

Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?

Revised Edition

A Historical Introduction

John Fea

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Introduction

How to Think Historically

At the heart of the debate over whether the United States was founded as a Christian nation is the relationship between history and 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.”¹ What does Wood mean? Is there a difference between “the past” and “history,” two terms that we often assume are synonymous?

The Search for a Usable Past

Sadly, most people have no use for the past. The United States has always been a nation that has looked forward rather than backward. As the first major nation–state born during the Enlightenment, America has attached itself to the train of progress. In some respects U.S. history is the story of the relentless efforts of ordinary Americans to break away from the tyranny of the past. Walt Whitman summed it up best in his tribute to American pioneers:

All the past we leave behind;
We debouch upon a newer, mightier world, varied world,
Fresh and strong the world we seize, world of labor and the march,
Pioneers! O pioneers!²

I regularly encounter college students who wonder why they are required to take a history course when it will probably have no direct bearing on their postgraduation job prospects. And, in most cases, they are right. I have yet to meet a graduate who landed a job because a potential employer was impressed with a grade in “History 101.” For many the past is foreign and irrelevant. We all remember the high school history teacher—perhaps we called him “coach”—who stood before the class and recited, in the words of historian Arnold Toynbee, “one damned thing after another.”

Of course not everyone thinks this way about the past. One will always find history books near or at the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list (think David McCullough or Doris Kearns Goodwin). If we ask the average history buff why we should study history, she will probably talk about its relevance to life today. This should not surprise us. It is our natural instinct to find something useful in the past. We are creatures of the “here and now.” The kind of relevance we look for in the past can take several forms, but let me suggest three. First, the past can inspire us. Second, the familiarity of the past helps us to see our common humanity with others who have lived before us. Third, the past gives us a better understanding of our civic identity.

The past can inspire. Christians have made good use of this benefit of studying history. Our lives are enriched by learning about great leaders of the Christian faith—Francis of Assisi, Joan of Arc, Martin Luther, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, William Wilberforce, Dorothy Day, Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, and Billy Graham. If by learning the stories of great religious leaders we gain insight into how to live faithfully, we can also become inspired by the examples of early Americans who fought for freedom, liberty, and independence in 1776. These men, the so-called founders, put their lives on the line in order to stage one of the greatest revolutions in the history of the world. Whether it was George Washington sneaking across the East River in the fog on an August 1776 evening, or the Continental Army enduring hard winters in Morristown and Valley Forge, or Patrick Henry proclaiming “Give me liberty or give me death!”—something about their heroics makes us proud and gives us an emotional connection to the past. It is easy to be moved by the fact that the men who founded the United States often used religious language and saw their revolution as a sacred cause. Indeed, the past inspires.

When we think about the way the past might be relevant for our lives, familiarity is also important. We tend to search the past for people like us. We want to learn about those in the past who felt the way we do, who

endured the same trials and tribulations, and who experienced the same joys and triumphs. Though societies change over time, there is much about the human experience that does not.

I recently completed a biography of Philip Vickers Fithian, a farmer from New Jersey who lived during the age of the American Revolution.³ Fithian was not one of the founders, nor did he achieve any degree of fame in his lifetime. But it was his obscurity that first attracted me to him. My goal in writing that book was to explore the American Revolution through the eyes of an ordinary person who lived during the period. I spent several years reading and interpreting Philip's diaries in an attempt to reconstruct the eighteenth-century world in which he lived. At the same time I believed that Philip's story would resonate with twenty-first-century readers. I hoped that my readers might relate to Philip's struggles between personal ambition and homesick longings, his desire to improve his life and remain true to what he believed was a call from God, his quest to educate himself for the purpose of overcoming his passions, his willingness to sacrifice his life for his country, and his love affair with the woman he would marry. I wanted my readers to see something familiar in the past and to realize that they were not the first people to experience such things.

The past can also help us understand our place in the communities and nation we call home. As soon as the United States was founded, historians began writing about the meaning of the American Revolution in an attempt to remind us of the values and ideals for which it was waged.⁴ History is a tool for strengthening the nation. It reminds us of where we came from and helps us chart where we are going. American history has always been a way of teaching children lessons in patriotism.⁵ History helps produce good citizens. We need the stories of our past to sustain us as a people. In America we study it to understand the values and beliefs that we as a people are willing to fight for and die for. We wish that our children and their children would learn the stories of the past and in the process embrace the beliefs that have defined the American experiment since its birth over two hundred years ago. This is why historical debates, such as the one currently being waged over whether the United States of America is a Christian nation, are so intense. The identity of the country is at stake.

What Do Historians Do? The Five Cs

While many of us look to the past for inspiration, continuity with the present, and a sense of civic identity, historians do not approach the past with the *primary* goal of finding something relevant. Those who pursue

the past for the purpose of inspiration, familiarity, and civic identity *alone* are not really practicing history at all. Historians know that there exists a constant tension between the familiarity of the past and the strangeness of the past. They must always operate with this tension in mind. Historians Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke have boiled down the task of historical interpretation into what they call the “5 Cs of Historical Thinking.”⁶

Historians must see *change over time*. While some things stay the same over the course of generations, many things change. The historian’s task is to chronicle these 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.”⁷

Historians must interpret the past in *context*. They examine the documents of the past in light of the time and the place in which they were written. Words ripped from their cultural and chronological context provide useful material for the compilers of quotation books, but they are useless to the historian. The words of the founders, for example, must always be interpreted from the perspective of the eighteenth-century world in which they were uttered or written. There is a wide chasm that separates the past from the present. Context helps us to realize that more often than not people in the past do not think and behave the same way that we do.

Historians are always interested in *causality*. I remember a few years ago when the talk radio 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.”⁸ Limbaugh could not have been more wrong about what historians do. They are not only interested in facts, but always ask why a particular event in the past happened the way it did.

Historians are concerned with *contingency*. This is the notion that “every historical outcome depends upon a number of prior conditions.”⁹ Contingency celebrates the ability of humans to shape their own destiny. Every historical moment is contingent upon another historical moment, which in turn is contingent upon yet another moment. Historians are thus concerned about the big picture—how events are influenced by other events.

Finally, historians realize that the past is *complex*. It often resists our efforts to simplify it or to 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 neatly constructed paragraph or two. Once again, the debate over whether America is a Christian nation is instructive here. On one hand, the opponents of Christian America draw the conclusion that just because the Constitution does not mention God then it must hold true that 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 call these assertions “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 Cs to reconstruct the past and make their findings available to the public. 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.

Most human beings tend to be present-minded when it comes to confronting the past. The discipline of history was never meant to function as a means of getting one’s political point across or convincing people to join a cause. Yet Americans use the past for these purposes all the time. Such an approach to the past can easily degenerate into a form of propaganda or, as the historian Bernard Bailyn described it, “indoctrination by historical example.”¹⁰

This sort of present-mindedness is very common among those Christian writers and preachers who defend the idea that America was founded as a Christian nation. They enter the past with the preconceived purpose of trying to find the religious roots of the United States. If they are indeed able to gather evidence suggesting that the founders were Christians or believed that the promotion of religion was important to the success of the Republic, then they have gotten all that they need from the past. It has served them adequately as a tool for promoting a particular twenty-first-century political agenda. It has provided ammunition to win the cultural war in which they are engaged. Gordon Wood has said that if someone wants to use the study of the past to change the world he should forgo a career as a historian and run for office!¹¹

Such an approach to the past is more suitable for a lawyer than for a historian. In fact, David Barton, one of the leading proponents of “Christian America,” counters his opponents by suggesting that his research is done in accordance with the practices of the legal profession. Barton “lets the Founders speak for themselves in accordance with the legal rules of evidence.”¹² The difference between how a lawyer uses the past and how a historian interprets the past is huge. The lawyer cares about the past only to the degree that he or she can use a legal decision in the past to win a case in the present. A lawyer does not reconstruct the past in all its complexity, but rather cherry-picks from the past in order to obtain a positive result for his or her client. Context, change over time, causality, contingency, and complexity are not as important as letting the “Founders speak for themselves,” even if such speaking violates every rule of historical inquiry. The historian, however, does not encounter the past in this way.

It is the very strangeness of the past that has the best potential to change our lives in positive ways. Those who are willing to acknowledge that the past is a foreign country—a place where they do things differently than we do in the present—set off on a journey of personal transformation. “It is this past,” writes historian Sam Wineburg, “one that initially leaves us befuddled, or worse, just plain bored, that we need most if we are to achieve the understanding that each of us is more than the handful of labels ascribed to us at birth.”¹³

An encounter with the past in all of its fullness, void as much as possible of present-minded agendas, can cultivate virtue in our lives. Such an encounter teaches us empathy, humility, selflessness, and hospitality. By studying history we learn to listen to voices that differ from our own. We lay aside our moral condemnation about a person, idea, or event from the past in order to understand it. This is the essence of intellectual hospitality. By taking the time to listen to people from a “foreign country,” we rid ourselves of the selfish quest to make the past serve our needs. The study of the past reminds us that we are not autonomous individuals, but part of a human story that is larger than ourselves. Wineburg sums it up well:

For the narcissist sees the world—both the past and the present—in his own image. Mature historical understanding teaches us to do the opposite: to go beyond our own image, to go beyond our brief life, and to go beyond the fleeting moment in human history into which we have been born. History educates (“leads outward” in the Latin) in the deepest sense. Of the subjects in the secular curriculum, it

is the best at teaching those virtues once reserved for theology—humility in the face of our limited ability to know, and awe in the face of the expanse of human history.¹⁴

Are we willing to allow history to “educate” us—to lead us outward? We need to practice history not because it can win us political points or help us push our social and cultural agendas forward, but because it has the amazing potential to transform our lives.

Part One

The United States Is a Christian Nation

The History of an Idea

Evangelical America, 1789–1865

As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Musulmen; and as the said States never entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.

So begins 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. The treaty 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 American 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 most deadly 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 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 the first one hundred years of its existence. The idea that the United States was a “Christian nation” was central to American identity in the years between the Revolution and the Civil War.

Nineteenth-century Americans who believed that the United States was a Christian nation made their case in at least three different ways. First, they appealed to divine providence. The United States had a special place in God’s plan for the world. The success of the American Revolution confirmed it. Second, they argued that the founders were Christians and thus set out to create a nation that reflected their personal beliefs. Third, they made the case that the U.S. government and the documents upon which it was founded were rooted in Christian ideas. Today’s Christian nationalists have a good portion of American history on their side.

Christian Nationalism in the Early American Republic

If the United States was ever a “Christian nation,” it was so during the period between the ratification of the Constitution (1789) and the start of the Civil War (1861). While the Constitution made clear that there would be no official or established religion in America, and the states were gradually removing religious requirements for officeholders, Christianity, and particularly Protestant evangelicalism, defined the culture.

When ministers, politicians, and writers during these years described the United States as a “Christian nation,” they were usually referring to the beliefs and character of the majority of its citizens. The United States was populated by Christians. This meant that it was not a “Muslim

nation” or a “Buddhist nation” or a “Hindu nation.” Indeed, the people of most Western European nations in the nineteenth century would have used the phrase “Christian nation” to describe the countries to which they belonged. But in America the phrase “Christian nation” could also carry a deeper meaning. It was often used as a way of describing the uniqueness of the American experiment. It was freighted with the idea that the United States had a special role to play in the plan of God, thus making it a special or privileged Christian nation. Moreover, when nineteenth-century Americans talked about living in a “Christian nation” they rarely used the term in a polemical way. In other words, they were not trying to defend the label against those who did not believe the United States was a Christian nation. Instead, they used the phrase as if it were a well-known, generally accepted fact.³

One of the main reasons that people could describe the United States as a Christian nation during this period was because the country was experiencing a massive revival of Protestant evangelicalism.⁴ Known as the Second Great Awakening, this religious revival stressed salvation through faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ and was quite compatible with the democratic spirit of the early nineteenth century. Humans were no longer perceived as waiting passively for a sovereign and distant God who, on his own terms and in his own timing, offered select individuals the gift of eternal life. Instead, ordinary American citizens took an active role in their own salvation. Theology moved away from a Calvinism that stressed humankind’s inability to save itself and toward a free-will or democratic theology, preached most powerfully and popularly by revivalist Charles Finney. The new theology empowered individuals to decide their own religious fate by accepting or rejecting the gospel message.⁵

This revival of religion 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. Long-established denominations such as Episcopalians, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists gave way to more democratic, enthusiastic, and evangelical groups such as Baptists and Methodists. New sects such as the Mormons and the Disciples of Christ emerged with force. Religious services continued to be conducted in churches, but they were also being held in camp meetings like the one in Cane Ridge, Kentucky, in 1801. Writing in 1855, church historian Philip Schaff quoted an Austrian writer

who observed, “The United States are by far the most religious and Christian country in the world . . . because religion is there most free.”⁶ When Thomas Jefferson claimed smugly in 1822 that Unitarianism would soon be “the religion of the majority from north and south,” he could not have been more wrong.⁷ Apparently Jefferson did not leave Monticello very much during the final years of his life, for America was fast becoming the most evangelical Christian country on the face of the earth.

The Election of 1800

Christianity merged with politics on many fronts during the early nineteenth century. This was especially the case in the presidential election of 1800. The incumbent president, John Adams, represented the Federalists, a political faction with particular strength in New England. Federalist strongholds such as Connecticut and Massachusetts had a long tradition of government-sponsored religion. The Federalists in New England worked closely with the Congregationalist clergy in order to ensure that the region would remain Christian in character and be governed by Christian political leaders.⁸ Ironically, John Adams was a Unitarian. As we will see in chapter 12, he rejected many essential Christian doctrines. But he was also a son of New England—a descendant of Puritans who understood that religion was needed to sustain a virtuous society.

Adams’s opponent was Thomas Jefferson, the vice president of the United States. Adams had defeated Jefferson in the presidential election of 1796, but the margin of victory was slim. As the population of the United States began to spread out beyond the Appalachian Mountains, and the religious sentiments of the country turned against state-sponsored churches, Jefferson would attract more and more Americans. His commitment to ordinary farmers and his strong defense of religious liberty meant that Baptists and Methodists—the catalysts of the Second Great Awakening, which was just getting underway—rallied to his cause. But Jefferson’s religious beliefs, or lack thereof, would present a problem for him in the Federalist-dominated northeast. As we will see in chapter 13, Jefferson was not a Christian. He was skeptical about doctrines such as the Trinity, the resurrection of Jesus Christ, and the divine inspiration of the Bible. He was not the kind of godly president that many New England Federalists thought should be leading a Christian nation.

The attacks on Jefferson’s supposed godlessness were fierce. William Linn, a Dutch Reformed minister from New York, wrote that he was forced to oppose Jefferson’s candidacy because of the Virginian’s “dis-

belief of the Holy Scriptures . . . his rejection of the Christian Religion and open profession of Deism.” He feared that the United States, under Jefferson’s rule, would become a “nation of Atheists.” Linn made clear that “no professed deists, be his talents and acquirements what they may, ought to be promoted to this place [the presidency] by the suffrages of a Christian nation.” He went as far as to argue that the act of “calling a deist to the first office must be construed into no less than rebellion against God.” Linn was fully aware that there was “nothing in the constitution to restrict our choice” of a president with religious beliefs akin to Jefferson’s, but he warned his readers that if they elected “a manifest enemy to the religion of Christ, in a Christian nation,” it would be “an awful symptom of the degeneracy of that nation.”⁹

Whig Christian Nationalism

The Federalist attack on Jefferson’s beliefs was unsuccessful. Jefferson won the election and became the third president of the United States. The Federalists would fade from the national stage, but their demise did not mean that Christian nationalism would disappear from American politics. Much of the Christian political vision of the Federalists would resurface in the 1830s and 1840s in the voices of the politicians and clergy who would make up the constituency of the Whig Party.

Most Whigs were ardent nationalists. They favored a nation of markets and Protestant religion. Whigs championed infrastructure improvements—roads, canals, and bridges—to connect small and isolated communities to a national economic system shaped by capitalism. Many of the nation’s great revivalists, such as Charles Finney and Lyman Beecher, were Whig supporters. These reformers established voluntary societies to promote the Christianization of America. Unlike their Democratic opponents, who favored individual liberty on moral issues, the Whigs dreamed of a homogenous Protestant culture where slavery did not exist, alcohol use was under control, and Sunday was kept as a day of Sabbath rest. In 1851 historian Robert Baird wrote that laws requiring the observance of the Christian Sabbath were based on the “avowed principle that we are a Christian nation.”¹⁰ The Whigs merged their economic and moral commitments. Roads, bridges, and canals could provide ordinary farmers with easier access to markets and liberate them from their isolated locales. In the process they would begin to see themselves as citizens of a nation rather than of a particular community, county, or state. There was something providential, the Whigs believed, about these

kinds of national infrastructure improvements. God was using them to fashion a nation. Some even believed that American economic and moral progress would usher in the second coming of Christ.¹¹

Lyman Beecher provides a good example of the way that Whig political principles and evangelical Christianity came together in this era. In 1832 Beecher, a well-known New England Congregationalist minister, became the first president of Lane Theological Seminary in Cincinnati. Shortly after he was appointed to his new post he embarked on a tour of eastern cities to raise funds for the seminary. As he traveled from town to town, Beecher delivered a speech that he called “A Plea for the West.” Beecher was an evangelical minister, but his speech was not designed to recruit missionaries to evangelize the vast American territory between the Allegheny and Rocky mountains. Instead, he believed that it was necessary to civilize this region through the establishment of seminaries of learning—like Lane Seminary—that would train an educated clergy committed to spreading Protestant culture. If such a plan were to be carried out, then American Protestants would need to act quickly. The West, Beecher feared, would soon be populated by Roman Catholic immigrants who had a stronger allegiance to their church than to the nation. Slavery was also on the move westward. Beecher feared that the region would be overrun by slaveholders unless something was done soon. “A Plea for the West” was Beecher’s call to extend the Whig and evangelical idea of a Christian nation to the unsettled regions of the country. As Beecher concluded, “perseverance can accomplish any thing, and wherever the urgency of the necessity shall put in requisition the benevolent energy of this Christian nation—the work under the auspices of heaven will be done.” Beecher was a nationalist in the sense that he wanted to integrate the unruly West into the United States. He was a *Christian* nationalist in the sense that his vision of the country was a distinctly Protestant one. He was the perfect Whig.¹²

A Christian Nation in Print

The early nineteenth century also saw a revolution in print—newspapers, magazines, books—that would be used to advance the idea that the United States was a Christian nation.¹³ Some of the nation’s first American historians began to write and publish during this period. Though they seldom described the United States as a “Christian nation,” they did not shy away from trying to discern the hand of God in American history. Many of these historians believed that God had intervened on

behalf of the United States during the American Revolution. David Ramsay, the author of *History of the American Revolution* (1789), described the events of the Revolutionary War through the grid of divine providence. Mercy Otis Warren, in *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805), was also overtly providential in her approach. She thought that the overthrow of English dominion by a band of colonial soldiers, and the creation of a government based on freedom, was so momentous that it could only be attributed to a “superintending Providence” or the “finger of divine Providence.”¹⁴ Warren believed that the “religious and moral character of Americans yet stands on a higher grade of excellence and purity, than that of most of other nations.”¹⁵ She called the American people to live up to the gift of independence that God had given them.

As the nineteenth century rolled on, more histories of the United States were written, perhaps none more magisterial than George Bancroft’s multivolume *History of the United States: From the Discovery of the American Continent* (1834–1874). Bancroft was the first historian from the United States to be trained in Germany, the hub of professional historical scholarship in the West. His *History* was an attempt to write American history using footnotes and primary sources. Bancroft was a devout Unitarian Christian who believed in the role of God’s providence in shaping the American past. He thought that America was a Christian nation established and sustained by God for the purpose of spreading liberty and democracy to the world.¹⁶

God’s providence in American history was also a dominant theme in school textbooks. Historian Jonathan Boyd’s close study of nine of the early nineteenth century’s most popular American history schoolbooks confirms that authors used providential language to teach students how to be good citizens of a Christian nation.¹⁷ In this sense, they look very different from the kinds of American history textbooks that schoolchildren read today. Charles Goodrich’s *History of the United States* started with a brief lesson on history: “History displays the dealings of God with mankind. . . . It cultivates a sense of dependence on him; strengthens our confidence in his benevolence; and impresses us with a conviction of his justice.”¹⁸

Other schoolbooks chronicled the way that God orchestrated events in history, including the founding of the British colonies, the American Revolution, the 1793 yellow fever epidemic in Philadelphia, and the American invasion of Fort Detroit.¹⁹ Emma Willard’s *History of the United States* (1826) describes the “wonderful coincidence of events” that led to the death of Native Americans:

HISTORY
OF THE
RISE, PROGRESS AND TERMINATION
OF THE
AMERICAN REVOLUTION.

INTERSPERSED WITH
Biographical, Political and Moral Observations.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

BY MRS. MERCY WARREN,
OF PLYMOUTH, (MASS.)

.....Troubled on every side.....
perplexed, but not in despair; persecuted, but not forsaken;
cast down, but not destroyed. ST. PAUL.

O God! thy arm was here.....
And not to us, but to thy arm alone,
Ascribe we all. SHAKESPEARE.

VOL. I.

BOSTON:
PRINTED BY MANNING AND LORING,
FOR E. LARKIN, No. 47, CORNHILL.

1805.



Fig. 1.1 Cover page of Mercy Otis Warren's *History of the Rise, Progress and Termination of the American Revolution* (1805).

Had they remained in their full strength, it is evident, that with the small means which the first European emigrants possessed, they could not have effected a settlement. In this the undevout will perceive nothing but a happy fortuity; but the pious heart will delight to recognise and acknowledge a superintending Providence, whose time for exchanging, upon these shores, a savage for a civilized people, had now fully come.²⁰

Noah Webster's *History of the United States* (1832) begins with a chapter called "Origins of the Human Race" that provides an exposition of the Genesis creation story. The book ends with an appendix titled "Advice to the Young." A modern observer might wonder why a history textbook would include a chapter exhorting readers to obey their parents, read the Bible, avoid sin, love their neighbors, and disdain luxury, but in the early nineteenth century the story of the American past was used as a source for the religious and moral improvement of young people. This blend of history and morality was considered a foundational part of any good education.²¹

Some writers used the press to refashion some of the founders into evangelical Christians. If America was a Christian nation, then it needed to be "fathered" by Christian statesmen. No one did this kind of refashioning better than Mason Locke Weems, an Anglican minister and traveling book salesman. Weems's biography of George Washington, *Life of Washington*, ran through forty editions between 1799 and 1825. The tales Weems told about Washington, including the story of him cutting down his father's cherry tree, were published over and over again. His stories were included in more than twenty-five nineteenth-century schoolbooks, including the famous *McGuffey's Eclectic Readers*.²²

While Weems is well known for inventing the story of the cherry tree, it is another story he tells about Washington that is most revealing. This is the account of Washington's father spelling young George's name with cabbage seeds. Augustine Washington secretly planted cabbage seeds in the family garden and patterned them after the letters in his son's name. After the cabbage had grown tall enough for George to see his name spelled out on the ground, his father used the experiment as a means of introducing George to his "true Father." George realized that it was not mere chance that caused these seeds to grow in such a way. The seeds had to be set in place by someone. Weems brought the lesson home through the words of Augustine Washington: "Well, then, and as my son could not believe that *chance* had made and put together so exactly the *letters* of

his name . . . then how can he believe that *chance* could have made and put together all those millions and millions of things that are now so exactly fitted to his good?"²³

But Weems did not stop there. The spiritual lesson of the cabbage patch made George Washington into the kind of evangelical statesman who was needed to build a Christian republic in America. This was Washington's conversion experience. After describing the completion of Augustine's lesson, Weems writes: "At this, George fell into a profound silence, while his pensive looks showed that his youthful soul was labouring with some idea never felt before. Perhaps it was at that moment, that the good Spirit of God ingrafted on his heart that germ of piety, which filled him after life with so many precious fruits of morality."²⁴ The Spirit had descended on young George. He would now be ready to stake his rightful claim as the Christian savior of the United States.

Christian Nationalism in the Civil War North

Well over a century later Abraham Lincoln would also have a chance to be the savior of the United States. Lincoln understood the meaning of the Civil War better than anyone in America. It was a war over slavery. It was a war over how the U.S. Constitution should be properly interpreted in regard to the rights of individual states. But it was also a religious war—a "theological crisis," as historian Mark Noll has described it.²⁵ In his second inaugural address, he made it clear: "Both [sides] read the same Bible, and pray to the same God; and each invokes His aid against the other."²⁶ Both the Union and the Confederacy thought that their societies were blessed by God and supported by his providence. They both claimed to be Christian nations.

Northern politicians and clergy argued against Southern secession by appealing to national unity. The United States was one nation, created by God and thus indivisible. As former Massachusetts Senator Rufus Choate put it in 1858, God "wills our national life." It was the responsibility of its citizens to work hard at keeping this "UNITED, LOVING AND CHRISTIAN AMERICA" together at all costs.²⁷ The idea that God favored a strong national union could be found in the sermons of many Christian ministers of the day. Both Horace Bushnell, one of the most prominent Christian leaders of the mid-nineteenth century, and Albert Barnes, pastor of Philadelphia's First Presbyterian Church, argued that Christians had a responsibility to obey the national government because it was established by God. "Civil government," Bushnell wrote, must



Fig. 1.2 Abraham Lincoln's second inaugural address (March 4, 1865) asked the nation to work together for reconciliation after the Civil War.

be “accepted as a kind of Providential creation.” Barnes added, “Government is to be regarded as of Divine appointment, and as deriving its authority from God.” Bushnell, a Protestant liberal, and Barnes, an evangelical Presbyterian, would have had many theological differences, but they could agree that good government was God’s government.²⁸

In their arguments on behalf of a Christian America, Northern clergy claimed to have the past on their side. Few appealed to history more forcefully than did John F. Bigelow, the pastor of the Baptist Church of Reesville, New York. In his sermon “The Hand of God in American History” (1861), Bigelow wrote that “God through Christ is in all history; and He is in it working out great *principles*.” God planted “the seeds of this great nation” in the British colonies and kept America free from the “Roman hierarchy” of its French-Canadian neighbors. The American Revolution, Bigelow argued, was part of God’s plan for the “highest interests of the human race for the Ages, and: the whole Kingdom of God on earth.” He praised George Washington, a man whom “Divine

Providence had, for years, been giving . . . special training for his work.” Washington was a “second Moses” with a divine mission “to lead our American tribes from the Egypt of Colonial bondage through the . . . Sea and wilderness of the Revolutionary struggle, to the Canaan of liberty.”²⁹

If the Union was ordained by God, then Christians were required to submit to it. Northern clergy invoked New Testament passages to counter the beliefs of Southern secessionists. Francis Vinton began his sermon “The Christian Idea of Civil Government” by quoting Romans 13:1–8, the Pauline passage urging the church in Rome to submit to the authority of the empire. If the Union was established by God, then “Disloyalty to the Constitution is, therefore, impiety toward God. . . . To destroy this Union, therefore, is to commit a sin, which God will righteously punish by evils which no prescience can foresee, and no wisdom can repair.” Like Vinton, Bushnell also used Romans 13 to take a direct shot at Southern rebellion: “Let every soul be subject unto the higher powers; for there is no power but of God.” E. E. Adams, the pastor of the North Broad Street Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, reminded the South that “God never overlooks rebellion against his throne—never pardons the rebel until he repent and submit.”³⁰

Early in the war Northern clergy railed relentlessly on the sin of secession and defended the idea that the purpose of the war was to keep the Christian Union intact. In 1861 Albert Barnes told his listeners that the Civil War was not “a war for liberating by force the four millions of men which are held in bondage at the South.” Barnes believed that slavery was an “evil,” but the emancipation of the slaves was “*not* the object of the war,” nor should it in “any way become the object of the War to secure this result by force of arms.”³¹ Yet, in the wake of Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation, the ministerial response to the war began to change. Most historians agree that Lincoln’s decision to issue this decree gave the North a moral cause for which to fight that was more urgent than the preservation of the Union. After 1863 more and more clergy began to conceive the conflict as a war against the evil of slavery.³²

It would be wrong to give the impression that Northern clergymen only became interested in the emancipation of Southern slaves after 1863. The early-nineteenth-century abolitionist movement had its roots in the Second Great Awakening. William Lloyd Garrison, one of the most radical of the abolitionists, was an evangelical Christian who believed that America could not truly call itself a Christian nation unless slavery was abolished. He proposed that the North secede from the Union in order to remain free from the sinful stain of slavery. Revivalist Charles Finney concurred

with Garrison about the need for separation: “To adopt the maxim, ‘Our Union even with perpetual slavery,’ is an abomination so execrable as not to be named by a just mind without indignation.” Similarly, about a week before the bombing of Fort Sumter, New England clergyman Zachery Eddy told his congregation to separate from the South so that the North could “develop all those forces of a high, Christian civilization.”³³

But it was after the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation that Northern clergy began to more fully embrace the belief that the Civil War was a war to end slavery. No one took up this cause more strongly than Henry Ward Beecher, the son of Lyman Beecher, the brother of Harriet Beecher Stowe, and the man whom historian Debby Applegate has recently called “The Most Famous Man in America.”³⁴ But Beecher’s tirade against slavery lacked any real theological sophistication. In the 1863 sermon “National Prejudice and Penalty,” he concluded that slavery violated human rights, and since God was always on the side of human rights, then slavery must be a violation against God. Though one could certainly make an argument that slavery was sinful because it violated the dignity of human beings who were created in the image of God, Beecher did not argue this way. Instead, he concluded that “if God is just, and if he rewards or punishes nations in this world, it is not possible for a nation systematically to violate every natural right of four millions of people, and go unpunished.”

Beecher was also a bit hesitant about making biblical arguments to support his opposition to slavery. He made clear that he would not go as far as some abolitionists (such as Garrison) who claimed “if the Bible does not condemn slavery, I will throw the Bible away.” But this did not mean that his arguments against slavery were based on an explication of biblical principles. In the end, he appealed to the “voice of God” for his justification of slavery’s sinfulness:

There are plenty of men who believe in Genesis, and Chronicles, and the Psalms, and Isaiah, and Daniel, and Ezekiel, and Matthew, and the other Evangelists, and the rest of the New Testament, clear down to the Apocalypse; there are plenty of men who believe in the letter of Scripture; and there are plenty of men who believe everything God said four thousand years ago; but the Lord God Almighty is walking forth at this time in clouds and thunder such as never rocked Sinai. His voice is in all the land, and in all the earth, and those men that refuse to hear God in his own time, and in the language of the events that are taking place, are infidels.³⁵

“Men who believe in the letter of Scripture” was a reference to Southern evangelicals who employed a literal interpretation of the Bible to defend their belief that slavery was sanctioned by God. As a Northern Protestant liberal, Beecher dismissed these Southern literalists and asked his hearers to end slavery regardless of what the Bible said. For Beecher, the United States was a Christian nation not because it followed the teaching of the Bible or church tradition, but because of the moral voice of God—the conscience—that could be found in every human being.

In his second inaugural address, delivered in March 1865 at a time when it appeared that the war would be won by the North, Lincoln was careful to remind the American people to be cautious about judging the South (he cited Matthew 7:1: “but let us judge not that we be not judged”). He urged them to have “malice toward none” and “charity for all.” Lincoln asked the nation to work together in an act of reconciliation—to “bind up the nation’s wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan.” While Lincoln believed that the South was responsible for starting the war, he also believed that anger or vengeance would not bring the Union back together in an expedient and peaceful fashion. “The Almighty has his own purposes,” Lincoln affirmed, and when he did venture to discern the spiritual meaning of the war he put the blame on both North and South for the “two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil” that blacks had suffered under slavery.

Lincoln showed much humility in his attempt at understanding the will of God. By asking Americans to lay aside their malice and replace it with love, Lincoln, who was a skeptic for most of his life, spoke in a manner that was fully compatible with Christian values. Yet very few of the North’s self-proclaimed Christian professionals heeded Lincoln’s call for reconciliation. Most Northern ministers used God-language to condemn Southern secession, Southern slavery, and the war itself. If it is indeed true that vengeance belongs only to God, then it appears that many Northern clergy must have missed that lesson in their divinity training.³⁶

Northern clergy were especially ready to call down God’s judgment on the South. Secession represented a sinful break from a divinely ordained political Union. It deserved punishment. E. E. Adams wrote that whoever resisted the “good government of the United States resisteth the ordinance of God; and they that resist shall receive to themselves damnation.” John Bigelow had similar things to say about anyone who was unwilling to recognize “the teachings of God’s Providence in History, which are the same with those of His Word.” He prayed that the Confederacy would “lay down their bloody arms, and come into line [with]

Thy great purposes of History.” But if the South continued in its rebellion against the Christian Union, Bigelow prayed that God would “with the breath of Thy nostrils, their infernal designs, scattering them to the winds of Heaven; and let the curse of Meroz, scathing with fires of Perdition, fall upon that man, or that class of men, whoever they may be, whether from the South or the North, from East or the West, who shall lift the hand for the overthrow, or the rupture of this *God founded* Republic.”³⁷ So much for “malice toward none” and “charity for all.”

Christian Nationalism and the Confederate States of America

As Northern propagandists extolled the Christian virtues of their national Union and the spiritual superiority of their society over a sinful South in need of God’s repentance, the religious and political leaders of the Confederacy were building what they perceived to be their own Christian civilization. Indeed, the “Christian nation” theme was even more prominent in the South than it was in the North. Southerners were convinced that the Confederate States of America was a Christian nation. They viewed the Confederacy as a refuge for the godly amid the “infidelity” of the Union to which they once belonged. Southerners were now ready to engage in a war that would prove that God was on their side. This mentality is clear in the Confederacy’s decision to adopt the Latin phrase *Deo Vindice* (“With God as our defender”) as its national motto.

Southerners looking for evidence that the Confederacy was a Christian nation needed to look no further than their Constitution. Unlike the U.S. Constitution, which does not mention God, the preamble of the Constitution of the Confederate States of America made a direct appeal to “Almighty God”:

We, the people of the Confederate States, each State acting in its sovereign and independent character, in order to form a permanent and federal government, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity—invoking the favor and guidance of Almighty God—do ordain and establish this Constitution for the Confederate States of America.³⁸

Southern clergy were absolutely giddy over the insertion of such God-language. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, the minister of the First Presbyterian Church of New Orleans, called it “a truly Christian patriot’s prayer.” He blasted the “perilous atheism” of the U.S. Constitution, adding that

its framers had been too tainted with the kind of “free-thinking” and “infidel spirit” that was often associated with the “horror of the French Revolution.” Palmer described the ratification of the Constitution in these terms: “The American nation stood up before the world, a helpless orphan and entered upon a career without a God.” The Confederacy, however, was charting a godlier path. Its framers had made a conscious effort to avoid the scandalous secularism of the U.S. Constitution. When Palmer read the preamble of the Confederate Constitution, with its “clear, solemn, official recognition of Almighty God,” he claimed that his “heart swelled with unutterable emotions of gratitude and joy. . . . At length, the nation has a God: Alleluia! ‘the Lord reigneth let the earth rejoice.’”³⁹

With a Constitution that recognized “Almighty God,” it was not much of a leap for Southern clergy and politicians to affirm that the citizens of the Confederacy were the new chosen people of God. References to the Old Testament “covenant” between God and Israel were a staple of Confederate writings. O. S. Barten, the rector at St. James Church in Warrenton, Virginia, invoked this theme in 1861: “In the gradual unrolling of the mighty scroll, on which God has written the story of our future, as fold after fold is spread before the nation, may there stand, emblazoned in letters of living light, but this one testimony: ‘They are my people, and I am their God.’”⁴⁰ In an 1861 sermon to a group of Georgia militiamen, J. Jones began his defense of the Confederacy as God’s chosen people with an appeal to the Old Testament book of Jeremiah, the prophet of the “New Covenant.” Other clergy connected the Confederacy to similar claims made by seventeenth-century Puritans, even going so far as to reference John Winthrop’s famous call for the Massachusetts Bay Colony to be a “city set upon a hill.”⁴¹ The Confederate government, under the leadership of Jefferson Davis, affirmed this special covenant with regular days of fasting and prayer.⁴²

Yet for many northerners, especially abolitionists, the question remained: How could the Confederacy claim to be a Christian nation and still keep four million slaves in bondage? The North asked this question relentlessly during the Civil War era, and in response the South developed an increasingly sophisticated answer. The political and religious leaders of the Confederacy had little problem reconciling slavery with their claim to be a Christian civilization. The nineteenth-century South always understood itself to be a society informed by the teachings of the Bible. And nowhere in the New Testament, they claimed, did the Bible condemn slavery.⁴³

Southern clergy justified slavery with a host of biblical passages. In the book of Philemon, for example, the apostle Paul urged Onesimus, Philemon's runaway slave, to return to his master. Romans 13, a passage employed by many Northerners in their arguments against Southern secession, could also be used by Southerners as a biblical injunction for the submission of slaves to their masters. And, of course, there were always passages such as Ephesians 6:5: "Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ." Thomas Dew, a professor of political science at the College of William and Mary, used the Bible to defend the idea that all societies had a fixed and natural social structure. Citing 1 Corinthians 7:20–21, he argued that slaves should remain slaves because God had made them to fulfill such a role in society. They had been given a divine "calling" and, in Paul's words, "each one should remain in the condition in which he was called."⁴⁴

Southerners reserved harsh judgment for what they believed to be the unbiblical approach to slavery taken by Northern abolitionists. In claiming that slaves should be set free, abolitionists violated the explicit teachings of Scripture. Robert L. Dabney, a Virginia Presbyterian clergyman and one of the strongest defenders of slavery in the South, argued that Christianity had always taught that slavery was a permissible institution. The notion that slaves had "rights" and thus deserved freedom was a modern idea that had been introduced in the eighteenth century by the progressive thinkers of the Enlightenment. As Dabney put it: "Neither primitive, nor reformed, nor Romanist, nor modern divines taught the doctrine of the intrinsic sinfulness of slaveholding. The church as a body never dreamed of it." Instead, it was the "political agitators of atheistic, Jacobin France" and a few misguided Christians, such as John Wesley, who first popularized abolitionism, "almost eighteen hundred years after Christ's birth." Dabney represented the traditional culture of the nineteenth-century South—a culture that distrusted the kind of progress that defined modern life. Dabney preferred to cling to nearly two thousand years of biblical scholarship defending the validity of slavery.⁴⁵

Southerners thought that abolitionism had no biblical legs to stand on. Anyone who believed that slavery was wrong would have to abandon a high view of the Bible's authority. William Lloyd Garrison was a prime example of this trend. When Garrison came to terms with the fact that the Bible seemed to support slavery, he rejected the Bible—or at least its literal interpretation. Writing in his abolitionist magazine, *The Liberator*,

Garrison said: “To say that everything contained within the lids of the bible is divinely inspired, and to insist upon the dogma as fundamentally important, is to give utterance to a bold fiction, and to require the suspension of the reasoning faculties. To say that everything in the bible is to be believed, simply because it is found in that volume, is equally absurd and pernicious.”⁴⁶ As already mentioned, Henry Ward Beecher made a similar argument.

These kinds of public declarations concerning the Bible became fodder for Southern attacks on Northern infidelity. James Henry Thornwell, another powerful theological voice in support of slavery, understood the Civil War as a clash between atheist abolitionists and virtuous slaveholders: “The parties in this conflict are not merely abolitionists and slaveholders—they are atheists, socialists, communists, red republicans, Jacobins, on the one side, and friends of order and regulated freedom on the other.” Stephen Elliott, the bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Georgia, described the “philanthropy” of the North as being opposed “to the word and the will of God.” Abolitionists were too optimistic and progressive. According to Southerners they rejected “the curse of God upon sin, which manifested itself in poverty, in suffering, in slavery, in a thousand forms which made the world as miserable as it is. . . . Instead of bowing before the word of God,” which clearly taught that slavery was a result of the fall of humankind in the garden of Eden, abolitionists and other opponents of slavery were more content to appeal to “the echo of the French revolution” and ideals such as “liberty, equality, fraternity.” In the process the North “defied God.” One Southern preacher even suggested that abolitionists should be denied the sacrament of Communion because of their infidelity.⁴⁷

The people of the Confederate States of America believed that they were citizens of a Christian nation *precisely because* they upheld the institution of slavery. Benjamin Palmer thought that the South had a divine mission to support this biblically sanctioned institution. The South had been called “to conserve and to perpetuate the institution of slavery as now existing.” It was a duty to “ourselves, to our slaves, to the world, and to Almighty God.” No one was more forceful in promoting this view than Robert Dabney. Reflecting on the Civil War, he argued that slaveholders were doing the will of God by lifting the nation’s four million slaves “out of idolatrous debasement.” By Christianizing slaves the South had brought “more than a half million adult communicants in Christian churches!” In other words, Christian slave masters did more to benefit slaves than any abolitionist ever could. Through their regular attendance

at Christian churches, Dabney argued, slaves learned how to be obedient to the Bible's teachings on slavery and were thus able to live in a manner that was pleasing to God. The motives behind the mission to Christianize slaves were "not carnal, but evangelical." They stemmed from a "sense of duty" and a "love for Christ and his doctrine."⁴⁸ If the Bible supported slavery, as the South believed that it did, then the people of a truly Christian nation must support it too.

Between 1789 and 1865 Americans—North and South, Union and Confederate—understood themselves to be citizens of a Christian nation. The religious, political, and print culture of early national America reinforced the notion that God had a special plan for the United States. Despite the religious skepticism of many of the founders, evangelical Protestantism, which manifested itself in the Second Great Awakening, defined the culture. The real debates in this era were not over whether God was on the side of the United States—that was a well-accepted belief. Rather, the conflict centered on what kind of Christian nation the United States would be. By 1860 there were two visions of Christian America. Many Northerners believed that the national Union was sacred because it was created and blessed by God. Many Southerners argued that the Confederate States of America was a Christian nation because the Bible's teachings were compatible with a Southern way of life.

The Union victory in the Civil War meant that a Northern vision of Christian America would prevail. God was moving his nation forward by ushering in a "new birth of freedom." As the North tried to remake the defeated South in its own image, it would come to embrace progress and modernity in such a way that threatened the very idea of a Christian civilization. Yet the vision of a Christian America persisted. It is to this story that we now turn.