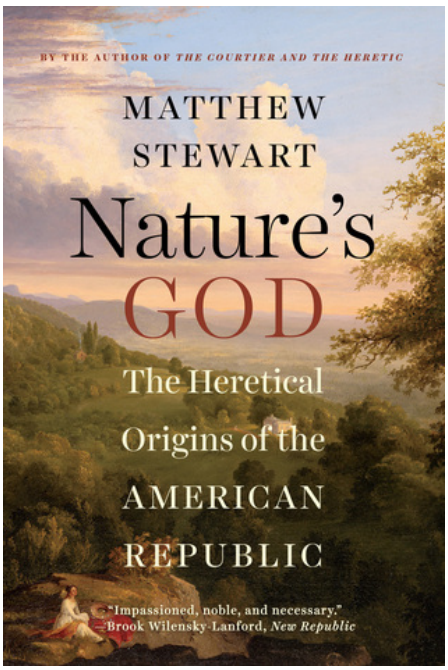

Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic

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America's founders intended to liberate us not just from one king but from the ghostly tyranny of supernatural religion. Drawing deeply on the study of European philosophy, Matthew Stewart brilliantly tracks the ancient, pagan, and continental ideas from which America's revolutionaries drew their inspiration. In the writings of Spinoza, Lucretius, and other great philosophers, Stewart recovers the true meanings of "Nature's God," "the pursuit of happiness," and the radical political theory with which the American experiment in self-government began.

Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic Details

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From Reader Review Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic for online ebook

David Melbie says

This is a superb account of what was really going down in the eighteenth century (and prior) with respect to how our founders were motived by some of the great thinkers and philosophers of the ancient and modern ages. In essence, the American Revolution is, according to Stewart (and I wholeheartedly agree), an ongoing affair. As long as all of our freedoms are intact we should be able to keep this ship afloat.

Bob says

Summary: An argument that the key ideas at the foundations of our country were not Christian but rather traceable back to Lucretius and to European thinkers, the foremost of whom was Spinoza, whose ideas were shaped by Enlightenment reason resulting more in a materialist atheism or nature pantheism/deism.

There is an ongoing argument surrounding American beginnings as to whether these were Christian or more attributable to a kind of vague deism. While I as a Christian would love to believe it was the former, when I read the writings of Adams, Jefferson, Franklin and other founders, I find that while they recognize the place and importance of Christian churches, they are not Christian in any orthodox sense in the personal beliefs that shaped the thinking behind our Declaration of Independence and our Constitution (which omits even the mention of "God").

Matthew Stewart explores the intellectual genealogy of the founders, but does so in an unusual fashion. He starts out with a book, The Oracles of Reason, written by Ethan Allen, of Green Mountain Boys and Fort Ticonderoga fame. This inelegantly written book conveys Allen's repugnance of the idea of the Christian deity, argues for a god of nature, the place of reason ("self evident truths") and a state free of control by the church. Where did Allen get these ideas, as an uneducated man? From Dr. Thomas Young, who exists around the edges of the more famous founders. Stewart will weave these two characters throughout the narrative.

What I think Stewart is trying to demonstrate is how widely held these ideas, often classed under deism, but in fact were closer to pantheism ("all is god") or even outright atheism. He then follows back the lineage of these ideas to Lucretius, and Epicurean philosophy, which rather than being hedonistic, actually talked about the idea of living well, or moderately. Stewart follows these ideas into Europe to Benedict de Spinoza, Hobbes, and John Locke, who may clothe them at times in Christian language, but actually lays the groundwork for a view of reality that is sees God and Nature as synonymous (hence making this either pantheism, or outright atheism if nature is viewed simply as matter). Truth is "self-evident" in that what we think has an existence of its own that precedes all else. As with Lucretius, the pursuit of happiness is not wild pleasure-seeking but virtuous living. This leads to an "empire of reason," a rational rule of law that recognizes the equality of all, unalienable rights, government by the consent of the governed, the right to abolish governments that do not serve these ends and to institute new ones.

The concluding chapter is titled "The Religion of Freedom". It explores the fact that the founders, while protecting the free exercise of religious faith, believing that popular religion served a certain good in inculcating morals necessary for a good society, ultimately envisioned a government free of religion's

control, where the individual could believe what he or she wants without constraint. Stewart argues that many of the founders were free-thinkers who might be classified as atheists today. And while religion went through a resurgence, and continues to play an important role, by and large it conforms to liberal ideals and only causes problems when it is not content to exist in a very privatized form.

One gets the sense in reading Stewart that he thinks that this is not only the truest account of the genealogy of ideas that formed our beginnings as a nation, but that this is as it ought to be, and that the continued existence of religion is an annoying hindrance. He writes,

"The main thing we learn now from the persistence in modern America of supernatural religion and the reactionary nationalism with which it is so regularly accompanied is that there is still work to be done. For too long we have relied on silence to speak a certain truth. The noise tells us the time has come for some candor. It points to a piece of unfinished business of the American Revolution" (p. 431).

What bothers me in Stewart's work is not the accuracy of the case he makes for the ideas that undergird our republic, but rather the selective treatment of Christian faith that presents a caricature featuring its most invidious expressions. Little attention, for example, is given to the educational enterprise, an extension of the churches, that brought together such a learned generation. No attention is given to another founder, Reverend John Witherspoon, President of the College of New Jersey (later Princeton), who thoughtfully sought to integrate Christian ethics and enlightenment thought, serving in the Continental Congress from 1776 to 1782. It seems to me that Stewart's intent is to marshal his evidence, as have some of our popular militant atheists, to make us want to eradicate "supernatural religion" (and one wonders if this also includes those who embrace it).

Likewise, for all it vaunting of reason and virtue, the tacit admission of the power of religious faith to foster morals, and public order suggests a certain weakness in this "empire of reason." Might a more constructive course be one that admits both the distinctive contribution of founders who articulated a vision of a public square not dominated by a single faith, but open to all, and the vibrant, but messy competing ideologies that seek to shape the minds, hearts, and moral life of our people that allows a thing rare in the annals of human history--freedom of conscience?

Caroline says

Prepare for a challenge when you pick this up, but it’s well worth the effort.

Matthew Stewart is, like many of us, confounded by the claim that the founding fathers intended the United States to be a Christian nation. The difference is, he has the tools to mount a meticulous argument to the contrary. Stewart starts with two of the more extreme agitators—Ethan Allen (Fort Ticonderoga) and Thomas Young (Boston tea party instigator)—and traces the roots of their thinking to radical enlightenment roots. That means Epicurus to Lucretius, through Bruno to Hobbes, Descartes, Spinoza, Locke and Hume.

Stewart then explains essential aspects of enlightenment thought, including its definitions of natural law, metaphysics, epistemology, theology, government, and much more, and shows direct linkages from the European philosophes to not only Young but to the men who wrote the revolution: Franklin, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, etc. He argues that while the majority of the 1770s populace may have still attended churches that preached revealed religion, the men who wrote the declaration, the constitution, and the bill of

rights only got to those ideas from a radical enlightenment position that denied revealed religion.

By quoting from their journals and letters, their deistic-to-atheistic views are made clear, even if they had to wrap the public versions of their ideas in a bit of religious prose to win wide backing. However, it’s important to note that the book covers the full range of the natural, political, and moral philosophy that influenced them, not just what pertains to whether God exists and if so what that means.

I listened to this, so I can’t offer any quotes, but I recommend it very, very highly. The ideas come thick and fast, but Stewart writes clearly and the logic is always clear. He does have a strong point of view, and stretches a point here and there to hammer it home, but even without those conclusions the argument is clean and incontrovertible. I am going to listen again, because there is far too much here to fully understand in a first pass.

Colin says

An astonishingly good summary of the role of religion - or lack thereof, to be more precise - in the creation of the American Republic, with special attention given to the issue of Epicurean philosophy, Deism, and Jefferson's conviction that not a living man existed in America who would not die a Unitarian, so great was his belief in the power of reason and that liberal religion compatible with reason would triumph . . .

Ron says

For those who persist in the delusion that our country was founded as a "Christian" nation, I recommend an honest reading of this scholarly book. Several chapters of the philosophical concepts are heavy going but well worth plowing through. From Amazon: Longlisted for the National Book Award. Where did the ideas come from that became the cornerstone of American democracy?
Not only the erudite Thomas Jefferson, the wily and elusive Ben Franklin, and the underappreciated Thomas Paine, but also Ethan Allen, the hero of the Green Mountain Boys, and Thomas Young, the forgotten Founder who kicked off the Boston Tea Party—these radicals who founded America set their sights on a revolution of the mind. Derided as “infidels” and “atheists” in their own time, they wanted to liberate us not just from one king but from the tyranny of supernatural religion.
The ideas that inspired them were neither British nor Christian but largely ancient, pagan, and continental: the fecund universe of the Roman poet and philosopher Lucretius, the potent (but nontranscendent) natural divinity of the Dutch heretic Benedict de Spinoza. Drawing deeply on the study of European philosophy, Matthew Stewart pursues a genealogy of the philosophical ideas from which America’s revolutionaries drew their inspiration, all scrupulously researched and documented and enlivened with storytelling of the highest order. Along the way, he uncovers the true meanings of “Nature’s God,” “self-evident,” and many other phrases crucial to our understanding of the American experiment but now widely misunderstood.

Stewart’s lucid and passionate investigation surprises, challenges, enlightens, and entertains at every turn, as it spins a true tale and a persuasive, exhilarating argument about the founding principles of American government and the sources of our success in science, medicine, and the arts.

Peter Mcloughlin says

The founders have been invoked by the religious right as creators of a Christian republic. This book explodes this idea and shows them for the radical secularists that they were. The term deism is sometimes thrown about when talking about the founders but before Darwin this was a popular enlightenment opinion. God was a god of nature not a divine agent found in holy books. The position of a large number of founders was as close as one can come to atheism without completely discarding the idea of god. The tributaries that flowed into the founders thought were Spinoza, Locke, Hobbes, Voltaire, Diderot, Lucretius and other heretics to the Christian faith. Not only were Paine, Franklin, Jefferson, Madison infidels but so were more vocal lesser known founders like Ethan Allen and Thomas Young. In fact much of our idea of the role of religion in the state and modernity in general flow from the American Revolution as much as the French. Not only were the founders the founders of America but one could say they are major figures in the growth of modernity. People like Thomas Paine look much like Secular social democrats of the modern era and would be reviled as "socialists" in many quarters of modern America. While the sins of the founders are well to be remembered (the slavery and racism) it is well to keep in mind how radical they were in regards to religion and the state. Progressives and secularists should reclaim the founding tradition as there own.

Pablo says

I only made it about 250 pages in. While it's fascinating stuff, and well written for the most part (that is generally accessible to relative novices in American history and philosophy) it was a little esoteric and rambling at times. I think it's an important book, if not a little speculative.

Linda says

Sometimes this book was a joy. Sometimes I felt like a slogged through it. When the author, Matthew Stewart, wrote about the founding fathers, especially when he wrote about Ethan Allen, the book was lots of fun. When he wrote about philosophers, I felt like it was way over my head. I could read several pages about the philosophers and feel like I didn't understand what I just read. It could just be me, but I'm not a stupid person and I wanted to know about the philosophers--it was too much schooling.
But when he wrote about the founding fathers, people like Jefferson and Washington and Franklin, and Thomas Young who isn't remembered but should be, that's when the book felt exciting and flowed along. When he wrote about the men who brought about the American Revolution, it didn't feel as ponderous as the sections on philosophy. Sometimes they were even funny. Stewart had some good lines. I like this line about Newton's view of God. "Newton's vision has always had appeal among those who like their deity to win awards for scientific achievement but also want him to have a day job."
I'd like to share this interesting part of Colonial American history. Ethan Allen and Thomas Young were friends. Young was a doctor and also a major player in the Boston Tea Party. In the colonies it was illegal to be vaccinated against disease because people thought disease was a punishment from God and to vaccinate was taking God's right to punish away from Him. So Ethan Allen decided he would very publically get vaccinated in the town's square in front of everybody. He had Thomas Young vaccinate him against small pox. Young vaccinated him and immediately skipped town. Ethan Allen stayed in town and was arrested for blasphemy. Isn't it amazing how times change? Now we frown upon people who don't get their children

vaccinated. Two hundred and fifty years ago, we'd arrest people for getting vaccinated.

Jennifer says

Matthew Stewart's book is not a comfortable read, but I think he does have some valuable things to say about the philosophical ideas in which several important members of the Founding Fathers were grounded. (I will note here that Stewart clearly has an agenda, and tends to view Thomas Jefferson, Ethan Allen, et. al. as closet atheists. My opinion is that it's more complicated than that, though it's certainly clear that they had an understanding of the problems inherent in all sorts of organized religion. Anyway, since many historians have made facile religious connections for various of the Founding Fathers, seeing the situation through a different lens is valuable.) Certainly those who set out on the path of revolution were indeed heretics and radicals, whose ideas about freedom, government, and the nature of the world would change everything for future generations.

Robin says

A very interesting book that probably has the right-wing, tea party fools frothing at the mouth. Mr. Stewart presents the truth about the individual philosophies of the "Founding Fathers". America's revolutionaries were a group consisting of men educated in the Enlightenment and who followed radical ideas, many of which originated in the classical pagan past. This is a well-researched, well-thought out book that is also surprisingly easy to read. I highly recommend it.

Bill Thompson says

Meticulously annotated, informed by imposing erudition, Matthew Stewart's book is a lively chronicle of the years leading up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence, especially noteworthy for detailing the unsung contributions (in word and deed) of such revolutionary figures as Ethan Allen and Thomas Young. It is also an admirably lucid survey of radical philosophical thought on the nature of man and the cosmos,

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Bob Schnell says

Advance Reading Copy review Publication date July 1, 2014

While I enjoyed this book more than 3 stars may indicate, sections of the book were just too dense and repetitive to really recommend it higher.

The premise is basically that America was never a Christian nation as many of the Founding Fathers were deists who believed in private, independent spirituality. Thomas Jefferson, for example, would be surprised that we haven't all become Unitarians by now. The book centers on Ethan Allen's auto-biography which bears a striking similarity to the writings of Thomas Young (one of the Boston Tea Party perpetrators). Young's writings, in turn, are based largely on the works of Spinoza and Locke who can trace their philosophies back to Lucretius and Epicurus. This is where the reader's eyes are likely to start glazing over.

The best parts are the when the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are interpreted to prove the founders' underlying deism. The chapter on the pursuit of happiness alone was worth the time and effort leading up to it. Unless you are a hardcore student of philosophy, best to skim over the deep end and head straight to the shallower, more enjoyable parts.

Ted Morgan says

Vital.

Robin Friedman says

How The United States Became An "Empire Of Reason"

Matthew Stewart's new book, "Nature's God: the Heretical Origins of the American Republic" (2014) offers a wide-ranging history of the importance of philosophical ideas to the American Revolution and to American democracy. Stewart has written widely about philosophy, including his book "The Courtier and the Heretic: Leibniz, Spinoza and the Fate of God in the Modern World." It will come as no surprise to readers of that book, that Spinoza emerges as one of the heroes of this new study. In his Preface, Stewart quotes the American Revolutionary figure Joel Barlow: "The present is an age of philosophy, and America the 'empire of reason'".

Stewart tries to explain the way in which America is an "empire of reason" and to show that Barlow was correct in his assessment.

"Nature's God" is a lengthy, difficult and multi-faceted book that demands a great deal of perseverance and attention to read. The distinction between "popular" and "academic" writing frequently becomes blurred, no more so than it is in this book. The book examines historical events, such as the Boston Tea Party, the Second Continental Congress, the Battle of Ticonderoga, together with a large scope of philosophical and literary books. The love of learning and the erudition are inspiring. Yet, for all its length, it may move too fast in places over the complex intellectual arguments it conveys. The book frequently is an uneasy mix between disparate components of history, both well-known and obscure, and philosophy.

Stewart's book has a passionate, teaching tone about the message it wishes to convey which I find admirable and with which I largely agree. The converse side is a tendency to polemic and perhaps to underestimate one's philosophical opponents. Sections of this long book are muddled and repetitive but the heart of Stewart's position is clearly stated. Stewart writes about Enlightenment thought and its influence on the American Revolution. He takes Enlightenment well beyond 17th and 18th century Europe to begin with the ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus and the Roman poet, Lucretius in "The Nature of Things". Stewart argues that nature and ethics lack a supernatural base but instead rest upon reason, understanding, investigation, and what Stewart terms immanentism. He wants to reject Abrahamic theism and Christianity in favor of immanentism and understanding and he pursues and expands upon his path throughout the book.

When it comes to the Enlightenment, Stewart distinguishes between its "moderate" and "radical" as discussed in a series of important, controversial books by the scholar Jonathan Israel, e.g.Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750. Moderate Enlightenment for Israel

reached an uneasy compromise with theism and is personified by John Locke among others. Radical Enlightenment carried the project of reason further and its key figure was Spinoza. Having made Israel's distinction, Stewart tries to collapse it. He tries to show that Locke was, in fact, a Spinozist and hid his commitment to Spinoza's philosophical programme behind the waffling, equivocal, contradictory language of his books that will be familiar to those who have struggled with Locke. Stewart doesn't look as closely as he might at Spinoza's metaphysics and its difficulties and at Spinoza's own use of language. In any event the heretical Spinoza, as captured for Stewart in the equivocations of Locke, becomes the founder of the ideas of the American Revolution. A difficulty with this argument is that there is little or no evidence that the American Founders knew of or had read Spinoza. It thus becomes critical for Stewart to transmit Spinoza to the Founders through the works of Locke. The Founders did know their Locke.

The book makes a great deal out of two early Americans whose achievements many will find unfamiliar. First, Ethan Allen, the hero of Ticonderoga, wrote, or at least claimed to write, and obscure philosophical book, "The Oracles of Reason" which expressed non-theistic, immanentist thinking. Allen's friend, Thomas Young, was self-taught and a physician and a hero of the Boston Tea Party. Young gets attention in another new book of more historical than philosophical scope by Nick Bunker, An Empire on the Edge: How Britain Came to Fight America. Stewart explores the parallel lives of Allen and Young in part to question the claim made by some scholars that Young wrote Allen's book. Some of this material on Allen and Young is fascinating. On the whole it is overdone and distracts from the flow and force of Stewart's presentation.

The book finds the glory and lasting significance of America and its Revolution not in the overthrow of a king but in its efforts to take a transcendental deity and claimed Revelation out of public life. The book is sharp, pointed and eloquent in this aim. Stewart draws another distinction, this time between the "radical" thought of the Enlightenment and the "common" thought of unschooled common sense. He tries to find the source of theism in "common" thought, so defined. The leaders of the Revolution, to a greater or lesser degree were committed to the "radical" project under the term of deism. The tension between "radical" and "common" thought was palpable in the Revolutionary Era and remains so in the United States today. Stewart attributes the American Revolution and the values that make the United States important to "radicalism" -- in freedom, intellectual curiosity, openness, economic opportunity, individual growth, and arts and culture. For the most part, Stewart stays relatively clear of current topical political issues which one cast one position as unequivocally right and the other position is unequivocally wrong.

The book brought to mind many discussions I have had with people about issues addressed in this book -- particularly a concern about the return of faith-based religions whether of a "conservative" or a "liberal" cast to American public life. For all their importance and complexity, the religious arguments in this book are done in places in an overly free-wheeling style. I have a great deal of sympathy with the approach and the argument and with Spinoza -- but that may be perceived by some as preaching to the choir.

Stewart has written a wonderfully challenging and provocative book for readers willing to make the effort. Not the least of it is his positive portrayal of America, its origins, and its promise, in face of an age of skepticism. Another large value of the book is its commitment to reason and understanding. Stewart rejects postmodernism, the "narrative" theory of understanding and history, and other forms of relativism which sometimes get used to provide an excuse for continued religious thinking. A commitment to reason and the pursuit of truth is refreshing. The book stresses the importance of learning, study, and the life of the mind. It is inspiring to see their importance and their pursuit in this book tied in so well with a discussion of the intellectual foundations of American life.

Robin Friedman

Otto Lehto says

An exceptionally great book about the history of ideas. Very scholarly and erudite, so some lay readers may find it dry, but is is written with such passion, eloquence and wit that a lover of truth will feel positively overpowered - and in a good way. For a philosopher, it melts on the tongue like a delicious frothy mouthful of whipped cream.

The Epicurean, Spinozist legacy of modernity deserves to be revived - and what better way to do it than by a necromancer of such caliber. The author is a wizard.

All hail the Radical Enlightenment! All hail the Empire of Reason! All hail Nature's God!
