

The Courier's recent request for opinions on whether our "nation's founders meant to establish a Christian nation" opens up an often contentious debate that has been around since the birth of our republic.

In studying this matter, it became painfully apparent that our founding fathers were often more hostile than complimentary of the religious institutions of their day. Amazingly, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, our first four presidents, all expressed opinions critical of contemporary religions.

To be able to better understand this matter, we must consider the times in which these men lived. When George Washington was born, the Church of England (later to become the Episcopal Church) was the state religion of the colony of Virginia and was involved with politics as well as with religion. In Virginia, and in other states, religious affiliation was required to be elected to public office.

At this time there was a significant conflict between the various churches, and the strict and inflexible dogma of church beliefs did not sit well with many of the men who were tasked to form a new and equitable form of government.

Our first president, George Washington, avoided discussions on religion, never referred to himself a Christian and rarely, if ever, referred to God, using metaphors to express his feelings on spiritual issues. Upon leaving office, a group of ministers questioned Washington on his position on whether he was a Christian. Benjamin Rush described the event as follows: *"...the old fox was too cunning for them. He answered every article of their address particularly except that, which he passed over without notice."*

John Adams, a very pious man in his own right, had a cynical view of Christianity as it was practiced in Europe and America. He is quoted with the following on the subject: In a letter to a friend in 1814 he writes, *"Have you considered that system of holy lies and pious frauds that has raged and triumphed for 1500 years?"*, and in a letter to Thomas Jefferson he states, *"The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by his own laws, or whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles."*

Early in his life, Thomas Jefferson was rather private about his religious views as they differed from prevailing religious sentiments. Jefferson was an ardent admirer of Jesus, whom he felt had provided the world with *"the most sublime and benevolent code of morals which has ever been offered to man,"* and a code of conduct which everyone should strive to emulate. *"Of all the systems of morality, ancient or modern, which have come under my observation, none appear to me so pure as that of Jesus."* *"A more beautiful or precious morsel of ethics I have never seen."*

While Jefferson's opinion of Jesus was one of admiration, his opinion of the teachings of many of the churches was that of disdain: *"I do not find in orthodox Christianity one redeeming feature."* *"Religions are all alike - founded upon fables and mythologies."* *"Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of*

Christianity, have been burned, tortured, fined, and imprisoned, yet we have not advanced one inch toward uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make one half of the world fools and the other half hypocrites."

James Madison, considered to be the author of the Constitution of the United States, fought valiantly to create a document which both protected all religions from interference by government and protected the government from interference by religion. There is not a single reference to God in the U.S. Constitution. I was amazed when I read his following comments on religion:

"What influence, in fact, have ecclesiastical establishments had on society? In some instances they have been seen to erect a spiritual tyranny on the ruins of the civil authority; on many instances they have been seen upholding the thrones of political tyranny; in no instance have they been the guardians of the liberties of the people. Rulers who wish to subvert the public liberty may have found an established clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just government, instituted to secure and perpetuate it, needs them not."

At one time or another, all four of the above leaders have been considered to be Deists. Although I am far from being qualified to accurately define a Deist, my working definition is someone who believes in a supreme being, and believes that each of us has a code of behavior built into our psyche which allows us to understand right from wrong, good from bad, and drives us to do the good and right thing in our lives

Thus, Thomas Jefferson was an ardent admirer of Jesus and the principles he espoused during his ministry. Yet, it is painfully obvious that he and many other founding fathers felt that true Christianity had been hijacked by those who held their personal interests above the teachings of Jesus and the needs of mankind.

Were our forefathers Christians and did they intend for the United States to be a Christian nation? My answer to that question is involved in the definition on Christianity. In the United States (2004 data) there are about 50 Christian Churches with 200,000 or more members. Each of these churches has different interpretations of the bible, different rituals and often vastly different concepts of right and wrong.

If Christianity involves the universal expressions of charity, forgiveness, understand and love as expressed by Jesus, then these men certainly were Christian in both thought and deed. If we define Christianity narrowly by the rules and rituals of the churches of their day, then our forefathers were certainly not Christians, as they struggled to protect us from the very entities which lay claim to the legacy of our nation being of Christian birth.

It has been impossible for me to read the Declaration of Independence, to study the U.S. Constitution and to review the war for independence without feeling that there was a divine hand involved in the creation of our nation. All of the great men who helped to shape our nation shared respect for their fellow man and had a sincere interest in forming as perfect a republic as was possible. Whether they were truly Christians or believed in

Christianity is immaterial, as the nation they formed and the laws they created should be acceptable to any religious order that prizes equality, justice and intellectual freedom.

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson were both bitter opponents and respected friends. They were instrumental in creating a government that, after 200 years, is still the benchmark to which all of the world's democracies are compared. They corresponded at length in their later years and their letters reveal the scope of their brilliance and the depths of their compassion for life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for their fellow man.

In 1826, John Adams lay on his death bed and uttered his last words, "*Thomas Jefferson survives.*" Unknown to Adams, Jefferson had died a few hours earlier. **Their deaths both came on the Fourth of July, exactly 50 years from the date they signed the Declaration of Independence.**

Mike Robichaux