

Foundational Documents of the United States

The Declaration of Independence has some wording considered by a few to reference the Christian god. The use of “Creator” suggests to some the Christian thought they see founding our country.

This is not historically true. Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of this document and he was an avowed Deist. Deism uses “God” as a term for that which created the universe and sustains natural law. To a Deist, God would not be a person who changed things based on someone’s prayer. A Deist would see this as superstition. The Bible is seen as a historical document, perhaps with good ethical teaching, but not divinely inspired. John Adams and Benjamin Franklin were also Deists serving on the “Committee of Five” charged with drafting the Declaration of Independence. (add links with Adams and Franklin) to-[2nd-Deism of Madison, Washington, Adams, Franklin and Allen]

SECULARISM: Exclusion of religion from public affairs - Religion and religious bodies should have no part in political or civic affairs or in running public institutions. Rejection of religion or its exclusion from a philosophical or moral system.

“Ref: Encarta World English Dictionary, 1999”

The “truths” that are “self evident” were Enlightenment Era concepts and not Christian at all. We know this because the original drafts of the Declaration of Independence did not include the word “Creator.” In a copy made by John Adams between June 11 and June 28 the wording was:

“We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal creation they derive in rights inherent and unalienable, among which are the preservation of life, and liberty and the pursuit of happiness; .” (1)

The above referenced version was derived from a prior first draft from Jefferson that also did not include “Creator.” The copy by Adams almost certainly was done in consultation with Jefferson and with his complete agreement. It was only after several drafts and revisions that the word “Creator” was inserted. Deism often used “God,” “Divine Providence” and other reverent wording with an explicitly non-Christian meaning. It is clear that “Creator” is derived from the secular words “equal creation” used in all first drafts. This may have meant nothing more than the fact of an equivalent process of birth implying equivalent rights. Humanity, at that time in history, had no science to approach answering the question of “Where do we come from?” The founding fathers had no counter-argument to having been “created”, somehow.

Jefferson was very explicit and open concerning the non-Christianity of his Deism. Some quotes from Jefferson to confirm this are:

“I have examined all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology. Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined

and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth.” (2)

-Thomas Jefferson to William Short

“But a short time elapsed after the death of the great reformer of the Jewish religion, before his principles were departed from by those who professed to be his special servants, and perverted into an engine for enslaving mankind, and aggrandizing their oppressors in Church and State.”

-Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Kercheval, January 19, 1810

“In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty. He is always in alliance with the despot, abetting his abuses in return for protection to his own”

- Thomas Jefferson to Horatio G. Spafford, March 17, 1814

“But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

-Thomas Jefferson, Notes on Virginia, 1782

Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because if there be one he must approve of the homage of reason more than that of blindfolded fear.

-Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787

The Declaration of Independence has another reference that seems somewhat religious; “the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God” This is again a concept deriving from Enlightenment philosophy placing heavy emphasis on nature. Jefferson is using an explicitly Deist and non-Christian concept of “God.”

The closing paragraph makes it explicit that the authority for the Declaration of Independence derives from the people and not from the Christian God:

“in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly Publish and Declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be, Free and Independent States”

This paragraph does include the phrase “a firm Reliance on the Protection of divine Providence.” This hopeful expression should not be surprising to anyone that understood Jefferson and his view of Deism. Providence is a rather standard term in the vocabulary of Deists. Jefferson also said “I swear, before the altar of God, eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” This last quote can be taken to be religious but in reality it is response to attacks on him from clerics and others appalled by his “atheism.” His Deism is consistent with the use of religious imagery even though he had no belief whatever in the divinity of Jesus, and, therefore, could not by any stretch of imagination be called “Christian.” The religious imagery of Deism could be very effective in communicating shared values with Christians without being a Christian.

The Constitution starts by defining the basis of government; “We the People of the United States.” Madison was a primary author of the Constitution and is often said to be the “Father of the Constitution.” He spoke often during the Constitutional Convention and kept meticulous records of the process. He was one of the three authors of the Federalist Papers that were instrumental in promoting the Constitution to the states. His leadership was important in the ratification of the Constitution and in the Bill of Rights that were to follow.

Madison's Deism was as explicit as Jefferson's. He is quoted saying, "What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on civil society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on reigns of Civil authority; in many cases they have seen the upholding of the throne of political tyranny: in no instance have they been seen to be the guardians of the liberty of the people." (3)

This choice to understand the power of government to derive from the people was the choice not just of Jefferson and Madison but of many religious denominations that found their religious liberty infringed by state religions. The political alliance between Enlightenment rationalists and evangelicals was first exhibited in the drafting of the Virginia Constitution led by James Madison. The evangelicals did not want a state church with its assessment provided to a church not of their choice. There were petitions with over 13,000 signatures filed and they were twelve to one against an assessment for a Virginia state church. The lawmakers were overwhelmingly against acknowledging Jesus the Christ in the Virginia Constitution. The Virginia Constitution was taken as a model for the American Constitution and the Bill of Rights. (4)

Article nine of the Constitution explicitly precludes any religious test for public office: "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States."

The only reference to Christianity in the Constitution is the date; "the Seventeenth Day of September in the Year of our Lord one thousand seven hundred and Eighty seven." This is obviously a formality and has no bearing in law.

The fact that the United States was not founded as a Christian nation was specifically confirmed by the Treaty of Tripoli:

"As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion" Article 11, Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary.

This treaty was signed on November 4, 1796 and approved by the Senate on June 7, 1797 without controversy. President John Adams signed it into law three days later.

Most of the historically important leaders of the Revolutionary War period were Deists.

Related Essay:

Deism of Madison, Washington, Adams, Franklin and Allen

References:

(1) Julian P. Boyd, Edited by Gerald W. Gawalt. The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text, By Revised Edition, The Library of Congress in association with the Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation, Inc., University Press of New England (1999) p. 60

Web available at:

<http://members.tripod.com/~candst/doi1j.htm>

(2) John E. Remsburg, Six Historic Americans

(3) Thomas E Buckley, Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1977

(4) Susan Jacoby, Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism, pages 23-24.

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