

Five Reasons the United States Is Not a Christian Nation

Rob Boston

“**T**he United States is a Christian nation.” If I had a nickel for every time I’ve heard this statement at a religious Right meeting or in the media, I wouldn’t be rich—but I’d probably have enough to buy a really cool iPad. The assertion is widely believed by followers of the religious Right and often repeated—and, too often, it seeps into the beliefs of the rest of the population as well. But like other myths that are widely accepted (you use only 10 percent of your brain, vitamin C helps you get over a cold, and the like), it lacks a factual basis.

Over the years, numerous scholars, historians, lawyers, and judges have debunked the “Christian nation” myth. Yet it persists. Does it have any basis in American history? Why is the myth so powerful? What psychological need does it fill?

I’m not a lawyer, and my research in this area has been influenced and informed by scholars who have done much more in-depth work. The problem with some of this material, great as it

There are essentially five arguments that refute the Christian nation myth. I’m going to outline them here and then take a look at the history of the myth. From there, we’ll briefly examine the myth’s enduring legacy and how it still affects politics and public policy today.

1. The Text of the Constitution Does Not Say the United States Is a Christian Nation

If a Christian nation had been the intent of the founders, they would have put that in the Constitution, front and center. Yet the text of the Constitution contains no references to God, Jesus Christ, or Christianity. That document does not state that our country is an officially Christian nation.

Not only does the Constitution not give recognition or acknowledgment to Christianity, but it also includes Article VI, which bans “religious tests” for public office. Guaranteeing non-

Christians the right to hold federal office seems antipodal to an officially Christian nation. The language found in Article VI sparked some controversy, and a minority faction that favored limiting public office to Christians (or at least to believers) protested. Luther Martin, a Maryland delegate, later reported that some felt it “would be at least decent to hold out some distinction between the professors of Christianity and downright infidelity or paganism.” But, as Martin noted, the article’s language was approved “by a great majority . . . without much debate.” The Christian nation argument just wasn’t persuasive.

In addition, the First Amendment bars all laws “respecting an establishment of religion” and protects “the free exercise thereof.” Nothing here indicates that the latter provision applies only to Christian faiths.

Finding no support for their ideas in the body of the Constitution, Christian-nation advocates are left to point to other documents, including the Declaration of Independence. This also fails. The Declaration’s reference to “the Creator” is plainly deistic. More obscure documents such as the Northwest Ordinance or personal writings by various framers are interesting historically

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is, is that it tends to be—how shall I say this politely?—‘dense.’

If I were a lawyer (the kind found on television dramas, not a real one), I would present the case against the Christian nation myth in a handful of easily digestible informational nuggets. Swallow them, and you’ll be armed for your next confrontation with Cousin Lloyd who sends money to Pat Robertson.

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When it comes to determining the manner of the U.S. government, only the Constitution matters. The Constitution does not declare that the United States is a Christian nation. This fact alone is fatal to the cause of Christian nation advocates.

2. The Founders' Political Beliefs Would Not Have Led Them to Support the Christian-Nation Idea

Key founders such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson opposed mixing church and state. They would never have supported an officially Christian nation.

Jefferson and Madison came to this opposition in two ways. First, they were well-versed in history and understood how the officially Christian governments of Europe had crushed human freedom. Moreover, they knew about the constant religious wars among rival factions of Christianity. Second, they had witnessed religious oppression in the colonies firsthand.

Remember, Madison was inspired to fight for church-state separation and religious liberty because he had witnessed the jailing of dissenting ministers in Virginia. Madison and other founders wrote frequently about the dangers of governments adopting religion; they often worked alongside clergy who made similar arguments. John Leland, a Massachusetts pastor and powerful advocate for church-state separation, said it best: "The notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever."

Jefferson's Virginia Statue for Religious Liberty, which many scholars consider a precursor to the First Amendment, guaranteed religious freedom for everyone, Christian and non-Christian. Attempts to limit its protections to Christians failed, and Jefferson rejoiced.

In his famous "Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments" Madison observed, "Torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion."

In his *Notes on Virginia* Jefferson observed, "The legitimate powers of government extend to such acts only as are injurious to others. But it does me no injury for my neighbour to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg."

Alexander Hamilton, writing in "Federalist No. 69," speaks bluntly to the religious duties of the U.S. president: There aren't any. In this essay, Hamilton explains how the American president would differ from the English king, outlining several key differences between the two. He writes: "The one has no particle of spiritual jurisdiction; the other is the supreme head and governor of the national church!"

3. The Key Founders Were Not Conservative Christians and Likely Would Not Have Supported an Officially Christian Nation

To hear the religious Right tell it, men such as George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were eighteenth-century versions of Jerry Falwell in powdered wigs and stockings. This is nonsense.

The religious writings of many prominent founders sound odd to today's ears because these works reflect Deism, a theological system of thought that has since fallen out of favor. Deists believed in God but didn't necessarily see him as active in human affairs. The god of the Deists was a god of first cause: he set things in motion and then stepped back.

Although nominally an Anglican, George Washington often spoke in deistic terms. His god was a "supreme architect" of the universe. Washington saw religion as necessary for good and moral behavior but didn't necessarily accept all Christian dogma. He seemed to have a special gripe against Communion and would usually leave services before it was offered.

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Washington is the author of one of the great classics of religious liberty—the letter to Touro Synagogue (1790). In this letter, Washington assures America's Jews that they would enjoy complete religious liberty—not mere toleration—in the new nation. He outlines a vision not of a Christian nation but of a multi-faith society where all are free to practice as they will:

The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for giving to Mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. . . . All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.

John Adams was a Unitarian. He rejected belief in the Trinity and the divinity of Jesus, core concepts of Christian dogma. In his personal writings, Adams made it clear that he considered the concept of the divinity of Jesus incomprehensible.

In February of 1756, Adams wrote in his diary about a discussion he had had with a man named Major Greene. Greene was a devout Christian who sought to persuade Adams to adopt con-

servative Christian views. The two argued over the divinity of Jesus. When questioned on the matter, Greene fell back on an old standby: some matters of theology are too complex and mysterious for human understanding.

Adams was not impressed. In his diary he writes, "Thus mystery is made a convenient cover for absurdity."

Jefferson's skepticism of traditional Christianity is well known. Our third president did not believe in the Trinity, the virgin birth, the divinity of Jesus, the resurrection, original sin, and other core Christian doctrines. Jefferson once famously observed to Adams: "And the day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

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Although not an orthodox Christian, Jefferson admired Jesus as a moral teacher. He even edited the New Testament, cutting away the stories of miracles and divinity and leaving behind a very human Jesus, whose teachings Jefferson found "sublime."

Perhaps the most enigmatic of the founders was Madison. To this day, scholars still debate his religious views. Some of his biographers believe that Madison, nominally Anglican, was really a Deist. Notoriously reluctant to talk publicly about his religious beliefs, Madison was perhaps the strictest church-state separationist among the founders, opposing not only chaplains in Congress and the military but also government prayer proclamations. As president, he vetoed legislation granting federal land to a church as well as a plan to have a church in Washington care for the poor. In each case, he cited the First Amendment.

4. Shortly After the Constitution Was Ratified, Conservative Ministers Attacked It Because It Lacked References to Christianity

Ministers of the founding period knew that the Constitution didn't declare the United States officially Christian—and it made them angry.

In 1793, just five years after the Constitution was ratified, the Reverend John M. Mason of New York attacked that document in a sermon. Mason called the lack of references to God and Christianity "an omission which no pretext whatever can palliate." He predicted that an angry God would "overturn from its foundations the fabric we have been rearing and crush us to atoms in the wreck."

Conservative pastors continued whining well into the nineteenth century. In 1811, the Reverend Samuel Austin thundered that the Constitution "is entirely disconnected from Christianity. [This] one capital defect [will lead] inevitably to its destruction."

In 1845, the Reverend D.X. Junkin wrote, "[The Constitution] is negatively atheistical, for no God is appealed to at all. In framing many of our public formularies, greater care seems to have been taken to adapt them to the prejudices of the INFIDEL FEW, than to the consciences of the Christian millions."

These eighteenth- and nineteenth-century pastors knew that the Constitution was secular and granted no preferences to Christianity. They considered that a defect.

5. During the Post-Civil War Period, a Band of Politically Powerful Pastors Tried Repeatedly to Amend the U.S. Constitution to Add References to Jesus Christ and Christianity

Nineteenth-century ministers knew that the Constitution was secular and that the nation was not officially Christian. They sought to remedy that through an amendment that would have rewritten the preamble to the Constitution.

The drive was led by the National Reform Association (NRA), a kind of early religious Right organization that sought an officially Christian America. This NRA had ambitious goals. It sought laws curtailing commercial activity on Sunday, mandating Protestant worship in public schools and censorship of material deemed sexually explicit or blasphemous. (Thanks to the NRA, freethought societies of this period often had difficulties mailing periodicals to supporters. The U.S. Postal Service was under constant siege by the NRA.)

The NRA was successful in many of its legislative endeavors, but it was never able to secure passage of the Christian nation amendment. The group's proposed preamble read as follows:

We, the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, the Lord Jesus Christ as the Ruler among the nations, His revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government, and in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the inalienable rights and blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness to ourselves, our posterity and all the people, do ordain and establish this Constitution of the United States of America.

Congress did consider the amendment, but the House Judiciary Committee voted it down in 1874, declaring its awareness of the dangers of putting "anything into the Constitution or frame of government which might be construed to be a reference to any religious creed or doctrine." The proposal was reintroduced several times after that; in fact, versions of it were still appearing in Congress as late as 1965.

While the NRA was never successful in getting the Christian nation amendment passed, the group had better luck with

another policy objective: adding "In God We Trust" to coins. That practice was codified in the North during the Civil War.

Obviously, there would have been no need to amend the Constitution to declare America officially Christian if the document already said as much. But it didn't, which is why the NRA felt so strongly about its emendation.

The Origins of the Christian-Nation Myth

This last point provides the key to understanding the staying power of the Christian-nation myth. The myth's origins go back not to the founding period but to a much different time in history—the post-Civil War era.

During this period, the country came as close it ever would to being officially Christian. Many laws did reflect the tenets of that faith. For example, books, magazines, and even stage productions were banned if they were deemed insulting to the Christian faith. Protestant prayer and worship were common in many public schools. Laws curtailed Sunday commerce. Even the Supreme Court flirted with the Christian-nation concept in its infamous decision in the *Holy Trinity* case.

The post-Civil War era was also a period of great social upheaval. The end of slavery in the South created dislocation and confusion, which left people grasping for answers in the chaos. Other social changes loomed. Late in the century, women began advocating for the right to vote. Not surprisingly, some people reacted to these changes by latching onto reactionary religious views.

Despite the social unrest, in many ways this period of history is the religious Right's ideal society. Think about it: public schools were pushing conservative forms of Protestantism. Religiously based censorship was common. All people were required to abide by a set of laws based on Christian principles, with the government playing the role of theological enforcer. Significantly, this was also a time of rigidly enforced gender roles and official policies of racial segregation.

Many of these principles still inspire the religious Right's agenda today. So when religious Right leaders or television preachers hearken back to our days as a Christian nation, remember that they are not talking about the founding period. What they long for is a return to an aberrant era in late-nineteenth-century America.

The attempt to "nineteenth-century-ize" modern America continues into the present. It's not uncommon to hear the Christian-nation myth invoked in battles over religion in public schools, displays of religious signs and symbols on public property, and other church-state disputes. It has also been raised in questions dealing with tax aid to religious groups through school vouchers and "faith-based" initiatives. The argument is that it's only to be expected that large amounts of taxpayer money will

end up in the coffers of Christian groups because we are, after all, a Christian nation.

The myth also feeds several psychological needs. It assures religious Right supporters who fear the pace of social change that things like same-sex marriage and the rise of secularists are aberrations that run counter to the "real" Christian nature of the country. It also invokes a "stolen legacy" myth—the idea that a grand and glorious history (in this case, a Christian one) exists but that it is being covered up or denied by usurpers who seek to suppress the nation's history as part of a power grab.


The Christian-nation myth also has political ramifications. Put simply, it is often used to motivate people to vote a certain way. Increasingly, the theocrats of the Far Right are assailing what they call the "secular Left," an all-purpose bogeyman guilty of many crimes, including denying the Christian-nation idea.

But the myth is by no means limited to the religious Right.

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Polls show great confusion in this area: in 2007, for example, 55 percent of respondents told the First Amendment Center they believed the Constitution establishes America as an officially Christian nation.

Misinformation like this has especially bad consequences for secular humanists. The myth promotes the pernicious idea that non-Christians are second-class citizens in "Christian America." It leads to the idea that the law mandates only a grudging tolerance of nonbelievers rather than what the Constitution really extends: full and equal rights to all Americans, regardless of what they do or do not believe.

That the Christian-nation myth has many supporters among the religious Right doesn't mean it has validity. It is, in fact, a form of "historical creationism" that mainstream scholars have repeatedly shown to be fallacious. But, like "scientific creationism," the Christian-nation-myth still has great power and wide acceptance. Humanists must confront—and debunk—the myth wherever it appears. 

Rob Boston is senior policy analyst at Americans United for Separation of Church and State in Washington, D.C.