



Book Review by Patrick Allitt

## NATURE'S GOD

*The Religious Beliefs of America's Founders: Reason, Revelation, and Revolution,*  
by Gregg L. Frazer. University Press of Kansas, 296 pages, \$34.95



WERE THE FOUNDING FATHERS GOOD Christians? “Christian America” advocates like David Barton insist that they were, and that America ought now to reclaim its public Christian heritage. Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, by contrast, asserts that the founders were militant secularists, who wanted to build a high wall of separation between religion and government. Gregg Frazer, a history professor at The Master’s College, denies both claims, showing how all these activists have distorted the historical record in order to claim the moral high ground for their contemporary projects.

In *The Religious Beliefs of America’s Founders*, Frazer argues that the most influential founders were neither Christians in the traditional sense nor deists, as often assumed, but “theistic rationalists.” The term is his own, not one used in the late 18th century, but he makes a persuasive case for its heuristic value. America’s founders sometimes went to church and often used religious language, but they had already separated themselves intellectually from much of the Christian heritage before the Revolution began.

They still believed in a God who played an active role in the affairs of the world but they no longer believed in such doctrines as original sin, the infallibility of Scripture, or Christ’s sacrificial atonement. Most had also rejected the virgin birth and the Trinity. Rather than subordinating reason to Biblical revelation, they subjected revelation to reason, discarding those parts of the Bible they found unreasonable. The influence of John Locke and the 18th-century Whig tradition had transformed their concept of God. As Frazer points out, no Calvinist would have made Thomas Jefferson’s claim that “nature’s God” had created man with an unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness.

If, moreover, the founders had been evangelicals on a religious mission, surely they would have mentioned Jesus Christ in the Declaration, the Constitution, or *The Federalist*. Jefferson drafted the Declaration in the language of theistic rationalism but was artful enough to make it palatable to a wide array of readers, many of whom, as he knew, *would* be Christians.

Frazer is not the first historian to make this claim. Giants of religious historiography

like Sydney Ahlstrom and George Marsden reached similar conclusions in the mid- and late 20th century. Frazer, however, traces the intellectual influences on George Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, and other “key founders” systematically. Crucial to his argument is the idea that this highly self-conscious and well-educated elite shared their theistic rationalism with many of the educated clergy of the time, though not with the wider population. They often used the familiar language of Christianity to address a public most of which was still Christian, while giving a new twist to much of the vocabulary.

FRAZER TRACES THESE NEW IDEAS TO several figures of the 18th-century Enlightenment. Franklin’s friend, the scientist Joseph Priestley, for example, denied the plenary inspiration of the Scriptures and subjected revelation to reason, discarding Biblical passages he found to be morally objectionable. He insisted that benevolence was God’s central attribute and rejected the idea of original sin. Others who influenced the founders are less well known, such as the An-



glican clergymen Conyers Middleton, a critic of Catholic superstition and Biblical literalism, and Samuel Clarke, an anti-trinitarian. Nearly all of them, says Frazer, regarded Jesus as perhaps a semi-divine figure but not as God incarnate.

Theistic rationalism made its way into many American pulpits in the late colonial era, gradually replacing Calvinist definitions with Whig political ideas, and de-emphasizing supernaturalism. Ministerial candidates read John Locke's *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695) and John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) while Harvard in particular began to develop a reputation for skepticism. Already in 1740 Evangelical preachers like George Whitefield were fretting: "As for the Universities, I believe it may be said, their Light is become Darkness." The harsh doctrines of predestination and total depravity gave way to a more optimistic, voluntaristic view of man's abilities and God's ways.

RATIONALIST PREACHING BASED ON THIS changing educational regimen helped prepare the revolutionary generation. The clergy themselves had by then assimilated Locke's ideas about human equality, natural rights, resistance to tyrants, and the social contract, and harmonized what had previously seemed like antithetical traditions, advancing revolutionary and republican ideas with the rhetoric of Christianity. When the war began, one Tory grumbled that the Presbyterian ministers of the middle colonies "are mere retailers of politics, sowers of sedition and rebellion."

Though earlier historians have tended to emphasize the religious differences between, say, Franklin and Adams, Frazer emphasizes the similarities, arguing that neither was really a Christian but also that neither was really a deist. In his *Autobiography*, Franklin describes becoming a deist at 15 but later rejects the position as impractical, because it denies the possibility of God intervening in the world and weakens the case for morality. He affirmed that God intervened directly in human affairs, as, for example, when He gave America the victory in its war of independence. Similarly, Adams, though willing to believe in miracles, including Jesus' resurrection, held many views that neither deists nor orthodox Christians espoused. Parts of the Bible might be genuine revelation, he wrote, but "millions of fables, tales, and legends, have been blended with both Jewish and Christian revelation" to make "the most bloody religion that ever existed." Remarks

of this kind were anathema to deists and Christians alike.

Frazer ably puts the founders' writings in context. He argues that their private writings and correspondence with close friends (e.g., the Adams-Jefferson letters) are likely to be more candid than their public statements. These private writings nearly all point in the same direction, away from orthodox Christianity and toward theistic rationalism. Frazer also knows the documentary record well enough to explain why we should regard occasional bursts of Christian rhetoric in printed versions of the founders' public statements as interpolations, added by secretaries, editors, or publishers.

WHAT ABOUT GEORGE WASHINGTON, a man so pious that he fell to his knees in the snows of Valley Forge beseeching God's aid? Frazer shows that this story—subject of a famous painting and even a bronze statue—was fabricated by the hagiographical myth-maker Parson Weems (who also invented the story of Washington chopping down the cherry tree). Several of his contemporaries noted that Washington did not kneel to pray even when he was in church, making it all the more unlikely that he would do so outdoors in midwinter Pennsylvania. Washington was certainly in the habit of going to church and listening to the sermon, but he usually left before administration of the sacrament. When a minister reproached him for this conduct, he simply ceased attending on Sundays when he knew the sacrament was to be administered. He also avoided answering frequent queries as to whether he was a Christian.

In the 20,000 pages of Washington's writings, the name of Jesus appears just once. On the other hand, he clearly did believe that he was in the hands of an active God, and credited "Providence" or "the Supreme Being" for his survival in battle and for America's eventual victory. As an active Freemason, he believed that the world's many peoples all had their own avenues to the same God, and that a shared morality was much more important than a divisive doctrine. His speeches regularly invoked the practical benefits of Christianity and morality as mutually supportive, but they were never sectarian. He used the word "bigotry" to mean an exclusive loyalty to a particular denomination, church, or sect.

Washington's successors in the White House were essentially of like mind. Jefferson took a pair of scissors to the New Testament, cutting out all the supernatural passages and


leaving only what he took to be the sound kernel of its moral teachings. Madison referred to "Nature" and to "God" almost interchangeably. In his promotion of religious toleration, he declared that the legal equality of all sects and churches was "a truly Christian principle." But as Frazer notes, that declaration showed the degree to which he was *not* a Christian as his colonial predecessors would have understood the term. "For that [statement] to be true, Christianity must be seen either as a benevolent mind set that values 'fair play' over eternal truth or a generic, nonsectarian religious system," an idea no Christian can endorse.

I LEARNED MUCH FROM *THE RELIGIOUS BELIEFS OF America's Founders*, but closed it unsure of how the author would address two possible criticisms. First, he offers a narrow definition of "Christianity" likely to offend many readers. Millions of liberal Protestants today would certainly describe themselves as Christians while actually holding to a faith Frazer himself would call theistic rationalism. In his view, it's not enough to call yourself a Christian; you must also affirm the doctrinal fundamentals. He comes from a circle of evangelical historians that has transformed American historiography in the last 30 years. Its superb leading figures—George Marsden, Nathan Hatch, and Mark Noll—have forced American historians to take evangelical religion more seriously than ever before as a major factor in the nation's history. So far as I know, however, they never denied the term "Christians" to members of the diverse groups that make up most of the American religious landscape.

Second, and on a closely related matter, Frazer never says of most figures in his book whether they did or did not call themselves Christians. It is clear that Washington and Franklin avoided using the term and that Jefferson only occasionally accepted it. But what about Madison, Gouverneur Morris, James Wilson, or Alexander Hamilton? Frazer admits that the evidence about them is rather more ambiguous but never says outright whether they accepted or applied the term to themselves. In other words, while adding "theistic rationalism" to "deism" and "Christianity" as possible categories of belief among America's founders, he has shrunk "Christianity" to mean rather less than it did at the time of the Revolution itself.

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