

Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction

John Fea

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Questions about religion and politics nearly always promise lively debate. At no point is this truer than when considering whether the United States was founded as a Christian nation. John Fea, a historian who teaches at Messiah College, certainly adds to the debate with a book that will likely fail to make many readers completely happy. Such a failure, though, is neither the fault of the book nor of the author. Ultimately, as Fea demonstrates quite convincingly in *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?*, answering such a question is not a simple task; rather, it is one that forces his readers to think seriously about the nature of questions, as well as the task of historical scholarship.

A review of this book really must begin with Fea's brief introduction on thinking historically. In less than seven pages (xxi-xxvii), Fea sets the stage brilliantly for the remainder of his study by treating the work of the historian or of anyone who would claim such a title. Making it clear that historians "do not approach the past with the primary goal of finding something relevant," Fea contends that true historians look to things like *change over time*, *context*, *causality*, *contingency*, and *complexity* as they investigate the past (xxiii-xxiv). These sorts of things, in Fea's estimation, matter, because being guided by such things, rather than by present-mindedness, helps produce work that "has the amazing potential to transform our lives" (xxvii).

Fea then models such potentially transformative scholarship by launching into the often-heated discussion of Christianity and the founding of America. Fea divides his historical primer into three distinct but connected parts—each of which approaches the question from a slightly different perspective. Part One documents some of the ways in which Americans since the late eighteenth

century have explained the nation's relationship to Christianity. Such an approach allows Fea to trace several strains of Christian nationalism voiced in different ways by evangelicals, fundamentalists, liberal Protestants, and Roman Catholics. Fea accomplishes much in this short intellectual history, making it clear that the idea of the United States as a "Christian nation" is both an old notion and a rather fluid one.

Of course, having an idea does not necessarily make it true. So, after establishing that many Americans have argued for variant forms of Christian nationalism, Fea then turns his attention in Part Two and Part Three to whether or not such proponents of a Christian America "have been right in their belief that the founders set out to create a nation that was distinctly Christian" (xviii). First, he examines the extent to which the American Revolution and the formation of the Constitution were primarily Christian events—or at least motivated by Christian principles. In the end, Fea finds that while Christianity was a significant factor in the lives of many of the leaders of these moments in American history (see especially Chapter 7), so were other things, such as economic factors and influences from Enlightenment philosophies and ideologies. Then, in his final section, Fea focuses explicitly on several key "founding fathers": George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, John Witherspoon, John Jay, and Samuel Adams. By briefly examining the roles of these seven leaders, Fea clearly demonstrates what he argued in Part Two, namely, that for some individuals, especially Witherspoon and Samuel Adams, Protestant Christianity was often one of the motivating forces, though not the only one, in their thought, while in many other cases it played little to no role whatsoever. In fact, in some cases, such as Washington's praying during the winter at Valley Forge, things we know to be "true" are actually stories created by later generations of Christian nationalists (such as those treated in Part One) who hoped to tell a particular, present-minded story about the United States and its leaders (172).

In the end, Fea's *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* is a wonderful study not only of a particular question in American

history, but also of the hard work that goes into historical scholarship. Not everyone, of course, will choose to do the hard work of the historian herself, but that does not excuse one from doing equally diligent work when reading and critiquing history. “We owe it to ourselves,” Fea concludes, “to be informed citizens who can speak intelligently and thoughtfully about our nation’s past” (246). Resources like *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* offer everyone the tools necessary to be such an active and thoughtful reader and citizen.

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