

Was America Founded As / To Be a ‘Christian Nation’?

“America has not been lucky, she has been blessed. She is the product of the determination of our forbearers to forge a nation built upon Christian principles. As they labored to create a Christian nation, God looked with favor upon their efforts and gave them supernatural guidance unlike the world has ever seen. The wisdom of our Declaration of Independence and Constitution can only be described as inspired.”

(Rick Scarborough, *Enough is Enough*, 65)

“The right’s contention that we are a ‘Christian nation’ that has fallen from pure origins and can achieve redemption by some kind of return to Christian values is based upon wishful thinking, not convincing historical argument.”

(Meacham, 18)

Three Preliminary and Necessary Questions:

1. What is / define: ‘Christian NATION?’

- 1) = government and its institutions / **institutional-legal sense**
- 2) = quality-character of people and their social and cultural institutions
/ **cultural-historical sense**

I am discussing and REJECTING the claim that America was founded as / to be a ‘Christian Nation’ in the FIRST (institutional-legal – not cultural-historical) sense.

“The Founders differentiated between *the state* and *the nation*. The former was the *political power* that bound the people together, and the latter was their *cultural unity*, including their common beliefs, aspirations, and principles. By no means did the separation of church and state mean that Americans were not a religious *people*. Nor did it preclude the possibility that the nation could become a Christian nation; that would be determined by the voluntary decisions of men and women in a free religious market, not by *government coercion*.”

(Lambert, 241, emphases added)

2. What is / define ‘CHRISTIAN nation’?

- 1) **used substantively** or in ‘essence’ something is ‘Christian.’
example: “Billy Graham is a Christian.”
- BUT, what are the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a ‘Christian’?
- 2) **used adjectivally** or as a matter of ‘description’ = adjectivally “Christian”
“Lincoln embraced Christian qualities of character.”
(though he was not A traditional, orthodox Christian.)

I am discussing and rejecting the view that America was founded as / to be a ‘Christian Nation’ in the FIRST (substantive) of these two senses.

“In certain circles of the far right of the religious spectrum it is customary to wax eloquent on the ‘Bible religion of our Founding Fathers.’ . . . Though we might wish fervently that these sentiments were accurate, the fact is that they express a pure mythology. *The idea of believing Christian Founding Fathers is very largely a pious myth . . .*”

(Montgomery, 50-51, emphasis added)

“Here is my Creed. I believe in one God, Creator of the Universe: That he governs the World by his Providence. That he ought to be worshiped. That the most acceptable Service we can render to him, is doing good to his other Children. That the Soul of Man is immortal, and will be treated with Justice in another life, respecting his Conduct in this life. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion.”

(Benjamin Franklin, in Holmes, 56-57)

“In a letter to Benjamin Rush three years after the 1800 election, [Jefferson] declared, *‘I am a Christian in the only sense [Jesus] wished anyone to be; sincerely attached to his doctrines, in preference to all others.’*”

(Lambert, 279, emphasis added)

“[Difficulties arise] because these brilliant men, surely the most capable generation of statesmen to ever appear in America, were at once *genuinely religious but not specifically Christian*. Virtually all these great men had a profound belief in “the Supreme Judge of the world” and in “the protection of Divine Providence,” to use the words of the Declaration of Independence. *Yet only a few believed in the orthodox teachings of traditional Christianity.*”

(Noll, Hatch, and Marsden, 72, emphases added)

“Only extreme naivete or invincible ignorance can claim that the chief midwives of our nation’s birth were representatives of the classical Christian tradition.”

(Montgomery, 57)

3. *When / What was the ‘Founding’?*

1) Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay colonies? – No!!

(vs. Mayflower Compact, etc.)

2) Declaration of Independence – yes?

(~ to a ‘charter’ of an organization?)

3) Articles of Confederation – yes??-no!

4) Present U.S. Constitution – ratified 1789 – yes!!

(~ to an organizational ‘bylaws’?)

EVIDENCE THAT:
“THE UNITED STATES WAS NOT FOUNDED AS / TO BE
A ‘CHRISTIAN (institutional-legal sense) NATION’”

I. Constitutional Convention of 1787

- 1) There was a deliberate decision made by the Convention not to include official public prayers in their proceedings!**
- 2) Only secular, non-theological ‘public reason’ debates occurred in the Convention.**
(vs. religion- based debates arguments)
- 3) In the midst of Convention controversy, Franklin did offer a ‘prayer motion’ - which the Convention declined to vote upon!**
- 4) and Franklin’s later account / assessment of the Convention’s response was:**
“The Convention, except for three or four persons, thought Prayers unnecessary.”
(notation at bottom of original speech draft by Franklin’s own hand)
- 5) There was a 4th of July religious service conducted *outside* of the Convention in which prayers were offered.**
(so, ‘separation of church and state’ is not inherently antagonistic to religion)
- 6) The text of the Constitution is secular and non-theological in its stated purposes and rationales.**

“We, the people of the United States, in Order to . . . [purposes listed] . . . do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

“The [Puritan Fathers] had brought to New England a determination to establish not only a Christian nation but one whose beliefs and practices would so conform to Scripture that future generations would look on it as a ‘City upon a Hill.’ The most cursory comparison between the Constitution’s preamble and John Winthrop’s *Model of Christian Charity* reveals the fundamentally different orientations between the two blueprints.”
(Lambert, 236-237)
- 7) The arguments of the *Federalist Papers* are secular, ‘public reason’, non-theological arguments advocating a secular, ‘public reason,’ non-theological Constitution.**

8) There were numerous 18th century Christian criticisms of the ‘Godless’ Convention and Constitution.

“The nation has offended Providence. We formed our constitution, without any acknowledgement of God; without any recognition of his mercies to us as a people, of his government or even of his existence. The Convention, by which it was formed, never asked, even once, His direction, or His blessings, upon their labors. Thus we commenced our national existence under the present system without God.” (Yale University President Timothy Dwight)

9) There were several major attempts to amend the Constitution with proposed ‘Christian amendments’ during the 19th century – all of which failed!

“[T]he National Reform Association was formed in 1864 to lobby for some form of ‘Christian Amendment.’ In 1867, the organization’s journal, *The Christian Statesman*, called for the following amendment to the preamble of the Constitution . . . “We, the people of the United States, acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, and His Will, revealed in the Holy Scriptures, as of supreme authority, in order to constitute a Christian government, form a more perfect union, establish justice. . . .” (Lambert, 289)

II. Treaty of Tripoli

Text: “Article 11. As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded upon the Christian Religion . . .”

(Passed unanimously July 7, 1797 during the Adams administration.)

Significance:

Notice that it is stated that the United States is “not in *any* sense” founded upon the Christian religion. This is much stronger than merely affirming that Christianity was not the official government-established state religion. This was not merely distinguishing a ‘non- state church way’ in which the United States (supposedly) *was* founded upon Christianity from the ‘state-church ways’ of the European nations and established state churches.

If it is (wrongly!) argued that the language of the article cannot be taken literally or at face value, but was political rhetoric for the benefit of the Muslim Barbary States, this argument would also apply to ALL statements by Founders and statesmen cited by advocates of Christian America. These statements also would be ‘religious rhetoric’ meant to positively influence the Christian citizens of the United States, thus not to be taken at face value.

III. Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States (1892)

Corrupted Text:

“Our laws and institutions must necessarily be based upon and embody the teachings of the Redeemer of mankind. It is impossible that it should 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 this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation. We find every-where 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 of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.”

[*italicized words are spurious* / non-italicized words are genuine]

False interpretation:

The United States is a ‘Christian nation’ institutionally and legally. Its republican institutions and laws are based directly and primarily upon the Christian religion. Government can grant Christian citizens and groups special recognition and privileges not granted to non-Christian citizens and groups.

Actual Text:

. . .
“But beyond all these matters, no purpose or action against religion can be imputed to any legislation, state or national, because this is a religious people. This is historically true. From the discovery of this continent to the present hour, there is a single voice making this affirmation .

. . .
There is no dissonance in their character. There is a universal language pervading them, all have one meaning. They affirm and reaffirm that this is a religious nation.

. . .
If we pass beyond these matters to a view of American life, as expresses by its laws, its business, its customs, and its society, we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth . . . These, and many other matters that might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation. In the face of all these, shall it be believed that a Congress of the United States intended to make it a misdemeanor for a church of this country to contract for the services of a Christian minister residing in another nation?

. . .
[non italicized words are genuine words contained in the corrupted text
– *italicized words are additional context content of the court decision*]

Author of the text: Justice Josiah David Brewer

The Holy Trinity case was not a church-state decision. Brewer's statements were 'dicta,' a part of the rationale provided by the court for its holding in the case. They were not part of the Court's 'holding' in the case. Dicta have no precedent-setting value and establish no principle of law. The 'Christian nation' statements of the actual text have been misinterpreted due to the spurious additions and tendentious deletions.

Correct Interpretation

Brewer was affirming that the United States was a 'Christian nation' in the sense that the country's "religious people" were and had historically been predominantly Christian. Thus the historical and cultural context of the congressional legislation at issue could not support any claim that the Congress had intended legislation regarding the importation of unskilled, manual labor to apply to or to prohibit a religious institution from hiring a non-U.S. citizen to serve as minister.

Brewer himself later wrote a book entitled The United States: A Christian Nation (1905) in which he clarified his view of America as a 'Christian nation.'

"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 organization is independent of all religions." (quoted in Boston, 84-85, emphases added)

A subsequent Supreme Court decision whose decision was authored by Brewer is also instructive.

"The [case] centered on legalized prostitution in New Orleans. A Methodist church challenged a city ordinance allowing prostitution in one area of the city. The church argued that prostitution should be illegal everywhere in New Orleans, and said that such activity was inconsistent with Christianity 'which the Supreme Court of the United States says is the foundation of our government'." (Boston, 84)

"Writing for a unanimous court, Brewer completely ignored the church's argument and upheld the New Orleans policy. Brewer's bypass in this case suggests that he did not mean that the United States should enforce the dictates of Christianity by law. Had that been Brewer's intention, he surely would have upheld the Methodists' claim." (Ibid.)

***Why do these issues matter? - The Role of 'Myth'
in religio-political ideologies and agendas.***

“Worldview myths **order the experience** of an individual or a group of people. They **constitute and empower individual and group identity**. They **provide ideological direction** for the practical -and political- activities of the individual and the group. **A worldview myth**, particularly when it serves a power interest and becomes an ideology, **can distort one’s perceptions and interpretations of fact and historical evidence**. . . .

The myth of Christian America is in part a creation myth or a myth of origins. It offers an explanation and a meaning of the American nation for the present-day ‘heirs’ of the Founder’s ‘Christian America’ [= ‘Religious Right Christians’] This worldview myth also reconciles religious allegiances to both church and state by means of a fundamentalist-style civil religion.

. . .

Because America is, according to the tradition and the worldview of the Religious Right, a Christian nation . . . **the historical origins of the nation . . . *must have been specifically, primarily, and directly Christian.*** The **Founding Fathers *must have been*** essentially like themselves . . . The **success of the Constitutional Convention *must have been*** due to the intervention of God.

. . .

Also, **because of the way things *must have been***, [Religious Right advocates of Christian America] believe that **they are the true Americans and theirs is the true America**. One should note the deductive historiography and circular reasoning inherent in such a view.

E.M.Adams has rightly criticized those “**who write about events for the purpose of promoting some theory or ideology. They interpret events in terms of the theory or ideology in question and then use the events involved as support for the theory or ideology.**”. . .

[Adams goes on to write] “There is a strong tendency to read the past in a way that not only explains the present but legitimizes it and provides direction for the future, When this tendency is not rigorously held in check, **pre-conceived theories and the purposes of justification and edification dominate the search for, and interpretation of, the facts.**”

(Whitten 43-44)

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