

America's Declaration of Independence: The Christian Legacy

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INTRODUCTION

Is the United States of America a Christian nation? For over one hundred years after America's founding, opinion leaders throughout the western world believed that it was.

America's great 19th century historian, George Bancroft, for example, believed that Christian theologian John Calvin had a profound influence on the origin of American independence. N.S. McFetridge, *Calvinism in History* 99 (1882).

Nineteenth century Spanish statesman, Emilio Castelar, traced America's source to one book, the Bible. *Harper's*, Vol. 45, p. 220 (July 1872). As late as 1892, a unanimous U.S. Supreme Court, after an extensive review of America's history, concluded without qualification that "this is a Christian nation." *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, 143 U.S. 457, 471 (1892).

Yet, on November 17, 1992, just a little over one hundred years later, Mississippi Governor Kirk Fordice ran into a buzz saw of opposition when he voiced the same opinion. Titus, "This Is A Christian Nation," *SCP Journal*, Vol. 17:4, p. 12 (1993).

Today, Americans have been led to believe that America is not, and never was, a Christian nation. See, e.g., *Christianity Today*, Vol. 25, p. 14 (July 17, 1981). The popular assumption is that the U.S. is a "pluralist" nation, inspired, by the best human reason rooted in the 18th century Enlightenment, not by the political ideas of the Bible anchored in the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century.

Those who claim that America is not Christian rest their case upon the proposition that the nation's founders were deists. One of the most influential proponents of this view was Carl L. Becker, author of a widely-read book on the Declaration of Independence. Becker claimed that, beginning with the latter part of the 17th century:

God had been withdrawing from immediate contact with men, and had become, in proportion as he receded into the dim distance, no more than the Final Cause, or Great Contriver, or Prime Mover of the universe; and as such was conceived as exerting his power and revealing his will indirectly through his creation rather than directly by miraculous manifestation or through inspired books. C. Becker, *The Declaration of Independence* 36-37 (Vintage 1959) (hereinafter Becker's *Declaration*).

Many Christians have endorsed this view. Some have come to this conclusion because they believe that America's revolutionary past is irreconcilable with the apostolic teachings of Paul and Peter in Romans 13:1-2 and 1 Peter 2:13-17.

These passages certainly command all people to obey the civil government authorities, but they also command those civil authorities to rule as God's servants, to punish evil and reward good. As servants or ministers of God, civil rulers are accountable not only to God, but to the people whom they rule.

This principle of accountability was expressed by Jesus Christ, Himself, when he laid down the rules for the leaders of the church:

Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: and whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all (Mark 10:42-44).

It was this Christian principle of servanthood that the American patriots claimed had been breached by England's King George III. After specifying 26 grievances against the king, the declarants concluded:

In every stage of these oppressions we have petitioned for redress in the most humble terms. Our repeated petitions have been answered only by repeated injury. A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free people.

How can one be sure that this claim rested upon Christian principles of servanthood and accountability? First, the very language of the Declaration is Christian. Second, the legal and political principles of the Declaration are Christian. Finally, the underlying worldview of the Declaration is Christian.

CHRISTIAN TEXT

Thomas Jefferson's initial draft of the Declaration began with a foundational appeal to the "laws of nature and of nature's God" as the cornerstone upon which America's claim for independence rested. This phrase remained unaltered in the final text. Becker's *Declaration* at 142, 186.

Professor Becker maintained that Jefferson's appeal to "the laws of nature and of nature's God" was an 18th century appeal to natural law, that is, to a system of law discovered by man's reason unaided by any special revelation from God. Becker's case was an elaborate one, based upon the scientific works of Newton and Descartes and upon the philosophical works of Locke.

Becker concluded that America's founding statesmen believed that "there was an exact correspondence between human reason and the objective world" and that the phrase, "laws of nature and nature's God" meant man's "rational explanation of the relation and operation of all that is" based solely upon his empirical observations and experience. *Id.* at 53-79.

Becker's view is simply wrong.

The Law of God

First, the term, "laws of nature," was equivalent to the well-known common law term, the "law of nature." The "law of nature" was the "will" of God revealed in nature and was composed of all of the "immutable laws of human nature, ... the eternal, immutable laws of good and evil, to which the creator himself in all his dispensations conforms." 1 Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England* 39-40 (Intro., Section 2, 1765) (hereinafter Blackstone's *Commentaries*).

Second, the term, "law(s) of nature," was not equivalent to "natural law." The former was established and stated by God, the latter was derived from God's original and stated by men. Sir William Blackstone, the great teacher of the English common law, put the distinction this way:

[T]he law of nature [is] expressly declared so to be by God himself; the other is only what by the assistance of human reason, we imagine to be that law. If we could be as certain of the latter as we are of the former, both would have equal authority; but, till then, they can never be put in any competition together. Id. at 42.

Third, the “laws of nature,” being the exact expression of God’s “will” for all of creation (including mankind) were “binding over all the globe, in all countries, and at all times: no human laws are of any validity, if contrary to this” 1 Blackstone’s *Commentaries* at 39-41.

With this proposition, Blackstone echoed John Locke who wrote almost a century earlier:

... [T]he law of nature stands as an eternal rule of all men, legislators as well as others. The rules that they make for other men ‘s actions must ... be conformable to the law of nature- i.e., to the will of God ... J. Locke, Second Treatise on Civil Government, 77 (C. XI, Sec. 135, Liberal Arts Press 1952) (hereinafter Locke’s 2d Treatise).

Fourth, the phrase, “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” was equivalent to Blackstone’s phrase, “the law of nature and the law of God.” The two terms were placed in tandem by Blackstone and the Declaration, because they were equivalents, coming from the same source, God, but in different ways and at different times.

The law of nature came at the time of creation. God revealed his will in the created order, itself, and empowered man to discover that will through his reason. 1 Blackstone’s *Commentaries* at 39-40. But man fell. Thereby, his reason became “corrupt, and his understanding full of ignorance and error.” *Id.* at 41. So God, “in compassion to the frailty, the imperfection, and the blindness of human reason,” revealed His will in “the holy scriptures.” This written “revealed or divine law” is what Blackstone called the “law of God” and what America’s founder’s called the “laws of nature’s God.”

As Gary Amos has pointed out in his book, *Defending the Declaration* (1989), the Declaration’s reference to both categories of God’s law “grew out of the church’s reading of...Romans 1 and 2:”

According to the Apostle (Paul), God’s creation law is not in conflict with His Scriptural law The phrase “laws of nature and of God,” which was in settled use by the time of medieval Christianity, grew out of this desire to affirm the validity both of the natural, pre-Mosaic law as well as the written law of Scripture (pp. 44-45).

In summary, the phrase “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” was a most convenient 18th century term to refer to the laws of God as revealed in the created order and as revealed in the Bible. Those who claim otherwise have the burden of proof that the Declaration utilized the phrase in a novel way.

Even Becker has acknowledged that it would have been foolhardy to have called the American people to a revolution “on principles that no one had ever heard of before. Becker’s *Declaration* at 25. Blackstone’s *Commentaries* were widely read in America by her lawyers and statesmen. Locke’s *2d Treatise* was equally popular. It would have been convenient, therefore, for America’s founders to have rested their case for independence on such widely-accepted and well-known

authorities.

It would also have been very strategic. The law of nature and of nature's God was the very cornerstone of England's common law and constitutional monarchy. Blackstone and Locke were accepted legal and political authorities in the Mother country. The foundation of America's Declaration of Independence, therefore, would not only have appealed to America's friends, but would have disarmed her enemies.

The Creation of God

While designed to meet the immediate political needs of the American colonies, the Declaration was also written for posterity. By appealing to the very laws of God, not to man's understanding of that law, the drafters rested their case on the eternal and unchanging decrees of the Almighty. And Who was that Almighty One? Unmistakably, it was the Creator God introduced in the Book of Genesis. Thus, the Declaration reads:

... [A]ll men are created equal; that they are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

In both the Old and the New Testaments, God is identified as the Creator (Is. 40:28; I Pet. 4:19). In Genesis, God is introduced as the Creator of the whole universe, including mankind:

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them (Gen. 1:27).

As Creator, God is the one who gave mankind all of the unalienable rights listed in the Declaration. He is the Giver of life:

And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul (Gen. 2:7).

God is also the Giver of liberty:

Now the Lord is the Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty (II Corin. 3:17).

Finally, God has given to mankind the "pursuit of happiness:"

And also that every man should eat and drink, and enjoy the good of all his labor, it is the gift of God (Eccles. 3:13).

Indeed, God is the Giver of all good things:

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning (James 1:17).

The Declaration's authors used Biblical terms to describe man's origin, because they believed that the book of Genesis was historically true. They rejected ancient evolutionary speculations about the origin of the world and of mankind. They came well before the resurgence of the evolutionary

hypothesis that burst upon the scene after 1859 with the publication of Charles Darwin's *The Origin of Species*.

Moreover, it was the creation account of the Book of Genesis that undergirded the "laws of nature and of nature's God" the very fountain of the Declaration's claim of right. That, too, was traced back to Blackstone who wrote in his *Commentaries*:

Man, considered as a creature, must necessarily be subject to the laws of his creator, for he is an entirely dependent being ... And consequently as man absolutely depends upon his maker for everything, it is necessary that he should in all points conform to his maker's will. This will of his maker is called the law of nature Blackstone's *Commentaries* at 39.

The Government of God

Not only did the Declaration's drafters affirm the Creator as the Author of Law and the Giver of Unalienable Rights, but as the active Governor of the Universe:

We ... appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the name, and by authority of the good people of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE and INDEPENDENT STATES And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of DIVINE PROVIDENCE, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honour.

In this concluding paragraph, America's founders appealed first to God, as "the Supreme Judge of the World." This appeal is like that made by Jephthah, captain of the army of Israel, before he led his nation's army into battle with the Ammonites: "(1)he Lord the Judge be judge this day between the children of Israel and the children of Ammon" (Judges 11:27).

The parallel was not coincidental. John Locke referred to this Biblical account to support the proposition that only God could judge man when in the state of war. Locke's *2d Treatise, supra*, at 14, Ch. 3, Sec. 21.

An appeal to God as judge could not have been made had America's founders subscribed to deism. For as Gary Amos has pointed out:

To believe that God intervenes as judge in the affairs of men is incompatible with the deistic view of God that holds Him to be aloof to human affairs. Amos, *Defending the Declaration, supra*, at 153.

But America's founders knew God, not only as judge, but as a merciful Father. Hence, they concluded their final appeal to God as "Divine Providence." Without doubt, this reference is to the God of the Christian faith.

Again, Gary Amos has provided good and sufficient documentation that "Divine Providence" was "one of the oldest cornerstones of Christian teaching" and "represented the heart of their belief in God, namely, that God was the ever-active, moment-by-moment governor of the universe." *Id.* at 153-58.

Indeed, God is introduced as “Jehovah-jireh,” God the Provider, in Genesis 22: 14, to explain the action that God took to provide for Abraham a substitute sacrifice for his son, Isaac. This event is the unmistakable forerunner of God’s providing His own Son, Jesus Christ, to die a substitutionary death upon the cross for all mankind.

What better evidence than this that the Declaration is a Christian document! Jefferson and his fellow patriots, having first affirmed their faith in God as Creator, were inevitably drawn to rely finally on God as Providence. For as Noah Webster put it in his 1828 *Dictionary*:

He that acknowledges a creation and denies a providence, involves himself in a palpable contradiction; for the same power which caused a thing to exist is necessary to continue its existence.

CHRISTIAN PRINCIPLES

Four principles anchor the Declaration of Independence. First, the rights of mankind are God-given and unalienable. Second, the purpose of civil government is to secure those rights. Third, the power of civil government is given by the consent of the governed, each of whom is equally entitled to rule. And, fourth, the right to govern is forfeited by a tyrant to lower civil magistrates in order to restore the rule of law. All four of these principles are Christian.

Rights - Endowed By God And Unalienable

In Jefferson’s early draft of the Declaration, he stated that man’s “inherent and unalienable” rights were “derived” from the fact that “all men are created equal and independent.” After submitting this draft to Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, the word “derived” was dropped in favor of the phrase “endowed by their Creator.” Later, Congress inserted the adjective “certain” in the place of “inherent,” so that the final document read: “that they (all men) are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights.” Becker’s *Declaration, supra*, at 139-75.

These changes were neither stylistic nor literary, but substantive. “Derived” means “drawn, as from a source,” or “deduced.” Jefferson’s draft rested upon the proposition that man by his reason could glean from the created order the rights given by God. But Jefferson’s colleagues sought a more sure footing than man’s reason.

By replacing “derived” with “endowed by their Creator,” the Declaration rested upon rights as God had given them, not as man understood them to be. Thus, America’s founders chose to establish the new nation upon the “laws of nature and of nature’s God,” not upon “natural law.” For as Blackstone had already written in his 1765 Commentaries:

the law of nature [is that] expressly declared so by God Himself and the ... [natural law] is only what, by the assistance of human reason, we imagine to be that law. Blackstone’s *Commentaries, supra*, at 42.

The word, “inherent,” means “existing in something else, so as to be inseparable from it” The word was appropriate if man was certain about the existence of the rights being relied upon, but uncertain of their exact content. Once God was identified as the Giver of those rights, however, then the word,

“certain,” became appropriate, because whatever God had given to mankind was “sure, true, undoubted, unquestionable ... existing in fact and truth.”

When the words “endowed” and “certain” are coupled with “unalienable,” then the Declaration makes a most remarkable claim. What God has given and defined for the benefit of all mankind cannot be given away by the recipient or taken away by the Donor. As for God, His character gives full and sufficient assurance that He will never renege what He has promised:

God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man, that he should repent: hath he said it, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good? (Numbers 23:19).

Nor will His character allow Him to take back what He has given:

(F)or there is no iniquity with the Lord our God, nor respect of persons, nor the taking of gifts (II Chron. 19:7).

As for man, that is quite another matter. First of all, many men are quick to give up that which God has given to them. Under the rights theory of the Declaration, however, that is not morally or legally possible. For if a man gives up a right given to him by God, then he has violated his duty to his Creator, namely, to receive the gift that God has given. James Madison illustrated this point in his famous *Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments*:

The Religion ... of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable; because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds, cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also; because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.

Thus, Madison, concluded that every man “who becomes a member of any particular Civil Society” must “do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign”

But there was also another problem with men. Many seek to take away the rights of their fellow men. How dare they do so, wrote Thomas Jefferson in his *Preamble to the 1786 Act Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia*. For if “the Holy Author of our religion ... chose not to propagate it by coercions” on mind or body, it is an “impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men” to “have assumed dominion over the faith of others.”

In summary, what God, Himself, has given and has no “right” to take away, a fortiori, no man can deny to or take from another man

Civil Government- Instituted by Men to Secure Their Rights

Not only has God guaranteed the rights that He granted to man, He has authorized men to establish civil governments for the purpose of protecting those rights. Thus, the Declaration states:

That to secure these rights (rights endowed by God), governments are instituted among men.

It is most instructive that the Declaration's authors did not make the same claim about "governments" as they had about "unalienable rights." God endowed mankind with rights, but governments are "instituted" among men. The Bible is the source of this distinction.

Before the flood there was no civil ruler authorized to wield the sword against evildoers (Gen. 4:15). After the flood, God authorized through the Noahic covenant the creation of civil society with authority to punish evildoing, even to impose the death penalty (Gen 9:6). But how was this civil rule to be constituted? No guidelines were expressly given until the establishment of the constitutional monarchy of Israel.

Before Saul became king of Israel, God sovereignly ruled His chosen people through judges whom He selected. This mode of civil rule was exceptional, designed to separate God's holy nation from the rest of the nations (See Ex. 19:4-6). Thus, Moses and the judges who followed him were God's judicial oracles (Ex. 19: 16), God's law bearers (Ex. 20), and God's sword (Judges 2:18). In other words, the judges of Israel acted as an exact substitute for the Lord who is judge, legislator, and king (Is. 33:22). This was so because the nation of Israel served both the creation and redemptive purposes of God.

When the elders of Israel rejected this mode of government by asking for a king "to judge us like all the nations" (I Sam. 8:5), God told Samuel, Israel's judge at that time, that they had not rejected Samuel, but God (I Sam. 8: 7). God then instructed Samuel to warn the elders of Israel that the kind of king that they had requested would exercise total power over the nation. In effect, God said that such a king would take away the people's lives, liberties, and property (I Sam. 8:11-17).

Nevertheless, the elders persisted. God relented: "Hearken to their voice, and make them a king" (I Sam. 8:22). From then on, the civil kingdom of Israel was not a gift from God, but was instituted among men who could not live under the direct sovereign rule of Almighty God.

Still God had a plan for this civil order that would, if obeyed, secure the people's lives, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. This plan had been forecast generations earlier through Moses:

When thou art come into the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee ... and shalt say, I will set a king over me, like as all the nations that are about me; Thou shalt in any wise set him king over thee, whom the Lord thy God shall choose: And it shall be, when he sitteth upon the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write him a copy of this law in a book ... that he may learn to fear the Lord his God, to keep all the words of this law and these statutes, to do them (Deut.17:14, 15, 18-19).

So it came to pass when Saul became king, Samuel "told the people the manner of the kingdom, and wrote it in a book" (I Sam. 10:25). And so Saul became king under the law, not above the law (See I Sam. 13 and 15), in accordance with God's law for all nations, as the apostle Paul would write generations later in Romans 13:

For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God .. For he [a civil ruler] is the minister of God to thee for good ... [and] the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil (vs. 1, 4).

In 1644, Presbyterian pastor, Samuel Rutherford applied these very scriptures to an analysis of the authority of the king of England. And American lawyer and law teacher, David Hoffman, wrote in 1824 that any study of constitutional law in the United States of America should begin with the study of the polity of Israel as set out in the Old Testament D. Hoffman, *A Course of Legal Study* (1824).

Civil Rule - By the Consent of the Governed

At the heart of the establishment of the civil monarchy in Israel, was that it came to pass through the consent of the people. The people's elders initiated the change of government authority, but that change was not implemented until ratified by the people, themselves (I Sam. 10:17, 24).

This illustrates the third great principle of the Declaration of Independence, namely, that governments derive "their just powers from the consent of the governed." In his great work, *Lex Rex*, Samuel Rutherford wrote that no king could claim to rule by divine right, unaccountable to the people. To support this position, Rutherford turned to the Holy Writ.

He, first, established the principle of equality and liberty among men:

Everyman by nature is a freeman born, that is, by nature, no man cometh out of the wombe under any civil subjection to King, Prince or Judge, to master, captain, conqueror, teacher, etc. 1. Because freedom is naturall to all, except freedom from subjection to parents: And subject politick is merely accidental, coming from some positive lawes of men. S. Rutherford, Lex Rex: The Law and the Prince 91-92 (1644).

Locke echoed Rutherford in his *2d Treatise*:

To understand political power right and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and that is a state of perfect freedom to order their actions and dispose of their possessions and persons as they think fit, within the bounds of the law of nature, without asking leave or depending upon the will of any other man. A state also of equality, wherein all the power and jurisdiction is reciprocal, no other. Locke's 2d Treatise, supra, at 4, (C. II, Sec. 4).

The Declaration summarized these views with the resounding phrase "all men are created equal." God had not created any special class or family of men who were entitled to rule over other men. The claim of the English monarchy to the contrary was rejected because it did not conform to the law of nature, *i.e.*, the will of God.

What, then, explained the right of the English king to rule? Rutherford contended that the source of the king's authority came from a covenant between the people under the law of God:

There is an Oath betwixt the King and his people, laying on, by reciprocation of bands, mutuall civil obligation upon the king to the people and the people to the King, 2 Sam. 5:3. Rutherford, Lex Rex, supra, at 96.

Likewise, Locke concluded that civil rulers generally derive their authority from a compact or covenant with the people:

The only way whereby any one divests himself of his natural liberty and puts on the bonds of civil society is by agreeing with other men to join and unite into a community for their comfortable, safe and peaceable living one amongst another... Locke's 2d Treatise, supra, at 54 (C. VII, Sec. 95).

The Declaration summarized this view in the phrase "consent of the governed." But having once consented to be ruled, was there no limit on the authority of the ruler? Again, such a claim was rejected as contrary to the law of nature and of nature's God. Rutherford wrote:

(T)he people give the Crown to David covenant-wise, and upon condition that he should performe such and such duties to them; and this is cleare by all Covenants in the Word of God, even the Covenant between God and man is so mutuall; I will be your God, and yee shall be my people. Rutherford, Lex Rex. supra, at 97.

Locke agreed:

A man, as has been proved, cannot subject himself to the arbitrary power of another; and having in the state of nature no arbitrary power over the life, liberty, or possession of another, but only so much as the law of nature gave him for the preservation of himself and the rest of mankind, this is all he does or can give up to the commonwealth, and by it to the legislative power, so that the legislative can have no more than this. Their power, in the utmost bounds of it, is limited to the public good of society. It is a power that has no other end but preservation, and therefore can never have a right to destroy, enslave, or designedly to impoverish the subjects. Locke's 2d Treatise, supra, at 76 (C XI Sec. 135).

The Declaration summarized these views by limiting governments to the exercise of "just" powers.

Civil Rule - The Right of the People to Resist

Having established that civil rulers derive their authority by the consent of the people and that they are obliged to govern the people justly, the Declaration turned to the matter at hand. What, if anything, can be done about a ruler who has violated his covenant with the people?

Must the people suffer injustice without recourse? Or may the people take up arms and depose a lawless ruler? The Declaration asserted that the people had the right to depose and to establish a new government:

[W]henever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends [i.e., securing man's unalienable rights], it is the right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute a new government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their safety and happiness.

Having stated this basic proposition, the Declaration then addressed the conditions necessary before the people could exercise this right:

Prudence ... will dictate, that governments long established, should not be changed for light and transient causes... But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same object, evinces a design to reduce them (the people) under absolute despotism, it is their (the people's) right, it is their duty, to throw off such government, and to provide new

guards for their future security.

The Declaration claimed that these conditions had been met. It accused “the present King of Great Britain” with having committed 26 separate acts, “all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute tyranny over these states.” Among the specific charges were that the king had interfered with the lawful exercise of legislative powers granted by the colonial charters, deprived Americans of their rights to due process and jury trial, and denied to them other unalienable rights.

Following this list of factual assertions, the Declaration recalled the previous efforts made for redress of grievances. First, came the reminder that they had “petitioned” the king repeatedly, only to have been “answered by repeated injury.” Therefore, they concluded King George III to be “a tyrant, ... unfit to be the ruler of a free people.”

Second, came the reminder that the colonists had also “appealed” to “our British brethren” for help, but “(t)hey too have been deaf to the voice of justice and of consanguinity.”

All petitions having failed, the Declaration concluded:

That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, FREE AND INDEPENDENT STATES; that they are absolved from all allegiance, to the British crown, and that all political connexion between them and the state of Great Britain is, and ought to be, totally dissolved

Did the American colonists have the authority to do this, to dissolve all political relationships with the Mother Country? And, if so, where did this claim of right originate?

Some have argued that the right to resist civil rulers to the point of deposing them from power could not possibly be a Christian principle. While a Christian may resist, and in some instances must disobey, a lawless civil ruler (Acts 5:28-29), he cannot go so far as to overthrow the existing civil government. That is God’s business (Ps. 2). For, as the apostle Paul has written, all authorities are “ordained of God,” and “whosoever resisteth the power, resisteth the ordinance of God: and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation (Rom. 13:1-2).”

This kind of argument was precisely the one made on behalf of kings and others who claimed authority to rule “by divine right” or, more accurately, “by divine appointment.” But this claim had been refuted by Christian writings dating as far back as the IIth century. Gary Amos has documented this in his recent study of the Declaration of Independence, where he has established that the Roman Catholic Church, itself, had laid the groundwork for a Christian theory of revolution:

This theory of revolution is known by the term “interposition.” Some have called it “resistance to tyranny through lower magistrates. “ It occurs when lower rulers - the lower magistrates who have remained faithful to the Law - “interpose” themselves between a despotic higher ruler and the people he is oppressing. Amos, Defending the Declaration 132-33 (1989).

This idea was put into practice in the 13th century in England when the barons and the bishops combined forces to resist King John, giving birth to the Magna Charta. This document was

presented by the barons and the bishops, as lower civil magistrates, to the king “with the choice of affirming known rights by means of a written compact and ending oppression of the church by the state, or face armed resistance which they themselves would lead.” *Id.* at 134.

It took the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century, however, to develop more fully the Biblical support for the idea that Christians could resist lawless civil rulers to the point of overthrowing them by force of arms if necessary. While Martin Luther affirmed the Catholic view of the right of interposition, it was John Calvin who exegeted the scriptural support for it.

In his first edition of the *Institutes of the Christian Religion* published in 1536, Calvin concluded that Romans 13 denied to the individual Christian the right to take up the sword against a lawless civil ruler, but it did not prohibit a “lower civil magistrate of the people” from doing so. Indeed, such magistrates were duty bound under “God’s ordinance” to protect the rights of the people from the tyranny of a king, emperor or other high magistrate. Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World* 29 (1992). This followed from Romans 13:4 which designates civil rulers as “ministers” of God, with the duty to wield the sword against all wrongdoers, even those who hold higher civil office.

According to Professor Douglas F. Kelly:

Calvin’s development of the doctrine of resistance to wicked authorities in terms of the theory of interposition by lesser magistrates ... was further developed and spread by his own “Calvinist” followers This was to be one of his most powerful legacies to the history of liberty in the modern Western world. Id. at 31.

The French Huguenots were the first to apply Calvin’s exegetical defense to a real life situation as they challenged the claim of absolute rule by the royalists of France. In 1579, they issued the famous *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* claiming that

officers of the kingdom whom the people have established ... very gravely sin against the Covenant with God if they do not use force against a king who corrupts God’s Law or prevents its restoration, in order to confine him to his proper bounds For as the entire people is above the king, so these officers, although below the king as individuals, are above him when taken as a body. Quoted in Id. at 45.

These principles contained in the *Vindiciae* were picked up by John Knox to support resistance to tyranny in Scotland and were adapted by Samuel Rutherford in *Lex Rex* (1644) to establish that the king in England was not law, “but rather subject to God’s law and obligated to the ‘fountain-power’ of the people, who have the right and duty to overthrow him for abuse of power they have delegated to him.” *Id.* at 68.

Approximately 40 years later, these ideas finally bore fruit. In June 1688, “a group of Tories and Whigs ... dispatched to William of Orange a request for assistance to aid in the restoration of English liberties and the delivery of the realm from the absolutism of James II (1685-1689):”

William landed in England on November 5, 1688, and marched unopposed to London. The royal army under James collapsed, and the king fled to the refuge of Louis XIV’s court,

never to return to England. Sources of Our Liberties 222 (R. Perry, ed., Rev. Ed. 1978).

Such action was ratified several months later when the English Parliament met in January 1689 and resolved that James II had “endeavored to subvert the constitution of the kingdom by breaking the original contract between king and people” *Id.* at 223. A Bill of Rights was penned 11 months later by “the lords spiritual and temporal and commons ... representing all the estates of the people of this realm.”

After identifying themselves as having assembled as the people’s representative body, they set forth a list of grievances against King James II, concluding that he had acted “utterly and directly contrary to the known laws and statutes, and freedom of this realm.” *Id.* at 246. This recitation of grievances was unquestionably written in order to ratify actions taken by “lower civil magistrates” over a year earlier. Thus, the English implemented the Christian principle of interposition to defend their 17th century Glorious Revolution. See, Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty, supra*, at 69.

In contrast, from the very beginning the American colonists were careful to work through their representatives, their lower civil magistrates, in their emerging dispute with King George III. In protesting the infamous Stamp Act, colonial legislative bodies, created under the colonial charters granted by the English monarchy (See *Id.* at 122- 23), called for a general congress of the various colonies to convene, to address their common grievances and to prepare an appropriate communication to the English authorities. *Sources of Our Liberties, supra*, at 261-66.

Nine years later, in 1774, delegates from twelve colonies assembled as the First Continental Congress to review the grievances that the several colonies had with the British Parliament. This Congress’s Declaration and Resolves, issued on October 14, 1774, emphasized the representative nature of the assembly to justify taking action:

The good people of the several colonies ..., justly alarmed at these arbitrary proceedings of parliament and administration, have severally elected, constituted, and appointed deputies to meet, and sit in general Congress ... in order to obtain such establishment, as that their religion, laws, and liberties, may not be subverted Id. at 287.

On July 6, 1775, in the Declaration of the Causes and Necessity of Taking up Arms and on July 4, 1776, in the Declaration of Independence, action was taken pursuant to the authority of “the representatives” of the people.

The care with which the American colonists acted was, to be sure, no accident. John Adams has attested that the “*Vindiciae* was one of the most important volumes circulating in pre-revolutionary America.” Kelly, *The Emergence of Liberty, supra*, at 132-33. The Calvinist influence generally was particularly strong in New England where the Puritans dominated and in the Eastern Atlantic states where the Scotch-Irish were strong. Both groups held firm convictions that civil government was “limited by divine law and based on the consent of the people, with a lasting right in the people to resist tyranny.” *Id.* at 120-21, 131-32.

Add to this the influence of John Locke and his *Second Treatise on Civil Government (1690)*, and the evidence is overwhelming that the Declaration’s justification for the War for Independence was the Christian doctrine of interposition by lesser magistrates. Amos, *Defending the Declaration*,

supra, at 148. Sir Ernest Barker, a leading English historian of the 20th century, studied Locke's two treatises and concluded that Locke (and the English Revolution of 1688 that Locke defended in those treatises) rested squarely upon "the principles for which the author of the *Vindiciae* had contended." Barker, *Church, State & Education* 98 (1957). What were those principles? Barker summarized them, as follows:

The right ... of resistance of officers of State and ... [of the people's legislative bodies], on grounds of public trusteeship and representation. By resistance kings must be kept within the divine law of the word of God; and by it they must be kept within the law of the land - a law not of their making, ... a law of which they are only the servants. Such resistance may go to the length of deposition Id. at 91.

This was the Christian revolutionary philosophy of John Calvin, mediated to America's patriots through the writings of not only the French Huguenots, but of the English theologian Samuel Rutherford and the English political theorist John Locke. From their opening statement calling for "no taxation without representation" to their closing argument that King unfit to rule a free people," America's founders acted as Christian statesmen, recognizing that God's law governed their revolutionary actions, and submitting those actions to be judged by that law.

CHRISTIAN WORLD VIEW

Since America's founding, there has been much controversy over the personal religious faith of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. While this is an interesting and challenging question, its answer would not resolve the question whether the Declaration rested upon a Christian worldview. As Gary Amos has so ably pointed out:

Jefferson is a notable example of how a man can be influenced by Biblical ideas and Christian principles even though he never confessed Jesus Christ as Lord in the evangelical sense. Amos, Defending the Declaration, supra, at 9.

And as Amos has also shown, even a "'born-again' Jefferson would not automatically mean that the Declaration contained Christian ideas." *Id.* at 10. The reason is simple: A person's personal religious faith may or may not inform his ideas about law and politics.

What, then, determines if a person's faith has influenced his actions in the legal and political arenas. The answer is whether there is evidence that that person brought a Christian worldview to bear upon his decisions in the civil realm. And the best evidence of that would be found in the written documents embodying the action taken.

Applying this criterion to the Declaration, one cannot help but conclude that its signers consciously embraced a Christian worldview which, in turn, facilitated the choice of a Christian text and of Christian principles in the writing of the nation's charter.

Truths: God Created, Not Man Invented

"We hold these truths to be self-evident." This opening statement of the second paragraph of the Declaration is truly remarkable. It is especially noteworthy in an age dominated by relativism; in

an age where the “only absolute is that there are no absolutes.”

But this was decidedly not the worldview of those who signed the Declaration. They held “truths” like we might hold a hammer. They believed that certain ideas were as real as any physical object could be. “Truth,” according to Noah Webster’s 1828 *Dictionary* meant “conformity to fact or reality; exact accordance with that which is, or has been, or shall be.”

They believed that “all men are created equal” because that was reality, not just probability. They believed that “all men ... are endowed, by their Creator, with certain unalienable rights,” because that was fact, not just opinion. “Opinion,” according to Noah Webster’s 1828 *Dictionary* meant “the judgment which the mind forms of any proposition, statement, theory, or event, the truth or falsehood of which is supported by a degree of evidence that renders it probable, but does not produce absolute knowledge or certainty.”

Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, John Hancock, and their fellow signers did not want to lay so feeble a foundation as “opinions,” for the new nation. They desired more permanence than that. Their faith in the existence of God, the Creator, provided the durability that they sought. For the Creator God was the eternally-existent one, Who transcended time and space, and so had created unchanging, absolute, and universal truths upon which one could confidently found a new civil order.

This faith in a God-created reality followed necessarily from the declarants’ creationist worldview. The very essence of that worldview is stated in Colossians 1:16 where it states that God created “all things ... visible and invisible” and in Hebrews 11:3 where it is stated that God created these “things” out of nothing. Thus, the first “truth” recited in the Declaration is that “all men are created equal.” This is both an affirmation of the physical reality of each individual human being and the spiritual reality that each human being “bears the image of God” (Gen. 2:7; 1:27).

This faith also followed necessarily from the declarants’ understanding of the person of God: “*God is not a man, that he should lie; neither the son of man that he should repent: has he said, and shall he not do it? or hath he spoken, and shall he not make it good*” (Numb. 23:19)? Thus, the second “truth” recited in the Declaration is that the Creator has “endowed” - given, furnished, granted - the rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

These two ingredients are of the very essence of a Christian worldview and are essential to any affirmation that there is a true reality “out there” to be discovered and relied upon. See Holmes, *All Truth is God’s Truth* 1-15, 31-38 (1977). But how can man, both fallen and finite, know such truth? Is it not beyond him? The answer to this question is found in the adjective that the Declaration used to explain what truths they were relying upon.

Evident Truths: God revealed, not man reasoned

When it was written, the Declaration addressed not only King George III, the English Parliament, and Englishmen and Americans in general, but all “mankind.” In order to show “a decent respect to the opinions of mankind,” as the Declaration claimed its purpose to have been, it had to be written in such a way that it could be understood by the whole world. To even begin to meet this standard the Declaration’s authors had to believe that the “truths” upon which they relied to state their case,

were truths evident to all mankind.

The Declaration could not have made such universal appeal if its authors had not believed that God had not only created all of reality, but revealed certain truths about that reality in the world that He had created. They were confident, however, that God had done just that, for Psalm 19:1-4(a) attests:

The heavens declare the glory of God; and the firmament sheweth his handywork. Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night sheweth knowledge. There is no speech nor language where their voice is not heard. Their line is gone out through all the earth, and their words to the end of the world

Thus, the Declaration's authors held that the truths that they listed were "self-evident." To be "self-evident," a truth must first be evident. In his 1828 *Dictionary*, Noah Webster defined evident, as follows: *Plain; open to be seen; clear to the mental eye; apparent; manifest.*

What truths could possibly meet this criteria of "evident?" Only those pronounced by God to be so. The apostle Paul claimed that all of "the invisible things of him (God) from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made ... (Rom. 1:20).

Once again, the truths recited in the Declaration meet this criteria. All men are created equal in that all men bear equally the image of God (Gen. 1:27) and, therefore, equally have the right to life (Gen. 9:6), liberty (Lev. 25:10), and the pursuit of happiness (Eccl. 3:13).

Even today the Declaration has retained its universal appeal. Lech Walesa, for one, has testified that he kept the faith in his battle against communism in his beloved Poland by reading and rereading America's Declaration of Independence. But the Declaration cannot continue to have the universal appeal that it has had, unless the truths it declared are not only evident, but are also "self-evident."

Self-evident Truths: God Imposed, Not Man Adopted

Noah Webster defined "self-evident" in his 1828 *Dictionary* to mean:

Evident without proof or reasoning; that produces certainty or clear conviction upon a bare presentation to the mind; as a self-evident proposition or truth. That two and three make five, is self-evident.

In his book on the Declaration, Gary Amos claimed that "the term *self-evident*, more than all the others ... is the one that most clearly shows the impact of Christianity on the Declaration." Amos, *Defending the Declaration, supra*, at 75. Amos is right. The very meaning of self-evident, when used as an adjective to modify a specific truth, affirms that such truth is true not because it has been proved to man's satisfaction. A self-evident truth is true because, as Amos has reminded us, it has been "'naturally implanted' in men ... as a direct revelation from God, without the need of proofs." *Id.* at 78.

Amos has documented that the idea of "self-evident truths" was rooted early in Christian philosophy through the teachings of the apostle Paul in Romans 1 and 2. *Id.* at 75-101. Not only did God impress certain truths about the world in things external to man (Rom 1:20), but upon each individual human being "who hold(s) the truth in unrighteousness; Because that which may be

known of God is manifest in them; for God hath shewed it unto them” (Rom. 1:18-19). Amos has summarized these self-evident truths as those concerning “God’s justice and wrath at sin, but...[not] the way of salvation which can be known only by hearing and believing in the gospel.” *Id.* at 79.

Because the Declaration concerns matters of State, not matters of the Church, its authors could confidently rely upon the Christian doctrine of “self-evident” truths, revealed in nature to all mankind, in stating their case for independence. After all, a civil ruler has been ordained by God to be “the minister of God, a revenger to execute wrath upon him that doeth evil” (Rom 13:4). Moreover, the Declaration was written not just to men who had accepted Jesus Christ as their personal savior. Therefore, the Declaration recited self-evident truths in order to appeal even to the “man without the Bible” who knew in his heart that such truths are true, because God had placed them in him (Rom. 2:14:15).

The success or failure of this appeal to universal truths was staked on the faith that where “man’s role in human society and civil justice is concerned, God’s grace makes it possible for man to respond in certain limited ways to intuitive reason and the knowledge of the moral law.” *Id.* at 88. This should come as no surprise, for it was after the fall, not before, that God created nations and delegated to man authority to enforce certain laws for the benefit of mankind (Gen. 10; Acts 17:26-27; Gen. 9:6).

CONCLUSION

Since the beginning of the 20th century, mankind has observed the lawless consequences of revolutionary wars. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia and the post-World War II revolutions in China and Cuba produced totalitarian regimes which by raw power took away the people’s lives, liberties, and properties. Why was this so? The Communist revolutions, like the French revolution before them, were not governed by the law of God. To the contrary, these revolutions were inspired by men who rejected both God and His law.

America’s revolution stands apart. It was governed by God’s law and, therefore, restored the rule of law and enlarged the liberty of the people. Today, many Americans are placing this great heritage in danger, because they refuse to submit to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God” that governed the nation’s founders. Unless America is restored to its Christian heritage, the lawlessness that plagues this great land will continue to increase, and the Declaration’s legacy of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness will be lost.

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