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Freedom of religion is important

It would be tragic for our country to succumb to the idea that the United States should be a Christian nation. The freedom to pursue one's religious or philosophical path can be integral to the full realization of our humanity. One of the great strengths of our society derives from having a secular government that endorses no religious perspective yet protects the rights of all citizens to follow our varied religious traditions or, just as importantly, to follow none at all.

While it's true our nation took root in a culture informed by Protestant Christianity, it's also true our government's founders largely were influenced by the Enlightenment — an 18th century intellectual movement that held reason to be primary in combating ignorance, superstition and tyranny to build a better world.

Among those founders, Thomas Jefferson was one of the most influential. In 1779, he first proposed Virginia's Act for Establishing Religious Freedom. It became a model for the secular aspects of the U.S. Constitution.

The eventual passage of Virginia's Religious Freedom Act in 1786 influenced delegates to the national Constitutional Convention that began in 1787. In her book, "Freethinkers," Susan Jacoby notes, "The convention could have modeled the federal Constitution after the Massachusetts constitution of 1780, which extended equal protection of the laws and the right to hold office only to Christians." She continued, "Legally entrenched privileges for Protestant Christianity were the rule rather than the exception in most states."

With such overwhelming precedence for providing religion, especially Protestant Christianity, legal deference, it would be reasonable to expect the same to happen with the Constitution's drafting, but it didn't. The delegates intentionally



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chose not to do so. Therefore, our federal Constitution never mentions God, not even as a rhetorical flourish in its preamble. Instead it begins: "We the people of the United States in order to form a more perfect union ..."

But the clearest indication of its secular intent appears in Article 6 Section 3, which stipulates "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." These secular innovations didn't go unnoticed at the time.

Again, Susan Jacoby wrote: "The secularism of the Constitution did produce substantial controversy during the ratification debates conducted by state conventions. The framers were denounced by religious traditionalists both for the Constitution's ban on religious tests for public office and for its failure to acknowledge God as the ultimate governmental authority. The opposition to Article 6 frequently took an anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic tone. At the

Massachusetts convention ... one speaker warned that unless the chief executive was required to take a religious oath, 'a Turk, a Jew, a Roman Catholic, and what is worse than all, a Universalist, may be President of the United States.'"

Before the First Amendment was added to the Constitution, that foundational document provided the basis for a secular government. Shortly after its ratification and George Washington's assumption of the presidency, he wrote a letter to the Jewish community of Newport, R.I., declaring:

"All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunity of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens."

May it ever be so.

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