

America's Choice: A Nation Under God or Without God

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Welcome to those who are joining with us in this 400th year celebration of the Mayflower landing in America. Today, I would like to speak about the critical choice currently facing America; will we be a nation under God or without God? But in doing so, I would like to first pay tribute to those who settled this choice land. Alexis de Tocqueville, the great French political scientist, described the voyage of the pilgrims, such as those who came on the Mayflower as, “The scattering of the seed of a great people, which God with his own hands is planting on a predestined shore.”¹ Suffice it to say, God’s hand has been ever-present in the discovery, establishment, and destiny of America. The Founding Fathers are but one example. Unfortunately, it has become academically in vogue to denigrate many of these national heroes. Undoubtedly, they had imperfections, but nonetheless, they were inspired men of God.

For a moment, consider the consequences if God could use only perfect men and women to advance

his work. To illustrate, suppose I were to tell you these four historical facts about a New Testament character and nothing more. First, Jesus said to him, “Get thee behind me, Satan.” Second, the Lord reprimanded him as follows, “O thou of little faith.” Third, in a fit of rage, this man cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant. And forth, this man denied knowing the Savior on three occasions, even though he walked with Him daily. If that were all you knew or focused upon, would you deem this man a servant of God or a reprobate, a saint or a sinner? This man of course, was Peter, Christ’s chief apostle. Would his imperfections cause you to reject or abandon Christianity, or would you say that his imperfections were only a small part of the total man? Would you put those events in context of his entire life, so as not to lose proper perspective? If we focus only upon Peter’s weaknesses, we will have missed the real man, his mark and his mission—the man who left his fishing nets to follow Jesus, the man who saw heavenly angels, the man who healed the infirm and even raised the dead, and the man who gave his life for his testimony of Jesus Christ.

¹ *Democracy in America*, ed. J. P. Mayer, trans. George Lawrence [Garden City, N. Y., 1969], pp. 378, 37, 280, 284

The same rationale that applies to Peter also applies to other historical figures. George Washington and Thomas Jefferson made enormous contributions to the founding of this nation, yet they were slaveholders. Martin Luther King Jr. played a pivotal role in advancing racial equality for which he should be commended. Yet it is no secret he engaged in serious moral transgressions.² Sometimes we are blinded by our political prejudices. We see only the good in those who agree with our philosophy of life, and only the bad in those who have opposing views. The world, however, is not so tidy, not so compartmentalized. Clearly the Founding Fathers had weaknesses, but if this is the prime focus of the critics and they fail to put those weaknesses in the context of one's entire life, then they too, will miss the real man, his mark and his inspired mission. While the critic sees only warts and blemishes, God sees the beauty and strengths and then uses them to further His cause.³ And so it was with the Founding Fathers.

Did the Founding Fathers coincidentally and conveniently appear on the scene at the same time? Or were they raised up by God as instruments in His hands. F.W. Boreham gives us some insights on how God directs and influences the destiny of nations.

[In 1809] men were following, with bated breath, the march of Napoleon, and waiting with feverish impatience for latest news of the wars. And all the while in their own homes, babies were being born. But who could think about babies? Everybody was thinking about battles...In one year... between Trafalgar and Waterloo there stole into the world a host of

² See Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down*, 471–475; Morrow, “A Reckoning with Martin Luther King,” *Opinion*, *Wall Street Journal*, June 19, 2019.

³ Saul, who later became Paul, is a case in point. He went about persecuting the Christians. Members of Christ's Church knew him only for the evil that he had done. When Ananias, a disciple of Christ, was instructed by the Lord in a vision to seek out Saul and give him a blessing, he was understandably reluctant, “I have heard by many of this man, how much evil he hath done to thy saints” (Acts 9:13). But the Lord had a deeper and greater perspective into who Saul really was and who he could really become, “He is a chosen vessel unto me, to bear my name before the Gentiles and kings, and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15). And what a powerful disciple he became.

*heroes: Gladstone was born in Liverpool... Oliver Wendell Holmes in Massachusetts... and Abraham Lincoln in Kentucky. But nobody thought of babies; everybody was thinking of battles. Yet which of the battles of 1809 mattered more than the babies of 1809? We fancy God can manage His world only with great battalions, when all the time He is doing it with beautiful babies. When a wrong wants righting or a truth wants preaching, or a continent wants discovering, God sends a baby into the world to do it.*⁴

And thus God provided for the establishment of this country with the birth of the Founding Fathers, perhaps the most extraordinary group of men to be born at one time, and in one nation. God Himself confirmed the providential timing of these births:

*And for this purpose have I established the Constitution of this land, by the hands of wise men whom I raised up unto this very purpose.*⁵

For years, historians have marveled at this incredible assembly of pragmatic and brilliant visionaries. Barbara W. Tuchman is but one example. She said, “It would be invaluable if we could know what produced this burst of talent from a base of only two and one half million inhabitants.”⁶ But we do know what produced this burst of talent. It was not a series of random bursts, rather, it was pursuant to God's master plan for America. The Bible, speaking of the inhabitants of this earth, reveals,

*And [God] hath determined the times before appointed [meaning when we would come to the earth] and the bounds of their habitation [meaning where we would be born].*⁷

And so it was with the Founding Fathers; God sent them at that time and to this place to fulfill their divinely appointed mission, which included the drafting of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution.

⁴ Boreham, *Mountains in the Mist*, NY: Abington Press (1919), 66-69, (emphasis added), as cited in Kimball, *Faith Precedes the Miracle*, 323-324.

⁵ *Doctrine and Covenants* 101:80.

⁶ Barbara W. Tuchman, *The March of Folly: From Troy to Vietnam* [1984], 18.

⁷ Acts 17:26, King James Version.

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As to the Constitution and its inspired nation, James Madison, considered the father of such document, wrote,

*It is impossible for the man of pious reflection not to perceive in it (the Constitution) a finger of that Almighty hand which has been so frequently and signally extended to our relief in the critical stages of the Revolution.*⁸

William Gladstone, a former British Prime Minister, observed,

*The American Constitution is the most wonderful work ever struck off at a given time by the brain and purpose of man.*⁹

Fortunately, God raised up the Founding Fathers to produce this divinely inspired masterpiece.

Were the Founding Fathers heroes or as some claim villains? Ted Stewart, a federal judge and author, put this question in its proper light,

*Today, it is common to criticize the founders of America. Judging them by today's standards of equality and justice, they do fail. Some owned slaves; none fought to give women equal rights. Most were wealthy white men. Yes, judging the founders by today's standards of equality and justice, they fail. But there is just one problem with judging them by today's standards, and it is this: but for those imperfect founders and the sacrifices that they made and the instruments of government which they created, there would be no current enlightened standards of equality and justice, by which to judge them.*¹⁰

⁸ Madison, "Concerning the Difficulties of the Convention in Devising a Proper Form of Government," From the Daily Advertiser, Friday, January 11, 1788. Madison also said, "it is impossible to consider the degree of concord [in drafting the Constitution] which ultimately prevailed as less than a miracle" (To Thomas Jefferson, 24 October 1787, in The Papers of James Madison, ed. William T. Hutchinson, William M. E. Rachal and Robert A. Rutland, 15 vols. by 1985, Chicago and Charlottesville: University of Chicago Press and University Press of Virginia, 1962, 10:207-8, as cited in The 5000 Year Leap, i).

⁹ Quoted in The Originality of the United States Constitution. (1896). The Yale Law Journal, 5(6), 239. doi:10.2307/781281. See also In "Kin Beyond Sea," North American Review, Sept-Oct. 1878, 185-186, as cited in American Gospel, 87.

¹⁰ Ted Stewart, Commencement Address Utah State University, May 6, 2017.

Justice Stewart is so right. The reason that critics can freely criticize, protest, vote for change, run for office and exercise freedom of religion, or irreligion, as they choose, is for one reason, and one reason only; because the Founding Fathers made it so.

We are part of the greatest Republic the world has ever known. Do the critics who believe these liberties came about by chance, or that they were spawned by evil men; if so, how do they reconcile such a position with the unerring logic of the Savior? "Ye shall know them by their fruits."¹¹ It seems somewhat hypocritical to partake of and enjoy the fruits of liberty, while at the same time, criticizing the very tree that produced such fruit. The Savior made it clear, "A good tree cannot bring forth evil fruit, neither can a corrupt tree bring forth good fruit."¹² Lest there be any question, the Founding Fathers were that good tree that brought forth the good fruits of liberty we are enjoying today, and as such, we should honor and respect them as the heroes they deserve to be.

In order for the inspired Constitution to be viable, meaning able to protect our God-given liberties, the Founding Fathers understood the necessity of a moral people. Without moral guidelines from God, there are no fixed boundaries to address the burning social issues of our day, no rock foundation on which to build an enduring nation. In essence, we would end up with a nation of moral relativism, built upon a foundation of sand that would shift or collapse with the constantly changing tides of public opinion.

John Adams was one of the many founders who addressed this issue:

*We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion.... Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.*¹³

¹¹ Matt. 7:16, King James Version.

¹² Matt. 7:18, King James Version.

¹³ From John Adams to Massachusetts Militia, 11 October 1798," Founders Online, National Archives,

George Washington was in full accord. He said,

There is no truth more thoroughly established than that there exists in the economy and course of nature, an indissoluble union between virtue [meaning morality] and happiness.¹⁴

There can be no doubt that the Founding Fathers understood the need for the new nation and government to be built on a foundation of divine morals, not individual self-enlightenment. They knew that morals were absolutely essential to liberty, happiness, and love of country.

Is it possible, however, to have moral standards as a nation without religion? George Washington believed the two to be inseparable, he said,

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.¹⁵

In other words, it is a pretense to believe that morality can be achieved, at least in a collective setting, independent of religious influence; it would be contrary to the history of human nature.

The nexus between morality and religion was a constant recurring theme in the hearts and minds of the Founding Fathers. Alexander Hamilton wrote, "Morality must fall without religion."¹⁶ And James Madison added,

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.¹⁷

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Adams/99-02-02-3102>.

¹⁴ Washington, "Washington's Inaugural Address of 1789," founders.archives.gov.

¹⁵ From George Washington, A Collection, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1989), 521-22.

¹⁶ Hamilton, "The Stand No. III," founders.archives.gov; emphasis in original.

¹⁷ Madison, "From James Madison to Frederick Beasley"; typography modernized. Madison also said: "Can we in prudence suppose that national morality can be maintained in exclusion of religious principles? Does it not require the aid of a generally received and divinely authoritative religion?" (as cited by Meacham in American Gospel, 28).

The following quote, often attributed to Alexis de Tocqueville—though the true author is unknown—is consistent with the Founding Fathers' beliefs that morals and religion must be the bedrock of a great nation:

I sought for the greatness and genius of America in her commodious harbors and her ample rivers, and it was not there; in her fertile fields and boundless prairies, and it was not there; in her rich mines and her vast world commerce, and it was not there. Not until I went to the churches of America and heard her pulpits aflame with righteousness did I understand the secret of her genius and power. America is great because she is good, and if America ever ceases to be good, America will cease to be great.¹⁸

In other words, America's greatness is not to be found in her economic prowess, political correctness, diversity, or in her governmental programs, but in her goodness, and goodness comes by learning the will of God and doing it. That is one reason religion is so critical to the welfare of America because it defines and reinforces the moral principles by which we should live. It is our nation's best catalyst for goodness. It is a counterbalance to man's natural selfish interests and desires for power. Justice Antonin Scalia summarized it well:

The Founders believed morality was essential to the well-being of the republic and that religion was the best way to foster morality.¹⁹

But one might ask, "What concrete proof do we have that religion fosters morality?" Arthur Brooks, a professor of business and government policy and

¹⁸ As cited by Ralph Hanson, "A History of Fake Quotes – Lincoln, de Tocqueville and Alcott," ralphhanson.com/2017/16/2-history-of-fake-quotes-lincoln-d-etocqueville-alcott/.

¹⁹ Scalia, Scalia Speaks, 73 (emphasis added). Jon Meacham concurred in this observation: "The Founders came to believe that religion, for all its faults, was an essential foundation for a people's moral conduct and for American ideas about justice, decency, duty, and responsibility." He then concluded: "So is religion in America a necessary evil, or can it be a positive force for good? Taken all in all, I think history teaches that the benefits of faith in God have outweighed the costs To argue against a role for faith in politics is essentially futile" (American Gospel, 27, 31-31).

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frequent contributor to The Wall Street Journal, wrote a book entitled, Who Really Cares? It is a candid, fact filled book on who gives for charitable purposes, who renders community service, and who does not. After providing an avalanche of facts he shares these conclusions:

*Religious people are far more charitable with their time and money than secularists. Religious people are more generous in informal ways as well, such as giving blood, giving money to family members, and behaving honestly.*²⁰

Brooks then makes this candid confession, which adds substantial weight to his conclusion:

*I confess the prejudices of my past here to emphasize that the findings in this book—many of which may appear conservative and support a religious, hardworking, family-oriented life-style—are faithful to the best available evidence, and contrary to my political and cultural roots. Indeed, the irresistible pool of empirical evidence ... is what changed the way I see the world.*²¹

Brooks was not alone in his positive assessment of religion. Timothy P. Carney, author and commentary editor of The Washington Examiner, wrote,

*From time to time, the media will trumpet some study finding some malady among the religious— they're angrier, or stupider, or greedier. But ask almost any social scientist Left or Right, religious or secular, and he or she will tell you with high confidence that religious people are better off socially and economically and fall into fewer negative behaviors (crime, teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, suicide) than non- religious people. Popular culture like to paint the dark picture of religion in America, but the actual data point the other way.*²²

Is it any wonder the Founding Fathers saw religion as the prime source for teaching and reinforcing the morals on which this nation was built? When Justice Antonin Scalia passed away, his son Paul made the significant observation,

²⁰ Arthur Brooks, *Who Really Cares*, 177-178.

²¹ Arthur Brooks, *Who Really Cares*, 12.

²² Carney, T. P. (2020). In *Alienated America: Why some places thrive while others collapse*. New York, NY: Harper.

*Dad understood that the deeper he went in his Catholic faith, the better a citizen and public servant he became. God blessed him with a desire to be the country's good servant, because he was God's first.*²³

This seems to be an eternal truth. If we will put God first in our life, then he will make us better patriots and public servants than we might otherwise be. That is why religion is so critical to the well-being of our society.

Since religion is so important to the well-being of our nation, one might ask, “What should be the role of religion in the public as well as private sectors of society?” There are many key cases decided by the Supreme Court responding to this question. In 1952, Justice Douglas in *Zorach vs Clawson* wrote for the majority,

*We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.... When the state encourages religious instruction or cooperates with religious authorities...it then respects the religious nature of our people and accommodates the public service to their spiritual needs.*²⁴

This decision encouraged religion, not a specific religion, but religion in general as an accommodation to our peoples' spiritual needs. But in 1968, in the case of *Epperson versus Arkansas*, the court backed off of this supportive role:

*The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion, and between religion and non-religion.*²⁵

Since that time, we've had some cases promoting religious freedom in the public sector, but other cases restricting freedom of religion in such forums. These cases which apply to a variety of tests left an uncertainty as to the courts' methodology of interpreting freedom of religion issues. For example, the Supreme Court declared a nativity scene sponsored by the government to be

²³ Antonin Scalia *Lessons from an American Believer on Faith*, 217.

²⁴ Quoted in Schultz, D. A. (2005). *Zorach v. Clawson*. In *Encyclopedia of the Supreme Court* (p. 535). New York: Facts on File.

²⁵ See *Zorach v. Clawson*, 343 U.S. 306, 313–14 (1952).

unconstitutional, but the public display of a Jewish Menorah and an Islamic Star and Crescent to be constitutional. Furthermore, the Court declared it unconstitutional for a high school to have the 10 commandments written on one of its walls, while, at the same time, sitting in its own courtroom with a painting of Moses and the 10 commandments on its wall.

Such conclusions cause one to wonder, where is the consistency, the conformance with historical intent as manifested by our Founding Fathers? Fortunately, in 2014, the Supreme Court put these various tests aside in the case of *Town of Greece vs Galloway*. The issue was whether or not the town council could open its meetings with local clergy offering prayers that were primarily Christian in nature. The court concluded that the test to be employed in deciding such a question had been properly stated in an earlier case as follows:

*It can hardly be thought that, in the same week, members of the first Congress voted to appoint and to pay a chaplain for each House and also voted to approve the draft of the First Amendment for submission to the states, they intended the Establishment Clause of the Amendment to forbid what they just declared acceptable.*²⁶

In other words, the founders' action should be powerful evidence of how the First Amendment should be interpreted. Therefore, prayers in town council meetings were deemed constitutional. The court went on to say,

*Any test the court adopts must acknowledge a practice that was accepted by the Framers, and has withstood the critical scrutiny of time and political change.*²⁷

In other words, the court might have multiple tests for varying circumstances to determine freedom of religion issues, but if the Founding Fathers sanctioned a specific action and it has withstood the test of time, then historical reality trumps all other tests. This seems reasonable, as who would know

²⁶ *Marsh v. Chambers*, 463 U.S. 783 (1983).

²⁷ *Town of Greece, N.Y. v. Galloway*, 472 U.S. 572, 577 (2014).

better the intent of the First Amendment than the very men who drafted its language?

Assuming this is true, did the Founding Fathers intend to support and encourage religion in the public sector, without fostering a national religion, or on the other hand, did they intend to be neutral or even hostile to religion in the public square? As evidenced again and again, the Founding Fathers believed that Judeo Christian morals were the basis for the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—and furthermore, that morals are dependent upon religion. For this reason, the Founding Fathers and national heroes of this country not only approved of religion, but actively encouraged it, both in the public as well as private sectors in at least the following ways.

First, religion was encouraged to be taught in public education. The Northwest Ordinance which regulated the western expansion of the United States was ratified by the first United States Congress in 1789. It stated,

*Religion, morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.*²⁸

This was a powerful endorsement for religion to be forever encouraged by government. Where? In public education. Once you keep in mind that this endorsement was given by the same Congress that adopted the Constitution, hence it clearly understood the desired role of religion in education. This sentiment towards encouragement of religion in public education was expressed by a number of the Founding Fathers. Benjamin Rush wrote,

²⁸ Northwest Ordinance, July 13, 1787; (National Archives Microfilm Publication M332, roll 9); Miscellaneous Papers of the Continental Congress, 1774-1789; Records of the Continental and Confederation Congresses and the Constitutional Convention, 1774-1789, Record Group 360; National Archives.

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*The only foundation for a useful education in a republic is to be laid in religion.*²⁹

He also understood the terrible consequences of removing the Bible and religion from schools:

*The great enemy of the salvation of man, in my opinion, never invented a more effectual means of extirpating Christianity from the world than by persuading mankind that it was improper to read the Bible at schools.*³⁰

Gouverneur Morris, one of the signers of the Constitution added,

*Religion is the only solid basis of good morals; therefore, education should teach the precepts of religion and the duties of man towards God.*³¹

It is of some interest to note that in the year 1787, the same year the Constitution was written, Yale University gave these instructions to its students,

*All the scholars are required to live a religious and blameless life according to the rules of God's word diligently reading the holy scriptures, that fountain of divine light and truth, and constantly attending all the duties of religion.*³²

No doubt, the administrators of Yale University were merely echoing the sentiments of the Founding Fathers on the subject. One might ask, are these sentiments of the Founding Fathers found in our schools today? And if not, why not?

Second, religion was encouraged in all the public sector, not just public schools. Many of the Founding Fathers expressed their feelings again and again that religion should be encouraged or promoted, not just in education, but in all aspects of the public sector. John Witherspoon, a signer of the Declaration of Independence stated,

*Those who are vested with civil authority ought...to promote religion and good morals among all under their government.*³³

John Jay added,

*It is the duty of all wise, free and virtuous governments to countenance and encourage virtue and religion.*³⁴

The Continental Congress of 1778 stated,

*Whereas true religion and good morals are the only solid foundations of public liberty and happiness...it is hereby earnestly recommended to the several states to take the most effectual measures for the encouragement thereof [meaning religion].*³⁵

Author John Meacham summarized Benjamin Franklin's views on public religion as follows:

*To Benjamin Franklin, history taught that 'public religion' was ultimately good for society. The concept of public religion includes a spirit of charity to others, a general moral disposition, and rituals acknowledging a dependence on divine providence.*³⁶

It would be difficult, if not impossible, to find a Founding Father or state legislature that expressed a contrary sentiment. Joseph Story, a Harvard law professor and a member of the US Supreme Court from 1812 to 1845, wrote the famous commentaries on the Constitution of the United States. Understanding the sentiment of the Founding Fathers and those who lived at the time the Constitution was written, he observed,

Probably at the time of the adoption of the Constitution,...the general, if not the universal sentiment in America was that Christianity ought to receive encouragement from the state, so far as is not incompatible with the private rights of conscience and the freedom of religious worship.... It yet remains a problem to be solved in human affairs, whether any free

²⁹ The Selected Writings of Benjamin Rush. Edited by Dagobert D. Runes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1947.

³⁰ Rush, Letters, Vol. I, p.521, to Jeremy Belknap on July 13, 1789.

³¹ Gouverneur Morris (1832). Cited in Jared Sparks, The life of Gouverneur Morris. Boston, MA: Gray and Bowen, Vol. III, p.483.

³² The American Patriot's Bible, p I-22.

³³ Witherspoon, "Thanksgiving Sermon," 265.

³⁴ Connecticut Courant, June 7, 1802, Oliver Ellsworth to the General Assembly of the State of Connecticut.

³⁵ Journals of the Continental Congress, 15:1191-1193.

³⁶ Meacham, "American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation," 20.

*government can be permanent, where the public worship of God, and the support of religion constitute no part of the policy or duty of the state in any assignable shape.*³⁷

This was nothing less than an acknowledgement of the Founding Fathers' desire for encouragement of religion in the public sector.

Third, our public monuments evidence government support of religious expression in public. Our public monuments, honoring our Founding Fathers and other national heroes, paid for and promoted by our government, are emblazoned with statements referencing God. Among others, we read on the Washington Monument "Laus Deo", which means Praise God. Why would we have a permanent public pronouncement to praise God if we were only to do so in private? Lincoln's second inaugural address engraved on the walls of the Lincoln Memorial mentions God 14 times and references the Bible four times. Does that sound like government wanted to remove references to God in the Bible from the public domain or rather to acknowledge Him who was present at every significant step of our nation's founding? One might well ask why the governmental establishment, maintenance, and promotion of these monuments which support religious principles if government is not in the business of endorsing and encouraging religion in the public sector?

Fourth, public prayers are evidence of supporting religious expression in public. Prayer has been a critical part of our nation's history. It has been the focus of presidential prayer breakfasts and the traditional beginning of each congressional session by a clergyman hired and paid for by the government. Consequently, one must ask, "Did Washington, Adams, and Madison, each of whom were Founding Fathers violate the intent of the Constitution when they sponsored national days of prayer and fasting during their service as president?" Many other presidents, including Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Calvin Coolidge, Franklin D. Roosevelt, Harry Truman,

John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama, and Donald Trump, to name a few, also sponsored national days of prayer. It would be hard to imagine greater endorsements of national prayer in the public setting than these. Certainly, exclusion of prayer from public places was not the intent of our Founding Fathers and other national leaders who advocated the necessity of prayer on a public basis in order to establish and preserve our nation.

Fifth, scripture reading is evidence of supporting religious expression in public. Franklin D. Roosevelt not only led the nation in prayer, but he invited the nation to read the Bible,

*I suggest the nation-wide reading of the holy scriptures during the period from Thanksgiving Day to Christmas.... Go to...the scriptures for a renewed and strengthened contact with those eternal truths and majestic principles which have inspired such measure of greatness as this nation has achieved.*³⁸

Was this not an endorsement of religion on a national basis?

Sixth, the government sponsors many activities encouraging our belief in God. Our currency contains the words, "In God We Trust." Our national anthem makes reference to God. Our Pledge of Allegiance, a pledge which has been made by members of the House and Senate at their daily sessions, acknowledges that we are "one nation under God." Our religious institutions are given favored income tax treatment by the government and property tax exemptions for houses of worship. Many of the oaths sworn in courts contain the words, "so help me God." Our Capitol building has a chapel for members of Congress to worship God and our government pays for military, as well as, congressional chaplains. Does this sound like a neutral position taken by the Founding Fathers and other national leaders on religion, or is it not instead, a conscious and unabashed encouragement of religion in the public sector?

³⁷ Joseph Story, Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States § 1874, p. 593 (1851).

³⁸ Franklin D. Roosevelt, Proclamation 2629—Thanksgiving Day, 1944 Online by Gerhard Peters and John T. Woolley, The American Presidency Project <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/210843>

And seventh, the Supreme Court publicly petitions for God's help. The Supreme Court begins each session with these words, "God save the United States and this Honorable Court."³⁹ How sadly ironic if this same court that regularly pleads for God's help, a form of prayer, in a governmental building should mandate governmental and public neutrality, or worse yet, even hostility against the very God from whom it seeks regular guidance.

What then does the wall of separation between church and state really mean? Thomas Jefferson is often quoted by the secularists and courts for his statement about a wall of separation between church and state as evidence that there is no place for religion in the public sector. But did Jefferson really believe that government should not encourage or even approve of religion in public life? Unfortunately, Jefferson's reference to a wall of separation between church and state has been completely taken out of context by many. Jefferson was responding to a letter from the Danbury Baptists, who were concerned that the Free Exercise of Religion Clause might be interpreted as a government-granted right and thus subject to change or compromise, rather than an unalienable right from God that could not be changed or compromised under any circumstances. Based on this concern, Jefferson replied that the Free Exercise of Religion Clause was a restoration of man's natural rights, meaning a right that pre-existed and was independent of government, namely a God-given right. Accordingly, Jefferson assured the concerned Baptist while there could be no establishment of a national religion, there was a wall otherwise preventing government from intruding into the free expression of religion, not the reverse—the exact opposite of how many courts have interpreted that phrase. Consistent with this interpretation, Jefferson gave us this clarifying statement about the federal government's ability to prohibit religious activities in public,

Certainly no power to prescribe any religious exercise, or to assume authority and religious

³⁹ The Court and Its Procedures. (n.d.). Retrieved December 21, 2020, from <https://www.supremecourt.gov/about/procedures.aspx>.

*discipline, has been delegated to the general [federal] government. It must then rest with the states.*⁴⁰

Wow! What a difference from how Jefferson is often quoted! Furthermore, if actions speak louder than words, then Jefferson's actions should evidence his true opinion of the role of religion in the public sector. What were those actions? In his second inaugural address, he invited the audience to join with him in supplications to God for the nation's well-being. Was this not encouragement of prayer, a practice at the heart of religion made from the nation's preeminent public pulpit? And why did he, along with Franklin, if they were opposed to the expression of religion in public, propose a national seal with these words, "God or Providence has favored our undertakings,"⁴¹ knowing that such seal would become a public symbol? In addition, Jefferson, as well as James Madison, attended church services, where of all places, in the Capitol building, one of the most visible of government buildings.⁴² By doing so, he clearly endorsed, not condemned, the free exercise of religion in public. Jefferson, as president, also allowed church services to be held in a number of government buildings, such as the Treasury building and the Supreme Court,⁴³ and in addition, authorized federal funds to pay for Christian missionaries to the Indians.⁴⁴ We might note this was all done after the Constitution was adopted.

These actions clearly condoned religious worship in public buildings and the use of government

⁴⁰ "From Thomas Jefferson to Samuel Miller, 23 January 1808," Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7257>.

⁴¹ "The Great Seal of the United States". U.S. Department of State, Bureau of Public Affairs. 2003. Retrieved November 25, 2011.

⁴² See Federal Orrery, Boston, July 2, 1795, p. 2. See also Bishop Claggett's (Episcopal Bishop of Maryland) letter of February 18, 1801, reveals that, as vice-President, Jefferson went to church services in the House. Available in the Maryland Diocesan Archives.

⁴³ Hutson, Religion and the Founding of the American Republic, p. 90.

⁴⁴ See Barton, D. (2013, January 22). No, I'm not wrong. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from https://world.wng.org/2013/01/no_im_not_wrong

money for religious purposes. If we were honestly looking for original intent, what better endorsement of a government advocating religion in the public sector than as evidenced by these key Founding Fathers? Nonetheless, the courts have quoted Jefferson's one-off phrase out of context in order to prohibit religious instruction, prayers, and reading of the Bible in schools, to remove displays of the 10 commandments from public buildings, and to outlaw public displays of a Christmas creche. No wonder Supreme Court Justice William Rehnquist opined,

*The 'wall of separation between church and state' is a metaphor based on bad history, a metaphor which has proved useless as a guide to judging. It should be frankly, and explicitly abandoned.*⁴⁵

Jefferson's phrase is not language to be found in the Constitution, and in fact, is currently interpreted by some courts as in opposition to most, if not all, of the Founding Fathers' observations on the subject. Likewise, it is in opposition to Jefferson's own words when placed in proper context to his clarifying words on the subject and to his own personal actions endorsing religion in the public sector.

Our nation's history is saturated with references to God because His influence has been profound in the discovery, establishment, and preservation of this country. Accordingly, we pay tribute to God through the presence of religious symbols and practices in both private and public places. It is nothing less than historical fiction to think that our government has not supported and encouraged religion for over 200 years. The initial intent of the Founding Fathers was clear—to promote and encourage religion in both the private and public sectors, and by so doing, reinforce the moral principles upon which our nation was built—but at the same time, never establish a national religion. Our Founding Fathers would be shocked to hear some advocate that religion should be expressed only in the confines of one's home, or the seclusion of a private chapel, or that it should be invisible in

the public domain; it would be anathema to them and all they stood for. Religion, to them, was the prime source for reinforcing the moral values essential to the ongoing viability of the Constitution.

I express my gratitude for our Founding Fathers, for the inspired and good men that they were, for our divinely directed Constitution, for the moral laws God has given us to preserve and protect our God-given rights, and for the free exercise of religion that makes all this possible. If we as a nation are a moral and religious people, then we can be recipients of this divine promise as recorded in Psalms, "Blessed is the nation whose God is the Lord."⁴⁶ May we be a nation under God, not a nation without God, I so pray, in the name of the God of this land. Amen.

The Mayflower Promise is a collaborative event by the Latter-day Freeman and the Restoration Generation, a project of the Thomas Jefferson Center for Constitutional Restoration.

To learn more about the importance of religious freedom and how to protect this essential right, follow The Mayflower Promise on social media and visit mayflowerpromise.com.



⁴⁵ Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38 (1985).

⁴⁶ Psalm 33:12, King James Version