

SPIRITUAL FORMATION OF THE U. S. CONSTITUTION, PART 1

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INTRO to HYMN #108: *My Life Flows On In Endless Song*

It may be hard for us today to realize that one of the most despised religious groups in early America, in the colonies, was the Society of Friends, or Quakers, who, like the Puritans before them, had fled from persecution in the land of their origin, England. Their founder, George Fox, taught the value of understanding and guidance through heeding one's "inward light," which required no mediation by institutions or outward authorities.

Fox urged them to "quake" at the word of the Lord, thus their nickname. They generally refuse to take oaths or bear arms, and often keep to themselves in a strong but humble religious posture that, back in the day, frequently angered their more intolerant colonial neighbors. However, unlike some other early sects, the Quakers had no problem with music or singing, as portrayed in an old song of theirs that is a favorite of mine, so much so that I included it in my ordination in 1988: #108: *My Life Flows On In Endless Song*...

SERMON: Spiritual Formation of the U. S. Constitution, Part I

In early America, when citizens somehow lived without the media blitz we post-moderns know so well, singing together was a common and popular pastime.

Through all the tumult and the strife, I hear the music ringing.

It sounds an echo in my soul. How can I keep from singing!

And musical testimonies about early political issues played a more important role in catching the people's attention than ever happens anymore today. One so-called "election song" in favor of the candidacy of Thomas Jefferson included this stanza:

Let foes to freedom dread the name / To tyrants never bend the knee;

But join with heart and soul and voice / For Jefferson and Liberty.

Another, much more lasting sentiment that debuted in an even earlier political song would be:

United, we stand. Divided, we fall!

In the days of the American Revolution, this was one of the most popular political slogans. It first appeared in a tune called "The Liberty Song" in 1768, and helped inspire the thirteen separate and very different colonies to join together and form "a more perfect union" in a federal government. *United, we stand. Divided, we fall!*

Now, way more than 200 years later, we today might easily forget just how different the colonies *were* from each other. So much so that uniting them in a common cause, even for Liberty, was no mean feat. But unite they did, standing together to ward off the threat of falling, divided.

We especially might forget just how different the colonies were from each other in *religious* matters. Or, we might not have ever even known how different they really were, since the complex religious history of our country is often avoided or thoroughly over-simplified in our schools.

And ironically, one could reverse that famous *political* slogan to accurately describe the courageous Constitutional solution to the *religious* pluralism of that era. Imagine this:

*United, we **fall**. Divided, we **stand**.*

In a capsule, though, that is what the Constitution mandated: respect for spiritual diversity, with *no* central uniting religious authority. And this critical issue is still before us today. In fact, it has never ceased to be an issue since the Constitution first codified religious freedom.

Can our nation flourish—or even survive—founded on this unusual premise? Respect the *diversity* of religions, and we stand; enforce *uniformity* in religion, and we will likely fall. United, we fall. Divided, we stand?

It is on the origins of this curious national proposition that I will focus my attention in a couple of sermons this month, today and then again in two weeks' time. In significant ways, I find our colonial and revolutionary religious climates remarkably relevant to these post-modern times, especially in election season and amid the latest in a 200-year series of assaults on the separation of church and state.

So I hope to illuminate for you—ever so briefly—some of the spiritual formation of our ambitious national origins, in particular how and why the formalization of religious liberty came about. May this portrayal strengthen your own abilities to articulate your religious values, one of which might surely be Liberty, from whence we derive our UU identity as a “liberal religious” people.

After some further introduction, today I will try to show the scope of colonial religious forces that prepared the way for how religion is treated in the Constitution, and then I'll lift up the actual cauldron of creation and its creators in my next presentation. You won't hear many familiar names today. Thomas Jefferson and his ilk really come forward in the next installment.

I believe that a greater historical understanding of these large, but often neglected forces of our spiritual history can help us relate more clearly to the current culture, as we wrangle about, for instance, the proper place for religious language in governmental settings, such as Inauguration prayers, or the posting of the 10 Commandments, etc.

In my research I was rather surprised to discover just how fragile and controversial an idea religious liberty was in the era of our nation's founding. And it remains so today—certainly controversial *and still fragile*. After this investigation, I don't wonder *why* quite as much.

By writing into the Constitution and the Bill of Rights two short but far-reaching passages, the

Founders of our country set in motion a radical experiment of legalized religious freedom, declaring essentially that, in religious matters, yes, “United, we fall, and divided, we stand” (although the application of that twisted phrase is my suggestion).

And by “united” in this context, I refer to an enforced uniformity of belief, which had been a long-standing posture of most previous Western governments, and which the Founders rejected in favor of allowing a diversity of belief systems. In language we’re not as familiar with today, “enforced uniformity of belief” means the “establishment” of a state religion.

It may be helpful to first review the actual wording in our most holy of political scriptures. Many of us know, at least cryptically, the *First Amendment's* initial restriction, that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

But that’s in what we call the Bill of Rights. Can you say how religion is addressed in the Constitution itself? There's again one sentence and one sentence only, at the end of Article VI. It begins with three key words you should commit to memory: “**No religious Test** shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

And that's all the references to religion there are—two short sentences—but it was a large leap. The addition of these two ideas was a giant step away from tradition. During most of the previous 13 *centuries*, western civilization had been organized precisely *on* the usually unquestioned collaboration of civil *and* spiritual authority to enforce uniformity in religion, differing regionally only in kind, not style.

State religions were well established, and religious tests for leaders were commonplace. This had been happening throughout Christendom since the Roman emperor Constantine converted early in the 4th century.

Thirteen hundred years later, and relatively suddenly, in this wild land of America, a rebellious group of transplanted European stock agreed to defy that time-honored method completely and *separate* the church from the state, predicting that each would be stronger by the separation. Hmmm. Were these rebels insightful geniuses or naive idealists?

Perhaps neither, as my portrayal will show. And from these 2+ centuries beyond their time, can we declare the experiment of religious freedom a success? Well, hardly, I think. A look around us today suggests that the jury is indeed still out. Inclinations toward enforced religious uniformity continue to rise up and effectively compete for power.

Witness Pat Robertson's impressive presidential candidacy in 1988 and his continuing audience, inspiring others to run for elected office waving a sectarian religious flag. I recall vividly a moment in time, in 1996, when there was a bold and very well supported effort by Washington State gubernatorial candidate Ellen Craswell, who blatantly offered to rule the state with a Christian yardstick. She lost, but not by much.

And strong voices for an enforced religious uniformity continue to ring out of Colorado, Florida and Virginia, to name but a few centers of right wing religiosity. The Bush administration's so-called "Charitable Choice" initiative was another recent attempt to spend tax dollars on religious support. Other examples abound, and confound many of us.

A very relevant, but also not so familiar word here is "theocracy," which describes a government based on religion, in which religious leaders are thoroughly intertwined with political leaders, and secular decisions are made according to religious doctrine. Many previous western governments were effectively theocracies, sometimes more in behavior than visible principle, but if it walks like a theocracy and talks like a theocracy, well, then, chances are mighty good it *is* a theocracy.

You won't hear Pat Robertson use that word to advocate for his platforms because it's so blatantly illegal, but scratch the surface and *theocracy* is what he's after: government based on a particular religious perspective.

Meanwhile, history begs for *our* judgment: are the church *and* the state *both* stronger for their legal separation, as the Founders of the US hoped and predicted? That is a crucial and demanding question, one that I find difficult to answer without a fuller comprehension of how this radical arrangement came to be.

It is indeed a challenge to summarize briefly the complex early American religious story. I must give grateful credit to church historian (and Unitarian) Sidney Mead, for the help I found in his delicious little book, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (copyright 1963).

What I think is very important to remember about the religious life of pre-Revolutionary America is that most of the colonies *had* some kind of established, state-supported religion right up to *and even after* the Constitution was ratified. They assumed, following umpteen centuries of examples, that enforced religious uniformity *was* the proper way, but that, of course, *they* would be able to do it more effectively, applying their particular religious slant to dominate any others.

The glorious value we revere—religious freedom with appreciated diversity—was *not* the first choice of the vast majority of colonists. Far from all being virtuous visionaries, they really just backed into it, finally unable to see any alternative. A curious alignment of unlikely collaborators helped to open the door that let in such a new breeze. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's go back to the early *17th* century, the very beginnings of European residence on this continent. The first Puritan settlers on our shores may have been escaping religious persecution in Europe, but they immediately set about establishing their *own* version of a dominant, government-supported religious order here—a theocracy.

In *New England* the Pilgrims and other Puritans fully intended to establish a society of religious uniformity, not unlike the traditional English system, only *more* pure and more democratic.

However, their democracy was not particularly open-minded. One principle they used went like this: “There is no Rule given by God for any State to give an Affirmative Toleration to any false Religion, or Opinion whatsoever...” They and their descendants were ruthless in banning dissidents from Massachusetts. The *Puritan* mission, after all, was to *purify* religion.

Contemporaneously, down in Virginia, the Anglicans held sway, ably representing the Church of England. They, too, were fiercely narrow. In 1612, shortly after arrival, they installed the death penalty for anyone speaking out against the Trinity and Christianity. (However, since about 90% of the first generation of settlers died *anyway* from the harsh conditions, one suspects this law was not so widely enforced or challenged.) But other intolerant—and legal—sentiments nonetheless carried the day for decades in Virginia, without question.

It was perhaps good that these two reigning religious groups—Puritan in New England and Anglican in Virginia—were at geographic ends of the colonies. Rarely did they have to compete directly for supremacy. One story of their clashing stands out for us, however, because of its Unitarian connection.

Back across the Atlantic, in *old* England, the government there—Anglican, of course—was not at all sympathetic to the dissident Puritans and their budding theocracy in *New* England. It got to the point where, in 1684, the English authorities revoked the Massachusetts Bay Charter, which had given the Puritans sole control over the region. This effectively thwarted further Puritan dominance and Anglicans everywhere no doubt chortled at the move.

Shortly thereafter, still in the mid-1680s, a new Royal Governor arrived from England onto the shores of Boston accompanied by—lo and behold—an Anglican chaplain. Of course there were no Anglican churches anywhere near Boston, so, failing to find a Puritan minister who would willingly open his church to this English chaplain, the governor had to take a pulpit *by force*. They held Anglican services there in an occupied Puritan church while a more suitable church, to be called *King's Chapel*, was being constructed.

King's Chapel is a notable landmark because, one century later, shortly after the Revolution, it became the first American church where unitarianism was preached, and it still thrives as such today. If you go to Boston and walk the famous Freedom Trail, King's Chapel is a prominent stop along the way. It has been a strong UU congregation for some time (as has, by the way, the church of the Pilgrims, First Parish in Plymouth).

The urge for *enforced* uniformity of belief was great for the two largest religious groups in north and south colonial America, but one particular factor was at work here in this big land that was very different than the way things worked back in Europe. It *was* BIG land. Unlike the hemmed-in feeling of both geography and tradition back in the old countries, here was lots of attractive *space* to move around in—physical and social space galore.

The space was big, but of course it was not empty of culture. Today we are sadly aware of how the European colonists dismissed and destroyed the flourishing indigenous Native American

societies. But at the time, our vaunted American value of freedom was greatly cultivated by the newcomers' *experience* of available space. If you and your kind weren't welcome in one place, you could take your beliefs to a different location and set up shop there.

However, much to the frustration of theocratic officials, the wide-open spaces also complicated most efforts at enforced uniformity. It was hard to govern by religion when the people were too far apart to get together. In Virginia, for instance, the rapidly growing tobacco industry spread planters so far apart that the Anglican Church decided to help create central towns, just so that planters and their families could be required to come in for weekly religious instruction.

Meanwhile, as historian Sidney Mead described it, the persecuted minority groups, like Roman Catholics, Quakers and Baptists, avoided *vertical* authority by moving *horizontally* into relatively free space. Thus, in the *middle* of the colonies, out of the reach of repressive Anglicans to the south and exclusivist Puritans to the north, some important demonstrations of religious co-existence were underway.

(Again, most colonists, as we know, had little interest in co-existing with the Native American religions. The levels of intolerance even *within* colonial Christianity could be extreme! But there was room to find a niche somewhere in this big land.)

Quakers were strong in Pennsylvania, but were hated almost everywhere else. Roman Catholics were despised even more, but welcome in *Maryland*. New York contained quite a variety of religions that seemed to get along. Baptists set up in tiny Rhode Island, where Roger Williams had helped establish a radically free society, which drove the nearby Puritans to the north crazy.

(Roger Williams was an interesting character, and extremely religious. He spoke about “the hedge or *wall of separation* between the garden of the church and the wilderness of the world” a century before the birth of Thomas Jefferson, who usually gets credit for that famous phrase. But Williams' focus on religious freedom was entirely to keep the state, the world, from poisoning religion—not an even-handed attitude at all.)

Into the 18th century, it became increasingly clear that no one group was going to be strong enough to establish, let alone *enforce* any uniform religion in this big land. Certainly some, if not most, *wanted* to, but circumstances just wouldn't permit it. So their options were to allow complete religious freedom, which was the path Pennsylvania and Rhode Island took, or *establish* a favored church and then barely tolerate dissenters, as in England.

Some of the colonies did follow this latter establishment option and established state religions, often either Anglican or what the Puritans had evolved into—Congregational, which became less strident but still committed to democratic process. This persisted well into the 19th century. Massachusetts, the seedbed of our religious heritage, only abolished its version of the state funding of churches, called “The Standing Order” in—get this: *1838!*

As an aside, maybe when some of you were younger, learned, as I did, a certain really long

word, one you could proudly pronounce as the longest word in the dictionary. Any guesses at it? Does “antidisestablishmentarianism” ring a bell? Such a convoluted word arose from this very period in our history (as I’m sure we all knew when we mouthed it). Those *for* religious liberty and freedom of belief promoted the *disestablishment* of the state church. The orthodox were against this effort, and countered with *antidisestablishmentarianism*.

Meanwhile, as had been happening in Europe since the Reformation, the Christian religion continued to split into competing denominations. Combine this fracturing with expanding distances amid some very demanding lifestyles in this very big land, and you find American church religion dwindling in vitality to a low ebb as the 18th century unfolded, even despite the consolidated power of established colonial churches.

Competition among denominations meant that people had to be *persuaded* to voluntarily join a church. Well, many weren't so persuaded, which became increasingly evident as church attendance decreased.

And so the stage was set for the emergence of a more personal, intuitive religion than the stale and formalized liturgies of the orthodox groups and their fractured relatives. A simplified and more *pious* form of Christianity arrived and thrived in the mid 1700s, largely in the shape of *very* persuasive revivals that became known collectively as the Great Awakening.

Pietism, as this trend was called, suited the individualistic nature of many of the new American people. Pietism emerged from within mainstream churches, such as Methodist and Baptist, but quickly stepped outside them (quite often literally—in tent revivals). It preferred piously *personal* religious experience over traditional rote church practices. At its extreme, very enthusiastic preachers like Jonathan Edwards stirred up frontier emotions with fearful religious imagery that took powerful hold in many relatively unsophisticated minds and hearts.

As described by none other than Time Magazine, in a relatively recent article about ranting, “Jonathan Edwards, the 18th century New England Calvinist, was a genius of the punitive theological rant [known for statements like]: “The God that holds you over the pit of hell much as one holds a spider or some loathsome insect over the fire abhors you, and is dreadfully provoked.” [Essay: “Oh, Shut Up! The Uses of Ranting” By Lance Morrow, Time online, Apr. 18, 2005: <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1050456-2,00.html>]

Many of the orthodox were aghast at this aspect of their own religion and rejected it with scorn. But the pietists demanded the freedom to follow their own conscience and, in fact, would soon become a force that helped religious freedom find its way into the Constitution.

At the same time, another flavor of American individualism was sprouting in the *intellectual* religious community, spurred on by the Enlightenment. Religious *rationalism* became a way of thinking for oneself about Scripture and religion, and was largely advanced by free-thinkers who would become the Unitarian movement. (Meanwhile, the Universalists were less intellectual about it, but also quite invested in their religious independence as well.)

This personal investigation of religious ideas heartily encouraged the concept of freedom of belief. It made slow headway into religious power bases, but still influenced many leaders of the day. (Jefferson and Madison, two major architects of American religious liberty, were prominent religious rationalists. More on them in two weeks.)

The rationalists made a strong case for freedom of belief, but they *had* to support the often *irrational* and persecuted pietists in *their* fight to believe as *they* wished. So we begin to see an unlikely—and brief—alignment of Pietist and Rationalist, each a small minority, widely divergent in style and theology, but *both* committed to an individual's right of personal belief.

Together, they helped open a door to the fresh air of spiritual liberty, a breeze that forced the Founders to step in a new direction: the legalized protection of religious freedom for all. (Shortly after Constitutional ratification, however, the pietists turned on their rationalist allies and re-aligned with the orthodox.)

For now, in closing, I will emphasize what was, for me, an important new awareness as I deepen my own understanding of our country's spiritual history. With the notable exception of only a few visionaries, the flow of religious forces leading to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 was no grand and principled movement inexorably toward the value we today might take for granted: religious freedom.

Rather, it was, finally, a reluctant and pragmatic reality that dragged our national ancestors out of their assumptions about enforced uniformity of belief into the grudging realization that the only way to ensure religious freedom for their own group was to guarantee it for all other groups as well. It is a lesson that seems to elude some of the more orthodox voices in our time.

The “lively experiment” of spiritual liberty for all was circumstantially derived and emotionally tentative. Most of the colonial religious groups did not have their heart in it. This helps me to understand that America still feels the effects of such formative ambivalence today, so that we who care must continually strive to sustain the right of personal belief. *The spiritual legacy of this great nation is still in formation, and we are the latest generation of standard-bearers for the value of theological diversity versus theocracy.*

I have also realized once again what a debt we owe to the Founders for their stalwart efforts that installed religious liberty so firmly into the Constitution and Bill of Rights. They were succinct, but it stuck, so that in the subsequent 200+ years of our national evolution, right wing tinkers and theocratic authoritarians who would steer us back toward some kind of enforced uniformity of belief have been thwarted.

So far, anyway! *Stay tuned.*

(In Part 2, I'll tell more of the story of the Founders themselves—the ones who led the drive for Constitutional recognition of religious liberty.)