



Focus on Religious Freedom

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Signers of Declaration of Independence Laid the Foundation for Religious Tolerance in America

The Declaration of Independence is revered, per University of Oxford historian Richard Carwardine, as “the founding political document of an embryonic American nation.”

But it was also significant, he writes, as “a moral summons to united action, written and signed by fifty-six men of diverse religious views.” And that, he suggests, laid the foundation for the enshrinement of religious liberty and religious tolerance into America’s laws and national character.

While religious freedom was not the Declaration’s primary focus, Carwardine makes clear, the signers were not unmindful of its importance. He illustrates this with a quote from Charles Carroll of Maryland, the document’s only Catholic signer:

“I had in view not only our independence of England, but the toleration of all sects professing the Christian religion and communicating to them all equal rights.”

It is also illustrated in the pragmatism of the document’s chief author, Thomas Jefferson, a Deist whose concept of a “creator God” was “consistent with eighteenth century rationalist ideas” that “fed the Enlightenment,” Carwardine observes.

The Preamble reflected such Enlightenment concepts as natural rights “endowed by the Creator” and sanctioned by “the laws of nature and Nature’s God...”

Yet, Carwardine explains, Jefferson shared with John Adams, “a Calvinist Congregationalist turned Unitarian, and the equally unorthodox Benjamin Franklin, a Freemason devoted to the ideal of human progress,” a “lifelong interest in religion” and an “esteem for Christianity’s ethical principles.” “Together,” Carwardine writes, “they ensured the Declaration was grounded in righteousness and virtue.”

And a “religious pragmatism in the pursuit of continental unity led Jefferson and his committee to embrace Congress’s additions to his original draft,” so that the final document includes the “theistic premise that the earthly world is ruled by God.”

This, Carwardine concludes, allowed “all the signatories—whether leaning towards Deism or Christianity, rationalism or biblicism—to unite in their diversity behind a natural rights manifesto that would shake the world”—and that would not have been possible without the signers’ exemplary commitment to religious tolerance and religious liberty.