

BOOK REVIEWS

*J*ohn Fea. *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011). Pp. 287 + xxvii pp. Cloth, \$30.00

There is no shortage of books on the religious views of the Founders and on whether the United States began as “a Christian nation.” John Fea, a historian at Messiah College in Grantham, Pennsylvania, weighs in on such topics alongside important recent studies by David Holmes, Mark Noll, James Hutson, Thomas Kidd, and Jon Meacham, among others. While their books differ in emphasis, Fea joins these other scholars in debunking the efforts of influential evangelical Christian authors to portray the Founders as orthodox Christians who set up a new nation privileging Christian denominations and ideals. At the same time, Fea shows how religion did figure into the founding and subsequent development of our nation.

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Its subtitle highlights the chief virtue of this study. Fea, a gifted writer, explicitly aims for a nonacademic audience, and the three sections of his book each only survey their respective topics. But these lively and balanced overviews, which include analyses of how historians use evidence (and how evangelical pseudo-historians such as David Barton and Tim LaHaye misuse it), will appeal to undergraduates at all levels and to a public at once intrigued and confused by public debate over these issues. Issued by a Presbyterian publisher, Fea's book can be marketed to Sunday school classes and ministers in mainline churches who will appreciate its serious attention to both religion and history.

Part 1 investigates, chronologically, the persistence of the idea that the nation is specifically "Christian." Part 2 focuses on whether the American Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Constitution were Christian events and documents. Part 3—to which many readers will undoubtedly turn first—analyzes the religious views of some of the iconic Founders and three secondary but more religiously orthodox figures.

The preponderance of Fea's evidence challenges the religious (pun intended) certainty of today's evangelicals on these issues, but he also questions the secularist view. Thus, after quoting the 1797 treaty between the United States and Tripoli (the "Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion"), Fea notes the religious framework through which most Americans viewed our conflict with the Muslim Barbary states. The opposition to the Constitution by some anti-Federalists because it did not privilege Christianity, and the persistent and unsuccessful efforts to amend the Constitution to make the United States an explicitly Christian nation, would seem to clinch the case for a negative answer to the book's title. But then an 1892 Supreme Court decision called the United States a Christian nation. Lest today's Christian conservatives, which of course includes many Catholics, feel vindicated by that ruling, Fea emphasizes that those who posited the United States as a Christian nation often really meant "Protestant," and they were as wary of Catholics as of Mormons, Jews, atheists, and others. That many advocates in the late 1800s and early 1900s of the "Christian nation" thesis also espoused the progressive Social Gospel should provoke thought among conservative Christian and liberal secular readers alike.

Fea's close analysis of the Declaration of Independence notes the religious language and providential assumptions at the Continental Congress, but convincingly shows that the references in the Declaration to "Nature's God" and "the Creator," while theistic, are not specifically Christian and had little theological intent. In discussing the decidedly non-Christian U.S. Constitution, Fea rebukes John McCain's 2008 claims to the contrary, while adding that many in the 1780s and thereafter believed that the states could properly embrace an explicitly Christian identity (the "federalist loophole").

Fea's accounts of the religious views of George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin are excellent. The writing is dramatic: the story of Washington praying at Valley Forge is laid out at length, only to be demolished through a withering critique of the "evidence" behind the fable. Fea's judgments take Christian doctrine seriously: Adams, while embracing its moral teachings, "fails miserably" the test of Christian "orthodoxy," as he rejected the Trinity and the idea of an "incarnate God." It is impossible to read these sketches and still believe that these Founders intended the United States to be a Christian nation, as conservative evangelicals use that term. Moreover, in his study of three secondary but more "orthodox founders," Fea concludes that today's "Christian nationalists" should "proceed with caution" in invoking their ideals, as John Jay and Samuel Adams were virulently anti-Catholic, and John Witherspoon derived his political views from the Scottish Enlightenment as much as from Presbyterianism.

It is difficult to criticize "a historical introduction" for not being comprehensive, but the single sentence on Washington's letter to Newport's "Hebrew Congregation" is inadequate on the Jewish question. (Neither "Jews" nor "Mormons" appears in the index.) Given the "federalist loophole," Fea should have discussed the gradual diminishment of established churches and of the privileged political position of Christians in various states, along with the still-controversial impact of the Fourteenth Amendment. But these are minor problems in a well-written and well-argued book with important insights into issues at the forefront of public discourse today.

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