

Glendale Christian Church

Is America really a
Christian Nation?

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In what sense can we speak of America as a “Christian Nation”?

I. Introduction

- *Is—or was—America a Christian Nation?* This question may be asked and answered in a variety of ways.
- David Barton, founder of www.wallbuilders.com, answers the question this way:

WallBuilders is an organization dedicated to presenting America's forgotten history and heroes, with an emphasis on the moral, religious, and constitutional foundation on which America was built – a foundation which, in recent years, has been seriously attacked and undermined. In accord with what was so accurately stated by George Washington, we believe that "the propitious [favorable] smiles of heaven can never be expected on a nation which disregards the eternal rules of order and right which heaven itself has ordained."

- At the other end of the spectrum is the position represented in the Treaty of Tripoli (article 11), a 1797 agreement between the United States and Tripoli, a Muslim nation located on the Barbary Coast of northern Africa, asserts the following:

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Mussulmen;³ and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation,⁴ it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries (signed by President John Adams and ratified unanimously by the Senate; it was published in several newspapers and there was no public opposition to it)

- Complicating the answer to such a question are some very practical concerns:
 - How should we define the label “Christian”?
 - Is it based on a collection of theological truths that correspond to Christian “**orthodoxy**” through the ages? What essential beliefs define a genuine Christian?
 - Is it based on the behavior, practice, and decisions which conform to the spiritual and moral teachings of Christianity as taught in the Bible (“**orthopraxy**”)? What elements of Christian practice define a genuine Christian (churchgoing? confirmation? participation in communion? baptize their children? etc.)
 - How do we judge the “Christian” character of the nation?
 - Do we look primarily to the **Founding Fathers** of the nation, to see what they believed and practiced?
 - Do we look primarily to the **founding documents/actions** of the nation’s government?

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- Do we look primarily at the **Christian character of the people** who make up the nation?
- At what point did the United States become a nation?
 - Was it in **1776**, when the Continental Congress declared its independence from England?
 - Was it **1789**, when the United States Constitution became the official frame of American government?
 - Is the point it became a nation different from its “founding” (e.g. when the Pilgrims arrived on American shores aboard the Mayflower in **1620**)?

II. Faith of the Founding Fathers

- Historical background: the Age of Enlightenment and the rise of **Deism**
 - John Locke, a philosopher and the author of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding and The Reasonableness of Christianity*, argued that **human experience and rationality**—rather than religious dogma and mystery—determined the validity of human beliefs. Locke’s test of truth was whether a belief made sense to human reason
 - Many Deists dismissed the doctrines of the **Trinity** (the teaching that God exists in the three persons of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), the **incarnation** (the assertion that God took human nature and form in the person of Jesus of Nazareth), the **virgin birth** (the belief that the Holy Spirit was the father of Jesus and the Virgin Mary his mother), and the **resurrection** (the declaration that Jesus physically rose from the grave after his crucifixion and burial). Additionally, they found belief in biblical **revelation**—the concept that the Bible revealed God and God’s will—faulty when subjected to rational analysis.
 - Deists postulated a **distant deity** to whom they referred with terms such as “the First Cause,” “the Creator of the Universe,” “the Divine Artist,” “the Divine Author of All Good,” “the Grand Architect,” “the God of Nature,” “Nature’s God,” “Divine Providence,” and (in a phrase used by Franklin) “the Author and Owner of our System.” The Declaration of Independence displays precisely this kind of wording and sense of a distant deity. In its 1,323 words, the Declaration speaks of “Nature’s God,” “Creator,” “Supreme Judge,” and “divine Providence.”
 - Deism proved influential in the United States from roughly 1725 through 1830. Since students and young people generally embrace novelty and new ideas, it would be surprising if Deism—which was viewed as cutting-edge thought—had not influenced the founding fathers, for most were young men when the movement began to spread.

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- **George Washington**

- Story of Washington praying at Valley Forge is probably false.
- Never went through confirmation as an Anglican/Episcopalian.
- Was intentionally very private about his faith: the Reverend Samuel Langdon wrote to Washington asking him to publicly identify himself as a “disciple of the Lord Jesus Christ.” Washington replied to Langdon’s request with a reference to “the Great Author of the Universe” whose “divine interposition was so frequently manifested on our behalf.” (In other words, he skirted the question and refused to identify himself, as Langdon had hoped, with the Christian faith).
- William White, Washington's bishop and pastor in Philadelphia: “Truth requires me to say, that General Washington never received the communion, in the churches of which I am parochial minister. Mrs. Washington was an habitual communicant.” The Reverend James Abercrombie, the assistant at Christ Church, objected so much to the practice of the president of the United States (and others) walking out of church prior to communion that he preached a sermon on public worship. In it he spoke of the “unhappy tendency of. . . those in elevated stations who invariably turned their backs upon the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.” Realizing that he was setting a bad example, Washington never again attended Christ Church on Sacrament Sundays.
- Unlike Jefferson (below), he was willing to serve as a godfather of a friend’s child.

- **John Adams**

- First president who was a Unitarian: God was one—a unit—and not three (a tri-unity). Jesus was in some way commissioned or sent by God but remained subordinate to him.
- Could not accept the historic Christian belief that Jesus Christ was God or that his death atoned for the sins of the world: “An incarnate God!!! An eternal, self-existent omnipresent omniscient Author of this stupendous Universe suffering on a Cross!!! My Soul starts with horror, at the Idea.”
- Thought the notion of “a mere creature, or finite Being,” making “Satisfaction to infinite justice for the sins of the world” was a “convenient Cover for absurdity.”

- **Thomas Jefferson**

- Rejected any doctrines that could not be explained by reason, including the incarnation, the deity of Christ, the atonement, and the resurrection. Did not believe that the Bible was the inspired Word of God
- Refused to serve as godfather for children of friends in Anglican baptisms, for godfathers had to profess a belief in what he viewed as the unreasonable doctrine of the Trinity.

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- **Benjamin Franklin**

- Privately questioned such Christian doctrinal teachings as the incarnation, the Trinity, and the resurrection, he remained cautious when discussing them publicly.
- Five weeks before his death, when he received an inquiry about his religious beliefs from a Congregationalist minister who was president of Yale College, Franklin replied:

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 its Conduct in this. These I take to be the fundamental Principles of all sound Religion...I have . . . some Doubts as to his Divinity, tho' it is a Question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, & think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble.

- **James Madison**

- In an 1825 exchange of letters with the Reverend Frederick Beasley, an Episcopal clergyman who was provost of the University of Pennsylvania, Madison's response only uses the phrase “Nature's God.” Though he displays his sympathy with Beasley's theism and declares that “The belief in a God All Powerful wise & good is so essential to the moral order of the World & to the happiness of man, that arguments which enforce it cannot be drawn from too many sources,” he omits any references, however, to Jesus, to the Bible, to the Judeo-Christian tradition, or to the church. Thus Madison's letter seems more the response of a Deist than that of an orthodox Christian

- **James Monroe**

- Religion was not a primary concern of Monroe. When he died, he left no deathbed statement. Instead, historians have only the assertion of a friend that he died resigned to his fate. The eulogies by his contemporaries at his funeral commemorations in New York, Richmond, and Boston speak of Monroe in terms of patriotism and statesmanship; none even mentions his religious faith
- He was a Freemason, and the ties between Deism and Freemasonry were close

- **John Witherspoon**

- Only minister to sign the Declaration of Independence.

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- **Ethan Allen**
 - Found biblical revelation contradictory and erroneous.
 - Came to believe that organized religion had been carried away by “a torrent of superstition.”
 - When discussing religion, he used such words as “Providence” and “God” but gave no salvific role to Jesus.
- **Patrick Henry**
 - An active Episcopalian, he read the Bible daily, paid for the printing and distribution of two attacks on Deism by British authors, and distributed religious tracts while riding circuit as a lawyer.
 - His letters and addresses typically spoke of “Almighty God,” “the gospel of Jesus,” and “the merits of Jesus.”
- **Samuel Adams**
 - Considered to be a genuine Christian.
- **Elias Boudinot**
 - President of the Continental Congress and brother-in-law of a leader of the Great Awakening, president of the General Assembly (or chief legislative body) of the Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, president of the New Jersey Bible Society, founding figure and first president of the American Bible Society, and a leading figure in the establishment of Princeton Theological Seminary
- **John Jay**
 - President of the Continental Congress, minister to Spain during the war, negotiator (with Franklin and John Adams) of the Treaty of Paris, secretary for foreign affairs, first chief justice of the Supreme Court, and second governor of New York. Along with Alexander Hamilton, he conceived the Federalist Papers but wrote only five because of illness
 - Believed in a literal fall of humanity, in a literal Noah, in the worldwide flood, in the tower of Babel, and in a future millennium
 - Used Christian terms that would rarely turn up in the writings of a founding father: “gospel,” “gospel ministry,” “mercy,” “grace,” “Divine ordinances,” and “apostolic succession.”
- If there was one **universal idea** that all the founders believed about the relationship between religion and the new nation, it was that **religion was necessary in order to sustain an ordered and virtuous republic**

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III. Founding Documents

- If one examines the specific arguments made by colonial political leaders in the years leading up to 1776, one is hard-pressed to find any Christian or biblical language apart from a few passing references to God which were of the non-descript deistic style.
- The colonies argued that they had “inherent rights and privileges” not because they were Christian or even believed in God, but because they were “natural born subjects within the kingdom of Britain.”
- Declaration of Independence
 - The right to declare independence from England comes directly from the “Law of Nature and Nature’s God”; the notion that the “unalienable rights” of “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” are endowed by the “Creator”; the appeal to the “Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions”; and the closing reference to the “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence.
 - “Nature’s God” was a term used often by eighteenth-century Deists who upheld the belief that God created the world, instilled it with natural laws of science, morality, and politics, and allowed it to function based on those laws without any further divine interference.
 - The reference to self-evident truths being “endowed by their Creator” was not part of Jefferson’s original draft of the Declaration. It was added later by Benjamin Franklin.
 - The Declaration never mentions Jesus Christ, nor does it quote the Old or New Testaments. It fails to move beyond vague descriptions of God.
 - The Declaration proclaims truths that the founding fathers thought to be “self-evident” to natural reason (a very deistic idea), not truths that are scriptural.
- Constitution
 - Makes one reference to religion: Article VI affirms that “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public trust under the United States.” The framers of the Constitution made clear that a person could not be excluded from serving his or her country in the new national government based solely upon his or her religious convictions.
 - If the “nation” represents the **national government** formed by the U.S. Constitution, then it is clear that the framers of the Constitution were not interested in promoting a religious nation of any kind

IV. Faith of the American People

- In their state constitutions, most states made very clear that they were Christian societies, placing Protestant qualifications on office holding and allowing government to tax citizens for the purpose of promoting the Christian religion.

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- If we agree that the Constitution created a “roof without walls,” or a very limited sense of “national” identity (according to historian John Murrin), then it might be appropriate to look to the **state governments** as the best reflection of the will of the American people.
- Some of the nation’s first American historians began to write and publish during the early period. Though they seldom described the United States as a “Christian nation,” they did not shy away from trying to discern the **hand of God in American history**. Many of these historians believed that God had intervened on behalf of the United States during the American Revolution.
- During the Civil War, competing Christian visions came to a head:
 - If the Union was ordained by God, then Christians were required to submit to it. Northern clergy invoked New Testament passages to counter the beliefs of Southern secessionists.
 - The preamble of the Constitution of the Confederate States of America made a direct appeal to “Almighty God”
- By the 1950s evangelical and mainline Protestants were experiencing growth of their own. The nation experienced nothing short of a religious revival
 - In 1954 Congress approved an act to add the words “under God” to the Pledge of Allegiance. It was important during the Cold War for the United States to define itself as a God-fearing nation
 - In 1955 this connection between God and the United States was further strengthened when Congress opted to put the words “In God We Trust” on all United States coins and currency
- In the 1960’s there was a turnaround with the rise of feminism, rock and roll and the drugs, alcohol, and free sex culture that came with it, the 1962 Supreme Court decision making school prayer unconstitutional, and the 1973 Roe V. Wade Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion.

V. Conclusions

- There are no quick and easy answers as to whether the United States was intentionally founded as a Christian nation—any answer must be carefully qualified by the criteria and time period which are selected.
- In my judgment, the best answer is that America, by virtue of its European origins, **accepted Christianity as a civic religion** (cultural Christianity)
 - Throughout history most cultures have been influenced by some religion or other.

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- Typically, most people in the culture don't make the dominant religion the central point of their life. But the religion nevertheless plays an important role in providing the culture with a shared worldview, shared history, shared values and practices, common holidays, and so on.
- The civic religion of America from the start has been some version of Christianity, since that is what America inherited from its European forbears. This probably explains why a majority of Americans still identify themselves as “Christian” to pollsters.
- The actual impact of this civic religion on people's lives is negligible in the majority of cases: the majority of professing Christians in the US, when asked, lack even an elementary understanding of the faith they profess and it is unlikely that it makes a difference in their lives.
- The potential negative impact of this civic religion as it is intertwined with national identity is that it can turn others off to the message of Christ because of the “guilty association” with all that is wrong with America—I think this is a large part of the reason that many Muslim nations hate us.
- We do well to remember that, as Jesus told Pilate, His kingdom “is not of this world” (John 18:36) and that “the whole world lies in the power of the evil one” (1 John 5:19)
 - We can never assume that any particular nation—including our own—is always, or even usually, aligned with God. Not even the nation God Himself established—Israel—was able to accomplish that.
 - This ought to prompt us to have a healthy suspicion toward every version of the kingdoms of the world, including our own.
 - On the one hand, America was discovered (by Europeans), conquered, and governed in the early years in a typical, barbaric, violent, kingdom of the world affair (e.g. “Manifest Destiny” with native Americans, widespread slavery, etc.)
 - On the other hand, America has arguably now become, by historic and global standards, a relatively good version of the kingdom of the world.
 - Can we use the methods of the kingdoms of the world to achieve the goals of the kingdom of God?
 - If we can just get more Christians into office, pass more Christian laws, support more Christian policies...will this help non-Christians to become more like Jesus?
 - If we can just protect the sanctity of marriage, make it difficult, if not impossible, to live a gay lifestyle, and overturn Roe vs. Wade...will this help non-Christians to become more like Jesus?

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- If we can just get prayer (Christian prayer, of course) back into our schools along with the Ten Commandments and creationist teaching...will this help non-Christians to become more like Jesus
- If we can just keep “one nation under God” in our Pledge of Allegiance, protect the rights of Christians to speak their minds, get more control of the liberal media, clean up the trash that’s coming out of the movie and record industry, while marginalizing, if not eradicating, liberal groups such as the ACLU...will this help non-Christians to become more like Jesus?
- When did Jesus ever act or talk like this?

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