

The U.S.A. Has Never Been A Christian Nation!

By David Lee Burris

This article originally appeared as a single page Guest Column I wrote for a regional newspaper many years ago.

Much misinformation about religion in America is the responsibility in part of a modern convergence of terms which originally held separate meanings – Christian nation, people, society, or state. Deliberate lies have been widely broadcast in the Christian community. For example, few Christians know that the 1797 Treaty of Tripoli negotiated by President Washington states: “The government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion.”

The facts are as follows. The Mayflower colony at Plymouth Rock, Massachusetts, was a very homogeneous grouping of settlers that sought an utopia through a purist Anglican theocracy. These Pilgrim Puritans came here primarily for the freedom to run their own community. That included the freedom of the collective to coerce in matters of conscience. In other words, cultural pluralism was considered religiously incorrect. Catholics, Anabaptists, and even Quakers were religiously “cleansed” or physically removed. Socio-religious conformance was legally enforceable! Yet, there was another colony of Christians located at Jamestown, Virginia, that were a more heterogeneous people with more diversity of thought.

At the Constitutional Convention the Madison and Jefferson Virginians joined forces with the Hamiltons of New York – a state which had recently incorporated religious toleration into its law. Together they carefully crafted what was almost immediately labeled a *godless constitution* by an evangelical minority in every single state ratification convention.

However, it was not considered *godless* due to any blind mistake of the framers in their confusing choice of separation language by way of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment. Records kept of the state ratifying conventions made this abundantly clear. Surprisingly, a majority of ratifiers were of the same mind as the framers for provision of an institutional dichotomy/disconnect and constitutional construction of a firewall or zone of religious neutrality between church and state. One hundred fifty years had elapsed since the Baptist preacher Roger Williams who founded Rhode Island had made the strong appeal for the provision of a hedge or wall to separate church from state. He had admonished those of Salem witch hunt fame that force should not be applied in matters of faith.

A religious test for office-holders was another matter altogether. Many, if not most, ratifiers felt the framers should not have omitted what was popularly considered as a public service insurance for integrity. These original charges of *Constitutional godlessness* would be called in a court of law “an admission against the interest” for those claiming heritage of a Christian America. What development had occurred over a period of a half century from continental confederation to a national government? We went from Renaissance to the Enlightenment!

What did the period philosophical father of our revolution have to say on this subject? John Locke believed in concurrent economic and religious laissez-faire from state intervention. ‘Anyone may employ as many exhortations and arguments as he pleases, towards the promoting of another man’s salvation. But all force and compulsion are to be forborne. Nothing is to be done imperiously.’

There have been repeated efforts to create Christian America. About a hundred years after our revolution we find a country in civil war trying to redeem itself before the Almighty. Many felt the need for a comprehensive redemption. Many thought we were being punished by God for *compromising the sin of slavery to this **godless constitution***.

In February 1864, delegates from the first NRA – the National Reform Association - visited President Lincoln to read to him their proposed Christian Amendment for a Preamble addition:

“We the people of the United States, humbly acknowledging Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil government, The Lord Jesus Christ as Governor among the Nations, and His revealed will as of supreme authority, in order to constitute a Christian government do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.”

The petition to Congress for the amendment also said: “God was baptizing the nation in blood as punishment for a Christian nation with an *Atheistic Constitution*.”

Should there be a legally normative Christian America as opposed to a national description of Christian faith?

Not as proposed! Personally, my reaction to any such theocratic accommodation proposals has been to celebrate the New World separation of the spiritual and temporal swords as the BJC Joint Committee in their defense of man's soul freedom: "Separation results in a free, pluralistic society and a healthy robust church. Both the church and the state are a lot better off when neither tries to do the job of the other."

New World Theocrats refuse to recognize the religious diversity of our citizen revolution. The Baptist, Presbyterian, Congregationalist, Catholic, Jewish, Deist, and Non-Theist one-third colonial support for the revolution did not fight for the continuation of a Pilgrim Church-State System. However, this was one of the hopes motivating the primarily Anglican and Wesleyan one-third Tory Loyalist support for the British monarch. The Constitutional framers saw strength in our cultural diversity and in their finished document with its Bill of Rights that provided protection for minority rights against majority rule.

Therefore, in our republic there is a Constitutional separation between civil society and political society to match that of church and state. Those who do not respect this feature of our Constitution have no recourse but to second guess the framer phraseology, deliberate intent, and manifold wisdom with regard to individual rights by pursuit of an accommodative rewrite. These theocrats are both anti-historical and anti-apologetic. In their reverence for the symbolic slogan of our nation's religious heritage that we place on our coinage – "In God We Trust" – they chose to ignore the substantive seal of our secular society – "E Pluribus Unum" or "Out Of Many One" – which is a testimony to our foundation in pluralism.

Letter to Thomas Jefferson

Danbury Baptist Association's letter to Thomas Jefferson, October 7, 1801.

Sir, — Among the many millions in America and Europe who rejoice in your Election to office; we embrace the first opportunity which we have enjoyed in our collective capacity, since your Inauguration, to express our great satisfaction, in your appointment to the chief Majestracy in the United States; And though our mode of expression may be less courtly and pompous than what many others clothe their addresses with, we beg you, Sir to believe, that none are more sincere.

Our Sentiments are uniformly on the side of Religious Liberty — That Religion is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals — That no man ought to suffer in name, person, or effects on account of his religious Opinions - That the legitimate Power of civil government extends no further than to punish the man who works *ill to his neighbor*: But Sir our constitution of government is not specific. Our ancient charter together with the Laws made coincident therewith, were adopted on the Basis of our government, at the time of our revolution; and such had been our Laws & usages, and such still are; that Religion is considered as the first object of Legislation; and therefore what religious privileges we enjoy (as a minor part of the State) we enjoy as favors granted, and not as inalienable rights: and these favors we receive at the expense of such degrading acknowledgements, as are inconsistent with the rights of freemen. It is not to be wondered at therefore; if those, who seek after power & gain under the pretense of *government & Religion* should reproach their fellow men — should reproach their chief Magistrate, as an enemy of religion Law & good order because he will not, dare not assume the prerogatives of Jehovah and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ.

Sir, we are sensible that the President of the United States, is not the national legislator, and also sensible that the national government cannot destroy the Laws of each State; but our hopes are strong that the sentiments of our beloved President, which have had such genial affect already, like the radiant beams of the Sun, will shine and prevail through all these States and all the world till Hierarchy and Tyranny be destroyed from the Earth. Sir, when we reflect on your past services, and see a glow of philanthropy and good will shining forth in a course of more than thirty years we have reason to believe that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State out of that good will which he bears to the Millions which you preside over. May God strengthen you for the arduous task which providence & the voice of the people have cald you to sustain and support you in your Administration against all the predetermined opposition of those who wish to rise to wealth & importance on the poverty and subjection of the people.

And may the Lord preserve you safe from every evil and bring you at last to his Heavenly Kingdom through Jesus Christ our Glorious Mediator.

Signed in behalf of the Association.

Nehh Dodge
Ephram Robbins The Committee
Stephen S. Nelson

To Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson a committee of the Danbury Baptist Association in the state of Connecticut.



Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem & approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist Association, give me the highest satisfaction. My duties dictate a faithful & zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more & more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions ~~and~~ ^{only} and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof: thus building a wall of eternal separation between church and state. Con-

gress thus inhibited from acts respecting religion, and the Executive authorized only to execute their acts, I have refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion ^{prescribed indeed legally where an} practised indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of ^{a national} its church, but subject here, as religious exercises only to the voluntary regulations and discipline of each respective sect. Confr-

adhering to the expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the people, I am myself therefore to the duties of my station, which are merely temporal, be assured that your religious rights shall never be infringed by any act of mine, and that I shall see with ^{friendly} ~~dispositions~~ ^{genuine satisfaction} the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

This paragraph was omitted in the original that it might give occasion to some improper supposition that the President was to be understood as interfering with the rights of the Danbury Baptist Association.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious ~~association~~ ^{the Danbury Baptist Association}, assurances of my high respect & esteem.

Thomas Jefferson
Jan. 1. 1802.

[The Library of Congress](#) > [Information Bulletin](#) > [June 1998](#)

Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists

The Draft and Recently Discovered Text

To messers Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins, & Stephen S. Nelson, a committee of the Danbury Baptist association in the state of Connecticut.

Gentlemen

The affectionate sentiments of esteem & approbation which you are so good as to express towards me, on behalf of the Danbury Baptist association, give me the highest satisfaction. my duties dictate a faithful & zealous pursuit of the interests of my constituents, and, in proportion as they are persuaded of my fidelity to those duties, the discharge of them becomes more & more pleasing.

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man & his god, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;" thus building a wall of eternal separation between Church & State. Congress thus inhibited from acts respecting religion, and the Executive authorised only to execute their acts, I have refrained from prescribing even those occasional performances of devotion, practiced indeed by the Executive of another nation as the legal head of its church, but subject here, as religious exercises only to the voluntary regulations and discipline of each respective sect,

[Jefferson first wrote: "*confining myself therefore to the duties of my station, which are merely temporal, be assured that your religious rights shall never be infringed by any act of mine and that.*" These lines he crossed out and then wrote: "*concurring with*"; having crossed out these two words, he wrote: "*Adhering to this great act of national legislation in behalf of the rights of conscience*"; next he crossed out these words and wrote: "*Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience I shall see with friendly dispositions the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced that he has no natural rights in opposition to his social duties.*"]

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection & blessing of the common father and creator of man, and tender you for yourselves & the Danbury Baptist [your religious] association assurances of my high respect & esteem.

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Jan. 1. 1802.

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