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PREFACE

As I sat in a convention hall about thirty years ago listening to the authors of *The Light and the Glory* make a severely flawed case that America was founded as a Christian nation, I decided that someone should write a comprehensive, accurate account of the religious beliefs of the American Founders. My frustration with the lack of an accurate record grew each time someone passed me a video by Christian America advocate David Barton. Representatives of the other extreme were just as exasperating in their inaccuracy. People such as Americans United for Separation of Church and State spokesman Barry Lynn tried to make the equally flawed case that the Founders were rank secularists who wanted to completely separate religion from the public realm. I saw both sides as clearly wrong and as interested parties who were willing to manipulate the historical record in support of their agendas. The Supreme Court regularly compounded the problem by interpreting the Establishment Clause on the basis of the historically spurious “wall of separation” notion. All of this compelled me to consider taking on the project myself. I felt increasingly driven to set the record straight. The interest of my colleague Joseph Bessette encouraged me to finally put decades of research into written form.

Any historian worth the label has a desire to correct the historical record when it is in error. And any student of politics knows, as did the Founders, that those who win the battle of ideas generally determine policy. My purpose in writing this book spans both disciplines and includes both motives. I want to get the history right. More than that, though, I want to force extremists on the Left and on the Right to make the case for their vision of what America should be on its own merits, without hijacking the fame of the Founders and without holding their reputations hostage to causes of which they would not approve. Since the Founders are not here to defend themselves in person, this book is an attempt to allow them to defend themselves through the written record of their words.

My first goal was to try to discover from their own testimony what the key Founders actually said that they believed—as opposed to making assumptions based on mere denominational affiliation. My second goal was to trace to the extent possible the effect that their religious beliefs had upon their political actions and, consequently, on the Founding of America. A third goal was to explicate the arguments made by patriotic preachers in

support of the American Revolution and to demonstrate the affinity between the beliefs expressed by the religious leaders and those of the political leaders. Finally, I wanted to suggest a possible solution to the twenty-first-century argument over the relationship between church and state by showcasing the approach taken by the nation's key Founders. This last goal was born out of my conviction that the Founders best understood how government can and should promote and support religion while affording maximum religious liberty.

Pursuit of the first goal led to the conclusion that the expressed beliefs of the key Founders did not fit within any established categories, which in turn led me to develop a name for their belief system: *theistic rationalism*. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of theistic rationalism, distinguishes it from Christianity and from deism, and lays out today's dispute over the religious views of the Founders. Chapter 2 traces the origins of theistic rationalism by reviewing the beliefs of those clergymen and religious philosophers who most heavily influenced the key Founders and the preachers who supported the Revolution. In chapter 3, I explain the importance of the education of eighteenth-century ministers and analyze the content of their sermons in support of revolution and republicanism. Chapters 4 through 7 provide in-depth analysis of the expressed religious beliefs of eight men who arguably were the most influential Founders. Although John Adams was affiliated with a Congregational church and is regularly categorized as a Christian, the evidence presented in chapter 4 makes him the clearest representative of theistic rationalism. Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin are routinely placed at the other end of the spectrum as deists, but that designation does not stand up to scrutiny, as revealed in chapter 5. Chapter 6 explores several fundamental beliefs of theistic rationalism in the words and actions of four prominent framers of the Constitution: Gouverneur Morris, James Wilson, James Madison, and Alexander Hamilton. The religious beliefs of the famously taciturn George Washington are unearthed in chapter 7, where he is shown to be neither Christian nor deist but a theistic rationalist as well. The book concludes in chapter 8 with a look at how the theistic rationalism of the key Founders and many patriotic preachers impacted the American Founding and left a legacy in American civil religion. Special attention is paid to the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, as I suggest a proper understanding of the religious elements and aspects of both.

A fundamental and necessary assumption of this work is that the key Founders believed what they said and said what they believed—unless the context gives us some reason to doubt that. We cannot evaluate and draw conclusions about what individuals believed if we cannot generally trust

what they said that they believed. Otherwise, we decide in advance what they must have believed and then interpret all evidence according to that agenda, dismissing any evidence to the contrary. Unfortunately, that has been the standard approach of most of those in the Christian America and secular camps.

That said, certain types of sources are generally more reliable than others. It is my conviction that private correspondence, diary entries, and personal memoranda are the most reliable sources because an author is freest to use candor when there is no threat of public disapproval. The fact that some, such as Thomas Jefferson, tried desperately to retrieve their letters to keep them from public view supports this conviction. The bulk of the evidence presented here concerning the beliefs of the key Founders comes from private writings. The least reliable sources are those produced for public political consumption and designed to gain public approval. Public pronouncements, public speeches, and public proclamations must be viewed carefully, with attention to possible ulterior motives. That does not mean that they are useless but rather that one must be circumspect in the treatment and consideration of them. Where clergy are concerned, I take their sermons to be reliable conduits for their sincere views—especially the published versions. Where jurists or philosophers are concerned, their lectures unrelated to specific cases and their treatises would appear to be reliable.

In the chapters that follow, I take expressions of belief to be genuine unless there is some contextual reason to doubt them. On a number of occasions, I will point out such instances and suggest ulterior motives that should, perhaps, shape our understanding of a given statement or document.

I am grateful for the interest, encouragement, and input of many faculty colleagues at The Master's College. Special appreciation goes to my mentor and sounding board, John Stead, and to John Hotchkiss and Grant Horner, who willingly answered many questions of style and word choice. I am indebted to John Hughes for a reduced teaching load and a timely sabbatical during which the principal part of the manuscript was written. I also wish to acknowledge Peg Westphalen and Grace Bater for innumerable interlibrary loan acquisitions.

Through the evolution of this work, Ralph Rossum offered support, encouragement, and a number of helpful suggestions. Charles Kesler posed critical and difficult questions, pushing me to greater clarity and to a tighter line of argument. Joseph Bessette provided guiding wisdom, his usual attention to detail, and valuable advice in pursuing publication. I am greatly indebted to him for his painstaking efforts and for his friendship. It is an honor to have these eminent scholars approve my work.

Speaking of eminent scholars, Thomas Pangle read the original version of the manuscript and offered very helpful, detailed recommendations for revision, clarification, and readability. Russell Muirhead read the revised manuscript and provoked some restructuring, polishing, and focused improvements. By his permission, a few sentences in the final text are his. The final version is much improved as a result of their recommendations; their enthusiasm for the book was encouraging and made publication possible. Director Fred Woodward orchestrated the project for the University Press of Kansas, and his insights and suggestions throughout the process were invaluable.

I also wish to thank the University of Notre Dame Press for granting me permission to include material revised from “Alexander Hamilton, Theistic Rationalist,” in *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life*, edited by Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffrey H. Morrison and published in 2009, in chapters 1 and 6 of this book.

Finally, I want to thank my daughters, Kaci, Kelli, and Kari, for sharing their daddy with an office for many years and my wife, Leanne, for her amazing selfless support and encouragement. I cannot adequately express my appreciation to her.



I

Theistic Rationalism Introduced

A Creed which should be acceptable to all good and reasonable men.

Basil Willey

THE FOUNDERS OF THE UNITED STATES believed that ideas have consequences. Some of the most important and powerful ideas held by men and women concern religion or religious belief. Because they are so important and powerful, religious ideas inevitably influence political thought and practice. That was certainly true with respect to the American Founding. The Founders were religious men who believed that religion was a crucial support for free societies. Yet even though religious ideas played a significant role in the Founding era, a profound misapprehension of those ideas pervades twenty-first-century America. Thomas Pangle, distinguished scholar of American political thought, wrote what serves as a virtual commission for this book when he observed: “What is needed is a more sustained attempt at interpreting the few greatest Founders in their own terms and spirit.”¹ This book aims to meet precisely that need.

It is tempting for some to go beyond what the Founders actually said about their religious beliefs by speculating more generally about those beliefs and about their spiritual lives—if only because we want to “know them” and because there is so much we would like to know that they did not speak to. And so—from sympathy or affection or curiosity—we fill in their silences and speak for them when they refuse to speak for themselves. But this is a mistake, one that is more likely to distort our understanding of the Founders than deepen it. That the mistake is all the more tempting when some wish to recruit the Founders to their side in contemporary disputes is all the more reason to avoid it. This book resists the temptation to speak for the Founders: it does not suppose that we can know more than they revealed. The problem today is that we are so invested in the Founders that, in an effort to agree with them, we too often make them agree with us. In the process, we lose sight of what they actually said and wrote. This is particularly the case with their religion. One side wants to see the Founders as forerunners of today’s secularists who prize a “wall of separation” between church and state. Another side wants to show that the Founders

intended the United States to be a Christian nation built upon Christian and, specifically, biblical principles. Amid this, the danger is that we will not see past our own attachments to entertain the Founders accurately, on their own terms. This book seeks to allow the key Founders to speak for themselves so that we can understand their religious beliefs on their own terms. Although “cherry-picking” or a convenient perusal of the evidence could supply material in support of either view, a comprehensive study reveals that neither of the prevailing views is correct. The political theology of the American Founding era was neither Christianity nor deism. The prevailing political theology of the American Founding era was *theistic rationalism*.

The “secular” camp is represented in the academic community by the majority of historians and political scientists. Many prominent names are closely associated with this view, including Charles Beard, Vernon Parrington, Louis Hartz, Adrienne and Gustav Koch, Gordon Wood, Walter Berns, Wilson Carey McWilliams, and Robert Goldwin. Their arguments range from economic determinism to the march of secularism to Lockean consensus to entrenchment in the Enlightenment to outright opposition to religion to stark cynicism on the part of the Founders. The secular school of thought has been extremely influential on university campuses because it accords well with the secularism taught in other disciplines and because members of its intended audience *want* to believe that it is true, as it coincides with the type of society and culture they prefer.

A number of interest groups and organizations in the public eye are also members of the secular camp. They raise money and support by declaring the irreligion of those who founded the country, by extolling the virtues of a wholly secular republic, and by warning of danger in the growing power of those who contend for religious influence in politics. Included in this group are the American Civil Liberties Union, People for the American Way, and Americans United for Separation of Church and State. Their influence depends on the extent to which they can raise the specter of fundamentalist theocracy in America. Their sensitivity on this issue was exemplified by their near hysteria over the nomination of John Ashcroft as attorney general. Ashcroft was grilled by members of the Judiciary Committee over his (accurate) quotation of a religious slogan from the Revolutionary period: “No King but King Jesus.”² It was difficult to tell whether the secularists were more upset about the quote itself or about the fact that Ashcroft made the remark at a fundamentalist Christian college.

The “Christian America” camp is not well represented in the academic community. For the most part, historians or political scientists who hold this view teach at sectarian colleges or at colleges specifically created to

promulgate the view, such as Patrick Henry College. The academic arenas in which the Christian America view holds a dominant position are the Christian school and home school movements. Most of those who are published and influential in this group, however, are either lawyers or pastors, not historians. Thus, there are no prominent historians or political scientists to mention in connection with the Christian America camp, but one book and one individual deserve mention. On the heels of the American Bicentennial celebration, Peter Marshall and David Manuel's *The Light and the Glory* was published and inspired a revival of the Christian America view. It became the classic text of that camp. Its historiography is abominable; it is a collection of speculations, suppositions, personal musings, and "insights" with little or no proof or documentation for extraordinary claims. Nonetheless, it remains very influential. The most prolific of the Christian America proponents is David Barton. Barton has created an entire organization, called Wallbuilders, to promote his views and to market his voluminous material.

The Christian America camp has its main influence in the evangelical Christian subculture. Prominent pastors, particularly those with television programs, effectively propagate the message to willing listeners. D. James Kennedy even established the Center for Reclaiming America as an "outreach" of his church. In addition to books and school curricula, videotapes and DVDs have been a most effective means of disseminating this view. Interest groups, publishing companies, legal services, tour group companies, lecture circuits, and colleges have all been established to promote the Christianization of the American Founding.

The Christian America camp is very active politically, and adherents have organized in order to "take back America" from the secularists and return the nation to its "biblical foundations." The Christian Coalition and numerous grassroots organizations work to elect Christians to political office across the country. They will not be satisfied until professing Christians occupy the strategic offices of the land and promote biblical policies, as they believe the Founding Fathers did. In other words, their utopian goal is to create exactly the kind of society warned against by the secularists. The Christian America view has found a huge and trusting audience among those who feel alienated by the cultural and political changes in America and who *want* to believe that the view is accurate.

Both the secular and Christian America schools of thought, then, are warmly received by their intended audiences. Consequently, there is little motivation to investigate the evidence and to make an independent analysis. This book presents the results of such an independent analysis and finds

both views wanting. In addition to receptive audiences, the political and cultural groups organized around these two views have one other thing in common: they both base much of what they claim on what they believe to be the political theology of the American Founders. This book demonstrates that both of these camps err in their view of the Founders' political theology.

It is worth noting that a third school of thought exists concerning the political theology of the American Founding. This perspective is not nearly as popular as the Christian America view or as widely accepted in the academic community as the secular view, but it is much closer to being correct than either of the others. This third view might be called the "balanced" view. It recognizes a significant degree of impact on the Founders from both secular and Christian influences. Alan Heimert's *Religion and the American Mind* and Alice Baldwin's *The New England Clergy and the American Revolution* are the definitive works of this camp. Historians Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden and political scientists Thomas Pangle and Michael Zuckert have done fine work in this area. Yet none has done a comprehensive study of the religious beliefs of the key Founders or made the theoretical connection between the religious and political leadership of the Founding era.

Pangle's remarks in *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* about the political theology of the Founders are essentially correct, but he ends the discussion just as he whets the appetite of the reader. His analysis culminates in a series of probing questions:

But the question remains whether the moral and political understanding of men like Franklin, Madison, Jefferson, Wilson, and Hamilton can be adequately interpreted as a continuation of the Christian tradition. . . . Was Christianity the dominant or defining element in their thinking? Or were they not rather engaged in an attempt to exploit and transform Christianity in the direction of a liberal rationalism? Does their "Christianity" not look more plausible to us only because they succeeded so well in their project of changing the heart and soul of Christianity?³

Pangle's incisive questions go to the core of the dispute over the political theology of the American Founding and serve as a call for a study such as this.

Why would the key Founders be interested in trying to change or shape religious opinion? Sidney Mead suggests that "societies create their concepts

of the attributes and character of the god they worship in the likeness of the pressing practical problems of their time and place.”⁴ For the key Founders and a number of ministers, the Christian God—the God of the Bible—was inadequate for their political needs. That God did not grant religious freedom, He claimed to be the sole source of governmental authority, He neither granted nor recognized natural rights, and He preferred faith and obedience to moralism.⁵ To meet their needs, they constructed a god and a belief system more to their liking. In particular, liberal democratic and republican theory significantly shaped religious belief in eighteenth-century America and contributed to the construction of a new belief system—theistic rationalism. That belief system, in turn, provided fertile soil in which to plant the American experiment. It furnished the basis for the toleration, diversity, and emphasis on rights and morality that lie at the heart of the American political culture. As one embarks upon a study of the political theology of the American Founding era, it is critical to recognize that the god of the theistic rationalists was not the God of the Puritans in the previous century. Although, as Stephen Marini notes, a form of religious liberalism informed by the Enlightenment “supplied a powerful theological and philosophical foundation for the cosmopolitan republican culture of the 1780s,”⁶ it was not deism, either.

POLITICAL THEOLOGY AT THE FOUNDING: THEISTIC RATIONALISM

Many scholars who study the period have concluded that political and religious thought were not nearly as differentiated in the Founding era as modern sensibilities or modern thinking would make them. Henry May explains that men of that period, regardless of their religious persuasion, “seldom thought about any branch of human affairs without referring consciously to some general beliefs about the nature of the universe and man’s place in it, and about human nature itself.” Religious historian Nathan Hatch complains that the modern penchant for compartmentalization has hindered understanding of the Founding era. He argues that modern scholars struggle to make sense of “the surprisingly undifferentiated thinking” of men of the late eighteenth century and to “bring together conceptual worlds that for the Revolutionary generation never were separate.”⁷

The realms of religion and politics were inextricably linked for the Founding generation. That may be why courses in moral philosophy were centerpieces of university education. John Witherspoon, for instance, exerted

a profound influence over a generation of prominent figures through his course in moral philosophy at Princeton. It is also, perhaps, the reason that Benjamin Franklin and others expended so much effort in the search for the essentials of religion to which “all good men” could agree. It was important to them because religion and politics “are very closely intertwined components of the human search for order.”⁸

Because of the intimate connection between religion and politics, monumental political events and ideas necessarily produced considerable religious changes. Sydney Ahlstrom observes that the politics of the Founding era “accelerated the advance of Enlightenment philosophy, natural theology, and secularized thought,” which, in turn, “contributed to theological transformation.” Because the biblical God does not specifically or exclusively favor liberal democratic thought,⁹ the changes and transformations to which Ahlstrom refers were movements away from Christianity and the Bible and toward a belief system that harmonized with the spirit of the age.

Most obvious was the revolt against Calvinism, which was abandoned by many at the time of the Revolution because it was viewed as inconsistent with the Revolutionary emphasis on liberty. Each of the so-called five points of Calvinism offended liberal democratic sensibilities. Eventually, many deemed the tenets of Calvinism to be irrational, making those who had rejected them feel further justified. As Cushing Strout contends, “Tocqueville’s emphasis on the Puritan roots of the Revolution does less than justice to the rationalist anti-Calvinists who led it.” George Willis Cooke connects the Calvinist doctrine of decrees with divine right of kings and Arminianism with the people’s claim to the right to rule.¹⁰ In doing so, he demonstrates another reason that Calvinism had to go.

In eighteenth-century America, *Arminianism* was “the technical term for democracy in religion” and was characterized by “toleration, free inquiry, the use of reason, [and] democratic methods in church and state.”¹¹ For example, Arminians criticized the practice of distinguishing between communicant and noncommunicant members and labeled such distinctions “undemocratic” or “illiberal.” The term itself stemmed from a theological position that contrasted sharply with Calvinist conceptions of the relationship between God and man. In particular, it was a denial of the doctrine of original sin and an affirmation of man’s ability to save himself through “a continuous rational process of self-dedication.” Arminians viewed man as a “free agent” who “worked out his own salvation and suffered his just deserts.”¹² Clearly, this view fit more easily with republican ideas than did Calvinism.

A more subtle change was the convenient reinterpretation of Scripture. Thus, since the Bible never promotes political liberty, passages extolling *spiritual* liberty and freedom from sin were commandeered and pressed into service in support of *political* freedom and the Revolutionary cause. And as will be discussed in chapters 2 and 3, the quintessential passage demanding subjection to governing authority (Romans 13) was turned on its head to support rebellion. Furthermore, in order to support and justify the American cause, the history of Israel was rewritten. Theistic rationalists read concern for political liberty and republican self-government into the accounts of premonarchical Israel.¹³ This abuse of the history of Israel will be addressed in chapter 3, but a few observations by Robert Kraynak are appropriate here to illustrate the desire of theistic rationalists to move away from Christianity and a plenary view of Scripture to revelation of their own choosing and interpretation.

First, as Kraynak points out, “the biblical covenant is undemocratic: God is not bound by the covenant and keeps His promises solely out of His own divine self-limitation.” Second, “there is nothing voluntary or consensual about the biblical covenant; and the most severe punishments are threatened by God for disobedience.” Third, “insofar as the covenant with Israel sanctions specific forms of government, the main ones are illiberal and undemocratic,” including patriarchy, theocracy, and kingships established by divine right. Fourth, “the Bible shows that God delivers the people from slavery in Egypt and supports national liberation, not for the purpose of enjoying their political and economic rights, but for the purpose of putting on the yoke of the law in the polity of Moses.” Fifth, “the content of the divine law revealed to Moses consists, in the first place, of the Ten Commandments rather than the Ten Bill of Rights, commanding duties to God, family, and neighbors rather than establishing protections for personal freedom.” Sixth and finally, the combined judicial, civil, ceremonial, and dietary laws imposed on the people “regulate all aspects of religious, personal, and social life.”¹⁴ The history of Israel, therefore, had to be radically rewritten to provide support for the demands of political liberty and for republican self-government.

Various strategies were employed to inculcate Whig and republican ideas into acceptable religious forms. In the quarter century leading up to the Revolution, roughly half of American books and pamphlets discussed politics from a religious perspective. In the 1770s, the vast majority of sermons addressed the political crisis from the Whig point of view. By the time of the Revolution, republican ideas were for many an article of faith.¹⁵ Steven

Keillor aptly describes radical Whig ideology as “political Protestantism.” Theistic rationalists, though no longer strictly religious Protestants, were political Protestants and could, consequently, use familiar and socially acceptable language. Radical Whig republicanism “offered underlying parallels to Protestant Christianity,” and that reassured the theistic rationalists that “they had jettisoned only religious dogmas and were otherwise following tried and true paths.” For example, both republicans and Christians stressed virtue, but republicans meant political virtue, whereas Christians meant biblical morality. Although the theistic rationalists tried to make republican virtue equivalent to Christian morality, “republican virtue was embedded in a worldview that was Greco-Roman, rationalist, egalitarian, antiauthoritarian and basically non-Christian.” Similarly, one could confuse republican concern about the lust for power with the Christian belief in human depravity.¹⁶

A number of scholars have identified and discussed the belief system I call theistic rationalism, but none have examined it in a comprehensive fashion or recognized that it was the predominant political theology of the Founding era. Some have encountered it in connection with their study of the key Founders and others in their study of influential preachers; some have suggested its political significance. No one, however, has made the connection between all three. To place the remainder of this study in context, it is important to review scholarly observations of rational religion in eighteenth-century America.

Establishing the larger context, Basil Willey noted that the religious conflicts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries set the stage for the eighteenth by “calling in doubt all the points of the faith, and reducing them to the level of controversy.” As a result, said Willey, “a desire arose during the seventeenth century to formulate a creed which should be acceptable to all good and reasonable men.”¹⁷ That desire was eventually satisfied in the eighteenth century by theistic rationalism. In his discussion of what I am calling theistic rationalism, Conrad Wright said that “it was so widely accepted, across denominational lines, that one might justly call it the great ecumenical theology of its age.” He elsewhere described it as “virtually the orthodox theology of the Age of Reason.” According to Wright, it was “far more sharply defined, prevalent, and significant than any of our scholars . . . have ever intimated.” In fact, he described it as “all-pervasive.” In clarifying to what he was referring, Wright noted that “we should of course keep it in mind that we are not talking about a sect, or a denomination, or similar special group. The term refers to a position in a scheme of logical classification of ideas, not to a sociological entity.”¹⁸ In other words,

theistic rationalism was a belief system not identified with any particular religion or church structure.

Wright offered an explanation for the lack of general awareness of theistic rationalism: "It is certainly satisfying—at any rate, for pedagogues—to be able to contrast Deism with Puritanism, the Enlightenment with Christian orthodoxy, Benjamin Franklin with Jonathan Edwards, the eighteenth century with the seventeenth." However, said Wright, "the choice was not simply between Natural Religion and Christian orthodoxy, but . . . there was a viable middle way, which was widely accepted in the American colonies." Furthermore, he essentially called for this book when he suggested, "There is a magic about names; and if there is an entity without a common name, we fail to recognize that it exists. I would even go so far as to argue that the fact that Deism has long had an accepted name, while the other kind of rationalism . . . has not, helps to explain why the latter has been so readily overlooked as a separate, distinct, and vigorous tradition in this country."¹⁹ I submit *theistic rationalism* as the name to finally bring recognition to this belief system.

Although scholars use different terms for this belief system (as demonstrated earlier) and stress different elements of it, there is essential agreement that the American experiment was begun "through a combination of the ideas of the Enlightenment and the ideals of the Christian religion."²⁰ For instance, Henry May argued that Protestantism and the Enlightenment were the two main "clusters of ideas" critical to an understanding of eighteenth-century America. Indeed, according to May, the "relation between these two major idea systems is basic to the understanding of eighteenth-century America." May discovered that Enlightenment thought was "often inextricably mixed with Christian ideas," and he concluded that eighteenth-century man did not think either Enlightenment thought or Christianity "express[ed] the whole truth about human nature."²¹ Although the latter remark is overstated, it is certainly true that the eighteenth-century men in this study held that view.

According to Robert Kraynak, these men of the Enlightenment "did not so much call for the abolition of religion as for the transformation of religion into something more reasonable" that "discarded" many fundamental elements of Christianity "while preserving a set of core convictions grounded on reason rather than on revelation or Scripture."²² Kraynak surveyed a number of "rational religions" that emerged in response to this call. One of them was "Theism, which saw God as the Supreme Governor who not only created the universe but also actively and continuously intervenes in it, directing the lives of men and nations, judging their actions, and

administering rewards and punishments in this life and the next.”²³ This is the God of theistic rationalism.

Following his survey of rational religions, Kraynak concluded:

What all of these movements have in common is the belief that religion can be preserved in the modern age of Enlightenment only by rationalizing and simplifying it to include the belief in a rational morality of universal benevolence that requires religious toleration, human freedom, and scientific progress. Nearly all other doctrines of traditional Judaism and Christianity . . . were to be discarded as irrational relics of a less enlightened age which modern people, especially educated people, have outgrown.²⁴

Kraynak then identified “some of the most important figures” of the eighteenth century as “public or private adherents of rational religion,” including Franklin, Jefferson, Washington, Adams, and Madison.²⁵

Prominent scholars of American religious history have recognized that a new belief system was created with Enlightenment rationalism and Christianity as its building blocks. Sidney Mead acknowledged that “the main currents of thought among the intellectuals” came to theological agreement “at the expense of discarding the keystone of the orthodox Christian arch—the Bible as the one and only revelation of God for the guidance of mankind to ‘salvation’ through Jesus Christ, truly God, truly human, and only Savior.” Furthermore, “the new breed of intellectuals presumed to be rational beside, beyond, or without the Scriptures, and in doing so they created a new religion.”²⁶ Mead was quick to note that they were not atheists but “infidels” in the precise sense the term then conveyed, in that they rejected the orthodox Christian premises: that the Bible was the only revelation of God to man, and that Jesus was Deity.²⁷ According to Cushing Strout, “The secular leaders, participants in the Enlightenment’s culture of liberal political philosophy, Newtonian science, and classical humanism, still preserved residual connections with Christianity, even when they attacked specific Christian dogmas and practices. Their Christian allies also thought of themselves as friends of the secular ideology of social contract and the natural rights of man. The two groups were symbiotically related.”²⁸ Strout came close to recognizing that many in the two groups actually shared the same belief system, but he saw it as simply a “mutually advantageous alliance.” Speaking of the secular leaders, he argued that, among others, Madison, Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams had “a shared conception of ‘enlightened’ religion, purified of the corruptions they believed the historic faiths had

made in the simple truth.”²⁹ Here, again, is the emphasis on simplicity implied by Willey’s comments on the search for a widely acceptable creed and identified as characteristic of the period by Kraynak. Strout also recognized that their belief system was something unique when he observed that “the rationalist statesmen did not believe in the traditional Christian religions, but they did have a religion of their own, neither cynical, deistical, nor fundamentalist in any exact sense.”³⁰

In his classic *Religious History of the American People*, Sydney Ahlstrom attested to the development of a new belief system, calling it “a distinct form of Enlightenment theology.”³¹ He said, “There emerged a recognizable type of ‘enlightened’ Christianity,” and he delineated its characteristics.³² Those characteristics meshed quite well with theistic rationalism. According to Ahlstrom, “‘Natural religion’ flourished in alliance with ‘revealed religion’ in the theology of many Christian rationalists [his term for theistic rationalists].”³³ Ahlstrom suggested, as does this study, that Adams, Franklin, and Jefferson were representative of this movement:

Each of these men sought to express the new rationalism with complete intellectual integrity. Each of them tried in a serious way, through a long and active career, to deal coherently with the separate but interrelated problems of man, God, nature, and society. Each of them exemplified in a unique way how the Puritan heritage, an emerging pattern of middle-class democracy, and the fresh influences of the Enlightenment were preparing the American colonies for a common and united destiny.³⁴

Conventional wisdom in the academic community says that Franklin and Jefferson were deistic anomalies among the Founders, but Ahlstrom concluded that “only an extensive essay could clarify the religious differences of the major Founding Fathers.”³⁵ He was right because the major Founders were theistic rationalists, and the only differences between them were those that resulted from differences in what individuals considered reasonable.

Three of the most respected American religious historians, then, came upon theistic rationalism in their study of the encounter between Enlightenment thought and Christianity in the eighteenth century. Although their own predilections caused them to use different terminology and to emphasize some aspects while missing others, they all recognized the creation and significance of what I have called theistic rationalism.

Finally, political scientist Thomas Pangle saw the same developments but emphasized the political import. Pangle began *The Spirit of Modern Republicanism* by observing that “the American Founding came to be dominated

by a small minority of geniuses who seized the initiative not merely by conciliating and reflecting common opinion but also by spearheading new or uncommon opinion.”³⁶ The specific context for this statement was not a discussion of political theology, but his explication of the statement included political theology. Pangle posed some vital questions about the key Founders’ relationship to Christianity. His answer to those questions was that eighteenth-century American political thought was “dominated” by a “new conception” of “human nature and politics.” That new conception was “antagonistic to traditional political theology, both Protestant and Catholic: the new thinking means to reinterpret the Bible, to found a new tradition of political theology, and to establish a new relationship between church and state.”³⁷ Pangle recognized the advent of a new, non-Christian political theology, but he did not investigate it in detail.

The observations of others could be brought to bear, but it should be clear that a new belief system came into being in eighteenth-century America and that it produced a new political theology. Some scholars and historians have recognized the existence of the belief system that I have called “theistic rationalism,” but those who have tried to give it a name have relegated it to the realm of religious history and identified it only with theologians and preachers. No one has applied it to the central political figures. Several terms have been used to identify this hybrid concept, but all are inadequate or misleading. It has been variously referred to as “supernatural rationalism,” “theological rationalism,” “Christian rationalism,” or “rational Christianity.”

Conrad Wright, who uses “supernatural rationalism,” attributes the term to early twentieth-century works by A. C. McGiffert and John Randall, but he notes that it has been used by other scholars as well. It has, in fact, been employed by a number of religious historians. Though the term is manifestly similar to “theistic rationalism,” there is a significant difference that makes the former misleading and inadequate. “Supernatural” merely indicates belief in *something* above or beyond the natural world. That something might be personal or impersonal; it might be multiple gods or a force or some set of mystical creatures, such as angels. The key Founders and patriotic preachers were decidedly and explicitly “theist.” They believed in a personal *God* above nature, about whom they had well-formed and well-defined ideas. Not completely comfortable with the term himself, Wright has expressed a “wish that some other term had come into common use.”³⁸ I offer such a term.

Cushing Strout describes the system as “theological rationalism,”³⁹ which is a more appropriate term. Yet it suffers from the same problem as the other in that it does not indicate belief in a particular God, which is

central to the system. For example, one might rightly describe Plato's views on the gods and reincarnation as "theological rationalism." The theism of the Founders and preachers is vital and must be included in a proper description of their belief system.

McMurry Richey calls the system "Christian rationalism," and Sydney Ahlstrom labels adherents "Christian rationalists." Ahlstrom and Henry May refer to the system as "enlightened Christianity" or "reasonable Christianity" or "rationalist Christianity." To Michael Zuckert, it is "rational Christianity."⁴⁰ These formulations accord with Jefferson's own description of his belief system as "rational Christianity."⁴¹ The problem with these appellations is that the adherents to this system were not Christians and the system was not a subset of Christianity. Those here identified as theistic rationalists denied every fundamental doctrine of Christianity as it was defined and understood in their day. Jefferson specifically did so item by item in a letter to William Short.⁴² If rejecting every fundamental tenet of a religion does not separate one from it, what does? In particular, they denied the person and work of the Christ of *Christianity*, without Whom the term itself makes no sense. Mere affiliation with a Christian denomination or sect did not make one a Christian in eighteenth-century America. There was no such thing as Christianity by association. One may have been a Baptist or Presbyterian or Episcopalian by association, but being a Christian required adherence to certain beliefs.

It was meaningless when someone such as Jefferson described his religion as rational Christianity because his description was based on his own personal definition of Christianity, which did not comport with the way every major church defined it. Those theistic rationalists who claimed to be Christians—and not all of them did—appropriated the word *Christianity* and attached it to a belief system that they constructed and found more to their liking than authentic Christianity. It would be interesting to ask those scholars who use such a term whether the ones who did not even claim to be Christians were also rational Christians. Christianity is not an ethnicity; no one is born a Christian. Like all religious faiths, Christianity is chosen. Since it is chosen, it can be not chosen or rejected. The theistic rationalists preferred a belief system of their own creation and rejected Christianity. Consequently, it is improper and misleading to include a form of the word *Christian* in a term for those whom I describe as theistic rationalists.

I think that *theistic rationalism* is a much more accurate and useful term to describe the belief system of a number of intellectual elites, both political and religious, in eighteenth-century America. It is, in my view, certainly more accurate and useful than *Christianity* or a broad, generic, catchall usage of *deism*.

DEISM, CHRISTIANITY, AND RATIONALISM

What, exactly, was this new belief system at the center of the American Founding? Theistic rationalism was a hybrid belief system mixing elements of natural religion, Christianity, and rationalism, with rationalism as the predominant element. Largely because natural religion and rationalism were critical components, theistic rationalism was not a popular system but appealed only to the well-educated elite—specifically, those versed in Enlightenment thought. Adherents of theistic rationalism believed that these three elements would generally complement one another; but when conflict between them could not be resolved or ignored, reason had to play the decisive role. Therefore, *rationalism* is the essence of the hybrid, and *theistic* is the descriptor. Adherents were willing to define God in whatever way their reason indicated and to jettison Christian beliefs that did not conform to reason. Theistic rationalism was not really a religion or denomination per se but rather a religious belief system and an approach to religious belief. Theistic rationalists did not call themselves by that name, meet or act in concert, or develop views as members of a group. They were alienated from the groups and categories that prevailed in their time, and they forged their own trail of belief. Thomas Jefferson famously claimed to be a “sect of one”; for theistic rationalists, that would make sense, as they assembled their own package of views from the most convincing ideas they encountered.

Though the term has a number of applications, *rationalism* in the context of this study refers to the philosophical view that regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge. Of course, emphasis on reason had been an accepted part of Christianity since the work of Thomas Aquinas. Yet the Thomistic view of reason and its role differed significantly from that of the theistic rationalists. Aquinas taught that the function of reason was to show that revelation was true. He “employed” reason to “support faith” rather than to destroy it and in order to develop “an impregnable rational proof of a divinely ordered world.” For Aquinas, the aim was to “reconcile experience with revealed truth.” As he saw it, faith was above reason and more certain than reason because it was based on direct revelation from God. Reason had to be faulty if it seemed to contradict revelation. For him, truth was not derived from reason itself but from an authoritative source, with reason providing support.⁴³

Aquinas differed from Muslim philosophers who taught that reason was the “sole judge of the truth of Revelation.” In this regard, the theistic rationalists shared the Muslim position. For Aquinas, God was the author of both reason and revelation, so there could be no real discrepancy between them. Any apparent discrepancy was “traceable to the imperfection of the

human mind.” So, for Aquinas, reason bowed to revelation. As Ernest Fortin put it, Aquinas made reason a “handmaid” to Christianity. The theistic rationalists, as we shall see, made reason the ultimate standard and considered revelation a supplement to reason. If there was a discrepancy between reason and revelation, they considered the revelation to be flawed or illegitimate. It is one thing to stress the importance of reason in understanding revelation; it is quite another to suggest that reason ought to determine revelation. Aquinas believed that “it is foolish for man to reject God’s revelation on the ground that it seems at some points to contradict man’s natural knowledge.”⁴⁴ That was precisely what the theistic rationalists did. Their rationalism was a significant departure from the rationalism of Aquinas.

Natural religion is a system of thought centered on the belief that reliable information about God and about what He wills is best discovered and understood by examining the evidence of nature and the laws of nature, which He established. Though they were not synonymous, the primary expression of natural religion in the eighteenth century was *deism*. In the latter half of the eighteenth century, deism influenced almost every educated man in England, France, and the United States.⁴⁵ Because of that fact and because one of the prevailing views today of the political theology of the Founding era is that most of the Founders were deists, it is important to understand the basics of deism.

Largely because of a false dichotomy promoted by modern observers that recognizes deism and Christianity as the only two categories of eighteenth-century religious belief, both *deism* and *Christianity* have become amorphous and nebulous terms in studies of that period. Many define deism in such general terms and include such a wide range of adherents that it is essentially a meaningless and, therefore, useless concept. A number of individuals have been identified as deists simply in the absence of another option besides Christian, not because they actually adhered to the fundamental beliefs of deism. There is far too much blurring when several Founders, such as John Adams, James Wilson, and George Washington, can alternately be identified by scholars as Christians and as deists.

For this reason, the definitions of deism and Christianity put forward here are bare-bones definitions reflecting essentials that every deist or Christian of whatever stripe would adhere to. These definitions are designed more to identify who was *not* a deist or Christian than to identify who was. Although some deists might add certain beliefs or attitudes to this definition, all would concur that one who disagreed with certain fundamentals was something other than a deist.

Eighteenth-century American deism was, at once, both a belief system on its own and a critique of Christianity. Lord Herbert of Cherbury was the

recognized “father of deism.” An editor of one of Herbert’s works summarized the historical philosophical definition of deism as the belief that God “has withdrawn his active presence” from the universe and “remains completely aloof while it functions in strict accordance with the natural laws with which he originally endowed it.” He added that “the withdrawal of God distinguishes deism from theism.” This definition highlights a critical element of deism: the effective absence of God. As deism scholar Kerry Walters summarized, “The God of nature . . . assumed the aloof character of an absentee landlord, so far removed from the everyday existence of ordinary people as to be completely indifferent to their petitions and worship.”⁴⁶

Another critical element of deism was the denial of any written revelation from God; revelation was credible to the theist but not to the deist. Another scholar argued that deism was the position that “natural religion contains all that is true in revealed religion; where the latter differs, the differences are either morally insignificant or superstitious.”⁴⁷ For prominent American deist Thomas Paine, the first premise of deism was “that nature, viewed by reason, is the only valid source of God’s revelation to man.” Deists considered biblical revelation to be tradition or history at best and more often simply hearsay or worse. Paine, for instance, said of the Bible, “It would be more consistent that we called it the word of a demon, than the Word of God,” and he added, “For my part, I sincerely detest it.”⁴⁸

These two elements, the effective absence of God and the denial of written revelation, clearly divided the deists and the theistic rationalists. Though it appears inconsequential to many today in light of modern sensibilities, that divide was “decisive” in the eighteenth century, according to deism scholar Peter Gay. It made “all the difference” whether one accepted some revelation and a generally Protestant concept of God or rejected both. As Gay put it: “If it is true that the deists took only a single step, it is also true that the step they took was across an unbridgeable abyss.” Conrad Wright used a similar metaphor—a “gulf” that was “unbridgeable”—in arguing that the religion of the period cannot be understood without recognition of this difference.⁴⁹ The decisive issues were revelation and the presence of God.

Deism was as much a critique of Christianity as a religion of its own, however. Jonathan Edwards, who dealt with deists firsthand, said that they “deny the whole Christian religion” and “deny the whole Scripture.” In fact, according to Edwards, deists went a step further: “They deny any revealed religion, or any word of God at all, and say that God has given mankind no other light to walk by but his own reason.”⁵⁰ Fundamentals of Christianity rejected by the deists included the Incarnation, the Virgin Birth, original sin, miracles, the atonement, the Resurrection, eternal damnation,

and the Christian notion of faith. They condemned Christianity for intolerance, persecution, and the “scriptural depiction of the deity as a capricious and wicked celestial tyrant.” The supernatural worldview of Christianity was also criticized as illogical and irrational, in violation of both human experience and reason.⁵¹

In addition, some deists criticized Jesus for being petty, for exalting the weaknesses of humility and meekness to virtues, for having no system to His moralizing, and for not being original in His ethics (they said the Greeks and Romans did it better). Though a few deists shared Paine’s view that Jesus was “a virtuous and amiable man,” most exhibited “malice” and “an earnest desire to find a flaw in the most perfect character” and sought ways to “fix a stain upon” the character of Jesus.⁵² Indeed, the so-called bible of deism, Elihu Palmer’s *Principles of Nature*, depicted Jesus as duplicitous and a hypocrite. He was referred to as a “religious impostor,” “immoral,” “criminal” in conduct, and an “enemy to moral virtue.” His moral system was described as “pretended excellence,” “inaccurate and incomplete,” and “trifling.” Palmer even called Jesus “a murderer in principle.”⁵³ Edwards further testified that the deists believed Jesus to be “a mere cheat.”⁵⁴ Clearly, most deists wanted nothing to do with Christianity or its central figure. Although the theistic rationalists shared some ideas with the deists, they had a much greater regard for Christianity and for Jesus than did most deists.

Surprisingly, deists did believe that God should be worshipped and that a future state of rewards and punishments awaited mankind.⁵⁵ In their view, the best way to worship God was to do good to and for one’s fellow man. Their view of a future state was a largely impersonal settling of accounts, the teaching of which was necessary to encourage morality.

For the purposes of this study, Christianity as a belief system will be defined by the standards of eighteenth-century America. It refers, then, to a set of beliefs officially espoused by all of the major Christian sects in America in the 1700s. Those who held these beliefs were considered to be Christians, and those who did not were considered to be “infidels.” The fundamentals of Christianity were common knowledge to contemporaries of the period, as they are to modern scholars who have written about the period. Those who held these basic beliefs were referred to as “the orthodox” by those who would be classified as “infidels” and by modern scholars.

Disputes over church polity and sacramental issues resulted in a number of sects, yet the period saw remarkable unanimity regarding central doctrines. The Congregational, Baptist, Presbyterian, and Anglican/Episcopalian denominations were the largest in America during that time. All of

the individuals identified as theistic rationalists in this study were affiliated with one or more of these denominations, as were forty-seven of the fifty-five members of the Constitutional Convention.⁵⁶ According to their creeds, confessions, catechisms, and articles of faith, all of these denominations shared common belief in: the Trinity, the deity of Jesus, a God active in human affairs, original sin, the Virgin Birth, the atoning work of Christ in satisfaction for man's sins, the bodily Resurrection of Christ, eternal punishment for sin, justification by faith, and the authority of the Scriptures. The fact that the Catholic Church, though irreconcilably separated from the Protestant churches, also embraced all of these fundamental doctrines is further evidence of the consensus concerning the basic core content of Christianity. A Calvinist might add doctrines to the definition that an Anglican or Baptist would not, but none of them would subtract any of these. Again, the definition is designed to identify who was *not* a Christian or who would not be considered Christian by any of the denominations.

With the addition of a little explication, the fundamental doctrines become clearer. Regarding God, Christians taught that God was Triune (one God comprehending three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit); that the God of the Old Testament was the same as that of the New Testament; and that, in addition to being loving and benevolent, God was holy, jealous, and just. Furthermore, God the Creator, Who remained active in His creation, could and did intervene in nature and in human affairs. Christians believed that Jesus Christ was God the Son (the second person of the Trinity), was preexistent as God, and became man as well as God incarnate when born into this world of a virgin. He lived a perfect, sinless life and died a sacrificial death to atone for the sins of mankind and to provide satisfaction to a just and holy God for those sins. He was bodily resurrected to prove the acceptance of His sacrifice and to guarantee resurrection to eternal life for all believers in Him and His work.

Christians believed that man was born with a sin nature as a result of Adam's Fall (original sin), that all men sinned, and that all men deserved eternal punishment and separation from God because of their sin. Men could only be saved from that damnation by the grace of God through faith in the atoning work of Christ, not by any works of their own or via any other religious system. The saving work of Christ regenerated man and empowered him to do good works as evidence of his faith. Finally, Christians believed that the whole Bible was divinely inspired, was God's special revelation of Himself, and was the only infallible authority in all matters that it treated. Theistic rationalists shared some beliefs with Christians but only those that passed the test of reasonableness in their eyes.

Table 1.1 Christianity in Eighteenth-Century America

Doctrine	Presbyterian and Congregationalist ^a	Lutheran ^b	Baptist ^c	Anglican and Episcopalian ^d	Catholic ^e
The Trinity	X	X	X	X	X
God active in human affairs	X	X	X	X	X
The deity of Christ	X	X	X	X	X
Original sin	X	X	X	X	X
Virgin Birth	X	X	X	X	X
Atoning work of Christ/satisfaction for sins	X	X	X	X	X
Resurrection	X	X	X	X	X
Eternal punishment for sin	X	X	X	X	X
Justification by faith	X	X	X	X	X*
Inspiration/authority of Scripture	X	X	X	X	X

^aWestminster Creed (1646) = official creed of Presbyterian and Calvinist churches—Affirmed by Congregationalists in 1680 and again in 1708

^bAugsburg Confession (1530) = official creed of Lutherans and some Reformed churches

^cPhiladelphia Confession (1689, 1720) = official creed of Baptists and churches that emphasized baptism

^dApostles' Creed (215), Nicene Creed (325), Athanasius' Creed (500), and Thirty-nine Articles (1662)—combined to form creed of Anglicans/Episcopalians

^eCouncil of Trent (1547) = official creed of Catholic Church

*Although Catholics disagreed with Protestants about the sufficiency of faith for justification, they agreed that justification required faith.

Largest Denominations (number of churches):	<u>1776</u>	<u>1780</u>	<u>1790</u>
Congregational	660–800	700	750
Presbyterian	500+	625	725
Baptist	470+	500	860
Anglican/Episcopalian	400+	150	170

Source: Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert, eds., *Religion in a Revolutionary Age* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994), table 1, p. 190.

Note: Numbers are rounded to the nearest multiple of 5.

Theistic rationalists believed in a powerful, rational, and benevolent creator God who established laws by which the universe functioned. Their God was a unitary personal God who was present and active and who intervened in human affairs. Consequently, they believed that prayers were heard and effectual. They believed that the main factor in serving God was living a good and moral life, that promotion of morality was central to the

value of religion, and that the morality engendered by religion was indispensable to society. Because virtually all religions promoted morality, they believed that many—perhaps all—religious traditions or systems were valid and led to the same God.

Though theistic rationalists did not believe that Jesus was God, they considered Him a great moral teacher and held a higher view of Him than did most deists. They believed in a personal afterlife in which the wicked would be temporarily punished and the good would experience happiness forever. Although they thought that God primarily revealed Himself through nature, theistic rationalists believed that some written revelation was legitimate revelation from God. Finally, though they believed that reason and revelation generally agreed with each other, theistic rationalists thought that revelation was designed to complement reason (not vice versa). Reason was the ultimate standard for learning and evaluating truth and for determining legitimate revelation from God.

Throughout this book, theistic rationalism will be contrasted with deism, on the one hand, and with Christianity, on the other. Theistic rationalism was a sort of mean between those two belief systems. Theistic rationalists held some beliefs in common with deists, some beliefs in common with Christians, and some beliefs that were inconsistent with both deism and Christianity. Theistic rationalism was not a popular system. Its import did not stem from the number of Americans who were adherents but rather from the position and intellectual power of its adherents. Theistic rationalism was a belief system for the educated elite. It held little appeal for the average American congregant but was a natural system for an individual raised in Protestantism and educated in Enlightenment rationalism. That was particularly true for ministers who, as will be demonstrated in this study, were trained in Enlightenment thought under the auspices of the seminary.



THE RELIGIOUS DIVIDE BETWEEN ELITES AND THE MASSES

Russell Kirk and others have recognized increased religious controversy leading up to the eighteenth century. As Kirk notes, “Scientific and metaphysical speculation, late in the seventeenth century and throughout the eighteenth, had weakened Christian belief among many of the educated.”⁵⁷ Those steeped in rationalism could not reconcile the many seemingly irrational elements of Christianity with their belief that all truth had to accord with nature and make sense to the rational mind. As a result, educated gentlemen throughout the colonies shared a belief in some form of rationalism

in the years leading up to the Revolution.⁵⁸ Just as a generation of college graduates was shaped by the liberalism of the Vietnam era, a generation of Revolutionary era gentlemen was shaped by their immersion in Enlightenment thought.

They had the leisure to read widely and to correspond with peers. As will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters, they generally “confined unorthodox thoughts to their diaries and to their letters to other gentlemen.” Indeed, they occasionally instructed recipients of correspondence to keep their views secret and away from public knowledge. It is important to note that, though their ideas resulted from a rejection of Christianity, “the Enlightened gentlemen who had abandoned orthodoxy . . . could still *sound* Protestant when talking politics.”⁵⁹ That was particularly true as liberal democratic politics and republicanism were insinuated into mainstream Protestant thought. Consequently, positions of political leadership were not threatened by the more conventionally religious masses, and ministers could effectively challenge traditional thought and shape public opinion without setting off alarms among the congregants.

The divide between the religious beliefs of the educated elite and the majority of the people has been recognized by most analysts of the period. May notes that Enlightenment thought “developed among the middle and upper classes . . . and failed to reach the agrarian majority.” Wright determines that what is here called theistic rationalism “appealed especially to men of prestige and influence.” Stephen Marini concludes that it “burst into full flower” among “the political, economic, military, and literary elites.” David Robinson identifies its roots with “the Boston establishment.”⁶⁰ Mead, Ahlstrom, and Kraynak limit its appeal to “the intellectuals,” “the educated classes,” and “educated people,” respectively.⁶¹ One of Franklin’s biographers has said that “evangelism appealed to the generally unsophisticated” and that rationalism “gained the favor of colonial intellectuals.” According to Russel Blaine Nye, they found in what I have termed theistic rationalism Franklin’s desired “essentials of religion . . . to which all educated men could agree.” The social class factor is so important to Gustav Koch that, for him, it was the primary difference between the deists and those I call theistic rationalists.⁶² Although I believe that Koch is wrong, his view highlights the social gap.

A final indicator of the social divide can be seen in the uneven reception evangelist George Whitefield received during his trips to the United States. Whitefield was an orthodox Christian and, by many accounts, the most effective of all Christian missionaries of the period. Franklin regularly went to hear him because of his prowess as a speaker, and they eventually became friends. As a general rule, however, Whitefield was “especially disliked by

the educated and refined.”⁶³ Most interesting is an observation made by Jonathan Mayhew, a contemporary of Whitefield’s and a progenitor of theistic rationalism. Mayhew said: “When [Whitefield] was lately in Boston, many persons attended him, but chiefly of the more illiterate sort, except some who went out of curiosity.”⁶⁴ Either Mayhew was being exceedingly petty or the educated class was not interested in Whitefield’s message.

An understanding of the difference in religious belief between the educated elite and the common people is necessary to properly grapple with a number of otherwise perplexing matters. For example, it helps to explain why men who did not hold Christian beliefs regularly attended Christian churches and used language Christians would find familiar and comfortable. To maintain positions of authority and power, they had to be acceptable to a religious people and communicate effectively to their audience.

Theistic rationalism was an elite understanding of the eighteenth century, shared by the key Founders and by many preachers. A gentle, hopeful, and nondenominational belief system that borrowed from Christianity and from deism, it never became the property of the masses. But it equipped elites to describe the projects of the Revolution and the Founding in terms that did not offend popular religion. If it never conquered the evangelical spirit of popular Christianity nor wholly displaced orthodox and traditional religion, it nevertheless was enormously influential in reshaping religious understandings in a way that made them welcoming of revolution, republicanism, and rights. If America can be both religious and republican today, it is partly because the Founders, in their day, were theistic rationalists.

