

## The Christian Founding of the United States of America

By Dan Jensen (2023)

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “works for beginners” first. They can be found on my website.)

The debate still rages on in the public sphere in our nation (and to some extent abroad) over whether or not our nation was established or founded as a Christian nation. Unfortunately, there is a *ton* of misinformation from both camps. This should never be the case with true Christians, but sadly it is. Much of the debate focuses on the definition of what would constitute a Christian nation. One of the most ironic aspects to this debate is the fact that most on both sides actually agree on that basic definition, but merely say that the nation did or did not meet that definition. And both sides are wrong on this point!

The skeptics are wrong by trying to say that there can only be one narrow definition of a genuinely Christian nation, and that is of theocracy. They are right in pointing out that our nation was not established as such. Most of the Christians are wrong by agreeing with that definition, and are doubly wrong when they try to say that our nation was established as such. Now, to be fair, I understand that many say that they are not advocating for a theocratic definition. Many will say that our nation was established as a biblical republic. Fair enough, but most still say that the nation was explicitly said to be Christian by our founding documents and leaders. This is not so and is still basically advocating for a theocratic definition of what would make a Christian nation an actual Christian nation.

I have already discussed some elements of my position on this point in some of my other works, especially on pages 44-47 of *Doctrine: Going Deeper* (part 2). I highly encourage you to read or reread that section of my work before plowing forward with

this essay. I will be presupposing everything said there, but will be adding a number of points here that will hopefully help people better understand my stance on this important topic and also will hopefully help people have a more biblical and historically accurate view on this debate.

You don't have to agree with my definition of what constitutes a nation as being a particular religious nation, but I present my definition here and I believe that it makes a lot of sense both philosophically and historically. I believe that there are 3 basic criteria that have to be met for a nation to be seen as being a particular religious nation. The first is that I believe that a solid cultural foundation of a particular religion has to be present before the establishment of that nation. Hence, I believe that if a nation is conquered by another nation that either has no religion or another religion, the newly formed nation (it would technically now be a nation within a nation or empire) cannot be fully said to be of the religion of the conquering nation merely because it is so now on paper. Even if most of the new nation quickly becomes culturally a part of the conquering religion through migration and severe measures being imposed upon the new nation to try to make the older culture conform to the new religion, I still think that the inevitable tension that will exist between the old and new religions makes it difficult from a sociological perspective to call this new nation a particular religious nation in a complete sense.

The second criteria is that I believe that a nation must be the religion in question culturally. If a nation is conquered by another nation with another worldview, the culture of this newly formed nation is going to highly reflect the culture of the old nation for a very long time unless the conquering nation takes severe measures to change that. And religion is obviously a core part of culture. This may seem to be nothing more than a regurgitation of the former point, but it is not. Under the first point, a nation could very quickly become a new religious nation culturally in many respects due to severe measures. In such a nation though, as stated above, a great deal of tension will remain. In the second scenario, the country may still remain culturally a part of the older religion through and through despite now being under the thumb of a government that does not

share the religion of the culture. Hence, it meets both my first and second criteria, whereas the conquered nation spoken of above does not meet the second criteria (it obviously does not meet the first as we saw) because it has become a tense amalgam, religiously speaking, from a culture perspective. As we will see though, the nation under question here plainly does not meet my third criteria because the government of the new nation does not reflect the older religion.

Another way in which the second criteria differs from the first is that the change in religion does not always have to come about through conquest. Often a country was truly a particular religious nation (meeting all 3 of my criteria), and remains so on paper, but has slowly shifted culturally to a new religion. When this takes place, this nation can no longer truly be said to adhere to the old religion despite doing so on paper. It is now culturally the new religion. This shift can often take place because of migration, apathy towards the old religion, a combination of both, or a combination of these two factors along with other factors as well. In this case, this nation meets my second criteria, but it does not meet my first because the cultural foundation of this nation from a religious perspective was/is that of the older religion. And there will never be any getting rid of that foundation completely unless a new nation is established. It also does not meet my third criteria, as we will see, because the government, in many respects, will still largely reflect the religion of the older culture.

At this point you may ask, "Ok, but how could a new nation ever meet the first criteria? Wouldn't the change in the nation always mean that the older foundation has been lost?" No, this is actually very often not the case in history. For instance, a war may break up the boundaries of a nation severely through no fault or desire of the older nation. Therefore, you may have only one fourth of the old nation left. At this point, a new nation and government must be established to meet the new needs and conditions of this remnant nation after the war. But, due to the fallout of the war, this new nation may be largely allowed to establish its new government as it sees fit. In this case, you have a genuinely new nation and government, but the people have largely remained the same culturally, especially from a religious perspective. In this case, all 3 of my criteria

are going to be met, including the first because the cultural foundation of this new nation, especially from a religious perspective, is the same as both the culture and government of the new nation.

Or as another example, you may have a nation along the lines of what I discussed when I talked about how a nation may drift into being another religion from a cultural perspective over time. Such a nation may deem it necessary to start a new government to better reflect the new cultural norms. When this takes place, technically speaking, a new nation has been started even if very little has changed from the old nation as far as geography and culture. Now, I do understand that often many laws of a nation may already be changed based upon culture. Many political commentators have talked about how often the law is downwind of culture. And I fully agree. With that admitted, changing individual laws can never fully get rid of the foundational elements of any government that came from the previous cultural norms. As long as the older government is in place, there will always be tension. This is precisely what we are seeing in our country today. More and more younger people are becoming opposed to free speech. And many older people in our nation who agree with them (despite being the minority within their own generation) often take legal and cultural action to try to implement this new norm within our country. But, as long as the first amendment is in place, there will always be tremendous tension here as we are currently seeing in our culture.

If a culture gets fed up enough with this tension, a new government will often be set up. When this happens, the cultural foundation of the new religion was already in place when the new nation is established. Because of that, the first criteria would be in place for this new nation. And if this nation is being consistent, the third criteria will always follow as well. Obviously the second criteria is in place as that is the reason this nation has decided to start a new government in the first place. Now, I fully understand that often things are never this simple. Often, the founding of new nations is extremely messy and complicated. And I would say that in those instances, you rarely have all 3 of my criteria present for saying that such a nation is a particular religious nation from a sociological standpoint. My point is that sometimes all 3 criteria are indeed present.

The third piece of my criteria, as you have probably guessed as I have already hinted at it a number of times in this essay so far, is that the form of government of a nation must be in accord with the religion in question. It is very possible to have a nation with a strong foundation in a particular religion well before the establishment of the new nation. And it is further possible that this new nation remains, from a cultural perspective, thoroughly immersed in that old religion. But, it is also the case that both of those realities can be present while the government itself does not share the religion of the culture. For example, a nation could have a long history of established Catholicism for centuries. Then, it may have been taken over by Communists. The form of the government is now deeply at odds with the culture and history of the people. And this new government only makes tepid efforts to rid the people of their Catholicism. Thus, the nation remains foundationally culturally Catholic, and thus from a cultural perspective is still a Catholic country. Yet, the form of government is explicitly opposed to Catholicism.

Where things get tricky with certain worldviews is that some worldviews do not believe in theocracy (or at least should not if they are going to be consistent with their scriptures and founding principles). I give two examples here. The first is Biblical Christianity and the second would be Buddhism. For a defense of the first example, see pages 39-44 of my *Doctrine: Going Deeper* (part 2). For a defense of the second, see my section on Buddhism in my work on the religions of the world found on my website. While I do not explicitly go over the Buddhist doctrine of civil government, it should become clear from that basic summary why any notion of a Buddhist theocracy makes little sense. None of this is to say that all orthodox Christians or all Buddhists have been consistent with this truth. Many have not. That does not change the basic argument in either case.

Therefore, as odd as it may sound at first, a theocratic Christian nation, or a theocratic Buddhist nation, would both fail to meet my third piece of overall criteria. Conversely, an Islamic nation such as Turkey, that plainly and overwhelmingly meets my first two criteria, does not actually meet the third because it is not an overtly theocratic (although

I fully agree that it often functions like it is) nation, and I am convinced that the Koran demands Islamic theocratic nations.

With all of that laid out, let us look to see if the United States met all three pieces of my criteria. It plainly did. No historian questions the fact that the predominant religious influence upon the Colonies before the founding of our nation was Christianity. Even those who wish to say that this influence had radically waned by the time of the founding, have to say that this only occurred just before the founding as the Colonies were allegedly becoming more and more Deistic and secular. But, even they cannot deny the Puritan and overall Protestant influence that shaped the Colonies across the board before the founding of the nation. And as we will soon see, they are largely mistaken about this broad secularization just before the founding.

Now, you may argue that this influence itself did not meet my three points. This is because most of the Puritans and most of the Colonies were theocratic to one degree or another. This is true. I am not saying that the Puritans, for example, were a fully Christian society, sociologically speaking. I think they failed very badly to understand the proper doctrine of Christian civil government from the Scriptures. I believe this is one of the key reasons they made so many civil mistakes. However, I am not saying that this previous influence has to be perfect. All I am saying is that it is necessary for the previous culture to have been thoroughly of the religion in question from a cultural standpoint. And on that front, no historian would deny that the Puritans were passionate Protestants. I am also not saying that this previous Christian influence was ever perfect or did not ebb and flow. It was far from perfect (which is in perfect keeping with Christian theology), and it absolutely underwent tremendous ebb and flow. Nonetheless, the predominant and pervasive cultural influence upon the Colonies from Jamestown forward, was orthodox Protestantism. This is also not to in any way deny other secondary influences. Native American religion, Roman Catholicism, the Quakers, and many other religious groups were all present as minorities. But, they were minorities. And that was true of Deism right up to the signing of the Declaration of Independence.

I have proven the second piece of criteria in regard to the United States in my *A False Kind of Christianity*. I have done so in #7 of my endnotes. I strongly recommend reading that endnote and then reading the resources I provide in it. I especially recommend carefully reading the pages I provide for the key resources defending my position on this point. It should be noted that those resources were not written by Conservative Evangelicals. And one of the resources is trying to dispel the notion of a Christian nation at our founding! It is true that it is primarily doing so by rightfully debunking the theocratic argument, but it is still highly significant that I am not even using a resource that would fully agree with my position here. These are eminent and highly respected historians that have thoroughly documented the point in question here.

With that made clear, those sources prove that the population of the Colonies, at the time of our founding, was 50-60% practicing orthodox Protestant. All other minority worldviews did not come close to those numbers. And again, it must be remembered that the orthodox Protestants were not merely the majority. They were standing upon the long societal dominance of orthodox Protestantism that had existed in the Colonies for almost 2 centuries by that time. In my *Doctrine: Going Deeper*, that I referenced above, I compared this to the cultural influence of the LDS Church where I live here in Southern Utah. The numbers of devout LDS people here are about the same as the numbers above for orthodox Protestants at the time of the founding of our nation. And LDS culture utterly fills every aspect of life here. That gives you some idea of the cultural milieu of the Colonies at the time of the founding. We do not have to prove that every single Colonist walked the streets with a Bible humming hymns to himself in order to demonstrate the fact that the nation was sociologically Protestant at the founding.

Even further, the trajectory of the nation at that time was decidedly moving in the direction of becoming *more* orthodox Protestant, and not less the way things are so often portrayed today by skeptics. This is proven by the Great Awakening (the first), and the fact that the nation only became more and more Evangelical over the course of the 1800's until the Civil War. No historian denies either of those historical realities. Many try to downplay the impact of the Awakening, but no one denies it or the fact that the nation

did move in a decidedly Evangelical direction after the founding. I assert that those two realities put together more than prove that the nation was already in the process of becoming more orthodox Protestant and not more Deistic at the time of the founding.

I am not denying the growth and influence of Deism on much of the culture of the Colonies at the time of the founding. Southern Utah is becoming more and more secular in many respects. The same was happening in certain ways in the Colonies. However, Southern Utah is also seeing many devout suburban LDS families move here from all over Utah, especially Salt Lake, just as it is seeing many secular people move here as well. And the LDS are beating the secular folks in numbers and also inevitably build upon the already very strong and pervasive LDS culture that has existed here for decades. Thus, in that sense, it is becoming more LDS over time. Similar events were taking place in the Colonies at the time of the founding as well.

Before plunging forward, I do want to clear up one point that could be confusing in my writing. And this is how I use the term *sociological*. The first way in which I use the term that could be confusing is the fact that sometimes I talk about “Christianity” from a sociological perspective, and other times I talk about Christianity from a sociological perspective. When I put the term *Christianity* in quotes, I am talking about any person who claims to be any version of “Christianity.” Sociologists are not going to make judgment calls, for the most part, over what is more or less true “Christianity.” When I don’t put the term in quotes I am talking about true Biblical Christianity. When I use the term without quotes, I am using it synonymously with orthodox Christianity; historic Christianity; orthodox Protestantism; orthodox Evangelicalism; Conservative Evangelicalism; etc.

The second way in which I use the term that could be confusing is how I use it in contrast to the term *cultural*. I understand that many may use those terms interchangeably, but I generally do not and do not do so in this essay. I use the term *cultural* more in the sense of what a specific culture is like from an ethnic, societal, and



(especially in this essay) religious perspective. I use the term *sociological* more in the sense of when a nation meets all 3 of my criteria or not.

Thus, we have now seen that the United States, at its founding, met two pieces of my overall criteria. I believe that it met the third as well, and as stated above, I believe I have adequately defended that fact on pages 39-44 of my *Doctrine: Going Deeper* (part 2). Hence, I believe that the United States of America was truly a Christian nation at its founding. For obvious reasons, to those who are well-versed in Christian history, I believe that it was the first truly and fully Christian nation and that this was no small thing. I believe that this is why, despite so many of its horrific sins, God has so blessed this nation for so long.

Before wrapping up this essay, I want to address a common objection, and that is the fact that only about 10% of the Colonists were actual members of churches. This stat is used all of the time to undermine any and all cases for any notion of a Christian nation at the time of the founding. And even though I defend the Christian founding of our nation in a very different manner than do many who also believe in the Christian establishment of our country, this stat certainly at first blush seems to potently undercut my case and approach. Formal church membership and church attendance/practice are not the same thing. I am a very strong proponent of formal church membership, but many, many godly and orthodox Protestants have not agreed with me down through the centuries. I cannot cover all of the reasons why this was the case at the time of the founding in an essay of this nature, but let us look at one of the central ones.

After the Great Awakening (again the 1st), countless people joined the Baptists and the Methodists. Before the Awakening, both of these branches of the Christian tree were minuscule compared to the other more established branches. And this was not only true in the Colonies, but across the church worldwide. Things radically shifted after the Awakening. Many unchurched people joined these branches and many others switched from one of the more established branches. One of the reasons this was the case was because these branches taught a much simpler version of the faith that appealed to

many of the Colonists who were truly coming to know the Lord after the Awakening. Many people in the Colonies began to see the older branches as being too stuffy and academic. Therefore, these newer branches held tremendous appeal and took full advantage of the times.

Such people would already be averse to joining churches for all of the reasons just stated. Further, these newer branches were not recognized by the state churches of the Colonies. Therefore, formal membership in some cases could carry consequences. And even where that was not the case, the worry that this could develop down the line was very real for many of these Christians who were either joining or switching their denominational allegiances to these much younger branches.

Regardless of the reasons, the 10% stat in no way changes the stat seen above regarding the fact that over half of the population at that time were practicing orthodox Protestants. The lack of church membership on the part of most of them does not negate their religious beliefs and practices. Hence, it is shown that the 10% stat is egregiously misleading. Please stop using it without explanation and context.

Finally, many ask if we should still consider the United States a Christian nation today because of our founding. Many try to say that until that founding is formally repudiated or destroyed, we must do so. You can certainly take that position if you want. But, it should be clear from my criteria that I can no longer call our nation a Christian nation. That in no way means that I cannot do all in my power to try to restore her former greatness no matter how impossible and daunting that task often seems today.

For further resources on these topics, please see the extensive bibliography I provided at the end of my *A False Kind of Christianity*.

## **Appendix**

I want to address the fact that I know that some will take exception to my remarks on how often immigration can drastically affect a given culture. I understand that this is a very sensitive topic for many because many perceive any apprehensions about immigration from white American citizens like myself (especially male ones like myself) as being rooted in racism. I also fully understand that this is indeed the case for many such citizens. I have had some tell that to me to my face. Thus, I want to be clear that this is absolutely not the case for me whether anyone wishes to believe this or not.

All of my kids have Hispanic blood within them. And not just some distant drop. Their great grandfather on their mother's side, whom they all knew and who only recently passed away, was a fully Mexican-American man. He migrated here from Mexico with his father when he was very, very young. One of my sons was born very brown with very dark black hair. Many of my very best friends over the years, going all the way back to my youth, have been Hispanic. My best friend in high school, whom I was very, very close with, was/is Hispanic. His last name is Esparza, his father is Mexican-American, and his mother is from somewhere in Central America, I don't remember the exact country.

I have rejoiced to see so many Hispanics in our country joining true and godly Evangelical churches. Again, I am personally friends with many Hispanic brothers and sisters in Christ (some of whom were not born here). I am not against all Hispanic immigration (or any other ethnic or national immigration for that matter) to this country. I am merely against illegal immigration and I do believe that any country needs to be careful about its immigration policies for cultural reasons. I understand that many will retort to such a statement by saying, "You would never say that if the immigrants were from Europe!" Um, yeah..., I absolutely would! I do not think that it is good for any nation or culture to change too much, too fast. And immigration can lead to drastic changes that can highly disrupt a culture. That is my position and it is not racist.