

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.

In July of 2004, Jerry Falwell, a Baptist pastor and social conservative, 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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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 secularism, 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 Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion" (Mount). Adams was also a devout Unitarian and, therefore, a proud proponent of a religion that did more than most to advocate for religious diversity. While he may have desired greater religious influence in governing, he certainly did not argue ardently for Christianity in particular. John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the United States, also wrote about the imperative need for "Christian rulers." Yet Jay actually supported the Supremacy Clause of the Constitution in his letters, and so it can be seen that in spite of his personal preference for Christian leadership, he knew it was beyond his jurisdiction to interfere (Morris). Many of the more religious Founding Fathers, it becomes evident, wanted to encourage a Christian zeitgeist but ultimately deferred to the inherent secular authority of the Constitution.

Other Founding Fathers, meanwhile, were prominent separationists, vociferously arguing against any brand of 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 priests of Jesus" (Jefferson 1816). In a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, Jefferson famously called for "separation between church and state," and he later reiterated his belief that Christianity should not be a part of common law (Jefferson 1802, 1814). In another example, James Madison wrote a speech entitled "Memorial and Remonstrance" about the pernicious influence of religion in government and how "a just government" did not need it (Madison). In delivering this, Madison articulated a commonly held belief — that government should seek to govern as well as it could without any form of religious guidance, an asser-

tion that makes the claim of America's supposedly Christian origin seem almost hyperbolically absurd.

In the modern day, of the 73 percent of Americans who are Christian, it can reasonably be assumed that a fair number of them will bring their particular moral values into the voting booth ("No Religion on the Rise"). In a democratic society, this may contribute to the smothering of minorities' religious freedoms by the powerful voice of the religious majority. Recently, for example, there were measures passed in over two dozen states banning Sharia law from being considered in lawsuits, though this is considered by many experts to violate the First Amendment (ACLU). In situations such as these, the federal government has the responsibility to intervene and ensure that these religious freedoms are not disregarded. Fortunately, several courts have already struck down the provisions against Sharia law as unconstitutional under the First Amendment and provided a model for how a government should balance the benefits of a democratic society with the basic need for religious equality and freedom ("Oklahoma Sharia ...").

Ultimately, it is clear that according to the Constitution and the archival writings of the Founding Fathers, America was definitely not founded as a "Christian nation," despite the Christian leanings of many of its Founders. Furthermore, these misinformed and dangerous attempts at mythologizing the genesis — pun intended — of America and its religious influences may contribute, in harmful ways, to the oppression of minority beliefs. In these situations, the burden is on the government to step in and prevent discrimination, creating a precedent for democratic tolerance and diversity, as well as secularism. If this can be done effectively and benignly, America may finally become, as the Founders intended, a nation of religious diversity and freedom.

Visit www.BJConline.org/contest for details on the 2014 essay scholarship contest and to read the other winning entries from 2013.

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