

Are Religion and Morality Essential to 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, and 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 role 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.

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 limit and regulate both. Opponents argue that 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 completely different perspective. The restraints they advocated were religious and moral. 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 lawlessness and anarchy.

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 something 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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By “religion,” Washington meant Christianity, and like the other founders, he believed that only Christianity provided the intellectual and moral underpinnings for a stable and prosperous society. John Adams made this clear in a 1798 speech in which he said, “Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other.”

Thomas Jefferson completely agreed with Washington’s farewell address, and he made it required reading at the University of Virginia, which he founded. Jefferson also said, “The philosophy of Jesus is the most sublime and benevolent code of morals ever offered to man. A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen.”

Indeed, the Founding Fathers believed that the teachings of Jesus and the entire Bible would awaken the best in the human heart and be a constraining force on the baser elements of human nature. This is why Dr. Benjamin Rush, member of the Continental Congress and signer of the Declaration of Independence, declared: “The only foundation for a republic is to be laid in Religion. Without this there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican

governments" (Hyatt, 163).

Understanding the First Amendment

The opening clause of the First Amendment says, "Congress shall make no law concerning the establishment of religion nor hindering the free exercise thereof." This was not a rejection of religion, for the day after ratifying the First Amendment, those same founders proclaimed a national day of prayer and thanksgiving.

The First Amendment merely blocked Congress from ever establishing a European-style, official state church. The First Amendment created in America a free and open marketplace for the exchange and propagation of religious ideas and teachings without government interference.

The founders believed such religious liberty, influencing every part of society, to be necessary for a stable and prosperous nation. And this was still the American way in 1831 when the French sociologist Alexis de Tocqueville visited America to study her institutions.

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After spending six months traveling throughout the land, he concluded that Americans had so merged Christianity with civil liberty in their thinking that it was impossible to make them conceive of one without the other. He wrote, "From the beginning, politics and religion contracted an alliance which has never been dissolved." These facts led the late Dr. Michael Novak to declare, "Far from having a hostility toward religion, the Founders counted on religion [Christianity] for the underlying philosophy of the republic, its supporting ethic, and its reliable source of rejuvenation" (Hyatt, 171).

The Choice for America is Clear

Fast-forward to 2024, and for the past 70 years, America has been in the process of eradicating the very things—religion and morality—its founders said would preserve the nation. Crosses, Christian symbols and Ten Commandments displays have been systematically removed from public properties. Prayer and Bible reading have been banned from public schools.

The consequences have been devastating with failing test scores, moral confusion and horrendous school shootings. This is why it is so refreshing to read of Louisiana requiring the posting of the Ten Commandments in the public classroom. Other states, including Texas, are promising to follow suit.

This could signal a turn in the direction that will save America from the deadly, un-American idea that the answer for every problem is more government regulation. As James Madison is reported to have said,

“We have staked the whole future of the American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future ... upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments” (Hyatt, “Pilgrims and Patriots [Second Edition],” 172).

After watching the Republican National Convention this week, I would say that the choice for America is quite clear. We will either choose leaders who believe we should be a free people, governed from within by Christian principles of morality and ethics, or we will choose leaders who want to control us from without with burdensome laws and tyrannical authority? As William Penn put it, “If we will not be governed by God, we will be ruled by tyrants.”

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