

NO GOVERNMENT 'INTERMEDDLING' WITH RELIGION!

Jefferson And Madison Opposed Government-Sponsored Prayer Proclamations

Founding Fathers Thomas Jefferson and James Madison opposed government-issued religious proclamations. Both men were key architects of religious liberty in America, and both believed strongly that government should not meddle in religious matters.

As president, Jefferson refused to issue proclamations calling for days of prayer. In a Jan. 23, 1808, letter to the Rev. Samuel Miller, he explained why. Here are some excerpts from that missive:

“I have duly received your favor of the 18th and am thankful to you for having written it, because it is more agreeable to prevent than to refuse what I do not think myself authorized to comply with. I consider the government of the U.S. as interdicted by the Constitution from intermeddling with religious institutions, their doctrines, discipline, or exercises.... Certainly no power to prescribe any religious exercise, or to assume authority in religious discipline, has been delegated to the general government....

But it is only proposed that I should *recommend*, not prescribe a day of fasting & prayer. That is, that I should *indirectly* assume to the U. S. an authority over religious exercises which the Constitution has directly precluded them from. It must be meant too that this recommendation is to carry some authority, and to be sanctioned by some penalty on those who disregard it; not indeed of fine and imprisonment, but of some degree of proscription perhaps in public opinion. And does the change in the nature of the penalty make the recommendation the less *a law* of conduct for those to whom it is directed?

I do not believe it is for the interest of religion to invite the civil magistrate to direct its exercises, its discipline, or its doctrines; nor of the religious societies that the general government should be invested with the power of affecting any uniformity of time or matter among them. Fasting & prayer are religious exercises. The enjoining them an act of discipline. Every religious society has a right to determine for itself the times for these exercises, & the objects proper for them, according to their own particular tenets; and this right can never be safer than in their own hands, where the constitution has deposited it.

I am aware that the practice of my predecessors may be quoted. But I have ever believed that the example of state executives led to the assumption of that authority by the general government, without due examination, which would have discovered that what might be a right in a state government, was a violation of that right when assumed by another. Be this as it may, every one must act according to the dictates of his own reason, & mine tells me that civil powers alone have been given to the President of the U.S. and no authority to direct the religious exercises of his constituents.

I again express my satisfaction that you have been so good as to give me an opportunity of explaining myself in a private letter, in which I could give my reasons more in detail

than might have been done in a public answer: and I pray you to accept the assurances of my high esteem & respect.”

Madison, who succeeded Jefferson as president, also had concerns about religious proclamations. Although he issued prayer proclamations during the War of 1812 at the request of Congress, he later expressed regret for doing so. In an undated essay that scholars call “The Detached Memoranda,” (believed to have been written around 1817), Madison addressed the issue at length:

“Religious proclamations by the Executive recommending thanksgivings & fasts are shoots from the same root with the legislative acts reviewed.

“Although recommendations only, they imply a religious agency, making no part of the trust delegated to political rulers.

“The objections to them are:

1. That Governments ought not to interpose in relation to those subject to their authority but in cases where they can do it with effect. An *advisory* Government is a contradiction in terms.
2. The members of a Government as such can in no sense be regarded as possessing an advisory trust from their Constituents in their religious capacities. They cannot form an ecclesiastical Assembly, Convocation, Council, or Synod, and as such issue decrees or injunctions addressed to the faith or the Consciences of the people. In their individual capacities, as distinct from their official station, they might unite in recommendations of any sort whatever, in the same manner as any other individuals might do. But then their recommendations ought to express the true character from which they emanate.
3. They seem to imply and certainly nourish the erroneous idea of a *national* religion. The idea just as it related to the Jewish nation under a theocracy, having been improperly adopted by so many nations which have embraced Christianity, is too apt to lurk in the bosoms even of Americans, who in general are aware of the distinction between religious & political societies. The idea also of a union of all to form one nation under one government in acts of devotion to the God of all is an imposing idea. But reason and the principles of the Christian religion require that all the individuals composing a nation even of the same precise creed & wished to unite in a universal act of religion at the same time, the union ought to be effected through the intervention of their religious not of their political representatives. In a nation composed of various sects, some alienated widely from others, and where no agreement could take place through the former, the interposition of the latter is doubly wrong.
4. The tendency of the practice, to narrow the recommendation to the standard of the predominant sect. The first proclamation of [George] Washington dated Jan.1, 1795, recommending a day of thanksgiving, embraced all who believed in a supreme ruler of the universe. That of [John] Adams called for a Christian worship. Many private letters

reproached the proclamations issued by James Madison for using general terms, used in that of President Washington, and some of them for not inserting particulars according with the faith of certain Christian sects. The practice if not strictly guarded naturally terminates in a conformity to the creed of the majority and a single sect, if amounting to a majority.

5. The last & not the least objection is the liability of the practice to a subserviency to political views; to the scandal of religion, as well as the increase of party animosities. Candid or incautious politicians will not always disown such views. In truth it is difficult to frame such a religious proclamation generally suggested by a political state of things, without referring to them in terms having some bearing on party questions. The proclamation of President Washington, which was issued just after the suppression of the Insurrection in Pennsylvania and at a time when the public mind was divided on several topics, was so construed by many.

Note: Some antiquated spellings and grammatical uses have been changed to modern useage.

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Americans United is a religious liberty watchdog group based in Washington, D.C. Founded in 1947, the organization educates Americans about the importance of church-state separation in safeguarding religious freedom.

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