

Faith of our Founding Fathers: A service for New Members
May 2, 2010

It greatly matters what you believe, but finding the institution in which your beliefs are supported, affirmed, and honored is not always easy. For the thirty-one new members who have officially joined this church during the year, we welcome you warmly, and we have at least an inkling of how difficult it truly is to find a religious community when one's own religious sensibilities feel utterly unique. You may have even surprised yourself by joining a church - -the last thing you expected. But then again, beliefs really matter.

And we all have beliefs as Ralph Waldo Emerson attested. We have beliefs as surely as a tree bears apples. We have beliefs about ourselves, our fellow human beings, our work, our play, and beliefs about our past and future and our destiny. What we love and are willing to serve, what we are prepared to sacrifice for or tolerate, what we are willing to fight against - -these all signify our faith...what we believe in; what we have confidence in.

James Luther Adams, our exalted Unitarian theologian of the mid-20th century, puts belief into the right context: The question concerning faith, he says, is not, 'shall I be a person of faith?' The proper question is 'which faith is mine,' or better yet, which faith should be mine? For whether a person craves prestige, wealth, security, or amusement, whether a person lives for country, for science, for God, or for plunder, that person is demonstrating a faith, showing that she or he puts confidence in something."

Maybe the reason we find ourselves these days in such difficult and dysfunctional times may be due to the failure of our leaders to clearly articulate their beliefs. They speak with ideological expediency, while failing to reveal their core beliefs. They may well make references to piety and God, loyalty to a certain denominational creed, but that represents mere window dressing for concealing that to which they offer their deepest loyalty.

The actual beliefs of this angry mob called Tea Partiers may be difficult to discern, but their rhetoric is riddled with nostalgia for a past that never existed. They insist that America is a Christian nation and must be brought back to the piety of our Founding Fathers. In efforts not to understand the past but to evade the present, they shout beliefs about keeping immigrants out and self-serving greed in, they believe in keeping science out and exploiting the earth's resources in, they believe in cutting taxes while cutting the deficit - a trick that could even mystify Houdini - all these point to a faith so radically different from those beliefs that tie in directly to the roots of American liberal theology. The faith of our Founding Fathers was anything but ambiguous. They rendered full testimonial to the core of loyalties, sympathies, and confidences that gave birth to American liberal theology.

American liberal theology is not limited to Unitarian Universalism, but offers a spectrum of beliefs with a few distinguishing features that were first introduced by our Founding Fathers. With our nation's right wing attempting to revise the core beliefs of our Founding Fathers, it might be apt to revisit just what they really brought to American religion.

American liberal theology, heavily influenced by The Enlightenment, European romanticism, and philosophers like Francis Hutcheson who first presented the idea of "Divine Disinterestedness," led to forming a concern for social justice as a religious and not merely a secular matter. American liberal theology separated personal piety from personal involvement in social change because personal salvation is irrelevant in a universe of divine disinterestedness. American liberal theology picked the fruits of reason from the Enlightenment, and our Founding Fathers, with an open and inquiring mind, presented the ideals of liberty and equality to the formation of our nation.

Even this week as our Supreme Court ruled 5-4 to keep a very large war memorial cross visible in the Mohave Desert because, as they argued, it is a symbol on behalf of ALL who have fallen in battle, the role religion plays in this country remains blurred by some mystique about this being a Christian nation.

Our Founding Fathers intentionally wrote the preamble to the constitution as free from any divine authority. Christian efforts to amend the preamble arose in congress three times, the latest in 1910. A compromise was made in 1864 – a time before the word "compromise" was removed from our lexicon, when the phrase "In God We Trust" was placed on the two-cent coin, but the preamble remained free of any divine reference.

In 1790, George Washington assured Jewish Americans that our government would never sanction bigotry which was inherent in any reference to the country as a Christian nation. When the ACLU attorney arguing against the cross in the Mohave Desert said that there are no crosses on the tombstones of Jews, Justice Scalia yelled that that was an outrageous conclusion...the cross is merely a common symbol of the resting place for the dead.

Our Founding fathers knew that the nation would grow evermore diverse in the years to follow. And that is why in Virginia, Thomas Jefferson's bill for religious freedom was "meant to comprehend within the mantle of protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mohametan, the Hindu and infidel of every denomination."

John Murray, the English pastor who brought Universalism to our shores in 1770 was decried as an infidel. And yet George Washington invited Murray to the prestigious position as any army chaplain even though Murray denied the existence of hell. The organized petitions that were signed for the dismissal of Murray would make the Tea Party of today look like a bunch of novices. George Washington held

firm, the Universalist preacher continued as a chaplain, and the Father of our Country drew a line in the sand that would prevent our new nation from becoming a theocracy.

It matters so much what you believe, that the religious right in Texas and their Tea Party patrons, want to revise history by injecting pious Christianity posthumously into the veins of our Founding Fathers.

The Texas Board of Education, notorious for its past efforts to undermine the teaching of evolution in public schools, has now moved to revise the social studies curriculum to emphasize the role of Christianity in the nation's founding. They have even eliminated Thomas Jefferson from the curriculum altogether – the author of that malignant phrase: “wall of separation between church and state.” So with Jefferson safely removed from the threat of filling children's minds with Christian infidelities, the History News Network recently asked: “Why is Texas afraid of Thomas Jefferson?”

Thomas Jefferson personified the unfolding of American Liberal Theology. He even cavorted with Unitarians: People who held the same mindset and worldview as we presently here do today. The Divine is fully disinterested in any of us, and so we can't pretend that He loves some of us while ignoring African-Americans, Latinos, immigrants, Muslims, gays, and all people with a penchant for critical thinking.

Thomas Jefferson, famous for attending church as infrequently as Barrack Obama, and who referred to himself among his friends...depending on the day as either Deist, Rational Christian, Unitarian, or Epicurean...and when they looked confounded relented: “I am a sect unto myself.” Many of us may feel “a sect unto ourselves” as no dogma ties us to anything specific; only to Jeffersonian loyalties, namely liberty and justice for all.

That in which Jefferson placed his confidence and was willing to die for, was not the idea that God was the head of authority and the rulers were to have their authority from Him, but he stood implacably committed to the enlightenment ideals of liberty and equality. He served as architect for American Liberal Theology where concern for liberating people was not just a secular matter but as profoundly religious as the Old Testament prophets demanded.

Jefferson had his vocal detractors not only as he ran for president, those Federalists who advocated a divine order holding up our nation, but even a hundred years later this country was divided between those calling upon a Commonwealth of God and those engaged in forming that Jeffersonian vision of an Empire of Liberty.

In his inaugural ceremonies, being sworn in as president of the United States in 1801 and 1805, Jefferson refused to swear on the Bible. Instead he kissed it, a token of his affection, but swore his oath without a hand placed on the book that many felt

must be the moral inspiration for our political leaders. Jefferson said that it is in our lives and not from our words that our religion must be read.

One of my favorite stories about Jefferson was when he was sworn in as vice president in 1797. That very week he was also installed as president of the American Philosophical Society which he said was a greater honor than serving as the nation's vice president. In his installation as president of the Philosophical Society, Jefferson stood next to the Unitarian minister, Joseph Priestly on the one side, and on the other side stood Count Volnoy, an international popularizer of Enlightenment thought. To which Federalist editor, William Cobbett lampooned the three of them as "the triumvirate of atheism, deism, and nothingism." (Some would consider this a compliment).

Not much has changed really, as Texas these days purges Thomas Jefferson from the records. And why not? Jefferson tried to advance scientific theories about the earth's antiquity long before Darwin, and he declared Noah's flood as an impossibility. The major irony I see in Texas deleting Jefferson from the annals of history, is that these same people who want Government out of their lives, collude to have government insert mind-control over their youngsters by requiring that a Republican fictional history be taught to students.

It matters what you believe and that you find institutions that support your view, which I suppose by your presence here and by becoming members of this church, that your views are an extension of American Liberal Theology.

I nod quietly and offer an insincere smile whenever people laughingly tell me (more often than you could ever imagine), that their religion is on the ski slopes, or golf course, or hiking the redrocks. These people mean well and want to be funny, but their premise is that it really doesn't matter what you believe.

First of all, when have hiking and Unitarianism ever been mutually exclusive? Religious liberals have always been free to explore and nurture their own spiritual practice even if it takes them to Southern Utah. But at the same time, there is much to be said for supporting the institution that gives power and action to the principles of liberty and equality. Without these institutions that uphold American Liberal Theology as envisioned by our founders, we retreat (as is so evidenced today)...we retreat back to pre-enlightenment ideas of government interpreting the will of an exclusively Christian God.

It matters what you believe, and when you make a decision about the religious community you join, it is an ethical act. You make an intentional choice. It will lead to inevitable consequences.

There is a feeling of mutuality between member and institution. We are there to serve each other...to help see the world more clearly as science expands our insights; to celebrate with one another in a world which has forgotten how to

rejoice; to teach our children, love our sisters and brothers, and roll up our sleeves in transforming society and working tirelessly for liberty and equality.

We extend our gratitude to our 31 new members for saying yes – saying yes to First Church, that in this busy world of dizzying proportions, there remains value in committing yourself as a member of this community.