



WERE THE FOUNDERS RELIGIOUS?

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What were the religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers of the United States?

There's been a lot of controversy surrounding this subject. But there shouldn't be.

Because of their prominence, I will discuss George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin—our nation's first three Presidents, and the man referred to as “the First American”—all of whom, even if some did not individually adhere to orthodox Christianity, were steeped in the Judeo-Christian tradition.

Here's what we can say for certain about their religious beliefs.

- 1) All of the Founders believed in a transcendent God, that is, a Creator who exists outside of nature.
- 2) All the Founders believed in a God who imposes moral obligations on human beings.
- 3) All the Founders believed in a God who punishes bad behavior and rewards good behavior in an afterlife.

The notion that any of the Founders believed in an impersonal deity who merely created the universe and then left it to itself is false. All of them believed in a God who, as Franklin said at the Constitutional Convention, “governs in the affairs of men.”

Let's start with George Washington.

Washington's writings, both public and private, are full of references to the Bible. This is certainly true during his eight years as the first President of the United States. Here is Washington at his first Inaugural: “The propitious smiles of Heaven can never be expected on a nation that disregards the eternal rules of order and right, which Heaven itself has ordained.” In all likelihood, Washington was an orthodox Christian.

Like Washington, Benjamin Franklin also referenced Bible verses, stories, and metaphors throughout his life. His calls for prayer at the Constitutional Convention were typical of his attitude. Franklin, who had his own unorthodox views, summed up his faith this way: “That the soul of man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this.”

While the religious views of Washington and Franklin are clear, those of John Adams and Thomas Jefferson are more complicated. Adams referred to himself as a Christian throughout his life, but did not believe in traditional Christian doctrines such as the trinity or

the divinity of Jesus. Nonetheless, before, during and after his tenure as President, Adams repeatedly asserted his admiration for the Christian faith: “Those general Principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the Existence and Attributes of God,” he wrote.

Likewise, Adams spoke of his great respect for the Bible. “[T]he Bible is the best book in the world. It contains more of my... philosophy than all the libraries I have seen...” Those who suggest that Adams was against religion like to quote from a letter he wrote to Thomas Jefferson in which he said, “This would be the best of all possible worlds if there was no religion in it.”

Unfortunately, those who cite this line never quote the lines that immediately follow “But in this exclamation, I should have been as fanatical as [the skeptics of religion]. Without religion, this world would be something not fit to be mentioned in polite company—I mean hell.” So, those who quote the first line without quoting the subsequent lines are either unaware of the full comment or are deliberately misleading people as to Adams’s beliefs.

Like Adams, Thomas Jefferson did not adhere to orthodox doctrine. Yet he often declared himself to be a Christian. “I am a Christian, he said, “in the only sense he [Jesus] wished anyone to be: sincerely attached to his doctrines...” As one of the leaders of the American Revolution, his views are well known. After all, this is the man who wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “all men... are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” You can’t get a much more explicit statement of belief than that.

These four founders – Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Franklin – were practical men with a sober view of human nature. They understood that man is morally weak and that religion provides the best encouragement and incentive to be good.

It does so, first and foremost, by teaching that choices have consequences. Not necessarily in the here and now, but most certainly in the hereafter – meted out by a just God. It should come as no surprise, then, that Jefferson, in his second inaugural, asked for, “The favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old, from their native land.”

So, what were the religious beliefs of the Founders?

They were diverse. But all of them were rooted in the Judeo-Christian values found in the Bible.

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