

A revolution with revolutionary religion



Highland Views
Chris Highland
Guest columnist

In his book, "Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic," Matthew Stewart presents a powerful historical balance to the mythology espoused by Christian Nationalists. While many claim the founders were conservative Christians who set out to establish a "Christian Nation," it seems abundantly clear from the Preamble to the Constitution and throughout our

founding documents, they intended no such thing. "We the People" in no way implies "We the Christians."

"Nature's God" introduces us to Ethan Allen's "Oracles of Reason," his acerbic attack on the power of the clergy. The leader of Vermont's Green Mountain Boys, he was not only a hero but a heretic, a deist, an infidel. Then we hear of Dr. Thomas Young, who, because of his unorthodox beliefs, was considered a rebel against two Sovereigns: the King and God. Then of course we meet up with the two Toms — Jefferson and Paine, both expressing their dislike for those who use religious faith to enact "tyranny over the mind of man" (see Jefferson's letter to Benjamin Rush, Sep-

tember 1800). The other Tom was a major pain in the backside of many orthodox believers, challenging "human inventions and priesthood" while calling for two revolutions: first in government, then in religion.

Who or what is "Nature's God"? Stewart refers to the pre-revolutionary view that there is a "Religion of Nature's God" and this could, in some minds, suggest a pantheistic worldview. "Pantheism is better understood as the idea that God and nature are two ways of talking about the same thing, and in this sense it is the core religious sensibility of the Enlightenment ..." John Locke, Baruch Spinoza, Ben Franklin, Ethan Allen and other rationalists seemed to

agree with the Apostle Paul when he spoke to philosophers in Athens, describing God as one "in whom we live, move, and have our being" (Acts 17:28). If we are a part of nature we can never be separate. If the divine is intimately intermingled with the natural cosmos, we cannot disconnect from either. This is not the traditional Christian viewpoint, yet seems to be integrated in the mindset of the revolutionary heretics who ignited the vision of the new nation.

It's true that some founders were preparing the way for religion, but what form of religion? Stewart argues: Amer-

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ica's founders did wish to promote religion — but not any and every kind of it that might be drawn [from the history of religion]." Secular citizens, and many believers, might be surprised, even a bit uncomfortable, with the notion that the founders sought a "reformation and containment of popular religion." They weren't about to carry forward the old religions of the Old World. They were interested in a new experiment. What if a practice of faith was more about "doing good rather than believing rightly," something that "builds the bonds of community," giving room for a wide di-

versity of beliefs? "In short, they wanted to bestow upon America the blessings of popular deism, or that variety of religion that translates into [a freethinking philosophy] on which the modern liberal state rests."

The Preamble itself asserts "the blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our posterity." Not the blessings of faith, theology, scriptures or church membership, but liberty. They were ordaining and establishing an open path to freedom of conscience and corporate responsibility. A state constructed on a foundation of freedom, guided by "Nature's God" — natural creative forces active in human society — is indeed quite radical and revolutionary. Though not Christian, it makes room for Christian beliefs. Though not establishing any

single sectarian faith, it opens the way for all faiths to flourish freely alongside other Americans who choose not to believe.

If there is anything like an American religion, Stewart suggests it is most likely "popular deism" — one religion "under nature." Not beholden to any one sect, it outlines the contours of the national religious landscape. The common expression of religion as personal "spirituality" leaves any distinct definition of the divine up to each individual. The church doesn't hold the power and authority any longer to direct the lives of citizens in a pluralistic secular culture. As it stands, the kind of secular map laid out by the founders of the republic may be the most effective guidance for healthy, sustainable religion — faith

with a future.

Stewart lays out the positive characteristics, the ethical principles, of our modern "secular religion": "It shows us how to find meaning and purpose in our short lives, it teaches us the importance of doing right by our fellow human beings, and it relieves us of all those false religions through which the mind enslaves itself." Freedom of thought leads to a free society.

Revolutionary religion is as experimental as the republic itself.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on "Friendly Freethinker" (www.chighland.com).