



Research article

**AMERICANS AND FAITH IN GOD**

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**ABSTRACT**

The impact made by the great American Rationalist, Robert Green Ingersoll, on American society was such that the average American began to entertain a doubt in his mind whether America is a nation under God or not. But, subsequent historical events in America showed that the American Faith in God grew stronger day by day! There can be no better example for this than the fact of the printed words in the very Dollar currency of America. : **“In God, we Trust”**.

Prior to his Inaugural Address, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt attended the prayers in St John’s Protestant Episcopal Church in Washington DC. The Sunday Church Services were held in the Chambers of the American Supreme Court and in the House of Representatives. FDR’s Inaugural Address reflected the spirit of the Papal Encyclical, *Quadragesimo*.

The copy of the Magna Carta and the Geneva Bible brought by the Pilgrim Fathers in the “Mayflower “ ship helped the diffusion of Christian virtues and Christian moral values among the early settlers which were then passed on to the succeeding generations of Americans, and thus faith in God and Church life became a part and parcel of the Christian way of life of the Americans. Thus, the American historical, political and literary traditions are such that America has always been, and will always be **‘One Nation, Under God, and Indivisible’ !**

The study contained in this article illustrates the teachings and philosophy of eminent personalities giving account of America’s strong belief in God, Spirituality and Christianity.



Swami Vivekananda has recorded in his letter to his favourite disciple, Mandam Chakravarti Alasinga Perumal Iyengar,<sup>1</sup> dated 2<sup>nd</sup> November, 1893 that the highest paid speaker in America, when he visited Chicago to participate in the Parliament of Religions, was Robert Green Ingersoll, who was a leading American Rationalist at that time. Ingersoll was being paid 500 to 600 dollars for a lecture at that time. The Chicago Opera House in the south-west corner of Washington Avenue was packed to the full (nearly 2,300 persons) on 29<sup>th</sup> October, 1892 to hear the lecture of Robert Green Ingersoll on 'The Gods'. The presence of his Statue in his home town, Glen Oak Park, Peoria, in Illinois is proof of the great impact and influence he had on the American society of his time. Prior to Robert Ingersoll, Thomas Paine, in his *Age of Reason*, criticized the miracles and wanted the Bible to be treated as an ordinary book. Robert Ingersoll emerged as the greatest American Rationalist in the 19th century America. He became the most famous critic of Religion in the Re-Construction period of American History, although he was a son of a clergy.

Robert Ingersoll was a great crowd puller in America; many went to listen to his rationalist speeches. He said: **"Kindness is the sunshine in which virtue grows."** "Put all theology out of Religion. Theology has always sent the worst to Heaven, the best to Hell". **"The hands that help are better than lips that pray."** "To hate man and worship God seems to be the sum of all creeds." "This is my doctrine: Give every other human being every right you claim for yourself." **"As more people become more intelligent they care less for preachers and more for teachers."** **"Justice is the only worship. Love is the only priest."** **"Wisdom is the science of happiness."** "I wish to substitute humanity for superstition, the love of our fellowmen, for the fear of God." **Religion was the lullaby of the cradle, the ghost-story told by the old woman, Superstition."**

Human psychology is such that when superstitious beliefs are attacked strongly, people have a tendency to swing to Rationalism depending on the logical and successful delivery of the oration of the Rationalist speaker of the day. Robert Ingersoll had this gift of oratory. Swami Vivekananda also opined that he would rather prefer a man to be an atheist than superstitious.<sup>2</sup> So, it was feared that the American society might drift towards Rationalism. So, the question began to be asked: **"Is America a Nation under God?"**

But, a careful study of American History and an examination of the historical events in America have shown that the American society held its own belief in God and did not drift away from the path of faith in God and Christianity to rationalist path. To begin with, a glance at the American Dollar currency note will show that it carries the words: "In God, we

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<sup>1</sup> Joshua Kalapati and T. Ambrose Jeyasekharan, *Life and Legacy of Madras Christian College* (Madras: Zha Communications, 2010), 117-18.

<sup>2</sup> N. Murugesu Mudaliyar, *The Traditional Hinduism and Social Development: An Enquiry* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1978), 2-3.



Trust.” The first Congress that met in 1774 started with a prayer. In Virginia, the House of Burgesses proclaimed June 1, 1774 as a day of fasting and prayer.<sup>3</sup>

Democracy in America was not inimical to Christianity or Churches.<sup>4</sup> The separation between Church and State in the American constitution did not mean that the State “must be anti-septically clean of all religious qualities- only that the State must not give unfair advantage to one denomination over another.”<sup>5</sup>

The common faith and philosophy shared by the great American stalwarts from the days of John Adams to the times of Franklin Delano Roosevelt- namely , **“One nation, under God, and indivisible”** has gone into the poetry of the people of America. So, simple because one or two Rationalists like Robert Ingersoll appeared on the stage of American History, one should not entertain the feeling that the American society might drift towards a rationalist era, abandoning faith in God, and faith in Christianity.

Franklin Delano Roosevelt tried his best to integrate the American Catholics in American government and politics. This aspect of F.D.R .has not received the serious attention that it deserves in the hands of research scholars. Although many books have been written on F.D.R.’s New Deal, much work has not been done on this aspect of F.D.R.<sup>6</sup> Some of the papers preserved in the Archives of the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. are not open for study in the Internet.

Americans, despite the rationalist rhetorics of Robert Ingersoll, are one of the most religious people in the world, particularly, compared to the people of other highly industrialized democracies.<sup>7</sup> Statistics say that America is not only a religious nation, but Christian one. Upto 85% of Americans identify themselves as Christians.<sup>8</sup> The seventeenth century settlers founded their communities in large part for religious reasons. In the nineteenth century, Sunday Church serves were held in the Chambers of the American Supreme Court and the House of Representatives.<sup>9</sup> The separation of State from the Church was not to establish freedom **from** religion, but to establish freedom **for** religion. This was spectacularly successful in America.

Many American poets have also shared their faith in God and Christianity, including Robert Frost, in their poems. Anne Bradstreet, a seventeenth century American poet, wrote

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<sup>3</sup> David Edwin Harrell, Jr *et al*, *Unto a Good Land: A History of the American People* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William Erdmans Publishing Co., 2005), 149.

<sup>4</sup> Peter L. Berger, “Religion in Revolutionary Society” in *America’s Continuing Revolution* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1975), 147.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Vide, *American Catholics and the Roosevelt Presidency*, (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1968), 32-36

<sup>7</sup> Samuel Huntington, “ Are We A Nation Under God ? ” *American Enterprise* 15, no.5 (2004):18.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.



many poems based on her personal experience. One common character in all her poems is her firm belief in God. She herself was a devout Christian. Barbara Roosing, Khalil Gubran and Ralph Waldo Emerson have also expressed their faith in God in their poems. An American scholar by name, Heather M. Hoover, has a Ph.D. thesis on “Faith and Field: Christianity, the Environment and Five Contemporary American Poets” which he submitted to the University of Tennessee in 2010.

Khalil Gubran, who was a Lebanese-American who lived in Boston for many years, wrote a poetic essay on the “Prophet” which deals with spiritual love in Christianity. This book became the best-seller in the twentieth century America, and was translated into forty languages.

Ralph Waldo Emerson, the famous American poet also expressed his belief in God and Christianity in the under-mentioned poems of his :

“For each new morning with its light,  
For the rest and shelter of the night,  
For health and food, for love and friends,  
For everything Thy goodness sends.”

“For flowers that bloom about our feet;  
For tender grass, so fresh, so sweet;  
For song of birds and hum of bee;  
For all things fair we hear or see,  
Father in Heaven, we thank thee !”

Robert Frost, another famous American poet, also expresses his faith in God and Christianity in his poems written in 1936. A.A. Browe, in his book, *The Poetry of Robert Frost* published in 1960, tells us how Robert Frost deals with the complex relationship of man and God in his poems. Robert Frost succeeded in pointing out the necessity of having religious faith. So, he was not an atheist. He was an Old Testament Christian. His poem, “**God’s Garden**”, proves this in particular.

Esther Lombardy’s book, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, was published after the death of Mark Twain. This was a classic of American letters and can be easily ranked with autobiographies of Ben Franklin and Henry James. In Chapter 52 of his book, *Life on the Mississippi* (1883 ), Mark Twain says: “ I feel more pleasure in going to the Church than



**the theatre.”** Quite significantly, many Catholics were present in the prayers at St John’s Protestant Episcopal Church ( across Lafayette Square from the White House ) when Franklin Delano Roosevelt began the Inauguration Day by attending the prayers in that Church. In fact, the process of integration of Catholics in government and politics started by F.D.R. bore fruit and reached its completion with the election of a Roman Catholic President in 1960 ( John F. Kennedy ). The American Catholics accepted the New Deal reform legislation enthusiastically, because it was presented to them by their leaders as an American version of the papal encyclicals.

Monsignor John Ryan became Franklin Roosevelt’s Catholic spokesman. Ryan held posts in government agencies in the 1930s, including the N.R.A., Industrial Appeals Board and on the Committee of Farm Tenancy. He articulated the relationship between Franklin Roosevelt’s reforms and Catholic teachings for learned audience. The force and conviction with which Ryan was emphasizing the relations between the New Deal reform and the Catholic teaching made the Radio Priest Charles Coughlin, to describe Ryan as a “ **Right Reverend New Dealer**”.<sup>10</sup>

Ryan’s book, *A Living Wage*, which was published in 1906, was regarded as “ the first attempt in English language to elaborate what may be called a **Roman Catholic system of political economy.**”<sup>11</sup>

Archbishop James Roosevelt Bayley of Baltimore was a cousin of F.D.R. F.D.R.’s Private Secretary, Grace Tully, was a Catholic. So also Thomas J. Walsh who was Attorney General for F.D.R. Jerome Frank, a Catholic within the AAA, was “more than ever the sparkplug of the reform drive” in the words of Arthur Schelesinger.<sup>12</sup> Ryan’s ally and fellow- priest, Francis Haas, assumed important positions in the administration of the President’s social programmes.<sup>13</sup>

American Catholics appreciated F.D.R.for appointing Catholics in key positions in his government. They supported his social agenda. Cardinal Patrick Haynes of New York supported F.D.R. In a speech in April 1933, William Cardinal O’Connell described F.D.R. as a godsent man who was willing to sacrifice all for the good of the country.<sup>14</sup> George Cardinal Mundelein was a great supporter of F.D.R. Bishop Gannon of Erie, Pennsylvania admitted in a private conversation that the Pope spoke appreciatively of the social reforms of F.D.R.<sup>15</sup> Bishop Ear J. Alter of Toledo, Ohio, saw in the inaugural address of F.D.R. the spirit of the

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<sup>10</sup> Kevin Schmiesing, “John A. Ryan, Virgil Michel and the Problem of Clerical Politics” *Journal of Church and State* 45, no.1 (2003):114.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Arthur M. Schlesinger, *The Age of Reform: The Coming of the New Deal* ( Boston; Houghton Mifflin Co., 1958 ), 74.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas E. Blantz, *A Priest in Public Service: Francis Haas and the New Deal* ( Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982)

<sup>14</sup> William Cardinal O’Connell, *Recollections of Seventy Years* ( Boston: 1934 ), 370.

<sup>15</sup> *New York Times*, August 12, 1933, 12.



Papal encyclical, *Quadragesimo Anno*. Appreciating F.D.R.'s pre-inaugural visit to the Church with his Cabinet, Bishop Bernard J. Mahoney of Sioux Falls, South Dakota said "Christ will not fail who made such a conspicuous profession of faith".<sup>16</sup>

Almost all the major Catholic organizations in America supported F.D.R.'s New Deal. The National Catholic Alumni Federation, representing fifty Catholic colleges and universities in the United States passed a resolution, endorsing the New Deal of F.D.R. The Catholic Daughters of America, whose membership ran to two lakhs, also passed a resolution supporting the New Deal of F.D.R. The appointment of James Farley as Postmaster-General and that of Thomas J. Walsh as Attorney General were a great source of pride to many Catholics. James Farley was the first Catholic in the Presidential Cabinet in the twentieth century.<sup>17</sup> Frank Murphy was posted Governor-General of the Philippines, which had a large Catholic population. He was the first Catholic to hold that position. Robert Hayes Gore, a Catholic was appointed Governor of Puerto Rico. In fact, according to William V. Shannon, it was Franklin Roosevelt who started the tradition of giving the post of National Chairman of the Democratic Party to an Irish Catholic.<sup>18</sup> The Catholic clergy stood by F.D.R.'s National Recovery Act.

F.D.R. accepted the honorary Degree from the Catholic University of America in Washington D.C. His participation in the National Conference of Catholic Charities in New York in October 1933 was another manifestation of his rapport with the Church. F.D.R. had respect for Catholic hierarchy. The Catholics had 134 newspapers and 198 magazines in 1936.

In his speech, the President admitted that "spiritual values count in the long run more than material values....with every passing year, I become more confident that humanity is moving forward to the practical application of the teaching of Christianity as they affect the individual lives of men and women everywhere."<sup>19</sup>

Let us not forget that the "**Pilgrim Fathers**" who sailed in the famous Mayflower ship carried with them the two things- one, a copy of the *Magna Carta* and another, a copy of the **Geneva Bible**. Hence, the settlement created by these "Pilgrim Fathers" in America started developing with the spirit of liberty and Christian Biblical values and Christian virtues. The determination of the "Pilgrim Fathers" to lead a life according to their convictions became the guiding spirit of American life. So, religious faith and integration of the races of mankind into one and indivisible democratic nation under God became the article of faith with the average American. No amount of rationalist tidings and political revolutions can change this underlying belief in the Christian character of the American. It is this democratic religious

<sup>16</sup> *National Catholic Women's Conference News Service*, Chicago, September 11, 1933.

<sup>17</sup> Vide, *American Catholics and the Roosevelt Presidency*. George Q. Flynn's book, 51

<sup>18</sup> Vide, *American Irish* (New York: 1964), 372.

<sup>19</sup> Samuel Rosenman, *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, Vol. II, 379-81.



faith and spirit that permitted the Hindus living in Pittsburg in America to build a Balaji Temple in white marble on the model of the Temple at Tirupati. The American historical, political and literary traditions are such that America has been, and will always be **‘One nation, under God, and indivisible’**.

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