

The Supreme Court and 'Christian America'

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Advocates of the claim that the United States is a 'Christian nation' have asserted that their view of the legal and institutional foundation of our country is correct because the Supreme Court has declared the United States of America to be a 'Christian nation'. Appeal is made to the decision Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States (1892) in which it is in fact stated ". . . this is a Christian nation."

It is important to know that the Holy Trinity decision was not a church-state case. Whether or not the United States is a 'Christian nation,' or in what sense it might be, was not the issue.

Furthermore, confusion has arisen as to the intent and the meaning of the statement due to two significant problems.

The first problem is that advocates of Christian America often have made their claim and based their interpretation upon a corrupted quotation from the decision. (The following is from literature disseminated some years ago by Vision America.)

Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it be otherwise. And in this sense to the extent that our civilization and institutions are emphatically Christian . . . This is a religious people. This is historically true. From the discovery of the continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation. We find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth . . . These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass or organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.

This 'quotation' contains words, italicized above, not present in the text of the court decision. Their erroneous inclusion has been a major factor in misinterpretation of the Court's 'Christian nation' language and affirmation. When the spurious words are deleted, and careful consideration is given to the genuine words of the decision in their original context, a different meaning of 'Christian nation' is evident.

A second problem that breeds confusion in most discussions as to whether or not the United States of America is a 'Christian nation' is the failure to distinguish between two senses of Christian 'nation.'

One is the institutional-legal sense of ‘nation,’ in which our laws and institutions of government have the Christian religion as their actual and necessary philosophical-doctrinal foundation.

A second is the historical-cultural sense of ‘nation’ in which the people of the United States and their social-cultural institutions have historically been influenced by the predominance of Christianity.

Religious Right advocates of Christian America have advocated the first (legal-institutional) sense as being affirmed by the Holy Trinity decision. But in fact, the decision only affirmed the second (historical-cultural) sense of America as a Christian nation, as it states that “This is a religious *people*” and “This is *historically* true.” The decision invoked a mass of considerations supporting this historical and sociological claim, thus the conclusion: “. . . this is a Christian nation.”

The author of the decision, David Josiah Brewer wrote a book in which he made it quite clear that it was not the institutional-legal sense in which he affirmed the United States as a Christian nation. In The United States: A Christian Nation (1905) he explained:

But in what sense can [the United States] be called a Christian nation? Not in the sense that Christianity is the established religion or that people are compelled to support it. . . . Nor is it Christian in the sense that a profession of Christianity is a condition for holding office or otherwise engaging in public service, or essential to recognition either politically or socially. In fact, *the government as a legal institution is independent of all religions.*

[Emphasis in the above quotation has been added. The quotation is contained in Robert Boston, Why The Religious Right is Wrong About Separation of Church and State, (Prometheus, 1993),]

In addition, the decision’s religious history survey and ‘Christian America’ statement are a part of the dicta which provide the rationale of the decision. They are not a part of the findings of the decision. Even if Brewer and the Supreme Court had been making a legal-institutional claim (which they were not), dicta establish no precedent or principle of law.

Any argument that the United States is a Christian nation in a legal-institutional sense based upon the Holy Trinity decision is factually in error. Any argument that transitions from the historical-cultural sense in which the American people may be described as a Christian nation to a legal-institutional claim or conclusion commits the logical fallacy of equivocation. Any person who cannot recognize the importance of the distinction between the two senses in which the claim “We are a Christian nation” may be understood is just . . . confused.