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ATHEISTS BENEFIT FROM THE FAITHFUL

by Diana L. Keathley

To the atheists in the United States: I am reminded of a phrase from Shakespeare, "Methinks he doth protest too much."

If you are so sure there is no God, why are you so bothered by the mention of his name? If you are so convinced that there is no Creator, why all the fuss about the references to him in our founding documents? If you were staunch in your belief, you would not feel so threatened by the words God and Creator. They would be just words, silly indulgences of our misty-eyed forefathers.

Could it be that what you really fear is the faith those words represent? What you may not know or want to recognize is that, while they saw the need to keep separate the workings of the institution of government and religion, our Founding Fathers were men of great personal faith. Their intention in the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution was never to separate God from our government, nor to separate our government's leaders from their personal faith. They knew this would be a nation upon whose people God's hand of blessing and bounty would rest and be witnessed in the world.

In that world, so misguided by governments that purported one brand of religion or another, this would be a nation whose government endorsed no particular religion, yet encouraged all men in the free practice of their personal faith. Indeed, it is you, the atheists, who have no personal faith yet enjoy the bounty and blessings bestowed upon the faithful (an ironic example of God's infinite grace) who are jealous, guilt-ridden and highly unconstitutional.

Editor's note – This letter first appeared in the *Tulsa World* newspaper on July 25th, 2002.

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A READER RESPONDS

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I was surprised and amused to find, according to Diana L. Keathley, I am "highly unconstitutional." Ms. Keathley does not suggest what should be done with people who are found to be unconstitutional based upon their world view; perhaps she hopes that the Supreme Court will someday use Thought Police to round them all up and order them to convert or be stripped of citizenship.

I am sorry that Ms. Keathley has such a poor understanding of what America and the US Constitution represent. Most atheists – including myself – wouldn't dream of interfering with the superstitions that others hold dear. Indeed, words referring to gods ARE "just words" which is why I wonder why the believers are so traumatized if they cannot be said aloud.

Ms. Keathley goes on to say that atheists are jealous and guilt-ridden. She does not explain what we are supposedly so jealous or guilty about, but typically, believers cannot stand the idea that atheists could be happy, well adjusted, productive, patriotic and moral members of the community because to admit this would be to admit religion is NOT absolutely necessary for a good life, so they imagine us to be jealous of them, or "guilty" for having reasonably rejected their ancient myths.

What I find most disturbing about Ms. Keathley's twisted view is the arrogant and dangerous idea that America's success is the result of being special pets of a supernatural deity, rather than the secular ideas about government created by a group of brilliant men, ideas which happen to include freedom of religion, but which do not include the branding of non-believers as "unconstitutional."

A FAR LENGTHIER, MORE DETAILED RESPONSE

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I am writing in response to your letter to *The Tulsa World* (published 25 July, 2002). To say that I take some issue with your letter would be mild at best. It would be more fitting to say that I take **great umbrage**. You have distorted American history and slandered the Founding Fathers in this missive of yours.

The separation of Church and State stands as one of the foundations of our nation. Because of it, Americans enjoy unparalleled religious liberty and nurture one of the most vital religious communities in the world. The wall of separation guarantees us the freedom to worship **(or not to worship)** as we choose.

To begin, you say, "I am reminded of a phrase from Shakespeare, 'Methinks he doth protest too much.'" Let's get the quote right, shall we? From Macbeth, "Methinks the lady doth protest too much." Now, I would hardly call the murderous guilt of the wife of a fictional Scottish laird to be a fair analogy to the unrest of modern freethinkers, but (as I have seen often), fundamentalists and Christian revisionists have a tendency toward such hyperbole.

But onward and downward, as it were. You continue in saying, "If you are so sure there is no God, why are you so bothered by the mention of his name?" First, let me remind you once again of something about our mother tongue. (Sorry, former teacher here.) If you are going to use your Deity's name, then it (and its accompanying pronouns) should be capitalized.

But back to the subject at hand. First, let us define "atheist." Directly from the Greek, the word translates as "without a god." As used in the vernacular (and as defined by some dictionaries), the word has come to mean, "One who does not believe in the existence of god(s)." I choose to call myself an agnostic, although I lean toward atheism (not caring whether or not there are god[s]) and Deism. (See below.) So let's get that much straight – I neither confirm nor deny the existence of god(s). **But mind you, that would include Yahweh as much as Cthulhu, and Jesus as much as Apollo.**

I do not fear the name of any deity. I do, however, want people to do what the Founding Fathers would have had them do, not to mention what Jesus told them to do: **to keep their prayers private, and to show their faith by works and not just words.** You do not, I am sure, want your children worshipping Baal or Artemis or Quetzlcoatl any more than I want mine having to listen to prayers to Jehovah, Christ Jesus, the Virgin Mary, or St. Blaise, or WHOMEVER.

You mistake my insistence upon constitutionality and complete neutrality with fear. I no more fear your god than I fear any bogeyman conjured up in the darkest recesses of the human psyche, Madam.

You continue on in saying, "If you are so convinced that there is no Creator, why all the fuss about the references to him in our founding documents?" Again, Madam, capitalization as needed to match your religiosity level! But anyway. I've never made a fuss about the mention of deity in early documents. The mention of deity was used to open documents of all kinds, from indentures to land grants and so on. (Seventeenth and eighteenth century America also had religious tests for office, not to mention forced tithing. Oh, and don't forget persecution against Baptists, Catholics, Jews, Quakers, atheists, etc.)

That deity is mentioned in some Revolutionary documents? Of that there can be no doubt. BUT is it then fair to assume that, because of this inclusion, that the Founding Fathers were "men of great personal faith?" Not hardly!

The god of 18th Ceremonial Deism was basically an amalgam of Jove (Jupiter), GAOTH (The Grand Architect of the Universe, as seen in Freemasonry of the period), a little bit (but only a soupçon) of the Christian god, and Reason personified. And this is only something found in SOME of the early charters and constitutional attempts.

Furthermore, We are not governed by the Declaration. Its purpose was to "dissolve the political bands," not to establish a theocracy. Its authority was based on the idea that "governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed," which is contrary to the biblical concept of rule by divine authority. The Declaration deals primarily with laws, taxation, representation, war, immigration, and so on, never discussing religion at all. The references to "Creator," "Nature's God," and "Divine Providence" in the Declaration do not endorse Christianity per se. I believe it fair and defensible to say that Jefferson (the old heathen) would roll over in his grave were to hear what has been made of his document by today's fundies.

Thomas Jefferson was a Deist. He was opposed to orthodox Christianity and to the supernatural. Much like Thomas Paine just a few years before, Jefferson was hated by many a cleric, and was condemned to hellfire from more than one pulpit across the Colonies. (Some even called him "The Great Antichrist" up until his death in the late first quarter of the 19th century.)

Jefferson wrote his own version of the Easter account, an account in which Christ died and did not rise again. He wrote countless essays and tracts in which he lambasted traditional religious beliefs. Here's one especially soothing gem for you: "I have recently been examining all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition (Christianity) one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded upon fables and mythologies. The Christian God is a being of terrific character – cruel, vindictive, capricious, and unjust..."

'Nuff said, or would you like some more? I can just as

easily start on Madison, Adams (a real firebrand!), or even Franklin. (Well, a little more on Benjamin Franklin a little further down, come to think of it.)

On an interesting side note concerning the use of florid, “Grand Architect,” or fuzzy “god language” in such documents of the period: Jefferson and his contemporaries did what many writers of the Enlightenment were wont to do – they personified Reason, often using the Roman goddess of Minerva as a convenient personifier. Jove represented order; Apollo wisdom, etc. Does this mean that the Founding Fathers also worshipped the deities of the Greco-Roman pantheon? Scarcely!

It would be just as easy for me to make the make assumptions and beg questions (as you have) about such innocuous neo-classical references when read out of context.

But away from Jefferson for a moment. Franklin (a member of The Hellfire Club) had been born the son of a Congregationalist minister. He rejected traditional Christianity for its hypocrisy, lack of good works (as commanded by Jesus), and want of “signs and wonders.” He was plagued throughout his youth by doubts about the divinity of Christ, a concept that he eventually came to find implausible at best.

Franklin had preached as a young man, but (see the famous Boyle letter) eventually became a devoted Deist. Franklin remained far more concerned with Deism than almost any other of the major players, though. When he called for a resolution to add prayer to the morning agenda of The Constitutional Convention, he was voted down. Franklin, like many of The Founding Fathers, believed that Christ's teachings had been colored with superstition and priestcraft. (Benjamin Franklin's famous lightning rod, by the way, was condemned as blasphemous by New England clerics who feared that this “infernal contraption” would interfere with “God's will” and “the powers of the prince of the air.” – Ah, how refreshing to hear that little has changed! Today, it's not lightning rods; rather, it's cloning and genetic engineering . . . but again, I digress.

You write, “Could it be that what you really fear is the faith those words represent?” No, again, I've already addressed that. **It's not faith I fear; rather, it's theocracy getting its foot in the door.** It's unconstitutionality. It's the same thing that compels me to say, “You want a country run by religion? Move back to Cotton Mather's New England, then. Move to Iran. Move to Afghanistan.”

You continue then in saying, “What you may not know or want to recognize is that, while they saw the need to keep separate the workings of the institution of government and religion, our Founding Fathers were men of great personal faith. Their intention in the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution was never to separate God from our government, nor to separate our government's leaders from their personal faith.”

I am assuming that the typos above belong to the newspaper. Again, I've already discussed what a goldbrick statement it is to assume that a) the Founding Fathers were all “men of great faith,” and b) quite so intent upon keeping religion within public life. You claim to speak for the Founding Fathers in interpreting their “intention.” Please expound upon the following paragraphs, then.

It is true that the literal phrase “separation of church and state” does not appear in the Constitution, but that does not mean the concept isn't there. The First Amendment says “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . .”

Now, what does that mean? In an 1802 letter to the Danbury, CT Baptist Association, Thomas Jefferson (then president) declared that the American people through the First Amendment had erected a “wall of separation between church and state.” (Baptist pioneer Roger Williams had used a similar phrase app. 150 years prior.)

President Jefferson, though, was not the only leading figure of the post-revolutionary period to use the term separation. James Madison, considered by many to be the father of the Constitution, said in an 1819 epistle, “[T]he number, the industry and the morality of the priesthood, and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the church and state.” In an earlier, undated essay (probably early 1800s), Madison wrote, “Strongly guarded...is the separation between religion and government in the Constitution of the United States.” Madison also wrote, “Rulers who wished to subvert the public liberty have found in the clergy convenient auxiliaries. A just government, instituted to secure and perpetuate liberty, does not need the clergy.”

As Pfeffer states in Church, State and Freedom, “It is true, of course, that the phrase 'separation of church and state' does not appear in the Constitution. But it was inevitable that some convenient term should come into existence to verbalize a principle so clearly and widely held by the American people . . . [T]he right to a fair trial is generally accepted to be a constitutional principle; yet the term 'fair trial' is not found in the Constitution. To drive this point home, who would ever deny that 'religious liberty' is a constitutional principle? Yet that phrase too is not in the Constitution. The universal acceptance which all these terms, including 'separation of church and state,' have received in America would seem to confirm rather than disparage their reality as basic American democratic principles.”

Thus, it is entirely appropriate to speak of the “constitutional principle of church-state separation” since that phrase summarizes what the First Amendment's religion clauses do – they separate church and state.

Continuing, we see that, in 1797, America made a treaty with Tripoli, declaring that “the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.” This reassurance to the Muslim inhabitants of the region was written under Washington's presidency, and was approved by the Senate under none other than John Adams. Read those words over again, Madam, **“the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”**

But back to your letter. You continue in writing, "They knew this would be a nation upon whose people God's hand of blessing and bounty would rest and be witnessed in the world." Nice statement. References, please? And, again, which incarnation of god? Are you prepared to reconcile GAOTH with YHWH? Goldbricks and greeting card warm fuzzies don't hold a lot of water with me, so please clarify and enumerate as needed.

You finish by saying, "In that world, so misguided by governments that purported one brand of religion or another, this would be a nation whose government endorsed no particular religion, yet encouraged all men in the free practice of their personal faith. Indeed, it is you, the atheists, who have no personal faith yet enjoy the bounty and blessings bestowed upon the faithful (an ironic example of God's infinite grace) who are jealous, guilt-ridden and highly unconstitutional."

WHEW! Someone's awfully proud of herself, huh? (No, I'm not turning the argument *ad hominem*.) Rather, I'm making a very real statement. First of all, you are begging the question in stating that "the bounty and blessings bestowed upon the faithful (an ironic example of God's infinite grace) who are jealous, guilt-ridden, and highly unconstitutional." You are guilty here of the classic fallacy of *Post hoc ergo propter hoc* ("after which, because of which"). That is to say, you are assuming that America is great because of your deity. Odd, given that it has been a heady cocktail of distinctively non-Biblical things which have made this country great. For example, greed/the love of money (something condemned by Jesus repeatedly), civil disobedience (read the 13th chapter of Romans, and read Jesus on the subject), pluralism ("Yoke not yourselves unto unbelievers . . ."), etc. This country is great (and I believe that THIS can be proved) because of distinctively radical, Enlightenment based principles – that is to say, the profane and not the sacred.

Finally, you're stating (in a small way) what I've already contended: "... whose government endorsed no religion . . ." My point exactly. The "god" stuff you talk about with such facility is clearly biased; it is clearly endorsing. If nothing else, it is by definition, monotheistic. It is also biased in favor of a view of God which presupposes his/her/its/their involvement in human affairs.

You continue in projecting your own religious beliefs (and in a very *ad hominem* vein, I might add) in writing a la pop psychology about those who believe differently than you. Am I "guilt ridden?" Not one whit. I'm a healthy, happy, sane, caring individual who just happens to believe that he has better things to do with his time than to chase specters and to run around after wraiths.

I'm "jealous," you say. Of what, exactly, am I jealous, Madam? I for one fail to see what in all of Christendom I would even want! I mean, I adore Chartres Cathedral, and have been a longtime reader of Niebuhr, true. I like a good Bach cantata as much as the next fellow, and I've nothing but respect for the late Mother Teresa of Calcutta. But jealous? Scarcely. I also admire many a Buddhist. Does this make me jealous of Buddhism? Not one crumb, no. I could just as easily make a similar statement about you.

For example, let us say that I worship the Great Winged Walrus God. I could say to you, "WHAT? You

don't believe in him? The Great Winged Walrus Himself? Why, I'm shocked! You must be jealous or something!" (See my point? I could just as easily do this with Allah, Jesus, Vishnu, Diana, *et al.*, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseam*.)

I'm a proud and open freethinker. I gain my sustenance from Noam Chomsky, not the myth of Noah. I glean wisdom from Ayn Rand, not Ecclesiastes. I find more truth in just one of the mathematical treatises of Gauss than in all of the Prophets and Torah combined. Again, please explain how it is that I'm "jealous." (This should be highly entertaining!)

As for living off the bounty of the land, well, suffice it to say that churches are fine ones to talk there. (Especially not paying taxes . . .)

We would likely have no republic had it not been for atheists such as Thomas Paine, "the kindling that started the Revolution." Count among the freethinkers (whom the Biblical god would not bless) all the Deists (again, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, etc.), and that adds further to your dilemma. Per your argument, such men would not be worthy of Providence's blessings. But guess what – our nation has thrived and prospered and lived in freedom for lo these past two centuries plus because of revolt and dissension and freethought, not craven worship and groveling submission! Our country was born in a fiery cauldron of disobedience, guerilla warfare, radical changes, and revolting against a so-called "anointed" king. (I recommend the 13th chapter of the Book of Romans if you'd like a primer on how Christians should react to tyranny, Madam.)

Finally, you call me and mine "highly unconstitutional." I daresay you're not a lawyer, else you would avoid so incendiary and illogical a term. The onus is now squarely upon your shoulders. I believe that my side has made quite a case for itself, and the Supreme Court has largely agreed to these past 4 decades. These decisions are not just "suggestions," nor are they empty opinions, Madam. They are the result of grueling hours of research and thought, case and rebuttal. Please explain to me how it is that you've arrived at your determination of my being "highly unconstitutional." Ah, big stones and big glass houses, friend.

I eagerly await your response.

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