WAS AMERICA FOUNDED TO BE SECULAR?

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What role should religion play in a free society? More and more people today would answer: none. That would not have been the answer of the Founders of the United States – the men who fought the American Revolution and wrote the country's Constitution.

To them the issue of religion and freedom were inextricably linked. You couldn't have freedom without religion. In fact, the political philosophy of the Founders necessitated a divine foundation.

Thomas Jefferson makes this clear in the Declaration of Independence when he writes that "all men…are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The purpose of government, Jefferson and his compatriots believed, was not to bestow rights; rather, it was to protect those rights already endowed upon human beings by God.

But government isn't enough for a free society. A moral people is also required; that is, a people moral enough to police itself. "Virtue or morality," George Washington observed, "is a necessary spring of popular government." Thus, for the Founders, liberty was not merely the ability to do what one wanted; it came with moral demands and boundaries.

They all accepted the rule of life expressed by Benjamin Franklin: "Nothing brings more pain than too much pleasure; nothing more bondage than too much liberty."

The Founders knew that the absolute enemy of freedom was – ironically – freedom that was absolute and unrestrained. And where was this restraint going to come from? Their answer was religion, which for them – because of when and where they lived – was some variety of Christianity.

"Let Divines, and Philosophers, Statesmen and Patriots unite," Samuel Adams wrote, "[in] instructing [citizens] in the Art of self-government…in short, of leading them in the Study, and Practice of the exalted Virtues of the Christian system."
The Christian system to which Adams refers is composed of Judeo-Christian values – the values rooted in the Old and New Testaments, both of which were referred to by the Founders with equal conviction and frequency.

Jefferson – yes, the very same Thomas Jefferson who is so often portrayed as anti-religious – confirmed this sentiment in his Notes on the State of Virginia, when he asked: "[C]an the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? [And] that they are not to be violated but with his wrath?"

James Madison likewise affirmed the essential connection between religion and morality: "The belief in a God All Powerful, wise, and good is. . . essential to the moral order of the world and to the happiness of man. . . ."

John Adams believed that "the doctrine of a supreme, intelligent, wise, almighty sovereign of the universe," a doctrine he credited to Judaism, was the "great essential principle of all morality, and consequently of all civilization." And he applied this thinking specifically to the new nation he helped to create: "Our Constitution," he said, "was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other."

As President, he replied to a letter from university students in a way that would surprise many today: "Science, liberty, and religion . . . have an inseparable union. Without their joint influence no society can be great, flourishing, or happy."

Meanwhile another Founder, Alexander Hamilton, looked at the French Revolution and saw something much different. That revolution, unlike the American Revolution, had devolved into violence and chaos. Hamilton believed he understood why. The anti-religious force it unleashed, he wrote, "annihilates the foundations of social order and true liberty, confounds all moral distinctions and substitutes [for] the mild and beneficent religion of the Gospel a gloomy, persecuting, and desolating atheism."

For the Founders, a free society divorced from religion simply could not work and would not survive. It is no wonder then that in his Farewell Address, George Washington chastised those who would claim to be patriots, and yet undermine the influence of religion: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens."

The Founders did not demand that anyone believe in any particular religion or even in God – quite the contrary. But while they understood the value of a secular government, they feared a secular society – one without religion.

So should we.

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