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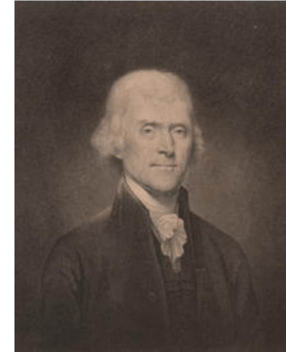
Religion in the Colonial World

Thomas Jefferson and Deism

by Peter S. Onuf



Thomas Jefferson, detail from an engraving published in 1801, based on a portrait by Rembrandt Peale. (Gilder Lehrman Collection)

Of all the American founders, Thomas Jefferson is most closely associated with deism, the Enlightenment faith in a rational, law-governed world created by a “supreme architect” or cosmic “clockmaker.” For many modern Americans, deist and “Christian” are antonyms, juxtaposing prideful reason—the apotheosis of man—and a humble faith in an all-powerful, triune Godhead. But the terminology is misleading and the opposition false.

Deism never constituted a coherent, organized force either in Britain or the United States. With other statesmen of the Revolutionary age, Jefferson expressed familiar deist sentiments. For this apostle of reason, the natural world was like a great book, made legible to scientists (or “natural philosophers”) through its predictable and lawful patterns. Enlightened men who discerned nature’s laws could begin to master the world, promoting the improvement of man’s lot and fulfilling God’s original intentions for His creation. Even politics could be reduced to a science, Revolutionary law-givers insisted, as they crafted new constitutions for self-governing peoples in the states and for the federal union. These constitutions were like machines or instruments for determining and enacting the will of a progressively more enlightened political public: they were something like the great clock that the deists’ clockmaker God had set in motion at the beginning of time. Of course, Jefferson and his fellow Revolutionaries did not presume to take God’s place in creating their own new world. To the contrary, they (metaphorically) killed King George III—a false god and illegitimate sovereign—in the name of their *true* sovereign, the God who pious patriots worshiped in their churches. With the break from Britain Revolutionaries sought to align their purposes with God’s plans for them and the world. The hubris of rebels who made their own law was thus transformed into a providential imperative, as self-declared “Americans” assumed “the separate and equal station” among “the powers of the earth . . . to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them.”[1]

Jefferson was not bridging a yawning gap between pious Christians and enlightened deists in the Declaration of Independence. To the contrary, deist tendencies in the thought and language of American Revolutionaries reflected the exigencies of political and military mobilization. Americans looked to “nature” and the Creator, “nature’s God,” for guidance and justification as they sought to hasten the coming millennium, the Kingdom of God on earth—an epoch of enlightenment, peace, and plenty. Human agency and divine purpose were fused: piety and enlightenment, religion and science, worked together. Jefferson’s lifelong spiritual quest was predicated on this ultimate complementarity of faith and science.

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Jefferson never called himself a deist, but he came to look like one in retrospect to his political opponents. In the heat of the struggle for religious freedom in Virginia, Jefferson staked out a radical position on church-state separation that later made him vulnerable to Federalist criticism. As he wrote in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, “the legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are

injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."[2] The reasonable Jefferson did not mean to endorse either polytheism or atheism, but rather to mark out the boundary between the authority of government and of individual conscience. Baptists and other evangelical opponents of the Anglican establishment understood this: Jefferson was their champion, not an enemy of Christianity.

Dissenters might not agree with Jefferson—or each other—about how precisely religious freedom would shape Virginia's future landscape, but Jefferson and his allies believed the progress of Christianity, purified and reformed through disestablishment, and republican government were complementary and interdependent. Baptists embraced separation with pious fervor: Muslims, some of them proclaimed in petitions to the Virginia assembly, should be free to worship as they pleased. They did not expect Islam to spread across the Commonwealth, nor did Jefferson expect any of his neighbors to worship "twenty gods." It was instead the defenders of surviving religious establishments in Congregationalist New England and exponents of clerical influence more generally who warned that religious freedom would unleash the forces of anarchy and atheism. Thus, in the presidential canvass of 1800, Federalist scare-mongers warned Christians to hide their Bibles if the Jeffersonians seized power.

As a historical phenomenon, what we call "deism," the new gospel of enlightened and liberated reason, appealed both to Jefferson and other elite thinkers and to radical populists such as Thomas Paine. Yet deism had a limited lifespan in the English-speaking world. Paine's sensational *Age of Reason*, first published in 1794, marked the apogee of deist influence, but generated a powerful backlash as defenders of traditional order decried French Revolutionary excesses. Some deists went underground; others recanted. Yet the deist threat lived on through the late 1790s and into the new century in the overheated polemics and preaching of Jefferson's Federalist opponents as they sought to redeem the republic from its many sins and tar Jefferson with the brush of infidelity and French philosophy.

The deistic Jefferson was the product of Federalist polemics in the 1790s, a partisan caricature that he vehemently rejected. For Jefferson, the term "deism" was interchangeable with "theism," "the belief of one only God." The Jews were deists, though "their ideas of him & of his attributes were degrading & injurious." Jesus's great reform was to universalize the deist principle. "The religion of Jesus is founded in the Unity of God," Jefferson wrote Unitarian Jared Sparks in 1820, "and this principle chiefly, gave it triumph over the rabble of heathen gods then acknowledged. Thinking men of all nations rallied readily to the doctrine of one only God, and embraced it with the pure-morals which Jesus inculcated." Though Jefferson did not publicize his religious beliefs, he came to think of himself as a follower of Jesus, "the benevolent and sublime reformer." Had the great reformer's pure doctrines "been never sophisticated for unworthy purposes," he wrote the Reverend Thomas Whittemore in 1822, "the whole civilized world would at this day have formed but a single sect." "Brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent institutor," Jefferson told Moses Robinson of Vermont in 1801, Christianity was the "religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science, and the freest expansion of the human mind."[3]

Jefferson fashioned himself a "primitive Christian," a faithful adherent of the unadulterated teachings of Jesus. In his view, the fabrications and mystifications that grew up around Jesus bolstered the power of the priests over the people, perverting those teachings toward worldly ends. Competition among churches—all claiming to monopolize religious truth—had made "Christendom a slaughterhouse." The greatest perversion was the doctrine of the trinity, the notion that three divine figures—Father, Son, and Holy Ghost—constituted one Godhead. This was the "Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus," Jefferson fumed, as they insinuated themselves between God and His people and struggled for worldly preeminence. When Jefferson told a Calvinist correspondent that "I am of a sect by myself" he was gently mocking the sectarian tendencies of self-appointed preachers who

fostered divisions among their followers and discredited Christianity generally. “There would never have been an infidel,” he quipped to Margaret Bayard Smith, “if there had never been a priest.”[4]

Jefferson’s assault on “priestcraft” anticipated Paine’s in *The Age of Reason* but led in a radically different direction. While Paine launched his fusillade at Christianity generally, Jefferson instead focused on church establishments, winning support from Baptists and other dissenters and identifying himself with a broad Protestant reform impulse that transformed the new nation’s religious landscape. For Jefferson, disestablishment would lead to the emergence of a genuinely free religious marketplace that would lead to the ascendancy of an enlightened, republican Christianity. The “truth is great and *will* prevail if left to herself,” he wrote in his famous Bill for Religious Freedom (1779): “she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.” State-supported churches were crucial props of the old regime in provincial Anglo-America as well as in the monarchies of Europe: preaching up hierarchy and privilege, priests combined “with the magistrates to divide the spoils of the people,” and established churches, in Jefferson’s view, demanded the unreasoning submission of credulous flocks, faith *against* reason. Republican governments, however, could not survive without the informed, ongoing consent of reasoning citizens that the complete separation of church and state could alone assure. Freeing itself from its corruptions, Christianity’s appeal to reasonable citizens would be irresistible.

Jefferson read the Bible carefully and repeatedly, seeking to sift Jesus’s pure teachings from the conflicting accounts of his brief career as a great reformer in the New Testament. Under the spell of the Greek philosopher Plato and his conception of transcendent, ideal “forms,” theologians, Jefferson believed, had discovered meanings between and beyond the lines of Scripture that defied reason and justified spiritual tyranny. Jefferson’s biblical hermeneutic—his common-sense, rationalist mode of interpretation—led him to extract his own version of the Christian Scripture from the corrupted texts preserved in the Gospels. The “Jefferson Bible” was not meant for publication and broad distribution, but instead modeled for his own and his family’s edification how a reasonable republican citizen might engage with Scripture.

Jefferson’s countrymen might be less willing to jettison the accounts of miracles and legends that made the historical Jesus divine and gave his teachings the kind of authority that former American subjects imputed to their British king, but self-governing Americans would follow Jefferson’s lead in questioning authority. The bill Jefferson proposed in 1779 for “the diffusion of knowledge” through state-supported public schools was thus the perfect complement to his Bill for Religious Freedom. Education was the surest “foundation” that “can be devised for the preservation of freedom, and happiness,” Jefferson told his mentor George Wythe in 1786: “if any body thinks that kings, nobles, or priests are good conservators of the public happiness, send them here . . . They will see here with their own eyes that these descriptions of men are an abandoned confederacy against the happiness of the mass of the people.”[5]

Jefferson did not believe unaided human reason could answer all metaphysical questions. He would rather “sleep on the pillow of ignorance” than speculate pointlessly about the presence of sea fossils in the high Andes or—more profoundly—about the original implementation of God’s design in his Creation. Priests and philosophers conjured up comforting myths and fables to explain the inexplicable, but their pretense to knowledge and authority disempowered the people. “Your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven,” Jefferson wrote his nephew Peter Carr in 1787, “and you are answerable not for the rightness but uprightness of the decision.” At this early date, when he still could be accurately described as a “deist,” Jefferson recognized both the limits of reason and the popular appeal of the

preachers' myths and mysteries. It was crucially important, however, for Jefferson to preach the republican gospel of equality: "state a moral case to a ploughman & a professor," Jefferson told Carr," the former will decide it as well, & often better than the latter, because he has not been led astray by artificial rules." After all, Jefferson had exalted the common sense of the people, their capacity to grasp "self-evident" truths, in the Declaration of Independence. Republican citizens must learn to reason for themselves and not defer to superior authorities who claimed a monopoly on truth.[6]

Jefferson repeatedly excoriated the unholy alliance of "kings, nobles, and priests," a this-worldly caricature of the Christian trinity. But disestablishment defanged priestly power and led Jefferson to a more positive and conciliatory attitude toward religious leaders. Early in his career, his concern with separation of church and state led him to proscribe clergymen from political office: if priests could lead their own flocks astray, they were bound to exercise a deleterious influence in the public councils: they would seek to gain special favors and privileges from the state, and ultimately some sort of new establishment. But by the time of Jefferson's ascendancy to the presidency in 1801, the "dominion of the clergy" was shattered and the remaining establishments—in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire—were on the defensive. As he famously wrote the Danbury (Connecticut) Baptists in 1802, the American people had come to see, with Jefferson, "that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God." Jefferson now tended to think of preachers as ethical teachers, building congregations of "ploughmen" by speaking the new republican language of common sense. Jefferson knew that many preachers in the expanding evangelical sects had little or no formal theological training: they were not the sophisticated "professors" who had exploited popular credulity to sustain hierarchy and church establishments. There was no reason, Jefferson ultimately concluded, to exclude these preachers —many of whom were his fervent supporters—from holding political office.[7]

Jefferson's early deism increasingly took on a self-consciously Christian cast. The success of the republican experiment depended on a moral, even spiritual revolution, something very much like the revivals of the Second Great Awakening of the early decades of the nineteenth century. Most historians argue that Jefferson—the stereotypical deist of Federalist caricature—was hopelessly out of step with the American people. They cite his absurd prediction (to Benjamin Waterhouse in 1822), "that there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die an Unitarian." But Jefferson was *not* particularly interested in sectarian labels or doctrinal differences. The key thing was that "in this blessed country of free inquiry and belief, which has surrendered its creed and conscience to neither kings nor priests, the genuine doctrine of one only God is reviving." Unitarians did not prove to be great revivalists —though Jefferson did think "missionaries from Cambridge . . . would be attended in the fields [of Virginia] by whole acres of hearers and thinkers"—but other sects rose to the challenge, preaching up democratic church organization, downplaying thorny theological distinctions, and promoting an evangelical and ecumenical religion of the people. Like Jefferson, evangelicals also often fashioned themselves "primitive Christians," returning with him to the pure font of Christ's teachings. Of course, they found different truths in the Bible and their faith in the miraculous did not wane. But their self-renovation in the "new birth"—the most compelling "miracle" of all—bore striking similarities to Jefferson's fundamental faith in the capacity of former British subjects to be born again as republican citizens.[8]

The young Jefferson's deism did not lead down the supposedly slippery slope toward atheism and relativism. His republican faith instead converged with a broad democratization of American Christianity and was most eloquently expressed in his conception of his countrymen as a "chosen people" with a providential role to play in world history. Jefferson did not hesitate to invoke a God who acted through history, unlike that distant and indifferent clockmaker of Enlightenment deism. Jefferson's democratic faith was not a product of the Enlightenment: he was not a deist relic in a Christian age. To the contrary, Jefferson's conception of democracy and nationhood drew him *toward* Christianity: by encouraging him to

identify with the (overwhelmingly Christian) American people, by underscoring the need for common values and beliefs to sustain republicanism, and by countering the cosmopolitan and universalistic tendencies of the Enlightenment. Jefferson fervently believed that Americans constituted a unique and exceptional people with a providential role to play in the progressive transformation of the modern world.

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[1] From the opening paragraph of the Declaration of Independence.

[2] Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1984), 285.

[3] Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Rush, April 21, 1803, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1124; Thomas Jefferson to Rev. Jared Sparks, November 4, 1820, in *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 20 vols., Andrew A. Lipscomb and Albert Ellery Bergh, eds. (Washington, DC: Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1903–1904), 15:288; Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Whittemore, June 5, 1822, in *Jefferson's Extracts from the Gospels. The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, 2nd series, Dickinson W. Adams, ed. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1983), 404; Thomas Jefferson to Moses Robinson, March 23, 1801, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1087–88.

[4] Thomas Jefferson to Francis A. van der Kemp, July 30, 1816, in *Extracts from the Gospels*, 375; Thomas Jefferson to Margaret Bayard Smith, August 6, 1816, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1404.

[5] Thomas Jefferson to George Wythe, August 13, 1786, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 859.

[6] Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 904 and 902.

[7] Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association, January 1, 1802, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 510.

[8] Thomas Jefferson to Dr. Benjamin Waterhouse, June 26, 1822, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, 1459; Jefferson to Waterhouse, July 19, 1822, in Dickinson W. Adams, ed., *Extracts from the Gospels*, 406–07.

Peter S. Onuf*, Thomas Jefferson Memorial Professor of History at the University of Virginia, has written extensively on sectionalism, federalism, and political economy, with a particular emphasis on the political thought of Thomas Jefferson. Most recently, with his brother, political theorist Nicholas G. Onuf, he collaborated on* Nations, Markets, and War: Modern History and the American Civil War *(2006), a history of international law and order in the Atlantic states' system during the Age of Revolutions and the early nineteenth century. Professor Onuf is currently collaborating with Annette Gordon-Reed on an intellectual biography of Jefferson.*