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RELIGION IN THE THOUGHT OF SOME OF THE LEADING AMERICAN FOUNDERS

THOMAS L. PANGLE*

INTRODUCTION

In trying to understand the deepest moral and philosophic foundations on which the American founders built our constitutional order, it is indispensable that we at some point address in a sustained way their views on the place and role of religion within the new republic. Not only is this theme obviously of the greatest intrinsic interest, but I believe that nothing can reveal so sharply the distinctive character of the founders' republicanism or republican political theory. For the founders on this momentous point broke sharply with the previous traditions of republican theory and practice.

I. RELIGION AND THE REPUBLIC BEFORE THE FOUNDING

Prior to the founding of the United States, it had been the general consensus in theory, a consensus supported by the almost universal testimony of history or of empirical example, that public, civil religion was an essential bulwark of any strong and healthy republic. This conception of the place of religion in republican or democratic life went hand in hand with the view that republican or democratic society depended, more than any other society, on a virtuous citizenry: a citizenry whose individual members were dedicated to self-restraint and even self-sacrifice in the name of the common good. Religious sanctions reinforcing such virtue were regarded as essential or, at any rate, as of the greatest efficacy. Thus, the greatest theorist of democracy known to the founders, Montesquieu, had taken republican Rome as his model of a virtuous republic. Montesquieu wrote: "Rome was a ship held by two anchors, religion and morality, in the midst of a furious tempest."¹

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1. C. MONTESQUIEU, *THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS* 119 (T. Nugent trans. 1949).

Yet we must also observe that the religion Montesquieu praises so highly is not biblical religion. Montesquieu goes out of his way to announce on the very first page of his great work that the "virtue" which sustains a democracy has nothing to do with Christian virtue:

[W]hat I distinguish by the name of virtue, in a republic, is the love of one's country, that is, the love of equality. It is not a moral, nor a Christian, but a *political* virtue; . . . the honest man of whom we treat . . . is not the Christian, but the political honest man, who is possessed of the virtue here mentioned.²

We must not forget that republicanism and democracy are not biblical themes. In fact, the Bible never even mentions democracy or republicanism. Republicanism and democracy are terms and ideas that come to us from our Greco-Roman, not our biblical, heritage.

Still, under the aegis of political theorists like Thomas Aquinas and the great natural law tradition, many of the principles of Greco-Roman republicanism had been incorporated, somewhat uneasily, into the Christian tradition, and a kind of synthesis resulted. It was this synthesis, an outlook that argued for the dependence of healthy society on civic virtue supported by religion, that was challenged by the political philosophers of the seventeenth century who founded the new tradition of *liberal* or *commercial* republicanism. Spinoza and Locke were at the forefront of this rebellion against the old consensus and synthesis. It is no accident that these two thinkers wrote theological-political treatises which were enormously influential in promoting toleration, making economic and political life independent of all religious regulation and sapping the authority of the Scriptures even in religion and theology. This new, liberal and tolerant, commercial and individualistic, radically secular republicanism is the principal source of the founders' political vision. Their reflections on religion make this especially evident.

II. RELIGION AS TREATED BY THE FEDERALISTS

If we turn first to *The Federalist Papers*, the most authoritative and thoughtful articulation of the principles underlying the new system of government, we observe that the authors remain almost totally silent about awe for divinity and intimate no regard for the contemplative life conceived as in communion

2. *Id.* at xxi.

with or engaged in reflection on the divine. When the authors of *The Federalist* treat classical republicanism, they show very little patience for the civil religion of the ancient city. Whereas even the strict St. Augustine, when speaking of the ancient pagans, accorded some honor to that portion of the pagan beliefs he called, following Varro, "civil theology,"³ *The Federalist* dismisses these beliefs as "superstitions."⁴

The Federalist does, it is true, lay faint (and somewhat ambiguous) claim to divine assistance in the creation of the Constitution: "It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution."⁵ But, mindful of the horrors of religious warfare and persecution, the founders—not all of whom were "men of pious reflection"—scrupulously refrained from claiming any divine inspiration or from suggesting any important connection between the Constitution and any specific conception of piety or of divinity. They agree, it would seem, with John Adams's earlier assessment of the role Americans assigned to divinity in the making of all their state constitutions:

It was the general opinion of ancient nations that the Divinity alone was adequate to the important office of giving laws to men. . . . The United States of America have exhibited, perhaps, the first example of government erected on the simple principles of nature; and if men are now sufficiently enlightened to disabuse themselves of artifice, imposture, hypocrisy, and superstition, they will consider this event as an era in their history. . . . It will never be pretended that any persons employed in [framing the United States government] had interviews with the gods or were in any degree under the inspiration of Heaven, more than those at work upon ships or houses, or laboring in merchandise and agriculture; it will forever be acknowledged that these governments were contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses. . . . Neither the people nor their conventions, committees, or sub-committees considered legislation in any other light than as ordinary arts and sciences, only more important. . . . The people were universally too enlightened to be

3. SAINT AUGUSTINE, *CITY OF GOD*, bk. 6, at 234 (D. Knowles ed. 1972).

4. THE FEDERALIST NO. 18, at 107 (A. Hamilton) (E. Earle ed. 1941); *id.* No. 38, at 234 (J. Madison).

5. *Id.* No. 37, at 231 (J. Madison).

imposed on by artifice . . . governments thus founded on the natural authority of the people alone, without a pretense of miracle or mystery, and which are destined to spread over the northern part of that whole quarter of the globe, are a great point gained in favor of the rights of mankind.⁶

Another statement remarkably similar to Adams's, is found in the pamphlet of the anonymous Federalist "Elihu":

But the light of philosophy has arisen in these latter days; miracles have ceased, oracles are silenced, monkish darkness is dissipated, and even witches at last hide their heads. Mankind are [sic] no longer to be deluded with fable. . . . The most shining part, the most brilliant circumstance in honour of the framers of the constitution is their avoiding all appearance of craft, declining to dazzle even the superstitious, by a hint about grace or ghostly knowledge. They come to us in the plain language of common sense, and propose to our understanding a system of government, as the invention of mere human wisdom; no deity comes down to dictate it, not even a god appears in a dream to propose any part of it.⁷

III. RELIGION AS VIEWED BY THE FOUNDERS

A. *Franklin's Thoughts*

Nonetheless, in the Constitutional Convention itself there was, at a crucial juncture, a dramatic appeal for the invocation of divine assistance. Herbert J. Storing's discussion helps disclose its significance:

What seemed to be irreconcilable differences of principle threatened to destroy the Convention. At this point, on June 28, Benjamin Franklin intervened with a proposal for daily prayer. . . . He sought to elevate the delegates' thoughts: . . . [and] turned the attention of the delegates to the War of Independence by recalling that during the war there was "daily prayer in this room for the divine protection."⁸

6. Adams, *A Defense of the Constitutions of Government of the United States of America*, in 4 LIFE AND WORKS OF JOHN ADAMS 271, 291 (J. Q. Adams ed. 1851).

7. 4 THE COMPLETE ANTI-FEDERALIST 248-49 n.1 (H. Storing ed. 1981).

8. Storing, *The Federal Convention of 1787: Politics, Principles, and Statesmanship*, in THE AMERICAN FOUNDING: POLITICS, STATESMANSHIP, AND THE CONSTITUTION 23 (R. Rossum & G. McDowell eds. 1981) (citation omitted).

Franklin's proposal, Storing notes, was itself the subject of considerable controversy, with Hamilton and others speaking in opposition. Franklin himself, in a later recollection, wrote that only three or four delegates sided with him. In any event, as Storing says, "the House adjourned without taking action. Human Wisdom proceeded unassisted."⁹ And yet, at the next meeting, somehow the tide began to turn toward reconciliation—one reason being that by chance (?), on a crucial vote, a Maryland delegate was too late taking his seat to be counted. "The result seems," Storing remarks, "to suggest that Franklin's prayer for Divine Providence was not altogether fruitless, though human reason also played its part."¹⁰

Certainly the spirit that the clear-eyed old rationalist promulgated seems to have contributed in no small degree to the Great Compromise. To Storing's account I would only add that Franklin's speech itself (which exists not only in Madison's notes but in a manuscript apparently reread and corrected by the author, perhaps with a view to readers of later generations) proves on examination to be not without intriguing features. In the peroration, Franklin first tells his younger fellow-delegates that the older he gets, "the more convincing proofs I see (the earlier proofs were perhaps not entirely convincing) of this truth—that *God governs in the affairs of men.*"¹¹ Franklin leaves the proofs for Providence with a rhetorical question: "And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?"¹² He then turns from empirical proofs to revealed authority, quoting Psalm 127: "We have been assured, Sir, in the sacred writings, that 'except the Lord build the House they labour in vain that build it.'"¹³ Here Franklin declares, "I firmly believe this."¹⁴ He goes on to explain this belief: unless the delegates seek and find God's aid they will never be able to transcend their "partial local interests."¹⁵ The evil results that will follow from such failure he then lists, in ascending order of gravity: first, their projects—above all the United States—will be confounded; graver still, "we ourselves shall become a reproach and a bye

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.* at 26.

11. 1 THE RECORDS OF THE FEDERAL CONVENTION OF 1787, at 450-52 (M. Farrand rev. ed. 1966).

12. *Id.* at 451.

13. *Id.*

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 452.

word down to future ages."¹⁶ But something more than the loss of this small, fledgling country and "our" reputations will ensue, something that touches the philosophic Franklin deepest of all: "what is worse, mankind may despair of establishing Governments by *Human* Wisdom, and leave it to *chance*, war and conquest."¹⁷ Ralph Lerner has brought out a similarly pregnant ambiguity in what Franklin's *Autobiography* has to teach about providence:

Early in the *Autobiography*, after speaking of the gratitude owed God for human vanity, Franklin goes on in his own name to thank God for "his kind providence, which led me to the Means I us'd and gave them Success." It is not clear where the stress falls in this sentence, on "his kind Providence" or on "the Means I us'd." Nor is it altogether clear what Franklin understands by Providence: when speaking of his managing to survive in London "without any *wilful* gross Immorality or Injustice that might have been expected from my Want of Religion [I say *wilful*, because the instances I have mentioned, had something of *Necessity* in them]," Franklin credits a certain opinion he held, "with the kind hand of Providence, or some guardian Angel, or accidental favourable Circumstances and Situations, or all together."¹⁸

B. *The Treatment of Religion by a State Constitution*

However this may be, Franklin's appeal to the power of at least a strong remembrance of the wisdom that may be obtained by respectful attention to the providential biblical God is, of course, not unusual in the founding context. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 (forged by John Adams, along with Samuel Adams, John Hancock, and other luminaries) is only one among many prominent examples. It included in articles II and III of its Declaration of Rights "the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons, to worship the SUPREME BEING."¹⁹ The Massachusetts Constitution therefore instituted "the public wor-

16. *Id.*

17. *Id.* (emphasis added).

18. R. LERNER, *THE THINKING REVOLUTIONARY* 46 (1987) (citations omitted). See B. FRANKLIN, *THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* 44-45, 115, 193 (Yale Univ. Press ed. 1964), where Franklin crossed out *Fortune*, and substituted *Providence*, leaving the manuscript so.

19. MASS. CONST. OF 1780, *Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts*, art. II, reprinted in *THE POPULAR SOURCES OF POLITICAL AUTHORITY: DOCUMENTS ON THE MASSACHUSETTS CONSTITUTION OF*

ship of GOD"²⁰ and "public instructions in piety, religion and morality"²¹ led by "public protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality,"²² enjoining "upon all subjects an attendance upon the instructions of the public teachers aforesaid."²³ In other words, we must not forget that there indeed persisted, especially at lower levels of government in the founding period, strong carryovers from the Christian heritage.

It must also be observed that these passages of the Massachusetts Constitution made no explicit reference to the Trinity or even to Jesus Christ. Moreover, these same passages occasioned the greatest debate at the state constitutional convention and the most controversy during adoption—in part because they were intermingled with other passages, guaranteeing toleration and religious liberty, that seemed, and indeed were, at odds with them. As Oscar and Mary Handlin summed up the situation: "Article III therefore was not so much the articulation of a theory as the description of such compromises, shaped by experience, as would be 'likely to hit the taste of the public.'"²⁴

C. Jefferson on Religion

Men like Jefferson and Madison, while not so easily satisfied, were nonetheless in quest of some sort of compromise as regards the role of religion in the future public life of their nation. They did honor religion: not for its theological richness or theoretical insight, but for its moral value. One must hasten to add that they did not approve of the otherworldly tendencies of Christian asceticism. Yet unlike Hume, they did not think it necessary or prudent to engage in polemics against this massive dimension of the Christian moral ethos; in this regard they implicitly followed the advice and example of Montesquieu.²⁵ They differed from the latter philosopher in the

1780, at 441-42 (O. Handlin & M. Handlin eds. 1966) [hereinafter POPULAR SOURCES].

20. *Id.* at 442.

21. *Id.*

22. *Id.* at 443.

23. *Id.*

24. *Id.* Introduction, at 33.

25. Compare D. HUME, AN ENQUIRY CONCERNING THE PRINCIPLES OF MORALS § IX, I, no. 219, with C. MONTESQUIEU, THE SPIRIT OF THE LAWS, bk. 25, ch. 12. Thomas Jefferson did of course undertake an "editing" or rewriting of the Christian Scriptures. He never tried to publish this work, however, but perusal of it is revealing of all that must be "pruned" from the Gospel in order to make it acceptable to Jefferson's worldly ethic. See JEFFERSON'S EXTRACTS FROM THE GOSPELS (D. Adams ed. 1983).

degree to which they seem to have supposed, or hoped, or wished, that they could continue to rely on the moral support from "religion" (they are often vague as to just which religion) while ignoring, or promoting the atrophy of, religious faith—that is, sustained thought, gripping and controversial argument, over the *content* of belief about the nature of divinity and the afterlife.

The difficulties or contradictions into which the founders were led are best illustrated by the case of Jefferson, who probably devoted more attention to the religious question than did any of his peers. For Jefferson, religion was at the least an "additional incitement" to virtue.²⁶ In his sole published book he went so far as to say that the "only firm basis" for "the liberties of a nation" was the "conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God . . . [t]hat they are not to be violated but with His wrath."²⁷ Yet in the same work Jefferson insisted that religious belief was an exclusively private matter, and that government had no legitimate interest in the promotion or discouragement of any such beliefs. He was able to maintain this thesis only, it would seem, by flagrantly contradicting himself. In Appendix 3, containing the Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, the writing for which, along with the Declaration of Independence, he wished above all to be remembered (see his epitaph), Jefferson declared that "our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions."²⁸

At first sight it appears that Jefferson does have a more coherent position, also present in the *Notes on the State of Virginia*: government can best promote the most sober and morally beneficial sort of religious belief by promoting complete freedom of speech. For the morally requisite religion is the true religion, and "[r]eason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal, to the test of their investigation."²⁹

The difficulty arises, however, when Jefferson goes on to indicate doubts as to whether there is discoverable any core of religious truth. He speaks as if there is nothing but irresolvable

26. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr (Aug. 10, 1787), reprinted in 6 THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 260 (Memorial ed. A. Lipscomb ed. 1903) [hereinafter WRITINGS].

27. T. JEFFERSON, NOTES ON THE STATE OF VIRGINIA, Q.18, at 163 (W. Peden ed. 1954).

28. Cf. *id.*, Q.17, at 157-59.

29. *Id.* at 159. Accordingly, Jefferson urges the young Peter Carr to "[q]uestion with boldness even the existence of a God." *Id.*

diversity of opinion in religious matters, a diversity rooted in the fact that religion is not a matter of reason but is instead, like our physical looks or appreciation for others' looks, a mere expression of native disposition, taste, and prejudice: "is uniformity of opinion desirable? No more than of face and stature."³⁰

Would the world be more beautiful were all our faces alike? were our tempers, our talents, our tastes, our forms, our wishes, aversions and pursuits cast exactly in the same mold? . . . These are the absurdities into which those run who usurp the throne of God and dictate to Him what He should have done. May they with all their metaphysical riddles appear before the tribunal with as clean hands and hearts as you and I shall.³¹

In this last sentence we see revealed the underlying assumption—that there is little or nothing to be truly known in theological controversy. The real aim of toleration and free speech in this respect is not the encouragement of progress in theological or metaphysical science, but the trivialization of theology and metaphysics. Government cannot be neutral as regards religion. By manifesting indifference to theological controversy, government necessarily promotes indifference among the citizenry: "[o]ur sister states of Pennsylvania and New York . . . have made the happy discovery, that the way to silence religious disputes, is to take no notice of them. Let us too give this experiment fair play."³² The real goal, it would then appear, is not vigorous debate progressing toward agreed-on truth, but conformity based on indifference; not diversity, but the tepid and thoughtless uniformity of unitarianism, in a society where unitarians no longer have to defend and prove themselves.

The aged Jefferson, in a letter he stressed was confidential, expressed his "confident expect[ation] that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States."³³ He went much further in a letter to Benjamin Waterhouse, on June 26 of the same year: "I trust that there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."³⁴ The only genuine truth, or objective validity,

30. *Id.* at 160.

31. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Charles Thomson (Jan. 29, 1817), reprinted in 10 THE WRITINGS OF THOMAS JEFFERSON 76 (P. Ford ed. 1899).

32. T. JEFFERSON, *supra* note 27, at 160-61.

33. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to James Smith (Dec. 8, 1822), reprinted in 15 WRITINGS, *supra* note 26, at 409.

34. *Cf.* the letters of Thomas Jefferson to Benjamin Rush (Apr. 21, 1803),

religion can evince is its tolerance, its refusal to press its theological pretensions too seriously or strenuously; the only genuine measure of the merits of a religion is its effectiveness in promoting peace, lawfulness, and the moral habits conducive to support for the rights of man. According to Jefferson, in Pennsylvania and New York “[r]eligion is well supported; of various kinds, indeed, but all good enough; all sufficient to preserve peace and order.”³⁵ Jefferson at first planned to avoid establishing any department of theology or divinity at his University of Virginia. He eventually decided not to keep the study of theology out of the University of Virginia, but instead to allow all churches to set up seminaries on campus: “by bringing the sects together . . . we shall soften their asperities, liberalize and neutralize their prejudices, and make the general religion a religion of peace, reason, and morality.”³⁶

But if the truest religion is the religion which simply reaffirms, echoes, and reflects the moral teachings of reason, why is religion so important? What is its distinct contribution? How does a preacher’s sermon and Sunday school instruction do more for the young than, say, the weekly exhortations of a good Denmother or Scoutmaster? The answer is evident in more than one of the Jeffersonian utterances we have quoted: religious faith and religious faith alone sanctions morals and civic duty by the “wrath” of God; by the “tribunal” before which we must all appear on judgment day in the hereafter. Religious faith places in the balance against the apparent unreasonableness of self-sacrifice (the example Jefferson himself refers to is the economically very costly manumission of the South’s slaves) the promise of another dimension to our existence that utterly transforms our “reasonable” calculations of utility. For “nature has constituted *utility* to man, the standard and test of virtue.”³⁷

But does a religion of reason establish, or even show the plausibility of, a God who intervenes providentially in the history of nations and the lives of individuals? Does reason by itself provide evidence for a God who bestows the reward of heaven or the punishment of hellfire in a resurrected life after death? Or is it only faithful trust in the scripture, and espe-

reprinted in 10 *id.* at 379, and to John Adams (Aug. 22, 1813), reprinted in 13 *id.* at 350.

35. T. JEFFERSON, *supra* note 27, at 161.

36. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Cooper (Nov. 2, 1822), reprinted in 15 WRITINGS, *supra* note 26, at 406.

37. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Thomas Law (June 13, 1814), reprinted in 14 *id.* at 143.

cially the scriptural narrative of the miraculous life and deeds of Jesus Christ, that can even indicate the plausibility of such intervention? The status of Scripture, and especially of the supra-rational, miraculous elements in scripture pertaining to divine punishment, thus becomes of fundamental significance for Jefferson's civil theology.

As regards Scripture, Jefferson insisted in his advice to Peter Carr, in his urgings addressed to other teachers (for example, Joseph Priestly), and in his own "rewriting" of the Gospels, that men must look with a doubting eye on precisely those portions of Scripture which assert that, for example, "the grace of God was upon him [that is, Jesus]"; "the word of God came unto John the son of Zacharis in the wilderness"; "and he [Jesus] healed them all" (some of the passages characteristically omitted from the Gospel in Jefferson's rewriting, a rewriting in which the life of Jesus terminates prior to the resurrection).

Read the Bible, then, as you would read Livy or Tacitus. The facts which are within the ordinary course of nature, you will believe on the authority of the writer, as you do those of the same kind in Livy and Tacitus. . . . But those facts in the Bible which contradict the laws of nature, must be examined with more care, and under a variety of faces. Here you must recur to the pretensions of the writer to inspiration from God. Examine upon what evidence his pretensions are founded, and whether that evidence is so strong, as that its falsehood would be more improbable than a change of the laws of nature. . . . [The New Testament] is the history of a personage called Jesus. Keep in your eye the opposite pretensions: 1) of those who say he was begotten by God, born of a virgin, suspended and reversed the laws of nature at will, and ascended bodily into heaven; and 2) of those who say he was a man of illegitimate birth, of a benevolent heart, enthusiastic mind, who set out without pretensions to divinity, ended in believing them, and was punished capitally for sedition, by being gibbeted, according to the Roman law. . . . Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it ends in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise, and the love of others which it will procure you.³⁸

38. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr (Aug. 10, 1787), *reprinted in 6 id.* at 258-60.

In his letter to William Short of October 31, 1819, Jefferson insisted that to “rescue” the character of Jesus “from the imputation of imposture,” it would be necessary to jettison, among other things, “the immaculate conception of Jesus [sic], His deification, the creation of the world by Him, His miraculous powers, His resurrection and visible ascension, . . . atonement, regeneration, . . . etc.”³⁹

Would a citizenry of Jeffersonian Unitarians believe in the divinity or miracles of Jesus? Lacking that belief, would they be moved by the fear of divine intervention in this life or punishment in another life? More generally speaking, can one maintain the belief in Heaven and Hell, as a vivid sanction in the “next life,” once one has succeeded in making the populace disbelieve in or distrust miracles? On the other hand, can religion focus on the afterlife without bringing metaphysical questions, and disputes, to the fore? Can belief in immortality of the soul or in providential interventions in this life be divorced from belief in miracles, and can one easily confine theological disputation once one encourages the belief in miracles? One searches in vain for answers to these questions in Jefferson’s writings, public or private.⁴⁰

IV. CLOSING THOUGHTS

The radical diminution of the lawgiver’s support for even diluted versions of the theological virtues goes hand in hand with the kindred neglect of the fine arts, especially poetry. The founders themselves grew up in a world where men were still likely to derive much of their moral guidance from the models provided by artists who conceived themselves to be responsible for the formation of moral and civic virtue. George Washington’s abiding reliance on Addison’s *Cato* is only the most noteworthy example of the moral power and responsibility of the artist in the political sphere. Church music, architecture, painting and above all, the Bible itself, made the mass of men and women intimately familiar with the morally educative power of the artist or the work of art, including the subordinate but critical art of translation. Yet the American lawgivers made few efforts, even of exhortation, to insure the continuation of the

39. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to William Short (Oct. 31, 1819), reprinted in 15 *id.* at 220-21.

40. In trying to discern Jefferson’s own understanding of what conclusion reason leads us to as regards our fate after death, one must not overlook his remarkable Letter to Major John Cartwright, June 5, 1824, reprinted in 16 *id.* at 42.

civic and religious artistic tradition by which they had been to some extent formed. They were determined to make both religion and morality as prosaic, reasonable, and simple as possible. They had in mind, as we shall see presently, a people whose virtues would be largely utilitarian and unheroic or unfanatical.

This posture toward morals and religion compelled them to look with some unease upon the imagination and to fear those powers which art possesses to arouse or inflame the imagination. The glory of military valor, the sublime intimation of otherworldly splendors, the alluring refinements of aristocratic taste or delicacy, the passionate call to self-sacrificing erotic love; and, on the other hand, the contempt for shrewd calculation, for humdrum work, for the inevitable coarseness, philistinism, and irreverence of egalitarianism: what constructive role, after all, could these great themes of past poets and modern novelists play in the life of the American citizenry? Small wonder that we find some of the founders speaking of poetry with warmth and concern only when they warn against the reading of poetry. Jefferson, in the course of replying to a request for advice on the education of women, takes occasion to warn that:

A great obstacle to good education is the inordinate passion prevalent for novels, and the time lost in that reading. . . . When this poison infects the mind, it destroys its tone. . . . Reason and fact, plain and unadorned, are rejected. . . . The result is a bloated imagination, sickly judgment, and disgust towards all the real businesses of life. This mass of trash, however, is not without some distinction. . . . For a like reason, too, much poetry should not be indulged. Some is useful for forming style and taste. . . .

. . . .

. . . Drawing is thought less of in this country than in Europe. It is an innocent and engaging amusement, often useful. . . .⁴¹

Similarly, Franklin notes in his *Autobiography* that he "approv'd the amusing one's self with poetry now and then, so far as to improve one's Language, but no farther."⁴²

41. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Nathaniel Burwell (Mar. 14, 1818), reprinted in 15 *id.* at 166-67.

42. B. FRANKLIN, *supra* note 18, at 90. See also Rush, *Thoughts U'pon Female Education, Accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners, and Government in*

In his presentation of the model law-giver, Plutarch tells us that in Lycurgus' polity, in addition to concision in speech, the children were taught to "sing well, and to make goodly ditties and songs."⁴³ This, he says, explains the remarkable fact that the kings of Sparta before every great battle always offered a public sacrifice to the Muses, "to put his soldiers in mind (as it should seem) of the discipline and wisdom of the Muses that they had been brought up in. . . ."⁴⁴ A not altogether atypical distant echo of this spirit is again to be found in the Massachusetts Constitution of 1780. In Chapter V, section I, official provision is made for Harvard University on the ground that

our wise and pious ancestors . . . laid the foundation of Harvard-College, in which University many persons of great eminence have, by the blessing of GOD, been initiated in those arts and sciences, which qualified them for public employments, both in Church and State: And whereas the encouragement of Arts and Sciences, and all good literature, tends to the honor of GOD, the advantage of the christian religion, and the great benefit of this, and the other United States of America.⁴⁵

A glance at the present curriculum of Harvard College is enough to indicate how very far the nation has moved from this spirit. It was Thomas Jefferson above all who pointed out the direction of this movement, though perhaps not its full trajectory or extreme reach. In meditating on Jefferson's and the other founder's wrestling with the question of the place of religion in a liberal democracy, we are ushered into reflection of a high order on a theme that reveals some of the deepest and most problematic limitations of our constitutional system—and, perhaps, of any political system.

the United States, and Webster, *On the Education of Youth in America*, in *ESSAYS IN THE EARLY REPUBLIC* (F. Rudolph ed. 1965).

43. PLUTARCH, *LIFE OF LYCURGUS* 20 (D. Turner ed. 1963).

44. *Id.* at 21-22.

45. MASS. CONST. OF 1780 art. V, § 1, *reprinted in POPULAR SOURCES*, *supra* note 19, at 465.