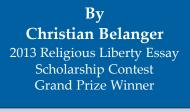
Christianity and the Founding Fathers: Exploring America's Purported Religious Origins

The 2013 Religious Liberty Essay Scholarship Contest asked high school juniors and seniors to examine religious diversity in America and evaluate the claim that the United States was founded as a "Christian nation." The grand prize winner is Christian Belanger, a 2013 graduate of Strath Haven High School in Wallingford, Pa. As part of his grand prize, Christian won a \$2,000 scholarship. His essay is reprinted below.

n July of 2004, Jerry Falwell, a Baptist pastor and social conserva-Live, succinctly stated that "any student of American history, from the Mayflower Compact to the New England Confederation to the Declaration of Independence" should be able to see that America is, and



always has been, a Christian nation. With this proclamation, Falwell espoused conceptions of America's foundations and Founding Fathers to which many Americans would enthusiastically assent. According to this view, America is a nation that predominantly utilizes traditional Christian frameworks with traditionally Christian values in its everyday governance. Unfortunately for proponents of religious government, there is ample proof both within the Constitution and within the writings of individual Founders that, despite being – as Falwell phrased it – "followers of Jesus Christ," few of these men ever intended the United States government to be anything other than a secular entity.

The Constitution refers to itself as "the supreme law of the land" and so it must be the most reliable and important document to refer to when examining the role of religion in the creation of the U.S. (Art. VI, par. 2). If the Founding Fathers had truly intended for America to be a Christian nation, surely the Constitution contains proof of their intentions. The first, most overt reference to religion is found in Article VI, when it is stated "no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States" (par. 3). This clause actually



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Visit vimeo.com/bjcvideos to see Christian Belanger read his essay.

shows a desire, depending upon one's interpretation, for either no religion or various religions - not just Christianity – to coexist within government. It emphatically does not prove the primacy of one religion over another in the minds of the Founders, but rather supports an array of religious diversity. The only other consequential mention of

religion comes in the First Amendment to the Bill of Rights, which begins, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The second half of that segment simply permits citizens to freely exercise their religious beliefs. The initial part of the amendment, however, is considerably thornier. According to constitutional scholars, it can be interpreted dually: as accommodationist, sanctioning interaction between religion and government, or separationist, completely severing the two entities (Davis). The debate between the two positions antedates the publication of the Bill of Rights, evidenced by the fact that eight separate drafts of the First Amendment are on record (Davis). Ultimately, though, it matters little which position one takes on the issue, because even with an accommodationist approach, there is no indication that any religion, especially not Christianity, should be preferred over another. In fact, many early accommodationist drafts took extreme pains to specify this, with one written as, "Congress shall make no law establishing one religious sect or society in preference to others ... " ("Bill of Rights"). Though that phrasing clearly allows for a general promotion of religion, it still goes to great lengths to display a nonpreferentialist approach. In the Constitution, then, there is little to be found that supports the use of an overarching Christian ideology to rule the country.

If the Constitution seems to promote secularity, or at least non-specificity, are the other writings of the Founding Fathers any different? Upon inspection, it becomes clear that even among those Founders who advocated for religious spirit in government, few explicitly supported a specifically Christian one. For example, John Adams, in a 1798 address to a Massachusetts militia, argued, "we have no government ... capable of contending in human passions unbridled by morality or religion. Our constitution was made only for a moral and religious people" (Adams 228). Two years earlier, however, President Adams had signed the Treaty of

Tripoli, which contained the notable addendum that "the tion that makes the claim of America's supposedly Government of the United States of America is not, in any Christian origin seem almost hyperbolically absurd. sense, founded on the Christian religion" (Mount). Adams In the modern day, of the 73 percent of Americans who are Christian, it can reasonably be assumed that a fair was also a devout Unitarian and, therefore, a proud proponumber of them will bring their particular moral values nent of a religion that did more than most to advocate for religious diversity. While he may have desired greater reliinto the voting booth ("No Religion on the Rise"). In a gious influence in governing, he certainly did not argue democratic society, this may contribute to the smothering ardently for Christianity in particular. John Jay, the first of minorities' religious freedoms by the powerful voice of Chief Justice of the United States, also wrote about the the religious majority. Recently, for example, there were imperative need for "Christian rulers." Yet Jay actually measures passed in over two dozen states banning Sharia supported the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution in his law from being considered in lawsuits, though this is conletters, and so it can be seen that in spite of his personal sidered by many experts to violate the First Amendment preference for Christian leadership, he knew it was beyond (ACLU). In situations such as these, the federal governhis jurisdiction to interfere (Morris). Many of the more reliment has the responsibility to intervene and ensure that gious Founding Fathers, it becomes evident, wanted to these religious freedoms are not disregarded. Fortunately, encourage a Christian zeitgeist but ultimately deferred to several courts have already struck down the provisions the inherent secular authority of the Constitution. against Sharia law as unconstitutional under the First Other Founding Fathers, meanwhile, were prominent Amendment and provided a model for how a government basic need for religious equality and freedom ("Oklahoma Sharia ... "). Ultimately, it is clear that according to the Constitution

separationists, vociferously arguing against any brand of should balance the benefits of a democratic society with the religion entering government, and they had a sizeable influence in establishing an early precedence for secular government in America. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, excoriated Christianity on several occasions, labeling it "mere Abracadabra of mountebanks calling themselves was definitely not founded as a "Christian nation," despite priests of Jesus" (Jefferson 1816). In a letter to the Danbury the Christian leanings of many of its Founders. Baptist Association, Jefferson famously called for "separa-Furthermore, these misinformed and dangerous attempts tion between church and state," and he later reiterated his at mythologizing the genesis - pun intended - of America and its religious influences may contribute, in belief that Christianity should not be a part of common law (Jefferson 1802, 1814). In another example, James Madison harmful ways, to the oppression of minority beliefs. In wrote a speech entitled "Memorial and Remonstrance" these situations, the burden is on the government to step in about the pernicious influence of religion in government and prevent discrimination, creating a precedent for demoand how "a just government" did not need it (Madison). In cratic tolerance and diversity, as well as secularity. If this delivering this, Madison articulated a commonly held can be done effectively and benignly, America may finally belief — that government should seek to govern as well as become, as the Founders intended, a nation of religious it could without any form of religious guidance, an asserdiversity and freedom.

and to read the other winning entries from 2013.

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