

America a Christian Nation?

Not by a long shot!

by: Kenneth Frawley

The classroom was full of students surprised by the sight of a substitute instructor. Added to the horror of an 8 am start time, and their sight of someone other than the usual person at the helm, I considerably asked the undergraduates to tap into their memory of the previous weeks and explain what they were able to recall from their previous class sessions, so that I could assess the group's areas of written language strengths and weaknesses. Suddenly, without the slightest provocation, one student immediately interrupted me, mid-sentence, to proudly pronounce that America was a Christian nation. It was odd for that out-of-nowhere subject to have been broached at that moment, so I moved on to the other pupils. However, that one student was determined to be heard, claiming that the Founding Fathers of the United States had based their reasoning, and the Constitution, upon the Bible. Thus, she went on to contend, the laws of the United States were built solely upon the holy book.



Surprised and desperate to avoid the subject in what was a composition class, I suggested the student familiarise herself with the US Bill of Rights, and its amendments, particularly the 1st Amendment. In rebuttal, the student pointed out that the composition course itself was focused upon argument, or the persuasive essay, to be specific, and that it was her goal to persuade everyone to accept Christ.

To manoeuvre away from the touchy subject gently, and since forming a position of any sort is based upon evidence, I asked the student to expand upon hers; yet, she had none. What she spoke was simply the echoing of statements belonging to her church. For her, research was a foreign notion. So, again, I suggested she perform her due diligence and fully research the evidence to support her contention, starting with the 1st Amendment.

From there the conversation switched to what one would expect in a composition course, sentence and essay structure, word choice, punctuation, etc. However, after returning from the class session's twenty-minute break, the student handed a printed copy of an Internet article titled *Absolute Proof That America is a Christian Nation* to me with an emphatic, "There!" Cordially, I accepted the piece, with the promise of reading it, which I did, despite doing so only because I was eager to discover some explanation for the student's tragic madness.

Immediately, I was gob-smacked by the realisation that the writer of the piece claimed to have absolute proof that America was a Christian nation, cast immediate suspicion upon the work. For, again, there is that pesky 1st US Amendment, which was adopted as rule of law on 15 December 1791, and inserted into the Bill of Rights.

Straight away, the amendment tackles the question of government and religion in its first clause:

'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion'

In clear and concise language, the Founding Fathers had stated that the US government will not base its laws upon any particular religion. Thus, stressing that church and the state are separate entities that, like oil and water, shall not be mixed.

Clause two of the 1st Amendment goes on to address religion further:

'or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'

Again, in concise phrasing, the Fathers quickly, and clearly, pointed out that the law of the land shall be to allow *all* citizens the freedom to practice *whatever* religion they so choose, or not. It is up to the individual, solely. Thus, all religions are welcomed in the US.

Wisely, the Fathers immediately followed with a clause to further specifics relating to individual freedoms with the next statement:

'or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press'

In the statement, the Fathers view speech of any kind as a civil right, which, ethically, should include the printed press as also being able to express itself and report without fear of a governmental heavy-hand.

Lastly, the amendment concludes by stating that the government accepts the right of the people to use that freedom of speech to express any and all views on the government itself:

*'or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,
and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances'*

In short, the Fathers wisely make it clear that a free society is one in which its people are free to voice their opinions on policy, which includes the right to *peaceably* protest, if they so choose. All of which is very people, of all kind, conscious and considerate. In short, well done, them! So, again, the full amendment reads as such:

*'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech,
or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble,
and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.'*

How anyone could read that and ascertain that America was solely a Christian nation, or one based exclusively on Christian principles, is simply astonishing. Yet, the adamant student's evidence, the essay titled *Absolute Proof that America is a Christian Nation*, was quick to point out that Thomas Jefferson had used the word 'God' repeatedly throughout the *Declaration of Independence*, which the article author contended, alone, supplied definitive proof that the Fathers were Christians. Suddenly, the article becomes even more dubious.

Firstly, the use of the word 'God' occurs only one time, not repeatedly, in the *Declaration*. Secondly, context does matter, which is why it is important to read the full clause in order to obtain the sense of the statement:

"the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them,"

Amazingly impressive, the *Declaration* is careful not to categorically imply that Jefferson and the rest of the founders, or anyone else, for that matter, is Christian. *God* is the single English language word for supreme-being, as is *Allah*. In fact, the clause actually reads as if the word *god* is used as a term for the great unknown. It is language, it's that simple. If one believes in a higher being, using that word does not unequivocally denote that the individual is Christian. Moreover, if the founders had based their reasoning and writings on Christianity, they would not have written, and passed, the 1st Amendment as they had.

All of which leads to much speculation as to just exactly why the founders drafted the 1st Amendment in that manner? Were the Fathers Christians or not? Did they believe in a god? The answers to such questions are actually fairly easy to acquire, since the responses to such inquiries have been well documented in the historical record.

If one conducts proper research, putting bias aside to let the evidence lead the way, one discovers the founders were rather vocal about their religious views. Thomas Paine, for example:

'I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of... Each of those churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all.'

James Madison, America's fourth president rather bluntly explained his position on religion quite often:

'Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise.'

That was followed with one of his more noted statements:

“During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution.”

Next, there are the views of John Adams, the US' second president. In his youth, he wanted to study law, but his father preferred he study to be a clergyman. To this he wrote that he found lawyers noble, and described the clergy as a:

‘pretended sanctity of some absolute dunces.’

Later, he explained:

“Twenty times in the course of my late reading, have I been upon the point of breaking out, ‘This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it!’”

Furthermore, as president, Adams wrote and signed, and received unanimous ratification from the US Senate into the law of the land, the *Treaty of Tripoli* in 1797. In it, Adams' aim was to state, unequivocally so, that America was an open-minded nation that accepted, and was tolerant of all faiths, including Muslims. So, he wrote Article 11 in the treaty itself:

‘As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion,—as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen [Muslims],—and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan [Mohammedan] nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.’

Professor of History at Purdue University, Frank Lambert, explains Article 11 as:

"Intended to allay the fears of the Muslim state by insisting that religion would not govern how the treaty was interpreted and enforced. John Adams and the Senate made clear that the pact was between two sovereign states, not between two religious powers."

Lambert would continue with:

"By their actions, the Founding Fathers made clear that their primary concern was religious freedom, not the advancement of a state religion. Individuals, not the government, would define religious faith and practice in the United States. Thus the Founders ensured that in no official sense would America be a Christian Republic. Ten years after the Constitutional Convention ended its work, the country assured the world that the United States was a secular state, and that

its negotiations would adhere to the rule of law, not the dictates of the Christian faith. The assurances were contained in the Treaty of Tripoli of 1797 and were intended to allay the fears of the Muslim state by insisting that religion would not govern how the treaty was interpreted and enforced. John Adams and the Senate made clear that the pact was between two sovereign states, not between two religious powers.”

As to the actual treaty and the events surrounding it, the recorded facts are: firstly, the treaty was written during Washington’s presidency, and sent to the Senate during the Adams administration. There, it was read aloud to the Senate, with each Senator receiving a printed copy. Secondly, although it was the 339th time a recorded vote was required by the Senate, it was only the third time a Senate vote was unanimous. Additionally, there is no record of any debate or disagreement on the treaty. In fact, it was re-printed in full in three newspapers, two in Philadelphia, and one in New York City. Lastly, there is no record of any public outcry or complaint as a result of the treaty.

Hence, according to the manner in which the founders also established the jury system to work, reasonable doubt, and all that, is the case absolute? Not by a long shot! Were the Founders Christian? Quite simply, no! Even if several had believed in a supreme being, or were, indeed, Christian, that is not to say that their decisions were based only upon Christian beliefs. In fact, as educated men, they tapped into their own humanity, and professionalism, setting aside their own ideals for the greater good? They were intellectuals who understand that belief is between one person and that individual’s own idea of god? Moreover, with supreme wisdom, they announced that in America, true justice is blind, and leaving a god of any kind out of that equation was most important; what was, in fact, was evidence.

Not to be forgotten, apart from his 1st Amendment writing, Thomas Jefferson, America’s third president, also scribbled a thought on religion, in his famous, or infamous, as some *head-in-the-sand* individuals sadly elect to refer to it, letter of 1802 to the Danbury Baptist Association, a rather all-telling statement. It reads:

“Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between church and State.”

Thus, in the end, the only thing absolute is that the article *Absolute Proof That America is a Christian Nation* offers absolutely no absolute proof at all. Tragically, an under-educated populous, unaware of even its own history, sets itself up as gullible flock, unsuspecting and ripe for charlatans spinning historic events in manners that assist them with their false claims. For the misguided student and her ilk, conducting proper, unbiased research may not ever take place. Sadly, for such individuals, it’s not about the actual truth, but finding a way to justify a long-held belief. In fact, and rather desperately, such

victims of credulity also often bang on about the inclusion of the words *In God We Trust* printed on US currency as further proof. However, factually, the words were not added to US notes until 1956, a manipulative ploy inspired by the McCarthy era hysterics.

The US was established to be an all-accepting nation, free from the oppression of religion, or free to follow the teachings of one. The nation's cup may *runneth* over with historical evidence supplying support for that level-headed and most humane of ideals: *individuality*. Indeed, on 28 October 1886, more than a full century after the founding of the nation, the *Colossus of Rhodes* poem was written and posted at the Statue of Liberty, to serve as reminder of America's true sentiment. For it graciously repeats the sentiments of America's founders with a welcome to *all*, saying nothing about accepting Christianity, or adhering to *Christian* policies, or shunning Muslims, as one entered the country:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.
"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

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