

# RELIGION: THE "INDISPENSABLE SUPPORT" OF THE NATION

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## THE SEPARATE SPHERES OF GOVERNMENT AND RELIGION

In arguing for religious freedom for the nation, Madison opposed the traditional ideas that Christianity would fall if not supported by the civil government, and that government required the prop of established Christianity, contending that the state of Virginia "conspicuously corroborated the disproof" of this conception of the relationship of religion and the state (quoted in Alley 1985, 90). In his Memorial opposing religious establishment in Virginia, he presented an historical defense against the necessity of religious establishment, arguing that Christian religion had flourished originally with no "human laws" to support it, and in fact in the face of persecution, not only in the time of miracles, but also long after "it had been left to its own evidence and the ordinary care of Providence." As Christianity was not "invented by human policy," it was not in need of human policy to support it. Establishing Christianity, he contended, only betrayed a lack of confidence in the "innate excellence and the patronage of its Author," and fostered suspicion in those who reject it that its adherents are "too conscious of its fallacies to trust it to its own merits" (ibid., 311). Building on this argument, he defended his conviction that the civil government required no support from a religious establishment, because if establishments are desired as a means to support government because they support religion, and establishments do not support religion, then they can be of no use to government. Madison maintained that establishments were not just inefficacious both for the support of religion and government, but were harmful to both. "What influence in fact have ecclesiastical establishments had on Civil Society?" he asked, "In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the Civil authority; in many instances they have been seen as upholding the thrones of political tyranny: in no instances have they been the guard-

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<sup>1</sup> Continued from *The New Philosophy* October–December, 2008.

ians of the liberties of the people” (ibid., 311). And with respect to their effect on religion, he asserted that the fruits of establishments had been “More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution” (ibid., 311). Believing that religious establishments had been a force of corruption in governments and churches throughout history, he fought hard to steer the new republic away from choosing this fate, and lead it instead on a revolutionary path in respect to religious freedom.

In 1787, when the first draft of the Constitution appeared, some were dismayed that it in no way confirmed a belief in God or the tenets of Christianity. One critic from Connecticut described it as “sinful omission” which revealed that the new Constitution did not look to God for the guidance of government. Convention delegate William Williams of Connecticut wished that the beginning of the preamble could have been phrased:

We the people of the United States, in firm belief of the being and perfections of the one living and true God, the Creator and the supreme Governor of the world, in his universal providence and the authority of his laws; that he will require of all moral agents an account of their conduct; that all rightful powers among men are ordained of, and mediately derived from God . . . (quoted in Davis 2000, 206)

The delegates to the constitution could have voted for an establishment similar to that instituted in Pennsylvania where public office-holding required a belief in the judgement of the afterlife, based on the idea that a minimum of belief must be supported in order to maintain a peaceful society (Kid 1999, 1019–1020). However, the majority supported, whether from conviction or pragmatism, the absence of any establishment whatsoever.

Although both Jefferson and Madison agreed that the beliefs outlined by the Connecticut delegate were in fact crucial to the good of society, they did not support religious establishment under any creed or banner. Jefferson was opposed to the establishment of Christianity, however general, because he wanted religious freedom “to comprehend within the mantle of its protection the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo and infidel of every denomination” (quoted in Lambert 2003, 236).

Madison, after securing the defeat of any reference to Christianity in the debate over Jefferson's bill for religious freedom in Virginia in 1786, explained that he did not want to "profuse it by making it a topic of legislative discussion, and particularly by making His religion the means of abridging the natural and equal rights of all men, in defiance of His own declaration that His Kingdom was not of this world" (quoted in Alley 1985,189). Religious belief originated with the people, they were convinced, and was beyond the purview of the government, and the government could only harm it by any enforcement of its principles. Legal requirements could do nothing to ensure that the governors of the nation were moral people. Only by the judgement of a people whose reason and conscience were left to operate in freedom, could good leadership be secured. As Madison famously stated before the Virginia ratifying convention in June of 1788,

But I go on this great republican principle, that the people will have virtue and intelligence to select men of virtue and wisdom. Is there no virtue among us? If there be not, we are in a retched situation. No theoretical checks—no form of government can render us secure. To suppose that any form of government will secure liberty or happiness without any virtue in the people, is a chimerical idea. If there be sufficient virtue and intelligence in the community, it will be exercised in the selection of these men. So that we do not depend on their virtue, or put confidence in our rulers, but in the people who are to choose them." (Quoted in Kloppenberg 1987, 27)

Madison was insistent that the bounds between the civil government and religion be scrupulously maintained. He described this position in the *Memorial* when he wrote that "The preservation of a free Government requires not merely, that the metes and bounds which separate each department of power be invariably maintained; but more especially that neither of them be suffered to overlap the great Barrier which defends the rights of the people" (Cousins 1958, 309).<sup>9</sup> Maintaining "the great Barrier"

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<sup>9</sup> In his speech, Madison advocated that instead of a bill, a clause should be incorporated into the text of the Constitution that would read, "No state shall violate the equal rights of conscience, or the freedom of the press, or the trial by jury in criminal cases." This would have barred not only the state but also the federal government from making any laws respecting the regulation of religion (Lambert 2003, 262).

meant that governors could not form ecclesiastical assemblies of any kind, and should not make any decrees “that imply a religious agency” (quoted in Lambert 2003, 271). For this reason he was opposed to public proclamations of thanksgiving, fasts, and days of prayer.<sup>10</sup> He did not object to chaplains in Congress or for military branches, but was opposed to their public support. This did not mean, however, that the religious views of politicians and judges could not be publicly expressed, simply, “they should be represented as such and should be accorded no more weight than any other American’s sentiments regarding personal belief” (ibid., 272). By “the great Barrier,” Madison did not mean that religious ideas should not be part of public discourse; he meant rather that religious convictions of the nation’s leaders would participate in America’s free market of religious ideas equally with those of the people.

His great insistence on the distinction between the spheres of government and religion, however, should not be taken as evidence, as some scholars have, that Madison was in anyway hostile to religion. The opposite, in fact, is true. As Robert S. Alley writes, in his work *James Madison on Religious Liberty*,

Madison made it clear again and again, as he did in the *Memorial and Remonstrance*, that the separation was as necessary for the vitality and salutary influence of religion as it was for the tranquility of society. It is no doubt true that Madison saw the primary defense of religious freedom in its status as one of the inalienable rights of man, but it is also true, and of considerable importance, that he saw that same principle as a great bulwark to the strength of religious sentiments. (Alley 1985, 189)

Madison expressed his understanding of the interaction of the spheres of religion and government in a letter to a New York clergyman, writing that “a due distinction, to which the genius and courage of *Luther* led the way, between what is due to Caesar and what is due God, best promotes the discharge of *both* obligations . . . A mutual independence is found most friendly to practical religion, to social harmony, and to political prosper-

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<sup>10</sup> Although he had formally professed his opposition to proclamations of thanksgiving and days of prayer, he issued them later as president (Alley 1985, 241).

ity" (ibid., 190) Convinced, as all of the Founders were, that religion and liberty could not prosper apart from each other, Madison hoped to foster a mutually beneficial relationship between the distinct spheres of church and state.

## CHRISTIAN MORALITY AS THE FOUNDATION AND THE WAY TO TRUTH

### **The Morals of Christianity "the best the world ever saw"**

The Founding Fathers had the greatest hopes that freedom of conscience would pave the way for a flourishing of pure and rational religious belief among the American people. In 1793, in a letter to the New Church in Baltimore, Washington wrote, "We have abundant reason to rejoice that in this Land the light of truth and reason has triumphed over the power of bigotry and superstition, and that every person may here worship God according to the dictates of his own heart" (Cousins 1958, 62). And Jefferson, in 1821, in a private letter, exclaimed, "No one sees with greater pleasure than myself the progress of reason in its advances towards rational Christianity" ("Letter to Timothy Pickering" in Cousins 1958, 157). In a response to a request of the effect of separation of church and state in Virginia in 1819 Madison wrote "That there had been an increase of religious institution since the Revolution can admit of no question. . . . Religion is now diffused throughout the community by preachers of every sect. . . ." ("Letter to Robert Walsh . . ." in Cousins 1958, 319–320). Madison was able to report on the success of his great experiment in religious freedom.

Although the Founders varied in their religious ideas, there can be no doubt of their belief in the truth of Christian morality. Some, like Jefferson, Franklin, and Thomas Paine, were deists. Indeed, Jefferson did not believe that Christ was divine, and declared that Jesus only ascribed to himself "every *human* excellence" (quoted in Lambert 2003, 174). Franklin expressed his doubts when asked about his position on the divinity of Jesus, but remarked on an occasion shortly before his death, that he believed he would soon have "the opportunity of knowing with less trouble" ("Letter to Ezra Stiles . . ." in Cousins 1958, 42). Washington belonged both to the Episcopalian Church, and the Freemasons, a group which tended to de-

part from traditional Christian forms (Brookhiser 1996, 149). Those like James Madison and John Adams took a reverent and reserved approach to Scripture. Every president among them mentioned God in their inaugural addresses, but none made sectarian references (Davis 2000, 216). Most expressed a belief that there exists a supreme Creator who governs the world through His providence and His laws, and that the good are rewarded and the wicked punished in the afterlife. Most emphasized the importance of showing piety toward God. Washington frequently cited the hand of providence in the creation of the nation, and continuously asked his countrymen to show the “Gratitude and Piety” to the “Supreme Author of all Good that their good fortune demanded” (“General Orders” in Cousins 1958, 51). Despite the variation in their thinking about religion, the Founders were unanimous in their support of Christian morality, whether out of conviction that the Bible was the revelation of God, or from admiration of the perfection of the teachings of Jesus:

*“As to Jesus of Nazareth, my opinion of who, you particularly desire, I think the system of morals and his religion, as he left them to us, the best the would ever saw or is likely to see . . .”* (quoted in Cousins 1958, 19). — Benjamin Franklin

*“I am a Christian, in the only sense in which [Jesus] wished any one to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others . . .”* (quoted in Lambert 2003, 174). — Thomas Jefferson

*“Now I will avow, that I then believed and now believe that those general principles of Christianity are as eternal and immutable as the existence and the attributes of God”* (“To Jefferson,” quoted in Cousin 1958, 230). — John Adams

*“This is all the inheritance I can give to my dear family. The religion of Christ can give them one which will make them rich indeed”* (Morgan 1907, 457). — Patrick Henry

*“Christianity is the only true and perfect religion; and that in proportion as mankind adopts its principles and obeys its precepts they will be wise and happy”* (Runes 1947, 117). — Benjamin Rush

*"To the distinguished Character of Patriot, it should be our highest Glory to add the more distinguished Character of Christian"* ("Headquarters" in Cousins 1958, 51). — George Washington

*"I have long been of opinion, that the evidence of the truth of Christianity, requires only to be carefully examined to produce conviction in candid minds . . ."* (quoted in Jay, 266). — John Jay

James Madison talked about Christianity as "the most sublime of all Sciences," and Alexander Hamilton at one time had ideas about forming a "Christian Constitutional Society" (quoted in Noonan 1988, 66; quoted in Cousins 1958, 329 respectively). In their hopes that freedom of reason and conscience would propagate pure religious belief in America, there can be no doubt that the Founders hoped this brand of belief would be either a Christian religion, or one that upheld the moral code prescribed by Christ. Given, as it was discussed earlier, that the Founders believed that the only basis of liberty in a republic can be found in religion, and that a belief in a law of divine origin was the only source for reliable social bonds, it can therefore be concluded that the Founding Fathers believed that the possession by the people of religion that included a belief in the immutable truth of the moral system of Christ, was the means of ensuring the present and future liberty of the nation. Jefferson summarized this position nicely when he wrote to Adams that without the doctrines of Jesus, "in which we all agree," this world would be, as you again say, 'something not fit to be named, even indeed, a hell'" ("Letter to Adams . . . , 1817," Cousins 1958, 283).

## **The way to truth**

### *Jefferson*

Jefferson, believing the "Christian philosophy" the most sublime in the world, also believed it that it was the "most perverted system that ever shone on man," and it was his great hope, indeed his expectation, that the "dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States" would restore the genuine doctrines of Jesus ("Letter to Priestly" in Cousins 1958,

131). This was the great spiritual significance that he placed on the separation of church and state in America. As Edwin S. Gaustad demonstrates in his religious biography of Thomas Jefferson, one cannot fully understand Jefferson's ideas, both political and private, without understanding his desire to reform religion (Gaustad 1982, xiii). Jefferson particularly wished to do away with the doctrine of the Trinity, which he described as a "phantasm of a God like Cerberus, with one body and three heads," that had corrupted Christianity, and he looked to America to restore belief in the one Creator (Cousins 1958, 159). In a letter to James Smith in 1822, he noted with satisfaction the progress of his dream,

And strong proof of the solidarity of the primitive faith, is its restoration, as soon as a nation arises which vindicates to itself the freedom of religious opinion, and its external divorce from civil authority. The pure and simple unity of the Creator of the universe, is now all but ascendant in the eastern States; it is dawning in the West, and advancing towards the south; and I confidently expect that the present generation will see Unitarianism become the general religion of the United States. ( *Ibid.*, 159)

Freedom of conscience, in Jefferson's opinion, had cleared away every obstacle in the path of truth. In a free market of religious ideas reason would naturally reveal the truth, he believed, because the "errors" of religion would cease "to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them" ("Bill," in Cousins 1958, 261). The belief in one God represented to Jefferson, like the new scientific understanding, one more improvement of mind through the triumph of pure reason.

Convinced that free reason observing nature could not help but confirm the existence of an almighty creator, Jefferson rejected the idea that revelation is necessary to religious belief. He opposed the adoption of creeds of any kind, believing that they destroy religious truth by subverting reason. He was offended by the idea contained in the dogma of Christian religions that there is no sufficient proof of God without revelation. In a letter defending his rejection of this belief, he wrote, "I hold (without appeal to revelation) that when we take a view of the human universe . . . it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a

conviction of design, consummate skill, and indefinite power in every atom of its composition . . ." ("Letter to Adams." In *cousins* 1958, 290). To him, the interposition of false religious ideas could be accounted for solely by the captivity of the mind by religious and civil institutions. In his discourses on religious corruption, it was always human error he referred to, never sin.

Despite his confidence that empirical evidence would always reveal the existence of God and the moral laws of society that he strove to affirm in his country, there were troubling contradictions in his philosophy that weakened its affirmation of universal human rights. As John P. Diggins observed insightfully, Jefferson's theory of natural rights was not compatible with his theory of equal rights. Diggins writes that Jefferson believed that men derived their natural rights from their equal creation, and that proof of this equality was found in their ability to respond to the challenges of their environment. The problem, according to Diggins, was that when the equality of men could not be confirmed by observation, their equal rights could not be confirmed either (Diggins 1976, 224). Adding to the difficulty was Jefferson's belief that man's power to adapt to his environment was the ultimate test of his moral worth (*ibid.*, 210). In Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia*, observing black slaves in the environment of Virginia, he wrote, "as a suspicion only, that the blacks, whether originally a distinct race, or made distinct by time and circumstances, are inferior to whites in the endowments both of body and mind" (*ibid.*, 224–225). Jefferson, in perceiving inferiority of creation in the black slaves of Virginia, could not logically affirm their equal rights. If Jefferson glimpsed these consequences in his assessment of the black slave, perhaps they were relatively easy to ignore because they applied to people who were far from being his social equals, and in whom he could have felt more comfortable suspecting a natural inferiority that had devastating implications for their human rights. The conflict between natural rights theory and the natural observations of some of its proponents is what Diggins terms "the pathos of the Enlightenment," the burden of which he believes we still carry today (*ibid.*, 207). He points out that unlike Jefferson and other devotees of the Enlightenment, those who ascribed to the authority of Scripture avoided this burden by deriving the argument for human rights from an account of the equality of the human soul.

The dominance of a religious framework shielded those like Jefferson from the unsettling implications of building a moral system based upon human observations of a diverse and variable natural world. In Jefferson's America, thinking about morality took place within a religious context. Those who doubted the existence of God in America were a small minority and those who doubted that the Christian moral code represented immutable laws of society were surely rare. At least among the Founders no such doubt existed. That the triumph of science and reason could confirm anything but a belief in the divine and the moral teachings of Christ, Jefferson thought "impossible." He would never witness the effects of a system of human relationships that attempts to base itself purely on natural philosophy, divorced from the traditional ideas of spiritual order that were so much a part of his world.

### *Madison*

Madison, in his understanding of the way to religious truth, seems to have been somewhat of a mixture of the "Old Learning" and a reserved version of the new. In reply to a request for his opinion about a pamphlet attempting to prove *a priori* the existence of God, Madison responded that although the abstract ideas would be convincing to some, he thought that "it will probably always be found that the course of reasoning from the effect to the cause, 'from Nature to Nature's God,' will be the more universal and more persuasive application" (quoted in Alley 176). But on the other hand, in the *Memorial*, he opposes a bill for religious assessments because the action would be "adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity," and prevents those who "remain under the dominion of false religions" and are "strangers to the light of revelation from coming into the Region of it" (Cousins 1958, 312–313). As John T. Noonan commented, Madison "addresses Christians as a fellow Christian; he speaks as a believer in Christianity's special light; his argument looks to the evangelization of the world" (Noonan 1998, 87).

Madison's use of the terms "light" and "revelation" as diffusers of religious truth stand in contrast to Jefferson's notion of unaided human reason. A reverent attitude toward revelation is evidenced by Madison's

treatment of the Bible, especially when contrasted with Jefferson's handling of Scripture; while Jefferson edited from the Bible what he perceived to be superstitions and falsifications, completely discarding the Old Testament and condensing the New Testament, Madison took notes on their meaning (Alley 1985, 192). And in contrast to Jefferson's empiricism, Madison recommended that the science of man be always approached with God in view. Writing to his friend William Bradford, Madison urged,

I doubt not but you design to season them with a little divinity now and then, which like the Philosopher's stone in the hands of a good man will turn them and every lawful acquirement into the nature of itself and make them more precious than fine gold . . . a watchful eye must be kept on ourselves lest while we are building ideal monuments of Reason and Bliss here we neglect to have our names enrolled in the Annals of Heaven. ("Letter to Bradford" in Cousins 1985, 298)

In Madison's thinking, it is our religious ideas that inform and enlighten our natural vision, and not the other way around. □

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RELIGION: THE "INDISPENSABLE SUPPORT" OF THE NATION

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