God and the Declaration of Independence
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The second sentence of the Declaration of Independence may be the most well-known quotation in America. “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.” When Americans want to talk about personal freedom and liberty, especially about “unalienable Rights” that everyone deserves without question, they quote this sentence.

At a moment when America’s politicians are looking back at this country’s origins by public reading of a foundational document like the Constitution, it is worth taking a look at this sentence in the Declaration of Independence and thinking about its meaning. Sentence two comprises not just a claim about freedom but also a theological statement about God and the nature of humanity.

The Declaration is an interesting document. It was drafted by Thomas Jefferson, an adherent of the Enlightenment and a Deist. But the text was debated, altered, approved and finally signed by the members of the Continental Congress in 1776. The delegates to the Congress came from a wide variety of Christian backgrounds, although nearly all belonged to one Protestant church or another.

In this light, it is important to note that in sentence two God is designated the “Creator.” At first this just seems like nice “neutral” language, designed to avoid offending religious sensibilities. But the choice of wording is specifically not Christian. The text does not say “God the Father” or “Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.” There is nothing to reflect Christianity directly. It is the language of Deism. Furthermore, the wording is also acceptable to Judaism, to Islam, and to many other religions, including Hinduism.

That observation does not mean the wording is anti-Christian. It is not. If it had been, Congress’s delegates would not have signed it. “God the Father” is routinely considered the Creator in Christianity and the opening sentences of John’s gospel identify Jesus as participating in creation as well.

Even though Thomas Jefferson was a slave-holder, nearly a quarter of his draft of the Declaration comprised a tirade against the slave trade. That was deleted to persuade the southern states to vote for the document. However, the Declaration retained the important claim “that all men are created equal.” This sentence should be seen as referring to slavery, and in a rather mathematical sense. When the Constitution was adopted it referred to slaves as being worth just “three fifths” of a person. This was later changed by the Thirteenth Amendment.

Today of course we understand “men” to include all humans of both sexes. Furthermore, it is important to understand that “all” are created equal. Not just believers in a particular religion. Not just members of one racial, national, or ethnic heritage. And, in light of our current social debates, not just people of one sexual orientation.

Finally, note that the Bible is never mentioned. Humanity’s rights are “self-evident,” not Scriptural. Authority for them does not come from revelation, whether Christian or otherwise. Instead, as the Declaration’s first sentence states, these rights are self-evident to all because Nature makes them clear. Humans have a right to an “equal station to which the Laws of Nature and Nature’s God entitle them.”

The Declaration is thus based on the Enlightenment concept of Natural Law, not on a Christian view of the world. Although the wording of this claim is not inimical to Christianity, which accounts for its adoption, it certainly did not come from Christian theology.

The freedom and rights identified by the Declaration of Independence are thus based on Enlightenment principles, not on Christian beliefs. This approach to religion was carried into later decades and in the end gave rise to another of the rights for which our country is most famous, namely, the freedom of all people to worship (or not) according to their own beliefs. It is an irony of history that the Enlightenment’s move away from religious authority enabled America to become a bastion of religious freedom.