

# Endowed by Our Creator

## Intelligent Design at America's Founding

by John G. West

**O**n July 4, the United States will celebrate the 250th anniversary of its Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that “all men are created equal” and “are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”

The Declaration's words are majestic and inspiring. What many Americans may not realize is just how much they owe to an intelligent design understanding of the universe. In their proclamation of a Creator, America's Founders drew on a rich philosophical and theological tradition that grounded belief in a Creator in our observations of nature.

“I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the Universe, in its parts general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition.”

—THOMAS JEFFERSON

### The Ancients

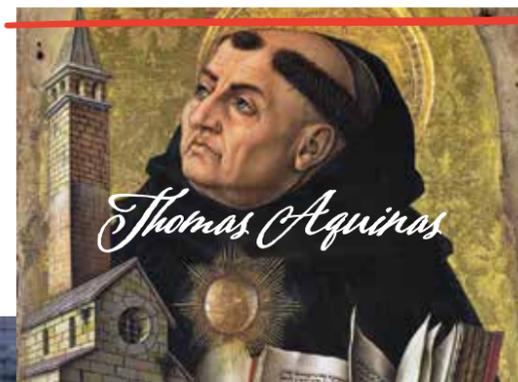
**M**ore than two millennia ago, pagan thinkers such as **CICERO** already argued that nature supplies evidence of a Creator:

Can any sane person believe that all this array of stars and this vast celestial adornment could have been created out of atoms rushing to and fro fortuitously and at random? Or could any other being devoid of intelligence and reason have created them? Not merely did their creation postulate intelligence, but ... intelligence of a high order.<sup>1</sup>

The Bible taught the same: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands” (Psalm 19:1) and “since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that people are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

### Medieval Thinkers

**E**arly Christian thinkers made similar arguments,<sup>2</sup> as did the Catholic and Protestant Christian thinkers of later eras. Catholic theologian **THOMAS AQUINAS** (1225–1274) argued that when “things which lack intelligence, such as natural bodies, act for an end,” they show that “some intelligent being exists by whom all natural things are directed toward their end; and this being we call God.”<sup>3</sup> Centuries later Protestant Reformer **JOHN CALVIN** (1509–1564) wrote that “the elegant structure of the world serv[es] us as a kind of mirror, in which we may behold God, though otherwise invisible.”<sup>4</sup>



### Early Modern Scientists

**T**he rise of modern science in the 16th and 17th centuries reaffirmed this consensus. Scientists and theologians, Christians and deists alike, thought that the discoveries of science were revealing further evidence of a Creator to whom we owed our lives and capacities.

**SIR ISAAC NEWTON** (1642–1727), one of the greatest scientists who ever lived, declared that our “most beautiful” solar system “could only proceed from the counsel and dominion of an intelligent and powerful being”<sup>5</sup> and argued that “the best argument” for an omnipotent and omniscient God “is the frame of nature & chiefly the contrivance of the bodies of living creatures.”<sup>6</sup>

English philosopher and cleric **SAMUEL CLARKE** (1675–1729) was a friend of Newton. In his book *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, Clarke offered a full-throated argument that as natural science advanced, the case for atheism retreated. “The deeper Men inquire into Things, and the more Accurate Observations they make, and the more and greater

Discoveries they find out ... the stronger” the argument grows for God.<sup>7</sup> Clarke wrote that if the ancient physician Galen with his crude knowledge could find evidence of intelligent design in the human body, “what would he have said, if he had known” about the latest discoveries in anatomy and medicine?<sup>8</sup>

**JOHN RAY** (1627–1705), a pioneering English botanist, wrote *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation*, which underwent multiple editions and claimed,

There is ... no more palpable and convincing argument of the existence of a Deity, than the admirable art and wisdom that discovers itself in the make and constitution, the order and disposition, the ends and uses of all the parts and members of this stately fabrick of heaven and earth.<sup>9</sup>

Physician and poet **RICHARD BLACKMORE** (1654–1729) penned a seven-part poem “to demonstrate the Existence of a God from the Marks of Wisdom, Design, Contrivance, and the Choice of Ends and Means, which appear in the Universe.”<sup>10</sup>

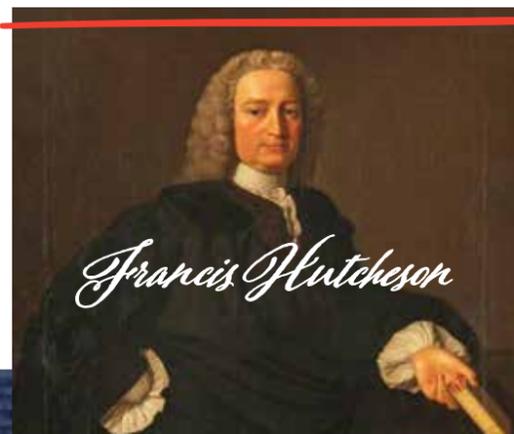
“Is not the supposition unnatural and improbable—that the rational and moral world should be abandoned to the frolicks of chance, or to the ravage of disorder?”

—JAMES WILSON

## Theologians

Leading theologians took a similar view. Calvin argued that “astronomy, medicine, and all the natural sciences” were “designed to illustrate” the proofs of God’s existence.<sup>11</sup> Anglican Bishop JOSEPH BUTLER (1692–1752) argued that “to an unprejudiced mind, ten thousand thousand instances of design [in nature], cannot but prove a designer.”<sup>12</sup> French Catholic Archbishop FRANÇOIS FÉNELON (1651–1715) wrote a book arguing that “All Nature shows the Existence of its Maker.”<sup>13</sup>

The writings of Scottish philosopher FRANCIS HUTCHESON (1694–1746) were influential on a number of America’s Founders. Hutcheson saw the evidence of intelligent causation throughout nature, from “the order, grandeur, regular dispositions and motions, of the visible world” to “the several classes of animals and vegetables [that] display in their whole frame exquisite mechanism, and regular structure, evidencing counsel, art, and contrivance for certain ends” to “the structure of our own nature and its powers.”<sup>14</sup>



## America’s Founders

In line with these ideas, notable signers of the Declaration of Independence such as JOHN WITHERSPOON, JAMES WILSON, BENJAMIN FRANKLIN, and THOMAS JEFFERSON all saw evidence for God the Creator in nature.

Witherspoon explained that one way we can know God exists is by “contemplating the universe in all its parts, observing that it contains many irresistible proofs that it could not be eternal, could not be without a cause; that this cause must be intelligent.”<sup>15</sup>

According to James Wilson, God formed man “with wisdom and design,”<sup>16</sup> and

when we view the inanimate and irrational creation around and above us, and contemplate the beautiful order observed in all its motions and appearances; is not the supposition unnatural and improbable—that the rational and moral world should be abandoned to the frolicks of chance, or to the ravage of disorder?<sup>17</sup>

In other words, if the “beautiful order” exhibited by inanimate nature reflects God’s intelligent design, how much more so should the rational part of creation (man) be subject to God’s design and care?

Benjamin Franklin created his own private liturgy for use in worshiping God. The section on the adoration of God had him affirming that nature testifies to its Creator:

Thy Wisdom, thy Power, and thy GOODNESS are every where clearly seen; in the Air

and in the Water, in the Heavens and on the Earth; Thou providest for the various winged Fowl, and the innumerable Inhabitants of the Water; Thou givest Cold and Heat, Rain and Sunshine in their Season, and to the Fruits of the Earth Increase.<sup>18</sup>

Franklin’s private liturgy included a section where he instructed himself to read selections from the writings of natural philosophers and theologians John Ray, Richard Blackmore, and Archbishop Fénelon.<sup>19</sup>

Thomas Jefferson likewise believed that the discoveries of natural science provided a rational grounding for belief in God as Creator. Writing to JOHN ADAMS in 1823, Jefferson declared, “I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the Universe, in its parts general or particular, it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition.”<sup>20</sup>

What was some of the evidence from nature Jefferson had in mind? He continued:

The movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their course by the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces, the structure of our earth itself, with its distribution of lands, waters and atmosphere, animal and vegetable bodies, examined in all their minutest particles, insects mere atoms of life, yet as perfectly organised as man or mammoth, [and] the mineral substances, their generation and uses.

## Full Circle

Within a few generations of the Declaration, the rise of Darwinian biology challenged the Founders’ consensus about the intelligent design of nature.

The good news is that science itself is now pointing back to the reality of intelligent design. As philosopher Stephen Meyer points out in *Return of the God Hypothesis*, by revealing the exquisite fine-tuning of physics, chemistry, and biology for life, science is once again proclaiming convincing evidence of a Creator.<sup>21</sup>

We have returned to the state of affairs of the Founders’ own day, when Thomas Jefferson could talk of theists “pointing ‘to the heavens above, and to the earth beneath, and to the waters under the earth’” to argue for “a first cause, possessing intelligence and power; power in the production, & intelligence in the design & constant preservation of the system.”<sup>22</sup> ☉

### Notes

1. Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, II.xliv.115, trans. H. Rackham (1929), 233.
2. See John G. West, *Stockholm Syndrome Christianity* (2025), 56–58; *Design in the Bible and the Early Church Fathers* (2009); *The Patristic Understanding of Creation: An Anthology of Writings from the Church Fathers on Creation and Design*, eds. William A. Dembski, Wayne J. Downs, and Father Justin B. A. Frederick (2008).
3. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, First Part, Question 2, Article 3, translated by The Fathers of the English Dominican Province, second and revised edition (1920).
4. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, Chapter XX, Section 16, translated by Henry Beveridge (1989), 51.
5. Isaac Newton, “General Scholium” from *The Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy* (1729), *The Newton Project* (Jun. 2009); also see Vincent J. Torley, “Newton on Intelligent Design,” *Uncommon Descent* (Mar. 14, 2013).
6. Isaac Newton, “Draft of the ‘Hypothesis Concerning Light and Colors,’” *The Newton Project* (Jun. 2011).
7. Samuel Clark[e], *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, 2nd ed. (1706).
8. Clark[e], *A Demonstration of the Being and Attributes of God*, 178.
9. John Ray, *The Wisdom of God Manifested in the Works of the Creation* (1777).
10. Richard Blackmore, *Creation. A Philosophical Poem. Demonstrating the Existence and Providence of a God. In Seven Books* (1715).
11. Calvin, *Institutes*, 51.
12. Joseph Butler, *Analogy of Religion*, in *The Works of Bishop Butler*, ed. David E. White (2006), 299.
13. François de Salignac de la Mothe-Fénelon, *A Demonstration of the Existence and Attributes of God* (1720).
14. Francis Hutcheson, *A System of Moral Philosophy* (1755).
15. John Witherspoon, *An Annotated Edition of Lectures on Moral Philosophy*, edited by Jack Scott (1982), 96.
16. James Wilson, *Lectures on Law*, in *Collected Works of James Wilson*, edited by Kermit L. Hall and Mark David Hall (2007), I:506.
17. Wilson, *Lectures on Law*, I:504.
18. Benjamin Franklin, “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion,” November 20, 1728, *National Archives: Founders Online*.
19. Franklin, “Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion,” note 7 and accompanying text.
20. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823, *National Archives: Founders Online*.
21. Stephen C. Meyer, *Return of the God Hypothesis: Three Scientific Discoveries that Reveal the Mind Behind the Universe* (2021).
22. Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 8, 1816, *National Archives: Founders Online*.