

Faith of our Founding Fathers – James Madison

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September 2009*

ESPN recently aired a special on the most effective athletic combinations. If the History Channel were to do a similar show, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson would be at the top of their list.

From the same Virginian plantation class, lifelong members of the Virginia-established Anglican/Episcopalian Church, and almost neighbors, Madison and Jefferson were political and social soul mates. Madison was secretary of state for President Jefferson and succeeded him to the White House.

Madison was an unlikely person to so profoundly change Virginia and America. He was small, sickly, thin and short of stature. Some called him “Little Jimmy Madison.” He was shy, studious, cold, aloof and awkward at social events. He did not make a good first impression.

Two events shaped his religious and political views. First, Baptists were numerous where Madison lived: Orange, Va. By the late 1760s, Baptists were persecuted by the same state church Madison was a member of. They were kicked, punched, whipped, drug by their hair and imprisoned until the outbreak of the war in 1776. Their crime: they disturbed the peace by preaching outdoors, thus challenging the authority of the Anglican/Episcopalian established church.

Second, Madison attended the college of New Jersey, Princeton College, known as “a seminary of sedition” due to President John Witherspoon’s passionate advocacy for religious freedom and political independence from England. Madison studied with Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the Declaration of Independence. So taken by him, Madison stayed an additional year at Princeton to “read divinity,” as seminary education was then called; he considered going into ministry.

The Baptist experience of persecution and Witherspoon’s political and religious influence were not far from Madison’s heart and mind when he was elected delegate to the Virginia Assembly in 1784.

Religion became political in 1784. Virginia, along with the other 13 colonies was revising its constitution. All colonies were moving from colony to state in a new nation. Should Virginia have one established state church like the past – Anglican/Episcopalian – or several? Should Virginia support one or all of these churches through taxes? The Madison/Jefferson political combination sprang to life. Quarterback Madison took architect Jefferson’s 1779 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, and through a series of legislative and political moves, saw it become the law of the land in 1786. In less than 20 years, Virginia went from an established church for some, paid by all, to guaranteeing religious freedom for all and taxing none.

Madison laid out the case for religious freedom in an anonymously published pamphlet entitled “Memorial and Remonstrance against Church Religious Assessments” (taxation). He cited numerous reasons for not having an established church. The state would corrupt the church and vice versa. Bad

laws would be passed. Religious wars would occur. Government would interfere with the church and the church with government. The Christian faith and church does not need the power of government; it has the power of God! Government with an established church would end up penalizing, persecuting and not protecting those of a minority religion. "Religion and government," said Madison, "will both exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together."

In retrospect it is clear, as Virginia went so would the country. Virginia was the most populous, wealthiest, and hence, most important of the 13 Colonies. Eight of the first nine presidential terms were held by Virginians: Washington, Jefferson, Madison and Monroe. All served two terms.

The Madison/Jefferson combination rolled along to the federal Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia in 1787. Madison took such an active role that he is known as the "father of our Constitution." He authored the Bill of Rights, the first 10 amendments to the Constitution, and took a leading role for their authorization in order to appease Baptist leader John Leland. Leland opposed ratifying the federal Constitution of 1787. There was no guarantee of religious freedom. They cut a deal; Leland would use his considerable influence *for* ratification, *if* Madison would propose an amendment *for* religious freedom *after* ratification. Both men fulfilled their promises. The First Amendment, like the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, guaranteed religious freedom: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free expression thereof."

Toward the end of his long life Madison reflected on the impact of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom that disestablished the Anglican/Episcopalian Church. "No doubt exists," he said, "there is more religion among us now than there ever was before the Act was passed. This proves that law is not necessary to support religion."