

Three American Myths

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Musings on Christians as Presidents and America as a Christian Nation

by Charles Strohmer

Long before the 2008 presidential election, the only question I had was how badly the Democrat would beat the Republican, whoever the Democrat candidate turned out to be. The slow burn toward President Bush had become pretty hot across the country during 2006-2007, and it seem likely that a large enough percentage of the electorate by 2008 had determined that the Republicans simply did not deserve four more years in the White House. A change would occur, was my view. The moral and social problems that you would like to see eliminated from our nation are not going to be solved by having presidents ? or vice-presidents ? who are Christian.

After the election of Barack Obama as the 44th President on the United States, I began to think about how giddy those who had elected the Democrat would become, thinking their guy would fix everything, and about how depressed conservative Christians would become, thinking that guy would ruin everything. Such meditations again reminded me to three powerful myths of American religious and political life. Let's start with The Myth of the Christian Presidency, the wine of choice mainly of conservative Christians.

Friends, put down that drink. The moral and social problems that you would like to see eliminated from our nation are not going to be solved by having presidents ? or vice-presidents ? who are Christian.

To learn from history is to gain wisdom. Since Jimmy Carter, America has had more than three straight decades of presidents ? Republican and Democrat ? claiming quite publicly and deliberately to be active, practicing Christians (even their secular critics have not doubted their faith). This string of overtly Christian presidents faced countless domestic problems, yet the moral ambiguity of the country remained constant, although we may say that it took different guises. And whatever the international community may have hoped to see of the kingdom of God from America those decades paled before their experiences of American hegemony.

Liberal Christians seems to understand the principle more than conservative Christians. Call it what you will. I like what British philosopher and theologian John Peck calls it: The ICT Factor: The Inherent Cussedness of Things. On a more scholarly note, the influential pastor and political writer Reinhold Niebuhr called it The Irony of History: the admixture of virtue and vice, of hope and tragedy, of wisdom and folly inherent in all that we humans do and support, including, and perhaps especially, our political decisions. I will not say anything more about this principle, here, of which Niebuhr's The Irony of American History is must reading.

I do hope, however, that conservative Christian historians, teachers, ministers, and other public Christians will learn from history and instruct their faithful wisely about one of the biggest lessons of the last thirty-two years: that the change of heart that occurs when an individual becomes a Christian does not with the swearing of the presidential oath of office transmute into a worldview out of which political decisions will arise that will put paid to the moral ambiguity of our nation. U.S. presidents who are Christians do not function in office as religious leaders. They function as government officials. Conservative Christians need to stop expecting so much from their politicians who are Christian. The swearing-in does not anoint a new president with an evangelistic calling to see others' hearts changed with the gospel. Politics and government have their own purposes and functions under God, and these do not include making religious conversions. Hey, we don't even expect our pastors and priests to eliminate moral ambiguity from our congregations. U.S. presidents who are Christians do not function in office as religious leaders

Another American myth, that of The Christian Nation, is the vineyard that helps sustain The Myth of the Christian Presidency. In fact, there's not a big franchise of "Christian Nation" pubs across the country. Friends, stop frequenting those places. They will keep you so satiated and so distracted from the Constitution that you won't even remember to look there for the truth about our nation's legal founding.

Anyone who wants to know what specific religion, if any, fundamentally organizes a nation merely needs to read that nation's

constitution ? its only legally binding founding document. Want to know about Iran or Pakistan? It is clearly spelled out in each of their constitutions that each one is an ?Islamic republic.? Voila! There's the religion. Nowhere in the constitution the United States of America, however, is it written that our nation will be Christian. There is not even a mention of ?God? or "Jesus," or even ?Providence? (unless you count the ?Providence Plantations? of Rhode Island, but that is completely beside the point). A chief reason for our constitution as we have it was because those who wrote it were historically too close to the failed Protestant political experiment of the colonies and the early states to have forgotten what that history taught everyone.

One of the easiest to understand recent books on this crucial lesson from American history can be found in Steve Waldman's well-researched *Founding Faith*. As Waldman points out, it was one thing for Christians of the seventeenth century to have fled religious persecution in England for the colonies in order to establish various Christian religious-political entities along the east coast, but that is a far cry to extrapolate from there to assume that the United States of America was itself founded as a Christian nation. This is not silly hair-splitting. The fact that it has been ignored, or denied, or stared at in disbelief by so many otherwise informed leaders and their followers has resulted in endless confusion, heartache, and wasted brain cells. people claiming to be Christian acted with violence against others who claimed to be Christian, as each religious group experimented with their own kind of "Christian" political rule

The original Protestant settlers were not interested in religious freedom for everyone but only in the freedom to practice their particular approach to Christianity, ?often at the expense of other denominations,? Waldman said during an interview on NPR's *Fresh Air*. This fact of early American history is central for understanding why the writers of the U.S. constitution did not make the new nation legally Christian. That is, the earliest colonies were what today we would call sectarian (in his book, Waldman describes the religious-political ethos of this early period with refreshing objectivity, given such a controversial topic).

It was a time when denominations persecuted denominations up and down the east coast, sometimes in horribly murderous ways, including hangings ? people claiming to be Christian acted with violence against others who claimed to be Christian, as each religious group experimented with their own kind of "Christian" political rule. Quakers were persecuted in Massachusetts by Puritans who considered the Quakers heretics. Anglicans persecuted Baptists in Virginia, sometimes just for being Baptist. And everywhere Protestants were hostile to Jews and fought the spread of Catholicism. These were religious-political experiments, Waldman notes, ?in having a majority or dominant faith running the state, and in each case the experiment failed.?

The writers of the U.S. constitution had learned wisdom from this long and violently sectarian religious-political history, and they applied that wisdom by establishing a constitutionally different model. In hopes of forming a more perfect union, establishing justice, ensuring domestic tranquility, promoting the general welfare, and so on the writers refused to establish the new state as constitutionally Christian (or any religion). It was to ensure that Congress would not try to make an end run around this legally binding principle some day that the First Amendment was passed. Our nation's founders, as Waldman aptly writes, ?forged a new approach to religious liberty, a revolutionary approach that promoted faith ... by leaving it alone.?

It is not that in 1787 the writers flipped the bird to the Bible or to Christian ideas, values, and morals. Biblical morality and Christian mores greatly informed their worldviews and those of the burgeoning population and influenced, albeit imperfectly, family matters, business dealings, political decisions, and much more. Our ?secular? nation still lives off this religious capital even today. But that does not a Christian nation make. (Besides *Founding Faith*, the book *The Search for Christian America*, by Noll, Marsden, and Hatch, is a read for those wishing to better understand the theological and philosophical admixture of colonial American that lead up to the writing of the constitution. It seems to me it was at least a mix of New England Calvinism, Virginia deism, and Jeffersonian enlightenment rationalism. Shaken, not stirred.)

If the United States were founded as a Christian nation, it would be understandable why many Christian leaders today claim that the nation has backslid from that original vision ? its Christian founding ? and why they argue quite publicly for a return to the original vision as a the solution to our moral and social ills. Because the United States is not constitutionally a Christian nation, those who preach this are making a huge category mistake. Until this error is credibly redressed, and the effort will take much more than merely changing the semantics, confusion, disillusionment, and missing the mark will continue to abound. It would be better to call for the country to become Christian rather than call for a return to what it never was.

This brings us to The Myth of the Liberal Fix, which has its own extensive franchise of pub restaurants across the country, and, like conservatism, bottles and carefully packages its spirits, which are then shipped to the institution called Government & Politics. Although patrons are elated with the election of Barack Obama, that's irrelevant to them. What matters is that a liberal occupies the White House. That will fix most everything. In fact, so many glowing faces have been seen drifting out of these pubs since Obama's election that an observer might be led to think that the country will be verging on heaven by 2012.

Friends, put down that drink and call for a ride home. And then stay out of that place. Liberalism is not going to change G&P Inc. into the kind of moral force that would be necessary for fixing the economic and social ills of the country. If conservative Christians cannot get back to a Christian nation, you cannot get ahead to heaven on earth. Sin indelibly mars the systems, structures, and institutions of the country in such a way that hugely complicated national ills have become the norm

The stark reality is that there is an ambiguity that runs right the way through all human life and activity in this world. Created in the image of God, we have become sinners all. And it's not just a personal individual thing. Sin indelibly mars the systems, structures, and institutions of the country in such a way that hugely complicated national ills have become the norm. There is no liberal (or conservative) root fix for this, our collective condition. Truly wise politicians would be helping the country acknowledge this and face it with sober judgment as they discuss their policy proposals. Instead we hear the wine of their intoxication talking idealistic dreams, left, right, and center.

Like all presidents, Barack Obama is going to be both good and bad for America and the world. It is the height of simplism to think he will be either one or the other. Such is life in this world that politics and government do not escape the curse of repackaging the same old story with a new set of words. The country will merely experience more current expressions of age-old problems and political patch-up jobs to them.

The economic crisis is but an extreme case in point. No future Washington policies will prevent some Wall Street wizards and banking industry CEOs from the kind of sin implicated in the deep and long term economic crisis we now face. Has anyone yet heard G&P Inc. calling for repentance from financial leaders? Or from we peons, for living beyond our means? Even Christian ministers don't seem to be preaching this, for they too may be implicated. We all seem insistent on living beyond our means through credit.

For years I have been calling this the phenomenon of inverted pyramid. And what a fascinating sight it is to behold! At least while it's going up. But keep building on it. Sooner or later a height will be reached where the weight and size of the thing is too great for the point of it. Then it will topple. The balancing act will be finis. Forget about it, says conservatism and liberalism. Let's hoist another one. And a hearty toast to throwing more money at the money problem. This is the hot message of the economic crisis, now turned international, but it is not the message of our political leaders.

"Let the Free Market do its thing and correct what's wrong," one side cries. "No, no! Let Government Regulation solve the problem," cries the other side. In the face of our collective economic sins and their structural embeddedness, our presidents and other politicians who are Christian, not to mention those media pundits who claim to have talent on loan from God, ought to be ashamed of their simplistic, clichéd sound bites implying that their way will root out fundamental problems. But such as the propaganda loops that keep being rolled out of their franchises. A man with a fan standing on the levees of New Orleans cannot blow a hurricane back into the Gulf.

One of the most frightening lines in all of Scripture appears almost as an aside. After horrific catastrophes of all sorts have come upon nations to stab them awake to the possibilities of better futures following collective repentance, the Book of Revelation notes that even after all those calamities the nations still would not repent. Still, for us today, although sin is a reproach to any people, the Bible promises that righteousness exalts a nation. Isn't it time we all sobered up?

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