

A Comment on the Religious Origins of the United States of America

by David Maurice Garrett, 2014

Is the Constitution of the United States of America modeled largely on the Christian Bible? The recent decision issued by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals and the resulting "Pledge of Allegiance" debate which has stirred our nation has prompted me to address the popular misconception that our country is built on a purely Christian Biblical model.

Here in the southern U.S. especially (called the Bible Belt) there is a huge controversy over the separation of Church and State. Here in Alabama there is even one constitutionally misguided judge who has the Ten Commandments hanging in his courtroom! Now, if I were a Muslim or Buddhist I wouldn't think I would be receiving impartial justice in Judge Roy Moore's courtroom.
(1)

Many citizens feel that our country was built on a Biblical support and therefore all people here (whether immigrant or not) should respect and tolerate that Christian ethic. Prayer in school should be allowed and be a Christian prayer! The laws of the courtroom are supported by the Ten Commandments and that when the Pledge of Allegiance states "One nation under God"; by God it means the Christian God!

For these people let me point out a few facts. The U.S. Constitution was largely modeled on English Common Law and not the Bible. And what about the origins of English Common Law? "Where did this law come from -- this Anglo-Saxon Common Law? Did it come from Christianity's introduction to England? Apparently not.. It is on record in the Vatican --- The early Christian missionaries reported that the people of Northern Germany 'already have the law'. (2) Where the United States deviated from English Common Law was in the places where the English system was felt to be lacking in clarity and support of the "little man". The average citizen's right to privacy of their property and taxation.

"At Runnymede, in 1215, the Barons of England forced King John to sign the Magna Carta, one of three primary documents establishing the fundamental rights of the English people to this day, {The others being the revision of the Magna Carta in 1225, the Petition of Rights[1628] and the Bill of Rights [1689]}. The primary objective and content of the Magna Carta was the prohibition of the use of Summary jurisdiction [the Roman or Admiralty Law] as a means of unauthorized taxation and seizure of property without due process of Law or just compensation. The colonists were, on the whole, very well schooled in the Common Law and were quite aware of the wrongs that King and Parliament were committing against them. This eventually forced them to rebel."
(2)

The Founding Fathers were experts on this English Common Law system and were given a terrific opportunity to reform this system in an effort to remove the problems that they saw in it. "The common law is a great scientific lab, the resources and results of which are brought to bear on

the populations which are fortunate enough to possess an English common law tradition, such as exists, for example, in: Canada, the United States and Australia.” (3)

So where does this belief that our country is modeled on Christianity come from? Is it because the Founding Fathers were Christian and held these values? Christians were certainly the majority in colonial America but many of the Founding Fathers were not, in fact, Christians. The Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) lists John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine as former UU's. (4) If you are not familiar with the views of the UUA then you really should read about them. They are certainly not considered a strictly Christian Church. The UUA is a very liberal organization that recognizes all world religions as valid systems of worship. The UUA is more humanistic in its approach to religion.

It is my contention that these Founding Fathers who were heavily influenced by the European Enlightenment movement were loath to speak out about their religious beliefs for fear of being ostracized by a largely Christian public. Benjamin Franklin gives a good example of this tiptoeing around his religious stance in a letter he penned to Ezra Stiles on March 9, 1790. “Here is my Creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe. That he governs it by his Providence. That he ought to be worshipped. That the most acceptable Service we render to him is doing good to his other Children. That the soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another Life respecting its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion, and I regard them as you do in whatever Sect I meet with them. As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the World ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupting Changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his Divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and think it needless to busy myself with now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that Belief has good Consequences, as probably it has, of making his Doctrines more respected and better observed; especially as I do not perceive, that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the Unbelievers in his Government of the World with any peculiar Marks of his Displeasure.” (5)

One man who has been severely overlooked by the other giants of Founding Fathers is the man who had the largest influence in 1) persuading the American Colonial citizens to revolt, 2) influencing the minds of the Continental Congress and thus Thomas Jefferson's writing of the Declaration of Independence and James Madison and the other Founding Fathers in framing the Constitution and 3) Influencing the French to follow America's lead and revolt against the system that had been in place there for such a long time.

This man's name was Thomas Paine and he inspired the American public to support a largely hopeless cause in his work entitled Common Sense. “Thomas Paine inspired the American Revolution with a prose that spoke directly to the people. Common Sense was devoured and debated by Americans in taverns, reading clubs, parlors and street corners. The American Crisis, Number 1, the first in a series of essays meant to boost morale and exhort the revolution, has

perhaps the most famous opening sentence in American literature: 'These are the times that try men's souls.'" (6)

"His Rights of Man, published in London in 1791, attracted the attention of the French liberal party, and he was made a citizen of France and elected to the National Assembly. He had the courage to vote against the execution of Louis XVI., and thus incurred the anger of Robespierre, who threw him into the prison of the Luxembourg on December 28, 1793, and there he remained until November 4, 1794, when, on the solicitation of James Monroe, minister to France, he was released." (7)

He was also vehemently opposed to the Bible. In his work called *The Age of Reason* he pulled no punches in declaring his views of the Bible. "His pamphlet, *Common Sense* (January, 1776), was one of the memorable writings of the day, and helped the cause of Independence. His *Rights of Man*; being an Answer to Mr. Burke's Attack on the French Revolution is a complete statement of republican principles. But it is as the author of *The Age of Reason*, an uncompromising attack on the Bible, that he is most widely known, indeed notorious. [T]he reputation he had made as a patriot had been almost forgotten and it was as the author of *The Age of Reason* he was known. So great was the popular execration of that book that many who would gladly have shown their appreciation of his great services to the country refused to countenance him on account of it." (7)

And so we see how reviled he was by the very public who owed him the largest show of gratitude. The famous Walt Whitman wrote a speech entitled "In Memory of Thomas Paine" on January 28, 1877 that echoes my sentiments precisely in regards to the debt we all owe Thomas Paine. "That he labor'd well and wisely for the States in the trying of their parturition, and in the seeds of their character, there seems to me no question. I dare not say how much of what our Union is owning and enjoying to-day — its independence — its ardent belief in, and substantial practice of radical human rights — and the severance of its government from all ecclesiastical and superstitious dominion - I dare not say how much of all this is owing to Thomas Paine, but I am inclined to think a good portion of it decidedly is. [A] nd I for one here cheerfully, reverently throw my pebble on the cairn of his memory. As we all know, the season demands — or rather, will it ever be out of season? — that America learn to better dwell on her choicest possession, the legacy of her good and faithful men - that she well preserve their fame, if unquestion'd — or, if need be, that she fail not to dissipate what clouds have intruded on that fame, and burnish it newer, truer and brighter, continually." (8)

So it would appear that people who taut the "Christianity founded this country" line of reason are largely uneducated. I would like to finish this piece with the words of Thomas Paine himself. This is his *Profession of Faith* from *The Age of Reason*. "I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life. I believe the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavoring to make our fellow-creatures happy. But, lest it should be supposed that I believe many other things in addition to these, I shall, in the progress of this work, declare the things I do not believe, and my reasons for not

believing them. I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.”

A COMMENT ON THE ORIGINS OF THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE

The Pledge of Allegiance was written by Francis Bellamy in August 1892 to commemorate the raising of the Flag at a Columbus Day celebration at a school. The original version didn't contain the words "under God". The original version went as follows: "I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all." It is interesting to note that Mr. Bellamy originally wanted to place the word "equality" in the Pledge but he knew that the school's State Superintendents of Education would have probably objected due to the fact that they did not view women and blacks as equals. (9) It is my belief that we should remove the phrase "under God" and add the phrase "with equality". Your view of God has no bearing whatsoever on your patriotism and loyalty to your country.

(1) <http://www.sunnetworks.net/~ggarman/10v2.html>

(2) <http://www.detaxcanada.org/cmlaw1.htm>

(3) <http://www.keele.ac.uk/socs/ks40/hurst2.htm>

(4) <http://www.famousuus.com/american.htm>

(5) <http://my.linkbaton.com/bibliography/Franklin/Benjamin/>

(6) <http://www.pbs.org/ktca/liberty/chronicle/paine.html>

(7) <http://www.utm.edu/research/iep/p/paine.htm>

(8) http://douglass.speech.nwu.edu/whit_a56.htm

(9) <http://www.vineyard.net/vineyard/history/pledge.htm>