

# A Celebration of Infidels: The American Enlightenment in the Revolutionary Era

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'UnChristian America' historians see the Revolution as an expression of an apostate culture dominated by Enlightenment ideology. A closer look reveals pervasive Christian influence.

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One of my graduate school professors, in an attempt to prove the anti-Christian sentiment of the patriots in the American Revolution, quoted Jefferson as saying that orthodox Christian doctrines were the “delirium of crazed imaginations”. Pressed on the nature of this quotation, he eventually admitted that it appeared in a private letter in 1822 (forty-six years after Independence!). I was amazed that anyone, much less a specialist in the period, would claim that American colonists had repudiated their Christian heritage on the basis of an obscure quote a half century after the fact. Unfortunately, this is frequently done by historians, embarrassed by the Christian influence on early American history, who in their own “delirium” minimize the nation's religious heritage and become cheerleaders for the Enlightenment.

This bias against America's Christian roots is evident in current histories and textbooks. Henry May admits that most historians are “partisans of the Enlightenment; of liberalism, progress, and rationality”. Invariably they stress the influence of the Enlightenment and make Jefferson, Paine, and Franklin, the least orthodox of the revolutionary generation, representative of the era's thought. They either ignore Christianity and Christian leaders or cast truly Christian leaders as Enlightenment thinkers. Attempts to correct this bias are met with the sharpest censure. That liberal, establishment historians would do this is not surprising. But also following the herd are Christian scholars, from neo-evangelical writers desperately seeking acceptance in academia, to Christian Reconstructionists, who should know better.<sup>1</sup>

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1 Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (N.Y.: Oxford, 1976), p. xii. Francis Fitzgerald, *America Revised: History Schoolbooks in the Twentieth Century* (N.Y.: Vintage, 1980). Though Fitzgerald discusses many revisionists, there is special antipathy for fundamentalists and creationists.

## A Christian America

In reality, the American revolutionaries were part of a culture that was predominantly Christian and largely Reformed and Calvinistic. Though not all American leaders would be considered true believers, they were all rooted in a Christian tradition and steeped in a theistic world-view. The few representatives of the period who abandoned the Biblical faith were not openly hostile to the faith at the time. Either they disguised and muted their theological peculiarities to avoid alarming their constituencies, or became famous for heterodox positions embraced later in life. Accusations that Christian leaders, such as John Witherspoon, were deeply influenced and essentially compromised by the Enlightenment are false.

The United States in the revolutionary period was the beneficiary of a century and a half of Christian development. Historians often overlook the political contributions of the Puritans, whose intense Biblical faith produced uniquely American conceptions of liberty and covenant. The Puritans were champions of jury trials, broad suffrage, a written bill of rights, and the notions of “no taxation without representation” and “due process of law”—political ideals associated with the American Revolution.<sup>2</sup>

In March, 1991 I attended a Symposium on the Bill of Rights, which was sponsored by the U.S. Congress and held in the Senate Office Building, just down the hall from Ted Kennedy's office. Former Chief Justice Warren Burger delivered the opening address. (It doesn't get any more establishment than this.) Donald Lutz, a Constitutional historian at the University of Houston, argued that “The Pedigree of the Bill of Rights” could be found in the bills of rights in colonial charters, primarily authored by ministers. Three-fourths of the provisions from the U.S. Bill of Rights, in fact, were outlined in the 1641 Massachusetts Body of Liberties, a Puritan document that came complete with Bible verses attached to each of the rights. (Conference participants gasped in horror when they realized that for their cherished liberties they were indebted to the hated Puritans, folks they considered repressive, religious zealots.) Note that this Biblically-oriented Puritan document was adopted a half century *before* the English Glorious Revolution and John Locke's *Second Treatise*, the supposed primary influences on the Revolution. Keep this as a handy fact to shock liberals with: the roots to our Bill of Rights are in New England Puritanism.<sup>3</sup>

Of course, the Revolutionary generation was not as shocked by public religion as are people today. Nearly half of the British colonies had been founded by religious sectarians with explicitly Christian visions for society. Two thirds of the original thirteen colonies had established state churches at the time of the Constitutional Convention. Colonies mandated religious test oaths, requiring that officeholders be theists, Christians, or Trinitarians. After independence, virtually all the new state charters had references to

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2 Ralph Barton Perry, *Puritanism and Democracy* (N.Y.: Harper & Row, 1944) is a good introduction to this theme.

3 See Charles Hyneman and Donald Lutz, *American Political Writing During the Founding Era, 1760-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1983). Unfortunately, Lutz interprets the 1641 Body of Liberties from a “rights consciousness” perspective, thus de-emphasizing the Biblical roots of the document.

Almighty God as the source of power, authority, and legitimacy.<sup>4</sup>

Even in colonies not noted for Reformed convictions Christian influences were evident. Maryland is an excellent example. Originally founded as a haven for Roman Catholics by George Calvert, Puritan settlers poured in and launched a civil war in retaliation for the persecution they received as Protestants. The matter was settled by the Act of Toleration (1649), the first colonial act to guarantee religious freedom. To soothe aroused combatants and ensure religious tranquility, the Act forbade the use of inflammatory terms: “heretick, Scismatick, Idolator, puritan, Jesuite, papist, ... or any other name or terme in a reproachfull manner.” But the Act left no doubt that the colony was a “Christian Common Wealth”, mandating the forfeiture of property and death for anyone who would “blaspheme God”, “deny our Saviour Jesus Christ to bee the sonne of God”, “deny the holy Trinity”, or challenge the “Godhood of any of the Three persons of the Trinity or the Unity of the Godhead”. Strong stuff; especially for a Toleration Act, especially in a colony not noted for its religious fervor.<sup>5</sup>

Or consider the case of Virginia. Though perhaps the most secular of the colonies, the Dominion's laws were still very “puritanical”. Virginia had statutes against gaming with cards and dice, bastardy, adultery (including requiring offenders to wear the scarlet 'A'), witchcraft, and sodomy (a capital crime). Blasphemy was also illegal; a 17th century crusade against “wicked oaths” in Henrico County netted 122 indictments, including one against a sly-tongued woman for sixty-five separate offenses, and one against a man eventually imprisoned for “oaths innumerable”. Skipping church could bring serious consequences: fines, corporal punishment, and death. Yes, in the “secular” colony of Virginia, under Governor Dale, the third offense of Sabbath-breaking brought the death penalty. A 1705 law, in force for over eighty years—through the Revolution—enacted stiff penalties, including disqualification from office, loss of civil liberties, and three years imprisonment, for denying the existence of God, the Trinity, the Christian faith, or the divine inspiration of the scriptures.<sup>6</sup>

Nor was the disestablishment of the church in Virginia a purely secular movement. For Jefferson, it might have been. But the real challenge to the state church came from evangelical dissenters, who opposed the use of their taxes to support the aristocracy's stuffy Anglicanism. Patrick Henry, for example, established a reputation in Virginia in the “Parson's Cause” (1763), by defending the colony from a preacher suing for additional money. For Henry, the greedy preacher was not only a “rapacious harpie”, but also “unpatriotic” for appealing to England to overturn the laws of his “country”, Virginia. Recent historians have underscored the evangelical contribution to disestablishment, noting that persistent Baptists “transformed” the Virginia through their unceasing assault

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4 See Pat Brooks, et.al., *Freedom or Slavery?* (Fletcher, N.C.: New Puritan Library, 1990), pp. 159-166, for references to God that still remain in the 50 state constitutions.

5 See Avery Craven, et.al., *A Documentary History of the American People* (N.Y.: Ginn, 1951), pp. 51-53.

6 Samuel Eliot Morrison, *The Oxford History of the American People* (N.Y.: New American Library, 1965), I:136-137. For the text of Dale's Laws, see Jack Greene, ed., *Settlements to Society: 1607-1763* (N.Y.: Norton, 1975), pp. 39-42. For the 1705 law, see Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (N.Y.: Norton, [1787] 1972), pp. 158-159.

on the state church and the established order. In short, it was the pressure of committed, if iconoclastic evangelicals that prompted the celebrated collapse of Virginia's religious establishment, not the machinations of a few infidels.<sup>7</sup>

Of course, the most visible symbol of America's Christian heritage in the pre-Revolutionary period was the Great Awakening of the 1740s. The Awakening revitalized American religion, touching all the colonies and uniting Christians from diverse denominations. Jonathan Edwards, George Whitefield, and Gilbert Tennent, representing Congregational, Anglican, and Presbyterian communions, reveal the ecumenical vigor of the movement. For Edwards the movement had eschatological significance; he believed that the new world, providentially discovered on the eve of the Reformation, would be the catalyst of a world-wide revival initiating a millennial age, of which the Great Awakening was a harbinger.<sup>8</sup>

The Awakening also challenged the liberalism of its day, as revivalists opposed lukewarm and proto-Unitarian colonial ministers. Gilbert Tennent's most famous sermon was against the "Unconverted Clergy". Nineteenth century Presbyterian theologian Charles Hodge, incidentally, argued that the Awakening had a negative impact on colonial Christianity by encouraging emotionalism, challenging the church's authority, and undermining its ability to exact discipline. (Following Hodge, some modern Reconstructionists have criticized the Awakening for its antinomian and anti-ecclesiastical tendencies. Their squeals about schism might be taken more seriously if the congregations they are associated with had not split from their parent church, the PCA, and started little maverick denominations of their own.) In short, while some Awakening leaders were stubborn and divisive, and perhaps contributed to the erosion of ecclesiastical authority, they faithfully and vigorously fought the apostasy of their time.<sup>9</sup>

The Great Awakening also paved the way for the American Revolution through its emphasis on individualism and democratization. Concerned about established churches, England's desire to establish an American bishopric, and the resulting loss of religious liberty, revivalists and their progeny tended to be deeply suspicious of the mother country. One historian described the Awakening's socio-political impact on Connecticut as a movement "from Puritan to Yankee". Leaders of the Awakening were prominent supporters of the Revolution. It is significant that when American patriots began their invasion of Canada in 1775, they stopped for prayers at the tomb of George Whitefield, the great evangelist of the Awakening. It should be stressed that on the eve of the War for Independence, the American colonies experienced a profound pan-colonial revival.<sup>10</sup>

The concern for the Bible and Christianity in the Revolutionary era was not restricted to

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7 See Rhys Issac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790* (N.Y.: Norton, 1988).

8 See Joseph Tracy, *The Great Awakening* (1843; Banner of Truth, 1976); and Jonathan Edwards, *Some Thoughts Concerning the Present Revival of Religion in New England* (1742), section 2.

9 Charles Hodge, *Constitutional History of the Presbyterian Church* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian Board of Publication, 1851).

10 For the influence of the Great Awakening, particularly on the Revolution, see Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1966). See also Robert Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1967); Ruth Bloch, *Visionary Republic*.

preachers. Most Americans were firmly grounded in the scriptures. Requirements for college entrance included the ability to read in Greek and Hebrew. Quotations from the patriot leaders came more frequently from the Bible than any other source. In the 1770s, for instance, 44% of all quotations used by the founders came from Holy Writ, while 20% came from Whiggish authors, 18% from Enlightenment writers, and 11% from the classics. M.E. Bradford's *A Worthy Company* has shown the religious roots of the American founders. Though expecting to find a large percentage of deists among the fifty-five members of the Constitutional Convention, Bradford discovered that the vast majority were "orthodox members" of established Christian churches, who sincerely believed they were perpetuating a Christian order. Most of the churches of the time had Calvinistic roots and Reformed creeds. As the great American historian George Bancroft put it, John Calvin was the "father of America". As late as 1839, Alexis de Tocqueville noted that "America is still the place where the Christian religion has the greatest real power over men's souls", and that Christianity reigned by "universal consent" (because people either believed its dogmas or were afraid to appear not believe them).<sup>11</sup>

Unfortunately, neo-evangelicals recently have attacked the idea of a 'Christian America'. While the country contained many professing Christians and had a religious flavor, these 'un-Christian America' historians argue, it was not truly Christian because it did not consistently meet Biblical standards. Certainly, early Americans were not perfect; they surely fell short of God's standards in their personal lives, religious duties, and civil observances. But no people has been perfect, nor should absolute perfection be the standard by which to judge a nation as 'Christian'. Furthermore, these historians have unfairly created an extra-Biblical, perfectionistic standard to judge the nation's heritage. They charge that American Christians were "indifferent to the oppressed and the unrepresented", too concerned about property rights, and, bringing their accusations up to the present, too dependent on "strategic nuclear arms". Notice how their "biblical" standards sound like the trendy nostrums of liberal academia. According to these standards, any believer who did not endorse Walter Mondale and Michael Dukakis, embrace statist socialism, or rail against the "structural injustices" of society, was not consistently Christian. Neo-evangelical historians still "search" for a Christian America because they are judging the past by today's Enlightenment ideals, rather than God's law.<sup>12</sup>

In the late 18th century America was a Christian nation. It had a Christian heritage; many colonies had been established specifically to create a Christian civil order. Its citizens were self-consciously Christian. The nation's leaders universally sought to establish a Christian code of morality and civic virtue. And finally, the Awakening had left a legacy of revival, evangelism, and evangelical fervor.

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11 M.E. Bradford, *A Worthy Company* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1982; Reprint edition, Plymouth Rock Foundation). For a breakdown of the quotations of the founders and the Bancroft citation, see John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 18,52. See also Lorraine Boettner's good overview in *The Reformed Doctrine of Predestination* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1932), pp. 382-399. Even the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican Church had Calvinistic leanings. See also Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vol., Ed. J.P. Mayer (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday/Anchor, [1848] 1966), pp. 291-292.

12 See Mark Noll, et. al., *The Search for Christian America* (Westchester, Illinois: Crossway Books, 1983), p. 22.

One can illustrate the “Christian America” problem by asking whether America's Bible Belt is Christian. Locals and Yankees alike agree that the South is a uniquely religious section of the country. My southern friends invariably insist, with either pride or disgust, that they live in the very “buckle” of the Bible Belt. The region has a high percentage of professing Christians; believing in God, Christ, and the Bible seems prerequisite to being Southern. My pastor lived in Tennessee for two years before meeting someone who admitted he was not a Christian. The area's culture, traditions, and civic observances are permeated with Christianity—religion is certainly much more visible here than what I experienced growing up in the North. Evangelical churches are ubiquitous in the South, dominating virtually every street corner. Local parsons publicly petition God's presence at high school football games. Folks out there in “radio-land” find it nearly impossible to escape Christian programming, loaded with incomprehensible preaching and loathsome music. This does not mean that all southerners are Christians, nor that their faith is consistently Biblical. Religion in the Bible Belt is often shallow and hypocritical. For many, no doubt, Christianity is a cultural veneer, part of one's southern heritage, like “Dixie”, the Stars and Bars, and 'possum pie. Many southern Christians have only a superficial knowledge of their faith and probably could not name the twelve disciples, define traducianism, or recite the Nicene Creed. Nor is the faith of Bible Belt as strong as it once was—it is slowly eroding as Yankees trickle down from the secular North. So, is the Bible Belt Christian? Despite its limitations, yes. Southerners are largely professing Christians, define themselves and their culture as Christian, stress a personal, evangelical experience, and at least try to apply their faith in personal and civic spheres. For the same reasons, America in the Revolutionary period was Christian.<sup>13</sup>

## Theories of Christian Resistance

The “*un* Christian historians” further charge that the War for Independence was proof of the Enlightenment's influence. Since Christians are commanded to be submissive to the civil government, the argument goes, the impetus for the Revolution had to be unbiblical. If Christians did support the patriotic movement, it was because they were children of the era's rationalism. As one of these historians asks: “[D]o we praise American patriots for their defense of 'natural law' and 'unalienable rights', or condemn them for failing to heed Paul's injunction in Romans 13 to honor their legitimate rulers?” The only consistent Christians, according to this theory, were Quaker pacifists and Anglican loyalists. But this approach ignores a long Christian tradition of legitimate resistance, articulated well in advance of the Enlightenment. (It is surprising and disappointing that advocates of the “*un* Christian” America theory have Reformed connections, such as at Calvin College, and should be better versed in Reformed history.) Christian pietists, modern day Anabaptists, and evangelical wimps might argue that these theories of resistance violate the ethic of Christ, but in no way can claim that resistance to tyranny is an intrinsically rationalistic ideal or was necessarily spawned by the political philosophy of the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup>

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13 For a discussion on civil religion in the South and the region's cultural Christianity, see Charles Reagan Wilson, *Baptized in Blood: The Religion of the Lost Cause* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1980).

14 Noll, *Search for Christian America*, p. 20; For other examples of this, see Mark Noll, *Christians in the*



The Bible records numerous examples of the elect resisting civil government: Abraham, Moses, Ehud, Jael, David, Obadiah, Daniel, Jesus Christ, Paul, etc. The idea is best expressed in Acts 5: 29—“We must obey God, rather than men.” Christian theologians traditionally argued that believers were bound to submit to political leaders, unless they were compelled into idolatry or immorality, which would require them to disobey God to whom they owed their highest allegiance. Calvin said if kings “command anything against Him, let us not pay the least regard to it...” Calvin, in fact, concluded his *Institutes* with the following admonition: “we are redeemed by Christ at the great price which our redemption cost him, in order that we might not yield a slavish obedience to the depraved wishes of men, far less do homage to their impiety.” In short, then, the Bible and Protestant theology provided Christians ample justification for participation in the American War of Independence.<sup>15</sup>

Another factor for Christian participation in the War was the historical example of resistance. John Adams said that one of the most influential works of the Revolutionary era was *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants*, by Junius Brutus, a Protestant who experienced bloody religious persecution in 16th century France. Thoroughly Biblical and Calvinistic in approach, *Against Tyrants* directly challenged the presumptions of royal absolutism and the divine right of kings, arguing that one must not obey the king when his commands violated God's law, ruined His church, or harmed the nation.<sup>16</sup>

The Scottish covenanting tradition was another religio-historical precedent for the War of Independence. In 1633, the Scots formed the “Solemn League and Covenant” to resist English tyranny and the imposition of the Anglicanism in Scotland. (During the same period of English tyranny Puritans fled to Massachusetts.) The best example of the covenanter's philosophy of resistance was Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex*, which challenged royal power by arguing that the law was king. Though Rutherford was not often quoted in the colonies, and the extent of his direct influence is unknown, the ideas of the covenanters were familiar to colonists. In *Common Sense*, for instance, in true Rutherfordian fashion, Thomas Paine insisted that “In America, THE LAW IS KING”. John Witherspoon, a native Scot and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, frequently invoked the example of the Scottish covenanters during the Revolution as people who bonded together to resist British tyranny. For Witherspoon, the Covenanter tradition was an horizon for the American Revolution.<sup>17</sup>

By the time of the War for Independence there was ample Christian theory justifying resistance to a corrupt and tyrannical king. Jonathan Mayhew's 1750 sermon, “A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission”, foreshadowed preaching on the topic. During the war New England preachers were called the “Black Regiment” because of the

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*American Revolution* (Washington: Christian College Consortium, 1977), and Raymond Cowan, “Evangelical Christianity and the American Revolution”, Paper presented at the Mid-America Conference on History (Fayetteville, Arkansas, 13 September 1986).

15 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, IV: 32. For an excellent treatment of this theme, see Gary North, ed., *Tactics of Christian Resistance* (Tyler, Texas: Geneva Divinity School, 1983).

16 Junius Brutus, *A Defense of Liberty Against Tyrants* (1689; Edmonton, Alberta: Still Waters Revival, 1989).

17 Samuel Rutherford, *Lex, Rex* (1644; Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 1982); and Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (1776; Garden City, NJ: Dolphin, 1960), p.41.

color of their clerical robes and their fervent support of the Revolutionary cause. Though some have charged them with politicizing the gospel and preaching up “the sacred cause of liberty”, these ministers were able to distinguish between secular and sacred causes. They did see political and religious issues as being interrelated, believing that British political tyranny would eventually destroy religious freedom. As John Witherspoon put it “there is no instance in history in which civil liberty was destroyed, and the rights of conscience preserved entire”. Yet as my own study has shown, even at the height of political and civil strife, these ministers gave the greatest priority to spiritual struggles, the need for salvation, and eternal destiny of all.<sup>18</sup>

## Classical Influence

The legacy of classical antiquity also had a powerful influence on the American patriots, who were steeped in the literature of Greece and Rome. For the revolutionary generation, which shared what historian Page Smith has called the “classical-Christian consciousness”, the lessons of antiquity tended to corroborate and confirm the Christian world view.<sup>19</sup>

Their view of human nature, for example, was rooted in the Biblical idea of Original Sin and buttressed by generally negative classical notions of human motives and conduct. These convictions about human depravity led to sometimes hysterical concerns about corruption in government and a passionate commitment to cultivating civic virtue. The history of the Roman Republic, especially when read from the perspective of Machiavelli's “Discourses” or the pessimism of “Cato's Letters”, showed how immorality, licentiousness, and greed ultimately produced despotism. English Whiggish authors further argued that man's natural corruption led to self-interest in government and eventual tyranny. Hence the idea that power corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Hence also the constant pleading for limited government, public morality, and most importantly, “virtue”, ideals outlined in the classics. Classical texts, then, reinforced both the doctrine of human depravity and the need for Christian morality in society and society's leaders.

These concerns are clearly seen in the U.S. Constitution. The framers, following Montesquieu, outlined a network of checks and balances to guarantee a republican government. Given their fears that politicians would usurp power, the framers insisted on a division of power to prevent tyranny. The commitment to a balance of powers and factions, growing from the convictions about human depravity, was especially keen in James Madison, the “Father of the Constitution”. He learned this from Witherspoon, the

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18 John Witherspoon, “A Pastoral Letter From the Synod of New York and Philadelphia” (June 29, 1775) and “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men” (May, 1776). See also Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre* (Oxford University Press, 1962), and Nathan Hatch, *The Sacred Cause of Liberty* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1977). For a study of Witherspoon's thought, see Roger Schultz, “Covenanting in America: The Political Theology of John Witherspoon”, *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 12:1 (1988):179-289. For an excellent anthology of sermons in the era, see Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991).

19 Page Smith, *The Shaping of America, v.3, A People's History of the Young Republic* (NY: McGraw-Hill, 1980), pp. 19-22.



leading colonial Presbyterian, who directed Madison's graduate program at the College of New Jersey. In short, the classical-Christian consciousness, with its emphasis on human corruption and the need to insure public virtue, was the foundation for the colonists' world view and was enshrined in the U.S. Constitution.<sup>20</sup>

## The Enlightenment

The European Enlightenment also influenced Revolutionary America, but only in a limited way. Americans diluted and modified Enlightenment ideas borrowed from England, where the Enlightenment impulse itself was weaker than on the continent.

Historian Henry May argues that there were four different streams of Enlightenment thought. First, there was the Moderate Enlightenment of 17th Century England, which emphasized reason, balance and order. These ideas were not necessarily antithetical to orthodox Christianity; indeed, they fit nicely with the notion of God's orderly creation and providence. John Locke's political theories are an example of how this benign version of the Enlightenment touched America.<sup>21</sup>

The next types of Enlightenment thought were more radical and anti-Christian. The Skeptical Enlightenment, best represented by Voltaire, flourished in France around 1750. It was negative, iconoclastic, and feverishly opposed to the Christian faith, but had few American adherents. The Revolutionary Enlightenment, best represented by Rousseau and the later writings of Thomas Paine, sought to destroy the old order and create a new heavens and new earth, and came to fruition in the French Revolution. But it had few partisans in America, where pragmatic leaders were more committed to sustaining a conservative English tradition than dabbling with the speculative, rationalistic ideals of the Enlightenment.<sup>22</sup>

The Didactic Enlightenment is May's last category. Strong in Scotland, particularly in Scottish "Common Sense" Realism, this form of Enlightenment thought vigorously opposed the skeptical and revolutionary versions of the Enlightenment and affirmed the legitimacy of reason and moral judgments. In many respects this variety of the Enlightenment was anti-Enlightenment, in that it tried to answer the radical and anti-Christian tendencies of the 18th century. Historians who claim that John Witherspoon or other revolutionary leaders became children of the Enlightenment by virtue of quoting Scottish Realists have missed the whole point. By quoting philosophers who attacked the radical Enlightenment, these American patriots tried to oppose the spirit of the Enlightenment, and only the weirdest mental gymnastics could transform them into *philosophes* and deists. Yet this approach is not uncommon. (Recently an historian used this rationale to suggest that, because of their zeal for rationalistic certainty in defending Biblical inerrancy, modern-day fundamentalists possessed the spirit of Enlightenment

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20 James H. Smylie, "Madison and Witherspoon: Theological Roots of American Political Thought", *The Princeton University Library Chronicle* (Spring 1961):118-132.

21 See Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (NY: Oxford, 1976).

22 Gordon Wood, *The Creation of the American Republic, 1776-1787* (NY: Norton, 1969), pp. 10-12. For an excellent treatment of America's conservative tradition, see Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court, 1974).

*philosophes* .) In short, though they might quote from the 'conservative Enlightenment', Christians in the Revolutionary age were no more the disciples of the Enlightenment than are contemporary fundamentalists.<sup>23</sup>

Even when colonists quoted from moderate Enlightenment authors, and they did, sometimes prodigiously, they did not necessarily embrace those authors' philosophical systems. Historian Bernard Bailyn notes that colonists borrowed quotations wholesale from Europe with a view to buttressing their arguments and sounding learned. These superficial references in no way suggested that the leaders in the Independence movement endorsed the Enlightenment. In fact, to prove a point, they might cite authors with whom they otherwise vehemently disagreed.<sup>24</sup>

Modern Christians employ the same technique. Gary North, who has sharply criticized Witherspoon for citing Enlightenment philosophers, frequently uses secular sources to prove a point. Using such sources is legitimate. Invoking non-Christian Austrian economists in support of some proposition, even a Biblical one, does not diminish the truth of the proposition, nor necessarily compromise the invoker. (His appeals to non-believing Jewish economist Ludwig von Mises, for instance, does not necessarily make North an infidel or Zionist.) Believing in “general revelation”, Christians have always held that non-Biblical references can illustrate the truths that scripture teaches. The Revolutionary leaders used Enlightenment sources in the same way scholars use sources today: to rebut ideas. It does not follow that they endorsed everything those sources advocated, nor that their Christian convictions were compromised in the process.<sup>25</sup>

## Deism

The religion of the European Enlightenment, deism, was very rare in America. First, it is important to distinguish between 18th century classical deism and radical deism. Today, deism, or radical deism, is synonymous with a belief that God made the world and then left. In this view, God is a sort of an absentee landlord. Or to use the metaphor of a watch, God created the world like a watch, wound it up, and left it to run without any intervention. But to even the freest 18th century American thinker, this radical deism would have seemed strange and extreme. Classical deism, on the other hand, which did have adherents in colonial America, was more of a “generic theism”. It had five principal ideas: 1) God exists, 2) God created and governs the world, 3) God should be worshipped, 4) God has moral laws which people are bound to obey, and 5) there is a future state of reward and punishment. Classical deism was clearly not atheistic, agnostic, or even “deistic”, according to its radical, modern definition. 18th century American deists saw their religion as a pure, simple monotheism in the Judeo-Christian tradition—a type of moralistic, utilitarian Unitarianism.

The critical differences between classical deism and orthodox Christianity were over the

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23 George Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 118.

24 Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1967), pp.28-30.

25 Gary North, *Political Polytheism* (Tyler, Texas: Institute for Christian Economics, 1989), pp. 402-3.

nature of authority, salvation, and Christ. Deists stressed “general revelation”, seeking a “religion within the bounds of reason alone”, and tended to overlook or minimize the special revelation of scripture. Deists saw Christ as a great and perfect man, but rejected, ignored, or were “doubtful” about his claim to be the divine son of God. Furthermore, deists had no concept of salvation and atonement, stressing instead moral duties and ethical responsibilities. They did not, however, deny the operation of God in history. It is arguable, in fact, given their stress on how God superintended the direction of history that classical deists had a keener sense of God's providence than modern evangelicals. In any event, deism, even in this moderate form, was rare in 18th century America.

Deism has been a blind spot in American historiography. Some partisans, eager to show the influence of the European Enlightenment and tuned for rationalistic arguments, find deists under every rock. Others, writing from a Christian perspective and looking for radical deists, find nary a one. The real problem is that people have failed to understand the type of deism articulated in the colonies. The next section of this essay will examine the beliefs of three such “classical deists” to explain the parameters of their world view. To begin, Jefferson, Franklin, and Paine were not Christians and their views were unBiblical. Yet, their ideas were not as radical as usually assumed; in fact, they often protested that they *were* religious and *were* Christians. Furthermore, recognizing that the rabble were not as sophisticated about religious questions, these men were very cautious about publicizing their ideas. And finally, even their cautious, moderate version of deism was very rare in the colonies.<sup>26</sup>

## **Benjamin Franklin**

Ben Franklin was an excellent symbol of the American Enlightenment, since the rustic, provincial philosopher had an international reputation. Franklin was so popular that when he served as a diplomat during the American Revolution, the French decorated commemorative items with his chubby visage, including chamber pots (which Franklin thought was a bit extreme).

In the area of religion, Franklin was a perfect example of a moderate, classical deist. He confessed that he became a “thorough deist” at an early age, but resented the labels of infidel and atheist, acquired because of his “indiscrete disputations”. Throughout his life he was dubious of orthodox dogmas. During a dispute in his Presbyterian church, he opined that “Original sin was as ridiculous as imputed righteousness”. Though he admired the ethical teachings of the Bible, he refused to accept the inspiration of the Old Testament, because of the “abominably wicked and detestable action of Jael”. He tried, probably without much success, to comfort his mother and persuade her that his soul was eternally safe when she became frantic about her sons' flirtations with Arianism and Arminianism. But Franklin eventually tired of deism for pragmatic reasons, saying “I

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26 John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1987), p. 228.

Though Jefferson called himself a deist, Eidsmoe says of Jefferson work: “These are not the words of a deist. Nor would a deist speak of submission to God and thankfulness to God the way Jefferson did.”

Eidsmoe correctly argues that Jefferson was not a radical deist, but fails to note the different nuances of deism.

began to suspect that this doctrine, though it might be true, was not very useful”.<sup>27</sup>

Franklin was very cautious about his beliefs, skirting around sensitive religious issues to avoid trouble, which is a good indicator of public religious sensibilities in America. One must read Franklin carefully, because he systematically tried to avoid the impression of heresy. Franklin began his *Autobiography* by giving thanks to “God's providence” in the following fashion: “I attribute the mentioned happiness of my past life to his divine providence, which led me to the means I used and gave the success”. It is unclear whether Franklin is sincerely thanking God for his success or is lauding his own diligence.

Franklin's *Autobiography* concluded with a letter home after a 1757 voyage to England. Upon arrival, passengers immediately went to church and “with hearts full of gratitude returned sincere thanks to God for the mercies we had received”. But it is not certain that he shared these sincere thanks. As a non-Catholic, he wouldn't vow to build a chapel, and, if inclined to vow at all, Franklin said he would build a lighthouse. One wonders if Franklin was most thankful for God's mercies or the ship captain's navigational skill.

Franklin's ambiguous relationship with established religion is seen in his career as a Pennsylvania officeholder. The colony required all civil officials to take a Trinitarian oath, guaranteeing, at least in theory, godly leadership. Here is the oath Franklin took: “I... solemnly and sincerely profess faith in God the Father, and in Jesus Christ his Eternal Son, the true God, and the Holy Spirit, one God, blessed forevermore.” Civil officials also swore that the Holy Scriptures were written “by divine inspiration”. Clearly, Franklin was not completely candid in taking this oath. (In 1776, he led the movement to modify the oath to refer only to the existence of God and the authority of the Bible.) Yet, at the same time, Trinitarian orthodoxy was not so repugnant to him as to preclude governmental service. There is a lesson here, too, for enthusiasts of modern religious oaths, who believe that these test oaths will secure a righteous republic. They didn't work in the past. And we might ask of evangelicals, who see Franklin's squeamishness about test oaths as a sign of apostasy, how many would be willing to support even Franklin's simple vow about God and the Bible as a civic test oath?<sup>28</sup>

But Franklin also felt that religion was important and insisted that he had always possessed religious principles. While he rarely attended divine services, either because he studied on Sundays, or disliked the preaching, or was angry that the congregation ran off a favorite minister, Franklin faithfully supported the Presbyterian church in town. He had an intense Yankee moralism that was reminiscent of the Puritans. Indeed, he praised Cotton Mather's *Essays to do Good* as one of the most influential works he had read. During one intensely moralistic phase, he kept a notebook to chart progress in his personal life, revolving around virtues such as temperance, silence, order, resolution, frugality, industry, sincerity, justice, moderation, cleanliness, tranquility, chastity, and humility, hoping to attain moral perfection, though he discovered that this was a more “arduous” task than anticipated. Though he did not see the Bible as authoritative, Franklin believed it was useful and contained solid advice. Franklin's writings, especially *Poor Richard's Almanac*, often sound like devotional literature because they are filled

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27 Paul Ford, *The Many Sided Franklin* (N.Y.: Century Co., 1915), pp. 131-176.

28 Ibid, pp. 147-150.

with scriptural quotations and allusions, usually from the Proverbs.<sup>29</sup>

Franklin's moralistic commitments were especially strong in the area of public ethics and virtue. Franklin is supposed to have said, "You can not legislate morality, but you must regulate behavior".<sup>30</sup> People who use the first half of the quote to deny the civil government's ability to maintain public standards of morality have unwittingly perverted Franklin's sense. Franklin echoed the convictions of the Revolutionary generation that virtue was imperative for the success of the new country. Reportedly asked about what was the best form of government, he responded, "A republic, if you can keep it", revealing his fear that corruption and immorality might eventually destroy a nation.

Concerned about civic virtue, Franklin often supported public expressions of religion to strengthen society. He proposed a public fast day in New York "to promote reformation and implore the blessing of Heaven on our undertaking". While such a petition for God's favor would embarrass evangelicals today, during the Revolution it was supported by the young nation's most famous freethinker. Franklin was also a friend to George Whitefield, published his material, gave him favorable press coverage during the Great Awakening, and seemed sympathetic with the evangelist's aims, particularly as they tended to improve the public moral climate. Franklin even outlined a way of increasing the chapel attendance in the local militia. When the militia chaplain, a "zealous Presbyterian", complained that soldiers were more prompt in receiving rum rations than in attending church, Franklin suggested the chaplain distribute the refreshments after prayers. Franklin noted that the chaplain liked the idea and undertook the task, and that "never were prayers more generally and punctually attended".<sup>31</sup>

What Franklin disliked about religion was its dogma and sectarianism. Though "religiously educated as Presbyterian", Franklin said that "some of the dogmas of the persuasion, such as the eternal decrees of God, election, reprobation, etc., appeared to me unintelligible, others doubtful..." He complained that the end of preaching was "to make us good *Presbyterians* rather than *good citizens*". Later, as a member of the Anglican church, Franklin deleted theological material from the prayerbook. His *Revised Prayerbook* dropped everything from the catechism except the duty to honor God and serve man, and purged from the Psalter all imprecatory psalms. Franklin omitted all potentially divisive doctrinal material since he believed that the differences of denominations only served "to divide us".<sup>32</sup>

Franklin developed his own religious creed, including the doctrines he believed were central to all religions. He expressed it simply as:

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29 Cotton Mather, *Bonifacius: An Essay Upon the Good* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1966), pp. viii-ix; and Benjamin Franklin, *Autobiography* (N.p.: Spenser Publishing, n.d.), chapter 6. For an example of the thoroughly orthodox religious literature Franklin printed, see John Thompson, *The Poor Orphan's Legacy* (1733). My thanks to Dan Witcher for introducing me to this work by his great... grandfather.

30 The quotation may be apocryphal, but has a Franklinesque ring to it and is consistent with his position on moral issues.

31 Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 196 and chapter 7. See also Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, p. 205. Franklin's *Gazette* gave very favorable coverage of Whitefield's revival, with six times as much friendly treatment as other papers.

32 Franklin, *Autobiography*, chap 7, and Ford, *The Many Sided Franklin*, pp.163-164.



That there is one God, who made all things. That he governs the world by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped by adoration, prayer, and thanksgiving. But that the most acceptable service to God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal. And that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter.<sup>33</sup>

These tenets are the essence of classical deism. They closely paralleled the doctrines of Freemasonry, an organization to which Franklin belonged, and nascent American Unitarianism. While Franklin's creed is not orthodox, it is strongly theistic. It is, in fact, very similar to the mainstream liberalism of 20th century American Christianity.

Notice how this creed differs from the radical deism which is often attributed to Franklin. Franklin clearly believed in God's providence, the existence of heaven and hell, and the possibility of God's blessing and retribution in the present life. Franklin's idea of providence bears further consideration, especially since he believed that prayer was a human duty. In his private religious devotions, Franklin said that since God was “the fountain of wisdom”, he thought it was “right and necessary to ask God's assistance for attaining it”. He was disturbed by Thomas Paine's religious heresies, telling Paine that a belief in “particular providence” was essential to religion. And at the Constitutional Convention, Franklin sought prayers for God's blessing on the new nation, arguing that “if a sparrow cannot fall without God's notice, a nation cannot rise without his assistance”.<sup>34</sup>

Franklin maintained this theology until the end of his life. In response to a question six weeks before his death, Franklin repeated his old creed, focusing on the familiar themes of one Creator God, his providential governance of the world, the obligation to worship him and do good to his children, the immortality of the soul, and the future life. He also added his view of Jesus of Nazareth, whose religion and system of morals were “the best the world ever saw”, but of whose divinity Franklin had “some doubts”. But on Christ's deity he quickly added—and this is vintage Franklin—that “it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble”. He believed there was “no harm” in the doctrine, especially if it made Christ's doctrines “more respected and more observed”. Franklin concluded that, “having experienced the goodness of that Being in conducting me prosperously through a long life, I have no doubt of its continuance in the next, though with the smallest conceit of meriting such goodness”.<sup>35</sup>

In conclusion, while Franklin was not an orthodox Christian, neither was he a radical deist. According to current definitions Franklin might easily be considered a conservative activist because he believed in God's providential involvement in human affairs and the need for public morality and religious observances. It is hard to imagine Franklin being enthusiastic about current National Endowment for the Arts projects or the types of

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33 Franklin, *Autobiography*, p. 119.

34 Ford, *The Many Sided Franklin*, pp. 174-175.

35 *Ibid.*, pp. 164-167.

public expression made famous by the Kitty Kat Lounge. If we are looking for symbols of the liberal, secularized Enlightenment in America, we must look elsewhere.

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## Franklin On Paine

Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine maintained a friendship throughout the Revolutionary age. In fact, many believed that Franklin had authored Paine's *Common Sense*. When a concerned Franklin read the first draft of Paine's *Age of Reason* in 1785, he urged Paine to burn it before anyone else read it, likening the piece to “spitting in the wind” and “beating one's mother”. This was Franklin's advice:

I have read your manuscript with some attention. By the argument it contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For, without the belief of a Providence that takes cognisance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection. I will not enter into any discussion of your principles, though you seem to desire it. At present I shall only give you my opinion that, though your reasons are subtle, and may prevail with some readers, you will not succeed so as to change the general sentiments of mankind on that subject, and the consequence of printing this piece will be, a great deal of odium drawn upon yourself, mischief to you, and no benefit to others. He that spits against the wind spits in his own face.

But were you to succeed, do you imagine any good would be done by it? You yourself may find it easy to live a virtuous life, without the assistance afforded by religion; you having a clear perception of the advantage of virtue, and the disadvantages of vice, and possessing a strength of resolution sufficient to enable you to resist common temptations. But think how great a portion of mankind consists of weak and ignorant men and women, and of inexperienced, inconsiderate youth of both sexes, who have need of the motives of religion to restrain them from vice, to support their virtue, and retain them in the practice of it till it becomes *habitual*, which is the great point for its security. And perhaps you are indebted to her originally, that is to your religious education, for the habits of virtue upon which you now justly value yourself. You might easily display your excellent talents of reasoning upon a less hazardous subject, and thereby obtain a rank with our most distinguished authors. For among us it is not necessary, as among the Hottentots, that a youth, to be raised into the company of men, should prove his manhood by beating his mother.

I would advise you, therefore, not to attempt unchaining the tiger, but to burn this piece before it is seen by any other person, whereby you will save yourself a great deal of mortification by the enemies it may raise against you,

and perhaps a great deal of regret and repentance. If men are so wicked *with religion*, what would they be *if without it*?

-- Quoted in Paul Ford, *The Many-Sided Franklin*, pp. 166-167.

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## Thomas Paine

The most notorious infidel during the Revolutionary period was Thomas Paine. Contemporaries saw Paine as an odious creature, infamous for his drunkenness, bankruptcy, scandalous moral behavior, and strange beliefs. Though an icon for future libertines, Paine had only limited influence on the early revolutionary movement, and the influence he did have, through *Common Sense*, was not of a radical nature. Paine was a latecomer to the colonies, not arriving til November, 1774, after the First Continental Congress convened, and thus had no influence on the early colonial resistance movement. Furthermore, Paine's radical phase came in the 1790s, long after the American Revolution. In the interim he traveled to France, joined its Revolution, proclaimed himself a "citizen of the world", and picked up additional nutty, radical ideas. (He became interested in Freemasonry, for instance, believing it embodied the sun worship of ancient Druidism and could be an occult alternative to Christianity.) When the French Revolution turned nasty, Paine returned to the safety of the United States to propagate his kookery. But such ideas were absent from Paine's *Common Sense* (1776), an anonymously published pamphlet which largely owed its popularity to its Biblical orientation.<sup>36</sup>

No Revolutionary period work is better known than *Common Sense*, the 1776 pamphlet that helped push colonists from resisting Great Britain to independence. What is often forgotten is that *Common Sense* is full of Biblical quotations and allusions and urged colonists to oppose monarchy because it was unscriptural. Noting that Gideon refused Israel's crown, Paine charged the king-coveting Hebrews with "disaffection to their proper Sovereign, the King of heaven". Turning to the institution of the Hebrew monarchy in I Samuel 8, Paine quoted the entire chapter with its warning about the inevitable tyranny of monarchy and statist government. Then he commented: "These portions of scripture are direct and positive. They admit of no equivocal construction. That the Almighty hath here entered his protest against monarchial government, is true, or the scripture is false." It is doubtful that any evangelical would so strongly argue that the Bible addresses the nature of government.<sup>37</sup>

Paine used the same Biblical and religious terminology in calling for an early American constitution. Of this charter Paine said : "let it be brought forth and placed on the divine law, the word of God; let a crown be placed thereon, by which the world may know, that

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36 James Billington, *Fire in the Minds of Men* (NY: Basic Books, 1980), p. 103.

37 Thomas Paine, *Common Sense* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin/ Doubleday, [1976] 1960), pp. 20-22. For more nonsense on Paine, see Marsden, *Understanding Fundamentalism and Evangelicalism*, p. 131.

so far we approve of monarchy, that in America, THE LAW IS KING”. Paine explicitly notes the divine origin of law, and implicitly refers to Rutherford's great work. Again, it is difficult to imagine a politician using such religious language today.<sup>38</sup>

Paine's early works included many religious allusions. American independence was made possible, Paine argued, because of God's unique providence, seen in the discovery of the new world at the time of the Reformation and the distance from the mother country which allowed for political autonomy. In the early numbers of the *Crisis*, Paine employed religious language in virtually every paragraph. He explained, for example, that “I am as confident, as I am that GOD governs the world, that America will never be happy til she gets free of foreign domination”.<sup>39</sup>

It is possible that Paine was not entirely honest about his religious convictions in these passages. But even so, his constant use of Biblical motifs suggests that colonists were responsive to that type of argument. If *Common Sense*'s religious language does not reveal the true nature of Paine's beliefs, it does reveal a great deal about the intellectual climate in America. *Common Sense* was successful, in part, because Christians found it persuasive. It is noteworthy that the most influential work of America's most notorious infidel has a strong religious tone.

And even then, Christian clergymen were perceptive enough to recognize that the author of *Common Sense* was not wholly orthodox. They complained about Paine's naïve concept of human goodness and his distasteful comparison of original sin and hereditary monarchy. Though a proponent of independence himself, John Witherspoon sharply criticized the anonymous author's weak conception on human depravity. (In light of this, it is curious that neo-evangelical historians both complain that Revolutionary era clergymen did not challenge Paine's theology, and allege that Witherspoon was weak on original sin, having a “high view” of man.)<sup>40</sup>

## Thomas Jefferson

As a revolutionary leader, primary author of the Declaration of Independence, U.S. president, and planter-philosopher, Thomas Jefferson was the era's most famous freethinker and an icon of the American Enlightenment. Those denigrating the Christian influence in American history inevitably raise up the Virginia slaveholder and his neutered Bible with miracles and the supernatural expunged as an examples of the liberal and secular bent of the American mind. But the extent and influence of Jefferson's religious views have been overemphasized. To begin with, Jefferson believed in God, claimed to take the teachings of Jesus seriously, and considered himself a Christian. While his beliefs were not orthodox, they were very similar to Franklin's moralistic theism and the Unitarianism emerging in the 19th century. Further, Jefferson was a very prudent infidel, revealing the heterodox notions developed later in life only in private correspondence to trusted friends, and then only after they were made fashionable by the

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38 Ibid., p. 41.

39 Thomas Paine, *The Crisis* (Garden City, N.Y.: Dolphin/ Doubleday, [1776] 1960), p. 73.

40 John Witherspoon, “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men”, in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, Ed. Ellis Sandoz, p. 539.

Unitarian movement. Jefferson's reluctance to reveal his true heretical views is a good barometer of American religious convictions at the time.

Jefferson's most famous work, the Declaration of Independence, was filled with religious imagery. Gary Amos's recent *Defending the Declaration* clearly shows the Judeo-Christian orientation of the Declaration. Terms like Creator, God, Providence, self-evident truths, and Supreme Judge had specific religious connotations. A deist could use such language, but so could orthodox Christians. While the language of the Declaration was broad, it was intentionally theistic. Though scholars might dispute Jefferson's intentions and the etymology of the legal and political terms employed in the Declaration, the references to God and appeals to divine standards in the document are inescapable. Such language today, appearing in a valedictorian's address, would undoubtedly prompt an outcry from the ACLU.<sup>41</sup>

Most neglected about Jefferson's religious views is that he considered himself a Christian. Indeed, he believed that he alone practiced a pure form of the Christianity. His religious ideas were summed up in "A Syllabus of the Doctrines of Jesus", in 1803, a privately circulated manuscript designed to correct "libels" against him. Jefferson said of his religious views:

They are the result of a life of inquiry & reflection, and very different from the anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. 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 he wished any to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others; ascribing to him every *human* excellence; & believing he never claimed any other.<sup>42</sup>

Note Jefferson's insistence that he was a true follower of Christ, and that his reputation for infidelity had been manufactured by detractors.

His main argument in the "Syllabus" was with the Bible and ecclesiastical tradition, which had distorted the teachings of Jesus. According to Jefferson, traditions about Jesus were written down long after the events by "the most unlettered and ignorant men". Established religions then transmitted the ideals of Jesus in a "mutilated, misstated, and often unintelligible" form, and "schismatizing" clerics further corrupted, perverted, and disfigured the simple ethic of Jesus by grafting them into "mysticisms of a Grecian sophist". All this sounds like the standard liberal jargon disseminated by mainline denominational seminaries.

Jefferson's greatest invective was leveled at the systematic Biblical theology of Calvinism. In an 1813 letter to John Adams, he said of Calvin:

He was indeed an atheist, which I can never be; or rather his religion was dæmonism. If ever a man worshipped a false God, he did. The God described

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41 See Gary Amos, *Defending the Declaration*, (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1989).

42 Thomas Jefferson, "A Syllabus of the Doctrines of Jesus", *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Ed. Paul L. Ford (N.Y.: G.P. Putnams, 1897), III:223-228.



in his five points [sic] is not the God whom you acknowledge and adore, the Creator and benevolent Governor of the world, but a dæmon or malignant spirit.<sup>43</sup>

In Jefferson's view, then, Calvinism, and probably most of orthodox Christianity, was a perversion of the true religion of Christ and a false, demonic religious system. (This hostility to Calvin is not restricted to professed deists. John Wesley would probably have concurred with Jefferson.) In short, Jefferson claimed that he was a true follower of Jesus, whose teachings were misrepresented in the Bible and the traditional doctrines of the established church.

Jefferson described his religion as deism: he called himself a Deist, and said he wanted to encourage a “pure deism”, defining it as “pure monotheism”. He said of the Jews that “their system was Deism; that is the belief of one only God”. He prudently avoided questions of the divinity of Christ and the inspiration of the Bible, insisting that they did not interest him, trying to avoid the central rub between deism and Christianity. In almost every instance, certainly in public pronouncements, Jefferson tended to stress the common ground he had with Christians by stressing the existence of God, his governance of the world, and the need to honor him.

His exuberant use of religious language is apparent in the 1786 “Act for Establishing Religious Freedom”, the act disestablishing the Anglican church in Virginia, which Jefferson considered one of his greatest contributions. The first sentence of the Act has four specific references to God (Almighty God, the Lord, the Holy Author of our faith, etc.) In public documents, even those with the reputation for being hostile to Christianity, Jefferson self-consciously used religious terms to maintain common ground with the evangelical dissenters who were his allies.<sup>44</sup>

Though Jefferson despised traditional theology and opposed the established church, he strongly emphasized the need for Christian morality in private and public behavior. In the 1803 “Syllabus” Jefferson described Christ's moral system the “most eloquent and sublime” ever taught. Or as he told Adams in 1817, true religion was constituted by the “sublime doctrines of philanthropism and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth, in which we all agree”. The whole purpose of the New Testament was to “reform ...moral doctrines” and to “inculcate the belief of a future state”. Though it is not part of Jefferson's standard persona, he believed the doctrine of the future life was a major contribution of Jesus and was essential for encouraging morality; in other words, it was important to teach about heaven and hell to get people to behave themselves.<sup>45</sup>

Finally, it must be reemphasized that Jefferson was secretive about his beliefs. His 1803 “Syllabus” was privately circulated to a three or four close friends, with careful instructions not to reveal the contents. Jefferson told one: “he could make any use of it his

43 Gilbert Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson: Apostle of Americanism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Paperbacks, 1957), pp.522-523.

44 Thomas Jefferson, “An Act for the Establishment of Religious Freedom (1786)”, in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (N.Y.: Norton, 1982), pp 223-225. That first sentence is a whopper, running some 57 lines; theological terminology is in the first few lines. See also Chinard, pp. 100-105.

45 Chinard, *Thomas Jefferson*, pp. 522-523.

discretion would approve, confident as Th: J. is that his discretion would not permit him to let it be copied lest it should get into print". In other words, this was not for public consumption. (Jefferson was afraid that "every priest" in the land would attack the syllabus if it leaked out.) Jefferson sent the "Syllabus" to another friend with this warning: "Th:J. would thank Mr.L. not to put his name on the paper in filing it away, lest in case of accident to Mr.L. it should get out." Jefferson's reticence about the Syllabus is a good indication of the Christian temper of the American mind and the type of public backlash he could expect if his deist notions became public.<sup>46</sup>

Jefferson at least partially succeeded in disguising his beliefs. While some Christians bitterly attacked him during the election of 1800, some likening him to the Antichrist, others came to his defense, arguing that enemies had trumped up stories of Jefferson's infidelity. Tunis Wortman, for instance, argued that one attack on Jefferson was "a base and ridiculous falsehood" and dedicated his "A Solemn Address to Christians and Patriots" to the ninth commandment. Arguing that "we have every reason to believe him (Jefferson), in sincerity, a christian", Wortman claimed that the charge of deism was "false, scandalous, and malicious" and that there was not a single passage in Jefferson's writings "repugnant to christianity, but on the contrary, in every respect, favourable to it".<sup>47</sup>

In conclusion, the most famous infidels in the Revolutionary generation, Franklin, Paine, and Jefferson, were ambiguous representatives of the Enlightenment. While not true, orthodox Christians, they believed in God and God's providential governance of the world, stressed the need for Christian morality, defined themselves as Christians, showing the greatest respect for Jesus and his teachings, and filled their works with religious terminology and allusions. Knowing the orthodox religious climate in America, they intentionally disguised and under communicated their heretical opinions. And these heterodox views evolved late, after the American Revolution. And even then, they felt constrained to reveal those views privately to trusted friends. The writings of these leaders do not substantiate a wide influence of the radical Enlightenment in America.

## **John Witherspoon**

Originally a native of Scotland and a Presbyterian minister, Witherspoon came to America to assume the presidency of the what is now Princeton, became a resistance leader in New Jersey and a member of Congress, and was a signer of the Declaration of Independence, the only clergyman to do so. According to a probably apocryphal legend, Witherspoon delivered the critical pro-independence speech at the Continental Congress, after a mud-soaked, all-night ride to Philadelphia. His contemporaries did not overlook his efforts in behalf of the revolutionary cause, especially since many of them considered Scots troublemakers and viewed the Revolution as a "Presbyterian Rebellion". At the start of the revolution, Horace Walpole opined that "Cousin America has run off with a Presbyterian parson". Adam Ferguson, secretary of the British Peace Commission to

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46 Jefferson, "A Syllabus", p.226n.

47 Tunis Wortman, "A Solemn Address to Christians and Patriots", in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, Ed. Ellis Sandoz, p. 1483.

America in 1778, charged that Witherspoon was at the “head” of the rebellion (Witherspoon was on the Continental Congress committee to evaluate the British proposal), but hoped that if proper measures were taken “we should reduce Johnny Witherspoon to the small support of Franklin, Adams, and two or three of the most abandoned villains in the world, but I tremble at the thought of their cunning and determination against us”. Even the first French foreign minister to the United States saw Witherspoon as the “soul of his party” in Congress.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to his personal contribution to the Independence movement, Witherspoon deeply influenced the direction of the early republic as an educator. His graduates from Princeton included the following: a president of the United States, a vice-president, ten cabinet members, six members of the Continental Congress, 39 U.S. representatives, 21 U.S. senators, 12 governors, 56 state legislators, 30 judges, three U.S. Supreme Court judges, and six members of the Constitutional Convention. A number of his students became educators, particularly in the South, of which 13 were college presidents, including founding presidents of seven colleges. And many Princeton graduates became ministers. Of the 188 ministers on the General Assembly roster in 1789, 52 had studied under Witherspoon.<sup>49</sup>

Despite a stellar transatlantic ecclesiastical and political career, John Witherspoon is one of the most neglected of the Revolutionary leaders. What attention he does receive is usually unflattering. Liberal historians often depict him as a stuffy, straightlaced parson. And now, Christian historians are attacking Witherspoon. “UnChristian America” historians, through either sloppy scholarship or deliberate misrepresentation, allege that Witherspoon was shaped by the Enlightenment and was hyper-patriotic, subordinating religious values to political goals. Borrowing from these neo-evangelicals as well as liberal Presbyterian historians, Gary North calls Witherspoon an apostle of “Apostate Covenantalism”, who signed a two hundred year “jail sentence for the American church” as a “covenantal agent for the Whig-Patriot churches”. While other historians charitably allow that Witherspoon was ignorant of the way the Enlightenment compromised his Christianity, North charges he deliberately conspired to create an apostate, pluralistic, Mason-dominated religious and civil order.<sup>50</sup>

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48 Varnum Lansing Collins, *President Witherspoon*, 2v. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925), II:35-37; and James Smylie, “Introduction” *Journal of Presbyterian History* 54 (Spring 1976): 5. See also Boettner, *Reformed Doctrine of Predestination*, p. 383. Boettner incorrectly states that Horace Walpole was the prime minister (his father had been), though Walpole maintained an active correspondence about the war. See “Letters of Horace Walpole”, in *The American Revolution Through British Eyes*, eds. Martin Kallich and Andrew MacLiesh (N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1962), pp.146-155.

49 Collins, *President Witherspoon*, II: 223, 229; Collins, Princeton (N.Y.: Oxford, 1914), p. 46; and Gary North, *Political Polytheism*, pp. 317-320. North makes a big deal of Witherspoon's influence on the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church, but the numbers are deceiving. The percentages of G.A. delegates that were Witherspoon students are as follows: 1789 (13%), 1790 (26%); 1791 (44%), 1792 (22%).

50 For a neo-evangelical look at Witherspoon, see Mark Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, and Noll, et.al., *The Search for a Christian America*. See also North, *Political Polytheism*, pp.318-319, 409. For a liberal's view of Witherspoon, see Willard Randall, *A Little Revenge* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1984). Randall is clearly miffed that Witherspoon referred to William Franklin, New Jersey's royal governor and Benjamin Franklin's illegitimate son, as a “base-born bastard”. For a balanced

The problem with these contemporary accounts is that they neglect Witherspoon's formative Scottish career, which is the key to understanding his thought. Witherspoon's forged his basic political commitments as leader of the Popular Party, a evangelical group contesting the dominance of the Church of Scotland by the liberal Moderate Party. Witherspoon was committed to basic democratic ideals, since he and his party insisted that the people of a parish must vote on the calling of ministers, rather than allowing the parish's patron and ancient heritor alone to make the decision. Since he was fighting against what he described as “ecclesiastical tyranny”, Witherspoon also emphasized the “freedom of conscience”, arguing that the church's liberal bureaucracy could not compel ministers to do what they believed was wrong, as in ordaining or installing ministers to whom the people of a parish objected. In short, the stands Witherspoon took on freedom of conscience and the oppressive nature of tyranny during the Revolution evolved from the ecclesiastical struggles of the Popular-Moderate controversy in Scotland.<sup>51</sup>

The controversy also crystallized Witherspoon's orthodox convictions and forced him to challenge the growing liberalism of the church. The best example of his confrontational approach to the “enlightened” wing of the church is his *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, a superb piece of satire on the order of C.S. Lewis' *Screwtape Letters*. In the *Ecclesiastical Characteristics*, a Moderate leader gives advice to a fledgling minister on how to be a good liberal through a series of maxims. The first maxim says that all suspected heretics “are to be esteemed men of great genius, vast learning, and uncommon worth; and are ... to be supported and protected”. Witherspoon's second tongue-in-cheek maxim is that the actions of the loose and immoral should be described as “good humored vices”. The true moderate man, according to maxim three, must speak of the Confession of Faith “with a sneer; to give sly hints, that he does not thoroughly believe it; and to make the word *orthodox* a term of contempt and reproach”. In other maxims, the moderate preacher is told to quote pagan authors, not scripture, use “rational considerations” in sermons, have “great charity” for Atheists and Deists, and to despise all learning but the system of Leibnitz and Shaftesbury, which has been so well licked into form and method by the late Mr. H\_\_n”. The Moderate Party, incidentally, included Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reed, and other representatives of the Common Sense Philosophy which was supposed to have influenced Witherspoon. In the Moderate controversy, then, Witherspoon clearly attacked the rationalism of the Enlightenment.<sup>52</sup>

Witherspoon's sermons show that he was thoroughly orthodox and evangelical. His communion sermons always had evangelistic appeals for people to be “born again” and experience a saving faith. He vigorously endorsed and propagated the Reformed faith,

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consideration of Witherspoon's ideas, see Rousas Rushdoony, *This Independent Republic* (Fairfax, Virginia: Thoburn, 1978), p. 3.

51 Gordon Talt, “John Witherspoon: The Making of a Patriot”, *The Ohio Journal of Religious Studies* 4 (October, 1976) :54-63; Margaret Stohlman, *John Witherspoon* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976), p. 99; Ralph Ketcham, “John Madison at Princeton”, p. 40; Wayne Witte, “John Witherspoon: Servant of Liberty - A Study in Doctrinal and Political Calvinism” (Th.D. thesis, Princeton Theological Seminary, 1954); and George Rich, “John Witherspoon: His Scottish Intellectual Background” (Ph.D. dissertation, Syracuse, 1964).

52 John Witherspoon, *Ecclesiastical Characteristics: or, the Arcana of Church Policy, being a Humble Attempt to open up the mystery of Moderation* (Glasgow, 1753).

which for Witherspoon included postmillennial expectations of the triumph of Christ's kingdom and the idea of national blessing and cursing from God's hand.<sup>53</sup>

Witherspoon did use reason, but only in apologetic sense of appealing to general revelation. Referring to scripture as the “unerring standard”, Witherspoon stressed: “Let not human understanding be put in the balance with divine wisdom.” Reason, always subordinate to the Word of God, had value in corroborating the Bible and in “inducing men to believe the other truths in scripture”. As Witherspoon in one sermon:

If the testimony of God in scripture is to be rested on, this one passage is sufficient; but the unbelieving heart is ready to challenge and call into question every such scripture declaration. Therefore, I shall, first, briefly lay before you some of the scripture declaration on this subject; and secondly, confirm them from experience, the visible standard of the world, and the testimony of our own hearts.<sup>54</sup>

And Witherspoon did attack Enlightenment philosophers, including representatives of Scottish Realism, of which Witherspoon is alleged to be an unwavering disciple. He warned against mixing philosophy and the gospel, and was very critical of “nominal Christians” who “disguise or alter the gospel in order to defend it”. As he explained in one sermon:

Hence the unnatural mixture often seen of modern philosophy with ancient Christianity. Hence the fundamental doctrines of the gospel are softened, concealed, or denied; as, the lost and guilty state of man by nature, his liableness to everlasting misery, and the ransom which was paid by our Redeemer when he died on the cross.<sup>55</sup>

Witherspoon, selected as Princeton's president precisely because of his evangelical enthusiasm, maintained these orthodox commitments throughout his career in America. He was not guilty, as some have charged, of subordinating the gospel to political activity or fashioning a new gospel of “the sacred cause of liberty”. In all of his political sermons, delivered before, during, and after the conflict, Witherspoon stressed that the patriot's greatest concern should be his soul's salvation. Political concerns, the revolutionary cause, and nation's destiny, though important, were of little consequence compared to the individual's eternal destiny.<sup>56</sup>

Nor is the charge accurate that Witherspoon was a hyper-nationalist who confused political and religious issues. Witherspoon did believe that America was unique and had

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53 See Witherspoon's sermons “Prayer for National Prosperity”, “The Glory of the Redeemer in the Perpetuity of His Work”, and “The Absolute Necessity of Salvation Through Christ”, for these themes. In *Works of John Witherspoon* (Philadelphia: Woodward, 1804) and cited in Roger Schultz, “Covenanting in America: The Political Theology of John Witherspoon” *Journal of Christian Reconstruction* 12:1 (1988): 179-289.

54 Cited in Schultz, p. 227. Witherspoon's sermons, “All Mankind Under Sin” and “Man in His Natural State” for the best treatment of this theme.

55 Cited in Schultz, p. 231.

56 For Witherspoon's sermons during the Revolution, see Schultz, pp. 232-241.



been uniquely blessed by God because of its strong religious heritage. But he developed and articulated this idea of American exceptionalism while still in Scotland, long before he came to America. This notion, right or wrong, was not a product of the Independence movement. Furthermore, Witherspoon believed that political and religious issues were intertwined and inseparable. Since there was no instance in history where “civil liberty was lost and religious liberty preserved entire”, he argued, “if we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage”. Like many Americans, Witherspoon feared the expansion of the Anglican establishment, and those fears were exacerbated by his Scottish heritage. In his sermons during the War for Independence, he reminded listeners of the Scottish covenanters and Oliver Cromwell, Christians who resisted English political and religious tyranny in their own day. Though he was a “true son of liberty”, as John Adams put it, Witherspoon's ultimate reasons for resisting the crown were not Whiggish, but inherently religious.<sup>57</sup>

Witherspoon's reputation as an apostle of the American Enlightenment arises from his *Lectures in Moral Philosophy*, an influential set of lectures dealing with ethics, epistemology, and political philosophy. Witherspoon compiled the lectures shortly after arriving in America, and delivered them in essentially unaltered form to each year's senior class for the rest of his teaching career. It is often the only work cited by historians, who ignore his other, voluminous writings. And it is one work Witherspoon refused to publish, believing it was poorly written and organized. There is something strange about outlining a person's philosophy from a work he did not want in print, and it is questionable how representative the “Lectures” were of Witherspoon's thought.<sup>58</sup>

By misconstruing his intent in the “Lectures”, arguing that since he uses rational arguments and quotes little scripture, Witherspoon had become a follower of the Enlightenment, historians have misread Witherspoon's basic philosophy. They fail to realize that in talking about natural philosophy or general revelation, for apologetic reasons, Witherspoon was not abandoning the authority of scripture or Christian orthodoxy. This does not mean that Witherspoon was unaffected by his age—he did use the philosophy of Scottish Realism to combat the radical Enlightenment. But no honest historian can claim that Witherspoon was an Enlightenment enthusiast or the apostle of “Apostate Covenantalism”.

In short, Witherspoon is an excellent example of a Christian in the Revolutionary period. His career was built upon defending the faith once delivered, both by stressing evangelism and combating liberalism in the church. He was an excellent example of the Reformed faith, true to the confessional standards of the church, stressing God's providential movement in history, confident in the ultimate triumph of the cause of Christ

57 When Witherspoon eulogized the faith and diligence of the people of New England in “The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men”, he added, in a rare footnote, that “lest this be thought a temporizing comment”, that he had copied the whole paragraph verbatim from a 1758 sermon from Scotland. For more on Witherspoon's affection for the Covenanters and Cromwell, see Jack Scott, ed., *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy* (University of Delaware, 1982), p. 46. But Witherspoon was not always a zealous rebel; he fought on behalf of George II, against the Young Pretender in 1745.

58 See Scott, *An Annotated Edition of the Lectures on Moral Philosophy*; and May, *The Enlightenment in America*, p.63.

and the gospel. His activity in the American Revolution provides a solid model of how a devout Christian balances concerns about the salvation of souls, the security and freedom of the church, and the temporal freedoms guaranteed American citizens. Let us hope that contemporary Christians will become more familiar with this Christian patriot, from his own writings and responsible biographies, and not through the jaundiced interpretations of Witherspoon's current detractors.

During the twentieth century, historians have increasingly minimized the influence of Christianity on the War for American Independence. Sometimes it is accidental, sometimes intentional. The historian who used Jefferson's 1822 quote about the "delirium" of Christian dogma still uses that quote to prove the influence of the Enlightenment on the Revolutionary generation to his classes. Apparently constrained by neither fear of exposure nor canons of objectivity, he still catechizes youngsters with his celebration of infidels. Unfortunately, Christian students must not only beware of these modern-day infidels, which is to be expected, but also of neo-evangelical historians, who, anxious to pronounce the shibboleths of the liberal university, perpetuate its myths. Perhaps, someday, a truly Christian historian will explain the Revolution the way Witherspoon did at the time, as an example of "[The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men](#)".

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## Neo-Evangelical Historians On Witherspoon

In trying to portray John Witherspoon as an apostle of the Enlightenment who ignored the scriptures, "unChristian America" historians, relying almost entirely on secondary sources, have distorted the record, either through sloppy scholarship or deliberate misrepresentation. This is an example of how they use quotations:

Mark Noll quotes James McAllister as saying of Witherspoon:

The answer to the question regarding the biblical contribution to Witherspoon's teaching about the law and liberty is: almost nothing ... his theory of society and civil laws was based not on revelation but on the moral sense enlightened by reason and experience.

Noll, *Search for Christian America*, pp. 90-91.

Compare that to McAllister's full quote:

One final question needs to be asked in this discussion of Witherspoon's concept of law and civil law particularly. Since Witherspoon was of a conservative theological bent and argued that "the wisest way for us, with regard to all revealed truth, is to receive it as revealed," how large a role did biblical revelation play in his theory of civil law? His *Lectures on Divinity* repeatedly illustrates his literalistic method of interpreting scripture; but when he raised the question about whether the laws of Moses are of "perpetual obligation," he argued that they are not because of their being particularly

suited to conditions of the Jews in Canaan. Nonetheless, he believed that criminal laws based on the principle of *lex talionis* were “founded upon so much wisdom, that it is a question whether departure from them in punishing crime has ever been attended with advantage.” Therefore, the answer to the question regarding the biblical contribution to Witherspoon's teaching about civil law and liberty is: almost nothing. We claim that his theory of social and civil law was based not on revelation but on the moral sense enlightened by reason and common experience. Although his theological method was based on a literalistic view of scripture, he somewhat inconsistently explained away a large part of the scriptural revelation which he said must be merely accepted without the believer's “presuming to be wise above what is written.”

-- James McAllister, “John Witherspoon: An Academic Advocate for Religious Freedom” in *A Miscellany of American Christianity*, ed. Stuart Henry (Durham: Duke University Press, 1963), pp. 217-218.

Notice the difference? Noll doesn't mention that McAllister, an honest historian who actually reads the sources, stressed Witherspoon's emphasis on scripture, its literal interpretation, and the necessity of receiving it “as revealed”. Nor does Noll mention that McAllister claimed that Witherspoon's social theory was rooted in reason and moral sense in social theory only because he did not make Mosaic case laws a foundation for American society. McAllister clearly judged Witherspoon and found him wanting by what could be called theonomic standards. If failure to adopt all Hebrew case laws as a civil pattern makes one an apostle of the Enlightenment, then many of the Reformers and most contemporary Christians, including American evangelicals, would fall into this camp. Without saying what he is doing, Noll holds Witherspoon to a standard which few people, probably including Professor Noll, could meet.

Nonetheless, we are happy to see Dr. Noll clandestinely employing theonomic standards, and wish him well as he begins to unfurl the Reconstructionist banner and diligently apply Mosaic law to contemporary society. We can only urge him to take greater care in his historical methodology.

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## **The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men**

**by John Witherspoon**

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In May, 1776, Witherspoon delivered “The Dominion of Providence over the Passions of Men”, one of the most famous sermons during the the War for Independence. Taken from Psalm 76:10, Witherspoon first defined the nature of divine providence and human depravity, then applied the text to the colonial crisis. Those who hold that Witherspoon was too political neglect what he

actually said. His application begins:

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In the first place, I would take the opportunity on this occasion, and from this subject, to press every hearer to a sincere concern for his own soul's salvation. There are times when the mind may be expected to be more awake to divine truth, and the conscience more open to the arrows of conviction than at others. A season of public judgment is of this kind. Can you have a clearer view of the sinfulness of your nature, than when the rod of the oppressor is lifted up, and when you see men putting on the habit of the warrior, and collecting on every hand the weapons of hostility and instruments of death? I do not blame your ardour in preparing for the resolute defense of your temporal rights; but consider, I beseech you, the truly infinite importance of the salvation of your souls. Is it of much moment whether you and your children shall be rich or poor, at liberty or in bonds? Is it of much moment whether this beautiful country shall increase in fruitfulness from year to year, being cultivated by active industry, and possessed by independent freemen, or the scanty produce of the neglected fields shall be eaten up by hungry publicans, while the timid owner trembles at the tax-gatherer's approach? And is it of less moment, my brethren, whether you shall be the heirs of glory or the heirs of hell? Is your state on earth for a few fleeting years of so much moment? And is it of less moment what shall be your state through endless ages! Have you assembled together willingly to hear what shall be said on public affairs, and to join in imploring the blessing of God on the counsels and arms of the United Colonies, and can you be unconcerned what shall become of you for ever, when all the monuments of human greatness shall be laid in ashes, for "the earth itself, and all the works that are therein shall be burnt up."

Wherefore, my beloved hearers, as the ministry of reconciliation is committed to me, I beseech you in the most earnest manner, to attend to "the things that belong to your peace, before they are hid from your eyes". How soon, and in what manner a seal shall be set upon the character and state of every person here present, it is impossible to know. But you may rest assured, that there is no time more suitable, and there is none so safe as that which is present, since it is wholly uncertain whether any other shall be yours. Those who shall first fall in battle, have not many more warnings to receive. There are some few daring and hardened sinners, who despise eternity itself, and set their Maker at defiance; but the far greater number, by staving off their convictions to a more convenient season, have been taken unprepared, and thus eternally lost. I would therefore earnestly press the apostle's exhortation, 2 Cor 6: 1-2... "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."

Suffer me to beseech you, or rather to give you warning, not to rest satisfied with a form of godliness, denying the power thereof. There can be no true religion, till there be a discovery of your lost state by nature and practice, and an unfeigned acceptance of Christ Jesus, as he is offered in the gospel. Unhappy are they who either despise his mercy, or are ashamed of his cross. Believe it, "There is no salvation in any other." "There is no other name under heaven given amongst men by which we must be saved." Unless you are united to him by a lively faith, not the resentment of a haughty monarch, the sword of divine justice hangs over you, and the fulness of divine vengeance shall speedily overtake

you. I do not speak this only to the heaven-daring profligate or grovelling sensualist, but to every insensible, secure sinner; to all those, however decent and orderly in their civildeportment, who live to themselves, and have their part and portion in this life; in fine, to all who are yet in a state of nature, for “except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God”. The fear of man may make you hide your profanity; prudence and experience may make you abhor intemperance and riot; as you advance in life one vice may supplant another and hold its place; but nothing less than the sovereign grace of God can produce a saving change of heart and temper, or fit you for his immediate presence.

While we give praise to God, the supreme Disposer of all events, for his interposition in our behalf, let us guard against the dangerous error of trusting in, or boasting of an arm of flesh. I could earnestly wish, that while our arms are crowned with success, we might content ourselves with a modest ascription of it to the power of the Highest. It has given me great uneasiness to read some ostentatious, vaunting expressions in our newspapers, though happily, I think, much restrained of late. Let us not return to them again. If I am not mistaken, not only the Holy Scriptures in general, and the truths of the glorious gospel in particular, but the whole course of providence, seem intended to abase the pride of man, and lay the vain-glorious in the dust.

From what has been said you may learn what encouragement you have to put your trust in God, and hope for his assistance in the present important conflict. He is the Lord of hosts, great in might, and strong in battle. Whoever hath his countenance and approbation, shall have the best at last. I do not mean to speak prophetically, but agreeably to the analogy of faith, and the principles of God's moral government. I leave this as a matter rather of conjecture than certainty, but observe, that if your conduct is prudent, you need not fear the multitude of opposing hosts.

If your cause is just, you may look with confidence to the Lord, and intreat him to plead it as his own. You are all my witnesses, that this is the first time of my introducing any political subject into the pulpit. At this season, however, it is not only lawful but necessary, and I willingly embrace the opportunity of declaring my opinion without any hesitation, that the cause in which America is now in arms, is the cause of justice, of liberty, and of human nature. So far as we have hitherto proceeded, I am satisfied that the confederacy of the colonies has not been the effect of pride, resentment, or sedition, but of a deep and general conviction that our civil and religious liberties, and consequently in a great measure the temporal and eternal happiness of us and our posterity, depended on the issue. The knowledge of God and his truths have from the beginning of the world been chiefly, if not entirely confined to those parts of the earth where some degree of liberty and political justice were to be seen, and great were the difficulties with which they had to struggle, from the imperfection of human society, and the unjust decisions of usurped authority. There is not a single instance in history, in which civil liberty was lost, and religious liberty preserved entire. If therefore we yield up our temporal property, we at the same time deliver the conscience into bondage.

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