

Saturday, September 12, 2020



MILITARY RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
f o u n d a t i o n

NEW BOOK BY MRFF'S SENIOR RESEARCH DIRECTOR CHRIS RODDA REVIEW AND INTERVIEW ON SALON

"Working at MRFF for the last thirteen years and being part of our modern-day struggle to maintain the wall of separation between church and state has only deepened my appreciation for the history of how that wall was erected, which led me to delve into one of the most interesting stories of the theocracy-fighters who came before us – the hard-fought struggle to overthrow Connecticut's 'protestant popedom,' as Thomas Jefferson called it." — *Chris Rodda, MRFF Senior Research Director*



SALON REVIEW AND INTERVIEW OF MRFF'S CHRIS RODDA

How democracy beat back lies, fear-mongering and conspiracy theories — in 19th-century Connecticut

By: Paul Rosenberg

Saturday, September 12, 2020

(Excerpts from Salon/Emphasis Added by MRFF)

With both parties' conventions behind us as we head into a quasi-apocalyptic election, there's more need than ever for a sense of balance. Not the kind of false balance that equates truth with lies, or soothing psychological balance that lulls us with a false sense of security, but rather a balanced sense of history and political possibility that helps us understand where we're going, and why.

[...]

But there was another time, long before the Civil War, when America threatened to come apart — and believe it or not, it was New England, not the South, that threatened to secede. That largely forgotten episode was entwined with a longer forgotten history: How religious freedom, once it was established in the U.S. Constitution, finally triumphed over theocracy in the intransigent state of Connecticut (as implausible as that may sound today). **That story is told in a new book by author and researcher Chris Rodda, "From Theocracy to Religious Liberty,"** which uses contemporary sources to trace the narrative that led from Thomas Jefferson's famous 1802 letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, to a state constitution that enshrined religious liberty.

What a story it is! It's a tale of two clashing partisan identities that's strikingly similar to our world today, especially as Rodda describes the "Party of God," circa 1800:

"The Federalists, like today's Republicans, were the conservatives, the party that **believed the rich should rule, feared that more people being able to vote would put them out of power, regarded immigrants with contempt, and hypocritically boasted of having 'all the religion.'**" The Federalist clergy, like the right-wing clergy of today, were outspokenly political, preaching that **it was a religious duty to vote for Federalists."**

The Federalists may not have had social media in the contemporary sense, but they definitely had viral memes, vicious rumors and conspiracy theories, often ruthlessly spread by the men in the pulpits of the largest and most powerful churches. Of course, they had voter suppression laws too. Arguably they had far more in common with us than contemporary Americans have with our own recent history — at least back when we still had the FCC's "fairness doctrine" ensuring some degree of balance in major media.

So the story of how Connecticut moved from a colonial-era theocracy to a modern pluralistic democracy is more than a historical curiosity. It's **a source of inspiration and instruction for all of us in the midst of our own very dark time.** There is light ahead, if we make it so. It's been done before. For a sense of its whole sweep, Salon interviewed Rodda by email. Our exchange has been lightly edited.

[...]

How did the Federalists describe themselves, and how did the Republicans criticize them?

The Federalists sounded a lot like today's Republicans. They boasted of having **all the religion, and were the party of law and order.** The Democratic-Republicans, who I'll just call Democrats since that's what the Federalists called them, constantly called out the Federalists as hypocrites, liars and conspiracy theorists, which were all well-founded charges.

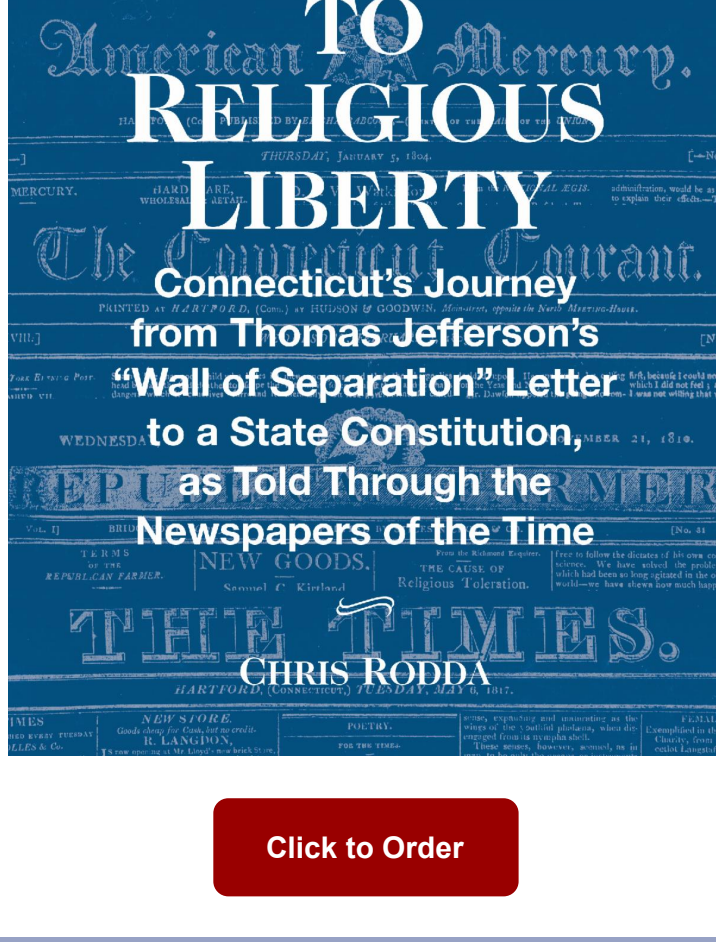
What argument did the Federalists make to attempt to maintain their power?

The Federalists, again not unlike today's Republicans, used a combination of fear-mongering and history. Their theocratic form of government was how things had always been, and to change anything instituted by their wise and pious forefathers would lead to all manner of vice and chaos. **If, God forbid, the Democrats ever got into power, all religion would be abolished, and even the institution of marriage would be abandoned. It would be just like the French Revolution's reign of terror.** There would be blood in the streets, Bibles would be burned, churches leveled to the ground, and the clergy driven from their pulpits or even killed. **Just think of Trump talking about Democratic mobs destroying America's history and you'll have an idea of the tone of it.**

In fact, a Republican senator, **Tom Cotton, recently said of today's Democrats** on the Senate floor, **"They've adopted the spirit of a Jacobin mob in the French Revolution.** A reign of terror, trying to completely erase our culture and our history. Unfortunately many **Democrats are vying to be the Robespierre for this Jacobin mob.** Are we going to rename the Washington National Cathedral the Temple of Reason, as the Jacobins did to Notre Dame during the French Revolution?" **Those words could have come straight out of a Federalist newspaper in early 1800s Connecticut.**

[...]

[Click to read full interview on Salon](#)



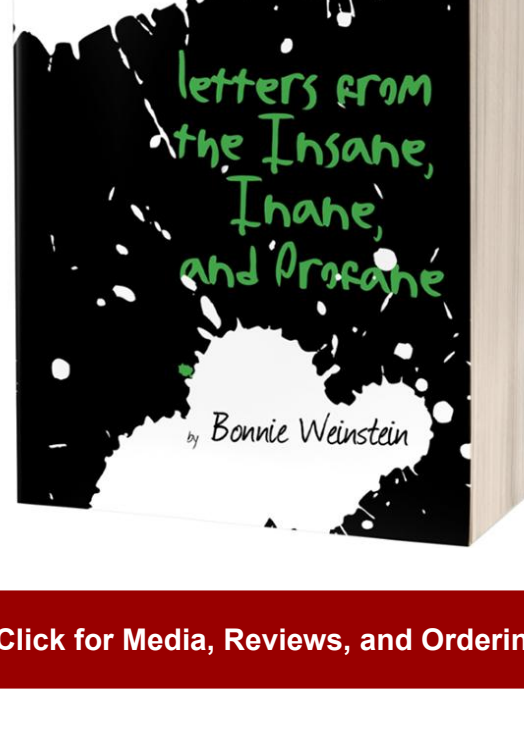
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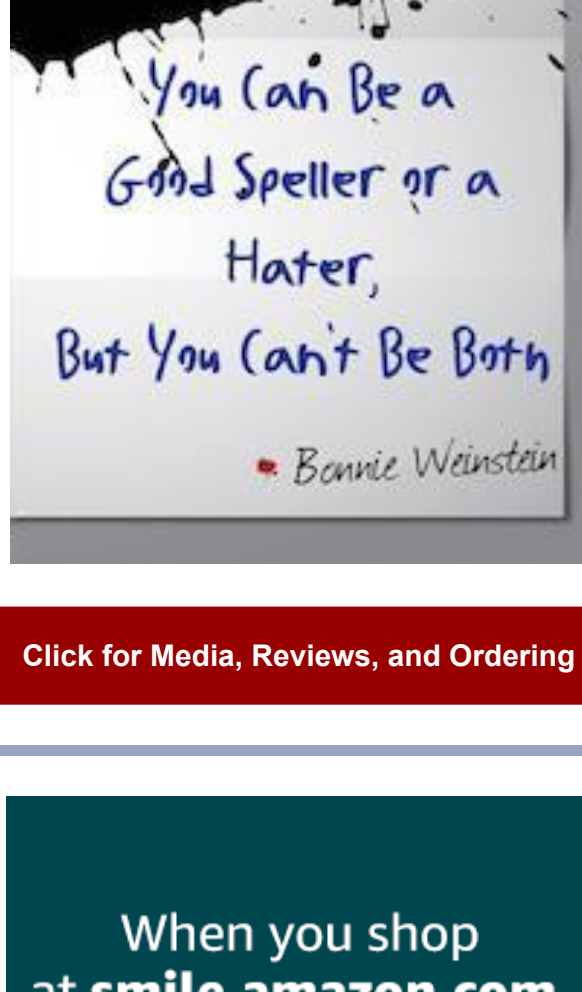
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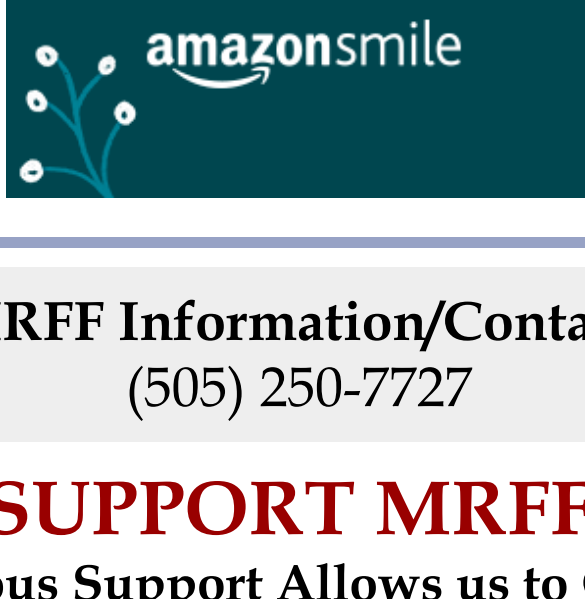
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