

The Biblical Roots of American Liberty, part 1: A Christian Nation

This is part one of a three-part essay by the late Rev. Edmund A. Opitz describing how the Bible built the foundations of America's free society. It should be noted that when he uses the term "secular," he does not mean it in the way the word is often used in today's context: Atheistic. As he makes clear early in the essay, he means merely that there was to be no officially established church. A nation without an official church has served America well as she flowered to become the world's leading Christian nation, but she has floundered as "secularism" has been redefined to exclude our founding religion from her own creation. – Ed.

The First Amendment to the Constitution forbids Congress to set up an official church; there was to be no "Church of the United States" as a branch of this country's government. Such an alliance between Church and State is what "establishment" means. An established church is a politico-ecclesiastical structure that receives support from tax monies, advances its program by political means, and penalizes dissent. Our Constitution renounces such arrangements *in toto*; the Founders wrote the First Amendment into the Constitution to prevent them.

The famed American jurist Joseph Story, who served on the Supreme Court from 1811 till 1845, and is noted for his great *Commentaries on the Constitution of the United States*, had this to say about the First Amendment: "The real object of the Amendment was, not to countenance, much less advance Mahometanism, or Judaism, or infidelity, by prostrating Christianity; but to exclude all rivalry among Christian sects, and to prevent any *national* ecclesiastical

establishment, which should give to an hierarchy the exclusive patronage of the national government.”

The various theologies, doctrines, and creeds found in this country can thus be advanced by religious means only—by reason, persuasion, and example. Separation of Church and State means that government maintains a neutral stance toward our three biblically based religions—Catholicism, Judaism, and Protestantism, as well as toward the various denominations and splinter groups. These several religious bodies, then, have no alternative but to compete for converts in the marketplace of ideas. This is a good arrangement, good for both Church and State; it avoids the twin evils of a politicized religion and a divinized politics.

A Christian Nation

It has often been observed that America is a Christian nation—around which observation several misunderstandings cluster. We are a Christian nation in the sense that our understanding of human nature and destiny, the purpose of individual life, our convictions about right and wrong, our norms, emerged out of the religion of Christendom—not out of Buddhism, Confucianism, or primitive animism. And it is a fact of history that our forebears whose religious convictions brought them to these shores in the 17th and 18th centuries *sought to create in this new world a biblically based Christian commonwealth*. But it was not to be a theocracy—of which the world had seen too many! It was to be a religious society, but one which incorporated a secular [non-denominational – **Ed.**] political order.

The reasoning ran something like this. The human person is forever; each man and woman lives in the here and now, and also in the hereafter. Here, we are pilgrims for three score years and ten, more or less. Life here is vitally important for it's a test run for life hereafter. Earth is the training ground for life eternal. Such training is the essence of

religion, and it's much too important to be entrusted to any secular agency. But there *is* a role for government; government should maintain the peace of society and protect equal rights to life, liberty, and property. This maximizes liberty, and in a free social order men and women have maximum opportunity to order their souls aright.

Separating the sacred and the secular in this fashion is a new idea in world history. Secularize government and you deprive it of the perennial temptation of governments to offer salvation by political contrivances. By the same token, things sacred are privatized as free churches, where the spiritual concerns of men and women are advanced by spiritual means only.

So, when it is said that America is a Christian nation, the implication intended is poles apart from what is meant when it is observed, for example, that Iran is a Shi'ite nation. The Shi'ite sect of Islam is a branch of the government of Iran. Other religions are not tolerated. Deviations from doctrinal orthodoxy are forbidden. The government punishes infidels because Shi'ism is Iran's official, authorized church. From time to time government uses the sword to gain converts. The government of Iran is not neutral with respect to religion.

In the United States, it is mandated that the government maintain a level playing field, so to speak, "a free field and no favor," where freely choosing individuals find their different pathways to God while government merely keeps the peace. This is what is really meant by the phrase, "Separation of Church and State." **This oft-quoted phrase is frequently misunderstood as suggesting that religion and politics are incompatible, and that we should keep religion out of politics.**

If we think of "politics" as several candidates wheeling, dealing, and slugging it out in an election campaign, it's clear that religion doesn't have a significant role in such a

situation. And if we think of “religion” in terms of a contemplative meditating and praying in his cell, it’s obvious that politics is absent. But there is no coherent political philosophy apart from a foundation of religious axioms and premises.

Join us tomorrow for part two of this essay.

The Rev. Edmund A. Opitz (1914-2006) was a Congregationalist minister, a FEE staff member, who for decades championed the cause of a free society and the need to anchor that society in a transcendent morality. A man of wide reading and high culture, Opitz was for many years on the staff of the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington-on-Hudson, New York. He was one of the few voices in the 1950s through the 1990s calling for an integrated understanding between economic liberty and religious sensibility. He was the founder and coordinator of the Remnant, a fellowship of conservative and libertarian ministers.

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