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Lightning in the Age of Benjamin Franklin: facts and fictions in science, religion, and art

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From time immemorial, thunder and lightning were seen as a wrathful Deity's instruments of punishment. But then, in 1752, came Benjamin Franklin's paradigm-shifting invention of the lightning rod, and the way we view God and nature was changed forever.

In *Lightning in the Age of Benjamin Franklin. Facts and Fictions in Science, Religion, and Art* Jan Wim Buisman shows how, in the second half of the eighteenth century, our scientific, religious, and artistic conceptions of one of nature's most violent phenomena were transformed. With the storm no longer a spectacle to be feared, poets, painters, and composers started to treat it as a subject in its own right. Never before was the beauty of thunder and lightning so frequently and fulsomely represented in Western culture as during the transition from the Enlightenment to the Romantic era.

JAN WIM BUISMAN (1954) is a retired Lecturer on the History of Christianity, with a special focus on the early modern period. He is now affiliated as guest researcher at the Leiden University Centre for the Study of Religion. He has written extensively on the history of religious mentalities and the impact in the Netherlands of natural disasters on views of God, man, and nature, between 1750 and 1830.

"The transition from a premodern fear of nature to Romanticism's love affair with the natural sublime has been explored from many angles. But in this absorbing and erudite book, Jan Wim Buisman reveals that lightning and electricity were central to this transformation. From the premodern practice of bell-ringing to ward off lightning, to the Enlightenment's playful use of static electricity to generate an "electric kiss," Buisman charts the evolution of Europeans' relationship to one of nature's fundamental forces. He shows how scientific advances such as the lightning rod actually made the Romantic fascination with nature possible. This electrifying book is essential reading for anyone interested in nature, religion, and intellectual history."

— Peter J. Thuesen, author of *Tornado God: American Religion and Violent Weather*

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