God and America: Our Nation’s Uneasy Relationship With Religion

By Peter Bolland
In November, Americans will head to the polls to choose the next president. Regardless of the outcome, one thing’s certain: At the inauguration in January, the victor will place his hand on a Bible and make a stirring speech invoking the name of God and imploring Him to guide and bless our great nation.

Religion has always been at the heart of the American experience, from the first pilgrim to the last Tea Party rally. Leaders from all points on the political spectrum scatter religious references like cherry blossoms on the Washington National Mall. The Promised Land, the new Israel, the land of milk and honey—it’s as if a divine mandate inspired the founding of the nation. Still a nagging question remains: Whose religion? In a land founded on the principles of freedom, particularly the freedom to think and believe as one sees fit, the United States has always had a tempestuous relationship with religion. When the two conflict, to whom do we owe allegiance, our nation or our faith?

Like the pharaohs of Egypt, the emperors of Rome and the kings of medieval Europe, political leaders have long claimed a special relationship with the divine. In the creation of the U.S. political system, the founders made a conscious break with the concept of the divine right of kings. In its place, many of them envisioned an empire of Reason, a republic founded on the inherent human capacity to steer a course through the vicissitudes of life with the rudder of rational discourse.

Was the United States founded by and for Christians, as some claim? The German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) reminds us that when we go searching for origins, what we usually find is our own prejudice. Looking back, Christian revisionists see the Founding Fathers as devout Christians building a theocracy, while atheist revisionists see Freethinkers erecting a secular state beyond the crippling reach of old world superstitions. In other words, no simplistic, reductionist and self-serving portrait can ever do justice to the rich diversity of thought present in early America. Like contemporary America, colonial life was characterized by a plurality of positions on all questions, especially those regarding religion. Simple platitudes like “America is a Christian nation founded on Christian principles” are not borne out by the evidence.

Faith and the Founding Fathers

Many leading figures of colonial America espoused deism, a deep and lingering animosity toward organized religion. They had a conviction that our God-given capacity to reason was our sole salvation. Deism views God as a distant engineer who is not involved with the day-to-day affairs of humanity. Deists also deny many traditional Christian doctrines like the trinity and the divinity of Christ. Yet Deists like Thomas Paine, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams and Thomas Jefferson believed God imbued his creation with Natural Law and that it was our primary duty, both as individuals and as a whole, to discover, expand and perfect Natural Law by envisioning and creating a just society. And one of the hallmarks of a just and free society was, said Jefferson, a “separation between church and state.”
“In every country and every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty,” Jefferson wrote in an 1814 letter to Horatio Spafford. Like his friend John Adams, Jefferson was wary of organized religion and what he derisively called “the churchmen.” Yet in his extensive study of classical literature and philosophy, no figure enjoyed greater esteem in Jefferson’s mind than Jesus, whom he regarded as the most important ethical philosopher of all time (see sidebar).

Our true salvation, according to Jefferson, Franklin, Paine and Adams, lay in our capacity to reason. Only through a vigorous and vigilant application of our God-given minds could we gradually realize a human society aligned with the ideals of Natural Law. For Adams, a Unitarian, “the question before the human race is, whether the God of Nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or whether the priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles.” The God of Deism is available to everyone without priestly or institutional mediation in the hallowed light of our own higher minds.

“The Infinite Father expects or requires no worship or praise from us,” wrote Franklin in his Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion. And in a letter written to Peter Carr in 1787, Jefferson calls us to “question with boldness even the existence of God; because if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason than that of blindfolded fear.”

Christian apologists often point to George Washington as the counterexample of the prevailing Deism of his time. They cite his mention of Jesus in several early writings and his talk of God’s providence in the American project. While it is true that Washington observed Christianity and attended church regularly, he refused to kneel in prayer as was his congregation’s custom, and he always slipped out before the communion sacrament, much to the chagrin of his wife and family. Abraham Lincoln was even worse, described by his longtime friend and law partner as a true-blood infidel who “had no faith in the Christian sense of the term.” Things sure have changed. Presidential candidates who exhibit the open disregard of mainstream Christianity that Washington, Adams, Jefferson and Lincoln did would today be utterly unelectable.

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‘In God We Trust’

The turmoil inherent in any open and free society often results in strange and deeply imbalanced eruptions of power. Out of the fearful spasms of the McCarthy era grew a campaign to change the Pledge of Allegiance to include the phrase “under God.” Originally penned in 1892 by Baptist minister Francis Bellamy, the pledge read “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” As a socialist, Bellamy wanted to include the word “equality,” as in “with liberty, equality and justice for all,” but knew it would never stand given the dire plight of African-Americans and women in his time. Despite his restraint, the socialist themes of his sermons got him defrocked by the Baptists. Sixty years later, in the long shadow of World War II, with its specter of nuclear proliferation and the global expansion of communism, conservative religious forces campaigned for the inclusion of the words “under God.” Thanks to vigorous activism by the Knights of Columbus, Congress passed a law in 1952 giving us the Pledge as it exists today.

In 1956, the phrase “In God We Trust” began appearing on paper money and officially replaced E Pluribus Unum (“Out of Many, One”) as the national motto. The long reach of religious authority, specifically Christian authority, was gradually replacing the freethinking secularism of an earlier age.
Religious Diversity in the White House

When John F. Kennedy ran for president in 1960, his Catholicism raised a lot of eyebrows. American presidents had always been Protestants of one form or another. Anti-Catholic voices grew bolder in the months leading to the election, wondering aloud whether Kennedy would be taking orders from the Vatican. John Adams expressed a similar concern in a letter to Thomas Jefferson when he asked, “Can a free government possibly exist with the Roman Catholic Church?”

Questioning the religious beliefs of a presidential candidate seems at once an invasion of privacy and terribly salient—all the evidence you need of a mixed mind at the heart of the American experience. But in the end, does it really matter? Nixon was raised as a Quaker. Did the deeply pacifist convictions he learned as a boy shape his Vietnam War policy?

Today both Barack Obama and Mitt Romney face similar scrutiny. Because Obama’s father was a Kenyan Muslim, because his middle name is Hussein, and because he lived in Indonesia for a time as a boy and attended a Muslim school, his Christianity will forever be seen by some as little more than manipulative political theater designed to render him electable.

Even more remarkable is Romney’s successful campaign to become the Republican nominee, given his background as a Mormon. Many evangelical Christians do not consider his faith to be a form of Christianity at all, but the fourth Abrahamic faith, after Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Others have branded it a cult. Yet clearly, mainstream Christians are willing to overlook this as well as some of Mormonism’s more curious deviations from traditional doctrine in the name of party unity. Perhaps they are digging deeper. Perhaps they are going back to a time when the promise of America was the vision of a pluralistic, multicultural and authentically free society, where on the big religious and philosophical questions, we are left to the privacy of our own conscience.

In spite of Obama’s embodiment of racial, ethnic and religious diversity, and regardless of Romney’s outsider status as a Mormon, no matter who becomes president in November and stands on the Capitol steps to take the oath of office next January, the idea of God will hang ever-present over the proceedings. The idea of God and the idea of America are forever joined. But the question of whose God and what sort of God will always draw us into a vigorous dialogue that compels us to speak and listen respectfully, compassionately and humbly, knowing the voices of the many are united in a common enterprise that ennobles and affirms us in our ultimate unity.

The Jefferson Bible

"The religion-builders," Thomas Jefferson reasoned, “have distorted and deformed the doctrines of Jesus.” Using two copies of the Bible and a penknife, Jefferson carefully cut out all of the best sayings of Jesus and pasted them in a new volume, now known as the Jefferson Bible, separating, as he put it, the “diamonds” from the “dunghills.” No virgin birth, no miracles, no resurrection and indeed no unique or divine status. The Jesus of the Jefferson Bible is a Deist, a humanist and a philanthropist who has absolutely nothing to do with the institutional Church that calcified around his name. Describing this document in an 1816 letter, Jefferson said, “It is a document in proof that I am a real Christian [his emphasis], that is to say, a disciple of the true doctrines of Jesus.”

Thomas Jefferson felt the Bible distorted Jesus’ sayings, so he created his own version, using a penknife to cull content from this source Bible. He called his document The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth.