

The Role of Religion and Morality in a Free Republic

On Thursday evening, Donald Trump closed a Republican National Convention filled with prayers and expressions of faith in Jesus Christ by making a speech in which he said, "I am here by the grace of Almighty God." This was too much God for many Democrats. As one liberal journalist derisively wrote, "Though the RNC meant to pitch a big tent, it ended up being a tent revival."

This, of course, has reignited arguments about the place of religion, particularly Christianity, in American politics. Also, the attempted assassination of Trump has renewed arguments about the need to curtail rights guaranteed in the U.S. Constitution, such as freedom of speech and the right to bear arms.

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Those who want to limit these rights argue that unregulated hate speech can stir violent reactions, often with guns, and laws must be put in place to regulate and limit both. Opponents say this would be a violation of rights guaranteed in the Constitution and Bill of Rights.

America's Founders Had the Answer

America's founders had an answer to this problem, but from a wholly different perspective. The restraints they advocated were religious and moral. In fact, they believed that only a religious and moral people would be capable of enjoying the freedoms they had enshrined in the Constitution and Bill of Rights. An irreligious and amoral people, they believed, would turn freedom into anarchy.

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This is why George Washington, in his 1796 Farewell Address, urged the new nation to maintain “religion” and “morality,” which he called “indispensable” supports for national prosperity. Interestingly, Washington did not see religion as a thing to be tolerated but as something indispensable for the life of the nation.

In this same address, Washington called religion and morality “those great pillars of human happiness” and warned against indulging the supposition that morality could be had apart from religion. “Both reason and experience,” he said, “forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle” (Hyatt, “1726, the Year That Defined America,” 165).

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