

## **George Washington and Religion**

In his Farewell Address, George Washington included an important comment about the role of religion in the life of the nation. There was a difference, he said, between the needs of an individual and the needs of America as a whole. An individual might not need the doctrines and practices of an organized church to cultivate his own private moral life. But for the welfare of the whole society, Washington believed the life of the nation must proceed within the fabric of religiously moral ideals.

There can be no democracy and no stability where the social order is based only on the individual's self-interest. And a genuinely fulfilling individual life cannot be rooted in the motive of mere personal gain. So, said Washington, religion and morality are indispensable "supports" for the well-being and "political prosperity" of the nation. Religion is necessary.

At the same time, religion cannot and must not be imposed on people. This is the key to the real meaning of America's relationship to religion. There must be religion (or its intense inner equivalent) and, of equal importance, there must be no *imposition* of religion by government, or by any group. There must be a sense of God, but there must also be the freedom to accept or reject God.

We might say that Washington and others like Franklin and Jefferson may not have regarded religious practices as ends in themselves. They saw them as instruments leading toward an inner improvement of man, a change of heart and not merely a change in outer behavior. But for the nation as a whole, the Founding Fathers considered religious belief and practice necessary. Religion would maintain a standard of virtue, without which no nation can endure.

Washington's insistence on the need for religion was profoundly practical. Religion can help keep the principle of personal gain from dominating the life of society, especially a society in which personal liberty prevails. The ideals of religious morality, together with a uniquely democratic Constitution, helped stabilize a free people who had thrown off the burden of tyranny.

For Washington, and for many of the Founders, freedom of religion meant not only the liberty to practice whatever religion one chooses. It also meant that

genuine freedom must be rooted in the religious dimension. A religion that is not freely chosen is not true religion; and freedom that is not religious is not true freedom. The present age has tended to emphasize the first half of this proposition, that religion must be freely chosen. But it has neglected the second half, which tells us that human freedom does not simply mean doing whatever one wants. That is a childish idea. A mature vision of freedom--religious vision of freedom—implies voluntary obedience to the higher law of conscience.

Our Founders believed that law calls to each and every one of us.

— **Jacob Needleman, author of *The American Soul: Rediscovering the Wisdom of the Founders*.**

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