

Faiths of the Founders
July 3, 2016
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Introduction

Good morning. Today I invite you to enter into the world of the men known as the Founding Fathers, five individuals in particular: Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, and Franklin. We'll listen to some of their words about what they believed to be true about God and religion, virtue, and the role these would play in the life of the new republic.

You're going to hear a lot of references to God today, so let me just say a word about what that meant to these particular men. They did believe in God, all of them. They did not necessarily believe in the Judeo-Christian God of Scripture, though some of them did, and our five Founders, although they called themselves Christian, doubted the divinity of Jesus, or even firmly denied it. In this way, they were all Unitarians at heart.

Children of the intellectual and cultural movement known as the Enlightenment, they prized reason as a God-given faculty by which all religious claims must be tested. Therefore, miracles and divine revelation meant nothing to them. For them, the divine revealed itself through nature and science. When they spoke of God, this was what they had in mind: the God of Nature, a Creator God who acted in the world to reward those who used their gifts of reason and free will to advance the cause of freedom, justice and truth. Not least of these divine interventions, in their view, was the role of Providence, as they termed it, in securing the success of the American Revolution. As people usually do, they firmly believed that God was on their side. They believed Providence had a stake in this new nation and its ideals. You'll hear this idea when we sing "America the Beautiful." The song was written a hundred years after our Founders lived, but the idea that America has been especially favored has never died.

This idea is also expressed in the prayer of thanksgiving that I'm about to read to you, authored by Benjamin Franklin. In order to make the words a bit more palatable, I've taken the liberty of mixing in some of the many names the Founders used for this God, or Providence: these included Great Governor of the Universe, Supreme Disposer of All Good, Higher Cause, the Great Teacher, Ruler of the Skies, Great Spirit, Powerful Goodness, Marvelous Guide, and Father of Lights.

Sermon

The founding fathers were no saints, though people often talk about them as if they were. We study their words, looking to discover their original intent. Not so that we can sharpen or amend their own ideas necessarily, but more often to prop up whatever our own opinions happen to be. If Thomas Jefferson agreed with me, I must be right, so there. Much the way that people use the Bible. The founders' words have something of the authority of Holy Writ. But like the Bible, the ideas of the founders were full of inconsistencies, ambiguities and contradictions, so it's possible to find support for a wide range of opinions.

As I say, they were flawed human beings. The five I've chosen for you to meet this morning were no exception. Benjamin Franklin neglected his family and harbored ugly bigoted views of immigrants and others. George Washington had a legendary temper that he controlled with effort. James Madison had a bleak view of human nature, John Adams was a curmudgeon, and Thomas Jefferson, like Washington, Madison and their fellow Southern landowners, was a slaveholder. Jefferson abhorred the idea of slavery; he knew it was inexcusable. Thinking of slavery, he said, "I tremble for my country when I think that God is just." And yet he was not strong enough to sacrifice his lifestyle by freeing the individuals who made it possible. These men were like us in their failings and unique in their gifts.

They included the charismatic Jefferson as well as the reserved Madison; the puritanical Adams and the bon vivant Franklin; Washington and Franklin had no great interest in theology, while Jefferson, Adams and Madison were lifelong seekers.

So no, we can't speak about the founding fathers as though they were one homogeneous group – these men who authored and signed the Declaration of Independence, who fought the Revolution, who hammered out the vision of a nation of laws in the hot summer of 1787, producing the masterpiece of our Constitution, and who served as presidents, ambassadors, cabinet members and justices in the early years of the new country. They were a varied bunch – in their opinions, prejudices, religions, class allegiances and personalities.

This doesn't stop people from talking about them as though they spoke with one voice. We hear talk about "returning to the values of the founding fathers" and need to ask, "Which fathers, and which values?" Of particular interest to us this morning is the claim made by many on the Religious Right that "America was founded as a Christian nation." The implications of that piece of misinformation are many and dangerous, from teaching Creationism and prayer in our public schools to discriminating against non-Christians in the workplace and in public service, to making moral judgements based on Biblical law, to dehumanizing Jews, Muslims, and atheists.

So it matters what the founding fathers actually believed. As it turns out, they included some orthodox Christians, but many more of them, including our five exemplars, were Christians only in the sense that they admired the teachings of Jesus. Most of them attended church, at least some of the time. It was the thing to do then as it is now, if you want to get ahead in the world, especially in public office, but they also sincerely valued the place of churches in their own lives and in creating societies of virtuous citizens.

And it most definitely matters that they were very explicit about *this*: America was not a Christian nation, or any other kind of religious nation. It's there in the first amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The state was not to interfere in the free practice of religion or impose any religious practices upon the people.

We may take the First Amendment for granted today. But it broke new ground when it was adopted in 1791. It was common then for states to support the churches of one denomination or another with tax dollars. The First Amendment doesn't forbid states from doing this, it leaves it up to them – but it sets a precedent. What's more, the founders, and author of the Bill of Rights, James Madison, in particular, were stating that the US was not like Britain, where the king was

also head of the official church, the Church of England. So this was a break with tradition and one that the Religious Right would do well to understand.

Before we start hearing from these revolutionary thinkers in their own words about religion and its place in the nation, I need to say a couple of other things to set the context.

These men were, as I said earlier, products of the Enlightenment, a movement that was boundlessly optimistic about the future of humankind. Scientific discoveries that shattered old worldviews were happening all around. The potential to understand the universe through the tools of science and reason seemed boundless. No wonder these Enlightenment figures worshipped the God of Nature.

At the same time, in this country, there was in their day a revival of fundamentalist Christian religion called the First and Second Great Awakenings. Hellfire and brimstone, extravagantly emotional religious revival meetings. The God of this movement was a god of threat and vengeance as well as the source of religious ecstasy – displays of emotion that the Unitarians sneeringly dismissed as “enthusiasm.” Baptists and Methodists were finding converts to a more miracle-based and non-rational form of religion, in direct opposition to the restrained, staid and more intellectual Anglican and Congregationalist churches of the founders. So the founders’ insistence on reason as the source of knowledge rather than revelation was opposed to all this, as was the new and growing movement of Unitarianism. It was a time when most Americans were very serious about religion.

So allow me to treat you to their views on these matters, in their own words, the words of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison – the first four presidents of the United States, as it happens – and of course, dear old Ben Franklin.

The Founders in Their Own Words

What did the founders believe about God and Jesus? Here are some of their general statements of faith and on the nature of God:

James Madison

The finiteness of the human understanding betrays itself on all subjects, but more especially when it contemplates such as involve infinity.

Benjamin Franklin

Here is my creed: I believe in one god, Creator of the Universe. That He governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render to him, is doing Good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound religion, and I regard them... in whatever sect I meet with them.

Thomas Jefferson

Question with boldness even the existence of God, because, if there is one, he must more approve the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear... Reason and free inquiry are the only effectual agents against error. Give a loose to them, they will support the true religion by bringing every false one to their tribunal.

Contemplating the movements of the heavenly bodies, so exactly held in their courses by the balance of centrifugal and centripetal forces, along with the earth and its plenitude of creatures, it is impossible not to believe that there is in all this design, cause and effect, up to an ultimate cause, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion.

John Adams

The Ten Commandments and the Sermon on the Mount contain my religion.

True religion is from the heart, between Man and his Creator ... The unchangeable and eternal foundation of religion found in all human beings {is not} the funguous growth or spurious sprout [of the sermons preached by] the grossest blockheads and most atrocious villains.

On life after death

Thomas Jefferson

When I was young I was fond of the speculations which seemed to promise some insight into that hidden country, but observing at length that they left me in the same ignorance in which they had found me, I have for very many years ceased to read or think concerning them, and have reposed my head on that pillow of ignorance which a benevolent Creator has made so soft for us, knowing how much we should be forced to use it.

Ben Franklin

[I believe] that the Soul is immortal and that God will certainly reward Virtue and punish Vice either here or hereafter... Our Recommendation will not be that we said Lord, Lord, but that we did Good to our fellow Creatures.... A virtuous Heretic shall be saved before a wicked Christian.

On Jesus and the teachings of Christianity

Thomas Jefferson

[The doctrine of the Trinity is] an unintelligible proposition ... that three are one and one is three; and yet one is not three, and the three are not one.

To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian, in the only sense he wished anyone to be; sincerely attached to his

doctrines in preference to all others; ascribing to him every human excellence; and believing he never claimed any other.

Among the sayings and discourses imputed to {Jesus} by his biographers, I find many passages of fine imagination, correct morality, and of the most lovely benevolence; and others again of so much ignorance, so much absurdity, such untruth, charlatanism, and imposture, as to pronounce it impossible that such contradictions should have proceeded from the same being. I separate therefore, the gold from the dross; restore to him the former, and leave the latter to the stupidity of some and the roguery of others of the disciples. Of this band of dupes and imposters, Paul was the great [leader] and the first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus.

John Adams

An incarnate God!!! An eternal, self-existent omnipresent omniscient Author of this stupendous Universe suffering on a Cross!!! My soul starts with horror at the Idea... [The notion of] a mere creature, or finite Being, making Satisfaction to infinite Justice for the sins of the world is a convenient cover for absurdity.

Benjamin Franklin

As for Jesus of Nazareth. I think the system of Morals and his religion as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw, or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have... some doubts to his Divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with it now, where I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. [Written 6 weeks before his death.]

On Providence and a God that acts in our lives

George Washington

[In a letter to his brother:] As I have heard since my arrival at this place, a circumstantial account of my death and dying speech, I take this early opportunity of contradicting both, and of assuring you that I now exist and appear in the land of the living by the miraculous care of Providence that protected me beyond all human expectation; I had four bullets through my coat, and two horses shot under me, and yet escaped unhurt.

John Adams

[America is] the Opening of a grand scene and design in Providence, for the illumination of the Ignorant and the emancipation of the slavish Part of mankind all over the earth.

Benjamin Franklin

I beg I may not be understood to infer, that our General Convention was divinely inspired when it formed the new federal Constitution... yet I must own I have so much faith in the general government of the world by Providence, that I can hardly conceive a transaction of such momentous importance to the welfare of millions now existing, and to exist in the posterity of a great nation, should be suffered to pass without being in some degree influenced, guided, and

governed by that omnipotent, omnipresent, and beneficent Ruler, in whom all inferior Spirits live, and move, and have their Being.

On the necessity of religion in human lives and in creating a virtuous Republic:

John Adams

What has preserved this race of Adamses in all their ramifications, in such numbers, health, peace, comfort and mediocrity? [Except for religion,] they might have all been rakes, fops, sots, gamblers, starved with hunger, frozen with cold, scalped by Indians, etc., etc., etc., been melted away and disappeared

The design of Christianity was not to make men good riddle-solvers or good mystery-mongers, but good men, good magistrates, and good subjects, good husbands and good wives, good parents and good children, good masters and good servants.

There is no such thing as morality without a supposition of a God. There is no right or wrong in the universe without the supposition of a moral governor.

Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.

Ben Franklin

Faith can conduce nothing towards salvation where it does not conduce to virtue.

{Some} can live a virtuous life without the assistance afforded by religion. [But most are] weak and ignorant men and women [who need religion to] restrain them from Vice and to retain them in the practice of Virtue till it becomes habitual. .. If men are so wicked as we now see them, with religion, what would they be if without it?

George Washington

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. [No man can claim the name of patriot] who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens... And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion... Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

On freedom of religion:

James Madison

Toleration is not the opposite of intolerance, but is the counterfeit of it. Both are despotisms. One assumes to itself the right of withholding liberty of conscience, the other of granting it.

Religion, or the duty which we owe our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force and violence; and therefore all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion according to the dictates of conscience.

George Washington

Of all the animosities that have existed among mankind, those which are caused by differences of sentiments in religion appear to be the most inveterate and distressing, and are most to be deprecated.

Believing, as I do, that religion and morality are the essential pillars of civic society, I view with unspeakable pleasure that harmony and brotherly love which characterize the clergy of different denominations ... exhibiting to the world a new and promising spectacle, at once the pride of our country and the surest basis of universal harmony.

Thomas Jefferson

I believe ... that he who observes those moral precepts [of honesty, truth, temperance and gratitude] in which all religions concur, will never be questioned at the gates of heaven as to the dogmas in which they all differ.

Believing... that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate 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.

So there you have it. Five of the founding fathers, worth getting to know better. I've tried to resist the urge to cherry pick their statements, as I've accused others of doing with a religious point to make, on both the religious right and the left. I would have liked to have found that they had no religious agenda of their own in establishing this new and experimental nation. I would have liked to have found that they believed God had nothing to do with the future success of the United States. But such is not the case.

On the other hand, they believed just as strongly in the separation of church and state and, I'm pleased to report, were decidedly Unitarian in their views on Jesus. What's more, they were fascinating figures, and with all their failings, inspirational. They truly cared for the common good, in many cases, putting it above their own. They were visionary. Knowing that they could not foresee what conditions we would be living with some two hundred and twenty five years into the future, they set in place the framework of laws that continues to support justice and the rights of the individual. They make me grateful for their legacy.

These founding fathers' words make me disheartened and angry and also reassured. Disheartened, when I think of how we as a nation have so often failed to live up to their expectations of us. Angry, when I see the cartoonish nature of some of our current political leaders; and reassured by these founders' idealism tempered by pragmatism, the proof they give us that brilliance need not be cloaked in cynicism. That women and men exist who care about living justly in the world *and* who have the wisdom to make it possible to do so.

On this national birthday, in this election season, and going forward, may their spirit be remembered. May we strive to be their worthy successors.

May we take courage from examples of goodness, wherever we may find them, and may we have the wisdom to see them for what they are; may we reject cynical despair about the ills and shortcomings we see in our world, in our nation and in ourselves.

Books consulted and sources of all quotations used:

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