

During the week of June 11, 2007, four thousand Christians converged on Williamsburg, Virginia, to celebrate the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of Jamestown—the first successful English colony in North America. The event was sponsored by Vision Forum Ministries, an organization that, among other things, is committed to “teaching history as the providence of God.” The “Jamestown Quadricentennial: A Celebration of America’s Providential History” was a gala event. For the cost of admission visitors were treated to lectures on various themes in early American history, historical reenactments, “faith and freedom” tours of Williamsburg and Yorktown, and hot-air-balloon rides over the site of the Jamestown settlement. One of the highlights of the week was a children’s parade. Led by a Pocahontas reenactor, a thousand boys and girls dressed in period clothing marched in a one-mile procession to commemorate the planting of this historic colony. The week came to an end for the American Christian pilgrims with a Sunday morning worship service.

The Vision Forum gathering differed markedly from the celebration planned by the national government and its Jamestown 400th Commemoration Commission. While both events featured activities for families and an array of educational opportunities, the government-sponsored commemoration did not include lectures and seminars with titles such as “Jamestown’s Legacy of Christ, Liberty, and Common Law” or “Refuting the Revisionists on America’s 400<sup>th</sup> Birthday.” Nor did the brochures advertising various tours of Jamestown read like the one being promoted by a popular Christian radio host and theologian: “Join Gary DeMar as he presents well-documented facts which will change your perspective about what it means to be a Christian in America.....If you are tired of the revisionism of the politically correct crowd trying to whitewash our Christian history, you will not want to miss this tour.”<sup>1</sup>

The providential historians' quadricentennial was part of an attempt by some evangelicals to reclaim what they believe to be America's Christian heritage. They have made the relationship between religion and the creation of the American Republic a dominant topic of debate in our recent culture wars. Many well-meaning Christians, like those associated with the Vision Forum, believe that America was founded as a uniquely Christian nation. These evangelicals have used this historical claim to justify policy on a host of moral and cultural issues facing the United States today. The study of the past, they argue, has been held hostage by secularists who have rejected the notion that the American founders sought to forge a country that was Christian. Instead, these revisionists wrongly claim that the American Revolutionary era was informed by Enlightenment ideals about toleration and pluralism.

In their attempt to counter these arguments, some believers in a Christian America have supported House Resolution 888, an attempt by Christian lawmakers in Congress to establish an "American Religious History Week" that celebrates "the rich spiritual and religious history of our Nation's founding."<sup>2</sup> Others have taken control of the Texas State Board of Education in an attempt to change the state's social studies curriculum to better represent the Christian themes that they believe all school children should study and learn. Since Texas is the nation's second-largest market for textbook publishers, and these publishers craft their textbooks to suit the needs of their best customers, it is likely that the decisions made by the Texas State Board of Education will influence what students learn in other states as well.<sup>3</sup>

Was America founded as a Christian nation? In my experience as a Christian and a Christian college history professor, I have found that many average churchgoers are confused about this topic. Unfortunately, those who dominate our public discourse tend to make matters worse. For example, during the 2008 presidential campaign, Republican candidate John McCain

announced that “the Constitution established the United States of America as a Christian nation,” but the Constitution says nothing about the relationship between Christianity and the United States. Former Arkansas governor and fellow presidential candidate Mike Huckabee said on the campaign trail that “most” of the fifty-six men who signed the Declaration of Independence were clergymen.<sup>4</sup> In fact, only one member of the clergy signed the Declaration—College of New Jersey president John Witherspoon. Recently, television personality Glenn Beck has devoted his Friday afternoon shows to the religious beliefs of the founders.

We live in a sound-bite culture that makes it difficult to have any sustained dialogue on these historical issues. It is easy for those who argue that America is a Christian nation (and those who do not) to appear on radio or television programs, quote from one of the founders or one of the nation’s founding documents, and sway people to their positions. These kinds of arguments, which can often be contentious, do nothing to help us unravel a very complicated historical puzzle about the relationship between Christianity and America’s founding.

It is not just the secularists and Christians who disagree. Evangelicals have legitimate differences over these issues as well. In 2005, when *Time* announced the twenty-five most influential evangelicals in America, the list included both David Barton and Mark A. Noll.<sup>5</sup> Barton, the founder of an organization called “Wallbuilders,” is, as we will see in chapter 4, one of the country’s foremost proponents of the theory that America is a Christian nation. Noll, a scholar of American religious history at the University of Notre Dame (and a long-time member of the faculty at evangelical Wheaton College), has spent a good portion of his career attempting to debunk, both directly and indirectly, the notion that America is a Christian nation. Barton has suggested that Noll, and scholars like him, rely too much on the work of other historians and not enough on primary documents. Noll has offered careful and nuanced arguments to refute the

Christian America defenders, but as a scholar his works lack the immense popularity among ordinary evangelicals that Barton enjoys.

All of this, of course, still leaves us with the question at hand: Was America founded as a Christian nation? I have written this book for the historically minded and thoughtful reader who is looking for help in sorting it all out. I have tried to avoid polemics as much as possible, although I am sure that my treatment of these controversial issues will not please everyone. This book should be viewed as a historical primer for students, churchgoers, and anyone who wants to make sense of the American past and its relationship to Christianity. I hope it might be read and discussed in schools and congregations where people are serious about considering how the history of the American founding era might help them to become more informed citizens in the present.

Was America founded as a Christian nation? The answer to this question depends on how we define our terms. What do we mean when we use terms such as “Christian,” “founding,” and “nation”? A close examination of these words and their relationship to one another in the context of early American history suggests that the very question, “Was America *founded as a Christian nation?*” or even its more contemporary rephrasing, “Is America a Christian Nation?” does not do justice to the complexity of the past. When we think about the many ways in which the words in this sentence can be defined, we come to the conclusion that the question itself is not very helpful. This book attempts to make sense of a difficult and complex issue..

Was America Founded as a *Christian* nation? How should we define the label “Christian” as it relates to the time of the American founding? We can define “Christian” as a body of

doctrine—a collection of theological truths that the church through the ages has described as Christian “orthodoxy.” Such an approach would require us to examine either the nation’s founding documents or the religious beliefs of the founders to see if those beliefs measure up to the standards of Christian orthodoxy as found in ancient formulations of faith such as the Apostles’ Creed or the Nicene Creed. We could, for example, ask whether a particular signer of the Declaration of Independence or member of the Constitutional Convention believed in God, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, or the second coming of Jesus Christ. We might examine the earliest forms of national and state government to see if conformity to standards of Christian orthodoxy were required to vote or hold political office. Or perhaps we could explore the intellectual roots of the values for which the Revolution was fought to see if these values—liberty, freedom, natural rights—were grounded in Christian beliefs.

Another way of defining the meaning of the word “Christian” is through orthopraxy. In other words, did the behavior, practice, and decisions of the founders and the governments that they established conform to the spiritual and moral teachings of Christianity as taught in the Bible? Are the actions of the founders consistent with the teachings of Jesus? Do they reflect Biblical standards of Christian justice and compassion? Do they institute policies that respect outsiders and neighbors as human beings created in God’s image and thus worthy of dignity and honor? Such an approach would require a close examination of specific policies and decisions made at the time of the American founding. For example, we might ask whether a nation that condones the institution of slavery can be honestly called “Christian.”

We may also want to examine the Christian character of the people who make up the nation. Though I am skeptical of the idea that any society on this side of eternity can be truly called Christian, it does seem that a society can reflect, in a limited sense, Christian principles if

the vast majority of its members are doing their best, through the power of God's grace and the work of the Holy Spirit, to live authentic Christian lives. Such an approach takes the focus away from the founders and the founding documents and places it squarely upon the religious behavior and practice of ordinary early Americans. Those who argue this way might examine church membership, church attendance, or the number of communicants in a particular congregation or denomination. Such popular piety is often difficult to quantify, but there do exist some signposts that can give us a general sense of the spiritual commitments of people living during this period. For example, church membership was a sign of personal commitment to the religious life of a Christian congregation. Similarly, becoming a communicant (partaking of the sacrament of the Lord's Supper) demonstrated devotion to the Christian gospel. By partaking of the bread and the wine, communicants celebrated the death of Jesus Christ for the sins of the world. This book also sets out to complicate terms such as "nation" and "founded." At what point did the United States of America become a nation? Was it in 1776, when the Continental Congress declared its independence from England? Was it 1789, when the United States Constitution became the official frame of American government? Or was it sometime later? How we define "nation" will have a profound influence on whether we can truly say the United States was "Christian." And at what point was the United States of America "founded"? Was it 1776 or 1787? Was it founded when the Pilgrims arrived on American shores aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620? Again, how we define our terms will affect how we answer the question posed in the title of this book.

One of my goals in writing *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* is to get Christians to see the danger of cherry-picking from the past as a means of promoting a political or cultural agenda in the present. I thus begin the book with a short essay on what it means to think historically. Here I lay the theoretical groundwork for much of what will follow and offer

historical thinking as a way of preserving the integrity of the past in the midst of the culture wars over the meaning of the American founding.

Following this introductory chapter, I have divided the book into three major parts. Each one of these sections can stand alone, allowing the reader to pick up the book at any point. Part one provides a four-chapter history of the idea that the United States is a “Christian nation.” A Christian understanding of American nationalism has been around since the first days of the Republic, but today’s advocates of this idea might be surprised to learn the various ways in which a Christian America was defended between 1789 and the present. The last chapter of this section—chapter 4—delves into the contemporary writers and historians who have tried to make the case for a Christian America.

After tracing the idea of Christian nationhood through the course of American history, I turn in the rest of the book to the age of the American Revolution to see if the advocates of Christian America—both past and present—have been right in their belief that the founders set out to create a nation that was distinctively Christian. Part two asks whether the Revolution can be understood as a Christian event. It focuses on the relationship between Christianity and the coming of the American Revolution, the Continental Congress and the Declaration of Independence, and the Articles of Confederation and the Constitution. Part three deals with the specific religious beliefs of the founders. Which ones were Christians and which ones were not? What is the relationship, if any, between the beliefs of the founders and the construction of a Christian nation?

Over the past five years I have given several talks about Christianity and the American founding to all kinds of audiences—both secular and Christian. What I have found is that most ordinary people come to a talk on this topic with their minds already made up. They expect me,

the speaker, to confirm what they already hold to be true. Whether you believe that America was founded as a Christian nation or not, I hope that you will come to this book with an open mind. I tell my students that education always requires risk and wisdom. Risk demands willingness, to use the words of historian Mark Schwehn, to “surrender ourselves for the sake of a better opinion,” while **wisdom** “is the discernment of when it is reasonable to do so.”<sup>6</sup> My hope and prayer is that those who read this book might be truly educated in the process.

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<sup>1</sup> Vision Forum Ministries, “The Jamestown Quadricentennial,” accessed Jan. 25, 2010, at <http://www.visionforumministries.org/events/jq/001/vision.aspx>.

<sup>2</sup> House Resolution 888, accessed Jan. 25, 2010, at <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/billtext.xpd?bill=hr110-888>.

<sup>3</sup> Mariah Blake, “Revisionaries: How a Group of Texas Conservatives Is Rewriting Your Kids’ Textbooks,” *Washington Monthly*, Jan.-Feb. 2010, accessed Jan. 25, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Dan Gilgoff, “John McCain: Constitution Established a ‘Christian Nation,’” accessed Jan. 25, 2010, at <http://www.beliefnet.com/News/Politics/2007/06/John-Mccain-Constitution-Established-A-Christian-Nation.aspx>; Huckabee Speech in Orlando, Florida, Oct. 21, 2007, accessed Jan. 25, 2010, at <http://politifact.com/truth-o-meter/statements/2007/oct/23/mike-huckabee/1-out-of-56-equals-most-no-it-doesnt/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Evangelicals in America,” *Time*, Feb. 7, 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Mark Schwehn, *Exiles from Eden: Religion and the Academic Vocation in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 49.