11 *Brooke Allen*

OUR GODLESS CONSTITUTION

One of the axioms of American political culture is that our eighteenth-century Founding Fathers were deeply religious, weaving Christian principles into the political fabric of the nation. In this brief historical survey, scholar and literary critic Brooke Allen debunks this assumption as myth. Rather than pious Christians fashioning the nation in the image of God, Allen depicts many of our key Founders—George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison—as at best religious skeptics, more deeply wed to Enlightenment rationality than any religious dogma. Our Constitution, The Federalist Papers, *and other founding documents make scant reference to God and virtually none to Jesus. Widespread fear of the oppressive potential of what we today would call religious fundamentalism relegated theological pronouncements to a mostly minor, mostly rhetorical role in our constitutional framework and early political discourse as a nation. Understanding why religion was viewed so skeptically—and why that skepticism ordinarily is not part of our national story—sheds light on our constitutional background and on the ideological conditioning we receive as part of our political culture.*

Our Constitution makes no mention whatever of God. Our nation was founded not on Christian principles but on Enlightenment ones. God only entered the picture as a very minor player, and Jesus Christ was conspicuously absent. The omission was too obvious to have been anything but deliberate, in spite of Alexander Hamilton's flippant responses when asked about it: According to one account, he said that the new nation was not in need of "foreign aid"; according to another, he simply said "we forgot." But as Hamilton's biographer Ron Chernow points out, Hamilton never forgot anything important.

In the eighty-five essays that make up *The Federalist*, God is mentioned only twice (both times by Madison, who uses the word, as Gore Vidal has remarked, in the "only Heaven knows" sense). In the Declaration of Independence, He

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gets two brief nods: a reference to "the Laws of Nature and Nature's God," and the famous line about men being "endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights." More blatant official references to a deity date from long after the founding period: "In God We Trust" did not appear on our coinage until the Civil War, and "under God" was introduced into the Pledge of Allegiance during the McCarthy hysteria in 1954.

In 1797 our government concluded a "Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli, or Barbary," now known simply as the Treaty of Tripoli. Article 11 of the treaty contains these words:

> As the Government of the United States . . . is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion—as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity of Musselmen—and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

This document was endorsed by Secretary of State Timothy Pickering and President John Adams. It was then sent to the Senate for ratification; the vote was unanimous. It is worth pointing out that although this was the 339th time a recorded vote had been required by the Senate, it was only the third unanimous vote in the Senate's history. There is no record of debate or dissent. The text of the treaty was printed in full in the Philadelphia Gazette and in two New York papers, but there were no screams of outrage, as one might expect today.

The Founding Fathers were not religious men, and they fought hard to erect, in Thomas Jefferson's words, "a wall of separation between church and state." John Adams opined that if they were not restrained by legal measures, Puritans—the fundamentalists of their day—would "whip and crop, and pillory and roast." The historical epoch had afforded these men ample opportunity to observe the corruption to which established priesthoods were liable, as well as "the impious presumption of legislators and rulers," as Jefferson wrote, "civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time."

If we define a Christian as a person who believes in the divinity of Jesus Christ, then it is safe to say that some of the key Founding Fathers were not Christians at all. Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Tom Paine were deists—that is, they believed in one Supreme Being but rejected revelation and all the supernatural elements of the Christian Church; the word of the Creator, they believed, could best be read in Nature. John Adams was a professed liberal Unitarian, but he, too, in his private correspondence seems more deist than Christian.

George Washington and James Madison also leaned toward deism, although neither took much interest in religious matters. Madison believed that "religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprize." He spoke of the "almost fifteen centuries" during which Christianity had been on trial: "What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution." If Washington mentioned the Almighty in a public address, as he occasionally did, he was careful to refer to Him not as "God" but with some nondenominational moniker like "Great Author" or "Almighty Being." It is interesting to note that the Father of our Country spoke no words of a religious nature on his deathbed, although fully aware that he was dying, and did not ask for a man of God to be present; his last act was to take his own pulse, the consummate gesture of a creature of the age of scientific rationalism.

Tom Paine, a polemicist rather than a politician, could afford to be perfectly honest about his religious beliefs, which were baldly deist in the tradition of Voltaire: "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. . . . I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church." This is how he opened *The Age of Reason*, his virulent attack on Christianity. In it he railed against the "obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness" of the Old Testament, "a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind." The New Testament is less brutalizing but more absurd, the story of Christ's divine genesis a "fable, which for absurdity and extravagance is not exceeded by any thing that is to be found in the mythology of the ancients." He held the idea of the Resurrection in especial ridicule: Indeed, "the wretched contrivance with which this latter part is told, exceeds every thing that went before it." Paine was careful to contrast the tortuous twists of theology with the pure clarity of deism. "The true deist has but one Deity; and his religion consists in contemplating the power, wisdom, and benignity of the Deity in his works, and in endeavoring to imitate him in every thing moral, scientifical, and mechanical."

Paine's rhetoric was so fervent that he was inevitably branded an atheist. Men like Franklin, Adams and Jefferson could not risk being tarred with that brush, and in fact Jefferson got into a good deal of trouble for continuing his friendship with Paine and entertaining him at Monticello. These statesmen had to be far more circumspect than the turbulent Paine, yet if we examine their beliefs it is all but impossible to see just how theirs differed from his.

Franklin was the oldest of the Founding Fathers. He was also the most worldly and sophisticated, and was well aware of the Machiavellian principle that if one aspires to influence the masses, one must at least profess religious sentiments. By his own definition he was a deist, although one French acquaintance claimed that "our free-thinkers have adroitly sounded him on his religion, and they maintain that they have discovered he is one of their own, that is that he has none at all." If he did have a religion, it was strictly utilitarian: As his biographer Gordon Wood has said, "He praised religion for whatever moral effects it had, but for little else." Divine revelation, Franklin freely admitted, had "no weight with me," and the covenant of grace seemed "unintelligible" and "not beneficial." As for the pious hypocrites who have ever controlled nations, "A man compounded of law and gospel is able to cheat a whole country with his religion and then destroy them under color of law"—a comment we should carefully consider at this turning point in the history of our Republic.

Here is Franklin's considered summary of his own beliefs, in response to a query by Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale. He wrote it just six weeks before his death at the age of 84:

> Here is my creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we 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 respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever sect I meet with them.
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> As for Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the

> truth with less trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the good consequence, as it probably has, of making his doctrines more respected and better observed, especially as I do not perceive that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any particular marks of his displeasure.

Jefferson thoroughly agreed with Franklin on the corruptions the teachings of Jesus had undergone. "The metaphysical abstractions of Athanasius, and the maniacal ravings of Calvin, tinctured plentifully with the foggy dreams of Plato, have so loaded [Christianity] with absurdities and incomprehensibilities" that it was almost impossible to recapture "its native simplicity and purity." Like Paine, Jefferson felt that the miracles claimed by the New Testament put an intolerable strain on credulity. "The day will come," he predicted (wrongly, so far), "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 Minerva in the brain of Jupiter." The Revelation of St. John he dismissed as "the ravings of a maniac."

Jefferson edited his own version of the New Testament, "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," in which he carefully deleted all the miraculous passages from the works of the Evangelists. He intended it, he said, as "a document in proof that I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus." This was clearly a defense against his many enemies, who hoped to blacken his reputation by comparing him with the vile atheist Paine. His biographer Joseph Ellis is undoubtedly correct, though, in seeing disingenuousness here: "If [Jefferson] had been completely scrupulous, he would have described himself as a deist who admired the ethical teachings of Jesus as a man rather than as the son of God. (In modern-day parlance, he was a secular humanist.)" In short, not a Christian at all.

The three accomplishments Jefferson was proudest of—those that he requested be put on his tombstone—were the founding of the University of Virginia and the authorship of the Declaration of Independence and the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The latter was a truly radical document that would eventually influence the separation of church and state in the U.S. Constitution; when it was passed by the Virginia legislature in 1786, Jefferson rejoiced that there was finally "freedom for the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohammeden, the Hindu and infidel of every denomination"—note his respect, still unusual today, for the sensibilities of the "infidel." The University of Virginia was notable among early-American seats of higher education in that it had no religious affiliation whatever. Jefferson even banned the teaching of theology at the school.

If we were to speak of Jefferson in modern political categories, we would have to admit that he was a pure libertarian, in religious as in other matters. His real commitment (or lack thereof) to the teachings of Jesus Christ is plain from a famous throwaway comment he made: "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." This raised plenty of hackles when it got about, and Jefferson had to go to some pains to restore his reputation as a good Christian. But one can only conclude, with Ellis, that he was no Christian at all.

John Adams, though no more religious than Jefferson, had inherited the fatalistic mindset of the Puritan culture in which he had grown up. He personally endorsed the Enlightenment commitment to Reason but did not share Jefferson's optimism about its future, writing to him, "I wish that Superstition in Religion exciting Superstition in Polliticks . . . may never blow up all your benevolent and phylanthropic Lucubrations," but that "the History of all Ages is against you." As an old man he observed, "Twenty times in the course of my late reading have I been upon the point of breaking out, 'This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!'" Speaking ex cathedra, as a relic of the founding generation, he expressed his admiration for the

Roman system whereby every man could worship whom, what and how he pleased. When his young listeners objected that this was paganism, Adams replied that it was indeed, and laughed.

In their fascinating and eloquent valetudinarian correspondence, Adams and Jefferson had a great deal to say about religion. Pressed by Jefferson to define his personal creed, Adams replied that it was "contained in four short words, 'Be just and good.' " Jefferson replied, "The result of our fifty or sixty years of religious reading, in the four words, 'Be just and good,' is that in which all our inquiries must end; as the riddles of all priesthoods end in four more, 'ubi panis, ibi deus.' What all agree in, is probably right. What no two agree in, most probably wrong."

This was a clear reference to Voltaire's *Reflections on Religion*. As Voltaire put it:

> There are no sects in geometry. One does not speak of a Euclidean, an Archimedean. When the truth is evident, it is impossible for parties and factions to arise. . . . Well, to what dogma do all minds agree? To the worship of a God, and to honesty. All the philosophers of the world who have had a religion have said in all ages: "There is a God, and one must be just." There, then, is the universal religion established in all ages and throughout mankind. The point in which they all agree is therefore true, and the systems through which they differ are therefore false.

Of course all these men knew, as all modern presidential candidates know, that to admit to theological skepticism is political suicide. During Jefferson's presidency a friend observed him on his way to church, carrying a large prayer book. "You going to church, Mr. J," remarked the friend. "You do not believe a word in it." Jefferson didn't exactly deny the charge. "Sir," he replied, "no nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has been given to man and I as chief Magistrate of this nation am bound to give it the sanction of my example. Good morning Sir."

Like Jefferson, every recent President has understood the necessity of at least paying lip service to the piety of most American voters. All of our leaders, Democrat and Republican, have attended church, and have made very sure they are seen to do so. But there is a difference between offering this gesture of respect for majority beliefs and manipulating and pandering to the bigotry, prejudice and millennial fantasies of Christian extremists. Though for public consumption the Founding Fathers identified themselves as Christians, they were, at least by today's standards, remarkably honest about their misgivings when it came to theological doctrine, and religion in general came very low on the list of their concerns and priorities—always excepting, that is, their determination to keep the new nation free from bondage to its rule.

Discussion Questions

1. Focusing on a few of our more famous Founding Fathers, identify their major objections to the intersection of religion and political life. How would you describe them religiously?
2. In the penultimate paragraph, Allen points out that politicians—then and now—know that to acknowledge any personal skepticism about religion amounts to "political suicide." Given how untethered our Founding Fathers were to theological precepts, speculate about why being skeptical about religion—or being non-religious—is political suicide.