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The United States as a Christian Nation

Historical and Legal Perspectives

Abstract

This white paper explores the argument that the United States was founded as a Christian nation, drawing from historical documents, the actions of the Founding Fathers, religious influences, and legal precedents. It examines the Declaration of Independence, the Constitutional Convention, the role of churches and the Black Robe Regiment, national observances, and various court rulings that affirm the Christian ethos embedded in the nation's identity.

Introduction

The debate over whether the United States is a Christian nation has been ongoing since the founding of the Republic. This discussion often pivots around the intentions and beliefs of the Founding Fathers, the language of foundational documents, and legal interpretations over time. This white paper argues that the United States was conceived with a Christian ethos, supported by historical actions, religious leadership, and legal precedents.

The Declaration of Independence

The Declaration of Independence, drafted by Thomas Jefferson in 1776, is often cited as the cornerstone of American political philosophy. Jefferson's original draft contained a single reference to a higher power, mentioning "Nature's God" as the source of human rights. However, the document evolved through committee revisions and the deliberations of the Continental Congress.

Jefferson wrote, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." The phrase "endowed by their Creator" was a significant inclusion, affirming that rights were granted by a divine source rather than man-made institutions.

The Committee of Five, which included John Adams, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, added more religious references. For instance,

the final document mentions “the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God,” and concludes with “a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence.” These inclusions reflect a broader acknowledgment of a divine power guiding the nation’s quest for independence.

The Constitutional Convention and Franklin's Appeal

Fast forward to the Constitutional Convention of 1787, where the framing of the U.S. Constitution took place. Benjamin Franklin, one of the most influential delegates, addressed the assembly on June 28, 1787, with a profound appeal for divine guidance. Franklin stated:

“I have lived, Sir, a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth—that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid? We have been assured, Sir, in the Sacred Writings, that 'except the Lord build the House they labor in vain that build it.'”

Following Franklin's speech, the delegates agreed to attend a religious service together, highlighting the importance they placed on seeking divine guidance. George Washington led the delegation to church, underscoring the connection between their political endeavors and religious faith.

John Adams on Religion and Morality

John Adams, another key Founding Father, emphasized the necessity of religion and morality for the sustainability of the American government. In a letter to the Massachusetts Militia on October 11, 1798, Adams wrote:

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge, or gallantry, would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious People. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

Adams' assertion highlights the integral role of religious and moral values in maintaining the framework and efficacy of the Constitution.

The Role of Churches and the Black Robe Regiment

Churches and clergy played a critical role in the American Revolution, serving not only as spiritual leaders but also as champions of independence. The "Black Robe Regiment" refers to the ministers who, donning their black clerical robes, fervently supported the cause of liberty from their pulpits. These religious leaders encouraged their congregations to resist British tyranny and uphold the principles of freedom and justice.

Pastors such as Jonathan Mayhew, who preached the famous sermon "A Discourse Concerning Unlimited Submission and Non-Resistance to the Higher Powers" in 1750, laid the intellectual groundwork for the Revolution by arguing that resistance to tyranny was a Christian duty. This sentiment was echoed by many other clergymen, whose sermons inspired and mobilized the colonial population.

Churches often served as meeting places for revolutionary planning and organization, and many clergy members took up arms or served as chaplains in the Continental Army. Their involvement underscored the deep connection between religious conviction and the fight for American independence.

National Observances and Practices

The influence of Christianity on the early Republic is further evidenced by national observances and practices. Both George Washington and John Adams issued proclamations calling for national days of prayer and thanksgiving. Washington's Thanksgiving Proclamation of 1789 called upon Americans to express gratitude to God for the successful establishment of the Constitution and the nation's independence.

Moreover, Congress and the Supreme Court both begin their sessions with prayer. This tradition underscores the enduring role of religion in the functioning of the nation's highest legislative and judicial bodies. The Supreme Court building itself features depictions of the Ten Commandments, prominently displayed on the doors of the courtroom, signifying the moral and legal foundations of the American legal system.

Legal Precedents and Judicial Acknowledgments

The notion of the United States as a Christian nation is not solely rooted in historical actions but has also been affirmed in various legal contexts. Several federal court cases have referenced the Christian heritage of the nation.

One notable case is the *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* (1892). In this case, the U.S. Supreme Court declared:

“These and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation. We find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth.”

The court’s opinion reflects an acknowledgment of the pervasive influence of Christianity on American legal and cultural foundations. Another significant case is *Zorach v. Clauson* (1952), where Justice William O. Douglas, writing for the majority, stated:

“We are a religious people whose institutions presuppose a Supreme Being.”

In *Runkel v. Winemiller* (1799), Chief Justice Samuel Chase of the Maryland Supreme Court noted: "By our form of government, the Christian religion is the established religion; and all sects and denominations of Christians are placed upon the same equal footing, and are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty."

Patrick Henry on Christian Foundations

Patrick Henry, an influential figure in the American Revolution, declared:

"It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded, not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religions, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

Henry's statement reinforces the view that the United States was founded with a distinctly Christian ethos, rooted in the moral and spiritual teachings of Christianity.

Conclusion

While the United States Constitution itself does not explicitly establish the nation as a Christian state, the historical context, actions of the Founding Fathers, national observances, and judicial acknowledgments affirm the significant role of Christian principles in shaping the nation's identity. From the Declaration of Independence's divine references to Benjamin Franklin's call for prayer, John Adams' reflections on morality and religion, the active role of churches and the Black Robe Regiment, national days of prayer and thanksgiving, the incorporation of prayer in governmental sessions, and the display of the Ten Commandments in the Supreme Court, the United States can be understood as a nation deeply influenced by Christian values and beliefs. This comprehensive view underscores the importance of recognizing the role of Christianity in America's past and its ongoing influence on the nation's ethos.

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