

Hillsdale and Christmas

Larry P. Arnn

The attack on Christmas, it seems, has ended its germination and broken into the light of day. Like many of the most aggressive weeds about us, it claims to grow from a seed planted by the founders of our country. It does not. Instead they planted a flower, the lovely idea of religious liberty. How does one distinguish it from the weed of religious suppression?

Practices long established here at Hillsdale College give an example.

Hillsdale was founded in 1844 by a group of Freewill Baptists. They were very devout, both as Christians and as patriots. They hated and they fought against the institution of human slavery. They loved the Constitution and led the search for a way to abolish slavery without violating it. They loved God and searched His word earnestly for salvation, even as they searched the books of pagan antiquity for truth.

Our Articles of Association, the definitive document here, states in its sixth article that "religious culture in particular shall be conserved by the college" and that "it shall be a conspicuous aim to teach by precept and

example the essentials of the Christian faith and religion.”

Preceding this, the first sentence of the preamble, a beautiful thing, gives thanks for the “inestimable blessings” resulting from “the prevalence of civil and religious liberty and intelligent piety in the land.” The purpose of the College, it says, is to provide “sound learning” in order to perpetuate these blessings. Piety and liberty go together in their minds.

In this they were like the people who built our country. To take one example, George Washington, more about which below, said in his Farewell Address: “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens.”

To take another, Thomas Jefferson famously wrote in *Notes on Virginia*: “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath?”

The Christian faith went, in the minds of these founders, side by side with the right of every man to worship as he sees fit. Hillsdale is a private institution—definitively so, as we refuse even the indirect student aid that would carry with it reams of pages of rules made by the federal government. At the College today most people are Christians, but there are others, and they are fully welcome. This is an old principle and habit here.

This is made possible in part by the specific character of the Christian faith. It is not a religion of law so much as of belief. It has its dispute about faith and works, but there is, as there has been for centuries, a wide agreement that faith is decisive, and salvation is by a free gift available to all who believe. Jesus said: "My kingdom is not of this world." As for morality, it participates in the moral law as known through reason and faith together throughout the Western tradition. This is what our founders called "the laws of nature and of nature's God."

On our own Hillsdale College Christmas card, we have for a long time used the expression "Seasons Greetings." In the last few years we have placed on the card a beautiful quotation

from George Washington. It is from his letter in 1790 to the Hebrew congregation at Newport, Rhode Island, and is historic in its treating Jews as equal citizens along with all others who "demean themselves as good citizens." The part we put on our Christmas card reads: "May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way, everlastingly happy."

This year we retain that quotation from Washington. But above it we have changed "Seasons Greetings" to proclaim "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

Freedom of religion has led to the flourishing of religion in our land. If our founders are to be believed, it has led also to the preservation of our liberties. If Christmas is under assault, then it is time to defend it.

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