
Sermon
American Religion

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July 4, 2010

First Reading: Benjamin Franklin. Response to Ezra Stiles, President of Yale, about his religious beliefs. Written six weeks before his death.

Here is my creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the universe. That he governs it by his providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable service we render to him is doing good to his other children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with justice in another life respecting its conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental points in all sound religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever sect I meet with them.

As for Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think his system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting changes, and I have, with most of the present dissenters in England, some doubts as to his divinity; though it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with now, when I expect soon an opportunity of knowing the truth with less trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the good consequence, as it probably has, of making his doctrines more respected and better observed, especially as I do not perceive that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any particular marks of his displeasure.

Second Reading: Declaration of Independence

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,^[71] that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

Sermon

What is American religion? If you listen to some of the television evangelists they will tell you American religion is their brand of religion and nothing else. I hear that a lot. Such arguments tend to assume that some form of Evangelical Christianity has been the dominant form of religion in America until just the last few years when Christianity has come under attack. Such arguments, however, are more than a little inconsistent. While on the one hand insisting on Christian dominance, it is also argued that Christianity is now being persecuted to the point that its existence is in peril. You

can't have it both ways. And reality, in the form of history, does not support such claims. The historical record demonstrates that during the period of the American Revolution and the following few years the citizens of the Colonies becoming states were the least religious people in the western world. The early Americans were far less likely to attend church than their European counterparts. Almost all of them would have identified themselves as Christians or used the language of Christianity to describe their religious beliefs, but they frequently disagreed with orthodox Christian beliefs in ways that are anathema to modern advocates of the myth of America as a Christian nation. The truth is that Evangelical Christianity was never weaker in this country than in the late 1700's. This is evidenced by the fact that in 1797 the Senate approved with only its third unanimous vote (out of some 339 cast to that point) the Treaty of Tripoli which contained these words:

"As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion;"

The text of the Treaty went on to proclaim that the United States had no religious animosity "against the laws, religion, or tranquility" of those holding the Muslim faith. Can you imagine such a treaty being unanimously approved today?

It was during this period that Unitarianism began to emerge with its rejection of the doctrine of the Trinity and – more importantly – rejection of the doctrine of original sin. Many of the important figures of the American Revolution were Unitarians, including three of the first six presidents. Others, such as Washington, Franklin and Hamilton, were not Unitarians, but demonstrated an unease with orthodox Christianity. Hamilton, for example, when asked why the Constitution did not contain any reference to God, is said to have flippantly responded that the new country had no need for foreign aid. Franklin had his doubts about the divinity of Jesus, but didn't think the question important because he did not perceive God as

distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any particular marks of his displeasure.

That is hardly the belief of an Evangelical Christian, a judgment confirmed by the fact that Franklin was also a deist. As for Washington, he was studiously opaque about his religious beliefs. We do know that he affirmed in writing the appointment of a Universalist chaplain during the Revolutionary War over the objections of several orthodox preachers. We also know that the quotation frequently attributed to Washington in recent years –

It is impossible to rightly govern a nation without God and the Bible.

is an outright fabrication. The only source attribution that can be connected to those words is the 9th Commandment – "Thou Shalt not bear false witness." It is interesting that when Washington was dying his last conscious act was not to pray or invoke religion, but to take his pulse – an act more in keeping with the principles of Enlightenment rationalism.

But that brings us to the Enlightenment, the true foundation of American religion. The Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that called for the critical use of reason and affirmed the idea that human rights were inherent, not something granted or

withheld by the whim of a King. It held out the belief that truth could be discovered not by revelation, but by systematically submitting belief to trial by reason. Reacting against the Thirty Years War it lifted up the idea of a better world, once again though the use of reason and human effort. It was not opposed to belief in God, but it opened the way to different ideas about the nature of God while at the same time seeing Human beings capable – in essence – of growing up and being responsible for themselves. In other words, people could think for themselves; govern themselves; better themselves; and test every idea with the tools of reason – religious or otherwise.

It was such Enlightenment ideas – not the bible, but Enlightenment ideas and principles – that formed the basis first for the Declaration of Independence and then for the United States Constitution. It has been said – correctly, I might note – that the United States was the attempt to create a country based on the principles of the Enlightenment. It is no accident that American Unitarianism emerged at the same time because it was the attempt to create a religion based on the principles of the Enlightenment.

Does that mean Unitarianism is THE American religion? I think not. Consider this story about religion in America.

Once upon-a-time a man was walking across a bridge. As he did so he saw another man standing on the bridge railing, about to jump off. He ran over to the would be jumper and shouted, “Stop! Don’t do it!”

“Why shouldn’t I?” was the answer.

“Well, there’s so much to live for!” replied the first man.

“Like what?”

“Well... are you religious?”

The man standing on the edge replied, “Yes.”

The would be good Samaritan said, “Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?”

“Christian,” was the reply.

“Me too! Are you Catholic or Protestant ?

“Protestant.”

“Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?”

“Baptist”

“Wow! Me too!

Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?”

“Baptist Church of God!”

“Me too! Are you original Baptist Church of God, or are you reformed Baptist Church of God?”

The man answered, “Reformed Baptist Church of God!”

“Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915?”

He answered, “Reformed Baptist Church of God, reformation of 1915!”

The first man then said, “Die, heretic scum!,” and pushed him off the bridge.

Just as no political party can claim to be THE American political party, no religion has the right to claim to be THE American religion. There is no such thing. The reality of American religion is not to be found in a particular religion, but in the multitude of religions that flourish in America. America is the most religiously diverse country in the world. It is the most religiously diverse country in the world because the basis of American Religion is not any particular religion, but the freedom of each individual to think and to question and to believe as the individual conscience demands. The result is a bewildering crazy quilt of religious beliefs and practices that includes the National Baptist Convention, USA, Inc.; National Baptist Convention of America; Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Landmark Baptists (also known as the American Baptist Association), Conservative Baptist Association of America, National Primitive Baptist Convention, North American Baptist Convention, General Association of Regular Baptist Churches, United Free Will Baptist Church, Baptist General Conference of America, the North American Baptist General Conference, the Progressive Baptist Convention and, of course, the Southern Baptist Convention. And that’s just some of the Baptists. Unitarians, by comparison, are remarkably uniform and non diverse. In addition to the Unitarian Universalist Association of Congregations we have only the American Unitarian Conference – an association the vast majority of Unitarians have never heard of because of its small size and inactivity. We have our own variety, of course, at the congregational level.

There are over thirty thousand varieties of Christianity, most of which are represented in the United States. Then, of course, there are the Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Confucians along with New Age groups that include multiple varieties of paganism. There are so many I can’t begin to count them, much less list them. And all of them are wrong – unless they agree with you and me. But that is the nature of religion in a country founded on Enlightenment Principles.

There are always those who will claim to have a monopoly on truth, justice and freedom. This is true in politics and religion. I hear it in the words of those who claim anyone who doesn’t agree with their politics isn’t really an American. I hear it in the words of those who claim those who don’t believe in the divinity of Jesus are going to spend all of eternity in hell. I agree with Mr. Franklin: If there is a God I see no evidence that he punishes those who fail to believe.

What is American religion? It is not any particular claim to truth, justice and freedom. It is the claim to have the freedom to search for truth, justice and freedom. An American may be a Free Will Baptist or an atheist, a Muslim or a Catholic, a Unitarian or a Methodist. Each has the freedom to believe as conscience dictates. No religious belief is un-American unless it denies the right of conscience to another.

The first declaration of religious freedom in European history was issued in Transylvania by King John Sigismund in 1568. It affirmed,

...that in every place the preachers shall preach and explain the Gospel each according to his understanding of it, and if the congregation like it, well. If not, no one shall compel them for their souls would not be satisfied, but they shall be permitted to keep a preacher whose teaching they approve. Therefore none of the superintendents or others shall abuse the preachers, no one shall be reviled for his religion by anyone, according to the previous statutes, and it is not permitted that anyone should threaten anyone else by imprisonment or by removal from his post for his teaching. For faith is the gift of God and this comes from hearing, which hearings is by the word of God.

Religions other than Christianity were not mentioned. But it was because of the political and military protection of the Ottoman Empire – which was Islamic – that Sigismund had the freedom to issue his proclamation.

It was that same spirit of freedom – and a recognition that freedom for one requires freedom for all – that inspired the founders of America to write a constitution that built a wall of separation between church and state to ensure the religious freedom not just of some of the people, but all of the people. Madison, the principle author of the Constitution, said, "religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprize." Religious freedom, on the other hand, leaves the mind open to question and to search for the truth wherever it may be found.

That is American religion. That is the genius of American religion. It is not the truth. It is the right to search for the truth. It is the right to question the truth. If it be true, to be able to confirm that truth, if it not be true, to declare it false and look elsewhere. It is an approach to religion that mirrors the famous statement by Senator Carl Schurz about patriotism.

"My country, right or wrong." In one sense I say so too. My country; and my country is the great American Republic. My country, right or wrong; if right, to be kept right; and if wrong, to be set right.

American religion says we have the right to proclaim the truth of our religious beliefs. And as Americans we have the right to question those beliefs – and if they are wrong to set them right.

America's founders identified themselves as Christians, although their Christianity was often unconventional by the standards of today. But they had no use for religious bigotry and prejudice. They were determined to keep the new nation free from the grip of sectarian tyranny. They did so in the only way possible - by making American Religion a matter of individual conscience based on the principles of the Enlightenment. For them – as for us – religious freedom is an inherent right. We must think for ourselves, govern ourselves, better ourselves, believe for ourselves and question for ourselves. And to ensure that freedom, we must be willing to support those same rights for others – especially when we think they are wrong. That's American religion.

Amen.