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THE AMERICAN REVOLUTION: AMERICAN IDENTITY and DISSOLVING POLITICAL BANDS

The American Declaration of Independence is memorialized each year on July 4th as Independence Day in the United States. It opens saying it means to explain the reasons why the colonies wished to “dissolve the political bands” with the British Empire. In its preamble it expressed the foundational principles of what America is or was intended to be all about. Significantly, “blood and soil,” the basis of national identity in most countries worldwide, whose people share ethnicity and geography, has no applicability to the United States. Rather, the Declaration makes clear that the ideology of equality before the law, inalienable rights, and the primacy of the individual pursuit of happiness is the basis of the American national identity.

These ideas were to become prominent again as the American Civil War loomed. Abraham Lincoln took them up during Independence Day celebrations on July 10th of 1858. The previous day, Illinois Senator Stephen Douglas, whom Lincoln sought to replace, had given a speech calling Lincoln “a good citizen and an honorable opponent,” but someone who rejected Douglas’ belief that the United States “was made by the white man, for the benefit of the white man, to be administered by white men.” Lincoln observed what had changed and what remained unchanged since the era of the nation’s founding:

“We have besides [the descendants of the original colonists] ... men who have come from [other countries] ... and settled here, finding themselves our equals in all things. If they look back ... to trace their connection with ... [the original colonists] by blood, they find they have none, ... but when they look through that old Declaration of

Independence they find that those old men say that ‘We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal,’ and then they feel that that moral sentiment taught in that day evidences their relation to those men, that it is the father of all moral principle in them, and that they have a right to claim it as though they were blood of the blood, and flesh of the flesh of the men who wrote that Declaration. And so they are. That is the electric cord in that Declaration that links the hearts of patriotic and liberty-loving men together, that will link those patriotic hearts as long as the love of freedom exists in the minds of men throughout the world.”

It is important to understand that this “electric cord” relates critically to the “political bands” the colonists fought to dissolve. For at the time of the founding the idea of the Divine Right of Kings held sway. The Declaration of Independence repudiated this doctrine, asserting the ideas of English philosopher John Locke (1632-1704), who said that “natural rights,” intrinsic to individual human beings, were the only legitimate basis of government:

“ ... to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, — That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.”

Lincoln’s “electric cord” comes with another important implication. For all who come to the

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United States intending to make it their home must “dissolve the political bands” they previously had such as to “blood and soil.” This must be replaced with the “love of freedom” and an intention and determination to pursue happiness each in their own way. These things, not ancestry, not physical features, not culture, religion or even language, are what make people Americans, whether descendants of earlier immigrants or more recent newcomers. For coming to the United States or already being here entails – it should entail! – a sort of “American Revolution” in one's own mind and attitudes.

But there is a serious danger to rooting a national identity in ideas. For unlike “blood and soil” that are stable and enduring, ideas are fragile. Judge Learned Hand (1872-1961) warned, in an address on May 21st of 1944 in New York City, that:

“Liberty lies in the hearts of men and women; when it dies there, no constitution, no law, no court can save it; no constitution, no law, no court can even do much to help it.”

These things relate especially to the issues of immigration and xenophobia today. All Americans are immigrants. Even “native Americans” came over from Asia. Americans therefore have no good reason to object to immigrants as such, and certainly not because of ethnicity, culture, national origin, and so on. But there is a kind of “xenophobia” that is understandable. This is the fear that newcomers may not feel the effects of or even be aware of that “electric cord” of which Lincoln spoke.

Those immigrants to the United States who seek only to practice their own version of oppression – as the Pilgrims did! – or public benefits, those who have not experienced a kind of “American Revolution” in their hearts and minds, those are the immigrants to be worried about. For the love of liberty dies when it is not passed to subsequent generations or it is diluted by those who have no understanding or appreciation of it. If that happens, all Americans are at risk of becoming “huddled masses” of the tired, poor and oppressed.

Thus it is vital to continually revisit the ideas that lie at the heart of the American national identity. Kindling and maintaining that love of freedom that links Americans together as one people should override all other political concerns. And with respect to reasonable anxieties about immigrants who are lacking in this zeal, it should be directed at changing those immigrants before they change America.

All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar, or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at: - www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of I-635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums on most non-first Sundays of the month, over breakfast/coffee (or not), in the atrium of the Embassy Suites DFW Airport North – on Bass Pro Drive in Grapevine beginning at 10:00 AM.

Game Night: Most Friday nights at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Imperial 2030, Dominion, Evolution, Le Havre, Ticket To Ride, and other fun games!

Have Another Idea? Email or call! Read bulletins & presentations and post on the FORUM at www.churchoffreethought.org LIKE US at www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/ and sign up for our Twitter feed at www.twitter.com/ntcof !

PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:

“SCIENCE: Is It Enough?”

**> Sunday, August 4, 2019 <
HERE at the Hawthorn Suites
by Wyndham Hotel
DFW Airport North 10:30 AM**

THANK YOU !! FOR YOUR TIME and FINANCIAL SUPPORT

**of the NTCOF !!
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**The North Texas Church of Freethought
The Fellowship of Unbelievers**

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Presenters...John Gauthier, Don Krause & Tim Gorski
Social Media Czar.....Aaron Kelton
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Videographer.....John Gauthier
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