FEATURE

Faith and Religion: Wisdom from the Founding Rationalists

What Jefferson and Adams Might Tell Mitt Romney

By David Ignatius

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A **bracing text** for this Christmas week is the famous correspondence between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson.

Their letters are a reminder that the Founders were men of the Enlightenment - supreme rationalists who would have found the religiosity of much of our modern political life quite abhorrent.

It's not that these men didn't have religious beliefs: They were, to their deaths, passionate seekers of truth, metaphysical as well as physical.

It's that their beliefs didn't fit into pious cubby holes. Indeed, the deist Jefferson took a pair of scissors to the New Testament to create his "Jefferson Bible," or, formally, "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth," which cut out the parts he regarded as supernatural or misinterpreted by the Gospel writers.

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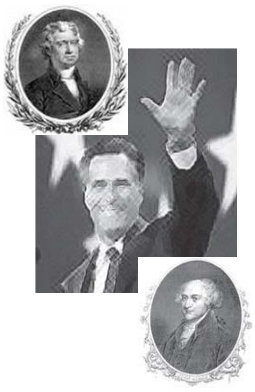

It's useful to examine the musings of these American rationalists in this political season when religion has been a prominent topic. Politicians and commentators have suggested that for the Founders, the very idea of **freedom was God-given** — or, as the Declaration of Independence puts it, that human beings are **"endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights."** Yet this famous passage begins with a distillation of the Enlightenment's celebration of human reason: **"We hold these truths to be self-evident."**

My Christmastime reading of the Adams-Jefferson letters was prompted by this year's most interesting political speech but one I also found troubling — Mitt Romney's Dec. 6 speech on **"Faith in America."** It was a fine evocation of our **twin heritage** of religion and religious freedom, until he got to this ritual denunciation of the bogeymen known as secularists. "They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. **Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life.** It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America — the religion of secularism."

Anyone who reads Adams and Jefferson — or for that matter, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton or other voices of the American Enlightenment — can make their own judgment about what the Founders would say about Romney's broadside against secularism. My guess is that their response would be something like: **"That is bunkum, sir."**

Many of the Founders liked to speak of the **"God of Nature,"** notes Garrett Epps, a professor of constitutional law at the University of Oregon. Adams used this term in a June 20, 1815, letter to Jefferson: **"The question before the human race is, whether the God of nature shall govern the world by His own laws, or whether priests and kings shall rule it by fictitious miracles?"** Adams mistrusted priests

and kings, but he was also skeptical of the revolutionary philosophers who had overthrown them in France. He spent his life looking for a middle ground.

Jefferson spoke in a May 5, 1817, letter of **"true religion"** as based on **"moral precepts, innate in man,"** and the **"sublime doctrine of philanthropism and deism taught us by Jesus of Nazareth."** He contrasted this true faith with **"sectarian dogmas."** If the sectarian version prevailed, warned Jefferson, then he might agree with Adams's speculation that **"this would be the best of all possible worlds if there were no religion in it."**

Before leaving these restless men and their ruminations on man and God in what one editor of the letters called "an epistolary duet," let us recall this caustic Nov. 4, 1816, missive from Adams: "We have now, it seems, **a national Bible Society, to propagate King James's Bible through all nations. Would it not be better to apply these pious subscriptions to purify Christendom from the corruptions of Christianity than to propagate those corruptions in Europe, Asia, Africa, and America?"**

The Founders certainly believed in God, but for most of them, their faith was **a deeply private matter**, as Jefferson put it in a Jan. 11, 1817, letter, a subject "known to my God and myself alone." Indeed, they found loud, public displays of religiosity a profanation of this inner and spiritual practice of religion. Adams, the more conventionally "religious" of the two, insisted in a Sept. 14, 1813, letter that there is **"but one being who can understand the universe, and that it is not only vain but wicked for insects to pretend to comprehend it."**

One theme in this year's political campaign has been whether the United States will move from the faith-based policies the Bush administration has celebrated to a more rationalist and secular approach. In this debate, religious conservatives like to stress their connection to the Founders and to the republic's birth as "one nation under God." But a re-reading of the Adams-Jefferson letters is a reminder that in this debate, the Founders — as men of the Enlightenment — would surely have sided with the party of Reason.

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