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### **The Enlightened Faith of our Founding Fathers**

Recently, there has been a spate of books about religion and America's founders, including two by Unitarian Universalist ministers. At least some of these books seem to have been written in response to claims by some on the religious right that this is a "Christian nation," from its very inception. Delving into some of these new books provides an interesting perspective on the religious views of our founders – their theologies and their ideas about the respective roles of government and religion. The founders were a diverse group – their religious affiliations ran the gamut. Among the 56 signers of the Declaration of Independence, there were Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Quakers, Unitarians, Roman Catholics, and Universalists. Haym Salomon, a Jew, was an important financier of the Revolution, and people of a wide range of faiths fought in the Continental Army.

The founders were some extraordinary men; their views were liberal, even radical, for their time. And I use the word "men" advisedly here. When this country was founded, only white, property-owning males had any political voice at all. I would love to be able to talk about our founding men and women, or founding mothers and fathers, but the fact is that the influential voices at our founding all belonged to men.

If we look carefully at the ideas of these extraordinary founders, we see that they are highly relevant to our current world, and that we would do well to revive those ideas. We would also see that the theologies of many of these early leaders come very close to our modern Unitarian Universalist theologies. If there is any one group that is

particularly well-situated to lead a revival of the perspectives of our founders, it would be us – Unitarian Universalists. So – first let's examine the religious perspectives of some of these founding giants, and then we'll look at some important common themes that emerge.

First, George Washington, commander of the Continental Army and America's first president by unanimous vote. Washington did not identify himself as a "Christian." He mentioned God and Jesus on only a very few occasions. He was interested in science, and he conducted various scientific experiments on his farm. This led him to look to nature rather than to revelation for his inspiration – to the vastness of creation and the orderly working of its laws. Like some of his colleagues in the Continental Congress, Washington harbored private doubts about the reality of heaven, hell, and other points of Christian doctrine. But he acknowledged the importance of the moral teachings that the various denominations shared. Being a Christian meant doing good in the world, rather than focusing on personal revelation and conversion. Washington was careful to appear even-handed, showing respect to all religions. He attended various religious services on different Sundays, including Quaker, Jewish, Methodist, and Unitarian services in addition to attending Anglican services with his wife, Martha. On one occasion, he related, he attended "the Presbyterian meeting in the forenoon and the Romish Church in the afternoon." Washington abhorred sectarian bickering. He went to great lengths to repair relations between protestants and Catholics, who were a religious minority at the time and viewed with great suspicion. In his public pronouncements, he emphasized that America was founded on the precept of freedom

of religion. In his vision for the nation, Washington went way beyond mere tolerance for different beliefs; he saw religious variety as a blessing and strength of the new nation.

Benjamin Franklin's parents intended him for the ministry, but they quickly saw that his questioning mind led him to doubt many of the Christian beliefs with which he had been raised. He found that he identified most closely with the "Deists," although he worked throughout his life to define his beliefs. Deists saw nature as a the primary means of understanding the world, and when they referred to a deity, it was chiefly in terms of "Chief Architect" or "grand designer." They worshipped in the church of creation, and their God was not the "providentialist" God of many denominations, who played an ongoing active role in the affairs of the world.

As we know from stories about his many experiments, Franklin was devoted to science; he wanted to understand the orderly working of the laws of nature. His interest in science brought him into contact with Joseph Priestly. Priestly was both a scientist and a preacher. He was the discoverer of oxygen, and he was also a Unitarian minister, first in England and later in America. Driven out of England for his heretical views, Priestly emigrated to Philadelphia, where he founded one of the earliest Unitarian churches in America. Priestly is worthy of mention because of his influence on a number of the founding fathers. Besides Franklin, George Washington and John Adams were also known to worship on occasion at Priestly's church.

Franklin found much in Unitarians' rational approach to religion that appealed to him, but he declined to align himself with any denomination. His creed was practical and simple; he believed in the value of religious teachings that led people to engage in good works. He believed that religious observance had a salutary effect on manners and

morals. If others wanted to believe that Jesus was the son of God, Franklin had no objection, especially if it made his teachings better respected.

Benjamin Rush was a physician, a member of the Continental Congress, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence. I mention him here, because Rush, like his colleagues and friends, Washington, Franklin, and John Adams, was also liberal in his religion. He affiliated with various denominations, but he is generally viewed as having been a Universalist, i.e., as one who believed in universal salvation, as opposed to heaven for the elite few and eternal damnation for the rest. He manifested these views in his work with the mentally ill in Pennsylvania. Because mental illness was widely viewed as divine punishment under harsh Calvinist doctrine, mental patients were kept in appalling conditions. Chained to the floor, living in their own filth, clothed in dirty rags, they were essentially shut away from view. Benjamin Rush helped to bring psychiatry out of the dark ages, and to improve treatment for these unfortunate souls.

Thomas Paine was another important figure in the founding of America. He was the publicist of 1776, whose writings supplied the initial spark that led to the war with Britain and eventual independence. He wrote for the masses, making his arguments in simple and understandable form. His pamphlet *Common Sense* first appeared in January 1776, and it sold more than 150,000 copies before the war was over. Paine was raised a Quaker, from which he retained a fierce commitment to radical equality and a fierce hatred of privilege. Over time, Paine became more of a Deist, seeking like many of his colleagues to find his deity in the “the divine geometry of nature.” Paine believed that a revolution in politics would surely be followed by a revolution in religion. He saw that religion became problematic when it had behind it the pomp and power of

the state. Paine's book, *The Rights of Man*, written after the French Revolution disconcerted many. It constituted a fierce defense of the liberty of the individual against the power of both church and state. People were created equal, Paine argued – in the image of God – and any distinctions between kings and commoners were therefore a perversion of divine intent. His book *The Age of Reason*, was considered by many to be an attack on religion. In it, Paine argued that people seeking knowledge of the divine needed to look not to scripture, but to creation. He referred to science as “the true theology.” In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, discoveries in astronomy demonstrated the vastness of our solar system and countless galaxies beyond. Reflecting on these findings, Paine wrote: “to believe that God created a plurality of worlds, at least as numerous as what we call stars, renders the Christian system of faith at once little and ridiculous.” Amid this plethora of worlds, why would God have singled out one small planet, and the inhabitants of one earthly tribe, to favor with God's special attention.

John Adams was probably the most religious of the founders. He was a devoted church-goer and he believed that the Bible was the best of all books and that Christianity was an indispensable guarantor of public morality. Although Adams may have felt like a true believer, however, he didn't think like a true believer. He rejected many of the basic tenets of Christian orthodoxy. He rejected the idea of original sin and the doctrine of predestination. And the theory of atonement – that God sacrificed his son to save humanity from its sins – was definitely not part of Adams' theology. Some consider Adams to have been a Unitarian, but this appears to be more a matter of theology than of actual church membership.

And we can't leave this look at the founders without considering Thomas Jefferson, a life-long Episcopalian who rarely attended church. He referred to himself at different times as a "theist," a "deist," a "rational Christian," and a "Unitarian." He was certainly Unitarian in his theology. Jefferson abhorred the rituals and doctrines of most organized religion, but he was devoted to what he saw as the genuine teachings of Jesus. To this end, Jefferson has created his own version of the Bible by cutting and pasting the gospels into a compilation of Jesus' teachings that he believed to be authentic and to reflect the true message of Jesus. Jefferson originated the concept of a "wall of separation between church and state," language that does not appear in either the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. He used this phrase in a letter seeking to reassure a congregation of Baptists in Connecticut that they would be free from government interference in the practice of their religion. And finally, we owe to Jefferson a resounding endorsement of Unitarian principles. Jefferson was influenced by the Unitarian theology of Joseph Priestly, which came close to his own theology. In his old age, Jefferson declared, "I trust there is not a young man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian."

So, what are some of the common themes that we find in the actions, the writings, the spoken words, of these founding fathers. One certainly, is an interest in and emphasis on science. All of these figures were greatly influenced by the scientific discoveries of their time, and by scientific thinking generally. They applied the test of reason to questions of religion, and their theologies tended to be ones that discounted doctrine and ritual that they found difficult to believe in. Thus, they tended to look to the natural world for evidence of the presence of divinity, rather than to the church. And

most of them saw religious belief and practice as matters of life-long searching, rather than as strict adherence to scripture and to religious doctrine.

Out of this sense of a dynamic search for truth rather than adherence to fixed dogma, came an appreciation of the diversity of religious belief and practice that characterized this new country. They were not just tolerant of different beliefs; they embraced religious diversity. They were open to attending different types of religious observances and to learning from the teachings of different faiths. They were welcoming to Jews and Catholics, who often faced discrimination. They apprehended that there might be validity in other forms of religion, that there might be different paths to the top of the mountain. They remained open to learning from other faiths. And, of course, they insisted on protection for different sets of beliefs. The constitution they drafted provided protection for the free exercise of personal religious beliefs, and it prohibited any establishment of religion. Based on these two provisions, Jefferson was confident in assuring the Baptists in Connecticut that the Constitution thus builds “a wall of separation between church and state.”

They were children of the enlightenment, which made them as unconventional in their religious opinions as they were innovative in their politics. They had little use for religion that they considered to be closed-minded or doctrinaire. Few of them believed in the literal accuracy of the Bible or in the traditional Christian creeds. Most regarded dogmas like the Trinity, the incarnation, and atonement as unreasonable, and at best, irrelevant to living a virtuous life. They were religious liberals who respected the Bible, but who criticized and revised scriptural teachings to fit the needs of modern society.

But interestingly, in spite of their devotion to reason, and their skepticism about dogma and doctrine, the founders were mostly religious men, who saw much to value in religion. They were disciples of tolerance, freedom and scientific thinking, but they saw religious faith as a progressive force in human affairs. Religious faith, they believed, united people of diverse beliefs in allegiance to a shared quest for justice and the common good. Almost all of them believed that religion was valuable as a repository of ethical and moral values. Many of them also found value in religion as foundation of community for themselves and for others.

It is profoundly moving to contemplate just how courageous and forward-looking these founders were. They were far ahead of their time, and their ideas still have a progressive ring. They were conscious of the impact that their actions would have on future generations and they considered the impact of their decisions on what Washington referred to as “unborn millions.”

These founders most certainly did not set out to found a Christian nation. On the contrary, through their foresight and generosity of spirit, they ensured that we in future generations would enjoy the blessings of freedom and acceptance of a divergence of religious beliefs. We Unitarian Universalists are rightful heirs to this tradition of progressive religion. Using our hearts as well as our minds, we need to reinvigorate the ideas on which this nation was founded –

A tradition of respect for reason and for the benefits of science;

A tradition of accepting of our religious diversity as a strength to be treasured;

A tradition that values the benefits of open and free religious practice;

A tradition that the people are truly free in the practice of their religion when religion is not interwoven with the power of the state.

And that, I believe, is our challenge – to honor the extraordinary legacy left us by our founding fathers.