

# **America, a Christian Nation?**

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The [Republican] Party [of Texas] understands that the Ten Commandments are the basis of our basic freedoms and the cornerstone of our Western legal tradition. We therefore oppose any governmental action to restrict, prohibit, or remove public display of the Decalogue or other religious symbols. The party decries any unconstitutional act of judicial tyranny that would demand removal of the words, “One Nation Under God” from the Pledge of Allegiance. The Party also demands that the National Motto “In God We Trust” and National Anthem be protected from legislative and judicial attack. The Republican Party of Texas affirms that the United States of America is a Christian nation, and the public acknowledgement of God is undeniable in our history... Our party pledges to exert its influence to restore the original intent of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution and dispel the myth of the separation of Church and State. We support the right of individuals and state and local governments to display symbols of our faith and heritage... We reclaim freedom of religious expression in public on government property, and freedom from governmental interference. We urge the Governor, the Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the House of Representatives to release space to restore a chapel to the original Texas Capitol building... Until such time as such unconstitutional spending programs of our federal government are repealed, we believe that the faith-based initiatives as proposed by President George W. Bush, and currently implemented, should continue to be funded by federal monies... The Party supports school subjects with emphasis on the Judeo-Christian principles upon which America was founded and which form the basis of America’s legal, political, and economic systems. Our Founding Fathers based the premise of this nation on God-given rights endowed by our Creator...  
- Excerpted from the 2004 Republican Party of Texas Platform

Shocked? I am. Perhaps this declaration comes as no surprise to some. After all, our nation *was* founded on Christian principles. Right? Many Christians would have us believe this. They would have us believe that the Founding Fathers were deeply religious men who never intended any separation of church and state. They would point to the word “God” used on our money, in our Pledge of Allegiance, and in other areas of our daily lives, and they would argue that they are in the majority, so it must be a Christian nation.

Texas Republicans aren't the only ones who endorse God. The Washington State and North Carolina Republican Party platforms echo the same sentiments. Both claim that our country was founded on Christian principles. They support the word "God" as used in the Pledge of Allegiance and our national Motto, "In God We Trust." They support spending tax payer's money on private, religious education. The Republican platforms of various other states share the same creed.

In fact, many of the Founding Fathers were Deists and were quite outspoken against religion, especially Christianity, as you will see. Deism is a belief in an impersonal God that created the universe and then "left it to operate under the natural laws he had devised." Deists rejected Christianity and based their beliefs on reason, not the teachings of any prophet. (Britannica Concise Encyclopedia)

The Founding Fathers wished to build a nation, in the words of John Adams, second President of the United States, "erected on the simple principles of nature."

The government was "contrived merely by the use of reason and the senses..." (Walker) Most importantly, they desired to avoid the many pitfalls of the European governments they fought so hard to free the American people from. At the time the Declaration of Independence was signed, only seven percent of the people in the 13 colonies even belonged to a church. (Warbois)

The framers of the Constitution orchestrated a society in America unlike any previously in existence, which avoided the religiously motivated wars, persecutions, inquisitions, and cruelties which had plagued European nations throughout history. Instead, they

designed a tolerant system of government “that would allow all citizens to believe or disbelieve any religion, theology, or philosophy they wanted without fear of state religious favoritism, prejudice, coercion, or retribution. They believed that freedom of conscience and expression should be allowed and protected by law...” (Schafersman)

Pat Robertson, outlandishly outspoken founder of the Christian Coalition, dares to call for a return to “Jeffersonian ideals.” On his Web site, he distorts quotes from Jefferson, deliberately omitting and twisting the words of this great Founding Father to suit his needs. At the University of Virginia, March 3, 2000, Pat Robertson garbled Jefferson’s words.

This evening, I think back to one of the most profound experiences of my life when for the first time I entered the Jefferson Memorial in Washington, looked up at the statue of that incredibly handsome and powerful man, and then I read his words chiseled in the marble frieze surrounding the ceiling: “I have sworn on the altar of God eternal enmity against every form of tyranny over the mind of man.” (Robertson)

If you read the context in which that statement was made, you can clearly see that Jefferson was accusing the Christian clergy of tyranny. In a letter to his friend, Dr. Benjamin Rush, Jefferson writes,

The delusion... on the clause of the Constitution, which, while it secured the freedom of the press, covered also the freedom of religion, had given to the clergy a very favorite hope of obtaining an establishment of a

particular form of Christianity through the United States; and as every sect believes its own form the true one, every one perhaps hoped for his own, but especially the Episcopalians and Congregationalists. The returning good sense of our country threatens to abort their hopes, and they [the preachers] believe that any portion of power confided to me [such as his being elected President], will be exerted in opposition to their schemes. And they believe rightly; for I have sworn upon the altar of God, eternal hostility against every form of tyranny over the minds of man. (Gould)

The “God” Jefferson refers to is the Deist’s idea of God, “Nature’s God.” He would have been opposed to the melding of any religion with the state, be it Christians, Catholics, Jews, or any other persuasion. This is but one example of the brazen misstatements made by Right Wingers who wish to portray Jefferson and other Deist Founding Fathers as God-fearing Christians. Another example of Robertson’s distorted view of Jefferson:

Every statement that Jefferson made about freedom carried with it his clear understanding that the right to freedom for every man and woman does not come from government; it does not come from social position; it does not come from wealth; it does not come from intellectual attainment. No ...Freedom comes from the direct creative act of a sovereign God.

Jefferson would roll over in his grave if he heard this. Freedom, in Jefferson’s view, came from the fact that we are all created equal and “that we all come inborn with the abilities of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

James Madison, fourth President of the United States, author of the Bill of Rights, and father of the Constitution, was perhaps the greatest supporter of the separation of church and state. In a letter to William Bradford on April 1, 1774, he stated, "Religious bondage shackles and debilitates the mind and unfits it for every noble enterprise." In a letter to Edward Livingston on July 10, 1822, "...religion and government will exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together."

How odd then that Sean Hannity, host of the television show Hannity & Colmes (and another Right Wing adherent who is against the separation of church and state) would make the following mistake: In December 2004, Hannity falsely claimed that James Madison "hired the first chaplain for the United States Congress." (Media Matters for America) In fact, Madison was adamant that tax-payer's money should not go to fund chaplains appointed to the Houses of Congress. In a detached memorandum circa 1817, Madison wrote that "The Constitution of the U.S. forbids everything like an establishment of a national religion" and that paying for religious Ministers out of the public purse was clearly unconstitutional.

Many Christians who believe that America was founded upon the Christian religion present the Declaration of Independence as "proof" because the document mentions God. However, the God in the Declaration is not the same as the God of Christianity. It describes "the laws of nature and of nature's God." This is the God of Deist philosophy.

The Declaration is an important historical document. It observed "that all men are created equal," that they have the right to pursue, "life, liberty, and happiness," and "that to

secure these rights, governments are instituted among men.” However, the Declaration says nothing about our rights secured by Christianity, nor does it imply anything about a Christian foundation.

The Declaration also does not represent the law of the land. It may have influential power, and judges may mention it in their summations, but it held no legal power then or today. Our Presidents, judges, and police officers take oaths to uphold the Constitution, a document that establishes the fundamental principles by which a government is governed, not the Declaration of Independence.

In the Constitution, there is no mention of Christianity, God, Jesus, or any Supreme Being. The only two references to religion use exclusionary wording. The First Amendment states “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion” and in Article VI, Section 3, “...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” (Walker)

The Treaty of Tripoli, Article 11, written during the administration of George Washington and signed into law by John Adams, reads “The government of the United States is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion.” This clearly represents the feelings of our Founding Fathers at the beginning of the United States government.

Here’s more on what our nation’s founders really thought about religion and politics:

In a letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, Thomas Jefferson warned that religion engenders fear and enslavement of weak minds. He cautions his nephew to “Question with boldness

even the existence of a god” and infers that if there were a god that he would praise reason more than “blindfolded fear.”

In a letter to John Adams in 1823, Jefferson decried that Christians have perverted the teachings of Jesus and expressed his hope that “The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus, by the supreme being as his father in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter.” He looked to a time in the future when the people of the United States would use their ability to reason and do away with the “artificial scaffolding” of Christianity.

Jefferson again demeans Christianity in a letter to William Short. “I have examined all the known superstitions of the world, and I do not find in our particular superstition of Christianity one redeeming feature. They are all alike founded on fables and mythology. Millions of innocent men, women, and children, since the introduction of Christianity, have been burnt, tortured, fined and imprisoned. What has been the effect of this coercion? To make one half the world fools and the other half hypocrites; to support roguery and error all over the earth.”

And again: “Christianity... [has become] the most perverted system that ever shone on man. ...Rogueries, absurdities and untruths were perpetrated upon the teachings of Jesus by a large band of dupes and importers led by Paul, the first great corruptor of the teaching of Jesus.”

John Adams wrote in a letter to Charles Cushing that “This would be the best of all possible worlds, if there were no religion in it.”



Benjamin Franklin was raised as a Christian, but by the age of 15 he had begun to question religion. As a young man, he read some books against Deism and found that the arguments of the Deists were more convincing than those of the Christians. He became a Deist at that point, and shortly after, fled his home in Boston to avoid the oppressive, politically powerful preachers there. For the rest of his life, he was outspoken against political power being held by those with religious power. In his autobiography, *Toward the Mystery*, he writes, "I have found Christian dogma unintelligible. Early in life I absented myself from Christian assemblies."

In *Religion of the American Enlightenment*, Ethan Allen writes, "Denominated a Deist, the reality of which I have never disputed, being conscious that I am no Christian."

In *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine, father of the American Revolution, writes vehemently against Christianity, "I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of... Each of those churches accuse the other of unbelief; and for my own part, I disbelieve them all."

"Of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is no more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory to itself than this thing called Christianity." Clearly, Paine did not support the formation of a Christian nation.

Many Christians will cite the use of "In God We Trust" on American currency as proof that we are a Christian nation. However, the first occurrence of the phrase on money did

not occur until 1864. Religious sentiment was high during the Civil War, which is common in times of trouble. Eleven Protestant denominations mounted a campaign to add references to God to the Constitution and other federal documents to indicate that the Union was on the side of God regarding slavery. In 1864, Congress passed the Act that allowed the phrase on government issued money. (Price, Robinson, & United States Department of the Treasury) “In God We Trust” was still not the national motto until 1956, once again during a time of national strife, the Cold War.

The Religious Right insists that the use of the phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance is further proof that ours is a Christian nation. However, the original Pledge of Allegiance written in 1892 read, “I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.” There was no mention of God until 1954, when the Cold War intensified. Congress moved to insert the words “under God” into the Pledge. In their own words:

At this moment of our history the principles underlying our American Government and the American way of life are under attack by a system whose philosophy is at direct odds with our own. Our American Government is founded on the concept of the individuality and the dignity of the human being. Underlying this concept is the belief that the human person is important because he was created by God and endowed by Him with certain inalienable rights which no civil authority may usurp. The inclusion of God in our pledge therefore would further acknowledge the dependence of our people and our Government upon the moral

directions of the Creator. At the same time it would serve to deny the atheistic and materialistic concepts of communism with its attendant subservience of the individual.

The following year, "In God We Trust" became a requirement for all United States coins and currency. The year after that, the national motto chosen by Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin, "E Pluribus Unum" (From Many, One) was also changed to "In God We Trust." (Freethought Today) "So help me God" was added to federal oaths despite the fact that the Christian Bible clearly states not to swear by God or any other person, place, or thing when taking an oath. (Matthew 5:33-37, James 5:12) The Constitution says nothing about swearing on a Bible, or even taking an oath.

These insertions of religion into the previously secular fabric of our government have not gone unnoticed and unchallenged. In 1907, President Theodore Roosevelt expressed disapproval of "In God We Trust" on coins. The use of the motto on all federal documents has been challenged three times between 1970 and 1994. (Robinson) In 2003, Atheist Michael Newdow sued a school district in California on behalf of his daughter because he didn't want her to be exposed to religion by hearing the Pledge of Allegiance said every day in her public school classroom.

In reference to this case, Justice Antonin Scalia said that removing references to God from public forums would be "contrary to our whole tradition." Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said there "are so many references to God" in public affairs, noting "In God We Trust" was on United States currency and coins. She added that the Supreme Court

opens all its public sessions with the words, “God save the United States and this honorable Court.”

We have clearly gotten out of touch with our nation’s history when we elect officials who don’t see anything wrong with saying that a secular pledge would be “clearly inconsistent” with the views of the framers of the Constitution.

Those trying to preserve or restore secularism to government are the true traditionalists. Nearly all of the references to religion in the federal government have come about in the last 50 years and do not represent long held American traditions. I would argue that the mixing of government and religion that has taken place over the last 50 years is precisely what the Founding Fathers were trying to prevent.

Today, the religious demographics of our nation are changing. Americans are increasingly losing their Christian faith. In a study by the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 77 percent of Americans identify themselves as Christian, a major slide from 86 percent in 1990. That’s a loss of nine percent. According to Robinson, if this trend continues, by the year 2042, non-Christians will outnumber the Christians in the United States.

Today, if ever our government needed proof that the separation of church and state works to ensure the freedom of religion, one only need to look at the plethora of churches, temples, and shrines that exist in the cities and towns throughout the United States. Only a secular government, divorced from religion, could possibly allow such tolerant diversity.

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