

RELIGION: THE “INDISPENSABLE SUPPORT” OF THE NATION

Shanda Heindrichs

INTRODUCTION

When it came time to settle the place of religion in the new republic, America’s founders chose complete freedom of worship and opted for no religious establishment. Religion received no mention in the United States constitution. But if religion was vital to the nation, and it clearly was in their opinion, then why did they choose to be silent on the issue? Although they were politicians who had great practical concerns to tackle, and there was no one way in which the founders thought about religion and the relationship of church and state, their decision was underscored by the shared philosophical position that only freedom of conscience gives rise to sincere and true religious belief. What is more, the two main spokesmen in the fight for religious freedom, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson, strongly believed that complete separation of church and state, and not merely religious toleration, represented the only appropriate relationship of the government to the individual’s religious will. Any religious dictate from the government meant tyranny over the conscience, which must be free. However, establishing religious freedom in no sense indicated an indifference to religion on the part of the founders. On the contrary, they had the greatest hopes for the growth of religion in America. Not only were they convinced that the health and liberty of the nation depended on religious vitality, they *defined* liberty as the ability of human reason to freely perceive religious truth, and the choice to act according to it. Therefore, any restraint on the body or mind that prevents the free use of reason, and any choice to act in contradiction to religious truth, is slavery. And as they believed that virtue ultimately derived from no other source than a divine creator, only piety could produce virtue. The equa-

¹ Shanda Heindrichs, B.A., is a graduate of the history program at Bryn Athyn College of the New Church, Bryn Athyn Pennsylvania. The author would like to thank Dr. Jane Williams-Hogan for her ideas and general support in the preparation of this paper.

tion therefore was simple: the nation must be free if it is to be religious, and it must be religious if it is to be free.

In the first section of this essay, I will briefly describe church-state relations as they existed in the colonies and later in the state constitutions as background to the federal decision. After describing the settlement of church-state relations in the United States Constitution and its first amendment, I will explore what sources were available to the founders for an understanding of virtue and its relationship to the state and attempt to show that while secular philosophies of the day played an important role in their thinking, their concept of virtue was essentially a religious one in which virtue was thought of as deriving from, and as an obligation to, a divine creator, and that the moral code of the New Testament was accepted as the best possible guide for human behavior. I will discuss how the thinking of the founders and that of evangelicals found a point of convergence in the belief that the vitality of true religion is necessary to the endurance of the state, and that reason and conscience must be set free in order for true religious belief to emerge though individuals in society. I will then argue, based primarily on the work of Foa Dienstag, that their definition of liberty was the ability to think freely about religious truth, and to act accordingly. I suggest through my discussion of the above points, that in attempting to understand what the founders thought about separation of church and state, it is as important to understand their spiritual conception of freedom, their deep conviction that true religion is necessary to the state, and their belief that separation of church and state would support its growth, as it is to understand what they technically meant by separation. Future generations have debated and continue to debate separation, but I hope I will have shown that the founders would have thought that an understanding of the original intent of the division is useless if it is not held as a fact that the freedom and endurance of the nation relies on its people striving to know and live according to absolute, divine principles.

BACKGROUND: RELIGIOUS TOLERATION IN THE COLONIES AND STATE CONSTITUTIONS

One can't think about the colonial American experience without thinking about intolerance and the struggle for toleration. Religious intolerance in England allowed the persecuted to come to the New World on a spectrum of ideas related to religious toleration. The rise of Puritanism in England saw the conflict between that group and the Anglican Church beginning as early as 1625. These tensions and the oppressive acts of the Stuart kings eventually culminated in the English Civil War of 1642–1649, the execution of Charles I, and the formation of the Commonwealth of 1651–1660 (Dees 1999, 676). Cromwell implemented broad toleration policies for the Commonwealth, but they dissolved with the defeat of the Puritan party and the ascension of Charles II to the throne in 1660, forcing dissenters to the Anglican Church to flee to England (Mendus 1989, 23; Dees *ibid.*). The Puritans who fled persecution by Stuart monarchs did not sail to New England for the opportunity of establishing a religiously tolerant society, but to establish one strictly ordered according to biblical principles (Morgan 1944, 10).¹ Like the individual, the family, and the church, the state as a whole entered into a covenant with God, pledging its outward obedience to Him (*ibid.*). In Massachusetts, religious intolerance found justification in the fact that the aim of government was to uphold the Puritan understanding of God's law in society, and therefore they could not tolerate interference with that order. Another model for church-state relations came through the vision of William Penn. Once jailed in London for his Quaker beliefs, he prescribed broad religious toleration in his charter for Pennsylvania, considering it an essential part of legitimate government—the power of which concerned only civil interests and was separate from the sphere of religion (Murphy 1997, 378, 384, 387).² Penn provided that all those living in his province would be free to worship

¹ Puritans believed that a covenant required free consent, but within this freedom one still had to obey God's laws, which included living within the structures of family, church, and state. In dissenting, one didn't abandon any of these institutions; they were only replaced by better ones (Morgan 1944, 26–27).

² According to Murphy, the "extensive religious freedom Penn had in mind for Pennsylvania encountered great difficulty in actually taking hold" (1997, 379).

according to conscience, and would not be molested on account of religious persuasion provided that they acknowledge “One almighty God, the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the World” (Penn).³ He also articulated that anyone regardless of their creed could serve in government, both legislatively and executively, provided that they professed a belief in Jesus Christ. The religious freedoms in Pennsylvania and Rhode Island were exceptions. In the other colonies where they had religious establishments, whether Anglican or Puritan, they believed that encouraging uniformity of belief around what they believed to be the one true faith was the best means to create a peaceful and virtuous society.

During America’s war for independence, religious dissenters joined forces with Whig politicians for religious freedom. In December of 1776, the Continental Congress cited abuses of power by the British monarchy that they claimed were progressively robbing the colonists of long-enjoyed and rightful freedoms. When state delegates met that year to draft new constitutions, the desire for self-determination that drove revolutionary America to fight for political and economic liberty also ignited the passions of dissenters and politicians who believed in the Enlightenment ideal of freedom of conscience. In addition, the ideology of the Great Awakening, a period of dramatic religious revival in America, added fire to the desire for religious freedom as ministers preached that the individual required freedom of conscience in order to obtain sincere faith. The swelling numbers of Baptists, Presbyterians, and Methodists that resulted from this movement also changed the religious landscapes of the colonies, converting them from mainly monolithic societies to pluralistic ones, and making uniformity much more difficult to maintain (Lambert 2003, 221). In Virginia where the Anglican Church had held official status since 1607, evangelicals along with Whig politicians fought for disestablishment from the Anglican Church. Small numbers of dissenters to the establishment had long been tolerated, with the requirement that they obtain special licenses, and dissenting sects lived relatively peacefully in the colony. However, long held resentment of political discrimination eventually led

³ This quotation is taken from Penn’s *Charter of Privileges*, which was drafted in 1701 and remained the basis of government until 1776.

to cries for disestablishment during the revolutionary era. Their goal was accomplished in 1785 through Virginia's revolutionary Statute for Religious Freedom, drafted by Thomas Jefferson (Lambert 2003, 226). In the various states, those supporting an establishment attempted to satisfy dissenters by suggesting the granting of liberal toleration, but dissenters in the revolution's climate of individualism could no longer be satisfied with the status of tolerated non-conformists (Lambert 2003, 207).

Arguments on all sides of the debate over church-state relations were passionate, and the religious settlements in the states varied. The results for the most part followed the colonial pattern. Rhode Island, like Virginia, had no establishment or restriction of citizenship based on religious persuasion. Delaware required office-holders to profess a belief in the Trinity, and in Pennsylvania they required a belief in heaven and hell based on the idea that a certain minimum of religious belief was necessary to maintain a peaceful society. After the revolution, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire upheld their establishments, while South Carolina, Maryland, and Georgia instituted a non-preferential establishment. Vermont, which became a state in 1791, also voted to uphold establishment (Kidd 1999, 1019–1020).⁴

The federal decision

The delegates to the federal constitutional convention almost unanimously supported the Virginia model of religious freedom, giving the federal government no authority over religious matters. In fact, it made no mention of religion, except to say that no religious tests of any kind could be required for office holding (Lambert 2003, 250, 237). When the first draft of the constitution was produced, some were dismayed to find that nowhere did it affirm the Christian faith or a belief in God.

When the Constitutional Convention convened in May of 1787, the delegates poured over James Madison's draft based on his Virginia Plan, and among the practical concerns surrounding the issue of religious lib-

⁴ Internal pressures eventually led to the end of religious establishments in New Hampshire in 1817, Connecticut in 1818, and Massachusetts in 1833 (Kidd 1999, 1021).

erty with which the delegates had to contend was the problem of supporting unity in a pluralistic nation (*ibid.*, 241). The question of religion could prove particularly divisive, and if any one sect felt that its right to religious liberty was compromised by any terms in the constitution, hopes of ratification could be destroyed (*ibid.*, 250). Choosing to be silent on religion avoided dissent and embraced the liberal concept of a plurality of sects competing in a free market of religious ideas. What constituted true Christianity was left to the opinion of individuals and states.

The absence of support for religion was contentiously debated when the draft was presented to the public. One of the Anti-Federalist objections to the constitution was that silence on the issue of religion would leave the nation open to corruption, as many believed that the stability and virtue of the republic depended upon some form of government support of Christianity. Some felt that the failure to mention God was a dangerous and “sinful omission” that rejected divine guidance (Davis 2000, 206).

On the other hand, many felt that a Bill of Rights was necessary to protect freedom of conscience from coercion by the federal government. It became clear that the constitution would not be ratified by some of the largest states, including Massachusetts and Virginia, without the explicit guarantee of religious rights. Dissenters feared that the absence of such a guarantee could leave an opening for a future establishment of a church by the federal government (Lambert 2003, 258). James Madison opposed the proposition for the bill, believing that an attempt to describe religious freedom would result in narrowing its definition. In a letter to Jefferson he wrote, “I am sure that the rights of conscience in particular, if submitted to definition would be narrowed much more than they are ever to be by an assumed power” (*ibid.*, 259). By explicitly granting freedom of religion, Madison feared, the amendment would only open the door to the abuse of what should be regarded as among man’s natural rights.

Understanding that the constitution would never be ratified without an amendment, Madison gave it his support in a speech to the House of Representatives, and the Bill of Rights was added to the constitution on August 24, 1789. The third article stated: “Congress shall make no law establishing religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed.” This prohibited establishment on the

federal level, but left the states free to choose their religious settlements (*ibid.*, 262).

Following the Virginia model of complete religious liberty (as opposed to mere toleration), the founders chose to depart from the theologically based government of their Puritan fathers, and constructed a secular state designed to care for the temporal concerns of politics and economics, and left matters of religion in the hands of the people and the states. As Washington stated, "It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise, of their natural inherent rights ("Reply to Seixas . . .," Gaustad 1892, 278–279). This total separation of church and state stood in contrast to the government of England and those around the world, in which an official church was sanctioned by the state. The sharp distinction between the spheres of church and state did not mean, however, that the founders believed that religion was not critical to the republic. They simply distinguished the government from the substance of the nation, which consisted of the people and their values. It was from the people, and not the political power, that they believed the virtue and strength of the nation must derive. As I show later, the founders believed that virtue had never been, nor could it ever be, successfully coerced from a people, but must arise in the individual from the free exercise of reason and conscience.

SOURCES OF IDEAS REGARDING THE RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND THE STATE

The founders and other Americans drew on diverse and intermixing sources of ideas regarding government and religious freedom during the founding era. This situation is described by James Kloppenberg, who wrote that "the ideas that sailed to America during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were rich in diversity and ambiguity" (Kloppenberg 1987, 19).

INTELLECTUAL AND RELIGIOUS CLIMATE

“The New Learning”

According to Frank Lambert, the founders were educated in the New Learning of the Enlightenment “almost without exception” (Lambert 2003, 167). In an Age of Reason, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke were optimistic that the free use of reason observing the workings of nature would lead to unbounded human progress (*ibid.*, 161). Bacon’s scientific methodology, Newton’s discovery of natural laws, and Locke’s empiricist epistemology opened the doors to a new methodological approach to understanding human society. Students of the New Learning were encouraged to rely on empirical data and to question authority, including religious teachers and Scripture itself (*ibid.*, 165–166). Deism, which became a popular form of religious belief among intellectuals, looked to human reason and the laws of nature as guides to understanding God, and rejected blind belief in Scripture. True religious belief, the Deists thought, only resulted when a principle agreed with a person’s reason, and in order for him to make this discovery, he must be able to think for himself, free from external threats that inhibit the mind’s activity. The “Old Learning,” in contrast, looked unquestioningly to the authority of the Bible for guidance in human affairs (*ibid.*, 165). The Founders varied in their approaches to the New Learning, and while many became Deists, they retained a Christian concept of morality and were able to incorporate the new scientific understanding with Christian ideals.

The evangelical call for freedom

Lambert asserts that the interests of followers of the Enlightenment in America converged with those of America’s evangelicals, as both groups believed in freedom of conscience (*ibid.*, 178). While many Anglicans and New England Puritans tended to hold to the traditional idea that religion should be supported by government and opposed the complete religious freedom endorsed by Jefferson and Madison, Enlightenment thinkers had important allies among evangelical churches, including Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, and the Disciples of Christ (Gaustad 1982, 272). The

Great Awakening had challenged the religious authority of churches and insisted that religious belief and salvation were achieved through a personal experience and internal perception of God. Doctrine and tradition could not save an individual; a person could only be redeemed by God through Jesus' sacrifice (Lambert 2003, 180–182). The path to a personal experience of God, they felt, must be cleared by ridding society of religious tyranny. Promise of material rewards and threat of punishment by government distracted the individual from receiving the voice of God within his own spirit. Although they differed in their understanding of the path to religious knowledge, both evangelicals and Enlightenment intellectuals in America agreed that government interference in religion had a corrosive effect on religious belief.

The Pietist⁵ Isaac Backus was an important ally to the founders in the quest to establish religious liberty. In his book on the religion of Jefferson, Edwin S. Gaustad calls attention to Isaac Backus, among others, as having an influence on Jefferson's ideas of religious freedom (Gaustad 1996, xiii). Having been asked to suggest a bill of rights for the Massachusetts constitution, Backus wrote:

1. "All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent and unalienable rights, among which are the enjoying and defending of life and liberty, acquiring, possessing, and protecting property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety." 2. "As God is the only object of all worship, and nothing can be true religion but a voluntary obedience unto His revealed will, of which each rational soul has an equal right to judge for itself, every person has an unalienable right to act in all religious affairs according to the full persuasion of his own mind . . ." (ibid., 268).

The words of Backus represented the common combination during the revolutionary era of the Enlightenment's argument for religious freedom as a natural right, and the evangelical argument for the autonomy of the soul.

The number of evangelical churches was swelling in the late eighteenth century and their masses proved to be powerful allies to the founders

⁵ Pietism was a movement within Lutheranism that began in the late seventeenth century and inspired John Wesley to start the Methodist movement.

in the quest for religious freedom. Both Jefferson and Madison, who struggled for religious liberty in their state of Virginia and later for the nation as a whole, credited the support of dissenters for the success of their efforts. Jefferson observed that by 1776 the majority of Virginians were dissenters. Even after the disestablishment of the Anglican Church, Virginia's Baptists and Presbyterians, as well as Episcopalians, played an important role in removing the remnants of establishment from the law books, seeing to it that religious freedom was actualized ("Religious" in Gaustad 1982, 270–274).

Civil theology

Political discourse during the founding era took place within the context of civil theology, meaning that it was part of conversation which assumed that religion was relevant to politics (Kidd 1999, 1010). As Colin Kidd argues, the political traditions of the time attempted to reconcile the ideas of religious freedom and religious order. Civil Theology, Kidd maintains, was a "fundamental part of eighteenth century social discourse," which was "bounded by questions of moral obligation and social cohesion on the conservative end, and on the other by doubts about religious establishments fuelling superstition and tyranny and encroaching on the natural and divine rights of religious freedom" (ibid., 1017). Kidd points out that within the framework of civil theology it was generally held that religious belief was a prerequisite condition if an individual is to be trusted in society. William Blackstone, Montesquieu, Francis Hutcheson, and John Locke all held this view.⁶ In English common law tradition, Kidd observes, blasphemy was deemed a legal offence in 1676 because to deny Christianity, the source of the moral bonds of English society, was considered a denial of the law. This position was also upheld by New York's Chief Justice James Kent in 1811 (ibid., 1011.) Among the few who showed disagreement with this idea were the French philosopher Pierre Bayle, who denied the idea that atheists couldn't be trusted in society, and Baron

⁶ According to the analysis of Donald S. Lutz, Montesquieu, Blackstone, and Locke were the thinkers cited most by the founders from the 1760s to 1805 (Lutz 1984, 193).

D'Holbach of Germany, who preferred a police system to religion as a means to preserve virtue, believing that the drawbacks of religion outweighed the benefits (ibid., 1015–1016).

POLITICAL VOCABULARY FOR THE RELATIONSHIP OF RELIGION AND GOVERNMENT

Republicanism

In classical republicanism, citizens had the role of protecting civic virtue against corruption by an executive power. Individuals were to define their interests in terms of the common good (Kloppenber 1987, 14). In Revolutionary discourse, John Trenchard's and Thomas Gordon's *Cato's Letters* and the *Independent Whig* played a very prominent role. In some cases their form of republicanism tended toward anticlericalism and preferred a natural religion to Christianity, but they emphasized the importance of religion to the republic and supported religious establishment (Kidd 1999, 1012).

Scottish Common Sense Moral Philosophy

The works of Scottish Common Sense moral philosophers were highly read during the founding era. As James Kloppenberg wrote, the recognition of their pervasiveness in "the American Enlightenment has been as important as the recognition that natural law provided the screen on which Locke projected his political ideals" (Kloppenber 1987, 17). The Scottish philosophers, among them Francis Hutcheson, Adam Ferguson, Thomas Reid, and Dugeld Stewart, shared a belief in the accountability of the individual to the community. Leaving behind the idea of a traditional religious establishment, they attempted to discover different ways in which to cultivate virtues through culture and economics (ibid., 18).

Francis Hutcheson, who is believed to be important in transmitting Whig politics and Enlightenment moral philosophy to the American colonies, supported the idea of general religious toleration qualified by restraint. In his *A System of Moral Philosophy* from 1755, he advocated limits

to toleration as well as positive government support of essential religious beliefs necessary to the good of society, including belief in a deity who governed earthly affairs through his providence and stood as the ultimate judge of individuals in the afterlife (Kidd 1999, 1011).

Liberalism

John Locke expounded the liberal notion of toleration in his 1689 treatise, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. Locke argued that religious coercion is useless because true religious belief “consists in the inward persuasion of the mind” and cannot be compelled by outward force. What is more, coercion is wrong because it results in hypocrisy by preventing the free workings of reason and conscience that are necessary to the individual’s salvation (Locke 1824, 6). Locke’s formula for avoiding religious tyranny while maintaining a virtuous society was to make the spheres of government and religion distinct, and to put certain limits to religious toleration which he deemed as necessary to peace and virtue, including restrictions against opinions contrary to the moral rules of society, and the requirement of a belief in God (*ibid.*, 26, 27). Unlike the individualism of Thomas Hobbes’ liberal theory, Locke’s conception of human rights and his empirical epistemology was bound by man’s obligations to God, and only by this means were the pursuit of self-interest limited and the concept of virtue absolute. Locke’s conception of liberal toleration diffused directly into American politics through the hands of his admirer, Thomas Jefferson, who interpreted Locke’s philosophy in his Virginia Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, in which he frequently paraphrased Locke’s *Letter* (Sandler 1960, 110). Jefferson, as well as Madison and others, went beyond Locke, however, to advocate complete religious freedom, opposing any requirement of belief by the government.

LOCKE AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LIBERTY AND VIRTUE

Historians such as Carl Becker once held Locke in a place of central importance in revolutionary ideas, but in the work of a younger generation of authors including Bernard Bailyn, Gordon Wood, and G.A. Pocock,

Locke became a minor player in an understanding of revolutionary discourse dominated by republican ideals (Egnal 1995, 1184). Contributing to a trend of scholarship that then moved away from the republican revisionism that challenged the idea of the centrality of Locke's liberalism, are authors such as Joyce Appleby, Thomas Pangle, Isaac Kramnick, Steven Dwoletz, and Jerome Huyler. These authors argued against interpretations of Locke's liberalism that equate it with unchecked possessive individualism associated with some modern conceptions of capitalism, making it necessary to look to republican forms of civic virtue as the basis of the founders' thinking about moral associations in a republican government. In different ways, they call attention to the moral duty inherent in Locke's theism that underpins his capitalism; however, these authors struggle to make a strong connection between Locke's Protestantism and his political theory. Among the attempts to identify the founders' ideas about virtue and liberty with a particular tradition, I find that Foa Dienstag has been most insightful in his analysis that links the founders' ideas to Locke's Christian asceticism, what Max Weber referred to as the Protestant Ethic.

In his article, *Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Political Thought*, Dienstag makes the clearest connection between Locke's ideas about virtue and his political philosophy, and makes the clearest connection between this philosophy and the thought of the Founders. Far from promoting a kind of possessive individualism that was at odds with Christian charity, Dienstag argues, Locke's belief in the right of individuals to labor freely and self-determinedly arose from his Puritan asceticism that sees labor as the highest expression of virtue. To Locke, the term labor not only referred to physical work; it described thought. Thinking is the primary form of labor. In Locke's understanding, God the Creator labors and man, created in his image, likewise labors. In this way "work acquires a certain holiness" (Dienstag 1996, 501). For Locke, the ability of the individual's mind to control its own labor was crucial to freedom, because his definition of freedom, both of the mind and the body, was the ability of the individual to suspend his own destructive desires. The indulgence of mental and physical passions, on the other hand, place the mind in a state of slavery. Dienstag quotes Locke, who wrote that self-denial is "so far from being a restraint or diminution of Freedom, that it the very improvement and benefit of it: 'tis not an Abridge-

ment, 'tis the end and use of our Liberty" (ibid., 503). Posing an external threat to this self-determined and self-denying labor, is a government that restricts civil liberties, thereby enslaving the mind through physical threats and denial of pleasure (ibid., 503). Both a lack of self-regulation and government coercion, therefore, were enemies to this internal conception of liberty. Civil liberty, in Locke's understanding, supports the primary liberty: freedom of the mind to choose virtue over self-indulgence. Man looks to the state to safeguard the conditions for temporal freedom in order to pursue the real freedom which the temporal can only reflect, and yet the essence of his personal freedom finds its foundation and protection in this solid ground. Political freedom becomes important for the spiritual freedom that relies on it.

Dienstag links Locke's thinking and that of the founders through an analysis of Adams and Jefferson. "In both cases," he contends, "it was a Lockean slavery which they feared and a Lockean virtue which they sought" (ibid., 497). Dienstag argues that although Jefferson and Adams showed admiration for some of the moral philosophy of the ancient Greeks and Latins (especially the Stoics, whose asceticism he points out was transmitted to Christianity through Augustine and others), they had no use for the politics of the Romans. He quotes Jefferson who stated that the Romans never knew "one single day of free and rational government," and Adams who "could never discover that [the Romans] possessed much virtue, or real liberty" (ibid., 506). Dienstag maintains that although Jefferson and Adams believed the Stoics had been morally correct in their asceticism, they believed the philosophers had failed to translate this asceticism into the right political principles. It was Locke, he argues, who they believed "found the formula . . . which properly linked morals to politics" (ibid., 506). He shows through the words of Jefferson and Adams that they shared Locke's belief that private virtue can only be fostered in the context of a government that refrains from using coercive techniques that enslave the conscience. He quotes from Jefferson's bill for the establishment of religious freedom: "Almighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether unsusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitates, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness" (ibid., 509). And turning to Adams, he

quotes from his diary: "Let us hear the danger of thralldom to our consciences from ignorance, extreme poverty, and dependence, in short from civil and political slavery" (ibid., 508). Both Jefferson and Adams made the Lockean connection between the need for the human conscience to function freely in order to function correctly, and political liberty. Dienstag maintains that Jefferson and Adams declared this view of government to be the broader understanding of the day. And to stand apart from them, he writes, would have been to "disavow both the leading 'liberal' of the day and the leading 'conservative' of the day" (ibid., 509).

THE NECESSITY OF RELIGION IN A FREE REPUBLIC

There can be no question that the founders agreed that religion was necessary to a free government. Their statements, both private and public, to this effect are numerous. Perhaps the most famous of these pronouncements was spoken by George Washington in his Farewell Address in September of 1796:

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 mere politician, equally with pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. (Cousins 1958, 69)

In 1798, John Adams, reflecting on the federal Constitution he had helped to create, declared, "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. . . . Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other" (Davis 2000, 193). John Turner, warning against the slavery that results when individuals do not govern themselves by religion, maintained, "without the prevalence of Christian piety and morals, the best republican constitution can never save us from slavery and ruin" (ibid., 210). Freedom originates with individuals who govern themselves by religious principles,

and political slavery is the reward of a society in which the people do not. The founders called upon the American people to maintain religion in order that they could provide the substance of liberty itself.

This understanding that liberty depended upon religion was shared by most Americans during the revolutionary era (*ibid.*, 60). The Reverend John Witherspoon, in a national fast day sermon in May of 1776, declared, “He is the best friend to American liberty, who is most sincere and active in promoting true and undefiled religion. . . . Whoever is an avowed enemy of God, I scruple not to call him an enemy to his country” (*ibid.*, 194). As they struggled to frame the Constitution for the nation, the congressional chaplain Jacob Duché reminded the politicians that “the character of TEMPORAL FREEDOM, and the records of ETERNAL TRUTH” were America’s foundation (Lambert 2003, 247). The Reverend William Smith, a patriot, put it simply, “Religion and liberty must flourish together or fall together in America” (Davis 2000, 60). This was the message preached from pulpits throughout the colonies as the people were called to defend their liberty from British tyranny. The association of religious purity and liberty helped to inspire patriots to believe in the sanctity of their struggle.

When the founders spoke of morality, the word “religion” was often coupled with it (as occurs in the above statements) because they viewed morality as dependent on religion. In his Farewell Address, Washington remarked, “. . . 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 principal” (Cousins 1958, 69). Alexander Hamilton warned that a free government was the reward only of a religious people, “With Morality overthrown (and morality must fall with religion) the errors of despotism can alone curb the impetuous passions of man, and confine him within the bounds of social duty” (Kidd 1999, 1022–1023). Similar to Locke’s recommendations for the education of good citizens, Benjamin Rush insisted that “The only useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion. Without this there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty” (Davis 2000, 193).⁷ Some during the founding era believed that

⁷ Jefferson composed the bill in 1779, which was passed by the Virginia Assembly in 1786 (Gaustad 1996, 259).

virtue could be fostered through the disciplined use of reason, but this was an uncommon opinion, and most colonial Americans were in agreement with their leaders that morality depended on religion (ibid.).

Religion was seen as the only secure foundation of morality because it provided an objective basis for the moral principles that govern society, a source of truth that transcended the individual, a law that had been and would always be. In the minds of the founders, the immutable moral laws of society derived from an infinite God. Jefferson once declared that religion is "the alpha and omega of the moral law" (Galston 1986, 811). James Madison referred to the "Supreme Lawgiver," and Washington to "the Divine Author of life and felicity" (Madison "Memorial . . ." Cousins 1958, 267; Washington "Letter to the Clergy . . ." Gaustad 1982, 279 respectively). In defending religious freedom, Madison stressed that religion is not "invented by human policy," it is divine policy, and the order that governs society emanates from its creator. ("Memorial . . .," Cousins 1958, 264).

According to the thinking of the founders, it was vital that the people acknowledge the divine source of moral laws and believe that they possess a duty to do God's will in order for them to consider themselves duty bound towards one another. In his *Memorial and Remonstrance* of 1785 that defended religious freedom in the state of Virginia, Madison wrote, "Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governour of the Universe" (Cousins, 1958, 309). He stressed the point that if a man takes away another man's freedom, it is first and foremost an offense against God" (ibid., 310). In Madison's understanding, we "violate the trust committed" to us by God when we violate the rights of other people (ibid., 309). Washington asked the nation, "where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation *desert* the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice?" ("Farewell . . .," Cousins 1958, 69). Jefferson asked, "Can 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 the gift of God?" (Galston 1986, 811). Only if citizens continued to acknowledge God, the founders were convinced, could they hope to maintain reliable social bonds in the republic.

In a republic where the sphere of government and the sphere of religion were separated, but where religion was considered crucial to the good of the state, civil leaders and religious leaders were called upon to fulfill their respective duties to the cause of religion. The founders asked the clergy to honor the responsibility of inculcating religious belief in the people: Adams wrote in 1775, "It is the duty of the clergy to accommodate their discourses to the times, to preach against such sins as are most prevalent, and recommend such virtues as are most wanted. . . . Justice [for example] is a great Christian as well as moral duty and virtue, which the clergy ought to inculcate and explain" (quoted in Davis 2000, 193). In addressing ministers in America, Benjamin Rush stated, "You are united in inculcating the necessity of morals" for "from the success or failure of your exertions in the cause of virtue, we anticipate the freedom or slavery of our country" (quoted in Davis 2000, 193–194). The clergy, in return, called on civil leaders to encourage religion and support it through example. The Reverend Samuel McClintock, speaking to the New Hampshire House of Representatives in 1784, earnestly advising the politicians to consider the difficulty of tempering the revolutionary spirit of its citizens in the new nation, stated, "it is the duty of rulers to give all that countenance and support to religion that is consistent with liberty of conscience." He continued, "as [Christianity's] genius and precepts are so friendly to civil government . . . it would be sound policy in rulers to give all possible countenance and encouragement to this religion as the means of strengthening their own hands . . ." (quoted in Elliot 1979, 200). In the young nation, civil leaders would protect religious freedom and honor and support the cause of religion in general, while members of the clergy would attend to the spiritual education of citizens under a freely chosen creed.

The message of the founders was clear and often repeated: In order for liberty and tranquillity to exist in the republic, it must be moral, and in order for it to be moral, it must be religious. The government, they believed, could provide the structure that could support liberty, but only the people could provide its spirit, and this they could only achieve by the personal freedom that comes with living a life according to religion. In the following section I will take a closer look at the spiritual principle that underwrote the decision to establish religious freedom in America: that in

order for a people to be religious, they must choose it by the free use of reason and conscience.

The free market of religious ideas

With no doubts about the importance of religion to the nation, the founders faced the challenge of deciding what religion's relationship to the state should be. This is what Derek H. Davis described as the "central paradox of the American approach." He wrote, "On the one hand, the founders realized the criticality of virtue. Still, for all its importance, direct inculcation of virtue lay outside the purview and purpose of government" (Davis 2000, 197). The founders certainly faced the practical consideration of discovering the best means by which to keep religious disagreement from causing civil unrest. As Madison stated, "Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion. Time has at length revealed the true remedy. Every relaxation of narrow and rigorous policy, wherever it has been tried, has been found to assuage the disease" ("Memorial . . .," Cousins 1958, 312). But the happiness of civil society required much more than the end of religious wars—it required that its people be governed by religious principles, and, the founders were convinced, only a government in which the people's minds and consciences were free, could foster and protect the vitality of religious belief.

Persuasion, not coercion

The founders unanimously held the view that persuasion, not coercion, was the means by which religious principles were inculcated. True religious belief, they thought, occurred only when truth has become acceptable to the reason and conscience of the individual, and it therefore cannot be imposed upon him by force. Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, regarded by scholars as the spokesmen for the founders on the subject of religious liberty, both declared this position in their efforts that secured complete religious freedom in their state of Virginia, and later for the nation. Jefferson, in his draft for Virginia's *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, which would provide the model for church-state relations for the

nation, declared that “the opinions of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds” (Gaustad 1982, 260).⁷ George Mason, in an original draft of what would become the *Declaration of Rights* for Virginia, edited for its final form by Madison, asserted

That Religion, or the Duty that we owe to our divine and omnipotent Creator, and the Manner of discharging it, can be governed only by Reason and Conviction, not by Force or Violence; and therefore that all Men shou’d enjoy the fullest Toleration in the Exercise of Religion, according to the dictates of Conscience, unpunished and unrestrained by the Magistrate, unless under Colour of Religion any Man disturb the Peace, the Happiness, or Safety of Society, or Individuals. (Noonan 1998, 69)

In a response to the efforts of Patrick Henry and others to get a General Assessment bill passed in Virginia that would declare that “the Christian Religion shall in all times coming be deemed and held to be the established Religion of this Commonwealth” and require citizens to pay taxes in support of ministers, Madison wrote his *Memorial and Remonstrance* (1785), one of the most important documents relating to the relationship of church and state (Cousins 1958, 308). His opening argument also stressed the role which reason and conscience alone played in religious belief. He contended that no establishment for religion should be made in Virginia on the grounds that it was

a fundamental and undeniable truth, “that 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 or violence.” The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. (Cousins 1958, 309)

Thus the primary defense for instituting religious freedom was that religious coercion was useless in inculcating religion, for the realm in which

the individual experienced religious belief was far beyond the reach of the government; it was the result of the persuasion of the mind and heart.

Not only did they view coercion in religious matters as useless, they believed it was dangerous because it discouraged the individual from acting from his own reason and conscience, and removed religious belief from the personal realm in which it can only be experienced, and made it a matter of conformity to government sanctions. In his Virginia bill, Jefferson warned of the corruption and hypocrisy that results from civil coercion in religious matters,

. . . all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness . . . ; the impious presumptions of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical . . . have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time. . . [Coercion] tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage; by bribing with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it . . . (Cousins 1958, 260–261)

Time had proven, in Jefferson's opinion, that coercion by governments only did injury to the individual's experience of faith, and brought ruin to the purity of churches. History showed that coercion in religious matters could in no way be justified, and must be opposed for the sake of religion.

TOLERATION: A RELIGIOUS RIGHT AND DUTY

Jefferson, in his *Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom*, and Madison in his *Memorial*, spoke of the right to religious freedom as a "natural right," but with both documents, the argument for a natural right did not stand apart from a spiritual justification. Jefferson talked about "the natural rights of mankind," in his argument for religious freedom in the state of Virginia, but he opened his draft for the bill with a religious defense of the

right, "Almighty God hath Created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain..." (ibid., 260).⁸ In the *Memorial* Madison stated that freedom of conscience was "in its nature an unalienable right," but added "It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. It is the duty of every man to render to the Creator such homage and such only as he believes to be acceptable to him" (ibid., 309). Jefferson also traced the source of human rights to "the Creator" in the Declaration of Independence. Every important document expounding the natural rights of men during the founding era declared them to be the creation of God.

⁸ Adding to the declaration that freedom of conscience is a creation of God, Jefferson asked that men look to God's example, observing that although "the holy author of our religion" had it in his power "to propagate [religion] by coercion" he chose instead to "extend it by its influence on reason alone" (Gaustad 1996, 260).

(To be continued)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, John. "Adams to Jefferson, June 28, 1813." Cousins 229–231.
- Alley, Robert S., ed. *James Madison on Religious Liberty*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1985.
- Backus, Isaac. "A Declaration of the Rights of the Inhabitants of the State of Massachusetts-Bay, in New England." Gaustad 268.
- Baltzell, E. Digby. *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
- Brookhiser, Richard. *Founding Father: Rediscovering George Washington*. New York: The Free Press, 1996.
- Cousins, Norman, ed. *In God We Trust: The Religious Beliefs and Ideas of the American Founding Fathers*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958.
- Davis, Derek H. *Religion and the Continental Congress 1774–1789*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Dees, Richard H. "Establishing Toleration." *Political Theory* 27, no. 5 (1999), 667–693.
- Dienstag, Joshua Foa. "Serving God and Mammon: The Lockean Sympathy in Early American Political Thought." *The American Political Science Review* 90, no. 3 (1996): 497–511.
- Diggins, John P. "Slavery, Race, and Equality: Jefferson and the Pathos of the Enlightenment." *American Quarterly* 28, no. 2 (1976): 26–228.
- Engel, Marc. Rev. "Locke in America: The Moral Philosophy of the Founding Era, by Jerome Huyler." *The Journal of American History* 82, no. 3 (1995): 1184–1185.
- Elliot, Emory. "The Dove and the Serpent: The Clergy in the American Revolution." *American Quarterly* 3, no. 2 (1979) 187–203.

RELIGION: THE "INDISPENSABLE SUPPORT" OF THE NATION

- Franklin, Benjamin. "Letter to Ezra Stiles, March 9, 1790." Cousins 41–43.
- Galston, William A. "Public Morality and Religion in the Liberal State." *PS* 19, no. 4 (1986) 807–824.
- Gaustad, Edwin S., ed. *A Documentary History of Religion in America*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982.
- _____. Edwin S. *Sworn on the Alter of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*. Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1996.
- Genovese, Eugene D. "Religion and the Collapse of the American Union." Miller 74–88.
- Jay, William. *The Life of John Jay: With Selections from His Correspondence and Miscellaneous Papers*. New York: J. & J. Haper, 1833.
- Jefferson, Thomas. "Letter to Adams, May 5, 1817." Cousins 283.
- _____. "Letter to Adams, April 11, 1823." Cousins 289–292.
- _____. "Letter to James Smith, December 8, 1822." Cousins 159–160.
- _____. "Letter to Joseph Priestly, March 21, 1801." Cousins 130–131.
- _____. "Letter to Timothy Pickering, February 27, 1821." Cousins 157–158.
- _____. "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 1779." Gaustad 1982, 259–261.
- _____. "Religious Liberty Effected." Gaustad 1982, 270–274.
- Kidd, Colin. "Civil Theology and Church Establishment in Revolutionary America." *The Historical Journal* 42, no. 4 (1999): 1007–1026.
- Kloppenber, James T. "The Virtues of Liberalism: Christianity, Republicanism, and Ethics in Early American Political Discourse." *The Journal of American History* 74, no. 1 (1987): 9–33.
- Lambert, Frank. *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003.
- Locke, John. "A Letter Concerning Toleration." In vol. 5 of *The Works of John Locke in Nine Volumes*. London: Rivington, 1824 (12th ed.). The Online Library of Liberty. 20 April 2004. Liberty Fund, Inc. 15 Sept. 2005. <http://oil.libertyfund.org/Home3Ebook.php?recordID=0388>.
- Lutz, Donald S. "The Relative Influence of European Writers on Late Eighteenth-Century American Political Influence." *The American Science Review* 78, no. 1 (1984).
- Madison, James. "Letter to Robert Walsh, March 2, 1819." Cousins 319–320.
- _____. "Letter to William Bradford, Jr., November 9, 1772." Cousins 298–300.
- _____. "Memorial and Remonstrance." Cousins 308–314.
- May, Henry A. *The Enlightenment in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1976.
- Mendes, Susan. *Toleration and the Limits of Liberalism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, Inc., 1989.
- Miller, Randall M., Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds. *Religion and the American Civil War*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Paludan, Phillip Shaw, "Overview." Miller 21–42.
- Morgan, Edmund S. *The Puritan Family*. New York: Harpor & Row, 1944.
- _____. *Virginians at Home: Family Life in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: William Byrd Press, 1952.
- Morgan, George. *The True Patrick Henry*. Berkley: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1907.

- Murphy, Andrew R. "The Uneasy Relationship Between Social Contract Theory and Religious Toleration." *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 2 (May 1997), 368–392.
- Noll, Mark A. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Noonan, Mark A. "The Lustre of Our Country" *The American Experience of Religious Freedom*. Berkley: University of California Press, 1998.
- Runes, Dagobert D., ed. *The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush*. New York: Philosophical Library, 1947.
- Sandler, Gerald S. "Lockean Ideas in Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 21, no. 1 (1960), 110–116.
- Stout, Hary S., D.G. Hart, eds. *New Directions in American Religious History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Washington, George. "Farewell Address, September 19, 1796." Cousins 69.
- _____. "General Orders: Headquarters, Valley Forge, May 2, 1778." Cousins 51.
- _____. "Letter to the Members of the New Church in Baltimore, January 27, 1793." Cousins 62.
- _____. "Letter to the Clergy of Different Denominations Residing in and near the city of Philadelphia." Gaustad 279.
- _____. "Reply to Moses Seixas, Sexton of the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, August 17, 1790." In Gaustad, 278–279.