

# OpenTheo

## Liberty, Pandora, and the Serpent

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### **Life and Books and Everything** - Clearly Reformed

Was America founded on purely Christian principles and ideals? Or, were the founding fathers simply trying to prevent corruption and preserve the sanctity of consciousness?

In this article for WORLD opinions, Kevin discusses three observable pillars that make up the famous and crucial founding principles of America's heritage.

### **Transcript**

[Music] Greetings and salutations, this is Life and Books and Everything. I'm Kevin DeYoung. Today I'm reading my latest article from World Opinions entitled Liberty, Pandora, and the Serpent.

What undergirds the American experiment? When James Madison died in 1836, his last testament, written six years earlier, was finally published. The document, only two paragraphs long, was entitled "Advice to My Country." After recounting a lifelong commitment to his country and the cause of its liberty, Madison expressed his deepest conviction, quote, that the union of the states be cherished and perpetuated. Then he offered one final admonition for the country he did so much to create, let the open enemy to it be regarded as a Pandora with her box opened, and the disguised one as the Serpent creeping his deadly wiles into paradise.

Madison's advice is a fitting testament for the architect of the Constitution and the entire generation of founders because it pulls together seamlessly and subconsciously, the three strands of political thought that shaped America's founding, Lockean liberalism with a reference to the cause of liberty, classic republicanism with a reference to Pandora and ancient mythology, and Protestant Christianity with a reference to the devil's deception in the Garden of Eden. Although the statesmen and thinkers of the revolutionary era disagreed on much, almost all of the founders took these three principles for granted, which explains why men as diverse an outlook as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, and John Witherspoon could work together in crafting or at least signing the documents that established

American independence and the American form of government. Although the three strands can sometimes pull in different directions, each played a crucial role in shaping the American experiment.

Lockean liberalism provided Americans with a basic understanding of the social contract and with a shared sense that government existed to preserve God-given rights. Classical republicanism provided Americans with the ideals of engaged citizenry and a free people who use their freedom responsibly and for the good of others. Protestant Christianity provided a shared belief in God's existence in his providential ordering of all things in the supreme importance of the Bible and in a basically Calvinist anthropology that saw man as fundamentally flawed but also capable of virtue and improvement.

Even the way America came to see itself as a country founded upon almost sacred texts requiring reverence and careful examination was a Protestant self-conception. As debates surrounding Christian nationalism continue, both as a critique from the left and as the desired political goal for some on the right, it's important to note that the language is foreign to America's founding. Did committed Christians and Christian principles play a key role in the founding of America? Yes.

Did most of the founders assume that Christianity would have a privileged place in American life? Undoubtedly. But this is different from suggesting that they set out to form a government ordered toward man's heavenly good, read Christianity. They were too wary of concentrated power to think that government could be trusted with such a lofty goal.

In general, there are two main ways to conceive of the task of government. One is to ask the question, what is the best we could accomplish as a people and how should government pursue this highest good? The other is to ask the question, what is the worst we might do as a people and how should government be ordered to prevent this evil? The American founding was animated by the second question. Although the founders believed that men were capable of self governance, they also recognized that because of human sin and selfishness, government by men should be fundamentally constrained.

This is why Madison argued that government as a reflection of human nature, which he says contains a degree of depravity requiring a certain degree of circumspection and distrust. Federalist 55 must not be given unchecked power, Federalist 51, and why Hamilton argued for a government that would offset the natural inclinations of men, Federalist 9. The proper role of government for Madison and Hamilton was not a grand plan of leading man heavenward, but the simpler and more manageable goal of safeguarding our life and liberty and that of our neighbor. In her book, *The Roads of Modernity*, Gertrude Himmelfarb argues that France, Britain, and America each had their own distinctive enlightenment.

In France, the enlightenment was about the exaltation of reason. In Britain, the

enlightenment was about social virtues. And in America, the enlightenment was chiefly about liberty.

There's a reason the founders spoke of an empire of liberty and called each other sons of liberty. Their great fear was tyranny and their great aim in ordering a new government was the preservation of freedom. Their emphasis on liberty was not a rejection of Christianity, but based on Christian ideas about the sanctity of the conscience and the corruptibility of too much power in the hands of too few persons.

I appreciate much of what Christian nationalism is against, a naked public square, atomistic individualism, and a conception of liberty that must allow for every form of deviance and degeneration. But as an ism, Christian nationalism is bound to fail, the language is too foreign to America's founding documents and founding ideals. Locking liberalism is not the problem.

The problem is when this liberalism exists without the communal aims of classical republicanism and the theological assumptions of Christianity. The three strands are undoubtedly frayed, but it is up to us to try to tie them back together. That's liberty Pandora and the serpent from my latest article in world opinions.

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(buzzing)