

Deism in America

Deism spread from England to America where it contributed to the emerging spirit of scientific inquiry and democracy. Most of the leading patriots, including Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Monroe, and Madison, were deists to some degree, although many kept their sympathies private for political reasons. Religious references in political documents used popular deist phrases, such as "the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God", placed by Jefferson in the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence.

Benjamin Franklin (1706-1790), after travelling in England and meeting with scientists there, founded the American Philosophical Society (APS) in Philadelphia. Dedicated to advancing science in America, this society naturally became a hotbed of deism.

Franklin, of course, was the leading statesman in America and famous throughout Europe for his science, wit, wisdom, and celebrity. During two decades spent in England as the unofficial ambassador of the colonies, Franklin absorbed liberal religious ideas and contributed to the ferment of freethought and republicanism. His many friends there included Joseph Priestly, David Hume, and the young Thomas Paine.

Although Franklin dabbled in many religious ideas in his lifetime, he was basically a deist of the early school. His stated creed, similar to Cherbury's, read as follows: "I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this."

Franklin regarded morality as independent of religious belief. He supported ministers of different denominations who preached good works. He also believed in religious diversity and contributed money to help found the first Unitarian chapel in London and the first Jewish congregation in Philadelphia.

The focus of the American Philosophical Society was science, and in the deistic mode of the day, the members viewed science as revealing the divine plan. The new president after the death of Franklin was David Rittenhouse, America's most famous astronomer, who measured the distance from the earth to the sun. His planetarium was the pride of the society.

Another prominent member was Dr. Benjamin Rush, surgeon general of the Continental Army and the most influential physician in the new United States. Rush was an innovator although his favorite treatments, bloodletting and purging with calomel, are now discredited. Dr. Rush founded the first free dispensary in

the U.S. and campaigned for more humane treatment of the mentally ill.

But the most famous APS member, besides Franklin, was Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson regarded the philosophers and scientists in the society as his closest circle of friends. He was APS president after Rittenhouse.

APS society members were among the first to condemn slavery. Dr. Rush helped found the first antislavery society. Rittenhouse spoke of how happy were the inhabitants of other planets, none of whom were "doomed to endless slavery, by us in America, merely because their bodies may be disposed to reflect or absorb the rays of light, in a way different from ours."

However, Dr. Rush and many other society members did not favor integration of the freed Africans into Euro-American society. Philosophically, they held as certain that all people were equal, because all are descended from Adam and Eve. However, they also believed that each race was probably designed for its own place in the world. (Paradoxically, the white Americans seemed to be designed to take over the continent from the American natives.) Also, there was a suspicion that the tropical climate of Africa may have weakened its natives. The hope of the early abolitionists was that the slaves could be returned to Africa, or perhaps given their own country in America.

Dr. Rush proposed a theory that the black skin of Africans was the result of leprosy on the home continent, passed on through generations. He hoped to find a cure to turn the skin white again. Meanwhile, he warned whites not to couple with blacks, so as not to risk infection.

Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826), who owned over a hundred slaves, tried repeatedly to abolish slavery or at least prevent it from spreading. In the Virginia legislature, he introduced a bill to make it easier for owners to free their slaves, but it failed to pass. He tried to insert a line in the Declaration of Independence, condemning the King for allowing the slave trade, but it was removed. In Congress he wrote legislation prohibiting slavery in any new state, but it failed. As president, he prohibited slavery in the Louisiana territory, and finally pushed a bill through Congress outlawing further slave trade with Africa.

Jefferson, the great defender of religious freedom, stands out as a freethinker among the founding patriots. Too liberal for even Unitarianism, which he admired, Jefferson remained unchurched. "I am of a sect by myself, as far as I know." Jefferson's philosophy was influenced by the books of Montaigne, Bolingbroke, Newton, Francis Bacon and Priestly. He followed science enthusiastically and served as president of the APS.

Jefferson admired Jesus as a great moral reformer, superior to the classical

philosophers because he emphasized the duty to love others. In *The Life and Morals of Jesus*, Jefferson rewrote the Gospel stories with the miracles removed.

Jefferson's political enemies accused him of atheism, which was false, and of keeping a slave mistress, which was true. Sally Hemmings, half-sister of Jefferson's deceased wife, was Jefferson's house servant the last 38 years of his life. Jefferson never acknowledged their many children, but did give them their freedom.

As a deist, Jefferson held that God created the universe and sustained it through fixed natural laws. He also felt that morality would be rewarded in an afterlife, but rejected the doctrine of punishment in hell. He did write that America should expect God's punishment for slavery.

Jefferson and his two political protégés, James Madison and James Monroe, were largely responsible for the guarantees of religious freedom in the Constitution. Jefferson coined the term 'wall of separation between church and state', and wrote Virginia's statute of Religious Freedom. Madison wrote the First Amendment and later tried to prevent the hiring of Congressional chaplains as contrary to the 'religious establishment' clause.

Jefferson modified his religious views after corresponding with Joseph Priestly (1733-1804), one of the founders of Unitarianism in both England and America. Following Priestly, Jefferson decided that orthodox Christianity distorted the original message of Jesus.

Priestly, a clergyman, outlined his deism in a treatise called *A History of the Corruptions of Christianity*, arguing that "the orthodox doctrines of the deity of Christ, original sin, atonement, and immortality of an immaterial soul (are) corruptions of Christianity, imported from the speculative metaphysics of pre-Christian Greece". To Priestly, nature is the best scripture for learning about God. Miracles are unnecessary because the original creation was perfect. He felt that scientists could make some assumptions based on religious givens. For instance, he believed spontaneous generation was impossible because nature was created perfect and needed nothing new.

Priestly gained fame as an amateur scientist when he discovered oxygen, which he called 'dephlogisticated air'. Priestly and others believed that phlogiston was the elemental substance in fire, and oxygen was air with the phlogiston removed. Lavoisier renamed it Oxygen. Encouraged by Benjamin Franklin, Priestly wrote *The History and Present State of Electricity*, an account which included Franklin's experiments.

Priestly angered many in England by sympathizing with the American

revolution. He also supported the republicanism of the French Revolution, and advocated abolishing the privileges of the British Crown and Church. On Bastille Day, 1781, a mob set fire to his library, destroying his books and scientific apparatus. He fled to America in 1784, at the age of 60.

Priestly had long been a member of the APS and visited the Society soon after his arrival. Jefferson and the other members were enthusiastic about Priestley's religious ideas, which became the standard in the society. Jefferson said that Priestly was the only clergyman he was comfortable with.

Many American deists, including John Adams, felt that the masses needed superstitious religion to discourage immorality. Abstract religious ideas, though philosophically correct, were too difficult for the common man. Other APS members hoped through scientific education to eliminate superstition in America by spreading natural and moral religion. Yet most of the members were from the upper classes. The one exception was Thomas Paine (1737-1809), who was rarely in attendance because he was living in France.

Paine became the greatest of American freethinkers when he published *The Age of Reason*, the most popular freethought book ever. With a sharp wit attuned to his own working-class background, Paine was able to inspire many thousands.

Paine's career had already included service in three great democratic movements. A native of England, Thomas was encouraged by Franklin to come to America. He arrived just in time to write the pamphlet, *Common Sense*, most credited with whipping up enthusiasm for the Revolution.

After the war, Paine returned to England, where over a million commoners read his second classic, *The Rights of Man*, which defended the democratic ideals of the French Revolution. In deist fashion, Paine believed that the creator placed in the nature of humankind certain rights that could not be removed, including life, liberty, freedom of conscience, and the use of property. Jefferson placed a similar deist clause in the preamble of the Constitution.

Fleeing an alarmed British Aristocracy, Paine next arrived in France where he was voted a citizen and elected to the National Convention. Serving with Condorcet on the Constitution committee, Paine influenced the inclusion of a 'Rights of Man' statement. But he lost favor when he spoke out against the increasing violence and tried to prevent the execution of the king. After writing the first half of *The Age of Reason*, Paine was arrested.

Ironically, the American ambassador, who neglected to defend Paine and may even have encouraged his imprisonment, was himself a prominent deist. Gouverneur Morris (1752-1816), who had distinguished himself as a New York

delegate to the Continental Congress and later chaired the committee drafting the Constitution, became a well-known champion of natural and moral religion. But he was also an aristocrat who detested Paine's radical democracy.

Paine escaped the guillotine only because the guards marked his door on the wrong side. He was released after intervention by the new American ambassador, his fellow deist and friend James Monroe. Paine then finished and published *Age of Reason* and returned to America.

Like Voltaire, Paine believed that religion could only be saved by making it rational and removing the myths. *Age of Reason* began with a short deist statement, "I believe in one God and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life". It then proceeded to expose the inconsistencies of the Bible and the sordid history of Christianity. Paine showed how the new spirit of science led to natural religion. Then he raised ethics over dogma in his great statement of moral religion, "I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow creatures happy."

America did not welcome Paine's return. Falsely vilified as an atheist by the clergy, Paine was so hated that strangers spat on him and stagecoaches refused him passage. Of all his patriot friends, only Jefferson, then President, openly welcomed him. But *Age of Reason* sold millions and spread across America even to the frontier. Paine's courage and his book made him the foremost hero of American "infidels".