“Having a form of godliness, but denying the power thereof…”: Mormon Thoughts on Civic Religion

By Nathan Oman

Introduction

American Civic Religion

“We hold these truths to be self-evident,” Thomas Jefferson wrote in the Declaration of Independence, “that all men are created equal, and that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Thus, in its founding moment, America’s basic creed of equality and rights was linked to God. The Creator was the fount of the liberties asserted by the American colonists, and it was with his blessing that they waged their revolution against George III.

For years, colonial lawyers had painstakingly constructed constitutional arguments against British policies in America. In his massive “Essay on the Cannon and Feudal Law,” John Adams carefully traced the rise of the English law and constitution. English liberties, he argued, rested in the common law which had emancipated Englishmen from the tyranny of the earlier cannon and feudal systems. The efforts of the crown and parliament to tax the Americans and their methods of enforcing those taxes were nothing less than an attempt, in violation of English law and tradition, to reinstitute the cannon and feudal system in America. The aim was to reduce America to serfdom, trampling on the legal rights and liberties secured to all Englishmen by Magna Carta and subsequent precedents.

For all of their erudition, Adams’s arguments and others like them proved legally useless and politically unpersuasive to succeeding British ministries. By 1775 political

pamphlets had given way to military resistance, and by 1776 America was willing to take the final step of declaring independence. Given the position the colonists found themselves in, Jefferson really had no rhetorical alternative but to appeal to some higher power. One could not advocate the overthrow of a legal system with legal arguments drawn from that system. A new justification for American resistance had to be found. Bereft of legal arguments, Jefferson turned to the higher authority of the almighty. British policy had violated the rights endowed by him, and was with a "firm reliance on Divine Providence" that America waged its revolution. God would legitimate the American enterprise.

In making his argument, Jefferson closely followed the reasoning of the sixteenth century English theorists John Locke and Thomas Hooker. In his *Second Treatise on Government*, Locke quotes approvingly from Hooker on the question of political equality. In words that closely parallel Jefferson's formulation a century later, Locke wrote:

> To understand political power aright, and derive it from its original, we must consider what state all men are naturally in, and this a state of perfect freedom . . . A state of nature is] a state also of equality, wherein all the power and jursidictionis reciprocal, no one having more than another . . . This equality of men by nature the judicious Hooker looks upon as [being] evident in itself and beyond all question[1].

Jefferson, perhaps shrewdly banking on the religious feelings of his countrymen, modified Locke's formulation. Where the Englishman had appealed to "nature," Jefferson laid his claim at the feet of God.

Importantly, Jefferson insisted that God's support for the American cause was self-evident. Jefferson's claim was grounded in the authority of reason. It was an

objective, public claim that insisted on its objective verifiablitility. Again he was following the reasoning of Locke. In his work on epistemology, Locke argued for gradations of human knowledge based on its level of certainty. The highest, most certain kind of knowledge, according to Locke, was intuition. Intuition, he said, was self-evident and did not require any mediating ideas to justify itself:

> This part of knowledge is irresistible, and, like bright sunshine, forces itself immediately to be perceived as soon as ever the mind turns its view that way; and leaves no room for hesitation, doubt, or examination, but the mind is presently filled with the clear light of it[2].

Jefferson asserted that the knowledge of God's support for the American cause enjoyed a similar kind of certainty. Like the propositions of geometry or algebra, any reasonable person would necessarily accept God's approval of America. Absent from this self-evident claim of divine approval is any inward religious experience. For Jefferson, there was no faith, prayer, or revelation. There was none of the "working out" with "fear and trembling" that Paul insisted on (Philip. 2:12). Instead, Jefferson invoked divine sanction with the Enlightenment's sunny faith in the powers of reason. It is a peculiar religious claim that requires no religious authority to back it up.

Aside from legitimating the new regime, civic religion served another important role in the political thought of the founder's generation. It provided a basis for public spiritedness and civic virtue. The question of civic virtue was important to the founders, because they did not share our present dogmatic faith in self-government. To eighteenth century ears democracy could carry connotations of mob rule, and the viability of a state based on the will of the people was an experiment whose outcome was far from certain.

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[1] John Locke, *A Treatise Concerning the True Original, Extent, and End of Civil Government* in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burtt (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 404.

Even as late as 1863, the desirability of popular government was far from a fore gone conclusion. At Gettysburg, Lincoln spoke of the civil war not as a crusade to end slavery, but as a "test" to see if "the government of the people, for the people, by the people" would "perish from the earth." Madison displayed an acute awareness of the instability and dangers of popular government. He observed that:

> Complaints are every where heard from our most considerate and virtuous citizens, equally the friends of public and private faith, and of public and personal liberty; that our governments are too unstable; that the public good is disregarded in the conflicts of rival parties; and that measures are too often decided, not according to the rules of justice, and the rights of the minor party; but by the superior force of an interested and over-bearing majority.[3]

Madison's answer to this complaint was the complex set of structural and procedural safeguards set out in the constitution. However, his was not the only solution put forward. Many of the founding generation argued that society should take positive measures to cultivate virtue in its citizens. The hope was that this civic virtue would temper the avaricious and unstable factionalism Madison wrote of.

The founders did not necessarily subscribe to a particularly optimistic view of human nature. This point can be illustrated by contrasting the American Revolution with the French revolution. The most influential thinker on the French revolutionaries, particularly in the later stages after the revolution had committed itself to a radical restructuring of society, was Jean-Jacques Rousseau. One historian of Rousseau has remarked:

> In the course of the French Revolution . . . his [Rousseau's] influence upon eighteenth century life and thought was at its zenith. No other figure of his age

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[2] John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human* Understanding in *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill*, ed. Edwin A. Burtt (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 321.
[3] James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay, *The Federalist Papers* (New York: Bateman Books, 1988), 42-43. The quotation is from No. 10.

> had more clearly expressed the Revolutionaries' commitment to liberty, equality, and fraternity nor a deeper devotion to the ideal of popular sovereignty.[4]

Rousseau didn't argue that human nature as such was inherently good. Rather, he argued that "men in the state of nature, having no moral obligations or determinate obligations one with another could not be either good or bad, virtuous or vicious."[5] However, he did assert that mankind's initial moral instinct was good. "I think, I need not fear contradiction holding man to be possessed of the only natural human virtue . . . I am speaking of compassion."[6] It was society that corrupted mankind. Left free man would follow his natural inclination to do good. Thus, the cultivation of public virtue was a simple negative matter of removing the corrupting influences of society. Not surprisingly, the French Revolution put a tremendous amount of energy into destroying the corrupting ancient regime.

The American founders, however, took the opposite view. Their earliest constitution making reflected a positive concern for cultivating a virtuous citizenry. In 1783**???**, while the Revolutionary War still raged, John Adams authored the constitution of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Previously, the Commonwealth had been governed by its colonial charter, and, after 1775, by a constitution cobbled together by revolutionary leaders.

Consciously or not, Adams was following a very ancient political tradition when he provided for his publicly supported teachers of morality. In the *Republic*, Plato offers

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[4] Robert Wokler, *Rousseau* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 15.
[5] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "A Discourse on the Origins of Human Inequality," *The Social Contract and the Discourses*, trans. G.D.H. Cole, Everyman Edition (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993), 71.
[6] Rousseau, 73.

what purports to be an outline of the ideal city. The book pays particular attention to education, outlining a curriculum for training up citizens who will live together virtuously and harmoniously. In the dialogue, Socrates, who is Plato's main character, agues that the laws should pay particular attention which kinds of "stories about the gods" are told. In particular Socrates wants to ban stories that might threaten public morals:

> The battles of gods and giants, and all the various stories of the gods hating their families or friends, should neither be told nor even woven in embroideries. If we're to persuade our people that no citizen has ever hated another and that it's impious to do so, then that's what should be told to children from the beginning by old men and women; as these children grow older, poets should be compelled to tell them the same sort of things[7].

Elsewhere he insists that stories that are not "pious, not advantageous to us, and not consistent with one another" would be forbidden in the ideal city[8]. Significantly, these discussions do not occur in the context of Plato's speculation on the nature of God. The concern with stories stems from their social effects rather than their theological accuracy. Socrates wants to use religion as a means of insuring social harmony and public virtue.

Significantly, Adams's provision for ministers contained no provisions to insure allegiance to some orthodoxy. The theology taught by the ministers was irrelevant so long as they provided moral edification for the citizens. Unlike his puritan forbearers, Adams was not trying to create a religious commonwealth. The men who had founded Plymouth Plantation and the Massachusetts Bay colony had been driven by the quest for the City of God, and the desire to set their community up as a light upon a hill. For them, orthodoxy was a serious concern, and those, like Quakers or Baptists, who took

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[7] Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A. Grube (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1992), 278c. All references are to the Stephanus numbers.
[8] Plato, 380c.

theological issue with that orthodoxy, were driven out of the community. In contrast, Adams was deeply skeptical of the Calvinist roots of New England. As a young man he had been destined for the ministry, but while at Harvard College he witnessed a bitter theological battle within his family's church which left him skeptical of the theological verities of his youth. He eventually broke entirely with the Calvinism of the majority of his fellow New Englanders, dying an Unitarian. Yet despite his religious aversion to congregationalism, he was perfectly willing to pay Congregationalist ministers from the public purse so long as they were morally edifying.

From its inception, the civic religion of America has served two purposes. The first was to legitimate the American regime. Jefferson first used God as a way of justifying American resistance to the British crown. Today, politicians liberally sprinkle their speeches with pleas of "God bless America." In his 1990 State of the Union address.

The Political Dangers of Civic Religion

A public faith that legitimizes a regime and moralizes its citizens poses a potential threat to basic civil liberties. Ironically, it is religion itself that is most likely to be threatened by the assumptions inherent in civil religion. Since civic religion serves, at least partially, to legitimize the state, religions that call for allegiance to something beyond the nation are likely to be suspect. Likewise, since civic religion serves to induce public morality it is unlikely to be tolerant of "immoral" religious alternatives. The Restoration provides powerful illustrations of both of these dangers.

In 1842??, Joseph Smith declared, "We believe in being subject to kings presidents, rulers, and magistrates, in obeying, honoring, and sustaining the law" (A of F 12). However, alongside this avowal of religious submissiveness to secular authority, the Prophet also laid out a radical program of "the literal gathering of Israel" and a prediction "that Zion (the New Jerusalem) will be built upon the American continent" (A of F 10). He also affirmed an expansive notion of religious liberty. "We claim the privilege of worshipping Almighty God according to the dictates of our conscience, and allow all men the same privilege, let them worship how, where, or what they may" (A of F 11). From the beginning the Restoration has had an ambiguous relationship with the state. It affirms loyalty and obedience, but insists on the right of the Saints to pursue the peculiar vision of Zion dictated by revelation. Thus Zion is set up as a potential rival to civic religion. By insisting on an allegiance beyond the state, Mormonism refuses to grant ultimate authority to the political regime legitimized by civic religion.

America, however, proved remarkably intollerent of this challenge to its legitimacy. During the course of the nineteenth century, the church came under increasingly harsh and centralized pressure from secular authorities. Beginning with civil and criminal actions against Joseph Smith in the 1820s and 1830s, pressure on the church increased to include organized mobs in Missouri and Illinois that operated with de facto government conivence. Finally, by the 1880s the full power of the federal government was enlisted in a massive crusade whose avowed purpose was the destruction of the church. Only when the Saints were willing to yield de facto allegiance to the state did the pressure against the Mormons subside.

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The Restoration begins with questions and claims about authority. Joseph Smith went to the grove inquiring which of the churches was correct. But he only made this attempt, he said, after his confidence in an appeal to the authority of ministers and the Bible had been shaken. For Joseph this question of authority was not an incidental or esoteric theological point. For him it was the central question of religious faith. The founding narrative of the church is a story about the Restoration of authority. Most of the innovative and distinctive doctrines of Mormonism would have to wait until later in the Prophet's ministry. But at the beginning we have the visits of John the Baptist, Peter, James, and John. The new message of Mormonism was simple