

Darwin or Intelligent Design—What Would a Deist Say?

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On the Road With Thomas Jefferson From Henry Wilder Foote's *Thomas Jefferson*

Thomas Jefferson was our third president, serving from 1801-1809. He was the principle author of the Declaration of Independence and also a Unitarian—not because he belonged to a Unitarian church, but because his religious beliefs were influenced by and conformed to Unitarianism.

Now, Jefferson was a very popular president, but as most politicians will discover, there will always be a group of people who, for one reason or another, don't like you very much.

In Jefferson's case, the group who were least fond of him were the clergy—Christian ministers. Because of some of the things he had said and written, they believed Jefferson was an immoral man who didn't like religion and wanted to weaken or destroy all the churches. But after a chance encounter, at least one minister found reason to alter his opinion.

The setting was this: On one of his periodic trips between his home at Monticello and his retreat at Poplar Forest, Jefferson stopped overnight at Ford's Tavern, a rooming house.

He was alone, and on alighting from his horse, was shown into the living room where a very respectable looking stranger was sitting. The latter, a clergyman, soon opened the conversation without having the least idea to whom he was talking.

He introduced the subject of certain mechanical operations that he had recently witnessed. Mr. Jefferson's inquiries and remarks soon satisfied the minister that he was conversing with an eminent engineer.

The topic of agriculture came up next and, after a short while, his companion made up his mind that Mr. Jefferson was instead a large farmer. Other topics arose ... music, poetry. Finally, the topic of religion was broached, and the clergyman became strongly suspicious that his companion was in the same vocation as himself. But he confessed that he could not discover to what particular persuasion he leaned, to which church he belonged.

There was something in Mr. Jefferson's presence that did not invite questions of a personal nature, and so the clergyman asked him no leading questions. At 10:00 Jefferson retired to bed.

Immediately the clergyman sought the landlord

to ask who his companion had been. "What, you don't know the Squire? That was Mr. Jefferson," came the reply.

"Not *President* Jefferson?"

"Yes, President Jefferson."

"Why," exclaimed the clergyman, "I tell you that was neither an atheist nor an irreligious man. One of finer and more just sentiments I have never met with."

A Few Words on Deism By David Holmes

"The religion of deism," Thomas Paine wrote, "is free from all those invented and torturing articles that shock our reason ... with which the Christian religion abounds. Its creed is pure and sublimely simple. It believes in God, and there it rests. It honors reason as the choicest gift of God to humanity and the faculty by which we are enabled to contemplate the power, wisdom, and goodness of the Creator displayed in the creation. And, reposing itself on God's protection both here and hereafter, it avoids all presumptuous beliefs and rejects, as the fabulous inventions of men, all books pretending to revelation...."

From the late seventeenth century on, a school of religious thought called "Deism" existed in Europe and America. It emerged from the Enlightenment ... and the scientific and philosophical work of three Englishmen—Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke—undergirded its English and American expression....

A philosopher and lawyer, Bacon insisted that observation and experience—not abstract principles—provided the only true foundations of human knowledge. Applying Bacon's (empirical) methodology to science, Isaac Newton, the leading physicist of the time, concentrated on discovering and reporting immutable laws of nature. For Newton, a "first cause" created the universe, which operated according to natural laws. Locke, a philosopher, argued that human experience and rationality—rather than religious dogma and mystery—determined the validity of human beliefs. Locke's test of truth was whether a belief made sense to human reason....

If we cannot call Deism "atheistic" it is equally impossible to call the movement "Christian," for Deists repeatedly called into question any teaching or belief in Christianity that they could not recon-

cile with human reason.... Thus, Deism inevitably undermined the personal religion of the Judeo-Christian tradition.... Deists needed no personal relationship with Jesus Christ. [In fact] the 18th century English Deist William Wollaston declared that human beings would learn more truths about religion if they studied nature and science rather than the Bible and Christian theology.

Reflections

Perhaps the most influential book written about the Founding Fathers of the Republic is *The Life of George Washington*, first published in 1800. Mason Locke Weems, an Episcopal cleric, was its author, and it is from “Parson Weems” that Americans learned of our first President’s moral probity and his exceptional piety. It is in Weem’s biography that the famous story of the chopped-down cherry tree is related.

Subsequent years saw the publication of books similar to the one composed by Weems, and these were instrumental in transforming their subject into an American icon, a Protestant saint, a second Moses delivering his people from bondage and dire oppression. In these hagiographies, Washington is depicted as a man bent on discerning and doing God’s will. So fervent is this patriot’s devotion that he conducts communion services before Revolutionary War battles, spends entire nights in prayer—sometimes stealing off like Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane to pray in solitude.

Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and James Madison received less, but comparable attention. All have been depicted as exemplary Christians, devoted church-goers, and believers in Scripture. Today, conservative Christians continue to insist that the authors of our liberty and our Constitution were (with the possible exception of Thomas Jefferson) orthodox in their views and evangelical in their ambition. The United States, they insist, was intended to be, and was established as, a *Christian* republic.

Most of these claims are, in fact, spurious, and many of the stories about the Founding Fathers have been embellished, idealized, or simply invented out of whole cloth. No doubt, men like Washington, Franklin, and Adams took pains to observe the proper religious protocols, for many of their constituents expected as much of public figures. It makes sense, then, that George Washington would argue for Revolution on religious as well as political grounds; that he and Adams would estab-

lish a national day of prayer and thanksgiving; that he would approve adding “so help me God” to the end of the presidential oath of office.

The fact is, those who were deemed *disrespectful* of religion—a Tom Paine or an Ethan Allan, for instance—were treated with disdain, no matter how patriotic their professions. Even Jefferson—who during his presidency discontinued the day of public prayer established by his predecessors—took care not to push the envelope. He was reluctant to speak publicly about his own religious views, saying “That is a matter between me and God.”

Still, the religious outlook of most of the Founders was comparable to Jefferson’s and their orthodoxy should not be assumed. What politics *required* them to do didn’t necessarily reflect what the Founders privately believed.

According to one authority, seven of the nine “Founding Fathers” rejected the divinity of Jesus. One piece of evidence supporting this conclusion is the testimony of Bird Williams, an Episcopal minister and professor of religion, who knew most of the Founders and their families personally. In an 1831 sermon Williams sought to dispel the myths that had begun to accumulate around the early Presidents. “Not one,” he said, “professed a religion any more conventional than Unitarianism.”

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During the Revolutionary War, George Washington required his soldiers to attend religious services, but his own opinions were shaped by Deism and Freemasonry. His twenty volumes of collected papers contain no mention of Jesus Christ, and in referring to God, Washington avoids conventional Christian terminology. He seldom referred to the Supreme Being as “Lord” or “Father,” but designated him “The Grand Architect” or “The Great Ruler of Events.”

Perhaps most revealing, while on his death bed, Washington—though fully conscious—never asked to be counseled or comforted by a clergyman. His final words, overheard by his wife and personal servant, were simply “Tis well.” “He died as a Roman Stoic, rather than a Christian saint,” Joseph Ellis concludes.

Benjamin Franklin was, apparently, of a more conservative cast than most of the early nation builders. It was he who proposed that sessions of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 open with prayer. It tells us something about his fellow delegates to the Convention that they ignored the older man's suggestion and composed the Constitution in a prayer-free atmosphere.

But even Franklin was at best a Christian minimalist. At the age of 25 he composed his own personal creed, and this is what it said:

There is only one God, the Father of the universe.

He is infinitely good, powerful, and wise. He is omnipotent. He ought to be worshiped, by adoration prayer and thanksgiving, both in public and in private. He loves such of his creatures as love and do good to others, and will reward them either in this world or hereafter.... Virtuous men ought to league together to strengthen the interest in virtue in the world, and so strengthen themselves in virtue. Knowledge and learning are to be cultivated and ignorance dissipated. None but the virtuous are wise. Humankind's perfection is in virtue.

Not a word in the foregoing about Jesus Christ or Christianity, the vicarious atonement, the infallibility of Sacred scripture, human depravity, or faith's primacy over reason.

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Thomas Jefferson was not, then, alone among the Founding Fathers in espousing a spirituality

more in tune with Enlightenment and Deistic principles than with dogmatic Christian teachings. In fact, most of those distinguished men actively resisted attempts to place a sectarian—or even an overtly religious—stamp on the germinal documents and institutions of the new nation. “Ours is,” John Adams wrote, “the first example of a government elected on the simple principles of nature ... without a pretense of miracle or mystery.”

The Founders created a Constitution in which there are only two references to religion, Article Six

and the First Amendment. But rather than soothe the sensibilities of the orthodox, these passages raised their anxiety. Article Six prohibits any religious test for the holding of public office and the First Amendment effectively levels the playing field for *all* religions, thus precluding the possibility of a Christian monopoly in America.

The degree to which the work of the Founders distressed those in the orthodox community is revealed in a remark made by the chaplain of the New York legislature in 1820. The Founders, he complained, showed a “degree of ingratitude without parallel” in drafting a Constitution “in which there is not the slightest hint of homage to the God of Heaven.”

Nor did this streak of religious independence and free thought expire with James Monroe, the last of the Founders. Abraham Lincoln—a leader whose stature is rivaled only by Washington himself—belonged to no church because, he said, “churches insist on membership qualifications beyond loving God and one’s neighbor.”

According to his law partner in Springfield, William Herndon, “Lincoln was a thoroughly religious man, though not a Christian—the kind of man a Transcendentalist could admire.” In other words, our sixteenth president was an avid reader and imitator of progressive Unitarians like Ralph Waldo Emerson and Theodore Parker. As Pulitzer Prize winning historian Garry Wills points out, a number of Lincoln’s most notable speeches echo phrases from Parker’s Boston sermons.

What I’ve shared thus far concerning America’s most celebrated forebears is of more than casual historical interest. Because men like Washington and Lincoln *are* so admired, their words so often quoted, their opinions frequently cited as “authoritative,” it behooves us to know where they actually stood with respect to formal religion and Christian theology.

Today we often hear the Founders’ invoked in discussions of public prayer, the display of the Ten Commandments and the Christian creche in public places, and with respect to publicly supported “faith-based” initiatives. We are told by the Conservative Christian leaders that our most distinguished presidents were pious men who dreamed of and fought for a Christian commonwealth and who turned to the Bible for inspiration and guidance.

But such claims, as I have indicated, lack foundation. These were men who read the Scriptures, but with a critical eye. They most certainly did not believe the Bible was literally true in all its particulars. The Founders, as David Holmes reminds us,

were Deists who “repeatedly called into question any teaching or belief ... that they could not reconcile with human reason.”

If forced to choose between reason and revelation, our second President, John Adams, said he would opt unhesitatingly for the former. In an 1813 letter to Jefferson, Adams insisted that no number of miracles, transcendent splendors, or heavenly voices could ever convince him that one-plus-one-equalled-three. “In my heart I would have to say, ‘this amazing spectacle is chance ... delusion, fiction, and a lie.’”

Today, a fierce battle in our public schools pits the theory of evolution against one variation or another of Creationism. Throughout the nation, school boards have roiled with controversy over the inclusion of “Intelligent Design” in the science curriculum. In some cases, the accepted definition of “science” has been altered to accommodate Creationism.

Although Creationism’s proponents recently suffered a setback in a Pennsylvania courtroom, the controversy is far from settled. In fact, fully 45% of Americans believe the universe was created by God in six days, and that the earth is no more than 10,000 years old. 52% do not believe human beings evolved from a lower species. An even larger percentage of Americans support some version of “intelligent design.” I suspect that if the issue were presented to the public in the form of a referendum, Creationism would probably carry the day, since the average American—unlike John Adams—has far more respect for sacred Scripture than for science.

Now, Abe Lincoln shares a birthday—February 12—with Charles Darwin (both were born in 1809). One wonders what Honest Abe would have to say on this matter? It’s not an altogether ridiculous question, since one can imagine in the future Lincoln being cited in some fundamentalist-inspired legal brief seeking to legitimate Creationism.

Abraham Lincoln felt that humankind was evolving slowly but surely toward a condition of optimal freedom. Any response must be, of course, speculative. Darwin’s *Origin of Species* wasn’t published until 1859, and we don’t know whether or not Lincoln was familiar with the scientist’s work.

We do know, however, that he believed in social evolution. His partner, William Herndon, confirms that Abraham Lincoln felt that humankind was evolving slowly but surely toward a condition of optimal freedom. One might suppose that his per-

spective on biology was similar; that he accepted the reality of evolutionary change in the natural world, and believed in the rational, purposeful nature of such change.

This would make Lincoln not a Darwinian, but a Lamarkian. Jean-Baptiste Lamarke, a child of the Enlightenment, was born a year after Thomas Jefferson and cogently argued that species do, in fact, “evolve” due to the inheritance of acquired characteristics. Like most Enlightenment thinkers, LaMarke believed in an orderly, rational cosmos moving toward ever higher levels of being. Guided by immutable laws, nature and human civilization were inexorably marching toward their ultimate fulfillment.

The belief that evolution is “purposeful” and governed by rational laws rather than random mutation and blind physical forces *does* resemble “intelligent design.” It is not *Biblical* creationism, which relies on Genesis for information about life’s origins, but it does manage to keep God in the picture.

Among the Founding Fathers, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were undoubtedly the most scientific-minded. With their connections to the French and English scientific communities, it is quite likely they were also Lamarkians. Certainly Joseph Priestley, a British Unitarian minister and scientist who Franklin and Jefferson greatly admired, held such views.

The Founders and Mr. Lincoln were not Biblical literalists, but they did believe in a supreme Master Architect who designed and set in motion a well-regulated cosmos. If evolution is seen as one of the operational principles of this cosmos, its rational, progressive, and beneficent character must also be assumed. Darwinian theory, on the other hand, doubts this is the case.

The question is: Would these early American notables maintain those views today?

I doubt it, because they were, first and foremost, defenders of reason. Ever doubtful, Jefferson once admonished his nephew to “question with boldness even the existence of God because, if there be a God, he approves of reason more than blind faith.”

As someone who believed that every species was created by nature for some rational purpose, Jefferson was deeply disturbed by the appearance in the late 18th century of skeletons of large animals—mastodon, giant sloth, saber-tooth cats—that seemed to have disappeared. The very notion of extinction offended Jefferson’s belief in a rational cosmos; it could not accommodate a “dispensable” species.

But rather than simply deny the fossil evidence, Jefferson asked Lewis and Clarke to look for living examples of these animals during their travels into the Northwest. Jefferson wanted to know the truth, no matter how unsettling it might prove.

The bottom line, then, is this: with respect to evolution, the Founders and Mr. Lincoln almost certainly entertained views that were closer to Intelligent Design than to the Darwinism embraced by 99% of today's life scientists. Given the level of

scientific knowledge at the time, that is altogether understandable.

But these were also men who celebrated reason above revelation, who discarded the Bible as a body of reliable scientific fact, and who saw empiricism as the key to advancing human understanding and human civilization. Thus, it is my educated guess that if the Founders were *not* evolutionists in the modern sense, reason would eventually have caused them to become so.