

Common Sense: The Founders Had Interesting Views on Religious Liberty

When you were a child, did you ever play the game Telephone? You know which one I'm talking about: the first person whispers a message to the second, the second repeats it to the third, and so on.

Usually, by the time the last person repeats the message back to the first, it's so mangled, it sounds nothing like the original. Then, a quick round of The Blame Game ensues, everyone pointing fingers and blaming someone else for missing a key part of the message.

Truths that are passed down from one generation to the next, if not done with the utmost care, can be similarly affected. Today's Christians perhaps understand that as well as anyone, especially when a young modern theologian decides to tell the rest of Christendom where they've got it wrong, and how we all need to get on the "right side of history."

This also applies to the American birthright of republican self-governance. In a general sense, Americans have become lazy and complacent in ensuring each successive generation has a firm grasp of the fundamental truths that led to the United States of America [ADHD Moment: one could easily make the case both situations—the decline of Christianity and patriotism in the U.S.—are the direct result of the destruction of the traditional family].

As I mentioned in my last installment, the very first settlers came to America with the belief that all people had an innate freedom of conscience, and by extension, a freedom of religion—or better stated in today's vernacular, a freedom to worship—that could not be infringed upon, not even by

government authorities.

But it also goes beyond that. No one can pry into your mind—at least not yet—and tell you what to think. The human mind is a castle, protected always by its moat, the conscience. But religious liberty is about more than just thought; it also covers one's actions.

We not only have the inherent right to believe what we believe, but we also have the right to live in accordance with those beliefs. This second aspect of religious liberty, however, is not without its limits. We'll get into that in more detail in my next installment.

For now, we'll just leave it that your freedom to act upon your deeply held religious views are absolute insofar as they do not prevent another human being from acting upon his or her own deeply held religious views. This was, essentially, the point President Thomas Jefferson was making to the Danbury Baptist Association when he uttered the phrase "wall of separation":

"Believing with you 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 legislative 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."

In fact, Jefferson's scholarly exploration delved deeply into matters of Christian faith. And, as a result, he frequently attended church services that were held, in of all places, the U.S. House of Representatives' chamber.

The first point we all need to understand when we see the Founders' use of the word "religion" is that they meant

Christianity. So the Establishment Clause of the Second Amendment not only prohibits the government from establishing its own religion (see David Lane's excellent exposition on that subject [here](#)), but specifically from establishing its own Christian denomination.

Church of England ... ever heard of it?

In fact, more than 100 years after the U.S. Constitution was ratified, the Supreme Court could come to no other conclusion—in its opinion in the case of *Church of the Holy Trinity vs. U.S.*—than: “Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should be otherwise. In this sense and to this extent, our civilization and our institutions are emphatically Christian.”

The court cited 87 existing precedents to affirm its conclusion.

Here are what some of the “big names” among the Founders thought about Christianity:

- George Washington—“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 connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked where is the security of property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which 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 forbids us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle."

- John Adams—"Suppose a nation in some distant region should take the Bible for their only law-book, and every member would be obliged, in conscience, to temperance and frugality and industry; to justice and kindness and charity towards his fellow men; and to piety, love and reverence towards Almighty God. In this commonwealth, no man would impair his health by gluttony, drunkenness, or lust; no man would sacrifice his most precious time to cards or any other trifling and mean amusement; no man would steal, or lie, in any way defraud his neighbor, but would live in peace and good will with all men; no man would blaspheme his Maker or profane his worship; but a rational and manly, a sincere and unaffected piety and devotion would reign in all hearts. What a utopia; what a paradise would this region be!"

- Benjamin Franklin—"I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, sir, in the sacred writings, that 'except the Lord building the house, they labor in vain that build it.' I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: We shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and by ward down to future ages. And what is worse, mankind may hereafter from this unfortunate instance despair of establishing governments by human wisdom and leave it to chance, war, and conquest. I therefore beg leave to move—that henceforth prayers imploring the assistance of Heaven, and its blessings on our deliberations be held in this assembly every morning before we proceed to business."

These views were passed from the Founders to the Framers, particularly to James Madison, the chief architect of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. Liberals often point to his book, *Memorial and Remonstrance*, as evidence of his desire to keep Christian influences out of government.

As usual, the opposite is true.

Madison and Patrick Henry—both of whom were arguing from their own personal views of Christian worship, fully understanding the long-term health of the nation depended upon it being passed on to future generations—were in disagreement over the best way to handle it. Henry wanted to establish a tax that would fund “teachers of the Christian Religion.”

Madison, however, was opposed to any government involvement in the free exercise of the Christian faith. He believed Christianity, in order to flourish, needed to be free of entanglements with the state.

Ironically, Madison grew up in an Episcopalian home. However, he soon developed the view that (quoting his book) if civil government were necessary to prop up Christianity, then it would prove that the Christian faith could not stand on its own merits.

“Because Christianity thrives in the absence of civil control and government intervention in religious affairs always served, historically, to weaken it, it should be kept separate from the institution of civil government.”

And that, really, is what the Founders (and the Framers) thought about religious liberty. Next time, we’ll discuss how that applies to other religions—specifically, Islam.