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Liberty and the Chains of Virtue

Edmund Burke, 18th-century British statesman and admirer of the American Founding Fathers, once observed:

Men are qualified for civil liberty in exact proportion to their disposition to put moral chains on their appetites; in proportion as their love of justice is above their rapacity; in proportion as their soundness and sobriety of understanding is above their vanity and presumption; in proportion as they are more disposed to listen to the counsels of the wise and good, in preference to the flattery of knaves. Society cannot exist unless a controlling power upon the will and appetite be placed somewhere, and the less of it there is within, the more there must be without. It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.



Exemplar: George Washington, a Christian and the very embodiment of virtue, recognized the unique importance of religion in the cultivation of morality. Noting the importance of morality to “political prosperity,” he cautioned: “Reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.”

The always eloquent Burke was reciting a fact that had not escaped the notice of America’s Founding Fathers. Those great men understood this as a bedrock principle, that public virtue and morality are necessary preconditions for political freedom. Necessary also to the successful establishment and subsequent longevity of a republican government is the achievement among the populace of a certain quality of education. This too the Founding Fathers, in their uncanny wisdom, took to heart as they created the American republic.

Ancient Roots

The Founding Fathers learned from Montesquieu that each form of government is predicated upon a certain fundamental condition or principle. Despots, he taught, derive their powers from fear, while monarchs depend on honor to rule. But republican government is dependent on virtue — virtue within a specific class whenever the primary power reposes with an aristocracy, and virtue among the general public wherever power resides with the people.

The notion of virtue in government was not new. Cicero, for example, saw virtue or piety as the reason for the spectacular success of the Roman republic. “The early Romans,” says Russell Kirk, “were a pious people, even though their religion itself was a simple faith.... They were earnest, tenacious, well-disciplined, frugal, often self-sacrificing when the state was in peril. A sense of duty and an attachment



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to honesty and honor worked upon their leading men.”

The Founding Fathers, learned men all, were certainly familiar with the lessons to be learned from Rome’s history. Even more importantly, however, the Founders’ understanding of the importance of virtue was informed not just by the example of the pre-Christian Romans, but by their own Christian heritage. They and their contemporaries in colonial America conceived of virtue in terms of unswerving adherence to Christian morals, combined with a reverence for Deity and a recognition of His role in the affairs of men.

Since the earliest days of the colonial period, an emphasis on Christian piety and morality had permeated the American colonies. According to historian Clinton Rossiter, this early emphasis on virtue “was a practical philosophy of huge consequences for the American future.” Elsewhere he added: “Few people in history have been more given to public moralizing, to proclaiming a catalogue of virtues and exhorting one another to exhibit them, than the American colonists.... Practical morality was an important by-product of Puritanism and rationalism as well as the actual experiences of the colonists. Yet so prevalent was this pattern of thought, so universal and self-generating was the urge to preach the solid values, that we may consider it an independent working philosophy to which thousands of colonists subscribed directly.”

The early American colonists saw Christian virtue not merely as a restraint — though as such it played a critical role in reining in the excesses of “fallen man” — but also as a stimulator of action, an inner source of light that encouraged men to discard the chains of passivity and bondage to baser appetites and strive to accomplish good and enduring works.

It was virtue, for instance, that moved men to make covenants with the Almighty. The notion of covenant was pervasive in colonial America, since many groups fleeing religious persecution in Europe, such as the Pilgrims, saw themselves, like the ancient Israelites, as covenant peoples guided by the hand of the Almighty to a Land of Promise.

This was the case, for example, with the expedition to America led by Puritan John Winthrop. “As the fleet set off, on Easter Monday 1630,” historian Paul Johnson tells us in his 1997 study, *A History of the American People*, “Winthrop was in a mood of exaltation, seeing himself and his companions taking part in what seemed a Biblical episode — a new flight from Egypt into the Promised Land.” Winthrop and his fellow travelers, though, were not simply undertaking the perilous journey for their own sake. Indeed, notes Johnson, “the New England colony was to be a pilot church and state, which would create an ideal spiritual and secular community, whose example should in turn convert and save the Old World too.” In a shipboard sermon, Winthrop shared his vision with his companions: “We must consider that we shall be as a City upon a Hill, the eyes of all people are upon us.”

By the time of the Founding Period, according to historians Richard Vetterli and Gary Bryner, “the general belief or acceptance that America had been singled out to perform a great mission and that the nation rested, as it were, in the bosom of Providence” had become “one of the most important ingredients of the American public religion or philosophy.”

Faith of the Founders

Most of the Founders were deeply religious, believing that nothing short of Christian virtue and morality were necessary for the American republic to endure. Though some of them were skeptical of



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certain aspects of Christian orthodoxy and sectarianism, their political writings and speeches were suffused with evidence of their belief in God and in their Christian heritage. Benjamin Franklin, for example, during a stalemate in deliberations at the Constitutional Convention, observed:

In this situation of this Assembly, groping as it were in the dark to find political truth, and scarce able to distinguish it when presented to us, how has it happened, Sir, that we have not hitherto once thought of humbly applying to the Father of Lights to illuminate our understandings? In the beginning of the contest with Great Britain, when we were sensible of the danger we had daily prayer in this room for divine protection. Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were frequently answered.... And have we now forgotten our powerful friend? Or do we imagine that we no longer need His assistance? I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth — that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?

James Madison's background was typical of the Founders and of his time; in the words of biographer Ralph Ketcham: "Certain elements of Christian thought had almost universal acceptance in colonial America and are important to an understanding of Madison's intellectual growth. The Christian affirmation ... that each human soul has infinite worth ... [was] of vast significance. There were, therefore, limits to the claim the state could make upon the individual.... Madison acknowledged that there is a nontemporal source of values; he insisted that the state live up to them, and he affirmed that individuals in a society were bound by more-than-earthly obligations." Such beliefs were to have profound consequences for the form of government the Founders set up. They understood governments to be amenable to a higher Authority, and they considered the "primary" institutions in society — churches, communities, families, volunteer organizations, and the like — to be as essential to republican government as the state.



James Madison

Importantly, the Founding Fathers rejected the claim that governments may be a source of virtue, for virtue in the Christian sense cannot be compelled. Further, the Founders were neither blindly optimistic



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nor unduly pessimistic regarding man's essential nature. While they incorporated into their system of government numerous refinements intended to limit the mischief men could cause by misuse of the machinery of state, they understood that the republic they had founded could endure only so long as the greater part of its citizens maintained their virtue.

The importance of a virtuous citizenry to the success of a republican government was stressed by James Madison in *The Federalist*, No. 55. "As there is a degree of depravity in mankind which requires a certain degree of circumspection and distrust," the father of the Constitution observed, "so there are other qualities in human nature which justify a certain portion of esteem and confidence. Republican government presupposes the existence of these qualities in a higher degree than any other form."

John Adams, too, stressed the importance of virtue. "Our Constitution," he said, "was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other." Joseph Story, Madison's Chief Justice, added that "piety, religion and morality are intimately connected with the well-being of the state, and are indispensable to the administration of civil justice." Franklin wrote: "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters." And Samuel Adams warned that "neither the wisest constitution nor the wisest laws will secure the liberty and happiness of a people whose manners are universally corrupt. He therefore is the truest friend to the liberty of his country who tries most to promote its virtue, and who, so far as his power and influence extend, will not suffer a man to be chosen into any office of power and trust who is not a wise and virtuous man."

Religion and Republic

But how could public virtue and morality be maintained? Widespread modern misconceptions to the contrary, neither was the republic contemplated by the Founding Fathers based on secular "ethics," nor was it an enemy of churches, despite the First Amendment proscription against Congress establishing a state religion. Unlike the French Revolution, whose leaders were militantly hostile to Christianity, as well as later, secularized traditions of "liberty," such as Benthamite Utilitarianism and radical democratic populism, which tended to glorify and even deify Man as the ultimate source of state authority, the system envisioned by the Founders welcomed religion as performing tasks complementary to government. Religion, for example, was the primary fount of morality, as George Washington explained in his Farewell Address:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness — these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked, Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation *desert* the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? 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 ... reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.



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The Founders assumed that, precisely because of the absence of a national religion, men would be encouraged to honor God according to the dictates of their own consciences, which would give rise to a flourishing culture of diverse sects united, in the main, by their acceptance of core Judeo-Christian values. In large measure, they succeeded. French traveler and philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville marveled at the collective piety he saw in America 50 years after the Revolution. Even in our comparatively secular age, religion is still a dominant component in American life: More than 40 percent of all Americans attend church every week. In fact, more people go to church each week in America than vote in a typical presidential election or attend sporting events in an entire year. Clearly, there is still a substantial reservoir of the virtue upon which our republic is predicated.

Role of Education

In addition to morality, education is another general trait absolutely crucial for preserving republican government. As Thomas Jefferson so trenchantly put it: “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free, it expects what never was and never can be.” In his Farewell Address, Washington also urged that education not be neglected: “It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.... Promote, then, as an object of primary importance, institutions for the general diffusion of knowledge. In proportion as the structure of government gives force to public opinion, it is essential that public opinion be enlightened.” Benjamin Rush noted the interdependence of virtue and education, stating: “There is but one method of preventing crimes, and of rendering a republican form of government durable, and that is, by disseminating the seeds of virtue and knowledge through every part of the state.”



Educating for liberty: The proper correctives for the attacks on our moral and cultural foundations include self-education, homeschooling, and the creation of centers of education that shore up, rather than erode, our noble Western and Judeo-Christian heritage. (gpointstudio/ iStock / Getty Images Plus)

By “education” the Founders did not mean the glorified technical training that passes for education in our day. The Founders were all cultured, educated, multitalented men; their education encompassed a thorough grounding in history and classical languages, coupled with a profound appreciation for the traditions and ideas associated with what is known as “Western civilization.” As with all truly learned men, much of their erudition was a result of tireless self-education; they read the ideas of philosophers ancient and modern, of statesmen, economists, and jurists. They studied the languages and histories of



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other cultures that had experimented in human liberty. From all of these they pruned and synthesized, adopted and rejected. Ultimately, they became innovators in their own right. Moreover, because of the educational climate of early America, the ideas they debated and defended were grasped and pondered by the general American public, most of whom were far more literate and well-educated than Europe's downtrodden, ignorant peasant classes.

At least as worrisome in our day as the obvious decline in virtue is the appalling lack of education in the traditional sense of the term. Public schools, rather than instilling an appreciation for the ideas and traditions of our Western heritage, instead deride the alleged cultural hegemony of "dead white males" and slander the reputations of the Founders themselves. Our great colleges and universities, besides promoting various subversive social and political agendas, pour their energies into training docile subalterns to carry out "practical" tasks that promise handsome rewards but teach little of the eternal truths to be learned from the lessons of history, philosophy, the arts, and other "impractical" disciplines. In the words of essayist Fr. James Thornton, these "'technological functionaries' ... are frequently little more than fools and dilettantes when they step outside of their chosen professions. And a society led by technological functionaries is ... ignorant of the lessons of the past and ignorant most particularly of its own ignorance. While the technological functionaries may well be brilliant in their own fields, they are not truly educated since they have been stunted in the ... acquisition of a useful base of knowledge." The Founding Fathers, by way of contrast, were both educated and practical men; they were, in addition to their formidable intellectual attainments, merchants, doctors, lawyers, investors, farmers, and landowners. Yet it was their education that kindled in their breasts the informed patriotism that produced our Constitution.

If our republic is to be preserved, we must renew our commitment to private and public virtue, and resolve to educate ourselves in the sweet doctrines of human liberty. For virtue, as Thomas Jefferson warned, "is not hereditary." Each generation of Americans must relearn the lessons of the past; each must build on the example set by the Founders to keep fertile the soil of public virtue in which the seeds of freedom are sown anew in every age.



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