

Continuing debate on religion and politics

By William C. Kashatus

Two-hundred and thirty-five years ago, the Second Continental Congress adopted the Declaration of Independence separating the American colonies from Great Britain.

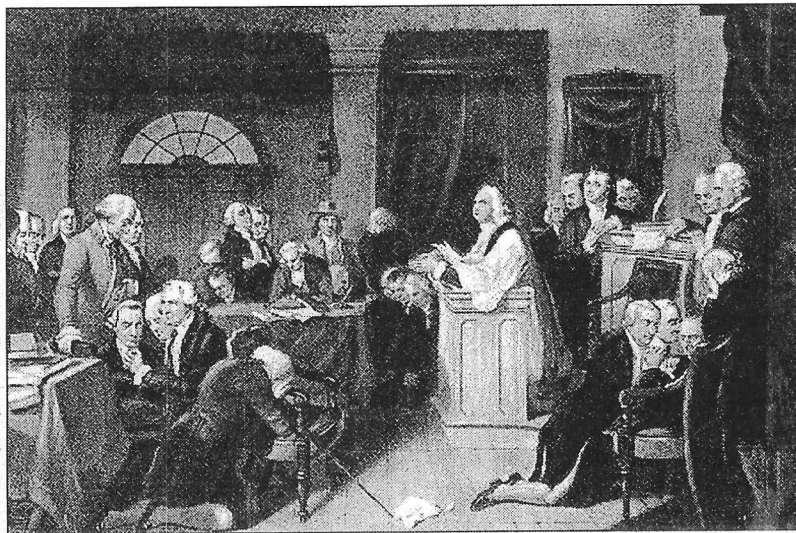
John Adams suggested that the occasion "ought to be celebrated as the day of deliverance with solemn acts of devotion to God Almighty from this time forward forever more."

Since then there has been a debate over whether the Founders envisioned the United States as a Christian nation. There is no easy answer.

The Founders, like the American people, hailed from several religions, the majority being Protestant. Of the 56 signers of the Declaration, 28 were Anglican; 12 belonged to the Congregationalist Church; 12 to the Presbyterian Church; and one each to the Catholic and Quaker denominations. Only two — Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin — were deists, who placed greater emphasis on reason and observation than revelation.

Most of the Founders considered themselves Christian and envisioned a new nation based on Christian ethics. "This great nation was founded by Christians," insisted Patrick Henry of Virginia. "For this reason, people of other faiths have been afforded asylum, prosperity, and freedom of worship here," he added, making clear the consistency between religious toleration and the Christian faith.

H.T. Matteson's 1848 painting "First Prayer of Congress" depicts the Rev. Jacob Duche of Christ Church leading the First Continental Congress in Prayer at Carpenters Hall on Sept. 7, 1774.



Just as important to the Founders was the influential role of Christianity in establishing a republican form of government. According to Dr. Benjamin Rush of Pennsylvania, Christianity was "the only foundation for a republic." "Without this," he insisted, "there can be no virtue, and without virtue there can be no liberty, and liberty is the object and life of all republican governments."

At the same time, the Founding Fathers were well versed in Enlightenment thought, which encouraged more liberal religious expression and faith in human reason to reform government. Accordingly, Jefferson's Declaration emphasized the primary role of the common people to protect the natural rights of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" (or "property") with which "their Creator" endowed them against "any form of government" that might threaten those rights.

Contrary to popular belief, Jefferson was not opposed to Christianity. In fact, he believed that the American people had within their grasp the opportunity for a purification of Christianity as significant as that achieved by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation. But he also believed that purifying the Christian faith would be possible only without government interference.

Nor did he, like the other Founders, want the government controlled or influenced by any specific denomination — "believing that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God."

The Framers of the federal Constitution were so committed to that principle that they insured it in the First Amendment. "Congress should not establish a religion and enforce the legal observation of it by law," wrote James Madison in the original wording of the amendment, "nor compel men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience, or that one sect might obtain a preeminence, or two combined together, and establish a religion to which they would compel others to conform."

Disestablishment allowed the Founding Fathers to create a unique accommodation in the polity of the new nation by integrating the Christian ethics of the majority into a more public religion that transcended denominationalism and preserved the liberty of conscience.

Despite the machinations of contemporary political and religious groups, the Founders were not evangelical Christians or atheists. They were simply products of the 18th-century culture in which they lived. Their genius is that in devising the federal Constitution they were wise enough to establish legal principles that transcend time to meet the needs of a changing society.

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