



A Christian Nation

By

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It is easy to start a heated discussion about whether the United States is a Christian nation. Everyone has an opinion, which is good, and many of us are either gratified or threatened by the opinions of others, which is inevitable. I'm sure some people don't care one way or the other, but in any case none of them seem to live near me, here in semi-rural Michigan. Let's review the most common arguments, pro and contra.

“America is a Christian nation.”

This is principally the argument from tradition: our nation was founded by Christian men and women on Christian principles. Nothing that has happened since then should have the effect of changing that commitment, so if we were a Christian nation then, we are still one today. To be a bit more precise, since a majority of Americans claim to be Christians, and since this is a democracy where the majority rules, it is by definition, so to speak, a Christian nation. It is a nation principally of Christians. All of these statements are quite true, much to the chagrin of the minority who do not consider themselves Christians.

The focus of this argument is clearly placed on self-identification. A Christian nation is defined to be a nation where most of the people are Christians. That proposition however is at best arguable. Nazi Germany was by that standard a Christian nation. The overwhelming majority of the people were Christians. Indeed the overwhelming majority were either Catholics or Lutherans. Because of that, the Catholic and Lutheran leadership could and did appeal to their followers to recognize and respond to their Christian duty to oppose Nazism, drawing a sharp demarcation between a Nazi nation and a Christian nation. In response the Nazis actually invented their own pagan religion and made it the state religion, celebrating fascism and the mythic German Volk.

The leaders of the Christians appealed to their people on the grounds that Germany was historically a Christian nation, and should still be one, but they couldn't make the further point that Nazi Germany was actually a Christian nation. It was not. The national religion was neither Christian nor the pagan nonsense cooked up by Joseph Goebbels. The national religion was the religion of the State, and the argument was made that because Church and State are separate, the Church was forbidden to oppose any idea

that the State endorsed. For the Church to oppose the State program was to interfere in the province of the State. The result of accepting that proposition, even grudgingly, was that Germany was during that time not a Christian nation, and the crimes committed in the name of that State, rather than the Christian traditions of the people, came to define it.

“American is not a Christian nation.”

Although most Americans are Christians, by no means are all of them Christians. Yet all are Americans without any difference or hint of inequality. If all are Americans, then the identity of the nation has to be defined in a way that encompasses everyone. That line of reasoning is also unquestionably true. The nation belongs to the citizens, and the citizens are those men and women who live and work there.

Nothing, no attitude, is more characteristic of Christians than that they treat all people the same. No one has to earn our respect or our love; these are due them not by our choice but by the gift of human life that comes from our Creator. He respects them and he loves them, and so must we. Now, respect takes many forms. We respect the physician who applies his talents faithfully to put into practice the Hippocratic Oath, and conversely we lose respect for him if, while claiming the title of doctor, he does not hold himself to that standard. Thus the doctor must earn our respect as a physician. Every person must earn the respect of the community by living up to their expectations of him. This is a matter of “respect as” this or that, in this or that way. But no one has to earn our respect as a brother or sister who has the same father in Heaven. Indeed in cases where someone has failed to earn our respect because of his unworthy actions, we are ashamed for him, ashamed because he has failed to live up to his calling as a brother or sister.

For someone whose religious beliefs demand some kind of sacrifice, as for instance that demand regular or frequent attendance at their religious rituals, we admire and respect the one who is faithful to that commitment. Thus, in that way, we respect the Christian whose faith brings him to church every Sunday, or every day that his Church requires. We respect Christians when they go to church. But we shouldn't become confused about it. We don't respect them because they go to church; we respect them because they are true to their commitment to submit to the demands of their Church and to attend their church. So persons who go to church are not in principle more to be

respected and admired than are persons who never set foot in a church. It is even truer that going to church cannot be a test or a proof of citizenship. Everyone is free to go and free not to go, as he judges best, and it is up to them to think through their choice. If they sleep all Sunday morning because of how they partied on Saturday, they do not earn our respect thereby, whether or not they claim to be Christians.

When we accept that our neighbors are all citizens equally, we accept also that whether or not this is a Christian nation is not a question of whether the citizens are Christians.

What then is a Christian nation?

Many people come from this point to the conclusion that since America embraces many non-Christians, it cannot be a Christian nation. I disagree. Senator – soon-to-be president – Obama was asked if America is a Christian nation, and he pointed to the non-Christians amongst us in answering in the negative. He is a politician, and so he naturally sees the American people in terms of groups and interests and self-identification into various little “tribes.” That is a reality in his world. There are A people and B people, and the A’s don’t want to be B’s, while the B’s would rather die than be thought of as A’s. In that world – or in the world when we view it through that lens – it seems offensive to try to co-opt the other guys. The Jews don’t want to be Christians and the pagans don’t want to be Jews. This is all very true, and Barack’s answer has a certain legitimacy.

Yet the politician’s point of view does not provide the true answer to the question at hand. This is a Christian nation if the Lord god thinks it is. He is the Christ, and he is the only standard of what is Christian. Abraham Lincoln made this point in another context, when he was asked during the Civil War if he prayed that God be on our side. His answer is that he did not. He prayed instead that we be on God’s side.

A Christian nation is one where the laws and norms of the society implement Christian principles of justice and mercy, of fairness, of tolerance, of a recognition of the worth of every person regardless of his accomplishments or his wealth and position. Every nation which submits its laws and its way of life to those principles is a Christian nation, regardless of whether any of the citizens are Christians or not. Any nation that, by contrast, insists that everyone be like me, or like you, or like any human norm is not a

Christian nation, and it does not save the case if the exemplar is or was the most notable of Christians.

Does this mean that it doesn't matter if there are any Christians walking the streets, or influencing the laws and customs of the nation from its birth? No, of course that matters. In principle a Christian is anyone whom the Christ accepts as Christian, but here in the real world we naturally expect that most of the actual Christians are those who have been educated in Christianity and who therefore profess it. No one was born a Christian; by original sin we were all born pagans. Whoever becomes a Christian does so because he has learned what that means. It is not necessary by some sort of law that he learn it from books and Sunday school. To many that wisdom has been given by the lessons of their life, facilitated by the love and wisdom of parents and friends. Yet our schooling in Christianity is not in vain. It is possible for someone to become a master of nuclear physics simply by meditating on the motion of waves and particles while resting on the beach, but just in case that method doesn't work too well for most people, we aren't going to close our universities. Learning and growing in knowledge and wisdom happen for a reason and not just by accident. So in practice, nations like America that have Christian heritage are far more likely to be Christian nations.

The Call to recognize our Christian heritage.

There is another way in which the Christian identity of most Americans matters. Christians have committed themselves to listen to and to follow leaders, thinkers who have devoted their lives to practicing Christianity and to providing, both by word and example, leadership to the community. They call us to be Christians. First of all, the call is personal. We are called to be Christian whether anyone else feels the same call or not. We are ultimately responsible only for ourselves and for the conduct of our own lives. But precisely because we hear this call, or to precisely the degree that we hear it, we want to implement our Christianity in the society at large, and to implement Christian truths in the laws and customs and culture that we share as Americans.

Just as individually we have not become Christians by accident, but as the result of the example and teaching of our ancestors in the faith, so is it true that this nation, and

every nation, will become a Christian nation only because of the example we provide and because of our courage and persistence.

An aside on the Jewish people.

Historically the premier example of non-Christian Americans are Jewish Americans. Their case is somewhat unique because they are our predecessors in the faith. Their scriptures contain a complete statement of the Law and of the requirements of our faith. Their great leaders and prophets have always been recognized as amongst the greatest of the saints. Accordingly because of their case it is necessary to adopt a somewhat broader terminology, and to call this not a Christian nation, but a Judeo-Christian nation. In this way we acknowledge what we have been taught about the seamless unity of the promise of the Messiah that flows from the banishment of Adam and Eve until the present time. It is not really germane whether the Jewish Americans would prefer that term, or would resent it bitterly. It is because of what we have been taught that it is obligatory for us.

Getting Specific.

So, is America a Christian, or a Judeo-Christian, nation? Nations, like persons, are never perfect, but are inclined to sin. The Christian sinner is still a Christian, though if he embraces grave sin he will die on account of it. The Christian nation, similarly, is not perfect. It is always possible to point out failures to live out Christian principles and Christians duties. It is not easy, therefore, to answer a simple “Yes” or “No” when asked if America is a Christian nation.

Toleration for, and even public encouragement of, elective abortion is a crime against human life. It is a violation of the Christianity that America traditionally professes. It is not indicative of a Christian nation, but of a pagan nation. Accumulating armaments far in excess of any possible need for self defense – spending more on arms than all the other nations of the world combined – is also a violation of Christianity. Initiating attacks on small countries that have not in any way threatened America or her people or her allies is another violation. If America is nonetheless a Judeo-Christian

nation, her people – all her people, and not just those who claim to be Christians and Jews – will work to correct these faults.

Systematic violation of the natural rights of citizens are also offenses against the demands of Christian conscience. The rights identified in the Declaration of Independence, including the right to liberty and the right to self-determination of peoples, cannot be ignored. Similarly, the rights of freedom of contract between private citizens, and the right of private property must be defended. The contemporary movement under the banner of “Equal Pay for Equal Work,” while appropriating a high-sounding title, is a clear case of the State overstepping its functions in an attempt to change the society it governs, and in particular to change the nature of relations between men and women. No authority has given the State insight into the value of the work that the citizens perform, and it is therefore an invasion of their liberty for the State to presume to enforce its judgment on those matters.

Whether the United States is a Christian nation or not is often understood as a matter of comforting tradition. Like all people everywhere, we want to feel that we own the land where we live. We want to think that America is not only the last line on our mailing address, the place where we happen to reside, but is ours and is like us. Jews and Christians, in particular, want to feel that their values and traditions are honored in their homeland, and not just grudgingly tolerated there: that their way of life is proper to the place where they live and raise their families. In this regard, Christians are not any different from other people.

Being a Christian however is not just a matter of customs and traditions, and not just a matter of personal beliefs. It appeals to eternal truths about justice and virtue, and can only be said to thrive where they are honored. Whoever desires to be a Christian has his work cut out for him, because it is not an easy path, and similarly anyone who desires to live in a Christian nation has his work laid out before him because that is if anything an even harder task.

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