

Christianity, the Founder's Intent, and Post-Secular Society: Analyzing the Contrasting Use of Religious Rhetoric Between Common Sense and the Federalist Papers

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Reflecting on the last decade of Presidential campaigns, we may comfortably assert that politics in the 21st century embodies a post-secular relationship between the public, religion, and politics. Whether it is George W. Bush placing his personal relationship in Jesus Christ at the forefront of his presidential identity,¹ Al Gore struggling to assert his commitment to Christianity,² Mitt Romney fusing his Mormon tradition with the evangelical tradition³, or Barack Obama being forced to defend his faith in Christianity against accusations of him being a Muslim; religion has seemingly emerged from enlightenment secularization to occupy a prime seat at the table of American governance.

We need not look much further than our television screens to understand how the founding fathers are recreated as a homogenous whole and employed to persuade the public that the Republican, Democratic, or Libertarian party represent the authentic will of the founders. We can trace the genealogy of political language by understanding how President Obama's public affirmation of his Christian identity appeals to the historical concept of American Exceptionalism consisting of God's provision for his chosen nation to be victorious, prosperous, and moral⁴, follows the legacy of the early colonialists whom envisioned themselves as the Israel

¹ "George the younger is the first president to make religious conversion his defining life story.... Bush puts his post-conversion relationship with God at the center of who he is and what he does in private and in public. Thus he told Bob Woodward, in recounting his decision to invade Iraq, that 'going into this period I was praying for the strength to do God's will.... I am surely not going to justify the war based upon God.... Nevertheless, in my case, I pray to be as good a messenger of his will as possible.'" Krammick and Moore 2005, 183

² Krammick and Moore 2005, 182

³ Medhurst 2009

⁴ Dreisbach 2009, 96

of old⁵ and George Washington as Moses⁶, and imitates President Lincoln's appeal to God's sovereign plan in his Second Inaugural⁷. However, when Obama affirms the liberty of homosexuals to marry and denies Catholic hospitals the liberty to withhold contraception from its patients, he follows another legacy of the founding generation, one of the enlightenment principle - affirmed in Jefferson's wall of separation and solidified in the *Federalist 10* - which sought to protect the oppression of individual liberty from zealous factions, such as religious groups, seeking to codify religious beliefs into national law.

The questions remain, how did American politics transcend Jefferson's wall to arrive at Bush's war on terror as a declaration of God's will? Moreover, what does it mean that the public seems to push a profession of Christian faith on presidential candidates? Does this reflect the general will of the people or has Christianity been co-opted by political PR campaigns to add moral legitimacy to political decisions? Is the argument of what the founding father's intended useful in this debate? Can we look back to their words and make a definitive statement on whether they intended the US to be a Christian or a secular nation?

My purpose is not to argue whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation, rather I posit that any appropriation of the founder's words is a rhetorical strategy based on writings that should be read rhetorically. To structure our conversation, I discuss the contrasting use of religious rhetoric between *Common Sense* and the *Federalist Papers*. Considered to be the most important documents of the revolutionary and constitutional generation,⁸ they become useful tools to understand how the intentions of the authors, writing at

⁵ Dreisbach 2009, Gaustad 1987, 7

⁶ Hay 1969, Gaustad 1987, Noll 1993

⁷ White 2003

⁸ "... perhaps the most brilliant and incisive examination into the nature and function of popular government that has appeared in any language at any time..." Cousins 1958, 328

different times, led to different utilizations of religious rhetoric. Thus, I argue that any simple reading of a particular text in isolation can be rewritten, in a Derridean sense, to support an argument defending a secular or Christian government. The consequences of each argument need not be discussed today but my interrogation may provide us a third way of thinking about religion and politics - more useful for public discourse in a post-secular society. This third way is a historical understanding of political and religious rhetoric that can be read to defend either side. Stated in another way, America is a nation with a Christian heritage and one that protects the liberty of religious and nonreligious individuals and communities. In a sense, I am attempting the lofty task of preparing a foundation for a Habermasian “ideal speech situation”, in which competing positions can discourse within a common linguistic understanding. Ultimately, this ideal speech situation is impossible to achieve as both groups stand outside the historical context of the founding generation, leading us to play language games while interpreting the writings of a group of men playing their own language games. As Caroline Berkin acknowledges:

It takes a conscious act of imagination to see America through the eyes of its founding fathers and to share their perspective may be disturbing. These men inhabited a world alien to modern Americans, a world in which the United States was a fragile, uncertain experiment, a newcomer, and to some degree a beggar at the gates of power and prestige among nations⁹.

Despite our inability to transcend time and space and the undecideable nature of language, I believe this task to be worthy of our undertaking.

The fusion of political and religious language has created a confused legacy of religion in America¹⁰ as American’s continue to appeal to the founding fathers to argue that the United States is either a Christian or a secular nation. In order to deconstruct both versions of this

⁹ Berkin 2003, 5

¹⁰ Krammick and Moore 2005

narrative, we must liberate the founding texts by situating them within their socio-historical context, objectives, and intended audience.

Thomas Paine and Religious Rhetoric of Revolution in *Common Sense*

Mark Noll (1993) discusses how evangelical and republican vocabularies merged into a “full blown Christian republicanism”¹¹ between 1770 and 1790 and how political writers began to tailor their projects to fit these normative languages. Noll explains:

When Paine published *Common Sense* in 1776, he probably already had come to the conclusion, as he put it later, that most of the Old Testament, with “a few phrases excepted . . . deserves either our abhorrence or our contempt.” But this opinion did not prevent him from citing the Hebrew Scriptures at great length in his attack on monarchy and hereditary successions of rulers¹².

Thomas Paine, the Deist,¹³ like many of the founding fathers, did not believe in the literal interpretation of the Bible¹⁴ but still utilized the Old Testament stories of Gideon, Samuel, and Adam to persuade the American people that the British government, based on the divine right of kings, was not just unnatural¹⁵, in an enlightened sense, but that it was also unbiblical and

¹¹ Noll 1993, 630

¹² Noll 1993, 630

¹³ Krammick and Moore define deism as “A non-doctrinaire religion, deism rejected a supernatural faith built around an anthropomorphic God who intervened in human affairs, either in answer to prayer or for other inscrutable reasons. Instead it posited a naturalistic religion with a God understood as a supreme intelligence who after creating the world destined it to operate forever after according to natural, rational, and scientific laws” Krammick and Moore 2005, 34

“Many of the Deists believed that religion, while salutary with respect to private morals, was prone to fanaticism and should be kept out of the public sphere except where it converged with beliefs based on reason, such as ‘that all men were created equal.’” Bellah, et al 2008, 221

Bellah, et al discuss the individual and intellectual nature of some of the founding fathers such as Jefferson and Paine, quoting Jefferson saying “I am a sect myself” and Paine saying “my mind is my church.” Bellah, et al 2008, 233

¹⁴ “And though most of them resisted the literal Biblical view of creation, they maintained respect for the Bible as the source of Judeo-Christian religious belief. They were opposed to legislation that sought literal acceptance of Biblical interpretation of the universe and man’s place in it. Similarly, they were opposed to laws – which actually existed in several of the American states – making church attendance compulsory. Man’s approach to God, they believed, was as personal as his soul.” Cousins 1958, 9

¹⁵ “But there is another great distinction for which no truly natural or religious reason can be assigned, and that is, the distinction on men into Kings and Subjects.” Paine 1776, 72

disapproved of by God¹⁶. Paine's utilization of religious rhetoric was essential for the justification of the revolution¹⁷ because, according to Gordon Wood:

There was none of the legendary tyranny that had so often driven desperate peoples into revolution. The Americans were not an oppressed people; they had no crushing imperial shackles to throw off. In fact the Americans knew they were probably freer and less burdened with cumbersome feudal and monarchical restraints than any other part of mankind in the eighteenth century¹⁸.

Though the colonialists did not face the type of tyranny expressed by Paine, they still perceived the revolution as a just war¹⁹ and as they revolted “not against tyranny inflicted, but only against tyranny anticipated,”²⁰ they began to see the cause of America as the cause of Christ²¹. Therefore, in order for revolutionary writers, such as Thomas Paine, to motivate the Americans to sacrifice their lives, fight for freedom, and construct their own government, they needed to appeal to that which was a believed foundation of authority – the Bible. Despite his personal beliefs, Paine identified with the public's belief in the authority of the Bible, distrust of hereditary authority, and their “conviction that people had to think for themselves in order to

“One of the strongest natural proofs of the folly of hereditary right in Kings, is that nature disapproves of it, otherwise she would not so frequently turn it into ridicule by giving man an ass for a lion.” Paine 1776, 76

¹⁶ “In the early ages of the world, according to the scripture chronology, there were no kings; the consequence of which there was no war; it is the pride of kings which throw mankind into confusion.... Government by kings was first introduced into the world by the heathens, from whom the children of Children of Israel copied the custom. It was the most prosperous invention the Devil ever set on foot for the promotion of idolatry.” Paine 1776, 72

“As the exalting of one man so greatly above the rest cannot be justified on the equal rights of nature, so neither can it be defended on the authority of scripture; for the will of the Almighty, as declared by Gideon and the prophet Samuel expressly disapproves of government by kings. All antimonarchical parts of scripture have been very smoothly glossed over in monarchical governments....” Paine 1776, 72, 73

“And when a man seriously reflects on the idolatrous homage which is paid to the persons of Kings, he need not wonder, that the Almighty, ever jealous of his honor, should disapprove of a form of government which so impiously invades the prerogative of heaven.” Paine 1776, 73

“In short, monarchy and succession have laid (not this or that kingdom only) but the world in blood and ashes. ‘Tis a form of government which the word of God bears testimony against, and blood will attend it.” Paine 1776, 80

¹⁷ Noll 1993, 633

¹⁸ Wood 1966, 5

¹⁹ Noll 1993, 633

²⁰ Moses Coit Tyler quoted in Wood 1966, 6

²¹ Noll 1993, 636

know science, morality, economics, politics, and even theology.”²² The rhetorical strategy of identification, Kenneth Burke contends, is essential to persuasion because the rhetor is only able to persuade a person insofar as he can talk the language of his audience “by speech, gesture, tonality, order, image, attitude, idea,” identifying his way with the ways of his audience²³. Paine’s identification with the liberal political and traditional Christian beliefs contributed to the immense influence that *Common Sense* had in the changing of the minds of Americans which inspired them to meet the dramatic challenge of fighting for the American independence²⁴.

Religion as a Rhetoric of Republicanism in the Federalist Papers

The Federalist Papers, were written to persuade the people to ratify the republican constitution. The objective of Madison, Hamilton, and Jay was to make the case for a strong federal government and develop a national identity²⁵. In the *Federalist 2*, John Jay, the only evangelical of the group²⁶, constituted the American people as a “*one connected country*” descendent from “the same ancestors, speaking the same language, and professing the same language, attached to the same principles of government,” and similar in manners and customs²⁷. Although he appeals to the cohesive history of a same religion, Jay, in the preceding passage, emphasizes how local associations

²² “Most Americans likewise shared both a mistrust of hereditary intellectual authority and a belief that true knowledge arose from the use of one’s own senses – whether the external senses for knowledge about nature and society, or the moral sense for ethical and aesthetic judgments. Most Americans were thus united in the conviction that people had to think for themselves in order to know science, morality, economics, politics, and even theology.” Noll 1993, 616

²³ Burke 1969, 55

²⁴ Noll 1993, Wood 1966

²⁵ Miller 1988

²⁶ Noll 1993

²⁷ “With equal pleasure I have as often taken notice that Providence has been pleased to give this *one connected country* to one united people, a people descended from the *same ancestors*, speaking the same language, professing the *same religion*, attached to the same principles of government, *very similar in their manners* and customs, and who, by their joint counsels, arms, and efforts, fighting side by side throughout a long and bloody war, have nobly established general liberty and independence: and who all fought to achieve American freedom” (Jay Federalist 2)

...undermine the parochialism that led citizens to see themselves primarily as members of towns and states rather than as part of 'we the united American people.' This united people, not citizens gathered in towns, counties, and states, would hereafter wield sovereign power in America, or to put it more accurately, the national government would wield sovereign power in their name²⁸.

Similarly, in the *Federalist* 10, Madison argues that a strong federal government was necessary to "break and control the violence" created by existing factions²⁹. Connecting local associations and factions to religion and oppression, Madison, who "had no difficulty proclaiming the existence of God,"³⁰ argued that religious passion is not simply a latent cause of faction but that religious zeal makes the public "more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good."³¹

The main purpose of the *Federalist* 10 is to argue the preeminence of a republic over a democracy because a republican form of government is able to secure the public good against faction and "preserve the spirit and the form of popular government."³² So, when he wrote about religion in the *Federalist* 10, it was to argue that "*that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control*" and that religious motives "are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number

²⁸ Miller 1988, 105, 106

²⁹ "AMONG the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the violence of faction." Madison *Federalist* 10

³⁰ Gaustad 1987, 103

³¹ "The latent causes of faction are thus sown in the nature of man; and we see them everywhere brought into different degrees of activity, according to the different circumstances of civil society. A zeal for different opinions concerning religion, concerning government, and many other points, as well of speculation as of practice; an attachment to different leaders ambitiously contending for pre-eminence and power; or to persons of other descriptions whose fortunes have been interesting to the human passions, have, in turn, divided mankind into parties, inflamed them with mutual animosity, and rendered them much more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good." Madison *Federalist* 10

³² "Hence it is that such democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property; and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths."

"To secure the public good and private rights against the danger of such a faction, and at the same time to preserve the spirit and the form of popular government, is then the great object to which our inquiries are directed." Madison, *Federalist* 10

combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.”³³ In this, he undercut religion “as a governmental means to promote civic virtue.”³⁴

The objectives of the Federalists differed from the objectives of Thomas Paine, which lead to different uses of religious rhetoric. Regardless, of the each of the four author’s personal beliefs, the use or non-use of Christian rhetoric is determined by the historical context, objective of the text, and intended audience. Thomas Paine was writing to destabilize society by deconstructing the legitimacy of English rule, while Madison, Jay, and Hamilton were writing to stabilize society by creating a national identity. *Common Sense* identified with American’s belief in the authority of the Bible to persuade them to rebel against the unbiblical structure of the English government, while the *Federalist Papers* attempted to protect the religious liberty of the various Christian sects that vied for power and authority in the new American Government³⁵. Thomas Paine wrote to incite the religious passion while Madison, Jay, and Hamilton wrote to avoid or minimize religious passion. Paine wrote to disassociate Americans from their English identity, while The Federalists wrote to construct a new national identity.

Conclusion

According to Jurgen Habermas, in his 2008 article “Notes on a Post-Secular Society”, the secularist devaluation of religion throughout modernity veiled the significance of religious belief in the public sphere and forced it into the private sphere. However, because of the return of

³³ “By what means is this object attainable? Evidently by one of two only. Either the existence of the same passion or interest in a majority at the same time must be prevented, or the majority, having such coexistent passion or interest, must be rendered, by their number and local situation, unable to concert and carry into effect schemes of oppression. If the impulse and the opportunity be suffered to coincide, *we well know that neither moral nor religious motives can be relied on as an adequate control*. They are not found to be such on the injustice and violence of individuals, and lose their efficacy in proportion to the number combined together, that is, in proportion as their efficacy becomes needful.” Madison *Federalist 10*

³⁴ Kramnick and Moore 2005, 31

³⁵ Arkin 1995, Kramnick and Moore 2005

religious fundamentalism as mode of persuasion globally and nationally, we are no longer able to ignore religion in the public sphere. When combined with the postmodern rejection of science and reason as a foundation for civil society, many are left to return to a foundation of faith as a secure ground to structure the self and society, which ultimately bleeds into the political governing. As we have discussed, this is not a new phenomenon in American society, but the question remains, is religion a legitimate guide for political action? Not whether or not it is valuable to public discourse, but whether it should be given legitimacy in governing. Reading *Common Sense* allows us to understand how Christianity, as a foundation of public life, provided a powerful tool for mobilizing the public but *The Federalist Papers* warns us of the consequences of allowing the religion to determine governing. Religion in 2013 is more complex than it was for the founding generation as Americans occupy an ever more differentiated disposition towards religion. Christianity may still occupy a central role in public consciousness but it is diluted by the varying interpretations of denominations, immigrant communities, levels of fundamentalism, as well as the growth of Muslim, agnostic, atheist, other religious communities. To further complicate religion in America, the post 9/11 climate, ushered in a view of Christianity diametrically opposed to Islam. Thus, we can understand how the rhetorical use of Christianity operates as a powerful motivator for the Christian public but incites fear in the non-Christian public.

Adopting a post-secular perspective of the public and political sphere requires us to unveil the historical significance of faith while recognizing the power of religious rhetoric to create factions zealously seeking to vex and oppress those outside of particular faith communities. Christianity has and continues hold an important role in the maintenance of social

norms and values but it should not be considered the absolute foundation of the moral fabric of our civil society.

As I have shown in my analysis of *Common Sense* and *The Federalist Papers*, when harkening back to the founding fathers, it is necessary to place the writings and the authors in their socio-historical context, to separate personal beliefs their rhetorical usage, and to consider the objectives and the audiences of the texts. If we desire to base our current beliefs about the role of religion in government, it is not sufficient to appeal to the intentions of the founding fathers. Each founder held individual beliefs about religion but they used religion rhetorically within different socio-historical contexts as they addressed diverse groups of people, with diverse political views, who lived in different states, belonged to different churches, and held different cultural beliefs. After such analysis, we can conclude that the words of the founding fathers are incomplete in determining what role religion should play in American politics. However, understanding the words of the founding fathers within their socio-historical context, intended audience, objectives, and personal beliefs, does provide us with tools to understand how religion has been used as political rhetoric throughout the history of our nation and give us incite into the continued importance of religious liberty as well as the dangers of elevating one religion over another.

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