

## Faiths of the Founding Fathers

Welcome to President's Weekend, a national holiday celebrating the February birthdays of Abraham Lincoln and George Washington. We set aside this time as a nation to remember our history, to honor those who have brought us to this day, and to enjoy a much-needed weekend off in the midst of a long cold winter.

I'd like to spend some time this morning looking at the religious faiths of our founding fathers to see how their beliefs influenced the shaping of our nation and to reflect with you about the meaning of the claim, so often made, that the United States is or was founded as a Christian nation. What can we learn from our colonial and revolutionary history?

The Eastern seaboard of the North America continent was settled in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by European dissenters, "religious troublemakers" and "other undesirables," who left their homes in England, mostly, because things weren't working out for them there, and traveled a long and dangerous way across the Atlantic in search of a better life (Kowalski, *Revolutionary Spirits*, 4). Some of them came seeking religious freedom, which most of them did not extend to each other once they got here. Some of them came for profit and personal gain.

These early colonialists displaced and destroyed the lives and culture of the Native American peoples who had lived in this land for centuries before their coming. By the time the United States stretched

from sea to shining sea, the indigenous people of North America had been reduced to a miserable remnant. Before we look at the opening days of this new nation, we need to acknowledge that there were people here before our forefathers came and that our nation is built on their graves.

The United States was also built on the backs of millions of black African slaves, who labored without compensation and under inhuman conditions to build the homes and till the soil and care for the children of their white masters for 250 years, from the arrival of the first slave ship in 1619 at Jamestown in the colony of Virginia until 1865, when the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment ended slavery. These African people provided an essential workforce for the development of American culture and wealth and hegemony in the world, and we have not yet seen the end of the injustice wrought by their enslavement.

I mentioned these painful and shameful facts about our national history because they seem to me to be relevant to the question of whether America is or was founded as a Christian nation. Certainly some of the slaveholders and Indian hunters believed that they were doing God's work in this new land, but according to my understanding of what Christianity means, I would have to say that mass murder and cultural genocide do not qualify as Christian behavior.

And I think when we talk about our history, we must always acknowledge our debt to the Native Americans and African Americans

without whose suffering the United States of America could not exist. This suffering is part of our national heritage.

According to Gary Kowalski in his book *Revolutionary Spirits: The Enlightened Faith of America's Founding Fathers*, the European colonists who came to settle this country were of many different faiths, and almost all of them were Christians and Protestants: Congregationalists and Presbyterians were “the largest sects, anchored mostly in New England. Baptists and Quakers [were] more widely dispersed in the middle colonies and the South... Anglicans flourished in Virginia, while the populations of North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were eclectic...most [Anglican] Americans had broken away from the Church of England, which they considered...corrupt. They were accustomed to defying the king, [which] prepared them for rebellion when the time came” (op cit).

In addition to these religious dissenters, other settlers were encouraged to leave England, including “the destitute, felons... entrepreneurs, adventurers, and vagabonds...Many were what John Adams called ‘Horse Protestants’ or ‘Protestants who believed nothing,’ which is to say they had about as much appreciation for reformed doctrine as Oliver Cromwell’s horse” (op cit). Very few Jews or Catholics could be found among the colonists. And while almost all the immigrants were nominally Protestant, “the vast majority...were unchurched and not eager to submit to any ecclesiastical body that might restrict their personal liberty” (Kowalski, 5).

Writing about the colonists in 1775, Edmund Burke, the Anglo- Irish statesman, warned the British Parliament that our founders were “Protestants, and of that kind which is most adverse to all implicit subjection of mind and opinion” (op cit).

And this was the challenge the founders faced [on the eve of the Revolutionary War]. Their countrymen and –women were of many faiths and no faith. Most didn’t regard themselves as Americans, but as Pennsylvanians or residents of whatever province they inhabited. As to nationality, most considered themselves British [with many exceptions] like Swedish Lutherans, Dutch Reformed, and German- speaking Moravians, whose primary allegiance was to their own church and culture. They were protective of their distinct traditions and fiercely independent, but could also be exclusive in their beliefs. The founders’ task was to meld this variety into a union of shared aspirations and commonly held values (op cit).

The historian Charles Beard identified six men as primary agents among the founding fathers “based on their spiritual affinity and preeminence in the American cause:” George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and Thomas Paine (Kowalski, 197). All were active in the American Revolution and the founding of the new nation. Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison served as the first four presidents of the new republic, one after the other from 1789 to 1817. Benjamin Franklin was an inventor, satirist, scientist, politician, diplomat and statesman who dedicated many years of his life to advocating for American independence and supporting the new United States. Thomas Paine wrote *Common Sense*, the pro- independence pamphlet published in January, 1776, which is credited with converting thousands of colonists to the cause of independence from Great Britain.

Each of these six men played an essential role in forming the nation we have inherited, and not one of them was an orthodox Christian (Forrest Church, “America’s Founding Faiths,” *UU World*, winter 2007, 26). Their religious views colored their political attitudes and influenced the founding documents and early governments of the United States.

According to Forrest Church, author of *So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle over Church and State*, George Washington’s character and philosophy were shaped by his social location. “A Virginia gentleman was judged on appearances. [After] Washington was elected America’s first president by acclamation...[he hoped to] honor his election by striving to prove himself worthy of it... [H]is thinking was Roman, not Christian; duty called, not God...Virtue proved itself by deeds apparent to all, not by a contrite heart or spotless soul...To Washington, virtue and honor coalesced into a single overriding aspiration : ‘to do my duty in this world as well as I am capable of performing it, & to merit the good opinion of all men’ (*UU World* 28).

He had been baptized into the Church of Virginia and attended services with his wife Martha, but he never prayed on his knees or took communion, and he always left the church after the sermon before the sacrament was offered. Forrest Church calls Washington “culturally Christian” and notes that as a military commanding officer or when he was president, Washington did not hesitate to call his countrymen to prayer. A few weeks after Congress passed the article in the Bill of Rights

calling for no established religion, those same legislators asked Washington to proclaim a National Day of Prayer and Thanksgiving to thank God for “affording them an opportunity peacefully to establish a constitutional government for their safety and happiness” and he issued the proclamation that established the first Thanksgiving Day (29).

Two priorities governed Washington’s attitudes toward religion and the state: first that religious freedom be honored. In a letter to America’s Baptists who asked him to support a Bill of Rights to be added to the Constitution, he wrote, “Every man, conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience” (ibid.).

His second priority was that religion should be “quiet to the state.” Asked by a delegation of Quakers to support the abolition of slavery, he rebuffed their appeal because it was based in their religion, which he believed should have no influence in government (ibid.).

Like Washington, whom he followed as president of the United States, John Adams was formed by his social location. He grew up on a modest farm in Braintree, MA, where “thrift, simple living, and a lack of ostentation were the bedrock of small- town life” (Kowalski 111). Baptized into the Calvinist faith, he attended mandatory Sabbath services and learned his letters in the local school where the alphabet began, “A – In Adam’s fall, We sinned all” (ibid.) An early conflict in the parish

concerning a controversial new minister put young John off his parents' plan to prepare him for the ministry. "I perceived very clearly," he wrote later, "...that the study of theology, and the pursuit of it as a profession, would involve me in endless altercations and make my life miserable, without any prospect of doing any good to my fellow men" (ibid.).

First exposed at Harvard to the writings of John Locke and the Enlightenment critique of Puritanism's strict adherence to Biblical truth alone, Adams later wrote, "the human understanding is a revelation from its Maker, which can never be disputed or doubted...we can never be so certain of any prophecy ...or of any miracle...as we are from the revelation of nature, that is Nature's God, that two and two are equal to four" (Kowalski, 118). If religious revelation contradicted common sense, reason was the final arbiter of truth.

He denied the Calvinist teaching of the elect, which taught that most people were damned and would burn in hell, as inconsistent with his understanding of a compassionate God, and wrote to Thomas Jefferson, "I believe no such things. My adoration of the Author of the Universe is too profound and too sincere. The love of God and his creation—delight, joy, triumph, exaltation in my own existence—...are my religion" (Kowalski, 121).

Adams continued to attend weekly worship his entire life. According to Forrest Church, "Adams didn't think like a true believer, but he felt like a true believer...to Adams the Bible was the best book in the

world and Christianity was the one indispensable guarantor of public morality” (*UU World* 30). He was defeated by Thomas Jefferson in his bid for a second term as president in part because of the growing strength of the minority churches, the Baptists and the Methodists. “As if on political cue,” Church writes, “the Second Great Awakening opened with a bang during the height of the 1800 campaign. By the thousands, seekers gathered at interfaith, evangelical camp meetings, hoping to be liberated by the gospel of freedom in Christ from all earthly authorities, including the established church” (*UU World* 30).

Jefferson’s election with the help of those who hoped to escape the constraints of traditional religion seems just. “He was famous for not attending church...To friends, he referred to himself variously as a ‘Theist,’ ‘Deist,’ ‘Unitarian,’ ‘Rational Christian,’ and ‘Epicurean; ‘I am a sect unto myself as far as I know.’ (Church, *UU World* 31).

In the Preamble to the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson listed our “inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” According to Forrest Church, these were “interdependent ideals...grounded...in an Enlightenment metaphysic...a universal bequest from nature and nature’s God” (*UU World* 30- 31). Jefferson said, “The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time” (31).

His 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptists delineating the line between church and state “encapsulates a lifetime of thought and effort dedicated to liberating the individual from government interference in

matters of religion” (ibid.). Jefferson wrote, “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God...that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between church and state” (ibid.).

James Madison was Jefferson’s close friend for 50 years, served as his Secretary of State, and followed him as President from 1809 to 1817. Earlier in the life of the republic Madison had helped organize the 1787 Constitutional Convention and developed the concept of separate but equal branches of government with checks and balances to protect individuals from the majority. He is credited with drafting the United States Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Historian Garry Wills wrote, “As a framer and defender of the Constitution [Madison] had no peer” (Wikipedia).

Benjamin Franklin is “the founding father who winks at us,” according to biographer Walter Isaacs (Kowalski 46). A signer of both the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Franklin’s presence and influence in the early years of the republic were so great that it has been said he was “the only President of the United States who was never President of the United States” (Wikipedia, “Benjamin Franklin”).

Franklin is credited with being foundational to the roots of American values and character, a marriage of the practical and democratic Puritan values of thrift, hard work, education, community spirit, self-governing institutions, and opposition to authoritarianism both political and religious, with the scientific and tolerant values of the Enlightenment (ibid.).

Baptized and educated in a Presbyterian church based on Calvinism, Franklin rarely attended services as an adult, preferring to use the time for study. "I was never without some religious principles," he said. "I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity; that He made the world, and governed it by His providence; that the most acceptable service to God was doing good to man..." (ibid.).

"Like most Enlightenment intellectuals, Franklin separated virtue, morality, and faith from organized religion, although he felt that if religion grew weaker, morality, virtue, and society in general would also decline. Thus, he wrote to Thomas Paine, 'If men are so wicked with religion, what would they be if without it.'" (ibid.).

Franklin was a strong believer in respect and tolerance for all religious groups and donated money for new places of worship to be built in Philadelphia. "John Adams noted that Franklin was a mirror in which people saw their own religion: 'The Catholics thought him almost a Catholic. The Church of England claimed him as one of them. The Presbyterians thought him half a Presbyterian, and the Friends believed him a Wet Quaker.' Whatever else he was, concludes [historian David] Morgan, 'he was a true champion of generic religion.'" (ibid.).

Thomas Paine's place among the founding fathers is secured

by his passion and his political writings, which advocated for independence among the colonists and provided inspiration during the Revolutionary War. *Common Sense*, which Paine published anonymously on January 10, 1776, became the best-selling work in eighteenth-century America, selling 100,000 copies in three months throughout the American British colonies. Paine's gift was to express political ideas in clear, concise writing accessible to the average reader. His work, which attacked the British monarchy in blunt terms, initiated public debate about independence and prepared the colonial man and woman on the street for the conflict to come.

Once the war started, Paine published a series of pamphlets called *The Crisis*, which General George Washington had read to his enlisted men to inspire them. The first *Crisis* pamphlet begins,

These are the times that try men's souls: The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap; we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives everything its value" (Wikipedia, "Thomas Paine")

In the next edition of the *Crisis* the words "the United States of America" appeared for the first time (Kowalski 95).

Paine was an Englishman who immigrated to the American colonies in 1774. His father was a Quaker, a minority that had been persecuted in Britain for many years, giving many Friends what Kowalski calls "a

defiant, oppositional edge” (90). Young Tom was “an upstart” who challenged the strict Quaker teachings such as pacifism and tee totaling, though he remained sympathetic to the religion his whole life. “What he retained from his childhood faith was a commitment to radical equality and a fierce antipathy to privilege” (ibid.).

“I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish Church, by the Roman Church, by the Greek Church, by the Protestant Church, not by any church that I know of,” he wrote.

“My own mind is my own church” (Kowalski 105- 106).

At the end of his life, he professed this simple creed: “The world is my country, All mankind are my brethren, To do good is my religion, I believe in one God and no more” (Kowalski 108).

These great men, our founders, shaped our nation with their beliefs in honor and duty, reason, religious tolerance, separation of church and state, checks and balances to protect the minority from the majority, freethinking and commitment to political change born of passion. Above all, they were “champions of liberty” who believed, as Forrest Church has written, “that to promote justice and liberty for all the secular and religious realms must be kept autonomous. Government attempts to impose religious (or moral) values suppress religion instead, they claimed, by violating individual freedom of conscience” (*UU World* 26).

So were they Christians? Well they lived in a religious landscape where almost everybody was some kind of Protestant. They were aware of

other religions and the need to protect religious minorities. People around them were experiencing ecstatic conversions in the Great Awakening. The Puritans in Massachusetts were still the Standing Order with an established church until 1823, teaching that only a few were elected for heaven, the rest to burn in hell.

These men were dissenters and abstainers from orthodoxy. Influenced by the Enlightenment, they studied science and some harbored Deist convictions, retaining their belief in God but letting go of orthodox doctrine. They were many kinds of believers, none of them orthodox Christians. Their respect for religious pluralism that they espoused reflects the reality of our nation, a country where many faiths abide side- by- side.

As President Obama said on his inaugural day, “We know that our patchwork heritage is a strength, not a weakness. We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers.” This rich diversity is our opportunity to learn to live together in peace and to listen to and learn from each other.

In this way we can carry forth the promise of our founding fathers.

So what does it mean when a person says, “America is a Christian nation”? Sometimes politicians make this claim to affiliate, or maybe even ingratiate themselves, with voters who want their leaders to be Christian. Here I think it means something like, “I am a good person. You can trust me. I agree with you about things like abortion and gay marriage. I will

work to keep our country morally right. I'm like you, fellow Christian, concerned about the immorality and lack of character in our country today, and I'm going to do something about it!" The subtext may also be racist (Let's keep or get our country back for the white people) or jingoist (America is the greatest country in the world, and we will defeat those Arabs and those Muslims).

Among ordinary people with no political aspirations or agenda, claiming America as a Christian nation reflects in my guess a concern about national makeup, character, morality, and/or hegemony. It assumes, as does orthodox Christian doctrine, that Christianity is the best religion, better than the others at least and usually the one true religion. It assumes that if people were good Christians they would behave well. There is, in my view, no evidence for this, and so the claim represents a kind of ignorance, willful or not, and a narrowness of vision and perspective.

There's no question that the world is a mess, and full of misery and pain. Calling for us to turn back to our so-called Christian roots will not, in my view, make it less so. The founding fathers were right about that: only respect for religious pluralism can lead the way forward. Fortunately for us, they wrote it into the law of the land.

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