

18th Century Civil Religion and the Declaration

Written by Calvin Fox

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Much is made of Deism in the study of American History in the late 18th-early 19th Centuries. It could be called the European Enlightenment in religious form. In Early America, a form of Deism became America's Civil Religion.

Beginning with the Pilgrims (1620) and the Puritans, Doctrines of Calvinism had dominated Colonial Thought and practices for some 80 years. By 1700 Calvinism showed signs of serious weakening and was becoming more a Tradition than a living Faith and churches had become dormant. A Revival called the Great Awakening broke out in all the Colonies. It began in the 1730's with Jonathan Edwards in Northampton Massachusetts, lost some of its vigor until the arrival of George Whitfield from England and others who came in his trail and really blazed up and down the Eastern Coast well into the 1740's. Then it abruptly ended. By 1760 a New Faith began to make itself known.. It would become known as the Religion of the Republic or simply, "Civil Religion" Calvinism was still prevalent in 1776, but no longer dominant. The Awakening had introduced alternative Christian Beliefs and practices which eventually led to the dominance of Arminianism and the almost total rejection of Calvinism by Christians. It further led to the adoption of Arianism (Unitarianism) and what we now call "Liberalism". After the War, a new "Civil Religion" (Some Christian Faith mixed with Deism, Enlightenment Philosophy and elements of Patriotism) became prevalent in America, Its major Tenets included Mind over Heart, Reason over Revelation, Morals over Miracles and Public Virtue over Private Salvation.

Benjamin Franklin was its first major advocate and promoted it for more than 40 years. He was also an active Mason. "Here is my Creed [he wrote]: I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshiped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do, in whatever Sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth, ... I think the System of Morals and his Religion as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw, or is likely to see; ...and I have ... some Doubts as to his Divinity ..."

While it is debatable whether George Washington was more than a nominal Christian (he was a life-long member of what became the Episcopal Church), there is little debate that he also subscribed to the non-Christian beliefs of the Freemasons (he was Master of the Masonic Lodge in Alexandria, VA). At his inauguration as President, He took his oath of Office upon a Masonic Bible. Masonic Rites were used at his Funeral. The George Washington Masonic National memorial in Alexandria it is "a memorial to honor and perpetuate the memory, character and virtues of the man who best exemplifies what Freemasons are and ought to be, Brother George Washington". (quoted from the Memorial's website)

From ancient times, there were guilds of actual, working stonemasons. There is evidence of a transition from "Operative" to "Speculative" Freemasonry, with membership of notable gentleman who were not actually stonemasons, in the early to mid 18th Century, first in Scotland and then in England. (It is a confusing story as there were several kinds of independent Lodges and all have their own histories. Of the 56 men who signed the Declaration

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of Independence, apparently 8 or 9 were Masons. Of the 39 who signed the Constitution, 13 were Freemasons [the actual number of the Founders who were Freemasons is disputed] The influence of Freemasonry and Freemasons upon the founding of America and its core Documents is rife with controversy and speculation.

According to Deism, there is one Supreme Being, Architect of the Universe. This "God" is the same for all Religions of the world, Freemasonry includes practicing members of all Faiths. But it rejects Christ as the necessary Savior of the World and denies the Atonement. Instead, it advocates a Religion of Morality and universal ethical principles.

Besides being a Freemason, Washington held to the tenets of the new Civil Religion. Thomas Jefferson, who was not a Freemason, was the most outspoken advocate of Civil Religion and made no bones about his rejection of the complete Bible (coming up with his own very abbreviated version), the Apostle Paul and Christian Theology, eg.- the "gibberish" about a Trinity. The main point here is that Freemasonry embodied the faith of the Enlightenment and Deism. Add a form of Patriotism to them and we have the Civil Religion of the mid-18th Century.

Civil Religion maintained a faith in one God, but that God, although still all-powerful Creator, was now impersonal and uninvolved in the affairs of the world He had made. Civil Religion included faith in Jesus (meaning great respect for Him) and professed itself to be "Christian", but its "Jesus" was simply a very Moral Man who taught simple wisdom. While the classic Creeds of the Church were rejected, there was a belief in Heaven and Hell, but where one spent the Afterlife would be determined by moral living, especially in public or civic life. High moral character and a virtuous life of public service was greatly esteemed.

Was this Civil Religion the seed bed for the ideas embodied in the Declaration of Independence?

Is any of this Christian or Biblical.

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