

This essay was published in *Freedom of Conscience and the Protection of Inter-Religious Understanding* (Moscow Russia: Russian Academy of Sciences, 2001), 98-103. Posted with permission of the publisher.

## **Human Society and the Cultivation of Morality: The Ideas of the American Founding Fathers Considered**

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Every society throughout human history has been concerned with how to cultivate morality among its people. Absent the practice of morality, a society understandably fears that it will be beset by crime, immorality, disorder, evil, corruption, and chaos. Every society therefore depends upon the cultivation of the “Good,” that sense of rightness, decency, virtue, ethics, and morality that will provide stability and foster the “good life” among its people. What I have said thus far is axiomatic; the more difficult problem is how to achieve this lofty aim, how to create a moral people. The subject is a formidable one, but I shall limit my discussion to the consideration of three issues. First, is religion foundational to the cultivation of morality? Second, what is the role of the state in cultivating morality? In this respect, I shall give special attention to the ideas of the American founding fathers. And third, can we arrive at some basic understanding about creating a social framework that best ensures the promotion of morality?

### **The Relationship between Morality and Religion**

Although leading thinkers throughout history have differentiated religion and morality, there persists today the popular notion that religion and morality are inseparable, that they are essentially the same thing. At least this perception persists in the United States. Two decades ago at a prayer breakfast held in Dallas, Texas, former U.S. President Ronald Reagan expressed this view by saying, “The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related.” This notion is pervasive in American society, perhaps more so than anywhere else on earth, but the notion should not go unchallenged.

It is true, of course, that for Christianity and Judaism, as examples, religion and morality are conjoined. These religions are rooted in an ethical monotheism that affirms that true morality issues only from genuine faith in a holy and righteous God. According to these two traditions, moral practice is only possible if one understands and imitates the moral character and demands of the supreme deity. But this linkage is not found in many other religious traditions. A relationship to a personal deity is not found, for example, in Confucianism, Jainism, or Theravada Buddhism. Confucianism denies the supernatural realm and holds that man is the measure of man. Similarly, Jainism holds the view that there is no Supreme Being, for there is not good higher than man himself. Theravada Buddhism likewise rejects the notion of any divine Being or Creator as the way to salvation; rather each person must rely on himself/herself, on self-discipline, for

salvation. There are ethical teachings in all three of these religions, but they are not rooted in some transcendent reality as in the case of Christianity and Judaism. Thus, the claim of many persons that religion is foundational to morality, and that deity is the essence of religion, denies to some religions any capacity even to be moral or to advance morality.

Locating morality in religion is also problematic when we consider that the codes of behavior encouraged by different religious traditions often differ radically. Some traditions affirm homosexuality; others find the practice sinful and immoral. Certain religions encourage abstinence from eating meat or from sexual relations; others would never question the morality of these practices. Many religious groups teach pacifism; others see war as inevitable and something that demands the participation of the righteous person in the name of removing evil from the world. In other words, to suggest that “religion” in some generic sense is the foundation of morality is to fail to take into account the range of ethical standards that exist among the thousand of religious traditions of the world. We must always ask, “Whose religion and whose morality?”

The claim that religion is the foundation of morality also loses some of its punch when we consider that while much good derives from religion, a great deal of evil also finds its source in religion. History documents that more wars have been fought in the name of religion than for any other reason. As Herbert Muller once wrote, “Nowhere does the name of god and justice appear more frequently than on the banner and shield of the conqueror.” A 600-year period of inquisitions resulted in more than a million executions of “heretics” in the Old World and the New. In the twentieth century alone, by some estimates at least 170 million people were the victims of genocide, and probably at least half of these human exterminations were religiously motivated. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal, himself a person of devout Christian faith, was surely right in writing, “Men never do evil so completely and so cheerfully as they do from religious conviction.” There is no suggestion here that religion is not a font of an indescribable amount of good, only that it produces evil also, such that we must be careful in making the unqualified claim that religion is the only or even primary source of morality. It could be said that morality is aided by religion, but is in no way dependent upon it.

### **The Role of the State in Cultivating Morality**

In commenting on the role of the state in cultivating morality among its citizens, I will draw heavily on the American founding fathers. Their attention to this question and the answers they formulated are not only the most familiar to me among the deliberations of many nations throughout history that have considered such profound matters, but I also happen to agree with the outcome of their deliberations. It is a complex discussion, but I will try to give you the essence of their wisdom on this subject. I am hopeful that much of what I have to say will apply in the Russian context as well.

The American founding fathers were genuinely concerned about creating an environment that was conducive to the cultivation of values, of moral development, and

not a framework that just turned everyone loose to pursue their own self-interest. It seems clear that within the superstructure they conceived, they believed that the Constitution's provisions separating church and state would contribute significantly to the overall goal of providing for the nation's moral foundations. But the problem was complex for them, just as it is for us. Many of the founders were astute readers of history. In examining the history of Western civilization to arrive at the best possible government framework, they were basically drawing on a history that was very much impacted by Christianity. Yet it was not the Bible per se that they were drawing from but two strands of political theory through which the Bible had been variously interpreted.

On the one hand, they were drawing from the classical tradition, that of Ancient Greece and Rome, a very rich tradition inherited from the writings of such illustrious figures as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Zeno, Plutarch, and others, in which it was generally held that government is a moral agent. That is, classical thought held that it is one of the functions of government to help make people virtuous and moral. Thus government should feel free to promote and advance and teach religion as the primary basis for moral development. Greco-Roman culture was very polytheistic, but there was a base of common teaching about the principal gods that was very much a part of the education of all citizens. The public worship of the gods was a mandatory part of citizenship as well. Christianity grew up in this environment (surpassing it and overtaking it, of course) and essentially adopted this political theory under which government is to be a moral agent. Thus, once Christianity officially became the religion of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century, the empire advanced the new common faith in its educational and political missions, generally toward the goal of ensuring that the people were moral through the instruction of Christianity. Once the empire fell to the northern barbarians in the fifth century, this tradition, through the influence of the Roman Catholic Church, continued throughout Europe. Catholic Christianity was essentially in close partnership politically with virtually every region and country across Europe. The union of church and state, what is sometimes today referred to as Christendom, was the order of the day; there was no such thing as separation of church and state. The Catholic form of Christianity was finally challenged in the Reformation of the sixteenth century, but the political theory that promoted the notion that government should be an agent and purveyor of Christianity was not really challenged until the seventeenth century.

It was then that several thinkers, the primary one being John Locke, suggested that Christianity was more private than public, and that a major reorientation of government was in order. Locke held that all humans have fundamental rights that government is responsible for protecting, things like life and property, and certain liberty rights, one being the free exercise of religion. Thus, in his scheme the role of government was to remove itself from promoting religion (government just got in the way) and instead government should protect the right of the citizen to pursue religious truth on his or her own. Locke wanted to change the superstructure of government. Government-promulgated religion had too often been the source of society's problems, not the solution. Thus, for Locke, as for many others, the millions of persons who had been killed in the name of religion over the centuries had to do with government having too much authority over religion, and with that authority it was natural that it would seek to

enforce its version of true religion, which unfortunately all too often conflicted with the understanding of people of minority faiths. Thus we have in the West a long history of religious persecution, witch hunts, inquisitions, and religious wars, all perpetrated in the name of promoting a common religion, the absence of which, it had been always believed, would result in social chaos. Indeed, the Inquisition itself, which lasted in its various manifestations from 1231 until 1834, was responsible for the executions of as many as 1.5 million people by some estimates, merely because their beliefs were not in keeping with those of the officially approved form of Christian faith. Locke lived and wrote at a time when most of these executions had already been carried out. He lived in a day when witch trials were still commonplace in Europe and even in New England, and of course he lived in an era of religious wars that claimed the lives of literally tens of millions. Locke thought there was a better way, and that society would actually survive letting people choose their own religion. He thought the linkage between religious zeal and civil power must end--that history must close the chapter on the union of church and state.

Locke had a profound influence on the founding fathers. He was among the most widely read philosophers of the day. It may be something of an overstatement to say so, but the Constitution essentially adopts a Lockean framework rather than a classical one. The Founding Fathers understood and appreciated the classical concern for the promotion of morality through government policy, but thought that moral training was better left in the hands of other institutions. Thus morality, character development, virtue, and personal integrity would not be formed and shaped by government institutions, but by churches and other religious institutions, families, voluntary organizations, and the like. Moral training was to be part of the nation's infrastructure, not its superstructure. The founders were well aware that the democracy they had created would not survive unless it was composed of a moral people, but they were banking on morality being inculcated by the private sector, not the public one. This is not to say that the founders believed that government cannot contribute anything to the development of virtue, but in terms of government using religion as a tool toward that end, with a few exceptions (discussed below) that was considered out of bounds. Thus our form of government is basically a Lockean one, and the separation of church and state is part of that framework. Government is to stay out of the religion business, for the most part. The Supreme Court, in deciding the cases already cited, basically saw it that way too. Thus, in the case of school prayer, for example, the Court has held repeatedly that government (and every school district is an agent of government) is prohibited from being a moral agent and using religion as a tool to cultivate virtue.

### **Applying the Founders' Wisdom**

In keeping with this Lockean framework, the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution denies to the government the opportunity to shape anyone's religion. But many good people suggest that this limitation on government is the source of today's moral decline. They would argue that we have gone too far with the Lockean framework, indeed that the founders did not intend to put so many obstacles in

the way of government to support religion. Thus we have a very active debate today on the original meaning of the first sixteen words of the First Amendment, which provide: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . .” This language was passed in 1789 at the First Congress as part of the Bill of Rights. The most controversial questions revolve around what the framers meant by saying that establishments of religion would be prohibited.

There are basically two readings here. One is the separationist, which holds that government is not to support, advance, or endorse religion of any kind. Thus, to allow teacher-led prayer in public schools, the placement of religious symbols (e.g. nativity scenes) on public property, or the financial support of religious schools, is prohibited. The other reading, the accommodationist position, holds that the framers sought only to prohibit the establishment of one national church, thus the advancement of one religion over others. This view would permit the advancement of religion, provided it is done nondiscriminatorily. In other words, if Congress wants to appropriate \$100,000,000 for religious schools, it can do so, provided it makes the money available to schools of all different faiths. Similarly, if we want to have prayer in the public schools, it is okay provided people of all faiths have the opportunity to participate in leading prayer. Today we see proponents of both positions on the Supreme Court, not to mention among academics. Presently, there is a virtual war being waged in the Supreme Court and in the scholarly literature over which of these positions represents the future of America. Both sides, of course, claim to have the founding fathers on their side.

What the accommodationist position calls for, if we think about it, is an infusion of the old classical notion that government should have a strong role in the moral development of the citizenry. It calls for a revision of the nation’s superstructure to permit government to become an active participant in building the morals of the people by becoming a moral agent. This position opposes the Lockean framework, but perhaps, just perhaps, we really do need an infusion of the old classical spirit. But we should proceed along these lines with considerable caution. Government promotion of religion virtually always infringes on freedom of the individual person. Take school prayer, for instance. Having students supplying their own form of prayer in class, perhaps on a rotating basis, is an enchanting prospect for many critics of church-state separation. This is real religious liberty, they would say. But consider the confusion this would create. Do we really want our youth subjected to an environment in which all prayers are seen as equally valid? Undoubtedly many parents would be upset enough about this policy alone to remove their children from the public schools. But this is not even the worst potential problem. The worst problem would be the peer pressure generated for students to conform to the majority religion, which, in virtually every school, of course, is Christianity. Children can be terribly cruel. Imagine a student being the only Jew, Muslim, Hindu, or Buddhist in a class and being laughed at continually by his or her classmates because the proffered prayer was the “weirdest one.” The potential for making students feel like second-class citizens in this scenario is enormous.

What about the classical position, resurrected today in the accommodationist interpretation of the religion clauses, which calls for government funding of churches and

other faith-based institutions to empower them to perform social programs or have religious schools? Again, the idea is that we need more help today from our churches and other faith communities to stem the moral decline. It is this writer's view that, generally, churches and other religious groups who want government money are asking government to do their jobs for them. If we have a moral crisis in America, and perhaps a good argument can be made that we do have such a crisis, then the solution, it seems, is not more government and more government money, but more people becoming serious about their faith, voluntarily contributing to their own churches and otherwise becoming more involved to help their own churches and faith communities become part of the solution to the problem. Government funding of religion is a wolf in sheep's clothing. We could undoubtedly learn a lesson from Europe on this point. For centuries, government has funded religious institutions all over Europe. Yet religion across much of Europe today is unfortunately looked upon by many Europeans as just another government program. Attendance in most European churches is abysmal. The people have lost, to a very large degree, the will to support their own religious institutions because government does it for them. It would be a disappointment indeed if in the United States of America, where religion is alive and robust, we would choose to adopt funding practices that for years have characterized most of Europe, where religion is essentially moribund. Yet this seems to be where we are headed, given the various kinds of legislative funding proposals now being considered by Congress.

There are today a number of pending bills in Congress that would allow government money to fund churches and other religious organizations that administer various social service programs. These programs range from child care to pregnancy counseling to juvenile delinquency. Moreover, Congress has passed bills calling for the posting of the Ten Commandments in public schools, courthouses, and city halls (affectionately called the "Hang Ten" movement). There is also school prayer legislation in the works. There is also pending a proposed constitutional amendment to insure that these kinds of initiatives are constitutional. Perhaps we should not be too quick to condemn Congress for trying to do something to stem the moral decline. But is this the right approach? Is the creation of new structures to permit government to serve as a moral agent the answer? Most likely not.

The need for change should focus mainly on what the religious community can do. It is our faith communities that need new energy, new initiatives. And fundamentally, it is not money that they need. It is compassion, concern, and caring. If it is unfair and impractical to provide religious training in our public schools, then the faith community must stand in the gap. Spiritual renewal must become the passion of our churches and other faith groups. It is churches, synagogues, temples, and mosques that must shoulder the load. They must lead the way in creating new ways to meet people's needs. It may be job counseling, participation in literacy programs, marital counseling, teenage pregnancy counseling, or any of hundreds of other kinds of initiatives that can reach people with genuine needs. To the extent that these programs need money, it will take new commitments from the religious community and perhaps new commitments on the part of the corporate world as well. Why not create a new strain of partnerships across America in which churches and other religious and social service organizations

partner with corporations to meet human needs? Not only would this be good for alleviating poverty in America, it would also permit the institutions administering the programs to avoid the government monitoring that would be associated with government funding.

### **Creating a Social Framework that Ensures Morality**

We have said thus far that governments should exercise extreme caution in assuming the role of moral agent, especially in employing religion to build morality into its citizens. The potential for abuse in a state's strategic use of religion is enormous; in most cases religion is damaged and loyalty to the state is diminished rather than enhanced. I have said that in the American case, it is the American people that must carry the ball in making a more moral America. It is not the government's job. This does not mean that government must remove itself entirely from anything having to do with building moral character. There are a number of things that government can do. These include: 1) offering more courses in our public schools on moral excellence; 2) offering more after-school mentoring programs; 3) reminding us periodically that it is our job, as private citizens, to build a nation of virtue; and 4) by encouraging Americans to elect to public office those who are good moral examples. We could add to this list, of course, but in keeping with our separationist tradition, these are things that can be done completely apart from religious considerations. Other nations that operate with a basic commitment to church-separation can do similar things. One is limited only by his imagination in terms of the number of creative programs and activities that can be implemented to cultivate morality.

In Russia, while I think I understand something of the important role in Russian history played by the Russian Orthodox Church, for the future I would hope that Russian officials would be extremely careful about reverting, formally or informally, to a policy of according special treatment and privileges to the Orthodox Church. The Orthodox tradition can help preserve Russian culture and shape the morality of the Russian people, but too heavily a reliance on this as a source for Russian morality would be a mistake. I hope I have made the case for religious pluralism, separation of church and state, and trusting the people and private institutions, not the government, to instill religiously grounded values. The long-term result will be a deeper respect for Russian officials, due to their trust in the people to develop their own values in a climate of freedom. It will also increase the respect of the people for the Orthodox Church, seeing that it is not dependent on favors from the government for its survival and influence, but rather on the love and respect of the Russian people who appreciate that it serves the faith needs of the people without reliance upon governmental power and prestige.

In spite of what I have already said, let me hasten to add that, in the bigger picture, it would probably be unwise to remove religion completely from a nation's superstructure, from its public philosophy, from that core of beliefs that has and does sustain the moral fiber of the nation. In America, I believe that we should oppose the kind of government advocacy of religion and funding of religion that interfere with the

right of people to develop their own faith and their duty to support it voluntarily. Yet it is also possible at the same time to be a proponent of the sort of civil religion now enshrined in the American order--the civil religion that sanctions the phrase "In God We Trust" as our national motto and on our currency, that recognizes public prayer by our presidents and even calls for a national day of prayer. The founding fathers did seem to favor these kinds of generic practices--and they are exceptions to a strictly Lockean framework. These are subtle compromises that, yes, are a violation of a strict notion of the separation of church and state, but are not coercive upon young, impressionable minds in the way that, for example, public school prayer is. These forms of civil religion provide a rather vague but essential sort of social glue that draws from both classical and Lockean political theory. These types of civil religious expression no doubt offend many Americans, but they verify for most Americans that our nation still considers God to be central to our nationhood. These kinds of public acknowledgments fit within a comprehensive picture of reality, it seems, in which most Americans consider God to be sovereign over all matters, including our national life, and not just our private lives. This vision is arguably a balanced one, and one that seems in keeping with what the founders intended. It is not the total prescription for what ails America, but perhaps it is at least a part of it. The prescription for what ails countries around the world may be considerably different, but the problems seem to me very similar in many contexts, so hopefully what I have said will be of benefit to Russian leaders as they think about the important question of how to cultivate morality in their beautiful motherland.