

# Origins of Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence

1776

by Catherine Millard, D.Min.

When in the course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which *the laws of nature and of nature's God* entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed...

That these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States; that they are absolved from allegiance to the British Crown, and that all political connection between them and the State of Great Britain, is and ought to be totally dissolved; ... And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.

(signed)  
July 4, 1776.

Virginia's **Richard Henry Lee**, delegate to the Continental Congress, penned and submitted, on June 7, 1776, his famous resolution asserting "that these United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States". **John Adams** praised the resolution as follows:

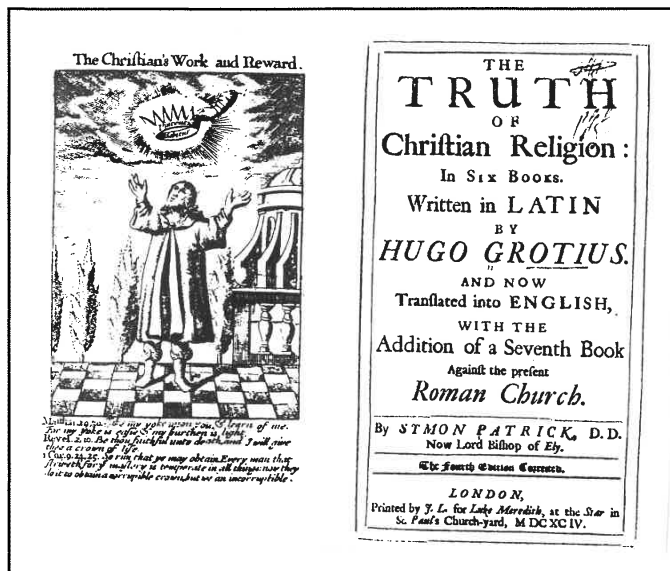
Yesterday the greatest question was decided which ever was debated in America; and a greater perhaps never was, nor will be, decided among men. A resolution was passed without one dissenting colony, that those United Colonies are, and of right ought to be, free and independent States.

- John Adams

## Taxation without Representation

British Parliament had passed prohibitive tax laws between 1764 and 1773: The Sugar Act (1764); the Stamp Act (1765)-which required tax stamps on newspapers, magazines and other printed matter - and the famed Tea Act (1773), resulting in the "Boston Tea Party." Being vigorously resisted by the American Colonists, the Stamp Act was eventually repealed.

Taxation without representation, together with the Crown of England's denunciation of the Colonists as "rebels," and Thomas Paine's "Common Sense," brought about patriotic fervor. This spread throughout the 13 States with "Organizer of the American Revolution," Samuel Adams' circular letters, and groups such as the Sons of Liberty.



Title Page of Thomas Jefferson's personal, initialed copy of *The Truth of the Christian Religion* by Hugo Grotius, father of International Law. From: *The Rewriting of America's History*. © 1991 by Catherine Millard.

## Jefferson pens his Declaration

Shortly after Lee's Resolution for Independence, in June, 1776, **Thomas Jefferson** penned his immortal document in Philadelphia. Only a few minor changes were made by Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, members of the Committee appointed by Congress to evaluate it. Fifty-six delegates to the Continental Congress from the 13 original Colonies, including John Hancock, its President, signed the document. The Preamble of Jefferson's Declaration - foundation stone for the U.S. Constitution, is great for two reasons: 1) The boldness of its principles, and 2) It was the first time in world history that these principles were enacted, establishing a new form of government and a new nation.

On July 4, 1776 these 56 signers changed the course of history forever, by dealing a fatal blow to despotic power and the rule of tyrants, as boldly proclaimed in the new nation's - and Virginia's - first mottoes. They are, respectively: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God," and "Ever thus to Tyrants."

## "The Truth of the Christian Religion" by Hugo Grotius

In his **Preamble**, Jefferson asserts that the new nation now "assumes among the powers of the earth the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them." From whence does this underlying principle originate? There are 190 entries under the title "Religion" in Thomas Jefferson's Library, now part of the Library of Congress, Rare Book Collection. It reflects a well-equipped and balanced library of Bibles and Christian works of the highest caliber, showing forth Jefferson's extensive personal collection of Old and New Testaments, intact. Included therein is *The Truth of the Christian Religion* by Hugo Grotius, 1694. Not only is the title page initialed by Jefferson, but he has marked many sections of Grotius' writings.

## Hugo Grotius, father of International Law

Grotius (1583-1645) was a Dutch Jurist, famous as the father of International Law. Intellectually one of the greatest men of his age, Grotius was no less outstanding in the statesmen-like nobility of his mind and spirit. As a brilliant classical scholar, he tried to devise a basis for the unification of the warring Christian nations. His *Truth of the Christian Religion*, written as a treatise of Protestant Christianity, became widely used in Protestant Christian nations.

Grotius also wrote noted Commentaries on the Bible. His *The Rights of War and Peace* (1625), laid the basis for International Law. Concerned about the unbridled sovereignty of the national states, the author set out to find some universal law to which all alike were subject. He founded his system on "*the laws of nature and of nature's God.*" Since all nations are subject to this natural law, there is no justification for international anarchy. I quote:

...For the **Author of nature ordained** that we should, as individuals, be weak, and in need of many things to make life comfortable, in order that we might be the more impelled to cling to society. But utility is the *occasion* of civil laws; for the association of subjection by mutual compact was **at the first instituted** for the sake of some utility.

And, accordingly, they who prescribe laws for others, in doing this, aim, or ought to aim, at some utility to be produced to them for whom they legislate...

### Jefferson's copy of "The Truth of the Christian Religion"

Jefferson's initialed copy of *The Truth of the Christian Religion* begins with, *A Christian Prayer for the Adversaries of True Religion*. Subtitles of the book include: **Section I** - That there is a God. **Section II** - That there is but one God. **Section III** - That all Perfection is in God. **Section IV** - God is Infinite. **Section V** - That God is eternal, omnipotent, omniscient and absolutely good. **Section VI** - That God is **the Author and Cause of all things**, etc... Among the numerous passages marked by Jefferson, denoting emphasis on Truth, are the following:

**Section XII: The Chief Points of Christianity** are approved of by the Heathen: and if there be anything that is hard to be believed therein, the like or worse is found among the Pagans.

"But the Pagans have the less to object against **Christian Religion**: because all the parts thereof are of such *honesty* and *integrity*, that they convince men's minds by their own light. In so much that there have not been wanting men among the *Pagans* also, who have here and there said every one of those things, which our Religion hath in a body all together. ..."

### The Second Book: Section XI: For Excellency of Reward.

"...In the *Soul* there shall be an understanding without error, even of *God* himself and his Divine Providence, or whatsoever is now hid from us. And a *will* freed from all turbulence of passions, busied chiefly about the sight, the admiring and praising of the *Almighty*. In a word, all things much greater and better, than can be conceived by comparison with the best and greatest things in this world..."

### The Fifth Book. Section II: The Jews ought to account the Miracles of Christ sufficiently proved.

"...But to omit further Testimonies, it is the confession of the Authors of the *Talmud*, and other *Jews* themselves, that strange *Wonders* were wrought by *Christ*; which ought to suffice for this particular. ..."

and many more.

The pastor of a foremost Christian Church passed on to me an e-mail written to ABC network by a concerned Christian citizen, expressing this critique:

"ABC is obsessed with the subject of homosexuality. I will no longer watch any of your attempts to convince the world that homosexuality is O.K....Read the first chapter of Romans (in the Bible). The Apostle Paul, God and Jesus were all against it.. .."

ABC's on-line response ensued:

"How about getting out of the Bible (which is only a Book of stories compiled by many different writers hundreds of years ago) and read the Declaration of Independence (what our nation is built on) where it says 'All men are created equal' and try treating them that way for a change! ..."

My response to ABC is the following: Firstly, the word "homosexuality" (of recent vintage) does not exist in Noah Webster's famed 1828 Dictionary - Jefferson's era. The word "sodomy" however, does.

As Thomas Jefferson penned the **Declaration of Independence**, and as he also condemns sodomy in his original, hand-written **Bill for Proportioning Crimes and Punishments**, as a crime whose punishment goes to "Limb - castration," the Declaration's statement that "all men are created equal" precludes criminals, including sodomites.

The punishment of crimes, according to Jefferson, extends to: 1) Life (death); 2) Limb; or 3) Labor. Quite obviously, criminals are excluded from enjoying the rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." Hence, ABC's promotion of sodomy is diametrically opposed to Jefferson's principles of equality.

Moreover, as we have already established, Jefferson's underlying principle in his Declaration, of "*the laws of nature and of nature's God*" comes from Hugo Grotius' writings, which in turn, are based upon the Bible - the world's No.1 best-selling Book to this day.

Although ABC has a far-reaching network, **the Bible**, which condemns sodomy, far exceeds its outreach, worldwide; and so do Jefferson's original, biblical principles undergirding this nation's founding document - **The Declaration of Independence** - which continues to be admired and esteemed internationally. (© 2009 by Catherine Millard).