

The United States of America is *Not* a “*Christian Nation*”

By

Robert P. Tucker, Ph.D.

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On March 1, 2006, hearings were held in Maryland on a proposed constitutional amendment to prohibit gay marriages. Jamie Raskin, professor of law at Washington’s American University was called to testify. In response to his testimony, Republican Senator Nancy Jacobs said: “Mr. Raskin, my Bible says marriage is only between a man and a woman. What do you have to say to that?” Raskin replied by reminding the senator that “People place their hand on the Bible and swear to uphold the Constitution; they don’t put their hand on the Constitution and swear to uphold the Bible.” [12]

That kind of interchange occurred because many people in this country falsely believe that the United States of America is in fact, by law, and according to its founders’ intentions a “Christian nation.”

Perhaps we should not be surprised that people like Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, or James Dobson preach such nonsense from their pulpits. [6:10-12, 55] Even if they know it is not true, it remains one of their deepest desires.

It is quite another matter, however, when a U.S. Supreme Court justice declares that “This is a Christian nation,” as David J. Brewer did in 1891. [6:73; 9:846]

I keep a file on public figures who make such false and outrageous statements. It never ceases to amaze and, frankly, to terrify me who some of these people are!

For example, in 2003, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Intelligence, Army Lieutenant General William Boykin testified before Congress about America’s War on Terrorism. One of the things he said was this: “The battle that we’re in is a spiritual battle. Satan wants to destroy this nation. He wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army.” [17] Boykin also appeared in uniform before church groups and told them not only that this is a “Christian nation,” but also that President Bush was “appointed by God” and that Muslims worship “an idol.” [5]

In 2006, seven Army and Air Force officers appeared in uniform in a promotional video for an evangelical Christian organization called “The Christian Embassy.” It evangelizes military leaders, politicians and diplomats in Washington, D.C. In the video, Air Force Maj. Gen. Jack J. Catton, Jr., said, “I’m an old-fashioned American, and my first priority is my faith in God, then my family and then country.” [5] I don’t know about you, but I don’t feel reassured knowing that a high-ranking member of this nation’s military puts national security third on his list of commitments, behind faith and family!

Then, there was Katherine Harris. Remember her? In 2006 she was a candidate in Florida’s GOP primary for the office of U.S. Senator. In an interview, she said that her religious beliefs “animate” everything she does, including her voting as a Representative in the Florida State House. She then warned voters that if they do not send Christians to office, they risk creating a government doomed to failure. “If you are not electing Christians,” she said, “then in essence you are going to legislate sin.” “Whenever we legislate sin,” she said, “and we say abortion...and...gay unions are permissible, then average citizens who are not Christians, because they don’t know better, we are leading them astray and it’s wrong...” She also said that separation of church and state is a “lie we have been told” to keep religious people out of politics. According to her, “God is the one who chooses our rulers” and “if we are...not actively involved in electing those godly men and women,” then “we’re going to have a nation of secular laws. That’s not,” she said, “what our Founding Fathers intended” and that “certainly isn’t what God intended.” [16]

The responses she elicited were instructive. Florida Democrat Representative Debbie Wasserman Schultz said that Harris “clearly shows that she does not deserve to be a representative” (much less a senator). Finding Harris’ remarks “outrageous,” State Democrat Representative Irv Slosberg wondered, “What is going through this woman’s mind? We do not live in a theocracy.” Even Republicans condemned Harris’ “hubris,” and some denied that she was “representative of the Republican party.” Others were “appalled that a person who’s been in politics this long would hold such extreme views.” The good news is that the voters agreed. Harris was not elected. [16]

Sadly, regardless of their political party, the same cannot be said for many other Christian theocratic candidates in recent years. [Cf. 6:12f., on G. W. Bush.] Taking note of this trend, Bill Moyers has written: “One of the biggest changes in politics in my lifetime is that the delusional is no longer marginal. It has come in from the fringe, to sit in the seat of power in the Oval Office and in Congress. For the first time in our history, ideology and theology hold a monopoly power in Washington... One-third of the American electorate...believes the Bible is literally true... These true believers subscribe to a fantastical [end of the world] theology.... [And, as for congress,] we’re not talking about a handful of fringe lawmakers who hold or are beholden to these beliefs. Nearly half of the members of Congress are backed by the Religious Right...” [15]

Unfortunately, whether or not America is a Christian nation is not a simple issue because what the law has said is complicated, and what the people have believed is confused.

The Oxford Companion to the Supreme Court of the United States is probably as neutral and balanced a guide as one can find. Its long article on “Religion” by F. M. Gedicks is extremely informative. In it he points out that from the founding of our nation until the 1940s “Protestant [but not Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox, Christian] religion was thought to be a significant and legitimate component [even the “foundation”] of American public [“cultural and social”] life.” [10:717, 718] “By the 1940s, however, American public life had become largely secular.” [10:717] These changes impacted how the U.S. Constitution was interpreted and applied.

America’s promise of freedom of and freedom from religion exist in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution. It consists of two parts called the “Establishment Clause” and the “Free Exercise Clause.” Together they say: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” [2:845]

“At a minimum, the Establishment Clause was directed at preventing the newly created federal government from granting to any denomination the [oppressive] political and governmental privileges enjoyed in England by the established [state-run] Anglican Church.” But it was “not intended to do away with religious establishments then existing among the new American states.” [10:717] “Most of the framers probably intended the Free Exercise Clause to prevent the federal government from imposing serious civil disabilities on religious dissenters, while still permitting recognition of the preeminent status of Protestantism.” [10:717f.]

In other words, the First Amendment “did not require that [state] government or politics be secular”; and for two centuries, they weren’t. Several states established state religions until the early 19th Century, and many states prosecuted and/or persecuted non-Protestants and atheists even longer. [10:717f.; cf. 7:210] The result was a “*de facto* [= in reality; not in law (*de jure*)] Protestant establishment” in which almost all things American “had a distinctly Protestant flavor” from the Founding Era until the early 20th Century. [10:718] Typical examples included: public schools in which King James Version Bible readings and prayers were forced on children; mandatory Christian holidays such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Easter; and Sunday “Blue Laws.” [10:718]

In the 20th Century, however, America underwent a shift “from Protestantism to secularism.” This began to undermine the de facto Protestant establishment. Darwinian evolution and the new impact of science “pushed public culture away from orthodox Protestant theology.” The “professionalization of American higher education...saw theologians and clergymen replaced by secular degree-holders as university faculty and administrators.” Even the legal profession began to rely more on reason and empirical investigation, rather than the so-called “natural law” of theology. Finally, in Europe and America there developed a “Secularization Hypothesis” which held that progressive secularization was not only inevitable but beneficial; and so religion began to be replaced or ignored as a public influence. Indeed, religion came to be seen as a “reactionary obstacle to secular progress.” [10:718f.] This led to a ruling in 1947 in which the U.S. Supreme Court “stated in unequivocal terms that the Establishment Clause required an absolute neutrality on the part of government, both as between particular religions and as between religion and nonreligion. The decision closed with a flourish, quoting the now-famous phrase from Jefferson’s letter...that the Establishment Clause ‘was intended to erect a “wall of separation” between church and state.’” [10:719] Far from codifying the notion of America as a “Christian nation,” Gedicks states that the modern legal understanding “suggests that a wholly secular society is possible and perhaps even preferable.” [10:719]

That does not mean, however, that there have not been, and continue to be, attempts made to legally transform America into a Christian nation. As Leo Pfeffer summarizes it: “Omission of reference to God or Christ in the Constitution was bitterly opposed by some during the debates in the states during its ratification... Two Presbyterian church groups resolved not to vote...until the Constitution... acknowledge[d] the sovereignty of God and Christ... In 1863 representatives from eleven Protestant denominations organized the National Reform Association [which wanted]...: ‘the Constitution...[to] declare the nation’s allegiance to Jesus Christ and its acceptance of the moral laws of the Christian religion, and so indicate that this is a Christian nation...’ As late as February 1951, Senator Ralph Flanders of Vermont introduced a proposal to amend the Constitution to add...: ‘This nation devoutly recognizes the authority and law of Jesus Christ, Saviour and Ruler of Nations through whom are bestowed the blessings of Almighty God.’” [In 6:75ff.]

There were and are two things that people who want America to be a Christian nation fail to understand or accept.

The first is that the founders of this great nation never intended it to become a Christian nation, nor a nation of any religious brand! As Jerome B. Agel writes: “The Europeans who had come to America’s shores in the 1600s were deeply familiar with the denial of religious freedom in the[ir] homeland; the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights was the product of this legacy. It not only prohibited the government from taking actions favoring one religion over another, it [also] forbid assistance to any religion. The Northwest Ordinance and the 1819 Treaty With Spain were among a host of documents that reflected this legacy. [1:70f.]

For me, two other examples stand out amid this host of documents: One is the 1797 Treaty With [Muslim] Tripoli which President John Adams (a Unitarian) and the U.S. Senate signed and approved. It declared explicitly: “The government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” [8:10; 6:16] Second is the Constitution of the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, which was adopted by the U.S. Congress in 1952. Instead of making that country a Christian nation, Congress approved a document which declares explicitly that “there shall be complete separation of church and state” in that American territory! [8:10]

As for the Founders’ intentions, no one with any intellect or honesty who has ever read any other their writings could draw the conclusion that they were out to create a Christian nation, at least not “Christian” in the way modern right-wing conservatives use that word. It was the purpose of almost all of the Founders to terminate, not instigate religious oppression. [Cf. Caroline Kennedy in 13:261]

Moreover, if they had wanted to make America religious, they would not have created it in the image of today's conservative, evangelical or fundamentalist Christianity. They were almost all of them far-left-wing Christians who were Unitarians or Deists or Agnostics of the most liberal sorts imaginable. Almost none of them believed in the deity of Jesus, in the Trinity, in life after death, in miracles, in the Bible as the inerrant expression of God's own words, or in any of the other typical beliefs held dear by Falwell, Robertson and their ilk. Unless one is blind and/or in denial, merely reading about them or—better yet!—reading their own writings would dispel such fantasies. Indeed, our nation's Founders were individuals raised up intellectually by the Enlightenment. They cherished reason and science. They distrusted despots whether they were sitting on thrones or standing behind pulpits. Knowing all too well Europe's history of religious oppression, they were detesters, not designers, of any "Christian nation." [1; 3; 4; 6; 7; 8; 10; 11; 13]

The second thing people who want America to be a Christian nation fail to understand or accept is that "ultimately, the question of separation of church and state is a question of equality and status...of whether we have only one class of Americans in this country or different classes based on religious affiliation." [Alan Dershowitz in 7:206]

President John F. Kennedy understood this. That is why, when he was campaigning, against much opposition, to become America's first Catholic president, he told a meeting of Southern Protestant ministers the following:

"I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the president (should he be Catholic) how to act, and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote—where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference—and where no [one] is denied public office merely because his [or her] religion differs from the president who might appoint [them] or the people who might elect [them].

"I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant, nor Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches, or any other ecclesiastical source—where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials—and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.

"For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been, and may someday be again, a Jew—or a Quaker—or a Unitarian—or a Baptist. It was Virginia's harassment of Baptist preachers, for example, that helped lead to Jefferson's Statute of Religious Freedom. Today I may be the victim—but tomorrow it may be you—until the whole fabric of our harmonious society is ripped...

"Finally, I believe in an America where religious intolerance will someday end—where all [people] and all churches are treated as equal—where every [person] has the same right to attend or not attend the church of [their] choice—where there is no Catholic vote, no anti-Catholic vote, no bloc voting of any kind—and where Catholics, Protestants, and Jews, at both the lay and pastoral level, will refrain from those attitudes of disdain and division which have so often marred their works in the past, and [will] promote instead the American ideal of brotherhood. . . .

"This is the kind of America I believe in—and this is the kind I fought for in the South Pacific, and the kind my brother died for in Europe... And in fact this is the kind of America for which our Forefathers died—when they fled here to escape religious test oaths that denied office to members of less favored churches—[and] when they fought for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and the Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom..." [14:256f.; sexism repaired]

As Roman Catholic John F. Kennedy knew, as Unitarian Deist Thomas Jefferson knew, and as Humanists know: America is not a "Christian nation." It is something much greater: a secular, pluralistic nation whose Constitution guarantees its citizens both freedom *of* and freedom *from* religion!

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Dr. Tucker
May be contacted by email at:
drroberttucker@aol.com