

# Nation's Founders Valued Religious Freedom

I would not hazard a guess as to how many preachers in these United States will make some reference this Sunday morning to our nation's Founding Fathers, and their reliance on the Ten Commandments in forging the laws for our new nation.

My suspicion is that such references will be numerous if unfounded. That is not to say that those who founded our nation were persons without religious conviction. They no doubt were persons with unique and personal understanding of what it meant to be religious.

However, in founding a new nation, they took every precaution to make certain that religion would be free from unnecessary government entanglement, and that government would not be controlled by religion. Their goal was novel. No nation had ever existed that sought so intentionally and purposefully to protect the religious freedom of its citizens.

That we worship in the place of our choosing, with the group of our choosing, in the manner of our choosing and that we direct our worship toward the deity of our choosing is a testimony to the ongoing success of their efforts to provide religious liberty for all. That a fair number of our fellow citizens will choose to not worship at all this Sunday, or will have already worshipped on Saturday or Friday, only serves to further illustrate the extent to which religious liberty and freedom of conscience prevail in our country.

Those who would suggest that our nation's founding was the work of men who wanted to create a decidedly religious nation in general, or a Christian one in particular, would seem not to have read the relevant material. Reading the Ten Commandments and the Constitution, along with the Bill of Rights, readily demonstrates that there are fundamental differences in the intent and purpose of those documents. A brief review of the Ten Commandments will quickly show that

they did not serve as a basis for the founding of our nation.

You shall have no other gods before me. In a nation relying on the Ten Commandments to form the foundation of its government, the First Amendment would never have even been conceived much less ratified. It in no way dictates that citizens must worship only the God that gave the Ten Commandments to Moses. What the first amendment protects is everyone's right to worship any god they choose or no god at all.

You shall not make for yourself an idol. From the soaring Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial, the monuments and memorials that mark the American experience serve as vivid and poignant reminders of the lives and events that have formed and shaped our nation. Some would say that a monument is not an idol. Someone else would insist that it is. That debate can take place in a peaceful way in a nation where no law either for or against idols has been passed.

You shall not make wrongful use of the name of your God. The framers of the U.S. Constitution took no chance on violating this commandment since they did not mention God even once in the document, wrongfully or otherwise.

Remember the Sabbath and keep it holy. One might suggest that the observance of the Fourth Commandment was one of the rights reserved to the states or the people by the 10th Amendment. I have childhood memories of stores being closed on Sundays. Some cities had "blue laws" that enforced religious standards, such as forbidding the sale of certain items on a certain day. The framers were wise to leave this one alone, as even Southern Baptists no longer prohibit secular employment on the Lord's day so long as it is "... commensurate with the Christian's conscience under the Lordship of Jesus Christ."

Honor your father and mother. There is no mention of mom or dad in the Constitution

You shall not murder. You shall not commit adultery. You shall not steal. You shall not bear false witness against your neighbor. This section of the Ten

Commandments most closely resembles long-standing laws in our nation. The problem with trying to say that our founders used the Ten Commandments as the source for those laws is that most every country on earth, regardless of religious heritage, has similar laws. Refraining from murder, adultery, theft or perjury is not a distinctively Christian practice.

You shall not covet your neighbor's wife. You shall not covet anything that belongs to your neighbor. This final commandment would seem to completely banish the notion that the Ten Commandments were a source for our Founding Fathers. They did, after all, birth a nation on land that belonged to another. It was land that their fathers and grandfathers had coveted, and that their sons would continue to covet until, in some cases, whole tribes of people who once inhabited the land were extinguished.

This is not to say that those who sacrificed so much in order to found our nation were not men of good moral character. They were. Yet their morality was subject to the times in which they lived. Some of them owned slaves. They denied women the right to vote.

While most of the founders were connected to a Christian denomination, they were also doing their work as the Age of Enlightenment drew to a close. No doubt their work was influenced by John Locke and other Enlightenment thinkers as much, if not more, than it was by their religious experience.

The Treaty of Tripoli was not ratified until John Adams held the office of president of the United States. Article 11 of that treaty reads as follow: "As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion ... no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries." The treaty, only two pages long, was ratified in June 1797 by a unanimous vote of the United States Senate.

A fair number of founders would have still been around the government at this time, if not actually in the government, not the least of which was Adams himself.

While it is doubtful that a treaty with such an article could be ratified in today's hyper-charged environment of religious revisionism, it is ironic that some of the men who actually helped found our country did pass a treaty containing such sentiments.

Five years later, Thomas Jefferson penned his now famous letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. In it, he said, "Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."

Few words sum up any better the tremendous gift that our Founding Fathers gave to people of faith in our nation. Baptist founder Thomas Helwys said much the same thing in 17th-century England, "If the King's people be obedient and true subjects, obeying all humane laws made by the King, our Lord the King can require no more: for men's religion to God is betwixt God and themselves; the King shall not answer for it, neither may the King be judge between God and man."

For expressing such an idea Helwys was imprisoned by King James I. Yes, the same King James whose Bible so many Baptists still read. Helwys died in prison because he would not violate his conscience.

Today we celebrate the freedom we have to worship and relate to God as we feel led by the Holy Spirit and not according to the dictates of state-enforced religion. It is a wonderful freedom that we ought to cherish with gratitude and humility. Let us be mindful of the many believers around the world who have no such freedom, and still they worship the risen Lord, putting at risk their well-being and in some cases even their lives.

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