

An Interview with Jon Butler ... Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?

You hear it all the time from the right wing. The United States was founded as a Christian country. What do you make of that?

Well, first of all, it wasn't. The United States wasn't founded as a Christian country. Religion played very little role in the American Revolution and it played very little role in the making of the Constitution. That's largely because the Founding Fathers were on the whole deists who had a very abstract conception of God, whose view of God was not a God who acted in the world today and manipulated events in a way that actually changed the course of human history. Their view of religion was really a view that stressed ethics and morals rather than a direct divine intervention.

And when you use the term deists, define that. What does that mean?

A deist means someone who believes in the existence of God or a God, the God who sets the world into being, lays down moral and ethical principals and then charges men and women with living lives according to those principals but does not intervene in the world on a daily basis.

Let's go through some of them. George Washington?

George Washington was a man for whom if you were to look at his writings, you would be very hard pressed to find any deep, personal involvement with religion. Washington thought religion was important for the culture and he thought religion was important for soldiers largely because he hoped it would instill good discipline, though he was often bitterly disappointed by the discipline that it did or didn't instill.

And he thought that society needed religion. But he was not a pious man himself. That is, he wasn't someone who was given to daily Bible reading. He wasn't someone who was evangelical. He simply was a believer. It's fair, perfectly fair, to describe Washington as a believer but not as someone whose daily behavior, whose political life, whose principals are so deeply infected by religion that you would have felt it if you were talking to him.

Thomas Jefferson?

Well, Jefferson's interesting because recently evangelicals, some evangelicals, have tried to make Jefferson out as an evangelical. Jefferson actually was deeply interested in the question of religion and morals and it's why Jefferson, particularly in his later years, developed a notebook of Jesus' sayings that he found morally and ethically interesting. It's now long since been published and is sometimes called, "The Jefferson Bible." But Jefferson had real trouble with the Divinity of Christ and he had real trouble with the description of various events mentioned in both the New and the Old Testament so that he was an enlightened skeptic who was profoundly interested in the figure of Christ as a human being and as an ethical teacher. But he was not religious in any modern meaning of that word or any eighteenth century meaning of that word. He wasn't a regular church goer and he never affiliated himself with a religious denomination--unlike Washington who actually did. He was an Episcopalian. Jefferson, however, was interested in morals and ethics and thought that morals and ethics were important but that's different than saying religion is important because morals and ethics can come from many sources other than religion and Jefferson knew that and understood that.

Where does he stand on Christ exactly?

Jefferson rejected the divinity of Christ, but he believed that Christ was a deeply interesting and profoundly important moral or ethical teacher and it was in Christ's moral and ethical teachings that Jefferson was particularly interested. And so that's what attracted him to the figure of Christ was the moral and ethical teachings as described in the New Testament. But he was not an evangelical and he was not a deeply pious individual.

Let's move on to Benjamin Franklin.

Benjamin Franklin was even less religious than Washington and Jefferson. Franklin was an egotist. Franklin was someone who believed far more in himself than he could possibly have believed have believed in the divinity of Christ, which he didn't. He believed in such things as the transmigration of souls. That is that human, that humans came into being in another existence and he may have had occult beliefs. He was a Mason who was deeply interested in Masonic secrets and there are some signs that Franklin believed in the mysteries of Occultism though he never really wrote much about it and never really said much about it. Franklin is another writer whom you can read all you want to read in the many published volumes of Franklin's writings and read very little about religion.

Where did the conservatives come up with this idea that the Founding Fathers were so

religious?

Well, when they discuss the Founding Fathers or when individuals who are interested in stressing the role of religion in the period of the American Revolution discuss this subject, they often stress several characteristics. One is that it is absolutely true that many of the second level and third levels in the American Revolution were themselves church members and some of them were deeply involved in religion themselves.

It's also true that most Protestant clergymen at the time of the American Revolution, especially toward the end of the Revolution, very eagerly backed the Revolution. So there's a great deal of formal religious support for the American Revolution and that makes it appear as though this is a Christian nation or that religion had something to do with the coming of the Revolution, the texture of the Revolution, the making of the Revolution.

But I think that many historians will argue and I think quite correctly that the Revolution was a political event. It was centered in an understanding of what politics is and by that we mean secular politics, holding power. Who has authority? Why should they have authority? It wasn't centered in religious events. It wasn't centered in miracles. It wasn't centered in church disputes. There was some difficulty with the Anglican church but it was relatively minor and as an example all one needs to do is look at the Declaration of Independence. Neither in Jefferson's beautifully written opening statement in the Declaration nor in the long list of grievances against George the Third does religion figure in any important way anywhere. And the Declaration of Independence accurately summarizes the motivations of those who were back the American Revolution.

Some of the conservatives will say, well, but it does make a reference to nature's God and isn't that a bow to religion?

It is a bow to religion but it's hardly a bow to evangelicalism. Nature's God was the deist's God. Nature's God, When evangelicals discuss religion they mean to speak of the God of the Old and the New Testament not the God of nature. The God of nature is an almost secular God and in a certain way that actually makes the point that that's a deistical understanding of religion not a specifically Christian understanding of religion. To talk about nature's God is not to talk about the God of Christ.

John Patrick Diggins has advanced the argument that not only were the Founding Fathers not particularly religious but in fact they were deeply suspicious of religion because of the

role that they saw religion played in old Europe, where they saw it not as cohesive but as divisive. Do you agree?

The answer is yes and the reason is very simple. The principal Founding Fathers-- Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin--were in fact deeply suspicious of a European pattern of governmental involvement in religion. They were deeply concerned about an involvement in religion because they saw government as corrupting religion. Ministers who were paid by the state and paid by the government didn't pay any attention to their parishes. They didn't care about their parishioners. They could have, they sold their parishes. They sold their jobs and brought in a hireling to do it and they wandered off to live somewhere else and they didn't need to pay attention to their parishioners because the parishioners weren't paying them. The state was paying them.

In addition, it corrupts the state. That is, it brings into government elements of politics and elements of religion that are less than desirable. The most important being coercion. When government is involved with religion in a positive way, the history that these men saw was a history of coercion and a history of coercion meant a history of physical coercion and it meant ultimately warfare. Most of the wars from 1300 to 1800 had been religious wars and the wars that these men knew about in particular were the wars of religion that were fought over the Reformation in which Catholics and Protestants slaughtered each other, stuffed Bibles into the slit stomachs of dead soldiers so that they would eat, literally eat, their words, eat the words of an alien Bible and die with those words in their stomachs. This was the world of government involvement with religion that these men knew and a world they wanted to reject.

To create the United States meant to create a new nation free from those old attachments and that's what they created in 1776 and that's what they perfected in 1789 with the coming of the federal government. And thus it's not an accident that the First Amendment deals with religion. It doesn't just deal with Christianity. It deals with religion with a small "r" meaning all things religious.

What about the conservatives' belief that we need to go back to the religion of the Founding Fathers?

If we went back to the religion of the Founding Fathers we would go back to deism. If we picked up modern religion, it's not the religion of the Founding Fathers. Indeed, we are probably more religious than the society that created the American Revolution. There are a

number of ways to think about that. Sixty percent of Americans belong to churches today , 20 percent belonged in 1776. And if we count slaves, for example, it probably reduces the figure to 10 percent of the society that belonged to any kind of religious organization.

Modern Americans probably know more about religious doctrine in general, Christianity, Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism, than most Americans did in 1776. I would argue that America in the 1990s is a far more deeply religious society, whose politics is more driven by religion, than it was in 1776. So those who want to go back would be going back to a much more profoundly secular society.

What do you make of the politicians who take the opposite point of view. It must make you go crazy.

It doesn't make me go crazy. It makes me feel sad because it's inaccurate. It's not a historically accurate view of American society. It's a very useful view because many modern men and women are driven by a jeremiad, that is jeremiad lamenting the conditions in the wilderness. We tend to feel bad when we hear that we are not as religious as our fathers or our grandfathers or our great grandfathers and that spurs many of us on to greater religious activity. Unfortunately in this case the jeremiad simply isn't true. And I don't think that those who insist it is true would really want to go back to the kind of society that existed on the eve of the American Revolution.

Americans do become religious in the nineteenth century, don't they? That's what you say in your book.

The American Revolution created the basis for new uses of religion in a new society and that was conveyed in the lesson taught by the First Amendment. If government was no longer going to be supporting religion how was religion going to support itself? It would have to support itself by its own means. Through its own measures. It would have to generate its measures. And this is what every one of the churches began to do. As soon as religion dropped out of the state and the state dropped out of religion, the churches began fending for themselves. And they discovered that in fending for themselves that their contributions were going up, they were producing more newspapers, more tracts, they were beginning to circulate those tracts, they created a national religious economy long before there was a secular economy. You could trade more actively in religious goods than you could in other kinds in the United States in 1805, 1810.

What happened in the United States is that the churches actually benefited from this separation of church and state that was dictated by the First Amendment. In addition to which America became kind of a spiritual hothouse in the nineteenth century. Not only did the quantity of religion go up but so did the proliferation of doctrine. There became new religions--the Mormons, the spiritualists--all created in the United States. New religious groups that no one had ever heard of before, that had never existed anywhere else in western society than in the United States.