

## **The Constitutional Convention and ‘Christian America’**

Religious Right advocates of ‘Christian America’ actually make two claims, which they most often confuse. They assert that the American people and their social and cultural institutions have been profoundly influenced by a Christian religious heritage – that the American people have been a ‘Christian nation’ in an historical-cultural sense. They also assert that the Founding Fathers intended, and the Constitution instituted, a national government based directly and primarily upon Christianity – that America is a ‘Christian nation’ in a legal-institutional sense. They are substantially correct concerning the former assertion and radically wrong concerning the latter.

The proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of 1787 constitute the most powerful argument against the claim that the Founding Fathers intended to create a national government based upon the Christian religion. The following facts concerning the proceedings of the Convention are inconsistent with the claim that the United States of America is a Christian nation in any legal-institutional sense of ‘nation.’

The Convention made a deliberate decision not to begin their proceedings with official public prayers. Since meetings of the Continental Congress had done so, and as the First Congress would create a chaplaincy and implement opening prayers in meetings of Congress, the Convention’s decision is noteworthy. Is this fact consistent with the Religious Right description of the Founders as pious Christian ideologues meeting to create a Christian nation?

During the darkest days of the Convention, Benjamin Franklin offered an eloquent motion noting the omission of prayers and recommending that they be instituted. Time and time again this author has seen apologists for Christian America assume or deceitfully insinuate that Franklin’s motion was well received and that the initiation of prayers in the Convention was the moment of breakthrough, resulting in a miraculous, God-blessed Constitution. In fact, a debate broke out over Franklin’s motion and it was never voted upon. Franklin wrote that the Convention “except for three or four persons, thought prayers unnecessary.” Is this fact consistent with Religious Right claims concerning ‘Christian America’?

A service was held outside of Convention proceedings on July 4<sup>th</sup> with members of the Convention in attendance. This provides a helpful reminder for some that ‘separation’ of ‘church’ and ‘state’ does not require a separation of the religious values and convictions of individuals from their political convictions and activities as individuals. It is also an instructive example of the necessary distinction and independence, institutionally and ideologically, between religion and government that constitutes true ‘separation of church and state.’

James Madison’s Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787, our best source for what took place in the deliberations of the Convention, evidence that no biblical or religious arguments, rationales, or purposes were presented in the course of the Convention’s debates. No religious intentions, whether sectarian or ecumenical, find expression. Secular, public reason arguments and rationales were offered for the goal of achieving secular, political, public-good purposes. Is this fact consistent with Religious Right claims concerning ‘Christian America’?

The text of the Constitution makes no reference to God, Christ, Christianity, or the Bible. It states no religious purposes or rationales. It is a 'Godless' document, not in the sense that it is opposed to or inconsistent with religious principles, but in that it makes no appeals to religion-based doctrines or principles. The only substantive mention of religion is clause three of Article Six, in which the Constitution prohibits any religious test for holding public office. It was rightly recognized and wrongly objected to by the 'Christian Americanists' of the day that such a prohibition would allow an adherent of any religion, or of none, to hold public office in the national government. Is this fact consistent with Religious Right claims concerning 'Christian America'? (Those who appeal to the "Sundays excepted" clause or the concluding "in the year of our Lord 1787" are grasping at straws, implicitly recognizing the significance of this point concerning the text of the Constitution.)

The *Federalist Papers* were written by James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Jay to win public support for the ratification of the new Constitution. They are the preeminent commentary on the substance and the philosophy of the Constitution. It is again noteworthy that, as in the Convention's proceedings, no biblical or religious arguments, rationales, or purposes are offered in these writings. There is nothing like "This is a Christian, Bible-based, God-blessed Constitution that all good Christian people should happily endorse." Instead, one finds secular, public reason arguments and rationales for the goal of achieving secular, political, public-good purposes. Is this fact consistent with Religious Right claims concerning 'Christian America'?

The Constitution's lack of biblical and Christian language, rationales, and purposes was quite evident to 'Christian Americanists' of the Founder's era. The Constitution and the Constitutional Convention were criticized for this lack. Timothy Dwight, orthodox Christian president of Yale University wrote:

"The Nation has offended Providence. We formed our Constitution without any acknowledgment 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."

Throughout the nineteenth century, efforts were made to amend the Constitution to provide religious language and purposes which it so clearly lacked. All of these efforts failed. These objections and efforts are definitely inconsistent with Religious Right claims concerning the Constitution and 'Christian America.' It is only in the past few decades that Religious Right advocates of Christian America have asserted that the Founders were Christian ideologues and that the Constitution is ideologically Christian – something their predecessors clearly recognized not to be the case.

The conduct of the delegates to the Constitutional Convention of 1787 and the Constitution they produced constitute a powerful rebuttal to claims by members of the Religious Right that the United States of America was founded to be, in any legal and institutional sense, a Christian 'nation.'

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