Of all the American founders, Thomas Jefferson is most closely associated with deism, the Enlightenment faith in a rational, law-governed world created by a “supreme architect” or cosmic “clockmaker.” For many modern Americans, deist and “Christian” are antonyms, juxtaposing prideful reason — the apotheosis of man — and a humble faith in an all-powerful, triune godhead. But the terminology is misleading and the opposition false.

Deism never constituted a coherent, organized force either in Britain or the United States. With other statesmen of the Revolutionary age, Jefferson expressed familiar deist sentiments. For this apostle of reason, the natural world was like a great book made legible to scientists (or “natural philosophers”) through its predictable and lawful patterns. Enlightened men who discerned nature’s laws could begin to master the world, promoting the improvement of man’s lot and fulfilling God’s original intentions for His creation. Even politics could be reduced to a science, Revolutionary law-givers insisted, as they crafted new constitutions for self-governing peoples in the states and for the federal union. These constitutions were like machines or instruments for determining and enacting the will of a progressively more enlightened political public: they were something like the great clock that the deists’ clockmaker god had set in motion at the beginning of time. Of course, Jefferson and his fellow Revolutionaries did not presume to take God’s place in creating their own new world. To the contrary, they (metaphorically) killed King George III — a false god and illegitimate sovereign — in the name of their true sovereign, the god who pious patriots worshiped in their churches. With the break from Britain, Revolutionaries sought to align their purposes with God’s plans for them and the world. The hubris of rebels who made their own law was thus transformed into a providential imperative, as self-declared “Americans” assumed “the
separate and equal station” among “the powers of the earth ... to which the laws of
nature and of nature’s God entitle them.”

Jefferson was not bridging a yawning gap between pious Christians and enlightened
deists in the Declaration of Independence. To the contrary, deist tendencies in the
thought and language of American Revolutionaries reflected the exigencies of political
and military mobilization. Americans looked to “nature” and the Creator, “nature’s
God,” for guidance and justification as they sought to hasten the coming millennium,
the Kingdom of God on Earth — an epoch of enlightenment, peace and plenty. Human
agency and divine purpose were fused: piety and enlightenment, religion and science,
worked together. Jefferson’s lifelong spiritual quest was predicated on this ultimate
complementarity of faith and science.

Jefferson never called himself a deist, but he came to look like one in retrospect to his
political opponents. In the heat of the struggle for religious freedom in Virginia,
Jefferson staked out a radical position on church-state separation that later made him
vulnerable to Federalist criticism. As he wrote in "Notes on the State of Virginia," “the
legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But
it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are 20 gods, or no god. It neither
picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” The reasonable Jefferson did not mean to endorse
either polytheism or atheism, but rather to mark out the boundary between the
authority of government and of individual conscience. Baptists and other evangelical
opponents of the Anglican establishment understood this: Jefferson was their
champion, not an enemy of Christianity.

Dissenters might not agree with Jefferson — or each other — about how precisely
religious freedom would shape Virginia’s future landscape, but Jefferson and his allies
believed the progress of Christianity, purified and reformed through disestablishment,
and republican government were complementary and interdependent. Baptists
embraced separation with pious fervor; Muslims, some of them proclaimed in petitions
to the Virginia assembly, should be free to worship as they pleased. They did not expect
Islam to spread across the Commonwealth, nor did Jefferson expect any of his
neighbors to worship “20 gods.” It was instead the defenders of surviving religious establishments in Congregationalist New England and exponents of clerical influence more generally who warned that religious freedom would unleash the forces of anarchy and atheism. Thus, in the presidential canvass of 1800, Federalist scare-mongers warned Christians to hide their Bibles if the Jeffersonians seized power.

As a historical phenomenon, what we call “deism,” the new gospel of enlightened and liberated reason, appealed both to Jefferson and other elite thinkers and to radical populists such as Thomas Paine. Yet deism had a limited lifespan in the English-speaking world. Paine’s sensational "Age of Reason," first published in 1794, marked the apogee of deist influence, but generated a powerful backlash as defenders of traditional order decried French Revolutionary excesses. Some deists went underground; others recanted. Yet the deist threat lived on through the late 1790s, and into the new century in the overheated polemics and preaching of Jefferson’s Federalist opponents as they sought to redeem the republic from its many sins and tar Jefferson with the brush of infidelity and French philosophy.

The deistic Jefferson was the product of Federalist polemics in the 1790s, a partisan caricature that he vehemently rejected. For Jefferson, the term “deism” was interchangeable with “theism,” “the belief of one only god.” The Jews were deists, though “their ideas of him and of his attributes were degrading and injurious.” Jesus’s great reform was to universalize the deist principle. “The religion of Jesus is founded in the Unity of God,” Jefferson wrote Unitarian Jared Sparks in 1820, “and this principle chiefly, gave it triumph over the rabble of heathen gods then acknowledged. Thinking men of all nations rallied readily to the doctrine of one only God, and embraced it with the pure-morals which Jesus inculcated.” Though Jefferson did not publicize his religious beliefs, he came to think of himself as a follower of Jesus, “the benevolent and sublime reformer.” Had the great reformer’s pure doctrines “been never sophisticated for unworthy purposes,” he wrote the Reverend Thomas Whittemore in 1822, “the whole civilized world would at this day have formed but a single sect.” “Brought to the original purity and simplicity of its benevolent institutor,” Jefferson told Moses Robinson of
Vermont in 1801, Christianity was the “religion of all others most friendly to liberty, science and the freest expansion of the human mind.”

Jefferson fashioned himself a “primitive Christian,” a faithful adherent of the unadulterated teachings of Jesus. In his view, the fabrications and mystifications that grew up around Jesus bolstered the power of the priests over the people, perverting those teachings toward worldly ends. Competition among churches — all claiming to monopolize religious truth — had made “Christendom a slaughterhouse.” The greatest perversion was the doctrine of the trinity, the notion that three divine figures — Father, Son and Holy Ghost — constituted one godhead. This was the “Abracadabra of the mountebanks calling themselves the priests of Jesus,” Jefferson fumed, as they insinuated themselves between God and His people and struggled for worldly preeminence. When Jefferson told a Calvinist correspondent that “I am of a sect by myself” he was gently mocking the sectarian tendencies of self-appointed preachers who fostered divisions among their followers and discredited Christianity generally. “There would never have been an infidel,” he quipped to Margaret Bayard Smith, “if there had never been a priest.”

Jefferson’s assault on “priestcraft” anticipated Paine’s in "The Age of Reason" but led in a radically different direction. While Paine launched his fusillade at Christianity generally, Jefferson instead focused on church establishments, winning support from Baptists and other dissenters and identifying himself with a broad Protestant reform impulse that transformed the new nation’s religious landscape. For Jefferson, disestablishment would lead to the emergence of a genuinely free religious marketplace that would lead to the ascendancy of an enlightened, republican Christianity. The “truth is great and will prevail if left to herself,” he wrote in his famous Bill for Religious Freedom (1779): “she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and 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.” State-supported churches were crucial props of the old regime in provincial Anglo-America as well as in the monarchies of Europe: preaching up hierarchy and privilege, priests combined “with the magistrates to divide the spoils of
the people” and established churches, in Jefferson’s view, demanded the unreasoning submission of credulous flocks, faith against reason. Republican governments, however, could not survive without the informed, ongoing consent of reasoning citizens that the complete separation of church and state could alone assure. Freeing itself from its corruptions, Christianity’s appeal to reasonable citizens would be irresistible.

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