune to misfortune. This belief is similar to the meaning of the phrase 'stoic calm', though the phrase does not include the "radical ethical" Stoic views that only a *sage* can be considered truly free, and that all moral corruptions are equally vicious.

Stoic doctrine was a popular and durable philosophy, with a following throughout Greece and the Roman Empire, from its founding until the closing of all philosophy schools in 529 AD by order of the Emperor Justinian I, who perceived their pagan character to be at odds with the Christian faith.

Stoicism became the foremost popular philosophy among the educated elite in the Hellenistic world and the Roman Empire, to the point where, in the words of Gilbert Murray "nearly all the successors of Alexander [...] professed themselves Stoics."

A distinctive feature of Stoicism is its cosmopolitanism: All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit and should, according to the Stoics, live in brotherly love and readily help one another. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus comments on man's relationship with the world: "Each human being is primarily a citizen of his own commonwealth; but he is also a member of the great city of gods and men, where of the city political is only a copy." This sentiment echoes that of Socrates, who said "I am not an Athenian or a Corinthian, but a citizen of the world."

A distinctive feature of Stoicism is its cosmopolitanism: All people are manifestations of the one universal spirit and should, according to the Stoics, live in brotherly love and readily help one another. In the *Discourses*, Epictetus comments on man's relationship with the world: "Each human being is primarily a citizen of his own commonwealth; but he is also a member of the great city of gods and men, where of the city political is only a copy." This sentiment echoes that of Socrates, who said "I am not an Athenian or a Corinthian, but a citizen of the world."

On Happiness: Aristotle, Epicurus, and the Stoics