

JULY 4th PRESENTATION

IS AMERICA A UNITARIAN-UNIVERSALIST NATION?

Happy Birthday, everyone... I know, for you purists, you're thinking, "July 4th isn't America's birthday. It was actually AUGUST 2d, the day most of the signatory actually placed their signature on the Declaration of Independence. Or perhaps you think it should be JULY 2d, the date the Second Continental Congress actually voted to approve a resolution declaring Independence. John Adams, the second president of the United States, would certainly agree with you about that date. He wrote his wife Abigail,

I am apt to believe the day will be celebrated by succeeding generations as the great anniversary festival...solemnized with pomp and parade, with shows, games, sports, guns, bells, bonfires, and illuminations, from one end of this continent to the other, from this time forward ...

But John Adams thought we would celebrate all this on the **2d** of July.

Well, I hate to burst the bubble of a President, but July 4th is the date we commemorate as our nation's birthday ...the date written on the face of the Declaration of Independence. And to be sure, whatever date we commemorate the event, the event was a watershed in the history of nations. For the first time, a colony had formally declared its independence from its parent country, and

sought to legitimize its existence not through ways that had been recognized in the past... NOT through claims of royal lineage or claims of divine right or the declaration of papacy... But instead by simply the appeal to reason and conscience. That in a nutshell, is why we HAVE a document entitled "The Declaration of Independence". In Jefferson's words, the Declaration was written, "In order to place before mankind the common sense of the matter in terms so plain and simple as to command their assent."

QUESTION FOR AUDIENCE: What was the 2d country in the Americas to declare and win its independence from a colonial power?Haiti

So my topic this morning is, "Is America a Unitarian Universalist Nation? This particular topic is inspired, of course, by claims of religionists that America is a "Christian Nation". I'd like to take a look at their assertions, and as the famed Unitarian playwright, Rod Serling might say, I would like to "submit for your consideration" that there is persuasive evidence that the founding of this country and its aftermath is more consistent with Unitarian Universalist values, rather than Christian principles.

Let's start by discussing what it means to be a "Christian Nation"? This term can bear several meanings, but no matter which meaning is used, the intent in using the expression is to have the listener believe that the country was founded by Christians, and because of this, it was the intent of the founders to incorporate Biblical principles into the laws of the land, or at least to allow the adoption of Biblical principles. It is sometimes alternatively stated

that because the founders were Christian, America was founded on Judeo-Christian principles. Let's have a look at these statements and the facts.

Let's first concede right off the bat that the overwhelming majority of Founding Fathers were raised in families and lived in communities that claimed to be "Christian". Many of the colonies... Massachusetts, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Virginia, Georgia, were founded as bastions and safe havens for Christian religions that had been persecuted in parts of Europe or other colonies. However, the fact that the founders were raised among "Christians" does not in any way establish that they in fact were also "Christians". Most of us here today do not practice the faith tradition in which we were raised, and more importantly, the founders were raised as, and in communities of, loyal subjects of the British Crown, under British law and tradition. Today, Americans celebrate how well the founders adhered to the traditions and principles in which they were raised.

But the Declaration of Independence does refer to God and nature's God and the supreme Judge at least four times in the document. The Declaration of Independence was drafted by Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson was certainly not an orthodox Christian. He called himself a "real" Christian, but he made it very clear that what he meant by that was that he was a great admirer of the philosopher, of the person, Jesus of Nazareth. But he also was very explicit in private letters that he did not believe that Jesus was divine. But anyway, Thomas Jefferson was the primary author of the Declaration of Independence. It does have religious references in it. Those references are, however, fairly clearly deistic references, "nature's God." There is not any Christian reference in it. More important than that, the Declaration of

Independence is not our governing charter. Though written in 1776, it was superseded by the Articles of Confederation for a while, which actually did have religious language in them. But it was not until September of 1787 that we agreed on, and it took a year or two to get it all ratified, the Constitution of the United States. That was the first significant governing charter in the history of mankind that did not invoke any gods. It didn't say, "in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." It didn't say, "in the name of God Almighty." It begins and gives clear authority for the establishment of government to "We the people." In the body of the Constitution there is no reference to religion, except a negative one. In Article Six it says, "No religious test shall be required to hold office under these United States. It didn't say, "Only these religious tests...." It said, "No religious test...." It did say that people could swear or affirm, which gave freedom to those who did not want to swear to an Almighty God that they were telling the truth, to do that when they testified or took oaths of office, affirmations of office.

One other thing I should mention about the Constitution is that it was dated in the "eleventh (or twelfth) year of our Independence." And "in the year of our Lord one-thousand-seven-hundred-and-eighty-seven." Some people have said that proves that these folks intended for this to be a Christian document. I want to ask for a show of hands here if I might. How many of you worship the god Saturn. How many of you worship Thor or the goddess Freya. What's the relevance of these kinds of questions? Well, I'd be willing to bet all of you call yesterday, Saturday, the day before Friday, and the day before that Thursday, each day named for a Norse god. Probably none of you worship the sun or the moon, or Mars, but you are here on Sunday, Monday and in March. Dating is something that does not convey religious belief. The conventional dating form of the day for all formal documents was to write "the year of our Lord," so that's what they did. They were

very unconventional in adding "the eleventh year of our Independence."

If the founding fathers wanted to say this is a Christian nation, who was going to stop them? They had precedent after precedent: state constitutions, the Articles of Confederation, any other governing charters they wanted to look at, many of which invoked or specifically mentioned religion, and they chose not to. It was not a mere accident that overt and explicit religious references do not appear in the Constitution. Actually, this point came up during the ratification debate that went on for a couple of years before the Constitution was ratified, that we can't be adopting a godless document, this is a terrible thing. There were people who did not want to ratify it because of that, but those people lost.

The fact is, the primary leaders of the founding fathers of our nation, the principal authors of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, were NOT orthodox, Bible-believing Christians; they were deists. Deism was a philosophical belief that was widely accepted by the colonial intelligentsia at the time of the American Revolution. Its major tenets included belief in human reason as a reliable means of solving social and political problems and belief in a supreme deity who created the universe to operate solely by natural laws. The supreme God of the Deists removed himself entirely from the universe after creating it. They believed that he assumed no control over it, exerted no influence on natural phenomena, and gave no supernatural revelation to man. A necessary consequence of these beliefs was a rejection of many doctrines central to Christian religions. Deists did not believe in the virgin birth, the divinity or resurrection of Jesus, the efficacy of prayer, the miracles of the Bible, or even the divine inspiration of the Bible.

These beliefs were forcefully articulated by Thomas Paine in [Age of Reason](#), a book that so outraged his contemporaries that he died rejected and despised by the nation that had once revered him as "the father of the American Revolution." Other important founding fathers that espoused Deism or unorthodox views of Christianity were George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, Ethan Allen, James Madison, and James Monroe. John Adams and his son, John Quincy Adams were NOT Deists however...they were Unitarians.

So why bother trying to cast the founders, and Jefferson in particular, in the mold of Bible believing, God fearing Christians? The reason is that the founders, and Jefferson in particular, were just too important in the formation of our nation to leave out if one is to sell the "Christian-nation" claim to the public. Hence, attempts are made to produce quotes from the founders that out of context suggest they were bible-believing, church going Christians that had intended to build our nation on "biblical principles." The irony of this situation is that the Christian leaders of Jefferson's time knew where he and other leaders stood on "biblical principles," and they fought desperately, but unsuccessfully, to prevent Jefferson's election to the presidency. Saul K. Padover's biography related the bitterness of the opposition that the clergy mounted against Jefferson in the campaign of 1800

The religious issue was dragged out, and stirred up flames of hatred and intolerance. Clergymen, mobilizing their heaviest artillery of thunder and brimstone, threatened Christians with all manner of dire consequences if they should vote for the "infidel" from Virginia. This was particularly true in New England, where the clergy stood like Gibraltar against Jefferson (*Jefferson A Great American's Life and Ideas*, Mentor Books, 1964, p.116).

Why would contemporary clergymen have so vigorously opposed Jefferson's election if he were devoutly Christian? The answer is that Jefferson was not an orthodox Christian, and the preachers of his day knew that he wasn't.

James Madison, Jefferson's close friend and political ally, was just as vigorously opposed to religious intrusions into civil affairs as Jefferson was. In 1785, when the Commonwealth of Virginia was considering passage of a bill "establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion," Madison wrote his famous "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments" in which he presented fifteen reasons why government should not become involved in the support of any religion.

After George Washington's death, Christians made an intense effort to claim him as one of their own. This effort was based largely on the grounds that Washington had regularly attended services with his wife at an Episcopal Church and had served as a vestryman in the church. Interestingly, Washington never received communion there.

Benjamin Franklin, whose libidinous conduct in the latter half of his life seemed more appropriate for a gigolo than a Christian statesman...is understandably seldom, mentioned. Then again, perhaps he was simply a visionary, setting the standard of personal MISconduct to which, American politicians seem to continually aspire.

Some Christians were of course involved in the shaping of our nation, but their influence was minor compared to the ideological contributions of the Deists who pressed for the formation of a secular nation. In describing the composition of the delegations to the constitutional convention, the historian Clinton Rossiter said this about their religious views

Although it had its share of strenuous Christians like Strong and Bassett, ex-preachers like Baldwin and Williamson, and theologians like Johnson and Ellsworth, the gathering at Philadelphia was largely made up of men in whom the old fires were under control or had even flickered out. Most were nominally members of one of the traditional churches in their part of the country--the New Englanders Congregationalists, and Presbyterians, the Southerners Episcopalians, and the men of the Middle States everything from backsliding Quakers to stubborn Catholics--and most were men who could take their religion or leave it along. Although no one in this sober gathering would have dreamed of invoking the Goddess of Reason, neither would anyone have dared to proclaim that his opinions had the support of the God of Abraham and Paul. The Convention of 1787 was highly rationalist and even secular in spirit".

At the constitutional convention, Luther Martin a Maryland representative urged the inclusion of some kind of recognition of Christianity in the constitution on the grounds that "it would be at least decent to hold out some distinction between the professors of Christianity and downright infidelity or paganism." However, the delegates to the convention rejected this proposal and, drafted the constitution as a secular document. God was nowhere mentioned in it.

As a matter of fact, the document that was finally approved at the constitutional convention mentioned religion only once, and that was in Article VI, Section 3, which stated that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." Now if the delegates at the convention had truly intended to establish a "Christian nation," why would they have put a statement like this in the constitution and nowhere else even refer to religion? Common sense is enough to convince any reasonable person that if the intention of

these men had really been the formation of a "Christian nation," the constitution they wrote would have surely made several references to God, the Bible, Jesus, and other accouterments of the Christian religion, and rather than expressly forbidding ANY religious test as a condition for holding public office in the new nation, it would have stipulated that allegiance to Christianity was a requirement for public office. Are we to assume, then, that the founding fathers, whom we otherwise revere for their wisdom, wanted to establish a Christian nation but it just slipped their minds to actually SAY so?

My point today is that there appears virtually no credible historical evidence that the founders intended this great nation to embody and embrace Christian or Judeo Christian, or Biblical principles....whatever those might actually be. And let me say in passing the Bible has LOTS of interesting moral principles and laws, most of which the most devout Christians today would (hopefully) consider primitive, uncivilized and barbaric. For example, nowhere in the Bible is slavery condemned, and the Bible recounts that the Apostle Paul himself returns a runaway slave to its Christian master.

But there ARE intriguing similarities between the founders' intent and Unitarian Universalist principles. First, the founders were all by their own admission and overwhelming historical evidence, influenced by the Enlightenment. The **Enlightenment** is the era in [Western philosophy](#) and intellectual, scientific and cultural life, in which [reason](#) was advocated as the primary source for [legitimacy](#) and [authority](#), with a strong belief in science. We have earlier noted that Thomas Jefferson stated the purpose of the Declaration of Independence was

"... To place before mankind the common sense of the matter in terms so plain and simple as to command their assent."

In other words, to demonstrate through reason the legitimacy and authority for declaring independence.

Does this sound familiar to you? (From the UU Card, “What do Unitarian Universalists Believe”?)

“WE BELIEVE in the authority of reason and conscience. The ultimate arbiter in religion is not a church, nor a document, nor an official, but the personal choice and decision of the individual.”

The Declaration of Independence states,

“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. “

Does this sound familiar to you? (Also from the UU Card)

“WE BELIEVE in the worth and dignity of each human being. All people on earth have an equal claim to life, liberty, and justice – and no single idea, ideal, or philosophy is superior to a single human life.”

How about this one?

“WE BELIEVE in the necessity of the democratic process. Records are open to scrutiny, elections are open to members, and ideas are open to criticism – so that people might govern themselves.”

Or this one?

“WE BELIEVE in the toleration of religious ideas....

Or perhaps this one.

“WE BELIEVE in the freedom or religious expression”

Now you may be thinking, “oh sure, the Unitarian Universalist Association just copied their beliefs from the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.” But in point of fact, these principles were at the core of liberal Unitarian thought in the late 1700s. We can add a Universalist principle as well. The notion that God is a God of love, rather than a God of hellfire and damnation, that would save all his children...not just a few, as mainstream Calvinist thought would have it in the 1700s...that view has now come to be the majority view of mainstream Christian churches in this country. Lets add to this the point that at that time, deists, Unitarians and Universalists were derisively considered by orthodox Christians to be “heretics”, but were also described by them as “freethinkers”. Sound familiar?

The reason that Jefferson believed Unitarianism would become the majority religion in America was because he, like Benjamin Franklin and Joseph Priestly, were primarily scientifically minded individuals. They saw no conflict between religion and science, believing that God created the world and then dropped out of active control, leaving science in charge. Jefferson believed in God and still accepts the precepts of science. Jefferson was so convinced of the logic of this concept that he predicted that within one generation, every American would be a Unitarian!

Although Jefferson’s prediction never literally came to pass, I again submit for your consideration and approval...that America was founded, in spirit and intent on Unitarian Universalist principles...I submit to you that the principles of pluralism, religious toleration, the primacy of reason and conscience, respect for the democratic process, and the belief in the inherent

worth and dignity of every individual espoused in Declaration of Independence and codified in the Constitution were principles espoused by Unitarians of the day. I submit to you today, that although most Americans today are not Unitarians, the principles and values of Unitarianism are the same that underpin the formation of America and the foundation of its laws. I submit to you today, that this, in my view, makes America, a Unitarian Nation!

Keith Jenkins
July 4, 2010