[MUSIC PLAYING]

In God we trust. Soul freedom. So help me God. How do these words relate to America? Stick with us, and we'll talk about that.

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But the word of the Lord abides forever.

Deliverance, Lord. Deliverance now.

So we are, then, one with the entire universe. We are not separate from it.

Whether it's been prompted by the public recitation of prayers at a high school football game, the staging of a nativity scene on the courthouse square, or the posting of the Ten Commandments in a public space, Americans have become more aware of the controversies associated with the separation of church and state in recent years. Some express concern that the nation is losing touch with its Christian roots, while others maintain that religion should have no bearing upon civic affairs and the functioning of government.

The basic questions are not new ones. What's the Constitution have to say about the relationship between church and state? And just how religious is America?

Well, the question of how religious America is is one that's been with us for a long time. We've been debating it from before we had the United States. So it's a tricky question. But the Constitution is a godless constitution. It's pretty clear that by law, this is a secular state. But one of the things this secular state does is give Americans freedom of choice when it comes to religion. And one of the things Americans do with that freedom of choice is they choose to be Christians. And they've done that for a very long time.

So I think we have secular by law, Christian by choice situation. And that dance between our secularity and our religiosity, our Christianity and our official noncommitment by law to religion. It is one of the great dynamics of American cultural and political history.

One of the real gifts of the Constitution and those who framed it was, they did not frame it explicitly as a Christian document. The Constitution does not contain the word "God." And that was not because our founding fathers did not care deeply about God and about their faith. But they cared so deeply, in a sense, that they realized that the framework of freedom that the nation would be founded on needed to be one in which faith itself was left free.

As Madison put it in his famous memorial and remonstrance, we cannot be demanding for ourselves the freedom to practice the religious life that moves us and at the same time deny that freedom to those who haven't seen it the way we have, who have not been convinced by the arguments and by the visions that have moved us. And that really is the realization that underpins the way in which religion does not play and in another way plays very deeply in the founding of the American Republic.

What's really I think significant about the American case is that this wasn't a secular elite-- and the elite was pretty secular-- imposing a separation of church and state on a religious populous that really wanted an established church. To the contrary, the strongest supporters besides the deist leaders themselves on the separation of church and state were the Baptists and the Quakers, that is, sectarian Christians who had been persecuted by established churches and did not want an established church. So the majority of believers, the majority of church goers, supported the First Amendment as fervently as the deists and the secularists.

So those people argued for the kind of constitution we have on theological grounds. And they pretty much knew what they were doing. They didn't say "nonestablishment" because they really meant, oh, well, we're all going to be Christians anyway. They said "nonestablishment" because they realized that we are Christians of many different dispositions, that Christianity is a long, protracted, centuries-long argument that has had many, many wars and that should not be established in the form of a state.

And because they also recognized, even if only theoretically, as Thomas Jefferson did, that to establish one religion might eventually mean that you could establish another. That it might be Islam, or that it might be some other religious tradition. So they steered away from that.

For example, in the Continental Congress Convention in Philadelphia, Benjamin Franklin stood up and said, I move that we open this meeting with prayer. And it was voted down. They weren't interested in prayer. They were interested in working out the details of their new government. Thomas Paine, who was sort of the philosophical architect, was known as the dirty little atheist. Thomas Jefferson, who was the author of the Declaration of Independence, was an 18th century deist. And even went through the Bible and carved out everything he didn't like and presented the Jeffersonian Bible. He took out all miracle and all supernatural references and left ethics in. So it's a myth to say that we were founded as a Christian nation. We were founded as a group of refugees getting away from religious persecution.

Many of the first Europeans who came to North America were looking for a land where they could freely practice their religious faith without fear of retribution. As they sailed across the Atlantic, those making the pilgrimage envisioned a meaningful and noble life for which they were destined. Approaching the shores of the New World, one of their leaders, John Winthrop, delivered a sermon in which he spoke of the new community they would build there with God's blessing. He spoke of this as a city upon a hill, stressing the importance of faithfully executing their responsibilities as God's worthy servants so that they might inspire others to follow suit.

Very biblical. I mean, people think Ronald Reagan invented that. He didn't, of course. It comes with the Sermon on the Mount and in Matthew's Gospel. And it was a figure much beloved of, first, Saint Augustine in the city of God and then appropriated by Protestants, particularly New Englanders, as an ideal society, a model society. That people would look at New England and they would see in it a way to alter and frame their own existence, particularly old Europe.

So when Governor Winthrop said we shall be as a city set on a hill in his sermon, A New Model of Christian Charity, in 1630, he was invoking an exemplary model, an exemplary notion. Now when we talk about the city of God, nowadays some religious people and some political people speak as if it once existed and we should go back to find it and reproduce it.

That's utter nonsense, it seems to me. The people who uttered the phrases about the city of God were always looking forward. They never imagined that where they were was where they were meant to be. They always understood that they were moving on toward something else.

The nation to this day has a strong Christian majority. And there has been the kind of common sense assumption that, because most Americans are some kind of Christian, we are just in a casual sense a Christian nation. But it's absolutely critical that legally and constitutionally we are not any particular religion. There is no established religion. And that was clear from the beginning.

It's not that our forefathers were not religious. They were. And in a way, it's the very religious principles that they believed in that motivated the insistence on the free exercise and nonestablishment of religion. They argued for that, actually, on theological principles, that we can't have the state determining what we should believe and what religious faith should be that of the nation.

The state language typically has been generic about God. So they've talked, for the most part, about God rather than about Jesus. And they've used language like the Almighty and the Creator and this sort of thing. That's changed a little bit in recent years. I think that is a change that we've seen since the 1980s. There's been more willingness of political figures to use more explicitly Christian language, where in the past the language that was acceptable for political leaders was largely, we might say, deist or more generic. It was more generic language. And there's more and more tolerance in the public space now of more explicitly Christian language.

But the mixing of religion and politics is nothing new. George Washington, when he was sworn in, he didn't put his hand on Thomas Paine's *Writings On Reason*. He put his hand on the Bible. And at the end of his oath of office, he said and improvised, so help me God. And so here's the irony of a godless Constitution and someone's standing there, the president, the first president, promising to uphold the Constitution with his hand on the Bible, which according to some is a clear violation of the Constitution itself.

But we've had that mixing, in other words. Church and state. There hasn't been a wall between church and state throughout American culture. And if there's been a wall, it's been a teeny little picket fence wall that just about anybody could jump over at this point or that. And so that's always been an issue, is exactly what kind of relationship should we have between church and state.

There were movements in the late 19th century to introduce in our Constitution a prologue that would explicitly state that Jesus Christ is the acknowledged lord of this nation. Those were defeated time and again. And of course, there are still people today who would like to see that as something explicitly stated in our Constitution. But the real strength of America is that the well being of the Church of Jesus Christ is not dependent on the power of the state, nor should it ever be. It is dependent solely on the faith and energy and vitality of Christian churches.

[CHURCHGOERS RECITING CREED]

Looking back at the history of Christianity in America, the primary focus of the Christian faith appears to have been somewhat different at different points in time. For his book *American Jesus*, Stephen Prothero examined the nature of this change, reaching back to the colonial period of American history.

Well, we think about the colonial period as a time when Christianity was really powerful and when Jesus was important. And Christianity was a powerful influence, particularly in its Puritan, Calvinist, Protestant form. But that form of religion really focuses on God the Father rather than on God the Son. And that was one really intriguing thing to me as I was doing my research, that the colonists that were interested in Christianity were really focused on God the Father and had a relationship really of fear to him. And very few focused on God the Son with the relationship of love that we tend to think of now.

So one of the major transitions in the early national period in American history was from this God-fearing culture to a Jesus-loving culture. So Jesus really wasn't a household name in the colonies, even as Christian as the colonies were. Most colonists practiced a form of Christianity that didn't really pay much attention to Jesus at all.

Some colonial Christians began to adopt a more personal relationship with Jesus in the 1730s, during a period that's been called the Great Awakening. It failed to transform the dominant Christian culture, however, which maintained its focus on God the Father. But more widespread change began to take place in the following century.

That's right. It begins in the 19th century, really in, I'd say, maybe the 1830s, 1840s with what's known as the Second Great Awakening, this period of real revivalism when more and more people are using Jesus as the pitch, as it were, in their revival preaching. Come to Jesus, accept Jesus as your savior and lord.

Then reach down, Lord, with your hand of love. And lift us up. Lift us up, Lord, as we lift our voices up to you in prayer. Lift us up, Lord, and show us your love. Lift us up, Lord, and show us your way. Lift us up and help us destroy our demons. This we ask in Jesus' name. Amen.

Amen.

You get a new idea that Christianity is really about relationship. It's not about doctrine. It's not about fear before God. It's not about community as much. It's about the individual's relationship with God. And the God with whom we have this relationship now becomes Jesus instead of God the Father.

So earlier it was, we have a covenant with God the Father, and now it's, I have a relationship with Jesus. It becomes more individualistic. It becomes more relational. And it becomes more focused on Jesus. And you start to get this idea of Jesus as your friend, Jesus is walking with you and talking with you, as the hymn goes.

[SINGING] And he walks with me and he talks with me and he tells me I am his own. And the joy we share as we tarry there none other has ever known.

Hymns were an important and powerful way to spread a religious message. Hymn books became best sellers at certain periods in 19th century American culture. And hymns spread even outside of books through revivals and through church services and just through popular singing in people's homes with organs that were set up in domestic circumstances. And you can look at the development of hymns from, say, the colonial period into the 19th century, and you see a real change where early on the hymns are really about mighty Jehovah and cowering before the strength of the Almighty God. And then increasingly, as the 19th century wears on, you get hymns that are about walking with Jesus, talking with Jesus, being in the garden with Jesus, having an almost loving, well, certainly loving but almost erotic relationship with Jesus.

[SINGING] What a friend we have in Jesus. All our sins and griefs to bear.

During the 19th century, then, churchgoing increased and huge resources were poured into building new churches on the frontier as it spread West and so forth. And so by the middle of the 20th century, Americans pretty much did assume that the United States was a Christian country. It was in the 1950s that we put In God We Trust on our currency and so forth. And currently, according to one of the surveys I did just a year or so ago, about 3/4 of the American population, this is everybody, still thinks that the United States is a Christian society and regards the country as having been founded on Christian principles.

And so we have in our country, I don't know, most everybody says they believe in God. But when somebody's an overt atheist, that's fairly rare in this country. But the fact is that a majority of our people aren't in church on Sunday morning. And this is an increasingly secular country.

The real religion of American in the fall is football. And that's the great cathedrals or the great stadiums, and the liturgical dance are the cheerleaders, and vestments are on the players. And so you can do a lot of things with that. But we are now a secular society. I think that's true. And that hurts a lot of people because they don't know how to relate to that. But we also are living in an increasingly small world.

All the religious traditions of America are now part of the we of "We the people of the United States of America." That "we" can mean we Muslims, we Buddhists, we Hindus. It means one more thing as well, which is that, to be a good American you don't have to be a religious person. That also is an important part of the civic we, we the people. And that was explicitly recognized by the founders as well, that every religious tradition has those who want to stand apart from it. Indeed, who have rejected it out of their own inner compass and their own inner sense of conscience.

So we have a right not to be religious. And believe me, there are many people who have come to the United States from other parts of the world and have felt oppressed there by Christian or Muslim or other religious establishments who cherish the freedom not to be religious in the United States, to be a perfectly good American citizen and not go to church or synagogue or mosque or temple. But to live one's life simply as a citizen. And that, too, is part of who we are.

What we're facing right now are huge questions about, what shall we do with respect to church and state, especially as we become a more diverse society? For instance, do we say one nation under God when we recognize that there are an increasing number of Buddhists in the United States or Hindus in the United States who are people of faith, but the phrase "under God" doesn't really fit?

Well, one of the fascinating things about America is this is the most Christian country on earth, but it's also one of the most multireligious. So often this question is ill posed, I think. People say, is this a multireligious country where the secular law, the First Amendment, provides an opportunity for a tremendous range of religious expression? Or is this a country that's dominated by Christians?

And I think the answer is just clearly both. It's just an ill-posed either/or question. So is the United States a Christian nation? Well, yes, of course, in some ways. And is it a multireligious state? Well, of course, it is.

You can see this in any city and town, or at least a big one, in the United States. And many places you see it very intensely, where the Hindu temple and the mosque and the evangelical Presbyterian church are all in juxtaposition with one another. And yet we do not worship together. We don't pray together. We have religious lives that are vibrant and contribute to the common good but are different. So it means, really, that all of us need to be able to distinguish our theological language from our civic language.

This definitely becomes a political issue. For instance, more than half of the public thinks it's a good idea to teach the Ten Commandments in public schools. And among those who think that the United States is a Christian country and was founded on Christian principles, the percentage who think that is much larger than among those who don't think that the United States is a Christian country. In fact, one of the interesting political dimensions of this is if one looks at several of these survey questions about America being a Christian country, having been founded on Christian principles, being strong because of its faith in God, and if one thinks of those as a kind of expression of American civil religion, the states in which those opinions are the strongest are the red states. It's almost exactly a red state/blue state division.

So we have in our country this huge gap between secular humanist and pious religious people, and it's expressing itself politically today as part of the tension between the blue states and the red states. Red states are religious people, blue states are not religious people, is what gets said. Now that's terribly naive, but the old values are under attack and people haven't been able to articulate new values. And that's what happens when the world changes. And my sense is we have to change with it, not because God is changing but because our perception of the divine always is in flux because it's part of our growing and expanding world.

I think that the criticism of secular humanism comes from people who feel that it has in certain instances become something like an established religion. That is, if you interpret the no establishment clause in such a way that you want to banish all religious, specifically religious, language from public life and allow only secular language, then in a sense you're saying secular language is our religion, even if the people using it say, oh, no, it's not religious.

And I think that's a legitimate concern. That's why the no establishment clause always needs to be balanced with the free exercise clause. Secular humanists have a right to express their views, but they shouldn't be allowed to exclude religious voices from public discussion. They've always been in public discussion in the history of this country. And they should legitimately be so.

It's unlikely that discussion and debate about the separation of church and state in America will come to an end anytime soon. It's been an integral part of the American experience since the beginning, and it reflects the need to continually monitor the balance necessary for a healthy democracy. As the First Amendment protects our right to express ourselves and to practice our beliefs, it also prohibits our government from establishing any form of state-sanctioned religion. The challenge remains how to encourage moral and ethical behavior without promoting one religion over another. I'm Charles Atkins, Jr. Thanks for being with us.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I'm Charles Atkins, Jr. Join me on the next edition of*Beyond Theology* as we hear some provocative ideas about changing images of God.

Am I acting like I own myself? Or am I acting like I belong to God?

God is no one's pigment, no one's flag, and no one's--