

**Pious Patriots or Religious Rebels:
Appraising the Faith of Our Nation's Founders
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**Gleanings from the Revolutionary Generation
From Benjamin Franklin,
"A Doctrine to Be Preached" (1731)**

There is only one God the Father of the universe.
He is infinitely good, powerful and wise.
He is omnipresent.
He ought to be worshiped, by adoration prayer and
thanksgiving, both in public and in private.
He loves such of his creatures as love and do good
to others, and will reward them either in this
World or hereafter.
Men's minds do not die with their bodies, but are
made more happy or miserable after this life,
according to their actions.
Virtuous men ought to league together to strengthen
the interest in virtue, in the world; and so
strengthen themselves in virtue.
Knowledge and learning are to be cultivated, and
ignorance dissipated.
None but the virtuous are wise.
Humankind's perfection is in virtue.

**From Judith Sargent Murray,
"On the Equality of the Sexes" (1790)**

While we women are pursuing the needle, or the
superintendency of the family, our minds are at full
liberty for reflection ... and if a just foundation is
early laid, our ideas will then be worthy of rational
beings. If we were industrious, we might easily find
time to arrange those ideas on paper, or should duty
press too hard for such an indulgence, the hours
allotted for conversation would at least become
more refined and rational.

Should it be argued, "Ladies, your domestic
employments are sufficient," I would calmly ask,
"It is reasonable, that a candidate for immortality,
for the joys of heaven, an intelligent being, who is
to spend an eternity in contemplating the works of
the Deity, should at present be so degraded, as to be
allowed no other ideas than those which are sug-
gested by the mechanism of a pudding, or the
sewing of seams on a garment? Pity that all such
censurers of female improvement do not go one
step further, and deny their future existence; to be
consistent, they surely ought!"

From the observations I have made in the con-
tracted circle in which I have moved, I dare confi-

dently believe that from the commencement of time
to the present day, there hath been as many females
as males who, by the mere force of natural powers,
have merited the crown of applause; who thus
unassisted have seized the wreath of fame.

Yes, ye lordly and haughty sex, our souls are by
nature equal to yours; the same breath of God ani-
mates, enlivens, and invigorates us; and that we are
not fallen lower than yourselves, let those witness
who have greatly towered above the various dis-
couragements by which they have been so heavily
oppressed....

**John Adams, from his correspondence with
Thomas Jefferson (1813)**

The human understanding is a revelation from its
maker which can never be disputed or doubted.
There can be no skepticism, incredulity, or infideli-
ty here. No prophecies, no miracles are necessary to
prove the celestial communication.

This revelation had made it certain that two and
one make three, and that one is not three nor can
three be one. We can never be so certain of any
prophecy, or the fulfillment of any prophecy, or of
any miracle, or the design of any miracle, as we are
from the revelation of nature, that is, nature's God,
that two and two are equal to four. Miracles or
prophecies might frighten us out of our wits, might
scare us to death, might induce us to lie, to say that
we believe that two and two make five, but we
should not believe it; we should know the contrary.

Had you and I been forty days with Moses on
Mount Sinai, and admitted to behold the divine
glory, and there been told that one was three and
three one, we might not have had the courage to
deny it, but we could not have believed it. The
thunders and the lightnings and the earthquakes
and the transcendent splendors and glories might
have overwhelmed us with terror and amazement,
but we could not have believed the doctrine. We
should be more likely to say in our hearts—whatev-
er we might say with our lips—"This is chance.
There is no God, no Truth. This is all delusion, fic-
tion, and a lie, or it is all chance...."

God has infinite wisdom, goodness, and power;
he created the universe; his duration is eternal ...
his presence is as extensive as space. It is said that

he created this speck of dirt—the earth—and the human species for his glory. And then, the orthodox theologians say, he chose to make nine-tenths of our species miserable forever, for his greater glory.

Now, my friend Jefferson, can prophecies and miracles convince you or me that infinite benevolence, wisdom, and power created and preserves for a time, innumerable millions, only in the end to make them miserable forever, and for no other purpose than his own glory?

Wretch! What is glory? Is he ambitious? Does he want promotion? Is he vain, tickled with adulation, exulting and triumphing in his power and the sweetness of his vengeance? Pardon me, my Maker, for these awful questions...but I believe no such thing. My adoration for the author of the universe is too profound, too sincere. The love of God and his creation—delight, joy, triumph, exultation in my own existence—are my religion.

The Calvinist, the Athanasian divines ... will say I am no Christian. I say they are no Christians, and there the account is balanced.

Reflections

TWO RECENT RULINGS BY THE FEDERAL COURTS HAVE once again brought the question of church-state separation to the forefront of public attention. Taken together, they deliver a decidedly mixed message.

On the one hand, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on the constitutionality of educational vouchers for private, sectarian schools. By the narrowest of margins, the Justices declared that government support for religiously oriented primary and secondary education does not violate the “establishment” clause of the First Amendment.

Within the same week, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals unexpectedly declared that the phrase “one nation, under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance wasn’t consistent with the Constitution.

Both rulings were highly controversial. According to Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, the voucher ruling was “the worst church-state decision in half a century.” And as one might expect, the 9th Circuit Court’s pledge opinion created a furor, with President Bush even vowing henceforth to “appoint judges who will affirm the role of God in the public square.”

Experts agree that the pledge decision is almost certain to be overturned, if only because the American public attaches so much symbolic value to our nation’s creed. Ironically, the school voucher

ruling, which also enjoys little popular support and whose practical consequences may be far greater, will stand because the Supreme Court has the “last word” on these matters. As is so often the case with human beings, symbols matter more than substance.

What would the Founders, the authors of the Constitution, have thought of all this? Would school vouchers or a transcendent reference in the Pledge of Allegiance have troubled them?

When it comes right down to it, we can only speculate. Publicly funded education was not available in the late 1700s, nor was any form of the Pledge of Allegiance then in use. How the Founders might have applied the separation principle in these instances is anybody’s guess. In the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, Thomas Jefferson insisted that the use of tax dollars for the propagation of opinions with which some citizens disagree is “sinful and tyrannical.” Would school vouchers have offended Jefferson? Perhaps. On the other hand, Jefferson also suggested that the Great Seal of the nation include a reference to Christianity. Our third president wasn’t always consistent.

What we *do* know is that church-state relations—and the principles of both freedom and separation—were of the utmost importance to the Founders. They knew very well that Roman Catholics, dissenters, and nonconformists were discriminated against in England, where the Crown, Parliament, and the Anglican Church colluded to monopolize power. They were determined that conditions in America would be different. “Government has no more right to invade or regulate a man’s conscience than his castle,” James Madison declared.

Accordingly, the Constitution was written in a manner deliberately to exclude any religious reference, or to show any religious preference. In fact, all of the Constitution’s allusions *to* religion are negative. Article 6 prohibits any sort of religious test for seekers of public office (George Bush, take note!). The First Amendment delivers a double-barreled “hands off”:

Congress shall make *no* law respecting an establishment of religion, or *prohibiting* the free exercise thereof.

It took Congress almost four months to “perfect” those sixteen words, to make them as clear and unequivocal as possible. Madison and Jefferson argued that the religion clauses should stand first in the Bill of Rights because they were the foundation upon which all other freedoms rested. Guarantee religion’s independence and keep the state free of

its influence, and both would prosper, the Founders felt.

The Founders endorsed separation because they believed, on the one hand, that any alliance of church and state would inevitably produce tyranny. But they also felt that if religion was weaned of its dependence on the state, it would grow stronger and assume its proper and indispensable role as a promoter of moral and spiritual uplift. "Our constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people," John Adams insisted. "It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

For the most part, the Founders took religion very seriously. They were thoughtful about it, wrote and talked about it frequently, and they believed it to be an essential element of viable communities and strong republics. Despite their warm endorsement of a "secular" state, the men and women of the Revolutionary generation were by no means anti-religious. They were, however, rather unconventional in their religious views—a fact that few people today fully appreciate. If they did, they might better understand why the U.S. Constitution appears as it does, and why this cornerstone of our democracy was overwhelmingly approved by the Constitutional Convention, despite the fact that it contains not a single reference to God.

While it is perhaps a little presumptuous to generalize about a community as culturally diverse and geographically dispersed as the Founders, at least a few points can legitimately be made.

In the first place, what distinguished many of these early leaders was their rather nominal identification with organized churches—with a particular sect or denomination. Jefferson may have been an Anglican, Adams a Unitarian-Congregationalist and Rush a Universalist, but each of these men were decisively influenced by intellectual currents outside of these confessions. The same could undoubtedly be said of Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, John Hancock, and numerous others. As far as religion was concerned, the Founders tended to be irenic in temperament, ecumenical in practice.

The cheerful, tolerant, and inquisitive spirit of 18th century gentlefolk was perhaps best represented by a man like Franklin. A scientific collaborator with the British Unitarian Joseph Priestley, whose religious thinking he also admired, Franklin tried to keep an open mind.

I think the system of morals taught by Jesus are the best the world ever saw or is likely to

see.... I have some doubts as to his divinity, but this is a question I do not dogmatize upon.

Franklin's approach to religion was, above all, pragmatic. If a doctrine like Christ's divinity proved socially beneficial, he saw no point in using reason destructively, to undermine it. Like many of his contemporaries, he also was able to appreciate different perspectives on and approaches to religion. In his *Autobiography* Franklin describes his first encounter with the well-known evangelist George Whitefield—a man known for his incredible oratorical powers. "I perceived that he intended to finish his sermon with a collection," Franklin recorded, "and I resolved that he should get nothing from me."

I had in my pocket a handful of copper money, three or four silver dollars and five pieces of gold. As Whitefield proceeded I began to soften, and concluded to give up the coppers. Another stroke of his oratory made me ashamed of that, and determined me to give the silver. But he finished so admirably, that I emptied my pocket wholly into the collection dish, gold and all. At this sermon there was also a friend who, suspecting a collection might be intended, had by precaution emptied his pockets before he left home. Toward the end of the discourse, however, he felt a strong desire to give, and asked a neighbor who stood near him to borrow some money for that purpose. Unfortunately, the request was made to perhaps the only man in the company who had the firmness not to be affected by the preacher. His answer was, "At any other time, Friend Hopkinson, I would lend to thee freely; but not now, for thee seems to be out of thy right senses."

One can practically see the twinkle in old Ben's eye as he relates this story. It testifies, however, to the intellectual openness and spiritual curiosity of the Founders. In later years, the two men became close friends. Jefferson, too, tempered his sometimes stinging criticisms of churches and clergy with generous contributions to Methodist, Presbyterian, and Episcopal building campaigns.

"Because they thought morality, virtue, and truth were universal," Henry Steele Commager writes,

The founders rejected alike the parochialism of any single church, including the Christian, or any single nation, including their own.

Unalterably opposed to sectarianism, the cream of the Revolutionary generation nevertheless support-

ed and sought to promote religion as a set of “universal” principles or norms.

What, then, were those norms? What did the Founders believe? What spiritual principles did they espouse? Broadly speaking, many fall under the classification of Deism, a belief system with which none of the established churches identified.

Deism proposes that a rational, self-regulating universe was created at the beginning of time by an intelligible, benign deity who has elected not to interfere with or intervene in its affairs. This universe operates independently, according to discernible moral and physical laws. To understand these laws—revealed not through revelation but in the book of nature—is to know the mind of God, and to observe them is to achieve happiness in this life and in the next.

It was upon such eternal and ultimately rational law, the Founders believed, that the Federal Republic was to be established. “The foundation of our empire,” George Washington declared, “was not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but in an epoch when the rights of mankind are better understood.... Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labors of philosophers and sages ... are laid open for our use.”

Washington’s Vice President, John Adams, echoed these sentiments: “Ours is,” Adams wrote, “The first example of a government elected on the simple principles of nature ... without a pretense of miracle or mystery....”

Deism’s god was, above all, a reasonable fellow. “Shake off all the servile fears and prejudices under which weak minds are crouched,” Jefferson admonished his nephew in 1785.

Fix reason firmly in her seat.... Question with boldness even the existence of God because, if there be one, He must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blind faith.

Jefferson’s contemporaries held similar convictions. In the readings offered earlier, we heard John Adams invoke reason to discredit orthodox teachings on eternal damnation. For Adams, “... miracles and prophecies might frighten us out of our wits ... but we should not believe it; we should know the contrary.” And no matter what the Bible might suggest about gender equity, Judith Sargent Murray argued that it is above all “reasonable” that women, candidates for immortality, should be given their place in the sun.

The Deism of these men and women was gener-

ally uncontentious and decorous. The same could not be said for Thomas Paine or Ethan Allen or Elihu Palmer, populist firebrands who wielded reason like a sharp sword, for the express purpose of cutting the Bible and Christianity into tatters.

Reason, Allen insisted, is not one avenue to insight, one among many wellsprings of knowledge—it is the only trustworthy oracle. When reason brings its judgments to bear on Biblical revelation, its teachings will be seen for what they are: deceptive, adulterated, spurious.

Thomas Paine’s hostility to revealed religion was even more pronounced. “Each religion, each church accuses the other of unbelief,” he wrote. “I, however, am impartial. I disbelieve them all.” In another place Paine announced his agenda: “I have now gone through the Bible as a man would go through a wood with an ax on his shoulder and fell trees.”

And finally there was Elihu Palmer, who described Moses and Muhammed as murderers in practice, and Jesus as a murderer in principle. “Never have we witnessed a greater specimen of nonsense and irrationality than in Christianity,” Palmer complained.

Most of the Founders deplored such language, and they often accused the radical Deists of rabble-rousing. Even if they sympathized with some of his views, men like Adams and Rush detected danger in the aims of someone like Thomas Paine. Reason should be used, not to tear the tree of religion up by its roots, but merely to prune away its dead or deformed branches that it might produce healthier fruit. And for the Founders, the real fruit of religion was “virtue.”

Virtue, these men and women believed, lay at the heart of the gospel message, and Jesus was an estimable figure because he spoke of and embodied the universal moral law. “Had the doctrines of Jesus been preached always as pure as they came from his lips,” Jefferson declared, “the whole civilized world would now have been Christian.”

The Founders believed in immortality and were convinced that God had established an eminently reasonable and automatic system of rewards and punishments. Virtue would be requited, vice punished, without fail and according to the unalterable laws of Nature. “None but the virtuous are wise,” Ben Franklin wrote, and “men are made happy or miserable according to their actions.”

Jesus was admired as an outstanding moral teacher, and a “savior” by example. But while he was surely exceptional, Jesus wasn’t unique. The

Founders also extolled Confucius for inculcating virtue in Asia. Classical writers—Socrates, Cicero, Epictetus—also were admired. Alexander Hamilton denoted not Jesus, but Julius Caesar as history’s greatest man.

Because they regarded churches—even orthodox ones—as important instruments for promoting virtue among ordinary citizens, the Founders supported their efforts. The same could not be said for those engaged in commercial activity. Indeed, some of the Founders’ fiercest invective was saved for “... those who have no object but their own particular interest.” “Merchants have no country,” Jefferson complained. They are attached only to the sources “from which they draw their gains.” If the young nation was to survive, it must develop a virtuous populace. Merchants, however, pandered to luxury, pressed superfluous baubles on a weak and gullible public, provided easy credit and thus encouraged indebtedness. Sam Adams, whose name ironically is now associated with a popular brand of beer, was particularly incensed. The British, he warned, were using American merchants to soften and corrupt Americans, hoping to regain by commerce what they had lost on the battlefield. Others echoed his

feelings. “Our citizens cannot thrive by cheap bargains, Hugh Williamson warned, “while the nation is ruined by them.”

Frugality, sacrifice, diligence, productivity in a useful calling—virtues such as these would support and strengthen the Republic, but they had no standing among merchants, for which reason these men were often scorned.

In the end, the Deistic religious views of the Founders were not embraced either by ordinary Americans or by the next generation of social and political leaders. By the close of John Adam’s presidency, the tide had begun to turn toward orthodoxy. Jefferson’s religious opinions almost cost him the election in 1800, and the greatest achievement of the Revolutionary class—the U.S. Constitution—was widely criticized as “negatively atheistical,” and indifferent to Christianity.

Thank God for that fleeting moment in history—for that special community of broad-minded, freedom-loving souls who seized the moment to create one of the world’s great legacies. May we honor their memory; may we embrace their vision; may we protect and defend their precious gift: a godless constitution and a goodly commonwealth.