

Liberal Religious Thinking and the Beginning of our Country

A Sermon for the Unitarian Universalist Society of Amherst

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Reading: from The American Creed by Forrest Church

The Pilgrims' and Puritans' migration to America was a self-conscious "errand into the wilderness," motivated by a hunger for religious freedom. "Behold I will do a new thing," God sang in the voice of Isaiah. "Now it shall spring forth, shall ye not know it? I will even make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert...to give drink to my people, my chosen." The Puritans thought that God was speaking through Isaiah directly to them. For better and for worse, the imprint this conviction left on our nation lingers to this day. Looking back on America's first New Englanders some two centuries after they landed in Plymouth Bay and Salem Harbor, Alexis De Tocqueville reminded us, "It must never be forgotten that religion gave birth to Anglo-American society. In the United States, religion is therefore mingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism, whence it derives a peculiar force."

President William Howard Taft knew his history well. "We speak with great satisfaction of the fact that our ancestors – and I claim New England ancestry – came to this country in order to establish freedom of religion," he said in a 1909 speech. "Well, if you are going to be exact, they came to this country to establish freedom of their religion, and not the freedom of anybody else's religion." It is certainly true that when the Pilgrims arrived on the shores of New England they sought religious freedom from one established religion with the stated intention of establishing a new one. Yet the logic that informed their own liberation led directly, if unintentionally, to the establishment of freedom for others....It is no exaggeration to say that America's cornerstone is religious liberty.

From the very outset – even in documents that spring from a different set of primary intentions – one can trace the beginnings of what came to be established as the American Creed. From 1620 onward, faith has invested the freedom Americans seek with meaning. And freedom has tempered the exclusionary strictures of faith.

I was very excited, a few weeks ago, to attend a lecture by one of our leading Unitarian Universalist thinkers and writers, The Rev. Forrest Church. I already own three of his books, Freedom From Fear, The American Creed, and The Separation of Church and State, and after the lecture I bought his most recent book, the one he was speaking about: So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State. Want to see what he wrote to me on the title page??? I was so pleased that he seemed to remember me from a couple of years ago when we met at Chautauqua and had a chance to talk for a bit about my then imminent move to western Massachusetts.

I had chosen this topic for today's service some months ago as part of a short series on Unitarian Universalism, so Forrest Church's timely lecture was a bonus for me and a boon of new information. In fact, some of it was so new to me that I am embarrassed to say that I've had to adjust some of my facts about the relationship between Unitarians and the beginnings of this

country. As in most things, the problem comes in assuming one can generalize about Unitarianism, even in its early days. Plus, little of Unitarianism in the 1770s was as we know it today. Those who called themselves Unitarians in the late 18th century (and many did not use the title because it was considered so heretical) would probably now be considered more theologically orthodox than most of the Congregationalists over on Main Street.

We commonly like to claim Thomas Jefferson as being a Unitarian, or at least as thinking like one even if he had never signed a membership book in a Unitarian church. Some people say Jefferson was a small u unitarian, not a capital U Unitarian. He did actually think Unitarianism might become our national religion, if anything did. So, agreeing that Thomas Jefferson could be called a Unitarian, and knowing that he was one of the prime time players in The Birth of a Nation Show, my assumption had always been that liberal religious Unitarian thinking played at least a large supporting role in the creation of our country. Notice the “had.”

What’s my favorite response these days? “It’s more complicated than that!”

Turns out there was more than one kind of Unitarian, even then! One brand of Unitarian was happily ensconced in the New England Standing Order, as part of the Congregationalist congregations. The big split between the Trinitarian Congregationalists and the Unitarians had not taken place to any great degree at this point in history. These Unitarians were not in favor of the separation of Church and State because it would mean losing their tax based State financial support. Everyone in a Parish was required to pay taxes to support the State established Congregational clergy. This anti-separation Unitarian branch constituted the majority of official Unitarians at the time.

But there was another brand of Unitarians, one that will be much more familiar to most of us these days. It was the brand practiced by Thomas Jefferson: non-conformist, usually Deist in theology, and influenced in great measure by Enlightenment philosophy, world religions, and the French revolution. These were the Unitarians who supported separation of Church and State.

We can claim Unitarian-like Jefferson as a supporter of the First Amendment, but we cannot claim that Unitarians in general were of the same opinion. In The American Creed we find this interesting fact: “In 1833 Massachusetts was the last state in the union to disestablish religion, making Unitarianism – today steadfast in its devotion to church/state separation – the American faith last to hold government sanction.” (p. 8) By 1833 the split between the Congregationalists and the Unitarians had already happened, and it was the Unitarians who retained claim on the Parishes.

Who were the champions of the separation of church and state? They were the Scots Presbyterians, the Baptists, the Methodists, the Jews, the Roman Catholics, and a smattering of influential Deists (such as Jefferson). These were the groups that wanted a “strict church-state separation as a guarantor of the religious liberty they long had labored to secure.” On the other side, “in league with many Presbyterians [of the non-Scots variety] and Quakers, church leaders accustomed to operating under state aegis (old-school Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Unitarians) believed that the nation would not survive independent of a strong Christian

government” (So Help..., p. 3) This was what threw me for a loop in Forrest Church’s talk those few weeks ago. Unitarians as the bad guys? It has been true, in more than just this instance.

In his book, So Help Me God, Forrest Church details the passionate decades-long struggle over issues of church and state that lasted through all the years of our first five presidents. “From the onset of our experiment in government, the founders fought tooth and nail in a contest over American values, a vigorous, sometimes savage, yet nearly forgotten thirty-year conflict to redeem the nation’s soul.” (p. 2)

Church writes, “From the moment the new government opened for business, the question of whether the young country should take on the cultural trappings of its English past or fashion itself on the French Enlightenment model spurred heated debate. Initial discussions exploded into fierce animosities, pitching absolutists on both sides into a war of conflicting ideals that threatened to tear the country in two. At the presidential level, these contests took on the character of religious crusades. The apostles of divine order were victorious first, then the champions of sacred liberty. Competing claims by today’s secular humanists on the left and Christian activists on the right that the U.S. government was erected on a secular or Christian foundation are, in a sense, both correct. John Adams presided over a Christian federal authority, Jefferson over a secular one. From the first contested national election onward, avatars of sacred liberty and defenders of divine order hurled imprecations at each other that would make a modern talk-show host blush.” (p. 6)

Then, as now, the country was pretty much divided right down the middle, in terms of numbers, between establishing a national religion and upholding the freedom of and freedom from religion that was being written into our national documents. It was difficult for many to finally accept that “to promote liberty and justice for all, the secular and religious realms must be kept autonomous. Government attempts to impose religious (or moral) values suppress religion.....by violating individual freedom of conscience.” (p. 2-3)

Finally, “in 1817, with the inauguration of President Monroe, followed shortly thereafter by the disestablishment of the state church in Connecticut, an armistice was struck. Preachers on both sides of the political aisle muted their partisan trumpets, and, against much of the prevailing wisdom, religion flourished. During the so-called Era of Good Feelings the executive branch became, for the first time in the young nation’s history, incontestably secular, and yet American churches grew and prospered. After decades of religious-political turbulence, the ship of state was steadied, liberty protected, religion fostered, and order served.” (p. 6)

As we know all too well, however, what went underground for quite some time, has re-emerged with a vengeance. Everyone has an opinion about what the Founding Fathers *really* meant by their words, and unfortunately they can usually find quotes in historical documents to support whichever side they are on. It seems the politicians two hundred years ago were often quite ambiguous in their posturing, usually depending on what was, in that moment, politically expedient. We don’t see anything like this today, of course.

In truth, the first five presidents of our country were not very religious themselves, although they made “accommodations to satisfy the expectations of their religious constituencies.” (p. 11)

We've never heard of anything like that before either. "Only John Adams was a church member, and they all (Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe) doubted the divinity of Christ....As for James Monroe [under whom the truce finally came] throughout his compendious literary remains there is no inkling that he entertained a single religious notion during his entire adult life." (p. 11)

Settling the argument between today's religious right and the secular left will be difficult because it may never be absolutely clear which is the most accurate interpretation of our Founders' words. All we know for sure is that their "professed goal was to establish a nation true to the spirit of divine law." (Church, The Separation of Church and State) Some interpret this "spirit" as that of the Christian God, others as more of a philosophical concept. Forrest Church contends that much of our "contemporary confusion stems from an inability to distinguish between: 1) the universal spiritual values that underlie the American experiment in democracy, and 2) the role assigned to government to advance those same values by protecting freedom of conscience and belief." (The Separation..., p. viii-ix) In other words, our country was set up to encourage spiritual values and moral behavior by freeing people to be religious in whatever manner works for them and instills that moral behavior. Our Founding Fathers "established a clear line of demarcation between church and state, not to abridge but to fulfill the nation's spiritual mandate." (p. ix)

That our nation had a spiritual mandate was apparent (at least in hindsight) as early as 1620 with the arrival of the Mayflower at Plymouth, MA. Here is an interpretation of the original Mayflower Compact that many of our Unitarian Universalist churches still use today as an affirmation of our covenantal community.

*We pledge to walk together
In the ways of truth and affection,
As best we know them now
Or may learn them in days to come,
That we and our children may be fulfilled
And that we may speak to the world
In words and actions
Of peace and goodwill.*

There is much more to this story than what I can impart to you this morning. It is a fascinating story, all the more so because it is ours.

Religious thinking, regardless of specific nature, that leads one to an ethical life of compassion, and commitment to what is just and equitable, was the aim of our Founding Fathers. In many ways, the Unitarian Universalist Association and our independent congregations, are religious institutionalizations of that very aim.

Let us continue on, as they hoped we would do.