H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Allen Jayne. *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy, and Theology.* Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. xiii + 245 pp. $39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8131-2017-1.

Reviewed by Robert M. S. McDonald (United States Military Academy)
Published on H-USA (March, 1999)

God and Man at Philadelphia

Ever since the Declaration of Independence gained status as a national icon, individuals have sought to uncover and amplify the subtleties of its meaning. Americans of Jefferson's era focused on its emphatic assertion of the right of revolution. Abraham Lincoln, however, emphasized its equalitarianism. Decades later, Franklin Roosevelt enshrined it as a charter of democracy.

Now Allen Jayne adds his voice to the chorus. The Declaration of Independence revealed not only a philosophy but also a theology, he writes, for it "attacked two claims of absolute authority–that of any government over its subjects and that of any religion over the minds of men as respects religious and moral truth–by putting the authority of both government and religion in the hands of individual human beings that make up the populace" (p. 174). The Declaration, in other words, stands not only as a totem of liberal politics, but also as a seminal text in America's religious freedom movement.

This is a brave claim. Although few people doubt Jefferson's sincere attachment to the separation of church and state, never before has anyone endeavored to establish a direct link between his most famous statement on politics and his tolerance of divergent faiths.

According to Jayne, Lord Viscount Bolingbroke "gave Jefferson his heterodox views on religion, which emphasized a deistic, universal, impartial God of natural religion whom Jefferson referred to in the Declaration of Independence as 'Nature's God."' John Locke, meanwhile, "contributed the political theory of the Declaration and added the egalitarian element to the God of that document, a God who created all men equal." In addition, the writings of Lord Henry Home Kames allowed Jefferson to believe that man "could independently and easily find the moral laws of nature by using his moral sense and a minimal amount of reason" (p. 168). Together, these thinkers helped Jefferson to envision a people worthy of independence and fit for self-government. The "moral men of Jefferson's and the Declaration's theology," Jayne writes, "would be able to earn their salvation by their own moral actions and govern themselves in a Lockean democracy to which they supplied moral direction, independent of scripture, church, and clergy" (p. 171).

Jayne's attempt to pinpoint the origins of the Declaration's ideas supplements the findings of a long list of scholars. Most prominent among them is Carl Becker, whose classic 1922 study, *The Declaration of Independence*, focused on the influence of Locke's theory of individual rights. Garry Wills's *Inventing America* (1978), however, argued that the more communitarian "common-sense" philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment–men such as Kames, Francis Hutcheson, Thomas Reid, and Dugald Stewart–made the greatest contributions to Jefferson's thought. Most recently, Pauline Maier's *American Scripture* (1997) noted that the Declaration's words and sentiments echoed those of many Americans, including the draftsmen of numerous local statements on independence.

These differing views may well result from the fact that, prior to the drafting of the Declaration, Jefferson read the works of many political philosophers. Does Jayne do a better job than his predecessors in determining the ones who influenced Jefferson most? We may never know for sure. Even Jayne admits that gaps in the evidence force some speculation. He contends, for example, that William Small, Jefferson's instructor at William and Mary, "no doubt" shared with his pupil knowledge of the Scottish Enlightenment (p. 19). Jefferson's affinity for the English common law tradition, moreover, "could well have been due" to the theory that it was not rooted in the Bible (p. 29). And even though Jefferson "did not extract any of Bolingbroke's anticlerical statements in his commonplace book," Jayne contends that "there is little doubt that his reading of Bolingbroke was a major source of his anticlericalism" in the 1770s because Jefferson, in 1818 and 1822, used a Latin phrase that had also been used by Bolingbroke: *genus irratabile vatum* (pp. 63, 194-

95n4). Given the relative paucity of surviving Jefferson writings from before 1776, we can sympathize with Jayne as he engages in guesswork and chronological stretches. But we cannot countenance his construction of the evidence as definitive.

Nor can we uncritically embrace the historiographical genre into which Jayne's book fits. The practice of quoting passages from the Declaration (or Jefferson's other writings) and matching them with passages from earlier tracts to somehow prove that Jefferson agreed with their authors has been tried before. But results have varied considerably. Comparison, after all, cannot justify assertions of causation. Even Becker, whose influential book helped to define the debate over Jefferson's sources, wisely cautioned that "men are influenced by books which clarify their own thought, which express their own notions well, or which suggest to them ideas which their minds are already predisposed to accept."[1] The corollary, of course, is that individuals might disregard–in whole or *in part*–works containing ideas that contradict their beliefs. Jefferson's apparent concurrence with a specific theorist on one point does not prove his agreement with that theorist on all (or even related) points.

This need not diminish the important achievement of Jayne's subtle and learned book. He does more than any other scholar to demonstrate that, for Jefferson, the writings of Locke, Kames, and Bolingbroke confirmed and, perhaps, refined his views on the proper relationship between church and state. This is no small accomplishment. The topic is nearly as broad as Jefferson's mind.

Determining the philosophical antecedents of Jefferson's Declaration of Independence, however, is a more focused enterprise. The levels of specificity and exactitude required for "proof" increase. At the same time, the amount of available and compelling evidence diminishes. As a result, Jayne's account fails to fully satisfy.

In the conclusion of his book, for example, Jayne quotes Jefferson's last letter. Written only a few days before his death, Jefferson's 1826 message to Washington Mayor Roger Weightman held that the Declaration would serve as "the signal of arousing men to burst the chains under which monkish ignorance and superstition had persuaded them to bind themselves." Mankind, he said, "has not been born with saddles on their backs, nor a favored few booted and spurred, ready to ride them legitimately, by the grace of God."[2] Jayne reads this statement as an indictment of "orthodox Christian authorities" and a repudiation of "'the grace of God' as an offense." He asserts that, ever since Jefferson extracted some of Bolingbroke's writings into his literary commonplace book (but not Bolingbroke's "anticlerical statements," as he writes on page 63), "Judeo-Christian 'grace' to Jefferson meant privilege or partiality extended by God to some men over others. Grace was thus alien to the impartial, universal, and egalitarian 'Nature's God' of Bolingbroke, Locke, and the Declaration" (p. 172). This may all be true. But it may not be what Jefferson had in mind when he penned his message to Weightman. Nearly fifty years ago, Douglass Adair pointed out striking word-for-word similarities between Jefferson's last letter and the famous final statement of British Col. Richard Rumbold, who in 1685 was executed for treason against the Stuart monarchy. Rumbold also said that no man "comes into the World with a Saddle on his Back, neither any Booted and Spurr'd to Ride him." Not even Rumbold may have been the originator of these words, however, for Adair notes that they may well allude to an even earlier statement by Venetian statesmen Paolo Sarpi.[3] The point is that the multi-layered rhetoric of freedom filled the air during the Enlightenment. The words of Jefferson reflected the general spirit of the time as much as the specific beliefs of particular predecessors.

Jayne, apparently, completed his book prior to the publication of Maier's *American Scripture*. He makes no mention of the work in his text, notes, and bibliography. But his study anticipates her line of argument, which he criticizes. Both Maier and Jayne point out that in 1825 Jefferson informed Henry Lee that, more than anything else, the Declaration aimed to express "the American mind."[4] Maier makes much of this in her attempt to demonstrate that Jefferson's text lacked the originality for which many modern-day Americans credit it. But Jayne contends that "the 'American mind' expressed in the Declaration … was clearly Jefferson's." After all, he writes, "there were few if any members of the [Continental] Congress, other than Benjamin Franklin, who shared the deist religious views Jefferson expressed in that document, even though most agreed with its political ideas" (p. 56). In other words, Jefferson's views on religion were uncommon, even if his political beliefs were not. This itself is a controversial position. Scholars seem confident, for example, that both George Washington and John Adams harbored deistic views. Nonetheless, Jayne rests his case on Jefferson, an individual who "did more than any other Founding Father to shape and articulate the ideas and ideals upon which American civilization is based" (p. xii).

Maybe. But Jayne's appeal to the authority of Jefferson belies his conflation of Jefferson's Declaration with the Declaration as edited and revised by the Continental

Congress. Most of these changes, as Jefferson said, were "merely verbal."[5] Jayne does not dispute Jefferson's statement, but he refers repeatedly to the first printed copy of the Declaration rather than Jefferson's original rough draft. He compares the wording of "the first printing of the Declaration as approved by the Continental Congress" with Locke's *Second Treatise* (1689), for example (p. 44), and despite the fact that his book's title is *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence*, its appendix includes only Congress's Declaration. To bolster his thesis, Jayne seems to desire not only the moral sanction of Jefferson but also the official blessing of the Continental Congress.

Jayne's confusion may have more to do with the politics of the 1990s than that of the 1770s. In fact, he begins his book by confessing its relevance to contemporary concerns. "There are many in the United States who fervently believe we should use governmental power in support of religious values, and many who just as fervently believe we should not." Were he with us today, according to Jayne, "Jefferson would support the latter group" (p. xi). Probably so. Jefferson, after all, wrote Virginia's statute for religious freedom; throughout his life, he maintained that both churches and governments would be better off if they abstained from interfering with each other's business. Based on the evidence that Jayne has marshaled, however, the contention that Jefferson had religious freedom on his mind when he wrote the Declaration seems tenuous.

Notes:

[1]. Carl Becker, *The Declaration of Independence: A Study in the History of Political Ideas* (New York, 1922), 28.

[2]. Jefferson to Roger C. Weightman, 24 June 1826, in Merrill D. Peterson, ed., *Thomas Jefferson: Writings* (New York, 1984), 1517.

[3]. Douglass Adair, "Rumbold's Dying Speech, 1685, and Jefferson's Last Words on Democracy, 1826," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d Ser., IX (1952), 521-31.

[4]. Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, 8 May 1825, in Paul Leicester Ford, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, 10 vols. (New York, 1892-99), X, 343.

[5]. Jefferson to James Madison, 30 August 1823, in James Morton Smith, ed., *The Republic of Letters: The Correspondence Between Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, 1776-1826*, 3 vols. (New York, 1995), III, 1875.

Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Robert M. S. McDonald. Review of Jayne, Allen, *Jefferson's Declaration of Independence: Origins, Philosophy, and Theology*. H-USA, H-Net Reviews. March, 1999.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2893

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.