

Defending the Declaration

How the Bible and Christianity Influenced the Writing of the Declaration of Independence

Book Review by Douglas S. Anderson

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With a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, fifty-six founding fathers mutually pledged to each other their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor. In doing so, they simultaneously claimed independence from an earthly power and dependence on a heavenly one.

Although the ink on our most famous document has long since dried, the rhetoric about the source of its ideas has not. The noble endeavor our founders embarked upon has now fallen victim to the revisionist's pen; a pen that has altered and distorted their original intent. Today any suggestion that our nation was founded upon Christian principles is often met with disbelief and scorn.

Perhaps no longer, thanks to Gary T. Amos and his book, *Defending the Declaration*. Although originally written in 1989, the first paperback edition was just published by the Providence Foundation in 1994. This book offers the reader far more than the tri-cornered hat, white-powdered wig and gold-buckled shoe image of colonial America. Instead, it provides important scholarship to the debate on the impact Christianity had upon our nation's history.

Defending the Declaration will challenge your intellectual comfort zone with a view of history rarely seen in today's anesthetized treatment of religion's influence. For readers brave enough to open the cover, they will find a persuasive challenge to those who say that the principles of the American Revolution and the Declaration were "basically secular and deistic." The book does so with an impressive arsenal of hard-hitting facts and incisive reasoning.

How Mr. Amos came to write this book is, itself, compelling. As a history major, he had read numerous books and had studied under many learned scholars. They taught him that John Locke was a deist, as were most of the founding fathers. They also taught that the lofty principles contained in the Declaration of Independence were copied by Jefferson from the deistic ideas of John Locke. Thus, according to the history texts and scholars, America was born out of deism, not Christianity.

Yet when he began to read the writings of John Locke for himself, Mr. Amos was startled by what he found.

"I could not believe my eyes. In page after page, Locke confessed Christ, the Bible, miracles, and many other elements of orthodox Christianity. And it was all very clear. He was not using vague words or hard-to-understand sayings. At first I was angry. I felt like I had been tricked or robbed. I had been told by

some of the best and brightest that Locke was a deist who rejected Christianity and the Bible. I had been lied to. And Locke had been lied about.” 2

That discovery propelled him into a four year research endeavor of the founding fathers and those who influenced them. His conclusion? He found that every key phrase in the Declaration of Independence was rooted in the Bible and Christian theology. This book is his effort to “set the record straight.”

Gary Amos has organized his book around what he believes are the “key criticisms” of the Declarations’ Biblical foundation. Each chapter examines a phrase or concept from the Declaration, as it relates to its true source. Terms such as “the laws of Nature and of Nature’s God;” “self-evident truths;” “unalienable rights” endowed by the Creator; and government by the “consent of the governed” are all discussed as to the meanings understood and intended by the founders during colonial America.

Mr. Amos does not deny that there existed Enlightenment and deistic thought in 1776. Instead he reveals that such thought was not predominant. In fact, the key concepts of liberty and independence, now attributed to the Enlightenment, were actually derived from the Bible and Christianity. Over time, many Biblical and Christian ideas have been changed by that same revisionist’s pen into something its not; a legacy of the Enlightenment. Indeed the Christian influence was so prevailing in 1776 that today’s “nearly universal silence about the Christian roots of American Revolutionary theory” is inexplicable.

If they were alive today, those fifty-six signers who relied on the protection of Divine Providence to initiate one American Revolution, might be tempted to initiate another. Only this time it wouldn’t be directed against England, but against current historical scholars who have so effectively excluded Christian influence from the annals of history.

Even amongst the deists of the day, which were few, they subscribed to Christian principles. Thomas Jefferson is a prime example. Although the author notes that Jefferson never confessed Jesus Christ as Lord in an evangelical sense, he clearly wasn’t a deist. Jefferson strongly believed that the moral principles found in the Gospels should be the guide of every person’s life. He also believed that God was real and that He intervened in the lives of people. In referring to the immoral practice of slavery he said; “I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever. . . .” John Adams has also been given the deist label. Yet he wrote in his diary that a “nation that took the Bible for its law book would be the best of nations.” Therefore those who argue as to how many of the founders were deists or Christians miss the point. Few of the deists in 1776 subscribed to the premise that God created us and then walked away. That “clockmaker God” idea of deism was not an accurate description for any of our founding fathers.

Defending the Declaration also illustrates that contemporary historians have lost the moral premise upon which the Declaration of Independence was based. The founders did not see themselves as rebels or revolutionaries. The term “revolution” is a misnomer. The Declaration of Independence was about a lawful break from a government that had committed numerous acts of tyranny. Such tyrannous acts constituted a material breach of the king’s right to govern the people.

According to the Biblical view, a civil rulers' right to rule is not absolute (1 Samuel 13:13-14). Rulers are servants of God who have a commitment to uphold justice and govern "for the people," rather than for their own benefit and power. If they forsake that commitment to God, they lose their right to rule (Proverbs 16:12). The English King, through numerous acts of tyranny, had forsaken his commitment and forfeited his right to rule. The founding fathers wisely relied on the only law that had precedence over that of their earthly king; "unalienable rights" endowed by their Creator. The principle was completely Christian in origin.

This is a much different approach from the lawless, mob overthrow seen in the French Revolution that had no basis in Christian thought. This kind of distinction made by America's founders has been lost today.

While this book goes a long way toward rectifying the recent misperceptions about our founding fathers and our founding document, there is an added bonus to reading it. The reader is drawn back into the dusty alcoves of dimly-lit libraries where he finds the renowned legal classics known so well in colonial America. Rarely does one get the chance to be exposed to such celebrated literature as John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Sir William Blackstone's *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, and Samuel Rutherford's *Lex Rex*. It's like getting a taste of culture mixed in with your history lesson.

Why should we care whether the Declaration of Independence was based on Christian principles? It is because, in the words of Gary Amos, "[w]e are living in a time of renewed struggle between Jerusalem and Athens." According to the secular world view, there are no God-given unalienable rights. All a secular society can offer is "civil rights." Since they are granted by government according to the will of men, they can be denied by government according to that same will. However, a government built on a Biblical Christian perspective, like the Declaration of Independence, recognizes rights and freedoms that are God-given. Such "unalienable" rights are not subject to the whims and discretions of those who hold government power.

Not everyone will agree with the conclusions drawn by Mr. Amos. That's half the fun of differing viewpoints in the marketplace of ideas. It also is why this book is critically important in today's dialogue. The Christian perspective, often pushed aside in the public arena, has much to offer. This book will intellectually challenge those who read it. It will also foster a better understanding in the swirling debate about the proper role of religion in politics.

Defending the Declaration enables the reader to retrace the steps of history to the ideals contained in our founding document and forcefully remind us that:

"The American Revolution was more than a contest with England. It was and is a war of ideas, a contest for the hearts and minds of men. It was and is a war to defend a vision about law, rights, justice, and the God-given dignity of man. The vision was inspired over time by the words of the Bible and the teachings of Christianity but applies to all men everywhere regardless of their faith." 3

We cannot fully appreciate our liberty if we do not comprehend the strong Christian heritage that produced it. For those who may fear a theocracy, that is not what the founding fathers sought in 1776 and it isn't what Mr. Amos advocates. As demonstrated by some of the original signers of the Declaration, one does not need to be a Christian to abide by Christian principles.

In candor, however, this book should not be necessary. Had it been written two hundred years ago, it would have been met with ridicule; not because it was untrue, but because it was so "self evident." The fact this book is necessary speaks volumes on how far our nation has wandered from our founding Christian principles.

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End Notes:

1 Gary T. Amos, *Defending the Declaration, How the Bible and Christianity Influenced the Writing of the Declaration of Independence* (Providence Foundation, 1994).

2 *Id.* at 3.

3 *Id.* at 169.

Excerpt from *Defending the Declaration*

by Gary Amos

The Theme of This Book

My theme is simple. The Declaration of Independence was not the bastard offspring of anti-Christian deism or Enlightenment rationalism. The ideas in the Declaration are Christian despite the fact that some of the men who wrote them down were not. Those ideas are not opposed to the teachings of the Bible or of mainstream Christianity. The popular notion that the intellectual heritage of the Declaration traces solely to deism, the Enlightenment, the Renaissance, and from there to pagan Rome and Greece is seriously flawed. Indeed, much of what we have been told for years about the Declaration's intellectual heritage and the meaning of its terms is largely a series of myths.

This book will show that most of the key terms and ideas in the Declaration of Independence arose from the Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition. It does not deny that there was such a thing as the Enlightenment or deists. But many of the ideas used by deists were borrowed from the Bible and

Christianity. Where the Declaration is concerned, its legal and political theories are consistent with Biblical principles and with historical mainstream Christianity, both Catholic and Protestant.

It is a mistake to read the Declaration of Independence as an ingenious "secularized" assault on the Bible, Christianity, or the western Christian tradition. The Declaration stands squarely inside the tradition, reflecting how profoundly Biblical principles had influenced the world in which the framers lived and worked.

I strongly disagree with my Christian brothers who have set out to prove that the founders rejected Christian principles and consciously built the American government on an anti-Christian base. For example, Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden have written that the "principles of the American revolution" were "basically secular," and that the founders' "political ideals" were "naturalistic." They insist that Christians in the colonies failed to influence the way America was founded because they were too busy mimicking deists, "baptizing political philosophies," and making an idol of nationalism. They deny that the country was founded on "Christian principles." They say that the founders relied on "Whig" ideology instead of Christian Biblical principles. And "Whigs...often transformed the defense of political freedom into a nearly idolatrous worship...`Radical' Whigs were often also full partners in the Enlightenment." This is close to saying that Christians in the colonies were really idolaters and heretics.

I disagree with Noll, Hatch, and Marsden that all the founders, including John Witherspoon, were infected with anti-Biblical rationalism. When they wrote that Witherspoon "explicitly excluded the Bible" in thinking about Revolutionary politics, they were mistaken. Had they read two sentences beyond the quote they chose, they would have found Witherspoon saying that any human wisdom opposed to the Bible is "false and dangerous." Indeed, Witherspoon often referred to the necessity of the Bible, but they somehow missed that fact and thought he rejected the Bible.

They have concluded that the "War for Independence was not a just war," "The American revolution was not Christian," "It was not Biblical," and "It did not establish the United States on a Christian foundation." And even though "religion" abounded in the colonies, "theology of every stripe was something on the fringe of American society." They admit that Christianity influenced culture in the colonies, but they deny that Christianity had any impact on how the founding documents were drafted. In the words of Mark Noll, "[A]lthough the Bible had worked itself into the foundation of national consciousness, it contributed little to the structures built upon that foundation."

Christians need to know that when they oppose the principles of the Declaration of Independence, they are opposing many of the very principles to which the Bible and the church gave birth.

Noll's last point is the key for this book. He believes that the ideas in the Declaration were not Christian even if many of the colonists were. I maintain that the ideas themselves were Christian even if some of the founders were not. The Bible did more than work itself into the foundations of national consciousness. It did indeed influence the structures on which America was built, even to the extent of affecting how the Declaration of Independence was drafted.

I also strongly differ with the widely known view of Christian writer C. Gregg Singer, who insisted that the framers rejected Christian principles:

Behind the political philosophy of the American Revolution . . . lay a view of God and of human nature which was not Christian but deist, which was not orthodox and conservative but radical. It thus follows that the American Revolution in its basic philosophy was not Christian, and the democratic way of life which arose from it was not, is not, Christian, but was, and is, a deistic and secularized caricature of the evangelical point of view. . . The fact that John Witherspoon and other evangelicals of the day were willing to sign the Declaration should not blind us to the essentially anti-Christian character of Jeffersonian democracy.

This bleak view of the founding fathers is not only wrong it is causing devastating results in the Christian community. Many wrestle with guilt or embarrassment over America's past. Many feel alienated, as though it is wrong or useless to participate in the public process. After all, Christians have always been on the outside looking in when it comes to American politics, and maybe that is where they really belong. Others, such as members of Witness for Peace and those associated with Sojourners magazine stay in the political process but feel compelled always to take an anti-American stand. Either way, the wrong view causes Christians to be a negative political force, instead of a positive one.

More is at stake, of course, than effective Christian political involvement. Christians need to know that when they oppose the principles of the Declaration of Independence, they are opposing many of the very principles to which the Bible and the church gave birth. By accepting a flawed version of America's founding heritage or feel spiritually obligated to be anti-American. They do not have to be politically irrelevant, on the outside looking in.

This book seeks to set the record straight about Christianity and the American Revolution. The church did directly influence the legal and political theory of the Declaration of Independence. The church was not on the fringe of culture.