Meridian Reader Phil Clifford writes:

James R. Birrell’s article on relativism seems flawed in places. My reading of history leads me to conclude that several of the leading Founding Fathers of the U.S. were deists, not ‘Christian’ per se [once God whatever his/its character and purpose] created things, he pretty much leaves them to work out things on their own.…

Jim Birrell’s Response …

Deism and the Founders

In his first point, Mr. Clifford is arguing that many of the Founders were deists. In saying this, I think he may be refuting my argument that the Founders were, overall, absolutists in their thinking about the relationship between virtue and liberty, Christ and freedom. Relativist and revisionist historians today like to discredit the idea that the American Founding had any spiritual or Christian significance; this strengthens the claim of the church/state separatists, and further and intentionally erodes the Christian voice and values in America’s culture wars.

About Deism

Deism denies the direct intervention in the natural order by God. It posits, to borrow an old illustration, the idea that God is like a clockmaker. God winds up the clock of the earth and it proceeds on its own without any further involvement from Him. This idea, found as early as Nicolaus of Oresmes (d. 1382), rose to prominence in Europe in the late 1600’s and remained fairly popular into the 1800’s. The deist believes in the reality of God, but sees no need to pray. God is an absentee landlord. He doesn’t interfere in natural law or mans’ ways. Laws of nature will prevail and guide men and women accordingly. Neither does God provide miracles. Reason and intellect, mediated by experience, guide the deist. Whereas natural laws that govern the universe are fixed, deist understandings of God can be quite relative-evolutionary; and I suppose to them, even extraordinary.

This belief system never really caught on amongst the colonists- the majority of which were Christian of the Calvinist order. Many states at the time of the Constitutional Convention did not allow confessed deists to hold public office (Bowen, 1966), as deism was generally held in low esteem. That is because roughly two-thirds of the colonists held beliefs that aligned with Calvinist states at the time of the Constitutional Convention did not allow deists to hold public office (Bowen, 1966), as deism was generally held in low esteem. That is because roughly two-thirds of the colonists held beliefs that aligned with Calvinist understanding and freedom. Relativist and revisionist historians today like to discredit the idea that the American Founding had any spiritual or Christian significance; this strengthens the claim of the church/state separatists, and further and intentionally erodes the Christian voice and values in America’s culture wars.

References


