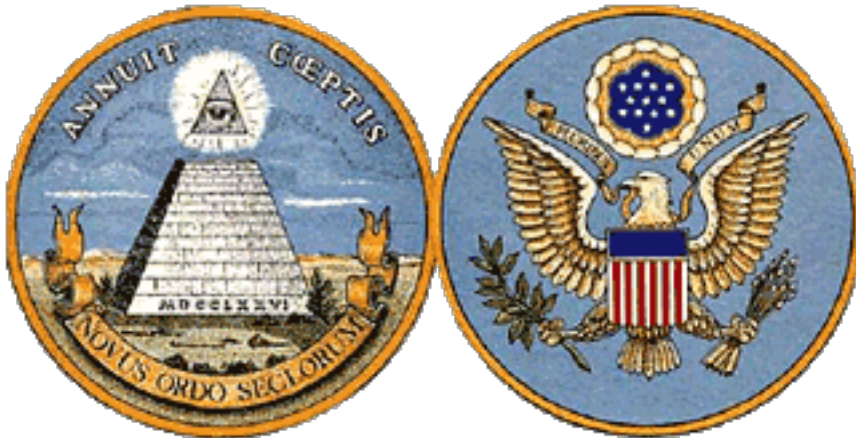


Deism and the Founding of the United States

An Online Professional Development Seminar



Ryan K. Smith

Associate Professor of History
Virginia Commonwealth University

AMERICA *in* CLASS[®]

from the National Humanities Center

GOALS

- Deepen your understanding of Deism and explore its role in the founding of the nation
- Advance the goal of the **Common Core State Standards** in English Language Arts and literacy in history and social studies:
“To help ensure that all students are college and career ready in literacy”
- Promote close attentive reading
- Foster deep and thoughtful engagement with high-quality literary and informational texts

FROM THE FORUM

Challenges, Issues, Questions

- What was Deism, this “religion of nature”?
- To what extent do the nation’s founding principles reflect Deist beliefs?
- What influence did Deism have on the culture of the new nation?



Ryan K. Smith

Associate Professor of History
Virginia Commonwealth University

Specialties: Nineteenth Century US
History, Material Culture and American
Religious History

*Gothic Arches, Latin Crosses: Anti-
Catholicism and American Church Designs
in the Nineteenth Century*
(2006)

How do you teach Deism?

What is your students' awareness of it?

Some Contextualizing Questions

- What was the Great Awakening (1730s-1760s)?
How did it affect church establishments?
- What role did religion play in the American Revolutionary War?
Declaration of Independence (1776)?
What was “Divine Providence”?
- What was Deism? Was it important in the American founding?
In comparison, how did the newly-independent Mexico (1822) handle its church/state relations?
- What was disestablishment? How did it work, in Virginia? In Massachusetts?
What was the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786)?
- What did Benjamin Franklin believe?
- What did George Washington believe?
- What did Thomas Jefferson believe?
- What did the original United States Constitution say about religion (1788)?
- What did the First Amendment say about religion (1789)?
- What was the occasion/meaning of Jefferson’s “wall of Separation” comment (1802)?

Seminar Structure

Part One: Definition and Beliefs

Part Two: Practice

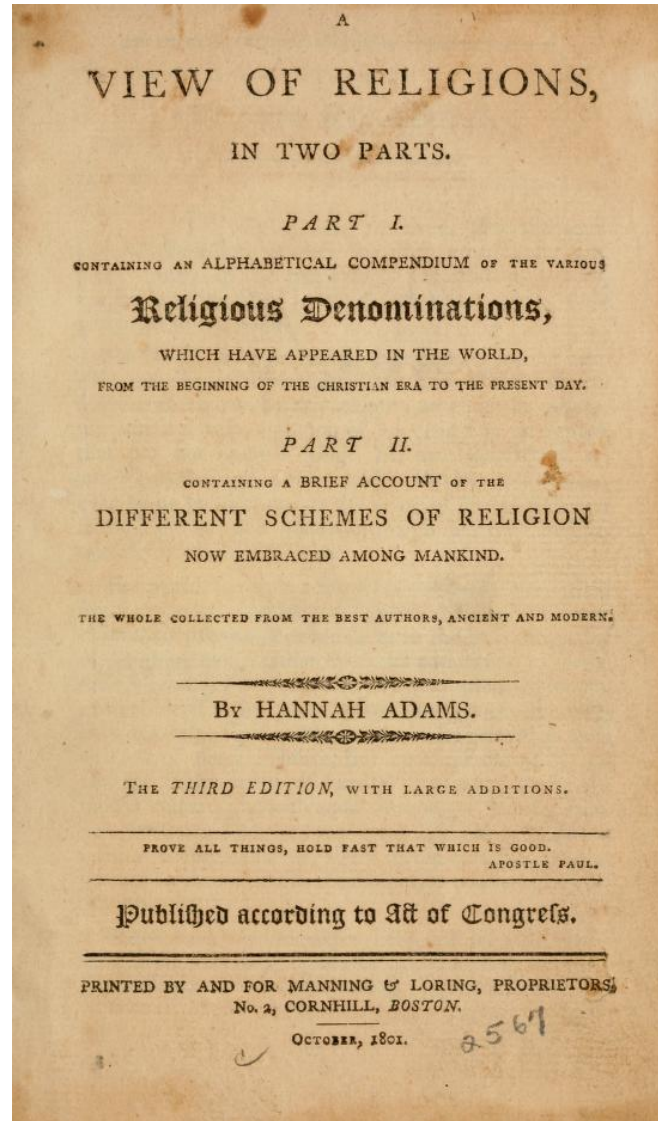
Part Three: Influence on the New Republic

Part One: Definition and Beliefs

What was deism? What does a deist believe?

What was Deism? What does a Deist believe?

- Deists were not atheists. They believed there is a God.
- He has revealed himself through nature and human reason [*not* scripture or prophecy]
- He is deserving of worship
- Humans serve him best through virtue and service to others
- There may be an afterlife
- This generally leads to the “clockmaker” view of God, in which God is viewed as an “architect” who set up the universe to run along natural laws and therefore needs no direct intervention.



How did people in
the 18th century
define deism?

A View of Religion in Two Parts..., Hannah Adams, (1801)

Deists. [found after “Jews” and before “Skeptics”]

“The Lord Edward Herbert, baron of Cherbury, who flourished in the seventeenth century, has been regarded as the most eminent of the Deistical writers, and appears to be one of the first, who formed Deism into a system.... He reduced this universal religion to five articles, which he frequently mentioned in his works.

- I. That there is one Supreme God.
- II. That he is chiefly to be worshipped.
- III. That piety and virtue are the principal parts of his worship.
- IV. That we must repent of our sins; and if we do so, God will pardon us.
- V. That there are rewards for good men, and punishments for bad men, in a future state.

The Deists are classed, by some of their own writers, into two sorts, *Mortal* and *Immortal Deists*. The latter acknowledge a future state; the former deny it, or, at least, represent it as a very uncertain thing.”

From the elite to the masses:

“The Deists of the present day are distinguished by their zealous efforts to diffuse the principles of infidelity among the common people. Hume, Bolingbroke, and Gibbon, addressed themselves solely to the more polished classes of the community; and would have thought their refined speculations debased by an attempt to enlist disciples among the populace. But of late, the writings of Paine and others, have diffused infidelity among the lower classes of society: and Deism has even led to Atheism, or a disbelief of all superior powers.”

“It has been my intention, for several years past, to publish my thoughts upon religion.... I intended it to be the last offering I should make to my fellow citizens of all nations, and that at a time when the **purity of the motive** that induced me to it, could not admit of a question, even by those who might disapprove the work.

The circumstance that has now taken place in **France** of the total abolition of the whole national order of priesthood, and of every thing appertaining to compulsive systems of religion, and compulsive articles of faith, has not only precipitated my int[ent]ion, but rendered a work of this kind exceedingly necessary, **lest, in the general wreck of superstition, of false systems of government, and false theology, we lose sight of morality, of humanity, and of the theology that is true.**”

Discussion Question

What is Paine trying to do?

Why was he so vilified for his efforts?

On reason and religious conflicts:

“Every national church or religion has established itself by pretending some special mission from God, communicated to certain individuals. The Jews have their Moses; the Christians their Jesus Christ, their apostles and saints; and the Turks their Mahomet, as if the way to God was not open to every man alike.

Each of these churches show certain books, which they call revelation or the word of God. The Jews say, that their word of God was given by God to Moses, face to face; the Christians say, that their word of God came by divine inspiration; and the Turks say, that their word of God (the Koran) was brought by an angel from heaven. Each of these churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.”

Discussion Questions

How would you describe the tone of this passage?

Does Paine intend to persuade readers through argument?

“Nothing that is here said can apply, even with the most distant disrespect, to the real character of **Jesus Christ**. He was a virtuous and an amiable **man**. The morality that he preached and practised was of the most benevolent kind; and though similar systems of morality had been preached by Confucius, and by some of the Greek philosophers, many years before : by the quakers since; and by many good men in all ages, **it has not been exceeded** by any.”

Discussion Question

**What was his attitude towards Jesus?
How might believers respond to this passage?**

Examples of sensationalism:

“Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and torturous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness, with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we called it **the word of a Demon**, than the word of God. It is a history of wickedness, that has served to corrupt and brutalize mankind; and, for my own part, I sincerely detest it as I detest every thing that is cruel.”

“Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself, than this thing called Christianity. Too absurd for belief, too impossible to convince, and too inconsistent for practice, it renders the heart torpid, or produces only atheists and fanatics.... so far as respects the good of man in general, it leads to nothing here or hereafter.”

Discussion Question: What is the tone of this passage?

“Constructive”:

“But some perhaps will say: Are we to have no word of God—no revelation? I answer: **Yes; there is a word of God;** there is a revelation.

The Word Of God is The **Creation** We Behold; and it is in this word, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man.”

Discussion Questions

What was the deist conception of God?

What, according to the deists, was God's chief characteristic?

Part Two: Practice

How did one become a deist?

How did one practice deism?

Making an American Deist

“My parents had early given me religious impressions, and brought me through my childhood piously in the Dissenting way. But I was scarce fifteen when, after doubting by turns of several points, as I found them disputed in the different books I read, I began to doubt of Revelation itself. **Some books against Deism fell into my hands....** It happened that they wrought an effect on me quite contrary to what was intended by them; for the arguments of the Deists, which were quoted to be refuted, appeared to me much stronger than the refutations; in short, I soon became a thorough Deist.

My arguments perverted some others, particularly Collins and Ralph; but each of them having afterwards wronged me greatly without the least compunction, and recollecting Keith's conduct towards me (who was another freethinker), and my own towards Vernon and Miss Read, which at times gave me great trouble, I began to suspect that this doctrine, tho' it might be true, was **not very useful.**”

Discussion Question: How does Franklin become a deist?

On what criterion does Franklin judge the value of deism?

Beliefs:

“I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that He made the world, and governed it by his Providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man; that our souls are immortal; and that all crime will be punished, and virtue rewarded, either here or hereafter. These I esteemed the essentials of every religion...”

Discussion Question

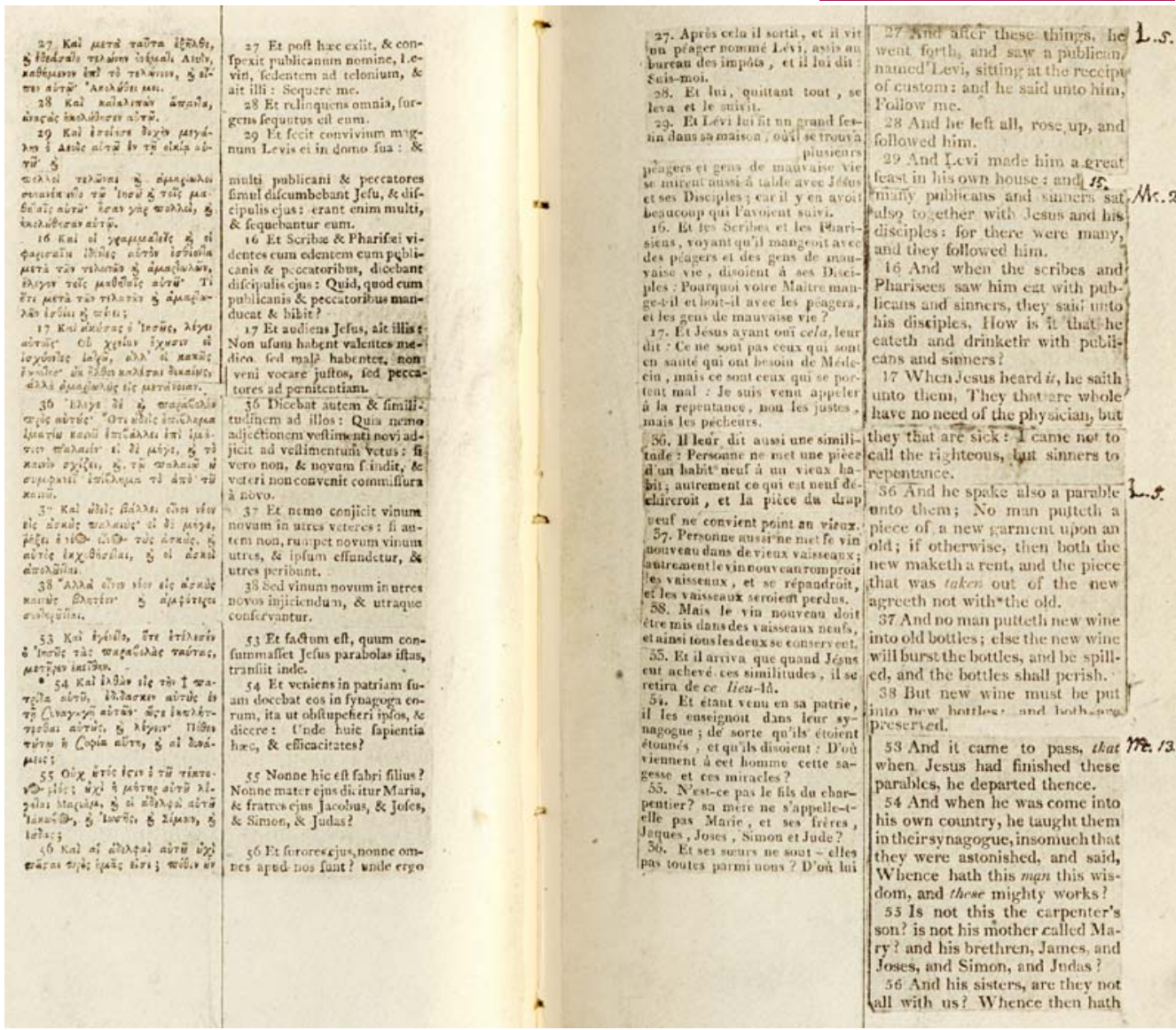
According to Franklin, what does a deist believe?

Deism in practice: attempting “the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection”:
“These names of virtues, with their precepts were:

- 1.Temperance. Eat not to dullness; drink not to elevation.
- 2.Silence. Speak not but what may benefit others or yourself; avoid trifling conversation.
- 3.Order. Let all your things have their places; let each part of your business have its time.
- 4.Resolution. Resolve to perform what you ought; perform without fail what you resolve.
- 5.Frugality. Make no expense but to do good to others or yourself; i.e., waste nothing.
- 6.Industry. Lose no time; be always employed in something useful; out off all unnecessary actions.
- 7.Sincerity. Use no hurtful deceit; think innocently and justly; and, if you speak, speak accordingly.
- 8.Justice. Wrong none by doing injuries, or omitting the benefits that are your duty.
- 9.Moderation. Avoid extreams; forbear resenting injuries so much as you think they deserve.
- 10.Cleanliness. Tolerate no uncleanness in body, cloaths, or habitation.
- 11.Tranquillity. Be not disturbed at trifles, or at accidents common or unavoidable.
- 12.Chastity.
- 13.Humility. Imitate Jesus and Socrates.”

Discussion Questions

Why did Franklin embrace these virtues? What does he hope to achieve by developing them?
What is missing from his conception of virtue?



National Museum of American History Website
http://americanhistory.si.edu/jeffersonbible/

John 19

40: Then took they the body of Jesus, and wound it in linen clothes with the spices, as the manner of the Jews is to bury.

41: Now in the place where he was crucified there was a garden; and in the garden a new sepulchre, wherein was never man yet laid.

42: There laid they Jesus,

Matthew 27

60: And rolled a great stone to the door of the sepulchre, and departed.

Discussion Questions

Does Jefferson show disrespect for the Bible, for Jesus?

Why does Jefferson end the story of Christ's life where he does?

Part Three: Influence in the New Republic

How did deism influence the cultural and politics of the newly established United States?

The Declaration of Independence, 1776

“When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all 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.”

Discussion Question

To what extent does the Declaration of Independence reflect deist beliefs?

The Declaration of Independence, 1776

“We, therefore, the Representatives of the united States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, 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, that they are Absolved from all Allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved.... 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 Honor.”

Discussion Question

To what extent does the Declaration of Independence reflect deist beliefs?

*An Act for Establishing Religious Freedom,
Passed in the Assembly of Virginia, 1786*

“Well aware that **Almighty God hath created the mind free**; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world, and through all time...”

“that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, more than our opinions in physics or geometry;

that, therefore, the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to the offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which in common with his fellow citizens he has a natural right...”

Result:

“no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.”

Deism and the Founding of the United States



The Great Seal of the United States

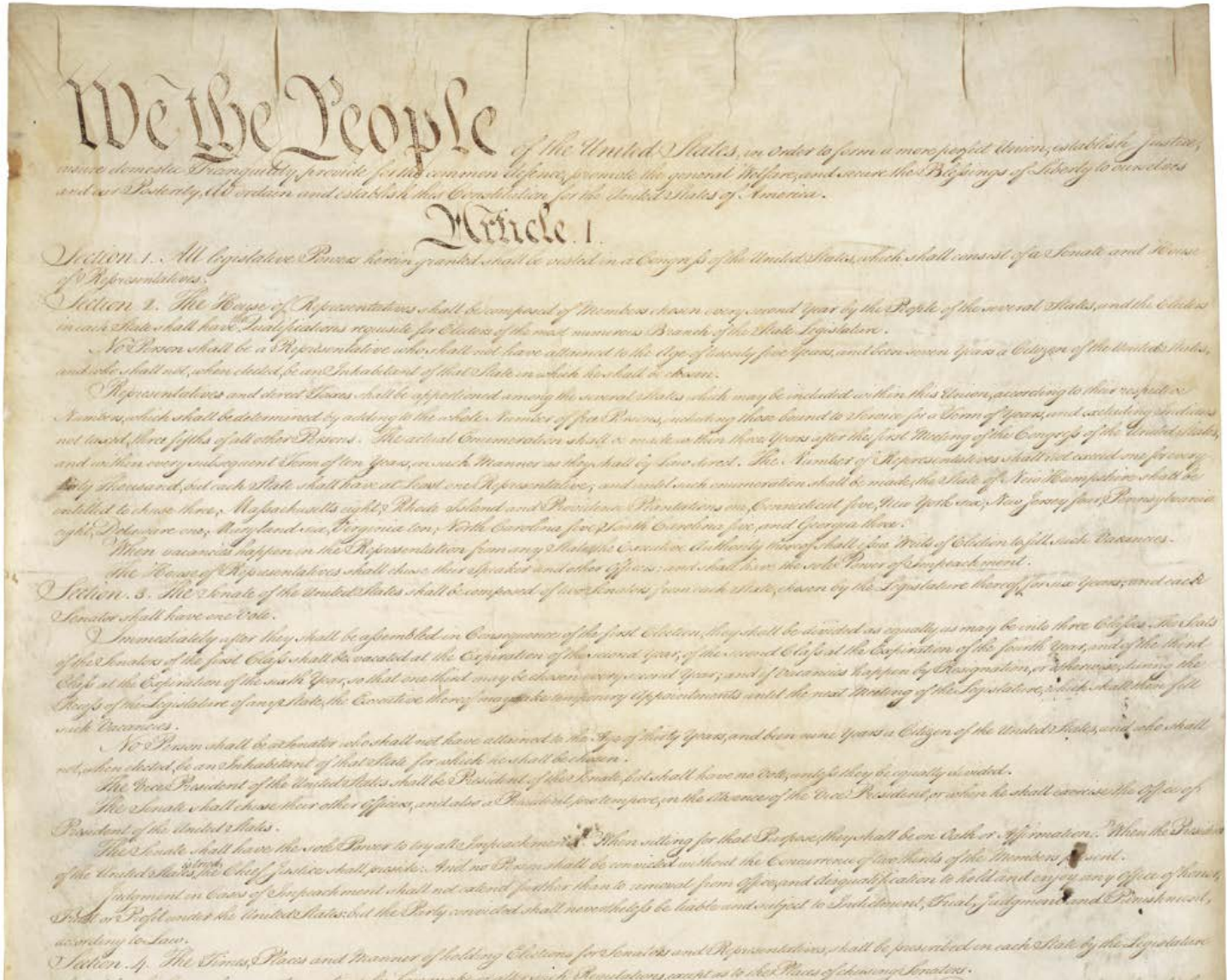
Annuit Coeptis: “He has favored our undertakings.”

Novus Ordo Seclorum: “New order of the ages”



From the *Columbian Magazine*, 1786

The "Godless" Constitution?



Discussion
Question

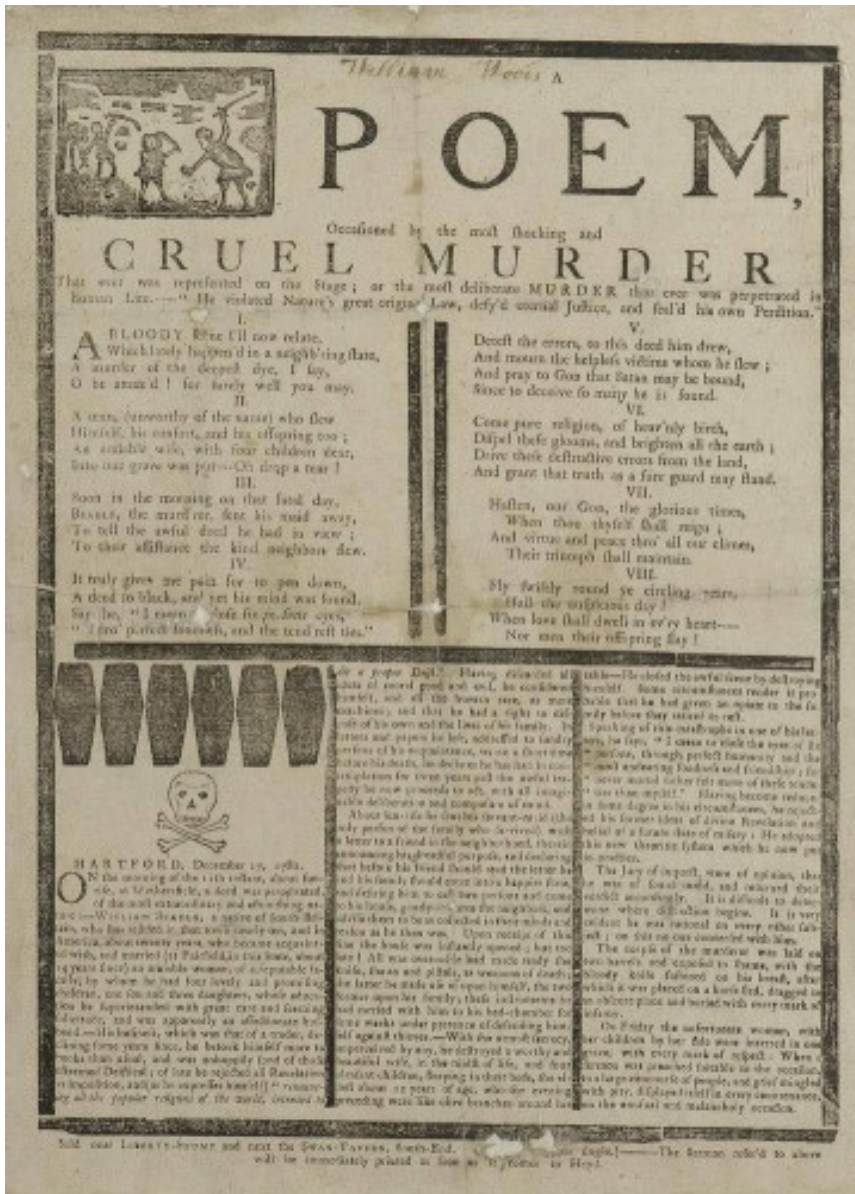
What is missing
from the
Constitution?

What influence did Deism have on the culture of the new nation?

- Poetry
- Freemasonry
- Transcendentalism
- Backlash...

“Go forth under the open sky, and list
To Nature's teachings, while from all around—
Earth and her waters, and the depths of air,—
Comes a still voice—Yet a few days, and thee...”

William Cullen Bryant
“Thanatopsis,” 1814



Social Backlash

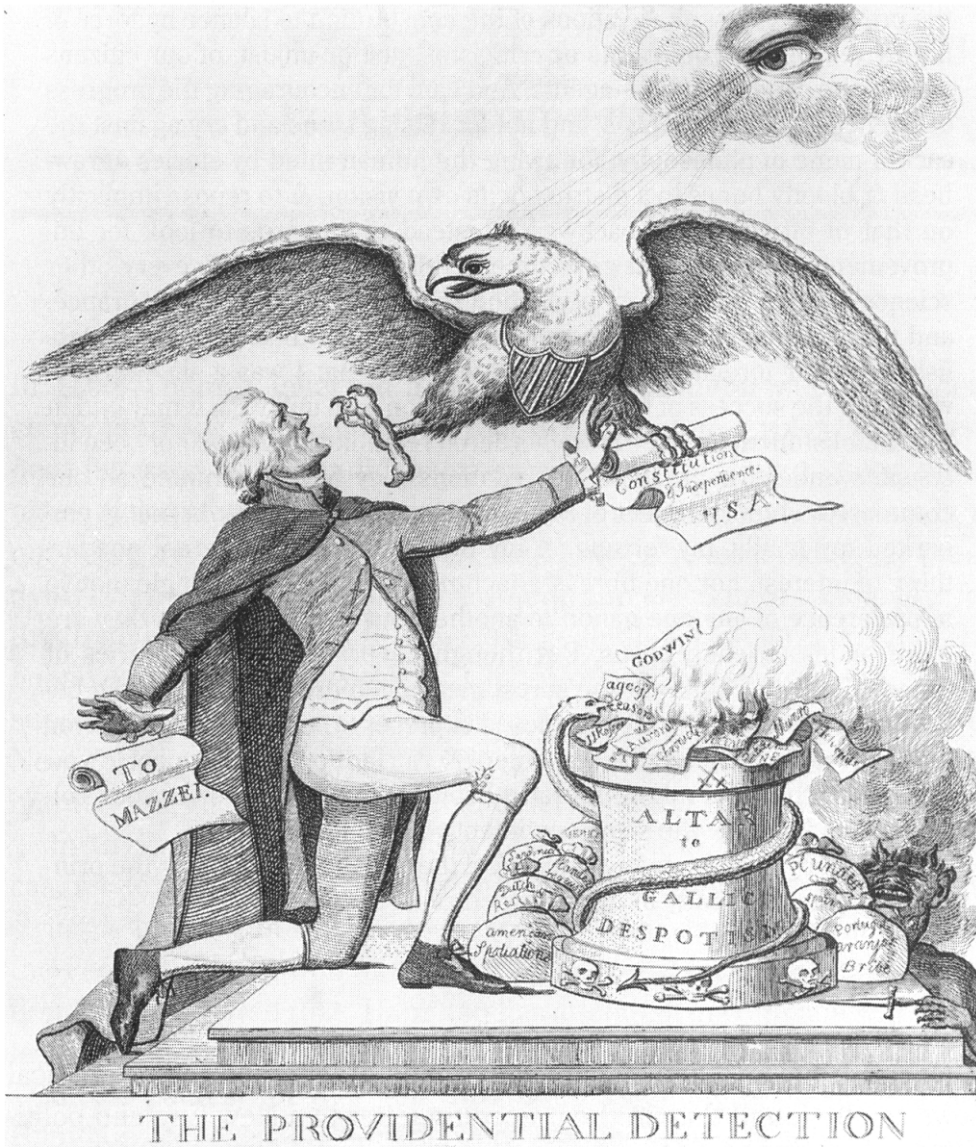
The murder of Lydia Beadle and her four children, by her husband, followed by his suicide, 1782.

He “intended to die a proper Deist.”

Poem relating the Beadle murders followed by an account from the *Connecticut Courant*, December 17, 1782.

Connecticut Historical Society and [Connecticut History Online](http://ConnecticutHistoryOnline.org)

The Providential Detection, 1800



Political Backlash

Final slide.

Thank You