

Religion and Liberty: The Founders' Legacy

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Introduction

This paper concerns the relationship between religion and liberty as it was understood by the Founders of the American Republic. The paper will also discuss the relevance of those concepts to the current cultural environment. In order to do these things appropriately, it will be necessary to present a brief description of the political structures and values of the British/American world at the time of the Revolution. Following this will be a presentation of the Founders thinking on these issues and a discussion of what made their views so revolutionary. This discussion will be extended to include passages from the Writings of the New Church that have a direct bearing on these topics. The final section of the paper will be devoted to an examination of what could be regarded as a crisis in our present political dialogue and suggestions will be made about how a return to the Legacy of the Founders could help us to overcome it.

It is so difficult to enter the mind of another era, even one that we feel related so closely to our own. It is difficult to describe it accurately let alone to judge it. The tendency to oversimplify is constant, while the danger of caricature cannot always be avoided.

Still, if we are going to describe the British/American world just prior to the American Revolution we must do so in broad terms, which while they make sense to us must also capture the ideas and feeling of the people living at that time. Our descriptions must be compatible with

the world as they saw it and acted in it. This is what this paper attempts to do. This has not been done simply as an historical exercise but with a specific purpose in mind. In recreating something of their world, a world now mostly lost to us, the focus is on understanding the Founder's truly revolutionary achievement. Furthermore, it is legitimate to ask whether the concepts and ideals that moved them still have the power to move us. It is my hope that a portion of their legacy may come alive again and serve as a guide for us as we confront the political and cultural issues of a new century.

We are focusing on two profoundly important notions: religion and liberty. In order to gain a clearer understanding of the Founders view of the concepts it is necessary to describe the definitions of these ideas as they were commonly understood in their world prior to the American Revolution.

The Eighteenth Century Background

The world of eighteenth century England was still closely linked to its medieval origins. To be sure, it was a less restricted society than prevailing in Continental Europe but it still contained many feudal structures and values. I wish to discuss five of its most relevant features Monarchy, Established religion, Aristocracy, Hierarchy, and Patronage.

Monarchy: Unlike the largely ceremonial monarchies in Western Europe today, eighteenth century Kings and Queens possessed substantial political power and immense prestige. William Blackstone,

the leading British legal theorist of the eighteenth century defined the king as "the paterfamilias of the nation" and as a result the subjects allegiance to him was both a personal and individual matter. All British subjects were subordinated to this paternal domination. The temporal basis of this power derived from the feudal concept that the lands of the kingdom belonged to the king and that he could dispense the use of them to specific individuals and their heirs in exchange for loyalty and military service. These individuals (the aristocracy) would then initiate a similar process on their lands that would yield a network of dependency up and down the social order. This order was thought of as "organic" with each element in its proper place and each with its appropriate privileges and responsibilities. This model of an organic society ruled by a monarch had undergone very large changes in England during the late 17th and 18th centuries. It was a much more open society than any other in Europe. Yet regardless of these changes, it was still a monarchical society that British subjects lived in and it was still a king to whom they paid allegiance. The king was still the largest landholder in the kingdom and easily the richest person in it. He ruled through personal (but not unlimited) prerogative and had immense influence on government. In fact, it is safe to say, that in the American colonies at least, royal authority was more deep-rooted and more effective by the 1760's than ever before. The king's power was enhanced by yet another important

reality; he was also the head of the Church of England, the established church of the nation.¹

Established religion: England prided itself on its religious tolerance. Religious warfare had been the scourge of Europe for over 200 years by this time as the different varieties of Christianity attempted to impose their particular creed on the individual countries of the continent. England itself had been a party to his religious conflict and developed a modified policy of toleration as a response to it. By the eighteenth century this policy recognized the king as head of the Church in England and granted political participation to all Christians who did not swear allegiance to a foreign power (Catholics) and it excluded those who did not accept the doctrine of the trinity (Jews and Quakers). This was by far the greatest grant of toleration of any major nation in Europe. But despite this, the Church of England reigned supreme and the King reigned over the Church. The Church was supported through taxation, its personnel received salaries and benefits from the government and its possessed a number of financial exemptions. As its head, the king received an extra dimension of legitimacy. His office was seen by many as having a Divine warrant, and reverence was added to duty for those who were subject to him. In addition, on a somewhat more secular dimension, a benefit of this religious office was the king's power to

¹ Carl Bridenbaugh, *Mitre and Sceptre: Transatlantic Faiths, Ideals, Personalities and Politics 1689-1775*. (Oxford University Press, 1967). This is the classic work on the relationship between the Church of England and British Imperial Policy.

appoint **all** officials of the Church whether in England or the colonies. In England the Anglican Church was firmly in the hands of the crown and operated essentially as a bureaucratic arm of the crown. In America, the king, through his appointed Bishop of London and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts, was exerting a much greater control of the appointment of Anglican clergy than ever before. Another key element of the politics of this time and another support of the established order was the Aristocracy.

The Aristocracy: As it is widely known the aristocracy had its origin in feudal times and was made up of the great barons whose families held their lands from the king and supported him in return. As a class, the aristocracy was hereditary and provided the hierarchy of authority immediately below the king. There were grades within the aristocracy but to the principle issue of concern to us is that the Aristocracy saw itself, and was seen by others as the governing elite of the kingdom. In England this elite had extended beyond land ownership and had invested its great wealth in other enterprises. Most importantly however, it saw its major function as providing leadership in the kingdom. This was its calling, a true gentleman was not to be involved in any activity which directly produced profit. His income came from rents or stable investments. He was genteel and thus free from the taint of self interested profiteering. In fact, this sense of "freedom from toil" was the most common usage of the word "liberty" in eighteenth century politics.

To be "at liberty" was to have the leisure, the learning and the broad perspective to provide wise government to the country. Liberty more and more came to mean an appropriate state for a gentleman; it derived from his socioeconomic privileges and entitled him to lead. This sense of the privilege of a gentleman extended cross all spheres of society and politics. This combination of inherited wealth and power gave the aristocracy a deep sense of its superiority and prerogatives. So distinct and so separate was the aristocracy from ordinary people that many people in the eighteenth century thought that there was a qualitative difference between them. Some romantics even believed that the aristocracy represented a different race from the nation as a whole. Needless to say, the idea that all men were created equal would not have been very popular in this context. As a practical matter, despite its internal political competitions the Aristocracy dominated both houses of Parliament, the Government, the major State ministries and the Anglican Church. This society was therefore organized in an explicitly vertical manner.

Hierarchy--in the eighteenth century a vertical hierarchy was considered the natural order of things. It was assumed to be part of the great chain of existence that ordered the entire universe. We in the twenty-first century may also think of the universe in terms of a hierarchy of various dimensions. But in the eighteenth century hierarchy was meant much more specifically. It was meant to justify and legitimate

a specific social and political order. It presupposed not just the rightness of the social order but the appropriateness of everyone's position in it. On the whole it was assumed that some were born to privilege, that their liberty entitled them to leadership, others were fitted for rougher lives of honest labor. Each person has his honor by fulfilling the obligations of his place. This meant, being always conscious of the needs and demands of those immediately above and those below. This model of vertical responsibility permeated all aspects of eighteenth century British/American society from the family to the economy to politics. This idea is consistent with the notion that society has a specific "organic" quality about it ie., that individuals are intimately connected with and subservient to each other. People at this time thought of themselves as connected vertically rather than horizontally. They were in a patriarchal family, or they were employed by a particular artisan, or farmed for a particular planter or owed their political office to a particular royal governor. This is where their particular affections and loyalties would be. Therefore they were more apt to be conscious of those immediately above and below them than they were of those alongside of them. That this type of society favored the position of inherited elites is fairly obvious. But the truly important question is how it operated in actual practice. The answer is basically that it operated through an all pervasive system of Patronage.

Patronage--To understand how patronage worked in the eighteenth century it must be remembered that the society in England or the colonies did not make our modern distinctions between public and private spheres or between business and politics. Everything was interrelated. Marriages could be arranged, political offices filled and lucrative contracts offered if the major party to the transaction felt his "interest was advanced by doing so. There was nothing illegal in this practice, in fact, dependent relationships in any sphere of this society could not be sustained without it. It was expected. Let me give you an example of how this worked.

In 1753 Benjamin Franklin became Deputy Postmaster General of North America. His first acts were to appoint his son Postmaster of Philadelphia, his brother Postmaster in New Haven, another brother Postmaster in Boston, and in addition he appointed the sons of two old friends to be Postmasters in Charleston and New York. There were no competitive exams, no interviews. But just as importantly, there was no outcry of protest either. Throughout the colonies this manner of gaining and using influence was universal. Whether the issue was a commission in the militia, an appointment to the town court or the awarding of government or private contracts, the pervasive influence of personal and family relationships was the deciding factor. But it is vital to remember, these relationships were assumed to be reciprocal!

As we move our attention to England we find the same system at work but on a much more massive scale. It is by no means an understatement to say that in England, patronage was the lifeblood of the Monarchy. The work of the British historian Sir Lewis Namier has indicated the depth and pervasiveness of this system.² His view has been summarized by another British historian, Paul Johnson, in the following words:

Patronage in the form of jobs, sinecures, titles, honors and pensions was the capital government needed to stay in business. A government survived by its prudent management of the nations affairs. But it also survived by the judicious skills which the prime minister doled out Crown patronage to the families and connections of members of Parliament and the nobility who owned or influenced their seats.³

This was the system perfected by Robert Walpole in the early eighteenth century and it continued through the Wellington ministry to 1830. But this highlights a serious issue in the Empire. The system of crown patronage was only available to those who had direct access to the House of Commons or the House of Lords. While the colonists had access to positions and contracts within the colonies they had no influence at all in the government in Whitehall because their power did not include any seats in Parliament. Not only that but they had no leverage to place officials in England. The closer one got to the inner core of the Crown

² Lewis B. Namier, *The Structure of Politics at the Accession of George III* (2nd Edition Macmillian, London, 1965). Namier's research opened the field of "court politics" for a generation of historians. His methods are now being applied to the other major Monarchies of Eighteenth century Europe.

³ Paul Johnson, *The Birth of the Modern*, (Harper Collins, 1991) p. 394.

patronage system, the further away one went from any colonial interest. The upper reaches of the English aristocracy and Church hierarchy were inaccessible to the colonists in any way except through pleadings and appeals addressed to sympathetic members of the English elite. The colonists had no practical means of influencing Government policy because they were not represented in the true inner circle of society where these issues were decided.

While this paper is not specifically focused on the causes of the American Revolution, it must be pointed out that in the 1760s British revenue and patronage decisions had an increasingly negative impact on the colonies. For example, after the conclusion of the French and Indian War in 1763, Parliament decided to issue land grants in the colonies to senior officers who had served in that war. The grants would be for 5000 acres each. After the announcement, however, Parliament realized that there were so many regular British Army officers who qualified that it would be necessary to restrict the grants only to them. This solved a problem for Parliament, it rewarded senior officers and their families thus increasing the Government's influence in Parliament; and it proposed to settle a large and intensely loyal group of large landowners in the colonies. This created extremely bitter feelings among colonial officers, who had fought in that war. It alienated their affections from the Crown. One of these officers was George Washington. During this time the Government also enlarged its influence in the colonies through

increased control of local government appointments and the posting of larger numbers of Anglican clergy to the colonies where the Church was established but also in New York and New Jersey, where it was not.

While it is almost impossible today to understand the eighteenth century Monarchy in its own terms, we can certainly see the role that patronage played in maintaining its authority both at home and in the colonies. We can also see the antagonism that this system created in the colonies against the imperial relationship. In fact, the power of appointment became the greatest political grievance that the Americans fought to overcome in their new revolutionary state constitutions of 1776.⁴

Given this brief overview of the political and social bases of eighteenth century British/American society, we can extract the notions of religion and liberty that prevailed in it. In practical terms, religion was conceived as a set of theological beliefs that served to legitimate the specific social order of the time. While English political theorists had moved away from the Divine Right theory of kings which was still adhered to in continental Europe, they regarded the British Constitution of their day ie. (the sovereignty of King-in-Parliament) as having a divine warrant. The Church was meant to provide crucial moral support to the government while infusing its operations with moral principles. These institutions interpenetrated one another and were inseparable. They were

⁴ Gordon S. Woods, *The Creation of the American Republic 1776-1787* (Chapel Hill, 1969), p. 78.

joined at the very top of society in the person of the king who was the head of both. This explains why in this society religious toleration could be a state policy while religious freedom could not. Religions which challenged major aspects of the established religion's legitimacy and thereby undermined its cultural support of the political order, could not be allowed to participate in the political life of the kingdom. In fact, there were times when they were actually persecuted.

The working definition of liberty that operated at this time was somewhat complex, yet we can see its principle meaning quite clearly. While it is true that many at this time viewed liberty from a common law perspective, ie, trial by jury of peers, freedom from unreasonable search and seizure, and so forth, there was another more important understanding of liberty dominant in the eighteenth century. This was the concept of liberty as "freedom from necessity." This situation was assumed to permit a dispassionate and broad view of the needs of the society. This "liberty" was essentially the characteristic of gentlemen whose access to proprietary wealth insulated them from the pressures of vulgar self-interest. It was the station and calling of gentlemen in general and the Aristocracy in particular to lead society because Providence had made them "at liberty" to do so.

Thus did these two notions of religion and liberty combine to provide an extremely powerful support to the political institutions which governed the British Empire in the decades immediately prior to the

American Revolution. As indicated earlier, we will not closely examine the mounting hostility and conflict that affected relations between the colonies and England during the 1760s and early 1770s. This conflict has been the subject of much scholarship. What needs to be examined here are the conceptions of religion and liberty that the colonists made explicit after it became apparent to many of them that a final break with England was necessary. It is also important to make it completely clear how interdependent these ideas were for the Americans and how radical their theory of government was at the time.

The Founders Challenge

The profound changes involved in the Revolution were clear to the leading advocates of it. They knew what they were doing. As the leading historian of the colonial period, Gordon S. Wood has recently pointed out, "the American Revolution was one of the greatest revolutions the world has known, a momentous upheaval that not only fundamentally altered the character of American society but decisively affected the course of subsequent history."⁵ By destroying monarchy in America and establishing a republic they were changing their society as well as their government. Sometimes we are prone to focus on inequities that the Revolution did not address or did not address sufficiently but it must not be forgotten that the Revolution established the moral framework for all the subsequent reform movements that have filled our history.

⁵ Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (Vintage, 1993) p. 5.

In presenting the revolutionaries radical conceptions of religion and liberty, it is extremely useful to compare their conceptions with those that dominated political discourse in colonial British America. The comparison should be borne in mind as we continue this discussion.

What then was their revolutionary conception and how did it differ from the prevailing view? In presenting their positions I will try to use their own statements as much as possible. The Founders gave a great deal of thought to these formulations and we need to make the effort to grasp their true meaning.

No single statement better captures the essence of the Founders vision of the nature of political society than the first sentence of the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence. The context is the revolutionaries explanation to the world of the reasons for the break with England and to state clearly their guiding principles. Thomas Jefferson was the author and it was approved by the Continental Congress in July, 1776. It reads as follows:

We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal and are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That to secure these rights governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it.⁶

⁶ Thomas Jefferson, in James Q. Wilson and John Di Lulio, Jr. *American Government* (8th ed., Houghton Mifflin , 2001) p. A 1.

No statement of political principle could have been more revolutionary at this time than this statement in the Declaration. In it the Congress repudiated the ideological basis for the Monarchy, the Aristocracy, the Established Church, as well as the whole vertically oriented structure of the colonial relationship. It challenged the entire structure of Crown patronage, as well as the legitimacy of any inherited right to government power. From the British government's point of view this really was "the world turned upside down."

It is vital for our purpose to examine the fundamental principle behind the Declaration. It will come as a surprise to many Americans today that the Congress based its argument for human rights on **religious** belief. Specifically, that these rights derive from the nature of the relationship between God and man. All human beings had rights that were endowed in their very humanity by God. Since these were inalienable, they could never be taken away. Many European political philosophers and theologians had postulated that since all human beings (at least Christians) could be saved, that this meant all were, in the abstract, equal in the sight of God. This view had many adherents among English thinkers in the eighteenth century, particularly John Locke. However, what was truly radical about the Founders view was that they rigorously drew out the political consequences from the reality of "spiritual equality." It was not an abstraction to them. They based their concept of liberty itself in the Divine origin of the human race. They

therefore made religious liberty one of the cornerstones of the political structure that they intended to erect.

It is important to examine the reasons that they gave for assigning such a fundamental role to religious liberty. They offered four basic arguments for their position. These will be listed in their order of importance and then brief comments of the Founders will be presented as they relate to each one.

First, religious freedom is good because it is based on the truth. There is a God, He created humanity and worshipping Him is the highest obligation we have in life. Second, religious freedom is good because politically empowered and established religion is dangerous. Third, religious freedom is the foundation of social morality. Fourth, religious freedom is the foundation of political liberty.

That religious freedom is based on the Divine order of creation is the logical first step in all the assertions that follow. This position was directly expressed in 1785 by James Madison in his essay "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious assessments":

The free exercise of religion is an unalienable right because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator. Before any man can be considered as a member of civil society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the universe. And every man who becomes a member of any particular civil society must do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign.⁷

⁷ James Madison, in Charles S. Hyneman and Donald S. Lutz, eds. *American Political Writings during the Founding Era* (Liberty Press, 1983) p. 632.

Religious freedom enables people to fulfill their duty to worship God. It is not just an add-on to social life, Madison directly asserts that religious practice is an essential part of an orderly and deeply human life. It is a source of infinite richness to the person and to the society to which that person belongs. Other Founders expressed this same view many times in their published writings and private letters.

The second argument for religious freedom concerned the dangers of an established religion. Thomas Jefferson gave the clearest expression of this position in his opening paragraph of the Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom of 1786. He states,

Whereas Almighty God hath created the mind free' that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments and burdens, or by civil incapacitations tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the Holy author of our religion, who being Lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was his Almighty power to do.⁸

Jefferson's point is well taken; by what right do governments impose their own religious views on their citizens when God, who though he has absolute power to do so, refuses to do that? God created each of us in spiritual freedom and the state must comply with the Divine order. In this very important respect the Founders have moved beyond Locke. Locke had argued for religious Toleration for specific faiths. Jefferson argues that toleration is not good enough since it still leaves in place a

⁸ Thomas Jefferson, in Daniel Palm, ed. *Faith and Free Government* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1997) p. 175.

state-sponsored ordering of religious preferences. Jefferson urges complete religious freedom that eliminates preferences entirely. It is also interesting to note that Jefferson lists as some of the consequences of established religion the characteristics of "hypocrisy" and "meanness"; he asserts that coerced faith is not genuine and only produces an internal dishonesty that is harmful to both religion and society. One can only assume that he was speaking from experience about the religious establishments of his own times. It is a fascinating fact in American history that immediately after the Revolution and the repeal of almost all laws establishing various religions that this country entered a period of explosive growth of religious participation.⁹

The third argument that religious freedom is a foundation of social morality that had been so forcefully stated by many of the Founders has been corroborated by modern sociological research. Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania stated plainly, "where there is no religion, there will be no morals."¹⁰ He based this argument on the fact that people are often driven by their passions and blind self-interest. Unless they have a strong internal moral source of control they can never be constrained by police power alone. Such a society of uncontrolled behavior would become a form of hell for those condemned to live it. George Washington

⁹ Roger Fink and Rodney Stark, *The Churching of America 1776-1990* (4th ed., Rutgers University Press, 2000) pp. 54-108.

¹⁰ Benjamin Rush, in Merrill Jensen, ed. *Documentary History of the Ratification of the Constitution*, vol. 2 (State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976) p. 595.

expressed similar views with his usual candor and simplicity in his Farewell Address to the nation:

Let it simply be asked, where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation **desert** the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice. And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that **National** morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.¹¹

These insights of the Founders concerning the relationship of religion to social morality have been confirmed on many occasions in modern research. Recently the sociologist, Roger Finke, summarized his work on this issue with the following observation; "we used church membership rates based on census data and found that cities and states having higher rates of church membership had lower rates of crime, delinquency, suicide, alcoholism and various disease."¹² By liberating religion from its direct association with political power the Founders fostered its spread among the general population thus providing a moral civilizing force for a rough, frontier society.

Their last argument for religious freedom concerns its positive relationship to political liberty. The Founders believed that this argument followed directly from the others. While it was possible to devise a political system with sufficient procedural safeguards (the system of checks and balances, for example) to function well in theory,

¹¹ George Washington, in Diane Ravitch ed. *The American Reader* (2nd ed. Harper Collins, 2000) p. 75.

as a practical matter, something else was needed. This "something" was a religiously based system of self-control. Without this, Madison argued in Federalist number 55 "nothing less than the chains of despotism can restrain them from destroying and devouring one another."¹³ He assumed that if the citizens were not connected to the State by bonds of moral legitimacy only a police state could maintain order. For genuine political liberty to exist the controls on social behavior must come from within the citizenry. By extension, in a society ruled "by the consent of the governed" the political leadership must be subject to the same moral constraints and expectations as the people at large. The Founders thus answered the age old question of politics, "who guards the guards?" They asserted that the guards must be restrained by the same religiously based moral system which governs everyone else; further that it will continue to guard the liberty of the people even after the present political leadership returns to private life, as it inevitably must. Again we can turn to Washington for a clear statement of this principle. Remember, we are quoting from his "Farewell Address" where he provides a powerful example for the future by voluntarily surrendering State power in compliance with the laws:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity,

¹² Fink and Stark, *opcit*, p. 12.

¹³ James Madison, in Robert Scigliano ed. *The Federalist* (Modern Library Edition, 2001) p. 359.

Religion and morality are indispensable supports. Tis substantially true that virtue and morality is a necessary spring of popular government. The rule extends with more or less force to every species of free Government. Who that is a sincere friend to it can look with indifference upon attempts to shake the foundations of the fabric?¹⁴

This relationship between religion and liberty was even more tersely stated by John Adams as he was commenting on the recently concluded Constitutional Convention. He said, "our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for the government of any other."¹⁵ While this judgment may appear harsh, it nonetheless points to the profound and intimate link which all the Founders believed to exist between a free society and a morally responsible people.

Some Principles of Freedom in the Writings

At this point in the discussion and before I focus on the meaning of the Founder's legacy for us today, it would be appropriate to look at passages from the Writings that bear on the Divine nature of spiritual freedom, in order to see what relationship they might have to the Founders ideas. I am not a theologian and I am not about to attempt a deep doctrinal analysis, however, it is startling to see the affinities between these two systems of belief. Of course, the Founders never claimed that their views constituted a distinct revelation but they

¹⁴ George Washington, in Ravitch, ed. *Opit.*, p. 75.

¹⁵ John Adams, quoted in Palm, ed., *opcit.*, Forward p. vii.

nevertheless believed in the objective truth of their conception of religious liberty.

There are many passages in the Writings that refer to spiritual freedom. I have chosen to refer to two numbers in *Divine Providence* because of their clarity and their immediate relevance to the Founders ideas. In Divine Providence number 97 we read the following,

It is therefore a law of divine providence that man shall act in freedom from reason. To act in freedom according to reason, to act from liberty and rationality, and to act from will and understanding, are the same. . . The man who does evil from love of evil and confirms it in himself . . . according to reason is in an infernal freedom which in itself is bondage.

This language is extremely similar to the Founder's conception that without a religious life human beings would be driven by their passions and ambitions into what Madison called "a form of slavery." But the Writings further state that the law of divine providence requires us to have this freedom and to remove it would also remove our will and understanding without which we could not be reformed or united with the Lord and live to Eternity. Further along in this same passage the Writings provide a lovely and direct statement about the essential spiritual basis for any concept of human freedom. "The Lord therefore guards man's freedom as a man guards the apple of his eye. Through that freedom the Lord steadily withdraws man from evils and so far as he can do this implants goods, thus gradually putting heavenly freedom in place of infernal freedom" (DP # 97) This is the spiritual drama of

regeneration and salvation. It is played out in the natural world by real human beings facing real social and political challenges. If you asked the Founders why they based political liberty on spiritual freedom, they would have replied "because it's the truth, because that is the way things really are." They would argue further that without spiritual power, human beings would be incapable of either social or political responsibilities. Again in *Divine Providence* number 97 the Writings underscore this conception in a very profound way, "every man has the faculty of volition called liberty and the faculty of understanding called rationality. Those faculties, are as it were inherent in man, for **humanness** itself is in them."

In one last example of the convergence between the Founders understanding and that seen in the Writings, a brief portion of *Divine Providence* number 129 is cited. Reading it hopefully you will recall the words of Jefferson's Statute of Virginia for Religious Freedom that was presented earlier. To quote the Writings, "It is a law of divine providence that man should not be compelled by external means to think and will, and thus to believe and love the things of religion, but should persuade and at times compel **himself** to do so." (DP # 129)

In these passages and quotations we can see many apparent connections and tantalizing parallels. The question of whether any of the Founders could have read portions of the Writings is a natural one. I know of no concrete evidence in this regard during this formative period.

Certainly no secular historian has discovered one. Perhaps they are not looking. New Church scholars have been exploring a wide variety of connections between Swedenborg and various major figures and movements in Europe as well as the United States in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.¹⁶ But this particular area of the possible connections between the Writings and eighteenth century American political thought is basically unexplored territory. We know for example that the Chaplain of the First Continental Congress in 1774, the Reverend Jacob Duché was a reader of the Writings. However, the extent of his knowledge of them and his relationship with the various delegates are unanswered questions at this time.

These kinds of questions are mentioned because they ought to play an increasingly large role in New Church intellectual life. These questions and those related to them, such as the relations of Swedenborgian thought to numerous religious and secular reform movements in nineteenth century America, are natural areas of scholarly interest for New Church scholars. Only recently have we begun to see the impact of the rich insight and sophistication from a New Church perspective on many areas of secular scholarship.

The Modern Crisis and the Founders Legacy

¹⁶ See particularly the large body of excellent research and analysis undertaken by JaneWilliams-Hogan, Professor of Social Sciences and History at the Bryn Athyn College of the New Church.

However, there is another way in which the New Church community particularly its intellectual community can contribute to the future wellbeing of our society. This involves understanding the legacy that the Founders have given to us and being prepared to accept its responsibilities and shoulder its burdens. This is the theme that I wish to address in the concluding sector of my paper.

As you can see from our discussion so far, the Founders had a very specific model about how the new American political system was intended to work. By freeing individuals from the frustrations and constraints of a legalise religious establishment, they provided them with the incentive to participate in the religious life in ways of their own choosing. In addition the Founders made the political institutions of the society dependent on the "consent of the governed." This was a fundamentally different concept from the one that they inherited. One might even say that it was revolutionary!

The Founders believed that the real moral energy of a society derived from its citizens free access to the spiritual world. They did not foreclose any appropriate form of spirituality and of course, they assumed that some very odd belief systems would develop in this free environment. But that is the risk they were willing to take in order to tap into the spiritual vitality that alone could make rule "by the people" truly work. They believed that spiritual energy and morality flow into

individuals and then flow out from them into the social and political institutions which would in turn provide prosperity and freedom.

This model is one that is completely compatible with our own understanding of how spiritual reality operates. We know that doing good is not merely a matter of "following the rules." Rather it proceeds from a love of the good, which is a love of God that seeks expression as use to the neighbor and to society in general. I am not at all implying that the Founders created a system of religious doctrine. They did not. What they did create was a system where the doctrines of the various creeds would be free to develop, thus bringing to their members the depth and richness which only the spiritual life can bring. The Founders vision counted on this and further assumed that from this source a fuller and more humane society would be created.

It should be clear to us at this point that the crucial component of the Founders model was the requirement that the citizen has the right to express his or her policy preferences in moral terms. After all, any society that wishes to prosper ought to accept the contributions of its deepest and most thoughtful moral traditions. This appears self-evident to us, but it has become less obvious to the secularized society that surrounds us. In our time a problem has developed, We are losing access to the possibility of discussing political policy in moral language. It is not that we have ceased to think in evaluative ways (How can you think in any other terms?), but that our moral views do not "count" in public

policy discussions. This can be seen in many ways as the visible symbols of the various religious traditions are driven from public life and political debates are conducted almost exclusively in pragmatic, rationalist and naturalistic terms.

This secularization of our political dialogue has been noted and criticized by a number of modern political philosophers, particularly Alasdair MacIntyre and Charles Taylor. They have noted with alarm the growing modern tendency to abandon a moral perspective that takes spiritual reality as its source. They argue, and I completely agree with them, that this naturalistic perspective impoverishes political discourse by removing it from the sources of true vitality. Taylor makes this point forcefully in his important book, *Sources of the Self*. In it, he states that naturalism "appears as the defining characteristic of modern moral theories, such as the maximization of general happiness, or action on a maxim that can be universalized, or actions on a norm that all participants could accept in unconstrained debate. The claims of the (moral world) cannot be heard in frameworks of this kind."¹⁷ We have all experienced life in this bureaucratic, procedural and secular world, where the raising of a moral concern is often dismissed as "making a value-judgment" or "imposing your morality on other people." Such is the psychological impact of such negative attitudes that we often choose to remain silent about our moral positions because we do not want to

deal with the aggravation of defending them. This process, which we all know in our individual lives operates at the more general level of political discourse as well. It thereby excludes our deepest concerns and insights from being taken seriously or even heard. How we came to this particular predicament has been a long and involved process that we will not address here. What is important for us to consider now is how we ought to respond to this situation.

I wish to make my own response most clear. I am urging us to articulate honestly the deepest beliefs that motivate us. Because that articulation, the very act of speaking, brings us closer to the moral source of the good and it provides power to us and encouragement to those around us. For many reasons, this sense of understanding the good as a moral source of human action has been deeply suppressed in the mainstream moral consciousness. So suppressed and stigmatized has it become that MacIntyre has suggested that most people do not even realize that it is no longer there.¹⁸ It is our task to retrieve this sense of moral articulation from oblivion and inject it back into the public discourse of our times.

I mentioned the word "task" above. What do I mean by that? I mean a specific attempt to articulate our moral positions on the issues of the day. While abstract formulations have their place and certainly are

¹⁷ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: the Making of Modern Identity* (Harvard University Press, 1989) p. 103.

needed to the on-going intellectual debate, I am thinking of something more personal and more individual. Each of us regardless of our nationality is a beneficiary of the Founders legacy. That legacy is based on the assumption that the genuine sources of our moral lives form the basis of our social activities and political views. Of course the Founders assumed that other, more worldly concerns would motivate as well. They also assumed that, being human our motives would always be mixed. However, they counted on our moral sense to interact with our interests and passions, thus elevating them; civilizing them. They could not have anticipated a time when the rules of political discourse would purposely excluded the vital role of our moral convictions.

Some of you may be thinking, "Taking moral positions on public issues could be a risky and uncomfortable business. People may form negative opinions of me thinking I am trying to impose my views on them." But really nothing could be further from the truth, you are not **imposing** your views on them, you are **expressing** them. In doing so you enrich political discussion and energize the world around you.

Taylor was aware of these issues and responded as follows, "There might be a risk. But even in this case, we would have at least put an end to the stifling of the spirit and the atrophy of so many of our spiritual sources which is the bane of modern naturalist culture."¹⁹

¹⁸ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (2nd ed. University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) see discussion in chapter 1.

¹⁹ Taylor, *opcit*, p. 107.

So now that I am reaching the end of my paper I wish to return to the issue of the Founder's legacy and the challenge it poses for us. In this world, we are participants in a large and varied religious community, but we are also members of a specific church, the New Church. This gives us a unique insight into the true basis of human freedom. However, this reality also places a special burden on us precisely because of the spiritual treasure that is in our possession.

The Founders' legacy cries out to us, it urges us to share our moral vision with our fellow citizens. On such a sharing of these moral sources does the future of free government depend. To paraphrase John Adams, it will survive in no other way. The challenges are great and the burdens might be painful. But that is the nature of things in our world today.

So I conclude with this legacy and this challenge. The legacy is ours by right, as participants in the life of our free society, but the challenge is ours by choice. We may accept it or we may decline. It is my deep hope that we will accept the Founders challenge and thereby add our individual moral richness to the common good; that we will choose to participate in the ongoing struggle to renew our culture and reaffirm our political purpose.