# America’s National Origin Myth

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George Orwell noted that totalitarian regimes are not concerned with uncovering (that is: elucidating) actual history; they are solely concerned with creating (that is: fabricating and/or obfuscating) pseudo-history—usually, some sort of hyper-romanticized national origin myth—in order to suit their interests. A gilded legacy—no matter how farcical—is employed to rationalize a glorious destiny (as defined by whatever ideological agenda proponents happen to be touting). We encounter this phenomenon around the world; and across all of history.

In his classic “The Crowd”, Gustav Le Bon noted that “the masses have never thirsted after Truth. They turn from evidence that is not to their taste, preferring to deify error if [that] error seduces them. Whoever can supply them with illusions is easily their master. Whoever attempts to destroy their illusions is always their victim.”

One might re-word this as follows: The masses are unconcerned with objective truth. They tend to reject any evidence that does not comport with their preferred worldview, opting instead to sanctify falsehoods that suit them. Whoever supplies them with palatable illusions becomes their hero; anyone who debunks those illusions becomes the villain.

Niccolo Machiavelli—and Leo Strauss after him—did not see this as a necessarily bad thing; as they recognized it could be used to the advantage of those in power (that is: to serve a purpose). This is about engineering a false consciousness; or, as Noam Chomsky phrased it, manufacturing consent. It involves what Carl Jung dubbed a palliative “psychic epidemic” (whereby we are our own worst enemies). Such collective psychosis (replete with mass mania and mass hysteria) is based on a delusive perception of ourselves and our place in the world; though one that satisfies certain needs.

False consciousness involves a widespread—one might say, collective—misapprehension; and it is often constructed en masse. It is rarely arbitrary; and is often BY DESIGN. The catch is that the masses are typically unwitting participants. After all, for false consciousness to work, it cannot be SEEN AS false. (This is especially true when it is COLLECTIVE false memory.)

The masses, then, must be kept in a state of (smug) obliviousness—that is: heedlessly immersed in chronic delusion. After all, the point is to sustain gratification. This is accomplished by deploying an array of psychogenic triggers (having to do with golden ages, glory days, and pending rewards). Such triggers are conveyed via a memetic vehicle: a compelling narrative replete with flash-points—both etiological and eschatological. When designed well, this memetic regime engenders a siege mentality…while instilling false pride (in a hallowed legacy) and false hope (in an enticing destiny). The key is that such delusion is CHOREOGRAPHED. The illusions offer that which the existentially disoriented crave: a sense of direction / purpose. The appeal lies in the false certainty conferred by the (quasi-plausible) illusions being proffered. The lesson: No more need to inquire; all the answers to your questions have already been figured out.

But what of the obduracy of the ideologue? For those smitten with a sanctified narrative, sticking to one’s guns becomes a source of (false) pride; thereby serving a psychical purpose. It is also a sign to one’s brethren that one is committed to the cause; thereby serving a social purpose. To abandon one’s deeply

held belief would not only lead to a bruised ego, it would come off as a kind of betrayal to fellow believers; thereby jeopardizing the in-group acceptance on which one has come to depend. Hence committing to a narrative is not only a personal issue (saving face), it is a tribal issue (retaining a much-needed support network).

The utility of a sanctified narrative is also at stake; as it can be used to justify one's favored worldview; and thus one's political agenda. So one will stick to one's guns even in the face of an alluvion of countervailing evidence. (The tendency to dig in our heals when certain dogmas are debunked is known as the "backfire effect".) Such obstinacy is made possible by the illusory truth effect, whereby the intensity with which one professes one's beliefs seems to validate those beliefs. Hence one will be snookered by one's own biases; and so see only what one wants to see. (We are often convinced that what we believe is true due to the ardor with which we believe it.) We might recall that blinkered thinking does not announce itself as blinkered thinking—just as delusions aren't recognized as delusions by those harboring them. The point of an illusion is that it doesn't SEEM to be an illusion.

Another way that illusion is sustained is by having a utility that people would much rather not do without. In other words, the illusion serves an important purpose. In such cases, utility is mistaken for veracity. For right-wing ideologues, America's national origin myth (that is: the proposition that the U.S. was founded as a Christian nation) buttresses their current political agenda. So they run with it.

To ensure the subsistence of sacrosanct dogmas, ideologues often peddle self-serving pseudo-histories. When the genesis of a nation is the issue, the ideology at stake is typically some form of national Exceptionalism with a theocratic bent.

National origin myths are useful, as they imbue the consecrated ideology with a veneer of legitimacy. The purpose of myth, after all, is not to explicate what literally happened; it is to notify the audience what ***it is supposed to believe*** happened…so that whatever they are exhorted to believe is given the appearance of justification for a wider audience. When this is done successfully, the distinction between what is actually true and what people decide should be ***treated as*** "true" is often lost. {1}

The canard that "America was founded as a [Judeo-]Christian nation" is a case in point. At first blush, this sounds plausible; yet those who make the claim are wildly off-base. The claim is erroneous not only in terms of historical fact, but in terms of the basic principles of liberal democracy.

Alas. This popular trope continues to enjoy prominence in American discourse amongst those who fashion it as a form of flattery. The myth that the U.S. is a "Christian nation" (and that the Constitutional Republic was somehow based on Mosaic law) has become so fully ingrained in the American consciousness, it is now rather difficult to dislodge.

Many (most?) Americans are blissfully unaware of their own mythology. So they proceed in errancy, deluded by the self-ingratiating—and intoxicating—illusion that their nation is some sort of "shining city upon a hill", put on some sort of cosmic pedestal by divine ordinance. This conceit has various implications in contemporary geo-politics—chief among them: a view of the exalted nation-State whereby it has no qualms arrogating to itself entitlements that it would never accord to anyone else. Such nationalism entails that "our" nation-State, unlike all others, has been endowed, by Providence, with "manifest destiny". The belief is that it enjoys the imprimatur of the Creator of the Universe; and thus carte blanche to do whatever it sees fit (in order to promote its own interests).

What might be dubbed the "doing god's work" syndrome is on full display with super-patriotism: an ersatz patriotism that is born of jingoism rather than civic-minded-ness. Genuine patriotism lay in possibility. It

involves loving what one's country COULD BE, not necessarily what is currently is. It wants to make the object of its affection better; which requires (often brutally candid) critical self-assessment. With genuine patriotism, there is no fetishism, no delusive thinking, no need to re-write history.

Super-patriotism rather different. It is, as Samuel Johnson put it, the last refuge of scoundrels. Johnson was not referring to ALL patriotism. He was referring to the FAUX patriotism of those who sympathized with the monarchical ideal (to wit: the British crown). Such super-patriotism, today as back then, operates in a pathologically hubristic manner. The thinking is: Any malfeasance is to be tolerated—even lauded—so long as it was committed by those who were waving the flag with sufficient vigor, and proclaiming love of country with enough ardor. In sum: Super-patriotism is about pageantry, not about principle.

There is an undeniable appeal in theocratic thinking; as one can get two authoritarian approaches to societal governance (a political system and a religious system) in a one-package deal. It's mentally lazy, yet stupendously convenient. Two sanctified regimens in one! Hence the Holy Roman Empire…as well as Nazism in Germany, Revisionist Zionism in Israel, Stalinism in Russia, Maoism in China, Juche in North Korea, Wahhabism in Saudi Arabia, Khomeinism in Iran, and—yes—Christian Dominionism in the United States. Hence the undeniable appeal of the delusion—so ardently touted by Christian Nationalists across America—that their Republic was founded as "a Christian nation".

As is usually the case, Revisionists are captivated by–and so married to–a compelling narrative that serves their ideological agenda. Consequently, when it comes to cultivating an understanding of the circumstances in which the vaunted "Founders" laid the groundwork for the American Republic, we find ourselves navigating a morass of obscurantism and confabulation.

In a letter to his friend (William Roscoe) in 1820, Thomas Jefferson noted that we mustn't ever be "afraid to follow Truth wherever it may lead, nor to tolerate any error–so long as reason is left free to combat it." It is in this spirit–the spirit of open and free inquiry–that any worthwhile analysis proceeds. Evaluate the evidence, and let the chips fall where they may.

The founding of the U.S. was not in any way predicated on Pauline Christology. This fact is obvious to anyone who has a firm grasp of the relevant history. However, the well-varnished myth of America's [Judeo-]Christian founding is still taken seriously across large swaths of the country simply because it hits the right notes for its target audience.

Given the vested interest in sustaining this fiction, it is no surprise that True Believers become incensed when the historiography undergirding the claim is debunked. How, then, shall we address this?

# Background:

We might start by asking: From where does such a mis-impression come? One possibility is the fact that the first settlers in New England were Puritans (read: theocratically-minded Christian fundamentalists). Perhaps some are thinking of the first settlers of Mary-land (centered at Saint Mary's City; named after Henrietta Maria of France), who were hidebound Roman Catholic theocrats. In any case, to conclude from such episodes that the establishment of the United States was predicated on doctrinal fealty–to any particular creed–is a gargantuan non-sequitur. Suffice to say: John Winthrop's navel-gazing asseverations played no role in the vision of a new Republic put forth in Philadelphia during the summer of 1787.

Why is this topic so rife with controversy? As with so many other national origin myths, nescient Americans cling to a vaunted legacy that is more farce than fact; but it has utility for those propounding it.

When ideologues encounter anything that threatens their dogmatic edifice, they tend to dig in their heals. And so it goes here: Even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary, delusive Christians insist that the United States was founded as a [Judeo-]Christian nation; and so feel at east pushing their religious agenda in the present day. Claims of divine ordinance are USUALLY at the root of Exceptionalism. To reiterate: A cherished myth can be stupendously resilient, especially when it serves an important purpose. By positing Providential provenance, the nation is granted license to do whatever it sees fit. In this case, hubris operates under the aegis of "Manifest Destiny".

So by dispelling the myths surrounding America's founding, a key buttress of American Exceptionalism is eliminated. Shorn of Providentialism, Manifest Destiny is deprived of its primary ideological fulcrum; and that is a problem for those who covet that leverage.

It is not for nothing this historiography is gilded. The notion of divine sanction gives license to impresarios of domestic and foreign policy to do whatever they see fit, as even the most odious act of imperialism is simply seen as doing god's work. And who can argue with that? With the (purported) imprimatur of the godhead, anything goes. Without this rationalization, though, one is forced to fall back on (universal) moral principles. And that is the last thing the theocratic-minded want.

Even after setting the record straight on this matter, large swaths of the American public still subscribe to Christianized myths about America's founding. Take, for instance, George Washington's fabled "prayer" at Valley Forge during the most dire winter of the war for American independence. This tale was almost certainly apocryphal, as the celebrated general actually commissioned the unabashedly anti-religious Deist, Thomas Paine to do a reading. (Washington knew Paine's soaring oratory and passion would increase morale amongst the soldiers, and galvanize the beleaguered cause during a grueling winter. He was correct.) In no uncertain terms, Washington attributed his soldiers' inspiration to Paine's oratory.

So what of the alleged "PRAYER"? The farcical account seems to have been concocted by Mason Weems, the same man responsible for the tale about Washington chopping down the cherry tree ("I cannot tell a lie"). Other apocryphal tales soon abounded–from Paul Revere's midnight warning, "The British are coming!" (many townsfolk thought of THEMSELVES as British) to the pilgrims breaking bread with Native Americans for "Thanksgiving". In Americans' eagerness to romanticize their heritage, they are apt to find heroes in the most ironic of places (as with, say, the bold "last stand" at the Alamo, by a cadre of white Texans who wanted to keep slavery legal).

When it came to the establishment of the new Republic, one might ask: Which of the founding principles, exactly, was grounded in the Abrahamic creed? The answer: none. {2} All the key insights of which the Founders availed themselves–and boldly proffered in the face of countervailing historic precedent–would have been available to them just the same had Judaism or Christianity never existed.

So if not doctrinal fealty, from whence did the Founder's ideals come? The "separation of powers" was based on Montesquieu's 1748 "The Spirit Of The Laws", a work that explicitly called for the elimination of three facets of government: feudal lords, the aristocracy, and the clergy. For Montesquieu recognized that democracy could not abide so long as feudalism, a moneyed elite, or religious doctrine held sway in the affairs of State.

We might recall that the ENTIRE ENLIGHTENMENT was, at root, a process of secularization; and was in no way dependent on religionism. Indeed, the Enlightenment zeitgeist–of which all the Founders were an integral part–was secular through and through (which is to say: it was a matter of emancipating thought

from religion-based dogmatism). Thomas Paine corroborated this in 1776 (during the lead-up to the American revolution) when he wrote "Common Sense". It was by recourse to our innate moral intuitions that the case for independence could be–and indeed WAS–made. (This point was even clearer with Paine's "American Crisis" essays…and clearer still with his "Rights Of Man".) The notion that humans are all equipped with a moral compass goes back the ancient notion of "genius": the Latin term for the divine nature that inheres in any given individual. And so it went with Immanuel Kant's exaltation of "the divine law within" each and every one of us (an idea he articulated in 1784 in a landmark essay).

The Declaration of Independence says nothing about religion having a role to play in government. The signatories swore not to a deity, as supplicants; instead they swore upon their sacred honor, as men of integrity. The drafters of the U.S. Constitution felt so strongly about this that they deliberately left any mention of a deity out of the document. Religion PER SE is mentioned only to make it clear that, in a genuine democracy, it was incumbent upon the State to never promote any given creed…while ensuring that each person was free to practice however he liked (of his own accord). Thus the Founders of the new Republic were focused on–more than anything else–ensuring that each individual was at liberty to conduct himself according to the dictates of his own conscience.

By "self-evident" Truths, Jefferson was clear he didn't mean obvious to everyone, but something that would be self-evident primarily to those whose minds were unclouded by superstition (that is: those who were not held captive by dogmatism, addled by ingrained biases, or stymied by ignorance). In other words: Jefferson recognized that the axioms he put forth in his famous letter to the British crown would probably not be evident to those who were Reactionary. (He may just as well have said: "If you are overly doctrinal, this will probably NOT be obvious to you. For Freethinkers, this is plain to see.")

Jefferson was an avid reader of "natural law" theory, which had come from the School of Salamanca during the Renaissance. The idea was that ethics (specifically, rights and mandates for liberty) inhered in nature itself rather than having been issued (as decrees) from "on high". Such thinking was inspired by the new humanism, which found human dignity in the natural order rather than in holy writ. Inspiration for such thinking had come from Deists like Locke and Montesquieu, not from church doctrine (which was man-made). The ideation of a "natural order" could be found across the ancient world–from Egypt ("Ma'at") to China ("Tian-ming"). {13}

When surveying the historical record, we find that various articulations incorporated idiomatic expressions–phraseology that were standard in the lofty rhetoric of the period. This included locutions like "divine Author", "the Creator" / "our Creator", "the Almighty" / "Almighty God", "Nature's God", and–of course–simply "God". Such practice was nothing new; it went back to ancient Athens. Aristotle also referred to the gods in decidedly NON-theocratic ways; yet was ultimately concerned with the natural order of things.

In the Revolutionary precincts of the American colonies, when composing heightened exposition, it was fashionable to pay lip service to the moral messages found within what was the only relevant religion of the time (and thus the only one worth referencing). For American colonists, that happened to be Protestant Christianity. The vernacular of Christendom was employed because THAT was the narrative most known to the general audience. Consequently, it provided the most poignant language. Noticeably absent, though, where terms like "Christ", "Messiah", "resurrection", and "Holy Spirit"…or, for that matter, ANY terminology that was distinctly [Judeo-]Christian. There was no talk of miracles or of sin or of salvation (in the soteriological sense). There was never any mention of a trinity or of a crucifixion…let alone of vicarious redemption.

Speaking in grandiloquent Providential terms enabled one to abstract from–nay, transcend–phrasing that was indicative of a specific creed. No particular dogmatic system was ever endorsed. Soaring oratory and flamboyant rhetorical flourishes were typical of disquisition during this period–which is why we encounter

idiomatic expressions involving such things as “Providence” and “the better angels of our nature” during the 18th and 19th centuries.

When seeking to couch ideas in familiar terms, the Judeo-Christian idiom was the obvious choice. Savvy expositors at the time recognized this–which explains why we sporadically encounter locutions like “divine author”, “the Almighty”, “Our Creator”, etc. in their discourse. It comes as little surprise, then, that such locutions cropped up in the Founders’ disquisition.

Be that as it may, the Framers were adamant about extolling personal prerogative (viz. religiosity) even as they espoused such things as “Christian virtue”. (“Christian virtue” was a catch-all term for the canon of virtues associated with Jesus of Nazareth–such as kindness, temperance, and forbearance.) In the idiom of the time, describing someone as “Christian” or “religious” was a way of saying the person championed estimable values, and so could be counted on to conduct himself ethically.

So far as the Founders were concerned, to be “Christian” was simply to be an upstanding citizen. They used the term as more of a colloquialism than as a tribal designation. (It most certainly was not an endorsement of a specific doctrine.) The whole point was neutrality on the part of the State, which was to be categorically secular. It makes no sense to construe a prescription for anti-theocracy THEN as a clarion call for theocracy NOW.

The supposition that the locution, “good Christian” might have any connection to sacred doctrine is belied by the fact that so many self-proclaimed “Christians” have not qualified as “good Christians”…even as plenty of non-religious people have been referred to as “good Christians” over the generations. Such modish turns-of-phrase are germane to demotic language. Over the years, admirable people have been described in a host of ways–from “god fearing” to “true blue”. This is not to insinuate that morally upstanding people are either neurotic or azure.

At the time, such wording was prudent if for no other reason than it had profound resonance with the general populace. And it would CONTINUE to have resonance in certain circles long into 20th century. But for most of us now, this is no longer the case; as such vernacular seems antiquated. {12}

The metamorphosis of demotic language is a reminder that the meaning of some phrases fluctuates over time. And so it has with the qualifier, “Christian”, which–in political theater–has been used more colloquially than formally. When Franklin D. Roosevelt was asked about how he thought of himself, he responded: “A Christian, an American, and a Democrat in that order.” Yet his administration was characterized by ANYTHING BUT a doctrinaire Christian approach to governance…or by any religiosity AT ALL, for that matter. (His policy was impelled by a sense of compassion for the downtrodden, the primary trait with which Jesus of Nazareth was associated. He railed against avarice, which was considered a very “Christian” thing to do by most Americans. Had he been in the Far East, it would have been considered a very “Buddhist” thing to do.)

Roosevelt was not pushing anything remotely close to a “Christian” agenda as we might know it today, yet he fashioned himself a “Christian” above all else. So what’s going on here? Clearly, Roosevelt was using the term colloquially, not in an attempt to proselytize.

Even the most secular expositors are apt to do this. {4} Theodor Adorno's disquisition was the epitome of secularity. Nevertheless, he routinely made use of religiously-charged language for rhetorical effect. Oxford don, A.J. Ayer–an adamant atheist–was known for always saying Grace before dinner–invoking "god" and blessings and all the rest. Idiomatic expression has always played an integral role in eloquent speech. Shall we suppose Adorno and Ayer were giving ringing endorsements to fundamentalist Christianity?

When Karl Jung (who was not even a Christian) averred that "the soul is naturally Christian", he was obviously not referring to an adherence to specific doctrinal points. {7} Such colloquialisms eventually came to be somewhat of a cliché. As qualifiers, they were euphemisms for having a "tried and true" moral compass. They often simply meant "someone like us", which–in turn–meant "someone who can be trusted". To be Christian wasn't to be dogmatic or tribalistic; it was simply to be morally upstanding.

At the time of America's founding, whatever was considered an admirable character trait was often associated with being a "good Christian" (that is: hewing to virtues that were generally extolled throughout Christendom). The gist was that MORALITY MATTERS; not that it was necessary to be a Christian fundamentalist. In his inaugural address, George Washington illustrated this point, stating: "The foundation of our national policy is laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality." This was hardly a mandate for religious zeal. {12}

Whenever the Bible was cited by the Founding Fathers, it was invoked as a familiar literary source, not as a holy book to which all were beholden. Certain passages were quoted for didactic purposes (that is: simply because a largely Christian audience could relate to them). We might note, though, that rarely did any of those passages convey points that were necessarily–or distinctly–Judeo-Christian; they were usually making larger points that could have been made in other ways. (Good will toward one's fellow man can be conveyed using myriad allegorical digressions. For a Buddhist audience, references to Siddhartha Gautama would have been the prudent choice.)

Another example of how idioms change over time is the Enlightenment sense of "the pursuit of happiness". Said pursuit was more akin to an adjuration to pursue the good life (to live a life of virtue) than it was an invitation to avarice and cheap gratification. It was human excellence (what Aristotle referred to as "eudaemonia"), not the trappings of opulence, that such thinkers had in mind when they spoke of "happiness". {5}

This was the point of stipulating that the State must ensure the ability of every person to pursue "happiness". As one of the Founders, James Wilson put it: "The happiness of the society is the first law of government." John Adams reiterated the point: "The happiness of society is the end of government." Hence the U.S. Constitution's Preamble declares that the raison d'etre of the State is, in part, to ensure "the general welfare"–that is: to facilitate the commonweal, not to engender widespread gaiety. Hubris had nothing to do with it. (The notion that avaricious plutocrats are simply "pursuing happiness" as the Founders stipulated is absurd.)

And so it went with the metamorphosis of myriad popular locutions. This is a reminder that to convey a message, people simply employ different idioms at different times–based largely on resonance. In the 19th century, some men referred to their wives as their "rib"; and in much of the 20th century, women referred to a menstrual period as "the curse". Both are obsolete religious idioms. No sane person today holds that women are somehow derivatives of men or that menstruation is punishment for Eve's impertinence.

Rhetorical flourishes involving the Abrahamic deity were standard amongst Deists throughout the Enlightenment period–from Spinoza to Kant. But why the use of the above locutions as opposed to, say, Odin or Zeus? To reiterate: The geo-political context at the time was ENTIRELY that of Christendom. So

discourse was festooned with those turns of phrase, as they resonated most–be it in Elizabethan England (as with Biblical phrases in Shakespearian verse) or 18th-century Philadelphia. (I explore another prime case-study of such locution in footnote 4.)

It should come as no surprise, then, that in Enlightenment exposition, the Christian idiom was so prevalent. And so it went with the American Declaration of Independence, with the invocation of the DEISTIC "Nature's God" (as opposed to the Biblical god). The phraseology was in keeping with the zeitgeist. Regardless of the message, one was apt to use such locutions for rhetorical purposes if for no other reason than that people can RELATE TO that articulation. Deists like Franklin, Washington, Paine, Jefferson, Madison (and even liberal Christians like Adams and Hamilton) would have surely agreed that religious ideology played a negligible role in the formation of the fledgling American government. {8}

Ironically, Hamilton and Adams were Federalists–at the time, the political party most AGAINST putting so-called "states' rights" above centralized government. This would have positioned both men in diametrical opposition to the agenda of today's Christian revisionists, who's fetishization of "states' rights" echoes the platform of the (adamantly "Christian") Confederacy. (The fetishization of "states right" suffused the rhetoric employed in the subsequent fight AGAINST civil rights throughout the Jim Crow south, and was inextricably linked to Christian doctrine. I explore this point in my essay on "The Universality Of Morality".)

So how are we to approach the historical record? In trying to distill the essence of a text, ANY text, fixating on the idiosyncrasies of a particular phraseology is a surefire way to miss the point. It makes sense, then, to ask of any document: What were the authors coming from; and what were they ultimately getting at? Answering such questions requires us to abstract from certain quirks in the vernacular of the time and place of composition. Our ability to do this presumes that we are not slaves to our own–or anyone else's–language games. Insofar as we manage to do this, we see how ideas could possibly be couched in alternate terms; and thereby ascertain why authors of a certain time and place opted to couch their ideas in the particular ways they did.

Looking back at the late 18th century, we find that it was incumbent upon (astute) statesmen to phrase things in a manner that would resonate with the target audience. Strident discourse is routinely conducted using the prevailing idiom of the time; as doing so is the most potent way to convey meaning. It stands to reason, then, that important points were made by couching them in Christian terms (that is: in FAMILIAR terms). To read this as a mandate for Christian theocracy is to mis-read history.

Perspicacity means repudiating the exegetical shenanigans so often encountered by Christian revisionists, who construe every religious-sounding locution as evidence of doctrinal fidelity. Those of us who are dispassionately committed to assaying the available evidence can see the myth of America's Judeo-Christian origins for what it is: an enchanting farce.

Could the Founders of the new Republic have phrased their message in another way? Indubitably. Had the idiom of the time been different, their mode of articulation would have reflected that. Had their audience been accustomed to–or been moved by–alternate turns-of-phrase, the authors would have surely adjusted their wording accordingly. That's what good writers do. The point, after all, is to be compelling. And any savvy statesmen takes care to employ phrasing to which the target audience can relate.

We encounter this in the 19th century as well. As it turned out, even those who were ***most suspicious*** of religious dogmas nevertheless spoke using religious idioms. Abraham Lincoln expressed these sentiments in a letter to Judge Wakefield (in the advent of his son, Willie's death): "My earlier views of the unsoundness of the Christian scheme of salvation and the human origin of the scriptures have become clearer and stronger with advancing years, and I see no reason in thinking that I shall ever change them." Lincoln even felt it necessary to declare: "The Bible is not my book nor Christianity my profession." Nevertheless, he opted to use the locution, "under God" in the triumphant conclusion to his address at

Gettysburg in November of 1863. Why? Because such turns of phrase RESONATED with his audience. The point was to be relatable, not to talk over everyone's head.

Similar phrasing is found in statements by Albert Einstein–as when he quipped that "god doesn't play dice" when inveighing against the indeterminacies of quantum mechanics. He also averred: "The more I study science, the more I believe in god" when marveling at the sublime wonders of the universe. Such phrasing is no more striking than more quotidian rhetorical flourishes like "god-speed", "god bless", "god willing", "god only knows", "god have mercy", and "god help us"…none of which have any necessary religious connotation. After all, Einstein was a DEIST…just like Ben Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, et. al. Indeed, Einstein was very clear that, in employing this idiom, he did NOT mean the personal god of Abrahamic religion. This made sense, as he was not in the least religious.

As it turns out, many colloquialisms are lifted from Biblical passages. When one notes that one made it "by the skin of my teeth", one is not necessarily citing Job 19:20. And when one admonishes against casting pearls before swine, one is not necessarily thinking of Matthew 7:6. When Shakespeare employed the adage that "there is nothing new under the sun" (Sonnet 59), he was not paying tribute to the Book of Ecclesiastes. Idiomatic expressions can't help but be heavily influenced by scripture, as scripture has played such a prominent role in our history (sometimes for the better, usually for the worse). To take this as an implicit endorsement of theocracy is to engage in a non-sequitur that could span the known universe.

So it went with familiar locutions found in America's founding documents. Yet some revisionists would suggest–against all common sense–that by dating the U.S. Constitution "the Year of our Lord 1781", the signatories were issuing a mandate for Pauline Christology. Shall we pretend that the use of "anno Domini" on the Gregorian calendar were a declaration of fealty to specific Christian doctrines? According to that logic, the interjection, "oh, my god!" is a profession of theism.

Pursuant to the normalization of ingratiating tropes, the American ethos has been re-engineered to resemble more theocratic nation-State (super-saturated with super-patriotism) than a genuine democracy. A few seemingly minor adjustments were emblematic of this normalization. "In God We Trust" was first introduced on coinage during the Civil War, yet became standard on currency when Eisenhower sanctioned it in 1956. (At the behest of Freemasons and the Knights Of Columbus, Eisenhower had already inserted "under god" into the pledge of allegiance in 1954.) And the cliche, "God bless America" was not standardized in presidential oratory until Nixon popularized the rhetorical flourish during the Vietnam War. (Isaiah Berlin had written the song "God Bless America" during the First World War, implanting it in the America psyche.)

In each case, a fashionable idiom was at play. Such was the case with Abraham Lincoln's use of "under god" in his soaring oratory. To mistake an idiomatic expression for a formal declaration is to fail to understand how language works. To this day, in common parlance, "god-given X" means that one is naturally endowed with X–whether X is a physical feature, a talent, or a RIGHT.

We could go on and on: "I swear to god" and "so help me god" and "god be with you" and "god bless you" and "god help us" and "god knows" and "thank god". Such utterances are not declarations of religious zeal…any more than are turns-of-phrase like "heaven help us", "heaven knows", or "thank heavens". For those who are NOT religious, they have as much to do with sacred doctrine as the interjection, "Holy Toledo!"

So where does this leave us? Any exegesis must correct for the metamorphosis of demotic language. Historical context is key. When the ancient Romans invoked "Providentia", it was a matter of thinking of things occurring in accordance with a divine plan. ("Providentia" was revered alongside "Libertas" and "Salus": Liberty and Security.) So it is no surprise that statesmen of the modern era often pontificated–and made their case–in terms of "Providence".

Let’s look at each of the Founders, and see how they thought of this matter.

# George Washington:

As colonel during the pre-Revolutionary years, Washington once averred: “Providence has directed my steps and shielded me.” When Benjamin Franklin once quipped that “god governs the affairs of men”, he was simply speaking in the argot of Providence. And when “In God We Trust” was first added to coins in 1864, it was likely intended as a way to galvanize the union–and, of course, invoke Providence–in the heat of the Civil War. When the (semiotically-charged) motto was inserted into the pledge of allegiance during the Eisenhower administration, it was not carrying out a legacy that went back to the nation’s founding. Rather, it was a way of asserting a stark geopolitical contradistinction: emphasizing the contrast between the (purported) forces of democracy and a (purportedly) godless Soviet “communism”.

Alas. It has come to pass that false impressions stem–in part–from people misconstruing idiomatic expressions as, well, something other than idiomatic. What it heaven’s name is going on here? (!) As we’ve seen, it was only natural that, during the Founding era, men of letters expressed themselves in the prevailing idiom of the time.

But the question remains: What were they REALLY getting at? George Washington provides us with a great illustration. Washington was especially fond of the locutions mentioned above (“the Creator”; “the Almighty”; “God”; etc.); and he invoked them with alacrity. Such grandiose oratory is sometimes referred to as “ceremonial Deism”. If Washington mentioned the Almighty in a public address, as he occasionally did, he was careful to refer to him not as “god” but with some non-denominational moniker like the “Great Author” or the “Almighty” or the “Creator”—a vague, Deist descriptor that had no theological baggage, nor any doctrinal connotations.

It is folly to interpret the use of such rhetorical flourishes as evidence for doctrinal fidelity or religious zeal; let alone to construe it as a sign of fealty to a specific INSTITUTION. In fact, even as he made use of such language, Washington was extremely wary of religion making incursions into politics. Just after being sworn in as the first president, he stated that “no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny.” {6} In expressing this sentiment, Washington’s aim was simply to warn his fellow Americans against “religious persecution” (as he put it). His talk of barriers echoed Jefferson’s well-known use of the metaphor, “wall of separation” from three years earlier…and portended Madison’s stipulation of “the total separation of the church from the state” thirty years later.

It might be noted that this principle goes back to Tacitus’ declamation: “deorum injuriae diis curae”: leave offenses against the gods to the care of the gods. In other words, the concerns of religion are not to be treated as matters of State. This was echoed with Jesus’ admonition (in the Gospel of Matthew) to leave unto Caesar that which is Caesars; and leave unto god that which is god’s.

Washington believed that morality, not piety, was the ultimate standard by which good citizenship was determined. To reiterate: In his first speech as president, he stated: "The foundation of our national policy is laid in the pure and immutable principles of private morality." He clearly did not mean that the nation's founding principles derived from the edicts of the Abrahamic deity (or were in any way validated by divine command theory). Instead, Washington made clear that the principles that he espoused came from the moral compass with which we are all endowed. As with Aristotle in ancient Athens, Washington tied virtue (esp. civic duty) with happiness. {5} He asserted that the "indissoluble union" between virtue and happiness stemmed from the "course of nature". He could just as well have said that said union stemmed from "Nature's God"; as that would have meant the same thing. {12}

Washington also noted that "religious controversies are always more productive of acrimony and irreconcilable hatreds than [disputes] which spring from any other cause." To mitigate such controversies, Washington ordered all commanders of the Continental Army to "protect and support the free exercise…and undisturbed enjoyment of…religious matters."

Like Benjamin Franklin, Washington's reason for attending church services was to be involved in the community. For both Washington and Franklin, the concern was the communal, not the doctrinal. While they articulated themselves in the idiom of "god", their approach to Faith was not dogmatic. As with virtually everyone else, he often used locutions like "thank god", "god knows", and "for god's sake"; and, during the Revolutionary War, purportedly appealed for "the blessings of heaven" on the army (while having Thomas Paine read aloud his secular benediction). Never once, in his storied career, did Washington ever mention Jesus / Christ. (!) If he'd been Christian, this moniker would have eventually been used at some point—at least in passing.

We might also consider the pastors from Philadelphia who knew Washington best: James B. Abercrombie (Episcopal), Bishop William White (Episcopal), and Ashbel "Asa" Green (Presbyterian). All three made quite clear that they did not consider him a Christian. {16}

Granted, Washington seems to have been involved in FreeMasonry—a cult that was vaguely Abrahamic in some respects. (In some of his letters, he referred to the "Great Architect of the Universe", a common Masonic moniker that had palpably Deistic undertones. He used other Masonic phrasing—as when he stated that the new nation "was under the special agency of Providence.") When writing to fellow Mason, the Marquis de Lafayette, Washington refers to things in distinctly Masonic terms, specifying that he often "indulged" Christians. Clearly, he did not think of himself as a Christian. He was merely using the same phraseology that we encounter with other avowed Deists—from Voltaire and Montesquieu to Paine and Jefferson. All of them believed that a degree of religiosity had some practical virtues (i.e. maintaining civility in day-to-day affairs, encouraging temperance and forbearance, etc.)

In a letter written in February 1800 (about two months after Washington's passing), Jefferson wrote in his personal journal: "Dr. [Benjamin] Rush told me (he had it from Asa [Ashbel] Green) that when the clergy addressed General Washington on his departure from government, it was observed in their consultation that he had never, on any occasion, said a word to the public which showed a belief in the Christian religion… I know that Gouverneur Morris [drafter of the U.S. Constitution] …has often told me that General Washington believed no more in [Christianity] than he did."

It is telling that Washington refused to take communion when he attended church. When he was compelled by the clergy of Philadelphia to make a public confession of Jesus Christ, he refused to do so (see "The Writings of Thomas Jefferson" vol. I; p. 284). And he adamantly rejected the presence of clergy when he was on his death bed.

# Thomas Paine:

Arguably the most important Founding Father of the new Republic was Thomas Paine. (George Washington even averred that the colonies would not have prevailed in the Revolution but for the galvanization effected by Paine's inspiring oratory.) So it is worth heeding Paine's perspective on the matter.

Even as a Deist, Paine harbored extreme antipathy toward religion (qua institutionalized dogmatism; especially insofar as it was tribalistic and atavistic). He inveighed against the "obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness" of the Old Testament. He described it (accurately) as "a history of wickedness that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind." The New Testament, he noted, is less brutalizing but more absurd. The story of Christ's divine conception a "fable, which—for absurdity and extravagance—is not exceeded by anything that is to be found in the mythology of the ancients." For good measure, he added: "All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian or [Muslim] appear to me no other than human inventions, set up to terrify and enslave mankind; and monopolize power and profit." He was not wrong.

Paine's "Common Sense" was a significant catalyst for the American Revolution; and it provided the primary articulation of the colonists' REASONS FOR seeking independence. Suffice to say: It had nothing whatsoever to do with religion. Paine actually devoted his masterwork, "The Age of Reason" to an argument AGAINST atheism AND religionism (that is: institutionalized dogmatism). Why? Because he championed Deism. He knew that the greatest enemy of civil society was a Reactionary mindset; and that dogmatic thinking was antithetical to societal progress.

For this reason, Paine recognized how crucial it was to separate religious matters from matters of State. H e was clear on this point: "Mingling religion with politics" was to be "disavowed and reprobated by every inhabitant of America." Note that this was from the man of whom John Adams–no fan of Deism–said: "I know not whether any man in the world has had more influence on its inhabitants or its affairs for the last thirty years than [Thomas] Paine. Call it, then, the Age of Paine."

YET, in spite of all this, the "Christian basis of the U.S. government" myth persists to the present day. This is a claim that the Founders of the Republic would have certainly found baffling. We might think of it this way: Had the authors of America's founding documents been thoroughly convinced that Judeo-Christian lore was entirely mythical, they would have articulated themselves IN THE EXACT SAME WAY.

Lo and behold, many of them actually did take such lore as myth, and–as it happened–actually did articulate themselves in the manner we find in the historical record.

The point, then, is to look at the underlying message. Doing so involves culling the spirit behind the exposition from the myriad quirks of the specific phrasing employed by the authors (who were, after all, themselves products of their own time and place). This requires one to get beyond the stylistic choices that the authors made when crafting the documents-in-question.

In sum: Elucidation of "original intent" is only possible by understanding the vernacular of the time and place.

When it comes to the era in which America's Founders lived, we find that many prominent figures employed the prevailing idiom of the time. To contend that this is a sign of staunch religiosity misses the point. Such special pleading fails to recognize idiomatic expression AS IDIOMATIC; and elides the amorphous nature of semantics.

In crafting a sacred history to suit a given purpose, wrinkles in a narrative (technicalities that complicate the desired flow) are often "ironed out"; and any events that threaten to undermine the desired schema are glossed over, or even elided. For example, when most of us think of the American Revolutionary War, that the British technically surrendered to the FRENCH (thereby rendering the Colonies the DE FACTO winners in September of 1781 in Yorktown, Virginia), not to the Colonies themselves, is generally disregarded as a (dispensable) technicality. {14}

It would seem to be a straight-forward question: To whom did the British surrender to bring the Revolutionary War to an end? And it is; though Americans infected with super-patriotism don't like the actual answer. (They have a need to proclaim, "WE did it!") Indeed, for many a proud citizen of the U.S., it seems unseemly to point out that, but for the arrival of France's powerful navy (thanks to Benjamin Franklin's prodigious skills of persuasion back in Paris), the American colonies would likely not have prevailed in their noble war for independence. {15}

The fact that most Americans are blissfully unaware of this is testament to the fact that sacred histories are made-to-order; tailored to suit our sensibilities and gratify our egos. We usually tell a story the way we WANT it to be told; Reality be damned. We want to leave ourselves in a flattering light; to heck with anyone else. And to heck with Truth. We regale ourselves with tales of past glory–thereby leaving our forebears looking marvelous. Thus OUR heroes are the only REAL heroes.

This ornery posture is a staple of tribal chauvinism; and the lifeblood of American Exceptionalism. Once infused with the conceit of divine Providence, we wind up with fascistic pathologies like American "Christian Dominionism".

Americans are inclined to ignore the fact that the biggest genocide in world history (somewhere between 20 and 100 million eradicated) was perpetrated by settlers of European descent in the so-called New World. Americans likewise pat themselves on the back for "winning" World War II in the European theater (even though the tide had already turned against the Nazis, thanks to the Russians) and in the Pacific / southeast Asian theater (even though the U.S. government committed genocide gratuitously, in Japan). And, of course, Americans are told that they "won" the "Cold War", never mind the genocide in Vietnam / Lao / Cambodia and the fictional "missile gap" used to justify an obscene military build-up during the Post-War era. America, so the story goes, is only a force for good in the world. End of story.

The point here is not to knock American history per se; it is to show that massive amounts of people can get history egregiously wrong (or, at least, severely misunderstand it); especially when the farce is self-serving. People collectively remembering events that never happened has been dubbed the "Mandela Effect". Such collective "false memory" often emerges organically (that is, it is not necessarily of a calculated plan to deceive). However, sometimes it is orchestrated–as it can be surprisingly easy for impresarios of the Grand Narrative to exploit the susceptibility of people to the Mandela Effect. In such cases, the mis-remembering is constructed in accordance the interests of those in power. The result is False Consciousness (BY DESIGN) at a societal level.

Actual historical scholarship is animated by perspicacity and a dedication to elucidating Truth (stating the facts, whatever they might be). By contrast, sacred history is animated by fealty to an ideology (that is: an urge to rationalize it by concocting a "just so" story). Put another way: Actual history stems from erudition; whereas sacred history stems from sentiment. The former is a matter of understanding Reality;

the latter is a matter of being attached to certain ideas (esp. coveted myths). The pivotal difference, then, comes down to vested interests.

In "How History Gets Things Wrong: The Neuroscience Of Our Addiction To Stories", Alex Rosenberg explained it thus: "The same science that reveals why we view the world through the lens of narrative also shows that the lens not only distorts what we see but is the source of illusions we can neither shake nor even correct for most of the time." Here's the catch: "It is people's beliefs about history that motivate [them], not the actual historical events. So, even if we get the facts right, that may be irrelevant to understanding people's [perception of] the present or their future…"

When it comes to unscrupulous hagiographers, the standard approach is as follows: Extol any ethereal verity (read: anecdote), countenancing whatever salutary "truths" happen to be in fashion, whilst coyly disregarding inconvenient facts…all in the name of upholding some program of mass consolation.
That way, no toes are stepped on; and we can all carry on with our day, unperturbed.
After all, consoling fables are–well–CONSOLING.

Disrupting this homeostasis is considered unseemly, as challenging sacred histories involves upsetting sacred apple-carts. But disrupt we shall.

# John Adams:

Imagine that we were to pose the question to the Founders: In which ways did you base your case for democracy on Judeo-Christian doctrine? Ben Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison would have been bewildered by such a question. Thomas Paine and Thomas Jefferson would have been utterly flabbergasted by it. Even John Adams, a New England Congregationalist (i.e. proto-Unitarian), would have found this query rather peculiar. It makes sense, then, to continue our survey with the most religious of the major Founders: John Adams.

Adams was a professed liberal Unitarian, but he, too, in his private correspondences, seems more deist than Christian. "Twenty times in the course of my late reading have I been upon the point of breaking out, 'This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!" Speaking ex cathedra, as a relic of the Founding generation, Franklin expressed his admiration for the Roman system whereby every man could worship whom, what, and how he pleased. When his young listeners objected that this was paganism, Adams replied that it was indeed, and laughed.

Adams opined that if they were not restrained by legal measures, Puritans—the fundamentalists of their day—would 'whip and crop, and pillory and roast.' The word of the Creator, they believed, could best be read in Nature. Pressed by Jefferson to define his personal creed, Adams replied that it was contained in four short words: Be just and good.

In May of 1797, John Adams signed the Treaty of Tripoli, which stated that ***"the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion"*** (Article 11). Here is a statement that could not possibly have been more straight-forward. President George Washington, who was an avowed Deist, approved the wording of the document; and for good reason. He concurred with what it said. It is very telling that Adams–arguably the most religious of the major Founders–endorsed the statement without reservation.

It is difficult to imagine a more unequivocal statement than that "the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion"…written by the man who was arguably the most Christian of the Founders. What could possibly explain this? Adams was able to separate his own convictions from the jurisdiction of the State. Whatever beliefs he may have harbored, he recognized something quite simple:

Such a personal matter had no bearing on matters of public policy; and should play no role in governance. Religiosity was no more a prerequisite for deliberative democracy than was, well, ANY form of dogmatism.

The Treaty of Tripoli was approved by both the first and the second Presidents of the United States (Washington and Adams)–reflecting a view that was propounded by the other major Founders–notably: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison (all Deists). The Senate approved the wording of the treaty UNANIMOUSLY. In other words, all Senators present (23 of the 32 were in session) ratified the declaration without so much as questioning this bold statement.

The key statement, adamantly repudiating the notion of a Christian basis for the new Republic, did not even raise eyebrows. Why not? It was patently obvious to all statesmen at the time.

And so it went: The entire Senate agreed with the proclamation that the United States was not founded IN ANY WAY as a Christian nation; and saw fit to announce this fact to the world. In his signing statement, John Adams then took care to make explicit that he viewed every point made in the document as having set an important precedent; and so was to be honored by all citizens of the United States thereafter.

The thinking behind this position is well-documented. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson, Adams pointed out that "the general principles on which the Fathers achieved independence were the general principles of Christianity." This meant that there was a ***correlation*** between such GENERAL PRINCIPLES (i.e. moral messages that could be gleaned from scripture, as was often the case in Christendom) and the guiding principles of civil society. He was not referring to the theology; he was referring to the didactic utility of religious parable.

With this in mind, Adams stated that "the principles of nature and eternal reason [are] the principles on which the whole government over us now stands." Again: He was not referring to Christian doctrine in particular…or even to Mosaic law. "Principles of nature" and "eternal reason" are clearly not referring to revelation. Scripture was useful for didactic purposes, insofar as it conveyed certain moral messages; not for theological purposes. (Thomas Jefferson's redaction of the Gospels illustrates this fact.)

Having been raised in a Christian milieu, Adams was fond of coupling "religion and morality". This was a classic pairing—like macaroni and cheese. The two are distinct things that exist independently of one another. Moreover, one can exist without the other.

The locution "religion and morality" was commonplace at the time. {12} Adams once said that "the principles upon which freedom can securely stand" are established by "religion and morality". This locution was en vogue amongst 18th-century Americans–Deist and otherwise. It was simply a reference to good character; which is to say that it had nothing to do with lore that was explicitly Christian. Nor was it a veiled attempt at proselytization. And it was certainly not a prescription for theocratic governance.

Touting "religion and morality" was not a clarion call for dogmatism; it was simply a way of lauding those who upheld traditional virtues (like, say, honesty and charity) and eschewed vice (like, say, deception and avarice). By using such phrasing, these men were not calling for fealty to a specific doctrine. Adams was especially fond of the "religion and morality" locution–a coupling that surely seemed as natural as peanut-butter and jelly. He once averred: "We have no government armed with the power which is capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other." In other words, the democracy would only work well assuming a morally upright citizenry. Clearly, this was not implying that the only way to be moral was to be religious; or that religiosity qua doctrinal fealty was the key factor. (As we well know, being doctrinaire is hardly a prerequisite for civic-mindedness.) What Adams may have

added was that those who most flaunt their piety are often the most reprobate members of society. Over the ages, civic virtue has been conceptualized in various ways.

Adams' observation–articulated in the idiom of a bygone era–is a far cry from the Christian Dominionists of today, who use religion as a carious surrogate for morality; or–at best–as a putrescent moral prosthetic. Adams clearly had in mind the "traditional" values that are associated–to the present day–with probity.

What did Adams mean by "religion" anyway? It was, after all, more a colloquialism than a formally-defined term. Indeed, what did he even mean by "Christianity"? Not what we might tend to think today. Adams referred to the notion of an incarnate god suffering on a cross "BAFFLING"; and—get this—a doctrine that was "destructive" to Christianity. (!) In other words: The Passion—which is understood by devout Christians to be the ENTIRE POINT of their Faith—was for Adams antithetical to it.

Theocratic governance was the LAST thing John Adams–or any of the other Founders–would have envisioned for the new Republic. Nothing in Adam's seminal work, "Thoughts On Government" indicates that he supposed the foundation of the federal government rested explicitly on Judeo-Christian tenets. {2}

While a professed Christian, it is important to bear in mind that Adams was assiduously anti-dogmatic, and had few sympathies for many of the institutionalized (that is: dogmatic) versions of the Faith. He openly rebuked doctrinaire treatments of the creed. In another letter to Jefferson, Adams wrote: "The divinity of Jesus is made a convenient cover for absurdity. Nowhere in the Gospels do we find a precept for Creeds, Confessions, Oaths, Doctrines, and whole cartloads of other foolish trumpery that we find in Christianity." Thus he noted the disconnect between the moral lessons found in the Gospels and the institutions that operated under the auspices of "Christianity". In any case, it is obvious that Adams garnered his insights on democracy—and civil society generally—from places other than holy books. Civil society was no more predicated on sacred doctrines than astronomy was predicated on astrological charts. As we'll see, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin agreed on this point.

So what of "Christianity" then? For Adams—as for most of his fellow Founders—being a "good Christian" was simply another way of saying "being a good person" in Christendom. Was this a declaration that a specific doctrine was required for someone to be "moral". Of course not. Recall that Adams once quipped that "it would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religions in it." And also recall that it was Adams who signed the statement—in the Treaty of Tripoli—that "the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."

# Thomas Jefferson:

What of Adams' political rival, Thomas Jefferson? A frequent attendee of the local Anglican (i.e. Episcopalian) church who openly denied the divinity of Jesus, Jefferson was surprisingly frank about his suspicions of institutionalized dogmatism; and so was careful to avoid leaving the impression that any of the ideals he espoused were in any way grounded in doctrinal thinking. It was not for nothing that he was viciously pilloried for being a de facto atheist by his political opponents, for whom his reticence to identify as a Christian was seen as problematic.

When he drafted ***"A Summery View Of The Rights Of America"*** in 1774, Jefferson opted to quote Cicero rather than the Bible. For it was Cicero's disquisition, not Christian scripture, that made the case for civil rights. In Jefferson's telling, those rights were deemed "god-given" (as was the colonialists' liberty and dignity). This was the standard conviction of a Deist. Indeed, such things could be said to have been "god-given" just as were the leopard's spots and the zebra's stripes and blueness of the sky.

In putting forth his case, Jefferson asserted recourse to the laws of "nature and of nature's god"; not of the Biblical god. Just as with John Locke before him, he spoke of "natural rights" (as with, say, the freedom of conscience), which were not derived from any catechism; they could be gleaned from the natural order of things. Again: This was an echo of Renaissance Humanism. Consequently, Jefferson invoked "a decent respect for the opinions of mankind", not for the revelation of prophets. MORALITY was the sine qua non; not religiosity.

It should come as no surprise, then, that Jefferson proudly asserted: "If ever the morals of a People could be made the basis of their own government, it is our case." The basis for government, that is, did not proceed from divine commandments, but from our own moral faculties. Again, the appeal was to our innate moral compass, not to the diktats of this or that scripture.

In fact, the inalienable rights Jefferson enumerated could not be found anywhere in the sacred texts he had on his library. Rather, they were to be found in the exposition of Locke and Montesquieu. Jefferson had a strong case to make about democratic principles; and–most would agree–he made it as eloquently as possible. Religion had nothing to do with it. {9}

In assaying his choice of wording, we might bear in mind that Jefferson was especially known for poetic stylization–as were both Thomas Paine and Benjamin Franklin. (Such florid rhetoric might be contrasted to the more dry, turgid prose of the Federalist Papers.) It should come as little surprise, then, that Jefferson made use of the prevailing idiom of the time.

The point here is worth reiterating: When idiomatic expression is used to convey an idea in a maximally poignant way–as savvy writers tend to do–the astute reader is able to abstract the underlying message from the particular phraseology employed. {10} So it stands to reason that Jefferson–with the approval of Ben Franklin–opted to use the locution, "Nature's God" in the opening statement of his letter to King George III of England in 1776, whereby he declared independence of the American colonies from the crown. After all, such an invocation was prudent when seeking to articulate one's intentions to a royal cynosure who thought ENTIRELY in Providential terms.

Providence was, after all, part of the zeitgeist. This is why Jefferson CONCLUDED the letter to the British monarch with an invocation of "Providence", intimating a divine imprimatur for the revolutionary cause (as people often did when employing soaring oratory). Such wording was designed to ensure maximal resonance with George III and his advisors. It had nothing whatsoever to do with Messianism.

Also in that propitious letter, Jefferson referred to "Nature's God" as "Creator" when he posited the endowment of inalienable rights. Such wording was often used when discussing NATURAL RIGHTS in the tradition of John Locke. Deists did, after all, believe in a Creator; though no particular doctrinal points followed from that precept.

As a Deist, it was only natural for Jefferson to employ the genteel locutions of his era–as Deists often did. Along with the vehemently anti-religious Thomas Paine, Jefferson invoked "Nature's God"…which, he was careful to point out, correlated with "the natural rights of mankind". None of this had anything to do with any particular sacred doctrine. To ensure this was clear, the common locution "we hold these truths to be sacred"–with its theological connotations–was changed to the more naturalistic "we hold these truths to be self-evident". After all, the idea was to appeal to REASON, not to divine ordinance.

This point is crucial to understanding how and why the "Founding Fathers" articulated themselves as they did. When Jefferson employed the Lockean locution, "Nature's God" in his letter to king George III, he was speaking the language of the Enlightenment–a language embraced by non-religionists like Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Henry Saint John of Bolingbroke. The phrase was standard in the argot of

"natural law theory", of which Jefferson was an aficionado.

In fact, considering his familiarity with Locke, it would have been surprising had he NOT used the phrase "nature's god". What he did NOT say was "the god of Abraham" or "the Christian god". For–clearly–he did not have in mind the god of one or another CHURCH. This is evidenced by the fact the some of the more religious signatories to the Declaration of Independence PROTESTED such phrasing, as they deemed it sacrilegious. They were–after all–well aware that "nature's god" had nothing whatsoever to do with their creed. (!) It was commonly understood to be non-religious terminology.

That George III–a pious man–was considered head of the Church of England meant that Jefferson was obliged to speak his language. And so he did. Thus it was a RHETORICAL strategy to phrase things in a way to which the target audience (the British monarchy) could relate. Hence Jefferson spoke of "divine providence", and articulated things accordingly. We might bear in mind that kings / queens of England were convinced that they ruled according to divine right; so–in seeking to convey a point as poignantly as possible–Jefferson would have been remiss NOT to couch things in providential terms.

And so it went: Jefferson was–effectively–a Deist; though he eschewed that particular label, as he associated it with Judaic theology, which he saw as derelict. Tellingly, he opted to use "Nature's God", which was a patently Deist locution; as it was held in contra-distinction to SCRIPTURE'S god, which was supernatural and interventionist. To reiterate: Jefferson was no oddity. His contemporary mentors were all Deists–most notably: Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, and Henry Saint John of Bolingbroke.

In keeping with the rest of his writing, Jefferson's tactful use of certain turns-of-phrase was largely about waxing poetic. It was only natural, then, that he included such rhetorical flourishes in this propitious letter. Obviously, such phrasing went far beyond mere colloquialisms like "Oh, my god!" The loaded wording Jefferson employed was intended to hit a nerve; and it a nerve it did. By using such super-charged locutions, there were surely connotations that would have struck a chord with the British. It should go without saying that the letter resonated with its intended audience not only because of WHAT it said, but HOW it said it.

For Jefferson, religiosity was a matter of personal prerogative. In his 1784 ***"Notes On Virginia"*** , Jefferson wrote: "The legitimate powers of government extend only to such acts as are injurious to others. But 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." He recognized that a person's freedom OF (his own) religion entailed that person's freedom FROM (the next guy's) religion. One freedom is, indeed, the logical corollary of the other. (In other words: One cannot have freedom OF one's own religion without a guaranteed of freedom FROM another's religion.) I am not infringing upon your liberties when I prevent you from infringing on my own liberties.

The matter here, then, is simply one of omni-symmetrical liberty: Freedom OF the exercise of one's own Faith entails freedom FROM others' exercise of their Faith. MY practice of religion must in no way encumber anyone else's ability to do the same. For any given party, the rule of thumb amounts to: On your own time, on your own dime. {11}

Such boundary conditions are required for maintaining a condition of omni-symmetry with respect to personal prerogative. Any given person's freedom to exercise his own Faith stops the moment it places a burden on any bystander. To recapitulate: A corollary of freedom OF religion is freedom FROM religion. One can't have the former without the latter.

This means that genuine religious liberty cannot exist without a patently secular (read: religiously neutral) government. Protection of one person's religious prerogative requires protection from mandates by any and all other religions. One person's exercise of religion cannot ever be allowed to inhibit or constrain–in

any way whatsoever–the next person's ability to exercise his own religion (or, for that matter, to simply refrain from exercising ANY religion).

This means no religious favoritism on the part of the State. But for Christians who'd much prefer to enjoy favor, the best way to countermand this precedent is to pretend that the American Republic was founded as a "Christian nation"; then begrudge anyone who doesn't play along with this ruse.

Secularism entails something quite different, as the American Founders recognized. It is not within the jurisdiction of the government to enforce piety…in ANY form; nor is it the government's place to curtail anyone to exercise piety of their own accord (so long as it in no way infringes on anyone else's prerogative to do the same for himself). With this in mind, Jefferson drafted Virginia's ***statute for religious freedom*** , wherein he explicated the principle of separation of church and state.

Jefferson was crystal clear on the matter: No person should be compelled to support any religious institution with taxes; nor compelled to subsidize any religious ministry–be it evangelism or worship. (One might call this the "on your own time, on your own dime" principle.) Jefferson's primary rational for this position was an inviolable freedom of conscience (couched in terms of an endowment by the Creator). The point wasn't to propound this or that theological position; the point was to recognize the ENDOWMENT.

As a (purported) virtue, "religious" was used (by Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Madison, et. al.) in the non-dogmatic sense. The key was to always treat Faith as a personal affair, never as public policy. The vision was of a polity in which each citizen participated in any given religion of his/her own accord. (I won't burden you with my religion; you don't burden me with yours. And we can both go about our business.)

When Thomas Jefferson drafted the Virginia ***statute for religious freedom*** in 1777, he characterized the document as having "within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mohametan, the Hindoo and Infidel of every denomination." For Jefferson, this landmark charter was not an enjoinder for theocracy; it was a mandate for personal prerogative. (The statute would serve as the basis for the Establishment and Free Exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution twelve years later.)

Jefferson's view on this matter was perfectly in keeping with the thinking at the time, which was loud and clear. He went so far as to cite John Locke, who—in 1689—submitted that "the church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct from the commonwealth [the political realm]." It was based on this "separation" that Jefferson proposed that Virginia CURTAIL all tax support for religious activity—recognizing the natural right of all people to practice their Faith of their own accord. (He honored the maxim: On your own time, on your own dime.) It's worth recalling Jefferson's adage that "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."

His Virginia ***"Statute For Religious Freedom"*** set the precedent for the separation of church and state. {22} When it was passed by the Virginia legislature in 1786, Jefferson rejoiced that there was finally "freedom for the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohammedan, the Hindu and infidel of every denomination." First composed in 1779, it read: "No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

Historian, Joseph Ellis noted that "If [Jefferson] had been completely scrupulous, he would have described himself as a Deist who admired the ethical teachings of Jesus as a man rather than as the son of God. (In modern-day parlance, he was a secular humanist.)" Jefferson's pride and joy, the University of Virginia, was notable among early-American seats of higher education in that it had no religious affiliation whatsoever. Jefferson even banned the teaching of theology at the school. He hoped for a day when religious dogmatism would be a thing of the past. "The day will come," he predicted (wrongly, so far), "When the mystical generation of Jesus—by the supreme being as his father, in the womb of a virgin—will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the [mind] of Jupiter." In keeping with this, we shouldn't be surprised that he dismissed the Book of Revelation as "the ravings of a maniac".

So what did Jefferson think of Christian doctrine PER SE (to wit: repentance; salvation via belief in Christ, etc.) In a letter to William Short (dated 1820), he wrote that "it is NOT to be understood that I am with [Jesus] in all his doctrines. I am a Materialist. He takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin. I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it." In fact, Jefferson's thinking was heavily influenced by Cicero—the loadstar of Stoicism.

Virginia's ***Statute For Religious Freedom*** was ratified by the state's General Assembly in 1786, three years before the Constitutional Convention; and so would serve as precedent thereafter. In the parlance of the Founders, "religious freedom" was not about imposing one's creed on others; it was about freedom of conscience…so long as it put no obligation / restriction on one's neighbor. In other words: "To each his own." It is folly to construe this as an exhortation to be "religious" in the (dogmatic, tribalistic) sense we often use it today. The notion of a certain party's creed being used as the basis for public policy would have struck the Founders as perfidious.

Revealingly, Jefferson was sometimes strikingly straight-forward about his disdain for religious dogmatism. He once wrote to John Adams: "The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being in the womb of a virgin will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter." Scorned by devout Christians at the time (who derided him as an "atheist", just as they did with Paine), Jefferson never budged when it came to his unorthodox views of Faith; and never wavered on his anti-theocratic stance. (Thomas Paine, another Deist who held religion in abeyance, was also inaccurately derided as an atheist. In reality, nobody embodied the ideals of the American Revolution more than Paine.)

When he bowdlerized the New Testament, Jefferson compared removing all the passages involving dogmatic nonsense–and accounts of the supernatural–to "extracting diamonds from a dunghill." Hence his "The Life And Morals Of Jesus Of Nazareth". So what, exactly, DID Jefferson cull from the Gospels after this extensive textual pruning? In treating the source-material as an allegory rather than as a chronicle, he highlighted the moral messages that were conveyed–thus abstracting from the Christological hocus-pocus in which it had been embedded. Jefferson was astute enough to recognize the DIDACTIC value of scripture; no dogmatism required, nothing supernatural involved. In other words: The moral messages could be divorced from all the soteriological musings.

As with his fellow Founders, Thomas Jefferson saw religiosity as a private affair. Consequently, so far as he was concerned, the separation of church and state was paramount. This was made clear when Virginia's ***statute for religious freedom*** was made law. Later that same year (1786), in a letter protesting a proposed "general assessment" in Virginia (a move to levy taxes to fund certain religious activities), Jefferson expounded:

"[T]he impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all

time; that ***to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical***." In sum: Any move to use public funds to subsidize the promotion of religion was antithetical to democracy.

In the same letter, Jefferson was careful to point out that ***"our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions."*** That is to say: participatory democracy does not depend on religiosity. Quite the contrary: Democracy is predicated on a clearly-demarcated boundary separating matters of Faith from matters of civic life. This is precisely why Jefferson saw fit—in a letter to Baptist leaders in Connecticut on New Year's day, 1802—to make it crystal clear that there must be an un-breach-able ***"wall of separation"*** between the State and any church. His point: The State should no more meddle in a congregation's affairs than the followers of a certain doctrine should meddle in the affairs of the State. The Christians in Danbury wholeheartedly concurred. (!)

Was this position inimical to the Founders' vision? Of course not. Jefferson even went so far as to claim that the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is what BUILT this wall of separation; and pointed out that this was perfectly in keeping with "natural rights"…which were themselves consummate with civic responsibility ("social duties", as he put it). Jefferson concluded the letter by reciprocating the congregation's "kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man." Why phrase it that way? Well, why not?

In his letter to the Danbury Baptists, Jefferson clearly saw the 1st Amendment as "building a wall of separation between church and state." {19} For most, this was interpreted as an integral part of the intent of the Amendment—a fact that was affirmed by Reynolds v. United States in 1878. Jefferson saw religion as a personal matter "which lies solely between man and his god." The prospect that anyone might have the audacity to use personal Faith as a justification for public policy was beyond the pale.

It is plain, then, that the 1st Amendment was an explicit repudiation of the Puritan mini-theocracy established in the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the two centuries leading up to the American Revolution (not to mention the explicitly Catholic colony established in Mary-Land). The point of the Revolution—as envisioned by Thomas Paine—was to emancipate the people from religious control, not to alter the brand of that control. It was obvious to (almost) everyone involved that freedom OF religion meant freedom FROM religion. That is: To each his own. This entailed something quite straight-forward: No party's exercise of Faith could in any way impost burdens / obligations on any other party.

Jefferson was adamant that religiosity and governance were to remain in their appropriate purviews. He saw how important it was that each mode of human activity be relegated to its own (delimited) domain. And that was perfectly fine for the Faithful. For Jefferson insisted that–in the end–***the truth will out*** (that is, so long as free inquiry was allowed to run its course). In the same letter, he reminded his fellow Virginians that "truth is great and will prevail if left to herself, that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error." He added that truth "has nothing to fear from the conflict, unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate–errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them." In sum: Jefferson recognized that the only TRUE democracy was DELIBERATIVE democracy. Hewing to the edicts of ancient texts was NOT the basis for this process.

Critical thinking (that is: independent thought) always trumped the dogmatic tendencies of religion in its fundamentalist form. Jefferson was emphatic in a letter to Peter Carr in 1787: “Question with boldness the existence of god. Because if there be one, he must more approve of the homage to reason than that of blindfolded fear.” {10} It is indubitable that the author of the “Declaration of Independence” did not predicate his vision for the new Republic on religious doctrine…let alone prescribe doctrinal fealty as a condition for democracy.

One of the most fundamental elements of civil society is freedom of conscience. It was for this reason that–in his famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association–Thomas Jefferson emphasized that “religion is at all times and places a matter between god and individuals.” {19} Public policy has no place in such affairs—just as such affairs have no place in public policy.

To reiterate: Thomas Jefferson was wary of the dogmatic tendencies of religionism. This was made especially clear when he wrote: “The caliber of people who serve [the Christian god]…are always of two classes: fools and hypocrites.” Elsewhere, he wrote: “Religions are all alike: founded upon fables and mythologies.” To top it all off, he conceded: “I do not find in orthodox Christianity one redeeming feature.”

Jefferson was also careful to point out that morality and doctrinal fealty often did not coincide; and that we conflate the two at our own peril. In a letter to Unitarian minister, Richard Price in October of 1788, he wrote: “There has been in almost all religions a melancholy separation of religion from morality.” For him, as for the other major Founders, morality trumped religiosity. And the glaring disjuncture between morality (as propounded by Jesus of Nazareth via parable) and the institution known as the Christian church was important to recognize.

In that same letter, Jefferson went on to list all the formal rituals of Roman Catholicism (“Popery” as he called it), including “getting to heaven by penances, bodily mortifications, pilgrimages, saying masses, believing mysterious doctrines, burning heretics, aggrandizing Priests”. He also rebuked Protestantism, what with its “fastings and sacraments” and other fatuous rigamarole. Regarding all those liturgical shenanigans, he then asked: “Would not society be better without such religions?”

Such pontification was no anomaly. In a letter to James Fishback in September of 1809, Jefferson noted the myriad sects “in their particular dogmas all differ, no two professing the same…[consisting as they do of different] vestments, ceremonies, physical opinions, and metaphysical speculations.” He pointed out that all this Tom-foolery–pompous and mawkish–existed independently of moral precepts (which are, he noted, what REALLY matter).

As he put it in a letter to Patrick Henry in October of 1776: “The care of every man’s soul belongs to himself. But what if he neglect the care of it? Well what if he neglect the care of his health or estate, which more nearly relate to the state? Will the magistrates make a law that he shall not be poor or sick? Laws provide against injury from others; but not from ourselves. God himself will not save men against their wills.” Thus freedom of conscience is paramount in a genuinely democratic society. Faith was a matter of personal prerogative, not public policy. Again: “On your own time, on your own dime.”

Jefferson left no doubt that dogmatism was inimical to deliberative democracy; and that religiosity was a personal affair. As if this point were not already clear enough, Jefferson once wrote: “I have always thought religion a concern purely between our god and our consciences, for which we were accountable to him and not to the priests. For it is in our lives, and not from our words, that our religion must be read. But this does not satisfy the priesthood. For they must have a declared assent to all their interested absurdities. My opinion is that there would never have been an infidel if there had never been a priest.” Then, in a letter to Thomas Law in June 1814, he stated that “our moral duties…are generally divided into

duties to god and duties to man." The former was a private spiritual matter; the latter was a public matter.

This distinction made perfect sense, as the Faith Jefferson espoused was categorically "natural" (in contradistinction to institutional). We might recall that "natural religion" was the sense of "religion" touted in David Hume's "Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion". This conceptualization was patently secular in nature (Hume was an atheist). {9} That is to say, "natural religion" was only "religion" in the sense of the (non-dogmatic) Faith espoused by Deists like Denis Diderot and Thomas Paine; and, later, by Johan von Goethe, John Stuart Mill, and William James. At the time, the most notable exemplar of "natural religion" was Immanuel Kant, who explicated how "religion" might exist "within the bounds of reason"; and in no way rested on dogmatism. {3}

Here's the key: For Jefferson, "NATURAL religion" (as opposed to institutionalized religion) was synonymous with morality. For he recognized that religion QUA INSTITUTION (sectarian, dogmatic, and prone to clericalism) often led to dysfunction. This fundamental distinction has been espoused by all the great Deists of history–from Spinoza to Einstein.

Jefferson's position should not come as a surprise. It was widely recognized at the time that sanctified dogmatism had often been the skein of civil society. To make the point clear, in June of 1822, the elderly statesman wrote in a letter to the reverend, Thomas Whittemore: ***"I have never permitted myself to mediate a specified creed. These formulas have been the bane and ruin of the Christian church, its own fatal invention which through so many ages made Christendom a slaughter house, and to this day divides it into [sects] of inextinguishable hatred of one another."***

Elsewhere, Jefferson averred: "I have examined all the known superstitions of the world; and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology."

Jefferson evinced contempt for religion in the institutional sense even as he harbored respect for a liberalized notion of "religion" in the non-institutional sense. Faith was a private matter; and was only sullied when institutionalized. Other liberal thinkers would concur on this point–from William Sloane Coffin Jr. to Martin Luther King Jr. to Johan Rawls.

Governance, then, must never be at the mercy of religious doctrine. Jefferson was crystal clear on this point: "The legitimate power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who does ill toward his neighbor." In other words, it was not the government's place to enforce any given group's sacred doctrine, nor to enact policies designed to promote this or that religious dogma. The State's sole role was to attend explicitly to jurisprudential matters in the SECULAR domain.

This conviction informed Jefferson's view of the U.S. Constitution. Being as it is a historical artifact, made by man in all his fallibilities, no document is unimpeachable. Even the best national charters must evolve with society—taking into account new developments, new insights. The notion of a "living constitution" means that political systems are a work in progress. It is important to keep this in mind when referring back to a dated national charter—as all eventually become.

In a letter to Samuel Kercheval, Thomas Jefferson lamented that "some men look at constitutions with sanctimonious reverence, and deem them like the ark of the covenant, too sacred to be touched." This, he recognized, was not a good thing. Democracy was an on-going experiment that was subject to modification as the need arose (as circumstances evolved; as new information came to light), so long as it adhered to its foundational principles. In sum: Democracy is a process, not a destination. {21}

In the letter, Jefferson went on to note that "laws and institutions must go hand in hand with the progress of the human mind. As that becomes more developed, more enlightened, as new discoveries are made, new truths disclosed, and manners and opinions change with the change of circumstances, institutions must advance also, and keep pace with the times." {23}

The principle of separation of church and state was first posited EXPLICITLY by the progressive pastor, Roger Williams (founder of Rhode Island) in the 1630's. (For earlier instantiations of this tenet, see my essay on the history of legal codes.) Williams noted that no worthwhile religion seeks collusion with the State, let alone demands State support.

As we'll see shortly, Benjamin Franklin also recognized this basic fact. Franklin stated: "When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when it cannot support itself, and god does not take care to support it, so that its professors are obliged to seek the support of the civil power, it is a sign…of its being a bad one."

Of course, leaving religion out of politics goes back to Jesus himself, who abjured to "leave unto Caesar that which is Caesar," where the Roman Imperium represented the affairs of State. The point of democracy, of course, is that authority is accorded–and thus derives its legitimacy–from the bottom up; NOT from the top down. In other words: There is no imperium–theocratic or otherwise.

Along with Franklin, Jefferson recognized that keeping religion in its appropriate place poses no problems for a genuinely democratic society. Indeed, civil society is not a function of any particular theology. In his Bill For Religious Freedom, Jefferson articulated this position–even as he opted to use the familiar idiom, "Almighty God". But WHAT OF this "Almighty God"? Jefferson is clear: "[He] hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain." How is this possible? Jefferson specified: "By making [each person's mind] altogether insusceptible of restraint." These are the words of a Deist, not of a religionist. {10}

Regarding Jefferson's auspicious letter to King George III, it is difficult to take every word seriously AS IT WAS–considering the exigencies of the time. This is–after all–the same document that proclaims that "all men are created equal" even though it meant ONLY males, and did NOT mean anyone who wasn't white. If all humans qua humans were truly endowed (by their Creator; a.k.a. "nature's god") with certain inalienable rights, then surely such an assertion encompassed women…and African Americans. (We're ALL supposedly made in the image of god, are we not?) That "all men" actually entailed "only white, land-owning men" rather than "mankind" is rather disheartening; as Jefferson surely had "mankind" as his ideal. Alas, in practice, "The People" referred to landed gentry…even as it may have referred to all civilians IN PRINCIPLE.

The point here is that the phrasing of even the most vaunted historical documents must be taken with a rather hefty grain of salt; and the exposition's deeper meaning considered in terms of its historical context. Surely, Jefferson was fully aware that the SPIRIT OF his letter was the thesis that all of mankind–rich and poor, male and female, black and white–was entitled to enfranchisement. Consequently, he would have conceded that the vision of the groundbreaking Declaration could not be fully realized at the time (the LITERAL reading of what he wrote notwithstanding). So for those who are hung up on the locution "our Creator", it suffices to say that they are completely missing the point. To fixate on this as a tacit declaration of Christian fealty is to be heedless of how exposition works in the real world. In considering the underlying message that Jefferson was trying to convey, this locution is rather beside the point.

For us to now fixate on Jefferson's use of "our Creator" in articulating his point is to miss the entire forest for a single fig-leaf. {4}

It should also be noted that whenever the buzz-term, "religion" / "religious" was used, it was typically coupled with "morality" / "moral", as devout-ness was typically associated with self-discipline and noble character. {12} Common-folk could relate to such terms; so those were the terms savvy orators tended to use. Up until the late 20th century, to be described as a "religious" man in the American vernacular was equivalent to being called an upstanding member of the community. The plaudit had nothing to do with hewing to a particular doctrine.

## James Madison:

During the founding era, never was Christology tied into these judiciously-employed rhetorical flourishes. In a statement repudiating the desire–held by certain Christians at the time–for "an establishment of a particular form of Christianity through the United States", Jefferson stated in a letter to Benjamin Rush: "I have sworn upon the alter of god eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the mind of man." He recognized that any effort to base the governance of the nation on a particular religion entails a tyranny over the minds of its citizens. (That is: A theocratic regime borne of unbridled religionism was synonymous with despotism.) This declamation is all the more poignant because he conveyed his adamance by swearing "upon the alter of god" (like, say, swearing "on my mother's grave").

As if the point were not clear enough, in a letter to Major John Cartwright, Jefferson said of the (unfounded) notion that "Christianity is part of the common law" that "the proof TO THE CONTRARY…is incontrovertible." He decisively denounced such a notion as "a conspiracy…between Church and State" that was being perpetrated by perfidious "rogues". In sum: Jefferson's ideals were diametrically opposed to even the slightest hint of Christian theocracy. Religiosity (in the doctrinal sense) could only ever undermine the integrity of deliberative democracy. The scourge of institutionalized dogmatism was antithetical to a vibrant demos.

James Madison echoed this sentiment when he said: "Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind; and un-fits it for every noble enterprise, every expanded prospect" (letter to William Bradford, April 1,1774). And in a letter dated 1822, Madison wrote: "Every new and successful example of a perfect separation between ecclesiastical and civil matters is of importance. And I have no doubt that every new example will succeed, as every past one has done, in showing that religion and government will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together."

For Madison, it was quite clear that there must a wall separating religion from governance; and vice versa (as is the case with walls). Keeping the State out of religion entails keeping religion out of the State.

Madison recognized that doctrinal thinking was inimical to deliberative democracy. In a letter to F.L. Schaeffer (Dec 3, 1821), he stated: "The experience of the United States is a happy disproof of the error so long rooted in the unenlightened minds of well-meaning Christians, as well as in the corrupt hearts of persecuting usurpers: That without a legal incorporation of religious and civil polity, neither could be supported. A mutual independence is found most friendly to practical religion, to social harmony, and to political prosperity."

In the eighty-five essays that make up The Federalist anthology, "god" occurs only twice—both times by Madison, who used the word in a Deistic sense. (Gore Vidal aptly noted the word was used in the "only

Heaven knows" sense.) The prospect of religious groups vying for supremacy would have terrified him. Madison knew that an overly-fragmented polis—whereby the political process was governed by partisan hacks engaged in a game of one-ups-man-ship—was inimical to the democratic process.

In Federalist 10, Madison implicitly conceded that deliberative democracy is predicated on the ability of the polity to transcend partisanship; which, ironically, is why he was somewhat SYMPATHETIC to factions. (His take was that so long as the rank and file remained fragmented, it would not be equipped to pose any threat to the properties classes.) He recognized the innate human proclivity toward "faction"—by which he meant our tendency to divide ourselves into political tribes that are so inflamed with "mutual animosity" that they are "much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to cooperate for their common good." This leads to a public square in which "the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions have been sufficient to kindle their unfriendly passions and excite their most violent conflicts."

Bottom line: A fractured demos—that is: a polity that was riven with quibbling factions jockeying for power—made deliberative democracy untenable; as it kept the demos perpetually distracted. (Social media has only exacerbated the fragmentation of the demos; partitioning us into dialectical silos. Religious fixations have also contributed to the division in U.S. politics.) Madison believed that "religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind; and unfits it for every noble enterprise." Clearly, religiosity was NOT a boon to deliberative democracy.

Along with Jefferson, Madison recognized that in a genuine democracy, there could be no theocratic element whatsoever. After all, the point of democracy was for the State to remain categorically neutral on religious (read: personal) matters. The upshot of this was neither to advance nor to inhibit religious practice. So long as it in no way placed a burden on bystanders, practicing one's own religion of one's own accord needn't be opposed to civic-minded-ness. (On your own time, on your own dime.)

Again, we see that the assurance of personal prerogative–for EVERYONE–is the essence of individual liberty. Madison's stance on the STATE'S freedom from religion could not have been clearer: "If religion be not within cognizance of Civil Government, how can its legal establishment be said to be necessary to Civil Government?" How indeed. Religion, Madison recognized, is NOT the basis for ("within the cognizance of") the maintenance of civil society.

Hence Madison's advocacy for a wall of separation–harking back to Roger Williams' aforementioned insight from the 1630's. He recognized that when that wall is breached, democracy suffers: "What influence–in fact–have ecclesiastical establishments had on Civil Society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of Civil authority; in many instances they have seen the upholding of the thrones of political tyranny; in no instance have they been seen the guardians of the liberty of the people." He noted elsewhere "a strong bias towards the old error": the erroneous conception that "without some sort of alliance or coalition between government and religion neither can be duly supported." He concluded: "An alliance or coalition between government and religion cannot be too carefully guarded against… [Therefore] every new and successful example of a PERFECT SEPARATION between ecclesiastical and civil matters is of importance" (letter to Edward Livingston, Jr.; 1822).

In a letter to Baptist Churches in North Carolina (June 3, 1811), Madison put it more bluntly: "Having always regarded the practical distinction between Religion and Civil Government as essential to the purity of both, and as guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States, I could not have otherwise discharged my duty on the occasion which presented itself."

Madison also did not mince words when it came to the deleterious effects of institutionalized dogmatism. He spoke of the "almost fifteen centuries" during which Christianity had been on trial: "What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution."

It makes sense, then, that two years prior to the Declaration of Independence (January of 1774), in a letter to William Bradford, Jr., Madison wrote: "Ecclesiastical establishments tend to great ignorance and corruption, all of which facilitate the execution of mischievous projects." As if that weren't enough, Madison saw fit to conclude with a plaintive observation: "Rulers who wish to subvert the public liberty have found an established clergy convenient auxiliaries." Meanwhile: "A just government, instituted to secure and perpetuate [liberty], needs them not." Clerics did not comport with deliberative democracy.

Madison echoed Thomas Jefferson's proclamation of a wall of separation between religious observance and the business of the federal government–stating in 1819: "The civil government operates with complete success by the total separation of the church from the State." In other words, democracy abides insofar as this wall of separation is maintained. He reiterated that the U.S. Constitution forbade ANYTHING like the establishment of a "national religion". As President, Madison elaborated on the matter:

"What influence, in fact, have ecclesiastical establishments had on society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the civil authority; on many instances they have been seen upholding the thrones of political tyranny; in no instance have they been the guardians of the liberties of the people. Rulers who wish to subvert the public liberty may have found an established clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just government, instituted to secure and perpetuate it, needs them not." He continued: "The religion, then, of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man: and that it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate."

Madison concluded thus: "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What has been its fruits? More or less, in all places, pride and indolence in the clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution" (A Memorial and Remonstrance; addressed to the General Assembly of the Commonwealth of Virginia in 1785).

Later, in a Boston address in 1819, Madison noted that "the morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the ***TOTAL SEPARATION OF THE CHURCH FROM THE STATE***."

What of the U.S. being founded on the principles of "capitalism"? James Madison once referenced the corruption of his time, whereby "stock jobbers" (i.e. those engaged in rent-seeking; as well as the more odious forms of financial speculation) were known to collude with lackeys in the federal government. He noted that the impresarios of big business pulled the strings of those in public office; thereby undermining the popular will. The avarice of a well-positioned few, not a sincere concern for the commonweal, was the primary motivating factor.

Madison thus expressed his compunctions with capitalism-run-amok (what came to be known as corporatism); which was unconcerned with the common good. Even in the first decades of the new Republic, public policy was often held hostage by moneyed interests; and had only a tenuous relation to the public interest. Such anti-democratic machinations were later made famous by the back-room deal-making in Tammany Hall, and continue to the present day with the corporate lobbyists on K Street.

Madison foresaw the depredations of corporatism, wherein legislation was bought and sold to the highest

bidder. In a letter to Thomas Jefferson (dated August 8, 1791), he confessed that "my imagination will not set bounds to the daring depravity of the times; as the stock jobbers will become the pretorian band of the government; at once its tools and its tyrant; bribed by its largesses; and overwhelming it by clamors and combinations." The call to get money out of politics would have been endorsed not only by Madison, but by Jefferson as well. An agrarian at heart, Jefferson championed distributed power; and was well aware of the perils of concentrated wealth / power—especially plutocracy (the collusion of financial and political power). {18}

When we look to the principles on which the U.S. was founded, we find that they often do not accord with what we now know as the "Washington Consensus". We've already seen how Neo-liberal support for corporatism is antithetical to early conceptions of the Republic. This was illustrated by Alexis de Tocqueville's observation that what is important in a democracy is that "those who govern do not have interests contrary to the mass of the governed; for in that case [their] virtues could become almost useless and [their] talents fatal." {20}

In sum: A genuinely democratic government is a meta-religious institution, exercising even-handedness toward all Faiths…as well as toward a complete lack thereof. Such a (secular) State serves to minimize the negative effects of religious discord in civil society; not to mention its tendency to sabotage deliberative democracy. Just as importantly, it mitigates religion's disruptive effects on democratic governance. Madison was well aware that importing religion into civic affairs was a recipe for disaster.

# Further Comments:

It is true that Christianity happened to be the majority religion in the American colonies–and the subsequent Republic–at the time. The "catch" here is crucial to note: The most ardent Christians in the American colonies during the era leading up to the founding of the Republic were fanatical Puritans. As the generations came and went, the balance of Christians came to be Anglicans (i.e. those who remained with the Church of England; a.k.a. "Episcopalians"), New England Congregationalists (proto-Unitarians), Quakers, and Presbyterians. Not coincidentally: ALL of these were what are now the most liberal denominations. (Reactionary constituencies emerged pursuant to the "Great Awakenings"; a development that had nothing whatsoever to do with the vision of the Founders.)

When it comes to the demographic breakdown of the American colonies, we might pose a question: Would Christian apologists today suggest that we use the (patently ridiculous) doctrines of 17th and 18th century Puritans as a model for our society? Indeed, if anyone references "Christian" influence in American historiography, then THAT is implicitly the primary point of reference; as it was the most vocal Christian presence at the time. Doctrinal Christianity (which, it should not be controversial to point out, is anti-democratic at its very core) was the most outspoken part of the religious landscape during the era preceding the American Revolution. Therefore that is the only thing one could possibly be referring to if one were to cite the role religion played amongst the rank and file in the 18th century as justification for present policies.

What else could Revisionists TODAY be referring to? Certainly not Adams' and Hamilton's decidedly liberal Faiths. (Are we to suppose, then, that they have in mind the preachments of the fanatical Puritan, John Winthrop?) Shall we still be burning witches? Shall women still be obliged to wear bonnets and remain silent in the public square?

The fact of the matter is: The Founders wanted no part of such a Reactionary mindset. So they took decisive measures to ensure that religiosity played no role in the establishment of the new Republic. To hold that Christianity was the basis for America's founding is like insisting that racism or genocide (ALSO incipient phenomena during the nation's early eras) were a basis for its founding. The credibility

of the Republic was established IN SPITE OF–not because of–such exigencies.

This included attributing the slave trade to CHRISTIANITY. Thomas Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence (the letter addressed to King George III of England in the summer of 1776) included the following indictment:

"This king has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating the most sacred right of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, capturing them and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere to incur miserable death in their transportation. This warfare on humans is the opprobrium of infidel powers. The CHRISTIAN king of Great Britain is determined to [maintain] an open market, where men should be bought and sold" (caps in the original).

In other words: Jefferson saw Christianity as the salient feature of the monarchy's iniquity on this score. (The passage was omitted from the final draft due the pre-established condition of unanimity. 2 of the 13 colonies–South Carolina and Georgia–dissented because they did not want the trans-Atlantic slave-trade to be listed as a grievance.) The heinous practice was begrudgingly tolerated by the Founders; and adamantly opposed by Thomas Paine. While this certainly falls short of a complete repudiation, it indicates that there was a will to MOVE AWAY from the enslavement of Africans, however attenuated at the time.

An early draft shows that Jefferson's primary grievance was that the mother country had "foisted" enslaved Africans on white Americans and then attempted to incite them against their "patriot owners". (While, as a slave-holder himself, he saw slavery as a moral blight, Jefferson's main grievance HERE was the monarchy's use of American slaves as leverage against the land-holding colonialists.) It was the king's duplicity—nay, hypocrisy—that incensed the Founders. In a strident objection to which he devoted 168 words (triple the amount of any other complaint in the Declaration), Jefferson stated that the king had encouraged enslaved Americans "to purchase that liberty of which he has deprived them, by murdering the people upon whom he also obtruded them." This, as much as "taxation without representation" (spec. favoritism granted to the British tea corporation), was a key point of contention against the monarchy. {17}

In his "Notes On The State Of Virginia", Jefferson weighed in on the iniquities of slavery, which would regrettably continue to be practiced (for the time being): "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep for ever; that considering numbers, nature, and natural means only, a revolution of the wheel of fortune–an exchange of situation–is among possible events; that it may become probable by supernatural interference! The Almighty has no attribute which can take sides with us in such a contest." {24}

Think of it this way: It does not follow that because only white men were enfranchised at the Founding, the Republic is to be characterized as being ONLY FOR white men. Legacy is not destiny–be it real or contrived. The same goes for the religious zealotry of the Puritan settlers in New England, or–for that matter–for ANY Christians during the Republic's germination.

The mis-guided notion that the American Republic was FOUNDED UPON slavery is tremendously disingenuous. Not only is it historically fallacious; it imputes motives to the Founders that clearly did not exist. The sentiments of the Southern states on the matter is hardly indicative of the principles that impelled the Founders–least of all Thomas Paine. The contention that the revolution was done IN ORDER TO SUSTAIN slavery would have come as a surprise to Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, and Alexander Hamilton…who were adamantly against the practice, and actively took measures to mitigate it as they championed the revolutionary cause…and in the years after.

In recalling the fallibility of 18th-century thinking, we might bear in mind that Thomas Jefferson was aware that certain elements of the founding charter would eventually become obsolete. He recognized that

THAT meant that the Constitution may need to be revisited from time to time (***as often as every generation*** , he once averred) to reflect new insights and accommodate for new developments. It was NOT to be considered holy writ; it was a historical artifact, subject to emendation as society evolved.

I conjecture that if either Thomas Paine or Thomas Jefferson were to take a time machine to the present, they would say: "What's this? You STILL haven't updated this stuff?" {24}

Living up to timeless ideals does not require revanchism; it means moving onward and upward. Remaining mired in "received wisdom" is a recipe for stagnation, not progress.

# Benjamin Franklin:

And so what did Benjamin Franklin think of all this? In his autobiography, Franklin–a freethinker if there ever was one–stated: "I have found Christian dogma [to be] unintelligible." Elsewhere, Franklin announced that "revealed religion has no weight with me." Nor did it with any of the other major Founders of the American Republic. This was no anomaly.

Franklin observed that, "The way to see by Faith is to shut the eye of Reason." This from a man who regularly attended the services of myriad denominations as a gesture of solidarity–and good will–to his fellow citizens (many of whom were devout Christians). As with Jefferson and Madison, Franklin recognized that Christianity was an integral part of the new American culture; yet he also recognized that the foundations of the new Republic existed independently of any specific doctrine. For he recognized that there was a distinction to be made between piety and probity. It is for precisely this reason that the sagacious Franklin criticized all religions for making "orthodoxy more regarded than virtue". In other words: The sine qua non was MORALITY, not religiosity. Religion was valued INSOFAR AS it was often the vehicle for promulgating virtue.

A French acquaintance of Franklin claimed that "our Freethinkers have adroitly sounded him on his religion. And they maintain that they have discovered he is one of their own—that is: that he has [no religion] at all." If Franklin COULD be said to have had a religion, it was strictly utilitarian. As Gordon Wood put it: "He praised religion for whatever moral effects it had, but for little else." Franklin noted that divine revelation had "no weight with me," and the covenant of grace seemed "unintelligible" and, in any case, "not beneficial". For Freethinkers, institutionalized dogmatism is NEVER edifying.

What did Franklin think of mixing religion and government? He noted, regarding the many pious hypocrites who have led nations across history: "A man compounded of law and gospel is able to cheat a whole country with his religion and then destroy them under color of law."

To reiterate: It is important not to get thrown off by idiomatic expressions intimating religiosity. The prolific use of idiomatic expression by the Republic's Founders is important to grasp. Conflating poetic invocations of Providence (which are figurative) with a literal mandate from heaven (which is delusive and imperialistic) paves the way for theocracy. Mandates from heaven are patently anti-democratic; as such claims can be put in the service of even the most heinous policies—as we see today with, say, the Judean Settler Movement of Israel. With the imprimatur of god, anything goes—be it "Gott mit Uns" (Nazi) or "Mafdal" (Revistionist Zionist).

The Founders of the American Republic would have ALL be baffled by the claims of "Christian Nationalism"; and they would have utterly horrified by it most fanatical incarnation: "Christian Dominionism", predicated as it was on hyper-dogmatic, literalist readings of scripture in conjunction with a

pathologically tribalistic mindset (read: hegemony based on racism). Their appeals to "natural law", though grounded in the idiom of theism (in the spirit of Locke and Montesquieu), were categorically secular. It makes sense, then, that the Declaration of Independence was—above all—an Enlightenment document, not a religious document. This was consummate with the writings of Thomas Paine, who—more than anyone else—instigated AND rationalized the American Revolution.

It is worth recapitulating: For both Washington and Franklin, the virtue of ritual observance was community, not piety. So when we hear that some of the Founders attended church, we should keep in mind that they were not being dogmatic; they were simply being pragmatic. To take their deferential orientation toward Christianity as BEING Christian is to misread their modus operandi.

Clinging to this faux history entails remaining mired in a daze of Reality-denial. As I hope to have shown here, the suggestion that the U.S. Constitution could not have been formulated BUT FOR Judeo-Christian doctrine is entirely spurious. It depends on eliding the fact that Judeo-Christian doctrine really had nothing to do with anything that the U.S. Constitution asserts. Those who persist in touting the trope that "America was founded as a Christian nation" are grossly ill-informed; and merely parroting a piece of gilded lore they find tremendously gratifying.

Such ignorance is not benign. A danger of religiously-charged national origin myths is that they are often deployed to rationalize morally questionable enterprises. As we've seen, a dubious historiography can be put in the service of an even more dubious destiny. The non-sequitur goes as follows: "This is where we came from; therefore this is what we shall do henceforth…to fulfill our destiny!"

In the case of America, Judeo-Christian identity has been invoked to justify "Manifest Destiny"–from the jungles of Indo-China to the jungles of Latin America. This candy-coated hubris continues to be the main source of American Exceptionalism. Such delusive thinking, based as it is on a Christian theocratic mindset, also comes in handy for those who insist that the zygotes of homo sapiens are full-fledged humans, that religious institutions should enjoy tax exemption, and that evolution should not be included in the curricula of public schools. Such positions are all based on farce; but it is EXTREMELY USEFUL farce. For all such positions serve an ideological purpose. The more people become educated on this matter, the less purchase faux histories will have on credulous minds.

Consideration of "original intent" should not be merely a matter of where we started; it must be a matter where we are headed. After all, civil society is not as much about this or that legacy as it is about possibility.

Democracy is not something to be preserved, as if a corpse kept in a vat of formaldehyde; it is something to be maintained, like a living body that is exposed to the elements and given a steady flow of nutrients (even as it is being constantly subjected to stress tests). Put succinctly: Democracy is not a destination, it is an on-going process.

Civil society is never on auto-pilot, as it requires active participation from a well-informed citizenry. (Any genuine democracy is a PARTICIPATORY democracy.) The vaunted "Founders" of the American Republic knew that civil society is not sustained via interminable revanchism, but sustained by perpetual improvement. And so it went: The Constitutional Convention was seen as a point of departure, not a fait accompli. The participants all recognized that democracy is aspirational, not atavistic; a progression rather than a retrogression. Revanchism plays no role in this on-going process.

The Constitution isn't just about where we came from; it's about where we're going. The American Republic is, after all, a work in progress.

Understanding what liberal democracy REALLY IS entails coming to terms with history–our own and others'. One might even go so far as to say that being honest about the origins of the United State is the Christian thing to do.

# Footnotes:

{1 This requires distinguishing between a second-order belief (BELIEVING IN believing X) and a first-order belief (actually believing X). Second-order beliefs (esp. with respect to deities) are often misconstrued as first-order beliefs. To wit: Most people who profess to be theists are, in reality, pseudo-theists; even though they (generally) do not intend to be disingenuous. It's not that they LITERALLY believe that the Abrahamic deity exists as delineated in scripture; they BELIEVE IN the belief that the Abrahamic deity exists as such; and so proceed accordingly. We know this is the case because the reasons they give for their (second-order) belief are based almost entirely on pragmatism (e.g. "Believing it gives my life meaning, etc.") Likewise, believing in the Judeo-Christian origins of the U.S. serves a certain (ideological) purpose. The key is that second-order belief is a PROFESSION OF belief. In that vain, it is used to signal fealty to a certain ideology (and/or loyalty to a tribe). First-order belief is revealed more in actions than in words. In terms of profession, there are no atheists in foxholes. In terms of taking action, there are no theists in foxholes.}

{2 We might even take this further: What founding principle was only ground-ABLE on the Abrahamic creed? That is: Which tenet (integral to the Framers' vision) depended for its very cogency on there having been such a creed? The answer is, of course, none. This fact belies any claim that democratic principles are somehow predicated on a Judeo-Christian legacy; or that such principles would be inaccessible BUT FOR proponents having espoused certain religious dogmas. It is no thanks to either Judaism or Christianity that we have an objective basis for deeming that deception, betrayal, theft, and murder are iniquitous. {3} We might inquire further: What ELSE are we to suppose we would have no solid grounds for (had Judaism / Christianity never existed)? Civil rights? Freedom of conscience? Freedom of speech? No such things are upheld in Abrahamic lore. (Meanwhile, patriarchy, the stoning of insolent children, genocide, and slavery ARE upheld. Gadzooks!) Even when Abrahamic doctrine gets some elementary points correct, it is superfluous; and thus un-necessary. The suggestion that our moral intuitions would be unable to inform us that lying, cheating, stealing, and killing are wrong but for the existence of Mosaic law is nothing short of preposterous.}

{3 The best explication of an objective basis for morality (which does not depend on institutionalized dogmatism) is Immanuel Kant's "Groundwork For The Metaphysic of Morals". Also see Kai Nielsen's "Ethics Without God".}

{4 The use of "Creator" as a rhetorical flourish was quite commonplace thereafter. In the first five editions of his "On The Origin Of Species", Charles Darwin offered a peroration to natural selection in his closing remarks: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been–and are being–evolved." Then, 23 years after the famous work was first published (i.e. the year the author died), Darwin's estate opted to insert "by the Creator" after "breathed" (in the 6th edition; 1882). Why was this done? It was a gesture to placate religionists who had been vexed by the publication. So now we might inquire: By inserting the loaded term "Creator" into the passage at the end of the book, did the editors change Darwin's theory? Of course not. Clearly, the locution was used idiomatically. The amended phrasing was a transparent effort to mitigate the acrimony the theory of evolution had stirred amongst Reactionaries. In other words: It was a sop to those who assailed Darwin for sacrilege. Saying "breathed by the Creator" was no more tantamount to putting the Abrahamic deity at the center of the theory than was

Einstein's quip, "God doesn't play dice" was tantamount to putting the deity at the center of the theory of relativity. To insist that the use of the phrase "endowed by our Creator" in Jefferson's letter to King George III (the "Declaration of Independence") rendered the exalted document god-centric is analogous to contending Darwin endorsed "intelligent design" because he used the words "breathed by the Creator" in his magnum opus.}

{5 Note that the Enlightenment sense of "happiness" (used by the likes of Jefferson, and later by John Stuart Mill) involved what the Greeks dubbed "eudaemonia". This conception of "happiness" did not pertain to cheap satisfaction or to idle pleasure; it pertained to the fulfillment derived from a cultivation of virtue. This does NOT correspond to what was dubbed "simcha" in the Hebrew Bible: the gratification one derives from living in accordance with god's will. Hence "simcha" is more consonant with Calvinism than with Mill's Utilitarianism; as it is a function of piety more than of probity. This disparity (viz. happiness) illustrates how ideations in Abrahamic lore do not always correspond to those with which we are now familiar…EVEN WHEN TRANSLATED INTO THE SAME WORD.}

{6 This was in a letter to the United Baptist Chamber of Virginia; May, 1789.}

{7 In the 19th century, American icon, Sarah Josepha Hale averred that "the spirit which seeks to do good to all and evil to none is the only true Christian philanthropy." She was clearly not invoking institutionalized dogmatism to convey this message. The key to understanding idiomatic expression of a bygone era is recognizing how they were used in everyday speech by the communities that ACTUALLY USED them…AT THAT TIME. Today, it is plain to see that proclaiming one "swears to god" is merely a rhetorical flourish, not the invocation of a higher power. Asking "What in heaven's name is going on here?" is the same as simply asking: "What is going on here?" And if I ask you, "What in god's name are you doing?", I have not made an inquiry into your doctrinal fidelity…let alone proclaimed my own. This is made clear by the fact that I could just as well ask you: "What the hell are you doing?" When it comes to demotic language, we must always be careful not to read too much into the locutions that have been employed.}

{8 Hamilton considered himself an informal member of the Anglican (i.e. Episcopal) church–hardly the archetype for contemporary American Christianity. Are we to suppose that it is a predominantly Anglican heritage to which Christian ideologues now refer? This would seem odd considering the absence of references to the Archbishop of Canterbury in the ramblings of American Dominionists (and other millenarian re-constructionists). There is no indication AT ALL that Hamilton grounded any part of his political philosophy on religious dogmas. Not once did he invoke church doctrine in making the case for his ideas.}

{9 Jefferson–an alumnus of William & Mary–founded what was the modern world's first categorically secular university: the University of Virginia. He wanted to ensure that there existed public education that was unhindered by clerical oversight, and unburdened by religious dogmatism.}

{10 As with Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson championed individual (Kantian) autonomy, exalting our capacity for critical thinking above all else. (See footnote 3 above.) This entailed constantly questioning "received wisdom" (esp. religious dogmas, sanctified or not). Jefferson saw this charge as critical to responsible citizenship. While in Paris (the summer of 1787), in a letter to his friend, Peter Carr, Jefferson counseled: "Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a god; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear." He even employed the idiom of the time, exhorting: "your own reason is the only oracle given you by heaven." This was the Enlightenment spirit endemic to Deism.}

{11 Which creed one opts to follow is a personal affair, and does not fall within the purview of the State. This view remained throughout the 19th century. (See footnote 4 above.) In his "On Liberty", John Stuart

Mill noted: “The great writers to whom the world owes what religious liberty it possesses have mostly asserted freedom of conscience as an indefeasible right, and denied absolutely that a human being is accountable to others for his religious belief.” If one would have gone to London in 1859 and asked John Stuart Mill how much he had based the insights articulated in his landmark work, “On Liberty” on Judeo-Christian doctrine, he would have surely responded, without hesitation: “Not at all.” Two years later, when he published “Considerations On Representative Government”, had he been asked the question, he surely would have given the same response.}

{12 In the “Northwest Ordinance” of 1789 (which served as a template for the charter of some of the new states), the author opines that “religion, morality, and knowledge” are key elements of good governance and human happiness; and so are things that should be encouraged. George Washington signed this ordinance. This is unsurprising, as Washington himself sometimes used the locution “religion and morality”–holding that it was something germane to good citizenship. This pairing would have come naturally at the time–like cookies and cream or peanut butter and jelly.}

{13 A popular gambit is to embark on a cherry-picking expedition–in which one harvests every parcel of text that happens to make use of these religiously-tinged buzz-terms. Christian Revisionists then present such extracts as evidence that the Founders were pushing a Christianized vision for the new Republic; thereby justifying a quasi-theocratic agenda in the present. This would be like extracting every instance in which “Marx” was mentioned in the ramblings of Kim Il-Sung to show that Juche is somehow based on Karl Marx’s ACTUAL ideals. I discuss Marx in Appendix 4 of my essay on “The Universality Of Morality.}

{14 What happened in that pivotal confrontation? Pursuant to the siege of Yorktown, British General Charles O’Hara surrendered to French Naval Marshal Jean-Baptiste Donatien de Vimeur (the Count of Rochambeau) on behalf of British Major General Charles Cornwallis (possibly with American General Benjamin Lincoln present). Technically, fighting continued for a 2-3 more weeks, but the outcome of the war was–by then–a foregone conclusion. Ultimately, Cornwallis personally surrendered (on October 19, 1781) jointly to French Admiral Jacques-Melchior Saint-Laurent (the Count of Barras), French General Gilbert du Motier (the Marquis of Lafayette), and American Major General George Washington (American Commander in Chief on who’s behalf the French Generals conducted themselves) at Yorktown. Washington had to be there, above all, for symbolic reasons. This episode made the conclusion official. King George III of England eventually signed the “Definitive Treaty of Peace” in Paris, France, with a delegation of French and U.S. leaders, almost two years later–on September 3, 1783. That marked the official day of U.S. independence. If not for the French navy (lead by Louis-Marie of Noailles, in the aforesaid engagement) neutralizing the British army at Yorktown (effectively blockading the Chesapeake Bay), there is no way the American colonies could have triumphed over the (far superior) British land forces. Thanks, France.}

{15 Note that by the time the American colonies achieved independence, Spain (1542), Russia (1723), China (1725), and Portugal (1761) had already abolished slavery. Scandinavia (1790-92), Canada (1793), and France (1794) would follow soon thereafter. I explore how little religion had to do with the mitigation of slavery in my essay, “The Universality Of Morality”.}

{16 Abercrombie was a member of the American Philosophical Society, and the minister of the church Washington most attended: St. Paul’s in Philadelphia. In a now-infamous letter, he took umbrage with the fact that Washington would routinely depart “immediately after the desk and pulpit services” (that is, after the sermon, before the sacraments were performed). Washington was not considered a “communicant” by either himself or others; and stated that participating in sacraments would have been hypocritical. White was the Senate chaplain. He stated: “I do not believe that any degree of recollection will bring to my mind

any fact which would prove that General Washington to have been a believer in the Christian revelation [beyond] his attendance [of services] in connection with the general reserve of his character." Green was a member of the American Philosophical Society, the President of Princeton University, one of the founders of the Pennsylvania Bible Society, and the chaplain for the U.S. Congress. He made clear that Washington "was not a believer in the Bible as a revelation from heaven" and that "while he was very deferential to religion and its ceremonies, like nearly all the Founders of the Republic, he was not a Christian but a Deist." In an article about Green in the Chicago Tribune (in the late 19th century, by B.F. Underwood), it was said that "from his long and intimate acquaintance with Washington, [Green] knew it to be the case that while he respectfully conformed to the religious customs of society by generally going to church on Sundays, he had no belief at all in the divine origin of the Bible, nor the Jewish-Christian religion" (see "Six Historic Americans" by John E Remsburg; p. 115-137).}

{17 By the end of 1776, a free African American soldier serving in the Continental Army (Lemuel Haynes) had drafted an essay entitled "Liberty Further Extended". He opened it by quoting Thomas Jefferson's statement "that all men are created equal" and "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights." By highlighting these claims, Haynes began the process of shifting the focus and meaning of the Declaration of Independence from the ordinance of secession to a universal declaration of human rights. That effort was later carried forward by other abolitionists. The Declaration was seen as a "promissory note" that had yet to be fulfilled for African Americans—as Frederick Douglas put it in his famous oration in 1852: "What, To The Slave, Is The Fourth Of July?"}

{18 There is an oft-touted quote of dubious provenance. In a letter to Colonel William F. Elkins (dated November 21, 1864), Lincoln purportedly wrote: "I see in the near future a crisis approaching that unnerves me and causes me to tremble for the safety of my country. As a result of the war, corporations have been enthroned; and an era of corruption in high places will follow. The money power of the country will endeavor to prolong its reign by working upon the prejudices of the people until all wealth is aggregated in a few hands, and the Republic is destroyed. I feel at this moment more anxiety for the safety of my country than ever before, even in the midst of [the Civil War]." Even if Lincoln had not penned these exact words, it is not unreasonable to suppose they accurately captured his—and others'—sentiment on the matter.}

{19 Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut on New Year's Day 1802 stated that "religion is a matter that lies solely between man and his god" and that a man "owes account to none other for his Faith or his worship." Here's the upshot: "The legitimate powers of government [pertain to] actions only, not [to] opinions." He noted that the Framers—himself including—composed the establishment clause of the Constitution's first Amendment "thus building a wall of separation between Church and State." The Supreme Court validated this principle in 1868 by citing the 14th Amendment—specifically with regard to state-level jurisdiction. It did so AGAIN in 1947 with Everson v. Board of Education—where it stipulated that the government could not aid one religion over any other. Ergo the maxim: "on your own time, on your own dime." For more on this, see the Appendix.}

{20 We might also consider the Neo-con / war-hawk support for militarism—to wit: how it does not comport with the original vision of the U.S. George Washington was very clear about being wary of foreign entanglements. When we think of the U.S. support for humanitarian atrocities perpetrated by fascistic regimes (Israel and Saudi Arabia being the most obvious examples at present), we might consider his warning against "passionate attachments" that expose the U.S. to "the insidious wiles of foreign influence". This goes for AIPAC as well as for the oil deals made with the House of Saud…and even the tacit agreements made with China to maintain access to cheap labor (for production) and gigantic markets (for sales). Passionate attachment to fascists was NOT part of the Founders' vision.}

{21 There have been many books that I have found helpful in understanding the founding of the American Republic. They include Forrest McDonald's ***"Novus Ordo Seclorum: The Intellectual Origins Of The Constitution"***, Jack Rakove's ***"Original Meanings"***, Bernard Bailyn's ***"The Ideological Origins Of The American Revolution"*** and ***"To Begin The World Anew"***, Pauline Maier's ***"Ratification"***, and Robert Middlekauf's ***"The Glorious Cause"***. Also indispensable are the major works of Gordon S. Wood—notably: "Empire Of Liberty", "The Creation of the American Republic", "Power And Liberty: Constitutionalism In The American Revolution", "The Radicalism Of The American Revolution", and "The Idea Of America: Reflections On The Birth Of The United States". To procure an in-depth understanding of democracy-in-general, I would recommend John Stuart Mill's landmark essay, "On Representative Government" as well as ANYTHING by Thomas Paine. When it comes to secularism in the U.S., Susan Jacoby's "Freethinkers" is a must-read. And last but not least: Tony Judt's "Ill Fares The Land" is a potent lament regarding the mis-apprehensions currently plaguing the American agora.}

{22 In his "Notes on the State of Virginia" (1787), Jefferson addressed the matter of government getting involved in religious affairs by promoting SOME tenets whilst suppressing OTHERS, using Pennsylvania and New York as exemplars: "Millions of innocent men, women and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burned, tortured, fined and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth. … Our sister states of Pennsylvania and New York, however, have long subsisted without any establishment at all. The experiment was new and doubtful when they made it. It has answered beyond conception. They flourish infinitely. … Their harmony is unparalleled, and can be ascribed to nothing but their unbounded tolerance, because there is no other circumstance in which they differ from every nation on earth. They have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes is to take no notice of them. Let us too give this experiment fair play, and get rid, while we may, of those tyrannical laws."}

{23 To fail to recognize this leads to absurdities—as when gun-fetishists today read the 2nd Amendment (pertaining to civilian militias being sufficiently equipped to fulfill their charge, at the pleasure of the State) and insist that it is now a license for one to stockpile armaments at one's own discretion (see my essay on "The Obsolescence Of The Second Amendment"). For more on this point, see Laurence Tribe's "The Invisible Constitution" and Stephen Breyer's "Active Liberty".}

{24 For more on this point, see my Appendix to "Robin's Zugzwang", where I discuss the debunking of the "1619 Project". There, I discuss the fact that democracy is a process, not a destination. Put another way: It is an ideal, and thus an aspiration. The Framers saw what they did as a POINT OF DEPARTURE, recognizing that there would be further work to be done going forward.}

# APPENDIX 1:

## Tax-Exempt Status For "religious organizations"

When Jefferson penned his famous letter to the Danbury Baptists on New Year's Day 1802, he stated that "religion is a matter that lies solely between man and his god." As a result, there must be "a wall of separation" between the affairs of the church and the affairs of the government. This relegation of religion and politics to their respective domains was seen as a prerequisite for a genuine (liberal) democracy. The question arises: Has this view been validated since? Until the Federalist Society—essentially, a factory for Roman Catholic theocrats—began to hold sway in the judicial appointments of the U.S., the answer was an

unequivocal YES. Let's review.

In the Supreme Court decision, Everson v. Board of Education (1947), the conclusion was unequivocal: Government could not aid one religion over any other. The implications of this are loud and clear: tax-breaks for religious institutions are categorically un-constitutional…as is the use of public facilities for the practice or promotion of ANY religion. If the public subsidizes a venue, then that venue cannot be used to facilitate religious activity; as the wall of separation between religion and governance is symmetrical: the liberty TO practice a religion of one's own choice entails others' prerogative to remain unencumbered by those practices. In other words: freedom OF religion entails freedom FROM religion. I'm not obligated to subsidize your religious activities.

In a secular society, one's own exercise of religion cannot in any way burden (that is: impose obligations and/or restrictions) on any given bystander. Ever. This is incontrovertible.

It helps to remind ourselves that churches are institutions that are run so much LIKE businesses that they effectively ARE businesses—even as they claim "non-profit" status (ultimately a specious characterization). Under U.S. law, in order to qualify for tax-exemption, an institution "must demonstrably serve—and be in harmony with—the public interest." Moreover, "the institution's purpose must not be at odds with the common community conscience as to undermine any public benefit that might otherwise be conferred." This makes perfect sense; and is entirely reasonable. Alas, it is almost NEVER enforced. Not only do cults like the Church of L.D.S., the Watchtower Society, and Scientology not qualify; but the Roman Catholic Church clearly doesn't qualify either…nor does any fundamentalist synagogue or evangelical church. Such (private) institutions do not come anywhere near meeting the above standard. In fact, it is easily demonstrable that they are conducted like businesses; and, on balance, their operations are counter to the commonweal.

Hence Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, and Scientologists (as well as Haredim / Hassidim, Roman Catholics, Seventh Day Adventists, Pentecostals, mega-church congregations, Salafis, Wicca covens, et. al.) should not be exempt from any civic duty anywhere, at any time.

If a certain (identifiable) element of said institutions are, indeed, providing a bona fide (demonstrable) public service, then THAT ELEMENT may tacitly qualify for tax exemption—that is: insofar as it can be shown that it raises funds that go directly to philanthropic operations FOR EVERYONE, with no strings attached. (It might be noted that "strings" are often "attached", entails that the operation is being used as a pretense for some sort of proselytization, or has some sort of evangelical angle.) But here's the catch: That element of the institution cannot serve as cover for the ENTIRETY of the institution; as the charity is often isolated from the other (ecclesiastical) operations. The charity typically has nothing to do with the central mission of the institution qua religious entity.

Those who deny the secular spirit behind the American Republic's founding seem to think that religiosity—specifically, Christianity—is necessary to maintain American heritage (and/or sustain a distinct "American" culture). This is false. What such people seem not to realize is that the hallowed Americana needn't involve religiosity to subsist from one generation to the next—even when it comes to things that were initially (ostensibly) quasi-religious. Hence something like Christmas can continue as a marvelous, secular holiday—replete with Christmas carols, Christmas trees, secret Santas, crèches, and nativity lore. This is true even in a society that is completely secular. (Freethinkers love singing "Silent Night" and decking the halls with boughs of holly as much as anyone else.)

Others are under the impression that (Judeo-Christian) religiosity is necessary to maintain civic order. This is not only false; it is the opposite of the case. The most secular societies are invariably the most

democratic. Enforcement of piety (i.e. blasphemy policing) has no place in a civil society.

And some are besot with the misapprehension that religion is somehow a prerequisite for living a meaningful life. It isn't. The panoply of social perks that religion brings—communal solidarity, a dependable support network, a sense of belonging, a shared ethical framework—are all wonderful things, indeed. Each can be realized sans religion; and arguably realized BETTER. The same goes for those seeking existential ballast. The panoply of existential perks—giving meaning to one's life, robust spirituality, a sense of purpose—can be cultivated without succumbing to institutionalized dogmatism. Sacred doctrine is required for none of these estimable things.

To resolve whether or not civil society is somehow predicated on religion, we might look again to Thomas Jefferson. In a letter to Dr. Thomas Cooper (February 10, 1814), he rightly observed that "Christianity neither is nor ever was a part of the common law." For the Founders, "natural law" or "common law" was not a function of this or that religious doctrine; it was a set of universal principles that transcended the particulars of this or that creed. And it was realized via our capacity to reason, not via piety.

When Jefferson wrote his letter to the Danbury Baptists immortalizing the idea of "a wall of separation" between church and state (January 1, 1802), his primary point was that "religion is a matter that lies solely between man and his god." Therefore each of us "owes account to none other for [our] Faith." Not only was religious freedom a private affair, it entailed not being burdened by ANYONE ELSE'S exercise thereof.

In other words: On your own time, on your own dime.

# APPENDIX 2: Christian Nationalism?

A brief word on the phenomenon of "Christian Nationalism"—effectively: the confluence of Evangelical (esp. Millenarian) Christianity and U.S. Exceptionalism (esp. "Manifest Destiny"). This ideological synthesis leads to a toxic cocktail of religious fundamentalism (one kind of collective pathology) and ethno-nationalism (another kind of collective pathology). The former involves cult activity; the latter involves a militant, ethno-centric, imperialist mindset (characterized by what sociologists dub "super-patriotism"). Each is comprised of two key elements: virulent tribalism and institutionalized dogmatism.

Both religious fundamentalism and ethno-nationalism engender their own kind fanaticism. Indeed, all the agit-prop and bombastic pageantry belies a slew of neuroses. When merged, these fanaticisms end up being mutually re-enforcing. (Different forms of delusive thinking tend to be symbiotic.)

Today, we see this odious phenomenon most flagrantly with Revisionist Zionism in Israel and Juche in North Korea. In most cases, the goal is a theocratic ethno-State. This is a reminder that fascism is cultic in nature—be it tied to a traditional religion or the latest demagogue du jour. Such cult activity is not just dogmatic and tribalistic; it is highly superstitious and downright racist. America's "Christian Dominionism" is simply the latest manifestation of this malignant cultural tumor.

When it comes to the strain found in the U.S., the pathology takes on a signature brand whereby American-ness is equated with Christian-ness (to the point where they become indistinguishable). Insofar as such an ethnocentric regime becomes militaristic and authoritarian, we call it "fascism". Behold Christian Nationalism. Just replace the swastikas with stars and stripes; and the "Volk" with WASPs (or with sycophants of the Roman Catholic Church, as the case may be); militarize the police; and we're there.

Recall George Steinbrenner's demand that everyone stand for the national anthem at each baseball game at

Yankee stadium, threatening to ARREST anyone who had the audacity to so much go to the bathroom as it played. It's right out of the Stalin / Kim Il-Sung / Mao Tse Tung playbook.

As I showed in my essay: "The Many Faces Of Fascism", one need simply insert ANY ethno-nationalist vision into the "Make X Great Again" slogan, and one finds myriad analogues. (Hence platitudes like "take our country back", "make America great again", and "America First".) This entails the propagation of alarmist claims that the in-group is "under siege" by some vilified out-group (an enemy at the gates), and the utterance of exhortations to restore the nation to its former glory: a chimerical Golden Age that exists only in the minds of the propagandists.

As is usually the case, the pathological degree of false pride is predicated on a deep-seated insecurity. Hence the prevalence of various neuroses—from the siege mentality to a persecution complex.

Christian fundamentalism in North America goes back to the Great Awakening in the 18th century, with proselytizers like John Wesley and George Whitfield: charismatic leaders who brought the movement across the Atlantic from England, subsequently establishing Puritanism-based theocracy in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. The signature American strain of Christian Nationalism, though, was pioneered in the 1930's by the German Anabaptist, Gerald Winrod (with the Defenders Of The Christian Faith) and Gerald L.K. Smith (with the Christian Nationalist Crusade; as well as the political "America First" party). At the time, the go-to periodical for the movement was "The Cross And The Flag". (Also notable at the time was William Dudley Pelley and his "Silver Legion".)

Christian Nationalism has had a rather meandering history. A Roman Catholic incarnation was pioneered by the radio celebrity, Charles Coughlin in the 1930's. Non-denominational incarnations were promoted by the likes of Frank Buchman and Charles Lindbergh in the 1930's and 40's. A Calvinist incarnation was pioneered by R.J. Rushdoony in the 1950's. A Mormon incarnation was pioneered by Willard Cleon Skousen in the 1960's. And the movement was put into overdrive in the 1970's by Paul Weyrich (a Roman Catholic) and Jerry Falwell (a Southern Baptist), both of whom rode a wave of religious fervor—largely in the form of Christian Re-constructionism. This led to such organizations as "The Moral Majority".

The admixture of religious zealotry and super-patriotism was a toxic cocktail of pathologies. Each version of this ideology was successful because it appealed to the universal predilection for tribalism and dogmatism. This super-charged religiosity was fused with American Exceptionalism to form a perfidious theocratic ideology: Christian Dominionism (which germinated within the nexus of tribalism, racism, and delusive thinking). It was Christian Dominionism that would serve as the theocratic foundation for Christian Nationalism vis a vis the United States.

All this had grave implications for both domestic (esp. regarding abortion) and foreign policy (esp. regarding Israel).

It comes as no surprise that those who subscribe to America's Christian Origin myth are far more likely to abide ethnocentric attitudes ("America is a [white] Christian nation!") Proponents of Christian Nationalism are obdurately Reactionary—which means that they are vehemently anti-intellectual, extremely dogmatic, virulently tribalistic, and stridently contemptuous of human rights. Cosmopolitanism, secularism, humanism, and even democracy itself are anathema to such ideologues.

The marriage of corporatism (esp. the fetishization of capitalism; which has operated under the aegis, "neo-liberalism" since the 1970's), militarism (under the aegis of "national defense"), and Christian fundamentalism (under the aegis of Providentialism) eventually led to:

- Think-tanks like the Heritage Foundation
- Cold Warriors with Biblical pretensions like John Foster Dulles
- Dim-witted heads-of-State like Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush
- Political hacks like Newt Gingrich and Mitch McConnell

Today's preachers have inherited this reprobate ideological mantle—most notably: Robert Jeffress and John Hagee. Buffoonish demagogues like Donald Trump—as he awkwardly holds a bible aloft in one moment and hugs an American flag the next—demonstrate that this is largely about theatrics; and remind us how easily manipulated this segment of the polis really is.

The allure of Christian Nationalism is undeniable. This is largely attributable to the standard assortment of enticements found in ANY cult activity—from false hope to false pride; and, of course, false certainty. The targets are—as is always the case—those who are insecure, credulous, and existentially disoriented. It appeals most to simple-minded people who are easily hoodwinked by a captivating narrative; and are looking for something solid to hold onto.

To make the ideology enticing, measures are taken that SEEM TO give it moral ballast, and provide the beguiling illusion of historical precedent. Those who partake in this charade often employ an Orwellian vernacular: provocative yet vacuous locutions that sound meaningful to the untutored ear…yet lack any solid, lexical content ("Christian Nation", "family values", "unborn child", "Second Amendment rights", etc.) Platitudes lend a veneer of credence to what is nothing but jingoistic balderdash.

The trick is to ramble on and on and on about "religious freedom" while refusing to recognize that such freedom entails a separation of church and state. This required eliding the fact that "freedom OF" has a logical corollary: "freedom FROM". Hence, "freedom of religion" is taken to mean something other than what it actually means. For Christian theocrats, the catch-phrase entails an array of dubious entitlements—notably: tax exemption for ostensibly "religious" operations, as well as the license to use public resources in the service of ostensibly "religious" activities. To deny them publicly-subsidized religion (or the ability to enact legislation based on Christian doctrine) is seen by them as an infringement on their (religious) "liberty"; hence the name of the "Christian Liberty Party".

This deranged treatment of "religious freedom" also involves being obsessed with American Exceptionalism—asserting that god is on our side (with paeans to a "shining city on a hill" and all the rest). The claim, then, is that "WE are the chosen; so WE are a beacon for the rest of the world." This is not a novel trope; it goes back to the Judaic conceit: "Or La-Goyim" (Light unto the Gentiles) and the Nazi "Gott mit Uns". I explore such conceit in my essay: "Genesis Of A People".

## POSTSCRIPT:

Abraham Lincoln once opined: "Happy day when—all appetites controlled, all poisons subdued, all matters subjected—***mind***, all conquering ***mind***, shall live and move; [and be] the monarch of the world. Glorious consummation! Hail, the fall of Fury and reign of Reason. All hail!" Note, here, that Lincoln did not hail FAITH; he hailed the rational faculties. This is a reminder that the American Republic was founded on categorically secular principles.

Broadly speaking, it is self-contradictory to posit a religiously-oriented democratic government. There can no more be a Christian democracy than there could be a Judaic or Islamic democracy. Alas. In America, Christian Dominionists will persist with their specious asseverations until they realize that theocratic democracy is an oxymoron. Such epiphany might begin with a better understanding of the founding documents of the United States.

When it comes to fetishized documents, flagrant mis-readings are de rigueur amongst ideologues. Such disingenuousness is especially egregious for those who are married to the inerrancy of the document…yet find themselves committed to agendas that do not comport with what the text ACTUALLY SAYS.

Sometimes this is a matter of eliding objectionable statements–as Judeo-Christian apologists are obliged to do when instructed to take an eye for an eye in the Hebrew Bible. They insist that this must REALLY mean: ensure the punishment is proportional to the crime (rather than what it obviously means: two wrongs make a right).

Other times, this is done to evade statements that they ardently wish did not exist–as when some Christians read the exhortation in the New Testament to "render unto Caesar what it Caesar's, and render unto god what is god's." Instead of recognizing the implicit endorsement for the separation of church and State, those with a theocratic bent opt to interpret this to mean, well, NOTHING.

Practitioners of eisegesis prefer that everyone read "between the lines" instead of simply read the ACTUAL LINES. Sometimes this involves positing chimerical subtext…which, lo and behold, just so happens to stipulate precisely what one wishes. Upon importing the desired meaning into a text, one can then pretend that it was there all along. Sometimes this involves insisting that words mean something other than what they obviously mean. Hermeneutic chicanery is routine for those who are forced to square their own ideals with a sacred text that is diametrically opposed to those ideals.

Right-wing ideologues in MOST contexts are able to promote their agendas by touting a revision of history that happens to serve their purposes. Those who argue for tax-breaks for big corporations claim to be doing so in the spirit of the American Revolution. Such people are stupendously confused. The Boston Tea Party, after all, was a protest against corporate tax breaks. (!) The British crown had instituted tax policy that favored the East India company over the smaller, local merchants–thus doing the bidding of oligarchs at the expense of the lower classes. America was founded on a REBUKE of corporate power; yet the way those on the right wing tell it, one would think that the Republic was predicated on plutocracy rather than democracy.

Manufacturing a heritage has become somewhat of a cottage industry in certain communities. The key is that the heritage is highly-varnished; and designed to suit the purposes of those doing the varnishing. The theocratically-minded in America do this by propounding a chimerical Judeo-Christian legacy. They can then justify their tenets by recourse to confabulated histories.

This is more a matter of self-ingratiation than of perspicacious deliberation. For the revisionist, historical records are made to be broken. It is easy for today's ideologues to disregard what the Founders ACTUALLY said in favor what what they WANT them to have said. While Neocons disregard George Washington's warning's about "foreign entanglements", right-wing libertarians disregard the Preamble to the Constitution, which explicitly states that the federal government was instituted to provide for the general welfare. Never mind Thomas Paine's position that the State's role is to facilitate the commonweal (via public education, public healthcare, social security, etc.)

By clinging in desperation to a confectionary heritage, Reactionaries revel in a farcical legacy that–they insist-must be upheld.  Little do they seem to realize that ideals are not static blueprints to follow; they are guides for evolution (to wit: an open-ended process).

One does not need to retain the dogmas of 1776 in order to uphold the spirit of 1776.  The dream of the American Republic is not about what we used to be; it's about what we can become.