

One Nation Under God?

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Recently, there has been a good deal of controversy in the United States over a U.S. Court of Appeal's ruling that it is unconstitutional for public school teachers to lead their students in the Pledge of Allegiance due to the phrase in the pledge, "one nation, under God." This has long been controversial for both believers and unbelievers alike. In fact, most of the opposition to this phrase has traditionally come from Christians whose beliefs do not allow them to pledge allegiance to any nation, or for whom, "one nation, under God" conflicts with their doctrinal beliefs.

There is, of course, a good deal of validity to these views. As a Christian believer it is obvious that my first allegiance is to God my Father and my Lord Jesus Christ (I Cor. 8:6). My second allegiance is to God's family throughout the world - over and above any national, racial, ethnic, denominational, or other worldly distinction (Mark 3:31-35). My primary citizenship is as a member of God's royal household, holy nation and heavenly kingdom (Eph. 2:18-19; I Pet. 2:9-10; Phil. 3:20). And finally, my sole hope for true liberty and justice is the second coming of Christ and the final establishment of God's kingdom - in a new heavens and new earth, where righteousness will dwell (Matt. 6:9-10; II Pet. 3:13; Rev. 21:1-7).

All of these above truths should be "givens" for every generation of Christian believers. Christians, however, may differ as to what their relation and duties to any particular nation or government may entail. Nevertheless, the great majority of us living in the twenty first century are citizens of earthly nations, not only citizens of a heavenly new Jerusalem. And so, just as Paul was a citizen of the Roman Empire and used his citizenship rights in advancing the

gospel, so I, as an American citizen, try to do the same in my life as a Christian. Therefore, it is interesting to see the views of the U.S. "Founding Fathers" in relationship to what they believed were mankind's responsibilities in living "under God."

The United States of America was founded and built on belief in God. In fact, the legal basis for its existence and laws derives from its belief in that God. The founding document of the United States of America, written principally by Thomas Jefferson but edited and signed by all of the members of the Second Continental Congress, is *The Declaration of Independence*. It was signed on July 4, 1776 and it sets forth the following "self-evident truths" as the legal foundation for the new American republic:

"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, that among these are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed."

How can a nation founded on the concept that the role of government is to secure the inalienable rights of men - given to them by a *Creator* - not teach in public schools that the world was *created* by that *Creator*? One would think that this "expression of the American mind" as Thomas Jefferson called it, would be the underlying philosophical basis for the laws of the United States of America. Of course, originally, this was the case. In fact, all of signers of *The Declaration of Independence* and *The Constitution of the United States of America* believed that the existence of a sovereign, loving and just God was the **only** basis for both personal morality and just government in this world.

The American Founding Fathers - men such as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John

Adams - did not believe in a merely formal or ceremonial “deism” – that is, in a God who was thought to have created an orderly universe and then withdrew from it to let the world run on its own – like a great clock. Instead, almost to a man the American Founding Fathers believed in a creator God who also providentially governed the universe and cared for his people. As the last line of the Declaration of Independence states,

“And for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor.”

Though men such as Franklin, Jefferson, and even Washington were at times accused of being deists, the historical record makes it clear that this was not the case. They each believed in God’s providential rule of the world. Though somewhat influenced by deistic thought of the Enlightenment, they were far more influenced by their own study of the Bible, and all openly professed some form of Christianity. In fact, all of these men became increasingly more interested in the things of God as they aged and as they had to deal with the huge pressures and burdens of public life. “Unorthodox” by some standards they may have been, but deists they certainly were not. Let’s look at some of their beliefs and then leave it to God to decide their true orthodoxy.

Most important of all was the great American hero and first President of the United States, George Washington. Washington set out his religious views, and their importance to the life of the infant American republic, in his famous *Farewell Address to the Nation*, at the end of his second term of office. In this address he stated,

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these

firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

“It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule, indeed, extends with more or less force to every species of free government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundation of the fabric?”

John Adams, the second President of the United States was a devout Christian and expressed his views as follows,

“One great advantage of the Christian religion is that it brings the great principle of the law of nature and nations, love your neighbor as yourself, and do to others as you would that others should do to you – to the knowledge, belief and veneration of the whole people. Children, servants, women as well as men are all professors in the science of public as well as private morality...The duties and rights of the citizens are thus taught from early infancy to every creature.” [Paul Johnson, *A History of the American People*, p. 208].

Thomas Jefferson, who was often called a deist, or even atheist, forcefully denied this and instead claimed,

I am a real Christian, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus [David Barton, *Original Intent*, p. 144].

Like most serious people Jefferson grew over time in his search for the truth. But his opposition was always forceful against religious hypocrisy, institutional religion's position of political power and tyranny, and especially, against the legal establishment of a national or state religion as with the Anglican Church in England as well as in colonial Virginia. For a time he was influenced by deist thought but he was too independent of mind to be forced into an established system of belief whether that of deism or of established Christian denominations. In his excellent book *Thomas Jefferson, A Life*, William Randall sets forth Jefferson's search for certainty in religious belief:

"The attacks on his religious views during the 1800 campaign had wounded him ... As the Federalists kept up their attacks on him as irreligious and an enemy of Christianity, Jefferson studied the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, marking the passages that he thought represented the simple beliefs of Jesus Christ and ignoring those he considered later corruptions ... He became convinced that early Christians most closely resembled the [biblical] Unitarians of the early nineteenth century and he found that his concept of God most closely resembled theirs." [p. 555-556].

In a letter to John Adams after his Presidency was long over, Jefferson professed to believe in,

"the pure and unsophisticated doctrines such as professed and acted on by the unlettered apostles, the Apostolic fathers and the Christians of the first century." [Ibid, p. 556].

Most of the Founding Fathers mentioned in this article would have agreed with these sentiments to a great degree because the biblical Unitarianism of that time – unlike the Universal Unitarianism of today – was one of the most biblically based of all the Christian denominations of that day. The *Theological*

Dictionary of 1823 described Unitarians as follows:

"In common with other Christians, they confess that He [Jesus] is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; and in one word, they believe all that the writers of the New Testament, particularly the four Evangelists, have stated concerning him." [*Original Intent*, p. 314]

These men were not interested in the post-biblical Christian arguments over creeds and doctrinal issues. Instead, they

"reject all human creeds and articles of faith, and strictly adhere to the great Protestant principal, "the Bible – the Bible only;" [Ibid].

In short, many of the founding fathers who adhered to these beliefs simply desired to live upright lives according to the simple truths of first century biblical Christianity, as they understood it.

Benjamin Franklin, like Jefferson, seemed to become more and more concerned with the things of God as he grew older. Like Jefferson, he dabbled in Deism but came to regard it as morally corrupting and "not very useful" [H.W. Brands, *The First American*, p. 94]. Franklin followed the ethical precepts of Christ, first and foremost, and came to revere a God who was both the creator of the world and providentially at work in the world. His famous speech at the Constitutional Convention of 1787 best exemplifies his belief in a God who is active in the world. Addressing the President of the Convention, George Washington, Franklin asked for the assembly to have daily prayers asking for God's aid. Then he stated,

"I have lived, sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid? We have been assured, sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House, they

labor in vain that build it.’ I firmly believe this; and I also believe that without His concurring aid we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel: we shall be divided by our little partial local interests; our projects will be confounded, and we ourselves shall become a reproach and byword down to future ages.” [Quoted from *Original Intent*, p. 111].

And this from the most famous of all Americans at that time, indeed; the foremost Enlightenment scholar of the world!

This speech was recorded by James Madison. Madison, who is often called the Father of the U.S. Constitution and who was the fourth President of the United States, was a great student of history and somewhat of a protégé of Jefferson and Franklin. Though ardently against any form of a legally established national or state religion he was also a student of the Bible and a strong proponent of the right of individuals and groups to freely exercise their religious beliefs. He expressed his basic belief in God as follows:

“Belief in a God All Powerful, wise and good is so essential to the moral order of the World and to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources. [Ralph Ketcham, *James Madison*, University of Virginia Press, p. 667]

Madison did *not* believe in a separation of *God* from state. Instead, he was instrumental in changing the old phrase “toleration of religion” - derived from England where the Church of England increasingly agreed to “tolerate” other Christian denominations - to the American concept of “the free exercise of religion” which gave all individuals and religious groups the *equal right* to practice their religious beliefs according to their own conscience rather than being forced to acknowledge a national “establishment of religion” such as the Church of England. This became an important right spelled out in the First Amendment to the U.S.

Constitution which was written primarily by Madison. It states;

‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...’

In his remarkable book, *A History of the American People*, the British Christian historian, Paul Johnson, does an excellent job of summarizing the original understanding of this “religion clause” of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

“This guarantee has been widely, almost willfully, misunderstood in recent years, and interpreted as meaning that the federal government is forbidden by the Constitution to countenance or subsidize even indirectly the practice of religion. That would have astonished and angered the Founding Fathers. What the guarantee means is that Congress may not set up a state religion on the lines of the Church of England, ‘as by law established.’ It was an anti-establishment clause. The second half of the guarantee means that Congress may not interfere with the practice of any religion, and it could be argued that recent interpretations of the First Amendment run directly contrary to the plain and obvious meaning of this guarantee ...

“In effect, the First Amendment forbade Congress to favor one church, or religious sect, over another...The next day it passed, by a two-to-one majority, a resolution calling for a day of national prayer and thanksgiving.

“It is worth pausing a second to look at the details of this gesture, *which may be regarded as the House’s opinion of how the First Amendment should be understood*. The resolution reads:

‘We acknowledge with grateful hearts the many signal favors of Almighty God, especially by affording them an opportunity peacefully to establish a

constitutional government for their safety and happiness.’

“President Washington was then asked to designate the day of prayer and thanksgiving, thus inaugurating a public holiday, Thanksgiving, which Americans still universally enjoy. He replied,

‘It is the duty of **all nations** to acknowledge the providence of almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His mercy, to implore His protection and favor ... That great and glorious Being who is the beneficent author of all the good that was, that is, or that ever will be, that we may then unite in rendering unto him our sincere and humble thanks for His kind care and protection of the people.’ “ [pp. 209-210].

So let us finally ask: is it right for the United States of America to proclaim itself as “one nation, under God”? Yes, because it accurately reflects the original intent of the founding principles of *The Declaration of Independence* and the U.S. Constitution. This statement is not an “establishment of religion”

since it does not set up a legal established national religion. Nor does it express any sectarian or denominational belief as opposed to others. However, *all* of the Founding Fathers believed that the United States should be “one nation, under God.” But better yet, perhaps we should go all the way with Washington and the U.S. Founding Fathers who believed not only in “one nation, under God,” but in the “self-evident” truths that:

1. “**all men** are created equal” and that
2. “it is the duty of **all nations** to acknowledge the providence of almighty God” and “to obey His will.”

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[For further study on this topic two books are highly recommended: *A History of the American People* by Paul Johnson and *Original Intent* by David Barton. The former book is one of the best histories of the United States I know of and the latter book is an outstanding compilation of the religious underpinning of the U.S. founding documents and the individuals who were most influential in the founding and establishing of the American Republic]