

**Why We Are Not a Christian Nation
And Why I Wish We Were**
By
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Many years ago, while I was working on my Master of Arts in Religious Studies, I attended a lecture by Daniel Berrigan, the Catholic priest, who, along with his brother Phillip Berrigan, also a priest, went to prison for breaking into government facilities and destroying draft notices during Vietnam. And if you think prison is a deterrent, in 1980 they broke into a nuclear missile facility in Pennsylvania where they damaged warheads and also destroyed government documents. After 10 years in court on that case, they were finally sentenced and paroled with time served.

During the question/answer part of his lecture I introduced myself to Berrigan by saying, "Although I'm not a Christian I do try to follow Jesus the best I can." He reacted with immediate confusion, as if I'd just contradicted myself. Although he didn't say it, I imagine he was thinking, "Isn't following Jesus the best you can precisely what it means to be a Christian?" Although his visceral response made the audience chuckle, he ended up not saying anything about my paradoxical statement, probably because, after thinking about it for a second, he realized I was correct, that, throughout most of its long history, Christianity has been far more about what one believes than it's been about what one does.

My actual question had to do with the war in Iraq that had just begun at the time, which I found to be supported by most the Christians I knew or encountered—and I encountered quite a few since I was studying at a Catholic university. What I couldn't comprehend is how, in light of all Jesus' teachings about nonviolence, love, and forgiveness, anyone professing to follow him could so readily support war. One of my fellow students at the time, for example, a devout Catholic, came to class one evening feeling very gung-ho about the war. So I asked him how, in light of Jesus' teachings, he could, as a Christian, support any war, let alone a preemptive strike against a country that had not wronged our nation in any way?

"I admit it seems strange," he said. "I guess all I can say is that Jesus was perfect and the rest of us are sinners and can't be expected to live up to his high standards." I appreciated his honesty and didn't argue the matter any further, though I found his response troubling, to say the least. The idea that Christians can't actually be expected to follow Jesus' teachings because he was perfect and they are not, is far more confusing to me than saying I try to follow them the best I can even though I'm not a Christian. Nonetheless, there seems to be an awful lot of people who agree with my classmate, that being a Christian doesn't have much to do with following Jesus. Believing *in* him, or, at least, in the fiction he became, seems far more important than simply believing him, believing what he said is true and worth putting into practice.

Maybe this helps us understand how it's possible to follow the teachings of Jesus without being a Christian, and how it's possible to be a Christian without following them. Whichever the case, many in our country continue to tout the notion that ours was founded as and remains a Christian nation. I would challenge this assertion on several grounds. Firstly, our nation was not founded; it was stolen. Regardless of the American mythos, Christopher Columbus didn't discover an uninhabited wilderness eager to be tamed by Europeans. Those referred to as this nation's "founding fathers" were among those who directly benefited from the worst genocide and destruction of existing civilizations in human history. So when I speak about the origins of the United States, I try not to gloss over what really happened by repeating the myth that America was discovered in 1492, or civilized by Pilgrims and Puritans in 1630, or founded by fathers in 1776, or tamed by rugged pioneers in the 1800s.

Perpetuating these lies, especially by speaking of "founders," not only continues to add insult to egregious injury upon the First Peoples of this land and their descendents, it also gives those who consider themselves good Christians the excuse needed to justify rejecting, deporting, and imprisoning Mexican refugees, or to turn away desperate Syrian refugees, simply because they think, "this land is our land," and "we were here first." While speaking against pluralism in our nation, for example, and what he envisions as the eventual takeover by a Christian majority, fundamentalist Oliver North once said, "We were here first, this is our government. They stole it."¹ If history refers only to white Europeans and their descendents, perhaps there would be some small grain of truth to North's claim, but, from a more pluralistic perspective, we know there were people, cultures, and entire civilizations here long before Europeans arrived. So it's offensive and inaccurate to speak of them as this country's founders. And since it was not found but stolen from those who really were here first, it could not have been founded as a Christian nation.

Secondly, those we should more properly refer to as the framers of the United States Constitution, not the fathers or founders of our nation, most certainly did not intend for it to be a Christian nation. Although there were many religious refugees among the European pilgrims who began arriving here in 1620, along with the Puritans who arrived a decade later, seeking to establish Christian communities, their main purpose in coming to America was to escape the Church of England so they could be free to practice religion as they saw fit.

Many of the key framers of the Constitution, furthermore, were Deists, meaning they believed in a god that created the universe but that has nothing else to do with it, having established natural laws that allow it work just fine on its own. Deism also promotes reason, human agency, and ethical behavior, while rejecting supernatural thinking. Revolutionary war hero, Ethan Allen, for example, didn't mind being called

¹ Fox, Matthew, *A New Reformation*, Wisdom University Press, Oakland, CA, 2005, p. 23.

“a Deist,” saying, in his own words, “that I am no Christian.”² Likewise, Thomas Paine, who, more than any other individual, may have been responsible for winning the Revolution and for the Declaration of Independence, said that when it comes to religion, “I disbelieve them all.”³ George Washington, sometimes called, “the Father of our Nation,” never professed to be a Christian in all his writings, disbelieved in Hell, and didn’t call for a clergyman on his deathbed. His successor, President John Adams, who once wondered if, “This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it,”⁴ ratified the Treaty of Tripoli, explicitly stating, “the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.”⁵ Thomas Jefferson, who followed Adams into the Oval Office, thought Christianity was based on Plato, not Jesus, and called most of what was written in the New Testament, “nonsense.”⁶ James Madison, the 4th US President, wrote, “Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise.”⁷

If the words of these Revolutionaries, Patriots, and the first four US Presidents aren’t enough to dispel that myth that ours was “founded as a Christian Nation,” then the Constitution they drafted should be proof enough alone. Actually, the same year it was ratified, in 1789, James Madison, concerned it didn’t initially guaranty any civil liberties, went to work drafting what would become the Constitution’s first ten amendments, also known as the *Bill of Rights*. The very first amendment of his draft began with the following sentence, “The civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed.” The 1st Congress agreed with its intent but abridged the sentence to simply state, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The States ratified the Bill of Rights just three years later, in 1791.

In light of all of this, it’s difficult to argue the United States of America was founded at all, let alone founded as a Christian nation. Yet today many people continue to believe and promote the lie that the framers of our government were all Christians who intended for ours to be a Christian nation. It is an unfortunate lie that still shapes politics today, perhaps, more than ever. As far as I know, there aren’t many Atheists openly serving in elected office, none in Congress. Even though it’s finally possible for a person of color to serve as our President, and, perhaps soon, the first woman President, or maybe the first Jewish President, it’s still difficult to imagine anyone openly professing to be an atheist getting elected to the White House.

² Koch, G. Adolph, *Religion in the American Enlightenment*, Thomas Crowell Co., New York, NY, 1968, p. 352.

³ Paine, Thomas, *The Age of Reason*, Prometheus Books, Buffalo, NY, 1984, p. 9.

⁴ Peabody, James, ed., *A Biography of His Own*, p. 403.

⁵ Treaty of Tripoli (Treaty of Peace & Friendship), 1796, Article XI

⁶ Brodie, Fawn M, *Thomas Jefferson, an Intimate History*, Norton and Co., Inc., New York, NY 1974, p. 453.

⁷ Moore, Virginia, *The Madisons*, McGrall-Hill Co., New York, NY, 1979, p. 43.

I do believe this attitude is rapidly changing, however, and within the next twenty years it may become difficult for anyone who isn't an atheist to get elected. But right now the religious beliefs of all our Presidential candidates have played a major role in the primaries. While campaigning in the South, Hillary Clinton spent a lot of time visiting churches and, when asked about the role religion plays in her life during a recent CNN debate, she said she prays on a regular basis throughout the day to give her the strength and support she needs. When her Democratic opponent, Bernie Sanders was later criticized for not mentioning his Jewish faith often enough, he too responded by stating emphatically how important it is to him.

The GOP candidates, as you can imagine, are even more outspoken about the role religion plays in their political aspirations. After winning just 3rd place in the Iowa caucus last month, Marco Rubio said, "I want to thank an all powerful and mighty God for the chance that he has given us to be a part of this endeavor in Iowa. ...And I thank my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ and I thank God for allowing me the opportunity to come this far with each of you."⁸ Ted Cruz, who actually came in first in Iowa, began his victory speech by saying, "God Bless the great state of Iowa. Let me first of all say, to God be the glory." He then pledged to help our nation, "get back to our core commitments, free market principles, Judeo-Christian values that built this great nation."

Despite all this rhetoric from those seeking the highest office in the land, it's also difficult to claim ours is a Christian nation given the demographic evidence that says we're not. Between 2007 and 2014, according to the Pew Research center, the number of people in the US claiming to be Christian dropped from more than 78 percent to just 70 percent, while the number of those claiming no religion rose from 16 to 23 percent. That's nearly a quarter of us with no religious affiliation, with more than 7 percent claiming to be atheist or agnostic.⁹ The percentage is even higher among adults under age 30. It's because of these rapidly changing demographics that when David Niose, author of *Nonbeliever Nation*, and a past president of the American Humanist Association and the Secular Coalition for America, spoke here a couple years ago, he said it's no longer fair to say we are a very Christian nation. Instead, he said, "We are a *somewhat* Christian nation."

So these are some of the reason it doesn't seem accurate to claim ours is a Christian nation. The framers of the US government were not very Christian. The US Constitution guaranties separation of church and state, and nearly a quarter of our population claims not to be very religious at all. But there is one more reason, the main reason I believe, it is error to claim ours is a Christian nation, because, by and large, our nation simply doesn't follow the teachings of Jesus.

⁸ Iowa Caucus Speech, February 1, 2016.

⁹ <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>

I realize there's a lot of noise, a lot of Bible thumping out there, to deflect and compensate for this embarrassing reality—rallying against abortion, or gay rights, or... well, abortion and gay rights is about it. Yet even these two issues have little to do with Christian tradition or the teachings of Jesus. Jesus never said anything about abortion or the sanctity of life. But he is reported to have said, **"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."**¹⁰ Clearly he was more concerned about quality of life issues than he was about preserving unwanted pregnancies. According to Christian tradition, in fact, Jesus never married or had children and taught his followers there are things far more valuable than life, saying things like, **"Whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it,"**¹¹ and, **"There is no greater love than to lay down your life for your friends,"**¹² Obviously Jesus, who ended up losing his own life in his pursuit of peace and justice for all, believed there are things far more sacred than life.

And when it comes to that other issue, the gay issue so many fundamentalists seem obsessed about, he never said anything. We do know, however, that he instructed his followers, "Judge not, lest you be judged,"¹³ and was often criticized by the religious legalists of his own day for welcoming and associating with outcasts. The current attempt in our society to condemn GBLTQs, rather, is much more based on the Old Testament, wrath of God, type thinking than it is upon the loving inclusive teachings of Jesus. "It's an abomination for a man to lie with a man," they love to quote from *Leviticus*, along with pointing out the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with fire and brimstone. Yet they don't ever seem to have any issue with the idea that the men of these towns wanted to beat and rape the foreigners among them, not have love affairs with them. They also ignore the Bible itself, which says, **"You shall not oppress a stranger. You know the heart of a stranger, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt,"**¹⁴ or the very words of Jesus who said, **"I was a stranger and you welcomed me,"**¹⁵ or of the prophet Ezekiel who said emphatically, **"Now this is the sin of your sister Sodom, she and her daughters were arrogant, overfed and unconcerned; they did not help the poor and needy."**¹⁶

So, at least according to the Bible, sodomy has nothing to do with people of the same gender loving each other. Sodomites are those, rather, who oppress strangers and foreigners. Sodomites are those who ignore the poor and the needy. Sodomites are those who exploit others for their own selfish gain.

So, as I said, obsessing about the unborn and homosexuality compensates for an otherwise dismal record when it comes to really valuing the sanctity of life by caring

¹⁰ John 10:10.

¹¹ Matthew 16:25.

¹² John 15:13.

¹³ Matthew 7:1

¹⁴ Exodus 23:9.

¹⁵ Matthew 25:43.

¹⁶ Ezekiel 16:49.

for those who have actually been born, or by condemning the behavior of one group while saying little about the greed, exploitation, oppression, and violence of our society at large.

But if we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't condemn or judge marginalized people; we'd welcome the strangers, with all their strangeness, among us.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't have the largest prison population in the world, mostly comprised of the poor and minorities; we'd have a criminal justice system based, not on punishment, but on forgiveness and compassion.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't be the only major nation in the world that doesn't guarantee healthcare for everyone; we'd heal the sick like Jesus told us to.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't allow a handful of people to store up all the treasures on Earth just for themselves; we'd establish a system that creates abundant life for all by sharing what we have with each other, turning a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish into enough to provide for everyone, with plenty of leftovers.

If we were really a Christian nation, we'd not allow one in a hundred people to have more than their fair share while everyone else suffers; we'd love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't be building walls at our borders, or turning away refugees our gates, or deporting immigrants; we'd find a way to offer our help.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't have underfunded schools, or half our kids living in poverty, or a rising number who are completely homeless; we'd embrace them like Jesus did, and make certain, as he instructed, that our children do not suffer.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't be involved in so many damn wars either; we'd put away our swords (and our guns) beat them into plowshares, and learn to forgive our enemies and love one another.

If we were really a Christian nation, we wouldn't stand by for the destruction of the Earth and Environment; we'd go out into the wilderness like Jesus did, to find inspiration from the birds of the air the lilies of the field, and learn from nature that there's enough for everyone and that we have to do our best to create Heaven here on Earth.

Why We Are Not a Christian Nation

These are the reasons I don't believe we are a Christian nation, and the reasons I sometimes wish we were. They are the reasons I still say, even though I'm not a Christian I do try to follow Jesus the best I can.