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Using the Past to “Save” Our Nation: The Debate over Christian America

The question of whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation continues to be a topic of heated debate in American culture. Scholars in the ivory tower might balk at the notion that the United States had Christian roots to which we must return, but anyone who spends time at a parent teacher association meeting, an evangelical church, or a local gathering of the Republican party or Tea Party will find that this view of the American founding is alive and well. Since writing my book *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* and speaking to a wide array of audiences that embrace diverse religious and political views, I have learned two things. First, the culture wars are real, and history is one of the primary battlefields. Second, many Americans do not know how to provide a thoughtful answer to the question I posed in the title of my book. We live in a soundbite culture that makes it difficult to have sustained dialogue on historical issues. It is easy for those who argue that America is a Christian nation (and those who do not) to appear on radio or television programs, quote from one of the Founders, and sway people to their positions. These kinds of arguments, which can be very contentious, do little to help us unpack a complicated historical puzzle about the relationship between Christianity and the American founding. I hope what follows might serve as a primer to these debates (1).

Let me begin with two stories. In July 2011 I was invited to Arizona to be the featured speaker at Hot Summer Nights, a bookdiscussion series sponsored by an evangelical megachurch in the city of Gilbert. A member of the congregation interviewed me for an hour followed by thirty minutes of questions from the audience. My recent book *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* was the topic of discussion (2). Hot Summer Nights was a popular event at the church. The previous summer the congregation had hosted John McCain. But despite the advanced notice, I was still shocked when a few hundred people packed into the church café. The interviewer for the evening was Steve, a prominent Phoenix attorney and businessman, a devout evangelical Christian, and a graduate of Princeton University’s Woodrow Wilson School of Public and International Affairs. He began the interview by turning to the audience and asking, “How many of you believe that America was founded as a Christian nation?” Nearly every hand in the room went up. I smiled and settled in for what turned out to be a very interesting night.

A few months later I gave a public lecture on my book at a research library with a collection devoted to the history of the American Revolution. Much like I had done in Arizona, I laid out the case for and against the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. During the question and answer session a woman, who was clearly frustrated with my attempt at evenhandedness, blurted out: “Please tell us what we have to do to stop these Christians who are trying to hijack our nation with their false views of American history?” As I was signing books after the lecture, I was approached by several members of a political organization who had come to hear me speak in the hopes of accumulating ammunition in their fight against the members of a local evangelical congregation who were trying to “undermine America’s historical commitment to the separation of church and state.”

There is ample evidence to suggest that Americans have always understood themselves to be living in a “Christian nation,” but they have varied on what they have meant by the term. In the election of 1800, Federalist clergymen believed that since the United States was a “Christian nation,” Thomas Jefferson could not be president, since he was skeptical of classic Christian doctrines such as the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the divine inspiration of the Bible. According to New York minister William Linn, if the country elected such a “manifest enemy to the religion of Christ, in a Christian nation,” it would be “an awful symptom of the degeneracy of that nation” (3). Later, the Whig party would lobby for a Protestant culture where slavery did not exist, alcohol use was under control, and Sunday was kept as a day of rest (4). During the Civil War, the leadership of both the North and the South believed that God was on their respective side. Northerners thought that the national union created by the Constitution was a compact with God that could not be broken. Southerners referenced God in the preamble of the Confederate Constitution and believed he had ordained the institution of slavery, making a war against that institution a war against the decree of the Almighty (5).

Following the Civil War, northern clergy petitioned Congress for an amendment to the U.S. Constitution affirming the idea that America was a Christian country. Others preached a social gospel, arguing that the United States would become more Christian when its citizens cured the social problems stemming from industrialization. Fundamentalists took a different approach. By converting people to the Christian gospel and defending the so-called fundamentals of the faith against attacks from Darwinism and criticism of the Bible, fundamentalists fought to restore the “Christian civilization” of the nineteenth century (6). In 1892 the U.S. Supreme Court, in *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States*, formally declared the United States to be a “Christian Nation” (7).

The idea that America was a Christian nation persisted through much of the twentieth century. Billy Graham tried to “save” Americans through massive revival meetings. The goal was not only to prepare sinners for eternity but also to season the culture with people of Christian character. Mainline Protestants continued to embrace their role as guardians of American civil religion—an understanding of American life, forged in the midst of a Cold War against “atheistic communism,” that merged patriotism and the moral teachings of Christianity (8) (Figure 1). American Catholics emerged from World War I confident and optimistic about their chances of building a “Christian culture” in America through local parishes, colleges, hospitals, parochial schools, and social service organizations (9). Even Martin Luther King Jr. believed that by defending civil rights for African Americans, citizens would be upholding what was best about the “most sacred values in our JudeoChristian heritage” (10).

At midcentury, few would have disagreed with the suggestion that the United States was a “Christian nation.” But all of that changed during the 1960s. The counterculture challenged the kind of morality necessary for a Christian republic to survive. The feminist movement empowered women in a way that led them to reject what many Christians saw as women’s God-given place in society. Rock ‘n’ roll music and the culture that came with it glorified drugs, alcohol, and free sex. In 1962 the Supreme Court, in *Engel v. Vitale*, eliminated prayer in public schools. A year later, in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, the high court declared Bible reading in public schools to be unconstitutional even as it made clear that it saw value in its study as literature (11).

In the early 1970s two significant Supreme Court cases galvanized evangelicals concerned about the fate of Christian America. In *Coit v. Green* (1971) the high court ruled that a private school or college that discriminated on the basis of race would no longer be considered for tax-exempt status. At the heart of the controversy was Bob Jones University, a school that banned interracial dating and denied admission to unmarried African Americans. In 1975 the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) moved to revoke the university’s tax-exempt status. *Coit v. Green* would also have implications for the hundreds of private Christian schools cropping up all over the United States (Figure 2). Many of these schools were in the South and had discriminatory admission policies. When President Jimmy Carter, a self-proclaimed “born-again Christian,” threw his support behind *Coit v. Green* he alienated many conservative evangelicals who believed that the chief executive and the Supreme Court were undermining the liberty of Christians to run their own schools without interference from the federal government. By 1976, the year that *Newsweek* declared to be “The Year of the Evangelical,” the so-called Christian Right had organized into a

fullblown political movement (12).

The second major Supreme Court case that mobilized Christian conservatives was *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized certain types of abortion in the United States in 1973. Prior to *Roe v. Wade* abortion had not been an important issue for Protestants. Most evangelicals, for example, believed that abortion was morally suspect but thought of opposition to abortion as a distinctly Catholic cause. This all changed, however, after 1973 as many evangelicals awakened to a belief that abortion was the equivalent to legalized murder and wondered aloud how a Christian nation could support such a practice (13).

As the leaders of the Christian Right continued their battles against the IRS and abortion, they also began to dabble in the field of history. The American bicentennial offered an ideal moment for the Christian Right to put forward a revisionist narrative of the founding of the United States that placed God at the center. In his book *Listen, America!* (1980), written in the wake of the bicentennial, Jerry Falwell argued that “The religious foundations of America find their roots in the Bible” (14). Like many of today’s Christian nationalist writers who appeal to the past, Falwell worked his way through early American history—from the Pilgrims to the American Revolution—noting whenever an early settler or founder invoked the name of God in public discourse, made reference to the providential destiny of the United States, or defended the belief that religion was essential to the survival of the Republic. According to the leaders of the Christian Right, history proved that the United States was a Christian nation. Somewhere along the way Americans had failed to learn this important civics lesson.

There are millions of Christian nationalists today, and they are more than ready to use American history to promote their political views. Through their tireless efforts they have convinced many rank-and-file evangelicals that such an interpretation of American history is correct. The most prolific of these voices is David Barton, the founder of Wall-Builders, an organization devoted to “presenting America’s forgotten history and heroes with an emphasis on our moral, religious, and constitutional heritage” (15) (Figure 3). It is hard to separate Barton’s political work from his political passions. He served eight years as the vice chair of the Texas Republican party, the same political organization whose 2004 platform included the line: “the United States of America is a Christian nation.” Barton’s books and videos about America’s Christian heritage have sold thousands of copies, and he speaks widely on the subject to large evangelical audiences, both in person and through his radio ministry. Recently, Barton was chosen by the conservative members of the Texas Board of Education to serve as an outside evaluator of

the state social studies standards. His recent book, *The Jefferson Lies*, has hit the New York Times bestsellers list despite the fact that it has been discredited by dozens of professional historians—including many evangelical historians—and his publisher has dropped the book from its list due to alleged historical errors (16).

The arguments made by Christian nationalist authors such as Barton can be boiled down to five central themes:

God is sovereign over history, and America is exceptional. God has acted providentially to shape the course of human affairs, and he has a special destiny for the United States.

The seventeenth-century settlement of the American colonies should be interpreted in light of the eighteenth-century American Revolution. Christian nationalists search the colonial (pre-1763) record—with a particular emphasis on the Puritans and Pilgrims of New England—in an attempt to find the antecedents of the Christian nation that they believe was founded in 1776.

Most of the signers of the Declaration of Independence and the framers of the U.S. Constitution were men of deep Christian faith. At the very least, Christian nationalists argue, the Founders believed that Christianity was essential and necessary to the survival of the Republic.

The Constitution of the United States is a Christian document, rooted in biblical and theological truth. Some argue that the Constitution was designed to create a Christian establishment of religion in America, and others point to the Christian language embedded in many of the individual state constitutions.

Historical revisionism, especially as it relates to school textbooks, is irresponsible and dangerous. Revisionists, Christian nationalists argue, have removed Christianity from the stories of the nation's past taught to children in public schools. This trend has had serious moral and social consequences for the nation (17).

The emergence of this kind of revisionism has, for the first time in American history, made the idea that America is a “Christian nation” a contested one. Historians, writers, and pundits have challenged this view of American history. Barry Lynn, the United Church of Christ minister who leads Americans United for Separation of Church and State,

has been a vocal opponent of this view of American history. In 2006 writer Brooke Allen published *Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers*, in which she painted the founders as non-Christians who set out to create a secular nation (18). Cornell University professors Isaac Kramnick and Laurence Moore wrote *The Godless*

Constitution: The Case against Religious Correctness to challenge the Christian nationalist view of the Constitution (19). Some of the attacks against the defenders of Christian America have been quite caustic. For example, former New York Times foreign correspondent Chris Hedges described the proponents of this view of American history as “fascists,” and Michelle Goldberg has connected their ideas to some of the most extreme conservative groups in American history (20).

But the attack against a Christian nationalist view of history has also come from evangelical scholars. In the early 1980s, esteemed historians Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch wrote *The Search for Christian America* to challenge the Christian and providential view of history put forth by the likes of Jerry Falwell, Peter Marshall, and David Manuel (authors of the wildly popular *The Light and the Glory*), and Christian apologist Francis Schaeffer. In an ironic twist, David Barton (founder of WallBuilders) and Mark Noll (who currently holds an endowed chair at University of Notre Dame but who spent most of his career at evangelical Wheaton College) were both listed in *Time Magazine*’s 2005 list of the most influential evangelicals in America.

Evangelicalism is a big tent, with serious disagreements over the ways the past can and should be used in contemporary life (21).

Thus far, much of this debate over whether or not America was founded as a Christian nation, with the exception of nuanced historical studies by Noll, Marsden, and Hatch, has generated more heat than light. Both sides of the debate are guilty of marshaling evidence from the past to support their political viewpoints in the present. Such an approach neglects the complexity of human history as it existed through time, contributes to national divisiveness and incivility, and fails to reflect accurately the degree of prudence necessary for making helpful connections between the past and present. In the end our students suffer. Rather than learning about the virtues of historical thinking and the importance of the past to their future role as citizens, they become collateral damage in the culture wars.

When Christian nationalists avoid theology and make honest efforts to uncover the mind of the founding generation, they make some important historical points. For example, the majority of state constitutions at the time of the founding either upheld specific Christian tests for office holding or maintained Christian religious establishments (taxes to support Christian clergy). This point is largely overlooked by Kramnick and Moore, who seem to be more interested in taking a shot at religious conservatives than putting forth a thorough and balanced

treatment of the role religion played in the founding era. It is also true that most of the Christian language in state constitutions was removed in the decades following the Revolution. And after the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868, all states were required to abide by the Bill of Rights.

Christian nationalists are also correct when they assert that the Founding Fathers believed religion was essential to a strong republic. There was almost universal consent on this point among the Founders. Christianity, or any religion for that matter, was useful and good to the Founders as long as it taught people how to sacrifice their own interests for something greater—the American Republic. As Benjamin Rush, the Philadelphia doctor who signed the Declaration of Independence put it, religion should be taught in schools because it was vital to making people into good “republican machines” (22).

Yet one is hard pressed to argue, as some Christian nationalists do, that the founders were orthodox in their religious beliefs. Many of them

—especially Benjamin Franklin, Jefferson, and John Adams—rejected core Christian beliefs such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the inspiration of the Bible, and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. While others—such as John Witherspoon, Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and John Jay—embraced religious beliefs that conformed to the teachings of Christianity. All of the Founders believed in the eighteenth-century doctrine of “providence,” or the idea that God was regularly ordering the world and could, at times, intervene in the lives of men and women in the form of an answer to prayer or a miracle. But here is where the logic of both the Christian nationalists and their critics fall apart. They often equate the personal religious beliefs of the Founders with their convictions about the role of religion in public life. Some of the Founders were orthodox Christians but were also strong proponents of what today might be called the separation of church and state. Some founders were unorthodox in their religious views but, as we noted above, believed that Christianity was good for the nation because it created moral and benevolent citizens (23).

Any discussion of the relationship between Christianity and the founding should remind us that history is complex. Our students must embrace this complexity if historical learning is to take place in our classrooms. We should not allow students to be satisfied with easy or politically driven understandings of the past. The religious world of the eighteenth century will not always be useful in the religious world of the twenty-first century. We must

teach our students the importance of understanding change over time.

Having said this, I have come to the conclusion that the question, “Was America founded as a Christian nation?” is a bad historical question. In asking such a question we take the cultural war debates of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century and apply them to a founding era quite different from our own. Any attempt to answer this question will also lead to definitional problems. For example, when we say that America is a “Christian nation” are we making a statement about demographics? If this is the case, then of course America is a Christian nation. The majorities of Americans have been, and continue to be, Christian in religious orientation. Or perhaps when we talk about America as a Christian nation we are referring to the behavior of the government of the United States. Do the policies of the country conform to the teachings of Christianity? Does a “Christian nation” allow slavery or exclude certain portions of the population from the democratic process? Of course, such an approach to the question forces us to move outside the realm of history and into theology, especially as we try to define what we mean by the “teachings of Christianity” in a post-Protestant Reformation world where everyone interprets the Bible in his or her own way.

So where do we go from here? Any effective challenge to a Christian nationalist view of American history will require a skill set not all historians possess. For example, some theological knowledge is necessary to critique a “providential” view of history. Noll, Marsden, and Hatch, as card-carrying evangelicals, have been able to offer substantial critiques from within the religious subculture. Many of those who defend the idea that the United States was founded as a Christian nation are more concerned with politics than they are with the pursuit of historical truth. As a result, historians as historians must work hard to educate the public about how to interpret evidence, think contextually, understand change over time, and avoid the dangers of superimposing our contemporary culture wars on the “foreign country” that is the past. The answer lies in historical thinking. As Sam Wineburg has reminded in his wonderful *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*, it is the responsibility of the history teacher to lead students into worlds that have long been lost (24). By entering such worlds we not only learn

something about that world but we also grow as human beings. We learn to listen to people who are different. We learn to empathize. We learn to decenter ourselves and think of our lives as part of a larger human history. It would seem that these skills—the skills of the historian—might be a new source of virtue as we continue to navigate controversial debates over the relationship between religion and public life.

Endnotes

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