

DOUBETERS, DEISTS AND DEMOCRATS -
APPRAISING THE RELIGION OF OUR NATION'S FOUNDERS
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Perhaps the most influential book written about the Founding Fathers of the Republic is *The Life of George Washington*, first published in 1800. **Mason Locke Weems**, an Episcopal cleric, was its author, and it is from "Parson Weems" that Americans learned of our first President's moral probity and his exceptional piety. It is in **Weem's** biography that the famous story of the chopped-down cherry tree is related.

Subsequent years saw the publication of books similar to the one composed by **Weems**, and these were instrumental in transforming their subject into an American icon, a Protestant saint, a second Moses delivering his people from bondage and dire oppression. In these hagiographies, Washington is depicted as a man bent on discerning and doing God's will. So fervent is this patriot's devotion that he conducts communion services before Revolutionary War battles, spends entire nights in prayer - sometimes stealing off like Jesus at the Garden of Gethsemane to pray in solitude.

Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and James Madison received less, but comparable attention. All have been

depicted as exemplary Christians, devoted church-goers and believers in Scripture. Today, conservative Christians continue to insist that the authors of our liberty and our Constitution were (with the possible exception of **Thomas Jefferson**) orthodox in their views and evangelical in their ambition. The United States, they insist, was intended to be, and was established as, a Christian republic.

Most of these claims are, in fact, spurious, and many of the stories about the Founding Fathers have been embellished, idealized or simply invented out of whole cloth. No doubt, men like Washington, Franklin and Adams took pains to observe the proper religious protocols, for many of their constituents expected as much of public figures. It makes sense, then, that George Washington would argue for Revolution on religious as well as political grounds; that he and Adams would establish a national day of prayer and thanksgiving; that he would approve adding "so help me God" to the end of the presidential oath of office.

The fact is, those who were deemed disrespectful of religion - a Tom Paine or an Ethan Allan, for instance - were treated with disdain, no matter how patriotic their professions. Even **Jefferson** - who during his presidency discontinued the day of public prayer established by his

predecessors - took care not to push the envelope. He was reluctant to speak publicly about his own religious views, saying "That is a matter between me and God."

Still, the religious outlook of most of the Founders was comparable to Jefferson's and their orthodoxy should not be assumed. What politics required them to do didn't necessarily reflect what the Founders privately believed.

According to one authority, seven of the nine "Founding Fathers" rejected the divinity of Jesus. One piece of evidence supporting this conclusion is the testimony of **Bird Williams**, an Episcopal minister and professor of religion, who knew most of the Founders and their families personally. In an 1831 sermon Williams sought to dispel the myths that had begun to accumulate around the early Presidents. "Not one," he said, "professed a religion any more conventional than Unitarianism."

During the Revolutionary War, George Washington required his soldiers to attend religious services, but his own opinions were shaped by Deism and Freemasonry. His twenty volumes of collected papers contain no mention of Jesus Christ, and in referring to God, Washington avoids conventional Christian terminology. He seldom referred to the Supreme Being as "Lord" or "Father," but designated him "The Grand Architect" or "The Great Ruler of Events" -

language that reflects the influence on our First president of Freemasonry, rather than conventional Christianity.

Perhaps most revealing, while on his death bed, Washington - though fully conscious - never asked to be counseled or comforted by a clergyman. His final words, overheard by his wife and personal servant, were simply "Tis well." "He died as a Roman Stoic, rather than a Christian saint," **Joseph Ellis** concludes.

Benjamin Franklin was, apparently, of a more conservative cast than most of the early nation builders. It was he who proposed that sessions of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 open with prayer. It tells us something about his fellow delegates to the Convention that they ignored the older man's suggestion and composed the Constitution in a prayer-free atmosphere.

But even Franklin was, at best, a Christian minimalist. At the age of 25 he composed his own personal creed, and this is what it said:

There is only one God, the Father of the universe. He is infinitely good, powerful and wise. He is omnipotent. 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... 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.

Not a word in the foregoing about Jesus Christ or Christianity, the vicarious atonement, the infallibility of Sacred scripture, human depravity or faith's primacy over reason. True, Franklin does extol prayer, but not prayer of supplication, prayer asking the Deity for special attention or favors. Proper prayer expresses praise and gratitude for the gift of life and liberty.

It is also telling that at the end of the Constitutional Convention Franklin heartily approved the finished product - despite its lack of Christian references or even a mention of the Deity. In his closing remarks, Franklin praised the Convention's achievement:

It astonishes me...to find this system approaching so near to perfection as it does... Thus, I consent to

this Constitution because I expect no better and because I am not sure it is not the best.

Among the Founding Fathers, Thomas Jefferson was hardly exceptional in espousing a spirituality more in tune with Enlightenment and Deistic principles than with dogmatic Christian teachings. In fact, most of those distinguished men actively resisted attempts to place a sectarian - or even an overtly religious - stamp on the germinal documents and institutions of the new nation. "Ours is," **John Adams** wrote, "the first example of a government elected on the simple principles of nature...without a pretense of miracle or mystery."

The Founders created a Constitution in which there are only two references to religion, **Article Six** and the **First Amendment**. But rather than soothe the sensibilities of the orthodox, these passages raised suspicions and heightened their anxiety. Article Six prohibits any religious test for the holding of public office - an extraordinary stipulation, **Gordon Wood** observes, in a world that was still dominated by religious hierarchies. And then there is the First Amendment, which effectively levels the playing field for all religions, thus precluding the possibility of a Christian monopoly in America.

The degree to which the work of the Founders distressed those in the orthodox community is revealed in a remark made by the chaplain of the New York legislature in 1820. The Founders, he complained, showed a "degree of ingratitude without parallel" in drafting a Constitution "in which there is not the slightest hint of homage to the God of Heaven."

Nor did this streak of religious independence and free thought expire with James Monroe, the last of the Founders. **Abraham Lincoln** - a leader whose stature is rivaled only by Washington himself - belonged to no church because, he said, "churches insist on membership qualifications beyond loving God and one's neighbor."

According to his law partner in Springfield, **William Herndon**, "Lincoln was a thoroughly religious man, though not a Christian - the kind of man a Transcendentalist could admire." In other words, our Sixteenth President was an avid reader and imitator of progressive Unitarians like **Ralph Waldo Emerson** and **Theodore Parker**. As Pulitzer Prize winning historian **Garry Wills** points out, a number of Lincoln's most notable speeches echo phrases from Parker's Boston sermons.

Nevertheless, today we often hear the Founders' invoked in discussions of public prayer, the display of the Ten

Commandments and the Christian creche in public places and with respect to publicly supported "faith-based" initiatives. We are told by the Conservative Christian leaders that our most distinguished Presidents were pious men who dreamed of and fought for a Christian commonwealth and who regularly turned to the Bible for inspiration and guidance.

But such claims, as I have indicated, lack foundation. These were men who read the Scriptures, but with a critical eye. They most certainly did not believe the Bible was literally true in all its particulars. The Founders, as **David Holmes** reminds us, were Deists who "repeatedly called into question any teaching or belief...that they could not reconcile with human reason."

If forced to choose between reason and revelation, our second President, **John Adams**, said he would opt unhesitatingly for the former. In an 1813 letter to **Jefferson**, Adams insisted that no number of miracles, transcendent splendors or heavenly voices could ever convince him that one-plus-one-equalled-three. "In my heart I would have to say, 'this amazing spectacle is chance...delusion, fiction and a lie.'"

Jefferson was even more forceful on this score. He once admonished his nephew to "question with boldness even

the existence of God because, if there be a God, he approves of reason more than blind faith."

This is not to say that Jefferson and the other Founders didn't take 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 Asecular@ state, the men and women of the Revolutionary generation were by no means anti-religious, nor did they embrace a secular outlook. They were all, with the exception perhaps of **John Jay**, unconventional in their religious views. But all were also, each in their own way, spiritually informed and motivated.

The First Amendment reveals just how important it was to the Founders to lay the groundwork for a productive relationship between church and state. Congress required almost four months to Aperfect@ the sixteen words of the First Amendment's Establishment and Free Exercise clause, to make them as clear and unequivocal as possible.

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

Madison and Jefferson argued that this clause should stand first in the Bill of Rights, because it was the foundation upon which all other freedoms rested. Guarantee religion's independence, 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, weaned of its dependence on the state, religion would grow stronger and perform its proper and indispensable role in producing worthy, self-sacrificing citizens. 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." **Washington** concurred. "Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

Thus at the heart of the Constitution we find a paradox, a mysterious sort of yin and yang. As **Jacob Needleman** observes, "There must be religion,

...but there must be no imposition - physical, economic or psychological - to compel individuals to open their

lives to the sacred... There must be a sense of God and there must be the freedom to accept or reject God.

Unalterably opposed to both sectarianism and partisanship, the intellectual elite of the Revolutionary generation nevertheless supported and sought to promote religion as an expression of universally valid principles and norms. They were earnest advocates of morality, virtue and truth, **Henry Steele Commager** writes,

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

What, then, did the Founders believe "true" religion consisted of? What spiritual perspective did they entertain? By what schools of thought were they influenced?

One obvious answer, of course, is Deism, a belief system that the colonies' established churches dismissed as little better than atheism.

Deism holds that a rational, self-regulating universe was created at the beginning of time by an intelligible, benign deity who refuses to contravene His own Natural

Laws, or to interfere with human affairs. The cosmos operates independently and predictably, according to intelligible moral and physical laws. To understand these laws B 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 on the basis of such eternal and ultimately rational laws, the Founders believed, that the Federal Republic was to be established. AThe foundation of our empire,@ **George Washington** declared, Awas not laid in the gloomy age of ignorance and superstition, but in an epoch when the rights of mankind are better understoodY. Treasures of knowledge, acquired by the labors of philosophers and sagesYare laid open for our use.@

Jefferson saw in a well-ordered federal system, harmonized by a system of checks and balances, a reflection of the cosmic order. "In time," he exclaimed, this American experiment "will exhibit to the world a degree of perfection, unexampled but in the planetary system itself." Thus, the United States was constituted on the basis of philosophical and spiritual premises - an utterly unique and original endeavor. The Constitution's underpinnings are as religious as they are political, though not in any sectarian sense.

Toward organized churches, the Biblical witness and the Christian religion in general, the Founders often seemed ambivalent. They certainly paid lip-service to Scriptural Revelation, but the spiritual resource they extolled and relied most heavily upon was Reason (with a capital "R"). What they had in mind here was not practical intelligence, but something more akin to Plato's "nous" or the Quaker's "inner light." Reason reflected God's own wisdom and allowed one who has been "created in God's image" directly to apprehend the highest moral, as well as physical Truths. The divine faculty of Reason must be awakened for true virtue to be recognized and cultivated. Control of the passions and the perfecting of human character are the fruit of Reason. **Jacob Needleman** puts it this way:

For (men like) Jefferson and Madison...the trappings of Church and dogma were to be abandoned; but the question of understanding the inner life of man, the relationship of man's capacity to see truth and overcome his inevitable passion - this was the issue, the arena of inquiry, the basic realm upon which were founded all principles of human society and government...

But cultivation of the inner life, the Founders complained, was typically short-changed in conventional, organized Christianity. Worse still, Reason had for centuries been enslaved, rendered impotent by dogma and superstition, just as people's political aspirations had been thwarted by hereditary monarchs and military despots.

Like Ivan in *The Brothers Karamazov*, The Founders were rather suspicious of the institutional church and its self-serving agenda. Nevertheless, they held Christianity -- in its original, uncorrupted form -- in high esteem. As an outstanding moral teacher, and a Savior by example, Jesus and his ministry were extolled. 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.

But while he was deemed exceptional, **Jesus** was not perceived as utterly unique or without peer. The Founders commended **Confucius** for inculcating virtue in Asia. Classical writers like Socrates, Cicero, Epictetus were also cited and embraced. **Alexander Hamilton** denoted not Jesus, but Julius Caesar as history's greatest man. What mattered most to the Founders was virtue -- as understood through Reason. And virtue, they believed, was the central theme not only of the Christian gospels but of **Marcus Aurelius'**

Meditations and **Aristotle's Ethics**. **Jesus** was an estimable figure because he taught and embodied universal moral principles, not because he was a unique incarnation of the Most High.

In a recent essay published in *The American Scholar*, historian **Garry Wills** - a practicing Catholic -- acknowledges that Jefferson and his peers treated Jesus as a great sage and moral guide rather than a metaphysical savior. In this he believes they were misguided. By downgrading the Man from Galilee they completely eviscerated Christianity's saving message. **Wills** scorns the Deism, Stoicism and universalism of the Founders, saying:

Jefferson was so offended by the miracles and the curses...that he created his own more acceptable Jesus, excising all those parts of the gospels he considered unworthy of a wise man's story. The result, cleansed of all the supernatural hocus pocus is the tale of a good man - a very good man, perhaps the best of good men... But Jesus is shorn of his paradoxes and left with platitudes. He is a man of his time, even ahead of his time, but not outside time... Jefferson's mild

humanitarian moralizer is not allowed to say (or do) anything shocking, challenging or obscure.

Wills is right. For the most part, the Founders weren't able to reconcile their Enlightenment faith in Reason and a well-ordered, predictable cosmos with the capriciousness and irrationality that crops up so often in the Biblical text. But rather than throw the baby out with the bath, rather than discard the entire tradition, they strove to rid Christianity of what they believed to be accretions and corruptions. Whether or not their assessment of Jesus was correct, it was probably no worse than many that have been offered before or since.

The Founders were not, then, of the same ilk as the intemperate **Tom Paine**, who once boasted that he "disbelieved all revealed religion" and meant to cut down the truths of the **Bible** as a woodsman might fell a whole forest of trees. Dissenting from those on Deism's radical fringe, the Founders argued that 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. **Benjamin Franklin's** caution was typical:

I think the system of morals taught by Jesus is the best the world ever saw or is likely to see. I have doubts as to his divinity, but this is a question I do not dogmatize upon.

Despite their reservations and complaints, the Founders (Jefferson included) continued to regard faith communities -- even orthodox ones -- as necessary for the promotion of virtue among ordinary citizens. And although they were ever-eager to curtail sectarian religion's influence in the public square, they supported the church's efforts to inculcate selflessness, humility, generosity and fellow-feeling in humankind. Thus Jefferson provided financial backing to a number of local churches, not just to the Anglican one to which he "officially" belonged.

It is somewhat ironic, then, that in 1798 the president of Yale College, **Timothy Dwight**, depicted Jefferson as an atheist and an implacable adversary of all religion. Ironic because Jefferson was far more serious and thoughtful about religion than practically any Chief Executive before or since. But unlike the Calvinist **Timothy Dwight**, **Jefferson** had no stomach for a Christian theocracy.

The Founders believed that human beings possessed immense if not infinite potential. They believed in progress and the achievement, eventually, of a near-perfect social order - the Kingdom of God on Earth. Central to their hopes was Reason - the free, unshackled use of that divine spark that is our common possession.

But they were not blithe optimists. Franklin, Washington, Jefferson, Adams - they were all aware of humankind's dual nature. We are creatures of passion as well as of Reason, and the former must be tamed and made to serve the latter if private lives, and a people's public life, are to prosper and reach their full potential.

The Founders objected strongly to the orthodox doctrine of original sin and innate depravity - of a human nature so tainted, so determined by its carnal appetites, that it was incapable of controlling its own destiny. In one of his letters, **John Adams** complained to **Jefferson**:

It is said that God in his infinite wisdom, goodness and power created this speck of dirt B the earth B 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... But what sort of glory is this? Is God

ambitious...? Is he vain, tickled with adulation, exulting and triumphing in his power and the sweetness of his vengeance? Pardon me, my Maker...but I believe no such thing... The love of God and his creation B delight, joy, triumph, exultation in my own existence B are my religion.

In general, then, the Founders had no need for a cosmic redeemer, a supernaturally-endowed Savior. Collectively, and with the aid of Reason, human beings could develop the institutions necessary to check human selfishness and aggression. With proper education and spiritual encouragement they would become steadily more virtuous.

Interestingly, despite their occasional jibes at religious and sectarian institutions, the Founders saved their harshest criticisms for commercial interests, those whose primary objectives were materialistic and monetary. The single greatest challenge to virtue and Reason, they believed, came not from organized religion, but from capitalism - a critique seldom mentioned by today's religious and political right-wingers. Merchants have no country,@ **Jefferson** complained. "They are attached only to the sources Afrom which they draw their gains.@

If the young nation was to survive, it had to produce a virtuous populace, citizens who could rise above gross, material self-interest. Merchants were a threat because they pandered to luxury, pressed superfluous baubles on the weak and gullible, provided easy credit and thus encouraged indebtedness. **Sam Adams**, whose name ironically now adorns a popular brand of beer, was particularly incensed by such behavior. The British, he warned, were using American merchants to soften and corrupt his countrymen, 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, "and the nation will be ruined by them" (and this was well before Wal-Mart had come on the scene).

Frugality, sacrifice, diligence, devotion to a useful and productive calling -- these were the sort of virtues a new republic required to achieve strength and stability. Toward such fine traits of character, however, the merchant was largely indifferent, and that is why men like **Adams** and **Jefferson** scorned them. The Founders wished to draw out the best of which the human spirit was capable. That was the whole rationale for our Constitution and our Democracy.

When Jefferson spoke of the "pursuit of happiness" as an unalienable right, it was hardly the cheeriness of the

sated, sports-obsessed suburbanite he was referring to. What he hoped a free republic would foster was the invincible happiness that follows from the full unfolding of our spiritual nature.

It is with this objective, this vision, that the religion of the Founders culminated. Whatever they might have expected in the next life, it is what they sought to achieve, religiously speaking, in this life.