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Was America Founded As a Christian Nation?

Exploring the Intersection of American Civil Religion and the "Christian Nation" Mythos

I. Introduction: The Tension of the American Identity

In the contemporary landscape of American public life, an enduring tension exists between the explicitly secular language of the United States Constitution and the pervasive "God Bless America" rhetoric that characterizes modern political discourse. From the inclusion of "In God We Trust" on national currency to the ritualized invocation of Divine Providence by leaders across the political spectrum, the United States often presents itself as a nation with a unique spiritual mission. This presentation frequently fuels the fire of American exceptionalism; the belief that the nation is specially ordained by God to serve as a "city upon a hill" for the rest of the world (Winthrop 1985, 91). However, this leads to a critical inquiry: how can we distinguish between the documented historical facts of the founding and the powerful founding myths that were later created to forge a cohesive national identity? (Green 2015, 16).

The answer lies in recognizing a key historical shift that leads to the central thesis of this paper. While the "Christian Nation" narrative is a powerful aspirational myth that coalesced in the 19th century to provide moral meaning to a fractured society, the actual founding was an eclectic blend of Enlightenment rationalism, pluralism, and a burgeoning civil religion that utilized the

language of Protestant Christianity. This structure was purposefully designed by the founders to unify a diverse populace and provide a shared ethical framework without establishing a formal, institutionalized theocracy. By examining the "Christian Nation" concept as a man-made constructive narrative rather than a fixed historical reality, we can better appreciate the complex and diverse religious heritage that actually shaped the American experiment.

II. Historical Complexity

To navigate the debate over America's religious origins, one must adopt a rigorous historical framework. Historian John Fea suggests utilizing the "Five C's" of historical thinking (change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity) to move beyond the overly simplified answers that often dominate the culture wars. Fea warns against the danger of "cherry-picking" evidence from the past by selecting isolated quotes from founders to support modern political or cultural agendas while ignoring the broader context of their lives and thoughts. History, in this view, is a "foreign country" where the inhabitants operated under different assumptions and worldviews than our own (Fea 2016, xxx).

While Fea's emphasis on complexity is compelling, it is important to acknowledge that the "Christian Nation" debate is a site of significant *historiographical* contention. Critics of the "secular founding" narrative often argue that Fea and similar historians underemphasize the pervasive biblical worldview that saturated the 18th-century mind. However, the strength of Fea's position, largely supported by the work of scholars like Steven Green, R. Laurence Moore, and Mark Noll, lies in its ability to reconcile the founders' private heterodoxy with their public support for religion. For example, Green (Green 2015, 13) emphasizes that even when the

founders utilized religious language, they were often repurposing it for civic rather than purely theological ends, while Moore (Moore 2003, 17) asserts that the absence of a national church was a deliberate tool for social stability. Noll further supports this by illustrating that the concept of a "Bible Civilization" was a cultural project that evolved long after the Constitution had been signed (Noll 2022, 13).

The religious landscape of the founding generation was characterized by immense diversity, defying any attempt to label the era as monolithically "Christian" in the modern sense. The founders themselves were an eclectic group whose beliefs ranged from traditional Christian orthodoxy to radical Enlightenment skepticism. While figures like John Witherspoon, the only active minister to sign the Declaration of Independence, held to historic doctrines, many other prominent founders “rejected core tenets such as the Trinity,” as well as the divine inspiration of the Bible or the resurrection of Jesus Christ (Fea 2016, 246).

For instance, Thomas Jefferson famously crafted his own version of the Gospels around 1820 by literally cutting out and pasting together the ethical teachings of Jesus, but removing all accounts of miracles and the supernatural (Jefferson, 2011). Benjamin Franklin, though a life-long supporter of religious institutions for their social utility, remained a theological skeptic who prioritized a "religion of virtue" over doctrinal adherence (Fea 2016, 227). Despite these varied personal convictions, there was a near-universal belief among the founders that religion, regardless of its specific denomination, was necessary to sustain an ordered and virtuous public. As John Adams famously noted, "Our Constitution was made only for a moral and a religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other" (Adams 1854, 229). In the

founders' eyes, religion served as a school of Republican virtue, transforming narrow self-interest into what Alexis de Tocqueville called "self-interest rightly understood," which was a public-spiritedness essential for the survival of a free republic (Tocqueville 2000, 500-503).

III. The Construction of the "Christian Nation" Myth

If the legal and political structures of the founding were intentionally pluralistic, where did the "Christian Nation" narrative originate? Historian Steven Green argues that this "founding myth" is a narrative created to transfigure historical reality and provide a society with moral and spiritual meaning. According to Green, this specific myth did not fully congeal until the early 19th century, during the transition to a second generation of Americans who sought to "sanctify" the nation's origins and forge a distinct national identity separate from their British heritage.

The rise of this narrative was inextricably linked to the Second Great Awakening, which was a massive wave of Protestant evangelicalism that swept across the country between the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and the Civil War in 1861. This movement shifted American theology away from a strict Calvinism (with its focus on predestination) toward a "free will" or democratic theology that empowered individuals to choose their own spiritual destiny. During this era, ministers and historians began to refashion the founders as "Evangelical Christians" to provide the burgeoning "Christian Nation" with appropriate "Christian Statesmen" as its fathers (Green 2015, 210).

The "Christian Statesmen" envisioned by 19th-century mythmakers were far removed from the complex, often heterodox figures of the actual founding. These idealized versions of the founders were portrayed as men whose political brilliance was a direct byproduct of their evangelical

fervor and strict adherence to Protestant dogma. Biographers like George Bancroft and various Second Great Awakening ministers scrubbed away the founders' Enlightenment skepticism and replaced it with a narrative of personal piety that mirrored the revivalist spirit of the 1800s. In this reimagined history, the drafting of national documents was seen not as a pragmatic political negotiation, but as a series of *moments* where “divinely inspired” leaders sought to codify biblical law into the American experiment.

George Washington, for instance, was frequently recast in the popular imagination and in widely circulated hagiographies as a devout, kneeling supplicant at Valley Forge; a stark contrast to his historically documented role as a more reserved Latitudinarian or Deist (Moore 2003, 16). Similarly, the intellectual restlessness of figures like Jefferson and Franklin was simplified into a "religion of virtue" that was conveniently aligned with the moral crusades of the 19th-century middle class. By framing the founders as icons of Protestant orthodoxy, proponents of the myth provided the "Bible Civilization" with a lineage of "Christian Statesmen" who served to sanctify the nation’s past and provide a moral mandate for its future expansion.

The distinctly Protestant character of this "Christian Nation" was perhaps most visibly enforced through the public education system, specifically regarding the mandated use of the Protestant Bible in classrooms (Green 2015, 7). While proponents of the myth claimed to be defending a universal Christian foundation, their insistence on the Protestant translation effectively categorized Catholic immigrants as religious outsiders. By framing the King James Bible as the only acceptable moral textbook for the republic, the state demonstrated that its vision of a

"Christian" America was built upon a specific Protestant hegemony that marginalized any faith, even other Christian denominations, that did not conform to its liturgical and cultural standards.

The construction of the "Christian Nation" myth was not merely an exercise in historical revisionism; it fulfilled several vital, and often aggressive, strategic functions that shaped the trajectory of the young republic. Chief among these was the forging of a robust sense of national identity and exceptionalism. By retroactively sanctifying the founding, proponents of the myth provided the American people with a sense of special providential election. This narrative suggested that the United States was not merely a political experiment in self-governance, but a central protagonist in the divine drama, occupying a unique and favored place in God's plan for the world. This belief in a transcendent mission transformed the American identity from a collection of disparate colonial histories into a unified, sacred "New Israel" (Fea 2016, 63).

Furthermore, this auspicious mythical framework provided the necessary legitimation of national policy and offered a moral veneer for state actions that might otherwise have been viewed as purely exploitative. The association of the American government with a "Christian Mission" became a potent tool for domestic and foreign policy (Green 2015, ix). It was used to provide a theological justification for the forced Christianization of Native Americans, a process that necessitated the systematic destruction of their indigenous cultures and homelands under the guise of "civilizing" heathens. This religious mandate also underpinned the 19th-century doctrine of Manifest Destiny and the Monroe Doctrine, which has been recently revived and reinforced by America. Thus by casting territorial expansion as a divine decree, the myth provided a

providential mandate for American imperialism, making the conquest of the continent appear both inevitable and holy.

Finally, the "Christian Nation" narrative functioned as a double-edged sword regarding social cohesion and conflict. Within the Protestant majority, the myth acted as a powerful social "glue," creating a shared vocabulary of symbols and values that unified a diverse and expanding population (McGuire 2002, 196). However, this same cohesion was predicated on the exclusion of those who did not fit the Protestant mold. In the 19th century, this led to the intense marginalization and persecution of Catholic immigrants, who were viewed as threats to the "Christian" character of the state, which was interpreted in Protestant terms only. This legacy of exclusion persists in the modern era as the myth continues to fuel public suspicions regarding the compatibility of non-Christian faiths, such as Sikhism and Islam, with the American democratic experiment. Consequently, while the myth provided internal stability for some, it simultaneously acted as a catalyst for deep-seated social friction and structural inequality.

IV. Civil Religion vs. Formal Theocracy

The founders' solution to the problem of integrating religious values without a state church resulted in what Robert Bellah calls "American Civil Religion." This refers to a distinct set of symbols, rituals, and practices that address issues of political legitimacy and ethics but are not fused with any specific ecclesiastical body. Bellah distinguishes this from a formal theocracy, explaining civil religion as a public philosophy that, while often using Protestant theological language, can be expressed in non-theological terms to include a diverse citizenry (Bellah & Hammond 1980, xi).

The evolution of American civil religion is most vividly illustrated through the starkly different rhetorical and legal frameworks of the nation's two foundational documents. The Declaration of Independence, which represents the "Republican Moment" of the revolutionary struggle, functions as the theological anchor for American identity (Bellah & Hammond 1980, 10). In this document, Thomas Jefferson and the Continental Congress utilized the language of Enlightenment Deism to establish a superstructural location of sovereignty. By invoking "Nature's God," the "Creator," and "Divine Providence," the founders did not establish a Christian state, but they did establish a moral authority that exists above and independent of the state. This transcendental reference point was strategically essential because it provided a universal moral ground upon which citizens could stand to judge their government. It framed the revolution not as a mere rebellion against a monarch, but as an appeal to a higher law when earthly authorities became tyrannical.

In sharp contrast stands the U.S. Constitution, which Robert Bellah and other scholars characterize as the "Liberal Moment" of the American founding. Drafted in secret eleven years after the Declaration during a period of pragmatic governance and the "complex working out of interests," the Constitution is a strikingly secular document (Bellah & Hammond 1980, 10). It contains no mention of God, Jesus, or Christianity at all, and the only reference to religion is a restrictive one in the First Amendment and the prohibition of religious tests for office in Article VI. While the Declaration sought to justify a revolution through divine principles, the Constitution sought to organize a functioning society through the mechanics of law, checks and balances, and the protection of individual rights. It moved the seat of sovereignty from a

providential "Creator" to "We the People," signaling a shift toward a procedural, pluralistic government that functioned without the need for an official ecclesiastical seal of approval.

Crucially, this constitutional silence on religion was not an act of hostility toward faith but a radical acknowledgment that religious diversity could be a source of national strength rather than a cause for civil war. The U.S. Constitution was the first major political document in Western history to recognize religious differences as a "normal condition" and a socially beneficial reality (Moore 2003, 5). As R. Laurence Moore argues, by refusing to establish a national church, the founders invited Americans to form alliances across sectarian lines based on shared civic interests rather than shared dogma. This allowed for the development of "multiple identities" where one could be a devout Baptist or a skeptical Deist while remaining a fully committed American citizen (Moore 2003, 5). This approach represented a profound departure from European models of nation-building, which historically relied on the forced imposition of a single religious identity to ensure social order. By institutionalizing religious pluralism, the American founding created a unique civic space where sacred and secular interests could coexist without the constraints of a formal theocracy.

V. The Theological Crisis of the Civil War

The "Christian Nation" myth was put to its ultimate test during the American Civil War, bringing conflict historian Mark Noll to describe it throughout his work as a “theological crisis.” Paradoxically, both the Union and the Confederacy thus believed they were the "true" Christian nation, and both sides appealed to the same Bible and prayed to the same God to justify their cause. Southerners, in particular, leaned heavily into the "Christian Nation" identity, pointing to

the fact that the Confederate Constitution, unlike its federal counterpart, made a direct appeal to "Almighty God" in its preamble (Confederate States of America Constitution 1861, pmbl.). Southern clergy argued that since the Bible did not explicitly condemn slavery, it was a permissible institution within a Christian society, going so far as to characterize Northern abolitionists as atheists who had abandoned the authority of Scripture. Conversely, the North increasingly saw the conflict as a crusade against the "evil of slavery," and as a moral cause that transcended the mere preservation of the Union (Fea 2016, 14).

This fracturing of what Mark Noll terms a "Bible Civilization" demonstrated that the "Christian Nation" was not a fixed reality but a contested cultural development that could be weaponized by opposing sides (Noll 2022, 245). For Noll, 19th century America was built on a broad Protestant consensus that viewed the scriptures as both a blueprint for national success and a shared moral vocabulary that unified a geographically expanding and ethnically diversifying populace. However, this "Bible Civilization" was not a fixed, peaceful reality and it eventually faced a terminal "theological crisis" during the Civil War. Because the Bible was used with equal fervor and linguistic authority to both defend and condemn the institution of slavery, the conflict demonstrated that a shared sacred text could not prevent a national rupture when fundamental interpretations were diametrically opposed.

VI. Modern Implications and Conclusion

The legacy of these 19th-century developments continues to shape the contemporary United States as the "Christian Nation" narrative remains a centerpiece of modern political discourse. Since the Bicentennial in 1976, various conservative movements have revitalized this mythos to

gain moral and political ground in the culture wars, often claiming that a "Christian consensus" existed at the founding and that secular elites have intentionally censored this history. However, the actual historical record, including the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli, which explicitly stated that "the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion," suggests a far more nuanced reality where the founding was a deliberate effort to create a space for religious pluralism (United States 1797, art. 11). By acknowledging that the "Christian Nation" is a man-made constructive narrative rather than a fixed historical reality, we can better appreciate the complex religious heritage that has actually shaped the American experiment.

In conclusion, while the "Christian Nation" narrative is a powerful myth that provides many Americans with a sense of purpose and identity, it should not be confused with the documented facts of the founding. The actual founding was an "unprecedented, unique, and confused" solution that balanced Enlightenment rationalism with the practical needs of a burgeoning pluralistic society (Bellah and Hammond 1980, 6-7). Ultimately, recognizing the distinction between the "City of God" and the "City of Man" remains essential for maintaining the delicate balance of the American democratic experiment (Augustine 1998, 14.28).

Annotated Bibliography

Adams, John. 1854. *The Works of John Adams*. Edited by Charles Francis Adams. Vol. 9. Boston: Little, Brown.

This primary source collection includes Adams' 1798 letter to the Massachusetts Militia, which contains the seminal argument that the U.S. Constitution is "made only for a moral and a religious people" (Adams 1854, 229). This work provides the necessary "Republican" justification for the role of religion in public life without requiring a specific sectarian foundation.

Augustine. *The City of God against the Pagans*. Translated by R. W. Dyson. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

In this foundational work of Western theology, Augustine distinguishes between two metaphorical cities that coexist throughout human history: the City of God (civitas Dei) and the City of Man (civitas terrena). He argues that the City of God consists of those united by the "love of God to the contempt of self," while the City of Man is defined by "love of self to the contempt of God" (Augustine 1998, 632).

Bellah, Robert N., and Phillip E. Hammond. *Varieties of Civil Religion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980.

This foundational text argues that American civil religion is a distinct religious dimension that exists alongside, but separate from, organized churches. "American Civil religion is distinct from other forms of civil religion in that it is differentiated from both church and

state" (Bellah and Hammond 1980, 27). This source provides the sociological framework for how a secular nation can still be profoundly religious in its public identity.

Confederate States of America. *Constitution of the Confederate States of America*. March 11, 1861.

The Confederate Constitution serves as a pivotal counterpoint to the U.S. Constitution within the essay's discussion of the 19th-century "theological crisis." By explicitly invoking "the favor and guidance of Almighty God" in its preamble, this document represents the legal codification of the "Christian Nation" myth that the South argued had been omitted from the original 1787 founding (Confederate States of America 1861, pmbl).

Fea, John. *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. Revised ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016.

Fea provides strong historical analysis, highlighting the diversity of the founders' beliefs and the Christian nature of state constitutions compared to the secular Federal Constitution. He writes, "Though the Declaration of Independence refers to God multiple times it cannot be called a Christian document. The same might be said for the U.S. Constitution which refers to God not at all. But when it comes to the individual states, today's defenders of Christian America have a compelling case" (Fea 2016, 246). This source is essential for establishing the historical complexity of the debate.

Green, Steven K. *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2015.

Green argues that the "Christian Nation" idea is a 19th-century "myth" created to assist in national identity formation, and he details how this narrative was used to legitimize expansion and marginalize non-Protestant groups: “The identification of protestant Christianity with Republican values led to the marginalization of Catholic immigrants during the 19th century; and belief in America's Manifest Destiny Justified American imperialism throughout that century and into the next” (Green 2015, ix). This source serves as the primary critique of the "Christian Nation" mythos in the essay.

Hamilton, Alexander, James Madison, and John Jay. *The Federalist Papers*. Edited by Clinton Rossiter. New York: Mentor, 1961.

These papers provide the primary evidence for the founders' political philosophy. Madison’s focus on controlling factions (including religious ones) and the pragmatic need for checks and balances because "men are not angels" shows a movement away from religious governance toward structural secularism (Hamilton, Madison, and Jay 1961, 322).

Jefferson, Thomas. *The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2011.

Commonly known as the "Jefferson Bible," this work literally extracts the ethical teachings of Jesus while omitting all supernatural and miraculous elements. "Therefore

all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets" (Matthew 7:12). This source is essential for the essay to challenge the notion of a monolithically orthodox founding.

McGuire, Meredith B. "Religion, Social Cohesion, and Conflict." In *Religion: The Social Context*. 5th ed. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, 2002.

McGuire explores how religion can act as a glue for social cohesion but also as a catalyst for conflict. "Religion is a powerful force for social cohesion, but the very same factors that make it integrate one group often make it a source of conflict with other groups" (McGuire 2002, 189). In the context of the essay, this source helps explain why the "Christian Nation" myth is so fiercely defended; it provides a sense of belonging and exceptionalism that is threatened by pluralism.

Moore, R. Laurence. *Touchdown Jesus: The Mixing of Sacred and Secular in American History.* Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

Moore examines how Americans have historically blended sacred and secular interests, often for political or nationalistic gain. “Religion is in the lexicon of American football, a fact that suggests how easily religious Americans can entwine the sacred with the secular” (Moore 2003, 11). His work provides modern examples of how religious identity is utilized in the civic arena to grant legitimacy to social programs.

Noll, Mark A. *America's Book: The Rise and Decline of a Bible Civilization, 1794-1911*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2022.

Noll tracks the influence of the Bible in American public life, characterizing the 19th century as a "Bible civilization" (Noll 2022, 13). This text bridges the gap between the founding and the Civil War, showing how scriptural influence grew and then fractured, proving that "Christian America" was a cultural development rather than a fixed founding reality.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *Democracy in America*. Translated and edited by Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

This classic work contains Tocqueville's concept of "self-interest rightly understood" which describes the mechanism by which individualistic citizens are drawn into public-spiritedness (Tocqueville 2000, 500-503).

US Declaration of Independence. July 4, 1776.

As a primary source, the Declaration references a "Creator," but avoids specific Christian terminology. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness" (U.S. Declaration of Independence, preamble). This serves as the first example of the "American Civil Religion" that Bellah describes; a public philosophy that can be expressed in non-theological terms.

United States. *Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary*. Signed November 4, 1796. Ratified June 10, 1797. Stat. 154.

This official diplomatic document provides critical evidence against the historical claim that the United States was founded as a legally Christian entity, explicitly stating "the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion" (United States 1797, stat. 154).

Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity." In *The Puritans in America: A Narrative Anthology*, edited by Alan Heimert and Andrew Delbanco, 82–92. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985.

In this 1630 sermon, Winthrop outlines his vision for the Massachusetts Bay Colony as a "city upon a hill" (Winthrop 1985, 91), believing that the colonists must act as moral exemplars for the rest of the world. This source is vital for understanding the religious foundations of American exceptionalism.