

Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?

by William B. Lindley

When the Shah of Iran was overthrown by the Ayatollah Khomeini in 1979, he remarked that his biggest mistake was when he “stopped bribing the Mullahs” (Moslem clergymen). Once the Iranian clergy began to preach against the Shah, the revolution was inevitable. Similarly, the first American Revolution was inspired and often led by fiery American preachers who spoke out against English oppression as not mere political excess, but violations of God’s own Law.

Point: Any religion, fully unbridled to engage in political activity can be a powerful, often irresistible, and even dangerous force.

Although some Americans become highly agitated over secular issues like affirmative action, equal rights, and high taxes, all of those issues are subject to compromise and can be moderated sufficiently to quiet both advocates and critics. In other words, if government moderately increases (or reduces) affirmative action, equal rights, and taxes, the affected parties can be “bought off” with political compromises and silenced or at least neu-

tered. There’s a political cycle for each of these issues as they alternatively “get hot”, achieve some political success, and then disappear from the political arena for several years or decades.

Not so, with the “Religious Right”. Over the past thirty-five years, the Religious Right has grown steadily more numerous and more politically powerful. Driven first by the Supreme Court’s 1962 decision to prohibit public school prayer and 1973 decision to legalize abortion, some religious activists have become demanding, defiant and occasionally, even violent (witness the abortion clinic bombings).

Christians of the 1960’s were almost shocked by the idea that they should personally engage in any challenge to government, let alone “religious activism”. This was the “silent majority” who would not stoop to engage in religious or political activism unless they saw evidence that these kinds of activism were not only acceptable, but also celebrated at various times in America’s history.

To “motivate” their church members to engage in political

action against abortion, religious leaders offered both opinion and historical evidence that America was – and should be – a “politically” Christian nation. Over time, American Christians “politicized” into the Religious Right and exercised so much power that they are deemed responsible for electing numerous political candidates and several Presidents.

Although its growth has been slow, the Religious Right shows no sign of serious decline. So long as school prayer is prohibited, abortion legalized, and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act judged unconstitutional, the Religious Right can be expected to persist, increase, and become even more politically active.

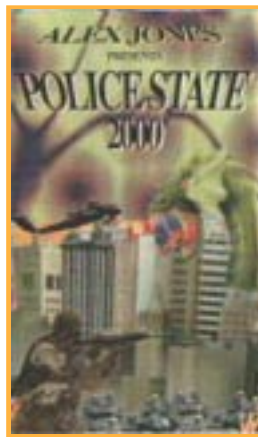
It is unlikely that any other political movements or issues are as potentially explosive as the Religious Right, school prayer and abortion. While virtually all other political issues go through the “get hot”-compromise-and-disappear cycle, the Religious Right continues to grow steadily larger and more powerful. Why? Because, at bottom, religion is not politics, and certainly not a democracy.

True faith is absolute, uncompromising short of victory, and ultimately capable of enormous self-sacrifice to achieve objectives viewed as righteous. For many people, abortion is not a "sin" but simply a political issue to be decided on the basis of reason and democratic votes. For the Religious Right, no appeal based on political "reason" or democratic majorities is relevant. As long as one "true believer" remains, he will spare no effort to please his God and prevent that sin.

Depending on your point of view, such dedication can be labeled "saintly" or "fanatical". But so long as the Religious Right is supported by a belief system that celebrates the wedding of religion and political activism, their political power will be considerable. As a result, those political interests that oppose the Religious Right have begun researching American history for evidence that most claims of "Christian nation" and "Christian activism" have been exaggerated or falsified. Just as religious leaders of the last 35 years have sought historical evidence to encourage their church members' political activism, other political activists are now seeking historical evidence and arguments to discourage the church members' political activism. As a result, a political debate has developed over whether America ever was or should be a "Christian nation".

The following article offers evidence and opinion to refute the "Christian nation" argument, and even implies we are better off as a non-Christian, secular society.

Those who believe that the United States is a Christian nation, or who



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want to change it to one, often say that we would be better off if the Ten Commandments were enacted into law. The Founding Fathers clearly disagreed. Not only were most of the Ten Commandments never enacted, but the Constitution, with the Bill of Rights, *would prohibit* the enforcement of most of them.

Let's look more closely. The Ten Commandments given here are from the King James Version of the Bible, Exodus 20, and are grouped the Protestant way:

1. Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

Believing in more than one god, or ranking other gods above Yahweh, is a thought or state of mind: it is *not* an act.¹ Violation of the First Commandment is a "thought crime", never illegal in the U.S. Having other gods before Yahweh is also the free exercise of religion protected by the First Amendment.

2. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth: Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me; and

shewing mercy unto thousands of them that love me, and keep my commandments.

Violation of this commandment is free exercise of religion. Enacting it would violate the First Amendment. (In any case it appears that God, himself, is supposed to do the punishing.)

3. Thou shalt not take the name of the LORD thy God in vain; for the LORD wilt not hold him guiltless that taketh his name in vain.

Enactment of this one would be in conflict with the First Amendment provision for freedom of speech.

4. Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy, Six days shalt thou labour, and do all thy work: But the seventh day is the sabbath of the LORD thy God: in it thou shalt not do any work, thou, nor thy son, nor thy daughter, thy manservant, nor thy maidservant, nor thy cattle, nor thy stranger that is within thy gates: For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it.

While there are no true seventh-day laws in the U.S., there are *Sunday* "blue laws" here and there which mandate that some businesses not operate on Sunday. (Choosing Sunday, the *first* day of the week, as a day of rest is a Chris-

tian corruption of the original Hebrew rule which specifies *Saturday* as the sabbath.) However, these "Sunday" laws passed constitutional muster only because they serve a *secular* (government) purpose. Any evidence that the legislative intent was religious would make the law vulnerable to attack as violating the establishment clause of the First Amendment. The religious intent of the Fourth Commandment is clear from its wording and would therefore fail a constitutional test.

5. Honour thy father and thy mother: that thy days may be long upon the land which the LORD thy God giveth thee.

Violation of this one, with no specification of what acts dishonor one's parents, or what acts honoring one's parents are required, is another thought crime and thus not prosecutable.

6. Thou shalt not kill.

This one is Constitutional and is on the books.

7. Thou shalt not commit adultery.

As long as the government defines the institution of marriage, adultery laws can serve a secular (government) purpose. Thus, this commandment could be enacted. Some adultery laws are still on the books here and there, but criminalizing adultery is less common than it used to be.

8. Thou shalt not steal.

This one is Constitutional and is on the books.

9. Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

This one is Constitutional and is on the books. Perjury laws prohibit this particular sort of lie, along with other lies told in court. If the commandment were expanded to include derogatory remarks as well as testimony, it is on the books under the laws covering libel, but its wording appears limited to prohibiting a particular subclass of false testimony in a legal proceeding.

10. Thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour's wife, nor his manservant nor his maidservant, nor his ox, nor his ass, nor any thing that is thy neighbour's.

Coveting is a thought, not an act, and therefore not subject to constitutional limitation or prosecution.

So there you have it. Five of the Ten Commandments fail constitutional muster outright, three are on the books, and two are on the books only here and there (and one of these would fail if it were enacted with its exact wording showing religious intent). Let's leave them in the Bible and in the churches, where they belong.

According to Mr. Lindley's constitutional analysis of the Ten Commandments, the five Commandments which cannot be enacted into secular law primarily involve "thought crimes". I.e., "Thou shalt have no other gods before me" and "Thou shalt not covet . . ." A refusal to enact these Commandments into secular law is sensibly pragmatic. After all, who could swear out a complaint as to what your true thoughts were, except YOU? Except for God, who else can truly know? And although government is currently trying to criminalize a variation of "thought crimes" ("hate crimes"), how could they truly prosecute a "thought crime" unless the alleged "thinker" agreed to testify against himself or God, Himself, agreed to testify as the prosecutor's witness? For the most part, no government can justly enforce any "thought crime" and only the dumbest or most oppressive would try. The fact that our government has (so far) avoided any serious attempt to prosecute "thought crimes" defined in the Ten Commandments does not necessarily mean that our government foundation is not Christian – only that, early on, our government had sense enough to avoid enforcing crimes that only God and the perpetrator can truly know.

Nevertheless, Mr. Lindley continues with a more compelling commentary exposing the Christian's duty to accept and obey any existing government, no matter what.

Fundamentalists and some other Christians claim that our nation was indeed so founded. Freethinkers and others have responded with some historical facts, such as

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that most of the Founding Fathers were Deists,² and that a 1796 treaty with Tripoli noted that the United States was "in no sense founded upon the Christian religion." However, helpful as this counter-evidence is, I think it best to consult the founding documents: for Christianity, the New Testament; for the United States of America, the Declaration of Independence.

While the New Testament does not prescribe the form of government or even require an intimate union of government and religion as does the Koran, it does give a clear indication of how Christians should behave when living under a monarchy, as the American colonists were in 1776:

"For the Lord's sake accept the authority of every human institution, whether of the emperor as supreme, or of governors, as sent by him to punish those who do wrong and to praise those who do right. For it is God's will that by doing right you should silence the ignorance of the foolish. As servants of God, live as free people, yet do not use your freedom as a pretext for evil. Honor everyone. Love the family of believers. Fear God. Honor the emperor." *I Peter 2:13-17*

The Apostle Paul wrote similarly in *Romans 13:1-6*:

"Let every person be subject to the governing authorities for there is no authority except from God, and those authorities that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists authority resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Do you wish to have no fear of the authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive its approval; for it is God's servant for your good. But if you do what

is wrong, you should be afraid, for the authority does not bear the sword in vain! It is the servant of God to execute wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be subject, not only because of wrath but also because of conscience. For the same reason you also pay taxes, for the authorities are God's servants, busy with this very thing."

How does this compare with the Declaration of Independence?

". . . when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce (the people) under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security . . . The history of the present King of Great Britain is a history of repeated injuries and usurpations, all having in direct object the establishment of an absolute Tyranny over these States." (There follows a long list of George III's abuses.) "A prince, whose character is thus marked by every act which may define a Tyrant, is unfit to be the ruler of a free People . . . We, therefore . . . do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States . . ."

Judge for yourself.

Mr. Lindley's point is that while the Bible's orders all people to give unquestioned obedience of all earthly authorities (including King George III), the Declaration of Independence decrees that in some circumstances, "it is [the people's] right, it is their duty, to throw off [tyrannical] Government, and to

provide new [government]." Therefore, the Founders who wrote, signed and implemented the Declaration of Independence were acting in direct contradiction to the Biblical edict of obedience and neither those Founders nor the foundation of this nation can be construed as truly Christian.

¹ *Barron's Law Dictionary*, Third Edition (1991), defines a crime as: "any act which the *sovereign* has deemed contrary to the public good; . . ." (emph. add.).

Also: "It has been stated that, although intent may in some circumstances make criminal an otherwise innocent act [*Badders v. U.S.*, 240 US 391, 60 L. Ed. 706, 36 S. Ct. 369], the law does not concern itself with mere guilty intention, unconnected with any overt act or outward manifestation." *People v. Belcastro*, 356 Ill. 144, 190 NE 301; *American Jurisprudence 2d*, Criminal Law Sec. 4. (I'd thought that the principle that thoughts are not crimes could be cited from less obscure sources, but the law is as you find it.)

² **deism** n. 1. belief in the existence of a God on the evidence of reason and nature only, with rejection of supernatural revelation . . . 2. Belief in a God who created the world but has since remained indifferent to his creation. *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language* (1989)

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