

**The Founding Fathers: Men of God, Sort Of, Sometimes**  
**Big Sky Unitarian Universalist Fellowship**  
**Worship Service presented by Bill and Joyce Kronholm**  
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Those of you who are not involved in education probably did not follow the deliberations of the Texas State Board of Education in January, and may even wonder why anyone here would care. The reason is quite simple. The board dictates what constitutes an acceptable textbook for nearly five million Texas schoolchildren. That is such a huge market that textbook publishers edit their texts to match what Texas wants. Those are the textbooks that are then available for other states to buy. And the Texas board is dominated by conservative fundamentalists who say proudly that they want their beliefs reflected in what children study.

The chairman of the board is a dentist named Don McLeroy, and he considers himself a Christian warrior, doing God's work. In an interview in October 2009 he explained his approach to history textbook evaluation: ". . . we are a [Christian nation](#) founded on Christian principles. The way I evaluate history textbooks is first I see how they cover Christianity and Israel. Then I see how they treat Ronald Reagan."

It is one of the Right's most cherished notions, claiming that the United States was founded explicitly as a Christian nation with a Christian government; they say they seek only to restore the faith of the founders. The Left tends to argue that the United States was grounded firmly on a secular foundation, as codified in the Constitution. Often in such cases, the truth lies somewhere in between. But in this case, it seems, both sides are right.

Forrest Church, the late senior minister at All Soul's Unitarian in New York, researched and wrote extensively about religion and government during our country's early years. What I'm passing along today is primarily based on his work, and particularly his 2007 book, "So Help Me God." And while we may think of today's disputes as unique, Church writes that the early republic divided right down the middle on the role of religion in government. From the outset, the founders fought tooth and nail in a contest over American values, a vigorous, sometimes savage, yet nearly forgotten thirty-year conflict. I want to walk through our first five presidents and how they faced the question of religion in government.

George Washington avoided the worst of the battle, elected by acclamation and universally admired. But factionalism seethed beneath the surface.

Washington actually brought little religious background to the presidency. Baptized into the Church of Virginia, Washington was elected to the church vestry shortly after his marriage. But in the church of the day, that was as much a political accomplishment as anything religious. And his religious practices showed no particular fervor. While he attended church, he would leave following the sermon, while Martha remained behind and kneeled with the faithful to take communion. Washington was culturally Christian, to be sure, but throughout volumes of correspondence Washington mentions Christ by name only once.

On his watch, the government was by no means Christian, but neither was it purely secular. As long as the language employed was inclusive, for example, Washington had no qualms about calling his fellow citizens to a national day of prayer. When America's Baptists appealed to the newly inaugurated president to support the addition of a Bill of Rights to the Constitution to protect the "liberty of conscience," Washington agreed.

But Washington never lost sight of a second priority, the tranquility and stability of the state. And thus his philosophy toward church and state was simple: Religious freedom would be honored fastidiously as long as the church behaved. He would uphold religious freedom, but religion should not intrude on government affairs. When a delegation of Quakers appealed to him to back the abolition of slavery, Washington dismissed their proposal as inappropriate. Washington believed that allowing a self-appointed group to impose its moral or political agenda on society would divide the nation. And at this time in our history, factionalism was seen as a great evil.

Of course, Washington was unique among our presidents. His stature was so great that he actually had to veto the idea of being named king. It was after Washington left office that the battle was truly joined, as two very different themes competed.

The first theme, sounded in New England from the time of the Puritans, championed the ideal of a Christian Commonwealth. Uplifted by the imperatives of Christian morality, the government would be a shining city on a hill, fulfilling God's mandates and receiving his aid. This is the concept that fires today's Christian Right. 200 years ago, it was championed by John Adams, who succeeded Washington.

The second theme, codified in the Declaration of Independence by Thomas Jefferson, arose from Enlightenment France. It worshiped the ideal of sacred liberty. Jefferson dreamed of establishing an Empire of Liberty, whose government would hold sacred each individual's God-given freedom of conscience to believe or not, as he chose. Of course, this is the ideal of today's left.

From the moment the new government opened for business in 1789, the question of which theme should prevail spurred heated debate that flared into the president elections that followed Washington. Absolutists on both sides waged a war of conflicting ideals that threatened to tear the country in two.

At the presidential level, these contests took on the character of religious crusades. Though they shared similar theological views, Adams presided over a Christian federal authority; Jefferson, over a secular one. And while it may seem hard to imagine, pulpit politics during the early Republic could easily be as nasty as the worst of today.

Washington was followed into the presidency by his vice president, John Adams. Adams was no orthodox Christian; for starters, he rejected original sin and the doctrine of predestination; the Atonement—"Christ died for our sins"—fit nowhere in his theology. He didn't think like a true believer, but he felt like a true believer. A lifelong churchgoer like his forebears before him, to Adams the Bible was the best book in the world and Christianity the one indispensable

guarantor of public morality.

In New England, establishment churches were supported by state taxes. And to Adams, the covenant his forebears made with their God in establishing a Christian commonwealth in Massachusetts was a step toward a more momentous compact—between God and the new republic. When Washington spoke of Providence favoring America, his words were generic and his theology was general. Adams uttered them with the strong New England accent of the Puritan establishment. Adams declared a national day of fasting and repentance in May 1798, and that proclamation unified many Congregationalists and other establishment Christians behind Adams and the government. But it alienated untold numbers of Baptists and Methodists, who at that time were religious upstarts who still feared they would be suppressed by a state religion.

Thomas Jefferson, of course, was our third president. His participation in organized religion can be sketched in a few brief lines. Although he was elected to an Anglican parish vestry, no record exists of his having served in that capacity. To friends, he referred to himself variously as a “Theist,” “Deist,” “Unitarian,” and “Rational Christian.” “I am a sect unto myself, as far as I know,” he wrote. He listed the Statute for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia among his most significant accomplishments.

Jefferson’s 1802 letter to the Danbury, Connecticut, Baptists remains the single most influential presidential document in the history of American church-state relations. Jefferson was asked what the First Amendment meant. He responded that it built “a wall of separation between church and state.” This letter was the basis for interpretations of the First Amendment right up to today.

Most established churchmen considered Jefferson an infidel. Many New England preachers, not a few Unitarians among them, rejected the Declaration of Independence as subversive to Christian values.

While the Jefferson administration was decidedly secular, even then church and state were not pristinely separate. When the government moved to Washington, Christian worship took place not only in the Capitol building, but also in the Supreme Court, the War Department, and the Treasury Department, where Presbyterians served Communion. Jefferson surprised his critics by attending worship services on a regular basis in the House chamber on Sundays, especially when his Baptist friends were in the pulpit preaching church-state separation.

So, many of the questions that we debate today were also center stage at the dawn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But the players may surprise you. Two centuries ago, the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Unitarians stood squarely on the Religious Right. Our Unitarian predecessors, who were among the religious establishment of New England, saw no problem with giving God a seat in Government. After all, it was their God who would be enthroned. The religious laws, and government financial support, would favor their churches.

In the vanguard of the religious left back then were the Baptists. No religious body fought

more eloquently for freedom of conscience and church-state separation than the Baptists. At the time, they were religious outsiders, accustomed to persecution. Together with leading Methodists, Jews, Roman Catholics, and a smattering of influential Deists, the Baptists championed strict separation of church and state to protect their own religious liberty from domination by the establishment faiths.

The debate continued after Jefferson left office and was succeeded by James Madison.

As a congressman, Madison had spearheaded the drive to adopt a Bill of Rights. But he wasn't enthusiastic about doing so, considering it unnecessary. Politics dictated his action: To be elected to Congress in Virginia's Orange County, Madison had to appease the Baptist clergy, who were locally dominant and had the clout to swing the election -- and who wanted the protection of specified rights. So in one religious gathering after another, Madison promised his Baptist constituents, that, if elected, he would place a Bill of Rights at the top of his congressional agenda. And so he did, championing the enactment of what he privately called "this nauseous business of amendments" and shepherding the Bill of Rights through Congress. So it was the Baptist passion for freedom of conscience that led directly to the First Amendment.

As president, Madison's policies varied depending on circumstances. He declared a record four national prayer days during the War of 1812. But later, in a blistering attack on his own policies, he recommended that the offices of congressional and military chaplain be abolished and urged future administrations to tightly regulate religious corporations, for fear their unchecked wealth and growing political power undermine the government.

The religious debate came close to splitting the nation during the War. A third of the nation was cheering for Great Britain, particularly in New England which felt a deep affinity for Christian England and felt the war bordered on sacrilege. By 1814, with British troops in Maine and laying siege to Washington, some Massachusetts townships were openly toying with the idea of secession. The Presbyterian and Dutch Reformed churches joined forces to proclaim a national day of repentance.

From Madison's perspective, the war critics in the pulpit were softening national resolve. Eager to regain the religious upper hand, the Republican Congress instructed him to issue a patriotic summons to prayer, invoking God's favor in battle. Madison's call to prayer turned the American religious establishment on its head. Southern Christians who had criticized Adams's prayer days as an infringement on their liberty welcomed Madison's religious proclamations, while the Puritan preachers of New England, who repeatedly had chastised earlier presidents for refusing to issue such declarations, sharply criticized Madison for doing so.

James Monroe, our fifth president, was a non-believer who steered clear of religion, but nevertheless became a clergy favorite. He won support from many of the same preachers who earlier insisted that unless the president was a professed Christian eager to lead the nation in prayer, God would bring down His hammer on America.

But victory over Britain calmed the storm. The New Englanders, who were the most active

advocates of Christian Commonwealth, were now branded as traitors. Their churches lost their state sponsorship, and silently they removed themselves from national politics.

Monroe, elected in 1816, was able to enjoy religious peace for one reason above all others: The loss by the New England establishment churches of their political franchise. Baptists—joined by Episcopalians and Methodists—plotted the end of state support for Connecticut's Congregational churches. In early 1818, a narrow majority of Connecticut voters approved a written state constitution guaranteeing equal rights and privileges to all denominations.

Monroe didn't obsess about the clergy in the way that his predecessors had. As long as the church was not imposing its theological constraints on government, Monroe welcomed religion as a stabilizing force in society. In return, Christians of all denominations embraced their president as a friend, ignoring his personal lack of piety. Given the ferocity of the long battle over the role of religion in the new republic, the silence in America's pulpits concerning presidential faith and Christian government during Monroe's presidency is breathtaking. This silence echoes even more tellingly, given Monroe's notable indifference to Christianity and the negligible ceremonial role the church played in his administration.

But it also set a template for future presidents. None of the first presidents was an orthodox Christian, but that had little bearing on where each stood on the religious-political spectrum.

Monroe's balancing act—keeping God out of the White House without offending the churches—would be passed along to his presidential successors. They would adapt his model of a religiously neutral and disengaged White House, more or less successfully and regardless of faith or party, throughout ten succeeding administrations.

Religion and politics would continue to mix, sometimes combustively, in the country at large, but for decades to come no president would have to suffer anything close to the religious troubles that spiritual partisans had inflicted on Adams, Jefferson, and Madison during the height of America's first great culture war.

With the collapse of the state churches of New England, the first great war over church and state had finally ended, and God would not re-enter the White House until the Civil War. But that is another story.

And thus for the question of the day, "Was America founded as a Christian nation or as a secular nation?" the answer is: Yes.

Shalom