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RELIGION AND THE AMERICAN FRAMING

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1. Introduction

I think that, for those outside the United States, the way that Americans consider and wrestle with the role of religion for politics, governance, and public life must seem strange. In some sense, it seems that religion is everywhere in American public life. President Bush, for example, like all previous presidents, took his oath of office on the Christian Bible. American money, since 1952, has been stamped with the fiduciary assurance, "In God We Trust." American politicians, of all stripes, reflexively reference God, salvation, and their 'private' religious beliefs. Nevertheless, in contrast with many European countries, Americans do not indicate on state documents that they are Protestant or Catholic or other denomination. The national and state governments are prohibited from funding or supporting churches, religious schools, or providing salaries for pastors. In American schools, unlike well-known cases elsewhere, a Muslim teacher may wear her veil and a Jewish schoolboy his yarmulke without problems or commentary. So, perhaps from abroad, these American behaviours do seem strange.

2. Battle of Ideas

Indeed, the situation is surely becoming more to understand, especially for those who might be considering the United States from abroad. Because, at the moment, a battle of ideas is waging in American politics about the place of religion. Some conservatives, especially in the Republican Party, are insisting on religiosity as a litmus test for political legitimacy. President Bush, in this light, has promoted or endorsed many religiously-oriented programs and policies, including limits on abortion and stem-cell research, "faith-based initiatives" for church/state cooperation in areas like healthcare and social welfare, and many policies associated with the so-called "culture of life" (terminology borrowed from the papacy of John Paul II by some Republican activists). Some analysts of American politics

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have even noted an interesting coalition forming in the United States between evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics that may become a central element of the Republican Party's long-term electoral strategy. Moreover, reflecting such rising importance of religion in American politics, an increasing insistence is heard in American public life that the source of the legitimacy for the American regime itself derives from a religious foundation. Increasingly, especially from political conservatives, is heard the assertion that the American "founding fathers" and the "framers" of the 1787 Constitution had intended to found a Christian nation in order to advance toward a final Christian purpose.

As can be imagined, this conservative understanding is contested. The reaction from both liberals and "seculars" to this claim about the American origin has resulted in something of a war of ideas about the question of religion for the founders and framers. The contending claim is the reverse – that the American regime was established on a secular basis. Reading the founding documents and the writings of the founders and framers from this perspective, seculars and liberals find not Christian beliefs or religion but, instead, only deism and a thick wall between church and state. For the seculars are found authors like Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, authors of *The Godless Constitution.*[1] For the religionists are authors like Michael Novak, author of *On Two Wings: Humble Faith at the American Founding*.[2] A war of ideas, a battle of interpretations, indeed!

What the American founders and framers actually thought about religion and public life, given the documentary record, is, however, both more complex and more difficult to discern than most battlers in the contemporary war of ideas seem to appreciate. The official documents of the founding and framing of the regime offer scant help for resolving this war of ideas. The Constitution of 1787 says nothing about God, and mentions religion only to warn against imposing religious qualifications for public service or holding office. Likewise, the 1781 Articles of Confederation – the United States' first constitution – has nothing in it about religion. The lengthy and theoretically rich Federalist Papers, written

[1]Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: The Case Against Religious Correctness*, New York: Norton, 1997.

[2]Michael Novak, *On Two Wings: Humble Faith at the American Founding*, Expanded Edition, New York: Encounter, 2003.

by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay to promote the Constitution, also say nothing about religion save to warn the young country against the danger of religious strife. Only Thomas Jefferson's 1776 Declaration of Independence (the revolutionary manifesto meant to announce the American colonies' separation from Great Britain) mentions God, but even here does so only to account for an idea of natural rights. The first of the amendments to the Constitution, included in the 1789 Bill of Rights, does indeed speak of religion, but only to warn the American Congress against attempts to establish a national religion or to interfere with private religious practices. Missing from all of these founding, official documents is discussion of the positive role that religion might play in a republic, which precisely is the point of contention in today's war of ideas.

Given these official documents, then, we might, in fact, find support for today's seculars who see scant attention paid to religion during the founding of the American regime. Additional support for such view might be gleaned from the fact that – contrary to many accounts – Americans currently are more religious than their early American forbearers. Statistically, more citizens believe in God now than at any time in the country's history – more than 90% according to a recent Fox News poll. It should also be noted that the years of the framers and founders were a period of lower religiosity, occupying something of a trough between the two Great Awakenings when religious fervour was high. The first of these Awakenings occurred in the decade of the 1740s, while the second emerged about the time of the War of 1812 and lasted for about a dozen years. The epoch of the revolution, founding, framing, and first years of the new regime was one of lower religious intensity. So, the contemporary conservative argument for the religiosity of the framers and founders can perhaps rightly be chided by those seculars who would indict the religionist conservatives for projecting present day religious sentiments upon the founding generation.

Yet, at the same time, the account given by religionist conservatives of the role of religion for the founders and framers also can find validity in the historical record. Religion was quite important for the nearly all the leading figures of the revolutionary and framing generation. As demonstrated unmistakably in their private correspondence, many of these men found religion to be central in their understanding of what they were about as revolutionaries, founders, and framers. Moreover, especially

outside the circle of those promoting the 1787 Constitution, the argument was made by several of the so-called Anti-Federalists (those opposed to the Constitution) that religion was needed to form the virtues in the citizenry that republican government required both to curb factional self-interests and to promote the common good. Indeed, this is an argument (albeit from a problem source) that supports today's religionist conservatives.

So, where does this leave things? Were the American framers in favour of religion informing or grounding politics, governance, and civilization? Or not? Were these revolutionaries and regime founders as inclined as contemporary American politicians to invoke their religious beliefs in their considerations of policy or administration? Or not? Perhaps both of these conflicting, contemporary interpretations – secularism and strong religionism – are somewhat supported, leaving only a paradox that is both confusing and unhelpful.

Yet, it might better be said that both of these (arguably) extreme interpretations of the framers are problematic. Indeed, my contention – and this is the central argument of these remarks – is that those who see in the framers either ardent religionists or ardent secularists are worrisomely simplifying the thinking of that era. Neither of these mutually exclusive interpretations is accurate. The books and articles of contemporary authors who insist on one side or the other of this matter are as much polemic and beholden to contemporary sensibilities as they are scholarly.

In fact, the framers and founders had many different ideas among themselves concerning religion and political life. They were divided and conflicted among the many intellectual currents of the period. Moreover, even given the differences, few among this generation can easily be fit into one or the other of the polarized interpretations of the question that have come to dominate contemporary discussions.

3. Four Types

To get a sense of the complexity of the thinking about the role of religion for politics and governing in eighteenth century America, it might be best understood in terms of four ideal categories or types: 1) secularism, 2) separationism, 3) civil religionism, and 4) sacerdotal religionism.[3]

[3]The typology and terminology represent the author's contemporary analysis. Such terminology is not found in the eighteenth century.

Secularism is, to some extent, anti-clerical. According to thinkers and writers in this category, religion should have no authoritative role in political or public life. The state, ideally, must oppose all public religious expressions. Instead of religious values, secular values are appealed to as the basis for politics, governance, and participation in the civil order. Moreover, the state advocates and promotes these same secular values. In the United States of the eighteenth century, secularism was overlaid with a deist understanding of reality, with the sense that, while God existed, the affairs of humankind (especially, government and politics) were beyond active divine concerns. In the nineteenth century, secularism became a prominent feature of the approaches of many European states to questions of foundational values for the political order.

Separationism, the second type, is importantly different from secularism, because it does not allow the state's endorsement of official, secular values. Indeed, in separationism, no value system – secular or religious – is promoted. Government, politics, and political life are ostensibly "separate" from such bases. The state, as a result, is obliged – however successfully or unsuccessfully – to remain pluralist, neutral, and objectively distant from (and not interfere with) whatever actually informs citizens' values.

Civil religionism, the third type, begins with an appreciation of the utility of religion for supporting governmental, social, or political ends. The political order uses religious elements to construct a civil religion, which is used to promote patriotism or nationalism for state support or public order. Similarly, civil religion can help to inculcate civic virtues that many theorists have argued are crucial for republican government. As with each of these types, varying thick and thin versions of civil religionism might be imagined, with its thick, single denominational version being very powerful. The civil religionism of eighteenth century America was, however, a thin and non-denominational version. A vague, general, Protestant-flavoured civil religion was advocated to help contest citizens' centripetal regional, state, and denominational identities with a new, unified, national American identity. Generic Protestant symbols, metaphors, language, and rituals were evoked in political practices to facilitate this. In this fashion, the experience that citizens have of the state is reminiscent of citizens' religious experiences associated with reverence, divine authority, and universal purpose.

The last type, *sacerdotal religionism*, reverses the arrangement of civil religionism. Instead of religion serving state purposes, here the state and the political order are understood to serve religious purposes. The thick form of this type is theocracy – such as what developed in Puritan New England in the seventeenth century. However, thinner forms of sacerdotal religionism are the norm. The key distinguishing feature, however, is that the state is perceived as essentially a tool for religion.

Arguably, this typology helps clarify the complexities of the framers' and founders' thinking about the role of religion for the political order. A few case studies and examples of these types in eighteenth century America are revealing: first, the less common types (secularism and sacerdotal religionism), and then, the more important types (civil religionism and separatism).

4. Secularism

In 1784, the hero of the pivotal battle of the Revolutionary War at Ft. Ticonderoga, Ethan Allen, wrote a book, entitled, *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, which best can be described as a manifesto for Enlightenment Deism.[4] The title explains much. Allen rejected the idea of a God as a person. He denied religion, miracles, the devil, and prayer. In place of such things, he recognized only a holy process at work in human and natural history, which he called Reason. He declared, moreover, that the American Revolution heralded an ultimate point in this process. It marked a break from faith, belief, superstition, and the accompanying repression of the human mind. It marked the start of a new order for the ages (*novus ordo seclorum*) of human liberty, reason, and freedom of thought. Civilization and the state would now be, he suggested, established on rational and scientific principles. In the vanguard of the holy process, America would be an order characterized by a science of civilization, a science of ethics, and a science of the state.

Reason the Only Oracle of Man was, however, not widely embraced by the generation of the American framing and founding. Indeed, in its own day, it was something of a scandal. Ethan Allen had great difficulty finding an American publisher for the book. When one was finally found in Connecticut, the printing was disrupted several times by vandalism and

[4]Ethan Allen, *Reason the Only Oracle of Manor a Compendius System of Natural Religion*, Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2003.

fire. After being published, the book was denounced from many pulpits in New England and derided in many comments from leading political figures, including some framers.

In France in 1784, such notions as Allen's were somewhat common and accustomed. Moreover, this is precisely the time that Immanuel Kant in Königsberg was writing his own ethics of reason. But the Enlightenment in America had its roots, not in France, but in Presbyterian Scotland and, thus, was not marked by the anti-clericalism of continental Europe. With the exception of Allen and some few others, like the renowned revolutionary propagandist, Thomas Paine (who in 1794, but in France, published the first volume of his *Age of Reason*), none of the prominent "founding fathers" or framers seems to fit into the category of what has here been labelled secularism.[5] Those who argued for establishing a secular, non-religious value order, such as Allen's, were very much a small minority in this generation.

Contemporary authors, such as the aforementioned Isaac Kramnick, surely err when they portray the constitutional framing and revolutionary founding periods largely in terms of secularism. Of course, today secularism has become more prominent among the arguments for what values should inform the political order. But, even currently few Americans subscribe to the thick version of this category and almost no politicians would fit this type, if we are to judge by their public language. Secularism has never evidenced a level of support in the United States that it has traditionally enjoyed in Europe.

5. Sacerdotal Religionism

If secularism is at one end of the spectrum of this typology, then sacerdotal religionism is at the other. This version of religionism, indeed, stands directly counter to secularism. Yet, like secularism, it has become a prominent and perhaps the dominant contemporary interpretation of the question of religion and politics for the American framing and founding. Unlike secularism, though, which had scant support in the eighteenth century America, a good number of framers and founders leaned in the direction of this type of religionism. That support was not, however, as strong among the framers themselves as among the Anti-Federalist opponents to the 1787 Constitution, several of whom were concerned that

[5]Thomas Paine, *The Age of Reason*, Whitefish, Mont.: Kessinger, 2004.

the document and its apologists did not invoke God or religion. Patrick Henry – famous for the Revolutionary War declaration, "Give me liberty or give me death!" – was one of the more well-known Anti-Federalists who might accurately be located under this type.

To be accurate, though, sacerdotal religionism should itself be divided into two groups. The difference between the two groups is more than one of thick and thin intensity. For example, the larger number of these religionists merely wanted to establish in the United States an arrangement between church and state that was parallel to that found in the eighteenth century Great Britain. Just as the king was head of the Church of England and appointed high church officials, and just as the English state was lent sanctity and legitimation through its official support from the church, so too in post-revolutionary America some argued for a single religious denomination to be recognized for individual states or even the whole nation. Governors or the President would enjoy religious powers like the king and high religious leaders would hold a quasi-public office. Among the founders and framers Timothy Dwight of Connecticut, Benjamin Rush of Massachusetts, Luther Martin of Maryland, and Patrick Henry of Virginia might be counted among religionists in this group.

But, in many ways, the other sacerdotal religionist group is more interesting. This second group might well be called "neo-Puritan," and not only because it was largely a New England phenomenon. For the neo-Puritans the Revolution, American independence, and the establishment of the government of the United States were conceived as divinely inspired. Through the Biblical metaphor of the "city on the hill," these religionists contended that America was not like other nations and states. They saw America as a New Testament reincarnation of ancient Israel, with its citizens as a new chosen people entrusted with laying the foundation for the New Jerusalem that is associated with the Second Coming. They maintained that the state and the political order should serve this divine plan. Notable among these neo-Puritans were the Congregationalist preachers Nathaniel Niles of Vermont and Fisher Ames of Massachusetts. Niles was an officer during the Revolution. Both Niles and Fisher served as Members of Congress.

One fascinating illustration of neo-Puritan fervour comes from Niles's service in the Revolution. In the days before their disastrous Battle of Montreal, Niles gathered with a select group of other officers of the Continental Army in a church near Boston. Together these zealous officers

dug up the body of the famous preacher of the first Great Awakening, George Whitefield, that was buried beneath flagstones. In a prayerful ritual, Niles took the clerical collar from Whitefield's corpse and, in a kind of communion, broke the white collar into pieces which were distributed to all the officers. Treating their Protestant relics reverently the officers subsequently carried them against their chests as they marched toward Canada with the vision of victory over Catholic Montréal.

As this vignette suggests, Niles, Ames, and others of this group of sacerdotal religionists perceived the Revolution and the framing as inseparable from their chiliastic religionism. America represented the penultimate stage of providential history, foundational for the Second Coming, and its politics, authority, and public life were understood as instruments of the unfolding of such Providence. Supporters of this variant of religionism advocated, among other things, religious tests for voting and public office, substantive religiosity in public policy, enforced religious education, officially endorsed religious denominations, and even (a bit later) religious political parties.

Curiously, just as was the case with secularism, the influence of sacerdotal religionism is stronger in contemporary American politics than it was during the founding and framing period. Today such thinking has significant support among Evangelicals, Latter Day Saints, and similar American religious movements.

6. Contemporary Polarity

It might be a bit of an overstatement, but in many ways the current battle of ideas about religion and politics in the United States seems to have organized itself around the extremes of what I have here called secularism and sacerdotal religionism. Despite their obvious difference, moreover, both of these extreme accounts – inspired as they are by true believers' zeal – grant little room for accommodation. Both of these contending interpretations are more ideological than pragmatic. Very importantly, both are chiliastic. I mean by this that both accounts perceive in their ideal of America an "end of history" to be realized. Both Nathaniel Niles (the sacerdotal religionist) and Ethan Allen (the secularist) were convinced that the establishment of the United States ushered in a final historical epoch. Niles's version anticipated the Second Coming, while Allen's was the famous secular "*novus ordo seclorum.*"

Hence, the contemporary battle of ideas – largely defined by such polarized positions – looks to anoint an authoritative interpretation of the American framing and founding that would advance one or the other of these chiliastic visions. This is not merely a battle of academic concern, inasmuch as the struggle has overflowed in recent years into American politics and has influenced both domestic and foreign policies. It bears repeating, then, that neither of these two extreme interpretations was widely supported during the founding and framing period. The great majority of the leaders of that generation, instead, can better be located under the canopy of the other two types, civil religionism and separatism. When the question of religion and public life was wrestled within America of the eighteenth century, it was predominantly within the framework of these more attenuated and nuanced types, and not within the parameters of today's more polarized extremes.

7. Civil Religionism

Arguably, civil religionism as a category captures the greatest number of prominent framers and founders. The very religious John Adams fits here. So, too, does the weakly religious Benjamin Franklin. George Washington belongs in this type, as also Alexander Hamilton (even though after he was disgraced by an extra-marital affair, Hamilton, too, thought of beginning a religious political party). Included here are infrequent church attenders as well as the very devout. What, then, it might be asked, does this type stand for? The central idea of civil religionism might be clarified from three perspectives: cultural identity, national unity, and civic virtue.

Regarding identity: if I remember my history correctly, German national identity was developed from "above." A national language, literature, mythology, and so forth were fashioned by leading intellectual figures such as Herder, Hamann, and Goethe. In post-revolutionary America, and in some contrast, many of the framers and founders thought that a non-confessional or generic Protestantism could be employed in a similar fashion to give the regionally-divided Americans a common identity. Benjamin Franklin, for example, thought so.

Regarding unity: a serious worry among the framers was the developing religious tensions and divisions in the young United States, which threatened national unity. In the decade of the 1780s, for example, the traditional Protestant denominations (such as the Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians) were declining as a percentage of the

population. At the same time new denominations were experiencing rapid growth, especially the Methodists and Baptists. The tensions that emerged (marked in some cases by outright persecution) between the new and old denominations had worrisome political overtones. Indeed, by the 1790s the Methodists and Baptists were closely leaning in favour of what would become the Jeffersonian Republican political party, while the Congregationalists and Presbyterians supported the Federalist party of Adams and Washington. As a response to these tensions, some (Alexander Hamilton, for instance) saw an advantage in the state developing a thin, non-denominational but Protestant civil religion to transcend such denominational divisions.

Regarding civic virtue: a widespread idea among the framers was that religion – any religion, really – was very useful for the inculcation and promulgation of those virtues in the citizenry that were deemed crucial for the success of republican government, such as civic participation, regulating private interest for the public good, supporting rule by law, respect for minorities, and even independence and hard work. Religion properly encouraged could also work, moreover, to invoke reverence for the idea of the nation itself, thereby strengthening patriotism, nationalism, and American exceptionalism. Nevertheless, great care needed to be taken to avoid associating such civil religiosity with any specific denomination, since denominational difference were so acute and so doing would only add to the divisiveness. Hence, once again, but from this different perspective, the civil religionist framers came to advocate a vague, generically Protestant religiosity for political ceremonies and public life. George Washington's famous Farewell Address (written in part by Madison and Hamilton) is illustrative of such efforts.

Washington himself did much to advance such a pragmatic use of religion, despite his own personal complicated religious feelings. It was more than rhetoric. He proclaimed a national day of prayer. He allowed ministers to open meetings with his Cabinet with prayers. He took his oaths of office on a Bible held by an Episcopalian bishop. His intention in all of this was to link the new state with the religious sentiments of America's citizens.

8. Separationism

While it is likely that a majority among the framers probably belongs under the civil religionism, a large minority can be located under

separationism, according to which the state and political practices should function independently of direct religious involvement. Thomas Jefferson, the author of the Declaration of Independence, and James Madison, the so-called "father" of the Constitution, and many others in this vein were convinced that the state's legitimacy depended upon a separation from institutional religion. Adherence to these two types (separationism and civil religionism), furthermore, waxes and wanes during the subsequent years and, although the numbers can never be sorted out with certainty, with Jefferson's presidency it seems likely that separationism became the majority understanding of the role of religion for public life.

Importantly for present concerns, separationism needs to be carefully distinguished from secularism. The historical narrative within which Jefferson first pens his oft-cited "wall of separation" between church and state speaks to this. In January 1802, during his presidency, Jefferson received a gigantic cheese from the Methodist community of Massachusetts. The cheese, reputedly, weighed about a ton and a half and was emblazoned in red with the words, "Rebellion against Tyrants is Obedience to God." The cheese had been sent to Jefferson to highlight and protest the civil rights discrimination that minority denominations (like the Baptists and Methodists) endured in states where a majority denomination had been established as the official church – like Massachusetts. On this same day, Jefferson wrote his famous letter to the Baptist community of Danbury, Connecticut, wherein he insisted that a "wall of separation" must stand between church and state. Hence, the giant cheese and Jefferson's wall must be understood together. The situation of the Methodists in Massachusetts inspired Jefferson's letter to the Baptists in Connecticut. The wall of separation itself needs to be understood against this historical backdrop. The wall, ideally, should serve both to protect religions from state interference (of the sort the Baptists and Methodists were experiencing in New England), as well as protecting the state itself and the political order from the enormous dangers of the sort of religious divisions that the giant cheese was meant to highlight.

The words of the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights of the American Constitution (written by James Madison in conjunction with George Mason in 1789) echo Jefferson's later "wall of separation" sensibilities. Madison's language there has two clauses concerning religion. Much like Jefferson's worries about the situation in New England, the first clause of the amendment forbids the national state from

establishing any religion. The second clause, however, also insists that the state does not interfere with the free practices of any religion. Congruent with separationism, in other words, the practice of religion is good, but the state cannot legitimately promote it.

Madison's and Jefferson's most important and fulsome elaboration of separationism, however, is found in their long collaboration in crafting the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. The statute was developed first by Jefferson in his writing of the revolutionary constitution for the State of Virginia during the Revolutionary War, but only much later and following much work by Madison was the statute finally passed in 1787 – and remains today a celebrated part of Virginia law. The logic of separationism is laid out in the train of that statute's argument. The logic of the argument runs as follows.

- Religious freedom is imperative, because God created the human mind free.
- The stronger religious truth becomes, then the stronger are the civic virtues necessary for republican government.
- Religious truth can only become stronger in an open, competitive, and free process of ideas and values.
- Finally, if the state involves itself in religion or if religion involves itself in the state, then, the free process of strengthening religious truth is compromised and the development of civic virtue is undermined.

Plainly, Jefferson and Madison hoped that their "wall" served to protect the process they describe so well in the Virginia Statute.

9. Conclusion

The lines of the debate about the role of religion for the political order and about the proper relationship of church and state during the early years of the American regime are best understood as between separationism and civil religionism.

On one side, we find Jefferson and Madison and, on the other, we find Washington, Adams, and Hamilton. Both sides were in agreement regarding many things. They agreed about the usefulness of religion (among other things) for developing civic virtue. They agreed also about the need to avoid the religious strife that had proved so destructive in so many historical cases. They agreed about the dangers of mixing strong, substantive religion with politics. Both sides, moreover, agreed on the

transcendental value of religion itself. Perhaps, too, both sides agreed that the way to proceed in considering the role of religion for political life was cautiously, pragmatically, and incrementally.

What emerges from the debate between these sides in the eighteenth and the early nineteenth centuries was in part a compromise (or, put perhaps better, a *détente*) and in part a fruitful tension in American public life that has been wrestled with in every succeeding historical period. In our own time, though, this fruitful tension and *détente* has been lost, as have the lines of the debate between separation and civil religion. In contemporary America, instead, we have, I fear, only a war of extremes, between a militant secularism and a militant sacerdotal religionism. Such a war is at odds with general spirit of the American framers and founders.[6]

[6]The present essay is the author's translation of a speech given at the University of Eichstätt, in Bavaria, Germany, to the Institute of Political Science, on 21 June 2005.