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2004

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

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by Rick Shenkman

Mr. Butler, former Dean of the Graduate School of Arts & Sciences at Yale University, is the author of "Awash in a Sea of Faith: Christianizing the American People" (Harvard University Press, 1990). This interview was conducted by HNN editor Rick Shenkman for The Learning Channel series, "Myth America," which aired several years ago.

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.

MORE COMMENTS:

Paul Shepherd - 3/9/2010

First of all, this whole article is chock full of non-factual, liberal agenda propaganda. The first amendment does not say anything about the separation of church and state...The term "Separation of Church and State" is derived from a letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802, Thomas Jefferson wrote:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & 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 & State."

In the United States the "Separation of Church and State" is generally discussed as a political and legal principle derived from the First Amendment of the United States Constitution, which reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" The concept of separation is commonly credited to the combination of the two clauses: the establishment clause, generally interpreted as preventing the government from establishing a national religion, providing tax money in support of religion, or otherwise favoring any single religion or religion generally; and the free exercise clause, ensuring that private religious practices are not restricted by the government. The effect of prohibiting direct connections between religious and governmental institutions while protecting private religious freedom and autonomy has been termed the "separation of church and state."

Jennifer Medina - 3/14/2008

The word "apostle" does not just have biblical meaning. It also means: a pioneer of any reform movement. As it is known to us, it appears to be a biblical reference but that is not its only use.

It is clear, religion was important to the people of early America as it is to people in America today. There is loads of evidence the founding fathers held beliefs in God. However, that does not mean they felt it would be best to converge the two. Thomas Jefferson was pretty clear on his belief of keeping them separate, as you said, to protect religious freedom but also to keep politics from being used as a wepaon for religious persecution.

It seems to me, people get so wrapped up in arguing about whether or not America was founded as a Christian nation the facts get completely ignored.

FACT: the existence of God has yet to be proven. FACT: historians can't even agree on the existence of Jesus. FACT: I am not even digging into history here just using current events: current governments (such as Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan etc.) that have a constitution or set of laws based strictly on one particular religious belief proves disasterous in every circumstance. People get extremely mistreated in countries such as these and it would be no different if it took place in America. In fact, there is an entire movement (religious right) that are fighting very hard to break down the wall of separation and even worse a group refered to as Christian Reconstructionist that want the constitution to be the Old Testament. Do you think this is a good idea?

You say " 'Separation of Church and State' has become a veil for the real agenda of "Segregation" - segregation of Church people and Christian principles from State policy." I disagree. I see it the other way around. If the American government was to embrace one particular religious view, to run a country with a population over 300 million people, it would be segragating beleivers in that one particular belief (which may or may not be your own) from non-believers resulting in persecution of the latter. It happenes everytime without fail.

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." It is a great quote, and from experience I would say very true. I am not saying that Thomas Jefferson was or wasn't Christian but using a quote that originated with Jesus does not make him anymore Christian than it does make me Christian for quoting "Thou shalt not kill". It is just good advice.

James Renwick Manship - 10/18/2007

So many anti-Christian academics (those who consider it "un-scholarly" to acknowledge the predominant role of Christian thought in the founding of this Constitution "in the year of our Lord..." or even "Church AND State" with the words "ordain and establish" or more modern, our One Nation Under God) dismiss the obvious as irrelevant, or meaning other than what is written. Is such "intellectual honesty"?

Let us recall that Franklin attended Christ Church in Philadelphia. Who was Franklin, the independent minded man trying to impress? Christ maybe? Franklin alluded to a Bible passage when he implored the assembled delegates at the Constitutional Convention to begin business each day with prayer as had been done before the Declaration of Independence was written over a decade before.

And at the end of the Constitutional Convention, Franklin answered a woman's question with "A

republic, madam, if you can keep it." A republic, not a democracy.

Arguably the clearest example of a democracy in action in the history of man is in Jerusalem, when the government servant abrogated his duty, abandoned the rule of law, and allowed the "demos", the rabble, the mob to rule, and incited by "rabble rousers" the mob ruled to convict an innocent man, and put him to death by crucifixion.

Yes, the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is the clearest example of "democracy" in action in the History of Man.

Remember that John Adams labeled "democracy" as a "mob-ocracy".

Also remember that Thomas Paine, author of Common Sense, described George Washington as the "World's Apostle of Liberty". Not "champion" of Liberty, but "Apostle of Liberty", clearly a Biblical reference.

A decade ago many modern academics labeled Washington as a "Deist". Go back a century and more and you find most scholars clear in their knowledge of Washington's Christian life.

The past 18 months have seen 6 books written on the Christian faith of George Washington. Most honest academics now acknowledge Washington was a devout Christian. The Novak's excellent book is one of those books. Peter Lillback yet another tour de force.

Jefferson wrote to Benjamin Rush to say in part, "My opinions are very different from that anti-Christian system imputed to me by those who know nothing ..." and in the same letter wrote, "I am a Christian...".

Many anti-Christians and even denomination-centric Christians have embraced the non-Christian theory of Thomas Jefferson and so assume or presume to deny Jefferson's words or that Jefferson meant what he wrote.

The oft-cited, often maligned, and mostly misunderstood "Jefferson Bible" was in fact a "Bible Study" done IN THE WHITE HOUSE when PRESIDENT -- so much for misrepresented "separation of church and state" position assigned to President Jefferson whose purpose for preparing a Gospel Tract from the "Great White Chief" (president) was to aid Christian Missionaries evangelize Indians to the Christian Faith. He personally funded missionaries, and when President used public funds to fund Christian missionaries to the Indians.

If you would like to see the title page of that "Gospel Tract" prepared by President Thomas Jefferson while in the White House, go to the link:

<http://thomas-jefferson-the-christian.blogspot.com/>

Unitarian Forrest Church and Beacon Press of Boston present only one of four translations of a later version of a so-called "Jefferson Bible". See the front page of that later version at the same link. Jefferson studied the words of Jesus in four languages so to have a more clear understanding of the

fine nuances of faith in Jesus, which is more than most scholars or pastors have done.

The Jefferson Bible is basically a "Red Letter" New Testament -- just the words of Jesus -- in part because Jefferson wrote "If the Gospel had been taught as pure as it came from His lips, the whole civilized world would now be Christian..."

Many say Thomas Jefferson did not like or believe in the Miracles or the Virgin Birth so he cut out all reference to them in his "Jefferson Bible" (which others, not TJ, gave it that title).

The truth is that Jesus NEVER described the Virgin Birth and NEVER described the Miracles. In only one verse in Saint John, Jesus listed the Miracles, and Jefferson included that verse, so Jefferson did not deny or delete the Miracles.

Thomas Jefferson's manservant, Isaac Jefferson was interviewed for a personal recollections biography as a free black blacksmith in Petersburg, Virginia in a.d. 1845 and he said TJ read the words of Jesus every day of his life.

How many Christian preachers, priests, or pastors can make the same claim of daily immersion into the words of Jesus as former slave Isaac Jefferson said of Thomas Jefferson?

The "Separation of Church and State" has become a veil for the real agenda of "Segregation" - segregation of Church people and Christian principles from State policy. In the same way that segregation of blacks out of participation in the civic policy process is illegal, so should be the current process of trying to shame Christians into a "self-segregation" from participation in government policy making processes.

The Jefferson phrase used in a letter to the Danbury Baptists was in reference to the Baptist leader Roger Williams writings about Separation of the Church from intermeddling by the State to protect the "garden of the Church from the wilderness of the world...", not the other way around as in these modern times is interpreted. It is a biological reference, and cell walls are semi-permeable membranes, they allow one way transfer, but block transfer in the other direction so to protect the life inside the cell walls. That is the meaning of Wall of Separation.

Some say Thomas Jefferson may have been a Church Vestryman early in his life, but in later years abandoned his Christian faith. Yet three years before he died, in a.d. 1823, Thomas Jefferson selected the motto for the University of Virginia , one of three accomplishments in his life for which he prayed to be remembered ~~

"And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free." -- the words of Jesus Christ.

Amen?

Tim Matthewson - 10/10/2007

In the 1790s, President John Adams signed a treaty with the Barbary regime of Tripoli, which had been

ratified by the Senate. The treaty itself stated flatly that the "government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion." (Quoted in Dershowitz, Blasphemy, p. 57).

Peter K. Clarke - 10/9/2007

Don,

The confusion or sloppy reading is evidently yours. I did not say "America was founded" (in the 17th or any other century). "America" was of course a name applied by a 15th century mapmaker to what Columbus thought was part of India. The Declaration of Independence of the United States was adopted on July 2, 1776. Maybe this is the ultimate source of the confusion underlying the article as well: America as a geographical label versus America as a conceptual model versus America as a sovereign political entity.

If Sam Adams really was the "last Puritan", that would be great news for high school boys in America, who would probably rather watch a malfunctioning Janet Jackson than read Hawthorn's "Scarlet Letter". Somehow I doubt that any such curriculum change is in the "offing".

Peter K. Clarke - 10/9/2007

The Puritan settlers who "founded" colonies in 17th century New England were indeed "deeply religious" in most cases. Confusing them with the framers of the late 18th century U.S. constitution is evidently a frequent mistake curiously unaddressed here.

Dave Livingston - 1/7/2005

Ben is correct on at least two points: that 1)"Many American colonists were rejecting the state religion of England" & that 2) "Europe was hardly a free society in the 1500s."

The first point is illustrated, in addition to the usual examples, by the colonization of Maryland, a Catholic colony, indeed the only one of the 13 established by Catholics.

In response to the baic query, "Was America founded as a Christian nation" in lieu of the dusty tomes most folks here like to dip into, I offer one even dustier, the history of our branch of the Scots Lowland House of Livingston. As mentioned a time or two before in other threads, our branch of the family was established on this of the Pond by a younger son, John George, age 19, who came ashore in 1732 at Martha's Vineyard.

In a matter of less than six months John George, a heck of a lot faster worker than I, had traveled to Penna., met, wooed & married a gal of a family long established over here.

Evidently John George was Protestant of one sort or another, but his oldest son, Adam, the next in the

line of our branch over here, then in the colony of Va., to the recalled even today intense chagrin of family & neighbors, converted to Catholicism.

How many, if any generations remained Catholic isn't available in the material accessible to me, but once in Tennessee we evidently again became Protestant of one variety or another.

Subsequent to the War Between the States our line found itself in southeastern Kansas, Quaker Valley, Kansas & somewhere along the line, probably beginning with my father's grandmother (whose first husband, Clinton Livingston, was one of four brothers KIA fighting for the South. One more brother too young to serve survived the war), circa 1866, we became Quaker ourselves. Indeed, the Friends Church in which my paternal grandmother's funeral was held yet exists.

The point of the above is that yes, the people of this land, the European colonists, have been Christian from the beginning, from long before the Revolution.

Nathaniel Brian Bates - 12/31/2004

Unfortunately, the Nations of the world reject Divine Law, which is found in the Tanakh ("Old Testament"). America should be different, due to the "Old Testament" nature of her Christianity, but she is not.

Bates

bill olbrich - 12/22/2004

Oh, Tempora! Oh, Mores! What is to become of us?

Mr. Shenkman uses "principal" when he means "principle" three times in his bulletin from the front. How can people of Good Will and Good Intentions successfully battle the Neo-Conservatives/Neo-Confederates ("Neocons/Neocons") if they get slipshod with their language?

Ben H. Severance - 12/22/2004

Good formulation, Oscar; people are rarely either/or.

Ben H. Severance - 12/22/2004

Good comments, Dave. And forgive my oversight of the Catholic community in Maryland. But then, it isn't surprising that you caught me on that one.

Ben H. Severance - 12/22/2004

On the one hand, the Religious Right would have Americans believe that the Founding Father generation was a time of Bible-thumping. On the other hand, the secular humanists (such as Butler?)

would have Americans believe that Christianity was an oddity outside of the mainstream of the political nation in the late 1700s. I think both of these viewpoints reflect current attitudes more than they depict past reality.

Oscar Chamberlain offers an instructive formulation in a separate comment thread.

Oscar Chamberlain - 12/22/2004

Were a large majority of Americans Christian at the time of the Revolution? Yes.

Does that mean that majority wanted to make this a nation that recognized Christianity as The Central Religion? Well, we know one thing, they didn't. Some states did so for a time, but the nation did not.

Did their versions of Christianity resemble modern evangelical Christianity? To a point, but the context was very different. As best as I can tell, few perceived a necessary conflict between faith and the observation and experimentation of the scientific revolution. To go back a generation or two, Cotton Mather could preside at Salem and champion smallpox vaccination.

To what extent were Christianity and Deism mutually exclusive. I suspect for many people, Christian and Deist alike, the answer was no. Just as today, when many evangelistic Christians--including perhaps President Bush--can accord respect to other faiths despite the dogma of their beliefs, so many people in the 1770s could see and appreciate aspects of the Deist perspective even while maintaining themselves to be Christian.

Some ministers perceived a dichotomy; so did a few deists. So do some academics and ministers today. I suspect many folk lived in the gap of the dichotomy quite comfortably.

Ben H. Severance - 12/21/2004

Shenkman might also have asked Butler what he thought about the "First Great Awakening." Historians take for granted the influence of the Enlightenment, but often overlook the religious revivalism of the early and mid-1700s. Many American colonists were rejecting the state religion of England and embracing such Christian denominations as Methodism, Baptism, and Presbyterianism.

As for the Puritans, historians generally scorn their authoritarian style of social order but forget the democratizing effect of Puritan political organization. Decision-making was a collective effort, albeit for the "Saints" only (just as the U.S.A. was for white men only until the 13th and 19th Amendments). Moreover, each Puritan settlement increasingly exercised local autonomy viz. Boston (something akin to states rights).

I also found Butler's comments regarding religious pluralism in American highly misleading. He contends that the political freedom won in the Revolution opened the door to religious expansion (e.g., Mormons, etc...). There is validity in this argument, but a secularized and democratized political environment is not an indispensable factor. Butler forgets, or perhaps omits, to point out that just as

many new religions and denominations sprouted in the wake of Luther's 95 Theses; and Europe was hardly a free society in the 1500s.

Finally, don't think very many Americans, Founding Fathers or otherwise, had really internalized Deism as a belief system. Jefferson and Franklin and Paine, yes, but most Americans were either devoted Christians or nominal Christians. I don't wear my faith on my sleeve, but I do believe in the Triune God. On this point, I think Butler's comments regarding Washington's christianity was closer to mark for most Americans throughout the nation's history.

Don Adams - 12/20/2004

You've managed to confuse yourself here. America was not founded in the 17th century by Puritan settlers. Some of the land which later became America was colonized by 17th century Puritans, but that is a different matter. America itself was founded on -- come on, say it with me -- July 4th, 1776. Its constitution was ratified in 1787. By my calendar, both of those dates took place in the 18th century. As for the Puritans, Sam Adams is sometimes referred to as "the last Puritan," but that's about as far as it goes for them.

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