

Faith and the American Founding: Illustrating Religion's Influence

Michael Novak

How long are we going to keep this experiment, this America? We are “testing whether this nation can long endure,” Lincoln said at Gettysburg. We’re still testing. Is America a meteor that blazed across the heavens and is now exhausted? Or rather is our present moral fog a transient time of trial, those hours cold and dark before the ramparts’ new gleaming? Are we near our end or at a beginning?

In answer to these questions, I want to tell six brief stories to illustrate the religious principles of the American founding. For a hundred years scholars have stressed the principles that come from the Enlightenment and from John Locke in particular. But there are also first principles that come to us from Judaism and Christianity, especially from Judaism. Indeed, it is important to recognize that most of what our Founders talked about (when they talked politically) came from the Jewish Testament, not the Christian. The Protestant Christians who led the way in establishing the principles of this country were uncommonly attached to the Jewish Testament.

Scholars often mistakenly refer to the god of the Founders as a deist god. But the Founders talked about God in terms that are radically Jewish: Creator, Lawgiver, Governor, Judge, and Providence. These were the names they most commonly used for Him, notably in the Declaration of Independence. For the most part, these are not names that could have come from

the Greeks or Romans, but only from the Jewish Testament. Perhaps the Founders avoided Christian language because they didn’t want to divide one another, since different colonies were founded under different Christian inspirations. In any case, all found common language in the language of the Jewish Testament. It is important for citizens today whose main inspiration is the Enlightenment and Reason to grasp the religious elements in the founding, which have been understated for a hundred years.

For these principles are important to many fellow citizens, and they are probably indispensable to the moral health of the Republic, as Washington taught us in his Farewell Address: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

Reason and faith are the two wings by which the American eagle took flight.

If I stress the second wing, the Jewish especially, it is because scholars have paid too much attention to Jefferson in these matters and ignored the other one hundred top Founders. For instance, we’ve ignored John Witherspoon, the president of Princeton, “the most influential professor in the history of America,” who taught one President (Madison stayed an extra year at Princeton to study with him), a Vice President, three Supreme Court justices including the chief justice, 12 members of the Continental Congress, five delegates

to the Constitutional Convention, 14 members of the State Conventions (that ratified the Constitution). During the revolution, many of his pupils were in positions of command in the American forces. We've ignored Dr. Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania, John Wilson of Pennsylvania, and a host of others.

I want to quote from some of the Founders to give you a taste of the religious energy behind the founding.

JEFFERSON'S SANCTION

Here is my first little story, an anecdote recorded by a minister of the time:

President Jefferson was on his way to church on a Sunday morning with his large red prayer book under his arm when a friend querying him after their mutual good morning said which way are you walking Mr. Jefferson. To which he replied to Church Sir. You going to church Mr. J. You do not believe a word in it. Sir said Mr. J. No nation has ever yet existed or been governed without religion. Nor can be. The Christian religion is the best religion that has ever been given to man and I as chief Magistrate of this nation am bound to give it the sanction of my example. Good morning Sir.

Note what Jefferson is saying. He didn't say he believed in the Christian God; he evaded that point. But Jefferson did agree with what all his colleagues in the founding thought, that a people cannot maintain liberty without religion. Here is John Adams in 1776:

I sometimes tremble to think that although we are engaged in the best cause that ever employed the human heart, yet the prospect of success is doubtful, not for want of power or of wisdom but of virtue.

The founding generation had no munitions factory this side of the ocean, and yet they were facing the most powerful army and the largest navy in the

world. Besides, their unity was fragile. The people of Virginia did not like the people of Massachusetts. The people of Massachusetts did not think highly of the people of Georgia. Reflecting on this point, President Witherspoon, who had just arrived from Scotland in 1768 and was not at first in favor of it, gave a famous sermon in April 1776 supporting independence two months before July 4. His text was read in all 500 Presbyterian churches in the colonies and widely reproduced. Witherspoon argued that although hostilities had been going on for two years, the king still did not understand that he could easily have divided the colonies and ended the hostilities. That the king didn't do so showed that he was not close enough to know how to govern the Americans.

If they were to stick together with people they didn't particularly like, the Americans needed virtues of tolerance, civic spirit, and a love of the common good. Further, because the new nation couldn't compete in armed power, the colonists depended on high moral qualities in their leaders and on devotion in the people. In order to win, for instance, Washington had to avoid frontal combat, and to rely on the moral endurance of his countrymen year after year. To this end, Washington issued an order that any soldier who used profane language would be drummed out of the army. He impressed upon his men that they were fighting for a cause that demanded a special moral appeal, and he wanted no citizen to be shocked by the language and behavior of his troops. The men must show day-by-day that they fought under a special moral covenant.

Now think of our predicament today. How many people in America today understand the four key words that once formed a great mosaic over the American Republic? *Truth*, we "hold these truths"; *Liberty*, "conceived in liberty"; *Law*, "liberty under law"; and *Judge*, "appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions." On the face of things, our Founders were committing treason. In the eyes of the world, they were seditious. They appealed to an objective world, and beyond the eyes of an objective world, they appealed to the Supreme Judge for the rectitude

of their intentions. That great mosaic, which used to form the beautiful, colorful apse over the American Republic, in this nonjudgmental age has fallen to the dust. It is disassembled in a thousand pieces. Fewer every year remember how it used to look.

CONGRESS IN PRAYER

In the first days of September 1774, from every region, members of the First Continental Congress were riding dustily toward Philadelphia, where they hoped to remind King George III of the rights due to them as Englishmen. That's all they were claiming: the rights of Englishmen. And they wanted to remind King George that they were wards of the king. They weren't founded by the Parliament, they were founded by the king, and they resented the Parliament taxing them. The Parliament had nothing to do with their relationship to the king, they thought. Yet, as these delegates were gathering, news arrived that the king's troops were shelling Charlestown and Boston, and rumors flew that the city was being sacked, and robbery and murder were being committed. Those rumors turned out not to be true, but that's the news they heard. Thus, as they gathered, the delegates were confronted with impending war. Their first act as a Continental Congress was to request a session of prayer.

Mr. Jay of New York and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina immediately spoke against this motion. They said that Americans are so divided in religious sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Anabaptists, some Presbyterians, and some Congregationalists, all could not join in the same act of prayer. Sam Adams rose to say he's no bigot, and could hear a prayer from any gentleman of piety and virtue as long as he is a patriot. "I've heard of a certain Reverend Duché," he said, speaking of the rector of Christ Church down the street from where they were meeting. "People say he's earned that character." Adams moved that the same be asked to read prayers before Congress on the next morning. And the motion carried.

Thus it happened that the first act of the Congress on September 7, 1774, was a prayer, pronounced by

an Episcopalian clergyman dressed in his pontificals. And what did he read? He read a Jewish prayer, Psalm 35 in the Book of Common Prayer. Now imagine the king's troops moving against the homes of some of the people gathered there. Imagine the delegates from South Carolina and New York thinking that the fleet might be shelling their homes soon.

Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me. Fight against them that fight against me. Take hold of buckler and shield, and rise up for my help.

...Say to my soul, "I am your salvation."

Let those be ashamed and dishonored who seek my life. Let those be turned back and humiliated who devise evil against me.

Before the Reverend Duché knelt Washington, Henry, Randolph, Rutledge, Lee, and Jay; and by their side, with heads bowed, the Puritan patriots who could imagine at that moment their own homes being bombarded and overrun. Over these bowed heads the Reverend Duché uttered what all testified was an eloquent prayer for America, for Congress, for the Province of Massachusetts Bay, and especially for the town of Boston. The emotion in the room was palpable, and John Adams wrote to Abigail that night that he had never heard a better prayer or one so well pronounced. "I never saw a greater effect upon an audience. It seemed as if heaven had ordained that that Psalm be read on that morning. It was enough to melt a stone. I saw tears gush into the eyes of the old, grave pacific Quakers of Philadelphia. I must beg you, Abigail, to read that Psalm."

In this fashion, right at its beginning, this nation formed a covenant with God which is repeated in the Declaration: "with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence." The Founders pledged their fidelity to the will of God, and asked God to protect their liberty. They further enacted this covenant in many later acts of Congress regarding Days of Fasting. Within the first six months, for instance, Congress put out a

proclamation that every American state set aside a day of prayer and fasting:

December 11, 1776: *Resolved* that it be recommended to all the United States as soon as possible to appoint a day of solemn fasting and humiliation to implore the Almighty God to forgiveness of the many sins prevailing among all ranks and to beg the countenance and the assistance of his Providence in the prosecution of the present just and necessary war.

And then, within another year, an act of Congress instituted a Day of Thanksgiving to commemorate the signal successes of that year, and again the next year. Years later, in *The Federalist* No. 38, Publius marveled at the improbable unanimity achieved among fragmented delegates, from free states and slave, from small states and large, from rich states and poor. “It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it a finger of the Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.” Three times *The Federalist* notes the blessings of Providence upon this country.

AN ACT OF PROVIDENCE

On the night before the battle of Long Island, the Americans received intelligence that the British were attacking the next morning, and Washington was trapped with his whole army. Washington saw that there was only one way out—by boat. During the night, the Americans gathered as many boats as they could. There weren’t enough. Morning came, and more than half the army was still on shore. A huge fog rolled in and covered them till noon. They escaped, and when the British closed the trap, there was no one there. The Americans interpreted that fog as an act of Providence.

In the preaching of the time, Americans learned as follows: Providence does not mean that God works magically; rather, from all time every detail of the tapestry is known to the one who weaves it. To the

Eternal God, there is neither time nor sequence, but every detail of the tapestry is visible to Him as if in one simultaneous moment, each thing acting independently and freely, but cohering as a whole, like characters in a well-wrought novel. Thus, the rival general, on the morning of the great battle comes down with dysentery and can’t concentrate. Nothing more common in the affairs of human beings than circumstance and chance, which only those who lived through them in time and sequence found to be surprising. The very sermon Witherspoon preached on behalf of independence in April 1776 was a sermon on how Providence acts by contingent and indirect actions—not *foreseen*, because God doesn’t “foresee” anything. He’s *present* to everything, in the Jewish and Christian understanding. He’s not *before* or *after*, He’s present to all things at one time. And like a great novelist, He sees the details of what He does, and how they all hook together, without forcing anybody’s liberty, without manipulating anything.

THE AUTHOR OF LIBERTY

When Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, he mentioned God twice. Before the Congress would sign it, members insisted on two more references to God. Thus, the four names already mentioned: the *Author* of nature and nature’s laws; the *Creator* who endowed in us our rights; the *Judge* to whom we appeal in witness that our motives spring not out of seditiousness, but from a dear love of liberty, and a deep sense of our own proper dignity; and a trust in *Divine Providence*.

The fundamental meaning of the Jewish, and later the Christian, Bible is that the axis of the universe is what happens in the interior of the human being. Every story in the Bible is a story of what happens in the arena of the human will. In one chapter King David is faithful to his Lord and in the next, not. And the suspense of every chapter is, What will humans choose next? Liberty is the reason God made the universe. He wanted somewhere one creature capable of recognizing that He had made all things, that the cre-

ation is good, and that He had extended his hand in friendship. He wanted at least one creature to be able, not as a slave but as a free woman or a free man, to reciprocate his proffered friendship. That, in a nutshell, is what Judaism is, and what Christianity is. (Christianity, of course, played an historical role in making the God of Judaism known universally.)

The members of Congress on July 2, 1776, were about to make themselves liable to the charge of treason and to humiliate their children into the *n*th generation for being the descendants of traitors. They needed that reference to their *Judge* in the Declaration. And they wanted that reference to *Providence*, to declare that God is on the side of Liberty, and those who trust in liberty will therefore prevail. Whatever the odds, Providence will see to it that they prevail.

Let me recall, from one of the old American hymns, words that reflect exactly this biblical vision. This world didn't just "happen," it was created. It was created for a purpose, and that purpose is *liberty*:

Our fathers God! To Thee,
Author of liberty,
To Thee we sing.
Long may our land be bright
With freedom's holy light;
Protect us by Thy might,
Great God our king.

A typical sentiment of the American people then, and even now.

I've mentioned that though some historians say they were deists, the early Americans who believed that the lifting of the fog on Long Island was an act of God, were not deists. Their god was not a "watchmaker God," who winds the universe up and lets it go. Their god was a God who cares about contingent affairs, loves particular nations, is interested in particular peoples and particular circumstances. Their god was the God of Judaism, the God of Providence. Not a swallow falls in the field but this God knows of it. His action is in the details.

THE LOGIC OF FAITH

The Third Article of the Constitution of Massachusetts:

As the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality, and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community but by the institution of the public worship of God and of public instructions in piety, religion, and morality: Therefore, To promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several towns, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic or religious societies to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of the public worship of God and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teachers of piety, religion, and morality in all cases where such provision shall not be made voluntarily.

When this article was attacked as an infringement on religious liberty, John Adams replied, in effect, "Not at all, you don't have to believe it. But if you want the good order that comes from instruction in religion, particularly the Jewish and Christian religion, then you have to pay for it." That's not the way we think today, I hastily add, but this is the sort of logic our Founders used. Let us walk through the three crucial steps of this logic, one by one.

Right at the beginning of *The Federalist*, in the second paragraph, the author says this generation of Americans is called upon to decide for all time whether governments can be formed "through reflection and choice" or must "forever be formed through accident and force." That's what the Americans were called upon to decide: whether a government may be formed through *reflection* and *choice*.

They then faced the question: How do you institutionalize such a decision? By calling a Constitutional Con-

vention and then having the agreed-upon text ratified in a manner that permits the whole people to participate in the decision. Can there be enough votes for something like that? Can people put aside their regional prejudices? Can they put aside their personal ambitions? Can they think about what's good for the long run? For posterity? That's what *The Federalist* tries to elicit—a long-range view, not what people feel at the moment.

Remember the ambitions of that moment. Many New Yorkers wanted New York to be a separate nation. (The early maps of New York go all the way out to the Pacific Ocean—it's not called "the Empire State" for nothing.) If New York becomes a separate state, it will have its own secretary of state, its own commander in chief, its own secretary of the treasury; distinguished families in New York will become ambassadors to the Court of St. James and to Paris and so forth. Such a dream might seem very attractive to some leading families, but would it be good for the country? If New York were to vote to become an independent nation, there could be no union between New England and the South. *Reflection* and *choice* were, then, the hinges of liberty. What Americans *meant* by liberty are those acts that are made from reflection and choice. The acts that we commit ourselves to when we have reflected on the alternatives and when we understand the consequences. That's freedom.

What you do by impulse, by contrast, is not freedom; that's slavery to your impulses. Such slavery is what the animals live under. They're hungry; they need to eat. That's not freedom; it's animal instinct.

Freedom is not doing what you want to do; freedom is doing what, after reflection, you know you *ought* to do. That's what freedom is, and that's why early American thought has been summed up thus: "Confirm thy soul in self-control, Thy liberty in law." Freedom springs from self-government, after reflection and calm deliberate choice.

The second step in the argument is this: To have reflection and choice, you need people with enough virtue to have command of their passions. You need people, that is, with the habits that allow them to

reflect, to take time to be dispassionate, to see consequences clearly, and then to make a choice based upon commitment. None of us act that way all the time. But we do aspire to have at least sufficient virtue to live responsibly. For how can a people unable to govern their passions in their private lives possibly be able to practice self-government in their public lives? It doesn't compute. In short, freedom in a republic is not feasible without virtue in a republic.

Next, the third step. George Washington said in his Farewell Address that most people are not going to have virtue or good habits in the long run without religion. And what he meant by that can be recited very simply. As Jews and Christians understand it, religion is not just a cold law; it is a relationship with a person. A person who knows even your secret thoughts. So religion adds a personal motive to the idea of virtue. In addition to that, this Judge sees you even when you're alone, even when you're in secret, even when the doors are closed. This is a Judge who knows whether or not you paint the bottom of the chair. Republics depend on virtue that holds up under such tests. The founding generation used the example of the well-known doctor in Massachusetts who, having been involved in an adultery, turned out also to be a British spy. This was a lesson they often referred to. A man who thinks he can get away with things in secret is not reliable for a republic. A republic cannot be made up of people who think they can do in secret what they wouldn't do in public. Jefferson wrote a very touching letter to this effect.¹

This is why the Founders thought that whatever may be said of persons of "peculiar character," as Washington said (some scholars think he's referring to Jefferson), we must not believe that virtue can be maintained in the long run without religion. Our sons are going to forget about the Revolution, the Founders expected; they're going to forget the suffering we went through. They're going to forget the frozen feet at Valley Forge

¹See "Letter to Peter Carr," August 19, 1785, in *Thomas Jefferson's Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York: The Library of America, 1984), pp. 814–815.

and the gangrene and the hunger, the lack of pay and the despair. They're going to forget all that, and their grandchildren are going to be tired of hearing it. There's a moral entropy in human affairs, such that even if one generation succeeds in reaching a very high moral level, it's almost impossible for the next generation and the one after that to maintain it. A republic, therefore, has to fight moral entropy. That's why there will have to be a series of moral awakenings. The Founders didn't see how that would happen without religious inspiration, beyond a merely utilitarian impulse.

So there are three principles in this fundamental logic: *No republic without liberty; no liberty without virtue; no virtue without religion.* Now, doesn't that sound old-fashioned? In these days, doesn't it sound hardly tenable? Yet our Founders were right. Is not our present circumstance dangerous to the Republic?

THE CHOICE OF LIBERTY

I first heard this story alluded to in Ronald Reagan's Inaugural Address. Dr. Joseph Warren, the family doctor of Abigail and John Adams in Boston, was among the first to join the Sons of Liberty and to stand with the men at Lexington. In fact, he was an officer, and he took a bullet through his hair right above his ear, where it left a crease, but he stood his ground. Two months later, Dr. Warren was commissioned as a major general of the Continental Army. It was a great title, but there wasn't much of an army for the defense of Boston, toward which the British fleet was bringing reinforcements. Dr. Warren learned just four days after he was commissioned that that night the Americans had sent 1,500 men up Bunker Hill. It was one of those still nights when hardly a sound traveled out over the water, where the British fleet was anchored. In the stillness, the troops dug, muffling their shovels, and constructed wooden fortifications, being careful not to strike anything with an axe.

In the morning, the British on board ship awakened to find that Bunker Hill was fortified, and began a five-hour bombardment. Warren heard the bombardment as he was on horseback riding toward Boston, and arrived at Bunker Hill by a back route and managed

to climb up into the ranks. He didn't try to take command; he just went into the ranks, in the front rows.

After the bombardment, some of the British soldiers came on land and put Charlestown to the torch, and tongues of flame from 500 homes, businesses, and churches leapt into the sky. Everything in Charlestown burned. Breathless, Abigail Adams watched from a hilltop to the south. She heard the cannons from the warships bombarding Bunker Hill for five long hours as Joseph Warren rode to his position. The American irregulars proved their discipline that day and the accuracy of huntsmen firing in concentrated bursts. They had only four or five rounds apiece. Twice they broke the forward march of thirty-five hundred British troops with fire so withering they blew away as many as 70 to 90 percent of the foremost companies of Redcoats, who lost that day more than a thousand dead.

Then the ammunition of the Americans ran out. While the bulk of the Continental Army retreated, the last units stayed in their trenches to hold off the British hand-to-hand. That is where Major General Joseph Warren was last seen fighting until a close-range bullet felled him. The British officers had him decapitated and bore his head aloft to General Gage.

Freedom is always the most precarious regime. Even a single generation can throw it all away. Every generation must reflect and must choose. Joseph Warren had earlier told the men of Massachusetts at Lexington:

Our country is in danger now, but not to be despaired of. On you depend the fortunes of America. You are to decide the important questions upon which rest the happiness and the liberty of millions not yet born. Act worthy of yourselves.

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