

*Faith and the Founders  
of the American Republic*

EDITED BY

Daniel L. Dreisbach  
Mark David Hall



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*To Joyce, with gratitude for 25 wonderful years,  
and to Mollie and Moriah.*

*—D.L.D.*

*To Lydia, of whom I am very proud.*

*—M.D.H.*



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# *Introduction*

*Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall*

RELIGION FIGURED PROMINENTLY in the identity and mission of English colonial settlements in the New World. An invocation of divine blessing and acknowledgment of a sacred mission to spread the Gospel were recurring themes in the colonial charters and other expressions of the colonists' political pursuits. The First Charter of Virginia in 1606 commended the colonists' "humble and well intended desires" to further, "by the providence of Almighty God," a noble work "in propagating [the] Christian religion to such people, as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God."<sup>1</sup> The signatories to the Mayflower Compact in 1620 affirmed that they undertook their voyage "for the Glory of God, and Advancement of the Christian Faith, and the Honour of our King and Country."<sup>2</sup> The New England Puritans, especially, endeavored, in the words of Matthew 5:14, to build a "city set upon a Hill."<sup>3</sup> These pious settlers committed themselves to establishing Bible commonwealths and remaking the world in conformity with God's laws, as they understood them. The Bible was often the explicit basis of early colonial codes, including Virginia's "Articles, Laws, and Orders" (1610–1611) and the Massachusetts Body of Liberties (1641).<sup>4</sup>

Although the religious fervor of the first generation of settlers waned, starting in the 1730s and continuing for decades, there was a spiritual "awakening" or religious revival that swept up and down the Atlantic seaboard. The Great Awakening was, in fact, a series of revivals in a variety of locations throughout the colonies led by dynamic preachers such as the fiery Anglican evangelist George Whitefield, the cerebral Congregationalist minister Jonathan Edwards, and the dissenting Presbyterian preacher Samuel Davies. In some regions of the country, such as the central Virginia Piedmont, revivals continued with little interruption until the end of the century.<sup>5</sup>

Historians have long debated whether these revivals, which burned brightest in the first half of the eighteenth century, influenced the political culture, especially the movement for independence from Great Britain that dominated the second half of the century. The Great Awakening was a powerful and, to some extent, ecumenical (but Protestant) religious movement that demonstrated to many Americans that a rich, meaningful spiritual experience could take place outside the four walls of an established church. Insofar as these revivals involved a direct, unmediated relationship between God (especially the Holy Spirit) and humans, they unleashed diverse interpretations of the Bible and religious experiences, which further challenged the singular, unitary, authoritative articulation of religion imposed by an established church. The Great Awakening was a national phenomenon that helped create a national identity, breaking down geographical barriers and giving colonists in diverse communities a shared experience as Americans. This shared identity would prove significant in the confrontation that was to come with the mother country. Its attacks on *religious* establishments and elites were translated into attacks on *political* establishments and elites. This was an easy transition in those parts of the country where the religious establishment was the Church of England. Some historians have argued that the Great Awakening was an important precursor to the ideas and actions of the struggle for independence. The notion that God “awakens” people directly and empowers them to interpret His Word (the Bible) themselves challenged “top down” ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, the idea that salvation (and an unmediated relationship with God) was open to *all*—rich or poor, male or female—promoted a democratization of religion and suggested a broader democratization of civil society. These ideas were translated in the political realm into the consent of essentially *equal* people as the source of legitimate governance.<sup>6</sup>

And so the founding generation was born in a colonial culture shaped, in important respects, by Christianity. Even more specifically, the culture was profoundly influenced by *Protestantism*. Approximately 98 percent of white Americans in the late eighteenth century were Protestants of one stripe or another. Only about 1.9 percent were Roman Catholics—and even in Maryland, which was founded as a haven for Catholics, they were always a minority and the Church of England had been the colony’s established church since 1692. There were also approximately two thousand Jews in the United States at this time.<sup>7</sup>

Few scholars question the notion that Christianity held sway in the lives of many eighteenth-century Americans. Yet some of the best-known and most influential founders—Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson,

for two examples—were cosmopolitan in outlook and influenced by the rationalist philosophies of the Enlightenment. Even before they were dead and buried, the founders were the subjects of extraordinary—even obsessive—curiosity about their faith commitments (or lack thereof). The words and deeds of prominent founders, from church attendance to private correspondence, have been studied and debated for what they reveal about their commitment to or departure from Christianity. There is a consensus that most founders were self-identified “Christians,” but were they orthodox in their beliefs? Did they attend church? Did they believe in a personal god who intervenes in the affairs of men and nations? Did they rely on reason or revelation or both? Did they believe faith should play a role in public life? For good or ill, answers to these questions have informed one of two metanarratives: America was founded as a Christian nation or America was founded as a secular republic.

Nineteenth century authors regularly portrayed the founders as pious, godly men.<sup>8</sup> An excellent example of this is Mason Locke Weems’s popular account of George Washington kneeling in prayer in the snowy woods of Valley Forge.<sup>9</sup> This story was regularly retold throughout the century—most significantly in McGuffey’s *Eclectic Reader* where it was read by millions of school children. That the event almost certainly did not happen as described by Parson Weems was not a problem for nineteenth century hagiographers.

History texts in the nineteenth century regularly portrayed American history in providential terms and asserted that the founders were pious Christians.<sup>10</sup> Robert Baird, for example, wrote in the 1840s that “[a]ll the leading men” at the Constitutional Convention “were believers in Christianity.”<sup>11</sup> Stephen Colwell similarly contended a decade later that the founders “acknowledged the revelation of [God] contained in the Holy Scriptures; they derived the sanctions of their institutions, and the morality of their legislation and of their whole social system, from these Scriptures.”<sup>12</sup> Most impressively, B. F. Morris compiled an 831 page collection of documents aimed at demonstrating that America was founded as a Christian nation and that it remained so to the present day (1864).<sup>13</sup> Such religious hagiography remains popular among Christian writers and publishers in the twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup>

In the twentieth century academics, along with many popular authors, began to tell a very different story. In this account, the American founding, sandwiched between two great religious “awakenings,” was an age of Enlightenment in which rationalist thought was in the ascendancy, especially among intellectual and political elites. Traditional Christian thought, by contrast, was in decline. The founders, according to this narrative, were



Deists who desired the separation of church and state and the establishment of a secular polity. For instance, Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard opined that “Jefferson, Paine, John Adams, Washington, Franklin, Madison, and many lesser lights were to be reckoned among either Unitarians or Deists. It was not Cotton Mather’s God to whom the authors of the Declaration of Independence appealed; it was to ‘Nature’s God.’”<sup>15</sup> More recently, historian Frank Lambert has written that the “significance of the Enlightenment and Deism for the birth of the American republic, and especially the relationship between church and state within it, can hardly be overstated.”<sup>16</sup> Law professor Geoffrey R. Stone similarly contended that “deistic beliefs played a central role in the framing of the American republic . . . [and the] founding generation viewed religion, and particularly religion’s relation to government, through an Enlightenment lens that was deeply skeptical of orthodox Christianity.”<sup>17</sup> “[T]he Founding Fathers,” sociologist William Martin averred, “were cosmopolitan intellectuals devoted to the rationalism of the Enlightenment.”<sup>18</sup> For a final example, and many more could be given,<sup>19</sup> the dean of American historians, Gordon S. Wood, asserted that “The Founding Fathers were at most deists—they believed God created the world, then left it alone to run. . . .”<sup>20</sup> Not surprisingly, given the weight of these opinions, religion’s contributions to the political thought of the founders and of the American founding have often been relegated to the margins—or ignored altogether<sup>21</sup>—by scholars and popular authors alike.<sup>22</sup>

When scholars who claim the founding was a product of the Enlightenment are attentive to the religious beliefs of the founders, they are usually drawn to the views of some combination of the following men: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Thomas Paine, and Alexander Hamilton. On rare occasions they reach beyond this select fraternity to include another founder or two, and almost inevitably they concede that not *all* founders were as enlightened as the ones they profile. Thus they leave the distinct impression that most founders, and certainly the important ones, were Deists.

Perhaps the near exclusive focus on a handful of famous founders could be justified if they were, in fact, the only consequential founders. But even the casual observer of American history knows that this is not the case. There was a large company of now “forgotten founders” who made salient contributions in thought, word, and deed to articulating the rights of colonists, securing independence from Great Britain, and establishing the new constitutional republic and its political institutions. Take,

for example, one of the founders profiled in this volume, John Dickinson of Delaware and Pennsylvania (serving both states as the elected chief executive). He was a delegate to the Stamp Act Congress, where he drafted the “Declaration of Rights and Grievances” (October 1765); a member of the First and Second Continental Congresses, where he was the principal draftsman of the “Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking Up Arms” (July 6, 1775) and author of an initial draft of the “Articles of Confederation”; and one of Delaware’s delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Early in the colonists’ struggle, he championed the rights of Americans in a series of brilliant “Letters from a Farmer in Pennsylvania” (1767–1768), and he later wrote a series of letters, under the pen name Fabius, in defense of the proposed Constitution that some scholars regard as more persuasive and intelligent than the more famous *Federalist Papers*.<sup>23</sup> Dickinson is only one of a host of other Patriots—Samuel Adams, Elias Boudinot, Elbridge Gerry, John Hancock, John Jay, Richard Henry Lee, George Mason, Gouverneur Morris, Charles Pinckney, Edmund Randolph, Benjamin Rush, John Rutledge, Roger Sherman, James Wilson, and John Witherspoon, just to name a few—who made salient, if now largely forgotten, contributions to the new nation.

One possible argument for giving excessive attention to Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Paine, and Hamilton in examinations of the founders’ faiths is that they represent well the founding generation’s religious views and their approach to church-state relations. Yet these founders are far from what social scientists call a “representative sample.” Consider for a moment the backgrounds and experiences of these seven individuals. Washington, Jefferson, and Madison were southern Anglican plantation owners. Hamilton was born and raised in the British West Indies, and Paine was born and raised in England (and he lived only twenty of his seventy-seven years in America). In an era when few people traveled internationally, Jefferson and Adams spent significant time in Europe, and Franklin lived *most* of the last thirty-five years of his life in Britain and France. As adults, Franklin and Hamilton were nominal Anglicans, which means five of these seven founders (71 percent) were Episcopalians (compared to 16 percent of all Americans in that era).<sup>24</sup> Paine, the scion of a Quaker father and Anglican mother, became one of the few open Deists in America. Although 50 to 75 percent of Americans in the founding era may be reasonably classified as Calvinists, only one of these famous founders worshipped at a Calvinist church—and Adams is not a particularly good representative of this theological tradition.<sup>25</sup>

As well, this elite group of founders does not contain a single person who can reasonably be called an evangelical. Born of the revivalism of the Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s, evangelicals are orthodox Protestants who emphasize the need for a conversion experience, have a very high view of the Bible, and believe Christians should actively share their faith.<sup>26</sup> Many evangelicals remained in Reformed denominations (notably the New Light Congregationalists and New Side Presbyterians), but they were present in most denominations. The eighteenth century saw the beginning of the explosive growth of two evangelical denominations, the Baptists and Methodists, which would radically alter America's religious landscape in the nineteenth century and beyond. In the eighteenth century, evangelical challenges to established churches contributed to advancing religious liberty and, according to some scholars, helped pave the way for the War for American Independence.<sup>27</sup>

We agree that the views of prominent and influential American founders warrant careful study.<sup>28</sup> A major goal of this project, however, is to expand the conversation to include other figures who had a significant role in the American founding. We do not dispute that rationalism—including Deism—had influence in the era, but we do think it is often misunderstood and its impact overstated.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, we believe Deism and related terms are interjected into discussions of the American founding without adequate explanation for what these terms mean. Deism is difficult to define because it is a belief system without an explicit, agreed upon creed or authoritative text to articulate its fundamental tenets; consequently, the term encompasses a wide range of sometimes inconsistent beliefs. Also, we want this volume to cast a light on the interplay among diverse religious traditions in the political culture and thought of the founding, as well as religion's influence on the political thought of selected founders. The essays collected in this volume, we believe, provide compelling evidence that diverse religious traditions were among the intellectual sources that informed and animated the American founding.

The first section of the volume contains thematic essays on how different religious traditions informed the political culture of the American founding or were viewed by the founders. We include essays on well-known traditions: Deism and Calvinism, as well as on minority faiths: Judaism and Islam. Two essays consider the impact of faith on two groups from the "losing" side of American history: Loyalists and Antifederalists. Finally, two essays explore how Americans from a variety of denominations used the Bible in their political discourse, and how

religion informed different founders' views of race—especially with regard to slavery. (Another religious tradition that, in our view, merits attention is Roman Catholicism. Having devoted a chapter to this topic in a previous volume, we chose not to revisit the topic in this collection, but we gladly direct readers to this essay on Catholicism in the founding era: James R. Stoner, "Catholic Politics and Religious Liberty in America: The Carrolls of Maryland," in *The Founders on God and Government* [2004], 251–271.)

The second section includes essays on individual founders deliberately selected because they come from and, perhaps, illustrate an important political or theological perspective or constituency in late-eighteenth-century America. For instance, an essay on Gouverneur Morris suggests a theological perspective that might describe the religious views of some prominent founders: theistic rationalism. Chapters on John Hancock and Elias Boudinot help illustrate how Calvinist convictions informed the political and economic activities of a significant number of founders. Similarly, the chapter on John Dickinson opens a window on the roles Quakers played in the American founding. Finally, a chapter on Isaac Backus and John Leland shines a light on the role of theology in shaping the political thought and engagement of Baptists.

The founders profiled in this volume came from traditions, some small and some large, that influenced the founding in various ways. Reformed Americans, for instance, were very well represented in every important civic body at the national level in the founding era. Baptists, on the other hand, were seldom represented in these bodies, but their numbers were increasing rapidly from the Connecticut River to the Shenandoah Valley. Moreover, their forceful opposition to religious establishments and advocacy for religious liberty had an important impact on the American political tradition. Quakers have never been numerous in America, but they have played significant roles in social reform movements—particularly with respect to racial and gender equality.

The contributors to this volume come from a variety of disciplines, and we afforded them the freedom to pursue their subjects according to the canons of their disciplines. We should note that the contributors themselves hold a variety of religious beliefs (including unbelief) and significantly different views on how church and state should relate in America today. Whether or how the founders' views should inform contemporary questions of jurisprudence and politics is a matter we leave for another day.

On a personal note, Daniel L. Dreisbach thanks American University for its continuing support of his research. He also thanks his research assistants Andrew Lewis, Michele Frazier, Ryan Ady, Elizabeth Bretz, and Nicholas Mueller for their work on this book. For their endless patience and good humor during the course of this and other projects, he thanks his wife, Joyce, and two daughters, Mollie Abigail and Moriah Esther. Mark David Hall is grateful for the support of George Fox University, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the Earhart Foundation. He also appreciates the Institute for Studies of Religion at Baylor University, where he serves as a Senior Fellow. Research assistance from Jay Miller, Austin Schaefer, Sergio Cisneros, and Chelsea McCombs contributed significantly to the success of this volume. Richard R. Johnson and members of the Pacific Northwest Early Americanists colloquium and Tommy Kidd of Baylor University were kind enough to comment on his essay for this collection. As always, he is grateful for the loving support of Miriam, Joshua, Lydia, and Anna.

## *Notes*

1. The First Charter of Virginia (1606), in William Waller Hening, ed., *The Statutes at Large; Being a Collection of all the Laws of Virginia, From the First Session of the Legislature, in the Year 1619* (Richmond, VA: J. & G. Cochran, 1821), 1: 58.
2. The Mayflower Compact (1620), in Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, eds., *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding* (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund Press, 2009), 86–88.
3. John Winthrop, “A Modell of Christian Charitie” (1630), in Dreisbach and Hall, eds., *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 131.
4. See Dreisbach and Hall, *Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 84–86; *Colonial Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History*, Donald S. Lutz, ed. (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1998), 70–87.
5. See generally Thomas S. Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009).
6. See, for example, Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind: From the Great Awakening to the Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1966), and Gordon S. Wood, “Religion and the American Revolution,” in *New Directions in American Religious History*, Harry S. Stout and D. G. Hart, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 173–205.
7. Barry A. Kosmin and Seymour P. Lachman, *One Nation Under God: Religion in Contemporary American Society* (New York: Harmony Books, 1993), 28–29; Roger Finke and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America, 1776–1990: Winners*

- and *Losers in Our Religious Economy* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 22–108.
8. In the heat of partisan battles of the 1790s and early 1800s, selected founders, such as Thomas Jefferson, were described by political opponents as infidels, Deists, or even atheists.
  9. Mason Locke Weems, *The Life of Washington: A New Edition with Primary Documents*, Peter Onuf, ed. (Armonk, NY: M. E. Sharpe, 1996), 146–147.
  10. See, for example, George Bancroft, *History of the United States: From Discovery of the American Continent*, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1834–1874). On this literature generally, see John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation: An Introduction* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 3–76, and Steven K. Green, *The Second Disestablishment: Church and State in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), esp. 91–103.
  11. Robert Baird, *Religion in the United State of America* (Glasgow: Blackie and Sons, 1844), 259.
  12. Stephen Colwell, *The Position of Christianity in the United States* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, 1854), 11.
  13. B. F. Morris, *The Christian Life and Character of the Civil Institutions of the United States* (Philadelphia: George W. Childs, 1864).
  14. See, for example, Peter Marshall and David Manuel, *The Light and the Glory* (Grand Rapids, MI: Fleming H. Revell, 1977); John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution: The Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1987); Tim LaHaye, *Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Brentwood, TN: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1987); and Gary DeMar, *America's Christian Heritage* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003).
  15. Charles A. Beard and Mary R. Beard, *The Rise of American Civilization* (New York: Macmillan, 1930), 449.
  16. Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 161.
  17. Geoffrey Stone, “The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?” *University of California Law Review* 56 (October 2008), 7–8.
  18. William Martin, *With God on our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America* (New York: Broadway, 1996), 376.
  19. See, for example, Edwin Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 1: 227 (“the founding fathers themselves, largely deists in their orientation and sympathy . . .”); Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 50 (“most of the American founders embraced some form of Deism, not historically orthodox Christianity.”); Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2006), xiii (“the Founding Fathers were . . . skeptical men of the Enlightenment who questioned each and every received idea they had been taught.”); Harvey Kaye, *Thomas Paine and the Promise of America* (New York: Hill and Wang,

- 2005), 108 (“[m]any of the nation’s original Founders subscribed to some version of religious rationalism”); and Green, *The Second Disestablishment*, 87 (“Although many of the nation’s elites privately embraced deism, *The Age of Reason* and other works popularized irreligion among the laboring and working classes”).
20. Frederic Smoler, “The Radical Revolution: An Interview with Gordon Wood,” *American Heritage Magazine* 42 (December 1992), accessed at <http://www.americanheritage.com/print/57789> on June 18, 2011.
  21. For instance, Alan Gibson’s excellent survey of the literature on political thought that informed America’s founding has chapters dedicated to progressive, liberal, classical republican, Scottish, multiple traditions, and the politically correct interpretations of the founding. He mentions only in passing, however, the possibility that Protestantism may have had an influence on America’s founders. Alan Gibson, *Interpreting the Founding: Guide to the Enduring Debates Over the Origins and Foundations of the American Republic* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2006), 3.
  22. There are some notable exceptions to this tendency. See, for example, Ellis Sandoz, *A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Barry Alan Shain, *The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994); James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1998); and Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).
  23. For more on the life and influence of John Dickinson, see Jane E. Calvert’s chapter in this volume.
  24. Finke and Stark, *The Churching of America*, 55.
  25. Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1975), 1: 426.
  26. This definition is closely related to, but not exactly the same as, that offered by David W. Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–17, and Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: The Age of Edwards, Whitefield, and the Wesleys* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 15–21.
  27. See Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind*; Kidd, *God of Liberty*.
  28. We included essays on the role of faith in the political thought, words, and deeds of the most famous founders in Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison, eds., *The Founders on God and Government* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2004) (Franklin, Washington, John Adams, Jefferson, and Madison), and Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison, eds., *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) (Hamilton and Paine).
  29. For more on the influence of Deism on the political thought of the founders, see Darren Staloff’s chapter in this volume.

PART I

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*Religion and Political Culture  
in the American Founding*





# I

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## *Deism and the Founders*

*Darren Staloff*

OVER THE LAST several decades, the role of Deism in the American founding has become a highly charged question of public controversy. In particular, this debate has focused on the faith and practice of six extremely influential founding fathers: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson. These figures have become vital proxies in the ongoing culture war between traditional and/or evangelical Protestants and their increasingly militant secular opponents. The champions of a role for religious values and beliefs in American politics have insisted on the centrality of Christianity to early American history and have argued that the nation was founded on Judeo-Christian principles. As evidence for the latter they note the regularity of Congressional prayer, national days of prayer and thanksgiving, and the invocation of God as the source of our “unalienable rights.”<sup>1</sup> Secularists who wish to insulate public life from religion deny that Judeo-Christianity played any appreciable role in the founding. The American regime was based on Enlightenment rationalism as evident in the strict separation of church and state they find in the First Amendment, as well as in the absence of scriptural references in the principal founding documents. They also note the use of presumably “deistic” natural religious terms to refer to God in the Declaration of Independence. Although they do not dispute the prevalence of Christian belief in the early Republic, they argue that the principal founders listed above did not share that belief, and that it was deistic and secular rather than Christian principles that informed the constitutional and political order they founded.<sup>2</sup>

The focus on these half-dozen statesmen is hardly haphazard. While they are of course a miniscule fraction of those engaged in establishing the new republic, they are among the most important figures in that project. Including the first four presidents, the most celebrated American of his day and the chief diplomat of the Revolution, and the principal architect of the federal republic's fiscal and foreign policy, these men palpably dominated the new nation. These are the A-list founders whose ideas, writings, and policy decisions patterned the political and constitutional order of the United States long after they retired from office. If, as the secularists maintain, these men were really Deists, however secretly, and their public actions flowed from those convictions, then a reasonable case can be made that our founding principles drew far more from the Enlightenment than from traditional Christianity. Without the A-list founders on its side, the secularist case loses traction and we are left with a Christian founding.

Part of what makes this public debate compelling is the way it reflects a rather more subtle ongoing division within the scholarly community over the role of religion in the American founding. On the one hand, the dominant debate over the revolutionary and early national periods has been between those who see the centrality of a republican ideology that stressed classical civic virtue and their liberal opponents who claim a market oriented, Lockean individualism as the driving force behind the politics of the early republic. Neither of these interpretive schools sees much role for religion in the founding. They do not deny the Christianity of much of the American people, but they argue that "most of the Founding Fathers, enlightened men in an enlightened age, were not all that enthusiastic about religion, certainly not about religious enthusiasm."<sup>3</sup> While the A-list founders are not always described as Deists per se, Jon Butler has claimed that they at least "embraced Deist principles."<sup>4</sup> And it was their principles that informed the American founding.

On the other hand, over roughly the same period a scholarly counter-tradition has emerged that challenges the assumptions of both ideological schools. Rather than Classical, Renaissance, and Enlightenment doctrines, they have argued that a traditional Christian worldview was central to the American founding. Beginning with Alan Heimert almost fifty years ago, these scholars have stressed the importance of the evangelical anti-authoritarianism of the Great Awakening as the essential precondition for the revolutionary struggle for independence and the ensuing federal settlement.<sup>5</sup> For these scholars, American republican government

drew far more from dissenting ideals and religious voluntarism than has usually been acknowledged. Others have argued that a providential view of history and millennial fervor were far more influential in the founding era than the writings of Montesquieu, Hume, or Harrington.<sup>6</sup> Even the purported heterodoxy of the most prominent founders has been questioned.<sup>7</sup> The result has been the reformulation of the disjunction posed by the popular disputants. Was the American founding predicated on shared Christian beliefs and a broad public religiosity, or was it instead a largely secular affair grounded in Enlightenment principles? Given such a stark choice, the only tenable answer must be *both*.

### *Deism*

The product of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century “free thinkers,” Deism was a form of rational theology resulting in a “religion of nature” which claimed human reason as its sole basis. All Deists shared at least two beliefs. The first was in the existence of God, a belief grounded in either the cosmological argument (the *a priori* claim that the universe must have a first cause) or the *a posteriori* argument from design. Deists also denied that revelation and scripture could serve as a legitimate source of religious authority and truth. Most further rejected the supernatural elements of revealed religion—miracles, prophecies, and acts of providential intervention—as mere superstition. The Deist God was a distant, if benevolent, creator whose creation ran itself with clocklike regularity. His primary demands were moral and social, not spiritual or ecclesiastical. All the received doctrines of traditional Christianity, from the incarnation and divinity of Christ to original sin and atonement, were denounced as the residues of priestcraft ancient and modern.

Beyond this broad portrait, however, it is very difficult to offer definitive generalizations about early modern Deism. In part this is because many Deists wrote in an esoteric fashion, shielding their most radical implications and inferences behind purportedly fideistic professions.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, there was good reason for such subterfuge; even in latitudinarian England the Toleration Act of 1689 specifically excluded all forms of antitrinitarianism; Thomas Woolston’s critique of the biblical account of miracles and the resurrection of Christ earned him a substantial £100 fine and a year in prison. Even more challenging is the wide range of disagreements among Deists. While all rejected miracles, some

nonetheless made room for providential interference in human affairs while others insisted on a purely necessitarian and materialist account of nature and history. Deists also disagreed whether the soul was immortal and immaterial with the more radical elements denying any grounds for belief in an afterlife with its divine rewards and punishments. Even attitudes toward revelation varied. Militant Deists generally ridiculed scripture as imposture while their more irenic colleagues accepted that much of its content, especially the message of Jesus, was morally salutary if not always literally true. Perhaps most striking is the way in which Deist thought evolved over time in both England and her North American colonies.

English Deism is normally traced to Lord Herbert of Cherbury, a prominent statesman and thinker whose *De Veritate (On Truth, as It Is Distinguished from Revelation, the Probable, the Possible, and the False)* (1624) laid out a rational theology based on the cosmological argument. Herbert sought to quell the rising confessional strife that had been wracking Europe for over a century and would shortly envelop England, Ireland, and Scotland in civil war. Meant as a universal creed that all religious people could embrace, Herbert's Deism included human duties of worship and virtuous behavior that would be rewarded in an afterlife. Despite his best efforts, Herbert's irenic creed bore little fruit. Religious strife continued unabated in the British Isles as well as on the European continent, and his rational religion found few adherents.

Beginning in the last quarter of the seventeenth century, however, Deism did emerge as a formidable presence in English public life. A series of strikingly militant authors, the so-called major Deists—Charles Blount, John Toland, Anthony Collins, and (to a lesser extent) Mathew Tindal—raised the specter of a Deist challenge to orthodox belief that reverberated through much of the first half of the eighteenth century. In 1679, Blount published *Anima Mundi* with its thinly veiled mortalism which ridiculed the immortality of the soul and compared most Christian churches “to the Muskmelons from the Dunghill” that had grown “out of the filthy Corruptions and Superstition of Paganism.”<sup>9</sup> Four years later, his *Miracles, no Violation of the Laws of Nature* denied any empirical basis for the accounts of miracles in the Bible, and his subsequent anonymously published *Oracles of Reason* (1693) rejected all revelation and scripture. John Toland's *Christianity Not Mysterious* (1696) purportedly claimed to merely limit the sense of scripture to the test of reason, although it too implied mortalism like Blount's work

before it. His subsequent publications, however, took on a distinctly radical, anti-Christian hue “in the direction of materialism, pantheism, and a republican quasi-Spinozism.”<sup>10</sup> Anthony Collins, a good friend of philosopher John Locke, rejected the latter’s distinction between scriptural accounts and religious doctrines that were above reason and contrary to reason in *An Essay Concerning the Use of Reason in Propositions the Evidence Whereof Depends on Human Testimony* (1707). Scripture could simply not be read as literal truth by a rational person, a claim he extended to the prophecies of Christ in his *Discourse of the Grounds and Reasons of the Christian Religion* (1724). Like Blount and Toland, Collins embraced mortalism and added to it a strong necessitarian strain that precluded providential intervention and made any need for divine judgment superfluous.

Given the distinctly anti-Christian tenor of their work, it is hardly surprising that these early major Deists sparked animus and controversy. George Berkeley’s *Alciphron, or the Minute Philosopher* (1732) sought to expose deistic freethinking as a cover for atheism and rank libertinism. Samuel Clarke denounced Deism as a sham: “Deists, in our Days, who obstinately reject Revelation when offered to them, are not such men as *Socrates* and *Tully* were; but, under pretense of Deism, ’tis plain they are generally Ridiculers of all that is truly excellent even in natural Religion itself.”<sup>11</sup> These charges were neither hysterical nor hyperbolic. As David Berman has cogently argued, the esoteric mortalism of the major Deists clearly obviated the need for any God at all to either intervene providentially or reward virtuous behavior in an afterlife.<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Israel has concluded that the natural religion of these men was hardly, upon careful examination, “distinct from atheism.”<sup>13</sup>

With the deaths of Toland and Collins in the 1720s (Blount died in 1693), the Deist controversy in England began to subside. In part this was due to the inroads made by Anglican invocation of Newtonian physico-theology that gave scientific legitimacy to supernatural intervention.<sup>14</sup> But much of the change came within Deism itself as its subsequent promoters returned to the more irenic posture of Lord Herbert and sought to reconcile the religion of nature and Christianity. Matthew Tindal seems to have been a transitional figure in this development. An important government official and author of the so-called “bible of Deism,” *Christianity as Old as Creation* (1730), Tindal is sometimes classed among the “radicals” for his purported mortalism and his rejection of revelation as literal truth.<sup>15</sup> Yet Tindal embraced rather than ridiculed Christianity, arguing

that the truth of revelation recapitulated the religion of nature and that the providential design of Christianity was to deliver men from superstition and awaken them to their universal moral duties. Like Tindal, William Wollaston also found grounds for a providential deity in his *Religion of Nature Delineated* (1722) as well as the immortality of the soul. The auto-didactic artisan Thomas Chubb may have denounced priestcraft and “superstitious practices,” but he also did so in defense of the true, rational Christianity as originally taught by its divine progenitor.<sup>16</sup> Even Thomas Woolston, whose *The Moderator between an Infidel and an Apostate* (1725) and *Six Discourses* (1727–1730) attacked the miracles of the gospels and the resurrection of Christ, accepted both providence and immortality. The rise of this more moderate freethinking represented an attempted reconciliation between providential Deism and revealed religion. The result was the extinction of any meaningful controversy by the middle of the eighteenth century in England.<sup>17</sup> Deism had evolved from a militant assault on Christianity to a minor theological peccadillo for an educated elite.

The history of Deism in early America took the exact opposite trajectory. For most of the eighteenth century, Deism was a generally private creed shared by a veritable “minority within a minority” of the wealthy and learned upper classes.<sup>18</sup> All forty-eight members of the American Philosophical Society in 1768 shared a belief in a transcendental God and an immortal soul and only Benjamin Franklin expressed doubts about the divinity of Christ.<sup>19</sup> Those who embraced Deism were decidedly not anti-Christian in tone like England’s major Deists. To the contrary, most colonial free thinkers claimed Jesus as “the first great deistic preacher” and expressed great admiration for his moral and spiritual teachings.<sup>20</sup> When early American Deists did espouse more critical principles, they generally did so in an oblique and subterranean fashion. Robert Beverley buried his latent criticism of revealed Christianity and its clerical priestcraft in his largely fictional depiction of Amerindian religion in his *History of Virginia* (1705).<sup>21</sup>

Far more direct was Benjamin Franklin who reprinted freethinking tracts in his *Pennsylvania Gazette*. Yet even Franklin did so for the avowed purpose of combating “dogmatism and superstition” rather than revealed Christianity per se.<sup>22</sup> Perhaps the only person to publicly identify himself as a Deist before the American Revolution was the Boston radical activist Thomas Young, who drafted much of the subsequently published *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man* in the 1750s.<sup>23</sup> In response to charges of irreligion,

he published a brief creed in *The Massachusetts Spy* in November 1772. Young offered no clear affirmation of either divine providence or an after-life. Nonetheless, he claimed that his belief in one God and His injunction “To do justly, and to love mercy and to walk humbly” (quoting Micah 6:8) comprised the core tenets of Christianity and that his more orthodox critics should leave off quibbling over “Paul, Cephas, Luther and Calvin; and put on charity.”<sup>24</sup> Fairly uncommon to begin with, Deism in colonial British America was decidedly moderate and accommodating to the larger Christian milieu.

In the years after independence, however, that began to change. The Revolutionary struggle had unleashed radical impulses in society and religion as well as politics, and the first evidence of this in the theological domain came in 1784 when Ethan Allen, the hero of Fort Ticonderoga and revolutionary leader of the Green Mountain Boys, published *Reason: The Only Oracle of Man*. Allen had drafted much of the work some twenty years earlier with Thomas Young (Young supplied the theology, Allen added biblical criticism and commentary). Allen rejected revelation (scriptural or otherwise), prophecies, miracles, and divine providence as well as such specifically Christian doctrines as the trinity, original sin, and the need for atonement.<sup>25</sup> Despite its radicalism, Allen’s screed attracted few followers. Very few copies ever circulated and its cumbersome style kept readers at bay. Indeed, Allen’s lengthy tome had little impact other than raising the ire of the New England clergy and the specter of homegrown freethinking.

Militant Deism did find a popular spokesman in the following decade with the able pen of Thomas Paine. The legendary author of *Common Sense* brought the same militancy and rhetorical flair to the struggle for Deism that he had for independence in the first volume of his *Age of Reason* (1794). Paine lambasted the superstitions of Christianity and vilified the priestcraft that supported it. Miracles, prophecies, and the incarnation and divinity of Christ were ridiculed, as was almost every other received Christian doctrine. More than simply irrational, Christianity was the last great obstacle to the coming secular chiliad, the Age of Reason. The whole “Christian theory,” he charged, was “little else than the idolatry of the ancient mythologists, accommodated to the purposes of power and revenue.” It remained to “reason and philosophy to abolish the amphibious fraud.”<sup>26</sup> Only when it was vanquished could human happiness and perfectibility be achieved. Paine’s impact was due as much to the punchy power of his



prose as the extreme radicalism of his views, as evidenced by this denunciation of the Old Testament:

Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind. . . .<sup>27</sup>

Paine was hardly less critical of the New Testament. Even his statement on the immortality of the soul was expressed as a mere “hope.” Militant Deism had arrived in early America with a bang.

His good friend Elihu Palmer fanned the flame that Paine sparked. Palmer, a former Baptist minister, traveled along the Atlantic seaboard lecturing audiences large and small about the truths of natural religion as well as the absurdities of revealed Christianity and the clerical priestcraft that supported them. A skilled biblical casuist, Palmer exposed the irrationality of Christianity and its debased moral principles in *Principles of Nature* (1801). Like Paine, Palmer hurled invective at traditional Christian doctrines like the atonement of original sin by the sacrifice of Christ: “To teach mankind virtue, they are to be presented with the example of murder; to render them happy, it is necessary to exhibit innocence in distress.”<sup>28</sup> A radical feminist and abolitionist, Palmer found the scriptures filled with an ethical code of intolerance and vengeful cruelty in sharp contrast to the benevolent humanitarianism of his own rational creed. Palmer spread the word in two Deist newspapers he edited, *The Temple of Reason* (1800–1801) and *The Prospect* (1803–1805). By the time he died in 1806, Palmer had founded Deist societies in several cities, including New York, Philadelphia, and Baltimore.<sup>29</sup>

Organized Deism did not survive Palmer’s demise. In fact, the Revolution had sparked a wave of evangelical revival that swept across the new republic.<sup>30</sup> In retrospect it is clear that the militant Deism of Paine and Palmer never really threatened mainstream Protestantism in early America. But that was not the way many orthodox divines saw it. In the years after Paine and Palmer began spreading their message, many ministers (particularly in New England) angrily denounced the growing menace of godless Deism, French-inspired Atheism, and revolutionary

and conspiratorial “illuminatism.” These charges took on an increasingly shrill and partisan edge, so much so that they became a campaign issue in the presidential election of 1800, which several clergymen depicted as a choice between the Federalist Patriot John Adams and the Francophile anti-Christian Thomas Jefferson.

### *The Founders*

If nothing else, the foregoing demonstrates that there were at least some Deists among the founding generation. More than merely a polemicist, Thomas Paine served as a secretary in the Continental Congress, while Ethan Allen was one of the most important revolutionary leaders in Vermont. Moreover, both publicly championed radical critiques of revealed Christianity every bit as militant as that of Blount, Collins, or Toland. To their number might be added Governor Stephen Hopkins of Rhode Island and Philip Freneau, the founding editor of the Jeffersonian *National Gazette*. A fairly plausible case could even be made for Virginia Governor Edmund Randolph who served as attorney general and secretary of state in the first two Washington administrations.

Despite their radicalism and prominence, however, the presence of these Deist founders will simply not support the claim that the founding was a purely Enlightened affair grounded in skeptical misgivings about revealed Christianity. First of all, they represent a tiny fraction of those leaders active in the politics of the early Republic, the vast bulk of whom were thoroughly orthodox in their religious lives. As Stephen Marini has shown, “a disproportionately large number of religiously active men served in the new nation’s constituent assemblies,” a pattern replicated in the ratifying conventions of the Federal Constitution.<sup>31</sup> Far more critically, however, their radical Deism had no impact on the imbrication of religion and politics in the new nation. By any measure, that imbrication was quite extensive. Like the Continental Army, the Congresses of the central government were routinely served by chaplains who just as routinely proclaimed days of prayer and thanksgiving. Many state governments continued to support church establishments and demanded professions of faith from potential officeholders. Most even included “preambulary references to God.”<sup>32</sup> For that matter, clergymen and lay church elders were hardly a rarity in the political councils of both nation and states. Hence Marini’s conclusion that “in a host of way” in the early Republic “the church served

as a school for politics.”<sup>33</sup> The case for an Enlightened founding in fundamental tension with traditional Christianity will simply not rest on the slender foundation of a handful of freethinking radicals.

It is precisely because of this weakness that those who argue for a purely secular Enlightened founding seek to claim the A-list founders. Although still a tiny fraction of those involved in the creation of the American Republic, these figures were arguably the six most critical actors in the political establishment of the nation. If it can be argued, as Brooke Allen has claimed, that these men’s “religious views really differed very little from Paine’s, if at all,” and that those views informed their policies and practices, then a tenable case could be made for an Enlightened founding shorn of most Christian moorings.<sup>34</sup> If Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Adams, and Thomas Jefferson were all Deists of the militant stripe, even surreptitiously, then surely the argument for the centrality of revealed Religion to early American politics must be doubted.

Of these founders, the case for Alexander Hamilton’s Deism is the weakest. Hamilton was noticeably devout in his youth and remained so throughout his college years. His piety certainly seemed to lag during his active years in politics, but there are no instances of him criticizing revealed Christianity or expressing freethinking principles in any of his voluminous writings or correspondence. Later in his life, especially after the death of his son Philip in a duel, he became quite religious again, regularly leading his family in prayer and attempting to organize a national “Christian Constitutional Society.” Although a consistent spokesman for Enlightened principles in politics, the sole evidence adduced for his Deism seems to be an adulterous affair as secretary of the treasury and his nonattendance at church through much of his twenties and thirties.<sup>35</sup> Obviously, neither a sinner nor a lapsed Christian does a Deist make.

The evidence of James Madison as a Deist is hardly more substantial than that for Hamilton. Madison too was a pious youth and spent a year reading theology—among other subjects—with John Witherspoon after his graduation from Princeton. Like Hamilton, he showed few signs of deep devotion during his active years in public life. Madison did not represent himself as a champion of public religion. Yet he did, albeit reluctantly, urge public days of prayer and thanksgiving as president. He also produced not a single page in defense of Deism or in opposition to Christian doctrine or revelation. The sole evidence for his Deism comes from his efforts on behalf of religious disestablishment in Virginia in the

1780s and in the First Amendment to the Constitution. The implication here seems to be that Madison sought to build what Jefferson called a “wall of separation” between church and state, and that the only possible motive for such an effort was an attempt to insulate an Enlightened republic from the baleful effects of religious dogma and superstition. Yet as Stephen Botein argued in the case of the Federal Constitution, the motivation behind “so secular a document” was an attempt to “forestall criticism from sectarians fearful of oppression by a national religious establishment.”<sup>36</sup> Daniel Dreisbach has shown that the same logic applied to disestablishment in Virginia. Far from a Madisonian urge to separate church and state, the political impetus behind the legislation came from dissenting evangelical churches that feared a revived Anglican establishment and sought to create a “flexible church-state model that fosters cooperation between religious interests and the civil state.”<sup>37</sup> As for the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment, Donald Drakeman has demonstrated that Madison’s role as draftsman has been vastly exaggerated, and that those who took the lead in that endeavor sought to preclude a federal establishment rather than erect a wall of separation.<sup>38</sup> Madison may not have been a very fervent or orthodox believer, but there is simply no convincing evidence that he was a Deist.

The Deism of George Washington rests on an equally slender evidentiary base, although a bit more tantalizing. Notoriously private and stoic in his mien, there is little clear evidence of Washington’s religious convictions. Although he attended church regularly as president and enjoined religious services on his soldiers, his church going in private life was intermittent and he was never seen to take communion or kneel at the name of Jesus in prayer (a traditional part of the Anglican liturgy). While his writings and correspondence are replete with references to God and Providence and are sprinkled with scriptural phrases, scholars have strained to find references to Jesus Christ. It is at least possible that Washington’s refusal to commemorate or refer to Jesus was because he doubted his divinity. Even so, that would make him a Socinian or Unitarian rather than a Deist. There is certainly no evidence of anything distinctly Deist in his writings. His 1783 Circular to the States specifically praised “the pure and benign light of Revelation” as a principal cause of “the blessings of society,” something no self-respecting Deist would do.<sup>39</sup> In his first inaugural, he explicitly offered his adoration and “supplications to that Almighty Being who rules over the universe” and whose “providential aid” had been so remarkably conspicuous in “every step” by which the American people had

progressed in “the character of an independent nation.”<sup>40</sup> Most famously, his farewell address included an encomium to religious belief as a necessary bulwark to social and moral order: “reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”<sup>41</sup> Far from advocating a strict separation of church and state, Washington “consistently sought to use governmental authority to encourage religion and to foster the religious character of the American people.”<sup>42</sup> If Washington did harbor Deist beliefs, they evidently had no impact on his public actions or pronouncements as commander in chief or chief executive of the new nation.

In stark contrast to Washington, Thomas Jefferson left a vivid corpus of heterodox religious opinions in letters and writings. By his collegiate years, Jefferson had become a veritable free thinker, rejecting the divinity of Christ and the biblical accounts of miracles as superstitious priestcraft. A lifelong reductive materialist of the most rigid sort, he considered talk of immaterial or spiritual entities mere nonsense; “to say that the human soul, angels, god, are immaterial, is to say they are nothings.”<sup>43</sup> Yet while Jefferson’s God may have been material, he was decidedly not mechanistic. Like most Newtonians of his day, Jefferson did not believe that the laws of nature were intrinsic to the universe any more than motion was inherent to matter. Jefferson’s cosmos required a superintending Deity to intervene and hold chaos at bay.<sup>44</sup> Jefferson also believed in an afterlife with rewards and punishments and deeply admired the moral teachings of Jesus. This constellation of beliefs was fully consonant with the moderate Deism of the latter English free thinkers, and it is quite likely that for much of his life Jefferson would have accepted that label.<sup>45</sup> That certainly changed in the 1790s, however, when he became acquainted with the person and writings of the famed chemist, political radical, and Unitarian minister Joseph Priestley. From Priestley he learned that he had been a Christian all along.<sup>46</sup> Jesus never claimed divinity and taught the same materialistic worldview Priestley found in the Old Testament; according to Priestley, the immaterialism and spiritualist doctrines of the New Testament were intrusions of Platonic mumbo-jumbo in the ensuing centuries.<sup>47</sup> Although Priestley may have been a theological radical, he was certainly no Deist. His support for the French Revolution was predicated on his reading of the prophecies contained in the Book of Revelation.<sup>48</sup> Jefferson embraced his newfound Unitarian creed with great ardor and began compiling a redaction of the genuine teachings of Christ shorn of their subsequent Platonic trappings. His second iteration of this project—“The Life and

Morals of Jesus”—comprised forty-six pages of “the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man.” These teachings were the core doctrines of the most radically and truly reformed Christianity, he insisted, “such as were professed and acted on by the *unlettered* apostles, the Apostolic fathers, and the Christians of the 1st century.”<sup>49</sup> So obviously authentic and true was the Unitarian reformation of Christianity that Jefferson never doubted all Americans before too long would adopt it. In his own mind, at least, the mature Thomas Jefferson was a Christian and one of the few who truly understood the teachings of its founder.

If anything, John Adams was even less orthodox than Jefferson. A Unitarian since his adolescence, Adams had early kept company with all manner of free thinkers from Deists and skeptics to outright unbelievers. He never accepted the materialism of Jefferson and Priestly, but neither did he embrace the immaterialism of Jonathan Edwards or George Berkeley. Adams’s usual position on most mysteries—metaphysical or theological—was a skepticism that alternated between fideism and agnosticism. The immortality of the soul seemed beyond reason and demonstration, but he humbly accepted the doctrine nonetheless. The divine purpose behind the biblical account of creation was not only inscrutable but also palpably inconceivable: “suppose an eternal self-existent Being existing from Eternity, possessed of infinite Wisdom, Goodness and Power, in absolute Solitude, Six thousand Years ago, conceiving the benevolent project of creating a Universe.” Adams could find no rational purpose behind such a project, but he accepted it anyway.<sup>50</sup> But he drew the line at the doctrines of limited atonement and eternal damnation of the reprobate. Such a God would be a sadistic tyrant and Adams would have no part of such belief. “Howl, Snarl, bite, Ye Calvinistick! Ye Athanasian Divines, if You will,” he wrote to his old friend Jefferson. “Ye will say, I am no Christian: I say Ye are no Christian: and there the Account is balanced.”<sup>51</sup> Adams, then, was a Universalist as well as a Unitarian who, like the Reverend Charles Chauncy of Boston, believed that a purely benevolent and unitary God would ultimately save all men. But he also decidedly considered himself a Christian and thought that the “general Principles of Christianity” were every bit as “eternal and immutable, as the Existence and Attributes of God.”<sup>52</sup> For all his heterodoxy and skepticism, Adams was no radical Deist critic of revealed Christianity. “Without Religion this World would be Something not fit to be mentioned in polite Company,” he declaimed, adding as if the point were not obvious, “I mean Hell.”<sup>53</sup>