

“Even a brand-new citizen has an absolute right to declare allegiance to the United States without acknowledging the authority of any god” - How the US religious right distorts history

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On the Fourth of July, the Today show featured an annual ceremony at Monticello, Thomas Jefferson's home, in which hundreds of immigrants take the oath that makes them naturalized citizens of the United States. Such occasions are always moving, as I can attest because I have attended the naturalization of several friends. The most affecting ceremony I ever witnessed, however, was one in which a committed atheist exercised his right to take the citizenship oath without the words “so help me God.” Think about that, Rick Perry, as you go forward with your plans for a Christian prayer summit to return America to its nonexistent theological roots. Even a brand-new citizen has an absolute right to declare allegiance to the United States without acknowledging the authority of any god.

Gov. Perry's Invitation to The Response from The Response USA on Vimeo.

This right is written into the Constitution. Article 6, Section 3 states explicitly that federal officials “shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” The addition of the word “affirmation” is significant because it meant that officeholders could not be compelled to take an oath on the Bible.

This provision led one North Carolina minister, during his state's debate over ratification, to describe the Constitution as “an invitation for Jews and pagans of every kind to come among us.” Actually, he was right. The forces of religious orthodoxy lost that initial battle in 1787, and their theological descendants have never stopped trying to reverse the verdict.

A provision conforming to the spirit of Article 6 is now written into the rules for taking the citizenship oath. Although the standard oath—which apparently everyone took at Monticello on Monday—concludes with the words “so help me God,” government rules explicitly note that some applicants, “by reason of religious training or belief (or individual interpretation thereof) or for other reasons of good conscience cannot take the oath with the words ‘on oath’ or [so help me God](#)’ included.” In these cases, the procedural requirements state, the words “solemnly affirm” will be substituted for “on oath” and the words “so help me God” will be deleted. Applicants do not have to provide any documentation of their beliefs; they need only state that their conscience prevents them from invoking God. It makes me proud to recall that the founders, who did in fact live in an era when the states were peopled almost entirely by Christians, thought to include freethinkers and non-Christians (as well as Christian

denominations forbidding the taking of oaths) in their basic laws. And it disgusts me to know that the governor of a large state, as well as a number of declared presidential candidates, are either ignorant or contemptuous of the best of our nation's founding principles. That the governor of Texas would lead an event sponsored by a conservative Christian group--at which only Christians will be allowed to speak--attests to the profound ignorance of the far right about the nation's past and present. The official spokesmen for "The Response" (the name of Perry's prayer event) told the far-right American Family Association (which is footing the bill) that that one purpose of the summit is to convert non-Christians. "A lot of people want to criticize what we're doing, as if we're somehow being exclusive of [sic] other faiths," said Eric Bearse. "But anyone who comes to this solemn assembly regardless of their faith tradition or background, will feel the love, grace, and warmth of Jesus Christ...that there's acceptance and that there's love and that there's hope if people will seek out the living Christ." There is much to debate in the founders' writings about religion--particularly regarding their private beliefs--but of one thing we can be certain from their actions and the Constitution they wrote. None of the first six presidents of the United States would ever have led a rally based on the principle that non-Christians may attend only to hear the news that Jesus really ought to be their leader here on earth. Perry's involvement in this event ought to rule him out of any serious consideration for the Republican presidential nomination. It won't, of course, because distortion and ownership of American history is one of the primary aims of the religious right. Perry's positions have too frequently been linked by intellectual snobs with his Texas origins. This is an insult to Texas: Gov. Ann Richards would never have endowed such a rally with the influence of her office two decades ago, and Lyndon Johnson would have sent the Christian soldiers of the American Family Association packing, no doubt with a few of his trademark profanities in their ears. Even George W. Bush, with his close ties to the religious right, would never have presided over such a rally of extremists as governor or president. Ignorance, and Americans' tolerance for ignorance, know no state boundaries. The fact-challenged Rep. Michele Bachmann, who has refused to retract her statement that John Quincy Adams (age nine when the Declaration of Independence was signed by his father and fourteen when Cornwallis surrendered at Yorktown in 1781) was one of the founders. She also claimed, with equally invincible ignorance, that the founders "worked tirelessly until slavery was no more in the United States." This rewriting of history is attributable neither to pure historical stupidity nor to a stubborn refusal to admit error (although both certainly play a role). The exclusion of any history that does not fit the right-wing script--whether that means admitting that many of the founders were slaveholders or that many of them feared religious entanglement with government--is essential to the "take back America" mantra of the right. As an antidote to the historical revisionism associated with the beginning of the 2012 presidential campaign, I highly recommend two speeches by Robert Green Ingersoll (1833-1899), known as the Great Agnostic in the late nineteenth century. In his Centennial Oration, delivered on July 4, 1976, in Peoria, Illinois, Ingersoll declared (alas, with too much optimism), "We have retired the gods from politics. We have found that man is the only source of political power, and that the governed should govern." He asserted (again, too optimistically) that the founders, by designating "We the People" as the

supreme governmental authority, “did away forever with the theological idea of government.” In 1890, Ingersoll gave a memorable speech in Boston on the many proposals by Protestant ministers to amend the Constitution and replace “we the people” with God or Jesus as the source of governmental authority. Here are the words you will never hear in public today—from extreme right-wingers like Rick Perry and from nearly all politicians, including those with a basically secular outlook, on the national stage: “There has been in our country a divorce of church and state. This follows as a natural sequence of the declaration that governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed.’ The priest was no longer a necessity. His presence was a contradiction of the principle on which the Republic was founded. He represented not the authority of the people, but of some Power from on High,’ and to recognize this other Power was inconsistent with free government. The founders of the Republic at that time parted company with the priests, and said to them: You may turn your attention to the other world—we will attend to the affairs of this.’ Equal liberty was given to all. Bu the ultra theologian is not satisfied with this—he wishes to destroy the liberty of the people—he wishes a recogniztion of his God as the source of authority to the end that the church may become the supreme power.”

“But the sun will not be turned backward.”

Turning the sun backward is precisely what Perry, Bachmann and their ilk are trying to do. They want to convince the public that their version of sacred authority, not human reason, ought to govern the United States. That they are taken seriously as potential leaders by anyone in this country is a sobering thought when we reflect on the rebellion against government by divine right that began two hundred and thirty-five years ago this week.

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P.S.

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