

The Faith of the Founders vs Moralistic Therapeutic Deism

Roll Call Sunday at Harbor Church, October 23, 2011

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This day marks 246 years since the day we believe the First Baptist Church began its life as a formal congregation. This year marks 350 years since a group of English families from Massachusetts and from Portsmouth, Rhode Island, came to Block Island to live. If we can believe the research of Arthur Kinoy in *The Real Mystery of Block Island* and even the history written by pastor Samuel Livermore, the original settlers of the island were Baptists and began to worship in their homes immediately—so in a sense the congregation of Baptists on Block Island dates from 1661. You might not know it from many of the activities surrounding the 350th anniversary, but the motivation of the founders to come to Block Island was religious.

The founder for whom this is most clear is James Sands. He had been a follower of Anne Hutchinson in Boston and when she was driven out of the colony for her heretical views, Sands moved with her family to Portsmouth, to a safe haven offered by Roger Williams. Hutchinson believed in the inner witness of the Holy Spirit and the freedom to interpret the Bible for herself. She held the “Anabaptist” view that civil penalties should not be used to enforce conformity in religious doctrine. Eventually the authorities in Massachusetts started making raids into Rhode Island to arrest heretics who were on the lam, and Anne Hutchinson, then a widow, decided to move far away to Dutch territory in the Hudson Valley—to what is still called the Hutchinson River. Guess who went with her to help her build a house? James Sands.

In the late 1650’s a group of men in Boston began talking about buying Block Island. These were wealthy men, well-educated landowners. Why leave the commercial center of Boston and move to an undeveloped island with no harbor? The reason seems to have been that such an island would be a safe place for them to worship and teach as they saw fit, while being unlikely to be attacked by forces from Boston. There were laws in Boston against Baptists. Dr. John Clarke of Newport had been arrested in a town outside Boston for serving the Lord’s Supper in a home and dragged with his deacon to Boston for a trial. In 1659, Mary Dyer, a friend and disciple of Anne Hutchinson, returned to Boston from Rhode Island and was arrested; she was eventually hanged on Boston Common. Being a Baptist was a dangerous thing.

It took over a century after the founders landed on Block Island for a church to be formally organized, but there is no doubt that the church that was formed reflected the faith of the founders. From the beginning both James Sands and Simon Ray, a young man who had inherited a large piece of land outside Boston but gave it up to have freedom, served the island as lay preachers. They had church in their homes. Ray and his son led a house church in which they would pray, sing the psalms, read from books of sermons, and sometimes give their own admonitions to those who were gathered.

But from the beginning, there was the hope that the island could attract a trained minister. The first survey of lots on the island shows #15 as “Minister’s Land,” which could be leased to pay the minister but never sold. Since there was no church, the town took responsibility for this land. It’s not clear how much of the income was really set aside for a future church, and it seems that the first pastor, Rev. Niles, sold his land when he was forced to leave the church because he wasn’t a true Baptist, having been corrupted by Harvard. But there was enough common understanding that the land really was to support a minister that in 1875 this church voted to ask the town to use the money from the minister’s lot to build a parsonage for the church. Unfortunately for me, that never happened. But my point is that the dream of a Baptist church was in the mind of the founders in 1661.

When the first pastor was finally called in 1700, 28 men signed a document extending the call and promising seven acres on Fresh Pond, laid out by Simon Ray, John Raymond, and Edward Ball. The kind of faith they had is reflected in the way that statement of call begins: “We the inhabitants of said Island, being deeply sensible of the great Love of God in Christ Jesus.” They said that they wanted to be “instructed by [God’s] word and to have [their] souls instructed and edified by him in his promises, that the word of God be preached and sounded forth in the purity of holiness according to the Scriptures.”

I want to compare that kind of faith to the religion that characterizes the island and our nation in the 21st century. Back in 2005, the results were published of a three-year study of the religious beliefs of American teenagers, funded by the Lilly Endowment. They were interpreted in two important books by two of the researchers—one by Christian Smith then of UNC and now of Notre Dame, called *Soul Searching*, and one by Kenda Creasy Dean of Princeton Seminary, called *Almost Christian*. What they discovered in 3,000 interviews was that it didn’t matter very much what teenagers were taught in church. They got almost the same answers from kids who attended evangelical or mainline or Catholic churches, or no church at all. What the teens believed was not the official faith of their churches. The great majority believed in a generic American religion which is a very watered-down version of Christianity—so watered down as to be unrecognizable. The researchers named this almost-universal American religion “Moralistic Therapeutic Deism.” They concluded that this was not just the religion of teenagers. This is the religion of their parents. It is the religion of the culture as a whole.

Here are the five basic tenets of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism they identified:

1. A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth.
2. God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions.
3. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself.
4. God does not need to be particularly involved in one’s life except when God is needed to resolve a problem.
5. Good people go to heaven when they die.

None of those beliefs will seem unusual to you. But they are a long way from the teachings of Christianity and the faith the founders brought to Block Island.

The moralistic part is the idea that God just wants us to be good and nice, and that if we are good and nice, we will go to heaven. The therapeutic part is the idea that God’s role is to meet our needs and to help us feel good about ourselves without becoming too personally involved in our lives. The deistic part is that the concept of God is similar to 18th century Deists in seeing one generic God in all faiths without any reference to Christ or the Holy Spirit as in Trinitarian faith, and the sense that God is “at a distance” letting the world go its own way—except, and this is the “therapeutic” idea, when we have problems. God is “something like a combination Divine Butler and Cosmic Therapist: he’s always on call, takes care of any problems that arise, [and] professionally helps his people to feel better about themselves.”

This kind of religion is perfectly suited to be the civil religion of America—inoffensive, bland, self-centered, in tune with consumer culture. But it is not Christian faith. And it is this religion—not atheism—that is the great threat to the church today. You see, the researchers got into the project trying to answer the age-old question, “Why are we losing the young people?” And the answer was not that the church believes too many doctrines that youth can’t accept, but that the church doesn’t believe anything worth giving yourself to. The teenagers were not rebels, rejecting the traditional faith of their parents; they were mirrors, reflecting the feel-good “all-dogs-go-to-heaven” religion of their parents and the culture at large. The researchers concluded that if we adults in the church actually believed in the Christian faith and put it in practice in some radical way, we might have a shot at communicating

Christianity to our kids and grandkids. Professor Dean at Princeton says that the most important thing you can do as a parent is to do *one radical thing* in your life because of Jesus—give up a job, take in an international student, give away a significant part of your wealth, choose to join a struggling church instead of a successful one—*something*, anything that will make your child see that you are really giving something up because you are a follower of Jesus. If they can't see that Jesus makes any difference in our lives, why would they want to bother with the pretense of church?

What would the founders of this town or the founders of this church think of the religion that pervades our society? They would find it far from the faith they came here to preserve.

Consider the “moralistic” part of the American religion. It says that God basically wants us to be nice; that's the sum of our ethics. Nice people go to heaven. But the Christian gospel does not command people to be good in order to gain God's approval; the gospel says that we are *not* good, but in spite of that God has *already* loved us and forgiven us and saved us. In light of that, we are motivated to *do* good and love others. That's a very different story.

The heart of the controversy between Anne Hutchinson and the Puritan clergy of Boston—the controversy that led to the settling of Block Island—was that Anne taught a covenant of grace while the clergy taught a covenant of works. The Puritans did not believe that you could be *saved* by works; they believed that you could tell if a person was saved by their works. So they had the right to decide if a person belonged in the church or not—whether they were among the elect, as they saw it—by whether they did the right things, like sitting through long sermons. Anne Hutchinson, on the other hand, taught that the experience of grace was an inner heart experience that could be recognized by someone else who had received grace—something more like being “born again.” The Boston leaders were Calvinists and therefore believed in grace, but in practice they had turned into moralizers who acted as if salvation was all about being a good person.

In this church in 1784 Thomas Dodge was ordained to the ministry, and at that time the church adopted 11 articles of faith, the first being that the Scriptures are the *only* rule of faith and practice. The fifth article our church adopted speaks to this idea that we can be saved by being good:

We believe that the justification of God's children or Believers is only by the Righteousness of Christ imputed to them without the consideration of any work of Righteousness done by them, and that the full and free pardon of all their sins and transgressions past, present, and to come is only through the blood of Christ according to the riches of his grace.

Hey, I *still* believe that. You don't go to heaven because you are a good person; you go to heaven because you have been forgiven on the basis of what God already did for us on the cross of Jesus Christ.

The second characteristic of the American religion is that it is “therapeutic”—that is, it's all about helping you feel better. Why do you come to church? People today say things like “I want peace of mind,” “I want to feel better about myself,” “I need to recharge before I head into a work week.” Do you see how to a person that thinks church is really about God those statements could sound downright narcissistic? The Christian faith accepts that life is difficult, that life involves growth and struggle, that life is about becoming the person God wants you to be rather than the person you are comfortable with. Faith means orienting your life around God, not around yourself. God does not exist in order to meet your needs. The church does not exist to make you feel good. The church exists to glorify God, to spread the message of God's love, to allow his Spirit to transform us, to work with God for justice and reconciliation in this world.

Back in 1940, C. S. Lewis noted the modern tendency to imagine a God whose primary concern was our feelings. He wrote in *The Problem of Pain*:

What would really satisfy us would be a God who said of anything we happened to like, “What does it matter so long as they are contented?” We want, in fact, not so much a Father in Heaven

as a grandfather in heaven - a senile benevolence who, as they say, "liked to see young people enjoying themselves" and whose plan for the universe was simply that it might be truly said at the end of each day, "a good time was had by all".

I think the slide into moralistic therapeutic deism was well underway by 1940, as you can see in the theology—or lack of it—in most of the movies of the 1930's. The theologians of the day complained of a slide into secularism, but it wasn't really that. It was just substituting a user-friendly God for the Christian one.

Deism is the third term used to describe the American religion. Deism usually refers to the rather philosophical faith of the Enlightenment, the belief system of many of the founders of our republic in the 1700's. It was the clockmaker God, who got things started but then allowed the world to run on rules. It was a generic God not colored much in imagination by Jesus, and certainly not a Trinitarian God described as a loving community. That God is pretty much the generic God of American civil religion who doesn't offend anyone or demand anything. When we say we are "under God," that's the God we mean; it's about as meaningful as saying that we are "under heaven."

But the founders of this church were very clear that while their faith was not the authoritarian faith of Boston, it was faith in Christ as revealed in the Scriptures, not faith in the generic god of the philosophers. In 1759, when David Sprague was called as the minister of this not-yet-constituted church, the condition of his employment was spelled out:

So long as said David Sprague shall serve the inhabitants of the town by preaching to them the gospel of Christ according to the Scriptures of truth, making them and them only the rules of his faith, doctrine, and practice.

I hope, frankly, that those are the conditions of *my* employment. I have been accused, virtually all my life, of being a liberal—because I stood against racism, because I opposed war in the name of Jesus, because I stood up for the rights of women, because I taught God is on the side of the poor, because I believe that Jesus accepts gays and foreigners and the mentally ill. Just this past week, a friend said to me, "No more liberal sermons!" But the truth is that I, like the founders, am just trying to follow the Bible as the only rule of faith and practice. I am trying to stand for the faith of our fathers that challenged Rome and Boston. I am repeating what Jesus said about choosing between God and Money and about loving your enemies. By my own lights I am profoundly, radically conservative, more conservative than political conservatives.

So yes, I stand with the founders against moralistic therapeutic deism, and I hope that our church does, too. My prayer for the First Baptist Church on this anniversary—be it the 246th or the 350th—is Paul's prayer for the church in Ephesus: "May Christ make his home in your hearts as you trust in him. May your roots go down into God's love and keep you strong....Glory to God in the church and in Christ Jesus through all generations forever and ever! Amen."