

Faith of Our Founders

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The Founding Fathers did believe in God.

Part 1

Some atheists are trying to revise history by claiming that the founding fathers did not believe in God. The atheistic Association for Rational Thought claims on their website that because the U.S. Constitution doesn't mention God, the founding fathers were against religion.¹ That's as silly as saying that because the Constitution doesn't mention apple pie, that apple pie is un-American. The Constitution doesn't mention apple pie because it is a political document, not a cookbook; and it doesn't tell people how to worship God because it is a document about how to run a country, not how to live a happy, fulfilled life.

The Association for Rational Thought correctly points out that Article 6 of the Constitution forbids any religious test to hold office; but incorrectly concludes that the founding fathers were godless men who were against religion. In response to this charge, the well-known Lutheran theologian Martin E. Marty, pointed out that when the Constitution was under consideration, a prominent New England Baptist, Isaac Backus, supported Article 6 because "no man or men can impose any religious test, without invading the essential prerogatives of our Lord Jesus Christ."²

It wasn't because Baptists don't believe in God that Baptists said that the Constitution should not require anyone seeking office to pass any kind of religious test. It is because Baptists historically have been champions of religious liberty. Baptists are not alone on this issue. Other Christian denominations stand firmly for religious liberty. We here at Radio 74 Internationale occasionally run public service announcements emphasizing the importance of religious liberty produced by the Seventh-day Adventist Church. Religious liberty is a fundamental Christian value shared by many Protestant denominations. That's precisely why religious liberty is firmly enshrined in our Constitution.

To evaluate the atheists' claims that the founding fathers were not religious, Martin E. Marty spent many hours pouring over a two-volume collection of early American political documents. His tabulation of all the religious references in those documents is as boring as you might imagine, so we will just cut to the chase. He found numerous references to such things as heaven, blessings, God, and the Bible in those documents.³

In our July 4, 2011, broadcast, we quoted a large portion of Samuel Adam's "American Independence" speech of August 1, 1776.⁴ You can read it, or listen to it, by going to our program archives on our website, KRSF.NET, so we won't read it again to you. Instead we will briefly summarize Adam's main points.

In that speech, Adams opposed those who wanted to remain loyal to Britain on the basis that America needed British protection because he believed America was under the protection of God. He expected

¹ The Association for Rational Thought, "The Godless Constitution of the United States", <http://www.cincinnati-skeptics.org/blurbs/godlessconst.html>

² Martin E. Marty, "Religion and the Constitution: The Triumph of Practical Politics", <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=182>

³ *ibid.*

⁴ <http://www.revolutionary-war-and-beyond.com/american-independence-speech-by-samuel-adams-august-1-1776.html>

God to give the military victory to underdog America because God believed in America as strongly as America believed in God.

This speech was given just one month after the signing of the Declaration of Independence, so the Revolutionary War was just beginning. Nevertheless, Adams was confident in victory. He based this belief upon how God had already blessed America, giving examples of the agricultural and industrial prosperity that God had already granted to America. He expected God to give the victory to the underdog because the underdog was under God.

Looking into the future, he recognized the danger that as the British government grew, it would have to raise taxes even more to support that massive government. If the colonists did nothing, then their children and grandchildren would be saddled with a massive debt they could not pay to support that oppressive government. His speech was designed to encourage the colonists to act now before it was too late.

Adams said America was the only nation where pure Protestant Christianity still existed. Other nations, like France, were officially atheistic. The Church of England was concerned more with political power than the pure religion of the gospel. And professors of religion in other countries were so obsessed with examining new interpretations, traditions, and human rules, that they had lost sight of Christianity completely.

Adams expected God to bless America because America was the only place in the world where men could worship God as their conscience dictated. Adams was right. God did bless America as a reward for her pure faith.

It is clear from this speech, and other documents of the day, that Samuel Adams, and the other founding fathers, really were religious men. But despite this, God was given no part in the federal government.

Here's an important distinction that is often missed. The founding fathers wanted a secular government—but they didn't want a secular country. Let me say that one more time. The founding fathers wanted a secular government—but they didn't want a secular country. There's a difference, and there's an important reason.

Remember who founded this country and why they did it. The colonists were escaping persecution from governments that were largely under the control of the Catholic Church, or the Church of England. They were fleeing religious persecution by the government in their homeland. They didn't want to establish a new government controlled by a potentially hostile religious power.

Fearing that their new government would someday not permit religious liberty, the first amendment to the Constitution the citizens of the new nation passed began with the words, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof".

Quakers were certainly God-fearing people who wanted to live in a Christian-friendly nation; but they did not want Congress establishing a state religion because, being a religious minority, the state religion would certainly not be theirs. Their religion would be outlawed. Quakers went to Pennsylvania to get away from state-sponsored religious persecution. They didn't want to risk being persecuted again.

I just used the Quakers as an example because their faith is unquestionable. Certainly I could have used any other small 18th century Christian denomination to show the reason the Constitution doesn't require one to be a member of a particular denomination in order to serve in public office. The reason was not because the founding fathers didn't believe in God. It was to guarantee that everyone will be able to

participate in the government no matter what denomination they belong to. The fact that the Constitution doesn't require elected officials to swear to particular religious beliefs doesn't mean the founding fathers didn't want ordinary citizens to worship God.

The founding fathers were deeply religious men who believed in God; but they weren't all members of the same denomination. Some could be more accurately characterized as deists than Christians. But they all certainly held to traditionally Christian values and morals. This is clear from George Washington's famous farewell address at the end of his presidency. Eighteenth century American English is not nearly as difficult for modern readers to comprehend as seventeenth century Shakespearian English, but it can be difficult to follow. So here are four paragraphs from Washington's farewell speech in his own words, which we will summarize later in modern English.

[27] 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 the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connexions with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, 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? And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

[28] It is substantially true, that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who, that is a sincere friend to it, can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric ?

...

[31] Observe good faith and justice towards all Nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all. Religion and Morality enjoin this conduct; and can it be, that good policy does not equally enjoin it? It will be worthy of a free, enlightened, and, at no distant period, a great Nation, to give to mankind the magnanimous and too novel example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. Who can doubt, that, in the course of time and things, the fruits of such a plan would richly repay any temporary advantages, which might be lost by a steady adherence to it ? Can it be, that Providence has not connected the permanent felicity of a Nation with its Virtue? The experiment, at least, is recommended by every sentiment which ennobles human nature. ...

[50] Though, in reviewing the incidents of my administration, I am unconscious of intentional error, I am nevertheless too sensible of my defects not to think it probable that I may have committed many errors. Whatever they may be, I fervently beseech the Almighty to avert or mitigate the evils to which they may tend. I shall also carry with me the hope, that my Country will never cease to view them with indulgence; and that, after forty-five years of my life

dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be consigned to oblivion, as myself must soon be to the mansions of rest. ⁵

That was George Washington in his own words, which you may have found a little bit difficult to follow. If we may be permitted the liberty, let us paraphrase what he said in modern English.

[27] Religion and morality are indispensable to political prosperity. Anyone who tries to subvert these great pillars of human happiness is no patriot. Politicians ought to respect and to cherish religion and morality just as much as the most pious man. I can't even begin to explain all the connections between religion and morality with private and public happiness. Let it simply be asked, "Where would be the security for property, for reputation, for life, if not for the sense of religious obligation? Upon what should the Courts of Justice rest if not upon religion and morality?" And don't even think that morality can be maintained without religion. Admittedly, a good education might produce some measure of morality in some people; but reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in the absence of religious principles.

[28] There can be no doubt that virtue and morality are necessary components of popular government, or any other kind of government, for that matter. That being the case, who can look with indifference upon attempts to remove religion and morality from government, and therefore shake the very foundation of government?

...

[31] Observe good faith and justice towards all nations; cultivate peace and harmony with all foreign countries. Religion and morality demand this conduct every bit as much as good common sense does. Our free, enlightened, and great Nation must be an example of a people always guided by an exalted justice and benevolence. Certainly, in the course of time, the fruits of such a plan will pay tremendous dividends. It is foolish to think that God will not tie the permanent happiness of a nation with its virtue. Every sentiment which ennobles human nature encourages us to at least try to be virtuous and see what happens.

...

[50] Looking back over my administration, I can't think of any intentional error I have made; but I'm not so foolish as to think that I have not committed many unintentional errors. Whatever mistakes I have made, I fervently beg God to lessen the evils my mistakes have caused. I shall also carry with me the hope, that my Country will never cease to view my mistakes with indulgence; and that, after forty-five years of my life dedicated to its service with an upright zeal, the faults of incompetent abilities will be forgotten, as myself must soon go to the mansions of rest.

George Washington was just as proud of his faith as he was of his country.

[Music – God Bless the USA]

⁵ George Washington's Farewell address, September 17, 1796,
<http://www.earlyamerica.com/earlyamerica/milestones/farewell/text.html>

Part 2

In the first segment of our broadcast, we addressed the false notion that the United States has never been a Christian nation, and that the founding fathers were not particularly religious men. We saw that there were frequent spiritual references in the political documents of the day, and saw from George Washington's farewell speech that he considered religion and morality to be essential to good government.

We emphasized the fact that the founding fathers wanted a secular government—but they didn't want a secular country and alluded to the fact that Article 6 of the Constitution, forbidding any religious test as a requirement to hold public office, was a reaction against suppression of religious freedom, not a rejection of religion.

We mentioned, in passing, that seventeenth century religious oppression resulted in an eighteenth century respect for religious liberty. During that segment we didn't want to get sidetracked by examining the historical reasons for why our founding fathers were so determined that our Constitution should guarantee religious liberty. But now, it is appropriate to review that history.

So let's listen now to these excerpts from Chapter 16, titled "The Pilgrim Fathers", in Ellen White's history of post apostolic Christianity, [The Great Controversy](#).

In the 1600's, many earnestly desired to return to the purity and simplicity which characterized the primitive church. They regarded many of the established customs of the English Church as monuments of idolatry, and they could not in conscience unite in her worship. But the church, being supported by the civil authority, would permit no dissent from her forms. Church attendance was required by law, and unauthorized assemblies for religious worship were prohibited, under penalty of imprisonment, exile, and death.

At the opening of the seventeenth century, the monarch who had just ascended the throne of England declared his determination to make the Puritans conform. Hunted, persecuted, and imprisoned, they could discern in the future no promise of better days. England was ceasing to be a habitable place. Some at last determined to seek refuge in Holland.

In their flight they had left their houses, their goods, and their means of livelihood. They were strangers in a strange land, among a people of different language and customs. They were forced to resort to new and untried occupations to earn their bread. Middle-aged men, who had spent their lives in tilling the soil, had now to learn mechanical trades. But they cheerfully accepted the situation and lost no time in idleness or repining. Though often pinched with poverty, they thanked God for the blessings which were still granted them and found their joy in unmolested spiritual communion. They knew they were pilgrims, and looked not much on those things, but lifted up their eyes to heaven, their dearest country, and quieted their spirits.

In the midst of exile and hardship their love and faith waxed strong. They trusted the Lord's promises, and He did not fail them in time of need. His angels were by their side, to encourage and support them. And when God's hand seemed pointing them across the sea, to a land where they might find for themselves a state, and leave to their children the precious heritage of religious liberty, they went forward, without shrinking, in the path of providence. Persecution and exile were opening the way to freedom.

When first forced to separate from the English Church, the Puritans had joined themselves together by a solemn covenant, as the Lord's free people, to walk together in all His ways. Here was the true spirit of reform, the vital principle of Protestantism. It was with this purpose that the Pilgrims departed from Holland to find a home in the New World. ...

It was the desire for liberty of conscience that inspired the Pilgrims to brave the perils of the long journey across the sea, to endure the hardships and dangers of the wilderness, and with God's blessing to lay, on the shores of America, the foundation of a mighty nation. Yet honest and God-fearing as they were, the Pilgrims did not yet comprehend the great principle of religious liberty. The freedom which they sacrificed so much to secure for themselves, they were not equally ready to grant to others. Very few, even of the foremost thinkers and moralists of the seventeenth century, had any just conception of that grand principle, the outgrowth of the New Testament, which acknowledges God as the sole judge of human faith.

The doctrine that God has committed to the church the right to control the conscience, and to define and punish heresy, is one of the most deeply rooted of papal errors. While the Reformers rejected the creed of Rome, they were not entirely free from her spirit of intolerance. The regulation was adopted by the colonists that only church members should have a voice in the civil government. A kind of state church was formed, all the people being required to contribute to the support of the clergy, and the magistrates being authorized to suppress heresy. Thus the secular power was in the hands of the church. It was not long before these measures led to the inevitable result --persecution.

Eleven years after the planting of the first colony, Roger Williams came to the New World. Like the early Pilgrims he came to enjoy religious freedom; but, unlike them, he saw that this freedom was the inalienable right of all, whatever might be their creed. ... Williams was the first person in modern Christendom to establish civil government on the doctrine of the liberty of conscience, the equality of opinions before the law. He declared it to be the duty of the magistrates to restrain crime, but never to control the conscience. In his words, "The public or the magistrates may decide, what is due from man to man; but when they attempt to prescribe a man's duties to God, they are out of place, and there can be no safety; for it is clear that if a magistrate has the power, he may decree one set of opinions or beliefs today and another tomorrow; as has been done in England by different kings and queens, and by different popes and councils in the Roman Church; so that belief would become a heap of confusion."

Attendance at the services of the established church was required under a penalty of fine or imprisonment. Williams condemned the law. To compel men to unite with those of a different creed, he regarded as an open violation of their natural rights; to drag to public worship the irreligious and the unwilling, seemed only like requiring hypocrisy. No one should be bound to worship against his own consent.

Roger Williams was respected and beloved as a faithful minister, a man of rare gifts, of unbending integrity and true benevolence; yet his steadfast denial of the right of civil magistrates to have authority over the church, and his demand for religious liberty, could not be tolerated. The application of this new doctrine, it was urged, would subvert the fundamental state and government of the country. He was sentenced to banishment from the colonies, and, finally, to avoid arrest, he was forced to flee, amid the cold and storms of winter, into the unbroken forest.

... [H]e continued his painful flight through the snow and the trackless forest, until he found refuge with an Indian tribe whose confidence and affection he had won while endeavoring to teach them the truths of the gospel.

Making his way at last, after months of change and wandering, to the shores of Narragansett Bay, he there laid the foundation of the first state of modern times that in the fullest sense recognized the right of religious freedom. The fundamental principle of Roger Williams's colony was that every man should have liberty to worship God according to the light of his own conscience. His little state, Rhode Island, became the asylum of the oppressed, and it increased and prospered until its foundation principles--civil and religious liberty--became the cornerstones of the American Republic.

In that grand old document which our forefathers set forth as their bill of rights--the Declaration of Independence--they declared: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." And the Constitution guarantees, in the most explicit terms, the inviolability of conscience: "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office of public trust under the United States." "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The framers of the Constitution recognized the eternal principle that man's relation with his God is above human legislation, and his rights of conscience inalienable. Reasoning was not necessary to establish this truth; we are conscious of it in our own bosoms. It is this consciousness which, in defiance of human laws, has sustained so many martyrs in tortures and flames. They felt that their duty to God was superior to human enactments, and that man could exercise no authority over their consciences. It is an inborn principle which nothing can eradicate.

As the tidings spread through the countries of Europe, of a land where every man might enjoy the fruit of his own labor and obey the convictions of his own conscience, thousands flocked to the shores of the New World. Colonies rapidly multiplied. Massachusetts, by special law, offered free welcome and aid, at the public cost, to Christians of any nationality who might fly beyond the Atlantic to escape from wars or famine, or the oppression of their persecutors. Thus the fugitive and the downtrodden were, by statute, made the guests of the commonwealth. In twenty years from the first landing at Plymouth, as many thousand Pilgrims were settled in New England.

The Bible was held as the foundation of faith, the source of wisdom, and the charter of liberty. Its principles were diligently taught in the home, in the school, and in the church, and its fruits were manifest in thrift, intelligence, purity, and temperance. One might be for years a dweller in the Puritan settlement, and not see a drunkard, or hear an oath, or meet a beggar. It was demonstrated that the principles of the Bible are the surest safeguards of national greatness. The feeble and isolated colonies grew to a confederation of powerful states, and the world marked with wonder the peace and prosperity of a church without a pope, and a state without a king.

But continually increasing numbers were attracted to the shores of America, actuated by motives widely different from those of the first Pilgrims. Though the primitive faith and purity exerted a widespread and molding power, yet its influence became less and less as the numbers increased of those who sought only worldly advantage.

The regulation adopted by the early colonists, of permitting only members of the church to vote or to hold office in the civil government, led to most destructive results. This measure had been accepted as a means of preserving the purity of the state, but it resulted in the corruption of the church. A profession of religion being the condition of suffrage and officeholding, many, actuated solely by motives of worldly policy, united with the church without a change of heart. Thus the churches came to consist, to a considerable extent, of unconverted persons. The union of the church with the state may appear to bring the world nearer to the church; but in reality it brings the church nearer to the world.⁶

The pilgrims did not come to America to escape religion—they came here to practice it. But in order to practice it, they had to make sure that the government would not control it. The founding fathers trusted in God to establish a country in which all men are free to worship God as their consciences dictate, and in God we still trust.

[Music – In God We Still Trust]

⁶ Ellen White, The Great Controversy, Chapter 16, “The Pilgrim Fathers”, <http://www.whiteestate.org/books/gc/gc16.html>