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The religion of the founding fathers, 1926.

"THE RELIGION OF THE FOUNDING FATHERS--WASHINGTON,
JEFFERSON AND FRANKLIN--WHAT WAS IT?"

RABBI ABBA HILLEL SILVER.

THE TEMPLE, SUNDAY MORNING,

FEBRUARY 21, 1926, CLEVELAND.

In these days of heresy-hunting, anti-evolution legislation and all moods of religious intolerance and reaction, it is good to spend an hour or two with those free and generous spirits who lived long ago in these United States; who were, in fact, the founding fathers of this republic, and whose great spiritual legacies this generation laid low but cannot entirely destroy.

It has often been a subject of great amazement to me to behold how the so-called professional appears in our midst, the men who would like to drive all but the 100% Protestant Nordics into the sea,--how these people who have assumed the role of defending the founding fathers, who speak of them with bated breath and high solemnity; who even attribute to these men of the past almost superhuman excellencies,--how these self-same people fail to grasp even the first principles of the philosophies of these self-same founders.

A few weeks ago an American writer had the temerity to say that George Washington was not at all that impossible angel that we had been taught to consider him; that in fact George Washington was very human. He smoked, he danced, he played cards and he drank occasionally; he held slaves, and he used to get very angry and swear at times. In fact, he was subject to all those frailties from which mortal man so frequently suffers. And what a protest

there arose from the sacred guardians of our national reverences! They called such statements blasphemy, sacrilege; they regarded it as treason to reduce a man to the level of common humanity. And yet these self-same people who are so zealous in the defense of these founding fathers--who need no defense--these self-same people will see the essential ideals of these founding fathers trampled upon and say nothing; nay, more, they themselves, in blindness and in stupidity, will trample upon the great ideals which motivated these men without any compunction.

Those were spacious days in which men like Washington, Jefferson and Franklin lived; they were very spacious and free and heroic days. The best minds of our country at that time were influenced to a larger or lesser degree by that critical, inquiring, revolutionary thought of the eighteenth century which was at that time making those marvelous strides which were soon to bring the thought of mankind to a dramatic climax in the French Revolution. And the best minds of America were steeped in the ideology and the thought concepts of that century. There was a fine canor of intellectual honesty abroad in the world and in the United States at that time. Men were suspicious of tradition; men were not afraid of the new just because it was new; men were not afraid of experimentation; rather they were eager for new experimentation in politics and social ameloration. And above all there was such a fine, embracing human sympathy among them; such a fine, human

fellowship, of the unity and integrity of mankind among them. In those days they spoke of humanity with vividness and with tremendous conviction. It was not to them a mere phrase, a stale piety. Those convictions were tremendously dynamic in their lives. When they spoke of human equality and of the rights of men they uttered no hackneyed phrases; they voiced the innermost and the profoundest convictions of their life; those ideas were still young and fresh and tantalizing. Today they become stale and threadbare; you repeat them; you pay them lip homage, lip service; you do not really live by them, feel them.

The Declaration of Independence, with its majestic sweep of vision, with its heroic accents on the equality of all men--"We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal"--with its insistence upon the right of a man to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,---The Declaration of Independence, I say, was not a mere accident, an intellectual or political sport. Such things do not just happen; they arise from profound conviction in a people's life. And those convictions were very strong in those days.

I am quite sure that the Declaration of Independence could not be written today in these United States. If it were written today it would not be an honest document; for we no longer feel emotionally, react spontaneously, react to the inspiring ideals of that immortal document, but it was an honest document when it was

drafted, for the men who drafted it believed it; these principles were the indispensable and sacred dogmas of their lives.

They were free men in those days, and truly progressive men. It would, for example, be a great surprise, I am sure, and a shock to orthodox religionists today to know that neither Washington nor Jefferson nor Franklin was an orthodox Christian; that none of them believed in the divinity of Jesus or in any of the orthodox dogmas of the Christian Church. These men were deists. The deists were the forerunners of modern Unitarians. These men, Washington, Jefferson and Franklin and their compeers, were very much like modern liberal Jews in their religious convictions. They believed in God, profoundly believed in him; they believed in God's moral law of justice, of love, of truth, but beyond that they did not subscribe to any formal creed or any orthodox dogma in the church.

Washington, for example, seems to have been a man of great faith; at all times he acknowledges his indebtedness and his dependence to divine Providence. In his masterful farewell address to the people of the United States he writes: "Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity religion and morality are indispensable supports; and let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education and minds of peculiar structure, reason

and experience both urge us to expect that national morality cannot prevail in exclusion of religious impulse." ✓

In other words, that morality and religion are not alone both essential to the prosperity of a country, but that morality cannot exist without religion. But it must find its source, its inspiration and its sanction in the religious impulse of man. But this same George Washington, who was a man of such stronger faith, nowhere indicates his adherence to any orthodox Christian dogma.

Thomas Jefferson is even more outspoken. He clearly denies the central dogma of orthodox Christianity, the divinity of the founder of the faith, and he says: "To the corruptions of Christianity I am indeed opposed, but not to the genuine precepts of Jesus himself. I am a Christian in the only sense in which he wished anyone to be, sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others, ascribing to himself every human excellence, and believing he never claimed any other."

And again he writes to John Adams shortly before he died: "And the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the Supreme Being as his father, in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter. But we may hope that the dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States will do away with all this artificial scaffolding and restore to us the primitive and genuine doctrines of this, the most venerated reformer of human

✓ errors." And he sums up in a letter which he wrote to a young man, giving him the advice of an old man, how to conduct himself in life. He sums up in a few sentences his simple philosophy and his just philosophy, and it reads like a chapter out of the Old Testament. He says: "Few words will be necessary with good disposition on your part. Adore God, reverence and cherish your parents, love your neighbor as yourself, and your country more than yourself. Be just; be true; murmur not at the ways of Providence. So shall the life into which you have entered be the portal of one of eternal and ineffable bliss."

And Franklin, who was perhaps the most radical of the three, who in a certain period of his life was more than an agnostic, but a man given to the negation of the principles of faith, sums up his religious belief in the following sentence: "I have been religiously educated as a ✓ Presbyterian (the word "Presbyterian" was used in those days to apply to New England Puritans), although some of the dogmas of that persuasion, such as the eternal grace of God, election, retrogression, etc., appear to me to be unintelligible, others doubtful, and I very early absented myself from the public assemblies of sect, although I never was without some religious principles. I never doubted, for instance, the existence of the Deity that made the world and governed it by His providence; that the most acceptable service of God was the doing good to man, that our souls are immortal, and that all crime will be ✓

punished and virtue rewarded, 'either here or hereafter.'

And in the last year of his life, when he was 84 years old, he wrote to a friend reiterating these Judaic doctrines of faith, and expressing his doubts concerning the orthodox dogmas of the prevalent faith.

Now these men, I am sure,--George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin, would not have been approved by William Jennings Bryan. I am quite sure he does not approve of them today, if he meets them--which is rather doubtful. I read these quotations for you to indicate just what liberality of religious thought was dominant in our land 150 years ago, so that you may contrast it with the rather ingrown centripetal, reactionary movements of our own day; what sense of toleration those men have; how keenly they realized that in matters of the spirit a man must be absolutely free and autonomous; how deeply and profoundly they realized that the true test of faith was not profession, not protestation, not avowed creed, but action, conduct, the doing of the moral duties of human life; how readily they grasped the great philosophic truth that in matters of religion, in matters concerning spiritual values, uniformity was not only impossible but highly undesirable, and how zealously they guarded against the encroachment of the authority of the state, of the civil magistracy upon the religious autonomy and freedom of the people is evidenced almost in every line and in every phrase which these men wrote.

George Washington, writing in May, 1789, to the general committee representing the United Baptist Churches of Virginia, declares: "If I could now conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, I beg you will be persuaded that no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution, for you doubtless remember that I have often expressed my sentiments that every man conducting himself as a good citizen and being accountable to God alone for his religious opinions, ought to be protected in worshipping the Deity according to the dictates of his own conscience."

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He writes in the ^{same year} to a group of Quakers: "The liberty enjoyed by the people of the States of worshipping Almighty God agreeable to their consciences is not only among the choicest of their blessings but also of their rights." There is a tremendous distinction involved. Religious freedom in these United States is not a matter of privilege granted to us as a gift or a blessing which some wise law-giver endowed us with, but it is a right inherent within the people themselves--a right which no one can deprive them of because no one has the right to deprive them of it. Freedom of worship, freedom of conscience, is something which cannot become a matter of legislation in these United States, over which the majority has no control, because it is beyond the scope of government; it is an

inherent and inalienable right resident in each and every human being, which is never surrendered to the whim or to the judgment of any group or of any body; and George Washington understood that quite readily, a thing which today we find difficulty in understanding. "The liberty enjoyed by the people of these states is not only among the choicest of their blessings but also their rights. While men perform their social duties faithfully, they do all that society or the state can with propriety demand or expect, and remain responsible only to their Maker for the religion or moods of faith which they may prefer or profess."

In 1793 he wrote this to the Board of a new Baptist Church in Baltimore: "In this enlightened age (and it was an enlightened age in the truest sense of the word; it was an age of light and light seekers) and in this land of equal liberty, it is our boast that a man's religious tenets will not forfeit the protection of the laws nor deprive him of the right of attaining and holding the highest offices that are known in these United States." In other words, a man's religion is not to be regarded as a qualification or as a disqualification for the enjoyment of any political rights or for the holding of any political office, however high, in these United States.

Now there are millions today in these United States among our professional compatriots, even, who will not subscribe to this simple and essential ideal of the founders of this country. And Thomas Jefferson, who

expresses himself so succinctly and concisely on all matters, has this to say on the matter of religious uniformity and religious qualification. Listen to this attentively. These are immortal words spoken by him who framed the Declaration of Independence. / "The legitimate powers of the government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others, but it does mean no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty Gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg. Constraint may make him worse by making him a hypocrite, but it will never make him a truer man. It may fix him obstinately in his errors, but he will cure them. It is error alone which needs the support of government. Truth can stand by itself. Subject anyone to coercion; whom will you make your inquisitors? Fallible men . . . by private as well as by public reasons; but why subject it to coercion? To produce uniformity. But is uniformity of any kind desirable? No more than uniformity of face and stature . . . Difference of opinion is advantageous in religion . . . Millions of innocent men, women and children since the introduction of Christianity have been burnt and tortured, fined and imprisoned. Yet we have not advanced one inch towards uniformity. What has been the effect of coercion? To make holy a half of the world and the other half hypocrites . . ."

These are words which we may well rehearse daily in our life today, for at no time were these United States hankering so much for uniformity of opinion, of thought, of conduct, for a regimentation of life, for the suppression of individuality in thought, in speech, in manner, in art, in literature as in our own day. One hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Jefferson understood that in things appertaining to mind and soul men were intended by their Creator to be different, each one a unique personality; and the more cultured we become, the more civilized we become, the more individualized we become.

The truly cultured man is a man unique, in a thousand ways differing from his neighbor. Once upon a time there was uniformity in the world, or at least attempt at uniformity. People thought that the ideal government was the empire--one government for all the people; one standard of art, one religion, one speech for mankind. That was the dream of those who built the Tower of Babel. But true civilization began when God, using now the legend of the Tower of Babel, confused the speech of men and scattered them to the four corners of the earth; for it is only through conflict and the clash of opposing ideas and opposing convictions that real human progress is begotten.

We just concluded a war, the bloodiest war in all history, avowedly to extend the privilege of self-determination to more peoples; and self-determination is nothing more than the right of the group to its own life,

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to the development of its own personality, to the expression of its own latent potentialities, even as the individual claims that right unto himself. Now in this land of 110 millions of people mass is the standard--mass production, mass thinking, mass passion. In this land we have drifted from these ancient moorings of our founding fathers; we are distrustful today of those who insist upon living their own lives, whether it be an individual or a group of individuals.

Thomas Jefferson was so zealous in keeping the church and state separate that he refused to sanction or to recommend a day of public fasting. When he was requested by a number of churches to make public the request for a day of national fasting and prayer, he refused, and he gives his reasons for it; not because he did not believe in fasting or in prayer; not because he was not a religious man, but simply because he did not wish to establish the precedent which would encourage religious denominations and groups in the days to come to turn to the civil magistracy of a government to carry out their discipline, their exercises, their ideas. The two were to be kept absolutely separate.

Such were the ideas of the founding fathers, and I have oftentimes wished that we of this day would recapture a bit of that spaciousness, of that freedom, of that enlightenment of 150 years ago. We have never been as free as they were in those days. Can you imagine for a moment that Washington or Jefferson or Franklin would

tolerate an immigration law, for example, such as we enacted a few years ago, whereby men are permitted to enter this land, are selected for admission into this country not on the basis of character, of moral qualifications, of ability, but on the basis of some pseudo-scientific notions of race values--the preference given to one racial group over against the other? Would he who said, "Behold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal" have sanctioned the law which clearly flaunts, cynically flaunts the basic principles of American democracy, and says, "All men are not created equal; therefore I shall choose the Nordic, or a group of Nordic people as against Mediterranean or Alpine or Semitic people? because these are by nature better endowed, better qualified to become citizens of these United States"? Would the founding fathers of our republic have sanctioned or condoned legislation such as has been passed in two or three states within the last few years whereby the authority of the state was invoked to prop up certain crumbling orthodox dogmas of religion? There a legislature and freeborn American citizens placed themselves on record as being medievalists, enemies of science, because forsooth that science was interpreted as being inimical to certain orthodox doctrines about the literal inspiration of the Bible or the divinity of the book.

The state, which the founding fathers so zealously safeguarded against the encroachment of theologic

bias, against any kind of interference, the state is today, 150 years later, being used as a tool to prop up crumbling orthodoxies of the past. Would the founding fathers have sanctioned the nigh nation-wide movement to sectarianize and sectionalize our public school system by introducing religious instruction into it? They would not, because they were profound thinkers; they were more radical thinkers; by radical I mean a man who goes to the root of a thing; they had a philosophic outlook on life; they did not sacrifice principle for expediency, and the ultimate for the immediate gain. They thought, and we refuse to think. We would rather entertain ten full-blooded, hot emotions than one cool, patient thought.

I wish that a bit of that old spirit would come back to us, that spirit which did not crave morbidly, that primitive spirit for uniformity, that craving that these United States should become the domicile of only one type of people, white and Nordic and Protestant, which is just a naive hankering after uniformity--the desire to have all people act alike, look alike, speak alike, think alike,--naive, primitive, which 150 years ago the framers of our republican form of government discarded, and which we today have taken to our bosom with so much patriotic fervor.

I therefore say, friends, it is good to stand a little while on an occasion like this, the day before a national holiday commemorating the life and the work and the ideals of Washington, one of the truly great men of the

world,--it is good to stand a little while in the intellectual world in which these people lived long ago, to understand how far we have drifted from their mighty teachings, and how much we still have to do to approximate their ideals.

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In these days of heresy-hunting, anti-evolution legislation and all moods of religious intolerance and reaction, it is good to spend an hour or two with those free and generous spirits who lived long ago in these United States; who were, in fact, the founding fathers of this republic, and whose great spiritual legacies this generation laid low but cannot entirely destroy.

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These are words which we may well rehearse daily in our life today, for at no time were these United States hankering so much for uniformity of opinion, of thought, of conduct, for a regimentation of life, for the suppression of individuality in thought, in speech, in manner, in art, in literature as in our own day. One hundred and fifty years ago Thomas Jefferson understood that in things appertaining to mind and soul men were intended by their Creator to be different, each one a unique personality; and the more cultured we become, the more civilized we become, the more individualized we become.

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We just concluded a war, the bloodiest war in all history, avowedly to extend the privilege of self-determination to more peoples; and self-determination is nothing more than the right of the group to its own life,

to the development of his own personality, to the expression of its own latent potentialities, even as the individual claims that right unto himself. Now in this land of 110 millions of people mass is the standard--mass production, mass thinking, mass passion. In this land we have drifted from these ancient moorings of our founding fathers; we are distrustful today of those who insist upon living their own lives, whether it be an individual or a group of individuals.

Thomas Jefferson was so zealous in keeping the church and state separate that he refused to sanction or to recommend a day of public fasting. When he was requested by a number of churches to make public the request for a day of national fasting and prayer, he refused, and he gives his reasons for it; not because he did not believe in fasting or in prayer; not because he was not a religious man, but simply because he did not wish to establish the precedent which would encourage religious denominations and groups in the days to come to turn to the civil magistracy of a government to carry out their discipline, their exercises, their ideas. The two were to be kept absolutely separate.

Such were the ideas of the founding fathers, and I have oftentimes wished that we of this day would recapture a bit of that spaciousness, of that freedom, of that enlightenment of 150 years ago. We have never been as free as they were in those days. Can you imagine for a moment that Washington or Jefferson or Franklin would

tolerate an immigration law, for example, such as we enacted a few years ago, whereby men are permitted to enter this land, are selected for admission into this country not on the basis of character, of moral qualifications, of ability, but on the basis of some pseudo-scientific notions of race values--the preference given to one racial group over against the other? Would he who said, "Behold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal" have sanctioned the law which clearly flaunts, cynically flaunts the basic principles of American democracy, and says, "All men are not created equal; therefore I shall choose the Nordic, or a group of Nordic people as against Mediterranean or Alpine or Semitic people? because these are by nature better endowed, better qualified to become citizens of these United States"? Would the founding fathers of our republic have sanctioned or condoned legislation such as has been passed in two or three states within the last few years whereby the authority of the state was invoked to prop up certain crumbling orthodox dogmas of religion? There a legislature and freeborn American citizens placed themselves on record as being medievalists, enemies of science, because forsooth that science was interpreted as being inimical to certain orthodox doctrines about the literal inspiration of the Bible or the divinity of the book.

The state, which the founding fathers so zealously safeguarded against the encroachment of theologic

bias, against any kind of interference, the state is today, 150 years later, being used as a tool to prop up crumbling orthodoxies of the past. Would the founding fathers have sanctioned the nigh nation-wide movement to sectarianize and sectionalize our public school system by introducing religious instruction into it? They would not, because they were profound thinkers; they were more radical thinkers; by radical I mean a man who goes to the root of a thing; they had a philosophic outlook on life; they did not sacrifice principle for expediency, and the ultimate for the immediate gain. They thought, and we refuse to think. We would rather entertain ten full-blooded, hot emotions than one cool, patient thought.

I wish that a bit of that old spirit would come back to us, that spirit which did not crave morbidly, that primitive spirit for uniformity, that craving that these United States should become the domicile of only one type of people, white and Nordic and Protestant, which is just a naive hankering after uniformity--the desire to have all people act alike, look alike, speak alike, think alike.--naive, primitive, which 150 years ago the framers of our republican form of government discarded, and which we today have taken to our bosom with so much patriotic fervor.

I therefore say, friends, it is good to stand a little while on an occasion like this, the day before a national holiday commemorating the life and the work and the ideals of Washington, one of the truly great men of the

world,--it is good to stand a little while in the intellectual world in which these people lived long ago, to understand how far we have drifted from their mighty teachings, and how much we still have to do to approximate their ideals.

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