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News *from* the University of Chicago Divinity School

FOR AMERICANS THE PHRASE “FAITH OF OUR FATHERS” CAN HAVE A DOUBLE RESONANCE.

It references both the founders of the United States of America and is also the source of that “holy faith” of which Christian hymnody proclaims the singer’s fealty unto death. This double legacy, with all its implications—the exclusivist reference of Christianity, the questions of the extent of citizenship, the establishment of religion—has been pivotal to the nation’s history.

Its omnipresence is heightened in the year of a presidential election. How might we think well about “the religion of the republic” in this new century whose advent is so variously challenged, not to say troubled? In a world that is smaller than ever, and in which our information about the claims to faith of myriad institutions—not solely religious or political ones—is so detailed, how does one talk about the “faith” citizens might have in their nation?

These are urgent questions, but their answer today is embroiled far too exclusively in the adjudication of disputes about prayer in schools and the like. At the time of the founding of the nation, however, the phrase “religion” had a significantly varied reference in the hands of those who, like Benjamin Franklin, were deists and distinguished between belief in God and the theologies of the Christian religions (note the plural). Franklin’s own idea of faith links it not to a particular religious tradition, but to an attitude toward ideals and their realization. For Franklin, republican faith had as its object the nation’s Constitution. But Franklin was clear that the faith was directed not to the document itself, but to the ideals to which it offers partial declaration. Indeed for Franklin the religions were themselves exemplary of misplaced or overreaching faith. The chief difference, he remarked in his speech endorsing the new Constitution on September 17, 1787, between the doctrines of the Roman Catholic and the Anglican churches, was that “the Romish Church is infallible, and the Church of England is never in the wrong.”

Franklin’s republican faith had another, parallel antithesis: the habits of individuals. What he deplored in these “Sects” he found abundantly present as well in his fellow

## Letter from the Dean



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creatures of God, “the many private persons (who) think almost as highly of their own Infallibility as that of their Sect.”

Whatever republican faith might mean, for Franklin it must not partake of the certitude of infallibility. In doctrine, whether institutional or personal, resided despotism rather than democracy.

Republican faith, then, is the antidote of doctrinal faith precisely because doctrine implies infallibility. One might wonder what Franklin would have made of John Henry Newman’s later concept of the development of doctrine; whatever the answer, we can be sure that Franklin would only have embraced it if, and when, he was assured that development precluded dogmatism.

Today our discussions of religion and democracy focus on matters of church and state and what sort of wall should exist between them in American public life. Franklin’s notion of republican faith suggests that we would do better to consider the quality of the faith that is the prerequisite even to such adjudications. Individuals and institutions, whether political or religious, hold in common a predilection for settled opinion. For Franklin, such established creeds, whether by church or by state, were in fact despotic and thus the antithesis of democracy.

To guard against both tendencies in our behavior and our institutions is to promote and preserve the civility that is essential to our common life. The common religion of our republic is thus the resistance of all dogmatisms. In that way, and that way alone, we may retain the benisons of republican government bequeathed to us. And this may be the ultimate act of faith—to enshrine values of the past in the present, for the benefit of the future. □

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