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Is the U.S. a Christian Nation?

This question is significant for what the answer tells us about how we, as Christians in the U.S., are going to relate to the culture around us. The answer to this question depends on what you mean by “Christian Nation.”

It is certainly true that for most of its history the culture of the United States was religiously dominated by a Christian world view. The vast majority of people in the U.S. have traditionally identified themselves as Christians and attendance at churches has always far outnumbered the attendance at synagogues, mosques, and other houses of worship.

But was Christianity enshrined in the political foundations of the U.S.? The answer to that question is clearly “No.”

The Declaration of Independence, for example, only mentions God once when it makes reference to “the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God” in the opening sentence of the document. Who or what is “Nature’s God”? The Father, Son, and Holy Spirit I know, but I can’t tell for sure whether “Nature’s God” is this same Blessed Trinity whom I know through Jesus. Perhaps it is in the eye of the beholder. The primary author of the document, Thomas Jefferson, once said of the Trinity:

When we shall have done away with the incomprehensible jargon of the Trinitarian arithmetic, that three are one, and one is three; when we shall have knocked down the artificial scaffolding, reared to mask from view the simple structure of Jesus . . . we shall then be truly and worthily his disciples . . . ~ “Letter to Timothy Pickering, on a Sermon by Doctor Channing”, in *A Library of American Literature: From the Earliest Settlement to the Present Time, Vol. III.* , pp. 283-284.

So clearly, when Jefferson said “Nature’s God” he did not mean the Father, Son, and Spirit. Jefferson’s Deism led him to go so far as to put together his own version of the Gospels in which he cut out all the miracles and references to Jesus as the Son of God and reassembled the text to portray Jesus as a good moral teacher. The University of Virginia has a copy of his version of the Gospels online if you’d like to have a look at it:

<http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/toc/modeng/public/JefJesu.html>

We know the signers of the Declaration ran the gamut, from devout Christians to devout Deists such as Jefferson. So I think it is entirely possible that some of the Christians who signed the document would have read “Nature’s God” to mean the Trinity revealed in Jesus. What is significant, though, is that they all signed the document. The Christians present were comfortable signing a document with only one, ambiguous reference to a general Deity and with no specifically Christian statements about that Deity.

Eleven years later, when American political leaders gathered to draft a Constitution they created a document that didn’t even mention “Nature’s God.” In fact, there is not a single reference to God in the U.S. Constitution.

Compare this to the Constitution of Ireland, for example. The Irish Constitution begins with the words “In the Name of the Most Holy Trinity . . .” The U.S. Constitution begins with the words “We the People . . .” The Preamble to the Irish Constitution goes on to mention “. . . our

obligations to our Divine Lord, Jesus Christ . . .” while the U.S. Constitution, of course, makes no mention of Jesus at all.

Is Ireland a Christian Nation? Their founding documents would seem to say “Yes.” Is the United States? Our founding documents say “No.”

So there are two key facts here:

A large number of Christians were present for, and participated in, the drafting and adoption of the U.S. Constitution.

Yet the document provides no special place for Christianity in our nation and makes no reference to any Christian understanding of God.

These two facts make it clear that the founders of the United States had no intention of founding a Christian nation. They founded a nation intended to function with people of many different religions, or no religion at all, living in peace together.

This is highly significant for us as American Christians when we seek to interact with our culture. What message does it send to atheists, Jews, Muslims, and Hindus when we Christians say things like “America is supposed to be a Christian nation” or “America needs to turn back to God”? The message it sends is that Christians are included and all others are excluded—or, at best—Christians are first class citizens and everyone else is a second class citizen somehow.

Is that the gospel? Is the gospel a message about doctrine and morality which says to other human beings “You aren’t included but you can be included if you believe what we believe and act the way we act”? I don’t believe that is the gospel.

The gospel is the good news that the Son of God has included everyone in his relationship with his Father. The gospel is the good news that we all belong, whether we believe it or not. Just as Christian and Muslim citizens of the U.S. are all full citizens, so also are all Muslims and Christians fully adopted children of the Father.

The structure of American polity, which says that people of all religions are equally included in our national life, offers us Christians in the U.S. a profound opening to preach the gospel. The very structure of our government enables us to show non-Christians the acceptance and inclusion that the gospel itself preaches.

The Scripture says “It is for freedom that Christ has set you free” (Gal. 5:1), and that freedom includes the freedom to not believe or to believe wrong things, and even the freedom to build houses of worship dedicated to wrong ideas. Jesus has never thrown down a lightning bolt from heaven to stop the construction of a mosque, yet here where I live in Tennessee, hundreds of people who call themselves Christians are trying to take freedom away from others and stop the construction of a mosque.

I think American Christians need to take a step back from the fiery political rhetoric of our current culture and ask ourselves “What is the core message that we really want non-Christians in America to hear from Christianity?”

An intersection of political interests has formed in the U.S. where economic conservatives, evangelical Christians, and Mormons are finding common political cause in resisting changes in

American society. However you may personally feel about the changes in our society (from gay marriage to a greater role for government), I want to encourage you to think carefully about how this marriage of economics, politics, and religion can impact our ability to share the gospel.

We are surrounded by a non-Christian culture that perceives Christians (especially evangelical Christians) as mean, angry, and moralistically judgmental. They perceive the Christian message as a message of morality and doctrine: *Do what we say, and believe what we say, and God won't roast you over a fire for all eternity.*

When we use our email, our Facebook accounts, and our conversations to publicly ally ourselves with the elements of American political life that say “America is a Christian nation” and “America needs to turn back to God,” we are only reinforcing this distasteful image of the gospel in the minds of our non-believing friends, family, and neighbors.

I think we need to be focused on one core message to everyone we know:

You are the Father's beloved child in Jesus Christ. Believing or non-believing, Muslim, Hindu, or Jewish, straight or gay, good or bad—you and I are part of the same world and the same Triune Life. We are all Americans and we are all the brothers and sisters of Jesus.

Only then will those who do not believe in their adoption begin to really understand how much their Father in heaven loves them.

~ Jonathan Stepp