

BREAKING THE CULTURE-WAR LENS

That brings us back to today's culture wars, one facet of which is the cherry picking of Founding Father quotes to prove almost anything. As I hope I've shown throughout this book, activists have made a number of false or misleading assertions about the Founding Fathers, the separation of church and state, and the birth of religious freedom. Among the commonly promoted ideas that are mistaken:

Liberal Fallacy 1:

Most Founding Fathers were Deists or Secular.

Deism held that God created the laws of nature and then receded from action. Most of the Founders agreed with the first part of that sentence but disagreed with the second. They rejected the idea that the Bible was inerrant but, to a person, believed in an omnipotent God who intervened in the lives of men and nations. That means they were either not Deists at all or were a flavor of Deists not typically imagined when the word is used. Some wanted secular government, but none of them was a secular individual. Also, many of the other men who were instrumental in the Revolution and the Continental Congress were orthodox Christians, including: Patrick Henry, Sam Adams, John Hancock, John Witherspoon, Roger Sherman, and many more. These men represented viewpoints that had to be heeded by the likes of Jefferson and Madison, who were not just philosophers but also politicians who assembled coalitions. It is even clearer that none of these Founders was a "secular humanist"; they believed in God and that He shaped their lives and fortunes.

Conservative Fallacy 1:

Most Founding Fathers were serious Christians.

Of course it depends on how we define the term, but if we use the definition of Christianity offered by those who make this claim – conservative Christians – then the Founders' studied in this book were not Christians. Jefferson and Franklin overtly rejected the divinity of Jesus. Jefferson loathed the entire clerical class and what had become of Christianity. Adams became an active Unitarian, rejecting much Christian doctrine. And Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams abhorred the Calvinist idea that salvation was determined by divine preference rather than good works. Madison and Washington remained the most silent on matters of personal theology and continued to attend Christian churches, but in their voluminous writings never seemed to speak of Jesus as divine. If they must wear labels, the closest would be Unitarian.

Liberal Fallacy 2:

The Constitution demanded strict separation of church and state throughout the land.

Actually, the original Constitution called for the federal government to keep out of religious affairs but allowed states, which governed most matters, to mingle church and state as much as they wanted. Had the original Constitution attempted to impose separation of church and state throughout the land, it probably would not have been ratified. Liberals can certainly argue for strict and pervasive separation, but they cannot claim all the Founders as agreeing.

Conservative Fallacy 2:

Separation of church and state is a twentieth-century invention of the courts.

Not all Founders wanted rigorous separation, but a few rather important ones did. James Madison, a man who knew a thing or two about the Constitution, strongly supported separation of church and state. For him, the higher the wall, the better. Jefferson agreed. Not everyone agreed with Madison and Jefferson, but clearly this was not a myth concocted two hundred years later by activist judges. Nor is it true that "the Founders" were protecting religion from the state and not the other way around, as is often maintained by Christian conservatives. Different Founders had different emphases. Madison and the Baptists tended to speak more about the negative effects of church-state entanglements on religion. But Jefferson more often emphasized the destructive effects of church-state cooperation on the functioning of a democracy. As a collective, they believed that separation of church and state was good for both.

Liberal Fallacy 3:

Separation of church and state was designed mostly to protect religious minorities.

That was certainly part of the goal, but just as important was the idea that the wall would allow for religion in general -- including the majority religion -- to flourish. Indeed, Madison and others hoped that the separation of church and state would help spread Christianity.

Conservative Fallacy 3:

Advocates of separation are anti-religion.

Actually, the separation of church and state resulted from an alliance of eighteenth-century rationalists such as Jefferson and evangelical Christians like Isaac Backus and John Leland, who were most certainly pro-religion.

Common Fallacy 4:

The Founders figured this all out.

The Founders crafted a revolutionary compromise that took huge steps toward separating religion and government at the national levels. But they disagreed with one another on the particulars, and even some of the core principle. They did not, alas, resolve many of the most difficult issues.

History seen through the lens of the culture war is history distorted. In their righteous advocacy for the cause, some activists on both sides have warped acts and the motives of their opponents. In the spirit of Adams' and Jefferson's rapprochement, it's time for each side to appreciate that its enemies are right on key points. We all have our biases, but as someone who respects any of the players on both sides of the culture wars, I would like to summarize my own views of what likely transpired:

America was settled to be a Christian nation. To be more precise, it was settled to be a Protestant nation. Inhabitants of most colonies prior to the Revolution were not interested in religious pluralism or tolerance. They wanted society based on Protestant principles, with a strong mingling of church and state and vigilant antagonism toward Catholicism. Almost all of the colonies tried some

variant on state-supported religion, and every one of those experiments failed. Perhaps the most important flare-ups of persecution came in a few Virginia counties, where they were witnessed by a thoroughly disgusted young James Madison. He and several other Founders looked at the wreckage of these experiments and concluded that official state religions led to oppression of minority religions and lethargy among the majority religions. Meanwhile, the Great Awakening created vibrant new denominations independent of and hostile to the official religions. These religious revivals also spawned a generation of Americans accustomed to fighting authority in search of higher principles.

The break from Great Britain had many causes, but the desire for religious freedom was one of them. In the South, the Church of England was the official religion, even though the majority of the population by that point was not Anglican. The oppressiveness of the Church seemed part and parcel of the royal tyranny. In the North, the Church of England was even more despised, and patriots stirred fears that freedom of religion would soon be curtailed. In one of the little-known, and less admirable, aspects of the struggle, rebels exploited fear of Catholics to help fuel antagonism to British rule.

The War of Independence further transformed colonial attitudes toward religious freedom. It created from a collection of colonies a single nation and forced, for the first time, its leaders to confront the growing religious diversity. George Washington imposed tolerance throughout the Continental army. The Continental Congress became ever more aware of the differences among its own members. Demographic facts and strategic wartime needs coincided with a growing philosophical movement emphasizing individual liberty. Beginning in 1776 with Virginia and ending with Massachusetts in 1833, all of the states discontinued the practice of having an official religion.

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