

Rationalism in American Religion

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Since the Declaration of Independence declares the right of all to freedom and the pursuit of happiness, it is not surprising that independence from allegiance to a supreme ruler in the form of a king led many Americans to claim independence also from an all-powerful god who chose to condemn many of his human creation to eternal suffering. This seminar will explore liberal religious ideas among 18th and 19th century Americans, including the Founding Fathers, looking into the Deist and Unitarian beliefs of many, influenced by the Age of Enlightenment thinkers of Europe and America.

Deism, belief in a god who created the universe but does not intervene in its activities, influenced a majority of the Founders. It stood for rational inquiry, for skepticism about dogma and mystery, and for religious toleration. Many of its followers advocated universal education, freedom of the press, and separation of church and state. If the nation owes much to the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is also indebted to Deism, a movement of reason and equality that influenced the Founding Fathers to embrace liberal political ideals remarkable for their time. Unitarianism, a rejection of the trinity and an acceptance of humanity's ability to discover religion through reason and not scripture, became an important strain in Massachusetts and beyond, as many Congregational churches converted to Unitarianism in the nineteenth century.

Four books will be central to the seminar. They are Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason* (1794), William Ellery Channing, *Unitarian Christianity*, known as the Baltimore Sermon or the Unitarian Manifesto (1819), Thomas Jefferson's *Bible*, originally called *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*, (1820), and Amy Kittelstrom's *The Religion of Democracy: the American Reformation and the Making of Modern Liberalism* (2015).

The Age of Reason was a bestseller, popular with most educated people of the Founders generation. It advocates reason in the place of religious revelation. Jefferson's *Bible* is an extraordinary work, compiled by Jefferson late in his life. In it, he compares six translations of the gospels, eliminating everything that strains reason – so all miracles are omitted. *The Religion of Democracy* focuses on seven liberal American thinkers, namely, John Adams, Mary Moody Emerson, William Ellery Channing, William James, Thomas Davidson, William Mackintire Salter, and Jane Addams. These very different people were a revolutionary, founder and President of the country; a maiden aunt and early example to Ralph Waldo Emerson; a leading Unitarian preacher and theologian; a key American philosopher who treated his depression with a will to believe; a Scottish-American intellectual; a post-Christian preacher of Ethics; and a local and international social activist and founder of Hull House, a Chicago settlement house supporting newly arrived European immigrants, especially women. Participants will select a topic from one of these books to discuss in a 20-30 minute presentation.

