

Our Founding Fathers and Christianity

Many of the Founders had adopted the rationalistic concepts of the Enlightenment's European deists, who had rejected all the traditional beliefs of Christianity. These concepts reached America before the Revolution and were taken up by BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, JEFFERSON, and MADISON, among others. GEORGE WASHINGTON declared that "The Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."¹

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When [WASHINGTON] chose to speak of God, it was in terms like "the Grand Architect," "the Governor of the Universe," "the Supreme Dispenser of all Good," "the Great Ruler of Events," and even "the Higher Cause." Nothing here suggested a warm or personal relationship.²

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As a deist, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN often mocked orthodox Christianity, but he still maintained friendships with Calvinists like Ezra Stiles, president of Yale University, and evangelist George Whitefield.²

JAMES MADISON drifted more and more toward deism in his life, but he rarely if ever made disparaging remarks about traditional Christianity, as did his friend Jefferson.²

When the founding fathers drafted the Constitution, they left all mention of God out of the Preamble. Some of the early presidents rarely attended church while in office.³

"Like many other Enlightenment thinkers," writes Samuelson, "JEFFERSON saw the sum total of man's religious past as one long line of crusades and persecutions piling abuse upon abuse and spewing rivers of blood." JEFFERSON had great hopes that once traditional religion was disestablished, and thus deprived of its political influence, the good religion of Reason would drive out the bad religion of revelation and tradition.⁴

Few Americans know that one of their esteemed founders, THOMAS JEFFERSON, created his own personal Bible while in retirement at Monticello by excluding from it everything inimical to his rationalist spirit--which meant the entire Old Testament, all the writings of St. Paul, most of the observations of the Evangelists; in short, pretty nearly the whole thing...[which become known as] The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.⁵

The religious right aims to reinvent the U.S. into a theocracy in which conservative Christian men will interpret God's will for everyone else and then turn their interpretations into national law. ... JEFFERSON had this to say about such dreams: "Millions of innocent men, women, and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned, yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites."¹

In 1794, THOMAS PAINE, the American Revolutionary War patriot, writer, and political theorist, stated his position in *The Age of Reason*: "I do not believe in the creed professed by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church ... all national institutions of churches... appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind and monopolize power and profit."¹

Note: All these sources quote the texts of original manuscripts.

¹ "Separation of Church and State: The Dividing Line Grows Thinner," USA Today Magazine, Nov96, Vol. 125 Issue 2618, p18

² "Disciples of Reason," Christian History, 1996, Vol. 15 Issue 2, p28

³ "God and Country," Civilization, Dec96-Jan97, Vol. 3 Issue 6, p24

⁴ "Religious Freedom Is No Luxury," Christianity Today, 09/01/97, Vol. 41 Issue 10, p14

⁵ "A Republic of Pagans," Report / Newsmagazine (Alberta Edition), 8/20/2001, Vol. 28 Issue 16, p3

Full Sources

"Disciples of Reason," *Christian History*, 1996, Vol. 15 Issue 2, p28

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Franklin, who said that this was the first time he had ever been asked, on March 9, 1790, readily obliged: "Here is my creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the universe: that he governs the world by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we can render to him is doing good to his other children. That the soul of man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life respect[ing] its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental principles of all sound religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever sect I meet with them."

In September of 1800, in the furies of Thomas Jefferson's initial presidential campaign, the *Federalist Gazette* of the United States editorially branded the 57-year-old Virginian as "an enemy to pure morals and religion, and consequently an enemy to his country and his God."

In fact, Jefferson was a religious man, as were the other founding fathers--Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, and James Madison. Though none could be considered orthodox Christians (all were products primarily of the Enlightenment), none of them was "an enemy to God."

Of the five founders, George Washington (1732-1799) had the least to say about religion. Like most members of the Virginia gentry, he was baptized, married, and buried in the Anglican (Episcopal) church. But he wore his denominational labels lightly and kept his private religion strictly private. "In politics as in religion," he wrote in 1795, "my tenets are few and simple."

When he chose to speak of God, it was in terms like "the Grand Architect," "the Governor of the Universe," "the Supreme Dispenser of all Good," "the Great Ruler of Events," and even "the Higher Cause." Nothing here suggested a warm or personal relationship.

Born in Braintree (Quincy), Massachusetts, John Adams (1735-1826) grew up in the sheltering fold of New England Congregationalism. But when many of those churches turned toward liberal Unitarianism, Adams turned with them.

Religion must never allow itself to become an evasion of moral duty but only a compulsion to it. For this reason, Adams impatiently dismissed the doctrine of original sin: "I am answerable enough for my own sins," he wrote in 1815, because "I know they were my own fault, and that is enough for me to know."

The basic essentials of the deist creed--a belief in God, freedom, and immortality--may well have been Madison's creed.

If Christianity could be cleansed of 17 centuries of corrupting tradition, the barnacles scraped off, the mysteries jettisoned, and the irrationalities tossed into a heap, then it would appeal again to an emancipated and enlightened world, even to Jefferson himself.

But he rejected the divinity of Jesus (as he believed Jesus did) and denounced the idea of the Trinity as "mere abracadabra," the saddest example of what happens when one trades "morals for mysteries, Jesus for Plato." So perhaps he was more precise when he noted in 1819, "I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know."

As a deist, Benjamin Franklin often mocked orthodox Christianity, but he still maintained friendships with Calvinists like Ezra Stiles, president of Yale University, and evangelist George Whitefield.

James Madison (left) drifted more and more toward deism in his life, but he rarely if ever made disparaging remarks about traditional Christianity, as did his friend Jefferson (right). For his part,

Jefferson, for the last 50 years of his life, read the New Testament daily, often in Greek and Latin-- although with the miraculous passages taken out.

"A Republic of Pagans," Report / Newsmagazine (Alberta Edition), 8/20/2001, Vol. 28 Issue 16, p3

Few Americans know that one of their esteemed founders, Thomas Jefferson, created his own personal Bible while in retirement at Monticello by excluding from it everything inimical to his rationalist spirit-- which meant the entire Old Testament, all the writings of St. Paul, most of the observations of the Evangelists; in short, pretty nearly the whole thing. The slender (46-page) result is being published now by the Beacon Press, an arm of the Unitarian church, as *The Jefferson Bible: The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Jefferson was an early espouser of the "Great Moral Teacher" view of Jesus; he called the results of his textual cull "the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man."

"What Children Did Not Learn in School: The Intellectual Quickening of Young Americans in the Nineteenth Century," *Church History*, Mar99, Vol. 68 Issue 1, p42

The young Franklin learned about religion at home, in church, and by reading his father's books in "polemic divinity." The latter, he said, he disliked because religious quarreling was pointless. When he attended church as an adult, and he often did, he complained that ministers spent their time trying to turn people into good Presbyterians rather than into good people.

However much he later dismissed the bulk of organized Christianity as useless argument, however much the fine points of theology bored him, the divines who most influenced him were troublemakers.

"God and Country," *Civilization*, Dec96-Jan97, Vol. 3 Issue 6, p24

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"Separation of Church and State: The Dividing Line Grows Thinner," *USA Today Magazine*, Nov96, Vol. 125 Issue 2618, p18

THOMAS JEFFERSON once wrote: "I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." These words are carved into the base of the Jefferson Memorial in Washington. Most visitors to the monument believe he was referring to tyrants like King George III of England. However, Jefferson was writing about the Christian clergy.

For example, there is almost no mention of religion in *The Federalist*, written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay to gain support for the new Constitution.

In 1794, Thomas Paine, the American Revolutionary War patriot, writer, and political theorist, stated his position in *The Age of Reason*: "I do not believe in the creed professed by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church ... all national institutions of churches... appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind and monopolize power and profit."

Many of the Founders had adopted the rationalistic concepts of the Enlightenment's European deists, who had rejected all the traditional beliefs of Christianity. These concepts reached America before the Revolution and were taken up by Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison, among others. **George Washington declared that "The Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion."**

Jefferson, in "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom" (1779), suggested instead that "no man shall be compelled to support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever." The Statute for Religious Freedom that he proposed called for religious freedom and church-state separation.

When Jefferson ran for the presidency in 1800, the wrathful conservative Christian clergy assailed their enemy. The constant attacks were so mean-spirited and vicious that he

sequestered himself throughout the campaign at his Monticello home, finally to emerge as the U.S.'s third president.

First Amendment to the Bill of Rights: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion."

The religious right aims to reinvent the U.S. into a theocracy in which conservative Christian men will interpret God's will for everyone else and then turn their interpretations into national law. They dream of a hierarchy wherein the world must submit to the authority of those to whom they believe God has granted power-- meaning, of course, themselves. Jefferson had this to say about such dreams: "Millions of innocent men, women, and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt, tortured, fined, imprisoned, yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites."

American Civil Liberties Union executive director Ira Glasser told the press: "Religious expression in public schools is already protected by the First Amendment. Any child can pray or say grace on an individual basis."

On July 12, 1995, Pres. Clinton proclaimed that the First Amendment does not "convert our schools into religion-free zones." He added that a memo would be sent to school districts throughout the nation stating what religious expression already is permitted.

"Religious Freedom Is No Luxury," *Christianity Today*, 09/01/97, Vol. 41 Issue 10, p14

Adams looked for the good in all religions and welcomed all to the public square. He expected disestablishment to bear good fruit in both piety and public policy. Thomas Jefferson, on the other hand, had quite different purposes. "Like many other Enlightenment thinkers," writes Samuelson, "Jefferson saw the sum total of man's religious past as one long line of crusades and persecutions piling abuse upon abuse and spewing rivers of blood." Jefferson had great hopes that once traditional religion was disestablished, and thus deprived of its political influence, the good religion of Reason would drive out the bad religion of revelation and tradition.

"Founders didn't envision 'Christian nation,'" *The Daily University Star*, Southwest Texas State U. 09/05/00

In an April 11, 1823 letter to John Adams, Jefferson discusses the story of the virgin birth, saying, "... the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerve in the brain of Jupiter." In another letter to Adams, dated Jan. 24, 1824, Jefferson describes the New Testament as being "so defective and doubtful that it seems vain to attempt minute enquiry into it."

In a letter to William Bradford, on April 1, 1774, Madison said, "Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble Enterprise."

George Washington, while ostensibly a member of the Anglican Church, spent far more time fox-hunting than he did sitting in a pew. At no point in all his massive correspondence does he identify himself as a Christian. On his deathbed, he didn't call for a clergymen and made no religious remarks of any kind. If Washington was a Christian, he certainly wasn't a very devout one.

Benjamin Franklin, like Jefferson, was a Deist in the tradition of the Enlightenment. He wrote a letter on the subject of religion to Ezra Stiles on March 9, 1790, just before his death. In it, Franklin states his belief that the system of morals devised by Christ had been corrupted by the church over the course of the centuries, and further states that he did not believe in the divinity of Christ.

Of all the Founding Fathers, however, none can be farther from a Christian than Thomas Paine. The great spokesman of the American Revolution, whose writings "Common Sense" and "The American Crisis" inspired the country to its greatest feats of courage, was an active opponent of Christianity. His work, "The Age of Reason," assaults organized systems of religion without mercy. In it, Paine said, "All national

institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish (Muslim), appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolize power and profit."

Of course, most of the Founding Fathers, being politicians, occasionally made public statements in support of religion, but if they really wanted to make America a Christian nation, they could have done so when they wrote the Constitution. But the Constitution never uses the words "God" or "Jesus" or "Bible." Its only reference to religion is in Article VI, Section 3, which states that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."