We begin now the eighth in our series of lessons on American Religious History. Our subject is that of the American Revolution. We began the discussion last time, and I’d like to extend that discussion today. By way of review, I think I would say this; it seems to me as I read the literature that America has a very unique beginning in terms of time. It began when the Enlightenment was just beginning to blow across Western Europe, and at the same time, Christianity was beginning to decline in its power and strength. America is born in that crack between those two antithetical entities.

It seems to me that we are over-stressing the information to suggest that America began as a distinctly Christian nation, as some would have us think. It began as a secular state; it began as a state that saw the importance of religion for its moral virtue as it blew the culture together, but yet it was not yet distinctly Christian in the historic, traditional definition of that term. It is religious and it is Christian, but it is of a variety of Christianity that most evangelical Christians would descent from.

I tried to say in the last lecture that the political philosophy that undergirded the Revolution is found in two sources: one, it is found in John Locke and Locke’s Theory of Social Entitlement. The theory goes something like this by way of review: It suggests to us that man in the state of nature, which is an idealized theoretical state, had enormous freedoms but could not protect those freedoms from the adverseness of those who are around him. Therefore, they met in congress in assembly and determined to give up some of those rights of freedom to entitle someone of their choosing to rule over them.

In return for the divesting of those privileges of self-rule, the entitled ruler then would direct the affairs of state and grant mutual protection. When any ruler is not faithful to the limits of his entitlement, then in the Social Contract Theory, one
is free as a sacred right and duty to rebel against that entitled ruler and establish a new ruler over them. So the Declaration of Independence, with its twenty-two reasons why the American people felt called upon to enter into open military conflict with Great Britain, those twenty-two reasons are the reasons why it was, in their judgment, their right and duty to disentitle a ruler and hopefully to entitle another. It is seemingly Locke’s Theory of Entitlement.

The second source is that of Scottish Common Sense. Let me say a word about the Scottish Common Sense Theory in general. Who are the Scottish enlightened thinkers? These would be men like Thomas Reed of the University of Glasgow, who wrote a very monumental book entitled, *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*. In his book he refuted or hoped to refute the rationalisms of Rene Descartes. Descartes simply argued that man is born with a set of principles in the mind, and from those principles he can order the external world. Man has a God-given, rational sense and from that rational sense he could bring order on the world around him.

He was also reacting to the fearful skepticism of fellow Scot, David Hume, who obviously said that rational arguments ultimately lead to skepticism. He wanted to found a place for his ideas that would escape the tyranny of skepticism. On the other hand, he was reacting both to Immanuel Kant, who simply argued that knowledge is a function of both innate ideas and sense perceptions, as well as John Locke. So the Scottish Common Sense School reacted to the prevalent theories of knowledge of the day in which they were surrounded. It flowered into a great school.

Now the other prominent figure among several was Francis Hutcheson, who is ultimately a Scot, of course, but ultimately the popularizer of Thomas Reed’s ideas. There’s also Dugald Stewart and Lord Kames. Now the essence of Scottish Common Sense Theory goes something like this: Scottish Common Sense thinkers argued that God placed in the soul of every man certain innate ideas, but they’re not ideas so much as they are an innate moral sense of virtue. An innate sense of justice that we are a sensible creature and that God has written on our souls, all of us, so it’s egalitarian. It is universal, it is a mechanistic view of man and mind and universe that God has written on our souls a moral sense and by performing the actions of moral sense, one can live in the external world.
Now Scottish Common Sense ideas impacted America through two great colleges in the late colonial period. One was William and Mary, where Thomas Jefferson studied. In fact, a real clear example of Scottish Common Sense as opposed to Locke Empiricism is that little phrase in the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. The phrase now reads: “We hold these truths to be self-evident.” When Thomas Jefferson penned the first draft, he did not use the word self-evident, but the word divine. “We hold these truths to be divine that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and among these are life, liberty, and property.” Divine would suggest an intuitive recognition by one’s moral sense. It seems to be more Scottish Common Sense. Self-evident seems to be more Lockean, that through the senses we know this to be true.

It also predominated in America through Princeton, where it was brought into America by the incoming president, Jonathan Witherspoon, in 1766. He was educated and was, of course, a Scotsman. He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence as well. Now Scottish Common Sense—this egalitarian, moral virtue or sense placed in every one of us that’s universal—predominated in the nineteenth century philosophically—later to be overturned by the coming of Hegelianism—through a very popular book such as Francis Wayland’s, *The Baptist Moral Philosophy*. Scottish Common Sense Philosophy became the foundation stone for the defense of Christianity in the nineteenth century. Now, so what I’m saying is this: the foundation stone of our great documents of state seem to be rooted in either Lockeanism or Scottish Common Sense.

Now this brings us to the two great documents; first, the Declaration of Independence. I should say before I start that though I highlight Thomas Jefferson, I am very well aware that the great document was ultimately the function of a committee of five. Thomas Jefferson, of course, was the prominent penman he drafted the first draft, but then it was passed to four others: John Adams of Massachusetts, Benjamin Franklin of Philadelphia, Roger Sherman of Connecticut, and Robert Livingston of New York. If you look at these men’s religious understandings, you see something vitally important.

Thomas Jefferson by his own admission was a Unitarian. He believed that God was one person, not three and that Jesus Christ was not God. For instance, he says, “My views are the result of a life of inquiry and reflection and very different from that anti-
Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing of my opinions. To the corruptions of Christianity, I am indeed opposed; but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus Himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which you wished anyone to be; sincerely attached to His doctrines and in preference to all others, ascribing to Himself every human excellence and believing He never claimed any other.” Thomas Jefferson was a Unitarian.

Ben Franklin, however, was a Deist. I am reading these quotes to help you to see that during the Revolutionary Period, men of diverse religious persuasions held a considerable amount of religious knowledge. Simply because a person believes in God, does not make them a Christian in an evangelical sense. Here is an illustration of Ben Franklin. Ben Franklin at the end of his life—I think he was to live yet but a few short months—received a letter from Ezra Stiles, the president of Yale College in 1790, and he was asked to comment upon his religious faith, and Ben Franklin did. Notice what he says:

Here is my creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the universe, that He governs it by His province, that He ought to be worshiped, that the most acceptable service we render to Him is doing good to His other children, that the soul of man is immortal and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the principle principles of sound religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the system of morals and His religion as He left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see, but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes, and I have with most of the present dissenters in England some doubts as to His divinity, though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble. I see no harm in it, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the proper consequence as probably it has of making his doctrine more respected and better observed, especially has I do not perceive that the Supreme Being takes an abyss by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any particular marks of His displeasure.

On another incidence he says this is what he believed; “That there is one God who made all things. That he governs the world
by His providence, that He ought to be worshiped by adoration, prayer, or thanksgiving, but that the most acceptable service to God is doing good to man. That the soul is immortal, that God will certainly reward virtue and punish vice, either here or hereafter.”

There was a certain fund of common religious knowledge that was held by all people within this era and that, I think, is what is profoundly mindboggling to some people. They read words like God and immortality and a belief in the miracles of the Bible, and they would suggest that, “See, these men are deeply Christian.” But you must understand in this era there was a shared understanding of the importance of religion as a glue that holds society together which was shared by Deists like Ben Franklin, by Unitarians like Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and even by outstanding Christian men in this period, such as Roger Sherman. Roger Sherman was the most prolific committeeman of the entire Revolutionary Period, having sat in on every committee from the 1770s to the Constitution. He was a convinced, Puritan Calvinist of Connecticut, but certainly he would have disagreed religiously with Ben Franklin or Thomas Jefferson.

Now this brings us to the Declaration of Independence and Thomas Jefferson. Thomas Jefferson was born of Virginia gentry, was a nominal Anglican by faith, educated at William and Mary College in law and political science. He was, however, during his college years religiously awakened by the Deist Bolingbroke and profoundly influenced throughout his life by the Unitarian Joseph Priestly. He, however, penned the first draft of the American Declaration. It seems to me that what I’m saying is that words in that declaration could be read by a sterling Christian man like John Jay, Samuel Adams, or Roger Sherman and be interpreted in a certain way; but they could also be read by men like John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, or Ben Franklin and be interpreted in a distinctly non-Christian way. So there’s a certain latitudinarianism about this document that we must be very, very careful to perceive.

Perhaps some insight into the Declaration, since it was penned by Jefferson, is to look at some of his religious views. So let’s begin first by looking at his understanding of God. Jefferson, like everyone in the Revolutionary Period, believed in the existence of God. Jefferson believed that God was the Creator of a mechanical universe, that He was a designer, that He was a fabricator of the world. His idea of God and the universe was patterned after the insights of Isaac Newton; to him God created a mechanical
universe that had order and design in it.

Secondly, this divine Creator was the artifactor of a Newtonian universe something like this: an orderly Creator created an orderly world deposited in man an orderly mind with the ability to discover and discern an orderly world. What I find in the Deists and the Unitarians is that they ultimately reject the necessity of divine revelation. They deposit in human capacity what Orthodox Christianity would deposit in revealed revelation. So first, concerning the existence of God, it’s terribly important to know that Jefferson believed in the existence of the great being.

Concerning religion, point two: Jefferson believed—as did all of the American founders of state—that religion was the basis of morality, that there’s such a thing as a corporate moral ethic; happiness, a societial order. Perhaps it’s expressed by Thomas Jefferson in a letter that he wrote later on the 19th of April, 1817. This is terrified important for those who would seek to argue that America had a secularist, humanist beginning, that it was not Christian. Now I would say it was not Christian if the letter C for Christian is a capital C, but it was Christian if you use a small c. He says this, “Without religion this world would be as something not fit to be mentioned in polite company; I mean hell.

So, far from believing in the total and universal depravity of human nature, I believe there is no individual totally depraved. The most abandoned scoundrel that ever existed never yet holy extinguished his conscience, and while conscience remains there, there is some religion.” And what I am arguing out of that quote is this: he simply believed that religion was a glue that all people shared together, and predicated upon that religious consciousness was the ground of civil society.

Third, let me say something about his notion of human nature. I think you could pick it up in a way in his quote that I have just given you. Jefferson believed that man, while degenerate, was innately virtuous, that he was educable. So Jefferson redemption is tied to religion and education, that all men are born with a moral sense—an instinctive moral sense of conscience—and that moral sense is the basis of corporate social relations and civil rights which you can see in the Declaration. The faculty of reason, or reasonable faculty, is to process the data of conscience and to act upon it.

Now to the Declaration of Independence itself. There are three references to God in the Declaration of Independence. If you look
at this document, there is a reference to Creator, to nature’s God, and at the end of the document is a reference Supreme Judge. I would hold that those references to God are elastic enough that a Unitarian certainly would embrace them, as well as a Deist and an Orthodox Christian. As I understand the framers of our nation, they did not perceive that a nation could be born and exist which was skeptical or atheistic. There are no atheists in the founding of our nation.

The most radical of this period was Thomas Paine, but if you read Thomas Paine, he was a Unitarian Christian who believed that the glue that would hold the culture together was religion. He was opposed to Orthodox Christianity, it seems, but it's amazing to me that he was not opposed to religion. Now, the ideology of the document first is that God is the foundation of political theory, that nature’s God, the Creator, the Supreme Judge, is the one who has laid the foundation of the civil body politic.

Another phrase that’s interesting is the phrase in this declaration that goes “All men are created equal.” I comment here to say that our founding fathers had an elitist, oligarchic idea of the nation. They believed in a natural, not fraternal, aristocracy and for Jefferson it would include white-landed farmers. It would exclude blacks, who in Jefferson’s mind were not only more thoroughly depraved than the white race, but whose existence in the nation because of their lower moral sense threatened the very life of the nation. It would include no women. It would include no Indians. So the founding fathers did not have a theory of universal suffrage. Theirs was an oligarchic, elitist dream tied to the land. At least some thought that.

Perhaps humorous, but insightful none the less, is a letter that Abigail Adams wrote to her husband, John Adams, when he was sitting in Philadelphia at the drafting of the Declaration of Independence. Abigail is writing her husband, this very prolific and skilled writer, to encourage the founding fathers to include a place for women in the new nation. She says this very prophetical statement;

I long to hear that you have declared an independency, and by the way, in the new code of laws which I suppose it will be necessary for you to make, I desire you would remember the ladies and be more generous and favorable to them than your ancestors. Do not put such unlimited power on into the hands of the husbands. Remember all men would be
tyrants if they could. If particular care and attention is not paid to the ladies, we are determined to foment a rebellion and will not hold ourselves bound by any laws in which we have no voice or representation. That’s the social contract theory that your sex are naturally tyrannical is a truth so thoroughly established as to admit of no dispute, but such of you as wish to be happy willingly give up the harsh title of master for the more tender and endearing title of friend. Why then not put it out of the power of the vicious and the lawless to use us with cruelty and indignity with impunity. Men of sense in all ages abhor those customs which treat us only has vassals of your sex. Regard us then as being placed by providence under your protection and an imitation of the Supreme Being make use of that power only for our happiness.

I would assume that the founders of our nation did not listen to the pleading case of Abigail Adams.

Now, religion and the Constitution of the United States—the second of our great documents. Predicated upon the victory at Yorktown over the last of British troops, the first form of government that our nation launched out upon was called the Articles of Confederation. Actually written in 1777 by John Dickinson, the Articles of Confederation laid out the early government of the thirteen colonies. In essence, the early government of the thirteen colonies was actually a league of thirteen independent nations in which the central government had ill-defined powers and prerogatives. Henry Morrison of Harvard has said this; “All modern history proves that it is easy enough for a determine minority to pull down a government, but exceedingly difficult to construct, to reestablish law and order, on new foundations.”

I’m arguing this: the textbooks indicate to us that the era under the Articles of Confederation from 1781 to 1787 was an era in which the nation did not prosper. There was little control; the individual states were supreme.

One writer has said this; “During the hard times of 1785-86, these golden dreams vanished”—that is, dreams of a prosperous nation. Instead of sharing as the people of an independent nation and trade and commerce of the world, American shippers found themselves no better off than they were as dependents of Great Britain. Everywhere people complained of hard times. Discouragement and ill humor displaced buoyant optimism with
which peace had been heralded.

“What is independence?” asked a writer in a short catechism. “Dependence on nothing” was the cynical answer. Financially, the Confederation was hopefully embarrassed, having some the wind by its bills of credit, it was now reaping the world wind.

In his book, John Miller frankly admits that the articles failed to meet the urgent financial needs of the nation, uphold national rights abroad, and counteract the strong centrifugal forces at work in the United States. In other words, the era of the Articles of Confederation was a failure. States independently went their way. To the credit of our founding fathers, I think the real wisdom of our founding fathers was that they recognized the deficiencies within a form of government that was actually a democracy.

So they met, as the story goes, in Philadelphia to rewrite our documents of state. If you read the Preamble of the American Constitution, it says this; “In order to form a more perfect union.” Those words are essential because it says to us that our founding fathers realized that our first government, the Articles of Confederation, was not a workable solution to the government of the emerging nation. They had to find a way toward a more perfect union, and they did. I think one of the great highlights of American history is the work of the Constitutional Convention.

It has been written up in a great variety of books, but I never cease to be amazed at the wisdom of the insight of our founding fathers. They scrapped an unworkable solution and erected a system of government with brilliant checks and balances between the executive branch, the legislative branch, and the judicial branch that would guide the nation. They recognized the evil of excessive independence and created a checks and balance system. I think fifty-six people signed the Declaration of Independence, thirty-eight the Constitution, and only a few that had served in the first convention were present in the second of our great documents—Roger Sherman, the evangelical Christian was, Ben Franklin was, of course, though he was by this time an older man and declining in years.

If you read the Constitution of the United States, you will find there no faith delineated, no national religion, no national creed. It is a secular document. As Edwin Gaustad said, “Four years after the Northwest Ordinance and the Philadelphia Convention, the first amendment, along with nine others, was added to the
newly ratified Constitution. Congress could not interfere with religion’s free enterprise, nor could it take any steps toward the establishment of religion. The modern world began; the secular state was on its way, profoundly affecting all of western civilization. The Enlightenment added its force in America to the realities of pluralism and the pleas of pietism. Revelation was dismissed, institutional religion was scorned, theological and metaphysical speculation were ridiculed; so began a radical experiment in separation.”

I think what Edwin Gaustad is saying is this; the birth of our nation represents a grand experiment in something unheard of before in the history of western nations, and that is the rise of pluralism. I would not use the word secular because in our day, secular is often a synonym for anti-religious or nonreligious, and I have tried to argue that all of the founders of our state were deeply religious men. They may not have all been evangelical Christian men, and that is certainly true, but all of them recognized that God existed, that He gave rights and privileges to men, that religion is the glue of society. I cannot believe that our founding fathers erected a nation with a view that it would become simply a secular state. It was a plural state.

Perhaps I can illustrate it this way. If you take a one dollar bill and you turn it over to its reverse side, opposite the great seal of the republic is a pyramid. It’s an unfinished pyramid. Over the unfinished pyramid is the eye of providence. Every one of them believed in the existence of a providential being. In fact, there could be no government without it. At the base of the pyramid in Latin numerals is the date 1776. Right under that pyramid is a Latin phrase which can be translated, “A new order of the ages.” And that’s what Gaustad is talking about: the beginning of a new order, the plural state in which there is no national religion, in which there is no national faith, in which everyone is now free of conscience to entitle their own substance of religion, but everyone must in their view.

Above that unfinished pyramid is another Latin phrase. It can be roughly translated, “He has smiled on our beginnings.” So I find our nation beginning as a deeply religious nation with a set of deep religious assumptions. Certainly not the secularly human estate that we are now experiencing, but a nation that recognized the existence of God. Yet I must say at the same time that it was not what I would consider to be evangelically Christian—Christian in the broadest sense only.
So what America was when it began was a secularized version of the dream of our Puritan forbearers in the New World. It was our city set upon the hill; it was our new national identity in purpose. Later in the nineteenth century, that same idea of destiny will be called Manifest Destiny, and people will speak of our sacred responsibilities of a way of justifying the extension of the American nation.

Now, what I want you to see in the Constitution is that the limited democracy was scrapped and replaced by a republican form of government based upon the great compromise—in which there will be two houses of legislator—one based upon population ratio, the Congress, the other based upon the states (the Senate) with two representatives per state. So our Constitution is not a democratic document; they rebelled against that, as the Puritans before them, and it is a republican document.

Now lastly, religion as a result of the American Revolution. Some positive things: one, the disestablishment of any national religion. As I read the first amendment to the Constitution—which clarifies the intent of the Constitution which some states having read the Constitution feared—the ten basic amendments were added right away. As I read the phrase in the first amendment that “There will be no established religion,” I think what that is saying is this: Americans would be free to choose religion, to choose a religion of their choice. So there is freedom of religion in America, but I can’t imagine our founding fathers believing that there would be freedom from religion in America.

Now things have obviously changed. The organization of denominations in the new republic looked like this: the Church of England in the birth of our nation acquired a national identity and became the Protestant Episcopal Church, the American wing of the Church of England. The Methodist Episcopal Church was founded in 1784 at the famous Christmas Conference in Baltimore, Maryland, where Thomas Coke ordained Francis Asbury, who would become, to the chagrin of Wesley, the bishop of the church in America. But Methodism begins and has a national identity.

The Roman Catholic Church recognized the new nation by recognizing John Carroll signed the Declaration. John Carroll became our first American Roman Catholic bishop and our first Roman Catholic Archbishop, so the Catholic Church in America takes on a national identity. The Presbyterian Church erected its Supreme Court which is called the General Assembly. Today
it’s changed, but it was then the highest court of their appeal. So these denominations take on a national orientation.

The establishment of state religion in New England is this; it’s readily apparent that the federal government could not favor one religion over another but was to favor them all equally. Religion was the glue of a virtuous society. The states had the freedom to maintain state religion, and state religion continued in Connecticut and in Massachusetts well into the nineteenth century.

The negative results of the American Revolution was the rise of individualism, the rise of the Enlightenment with its democratic religious themes, with its fairness doctrine, with right by entitlement not by oppression. So the monarchical theory of American Christianity is going to be refined in the early national period by the infusion of deep democratic themes that will change the very fabric of American religion, bringing even a deeper demise of Calvinistic ideas in the nation. We’ll talk about that much later.

Second is the rise of the secular state. I do not mean anti-religious state, but the pluralistic state. I frankly find today that forces on the far right and forces on the far left are trying to remove the pluralism and have one side or the other champion supreme. That is really not the American nation. The American nation is a function of brilliant compromises and toleration in symmetry which are the very virtues of the Enlightenment.

And lastly, the effect of both the American and French Revolutions, was the fear of anarchy. To understand the 1790s—to understand the federalist clergy’s fear of Thomas Jefferson—is to understand that our Revolution led (though at least there’s a direct linkage) to the French Revolution. The French Revolution led to the rise of the masses, the uproar of the masses, the fear of anarchy. One writer would say, “What is democracy really but anarchy.” And that insight will help us to understand the coming of the second Great Awakening and the hostility to Jefferson and to others.

Now this brings us to an end of our discussion of the colonial period. This brings us to your first examination in this course, so I would like to take the last minute that I have to explain the first of your examinations. There are three in this course: one coming after our discussion of the colonial period; one after our discussion of the national period (which is where we'll be moving in lesson nine); and one after the modern period. What I would
say is this: you should be reading your text carefully and using your text to fill in data that I have perhaps glossed over in my rapid and superficial survey.

So when you have read your text carefully, insert your material into your notes and study them and you’ll be ready to take your first exam. The exam will majoritively come out of the material that is in your outline notes that you have taken from the lectures. Now I am assuming that you will embellish them somewhat by reading the book, but that is your fundamental material.

The exam will consist basically of two things: one, some broad essays—three of them to be exact—that will test your ability to comprehend larger bulks of material and integrate them together. Secondly, it will include some identification. I will never ask you dates. I will ask you only important people, important events, things of that nature. When you answer an identification question, I want you to do this: identify that person without confusion with someone else, and then importantly tell me the significance of that event or person in colonial American history.