IN GOD WE TRUST

Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?

JOHN FEA

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—Douglas Bradburn, President and CEO,
George Washington's Mount Vernon

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Introduction

Every summer around the Fourth of July, Robert Jeffress, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, preaches a sermon to his congregation and radio audience titled "America Is a Christian Nation." In one iteration of this sermon, Jeffress claims that "our government is ceasing to acknowledge any kind of acknowledgment of God . . . in the public square." He rattles off a list of examples, from towns prohibiting prayers at high school football games to the banning of Nativity scenes in public spaces. "We are told repeatedly," Jeffress preaches, "that our country's founders were secularists, deists, sprinkled with a few Christians who came to this nation seeking above all other things to build an unscalable wall between the government and Christianity." With the problem diagnosed, Jeffress hammers home his central claim: "I realize it is [politically] incorrect to say this, but it is nevertheless true. America was not founded as a Muslim nation. America was not founded as a Hindu nation. America was not founded as a nation that is neutral toward Christianity. America was founded as a Christian nation, and today we are going to discover that truth from history." This claim always draws rousing applause from those seated in Jeffress's megachurch.[1]

One problematic historical reference after another fills the remainder of Jeffress's sermon. He makes the

exaggerated claim that fifty-two of the original fifty-five signers of the Constitution were "evangelical believers." He peddles the false notion that the disestablishment clause in the First Amendment was meant to apply solely to Protestant denominations, meaning that the founders did not want a "Presbyterian nation" or a "Baptist nation," but assumed that the United States was a "Christian" nation. Based on this argument, he concludes that "we do not restrict other people's right to worship however they choose to worship, but that doesn't mean we treat all religions equally. This is a Christian nation! Every other religion is an imposter, an infidel."[2]

Jeffress argues that the test oaths (religious requirements for holding office) and Christian establishments in the earliest state constitutions still apply today. He misinterprets *Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States* (1892) as an official statement by the Supreme Court that the United States was a Christian nation, when in fact that case concerned immigration. Near the end of his 2025 sermon, Jeffress suggests that spikes in violence, illegitimate births, divorce, and low SAT scores in America are the direct product of the Supreme Court decision to remove prayer and Bible reading from public schools.[3] The service typically concludes with indoor fireworks and the singing of patriotic songs.

Much of Jeffress's sermon comes straight from the political playbook of David Barton, his friend and fellow conservative political activist. (Jeffress mentions Barton's visits to First Baptist–Dallas in the sermon.) Nearly everything Jeffress says can be found on Barton's WallBuilders website. For the past thirty years, Barton, a GOP operative from Aledo, Texas, has provided pastors and politicians with a reading of American history designed to fuel a brand

of politics rooted in nostalgia for an idyllic Christian past. Nearly every serious student of American history, including those who teach at some of the country's most conservative Christian colleges, has debunked Barton's understanding of American history, yet he continues to maintain a large following among conservative evangelicals. Barton is not a historian; he is a politician who uses the past to achieve the political goal of restoring the United States to its supposedly Christian roots. He has strong ties to the evangelicals who surround President Donald Trump and has even visited the White House to meet Trump, whom he has called "God's guy."[4]

Today, conservative evangelicals like Jeffress and Barton are labeled "Christian nationalists." But what does this phrase mean? Recently, someone told me that I used the phrase in the first edition of this book, published in 2011 as *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*. The phrase was not popular in 2011, so I had to look to see how I employed it. It turns out that I used "Christian nationalist" a few times to describe those who, like Jeffress and Barton, made historical claims about the supposed Christian nature of the American founding. As I wrote about them fifteen years ago, these "Christian nationalists" taught that the roots of their Christian nation were embedded in the soil of John Smith's Jamestown in 1607, John Bradford's Plymouth Colony in 1620, and John Winthrop's Massachusetts Bay Colony—the "city upon a hill"—in 1630. They argued that the founding documents of the United States were the product of Western civilization's Christian heritage rather than the Enlightenment. And they made tortured claims that the founders were mostly, if not all, orthodox Christians. In the books, articles, and sermons of these political activists, the founding fathers were

often portrayed as men who might be comfortable worshipping on Sundays in the authors' megachurches.

Since 2011, and especially after the first election of Trump in 2016, "Christian nationalism"—a phrase used to describe those who believe the United States was founded as a Christian nation and must be reclaimed as such—has become part of mainstream political discourse. A Google search shows a sustained increase in the use of this phrase since 2013. Political analysts, Substack writers, journalists, activist academics (especially in the fields of political science, religious studies, and sociology, although historians have also joined the fray), and other culture warriors have built a cottage industry of books devoted to explaining and critiquing Christian nationalism. Titles include *American Idolatry: How Christian Nationalism Betrays the Gospel and Threatens the Church; American Christian Nationalism: Neither American nor Christian*; *Another Gospel: Christian Nationalism—and the Crisis of Evangelical Identity; How to End Christian Nationalism; American Heresy: The Roots and Reach of White Christian Nationalism*; *Preparing for War: The Extremist History of White Christian Nationalism—and What Comes Next*; and *The Violent Take It by Force: The Christian Movement That Is Threatening Democracy*. Some writers and scholars have built entire careers on exposing Christian nationalism.[5]

Christian nationalism, as described by these authors, is real. It informs much of the Make America Great Again agenda and has made inroads into evangelical communities. What was once considered a fringe movement associated with Reconstructionism (the belief, among other things, that biblical law should govern the country), Dominionism (the belief that Christians must "take dominion" over every area of national life), and certain segments of the religious

right, has become a central part of our political vocabulary. Self-professed Christian nationalists such as Idaho pastor Douglas Wilson, for example, are now taken seriously by the mainstream media. Wilson has appeared on *New York Times* podcasts and CNN features. Those in the National Conservative (NatCon) movement, a right-wing effort to promote Western culture in the United States, make no bones about their interest in advancing a Christian nation, often using Victor Orbán's Hungary as a model. Speakers at the 2025 NatCon convention included Southern Baptist Theological Seminary president Albert Mohler, Trump adviser and podcaster Steve Bannon, Heritage Foundation president Kevin Roberts, and, as we will see below, Wilson. None of these men shies away from the label "Christian nationalism."[6]

Yet sometimes critics apply the phrase so liberally that it can be difficult for the average observer to understand the difference between a "Christian nationalist" and a person who merely applies their religious convictions to their politics in some form. In 2024, *Politico* journalist Heidi Przybyla apologized after she appeared on MSBNC and said, in a derogatory manner, that a Christian nationalist was anyone who "believes that our rights, as Americans, as human beings, don't come from any earthly authority." Her critics, located across the political spectrum, were quick to point out that Thomas Jefferson also claimed that our "unalienable rights" came from the "Creator." So did Martin Luther King Jr. Similarly, Clara Jeffrey, the editor of *Mother Jones* magazine, was so outraged when an Alaskan Airlines flight attendant wished the passengers a "blessed" night as they landed in San Francisco that she tweeted, "Creeping Christian nationalism alert: @AlaskaAir flight attendant just wished us a 'blessed' night as we landed in

SFO to groans."[7] In some circles, commentators are finding Christian nationalists under every rock. It reminds me of H. L. Mencken's 1925 line about conservative evangelical Christians: "Heave an egg out a Pullman car window, and you will hit a fundamentalist." Today, Mencken's line might be adapted this way: "Drop an egg from a plane flying over the red states, and you will hit a Christian nationalist." While Christian nationalism is real, and its adherents spread misinformation about the founding of the United States in service of their agenda. Critiques of Christian nationalism can also overreach to include all Christian culture or anything faith-based.

Those criticizing Christian nationalism today—academics and popular writers—assume that the answer to the question "Was America founded as a Christian nation?" is a settled one. And for this group, the settled answer is, "No, it wasn't." With this assumption, they often make a priori claims that Christian nationalism, as they define it, rests on a faulty historical foundation. As with the Christian nationalists, these activists seek a past they can use in the present and tend to ignore the rest. What is often missing in all this punditry about Christian nationalism are nuanced treatments of Christianity and the American founding that do not cherry-pick from the past to make political points in the present—a practice that the late historian of the American Revolution Bernard Bailyn called, "indoctrination by historical example."[8] This is a problem on the political left and right. These ideological leaps on either side make a critical assessment of Christianity in the present cultural moment as well as in the historical record difficult or impossible.

Historical narratives that capture the full scope and complexity of religion's role in the founding are thus needed

more than ever. As we engage in a national conversation about the meaning of America 250 years after its founding, the debate over the question "Was America founded as a Christian nation?" has intensified.

At the heart of this debate is the relationship between history and contemporary American life. It is thus important to think about the nature of history and identify the difference between good history and bad history. What is the purpose of studying history? What do historians do? Does everyone who conducts a serious study of the past qualify as a historian? "In my opinion," writes Pulitzer Prize–winning historian Gordon Wood, "not everyone who writes about the past is a historian. Sociologists, anthropologists, political scientists, and economists frequently work in the past without really thinking historically." What does Wood mean? Is there a difference between "the past" and "history," two terms that we often assume as synonymous?[9]

While many of us look to the past for inspiration, continuity with the present, a sense of civic identity, the roots of modern-day injustices, or role models to emulate, historians do not approach the past with the primary goal of finding something relevant. Historians know that there exists a constant tension between the familiarity of the past and its strangeness. They always operate with this tension in mind. Historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have boiled down the task of historical interpretation into what they have called the "5 C's of historical thinking."[10]

Historians must see *change over time*. While some things stay the same over generations, many things change. The historian's task is to chronicle those changes. As historian John Tosh puts it, "There may be a gulf between 'us' and 'them,' but that gulf is actually composed of processes

of growth, decay and change which it is the business of the historian to uncover." We must always remember that we no longer live in the era of the American founding. Times have changed.[11]

Historians must interpret the past in *context*. When they examine documents, they account for the time and the place in which they were written. Words ripped from their cultural and chronological contexts provide useful material for the compilers of quotation books, but they are useless to the historian. The words of the founding fathers, for example, must always be interpreted from the perspective of the eighteenth-century world in which they were composed. A wide chasm separates the past from the present. Context helps us realize that people in the past do not always think and behave the same way that we do.

Historians are always interested in *causality*. In the 1990s, radio talk-show host Rush Limbaugh announced that "history is real simple. You know what history is? It's what happened. Now if you want to get into why what happened, that's probably valid too, but why what happened shouldn't have much of anything to do with what happened."[12] Limbaugh could not have been more wrong about what historians do. Not only are they interested in facts but also why a particular event happened the way it did. What caused it?

Historians are concerned with *contingency*, the principle that "every historical outcome depends upon a number of prior conditions."[13] Contingency celebrates humans' ability to shape their own destiny. Every historical moment is contingent upon another historical moment, which in turn is contingent upon yet another moment. Humans have free will to act in time, and historians are tasked with explaining how they act. Christians might believe that God is sovereign

and providentially orders the comings and goings of men and women, but historians are not in the business of trying to discern God's hand in history. They keep their focus on the way that human beings order their world over time.

Finally, historians realize that the past is *complex*. It resists our efforts to simplify it or cut it up into easily digestible pieces. Most students of history are exposed to the past through textbooks that offer rather straightforward narratives of how a particular era unfolded. While often necessary for overviews and syntheses of the past, textbooks often fail to reveal that the past can be messy, complicated, and not easily summarized in a few neatly constructed paragraphs.

The debate over whether America is a Christian nation is instructive here. On one hand, the opponents of Christian America contend that because the Constitution does not mention God and because the First Amendment has long been interpreted as separating church and state (see chap. 5), the framers did not believe that religion was important to the success of the republic. On the other hand, defenders of Christian America conclude that if the founders were people of Christian faith, then they must have set out to establish a uniquely Christian nation. Logicians say that these assertions are non sequiturs. Historians would argue that those who draw such conclusions lack an appreciation for the complexity of the past.

The task of historians is to use these five C's to reconstruct the past and publish their findings. Historians make the dead live. They bring the past to an audience in the present. If we think about the vocation of the historian in this way, then we must distinguish between "history" and "the past." The past is the past—a record of events that occurred in bygone eras. But history is a discipline: the art of reconstructing the past.

What follows is a concise version of the first two editions of *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. It centers on questions I have been asked repeatedly over the last fifteen years regarding religion and the American founding.[14] What did the founding fathers believe about the relationship between Christian faith and the American republic that they were trying to create? What did the founders believe about the "separation of church and state"? Was the American Revolutionary War a "just war"? Were the founding fathers Christians, deists, or something else? For those seeking a deeper analysis of the subjects contained in each chapter, please consult the longer version of this book.

I have also covered themes in this shorter third edition that I did not address in the two previous editions. For example, this version has more sustained coverage of deism and the founding. Over the last decade or so, my reading of the best scholarship on English deism has forced me to think in more nuanced ways about how this rational religious belief should or shouldn't be applied to some of the founding fathers. I have also added a chapter on the "Black Robe Regiment" of eighteenth-century patriot clergy. Today, more and more evangelical pastors feel empowered to use their pulpits to preach on political topics, and they often appeal to a group of revolutionary Boston ministers who did the same. Did such a Black Robe Regiment actually exist? And if it did, what role did it play in the British-American colonies? Finally, I have added a new chapter on the relationship between the First Great Awakening and the American Revolution. Many evangelical leaders today believe that an evangelical revival is the only real way to restore the United States to its supposed Christian roots. Without realizing it, they invoke a historically problematic

connection between the First Great Awakening and the movement for American independence.

In the end, the debates over whether the United States was founded as a Christian nation rest on an understanding of the proper relationship between the past and the present. Participation in a democratic society, especially in the United States, requires citizens to draw deeply on the wells of the past in our search for American identity. But it also requires us to engage in this work responsibly, realizing that we no longer live in the world of the founders and that the nation has changed considerably over time. At times, we might find the founders' views on church and state useful, but at other times, their views—products of the eighteenth century—may no longer be helpful in an increasingly diverse and pluralistic modern society. This conversation over the pastness of the past and the usefulness of the past must continue to remain at the core of democratic deliberation.

Chapter 1

When Did the Debate over Christianity and the American Founding Begin?

Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli, a 1797 agreement between the United States and Tripoli, a Muslim nation located on the Barbary Coast of northern Africa, was necessary because Barbary pirates, under the sanction of Tripoli, were capturing American ships and selling crew members into slavery. The Muslim states of the Barbary Coast (Tripoli, Algiers, Morocco, and Tunis) had long used piracy to control Mediterranean trade routes. Any nation that wanted to trade freely in the region was forced to negotiate a peace treaty with the Barbary States, which usually included some kind of monetary tribute. During the colonial era, American vessels were protected from the Barbary pirates by British warships, but after the Revolution, the United States would need to work out its own treaty with these countries. The Treaty of Tripoli, which included the assertion that the United States was not founded on the Christian religion, was signed by President John Adams and ratified unanimously by the Senate. The text of the treaty was published in several newspapers, and there was no public opposition to it.

The negotiators of this treaty did not want the religious differences between the United States and Tripoli to hinder attempts at reaching a trade agreement. Claiming that the United States was not "founded on the Christian religion" probably made negotiations proceed more smoothly.

But today this brief religious reference in a rather obscure treaty in the history of American diplomacy has played a prominent role in the debate over whether the United States was founded as a Christian nation. It has become one of the deadliest arrows in the quiver of those who oppose the idea that the country was founded on Christian principles.[1]

If the Treaty of Tripoli is correct and if the United States was not "founded on the Christian religion," then someone forgot to tell the American people. Most Americans who followed events in the Mediterranean viewed the struggle between the United States and the Barbary nations—a struggle that would last well into the nineteenth century—as a kind of holy war. Americans published poems and books describing Muslims as "children of Ishmael" who posed a threat to Christian civilization. Captivity narratives describing Christians who were forced to convert to Islam only heightened these popular beliefs.[2] In fact, the sentiment expressed in the Treaty of Tripoli—that the United States was not "founded on the Christian religion"—can hardly be reconciled with the way that politicians, historians, clergy, educators, and other writers perceived the United States in roughly the first two hundred years of its existence. The idea that the United States was a Christian nation was central to American identity in the two centuries following the founding era. And only then, with the emergence of the religious right during the Jimmy Carter presidency, did the idea that the United States was "founded as a Christian nation" become a contested one, a defining issue in what came to be called the "culture wars" in the late twentieth century.[3]

The US Constitution made clear that there would be no official or established religion in America, and many of the

states, in the decades following the Revolution, gradually removed religious requirements for officeholders. Nevertheless, Christianity, and particularly Protestant evangelicalism, defined the culture in the years between the ratification of the Constitution (1789) and the outbreak of the Civil War (1861). During this period, the United States experienced a massive spiritual revival that historians call the Second Great Awakening. This revival emphasized the free will of humans to turn to God for salvation and was thus quite compatible with the individualistic and democratic political ethos of the early nineteenth century. This revival owed a lot to the First Amendment (1791). By forbidding Congress from making laws "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," religion became voluntary. If churches could no longer rely on state support, they would need to craft their message in such a way that would attract people to their pews. For churchgoers, it was a new era of religious consumerism that Christianized the country.[4]

In the 1830s and 1840s, the Whig Party advanced a Christian political vision for the nation. The Christian wing of the party consisted of politicians interested in Christianizing America through social reform, many of whom were influenced by the revival fervor of the Second Great Awakening. The Whigs dreamed of a homogeneous Protestant culture where slavery did not exist, alcohol use was under control, and Sunday was kept as a day of Sabbath rest.[5] They were nation builders who fused their pursuit of infrastructure development and manufacturing with a commitment to Christianize the United States. An early-nineteenth-century revolution in print—newspapers, magazines, books, and school textbooks—helped the Whigs and others advance the idea that the United States was a Christian nation.[6]

By the outbreak of the American Civil War, two visions of what it meant to be a Christian nation had emerged. Northerners believed that the national union was sacred because God had created and blessed it. And following Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, the region defined its Christian identity against the Confederacy's commitment to the immoral institution of slavery. Many Southerners argued that the Confederacy was a Christian nation because the Bible's teachings were compatible with a Southern way of life and the Black chattel slavery that undergirded it. Northerners were radicals who, with their dreams of abolitionism and racial equality, sought to undermine the natural order of God's creation.[7]

The Union victory in the Civil War meant that a Northern vision of Christian America would prevail. Many Americans believed that God was moving the nation forward by ushering in what Abraham Lincoln described in the Gettysburg Address as a "new birth of freedom." As the North sought to remake the defeated South in its own image, it embraced progress and modernity in ways that threatened the very idea of a Christian civilization, yet the vision of a Christian nation persisted into the twentieth century, albeit in different ways. As churches navigated the half-century following the Civil War, "fundamentalists" fought hard for a Christian civilization in America rooted in the spirit of early-nineteenth-century revivalism and the essentials of Protestant orthodoxy. Liberal Protestants, or "modernists," rejected some of the core tenets of historic Christian orthodoxy but still sought to live in a nation defined by the Christian virtues of justice and love that might have the potential of ushering in the second coming of Jesus Christ.[8]

As the twentieth century progressed, there was little universal agreement on how to define the United States as a Christian nation, yet Christianity remained the country's dominant religious expression and the most popular way of framing national identity. The overwhelming majority of citizens could agree that American culture needed to be protected from the encroaching forces of secularism. The threat of atheistic communism abroad reinforced such a conviction. By the 1940s and 1950s, former fundamentalists, now choosing to describe themselves with the less combative word "evangelical," continued to prosper within their own networks of churches and parachurch organizations. Liberal Protestants, now referred to as "mainline Protestants," struggled to maintain their standing as the moral guardians of American religious life in the wake of the fundamentalist-modernist divisions of the 1920s.[9]

In the 1950s, both Protestant groups experienced significant growth as veterans returned from World War II, married, and started taking their families to church. As the new immigrants—Southern and Eastern Europeans (as opposed to the nineteenth-century migrants from Ireland and Germany)—came of age in America, Catholics reinforced this trend and sought to stake their own claims on American culture. As historian Jay Dolan writes, in the United States, "Catholics emerged from the experience of World War I confident and optimistic about the future. . . . Priests and lay people became involved in highly publicized convert crusades to win America to Christ." Such tactics bore fruit in the interwar period and post–World War II years; from 1945 to 1960, the Catholic population in the United States grew by 90 percent. Similar growth was seen in the number of bishops, priests, religious women, seminarians, Catholic hospitals, parochial schools, and colleges. Catholicism set

out to build a "Christian culture" in the United States and, in doing so, seemed to pay little attention to the nation's Protestant ethos. The Catholic attempt at Christianizing America required doing battle against the forces of secularism. Catholics led assaults against the secular and anti-Christian nature of popular culture, defended the family and condemned divorce, criticized the materialism of American capitalism, and excoriated communism's failure to respect the dignity of humanity. Dolan sums this resurgence up well: "Catholic intellectuals believed Catholicism was more than just a religion, it was an 'important cultural reality.'" It should pervade every inch of American culture, including "literature, politics, philosophy, indeed even athletics."[10]

Protestants took notice. In 1944, Harold Fey, a Protestant minister, editor, and writer, published an eight-part series in *The Christian Century* titled "Can Catholicism Win America?" Fey described in detail Rome's efforts to turn the United States into a Catholic nation. He described a change in American Catholicism that he believed should cause all good Protestants to take notice. Catholics were no longer content as religious outsiders in a predominantly Protestant culture. They were now acting "as a national church" with an agenda to reshape American character along Catholic lines. Using Robert S. and Helen Merrell Lynd's famed studies of Muncie, Indiana—"Middletown"—as a model, Fey showed the subtle ways in which Roman Catholicism might use "certain instruments of power" to take over an average American town through the establishment of Catholic schools, publications, medical facilities, and evangelism. He described a Catholic institutional machine on a mission to turn the United States into a Catholic nation. Was such a Catholic takeover possible? Fey concluded that it certainly was.[11]

As White Protestants and Catholics waged war against each other and against the forces of secularism and communism in the 1950s into the 1960s, African Americans were engaged in their own battle for a Christian nation. Theirs was a battle against injustice and, for many, an attempt to promote a national community defined by Christian ideas of equality and respect for human dignity. Most historians now agree that Christianity informed this powerful social movement in American life. As historian David Chappell has argued, the story of the civil rights movement is less about the triumph of progressive and liberal ideals and more about a revival of an Old Testament prophetic tradition that led African Americans to hold their nation accountable for the decidedly unchristian behavior it showed to many of its citizens.[12]

There was no more powerful leader for this kind of Christian America than Martin Luther King Jr., and no greater statement of this vision for America than his famous "Letter from Birmingham Jail." King arrived in Birmingham in April 1963 and led demonstrations calling for an end to racist hiring practices and segregated public facilities. When King refused to end his protests, he was arrested and placed in solitary confinement. Here King wrote a letter to the Birmingham clergy who were opposed to the civil rights protests in the city. The "Letter from Birmingham Jail," which was published in pamphlet form and circulated widely, offered a vision of Christian nationalism that challenged the localism and parochialism of the Birmingham clergy and called into question their own version of Christian America.

King understood racial justice in Christian terms. The rights granted to all citizens of the United States were "God given." Segregation laws were unjust not because

they violated the principles of the Declaration of Independence ("all men are created equal") but because they did not conform to the laws of God. In the end, King believed, Birmingham's destiny was connected to the destiny of the entire nation—a nation with a "sacred heritage" influenced by the "eternal will of God." By fighting against segregation, King reminded the Birmingham clergy that he was standing up for "what is best in the American dream and for the most sacred values in our Judeo-Christian heritage, thereby bringing our nation back to those great wells of democracy which were dug deep by the founding fathers in their formulation of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence." The civil rights movement, as King understood it, was in essence an attempt to construct a new kind of Christian nation—a beloved community of love, harmony, and equality.[13]

Despite the Christian witness of the civil rights movement, the 1960s were not good years for American Christians concerned about the Christian identity of the United States. Baby boomers, with their emphasis on "sex, drugs, and rock and roll," challenged the kind of morality American Christians deemed necessary for a Christian republic to thrive. For some, especially American evangelicals, the feminist movement empowered women in a way that led them to reject what some saw as a woman's God-given place in society. In 1962, the Supreme Court, in *Engel v. Vitale*, made prayer in school unconstitutional. A year later, in *Abington Township School District v. Schempp*, the high court declared Bible reading in public schools to be unconstitutional. Non-Western immigrants, with their non-Christian beliefs in tow (including Islam, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Hinduism) were now permitted to enter the country under the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965, eventually

changing the country's demographic makeup. Though a "silent majority" of conservatives would manage to vote Richard Nixon into office in 1968, the culture had apparently given way to forces intent upon undermining the idea of a "Christian America" as many in the White middle class understood it. In the early 1970s, two significant Supreme Court cases galvanized evangelicals concerned about the fate of Christian America. In *Green v. Connally* (1971), the Supreme Court ruled that a private school or college that discriminated based on race would no longer be considered for tax-exempt status. At the heart of the controversy was Bob Jones University, a school that banned interracial dating and denied admission to unmarried African Americans. In 1975, the IRS sought to revoke the university's tax-exempt status. *Green v. Connally* also had implications for the hundreds of private Christian K–12 schools cropping up all over the United States. Many of these schools were in the South and had discriminatory admission policies.

When Jimmy Carter, a self-proclaimed "born-again Christian," threw his support behind *Green v. Connally*, he alienated many conservative evangelicals, including Virginia Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell, Christian psychologist James Dobson, and Christian right activist Paul Weyrich. These conservatives believed that the president and the Supreme Court were undermining the liberty of Christians to form their own schools in their own way, without interference from the federal government. By 1976, the year of the American bicentennial celebration and *Newsweek*'s cover story announcing "The Year of the Evangelicals," the so-called Christian right had organized into a full-blown political movement.[14]

The second major Supreme Court case that mobilized conservative evangelicals was *Roe v. Wade* (1973),

which legalized certain types of abortion in the United States. Before *Roe v. Wade*, abortion had never been an important issue for Protestants. Most evangelicals believed abortion was morally suspect but thought of opposition to abortion as a distinctly Catholic cause. This all changed after 1973. More evangelicals began to oppose abortion and *Roe v. Wade* publicly. Many of them were awakened to a belief that abortion was equivalent to legalized murder.

The leaders of this new Christian right found theological and philosophical support for their views in the teachings of Christian intellectual Francis Schaeffer. From his chalet in the Swiss Alps called L'Abri, Schaeffer had developed a reputation as a thoughtful evangelical at a time when the movement lacked serious intellectual depth. By the mid-1970s, Schaeffer was a household name among American evangelicals. Following *Roe v. Wade,* he also became convinced that the fight against abortion was worth his time and energy. In a popular film series titled *How Should We Then Live*, Schaeffer challenged *Roe v. Wade* on legal and philosophical grounds, defending the dignity of all human life. Jerry Falwell and other members of the Christian right quickly embraced his ideas.[15]

As the leaders of the Christian right continued their battles against the IRS and abortion, they also started crafting narratives about the proper way to interpret the American founding. The bicentennial offered an ideal moment for the Christian right to engage in a revisionist effort to put God at the center of the American Revolution. In his book *Listen America* (1980), Falwell argued that the American founders "were not all Christians, but they were guided by biblical principles. They developed a nation predicated on Holy Writ. The religious foundations of America find their roots in the Bible." Falwell worked his way through

early American history—from the Pilgrims to the American Revolution—noting whenever an early settler or founder invoked the name of God in public discourse, referred to the providential destiny of the United States, or defended the belief that religion was essential to the survival of the republic.[16] According to the leaders of the Christian right, history proved that the United States was a Christian nation. Somewhere along the way, they believed, Americans had failed to learn these important civics lessons.

Schaeffer played an important role in shaping the Christian right's belief in a Christian America. As his prolific writings took on a more activist tone, he became interested in the work of Christian Reconstructionist Rousas John Rushdoony. Reconstructionists such as Rushdoony believed that Old Testament civil law should be binding on the people of the United States. Though Schaeffer did not agree with all of Rushdoony's ideas, he was influenced by the Reconstructionist view that the United States was founded upon biblical principles. In 1981, Schaeffer argued in *A Christian Manifesto* that American democracy was founded upon biblical ideals passed along in a direct line from the Protestant Reformation, to the works of seventeenth-century writer Samuel Rutherford, to eighteenth-century Christian minister and founding father John Witherspoon, to the writing of the Declaration of Independence. He also used this book to criticize a liberal understanding of the First Amendment, arguing that the amendment was being used to "silence the church" whereas it was originally written to protect the church from government interference. As historian Barry Hankins has shown, Schaeffer engaged in an extended private debate on these issues with evangelical historians Mark Noll and George Marsden, who, in 1983, would join Nathan Hatch

in writing *The Search for Christian America*, a work that was in many ways a direct response to Schaeffer and the members of the Christian right who relied upon his writings about the American founding.[17]

By the 1980s, the debate over America's Christian identity was underway. The question "Was America founded as a Christian nation?" was now a contested one, and as the twentieth century came to an end, it became a staple of culture war discourse. The Christian right, through its powerful use of television, talk radio, and direct mail, hijacked the conversation about what it meant for the United States to be a Christian nation. Earlier manifestations of America as a Christian nation—such as the social gospel's commitment to a nation defined by moral progress, the civil rights movement's dedication to desegregation and racial equality as a way of making the nation more Christian, and Catholic efforts to win America—had stopped framing their public theology in terms of Christian nationalism. Some of these groups pushed back against the Christian right's view of a Christian America, asserting that the Christian character of the nation could be found less in abortion, marriage, and homosexuality and more in terms of how the United States and its people engaged in foreign policy, treated the poor and oppressed, and defended freedom for all Americans. And as the Christian right sought to renew, restore, and reclaim America's supposedly Christian roots and save the nation from its downward moral spiral, they often turned to American history to accomplish the task. Their critics also turned to the past to shore up their own arguments about American identity.

But did each group use the past responsibly? Let's turn to the eighteenth century and find out.

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