



OWENS: One of the fundamental premises in your book rests upon the idea that

American national identity is based on the idea of a shared history and a common purpose. This is a central theme of your work, and it is one that has been widely discussed and debated in the public sphere. The idea of a shared history and a common purpose is a central theme of your work, and it is one that has been widely discussed and debated in the public sphere.

discussed in France, three years before the French Revolution. That's very important, and of course Jefferson was quite influential: he had just been appointed ambassador to the Court of Versailles (to be exact he was "Minister Plenipotentiary to the Court of Versailles).

To answer your question of whether there is a gap between the elite and the people. I answer yes, in the sense that Jefferson and most, if not all, of the Founding Fathers are deists. The average American is probably not deist or an agnostic at the time, and will be less and less sympathetic with deism with the rise of the Second Great Revival. Jefferson is the author of the so-called "Jefferson Bible, which takes away everything that has to do with miracles and the Resurrection.

That's not what the typical American would do, but that doesn't mean that Jefferson himself is anti-religious or that a secular person is necessarily anti-religious. Jefferson and Madison, in their fight against the Anglican Church in Virginia, are in fact representing or defending smaller churches, like Baptist churches, against an overpowering established church.

So there is in the narrative of secularism a notion of pluralism as well, and that's evident in the *Federalist*, when Madison is talking about political factions and compares them to religious sects. In fact, he gives almost a direct quote from Voltaire: You don't want only one church because then you have tyranny; nor do you want two churches, because you may end up with a civil war; but you want 30 or 50 churches. That's something that is also in Plutarch and other authors as well: the idea that religious pluralism is perfectly compatible with secularism. Secularism is all about state neutrality, separation of church and state, but certainly not about the disappearance or the destruction of churches. One should avoid that confusion.

owens: Yet there is an intertwining of these narratives, of course, and somehow

they are competing. Could you talk about what you see in the contemporary scene, how the narratives are referenced today in the 21st century?

Iacorne: There are many ways to look at it, but my claim is that the Enlightenment or secular narrative is probably best understood and defended by judges, federal judges and justices of the U.S. Supreme Court. That starts with a key decision, the *Everson* decision of 1947, where Jefferson is being rediscovered. Today, you still have a number of justices like Souter or Ginsburg or Breyer who believe in a separation of church and state and insist that, in the public space in the United States, you cannot have a nativity scene or tablets with the 10 Commandments, or prayer in school because that's not compatible with the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment.

Then on the other side, and more in line with the New Puritan romantic narrative, there are very conservative justices like Rehnquist for instance, or today Thomas and Scalia, who do not believe in the separation of church and state and who would like to abolish it. They object to Jefferson's notion of a "wall of separation between church and state". They think it is the "wrong metaphor" that's a quote from Rehnquist and are very much opposed to that.

To further complicate the debate, besides separatists and anti-separatists, you have

the accommodationists who in fact claim that there are circumstances where you can indeed have nativity scenes in the public space or the 10 Commandments in the public space, provided that it is next to other religious and secular symbols. If you have a Jewish Menorah next to a Christmas tree, then that's fine. If you have a nativity scene and an elephant and a clown, that passes muster because it's not just defending one church or the Christian tradition. Surprisingly, if you look at France which is supposed to be the land of strict, rigid separation of church and state there are a lot of accommodationists as well. One could illustrate this in looking at the way we created the French *laïcité*, but maybe that's a different topic.

owens: What are the particular bene-

ty and despite the fact that we often travel to the United States. The most striking thing for me is not so much the agreements or disagreements on secularism. I think we both understand what it means; we both understand what separation of church and state means and state neutrality. In this domain, the two societies are very much alike.

But if you move towards the mid 19th-century when evangelicalism becomes predominant the French don't understand it. Even Tocqueville doesn't understand it. Paradoxically, Tocqueville locates the point of departure of American democracy in New England with the Puritans although it's an abstract conception of the Puritans but when he visits camp meetings in the 1830s, he is horrified and he writes about evangelical sects the way Fanny Trollope writes about them, which I find very surprising.

That misunderstanding of evangelicalism still continues today. When a French journalist is repelled by all the references to religion in American political discourse, he or she blames it on the Puritans! The tendency is to say, oh, well, they're Puritan, they've always been Puritan, and that explains the strangeness of US politics. There is a complete lack of understanding of the complexity of religion in America and of religious pluralism and also a complete lack of understanding of the complexity of American politics, where not everyone is a member of the Christian Right or a Fundamentalist.

So you have strange writings coming out of France. Typical stereotypes: When Jean-Paul Sartre and later when Simone de Beauvoir travel to the United States right after the Second World War, they are absolutely convinced that they see