

RELIGION AND PUBLIC ORDER IN THE 1790S

by

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ABSTRACT

The connection between the founders and relationship between church and state has become increasingly important in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Entire books are regularly published on the private religious thoughts and practices of many of the founding fathers; often times these works exist in order to support a closer relationship between Christian practice and piety and the government. Just as often, published works also draw on the ideas of the same founders in order to support a more concrete separation between religious thought and practice and governance. These “culture wars” are an emotive part of the present day political discourse; however, this thesis argues that attempts to fight the culture wars through the thought of the founders is factually erroneous and misguided because the context of the founders and their debates have been overly simplified or just plain lost. The link between religion and the political culture of the 1790s was a practical matter of governance and support for a larger ideal of consensus, not an expression of cultural preference as is common in present-day political discourse. The connection between the governing structure under the Constitution, a blessing upon that government from God, and the inculcation of Christian ideals into the public that support both religion and the government became increasingly important as the range of political and social opinions expanded in the 1790s.

Contemporary political thought that places the intent of the founders at the center of political debate ignore the significant divisions among the founders’ political, philosophical, and religious ideals. There is little unity in thought among the founders; they virulently disagreed about religion, politics, and the connection between them. Arguing the present day culture wars through the lens of the founders is emotive and politically effective, but without a full appreciation for the larger historical and intellectual contexts of the early republic and the concerns particular to that time an appeal to the wisdom of the founders on religion and its connection to American politics, this claim to political legitimacy is of dubious intellectual validity.

INTRODUCTION

The use of rhetoric and easily recognizable symbols is an ancient political tool used to govern a country. Religion often functions as one of those political symbols, especially when a society is in flux, or if the legitimacy of the government is open to question. The long decade of the 1790s formed such a time in American history. The thirteen years between the Constitution Convention in 1787 and the 1800 election was a time of radical change in American politics as the new republic gave form to the political upheaval of the American Revolution. The revolutionary consensus formed by the shared experience of the protests against Britain and the revolutionary struggle was also slipping away. Ideas of what it meant to be an American were open to debate. The election of 1800 found the new nation bereft of universally recognizable symbols or a sense of national identity. The United States teetered uneasily on the brink of civil unrest throughout the latter half of the 1790s as new symbols of the republic were created, and a new uneasy ideological consensus reestablished itself. Contention over religion and the role of institutionalized religious bodies was an important element in the rhetoric of this divide. Religion and the establishment of a national public religion was one of the areas of conflict as this new series of symbols was in production.

Religious rhetoric and symbolism is particularly important because religious pronouncements often have a wider impact than on a purely religious topic. The words of rhetoric and the emotions thereby invoked are often times more important than the truths that they reveal--or in some cases, conceal. Religion is a blanket term describing a

malleable series of beliefs that can intersect with other ideas of hierarchy, the nature of humans, philosophy, and politics. The rhetoric of religion is also flexible; it has the ability to subsume other debates into a discussion of a person's relationship with God, organized religious bodies, government, and other members of society. The late eighteenth century was a time when many of the accepted precepts of how society reconciled different ideas of society and religion called into question by the intellectual influences of the Enlightenment.

The election of 1800 was the first hotly contested presidential election under the United States Constitution. With the passing of George Washington the previous year, the new republic had lost the first truly national figure that stood above political quarrels, sectional loyalties, or questions of personal morality. Left in the wake of his passing, the American political system was evolving in directions that might have been foreign to many of the writers of the Constitution. Rhetoric, especially emotive rhetoric, quickly became the currency of the new political system, challenging the old ideas of a natural, disinterested aristocracy. The growth of political parties, various non-governmental organizations, and a growing conflict between Federal and state governments represented an unforeseen evolution. In a political context, religion was an emotional issue that served as a personal attack on an opposing candidate, while drawing into question their fitness for public office.¹ Many times this characterization continued through the press with a scant nod to the true religious viewpoints of that candidate, or any recognition at all that many of nation's political leaders shared somewhat similar religious convictions

¹ William Linn, "Serious Considerations on the Election of a President," 3

while disagreeing with each other philosophically and politically. Despite the sometime incendiary pronouncements in the course of the 1800 campaign, in retrospect Jefferson and Adams discovered that their religious views were not as different as the campaign rhetoric would have led people to believe.²

The ratification of the Constitution was far from the inevitable, uncontested event that twentieth-first century American culture remembers. In many places, ratification was a bitterly contested political event that contrasted several different theories of how to balance the need for national political strength that was required to preserve order in the nation with the popular fear that was associated with a powerful national government.³ The proper relations between church and state were a fundamental feature of this argument. Debate over the merits of a state-level organized church, such as those common in New England during the early republic, against a more liberal definition of freedom of thought, such as that advocated by figures within the American Enlightenment like Thomas Jefferson, was a political and philosophical argument. Often times, the rhetoric of religion expressed the deeper ideas about the nature of man, the nature of society, and what it meant to be an American in a larger social context.

Debate over religion and the outward piety of government officials was one avenue of approaching larger debates. The Constitution left unclear how the practical machinery of the separation of powers between the Federal and state governments would

² Bruce Baden ed., *Ye Will Say that I Am No Christian: The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006), 87.

³ Alexander Hamilton, The Federalist No. 70 in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter (New York: Signet, 1999), 421.

function.⁴ The very public debate between Federalists and anti-Federalist reached some degree of conclusion by the ratification of the Constitution, but serious divide continued to separate the competing visions of American society. The establishment of a state-supported church structure was not a novel construction. Throughout the 1780s, most of the individual states rewrote their state Constitutions. The relationship of organized religion and the state figured in many of these new law codes; however, each state took a different positions on this topic. For example, the 1780 Massachusetts Constitution provided for public support for clergy and other teachers of the Christian religion, but the 1784 Virginia Constitution actually disestablished the Anglican Church. This debate also exposes a geographical fracture in the republic. Most of the New England states retained some form of public support for religious instruction, while many of the southern colonies were moving towards disestablishment.

Out of the many compromises that composed the Federal Constitution, why was religion one of the issues that played such a prominent role in the political controversy in the latter half of the 1790s? The ratification of the Constitution in 1787 provided a broad outline for the political organization for the early American republic, but no political document could produce a philosophical or religious consensus in the thirteen years between ratification and the 1800 election. The Constitution did provide for a series of formal Federal political structures, but those structures were often times weak, contested, and in constant evolution due to very serious personal, philosophical, and political conflicts among society elites. Political parties had no place in the classical concept of

⁴ Helen Veit, Kenneth Bowling, and Charlene Bickford, eds.: *Creating the Bill of Rights: The Documentary Record from the First Federal Congress* (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 157

Republican government.⁵ Steeped in the traditions of classical Greece and Republican Rome, the authors of the Constitution created no structure for the operation of political parties. The vice of the political party, or faction, represented one of the many evils of governance that the new Constitution sought to control. However, this worthy goal did not survive Washington's first administration. Political factions quickly coalesced around differing economic, philosophical, and religious viewpoints almost as soon as the ink was dry on the first draft of the Constitution. The Federalist Party tended to be "conservative," supporting a strong central government operated by elites, encouraging commercial interests, and advocating friendly relations with Britain, a standing military and a strong support for social order based at least in part on Christian morality. The Democratic-Republicans, on the other hand, was the more "liberal" of the two parties. Republicans supported a weaker central government, rural and agricultural interests, and tended to seek friendly relations with France as opposed to Britain, while holding a worldview that based public order on the intelligence of the population as well as their piety.

Many parts of both party's platforms were abstract, but the contending viewpoints on the social utility of religious piety provided an emotive incentive required to facilitate political action from people who had an emotional attachment to the religious debate. The use of the rhetoric of religion, and the ability to claim the symbols of order that religion represented, was a driving force in the inter-party strife of the 1790s.⁶ The religious debate was vital because it was possible to utilize the words and symbols of

⁵ John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 113.

⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 7, 1794.

Christianity to promote other social or political goals or to attack the opposing party. Other elements of a platform may be more important than candidates' religious connections, but it is difficult to articulate some of the fundamental portions of the platform, especially when that plank does not inspire a passionate response from the electorate.

The press became increasingly important during the early republic under the influence of the growing separation in political opinion. The press not only reported accounts of the various activities of government officials, but they increasingly became a means to disseminate propaganda. One of the goals of the sedition act of 1798 was to curtail the exchange of political views and information that was often time critical of John Adams and his Federalist administration. Two of the most influential newspapers of this time were *The Gazette of the United States* and *The Philadelphia Aurora*. These two newspapers were, respectively, the semi-official organs of the Federalist and the Democratic-Republican political parties. The writings of conservative William Cobbett, alias Peter Porcupine, were also widely disseminated throughout the republic. Articles from the *Gazette* and the *Aurora* were often times printed and reprinted by various newspapers throughout the new republic, while they in turn would republish politically friendly articles from other newspapers throughout the nation. The increased use of newspapers as a means of conducting public conversation often polarized the public body through the use of fiery political rhetoric that often times bordered on personal slander.⁷ The spread of information and views through the newspapers that allowed for a public

⁷ Richard N. Rosenfield, *American Aurora: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 35.

debate of political issues throughout the country reinforced not only the beginnings of an American public identity, but also exposed some of the fault lines that were embedded in this new national construction.

Other organizations outside of the formal Federal governing structure contributed to a feeling of national crisis that continued to grow throughout the 1790s. Federalist fears of a conspiracy against the public order, as set forth by the Constitution, paralleled a concern put forth by Republicans of a fear of a conspiracy that the Federal government was infringing on the liberties guaranteed to the people. For Republicans, the Federal government formed a threat against the liberties of the people and the powers reserved by the individual states while the government remained in the hands of the Federalist Party. A series of Democratic-Republican clubs established throughout the states in the 1790s blended elements of a political propaganda group and a social club that knit together a growing coalition of people into a political interest faction. These types of openly political factions had no place in the classical political thinking enshrined into the Constitution. Far from being an expression of support to work within the existing system, Federalists often saw these clubs as something akin to French revolutionary Jacobin organizations that served as a threat against the existing order.⁸

Some non-governmental organizations challenged Christian religious structures even more openly than did the Democratic-Republican clubs. Many organizations in the states promoted the intellectual and social study of deism throughout this time. These Deist clubs threatened the Federalists' concept of order by directly attacking the role

⁸ John L. Brooke, "Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies: Voluntary Association and the Public Sphere in the Early Republic" in *Launching the Extended Republic: The Federalist Era*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert, 310 (Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

played by the Christian religion and clergy in the new republic. Part of this conflict is explainable as a part of the growth of the two party political system, but there is a deeper meaning beyond mere politics in the relationship between the spread of deism and the fears of disorder. While there was no authority within the government structure that claimed that authority was invested in the government by divine right, the idea that God had a role in the establishment of the new nation was widely held.⁹ More importantly, support for the Christian religion was equated with support for social order. Many states, particularly those in New England, still had a state-level church establishment that mandated that public tax monies supported Christian religious structures and religious instruction. The position of Christianity and the clergy was increasingly under assault from Deistic thought. Thomas Paine's 1794 work *The Age of Reason* was a watershed in this debate. Paine openly called in to question the influence of the clergy in society and divine inspiration of the scripture. Some debate over Christian doctrines was not unusual, even in religious circles. The growth of Unitarianism during this time is an outgrowth of that sort of questioning. The essential difference is rhetorical. Unitarians were questioning Christian doctrine, but they were doing so in a way that did not rhetorically challenge the use of Christianity in maintaining social order, as was Paine and some other Deists. Jefferson's connections to Paine and some elements of deism would become politically embarrassing as the 1800 election drew closer. Jefferson committed the cardinal sin of questioning the construction and existence of communal as

⁹ James Madison, "The Federalist No. 37" in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, 227 (New York: Signet, 1961).

opposed to personal piety. That stance would make him the enemy of many clergymen, especially the Federalist leaning Congregational clergy of New England.

The conflict between a monarchical, hierarchal Britain and a republican France provided a stark contrast in the potential and foibles of two distinct systems of governance at the same time as a new American republic was beginning to negotiate the meaning of the Constitution and the relationship that the Federal government should have with society. Although the United States remained legally neutral, the conflicts in Europe further exposed a serious philosophical fracture within the American political body. Although there were economic and cultural connections with each of the contending powers that helped shape the course of action taken by the American government, ideas of religion, and the role of religion within society, also helped shape American reactions to the conflict. The course of the French revolution was anti-clerical in nature and in many cases presented a direct attack on the existence of the Christian faith.¹⁰ Although there were many variants of thought, it was easy to tar the entire revolutionary movement as atheistic, and to depict all those who supported either the rhetoric or the actual deeds of the revolution as a person who attacked Christianity.

The practical impact of the French revolution on the United States from an effect standpoint is debatable. Three recognizable impacts, however, are relatively clear. The first is that the quasi-war with France supplied a political cover story for the establishment of a national army, causing immeasurable impacts on the direction of public discussion over the powers of the Federal government to raise and keep armies.

¹⁰ William Cobbett, "Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism and Revolution" in *Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism and Revolution*, ed. David A. Wilson 152 (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 1994).

The second impact was the political cover that the conflict with France provided for the establishment of the alien and sedition acts. The sedition act in particular created a political firestorm based on the alleged efforts of the Adams' administration's attempts to curtail unfriendly political writings in the newspapers. The third effect was that the conflict provided a political weapon to strike at any political movements that was viewed as overly influenced by French political and social thought. Thomas Jefferson, Deistic societies, and the Democratic-Republican political clubs faced attack based on fears of this potential political connection.

The election of 1800 occurred at a time when the fundamental connections that bound people together as a society were reexamined. The Constitution was new; the boundaries of its powers were still untried and no universal interpretation was associated with it. The role that religion could play in uniting the country and supporting a hierarchical society were open to question, in part because the question of what religion "is" was also open to question. Christian belief was undergoing a change as radical as the political changes brought about by the American and French revolutions, although outward forms of piety concealed both political and theological unrest. The roles of church establishments and clergy within the political process were still undefined in the new republic, but the symbolic link between political movements and the stability of organized religion was a politically important construction.

Many elements in play during the 1790s helped create the political chaos that flowed into the 1800 election. The old symbols and the old consensuses had begun to fall apart. Some wholly unforeseen developments, such as the growth of formal political

parties, tested the viability of the American political process. The system was also unprepared for the growth of politically active organizations outside of the government. Groups such as the Democratic-Republican clubs were a new creation in American politics. The 1790s Atlantic world was in chaos as the revolution in France provided an example of the political and intellectual ferment that questioned the legitimacy of church and religious structures. The growth of public space and conversation, often in the form of the political press, created a new national dialogue to a degree that had not existed previously with somewhat surprising results. The resulting democratization of the political debate was a development that had no place within the Constitution. This upheaval placed a political premium on embracing the few recognized symbols remaining into order to produce an emotive response from the electorate. This was a response to the need to gain support within the evolving party structure. For the conservative Federalists religion was an important part of this public appeal, while Republicans attempted to defend themselves from charges of atheism.¹¹ A religious evolution was occurring at this time. The growths of new sects such as the Unitarians were a part of the evolution. However, religious evolution was not politically important, as long as that evolution took place under the broader outlines of a theological debate. Groups such as the Deists that did not fall under that umbrella were open to political attack, as was any group that did not use religious rhetoric in order to justify their

¹¹ *American Aurora* July 31, 1800 , September 10, 1800 in Richard Rosenfeld, ed., *American Aurora: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 847

political and philosophical positions. The tale of the long 1790s and the 1800 election represent an example of this link in the politics of the early American republic.

The creation of the American Republic through the Constitution was an experiment in the creation and governing of a nation. Many of the traditional foundations of public order had been stripped away, creating a need for a new system of governance that protected both the need for public order but also the liberties promised by the new republic and the first ten Amendments. The rhetoric of Christian belief formed an important pillar in the quest for political and social order throughout the 1790s. There were also theological disagreements as new ideas of the Enlightenment, such as deism and Unitarianism, challenged more traditional theology. The nature of this public discourse transformed through the 1790s from a political debate over foreign relations and American reactions to the French Revolution to an internal political debate that focused on competing ideas of the religious qualifications required to assume public office. The rhetoric directly affected the public discourse and the political process by combining fears of social Jacobinism, religious evolution, and the rise of the Democratic-Republican political party into a united threat in the effort to maintain and promote a conservative political, religious, and social structure in the face of a changing world.¹²

* * * *

This thesis is divided into five chapters. Chapter One, “The Evolution of Thought in a Christian Context,” details the efforts of the English Enlightenment to integrate new ideas of empiricism and reason into a Christian context that served as a proof of

¹² Charles O. Lerche, Jr., “Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, Vol. 5, no. 4 (October 1948), 469.

Christianity. This movement evolved into Deistic and Unitarian ideas that sought to purify orthodox Christianity of many of the unreasonable elements of traditional Trinitarian Christian thought.

Chapter Two, “The Constitutional Consensus and Religion,” considers the debate surrounding the ratification of the Constitution in 1787 and the relationship between the Federal government and the governments of the several states. Discussion surrounding ideas of religion, the Federal government, and society were not only a debate among those ideas, but the encouragement of public piety and the establishment of religious structures was also a ground of conflict between state and Federal authority.

Chapter Three, “The Federal Consensus,” analyzes the efforts on part of the first Federal governments to create and maintain a governing system based on the ideals of a consensus. The collapse of this consensus and the growth of a party based political system created fears of French inspired conspiracies against the Federal government that threatened the consensus. These fears of conspiracy correlate the experience of revolutionary France with a potential collapse of the American government due to the absence of a governing consensus and the existence of political and religious groups outside of the governmental structure. The Federalists proposed an essential combination that links the existence of support for France with religious infidelity and the encouragement of religious infidelity with encouragement for radical social upheaval against the Federalist consensus. To combat this combination, a conscious effort was put forth to combine support for the Federalist political ideology with support for orthodox Christianity and public order. The rhetoric of religion and the support of many of the

new republic's most prominent clergymen provoked an emotive attachment to the Federalist cause for many people on the basis a religious belief.

Chapter Four, "A Tale of Two Deists," reflects the contrasting experiences of two Deists, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine. Although their views and ideas concerning the use of religious thought in society were similar in many respects, the public response to their thought was different due to the significant problems with the Federalist political consensus in the mid-1790s and wide spread fears over a French revolution type of social collapse. Franklin was able to maintain his status in society despite his unorthodox religious views due to the lack an outside threat such as revolutionary France. Thomas Paine's 1794 work *The Age of Reason* forms a watershed in the public perception of Deistic thought by making Deistical tracts readily available for popular consumption, thereby stoking conservative fears of the connection between the example of France, religious infidelity, and social disorder.

Chapter Five, "The Election of 1800," details the final collapse of the Federalist consensus during the administration of John Adams, particularly after the death of George Washington in 1799. Religion and charges of religious infidelity played a vital role in the campaign by providing an emotive touchstone for many people to support the candidacy of John Adams because of Adams' support for orthodox religious thought. The fitness of Thomas Jefferson for public office was severely critiqued due to his history of free thought, his close connection to Deistical thought and French philosophy.

* * * *

The connection between the founders and relationship between church and state has become increasingly important in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Entire books are regularly published on the private religious thoughts and practices of many of the founding fathers; often times these works exist in order to support a closer relationship between Christian practice and piety and the government. Just as often, published works also draw on the ideas of the same founders in order to support a more concrete separation between religious thought and practice and governance. These culture wars are an emotive part of the present day political discourse; however, this thesis argues that attempts to fight the culture wars through the thought of the founders is factually erroneous and misguided because the context of the founders and their debates have been overly simplified or just plain lost.

Contemporary debate ignores the evolution of Christian thought that was occurring during the late eighteenth century. The definitions of Christian and Christianity were open to debate and interpretation to a degree that is not reflected in contemporary debate. The founders were not just engaged in a debate of cultural practices under the broad umbrella of religion; rather, religion was a means to express ideas on a wider range of relationships in the new republic. In the construction of the Constitution, religion was a vital part of the debate over the relationship between Federal and state governments at a practical level. This debate was neither solely theoretical nor only cultural in nature. The link between religion and the political culture of the 1790's was a practical matter of governance and support for a larger ideal of consensus, not an expression of cultural preference as is common in present day political discourse. Finally, and perhaps most

importantly, contemporary ideas that place the intent of the founders at the center of political debate ignore the significant divisions among the founders' political, philosophical, and religious ideals. There is little unity in thought among the founders; they virulently disagreed about religion, politics, and the connection between them. Arguing the present day culture wars through the lens of the founders is emotive and politically effective, but without a full appreciation for the larger contexts of the early republic and the concerns particular to that time an appeal to the wisdom of the founders on religion and its connection to American politics is of dubious intellectual validity.

EVOLUTION OF THOUGHT IN THE CHRISTIAN CONTEXT

This most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. --- Sir Isaac Newton

A reexamination of orthodox Christian theology and the connections between church and politics was a fundamental element of the Enlightenment. The search for God, Christ, and scientific truths took many forms, but each sought to define the divine in a new way that did not rely solely on scriptural evidence or clerical traditions.

Observation and the search for the evidence of God in the natural world rather than the uncritical acceptance of received truth was a vital feature of the new wave of Christian theology, scientific thought, and Enlightenment philosophy. Newtonian science was, in part, an explicit attempt to combine mathematics and scientific observation with Christian theology. Religious reformers, like Joseph Priestley, sought to restore the “true” refined gospel of Christianity by removing the dross of superstition and tradition. This combination of skeptical ideologies could be socially explosive; however, there was a concerted effort to confine these types of musings to those people within society that would not use religious skepticism in order to loosen the social bonds of society. In the late eighteenth century, a socially confined intellectual upheaval along with the theological ferment in the forms suggested by the English experience was acceptable; the social revolution model of revolutionary France was much less welcome in the early republic.

Newtonian science, natural religion, and Christianity were not necessarily opposed to one another in the historical and intellectual context of the seventeenth and

eighteenth centuries; indeed, these separate ideals often supported one another. Unlike the experience of the twenty-first century that separates religious and secular thought and then battles for the supremacy of one viewpoint, the world of the 1790s and the influences that created that world defy an easy division into secular and religious entities; the secular and the divine are interwoven with one another and into the fabric of the time. A simplified separation between Christian and secular makes little sense in light of this Enlightenment time-period when the very definitions of those terms were a subject of intense debate. Enlightenment thought had many strands in regards to religion. Science and religion were not opposed to one another; new discoveries such as the theory of universal gravitation were proposed as evidence that God existed. Other strands of thought used Newton's laws to describe the behavior of God, and to reconstruct human knowledge of the divine through filter of reason. Critical examination of the scriptures, and of traditional Christian structures such as the clergy was also an important part of the Enlightenment debate. This was done in order to purify and rationalize Christianity, not necessarily to disprove the gospel. Each of these movements are important because each is a retreat from a twenty-first century conception of charismatic Christianity that bases its theology on the sovereign authority of the scriptures, emotion, and the unknowable nature of God.

The universe proposed by Sir Isaac Newton was mechanical and observable in nature, but Newton's own conception of this universe was also a reflection of a deeply held conviction of the truth of Christianity. According to John Headley Brooke, Newton postulated, "space was associated with the intimate presence of God, who knew and

perceived all things.”¹³ Despite this assertion of God, Newton’s thought was a fundamental recasting of the religious nature of the middle ages. Middle ages thought dictated that the world was God’s creation that operated through the acts of God.¹⁴ Nature and natural law provided both a rational and moral construction for “moral conduct, as well as an order of physical motion.”¹⁵ In contrast, the Newtonian universe was a “vast machine...an artifact devised by the mind of the Creatorand an object of knowledge both to his mind and to those of human beings.”¹⁶ God presided over the heavens and earth, but humans could observe and understand the “mechanisms of the celestial motions.”¹⁷ Newton feared that a purely materialist conception of the universe, such as that of Descartes, could lead to deism or atheism.¹⁸ A strict materialist would “emphasize matter to the exclusion of spirit; a Deist might still believe that a deity created the world and set it in motion but then left it to run by itself; an atheist would deny the existence of the deity entirely.”¹⁹ All of these alternative ideologies horrified Newton.²⁰ His theological constructions were not a novel idea; however, Newton’s ideas provided a new type of evidence for very old questions.

¹³ John Headley Brooke, *Science and Religion: Some Historical Perspectives* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 137.

¹⁴ Errol Harris “Ethical Implications of Newtonian Science” in *Philosophical Perspectives on Newtonian Science*, ed. Philip Bricker and R.I.G. Hughes, 211 (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 1990).

¹⁵ Harris, 211

¹⁶ Harris, 211

¹⁷ Harris, 211

¹⁸ Mary Jo Teeter Dobbs and Margaret C. Jacob: *Newton and the Culture of Newtonianism*. (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1995), 31.

¹⁹ Dobbs, Jacob 31

²⁰ Dobbs, Jacob, 33

Newton's God has many characteristics that are familiar in traditional Christian theology. This Being "governed all things, not as the soul of the world, but as Lord over all."²¹ Newton further writes that God is:

a living, intelligent and powerful being; and from his other perfections, that he is supreme or most perfect. He is eternal and infinite, omnipotent and omniscient; that is, his duration reaches from eternity to eternity; his presence from infinity to infinity; he governs all things and knows all things that are or can be done....since every particle of space is always, and every indivisible moment of duration is everywhere, certainly the Maker and Lord of all things cannot be never and nowhere.²²

Newton's research into the function of the cosmos provided proof for the existence of some sort of a supreme being.²³ In a series of letters to Richard Bentley, Newton boasted that "when I wrote my treatise about our system, I had an eye upon such principals as might work with considering men for the belief of a deity; nothing can rejoice me more than to find it useful for that purpose."²⁴ In his General Scholium, Newton wrote that:

this most beautiful system of the sun, planets, and comets could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful Being. And if the fixed stars are the centers of other like systems, these, being formed by the like wise counsel, must all be subject to the dominion of the One especially since the light of the fixed stars is of the same nature with the light of the sun and from every system light passes into all the other system; and lest the systems of the fixed stars should, by their gravity, fall on each other, he hath placed those systems at immense distances from one another.²⁵

²¹Newton, 42

²²Newton, 43

²³Isaac Newton, "General Scholium" in *Newton's Philosophy of Nature: Selections From His Writings*, ed. H.S. Thayer, 42 (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1953).

²⁴Isaac Newton, "God and Gravity: Four Letters to Richard Bentley" in *Newton's Philosophy of Nature: Selections From His Writings*, ed. H.S. Thayer, 45 (New York: Hafner Publishing Company, 1953).

²⁵Newton, 42

These two passages reveal three important features of Newton's theology. First, Newton explicitly recognizes the existence of a single deity who constructed the universe according to a plan. The second important feature is Newton's proofs of how the existence of the deity could be proven. Third and perhaps most importantly, the proofs that Newton offers rely on science. He did not rely solely on the traditional theological proofs of God, such as the scriptures or the writings of the early church fathers. His proofs are physical and observable: the system exists and can only function because of the forethought of the Creator. This architect exists because the properties of the Creator are such that it would be physically impossible for a time and a place in which the Creator did not exist. Without this Creator, the system, the gravity inherent in the stars would have caused them to fall into one another through the natural processes inherent in the universe. The absence of destruction through the natural process of gravity thereby becomes a proof of God's operation in the creation of the world.

Newton's theology was far from universally accepted. Gottfried Leibnitz criticized Newton's construction of the deity. In *Newton and the Culture of Newtonianism*, Dobbs and Jacob write, "Newton certainly focused strongly on the regular operations of the laws of gravity in running the world-machine....the important thing for Newton was that the world was constantly under divine supervision and would proceed as God saw fit."²⁶ Leibnitz raised a serious objection to this understanding: "Newton's God seemed not to have enough foresight to make the world-machine run right perpetually, that Newton's God was an unskilled Workman Who had to keep mending

²⁶ Dobbs, Jacob, 58

His work.”²⁷ Newton’s thought also had many defenders. One was Samuel Clarke, a minister influenced by Newton’s teachings. Clarke directly engaged in a series of letters with Leibnitz that attempted to argue and reconcile with other interpretations of Newton’s thought.

Leibnitz’ first letter to Clarke observed that the state of natural religion in England was very poor due, at least in part, to Newton’s assertion that God’s constant intervention into the world was required for its continued function. This questioned God’s role in the creation of the world. If God were perfect, logically the creation of God would also be perfect. In his reply, Clarke claimed that the problems with natural religion related to “the false philosophy of the materialists.”²⁸ Clarke also defended the analogy of God as an artisan. God, according to Clarke:

not only composes or puts things together, but is himself the author and continual preserver of their original forces or moving powers: and consequently ‘tis not a diminution, but the true glory of his workmanship that nothing is done without his continual government and inspection.²⁹

Clarke’s defense of Newton’s idea of God working not only as an artisan but also as the original constructor of the mechanical world was insufficient for Leibnitz. For Leibnitz, the true skill of a workman was not in the power of that workman, but in the skill of his work.³⁰ The construction of the world, as suggested to Leibnitz by Clarke’s definition alone reflects God’s power, but according to Leibnitz, Clarke’s definition of how God operates in the universe does not reflect well upon God’s other cause for excellence:

²⁷ Dobbs, Jacob, 58

²⁸ Alexander, ed. 12

²⁹ Alexander, ed. 14

³⁰ Alexander, ed. 17

wisdom.³¹ Although this is a different justification for the operation of God, Leibnitz does not deny that God can play a direct role in the operation of the universe through his providence. This operation through providence reflects both God's power and wisdom. However, for Leibnitz, this still reflected an imperfection with the deity because God lacks either power or good will.³²

In his reply, Clarke writes that the continual intervention of God into the operation of the universe is not an imperfection of the system. The human perception of God's management of the system is at question for Clarke, not whether or not the system itself is faulty. Human perception dictates, for example, that the solar system will fall into some form of disrepair. This disrepair is true according to human perception, but to God the "renovation are all equally parts of the design framed in God's original perfect idea."³³ Human conceptions of God's operations are also important in understanding the nature of natural and supernatural interventions into the machine. There is a difference between natural and supernatural from the human perspective, but from God's perspective, they are the same.³⁴

The Clarke-Leibnitz correspondence is an important debate concerning God's construction and management of the machine universe, but there are some underlying agreements that frame the debate. Although there is disagreement about how the universe works, there is a tacit agreement that the universe is a creation of God that does work to some degree of success due to that creation. The language of the debate was

³¹ Alexander, ed. 19

³² Alexander, ed. 19

³³ Alexander, ed. 23

³⁴ Alexander, ed. 24

scientific, not theological in nature, even though the topic of debate is inherently theological. Both Clarke and Leibnitz critique one another for their ideas concerning how the mechanical universe works as explained in the writings of Newton and in light of their personal correspondence. The theological validity of the mechanical universe compared to that of a more traditional theology is noticeably absent from their debate.

The theology drawn directly from Newton and embracing his conception of the inherent presence of God in the operation of the universe was not the only evolution in Christian thought in circulation during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Deism was another important strain of thought that combined Christian theology with the universal laws of reason.³⁵ For the Earl of Shaftesbury, it is unreasonable that the grace of God is only available to a few chosen people, or that God governs through “arbitrary will or power.”³⁶ This is in keeping with some of Newton’s thought in that God also must work within a structure of universal laws that rationalize His behavior. However, Shaftesbury’s interpretation of the relationship between God and universal laws is different from Newton’s. For Newton, universal natural laws provide proof of God; for Shaftesbury, universal laws describe the behavior of God. The “laws of moral reason” limited God’s power, according to Shaftesbury.³⁷ God could not act unjustly because “the laws of His own moral nature” bound the actions of God.³⁸

³⁵ Stanley Grean, *Shaftesbury’s Philosophy of Religion and Ethics: A Study in Enthusiasm*. (Columbus: Ohio University Press, 1967), 60-1.

³⁶ Grean, 60

³⁷ Grean, 64

³⁸ Grean, 64

Shaftesbury was also an advocate for freedom of thought because “truth is more powerful than error.”³⁹ He believed that freedom of thought should extend to philosophical and religious matters. Religion would only profit from a closer connection with philosophy because philosophical inquiry represents “no threat to religious truth.”⁴⁰ Shaftesbury’s theology is unorthodox. He was a part of the movement including John Locke to distill Christian doctrine into two basic premises: Jesus is the messiah and God exists.⁴¹ However, in his personal theology, he even questioned the validity of Christ’s divinity.⁴² His personal religion also reflects his distrust of the traditional structures of Christianity. Institutionalized religious structures do not always produce people that are more virtuous; the clergy especially is often guilty of the sins of pride and conceit.⁴³ Although sometimes critical of church structures and the clergy, Shaftesbury saw no hypocrisy in publically conforming to the established church in order to model the benefits of social stability while privately holding beliefs that were not compatible with established doctrine.⁴⁴

Although Shaftesbury’s theological stances are unorthodox, he does not advocate atheism in any way: atheism was a “denial of all natural order.”⁴⁵ Ideas of public order and disorder are important to Shaftesbury; he is certainly not a social revolutionary. He is intolerant of the public advocacy of atheistic thought because it “was a direct threat to

³⁹ Grean, 130

⁴⁰ Grean, 131

⁴¹ Grean, 106

⁴² Grean, 105

⁴³ Grean, 104-5

⁴⁴ Grean, 109

⁴⁵ Grean, 30

morality and not simply a theological or philosophical issue.”⁴⁶ Shaftesbury’s thought requires a deity in order to operate effectively not only in a theoretical sense, but also in the very practical outcome of preserving public morality and peace. God was the source of morality; the two concepts were inseparable. His thought is intellectually and theologically liberal in its theoretical forms however, as a result of his stance on public conformity and his continued belief in the necessity of the established church as a means of social control casts Shaftesbury’s political impact in a distinctly conservative light.⁴⁷

The Glorious Revolution of 1688, despite its title, was not a radical event. In many ways, it prefigures the successes and limitations of the revolutionary era in American history. The government retained a fundamental structure; however, an ideology was required to support both the result and the limits of change. Historian Margaret C. Jacob links the order provided by the laws of Newtonian science in the natural world with an attempt to provide order in society through a system of laws.⁴⁸ Jacob and fellow historian Betty Jo Teeter Dobbs cite seventeenth-century theologian Richard Bentley as one of the voices that combined Newtonian thought with an essential structure in society. For Bentley, the revolution provided a perfect balance between fanaticism and libertinism.⁴⁹ Dobbs and Jacob sum up his ideals: “God is in His Heaven, universal gravitation holds the universe together, and all is right and lawful in the post-revolutionary order. Those who would reform the system of government further in the

⁴⁶ Grean, 133

⁴⁷ Grean, 113-4

⁴⁸ Margaret C. Jacob, *The Enlightenment: A Brief History with Documents*. (Boston, New York: Bedford/St. Martins, 2001), 16.

⁴⁹ Dobbs, Jacob, 70

direction of republicanism and away from oligarchic rule are dangerously misguided.”⁵⁰

John Headley Brooke drew a direct connection between Newton’s “emphasis on the freedom of God’s will, as disclosed in nature, could be useful when justifying the intervention of God’s will in human affairs- even in the removal of a king.”⁵¹ A unity of truth formed in England during this time: a conservative political and social structure openly supported by an equally conservative theology that emphasized public order and the relationship between religion and public order.

Despite the close links between a religious establishment and political stability, Locke was not a traditional Trinitarian theologian. His efforts were not directed at discovering an infallible truth based on any particular doctrine. He sought to define a Christianity that “would not only allow but provide a basis for political and social stability.”⁵² Towards this end, Locke attacked what he believed was the source for those conflicts: the idea that any group could lay a claim to infallibility.⁵³ No group, either the state or a religious body, could claim an absolute knowledge of the divine. Therefore, no group could assert the right to govern the religion conscious of another person.⁵⁴ The intellectual concept of infallibility created chaos in Locke’s mind, not the promotion of any particular ideology. Locke’s writing was an attempt to refute “a rationalistic rejection of Christianity” by providing for an alternative to pure rationalism and natural

⁵⁰ Dobbs, Jacob, 69

⁵¹ Brooke, 159

⁵² Locke, John: *The Reasonableness of Christianity*, ed. John C. Higgins-Biddle. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), cvii.

⁵³ Higgins-Biddle, ed. cix

⁵⁴ Higgins-Biddle, ed. cxiii

religion through reason.⁵⁵ Faith still played an important role in Locke's Christianity. Reason was an insufficient means of understanding salvation because the fundamental foundations of salvation were available to all through the scripture: revelation could transcend reason provided revelation was not contrary to reason.⁵⁶

In many ways, Locke's theology provides a bridge between Shaftesbury's faith in the connection between religion and public order with Priestley's efforts to simplify the faith. In *A History of Unitarianism*, Earl Morse Wilbur writes that Locke's *Reasonableness of Christianity* provided "especial stimulus to our movement [Unitarianism]" because Locke's interpretation of scripture emphasized "there was nothing in revelation incompatible with reason."⁵⁷ The fundamental requirements for salvation were simple, and directly revealed in scripture so that all may understand: Christ was the savior that promised in scripture, he rose from the dead to be Lord and judge of all men as their king and ruler.⁵⁸ Reason formed a bridge between man and the divine for Locke. God "gave him reason and with it law: That could not be otherwise than what Reason should dictate; unless we should think, that a reasonable Creature, should have an unreasonable law."⁵⁹ God grants men reason and law, because God is reasonable within His laws. The simplicity of Locke's system democratized religion by discounting the relationship between formal education and the gospel: "The writers and wranglers in Religion fill it with niceties and dress it up with notions; which they make

⁵⁵ Higgins-Biddle, ed., xxxix

⁵⁶ Higgins-Biddle, ed. cxv

⁵⁷ Wilbur, Earl Morse: *A History of Unitarianism in Transylvania, England, and America*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952), 232.

⁵⁸ Locke, 169

⁵⁹ Locke, 169

necessary and fundamental parts of it; as if there were no way into the Church, but through the Academy or Lyceum.”⁶⁰ Anything outside of the essential truths of Christianity is an academic nicety, not a theological requirement. An academic nicety is certainly nothing worth creating social disruption over.

Newton, Clarke, Shaftesbury, Locke, and the later Priestley share three characteristics. Although their methods were slightly different and their theological ideas varied, each of them recognized the connection between Christianity and social order. Each of them, in their own way, was seeking God in some form, whether through the proofs found in the mechanical universe or the promise of a refined Christianity returned to its uncorrupted state. All five men also lived in a time of social crisis. One philosopher stands apart from these broad agreements. David Hume was an advocate of natural religion, or a religion “that is on evidence that is independent of supernatural revelation.”⁶¹ This definition of natural religion forms the basis for deism. His great theological work, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, was published in 1779, a time that lacked the social threats of the 1690s or the 1790s.⁶²

In the *Dialogues*, Hume falls just short of declaring there is no God. However, the God that he retains through the character of Demea falls considerably short of the traditional personification of God as a loving father figure. According to Demea, “each man feels, in a manner, the truth of religion within his own breast; and from a consciousness of his imbecility and misery, rather than from any reasoning, is lead to

⁶⁰ Locke, 169

⁶¹ David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xi.

⁶² David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), xi.

seek protection from that being, on whom he and all nature is dependant.”⁶³ Rites such as prayer and sacrifice are not expressions of love for the Father, but an act of appeasement towards one who is able to “afflict and oppress us.”⁶⁴

Hume attacks the connection between morality and Christianity. J.C.A. Gaskin writes that Hume’s “charges are that religion is inimical to happiness and detrimental to morality.”⁶⁵ Religion, for Hume, causes misery because of the emphasis on sin as well as a sorrowful history of “bigotry, cruelty, and persecuting zeal” that is a part of the Christian history.⁶⁶ Christianity is also harmful to Hume’s sense of morality because the worship of the Christian God is causes an essential hypocrisy for believers. Although God is the all-powerful Creator of the world, He also allows the existence of the everlasting torment of Hell. “The heart secretly detests such measures of cruel and implacable vengeance; but the judgment dares not but pronounce them perfect and adorable.”⁶⁷ Believers find themselves justifying the torments of Hell, although the heart and human reason deplore the entire theological structure.

Coleman writes, “most of Hume’s contemporaries would have considered his criticism of natural religion offensive to both religion and morality.”⁶⁸ Natural religion had many more temperate uses than those promoted by Hume. Natural religion was a vital prop to the doctrine of religious tolerance and as a strengthener of personal

⁶³ Coleman, ed., 68

⁶⁴ Coleman, ed., 68

⁶⁵ Gaskin, J.G.A.: *Hume’s Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd Edition. (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press International, 1988), 192.

⁶⁶ Gaskin, 194

⁶⁷ Gaskin, 195

⁶⁸ Coleman, ed., xiv

morality.⁶⁹ For Hume, it was impossible to discern the divine will through the observation of the natural order.⁷⁰ This directly undercut Newton's religious proofs through proving order in the universe. This, combined with a distrust of supernatural revelation, changed how Hume saw institutions such as religion. For him, religion was a product of "habit and custom," not reason or revelation.⁷¹ Religion, then, was a human construct. Although an original cause may exist in the universe, it was an open question whether or not anything could be known about that cause.⁷² It was also possible that the universe did not work from a design at all. In an idea that foreshadows Charles Darwin in the nineteenth century, Hume believed that organisms could adapt without having been designed.⁷³ The theological impact of this idea could have been immense. If the natural world could evolve without the involvement of the Creator, the very existence of that Creator was open to question.

Hume's skepticism does not preclude him from finding a social utility for religion. In *A History of England*, Hume supported the necessity of "an ecclesiastical order, and a public establishment of religion in every civilized community."⁷⁴ Hume's form of established religion was an attempt to navigate a path between the twin perversions of an unreasonable superstition and an uncontrollable religious enthusiasm in order to promote civil order. His work was not a theological treatise; the positive influence of a church to reinforce a "shared sentiment of humanity" is more important

⁶⁹ Coleman, ed., xiii-xiv

⁷⁰ Brooke, 181

⁷¹ Brooke, 181

⁷² Brooke, 182

⁷³ Brooke, 183

⁷⁴ David Hume, *The History of England*, Vol. 3. (New York: Liberty Classics, 1983), 134-5.

than a precise theology.⁷⁵ Like many other Enlightenment figures, Hume feared the power of the clergy. Hume believed that the clergy was able to incite the population to trust in a clerical message that had “infused into it a strong mixture of superstition, folly, and delusion” unless the secular authority was wise enough to prevent it.⁷⁶ Towards this end, Hume proposed that the clergy should be salaried by the civil authority in order to curtail the potential excesses of a ministry dependant on the voluntary donations of the congregation.⁷⁷ Political scientist Will Jordan writes that while Hume retains the connection between public order and established religion, his thought subsumed theological inquiry under the administration of the civil government.⁷⁸

The emergence of Unitarian was an intellectual retreat from Hume’s intellectual skepticism to a more theologically moderate position. The works of Priestley illustrate the emergence of this Unitarian theology, despite the explicit exclusion of anti-Trinitarians from the 1689 Act of Toleration.⁷⁹ The importance of Unitarianism is that it provided a bridge between a world- view based on reasoned observation, and a form of natural religion without rejecting the utilitarian forms of Christian ethics as the basis for the smooth functioning of the republic. Priestley’s efforts, sought the original intentions of the Lord, not a destruction of Christianity or Christian ethics. To this end, Priestley followed a theoretical formula similar to that of the Newtonians. Priestley did not directly follow the mechanical universe of Newtonian science. There is little overlap

⁷⁵ Will R. Jordan, “Religion in the Public Square: A Reconsideration of David Hume and Religious Establishment” *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 65, No. 4 (2002): 703.

⁷⁶ Hume, 135-6

⁷⁷ Hume, 136

⁷⁸ Jordan, 702

⁷⁹ Michel Durey, *Transatlantic Radicals and the Early American Republic*. (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1997), 19.

between Priestley's methodology and that of the Newtonians, however, the basic premise of the connection between scientific advance providing proofs for religion are virtually identical. Each reformulated the bounds of Christian thought by questioning the orthodox theology either by providing new methods of examining the truth of Christianity or by critically re-examining the scriptural structures of the practice of Christianity. In both cases, science and religion were not opposed to one another; advances in science supported religion because it provided "the means under God of extirpating all error and prejudice and putting an end to all undue and usurped authority in the business of religion as well as of science."⁸⁰ For Priestley, the doctrine of the trinity was entirely false because he saw the personification of Christ as "mere Platonism" that resulted in the belief that "Christ was, in power and glory, equal to the Father himself."⁸¹ The corruption that Priestley saw in Christianity was not a result of the original doctrines of Christianity; they were the result of heathens and philosophers combining "their former tenets and prejudices" with Christian thought.⁸² This corrupting process was also intentional; corruption within the secular and clerical governments during the dark ages were the product of "worldly minded men being always ready to lay hold of every opportunity of increasing their power; and in the dark ages too many circumstances concurred to give the Christian clergy peculiar advantages over the laity in this respect."⁸³

⁸⁰ Brooke, 180

⁸¹ Joseph Priestley, *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity, Vol. II.* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), 442.

⁸² Priestley, 441

⁸³ Priestley, 443

Like most dissenting Christian sects, the Unitarians had problems with the clergy. Priestley's quest to simplify and democratize religion was an open threat to the power of the clergy. The observances of doctrine are not at the center of Priestley's Christianity. For him, scripture does not support the doctrine of atonement. Rather, "repentance and a good life are, of themselves, sufficient to recommend us to the divine favour."⁸⁴ These expressions of piety are intensely personal, rather than the more traditional communal ideal of piety. The ordinances and sacraments of the established church are of little use in this personalized conception of Christianity. Priestley simplifies Christianity to three simple tenets: "the unity of God, the doctrine of a resurrection to immortal life, and a state of future retribution."⁸⁵ Although Priestley advocated an unorthodox version of Christianity, this refined Christianity is not a stalking horse for atheism. In "Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever", Priestley writes, "an atheist has neither the motive, nor the means of being what he might have been, if he had not been an atheist."⁸⁶ A faith in reformed Christianity was still faith in Christianity, even if the theology supporting Unitarianism bore little resemblance to the structures of other Christian sects.

Unitarian doctrine is a product of the evolution of religious thought during the English Enlightenment, and was becoming a noticeably more important manifestation of American Christianity by the 1790s.⁸⁷ Unlike the French Revolution, there was enough

⁸⁴ Joseph Priestley, *History of the Corruptions of Christianity, Vol. I.* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), 155.

⁸⁵ Joseph Priestley, *Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever.* (New York, London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1974), xix.

⁸⁶ Priestley vii

⁸⁷ Briefly sketched, the Unitarians position blended Arminianism, supernatural rationalism and anti-Trinitarian thought. Arminianism dictated that people were born with both the capacity for both good and evil; that reason could be used to understand God although some supernatural revelation was

philosophical maneuvering room for figures such as Jefferson and Adams to be both Christian and skeptics.⁸⁸ The acceptance of Unitarianism as a valid expression of Christianity was not universal. Some political observers doubted that Unitarianism was even a religious structure. In his pamphlet “Observations on the Emigration of Dr. Joseph Priestley” William Cobbett argued that no man who denied the divinity of Christ and that Christ died for the sins of man could have any pretension to the title of Christian.⁸⁹ In Cobbett’s view, the religious debate that Priestley raised was nothing more than an attempt to “introduce their political claims and projects under the mask of religion.”⁹⁰ Unitarianism, according to Cobbett, was a political movement, not a religious debate. The immigration of Joseph Priestley to America was not the search for one man’s religious freedom, but the desperate flight of a failed revolutionary akin to those in France.⁹¹ Cobbett’s pamphlet is an open argument for Christian orthodoxy, and an attack on the spread of a rational Christianity, but this argument is not based on theological grounds. His argument emphasizes the political impact of Priestley’s movement, not the theological context of his thought.

Cobbett’s writings are symptomatic of a shift in the political background of the 1790s. Theological evolution is acceptable, but only insofar as that evolution does not cause any sort of social conflict. Commentators such as Cobbett effectively re-enforced a political perspective to an essentially theological debate based on fears of the connection

required; and that the doctrine of the trinity was not based on scriptural evidence. See Conrad Wright, *The Beginnings of Unitarianism in America*. (Boston: Starr King Press, 1955), 3-4.

⁸⁸ Gary B. Nash, “The American Clergy and the French Revolution” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, Vol. 22, No. 3 (1965): 399-400

⁸⁹ Wilson, ed., 53

⁹⁰ Wilson, ed., 54

⁹¹ Wilson, ed., 64

between unorthodox religion and social disorder. Edmund Burke promoted a similar idea in his book *Reflections of the Revolution in France*. *Reflections* was Burke's attempt to contrast the chaotic state of revolutionary France with the peaceful and structured situation in England. According to Burke, "religion is the basis of civil society and the source of all good and all comfort."⁹² Without the support of a religious ideology, civil society would cease to function in a controlled rational manner. For Burke, God:

hath built up the august fabric of states, but like a provident proprietor, to preserve the structure from prophanation and ruin, as a sacred temple, purged from all the impurities of fraud, and violence, and injustice, and tyranny, hath solemnly and for ever consecrated the commonwealth, and all that officiate in it.⁹³

Burke links the direct operation of God with the construction of a stable, peaceful society. God will preserve this society in its present form, as it is the will of God for those structures to remain. God also has directly blessed the men in charge of this society and has provided his divine protection for both the system and the men within the system.

Although the evolution within Christian thought to include some elements of Deistical thought, Unitarian ideas, and natural religion changed some of the theological structures of religion, orthodox Christianity remains an important aspect of fully understanding the context of the public debate over religion in the 1790s. The theology that God could and did intervene in the affairs of humans at His will and could bring judgment upon the people for their unrighteousness remained a feature of American religious thought. This continued attachment to an interventionist God is illustrated by the public reactions in Philadelphia after the 1793 outbreak of yellow fever. The scourge

⁹² Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. (New York: Penguin, 1969) 186

⁹³ Burke, 189

of yellow fever ravaged the American capital causing many ministers to use that event as a call for a refocusing of society around a God that directly intervened in human affairs. The November 27, 1793 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* contained a call for a day of thanksgiving for the cession of the epidemic, as well as a reminder for the people from a coalition of clergy from Philadelphia that:

although the ALMIGHTY may manifest himself to a people in judgment, as well as mercy, by means of natural causes, and with the same breath that he bids the Pestilence rage, he can bid its raging cease; yet his purposes in both are to be our chief consideration, and he hath told us, That when his judgements are in the land, the inhabitants should learn righteousness.⁹⁴

This public appeal for piety and a renewed attention to the things of God was a part of the intellectual current of this time. The ministers that authored this appeal drew on a traditional and orthodox Christian ideology that placed God at that center of the public's wellbeing. The God of this passage is an interventionalist deity that could and did directly act on the people as both a blessing and a curse for the people depending on their behavior in His sight. Access to divine favor to act on behalf of the people was a product of the righteousness of the people, while the wrath of God awaited those who practiced disobedience. The ministers also made a link between the spread of the interests of the people in the things of this world and the intellectual revolution that was occurring:

Or whether, on the contrary, the worship of the TRUE AND LIVING GOD, and the sacred ordinances of the GOSPEL, have not been too much slighted, or neglected, for the false pleasures of this world, its dissipations, its follies, or perhaps the too eager pursuit of its good and enjoyments?-- Evils, which, having their origin too generally among the gay, the rich, and those in higher stations, have, by fatal example, spread themselves

⁹⁴ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 27, 1793

downwards among all classes of our people, to the dishonor of God, and the unspeakable injury of their moral and religious character....⁹⁵

The initial section of this pastoral letter is a traditional appeal from members of the clergy to their religious flocks to turn away from the things of this world and turn their attention to their religious duties. However, the second portion of the letter, by pointing the finger of blame for the popularization of infidelity at the people of the upper classes, hints that the letter was also a reaction against some of the intellectual currents in circulation. Enlightenment religion had many adherents; however, traditional Christianity was still a vital part of the public discussion in the 1790s.

The late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries witnessed the creation of many different Christian ideals. New types of evidence were used in order to explore and understand not only the natural world, but also to use science and reason to discover God. This process blended both secular and religious thought in a manner that defies an easy separation; however, three important ideas are consistent. The first is that most intellectuals of the time believed in and promoted some form of a belief in God. True atheism or an unbridled belief in natural religion was somewhat uncommon, even if the exact definition of Christian was unclear. The second major idea that unites this spectrum of Christian thought is the idea that the exercise of morality and God were directly related to one another. Morality and virtue could not and did not exist without some form of connection with God. This connection between virtue and morality with God would remain a feature in both English and American thought. Third, the link between social order and religion is a connecting ideal held by most observers of the time.

⁹⁵ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, November 27, 1793

These connections would endure as an intellectual concept for the founders even after the ratification of an American Constitution that explicitly forbade the new republic from establishing a national church in order to promote civic virtue. The structural link between an established church and the Federal government was severed; however, the informal social understanding that religion ensured morality remained.

THE CONSTITUTIONAL CONSENSUS AND RELIGION

“The Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”- 1st Amendment to the United States Constitution

The ratification of the Constitution in 1787 provided a broad outline for the political organization for the early American republic, but no political document could produce a durable philosophical or religious consensus. The ratification of the Constitution was far from the inevitable, uncontested event that twenty-first century American culture remembers. In many places, ratification was a bitterly contested political event that contrasted several different theories of how to balance the need for national political strength that was required to preserve order in the nation with the popular fear that was associated with a powerful national government. The proper relations between church and state were a fundamental feature of this argument. Debate over the merits of a state level organized church, such as those common in New England during the early republic, against a full freedom of thought, such as that advocated by figures within the American Enlightenment like Thomas Jefferson, was a statement of the division of powers between state and Federal power structures. The lack of an explicit treatment of religion within the Constitution and the bill of rights is not a statement of interest or disinterest in the relationship between religious ideals and government; rather, it is a practical recognition of the impossibility of establishing a religious consensus in the early republic. A lively public debate developed concerning religion and the Federal government outside of the formal political process. It also provides insight into nature of

the relationship between the several states and the Federal government as it is explained through the ideals of religion.

The process of forming and enacting Constitutional structures was not unknown in 1787. The individual states had existing Constitutions, many of which also contained provisions for governing the relationship between government and religious structures. Although the new Federal Constitution forbade the national government from establishing a national religion or a national religious test act, it did not negate provisions within the existing state Constitutions that did establish a state supported church or some form of a religious test act for public officials.

The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 contained several provisions that established a framework for the state support of religion in order to provide for the general peace of the population.⁹⁶ One of the primary influences in the establishment of this public religion was John Adams. He was critical of how a religious establishment conducted itself in the past. He was not in favor of completely subsuming religious structures into the government, but he did believe that a “moderate and equitable” establishment would be a benefit to society.⁹⁷ The public religion, for Adams, consisted of three parts: religion as ceremony, religious morality, and institutional religion.⁹⁸ Part of the religious ceremony established was a test act that required all office holders to

⁹⁶ John Witte Jr., “A Most Mild and Equitable Establishment of Religion” John Adams and the Massachusetts Experiment” in *The Journal of Church and State* (1999): 235 For example, article 1 states that “It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publickly, and at stated seasons, to worship the supreme being...” Article 2 defines the Supreme Being as the Christian God. Witte, 235

⁹⁷ Witte, 237. Adams was “contemptuous” of the state playing a role in the direct establishment of religious doctrine and texts, but was in favor of Christian morality playing some sort of role in society.

⁹⁸ Witte, 237

swear that they “do declare, that I believe the Christian religion, and have a firm persuasion of its truth...”⁹⁹

Massachusetts was not alone in linking Christian morality with the effective operation of a republican government. The New Hampshire Constitution of 1784 dictated that a republican government depended on the “morality and piety, rightly grounded on evangelical principals.”¹⁰⁰ In this philosophy, order in society is predicated not only on the observation of Christian moral principals, but also on the outward and public piety of the people. The importance between Christian moral ideals and larger society includes the idea of basic order, but the meaning is much deeper. The government itself could not continue to exist as an effective body if the morality of the people was unequal to the demands that a republican form of governance places on the people. The expectation was that the officials of the governmental structure should follow a higher standard of Christian morality because a republican government required not only a virtuous citizenry but a Godly administration as well.

There was an important and controversial link between legal recognition of the importance of Christian morality and legislation governing how these moral values disseminated throughout society. The Massachusetts Constitution, for example, dictated that each community, at its own expense, should make provision for “the support and

⁹⁹ Witte, 238

¹⁰⁰ Jean Yarbrough, “New Hampshire: Puritanism and the Moral Foundation of America” in *Ratifying the Constitution*, eds. Michael Allen Gillespie and Michael Lienesch (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989). The New York Constitution had a similar clause: “No person who shall deny the being of God or the truth of the Protestant religion, or the divine authority of either the old or new testaments....shall be capable of holding any office or place of trust or profit in the civil department within this state.” Edwin Gaustad, *Neither King Nor Prelate: Religion and the New Nation, 1776-1826*. (Grand Rapids: Wm. Eerdmans Publish Co., 1993), 169.

maintenance public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality, in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.”¹⁰¹ The Constitution further gave the state the authority to “enjoin upon all the subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid...”¹⁰² This is not a established religious structure similar to Cromwellian England or the France of Louis XIV. The range of legally and socially acceptable forms of worship was broader than those two structures. The range, though, falls considerably short of the ideal of a full liberty of conscience, and contains no provision for the right not to believe in the Protestant structure. A person had some latitude in the manner of expressing their Protestant piety, but they were compelled to express some sort of conformist piety and to pay taxes for the support for the propagation of the same.

If John Adams and the Massachusetts Constitution is a representative sample of a philosophy that bases the welfare of society in Protestant piety, Thomas Jefferson and his work *Notes on the State of Virginia* is representative of another philosophical tradition. In query XVII in the *Notes*, Jefferson writes, “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.”¹⁰³ By 1786, the Virginia Assembly finally passed a religious freedom law first proposed by Jefferson in 1779. In this bill, Jefferson writes that religious tests acts “deprive him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow

¹⁰¹ Gaustad, 165

¹⁰² Gaustad, 165

¹⁰³ Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds.: *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson* (New York: The Modern Library, 1998), 254.

citizens he has a natural right...”¹⁰⁴ The bill further reads that “no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever....”¹⁰⁵ As Edwin Gaustad wrote, this provided for not only “freedom of religion, but also freedom from religion.”¹⁰⁶ Jefferson, much like the framers of the Massachusetts Constitution, did not question the potential utility of Christian morality in society.¹⁰⁷ His argument was not against a religious basis of morality, rather it was against a governmental body defining and imposing that morality on the people. Jefferson’s religious concept in this context is not a support of irreligious sentiment or of rejecting Christian morality as a vital base in social relations. Rather, it was a question of a separation of powers. For Jefferson, the government did not have the right to enforce a Christian form of morality.

Jefferson’s political philosophy is a stark departure from the philosophy illustrated by the Massachusetts Constitution in two themes. The first is the importance of religious ethical basis for the appropriate function of republican society. The philosophy promoted by Jefferson and the Virginia statutes on religious freedom assume that the ties that will bind the American society together are not necessarily religious in nature. What would bind the citizenry together in the new nation was not a commonly held religious practice or an agreement on religious beliefs. The second departure is in the envisioned structures for how religious beliefs can coexist with a secular government that has no direct role in promoting an openly pious basis for society. What is a debate

¹⁰⁴ Koch and Peden, eds., 290.

¹⁰⁵ Koch and Peden, eds. 290

¹⁰⁶ Edwin Gaustad Leigh Schmidt: *The Religious History of America: The Heart of the American Story from Colonial Times to Today*, 2nd edition. (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2002), 126.

¹⁰⁷ Gaustad, 105

concerning governmental structure in this case is expressed in terms of religion. In the world conception of the established churches, if a republican government was to exist through the virtue of the people then it is required that the people are properly educated, participate in the proper expressions of communal piety, and represented by men of the proper moral character. For Jefferson, it was possible for an individual to act with republican virtue without necessarily subscribing to any particular strand of Christian thought.

Two distinct threads of religious and political thought are illustrated by the Massachusetts establishment, as well as the disestablished status of Thomas Jefferson's Virginia. Both ideologies were in circulation as the Federal Constitution during the ratification process. The Federal Constitution was a public debate carried out in the newspapers during the ratification debates. This process was outside of the formal political debates of the period and the impact that public debates over the connection had in the formal political process is debatable, but the opinion of the larger community illustrates the interest that the public held on the connection between church and state.

The connection between religion, social order, and the prospects of the new government was one of the most explored elements of the Constitutional in informal settings. In the August 22, 1787 issue of the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, "A Foreigner" wrote "An ESSAY on the Means of Promoting Federal Sentiments in the United States."¹⁰⁸ In this appeal for support for the Federal Constitution, "A Federalist" wrote "that religion is a most valuable security to states, by its general influence on men of diverse characters

¹⁰⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 22, 1787

and conditions, is an opinion held not only by all the good and wise in the world, but by every thinking man.”¹⁰⁹

It must be a bad religion, that is not preferable to irreligion. Such, says an American author, is my veneration for every religion, that reveals the attributes of the Deity, and a future state of rewards and punishments, that I had rather see the opinions of Confucius or Mahomed inculcated upon our youth, than see them grow up wholly devoid of a system of religious principles....The main question in matters of religion is useful truth: and even errors that improve the heart, without impairing the judgment in other things, are valuable.¹¹⁰

All religious structures that inculcate moral values into a person are valuable and preferable for the benefit of society. Irreligion, then, is worse for the public than a conversion to Islam or some other form of religious thought that also denied the Christian theology.

Religion and ideas of its relationship to governing structures remain an important theme in the *Pennsylvania Gazette* during the ratification debates. An attachment between religion and the new Federal government was forged through the debates over ratification. In the October 17, 1787 issue of the *Gazette* contained an article from “A Minister of the Gospel”:

begging leave to ask, whether men can be serious in regard to the Christian religion, who object to a government that is calculated to promote the glory of GOD, by establishing peace, order and justice in our country? --- and whether it would not be better for such men to renounce the Christian name, and to enter into society with the Shawanese or Mohawk Indians, than to attempt to retain the blessings of religion and civilization, with their licentious ideas of government.¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 22, 1787

¹¹⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, August 22, 1787

¹¹¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, October 17, 1787

From this type of argument comes the seed of what would become the Federalist consensus. The connection between the governing structure under the Constitution, a blessing upon that government from God, and the inculcation of Christian ideals into the public that support both religion and the government became increasingly important as the range of political and social opinions expanded in the 1790's. However, even "A Minister of the Gospel" cast the relationship in terms of a duty that the public owed to a Godly form of government rather than support for the government to create a nationalized church structure. The power in this relationship rested with the people, and the connection between the people and their government based in part on the ties of religion that bound them together.

There is a separation between public debates, the formal political process resulting in practical governance, and the actual text of the Constitution. While the relationship between religion and the Federal government was a feature of popular debate, the formal political structures created by the Constitution were not the product of public debate. As Russell Kirk writes in his book *The Roots of American Order*, the exact language used in the first amendment was not solely a statement about religious thought and practice, but also a carefully constructed compromise between factions who believed in the continuance of state level institutional religious structures and those with a more open definition of toleration.¹¹² According to Kirk, the treatment offered by the Constitution in regards to religion had little to do with a statement of religious faith (or lack of faith) by the founders. For Kirk, the Constitution was an intensely practical outline for establishing the institutions of government, not a wholly inclusive statement

¹¹² Russell Kirk, *The Roots of American Order* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2003), 435.

of principals or a “philosophical disquisition.”¹¹³ Underlying Kirk’s argument that the Constitution was a practical, rather than a philosophical work is his belief that the first amendment “was no philosophe’s Deistical declaration, and no Encyclopedist’s rationalistic denunciation of Christianity.”¹¹⁴ The lack of a firmer statement of religious belief was not the product of disbelief; rather, such a statement does not appear because the forum for expressing those opinions was not within the bounds of a practical governing document. The first amendment prohibition on Congress instituting a national religion served as a check on the authority of the Federal government in relation to the several states.¹¹⁵ It did not serve as a statement of principal or as a statement of an accepted Deistical philosophy on the part of the founders. For Kirk, the relationship between the Constitution and religion and of the personal religious sentiments of the founders was not a religious question at all; it was a matter of practical governance.

Kirk’s contention that the religious clauses within the Constitution served as a practical check on the authority of the Federal government and not necessarily as a statement of principal is supported by the writings of Hamilton, Jay, and Madison in *The Federalist Papers*, as well as in the debates surrounding the ratification of the bill of rights in the first Congress. Religion is directly mentioned in the Constitution only twice: Article six, section three, and in the first amendment.¹¹⁶ The social concerns of this

¹¹³ Kirk, 439

¹¹⁴ Kirk, 436

¹¹⁵ Kirk, 437. Kirk further notes that it was not until 1940 that the Supreme Court ruled that the establishment clause also applied to the states and not just the Federal government.

¹¹⁶ George Anastaplo, *The Constitution of 1787: A Commentary* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 202, 288. Article six reads: “...but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States”; the first amendment reads “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”

religious element within the convention as well as the first session of congress had a direct impact the framing of the first amendment.¹¹⁷ In *The Federalist Papers*, Hamilton, Jay, and Madison presented arguments to the American people in order to gain their support for the passage of the Constitution. In the *Federalist No. 51*, Madison argues that religious liberty in the United States is secured in the same manner as political liberty is secured. Political liberty is secured by “the multiplicity of interests” while religious liberty was secured by “the multiplicity of sects.”¹¹⁸ In the *Federalist No. 70*, Hamilton sought to alleviate the fears that many had concerning the powers of the presidency. In contrasting the role of the president in the Federalist system with that of the British throne, he wrote “one has no particle of spiritual jurisdiction; the other is supreme head and governor of the national church.”¹¹⁹ In these two letters, two of the supporters of the Federal system deny the Federal government authority over religious issues, one by arguing that any attempt at an enforced conformity would be a failure, the other by arguing that one of the elements that separate a strong presidency from a monarchy was the lack of authority over religion. In his book *Church and State in America*, James Hutson writes:

Washington, Hamilton, and other like-minded delegates who in principal had no objections to funding and employing religion to produce virtuous citizens, were certain that injecting religion in any form into the

¹¹⁷M.E. Bradford, *Original Intentions: On the Making and Ratification of the United States Constitution* (Athens, London: University of Georgia Press, 1993), 88-91. Congressman Benjamin Huntington, for example, expressed concern that the first amendment could “be taken in such latitude as to be extremely hurtful to religion.”

¹¹⁸ James Madison, “The Federalist No. 51” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, 321 (New York: Signet, 1999).

¹¹⁹ Alexander Hamilton, “The Federalist No. 70” in *The Federalist Papers*, ed. Clinton Rossiter, 421 (New York: Signet, 1999).

Constitution would antagonize voters who might already be dubious about the document for other reasons.¹²⁰

Debate within the first Congress on the passage of the bill of rights conforms to the general pattern proposed by *The Federalist Papers* and Huston's *Church and State in America*. The language of religion is used in order to transact what is essentially a debate over the construction of the new government. In the Congressional Register for August 15, 1789 a debate over whether a clause reading, "no religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed" was introduced for debate. In this debate, Congressman Peter Sylvester argued that this amendment "might be thought to have a tendency to abolish religion altogether" because the language of the bill "was liable to a construction different from what had been made by the committee."¹²¹

Congressman Sherman thought that the "amendment was entirely altogether unnecessary inasmuch as Congress had no authority whatever delegated to them by the Constitution to make religious establishments, he would therefore move to have it struck out."¹²² The language of the amendment less concerned Congressman Carroll, who saw it as a political tool that "would tend more towards conciliating the minds of the people to the government than almost any other amendment he had heard proposed."¹²³ His primary goal was to "secure the substance in such a manner as to satisfy the wished of the honest

¹²⁰ James H Hutson, *Church and State in America: The First Two Centuries*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008),144.

¹²¹ Helen Veit, Kenneth Bowling, and Charlene Bickford, eds.: *Creating the Bill of Rights: The Documentary Record from the First Federal Congress*. (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 157.

¹²² Veit, Bowling, Bickford, eds., 157

¹²³ Veit, Bowling, Bickford, eds., 157

part of the community.”¹²⁴ Congressman Livermore’s treatment of the whole debate was even pithier. He “was not satisfied with the amendment, but he did not wish them to dwell long on the subject.”¹²⁵

The congressmen present a variety of different ideals concerning what would become the first amendment; however, with the exception of Congressman Sylvester the committee did not debate the idea of religion or its role in society directly. Congressman Sherman believed that the whole work was unnecessary, Congressman Carroll saw the proposed bill as a political advantage to encourage faith in the government, while Congressman Livermore wished to move on to other business entirely. Far from being a wide-ranging discussion on religion, the debate over the first amendment in Congress was very much a political debate. The product of the first amendment was a compromise between those who feared that a Federal government would establish a nationally established church structure and those who felt that some form of religious structure was required in order for society to continue functioning. The Federal Constitution did not end the state level modified establishment structure; its purpose was as a guarantee that the Federal government would not have a national established church that would have competed with state structures. The treatment of the religious issue in the Constitution and the first amendment was a political deal over the separation of powers between the states and the Federal government in order to secure public support for a new form of governance, not the statement of principal applicable to future generations.

¹²⁴ Veit, Bowling, Bickford, eds., 157

¹²⁵ Veit, Bowling, Bickford, eds., 158

The Federal Constitution has little to say about the issues of church and state; limiting its treatment to forbidding the establishment of a Federal test act and prohibiting the Federal government from interfering with the free exercise of religion.¹²⁶ Matters of religion and religious freedom provided some of the most sustained debate within the larger crafting of the Constitution.¹²⁷ The Constitutional convention had members from a wide variety of religious background ranging from deism through nominal Christians, to delegates who closely identified themselves with one of the many of the orthodox denominations of Christianity.¹²⁸ Bradford argues that although there has been a great deal of attention paid to the religious backgrounds of Deists such as Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine, many of the framers of the Constitution were in fact fully orthodox Christians. In this argument, Bradford claims that the religious stories of men such as John Jay, George Mason, and Roger Sherman are ignored.¹²⁹

Examining the individual beliefs of the founders in the effort to ascertain their original intents concerning the relationship between the Federal government and the individual is alluring, especially in a political climate that uses the rhetoric of religion in everyday political discourse. However, this line of inquiry ignores the functional quality

¹²⁶ Anastaplo, 202, 288.

¹²⁷ Robert J. Morgan, *James Madison on the Constitution and the Bill of Rights* (New York, Westport, London: Greenwood Press, 1988). For example, one version of the first amendment read, "The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext infringed." This version of the amendment was rejected due to the fear that it would open the door for "Jews, Turks, and infidels" to enter the government. Gary D. Glenn, "Forgotten Purposes of the First Amendment Religion Clauses" *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (1987): 347

¹²⁸ Bradford, 88-9

¹²⁹ Bradford, 90-1. George Mason, in departing from his children for a trip is cited as commending his soul to his "blessed Savior for a remission of sins"; Roger Sherman was a "ruling elder" within his denomination; John Jay wrote that he gave thanks to God for "our redemption and salvation by his beloved son.:"

of the Constitution in dividing powers between Federal and state governing structures. While the Constitution did establish a ban on the Federal imposition of a test act or the establishment of a Federal church, no Federal legislation existed that curtailed states maintaining religious test acts and church establishments. This recasts the debate of the religious elements of the Constitution from a statement of the principle of separation of church and state to a statement of principle concerning the separation of powers between the Federal government and the governments of the several states.

This formal separation, however, does not preclude the existence of an unofficial or functional relationship between governmental officials and the clergy. Although there was not an established Federal church, the conceptual link between established Christianity, morality and the effective operation of the government still existed. As the 1790s progressed, the fears of French-inspired social disorder became an important feature of a Federalist consensus. At the center of this idea of consensus was the stabilizing effect of religion on society.

IRRELIGION AND DISORDER: THE GALLIC MENACE AGAINST THE
FEDERALIST CONSENSUS

An Instructive Essay, tracing all of the horrors of the French Revolution to their real causes, the licentious Politics and infidel philosophy of the present Age.

---Peter Porcupine, "The Bloody Buoy"

The French Revolution shook the intellectual Atlantic world to its foundations. The violent events of 1793 provoked varying responses in Britain and the United States ranging from horror to celebration; few internal political debates could take place without reference to France. The focus on France as a source of irreligion and disorder continued throughout the 1790s. The United States, governed under a new and untried Constitutional union, lacked many of the traditional structures of political unity that were common in eighteenth-century society as the events of 1793 were occurring; most of the political and theological elite saw it as an expansion of the American Revolution. Over the course of time, as the knowledge of this unconstrained radicalism during the terror became widely feared, this support changed due to the fear of that sort of disorder spreading through America. There was an explicit intellectual link made as these fears grew over the course of the mid-1790s: political and social groups espousing sympathy with France equated with irreligion; perceived irreligion recast as support for social disorder; social disorder equated with the worst excesses of the reign of terror. A direct chain of causality linked irreligion to chaos. The acceptance of traditional religion, and the rejection of Deist or Unitarian thought, then, was the key to protecting the home, hearth, and safety of the American people and the American nation in the minds of many American observers. The tenets of consensus politics in the 1790s United States changed

over the course of the decade; often times, these tenets referenced the French Revolution and the diverse American reactions to these foreign events. The example of revolutionary France frightened many Americans, compelling them to support a Federalist political consensus that offered social stability in a changing time.

* * * *

The increasingly radical course of the French Revolution directly influenced American perceptions of the French Republic. Citizen Genet was the representative of the French revolutionary regime to the United States. In *The Age of Federalism*, Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick argue that Genet's instructions were a hopelessly confused "Rube Goldberg-like" set of instructions that conflated the interests of France with those of the United States.¹³⁰ His basic instructions were to negotiate rights for French privateers engaged in combat with Great Britain to be constructed, resupplied, and gain the ability to sell their prizes in American ports.¹³¹ The Washington administration was not willing to negotiate, citing "the right of every nation to prohibit acts of sovereignty from being exercised by any other within its limits and the duty of a neutral nation to prohibit such as would injure one of the warring powers."¹³² Genet's function was to act as an advocate for the desires of his government, but his interactions with the American government far exceeded the accepted bounds of advocacy. He came to act as an executive power in his own right by recruiting Americans for military service and commissioning privateers in American ports in direct contradiction of President

¹³⁰ Stanley Elkins and Eric McKittrick: *The Age of Federalism: The Early American Republic, 1788-1800* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1993), 332-3.

¹³¹ Elkins, McKittrick, 332-335.

¹³² Elkins, McKittrick, 345.

Washington's declaration of neutrality. Genet was subsequently recalled, but the political conflict that his activities set in motion would help define the separation between the Republican and Federalist parties.

Federalist rhetoric linked the success of President Washington in the revolution with divine intervention on behalf of the American people. The personality cult of George Washington existed to intertwine divine favor, support for the Federalist administration and policies, and to cast the Republican Party as the tool of a foreign power.¹³³ In the Federalist view, the divine hand of providence elevated Washington to the Presidency in order to preside over the American Republic as the anointed of the Lord oversaw ancient Israel.¹³⁴ Opposition to the Washington regime, especially organized opposition, by this logic was not only unpatriotic but also an unholy act that was an affront to both secular and religious structures. Federalists tied the growth of the Democratic-Republican Party and the Democratic-Republican clubs with the rise of Deism and infidelity inspired by France.¹³⁵ The threat to the Federalist style of consensus politics was not domestic in origin. Discontent with conservative Federalist ideology was not a discontent brought about by genuine disagreement within the American political body; discontent was a foreign infection that hindered the proper order of a well functioning society.

¹³³ John F. Berens, *Providence and Patriotism in Early America, 1640-1815* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), 113.

¹³⁴ Berens, 135.

¹³⁵ Berens, 135.

Alexander Hamilton further linked the spread of the Democratic Societies with the presence of Citizen Genet.¹³⁶ One correspondent of Hamilton wrote that the groups were “Jacobin Clubs” that existed to promote “an idea to the People of America that there are such defects in our government as to require an association to guard against them.”¹³⁷ Hamilton himself had heard that Genet had been elected the President of the Philadelphia Democratic Society, and that the Society had been in contact with French representatives. He described this situation as a “subject of alarm.”¹³⁸ The public activities of the Philadelphia club did provide some justification for Hamilton’s concerns about connection between American politics and the French interest. The May 7, 1794 edition of the *Pennsylvania Gazette* contains an article detailing a celebration thrown by the Philadelphia Democratic-Republican club to celebrate the successes of the French Republic:

Though the celebration of the day (St. Tammany's) by several desperate companies, deprived the general meeting of a number of true Republicans, and though the notice of this Civic Festival was but short, yet about 800 citizens among whom the Governor and several officers of the State and Federal government attended, assembled to celebrate those events which have to eminently conducted to consolidate French liberty and guarantee our independence. The Minister and other officers of the French republic favoured the citizens with their company.¹³⁹

This celebration reflected many of the fears of Hamilton and other Federalist figures by linking together the agents of a foreign power in the person of the French minister, a

¹³⁶ Elkins andMcKitrick, 363.

¹³⁷James Roger Sharp, *American Politics in the Early Republic: A New Nation in Crisis* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993), 87.

¹³⁸ Sharp, 87

¹³⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 7, 1794

political opposition group of perceived social and moral infidelity, and leading opposition political figures such as the Governor of Pennsylvania. Many of the toasts offered at this event also reinforced the stark contrast between the Federalist and Democratic-Republican platforms on the French crisis. For example, one toast openly advocated for an alliance between the United States and the French Republic: “The alliance between the sister republics of the United States and France-May their Union be as incorporate as light and heat and their friendship as lasting as time.”¹⁴⁰

Other more temperate toasts amounted to advocacy against the official neutrality established by the Washington administration in particular and against the Federalist consensus in general. For example, one of the toasts offered read:

The men of people--the minority of the Senate--and the majority of the House of Representatives of the United States--May they in future, as on past occasions, have wisdom to discover and fortitude to resist every attack upon the Constitution and rights of their country, while they enjoy for their services the patriots true reward, the love and confidence of their fellow citizens.¹⁴¹

These toasts position the Democratic-Republican club in direct and open opposition to the official policy of the American government as well as exposing a cleavage in the government of the United States into separate factions that were fundamentally opposed to one another. Political faction constituted a symptom of disorder, at least to Federalists. The acknowledgement and tacit (if not open) support of these non-conformist ideas by public officials blew a cold wind on the ideal of a political system based on consensus.

Organized opposition to the Federalist consensus had a popular basis beyond the operations of government officials or the nefarious activities of Citizen Genet. If the link

¹⁴⁰ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 7, 1794

¹⁴¹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, May 7, 1794

between political and social consensus and religious morality was valid, then questioning either part of that link was a threat to both ideals. The Democratic-Republican Clubs questioned both of the foundational ideas of that tenet. The clubs were not explicitly Deist or in many cases expressly revolutionary, but their very existence was another blow against the ideal of consensus political thought. In his book *Democratic-Republican Societies*, Eugene Perry Link writes that the clubs were not religious or irreligious, but appealed to a broad spectrum of people such as Scotch-Irish Presbyterians who value egalitarianism.¹⁴² Although the membership of these clubs enjoyed a broad base, Link found that many of the intellectual leaders of the clubs were Deists, and saw a connection between “superstition in religion and gullibility in political life.”¹⁴³ Link further argues that many of the members of the Democratic-Republican clubs were anticlerical in their outlook, not irreligious, Deistic, or irreligious.¹⁴⁴ Hamilton was factually incorrect in his charges that the clubs were the center of a pro-French rebellion against the government of the United States. However, he was correct in noting that the clubs did serve as an outside watch on an administration that had been cast as the political successor of the American Revolution and as a regime that had been anointed by God.

The Federalist conception of the American political republic in the 1790s held at its center the ideal of consensus. The very existence of the clubs formed a challenge against the historical and social narrative of the Federalist Party. Washington himself labeled the clubs as “the most diabolical attempts to destroy the best fabric of government

¹⁴²Eugene Perry Link, *Democratic-Republican Societies, 1790-1800*. (New York: Octagon Books, 1973), 119.

¹⁴³ Link, 119

¹⁴⁴ Link, 121

that has ever been presented for the acceptance of mankind.”¹⁴⁵ However, ideas of what constituted the consensus were not completely static; attitudes towards France and the French revolution evolved based not only on the situation in France but also on the domestic situation as well. From 1789 to 1792 when support of the goals of the French Revolution was a part of the consensus due to the close intellectual connection between “The Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” and American documents such as the “Declaration of Independence.”¹⁴⁶ Illuminations and celebrations throughout America celebrated French victories against Prussia and Austria. Celebrants included most of the New England Clergy and other noted conservative figures (and Federalists) such as Alexander Hamilton, John Jay, and John Marshall.¹⁴⁷

The execution of Louis XVI and the activities of Citizen Genet were a turning point for American perceptions of the revolution. While support for the abolition of the monarchy was generally popular among both Federalists and Democratic-Republicans, as the nature of the revolution turned radical, and as more radicalized ideas such as those advocated by Thomas Paine became the voice of the French Revolution, American support for the revolutionaries among conservatives dwindled. The consensus changed as fears of social upheaval in the United States brought many to the conclusion that the French example of irreligion and rapid social change could collapse the fragile American nation. Conservatives began a public counterattack against French ideas, and those that were susceptible to the allure of French ideals by promoting newspaper writers such as

¹⁴⁵ John L. Brooke, “Ancient Lodges and Self-Created Societies: Voluntary Association and the Public Sphere in the Early Republic” in Ronald Hoffman and Peter Albert, eds., *Launching the Extended Republic: The Federalist Era*, 310(Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, 1996).

¹⁴⁶ Elkins and McKittrick, 309

¹⁴⁷ Elkins, McKittrick, 310

William Cobbett to attack potential subversive groups. William Cobbett (alias Peter Porcupine) was a newspaperman, writer, and conservative political pundit who provided commentary on the political and religious status of the world around him. His *Porcupine's Gazette*, along with several of his pamphlets attacked the irreligious ideals of the French revolution and the destructive influences that example provided for American political and intellectual figures.

In his pamphlet “The Bloody Buoy,” Porcupine explicitly links social anarchy with religious infidelity. The success of the French National Assembly and the *philosophes* was predicated on the destruction of the Catholic Church in France.¹⁴⁸ Modern philosophers, in his eyes, were either atheists or Deists who propagated their philosophies with “a sort of fanaticism in irreligion that leads the atheist to seek for proselytes with a zeal that would do honour to a good cause, but which, employed in a bad one, becomes the scourge of society.”¹⁴⁹ The equation of Enlightenment philosophy with irreligion is an important link between Cobbett’s views on politics and society. Political figures that were part of the Enlightenment intellectual movement, such as Thomas Jefferson, were suspect in his eyes due to their attachment to an atheistic doctrine. These figures were also untrustworthy because Cobbett attached an evangelical ethic to the atheistic doctrine of the Enlightenment.

¹⁴⁸ William Cobbett, *Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism and Revolution*; David A. Wilson, ed. (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press), 147.

¹⁴⁹ Cobbett, “The Bloody Buoy” in *Peter Porcupine in America: Pamphlets on Republicanism and Revolution*; ed. David A. Wilson, 146 (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press).

Cobbett feared that the political disorder associated with the French Revolution would spread to America through the influence of American intellectuals who had ties to France. Cobbett wrote that:

we are not what we were before the French revolution. Political projectors from every corner of Europe, troublers of society of every description, from whining philosophical hypocrite to the daring rebel, and more daring blasphemers, have taken shelter in these states.... Nor are men of the same stamp wanting among native Americans. There is not a single action of the French revolutionists, but has been justified and applauded in our public papers and many of them in our public assemblies. Anarchy has its open advocates. The divine Author of our religion has been put on level with the infamous Marat.¹⁵⁰

Cobbett skillfully blended domestic social fears with external concerns into a biting social and political critique that attacked Enlightenment philosophy as a whole while bemoaning the influence that philosophy had on American society. Underlying his critique is his connection between irreligion and philosophy. If modern philosophy was a French conspiracy to promote atheism, then adherents to modernistic philosophical thought was both un-American and irreligious.

The Congregationalist clergy were another political and social interest group whose views on the French revolution evolved over the course of the early and middle years of the 1790's. In his article "The American Clergy and the French Revolution," Gary Nash traces the change in attitudes among the Federalist clergy from an open encouragement of the revolution to a rabid hatred for the increasingly irreligious nature of the revolution. Three sermons by Jedidiah Morse illustrate the sea change in clerical feeling. In a Thanksgiving sermon in 1794, Morse preached, "liberty is the birthright of

¹⁵⁰ Cobbett, 152

all mankind usually stolen away by despots and tyrants.”¹⁵¹ By February of 1795, Morse was still comparing the French Revolution to the American experience, although he regretted some of the excesses of the former.¹⁵² By 1798, his view had evolved to a claim that a mysterious offshoot of the Masons known as the *illuminati* was responsible for the French revolution. The *illuminati* supposedly were a group dedicated to the throwing down of all constituted authority both temporal and ecclesiastical not only in France, but in America as well.¹⁵³

Timothy Dwight was a Connecticut minister and president of Yale University. His influence was such that he is sometimes called “The Pope of New England.”¹⁵⁴ In his Fourth of July sermon 1798 entitled “The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis,” Dwight further promoted Morse’s theory that the irreligion of the French revolution was the work of a small group of illuminati, whose doctrine denied and ridiculed God, attacked government and civil society, and mocked chastity while promoting adultery.¹⁵⁵ Dwight directly linked the course of irreligion to the collapse of civil society.¹⁵⁶ The claims of Morse and Dwight were widely disseminated through other clergymen who seized on the idea of the illuminati to explain the political and social scene of 1798.

In *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati*, Vernon Stauffer writes of one sermon offered by Dwight that cast the French Revolution as a series of acts by “men

¹⁵¹ Gary B. Nash, “The American Clergy and the French Revolution,” *William and Mary Quarterly* 22, no.3 (1965): 393.

¹⁵² Nash, 393

¹⁵³ Nash, 392

¹⁵⁴ Robert J. Imholt, “Timothy Dwight, Federalist Pope of Connecticut” *The New England Quarterly*, 73, No. 3(2000): 388.

¹⁵⁵ Timothy Dwight, “The Duty of Americans, at the Present Crisis, Illustrated in a Discourse, Preached on the Fourth of July, 1798” 12

¹⁵⁶ Dwight, 10

avowed object was the overthrow of alters and thrones, that is, the destruction of all religion and government.”¹⁵⁷ Dwight further supported the link made by Jedidiah Morse that the link between religion and government is vital because a strong church structure and a strong government structure support one another. The reverse was also true: a collapse in religious structure could result in the collapse of the government as it was in the case of France during the revolution. Although the examples from these three ministers described the events in Europe, his audience could easily reapply his teaching to the situation in the United States. If the assault on the outward piety and church structures in Europe already collapsed French society and threatened the stability of other European states, then the impact would be similar in America.

In *The Paranoid Style in American Politics*, Richard Hofstadter wrote that the reactions of Morse and Dwight display the attributes of a “paranoid style” in American political culture.¹⁵⁸ The paranoid style featured “moral indignation” brought about by “a hostile and conspiratorial world....directed against a nation, a culture, a way of life....”¹⁵⁹ The writings of Morse and Dwight as well as Hofstadter’s interpretation of their work illustrate not only the degree to which organized political dissent in the early republic was equated with a conspiracy against both order and religion, but also the fracturing of the Federalist consensus. A way of life and political thought embraced by many was under scrutiny by 1798; it was much easier and emotive to blame a small minority of designing

¹⁵⁷Vernon Stauffer, *New England and the Bavarian Illuminati*. (New York: Russell and Russell, 1918), 253.

¹⁵⁸ Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style In American Politics and Other Essays*. (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 14.

¹⁵⁹ Hofstadter, 4

persons for that scrutiny rather than legitimizing genuine political and social disagreement.

Jedidiah Morse's earlier responses to the irreligious nature of the revolution were much more ambiguous than the ministry that he offered in 1798. The Congregationalist clergy as a necessary and proper attack on idolatry supported the anti-Catholic strain of revolution.¹⁶⁰ He cast his attitude towards the "temporary" rejection of Christianity as an understandable reaction against the dominion of Rome; after the reestablishment of government, an outpouring of Christianity would reestablish the religious foundations of society.¹⁶¹ For the clergy as well as for Peter Porcupine, the publication of Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* sparked outrage among the clergy and a public debate on an epic scale; the popularity of the volume was such that seventeen printings in America by 1796.¹⁶² *The Age of Reason* had a two-fold impact on the political process: it changed clerical viewpoints towards the revolution and encouraged an active link between Federalist politicians and members of the clergy. Fisher Ames best explained this connection: "Tom Paine has kindly cured our clergy of their prejudices."¹⁶³ Paine also offended the political portion of this new coalition by questioning the role of George Washington during the revolutionary struggle. In a letter reprinted in the *Aurora*, Paine argued that Washington did not in fact win the Revolutionary War; rather, America's victory was due to the intervention of France on the battlefield and as a vital prop to the American economy. Not only was this letter an attack on the figure of George

¹⁶⁰Nash, 394

¹⁶¹ Nash, 393

¹⁶² Nash, 402

¹⁶³Nash, 411

Washington, but it was also an attack on the Federalist conception of the American Revolution and an open support for France at a time when support for France was on the decline.¹⁶⁴ Washington declared it “the most insulting letter that he ever received” while John Adams wrote, “He must have been insane to write so.”¹⁶⁵

Both wings of the Federalist consensus found themselves under attack by dissenting voices such as Thomas Paine. The connection between the Federalist Party and the Congregationalist clergy was based on the domestic American situation rather than any knowledge gained or excesses discovered about the course of events in France. Clerical fears of religious infidelity and social unrest turned them against France and those Americans that may be in sympathy with French interests. For Jedidiah Morse and others like him, a potent blend of the fear of irreligion and an evolving political consensus transformed his outlook from an understanding of a temporary acquaintance with irreligious thought to a fear of a full-scale conspiracy against both order and religion.

Powerful social and religious forces were in motion in the mid-1790s as America entered onto the world stage. Independence did not create a sustainable consensus in American politics or society. Public debate over the foreign policy of the new nation, the role of religion in society and the growth of two reasonably cohesive but opposing political doctrines caused a very public split between the elite classes of American society. Religion and perceived connections to an irreligious French doctrine became a vital and emotive role of American politics. An essential link existed between political

¹⁶⁴Richard N. Rosenfield, *American Aurora: The Suppressed History of Our Nation's Beginnings and the Heroic Newspaper that Tried to Report It*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997), 33.

¹⁶⁵ Rosenfield, 33

discontent and an outside foreign power acting through illicit domestic groups in order to threaten the American system of government through the questioning of spiritual and temporal authority structures. To combat this perceived threat, the cult of George Washington and the symbols and language of religion buttressed a particular vision of a political and cultural consensus that may or many not have had many true adherents. Religion became part of the public debate though its political and social usefulness at that particular time in order promote the interests of one political faction and its cultural allies rather than as a part of a conscious model of conduct for future generations to follow.

The contrasting experiences of Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin illustrate the importance of religion and the experience of the French Revolution in American politics. Although their actual beliefs were similar, the world changed in the four years between Franklin's death in 1790 and the publication of *The Age of Reason* in 1794.

Theologically unorthodox thought drew suspicion from many observers in the United States. In the case of Paine, this suspicion combined with his close connection with the events of the French Revolution transformed *The Age of Reason* from a critical examination of the *Bible* to socially destructive threat to both secular and religious authority, as well as a threat to the public peace.

A TALE OF TWO DEISTS

“The Age of Reason cannot be better described than by saying that it is a stupid and despicable as its author.”- William Cobbett

The contrasting stories of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine outline an important shift in American political and religious thought. While both were Deists, their representations of this ideology, the social impact and response to their religious thought were different. Society around them was not a static entity either. The larger social responses to their thought were a product of the changes in political culture and the collapse of the Federalist consensus during the 1790s. These changes in political culture and fears over the connection between social upheaval and religious infidelity directly influenced how society received and accepted the role of Deistical thought. The stories of Franklin and Paine also illustrate one essential feature of the debate concerning the relationship between Providence and the people in the early republic: Franklin was able to cast his thought within the context of Christianity and use Christian rhetoric more effectively than Paine was able to do. He was much less provocative with his religious view for that reason. Unlike Paine, Franklin’s ideas were not a threat to public order because its presentation was less forceful and as public as Paine’s *The Age of Reason*.

Many of the revolutionary founders of the American republic belonged to the Enlightenment intellectual revolution. The intellectual shifts of the time not only influenced perspectives on science and nature, but also reflections on humankind’s interactions with religion and the divine. The figure of Benjamin Franklin personifies some of the intellectual interactions of the time. While Franklin’s pursuit of scientific

knowledge is renowned and his role in politics is well known, his ideas on religion are not at the forefront of thought about this amazing historical figure. Franklin's exact religious beliefs and affiliations are questionable; the best evidence suggests that he was some form of Deist even if he did not explicitly attach himself to any particular creed.¹⁶⁶ In his philosophy, there were essential elements of religion, while the other features of a creed were packaging.¹⁶⁷ Franklin's religious creed held a small handful of essential elements that were similar to Paine's writings. Franklin's first two elements were that there was a God who made the world, and who governed it by his Providence and who should be adored and served.¹⁶⁸ Franklin also believed in some form of an afterlife for the immortal soul, which would face a judgment where vice would be punished and virtue rewarded.¹⁶⁹ Perhaps the most important practical element of Franklin's religious thought was that an individual best served God by doing good to men.¹⁷⁰

This creed suggests that Christianity and Christian morality are not bound by a theological doctrine, but is an expression of the service that believers in Christian morality provided to the people around them. Religious doctrines and organized religious bodies, then, were of little use outside of the temporal services the members of the organization provided. Divine grace is found through works, rather than exclusively

¹⁶⁶ Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), 5. The exact nature of deism and Deistic belief has no stable definition. Allen equates it with a belief in God but not in Christ's divinity or the doctrine of the trinity. In "Deism Historically Defined," S.G. Hefelbower argues, "there is no accepted definition of deism." S. G. Hefelbower, "Deism Historically Defined" *The American Journal of Theology*, 24, No. 2. (1920): 217-223.

¹⁶⁷ Kerry S. Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Urbana, Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 132. "In each religion there are some essential things, and others which are only forms and fashions; as a piece of sugar can be wrapped up in brown or white or blue paper, and tied with flaxen and wool string, red or yellow; it is always the sugar which is the essential thing."

¹⁶⁸ Walters, 133

¹⁶⁹ Walters, 133

¹⁷⁰ Walters, 133

by faith or predestination. It also speaks to the idea that public displays of morality were a beneficial but ultimately individual matter, not a socially organized construction.

Morality was personal, much like Paine's future writings also suggested, but Franklin was much more circumspect in his critique of Christian theology than Paine would prove to be.

Franklin's involvement with management of the Constitutional Convention often touched on the ideals of religion and religion's intersection with society. However, this involvement was in keeping with Franklin's essentialist views on religion. In her book *Miracle at Philadelphia*, Catherine Drinker Brown recounts a moment at the convention in which Franklin reminds his fellow delegates of the dark days of the revolution and how the Continental Congress had prayed for divine intervention on the behalf of the American nation.¹⁷¹ "Our prayers, Sir, were heard and they were graciously answered."¹⁷² Franklin continued his appeal to remember the hand of Providence in the affairs of the American people by noting, "I have lived Sir, a long time, and the longer that I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth- that God governs in the affairs of men."¹⁷³ Franklin's call upon God was not opposed to the essentialist and utilitarian nature of his larger religious thought: it was a call upon God to secure the practical social benefit of a more stable government, not a statement of any particular doctrinal creed or theology.

¹⁷¹Katherine Drinker Brown, *Miracle at Philadelphia: The Story of the Constitutional Convention May to September 1787* (Boston, Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1966), 126.

¹⁷² Brown, 126.

¹⁷³ Brown, 126.

In her book *Moral Minority*, Brooke Allen argues that Franklin “saw religion in a strictly utilitarian light, valuing it only insofar as it was productive of charity, kindness, and the other social virtues he prized.”¹⁷⁴ Christianity was not always an agent for the promotion of virtue in Franklin’s eyes. The long history of repression and intolerance within Christian history violated “all the good principals of civil society.”¹⁷⁵ The social results of religion, not the theology or the constructs behind any given denominational theory, was the important outcome for Franklin. His emphasis on the social fruits of Christianity did not prevent him from effectively using Christian rhetoric in his role as a public figure during the early republic even if his personal views on the uses of religion in the public sphere were more nuanced.

Although Franklin was Deistical in his religious thought, the American political and cultural scene was much more forgiving of religious infidelity prior to the collapse of the Federalist consensus in the early 1790s, the social radicalism of the “irreligious” French Revolution, and the growth of political parties and political press in America. Franklin’s religious thought, as unorthodox as it was, lacked three of the essential elements required to create social concern over religious infidelity. First, there was no outside example of a failed state such as France to provoke fear over the stability of society at Franklin’s time. Secondly, there was not the widespread fear of social upheaval in the United States due to an attack on orthodox Christian thought. Perhaps most importantly, Franklin’s thoughts on religion were not made in as public of a fashion as Paine’s *The Age of Reason* would be.

¹⁷⁴ Allen, 12.

¹⁷⁵ Allen, 14.

The tragic figure of Thomas Paine illustrates the seriousness that Christian ideals served as a prop to support the conservative Federalist consensus throughout the 1790's. Paine's reputation fell from that of a renowned hero who distilled the emotion of an entire revolutionary movement in pamphlets such as *The Crisis* and *Common Sense* to that of a reviled caricature as an "insane" practitioner of atheism and as a Jacobite stalking horse through the publication of his work *The Age of Reason*. *The Age of Reason* was an explosive attack on the communal nature of religion, the clergy, and Christian theology. This assault on orthodox Christianity provoked direct responses in the United States by conservative Federalist political, clerical and newspapermen. Religious and political liberals who thought that Paine's attacks on religion were beyond acceptability also attacked Paine in a more muted form. The publication of Deistical thought in such a direct and public method provided a dividing line between reasonable and acceptable religious inquiry and an evangelistic Deist threat to public order. The publication of *The Age of Reason* changed the nature of public debate concerning the interaction between public order, religion, and the social dangers that occurred when the link between those two structures became too distant.

For Paine and his reputation, *The Age of Reason* became public at an unfortunate time in the evolution of American Deistical thought, a change in the domestic and international political situation, and the collapse of the Federalist consensus. There was no set definition for Deistic thought; many Deists adapted easily to existing streams of social thought.¹⁷⁶ Douglass Adair and Marvin Harvey argue that Deistic thought

¹⁷⁶Herbert M. Morias, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1960), 16, 88-89. Morais writes that basic religious beliefs of Deists focused on the restoration of Christianity to the

influenced the “religious thought or behavior of practically every educated man in the Atlantic civilization.”¹⁷⁷ Deistic thought had many manifestations of the relation between the divine and reason, from the violently anti-Christian thought of Voltaire, to Unitarians like Jefferson and Adams, to those who remained within the framework of orthodox Christianity.¹⁷⁸ As the eighteenth century ended, Morais argues that there was a fundamental shift in how Deists presented their ideas to the public. Prior to 1784, Deists made little public effort to attack the “revealed word of God” directly, instead focusing their efforts on promoting the tenets of natural religion.¹⁷⁹ The publication of Thomas Paine’s *The Age of Reason* was the first widely spread Deistical work published in America that directly attacked the divine origin of the scriptures and the clergy.¹⁸⁰ This work marked a division between the mild and socially acceptable form of skepticism practiced by Jefferson, Franklin, or Adams and a shrill declaration of war on the part of a small group of Deists such as Paine and Elihu Palmer that sought to destroy Christian practice and clergy.¹⁸¹

Theologically, *The Age of Reason* was not an entirely new concept, but Paine presented an anti-religious message to a degree that was not common in the Anglo-American strain of the Enlightenment. Conflict over the relationship between observational knowledge and reason on one hand and divinely revealed religious truths

simple doctrines that Christ taught while stripping away the useless man created rituals associated with churches. Direct divine interactions such as miracles were also outside the interests of this Deistic God because it would not be in keeping with the theology that God ruled the world through his universal laws.
¹⁷⁷ Douglass Adair and Marvin Harvey, “Was Alexander Hamilton a Christian Statesman” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd Series, 12, No. 2 (1955): 312.

¹⁷⁸ Adair and Harvey, 312

¹⁷⁹ Morais, 16

¹⁸⁰ Morais, 20-1

¹⁸¹ Morais, 20-22. Morais argues that the attention given to this group of Deists by the clergy was far “out of proportion to its actual influence.”

on the other was the subject of a series of philosophical and political debates that had taken place over the course of centuries and had reached any number of different conclusions. However, Paine's conclusions concerning the relationship between the state, the individual, and organized religion were far more radical than those proposed by other theological reformers such as Joseph Priestley. *The Age of Reason* was exceptional because of the popularity of the work among a mass audience, the direct connections between a theologically provocative work and an unraveling political consensus. Many of the leaders of the early Republic saw this message as socially dangerous because of its open rejection of an overarching Christian theology that governed public conduct.

The Age of Reason was a widely disseminated public manifesto extolling the benefits of Deistical thought that brought Deistical debate to the public to a degree that was exceptionally uncommon for philosophical literature during this time. In his book, *Deism in Eighteenth Century America*, Herbert Morias wrote, "with the publication of *The Age of Reason*, the axis about which Deistic thought in America rotated, and the new ideology reached the rural and urban masses."¹⁸² What had once been a hushed debate within the upper classes or a reform movement within the overarching structure of Christianity was transformed into a public debate over the very existence of Christianity as a foundation for personal or community relations.

The Age of Reason was one of the most divisive books of the Enlightenment era not only because of the audience for the work but also for the directness of its critique of the Christian faith. In this work, Paine attacks the fundamental structure of the Christian religion by challenging what he saw as the mythology of the faith. He also attacked

¹⁸² Morias, 120.

community religion by casting nationally instituted religion as “a human invention, set up to terrify and enslave mankind, and monopolies power and profit.”¹⁸³ True infidelity in Paine’s eyes, was not in “believing or disbelieving; it consists in professing to believe what he does not believe.”¹⁸⁴ The ideal of a consensus within the public body on the matter of religion could not exist because not only was there disagreement over many of the basic tenets of the faith, but the very idea that a community of believers could exist was a result of an adherence to an imposed ideology that existed for the profit of others at the expense of the individual. Paine attacked the theology of Christianity for its dependence on a narrative that attempted to create a communal religious experience based on the word of only a few direct witnesses. For Paine, divine revelation was limited to the individual that actually heard the voice of God; revelation was not a communal event that applied to entire peoples.¹⁸⁵ Revelation could occur, but as soon as the revelation was disseminated it ceased to be divine revelation and became hearsay evidence that others were not obliged to believe in.¹⁸⁶ In this construction, there were no chosen peoples or chosen faiths, only chosen individuals who had entered into the presence of God. This evidence of the divine was nontransferable; the community of the faith did not exist on any real evidence. The attack on revelation was a direct attack on the authority of the scriptures, and an open disbelief of a God that intervened into human affairs.

¹⁸³ Thomas Paine, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine: The Age of Reason*, ed. William M. van der Weyde (New Rochelle: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925), 5.

¹⁸⁴ Paine, 5

¹⁸⁵ Paine, 7

¹⁸⁶ Paine, 7

The nature of Christ was another target for Paine's critique of Christianity.

Although Paine recognized Christ as a great moral philosopher, Paine did not believe that the reasonable evidence concerning His divine nature was sufficient.¹⁸⁷ Paine thought that stories of Christ's divinity "has every mark of fraud and imposition stamped on the face of it."¹⁸⁸ He links the similarities between Roman mythology and Christian theology together as similar types of stories. Christ, in Paine's conception, was not truly divine; the divine nature of Christ in Christian theology was a product of integrating the figure of Christ into a preexisting heathenistic model that often time cast heroic figures as the sons of the gods.¹⁸⁹ If the divinity of Christ was a product of mythology, then the Christian church doctrine that celebrates the divinity of Christ is not only subject to question but is utterly unbelievable. Continued attachment to this false doctrine is both futile and a denial of the true potential of the power human reason through an irrational attachment to a false consciousness. Much like Franklin, the use of religion for Paine was in the good works that it produced. In 1803, he wrote Samuel Adams:

We cannot serve the Deity in the manner we serve those who cannot do without that service. He needs no service from us. We can add nothing to eternity. But it is in our power to render a service acceptable to him, and that is not by praying, but by endeavouring to make his creatures happy.¹⁹⁰

Religion, then, for Paine as well as Franklin was measured by the social outcomes and the social behaviors produced by a belief in any given religious structure. This ideology places the responsibility for good works and socially beneficial behavior on to the

¹⁸⁷ Paine, 11-12

¹⁸⁸ Paine, 13

¹⁸⁹ Paine, 9

¹⁹⁰ Paine, 420

individual for the individual to exercise choice over their conduct. Piety was not a communal attribute; it was a relationship between an individual and his God.

The Age of Reason was severely critiqued upon its arrival in the United States.

Perhaps the most emotional critic was William Cobbett (alias Peter Porcupine).

Porcupine's Gazette, Cobbett's newspaper, had a paid subscribership of over 3,000, making it one of the most widely circulated newspapers in the early republic.¹⁹¹

Cobbett's commentary on Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* was an incendiary attack on both the work and the author. Porcupine wrote, "*The Age of Reason* cannot be better described than by saying that it is a stupid and despicable as its author."¹⁹² In

Porcupine's concept, Paine wrote *The Age of Reason* as a means of easing his plight in prison by integrating himself into the irreligious intellectual currents of the French revolution as proposed by Danton and Robespierre.¹⁹³ Far from a well-considered treatment of religion, the book was little more than an attempt to save his own life by turning away from the respect for the Christian religion that he had shown in previous works.¹⁹⁴ Paine, by this logic, was not speaking from a place of careful and conscious thought about God and the nature of Christianity; he was acting as the voice of an atheistic regime that destroyed both religious and social orders with abandon.

One commentary on the impact of Paine's militantly Deistic tract was in the reactions that it incited against the author. There were more than thirty-five printed replies to *The Age of Reason*, and it was "shouted down from virtually every pulpit in the

¹⁹¹ Cobbett, 35

¹⁹² Cobbett, 219

¹⁹³ Cobbett, 221

¹⁹⁴ Cobbett, 222

country.”¹⁹⁵ Christianity was believed to have beneficial impacts that Christian morality could have in the governance of the republic even if there were serious debates over the relative roles of national and state government on one side and the promotion of a directly Christian ethos on the other side. By crossing the line from the advocacy of reform within the broader theology of Christianity to an open attack on it, he also personally crossed the river that divided his place in the pantheon of revolutionary heroes to a distant shore of obscurity if not outright hatred.¹⁹⁶ There were fears of Deistic philosophy spreading beyond the bounds of the wealthy and educated to the masses of people.¹⁹⁷ Not only would this leave the social hierarchy open to question, but also the perceived moral basis of society would be open to attack. Paine was condemned because of the bluntness with which he presented his case and the very public nature of his appeal for a critical examination of Christian thought.

Paine spent much of his later life explaining his intent for the writing of *The Age of Reason*, and the meanings that he had attempted to promote through the work. It is ironic that many of the charges of infidelity that were cast upon him by figures such as William Cobbett were attacks against ideas that Paine claimed to have not expressed at all. In Paine’s 1802 and 1803 exchange of letters with Samuel Adams, Paine attempted to clarify his intended message in *The Age of Reason*. Adams addressed Paine as a friend to

¹⁹⁵ Gary B. Nash, “The American Clergy and the French Revolution” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 22, No. 3 (1965): 403

¹⁹⁶ G. Adolf Koch, *Republican Religion: The American Revolution and the Cult of Reason*, 2nd edition. (Gloucester: Peter Smith, 1964), 135. Benjamin Rush, for example, wrote, “His principals avowed in his *The Age of Reason* were so offensive to me that I did not wish to renew my intercourse with him.” One New Jersey stagecoach owner declared that “he would be damned in Tom Paine should go in his stage” because he was a Deist or an atheist. One editorial in the Baltimore Republican referred to him as “thou lily-livered sinical rogue, thou gibbet inheriting slave, thou art nought but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pander, and the son and heir of some drunken she-devil...” Koch 133-36.

¹⁹⁷ Morais, 121

liberty and the human race, but confessed that “when I heard that you had turned your mind to the defense of infidelity, I felt myself much astonished, and more grieved, that you had attempted a measure so injurious to the feelings and so repugnant to the true interest of so great a part of the citizens of the United States.”¹⁹⁸ In reply, Paine wrote that the entire point was not to promote a disbelief in God, but rather to write “against all divided beliefs and allegorical divinities” while attempting to encourage all people of all creeds to agree on one essential religious statement: “I believe in God.”¹⁹⁹ Paine was deeply concerned about the atheistic turn that the French Revolution had taken. By reducing theological strife to a basic affirmative statement of belief, Paine hoped to “stop them in their career, and fix them on the first article (as I have before said) of every man’s creed who has any creed at all, I believe in God.”²⁰⁰ Paine believed that the attacks on him and his work were not a product of the American clergy or of concern over religion. Religious attacks accusing him of infidelity were not a cause for him, but a “stalking horse” for a political agenda to discredit him on behalf of the Federalists.²⁰¹ Paine accused the Federalists of using religion as a front to conceal a political agenda that sought to “overturn the Federal Constitution established on the representative system, and place government in the new world on the corrupt system of the old.”²⁰²

On religion, he wrote to Samuel Adams that they were in full agreement concerning the basic faith required for society to function. Paine cited a letter from

¹⁹⁸ Samuel Adams to Thomas Paine, November 30, 1802 in Thomas Paine, *The Life and Works of Thomas Paine: The Age of Reason* ed. William M. van der weyde. (New Rochelle: Thomas Paine National Historical Association, 1925)

¹⁹⁹ Paine, 416-7

²⁰⁰ Paine, 418

²⁰¹ Paine, 418

²⁰² Paine, 419

Samuel Adams to John Adams stating, “let divines and philosophers, statesmen and patriots, unite in their endeavours to renovate the age by inculcating in the minds of youth the fear and love of the Deity, and universal philanthropy.”²⁰³ To this letter Paine responded, “this is exactly my religion, and the whole of it.”²⁰⁴ In this exchange of letters, Paine clearly links what he sees as an attempt to discredit his political ideals by the means of discrediting him personally by misconstruing his writings on religion and his concept of Deistical faith. Paine identifies himself as a believer in some form of an ill-defined universal God, not as an atheist who rejected God.

Paine was by no means the only figure that was critical of the state of 1780s and ‘90s religious thought and practice, but other commentators, such as Franklin, were much more circumspect about their observations or retained at least some element of Christian rhetoric in their musings. Other reformers did criticize Christianity, but the criticism of religion and the cure for the ills of the current theology drew upon an alternative interpretation of scriptural evidence concerning theological questions that were almost as old as the Christian faith itself. The contrasting social responses to the thought of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine speak to the changing nature of American government and society in the early 1790s. While Franklin’s and Paine’s religious views are quite similar, the reactions to their thought was different due to an evolution in the fears held by society. In Franklin’s time, there was not the same degree of fear over social upheaval brought about by religious infidelity or over the possibility that civil society in the United States could collapse due to the example of France. Franklin

²⁰³ Paine, 419

²⁰⁴ Paine, 418

himself was dead prior to the anti-clerical and socially radical events of the French Revolution. There was no contested political consensus to protect for political figures in Franklin's time nor was his religious thought disseminated to the degree of Paine's *The Age of Reason*.

Paine was different, not only in the direct nature of his theological musing, but also in the popularity of his writings. He did not use the words and symbols of Christianity in a familiar way, leading to misinterpretations over what his stated message was. In the political climate of 1794, these misinterpretations were undoubtedly intentional in some cases due to the sheer skill with which Paine could (and often did) attack the Federalist consensus. Paine linked the twin threats of religious discord and infidelity with a radical political ideology that threatened both of the basic tenets of that consensus; the dual threat would bind the cause of the Federalist Party and religious conservatives closer together. Personally, Paine became a target for what amounted to an exercise in character assassination in order to eliminate his influence in the new republic.

Paine was perhaps the first victim of a larger social conflict that linked the establishment of the Federalist alliance between the conservative political figures of the Federalist Party with members of the clergy. Paine's abilities to reach a mass audience with a relatively accessible and uncomplicated critique of Christianity, combined with his proven abilities as a political writer during the American Revolution made Paine a dangerous influence upon the masses. In response, the Federalists followed the age-old formula that states that if you cannot destroy the message, then destroy the messenger. The reactions to *The Age of Reason* over the last half of the 1790s foreshadows the

politicalization of alleged religious infidelity as the election of 1800 drew near and the Federalist consensus continued to unravel.

RELIGION AND THE ELECTION OF 1800: THE LAST STAND OF THE
FEDERALIST ALLIANCE

“No professed Deist, be his talents and acquirements what they may, ought to be promoted to this place by the suffrages of a Christian nation.”- William Linn

The role of religion played an emotive role in the election of 1800. The election occurred at a time when the fundamental connections, such as established religious structures that bound people together as a society, faced collapse. Many of the fundamental tenets of the Federalist political consensus that had characterized the administration of George Washington were in ruin, due to a series of missteps by the succeeding John Adams administration and a growth in the divisive nature of party politics. For the first time in a presidential election, the personal attributes of a candidate became political tools. Religion and the role that religion played in the selection of the new executive was not a calmly debated abstract notion. Theological ideals were not examined nor were any great theological themes explored in depth by partisans for either party. For the election, religious structures served as the handmaidens of political operations in order to provoke an emotive response from the electorate on behalf John Adams and the Federalist Party. This was accompanied by an equally passionate response from Democratic-Republican writers on behalf of Thomas Jefferson. The rhetoric of religion, and the essential links between irreligion and fears of social disorder rather than the substance of Jefferson’s beliefs was the order of the day.

In 1796, George Washington decided to retire from the presidency. In his farewell address, Washington proposed that while the new Constitutional government

was a success, the people needed to be on guard against any potential threats towards that government by political factions and the spirit of political party.²⁰⁵ The connection that he drew between religion and the governance of a republic through virtue led him to leave a few sage words of advice for his successors in their efforts to govern the new republic and encourage the civic virtue of the citizens.

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and Morality are indispensable supports. - In vain would that man claim the tribute of Patriotism, who should labour to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of Men and Citizens. - The mere Politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. - A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.²⁰⁶

Washington's address sets forth his ideals for the continued success of the American nation through the encouragement of civic virtue in order to forestall political distress. This distress was due to immorality and required encouragement for some form of attachment to the morals of Christianity in public life. It is an eloquent expression of the connection between a peaceful political consensus and the need to support Christian moralities in order to support that political consensus. For Washington, the civic morality required in a republic was a product of an existing Christian morality. Any social or intellectual movement that threatened Christian morality was by extension a

²⁰⁵ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 21, 1796

²⁰⁶ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, September 21, 1796

threat to the civic morality upon which the success of the republic depended. Without a Christian morality to govern the conduct of the people, rights to property and the institution of the rule of law lacked support. These conservative social and political goals found support in an appeal to religious belief. Washington did not propose a particular theological argument or denominational belief in his farewell address. This construction of religious belief was political and social in nature; the actual content of religious beliefs matters less than the social peace that those religious beliefs would bring to society. Washington's link between Christian morality and civil virtue bears many similarities to the nationalized church establishment of England. The underlying philosophical theory that linked established Christianity with social order and virtue remained, even if the formal structure of an established church did not exist.

Washington's expressions of public piety continued during the John Adams administration. Days of fast and thanksgiving were a common feature of both administrations' public displays of piety. Federalists believed that it was vital to maintain a religious presence in the political administration in order to buttress the natural authority structure of society.²⁰⁷ President Adams' Thanksgiving Day proclamation of March 13, 1799 provides an outline not only for the relationship between God and the nation, but some features of the relationship between the individual and God. In his proclamation, Adams recommended to the people that public piety was a requirement of an individual within a blessed society:

²⁰⁷ David Waldstreicher, "Federalism, the Styles of Politics, and the Politics of Style" in *Federalists Reconsidered*, eds. Doron Ben-Atar and Barbera Oberg, 110 (Charlottesville, London: University Press of Virginia, 1998).

the well being of communities; as it is, also, most reasonable in itself, that men who are made capable of social acts and relations, who owe their improvement to the social state, and who derive their enjoyments from it, should, as a society, make their acknowledgments of dependence and obligations to Him who hath endowed them with these capacities, and elevated them in the scale of existence by these distinctions.²⁰⁸

Adams' concept of the relationship between an individual and society focused on the duty that an individual owed to God as a just observance for the benefits that society brought to him. This was an inherent requirement that applied to all citizens regardless of personal feeling or religious belief as a communal rite. Adams continued his supplication to both God and the people:

That he would interpose to arrest the progress of that impiety and licentiousness in principle and practice, so offensive to himself and so ruinous to mankind: That he would make us deeply sensible that "righteousness exalteth a nation, but that sin is the reproach of any people:" That he would turn us from our transgressions, and turn his displeasure from us: That he would withhold us from unreasonable discontent; from disunion, faction, sedition, and insurrection: That he would preserve our country from the desolating sword: That he would save our cities and towns from a repetition of those awful pestilential violations under which they have lately suffered so severely.... that he would preside over the councils of the nation at this critical period, enlighten them to a just discernment of the public interest, and save them from mistake, division and discord... That he would bless all magistrates from the highest to the lowest, give them the true spirit of their station, make them a terror to evil doers....²⁰⁹

This section of the proclamation openly intertwines religious principals with political ideology and a defense of his administration. The idea of divine judgment due to the iniquity of the people toward the dictates of the Lord is a Biblical concept; however, Adams' broadened the definition of religious iniquity to include disunion, faction, and

²⁰⁸ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13, 1799

²⁰⁹ *Pennsylvania Gazette*, March 13, 1799

sedition against his secular administration. This prayer was a thinly veiled reference to the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions (written by James Madison and Thomas Jefferson) and to the widespread public dissatisfaction over the Sedition Act of the previous year. The juxtaposition of secular and religious interests served as an appeal for support of his policies by equating the search for divine favor with that support. It was symptomatic of the unraveling of the Federalist consensus as the election of 1800 approached.

By 1800, the Federal consensus was in collapse due to a series of political maneuverings that left the conceptual nature of the consensus in doubt.²¹⁰ The national political consensus of the Washington regimes had disappeared, and the spirit of faction became increasingly well organized. With the secular component of the Federalist consensus under an increasingly successful series of attacks, the operations of the religious community as an auxiliary of the Federalist ideology became more important as the election drew near. An effort to change the rhetoric of political debate away from supporting Federalist regime on the strength of its record in office to a conversation focusing attention on the social and moral problems that would result from the election of Jefferson. The rhetoric of religion was a vital part of this shift. In “Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear,” Charles Lerche, Jr. argues that Jefferson was the victim of a political smear through this process because Jefferson’s “undogmatic religion, interest in abstract learning, and his devotion to the principals of

²¹⁰ For examples: The Alien and Sedition Acts, the arrest of William Lyon, and the overreaction to Fries’ “rebellion”. Each of these political missteps gave credence to the Democratic-Republicans charge that the Federalist administration was acting in a tyrannical fashion in order to enforce a consensus. The open split in the Federalist Party between supporters of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton also hurt the Federalists.

literal democracy” provided fodder for propagandists.²¹¹ Lerche posits that the charges of atheism and infidelity were a convenient peg created by the Calvinist clergy to express “nearly any disagreement with Jefferson or with any part of Jefferson’s policy.”²¹² Arguments over Jefferson’s religious thought formed the means of expression for any number of other political disagreements many people had with him; religion was not the core of their discontent.

The April 14, 1800 Philadelphia *Aurora* reprinted an article from the *Federalist Gazette of the United States*, arguing that “Jacobinism is triumphant, and unless a different temper shall soon shew itself, it will soon trample underfoot all order, law, property, as it has done to religion...”²¹³ In the Providence *Gazette* for July 5, 1800, a writer warned that the people should flee from Jefferson’s democratic principals because “if our civil government should be overthrown, religion would inevitable flee away, and atheism, superstition, and idolatry, would immediately creep in....”²¹⁴ The Newport *Mercury*, in a September 2, 1800 article argued that Jefferson was “an atheist in principal- destitute of all religion.”²¹⁵

In an October 8, 1800 article published in the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a Federal Committee addressed the electors of Salem County. The committee restated the basic

²¹¹ Charles O. Lerche, Jr., “Jefferson and the Election of 1800: A Case Study in the Political Smear” *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd series, 5, no. 4 (1948): 469. Lerche argues that there were four major charges against Jefferson: accusations of atheism, accusations that he was an impractical dreamer, the Mazzei letter in which Jefferson allegedly attacked George Washington, and his close association with the French revolution.

²¹² Lerche, 472.

²¹³ Rosenfeld, 770. It was not unusual for newspapers to reprint articles from one another. Jacobinism was the catchall term for American republicans, French republicans, dissenters, levelers, and radicals of all sorts.

²¹⁴ Charles F. O’Brien, “The Religious Issue in the Presidential Campaign of 1800” *Essex Institute Historical Collections*, 107, No. 1(1971): 85.

²¹⁵ O’Brien, 85

case against the election of Jefferson as president. Their arguments follow a very familiar course of causality and logic expressed by many supporters of the Federalist consensus throughout the nation:

A revolution in property, as well as government, would no doubt be very convenient to some of these gentlemen; and they probably see no fairer opportunity of bringing it about, than by elevating the man to the Presidency, who has declared it to be a matter of indifference to him whether his neighbour believes in twenty Gods, or no God, who prefers the tempestuous sea of liberty to the calm of despotism (meaning the settled order of our own regular government) and the savage state, where no laws exist, to a government of laws, where men are prohibited from injuring their neighbours; who therefore considers peace as pestilence, and the beautiful order of society as deformity.²¹⁶

This appeal emotively intertwined religious and secular rhetoric for the support of the Federalist consensus in an attack on Jefferson's political ideology. The committee warned that Jefferson's elevation to the presidency would create a Jacobin style revolution in property; this secular logic is immediately followed by a connection to Jefferson's religious views. The social upheaval that would accompany Jefferson's ascension to the presidency was in part a reflection of his unorthodox religious views, but not necessarily a result of any particular political stance. A strong government was not inevitably a threat to the people as long as they were law-abiding citizens; a strong central government was only a threat to those that were involved in some sort of anti-social malfeasance that was to the detriment of the public. This claim supported the observations of the Federalist clergy who linked political and social ideology to religious thought. Joseph McKeen, in the 1800 Massachusetts election sermon, noted that the Jeffersonian idea that "a free government and a weak government mean the same thing," commenting "liberty cannot

²¹⁶ *Philadelphia Gazette*, October 8, 1800

long be enjoyed under a government that had not sufficient energy to be a terror to evildoers.”²¹⁷

William Linn’s pamphlet, entitled “Serious Considerations on the Election of a President,” was an expanded treatment of Jefferson’s unsuitability for the presidency based on his religious thought. Linn expressed admiration “for his [Jefferson’s] talents” and gratefulness for “the services which he has been instrumental in rendering to his country.”²¹⁸ Despite this admiration and respect for Jefferson personally, Linn could not support his presidency because he “objected to his being promoted to the presidency” based solely on “his disbelief of the Holy Scriptures, or in other words, his open rejection of the Christian religion and open profession of deism.”²¹⁹ Linn supported his assertion that Jefferson was a Deist by exploring Jefferson’s writings for evidence that revealed some degree of skepticism for the traditional narrative of Christianity.

The first example used by Linn is Jefferson’s skepticism concerning the truth of a universal deluge.²²⁰ Jefferson’s disbelief of the reality of this Biblical event provided enough proof for Linn that Jefferson had “disrespect for divine revelation” and “discredits sacred history.”²²¹ This moral failing made Linn believe that Jefferson’s “faith was too weak” to give the proper deference that should be expected towards the supernatural workings of God.²²² Linn stops well short of engaging Jefferson’s writings as a potential source of truth fit for critical examination. Rather than examining and

²¹⁷ O’Brien, 83.

²¹⁸ William Linn, “Serious Considerations on the Election of a President” 3

²¹⁹ Linn, 3

²²⁰ Linn, 6

²²¹ Linn 6,7

²²² Linn, 8

potentially alleviating Jefferson's doubts by providing evidence of the truth of the Christian tradition, Linn wrote "it is not my business at present (and I beg it to be remembered) to refute his principals; but only to show their inconsistency with the Holy Scriptures."²²³ Linn's dependence and absolute faith in the received wisdom of the Bible and the possibility of the supernatural workings of God, Linn does not directly engage with Jefferson's writings on a theological basis. However, Linn's message was politically effective.

In addition to questioning Jefferson's belief in Biblical truth and revelation, Linn also charged that Jefferson sought to spread a "Deistical education" through the Virginia school system.²²⁴ According to Linn, Jefferson's attempt to encourage an education system that taught young children "useful facts from Grecian, Roman, European, and American history" was dangerous because that sort of education provided a false moral basis for student morality.²²⁵ Linn took further exception to Jefferson's educational theory that teaching the young from the Bible was incorrect because "their judgments are not sufficiently matured for religious inquiries."²²⁶ Linn's concept for the use of education was different from that of Jefferson. For Linn, the point of an educational system was to encourage religion, which would in turn encourage morality.²²⁷ Linn's viewpoint echoes that of Washington's farewell address: morality and religion were essential in order to create social harmony. The education system was a venue to encourage this understanding in perpetuity through the education of the young.

²²³ Linn, 8

²²⁴ Linn, 14-5

²²⁵ Linn, 14

²²⁶ Linn, 14

²²⁷ Linn, 15

Linn also questioned Jefferson's political philosophy, charging that Jefferson's desire to institute "a government in which no religious opinions were held and where security for property and social order entirely on the force of laws" would result in "a nation of atheists."²²⁸ This style of governance would have a disastrous effect on social order; it was "contradictory to reason and experience of mankind."²²⁹ For Linn, this did not represent religious freedom but social license: "far from Jefferson's assertion that it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there is twenty gods or no god, it neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."²³⁰ Linn thought that "as soon as his neighbor believed "that there was no God, and he will soon pick my pocket and break not only my leg but my neck."²³¹ The lack of direct connection between religious structures and government was dangerous for the legitimacy of the government because "if there was no God, there is no law; no future account; government is the ordinance of man only."²³²

Linn's thinly veiled threat that Jefferson's election would lead directly to an assault on both person and property painted an evocative picture of a society in chaos. A government that did not entwine the interests of property and religion, which resulted in the spread of atheism, would cause chaos. Averting bedlam required the public to deny Jefferson the presidency and support John Adams, not for the merits of his present administration or for the future benefit of a second term in office, but to avoid a moral and religious collapse of society. The connection between a defense of property and a defense of religion is a feature of Federalist ideology, but Linn carries his support for the

²²⁸ Linn, 18

²²⁹ Linn, 19

²³⁰ Linn, 19

²³¹ Linn, 19

²³² Linn, 19

Federalist consensus a step further. Linn placed his faith in the existing and understood, if unwritten conservative social code rather than a rule of formal law. The understood social consensus, not statute law should govern the affairs of the nation in Linn's Federalist ideology.

Linn's perspective is reflective of a larger political ideology with adherents in both the United States and England. The informal social code protected status and structure. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, Edmund Burke wrote:

The occupation of an hair-dresser, or of a working tallow-chandler, cannot be a matter of honour to any person-to say nothing of a number of other servile employments. Such descriptions of men ought not to suffer oppression from the state ; but the state suffers oppression, if such as they either individually or collectively, are permitted to rule. In this way you think you are combating prejudice, but you are at war with nature.²³³

Burke's vision for society is not a government of the people, nor is it a government based on formal laws. For Burke, custom dictated how the state should run as well as who should run the state. The lower sorts of people were not forbidden by law from public roles, but the involvement of the lower sorts in society in the public process held the state hostage and was against the natural law of the universe. Burke provides a separation between the legal management of society and the informal social code that actually governed society.

Jefferson's alleged disbelief did not legally disqualify him from assuming any post within the government; there was no law or any provision within the Constitution to disqualify him from office. For Linn, however, the lack of a formal law forbidding

²³³ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*. (New York: Penguin, 1969), 138.

Jefferson's presidency did not necessarily mean that the public should consent to

Jefferson's rise to power:

The public opinion ought to disqualify him on account of his disbelief of the Holy Scriptures, and his attempts to discredit them, he ought to be rejected from the presidency. No professed Deist, be his talents and acquirements what they may, ought to be promoted to this place by the suffrages of a Christian nation.²³⁴

Linn foresaw dire consequences for the young republic during a Jefferson presidency.

Unlike the example of the openly pious administrations of George Washington and John Adams, a Jefferson administration would “destroy religion, introduce immorality, and loosen all the bonds of society.”²³⁵ Even worse in Linn's eyes, the election of a Deist would constitute “a rebellion against God” that would be “an awful symptom of the degeneracy of the nation.”²³⁶ This degeneracy would bring the judgment of God down upon the nation, an awful fate that Linn thought “we have already seen tokens of the divine displeasure for several years past.”²³⁷

The commonality of Linn's intellectual connection between social harmony and the precepts of orthodox Christianity reflects not only the important links between these two mutually supporting ideologies, but also the depth to which concerns over social disorder had seeped into the ideology of the Federalist Party. The Federalists were not a united party, and lacked a centralized political platform that would become a familiar feature of American political reality. However, the frequent repetition of a similar message within this decentralized model of politics reflects a genuine concern over the

²³⁴ Linn, 20

²³⁵ Linn, 24

²³⁶ Linn, 28

²³⁷ Linn, 34

connection between public order and religious ideals on behalf of a vocal segment of the population. Writings such as “Serious Considerations” attempted to use that vocal segment of the population to persuade the larger public that the political ideology of Thomas Jefferson was a clear danger to the people. This danger did not emerge from of any particular political stance that Jefferson held, but because his personal beliefs would lead to a public disaster, if not at the hands of temporal atheists then at the hands of an offended God.

Jefferson’s supporters counterattacked his critics during the campaign. The Philadelphia *Aurora* offered what amounted to the standard Republican doctrine on the subject of church and state, charged in an article dated September 10, 1800 that the religious establishments in New England were both impious and intolerant because they charged tithes for all citizens. The *Aurora* contended that the Federalists attacked Jefferson on his religious views because he was against the imposition of mandatory tithes to support an established church.²³⁸ This is a far different conception of the relationship among society, the individual, and God. According to William Duane, the editor of the *Aurora*, “the path of true piety wants no political direction.”²³⁹ Duane speculates that the close connection between religion and the political ideology of John Adams was actually harmful to both: “Had President Adams attended less to fasting and more to the public accounts, religion and government would have been better obeyed and

²³⁸Rosenfeld, 847.

²³⁹Rosenfeld, 847.

more respected.”²⁴⁰ Enforced displays of public piety, such as fast and thanksgiving proclamations, were actually counter productive in Duane’s eyes.

Democratic-Republican pamphlet writers attempted to refute the charges leveled against Jefferson in writings such as William Linn’s “Serious Considerations.” One of these pamphlets was “Serious Facts, opposed to Serious Considerations, or The Voice of Warning to Religious Republicans” by “Marcus Brutus.” In “Serious Facts” Brutus levels several charges against the Federalist administration, while attempting to compare the nature of Jefferson’s Christianity against that of John Adams.²⁴¹ “Jefferson is at least as good a Christian as Mr. Adams,” Brutus argues, “and in all probability a better one” and that “the election of Mr. Jefferson is the only event which can secure the liberty of the people and the safety of the Constitution of the United States.”²⁴² For Brutus, the threat to society was not an excess of democracy or the connections between deism and the thought of Thomas Jefferson, but the connections among Adams, Hamilton, and the promotion of monarchical ideals against the will of the people.²⁴³ A weak government was not a threat to the liberties of the people; a strong government operating at the behest of John Adams and Alexander Hamilton was.

Brutus explicitly linked the political failure of the monarchical system that he attributes to Adams and Hamilton to the shift of discourse to the topic of religion:

Conscious that their views and measures are incapable of support from argument, are obliged to wave the subject and attempt to render religion

²⁴⁰Rosenfeld, 347.

²⁴¹ “Marcus Brutus”, “Serious Facts, opposed to Serious Considerations, or The Voice of Warning to Religious Republicans” 2. Brutus charged that both Hamilton and Adams were really monarchists and that Pinckney was a member of the British party and a Deist.

²⁴² Brutus, 2

²⁴³ Brutus, 4

the engine of their political crimes. It is only to be regretted that they could prevail upon such unworthy clergymen as Dr. Linn and others to become their instruments, and prostitute Christianity into a cloak to shield and cover political villainy.²⁴⁴

Brutus forcefully denies that religion is the topic of discussion in pamphlets such as “Serious Considerations.” He sees the use of religion as a political ploy to gain support for the Federalist ideology through an emotive but entirely false appeal to religion. Religion and the role of religion within the 1800 election was not a legitimate debate for Brutus; it was a cynical design to cover a political ideology that had already found little support among the people. Due to this lack of legitimate public support for their policies, it was necessary for Adams and Hamilton to wrap their unpopular political goals in the rhetoric of religion to gain support for a rejected political ideology. Brutus also thought little of the ministry becoming involved in a political campaign. He found it “unpardonable, and shows what lengths unworthy priests will take when they forsake the altars of their God and descend upon the stage of politics.”²⁴⁵ Brutus called for the full separation of formal religious bodies from participating in the political process, but this appeal falls short of calling for a severing of Christian morals from politics. He is not advocating that Christians should be disinterested, nor is he attacking the idea that religious morality and republican virtue are somehow connected. Clergymen, in their official office as clergy, should not enter into the political fray because it is a mark of an unworthy minister. Indirectly, this is an attack on the entire structure of the Federalist coalition between conservative political figures and the clergy.

²⁴⁴ Brutus, 10

²⁴⁵ Brutus, 10

Addressing “Serious Considerations” directly, Brutus rejected Linn’s claim that Jefferson was a Deist. In his examination of Jefferson’s writings, Brutus found enough evidence of Jefferson’s Christianity to “convince every intelligent mind that Mr. Jefferson is not a Deist.”²⁴⁶ Jefferson’s writings “not only declare the existence of a Deity and religion- not only acknowledge the heavenly attributes of the Almighty, in inculcate the belief of a particular superintending providence, tenets which are peculiarly applicable to the serious Christian only.”²⁴⁷ In this view, attacks on Jefferson’s religion are political in nature because the authors of those attacks either did not notice or willfully ignored the underlying Christian tenets of Jefferson’s religious thought.

The separation between actual belief and the use religious rhetoric in this political process was revealed in the correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson in their later years. Ironically, both the theoretically orthodox Adams and the supposedly atheistic Jefferson would identify themselves as Unitarians in their correspondence after Jefferson’s terms in office.²⁴⁸ The fact that the two principals of an election that proposed such a separation between orderly and orthodox worldview and a contrasting image of a Deistical and disorderly society illustrates the political nature of the religious debate during the election. It is also a commentary on the scant regard for the nuances within Christian thought during the eighteenth and nineteenth century when political interests intersected with theology. Charges of religious fidelity and infidelity was a rhetoric used to comment on secular political conflicts for which the rhetoric of religion

²⁴⁶ Brutus, 12

²⁴⁷ Brutus, 12

²⁴⁸ Bruce Baden ed., *Ye Will Say that I Am No Christian: The Thomas Jefferson/John Adams Correspondence on Religion, Morals, and Values*. (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006), 87.

provided an emotional tie for the public to political platforms for which they may or may not have actually supported. The election also represented the last stand for the Federalist Party. After 1800, the party did not immediately disappear from existence, but it ceased to exist as an effective alternative to an ascendant Democratic-Republican governing consensus. Religion, in this election, worked as a handmaiden for political interests, a role that has been unfortunately reprised in recent years.

CONCLUSION

The political use of religion not only as a means of attacking political enemies but also as a support system for a particular political agenda appears somewhat similar over the course of American history. The events of the early republic are reflected in the political currents of the early twenty-first century. However, on closer examination, the reflection is hazy in many respects; the connection between the past and the present are somewhat similar in their broad outlines, but those similarities conceal many vital differences that cast doubt on the validity of using the early republic as a model for present day political practice. Religion and the connection between faith and politics were important in both periods, but the social connotations and the social effects of the debate were far different. Contemporary political use of the early republic as the model for the relationship between church and state—whether used to support the inclusion of openly religious elements in the political process or the total separation of church and state—ignores the historical and philosophical background that informed the world of the founders.

The definition of Christianity and the acceptable ideologies within the Christian context changed in the time between the founders and present-day political thought. Modern Christianity often sees an intellectual world with a clear division between secular and religious thought. This division did not exist in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. There was not a clear divide at this time; there were however many gradations of thought that straddled that divide. Contemporary labels such as Christian, Deist, or atheist do not accurately reflect the many nuances that those labels conceal.

The Constitution and the founding fathers are vital sources of legitimacy for the conduct within the political sphere. The treatment of religion and the connection between the Federal government and religious ideals has drawn attention to the personal beliefs of the founders in order to explain their true intent and message to future generations. This misguided quest ignores the practical restrictions that the founders labored under in the construction of the Constitution. In a display of statesmanship and acquiescence to the dictates of reality, the founders did not provide an expansive treatment of religion at the Federal level because it was impossible to do so. The interests and powers of the individual states to regulate religious establishment is a function reserved to the states. This changes the nature of discussion concerning the separation of church and state to a discussion of the separation of powers between state and Federal governmental entities in a Federal form of government.

The Federalist political consensus began the debate over the connection between the Federal government and religious ideals. Religion served as a buttress for a political consensus in the process of evolution. The growth of the Democratic-Republican Clubs, the anti-clerical nature of the French Revolution, and fears of a Jacobin-style uprising frightened enough conservatives that a supposed link formed between social disorder and irreligion. Once this link became established, any social or intellectual concept that questioned either component of the consensus was open to attack as irreligion. Charges of irreligion invoked fears of a violent social upheaval that threatened the general welfare of the people. This dialectic remained a feature of the Federalist consensus throughout the 1790s.

Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* cemented the political alliance between conservative clergy and Federalist political ideology. Paine's writings and religious views were not wholly new, but for the first time deism and unorthodox Christian concepts became available to the mass public. The contrast between the experiences of Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Paine illustrates the difference between the privately held skepticism of Franklin and the open critique of Christianity provided by Paine. Franklin's Deistical views were not a threat to the larger society because his religious views lacked the intentional publicity of *The Age of Reason*. Paine took what had been an academic and theological debate among elites and democratized that discourse. Conservative fears that an attack on orthodox religion would inevitably result in secular disorder led to a series of attacks on Paine, and anybody that could be associated to any degree with his free thought. One of the victims of this association was Thomas Jefferson, a fellow skeptic and the leader of the Democratic-Republican political party.

The election of 1800 was a confused and closely fought political battle. The Federalist coalition between conservative clergy and secular conservatism remained intact. However, the political consensus established by George Washington and administered by John Adams laid in ruins; shattered by the combined blows of the division within the party between Adams and Hamilton, popular discontent with Federalist legislation such as the Alien and Sedition Acts, and fears that the Federal government was gaining too much power. Appeals to religious sentiments attempted to buttress the flagging popular support of the Federalist Party. This resulted in a systematic attempt to attack Thomas Jefferson's religious thought in order to cast him as an

unworthy leader of the American people because of his lack of support for orthodox Christian theology. These efforts were ultimately unsuccessful, but these attacks displayed a new style of politics that subjected the individual candidate to a degree of personal scrutiny that did not previously exist.

An appeal to the wisdom of the founders in order to discover their original intent must take into account the larger historical background of their world. Often times, modern political discourse fails to contextualize the writings of the founders. Without this context, the true story of connection between the American people, their government, and religion transform into a series of political arguments that bear little resemblance to the actual conditions of the early republic. Religion was a vital part of the political debate, but the context of that connection is important. Religion was a tool that used to support a political consensus, to attack political enemies, and to maintain a certain vision of domestic tranquility. Religion was a part of the political process; however, the founders used this emotive tool for their own purposes, not necessarily an intentional model for future generations to follow.

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