

PRAYER AND POLITICS IN THE EARLY AMERICAN REPUBLIC

By Nick Gier

When you pray, go into your room and shut the door.

--Jesus, Matthew 6:6

When the church and state tucked into bed together, it was the church that ended up asking: "Will you respect me in the morning," and the answer was almost always "No."

--Forrest Church, *So Help Me God*

Religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.

--James Madison, Letter to Edward Livingston, July 10, 1822

In every county and in every age the priest has been hostile to liberty.

--Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Horatio G. Spafford, March 17, 1814

The fondness of magistrates to foster Christianity has done
it more harm than all the persecutions ever did.

--Baptist Minister John Leland

Religion: We love it in its purity, but not as an engine of political delusion.

--early Republican motto

In 1774 Thomas Jefferson proposed a resolution before the Virginia House of Burgesses for a day of "fasting, humiliation, and prayer" so that God would "turn the hearts of the King and Parliament to moderation and justice." It passed unanimously and the British governor immediately fired the legislators as traitors to the Crown. Anti-British sentiment was growing in New England and Jefferson and his fellow Virginians were eager to show support for their compatriots.

Is this the same Jefferson who was called "that atheist and leveler from Virginia" in the hotly contested 1800 election, or the same uncle, who encouraged his young nephew Peter Carr "to fix reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of God"?

It is clear from Jefferson's own comments on his prayer resolution that it was purely political and not a principled endorsement of state sponsored prayer. In his autobiography he states: "We cooked up a resolution to implore Heaven to avert us from the evils of civil war [and] inspire us with firmness in support of our rights." Religious historian Forrest Church explains Jefferson's ploy: "Because the most conservative delegate was reluctant to vote against God and the most radical was delighted to press Him into service, the motion passed without dissent."

Earlier in their careers in Virginia, James Madison joined Jefferson in winning “a large majority” of votes to delete the name “Jesus Christ” as “the Holy Author of our religion” in order to protect “the Jew, the Mahometan, and the Hindoo.” As Madison wrote: “Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace the religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yielded to the evidence.” The Constitution not only guarantees freedom of religion but the liberty not to have any at all.

At the Constitutional Convention in 1787 a proposal to open its sessions with prayer did not even come to a vote. The record shows that “the Convention, except three or four persons, thought prayers unnecessary” (*The Records of the Federal Convention*, vol. 1, p. 452, fn. 15). Except for the “establishment clause” and the prohibition of a religious test for office, the Constitution contains no mention of religion.

Even though James Madison, known as the “Father of the Constitution,” believed that there should be none, the first Congress did appoint chaplains and paid them from the national treasury. As Madison argued: “The establishment of the chaplainship to Congress is a palpable violation of constitutional principles.” Madison also included military chaplains in his proscription.

Under political pressure from Alexander Hamilton, who said that “we should make the most of the religious prepossessions of our people,” George Washington declared a day of thanksgiving on November, 26, 1789. Forrest Church submits that “it met a polite yet cool reception.” As Washington called God simply “a great and glorious Being,” the Presbyterians complained that the text lacked “a decidedly Christian spirit.”

National religious days continued to be controversial, and Church relates that John Adams’ national “fasts divided the electorate. He later claimed that they cost him the election of 1800.” This is exactly the problem with state sanctioned religious ceremonies: they are diluted to accommodate everyone but it ends up pleasing no one. It is perhaps for this reason that in 1792 Congress refused to support a national fast, “explicitly because,” according to Church, “it recalled royal presumptions to sacral authority.”

Even though he was under much pressure to do so during his two terms as president, Jefferson refused to declare days of national prayer or thanksgiving. In his famous 1801 letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, Jefferson introduced the phrase “a wall of separation between church and state.” He was advised by his Attorney General Levi Lincoln to delete his intention to dispense with government sanctioned prayers, even though the Baptists requested them in the aftermath of the bitterly fought election. Jefferson agreed with Lincoln that leaving the language in would not only alienate the Baptists as potential allies, but also unnecessarily provoke his Christian Federalist enemies in New England.

The Connecticut Baptists were well acquainted with Jefferson’s unorthodox religious views, but they trusted him far more than the Federalist Congregationalists in their state. They had established a Christian Commonwealth which levied taxes on and generally suppressed all other sects. The Baptists believed that it was wrong for the Federalists to make Jefferson “an enemy of religion, law, and good order because he will not assume the prerogative of Jehovah [as the Federalists had done] and make law to govern the Kingdom of Christ.”

In 1808, taking aim at Jefferson and other “infidels,” the Connecticut legislature passed a law that made being a deist a felony. The New England Federalists were so concerned about Republican atheism that they threatened to secede from the Union. Only in 1811 did a coalition of Episcopalians, Methodists, and Baptists outvote the Congregationalists and disestablish their church, and only then did true religious liberty rule in the state.

Both Federalists and Republicans politicized religious issues, and it is good for us that the Republicans won because minority religions flourished in the aftermath of Jefferson’s savvy politics. (Historian Church notes that clubs devoted to deism and religious skepticism declined.) Jefferson was playing both sides of the Wall of Separation: insuring religious freedom for minorities and keeping the state as secular as possible.

Ironically, Jefferson and the Republican presidents after him laid the ground for the Great Awakening of the 1830s, and they proved Madison’s prediction that “religion and government will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together.” Many commentators have pointed to the early church and how it flourished even under Roman persecution. They also reminded readers of how a Christian Roman empire compromised its spiritual principles and began to wage war against non-Christians.

Even the Democrat Andrew Jackson followed Jefferson’s precedent in maintaining the Wall of Separation as he refused to declare a national prayer day in 1832. As he argued: “I could not do otherwise without transcending the limits prescribed by the Constitution and without feeling that I might in some degree disturb the security which religion nowadays enjoys in this country in its complete separation from the political concerns of the general government.” The Great Awakening had just got under way, sweeping across the nation because the persecuted denominations were now free to evangelize.

Early Republicans had a great motto: “Religion: We love it in its purity, but not as an engine of political delusion.” The belief that Americans can have non-denominational prayers that include all of us in this multicultural nation is indeed a delusion. For the first time in American history President Obama mentioned non-believers in his inaugural address, and in declaring a national day of prayer he allowed them an alternative with “pray or otherwise give thanks.” (He also did not hold any services at the White House.) This does not, however, make up for his decision to invite evangelical Rick Warren to give the inaugural invocation, praying in Jesus’ name and concluding with the Lord’s Prayer.

Today’s conservative Republicans have essentially betrayed two of the greatest achievements of their forbearers: Jefferson’s and Madison’s strict view of the separation of church and state and post-Lincoln views on civil rights. As Democrats finally turned away from playing the race card, conservative Republicans have started playing it to their advantage.

Recently delegates to the Baptist General Association of Virginia passed a resolution condemning the Texas School Board’s decision to demote their hero Thomas Jefferson as an Enlightenment thinker and to remove mention of government neutrality with respect to religion. The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty (BJC) also weighed in against this revisionist history. Going against the Baptist history outlined above, the Southern Baptist Convention cut all ties and funding to the BJC in 1991, because it believed that the BJC had joined the secularist crusade against religion in America. BJC’s General Counsel K. Hollyn Hollman reminds

Baptists that now that “we are in the majority [some of us] have lost sight of the compelling story that informs our freedom.” When the Unitarians were strong in the 19th Century, they supported the Federalist position on church and state, but they have learned the error of their ways now that they are a small minority.

The Religious Right condemns secular humanists for playing God, but what about the late Jerry Falwell declaring that God does not answer the prayers of Jews? Doesn't this undermine divine prerogatives? Surely God can decide to answer any prayer that She chooses to.

One of my favorite cartoons about public prayer is the one featuring the late Sen. Jesse Helms kneeling in prayer. After his failure to reintroduce prayer in the schools, he asks the Lord how Christian values can possibly survive. God answers in the last panel: "Don't worry, Jesse, I can take care of it."

Nick Gier taught philosophy and religion at the University of Idaho for 31 years. The principal references were Forrest Church, *So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State* (Harcourt, 2007) and Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Eerdmans, 1996).