A “Christian Nation?” Religion and Politics in the United States
By Joe Lormel

The argument over the place of religion in American politics has become as nationally identifiable as baseball. The primary inquiry concerning religion in American politics is whether or not America is a “Christian nation.” There are two fundamental and opposing answers to this classic question. The first is “no.” The nation has no established religion whatsoever as is clearly outlined in the very first amendment of our constitution. However, according to a recent survey by the First Amendment Center, fully 55% of the population believes that the U.S. Constitution establishes us as a "Christian nation" (Thomas). The second possible answer addresses the nature of our democratic republic and suggests that if the majority of the country is Christian then the answer would be “yes.” While the founding fathers did not assert or establish any particular religion—an action that was certainly calculated and reasonably executed—the democratic republic which they also constructed allows for any group able to mobilize to provide influence (Reimer 38). While there is no religion constitutionally established in American politics, the republic supports a pluralism which allows for any religion to be influential. This then poses another crucial question. Since Christianity is the most influential religion in the nation, then it is plausible that the nation is “Christianly” motivated.

The United States has no nationally established religion because no religion was constituted by the framers of the constitution. While not shunning religion, they greatly valued individual rights and knew the danger an established religion could do to those rights (Reimer 38). Many of the founding fathers personally and politically condoned a secularist state. Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison were founding fathers who practiced religion in their personal lives but recognized the dangers of organized religion. These men were all intellectuals of European descent who were influenced by and ultimately contributors to the Enlightenment ideals of their age, particularly the idea of individualism and unalienable human rights (Gaustad 27). These concepts were embraced by the founding fathers and they worked tirelessly to ensure they would be embedded in the political roots of the country. Thus, when it came to religion, regardless of their personal religious preferences, it was imperative the nation be free from any establishment that would infringe on individual rights (Gaustad 85). Their opposition toward religion came on two fronts—the political and philosophical. That is to say, while they had their own personal difficulties with religion, they also knew that the relationship between government and religion was a significantly delicate one (Gaustad 86).

One of the founding fathers, James Madison, perceived religious diversity to be beneficial to his republican dream. He saw the multiplicity of different religious sects throughout the nation as ensuring religious liberty, in the same manner that the multiplicity of social, political, and economic interests ensured civil freedom (Reimer 38). Madison understood that secularism would benefit the population rather than harm it. He expressed that while uniformity might appear
to contribute to a peaceful and functioning society, in fact it works against this goal. On the other hand, a religiously diverse population could advance individual freedom without interfering with civil decorum and harmony (Reimer 38). Madison was a strong advocate of the republican government. Though he understood the difficulties of creating a republic as large and diverse as what the United States would be, he recognized that, “though it is more difficult to form a republican government in an extensive country than in a city, there is more facility when once it is formed, of preserving it steady and uniform, without tumult and faction” (Reimer 38). By advocating for a republican government where all the interests and rights of every class would be represented, and by understanding that the fundamental principle of that republic be that men cannot be justly bound by laws which they have no part in making, Madison contributed to the creation of a secularist nation.

Thomas Jefferson may have been a student of the Enlightenment ideals more than any other of the founding fathers. He viewed the time of his existence to be exceptionally exciting and believed that in America one had the opportunity to liberate minds, refashion the arts, establish freedoms, dive deeply into nature, reform religion, universalize education, and defeat tyranny everywhere. Jefferson embodied the nation’s aspirations for freedom and enlightenment (Peterson ix). Jefferson’s infatuation with Enlightenment ideals shaped how he regarded religion. His first encounters with such ideals occurred when he was a student at the College of William and Mary, where he encountered the Baconian revolution in logic and method, the Newtonian revolution in science and mathematics, and the Lockean revolution in politics and philosophy (Gaustad 17). At the heart of Enlightenment theory is the value placed on “reason.” The intellectual community from political philosophers to mathematicians embraced the realism found in reason. While the Enlightenment spawned brilliant aspirations as well as fundamental intellectual creations, it did not however do great things for religion. Because of the devotion to reason, intellectuals such as Jefferson found the mystical aspects of religion unappealing. Jefferson noted, “Your own reason is the only oracle given to you by heaven” (Gaustad 16). Thus Jefferson, along with other founding fathers such as Franklin, found that while they themselves were spiritual, they opposed aspects of Christianity which seemed unreasonable, such as biblical revelation. These founding fathers chose to recognize god in a more personal and less institutionalized sense, thus their association with deism.

As a statesman, Jefferson recognized the imperative of outlining the specific relationship between the state and religion. He believed very strongly in the first amendment and by his presidency vocalized his famed separation of church and state. He did so in a reply to the Danbury Baptist Association which suggested he set aside a national day of fasting after the raucous election (Gaustad 98). In response, he sent the following correspondence:

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 and
establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” thus building a
wall of separation between Church and State (Gaustad 99).

This was a stance which he held throughout his presidency. But it must be
reiterated that Jefferson, among with most of the other founding fathers, would
never deny that he himself was religious. There were aspects of Christianity, as
well as religion in general, that he liked. For example, Jefferson found value in
the principles of Jesus which provided a moral foundation. Similar to Benjamin
Franklin, Jefferson respected and employed in his own life the moral code
provided by Christianity (Bowers 103). It was the mystical aspects of the religion
that assaulted the reason he had come to practice which turned him away from
the organized Christian church.

Benjamin Franklin was a secular religious statesman. While perhaps not
as fundamental an influence to the relationship between religion and the state in
American politics as Madison or Jefferson, his personal and public assertions
about religion are significant to the argument that our founding fathers did want
nor did they establish any religion in America, including Christianity. Franklin’s
relationship with Christianity was quite paradoxical because while he did not
believe in the religion, he was still attracted to it as a system of worship and to
clergymen of all faiths (Aldridge 8). He found religion to be of great importance
because of its inquiries into the nature of God, which he saw as the fundamental
problem of philosophy, as well as the basis of external welfare and morality
(Aldridge 10). His interest in the morality proposed by Christian denominations
was similar to that of Jefferson.

The founding fathers had a blank canvas to work with and they exerted a
lot of effort to make sure that they fostered a government that was significantly
different from the monarchy of England which had politically dominated them.
They sought to structure the new nation on Enlightenment ideals. Again, one of
the most important values they emphasized was individual rights, which is
imperative to understand when discussing the place of religion in American
politics. While the opinions on organized religion amongst the founding fathers
were generally negative, they still understood the importance of allowing
individual freedom to prevail. The first amendment is a testament to this:
“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or
prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”(www.law.cornell.edu). The entire
amendment is an attempt to ensure the individual’s rights on both sides of the
issue. No state religion should be established because that may impose upon an
individual’s rights while no religion should be outlawed or prevented form being
practiced. The amendment establishes the famed separation of church and state.
Yet the first amendment does nothing to prevent the church from having
influence on the state. The reality is that our democracy encourages any social
class or group to engage in politics. While the republic aims to allow
representation of the minority as well as the majority, the majority holds the
greatest influence. In this context, it is reasonable that while America was not
established as a Christian nation, Christianity holds great if not premier influence
over it.
Religion has always played an important role in American society, and in turn politics. As immigrants traveled to the United States they depended on their religion and ethnicities to empower and unify their peers. The power of religion for most of American history is seen through the occurrence of a denominational struggle in society. As the so-called “melting pot” sought to meld the ethnicities that separated the many communities of American society, it was religion that helped to maintain communal separation. As assimilation proceeded, ethnic group boundaries faded, but religious boundaries did not (Healey 52). Thus the early concept of religious power in America is better understood as a social phenomenon rather than a political one. Religious groups became in part social groups.

After World War II and with the start of the Cold War, the question of the relationship between politics and religion entered a new phase. With the rise of the “godless” Soviet Union it almost became imperative that the nation embrace its religious beliefs. Thus we aligned ourselves personally and publicly with that god. For example, the pledge of allegiance did not include, “one nation under god”, until godless communism became our tireless national enemy. That is not to suggest that religion had never posed such a presence before. The first significant immergence of religion in the new nation was during the Second Great Awakening. During this time religious fundamentalists looked to attack the principles of the Enlightenment ideals which had all but founded the country. This counter-revolution encouraged emotion and religious belief to place check on reason (Gaustad 212).

In recent times, the presence of religion in the larger American society and politics is very similar to that of the Second Great Awakening. Similar to the faithful who felt threatened by the ideals of the Enlightenment during the Second Great awakening, the faithful of recent American history feel threatened by the values that secular society promote and feel it necessary to contract the larger society to validate and reinforce their views (Obama 213).

The greatest power in democracy is numbers—or the power of the majority. Thus the power of religion in America is placed on an equal playing field with other social interests or priorities when it comes to the structure of American pluralism. One of the main reasons that religion wields influence socially anywhere in the world is because of how it provides moral standards upon which to build a lifestyle. Christianity in American society has asserted itself in association with moral behavior and has been instrumental in the construction of what Americans deem to be moral and immoral. Presently, millions of Americans would identify themselves as Christians based on moral standards they believe to be “Christian.” Those criteria would include such things as going to church regularly, participating in Christian religious rites such as a baptism or communion, and or the stricter religious moral standards such as sexual abstinence until marriage. The social morality of the United States, as President Eisenhower asserted, is based upon Judeo-Christian values (Silk 64).

The social revolutions during the 1960s and 1970s were deemed by Christians to be the result of an increasing secular society. The result was a religious backlash which is responsible for the role that religion plays in politics
still today. As presidential nominee, Senator Barack Obama notes in his book *The Audacity of Hope*, “The failure of the country’s dominant cultural institutions to acknowledge America’s religious impulses helped foster a degree of religious entrepreneurship unmatched in the industrialized world” (Obama 200). The concept of social backlash is not unusual. When Ronald Reagan assaulted the environment during his presidency it resulted in a public outcry for environmental concern that lasted into the early nineties. Environmental problems seemed less polarizing while a more environmentally friendly President Clinton was in office. However, with the environmentally unconcerned presidency of George W. Bush and the rise of global environmental issues such as global warming, environmental concern has returned. The same kind of reaction occurred after the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. As Christian frustration mounted with what they believed to be social deterioration, a political movement led primarily by Evangelicals began and surged into the eighties.

Two critical things allowed for this to happen. For one, the rise of the Evangelical population generated enormous political power. The Evangelicals were able to attract millions of people because of the high numbers of born-again Christians and the slowly diminishing following of the mainstream American Christian denominational churches which were trying to acclimate themselves to modern times and growing secularization. However, certain social divisions fueled by religion created an umbrella of overall Christian pluralism. Controversial issues such as gay marriage and abortion created issues that different Christian denominations could coalesce against. This contributed to growing Christian power in America. Religion and politics fueled a Christian unification which was led by the Evangelicals (Allitt 159). And as the historic division between Catholics and Protestants continued to narrow, Christians were linked to fellow believers from other denominations according to shared convictions (Noll 185). The Evangelical voice was now able to include those on the other side of the religious umbrella in an effort to warn the greater American society against the asserted assaults of feared secularist society (Silk 77). The Evangelicals demanded great adherence to core Christian ideals. While such religious loyalty may have seemed socially impractical in modern America with regards to recruiting followers, religious sociologists have concluded that that the more a church demanded of its members, the more likely it was to keep them (Allitt 259).

Thus the numbers of Evangelicals in the United States skyrocketed, complimented by an overall Christian coalition to salvage American society which they claimed to have been ravaged by the immoral values that secularization allows. What was incredible was the ability of the Evangelicals, with their strong convictions and expectations, to not only survive in the social climate of modern America but to thrive and utilize aspects of the media. They completely took advantage of the multiplicity of media outlets such as television and radio. As Obama asserts, “Their fervor has gone mainstream” (Obama 202). This certainly helped build the army of Evangelicals which would begin to fuel Christian power in American politics. A product of the emergence of this large religious social group threatens Jefferson’s wall of separation between church and state as
politicians now wear their religious convictions on their sleeves. Going beyond religious practice in their personal lives, their religious convictions influence their political discourse. The election of Ronald Reagan, which evangelical leaders such as Jerry Falwell credited themselves for, is a great example of this. This constituted the second great step of the religious movement, which validated and put into action its power by aligning itself with the Republican Party.

While this religious movement was certainly present throughout the 1980s and 1990s, it has enjoyed its greatest influence thus far during the Bush administration of the past eight years. As Dana Milbank asserted in a *Washington Post* article in 2001, “For the first time since religious conservatives became a modern political movement, the President of the United States has become the movement’s de facto leader” (Phillips 171). President Bush has been candid not only about the role his faith has had in his personal life, but how it sets the foundation for his political platforms. He has depended upon the power of Christianity in America to elect him to the presidential office twice. His religious commitment transparently impacts his political actions and attitudes. His presidency is symbolic of the power that religion has acquired in America. Of course some of the overall religious fervor has been intensified by a certain event: September 11th. While the atrocities of September 11th provided an array of effects on America, it profoundly affected the outlook of the president. He began to see himself not only as the president of the United States but the leader of a cultural war. As Kevin Phillip describes in his book entitled, *American Theocracy*, “Bush’s fusion of a religious outlook with administration policy is a striking shift in rhetoric. Other Presidents petitioned for blessings and guidance. Bush positions himself as a prophet, speaking for god” (Phillips 207). Phillips goes on to back that statement up with a comment made by Bush himself in mid-2004, “I trust God speaks through me. Without that, I couldn’t do my job” (Phillips 208). The idea that the leader of the free world believes that he is acting on behalf of his Christian God says a lot about the power of Christianity in America.

As much as the Bush presidency may serve as a manifestation of Christian power in America, it is symbolic of a social and political division which the nation hasn’t seen since the Civil War (Phillips 132). The divide is multidimensional. It is political with democrats v. republicans; it is social with religious v. secular; and it is geographical with north v. south. The election of 2004 solidified that division. The 2004 election posted an electoral first—never had the nine northeastern states of Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania voted against the winning president (Phillips 133). Of course the division wasn’t purely in response to the surge of religious influence in the White House. But it can be said that the influence of religion in the Bush administration certainly has affected the president’s global outlook and thus has influenced his foreign policy. Whether the terms conservative and liberal should or should not carry as much weight as they do in American politics, the truth is that their meanings and constituencies had become emboldened by the 2004 election. And so did their relationships with the Republican and Democratic parties respectively. This is the basis of the cultural war that has existed domestically
during the second term of G.W. Bush. The heart of the debate in this culture war is whether we are moving toward a politically unpronounced but Christian influenced nation or whether we are to maintain the separation between church and state.

Against the rise of the religious right is increased religious diversity in the U.S. that can only support secularism. The cultural influences that exist throughout the country show no signs of slowing down as globalization contributes to the migration of people, as well as cultural, and in turn religious ideals, from all around the world. Unless the U.S. institutes a radical immigration policy in the near future, the diversity of the American population will increase. It is a reasonable assertion that increased ethnic diversity correlates to cultural diversity, which ultimately will produce the kind of religious diversity that supports a secular state. But while we are consumed with the idea that the religious gap has produced a cultural gap it may be the gap between the rhetoric and the reality of American cultural division and not the division itself that is perhaps the most fundamental feature of our cultural politics (Garnett).

The religious makeup of America is ever diversifying and increasingly complex. As modernity and globalization speed up the process of diversification, we must contemplate the power other religions may grow to have in America. While minority faiths such as Buddhism and Islam are on the rise in the United States, according to a recent report by the Pew Research Foundation, about eight in ten adults say they belong to the Christian tradition in one of its manifestations and 5% say that they adhere to other faiths (The Economist). While that may seem like a dominant majority, an ARIS study found that the proportion of American Christians declined from 86% in 1990 to 77% in 2001, and that mainline Protestantism is believed to have presently fallen from the majority of the population for the first time in the nation’s history (www.religoustolerance.org). The Pew research results indicate that in fact only 26% of the American population self-identifies as Protestant (The Economist). It appears as though the greater American society is encountering the type of alienation from institutional religion as the founding fathers did. For example, a USA Today Gallup poll in 2002 reported that half of the population feels alienated by religion (www.religoustolerance.org). Furthermore, the fastest growing religious group in the United States are unaffiliated people (16% of adults presently where only 7% claimed to be so as children) the majority of which claim to have no religion at all according to the Pew research report.

In conclusion, while the United States is not a Christian nation because no state religion has ever been established, Christianity has been socially prominent and politically influential in recent American history. A number of the founding fathers made a distinct effort to prevent religion from infringing upon individual rights. However, while that effort has kept any religion from being established as America’s national religion, our larger political structure does not limit the amount of influence any interest group can wield—including a religious one. The social climate of the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s produced a reaction by the religious community. The reaction resulted in the creation of a large coalition comprised of a multitude of Christian denominations dedicated to defending the
religious ideals which they felt were being assaulted by the social trends of the counterculture. They found secularization responsible for the deterioration of the orthodox values to which they ascribed. Their efforts paid off with the election of multiple openly religious politicians including Presidents Reagan and George W. Bush. The religious movement is still very alive in America but recent polling has shown that religious following is beginning to change.

Perhaps the growing number of religiously unaffiliated people in the United States suggests that the society is beginning to view Christianity and religion in general, the way that Jefferson and Franklin did. That is to say, while most Americans feel they are religious or spiritual, institutionalized religions seem unfit to deal with modern dilemmas and conflicts. Ultimately it is hard to speculate what role religion will play in American politics over the next century. It will depend upon an array of things. For one, will Christianity and other religions be able to adjust to, address, and provide relevant answers to the different kinds of conflicts and philosophical inquires which secularism will pose? It is hard to imagine that American society will abandon religion anytime soon, thus religion will continue to be influential. The question is how? And in what form?

Works Cited


