

**POLITICAL THEOLOGY  
IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE**

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## ABSTRACT

The Declaration of Independence is the most explicitly religious of the Organic Laws of the United States, of which it is the first. (Certainly it is more so than the "godless" Constitution, our fourth, and "supreme," Organic Law.) The Declaration contains no less than four references to the deity, and its political logic, especially the grounding of so-called "natural rights," arguably depends on the existence of a supreme being. Yet the precise nature of the Declaration's god-talk is less than explicit. One scholar has argued persuasively that the document contains an "equivocal religiosity." This paper explores one aspect of the equivocalness of the Declaration's religious phrasing, through an examination of the last two references to the divine. It suggests what was meant -- and more importantly, what was understood -- by "the Supreme Judge of the World" and "the Protection of divine Providence" in the final sentences of the Declaration. While prior scholarly attention has been paid almost exclusively to Jefferson's first two theistic references, to "nature's God" and "[all men's] Creator," this paper focuses attention on the last two references, which were inserted by the Second Continental Congress into Jefferson's draft. These the author sees as examples of "strategic piety" on the part of the Continental Congress: they were intentionally calibrated to the ears of American Calvinists, the largest religious constituency in the colonies, while the first two references were aimed at deistic (or Unitarian) readers. During the course of this argument a novel observation is made, namely that it was used by Jonathan Edwards in a sermon before it made its appearance in the Declaration of Independence.

## POLITICAL THEOLOGY IN THE DECLARATION OF INDEPENDENCE

Jeffrey H. Morrison<sup>1</sup>

*Freedom sees religion as the companion of its struggles and triumphs, the cradle of its infancy, and the divine source of its rights.*

–Tocqueville, Democracy in America

*God is the Supreme Judge of the world.*

–Jonathan Edwards, "The Final Judgment"

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In 1943 the poet Archibald MacLeish, at that time Librarian of Congress, suggested that the "actual meaning" of the words of the Declaration of Independence "had left them." They had gone, he wrote, "from hand to hand like coins whose inscriptions all men recognize and no men read or see. But now in these dangerous years, when every preconception, every easy understanding, has been questioned by brutality and violence, the words take shape again and, taking shape, take meaning."<sup>2</sup> Something very similar might be said today; and not merely because of the recent attack on Washington, D.C., home to Thomas Jefferson's Memorial. It seems that even the *theological* meaning of the Declaration's religious words has left them. Pauline Maier (one of the participants at this conference) has written of the "sacralization" of the Declaration,<sup>3</sup> and most certainly it has become a sacred text of the American civil religion; but there has also been a corresponding *secularization* of our American Scripture, at least by academicians. Things are only slightly better in this regard than they were in 1970, when Willmoore Kendall remarked that the "official [i.e. scholarly] literature . . . has never wasted much time or thought on the religious emphasis of the Declaration."<sup>4</sup> Even recent studies purporting to examine the theological sources of the Declaration ignore one-half of its

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<sup>2</sup> Archibald MacLeish, "Foreword," in Julian P. Boyd, The Declaration of Independence: The Evolution of the Text, rev. ed., ed. Gerard W. Gawalt (Washington: Library of Congress, 1999 [1943]), 14. Subsequent references to Boyd's The Declaration of Independence are to this revised edition.

<sup>3</sup> See Pauline Maier, American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), 197.

<sup>4</sup> Willmoore Kendall and George W. Carey, The Basic Symbols of the American Political Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 12.

religious language altogether.<sup>5</sup> I suspect that such imbalance in the literature results not so much from willful ignorance as from a kind of tone deafness to eighteenth-century theological language on the part of contemporary scholars, which in the case of the Declaration of Independence leads us astray from a fuller understanding of that important document.

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Rick Fairbanks, "The Laws of Nature and Nature's God: The Role of Theological Claims in the Argument of the Declaration of Independence," The Journal of Law and Religion, vol. 11, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 551-89; and Allen Jayne, Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy and Theology (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), both of which, although they discuss some of the "theology" of the Declaration, ignore the third and fourth references to God, and thus one-half of the Declaration's religious language. For example, at p. 559 Fairbanks claims that "we are justified in focusing almost exclusively on the intellectual influences on Jefferson." A happy, if sometimes overconfident and a-historical, exception to this secular trend is Gary T. Amos, Defending the Declaration: How the Bible and Christianity Influenced the Writing of the Declaration of Independence (Brentwood, Tenn.: Wolgemuth & Hyatt, 1989).

This despite the fact that the Declaration is the most explicitly religious of the Organic Laws of the United States, of which it is the first.<sup>6</sup> (Certainly it is more so than the "godless" Constitution, our fourth, and "supreme," Organic Law.) The final version of the Declaration refers explicitly four times to the deity: to "Nature's God" and all men's "Creator" in the first two sentences, respectively; to "the Supreme Judge of the World" and "the Protection of divine Providence" in the last two sentences.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, its political logic, especially the grounding of so-called "natural rights" (we might even call them "supernatural rights," since they are endowed by a supernatural agent) arguably depends on the existence of a supreme being. Yet the precise nature of the Declaration's god-talk is less than clear. Wilson Carey McWilliams (another participant in this conference), who has thought much and written insightfully about religion and American political thought, rightly notes that these references to God add up to an "equivocal religiosity" that was "designed to be acceptable to deists and orthodox believers alike." McWilliams also says that neither "Nature's God" nor the "Creator" is the "distinctly biblical God."<sup>8</sup> Perhaps not; but as I am going to suggest, the other names for God in the

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<sup>6</sup> The four "Organic Laws of the United States of America," as they appear in Volume I of the United States Code, are the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, the Northwest Ordinance, and the Constitution. See United States Code: Containing the General and Permanent Laws of the United States, in Force on January 4, 1994, 35 vols. (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1995), 1:xxxix-lxix; the Declaration runs from pages xli-xliii.

<sup>7</sup> "Document X. The First Printing of the Declaration of Independence Inserted in the Rough Journal of Congress," in Boyd, The Declaration of Independence, 98. Unless otherwise noted, subsequent quotations of the final text of the Declaration are from this version.

<sup>8</sup> See Wilson Carey McWilliams, "The Bible in the American Political Tradition," in Myron J. Aronoff, ed., Religion and Politics (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Books, 1984), 21.

Declaration, "divine Providence" and "the Supreme Judge of the World," would have been quite acceptable to Reformed (i.e. Calvinist) Americans in 1776, and conjured up images of the "distinctly biblical God" when they heard or read the Declaration. Thus my principal task is to suggest precisely how the Declaration was designed to appeal to the largest block of "orthodox believers," the Reformed churches. In other words, I will be focusing on one aspect of the "equivocal religiosity" of the Declaration, and, true to the origins of the word "equivocal" (it derives from the Latin *voce*, for voice), I will be amplifying a distinct religious voice of that day. I will also be suggesting that the Congress intentionally calibrated its phrasing to the ears of Reformed Americans, including Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Dutch and German Reformed, who collectively made up the largest religious constituency in the colonies in 1776, and a sizeable political constituency.<sup>9</sup> Thus the last references to God in the Declaration can best be seen as examples of what I call *strategic piety* on the part of the Continental Congress: careful modulation and arrangement of theological language to serve political, and even military, purposes, in addition to quite possibly being genuine expressions of their own piety.

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<sup>9</sup> By 1780, for instance, Presbyterians alone had roughly 500 congregations in America; they were the largest denomination among the Reformed churches, who collectively made up "the largest religious sector of the United States" at the time. See Fred J. Hood, Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837 (University, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 2.

I say "the Congress" -- and not "Jefferson" -- because Jefferson's initial draft contained only one explicit reference to the deity, to "nature's god." Two, and possibly three of the references were suggested by other members of the Second Continental Congress. (We do tend to think of the Declaration springing, like mythical Athena from the head of Zeus, fully formed out of Jefferson's head, though it did not happen quite that way.) The manuscript record shows that Jefferson's first draft (the "Original Draft"), which was copied out in its entirety by John Adams between June 11 and June 28 (probably before it was shown to Benjamin Franklin), contained only one explicit reference to the deity: to "nature's god."<sup>10</sup> True enough, in that first draft Jefferson had alluded to a creator, but only implicitly. His Original Draft read: "We hold these truths to be sacred and undeniable; that all men are created equal and independent; that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent and inalienable, among which are the preservation of life, & liberty, & the pursuit of happiness."<sup>11</sup> For some reason Jefferson thought

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<sup>10</sup> See Boyd, The Declaration of Independence, 59 (facsimile "Document IV. John Adams' copy of Jefferson's Original Draft, page one"), 67 (facsimile "Document V. Jefferson's Rough Draft, page one"). The Adams draft renders it "nature's God"; Jefferson, who habitually used lower-case letters, even to begin sentences, wrote "nature's god."

<sup>11</sup> See Boyd, The Declaration of Independence, 67 (facsimile "Document V. Jefferson's Rough Draft, page one"), 60 (facsimile "Document IV. John Adams' copy of Jefferson's Original Draft, page one"); and Carl L. Becker, The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 142 (transcription of "The Rough Draft[,]

better of the wording of that sentence, and -- whether prompted by his own muse or someone else's on the Drafting Committee, we do not know -- changed the implicit reference to "creation" to an explicit reference to all men's "creator," thereby doubling the number of outright references to the deity. But I wish to focus our attention on the third and fourth, non-Jeffersonian, references to the deity in the Declaration.

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as it probably read when Jefferson first submitted it to Franklin").

Now we have it on good authority -- namely John Adams, the "North Pole" of the independence movement<sup>12</sup> -- that "the Revolution was in the minds and hearts of the people; a change in their *religious* sentiments of their duties and obligations." "Who will believe," Adams wrote in 1815, "that the apprehension of Episcopacy contributed fifty years ago, as much as any other cause, to arouse the attention . . . of the common people, and urge them to close thinking on the constitutional authority of parliament over the colonies? This, nevertheless, was a fact as certain as any in the history of North America."<sup>13</sup> A 1768 political cartoon, "An Attempt to Land a Bishop in America" from the Political Register, underscores Adams's point. The cartoon shows New England dissenters driving an Anglican bishop from American shores brandishing books titled "Locke" and "Sydney on Government," and pelting him with "Calvin's Works," while they shout that they will have "no lords spiritual or temporal."<sup>14</sup> (Jefferson himself, in a well-known letter, enumerated "Locke, [and] Sidney" -- though not Calvin -- among the "elementary books of public right" that expressed the "harmonizing sentiments of the day" grounding the Declaration's authority.)<sup>15</sup> Modern historians, too, have seen the link between

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Rush called Adams and Jefferson the "North and South Poles of the American Revolution." See Rush to John Adams, February 17, 1812, in Letters of Benjamin Rush, ed. L. H. Butterfield, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1951), 2:1127.

<sup>13</sup> John Adams to Dr. J. Morse, December 2, 1815, in The Works of John Adams, ed. Charles Francis Adams, 10 vols. (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1850-56), 10:185.

<sup>14</sup> In Michael Wynn Jones, The Cartoon History of the American Revolution (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1975), 38-39.

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in Thomas Jefferson: Writings, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: Library of America, 1984), 1501. Of Calvin, Jefferson wrote: "The blasphemy and absurdity of the five points of Calvin, and the impossibility of defending them, render their advocates impatient of reasoning, irritable, and prone to denunciation." See Jefferson to Dr. Thomas Cooper, November 2, 1822, in *ibid.*, 1464.

communities of faith and Revolutionary fervor. Perry Miller, dean of historians of New England Puritanism, wrote in 1967 that "we still do not realize how effective were generations of Protestant preaching in evoking patriotic enthusiasm";<sup>16</sup> in 1973 William McLoughlin asserted that "the Great Awakening . . . was really the beginning of America's identity as a nation -- the starting point of the Revolution."<sup>17</sup> More recently, the "harmonies," to take a cue from Jefferson's language, between religion and American patriotism during the colonial period have also been noted, particularly by political theorists.<sup>18</sup> So I take it for granted that such harmonies were present, and were acknowledged by revolutionary-era Americans. What needs explaining is precisely how the Continental Congress, through the Declaration, played their own variant on that religious theme. What did the Declaration's authors intend to say, and (perhaps more important) what did a "candid world" -- including religious Americans -- likely understand the Declaration to be saying about God and government? As a matter of political hermeneutics, how Americans of that day (Adams's "common people") interpreted the Declaration seems far more

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<sup>16</sup> Perry Miller, Nature's Nation (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1967), 97.

<sup>17</sup> William G. McLoughlin, "The Role of Religion in the Revolution: Liberty of Conscience and Cultural Cohesion in the New Nation," in Stephen G. Kurtz and James H. Hutson, eds., Essays on the American Revolution (Williamsburg: Institute of Early American History and Culture, 1973), 198.

<sup>18</sup> For a representative sampling of this literature, see Ellis Sandoz, A Government of Laws: Political Theory, Religion, and the American Founding (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1990); Barry Alan Shain, The Myth of American Individualism: The Protestant Origins of American Political Thought (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994); John G. West, Jr., The Politics of Revelation and Reason: Religion and Civic Life in the New Nation (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1996); and Michael Novak, On Two Wings: Humble Faith and Common Sense at the American Founding (San Francisco: Encounter Books, 2002).

interesting than speculations about what the phrase "nature's god," for example, may have meant in Jefferson's mind when he penned it. For the Declaration was, at the very least (although certainly it was a great deal more), a political document, one designed to solicit support for the American cause from potential allies foreign and domestic, and -- we must never forget this -- it was also a group production. It may not have been written primarily to attract French support, as Russell Kirk (and John Adams, too) argued,<sup>19</sup> but it was surely written with at least one eye on fence-sitting Americans. Adams used to say that in 1776 at most only one third of Americans were for independence,<sup>20</sup> and the mother tongue of those Americans was the language of

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<sup>19</sup> "The Declaration of Independence, calculated to please Paris and Versailles, had broken with the constitutional argument of the Americans that had been advanced ever since the passage of the Stamp Act. Until 1776, protesting Americans had pleaded that they were entitled to the rights of Englishmen, as expressed in the British constitution, and particularly in the Bill of Rights of 1689. But Jefferson's Declaration of Independence had abandoned this tack -- what did Frenchmen care for the real or pretended rights of Englishmen? -- and had carried the American cause into the misty debatable land of an abstract liberty, equality, fraternity." Russell Kirk, "Edmund Burke and the Constitution," Intercollegiate Review, vol. 21, no. 2 (Winter 1985-86): 6.

An old John Adams took a similar position in his letters to Jefferson about the meaning and role of the Declaration in the Revolution. "In the Adams version of the true story, however, the culminating moment was not July 4, 1776, and the decisive document was not the Declaration of Independence. The war itself was already raging by that time. Most of the delegates to the Continental Congress regarded the Declaration as a ceremonial confirmation of what had already occurred; its chief practical value, apart from publicizing a foregone conclusion in lyrical terms, was to enhance the prospects of a wartime alliance with France, and all the revolutionary leaders understood the French alliance to be the urgent issue at the time." Joseph J. Ellis, American Sphinx: The Character of Thomas Jefferson (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 245.

<sup>20</sup> "At the moment when independence was declared you know there were full one third of the people who detested it in their hearts, though they dared not confess it. In Pennsylvania and New York I have always thought there was at least one half." John Adams to Benjamin Rush, July 31, 1811, in John A. Schutz and Douglass Adair, eds., The Spur of Fame: Dialogues of John Adams and Benjamin Rush, 1805-1813 (San Marino, Calif: Huntington Library, 1966), 184. See also Rush's reply to Adams: "Your account of the state of the parties in new York and Pennsylvania at that memorable period I believe is chiefly just." Benjamin Rush to John Adams,

religion; to most of them, it was the language of Reformed Protestantism.<sup>21</sup>

When the Congress appealed in the penultimate sentence of the Declaration to "the Supreme Judge of the World" for the rectitude of their intentions, and when they relied on "the Protection of divine Providence" in its final sentence, they were not playing to the deists in the American crowd; Jefferson had already done that with his earlier references to "nature's God" and the "Creator." Besides, deists (or, more properly, Unitarians) of Jefferson's stripe were a small minority among the population at large. Instead, Congress was intentionally sounding notes that would resonate with the many Reformed Protestants, and, they hoped, stir them to action.

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August 6, 1811, *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> By 1780, for instance, Presbyterians alone had roughly 500 congregations in America; they were the largest denomination among the Reformed churches which included Dutch and German Reformed, and Congregationalists, and collectively made up "the largest religious sector of the United States" at the time. See Fred J. Hood, Reformed America: The Middle and Southern States, 1783-1837 (University, Ala: University of Alabama Press, 1980), 2.

Appeals to a supreme judge of the world would indeed have pricked up the ears of revolutionary-era American Calvinists, for they had heard that very phrase, and paraphrases, too, from pulpits and catechisms their whole lives. True, some of them might have recalled John Locke's allusion to God as that "Supream Judge of all Men" in his Second Treatise of Government,<sup>22</sup> but then Locke himself was an "heir" of Reformation political thought.<sup>23</sup> More likely, the phrase called to their minds stern Puritan tracts and sermons like Jonathan Edwards's "The Final Judgment." In fact it was Edwards (1703-1758), and not Locke, who had used the precise phrase "the Supreme Judge of the World" before its appearance in the Declaration of Independence. In that sermon, only slightly less terrifying than "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God," Edwards promised to show: "That God is the Supreme Judge of the world. That there is a time coming, when God will, in the most public and solemn manner, judge the whole world. That the person by whom he will judge it is Jesus Christ. That the transactions of that day will be greatly interesting and truly awful. That all shall be done in righteousness." The subtitle of the first section of Edwards's treatise reads, "SECT. I. *God is the supreme judge of the*

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<sup>22</sup> "That Question then cannot mean, who shall judge? whether another hath put himself in a State of War with me, and whether I may as *Jephtha* [sic] did, appeal to Heaven in it? Of that I my self can only be Judge in my own Conscience, as I will answer it at the great Day, to the Supream Judge of all Men." John Locke, Second Treatise of Government, Sec. 21, in Two Treatises of Government: A Critical Edition, ed. Peter Laslett, rev. ed. (New York: Mentor Books, 1965), 323.

<sup>23</sup> See Winthrop S. Hudson, "John Locke: Heir of Puritan Political Theorists," in George L. Hunt and John T. McNeill, eds., Calvinism and the Political Order (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1965), 108-29; and Herbert D. Foster, "International Calvinism through Locke and the Revolution of 1688," American Historical Review 32 (April 1927): 475-99. Laslett, op. cit., also suggests that Locke was indebted to "the Calvinist position" on the role of the Hebrew Judges in political history when he calls God the "Supream Judge."

*world.*"<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Jonathan Edwards, "The Final Judgment: or, The World Judged Righteously by Jesus Christ," in The Works of Jonathan Edwards, ed. Edward Hickman, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1834; repr. 1974), 2:191 [emphasis in original].

Edwards himself was drawing on earlier Reformed language, especially that of the Westminster Confession of Faith of 1647 (printed when Locke was a boy of fifteen), which contains, as he and all American Calvinists well knew, the following line: "The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies . . . and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture."<sup>25</sup> (Eighteenth-century American Calvinists were steeped in the language of the Westminster divines; they knew the language of the Confession itself, and generations of Calvinist children were taught to memorize the Shorter Catechism, and adults the Larger Catechism, with their language of divine judgment and providence.) Thus, to Edwards and the Reformed Americans he represented, the "Supreme Judge of the world" stood for precisely the "biblical God," as Professor McWilliams put it: God is a judge in the Old Testament ("the LORD . . . shall judge the world in righteousness," Psalm 9:7-8), and, according to Edwards, God is a judge in the person of "Jesus Christ" in the New Testament.

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<sup>25</sup> See Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), Chap. I, Art. X, in Philip Schaff, ed., The Creeds of Christendom, 6th ed., 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990 [1931]), 3:605-06.

But Jonathan Edwards was merely the most famous Reformed clergyman to use language prefiguring that of the Declaration; there were many dimmer Calvinist lights who used similar language, and these preachers, although not so well known to posterity as Edwards, carried weight with their politically astute parishioners in the revolutionary era. Moreover, Edwards was an a-political clergyman who died eighteen years before the Declaration was written, though of course his writings found their way into the libraries of many a Reformed pastor, including John Witherspoon of the Continental Congress -- about whom more will be said shortly. During the run-up to the Revolution, large numbers of Reformed pastors delivered election-day and fast-day sermons to attentive audiences (in person and in print), and these sermons illustrate just how evocative the phrases "Supreme Judge of the World" and "divine Providence" were of Calvinist sermonic literature and discourse. Sermons by New Englanders like Eliphalet Wright were stocked with the names for God that Congress used in the Declaration. In December 1776 Rev. Wright preached on "A People Ripe for an Harvest," and warned: "An increase of sin, under special favours or frowns of divine providence, ripen people for an harvest. This Moses sheweth in his prophetic song, when he tells Israel of the distinguishing favours that God had shewed unto them; but they had waxed fat and wicked." Americans, he said, were fat and wicked too: "with respect to the kind favours that God hath shewed us . . . alas! how ill have we requited God! How sin has abounded in the midst of us!"<sup>26</sup> This, of course, is standard fare for American Jeremiad sermons, as is Wright's conclusion that the people of "English America" are themselves over-ripe for a harvest. But no hearer of his sermon would have mistaken Wright for a deist, or

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<sup>26</sup> Rev. Eliphalet Wright, "A People Ripe for an Harvest," December 5, 1776 (Norwich, Conn.: J. Trumbull, 1776), 7.

seen his reference to "divine providence" pointing to anything but a biblical, perhaps even Calvinistic, god.

The Rev. Oliver Noble provides another example of Reformed political pulpitering. To commemorate the fifth anniversary of the Boston Massacre, Noble gave a sermon in March 1775 at Newbury-Port on the "Sacred Story Recorded in the Book of Esther, Shewing the Power and Oppression of STATE MINISTERS tending to the Ruin and Destruction of GOD's People: -- And the remarkable Interpositions of Divine Providence in Favour of the Oppressed."<sup>27</sup> This last phrase, about "the interpositions of divine providence," is, to mix biblical metaphors, positively legion in Calvinist religious literature from the revolutionary era. For example, in 1780 during the worst of the War, the Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church at New Platz, New York reminded Governor Clinton and his legislature that "the beneficent Ruler of the Universe has, at divers times and occasions, given the most indubitable proofs of his Divine and benevolent interposition for the good of these United States, and this State in particular."<sup>28</sup> Such examples were multiplied many times over. But three pre-Declaration political sermons (all printed) stand out as especially noteworthy examples of the kind of Calvinist political theology and discourse that found their way into the final sentences of the Declaration of Independence, and were immediately recognizable to American Reformed Protestants: Rev. Samuel Langdon's 1775 Massachusetts election-day sermon; Rev. John Witherspoon's congressional fast-day sermon of

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<sup>27</sup> Rev. Oliver Noble, "Some Strictures Upon the Sacred Story Recorded in the Book of Esther," March 8, 1775 (Newbury-Port: E. Lunt and H. W. Tinges, 1775), 1 [emphasis in original].

<sup>28</sup> Synod of the Dutch Reformed Church at New Platz, New York, October 1780, in Edward Frank Humphrey, Nationalism and Religion in America, 1774-1789 (New York: Russell & Russell, 1965 [1929]), 108.

May 1776, and Rev. Samuel West's election sermon, also of May 1776, which in one respect is the most rhetorically interesting of the lot.

In May 1775, thirteen months before independence was declared, the Rev. Dr. Samuel Langdon (1722-1797), president of Harvard College, delivered an election-day sermon at Watertown, choosing for his biblical text a line from the Proverbs: "As a roaring Lion and a ranging Bear, so is a wicked Ruler over the poor People" (Prov. 28.15). The Congregationalist Langdon implored his hearers to keep their "eyes fixed on the supreme government of the Eternal King, as directing all events, setting up or pulling down the kings of the earth at his pleasure . . . and granting the favorable interpositions of his providence. . . . Let us consider . . . that *Divine Providence* will interpose to fill every department with wise and good men."<sup>29</sup> The discourse is then laced with more acknowledgments of the "gracious interpositions of his [God's] providence," and with pleas for repentance that will perhaps "obtain the gracious interpositions of Providence for our deliverance."<sup>30</sup> The protection of divine Providence for Americans was much on the mind of the Harvard president, and, one can reasonably infer, on the minds of his Congregationalist readers. The following day, Langdon, who later served in the New Hampshire convention that ratified the federal Constitution, signed a letter on behalf of his fellow ministers to the Massachusetts congress, which said, "We, the pastors of the Congregational churches of

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<sup>29</sup> Rev. Samuel Langdon, D.D., "Government Corrupted by Vice, and Recovered by Righteousness: A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Congress of the Colony of the [sic] Massachusetts-Bay . . ." [Election Sermon], May 31, 1775, in John Wingate Thornton, ed., The Pulpit of the American Revolution (Boston: Gould and Lincoln, 1860; repr. New York: Da Capo Press, 1970), 238-39 [emphasis added].

<sup>30</sup> Langdon, Election Sermon (1775), in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 242, 249.

the Colony of the [sic] Massachusetts Bay, in our present annual convention gratefully beg leave to express the sense we have of the regard shown by the Honorable Provincial Congress to us . . . now met under the smiles of Divine Providence . . . We devoutly commend the Congress, and our brethren in arms, to the guidance and *protection of that Providence* which, from the first settlement of this country, has so remarkably appeared for the preservation of its civil and religious rights."<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Annual Convention of Congregational Ministers of Massachusetts Bay to Massachusetts Provincial Congress, June 1, 1775, in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 231-32 [emphasis added].

Langdon also warns against invoking "divine" protection for George III: "let them who cry up the divine right of kings consider that the only form of government which had a proper claim to a divine establishment was so far from including the idea of a king, that it was a high crime for Israel to ask to be in this respect like other nations." Moreover, there are allusions to the supreme judge of the world in Langdon's election-day sermon, which come in the typically Calvinistic form of ominous warnings to Americans to stop sinning, lest they incur "a righteous judgment of Heaven." After all, "God, in righteous judgment, left them [the Jews] to run into all this excess of vice, to their own destruction." In addition to being judge and protector, Langdon's god is the endower of rights. "Thanks be to God that he has given us, as men, natural rights, independent on all human laws whatever, and . . . [b]y the law of nature, any body of people, destitute of order and government, may form themselves into a civil society." Langdon ended his sermon with this prayer: "May the Lord hear us in this day of trouble, and the name of the God of Jacob defend us."<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Langdon, Election Sermon (1775), in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 239-41, 250, 258.

A year later, on May 17, 1776 (and six weeks before he himself joined the Continental Congress), the Rev. Dr. John Witherspoon (1723-1794) preached a fast-day sermon at Princeton, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men," whose very title should tip us off to the consonance between the Declaration's "divine Providence" and Reformed religious phrasing. Witherspoon was an unbending Calvinist, the leading figure in American Presbyterianism and a former champion of the theologically conservative Popular party in the Scottish kirk. (He was also President of the College of New Jersey at Princeton, where he was a mentor to James Madison, and the sole clergyman to sign the Declaration.) The second paragraph of his printed discourse, one of "the most significant statements of support for the Revolution to be delivered from an American pulpit,"<sup>33</sup> notes that "[t]he doctrine of *divine providence* is very full and complete in the sacred oracles. It extends not only to things which we may think of great moment . . . but to things the most indifferent and inconsiderable: *Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing, says our Lord, and one of them falleth not on the ground without your heavenly Father; nay, the very hairs of your head are all numbered.*"<sup>34</sup> This reference to "divine providence" can only be seen, and could only have been seen at the time, as a sample of the orthodox, even Reformed, understanding of God's workings in human affairs. Witherspoon, after defining the "doctrine" of divine providence ("Providence" was considered a distinct branch

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<sup>33</sup> Thomas P. Miller, ed., "Introduction," in The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1990), 3.

<sup>34</sup> John Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men," May 17, 1776 (Philadelphia: R. Aitken, 1776), 2 [first emphasis added]. See also Ellis Sandoz, ed., Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805 (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1991), 529-58; and Miller, ed., The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon, 126-47.

of Doctrinal Theology in the eighteenth century),<sup>35</sup> immediately quotes not only the Bible, but "our Lord," Christ himself, as proof of the extent of divine providence. Witherspoon uses the phrase "divine providence" four times more in the course of a sermon that speaks of the "mercy of divine providence," the "triumph of divine providence," "the power of divine providence" over weather, and claims that "[t]here is no part of divine providence in which a greater beauty and majesty appears than when the Almighty Ruler turns the counsels of wicked men into confusion and makes them militate against themselves."<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Charles Evans, American Bibliography: A Chronological Dictionary of All Books, Pamphlets and Periodical Publications Printed . . . in 1639 Down to and Including the Year 1820, 14 vols. (New York: P. Smith, 1941-59), 5:448.

<sup>36</sup> Witherspoon, "The Dominion of Providence Over the Passions of Men" (1776), in Miller, ed., The Selected Writings of John Witherspoon, 128, 134, 135, 133.

"Divine Providence" was Witherspoon's favorite formulation for the deity, and not only in public contexts such as the fast-day sermon just quoted. Even his "Lectures on Divinity" to Presbyterian divinity students at Princeton contain the phrase. "A great part of the inspired writings," he said in the fourth Divinity lecture, "is history: the Old Testament is founded upon the fall of man, and is filled up with the history of Providence, or God's conduct to his chosen people; and the New Testament contains the birth, life, and death, the resurrection and ascension of Christ."<sup>37</sup> To Witherspoon, "divine Providence" meant what it did to Calvin, who wrote: "providence means not that . . . God idly observes from heaven what takes place on earth, but that . . . he governs all events."<sup>38</sup> (In fact most eighteenth-century Americans, even heterodox ones like Benjamin Franklin, distinguished between God's general providence for creation, and his special providence or care for certain peoples.)<sup>39</sup> The presence of the phrase "with a firm reliance on the Protection of Divine Providence" in the Declaration doubtless struck Witherspoon, a signer, as a biblical and indeed even Calvinistic way of referring to God's active

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<sup>37</sup> John Witherspoon, "Lectures on Divinity IV," in The Works of John Witherspoon, D.D., 9 vols. (Edinburgh: Ogle & Aikman et al., 1805), 8:40.

<sup>38</sup> John Calvin, Institutes of the Christian Religion, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, ed. John T. McNeill, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), Bk. I, Chap. 16, Sec. 1, 1:202. Calvin's position was later codified in Question 18 of the (Westminster) Larger Catechism: "Q. 18. What are God's works of providence?/ A. God's works of providence are his most holy, wise, and powerful preserving and governing all his creatures; ordering them, and all their actions, to his own glory."

<sup>39</sup> See Benjamin Franklin to [Thomas Paine?], undated [1786?], in The Works of Benjamin Franklin, Federal Edition, ed. John Bigelow, 12 vols. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1904), 11:296-97: "By the argument it [The Age of Reason?] contains against a particular Providence, though you allow a general Providence, you strike at the foundations of all religion. For, without the belief of a Providence that takes cognizance of, guards, and guides, and may favor particular persons, there is no motive to worship a Deity, to fear his displeasure, or to pray for his protection."

care for his "chosen people" -- in this case, the American people. There is even an oral tradition that it was Witherspoon himself who urged adoption of the phrase regarding divine Providence in Congress, and that tradition has insinuated itself into the musical 1776 and polemical books like Christianity and the Constitution.<sup>40</sup> Like most oral traditions, this one can neither be proved nor disproved; the important point is that the Declaration's phrase mirrors perfectly Witherspoon's own usage in addresses to both political and religious audiences. In Witherspoon, who was as staunch a Calvinist as Jonathan Edwards, and the leading Presbyterian in the colonies (he helped write the constitution of the new Presbyterian Church in America and was elected its first moderator), we have a clear example of a famous Calvinist using "divine providence" to refer to the biblical god.

On May 29, 1776, a month before Jefferson and the Drafting Committee began preparing their declaration, the Rev. Samuel West (1730-1807) preached a sermon that anticipated not only the language about a supreme judge and divine providence, but every theistic phrase in the Declaration. Rev. West was, like Langdon and Witherspoon, a political preacher who moved in high Calvinist circles. Graduated from Harvard in 1754, West was "distinguished in metaphysical speculations with the [Jonathan] Edwardses, father and son," and went on to be a political pamphleteer, member of the Massachusetts constitutional convention and the Massachusetts ratifying convention.<sup>41</sup> Also like Revs. Langdon and Witherspoon, West did not

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<sup>40</sup> "Some believe the phrase 'with a firm Reliance on the protection of Divine Providence' in the final sentence [of the Declaration] was his [Witherspoon's] contribution." John Eidsmoe, Christianity and the Constitution: The Faith of Our Founding Fathers (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Book House, 1987), 86.

<sup>41</sup> See "Editor's Prefatory Note," in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 265.

preach like a theological liberal or closet Unitarian: his 1776 election sermon pays homage to "the sacred Scriptures" and "our blessed Saviour."<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Samuel West, "A Sermon Preached Before the Honorable Council, and the Honorable House of Representatives of the Colony of Massachusetts-Bay . . . May 29, 1776" [Election Sermon], in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 285, 269.

Once again, in that election sermon, which was printed at Boston in 1776, we see the grateful acknowledgment of "the interpositions of Divine Providence" and "the dispensations of Providence towards this land." West marvels at "how wonderfully Providence has smiled upon" the colonies and caused them to unite against "the tyranny of Great Britain." And since "Divine Providence has placed us at so great a distance from Great Britain that we neither are nor can be properly represented in the British Parliament, it is a plain proof that the Deity designed that we should have the powers of legislation and taxation among ourselves." Turning to the New Testament for examples of due submission to what he calls "good government," West finds "our blessed Saviour directing the Jews to render to Caesar the things that were Caesar's . . . and the apostles . . . strongly enjoin[ing] upon Christians the duty of submission to that government under which Providence had placed them."<sup>43</sup> Elsewhere in West's sermon, the "Saviour" and "Providence" appear in the same sentence, which should once and for all disabuse us of the notion that "Providence" must be read as Enlightenment code for a less-than-biblical god. In fact it was common practice for "Awakened" pastors to use what would today be considered deistic language to refer to God. For example, Joseph Bellamy, a Connecticut New Light revivalist and associate of Jonathan Edwards frequently used phrases such as "the great Governor of the world," and "the supreme Governor of the world" in discourses like "True Religion Delineated"

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<sup>43</sup> Samuel West, Election Sermon (1776), in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 311, 310, 303, 305, 269 [emphasis added].

(1750).<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Joseph Bellamy, "True Religion Delineated" (1750), in Richard L. Bushman, ed., The Great Awakening: Documents on the Revival of Religion, 1740-1745 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1969), 148.

Besides "Divine Providence," God appears in Rev. West's sermon in the robes (more or less) of a supreme judge of the world. He is "our supreme magistrate, who . . . will reward or punish [i.e. judge] us according as we obey or disobey," and "the Supreme Magistrate of the universe" under whom all earthly magistrates act. Coming closer still to the language of the Declaration, God is "the great Judge of quick and dead," and the good people of Massachusetts, having "made our appeal to Heaven . . . cannot doubt but that the Judge of all the earth will do right."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, Samuel West's god is the "Creator," the endower of rights, and author of the laws of nature, in addition to being "Divine Providence" and "the [Great] Judge of all the earth." In fact, the first four sentences of his election sermon refer to the following concepts: a Creator who endows mankind with certain affections; all men's happiness; self-evident truths; laws of nature; and a supreme magistrate who will judge the world. Here is the beginning of West's sermon, with the corresponding phrases from the Declaration bracketed into the text:

The great Creator ["their Creator"], having designed the human race for society, has made us dependent on one another for happiness ["the pursuit of Happiness"]. He has so constituted us that it becomes both our duty and interest to seek the public good; and that we may be the more firmly engaged to promote each other's welfare, the Deity has endowed us ["endowed by their Creator"] with tender and social affections . . . . The Deity has also invested us with moral powers and faculties, by which we are enabled to discern the difference between right and wrong, truth ["self-evident" truths] and falsehood, good and evil . . . . This proves that, in what is commonly called a state of nature, we are the subjects of the divine law ["Laws of Nature and of Nature's God"] and government; that the Deity is our supreme magistrate, who has written his law in our hearts [again, "self-evident" truths], and will reward or punish us according as we obey or

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<sup>45</sup> Samuel West, Election Sermon (1776), in Thornton, Pulpit of the American Revolution, 267, 275, 292, 305.

disobey his commands ["the Supreme Judge of the World"].<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 267.

Samuel West's election sermon of May 1776, perhaps more than any single religio-political artifact of the revolutionary era, reveals the deep harmonies between the language of Reformed colonial Protestants and the theistic language employed in the Declaration. These harmonies are so striking (if we have ears to hear), that one is led to believe that those later references to the deity were inserted into the final draft to resonate with a large and peculiarly pious Calvinist audience. Indeed, as all of the preceding sermons and discourses suggest, the appeals to "the Supreme Judge of the World" and "the protection of divine Providence" in the last sentences of the Declaration would have struck Reformed Americans as simply good Calvinist faith in practice, and rallied their support for the cause of independence; which, in the event, they gave.<sup>47</sup> It was in this way that the Second Continental Congress made strategic (though not necessarily impious) use of what can be called political theology in its Declaration of Independence.

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<sup>47</sup> Among the Reformed denominations, Presbyterians were at the van of patriotic service; in fact what we now call the Revolutionary War was known by many in Europe and England -- even by George III himself -- as the "Presbyterian Rebellion." See Paul Johnson, A History of the American People (New York: Harper Collins, 1997), 173: "George III was not far wrong either when he called the Revolution 'a Presbyterian Rebellion.'" One of the King George's Hessian mercenaries wrote from America, "[c]all this war, dearest friend, by whatever name you may, only call it not an American Rebellion. It is nothing more nor less than an Irish-Scotch Presbyterian rebellion." In James H. Smylie, "Introduction," Journal of Presbyterian History, vol. 52, no. 4 (1974): 303. And the *de facto* Presbyterian College of New Jersey under President Witherspoon supplied the Continental army with "eleven captains, six majors, four colonels, and ten lieutenant-colonels . . . [and] eleven army chaplains." In Varnum Lansing Collins, President Witherspoon: A Biography, 2 vols. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1925; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1969), 2:229.