

## Can America Be A Christian State Or Nation?

### I. Introduction

The history of the Christian West displays a continuous debate on the question whether or not there can be a Christian state: that is to say, a conflict on the question of the relationship between religion and the state. Very strong views have been held on both sides of the question. Indeed, religious wars were fought—some times for decades—over the issue. In modern America each day the media recounts dozens of incidents touching the religion/state issue. For example, recently in the small village of Northport, Michigan a proposal was made to allow five area Roman Catholic congregations to rent the local high school auditorium for a common worship, priests being in short supply. Some citizens were concerned that this practice would bring religion and the state[read church and state] too close together. During the same week a nearby community had a public meeting on the question whether the practice of township snow plows being used to clear several church parking lots on Sunday mornings should end. Hundreds of such incidents are at issue across America on any given day.

Much of the church/state debate over the last fifty years has been deeply influenced by ill-informed people both in the Courts and in the public square. For example, there is no historical basis for the widely used phrase “wall of separation” when referring to the Founders’ views of religion and the state, a phrase frequently attributed to Thomas Jefferson. It was, rather, a phrase slipped into the discussion in a 1947 brief before the Supreme Court by a law school professor. Moreover, much of the Religious Right has been misinformed, or ignorant when it comes to the question of a Christian America or a Christian state in America. The purpose of this essay, in light of these deficiencies, is two-fold: first, to summarize and explain the larger historical picture, and second, to suggest how Christians in modern America should look at the question of religion and the state and society.

The practical value of this task will be evident immediately as we begin with a brief review of *Blinded by Might*, published a few years ago by two of the Religious Right’s insiders—Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson. The larger context of the emerging Religious Right was the “Reagan Revolution” which itself was an emergent political movement at that time. The relationship between these two developments was important because their proximity to each other raised again age-old questions about religion and the state. Among others, the following questions appear as the Religious Right walked the halls of political power in the Reagan era:

What roles should Christians play in governing the nation?

Should they try to control the reigns of power[Congress]?

Should governmental power be used to enforce Christian morality?

Can there be a Christian state? Can there be a Christian nation? Are they the same?

Having considered these questions in the context of *Blinded By Might*, the essay turns to a brief review of the development of the church/state question since the days of Constantine, early in the 4<sup>th</sup> century. Crucial to any understanding of this issue, however, are the views of the great Church Father, St. Augustine. This point cannot be emphasized too strongly. Indeed, his views are the key to the whole question. The essay concludes with some practical suggestions as to how thoughtful Christians today could answer the questions posed above.

## II. Blinded by Might

*Blinded by Might* is a well-written and lively account of how the two authors came into the Moral Majority movement, what roles they played as vice presidents, and how they came to see the movement's crucial, indeed, fatal weakness. It was Jerry Falwell, whose powerful, energetic, and charming personality persuaded them to join him on this new crusade in the 70s. Says Thomas,

Jerry Falwell was the most intriguing person I had ever met. His personality was infectious. In some ways, he and President Clinton are a lot alike—using the force of their personalities to persuade people to believe in them and to follow their direction, but hiding feelings of inadequacy and fear of failure. They are superovercomers for whom defeat is taken very personally(p. 13).

The book recounts the seductive influence of power on the authors and how it became easy for them to confuse political matters with strictly biblical ones. It also contains critiques of specific leaders such as Focus on the Family's James Dobson, and finally, comments on how the Religious Right in the end did not achieve even one of its cherished programs. After stating that they still hold to the same views that they embraced while active leaders in the Moral Majority, they assure readers that they are still committed to a biblical view of the world. Then they come to the heart of their position, the reason why they wrote their book. Thomas and Dobson state, "What has changed is that we no longer believe that our individual or collective cultural problems can be altered exclusively, or even mainly, through the political process" (p. 15). Stated another way, they now believe that the state cannot solve all of their social, moral, and cultural problems.

There is, of course, much more of great value in this book for students of politics, history, and contemporary Christian thought. Yet, at the heart of the authors' complaint is the question of how Christianity should relate to the state. Their clear and unequivocal answer is that they and the movement got too close to the state and its power. To emphasize, they believe that organizations that label themselves Christian as they work in the political arena end up becoming merely another political lobby. Such an organization can, Thomas says in retrospect, naturally be expected to be treated like other lobbying groups—subject to wheeling, dealing, and compromise just like other interest groups. This is confusing when the issue being pushed is deeply moral, or one on which reasonable Christians differ. Stated another way, the voice of Moral Majority in particular, and the Religious Right in general, became less clearly moral and more clearly political over time. It will be useful, however, to move on and place the issues raised by this book in a larger context. If we search for a phrase that captures the larger context in which the Religious Right emerged and flowered in the last quarter of the twentieth century, it would be the “Reagan Revolution.”—whether it was a revolution or not is still debated by some in the early years of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **III. The Reagan Revolution(1980-??) and the Religious Right**

In recent research for an essay about Ronald Reagan, several factors became obvious. First, though most college-history text writers are liberal, they all assumed that Ronald Reagan initiated a revolution of some sort—titling a section of their texts with the phrase “The Reagan Revolution.” At the same time, it was remarkable that not much positive comment about him appears in the texts, or elsewhere either. After extensive reading and reflection, it seems that the following five elements make up the essence of what is now generally acknowledged as the Reagan Revolution:

1. Ronald Reagan was a visionary leader. He had a clear idea of what America was and should be.
2. He stood squarely and forcefully for limited government, even hoping to roll back some of big government.
3. He reaffirmed traditional values such as the centrality of family and the necessity of living by moral absolutes.
4. He attacked the Leninist philosophy of the Soviets, calling it evil rather than accepting the existence of the Soviet Union--this much to the dismay of pundits and politicians.
5. Finally, as a conservative, he was **inclusive** when it came to relationships with other political factions. In this he did not compromise his principles.

People on the Religious Right gravitated to the Reagan movement in the early seventies, just as other political conservatives increasingly supported Reagan. Thomas and Dobson tell us in detail, for example, how Jerry Falwell set out to influence the 1980 election by speaking for months in support of Reagan. Of course, it is easy to see why a Falwell would be drawn to Reagan since Reagan articulated strong traditional moral principles and attacked the evils of Soviet communism.

With Reagan in power, the Religious Right was on the rise in terms of power and influence, again a matter detailed by *Blinded by Might*. Since Reagan's brand of Republicanism was inclusive, the leaders of the Religious Right—the Moral Majority was just one part of it—were invited to sit down with Reagan and his advisors from time to time to discuss their agenda. This was a crucial development from the point of view of how it is that Christianity ought to relate to the state. Consider the following.

Each side in these conversations likely viewed the meetings from vastly different points of view. The leaders of the Religious Right probably thought that they were now active participants in the moral revival of America from the inside out. They were, after all, in the seats of governmental power. In their minds, they were helping to return America to its Christian roots, doing so through their new friends in Congress. They would ban abortions, restore prayer to schools, select godly men for the courts, and more. A Christian America would again emerge through their efforts in the White House and in Congress. So they thought.

On the other side of the table in these conversations sat experienced practitioners of the political arts who saw the leaders of the Religious Right from a different angle. To the political operatives, the Religious Right was no doubt just another lobbying group—a very important one for the moment to be sure. They knew that Reagan and numerous members of Congress owed their election to the efforts of the growing Religious Right. It was in their interest, therefore, to listen to them, work with them so far as possible, and not least—take their money.

Reagan's success in creating a revolution was due substantially to the efforts of the Religious Right. Of this there can be no doubt. Unfortunately, the Religious Right seemed to think that this success, which flowed into the Bush administration, was due almost exclusively to their efforts and power. They did not appear to understand that Reagan's "inclusiveness" principle drew in other equally powerful factions from the political arena. Traditional Republicans were included. These were people who by birth or temperament allied themselves with the Republican Party. Fiscal conservatives were an active and influential element in the Reagan coalition too. Disaffected Democrats, Democrats who held traditional moral values and were not happy in a liberal McGovern style party, were also part of the mix. The point is

that the Religious Right did not recognize the power of these other factions in the Reagan movement. Perhaps they saw their program as more important, that is, that moral reform was more important than the interests of other factions in the Reagan camp.

As long as Reagan was in power, as long as they continued to elect more members to Congress who openly supported them, the Religious Right enjoyed great influence among the politically powerful. The Reagan Revolution, however, would gradually change once Reagan retired.

#### **IV. The Reagan Revolution Without Reagan: 1988-1998**

Reagan's Revolution had certain profound, long-term effects such as bringing a decisive end to the Cold War and raising again the question of the place of moral absolutes in American society and in the political arena. Many believed that his Revolution would be an on-going one, that is, one that would continue for years, if not decades. Indeed, Reagan himself hoped, as did his supporters in the Religious Right, that they were now on the road back to a Christian America. The question was whether that would happen once Reagan retired.

The mantle of the Revolution fell on the shoulders of Vice President George Bush in 1988, but there was a question of how well he would wear it. By all accounts, George Bush was a decent man cast in the mold of traditional eastern-establishment Republicanism even though he had lived in Texas for some years. Once in office, it became evident that he did not grasp well the scope of the coalition that Reagan had put together. He alarmed Jack Kemp and other fiscal conservatives by soon going back on his promise to refrain from raising taxes. Bush's attempts to relate to disaffected blue collar Democrats were awkward too. And, he seemed to not understand the culture and concerns of the Religious Right at all, nor did he seem to be at home among any Bible-reading Christians. Cal Thomas, again in *Blinded by Might*, tells how Bush, while speaking before conservative religious leaders attempted to convey an understanding of the Bible. He did so by referring to John 3:16, except he referred to it as John 16:3—a mistake that no one really familiar with the Bible would make. Evidently, he did not possess the “born again” quality so obvious later in his son George W. George Bush was highly pragmatic in most matters, even when it came to the issues of deepest concern to the Religious Right.

As the 1992 campaign season neared, and suddenly the boy wonder of Arkansas emerged as a serious Presidential candidate, Conservatives in general and religious ones in particular had a problem. Clinton could talk the language of morality and the Bible, and he did. He could also talk the language of fiscal responsibility, and he did. Enter Ross Perot. He was obviously a moral man, and he had a fiscally

conservative message—though he was a bit eccentric personally. Still high from success in Desert Storm, George Bush continued to talk about foreign policy, but this foreign policy focus was off target in the minds of most Americans because it was also now clear that the Cold War was over. Moreover, it seemed to many voters that Bush did not really want another term, at least he did not campaign vigorously. How should religiously conservative people vote with these candidates? How did they vote? Some were seduced by Clinton. Many voted for Ross Perot. Not enough voted for Bush. Clinton won with only 43% of the vote.

The Reagan Revolution was unraveling, including its commitment to principles held by the Religious Right. Would the Revolution erode further with Bill Clinton in the White House? Soon, Clinton made it clear that he was no special friend of the Religious Right, though he still spoke to them from time to time in their language—biblical language. Within hours of assuming power, President Clinton announced that he would seek special rights for gays in general and for those in the military in particular. This was a slap in the face of the Religious Right, for if there was one issue that symbolized their movement, it was opposition to further “social rights” for homosexuals. The homosexual community had supported Clinton vigorously with votes and money in his bid for the Presidency. Clinton seemed to oppose other important issues of the Religious Right too, such as abortion. It is difficult, of course, to know just what President Clinton stands for. On one occasion he will say he is for prayer in schools, and then on another occasion he says that he opposes it. And, when confronted by the conflicting evidence, he parses the words till no one is any more clear about what he said than when they asked the question.

The Religious Right was somewhat more encouraged in the next two election cycles. President Clinton’s attempt to create a national health care plan under the direction of his wife startled the nation. The public’s displeasure was evident in the 1994 elections in which the Republicans gained control of the Congress. Many of those elected were outspoken supporters of the Religious Right’s agenda, many also being active members of the movement. These results breathed new life and confidence into the movement and into new Republican leaders of Congress. Would this newly found power reinvigorate the Reagan Revolution? Some members of Congress apparently thought so. Most of what this new Congress did was captured in the slogan “Contract With America,” and its content seemed to be consistent with many of Reagan’s main ideas, though little of it was actually part of the agenda of the Religious Right. That is to say, most of what the new Congress did involved fiscal policies rather than social and moral ones. The new Congress under Republican control, and the energetic leadership of Speaker Gingrich, did continue to give vigorous lip service to the Religious Right and its issues. Congressmen happily

continued to take their money too.

By the time of the 1996 election cycle, the Religious Right had reason to feel somewhat better than it did at the end of George Bush's term in 1992. But clouds once more appeared on the horizon. There was Ross Perot again. Could the Republicans find another telegenic, visionary leader in the mold of Ronald Reagan? Bush certainly had not filled the bill. Continuation of the Reagan Revolution seemed to depend upon finding such a leader. The Republicans, however, nominated another candidate much in the mold of Bush, though instinctively more conservative—Bob Dole. Dole was a decent man too—married to a genuinely “born again” Christian, a war hero, well along in years, and owning a long record in Congress that was more pragmatic than principled. Bill Clinton continued to hold about 40% of the electorate and he was running again. Clinton, one of the truly brilliant politicians of this age, was re-elected, but not able to gain more than 49% of the vote. The Religious Right could take some solace in the fact that the Congress remained in the hands of the Republicans who seemed to support them, and who continued to take their money.

And then there were the Clinton scandals. Courtroom-quality evidence about Bill and Hillary Clinton's past questionable dealings in Arkansas was difficult to establish, though numerous of his previous political associates went to jail. More to the point for members of the Religious Right was the fact that President Clinton again became sexually involved with a woman other than his wife. The Lewinsky affair not only involved sexual matters but charges of obstruction of justice, perjury, and more. This led ultimately to Clinton's impeachment. Of interest here is the fact that the Religious Right had much advice for the Congress about the year-long Lewinsky affair. In other words, it appeared to have great influence in the corridors of power in a moment of great political crisis. And then there was an election. Some in the Religious Right thought that the moral overtones of the impeachment matter would generate great support for their cause, though the polls curiously showed continued support of President Clinton's work. Republican seats were lost in the 1998 House election. Following the election, the Senate soon voted not to sustain the impeachment charges sent to it by the House.

## **V. The Religious Right and the Future**

Diminished Republican power in Congress due to the 1998 elections began the year 2000 election cycle very early. Indeed, early in 1999 it was on the horizon. Would the Republicans, many of whom are rather conservative, lose control of the House? With this prospect, the Religious Right's future seemed less certain, at least as a political movement. Divisions also appeared among its factions over the question

of strategy. Focus on the Family's James Dobson threatened to support a third party if the Republicans did not support his social-religious agenda more actively making it part of the party platform, for example. Gary Bauer, long a Washington spokesman for the Religious Right, announced his candidacy for the Presidency focusing on such issues as abortion. Then, Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson published their book, *Blinded by Might*, attacking the decades-long strategy of the Religious Right. Their view is, as noted above, that the Religious Right had the correct goals but the wrong strategy. Specifically, they believe that individual and collective cultural problems—moral issues—cannot be altered exclusively, or even mainly, through the political process. Thomas and Dobson tell us that Christians must seek social and cultural renewal by preaching the Gospel to people, changing hearts one by one. In addition, each person should be active politically. In short, Christians must pray for their neighbor and personally call their Congressmen.

It is not likely, however, that deeply entrenched, Washington-based factions of the Religious Right will wake up one day, after reading *Blinded by Might*, and say, “Yes, Thomas and Dobson are correct. We must close up our Washington shops and go home to preach and call our Congressman long distance.” Most likely they will continue as lobbying groups for their causes—anti-abortion, prayer in the public schools, educational vouchers, and the like. They will be a voice in Washington, but given the changing political climate, will they be only a voice crying in the wilderness? And what will happen if their allies in the Republican Party lose control of the House at some point? It may be concluded that the prospects for Christian cultural influence, as embodied in the Religious Right, look dim, that this chapter in the history of church/state relations is ending. But, it may also be asked whether the possibility of Christian influence on statecraft in America must end. The answer is decidedly no!

What is needed now among Christians is a deeper understanding of past church-state relations, a past which holds many lessons for them. And, they also need a new vision and strategy, one that goes beyond the withdrawal from the political arena called for by Thomas and Dobson. Indeed, a new visionary leader would help. Indeed, much can be learned in a brief review of earlier struggles between Christianity and statecraft. To emphasize, it may be argued that a better understanding of past struggles will provide some practical insights for both politicians and would-be advocates of Christian-based legislative social and cultural reform.

## **VI. Christianity and Statecraft: The Past as Prelude**

Come along for a brief history lesson. History lessons are most beneficial when begun with the

“big picture.” So, we ask, what is the big picture when it comes to the history of Christianity and statecraft?

### **A. Augustinian Principles**

St. Augustine (354-430) long ago was the first to comment on this question and he did so in his famous work *The City of God* which he wrote as a defense of Christianity while Rome fell to barbarians. Christianity had been the official religion of Rome for about 100 years at the time it was being sacked and many charged that Rome was being defeated because of Christianity. St. Augustine denied this charge and went on to explain how Christianity relates to societies.

First, he stated a view of history that most Christians have followed ever since. In it man is the subject and traces his roots to his origin in the Garden of Eden. History moved from Creation to the Fall, to Christ, and then on to Judgment Day at the end of time. Second, said Augustine, within history there exists two, and only two, types of men. One loves God and the other loves the world. Both types live in the temporal world and its communities, often together in a particular community—Rome, London, or Grove City. He emphasizes this view of history by likening humanity to a great stream in which flows two currents—one flowing from God and the other from the Devil. The currents meet and mix, yet they remain distinguishable within the one great, common stream. Third, for Augustine these two types of men are citizens in two different societies—two cultures, cultures that are basically spiritual in nature. Hear Augustine himself on this matter:

The City of God is a spiritual society on an earthly pilgrimage living by faith. . . it lives as a captive or alien. . . It has no hesitation about keeping in step with the civil law which governs matters pertaining to our existence here below. . . . .  
 For as mortal life is the same for all, there ought to be a common cause between the two cities in what concerns our purely human living. . . The heavenly city knows and by faith believes that it must adore God alone and serve Him with complete dedication. . . . .  
 As a result the heavenly city has been unable to share with the earthly city a common religious legislation, and has had no choice but to dissent on this score and so to become a nuisance to those who think otherwise.

Again Augustine speaks, this time about the earthly city:

In it each individual pursues his private purpose. . . The result is that the city of man remains in a chronic condition of civil war. . . .  
 The earthly city has made for herself, according to her heart’s desire, false gods out of any sources and all, even out of human beings, that she might adorn them with sacrifices.

Speaking of how the two spiritual societies or cities exist in the temporal world, he said:

Both of these cities alike make use of temporal goods and both are equally afflicted by temporal ills—but how different they are in faith, how dissimilar in hope, how unlike in love. . . . They will go on until they are to be separated in the last Judgment, when each will achieve its appointed end—an end that will have no end.

Biblically literate Christians know what St. Augustine is talking about—that they are “in this world but not of this world.” Indeed, God has not abandoned this world to sin and evil. He has, through His grace common to all men, created governments among men to restrain evil and provide for peace, safety, and justice. This is the purpose of statecraft.

Notice that St. Augustine also raised the question of how it is that the citizens of the City of God should relate to the rest of mankind among whom they live, beyond living peaceably. His answer was powerful then even as it is powerful now for Christians in America. Said Augustine, “**We must make common cause with them in so far as we are able.**” This Augustinian principle should be considered normative in developing a view of culture, society, and political action. Before looking into how this may be done, it will be very important to note how past civilizations have viewed the relationship between the City of God and human communities or states. In more familiar terms, what has been the relationship between the church and state historically?

### **B. Church-State Paradigms: From Constantine to Roger Williams**

There have been several forms of church-state relations, or paradigms as they will be called, from the early days of Christianity to the present. These may be conveniently divided into two groups, a division being made at the point a new paradigm emerged in Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s. The difference between paradigms depended upon how practitioners saw the relationship between three factors—the church, the state, and the community as a whole. The **church** may be defined as a temporal expression of the kingdom of God, the **state** as God’s instrument for preserving peace, safety, and justice, and the **community** as the people who collectively inhabit the realm.

The earliest church-state paradigm appeared at the hands of the Roman Emperor, Constantine the Great. After his own conversion to Christianity (312), he believed that his new faith should be the foundation of his empire. So it was that in 322 he pronounced his empire to be Christian. All inhabitants had a brief time in which to be baptized and make a confession of faith—to become Christians. Those who did not comply, ironically, would be dispatched with the sword. As I have noted elsewhere, the sword

was welded to the cross. Or, it may be said that he attempted to make the religion of Jesus the glue that would bind the empire together again. Look now at the form of what Constantine did. He placed the power of the state over the church. To emphasize, the church was subservient to the state. Here was the beginning of the most popular paradigm for church-state relations for the next 1500 years.

But, there is another very important element in his formulation. Constantine assumed or demanded that the whole realm, the whole culture, be Christian. He assumed that his empire was a “universal Christian community.” This was a very important development, for it opened the door to a policy of non-toleration of dissenting people and groups—a characteristic of the Christian West for more than a 1500 years. This view of the community also heightened the tension between the two competing claimants to power in it—the church and the state.

The Constantinian model was dominant in Christian Europe for centuries, until the eleventh century when Pope Gregory VII challenged imperial power. Pope Gregory asserted Church authority over an emperor by excommunicating him in 1077. Of course, this emperor was ostracized from the rest of the community (universally Christian) until he repented. Eventually the emperor did repent and was reinstated in the Church and, importantly, Pope Gregory re-invested him with his political power. Notice what happened here from the perspective of the three factors that made up communities in the West. Pope Gregory asserted the supremacy of the Church over the state, evident in his excommunication of the emperor. The emperor acquiesced to papal claims of power when he acknowledged the Pope’s authority to excommunicate him and then to re-invest him with political authority after he repented. The actions of the Pope and the emperor also assumed the universality of Christianity in the community or empire. As a footnote, it must be stated the emperor eventually sacked Rome and drove the Pope from power.

Lutheran Germany in the 1530s, Calvinist Geneva in the 1540s and 1550s, Elizabethan England 1560-1600, and John Winthrop’s Boston in the 1640s, like most of the Christian West, all assumed and practiced variations on the Constantinian model of church-state relations. In some cases there was a clear superiority of state over church, as in Elizabeth I’s England. Queen Elizabeth, after all, appointed bishops and held the title “defender of the faith.” At other times, the same people who ran the state ran the church. For example, a John Winthrop could be Governor of Massachusetts Bay Colony and also an Elder in the First Church of Boston, having great influence in each realm.

Even though observations here about the church-state question are brief—though covering the period from the days of Constantine the Great (322) to the time of Puritan John Winthrop’s Boston (1630s), they do represent the essence of that relationship. A new age in church-state relations was about

to emerge, however, even as Governor Winthrop confidently set about to create his “City on a Hill” in Massachusetts Bay in the 1630s. One of his beloved young pastor-friends was about to stir the pot and create a new paradigm for church-state relations. His name is one that once was known to all American school children—Roger Williams.

### **C. Church-State Paradigms: From Roger Williams to the Everson Case(1947).**

Roger Williams, the brilliant, eccentric young pastor who came to Massachusetts Bay Colony soon after it was founded in 1630, had some ideas about church-state relations that were distinctly different from anything that had been practiced before. Perhaps he got some of them from a dissenter or two before he left Old England for New, but the fact is that he began something genuinely new in Rhode Island. Being a deeply spiritual man with a very tender conscience, he objected to numerous Bay Colony practices—such as forced worship, which he said “stinks in the nostrils of God.” When he was about to be tried in a religious court in the Bay Colony for his views, he left, going off into the wilderness, eventually setting up his beloved Rhode Island.

As the form of this new colony emerged, it was clear that Williams also assumed the existence of a universal Christian community, though his writings indicate that he had doubts about this too, as he got older. Moreover, Williams believed deeply in the power of sin and the need to restrain it through the power of the sword in the hands of the state. So it was that Williams’ colony also had a traditional view of the state and its duties, one like that found in the Christian West for centuries.

It was in his view of the church that Williams differed dramatically from his contemporaries. For Williams the church had no special status in the community as it did in England and elsewhere in the Christian West. Worship was a highly personal matter for him, not first of all an institutional act. Indeed, Williams believed that true worship could occur only when one’s conscience was freed from strictures and restraints that state-sponsored, or established, institutional religion [church] always seemed to place on it. Churches, therefore, in Rhode Island had the same standing as other human institutions—such as the family or an economic enterprise. The State had a duty to protect them and the interests of each, all in the same way, no more and no less. Students of the Rhode Island paradigm for church-state relations call it “disestablishment,” that is to say, the church was cut free from the special ties it had elsewhere to the state and to the universal community.

At the time of the American Revolution (1770s), the Rhode Island paradigm for church-state relations was widely accepted among American colonials. Most state charters and constitutions in the late

1770s provided for Williams' basic principles—no state church and freedom of conscience. All of them disestablished their churches by the first years of the nineteenth century. And, when the Founding Fathers wrote the Federal Constitution in 1787, they faced the question whether the “disestablishment of religion” features of the state constitutions needed to be included in the new Federal Constitution. Passage of this constitution was, in fact, conditioned upon the creation of a Federal Bill of Rights, which was drafted, debated, and then passed in 1791. The Williams principles were placed first in this document in the most quoted phrase of the Bill of Rights—“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, nor prohibit the free exercise thereof.” Thus, churches were disestablished under the Federal Constitution.

But, what about the notion of a universal Christian community? Roger Williams had assumed it as had Christians for centuries. What did the Founding Fathers have to say about it?

There can be no doubt about the fact that the Founders assumed that the new nation was a Christian community in the historic sense, though they acknowledged that within it there were individuals who did not espouse a Christian view of the world. Evidence of this includes the fact that many leaders often said, “This is a Christian nation.” Those of us who have studied the literature of the Revolutionary era extensively know that the words “religions” and “Christianity” were used synonymously, or interchangeably. Moreover, most of the states included in their constitutions the phrase, “Religion, or the duty we owe our Creator. . .” as they provided for the free exercise of religion. What could be more explicitly Christian? Separation of church and state? Yes! Suppression of Christianity from the public square? Absolutely not! In fact, as noted, most people in the era of the Founders assumed the universality of Christianity in the American community.

The Williams paradigm used by the Founders continued to dominate American culture through the nineteenth century. The evidence for this is vast. Plays, literature, political speeches, and sermons almost universally spoke of “God’s American Israel,” and of America as a “Chosen Nation.” God planned America’s destiny, many believed. And what was this destiny? America was to bring Christianity, democracy, and capitalism to the inhabitants of the continent and then to the rest of the world. There were no state churches, but religion, that is Christianity, was universally assumed and widely encouraged. Indeed, it was part of America’s mission to be a Christian nation.

This view was not seriously challenged until the middle of the twentieth century. Yes, non- and anti-Christian voices appeared in number by the turn of the twentieth century, due to a variety of developments—rampant materialism, scientism rooted in Darwinian ideas, and plain old unbelief. Yet, the prevailing public philosophy about religion and the state still rested upon the assumptions of the Founding

Fathers. That began to change, and change rapidly, in the post-World War II era.

#### **D. Everson's Legacy: America Not a Universally Christian Community**

A series of Supreme Court decisions, beginning with the Everson case in 1947, redefined the meaning of the religion clauses of the Constitution. Of course, the Court's efforts reflected the changes in society as a whole. By the late 1960s it was clear that the Williams paradigm, followed by the Founders and most Americans for a century and a half, had radically changed. At least, it had changed as an element in American public philosophy. And, what was that change?

The assumption that America was a "universal Christian community" was now denied by the Court, and by an ever larger number of politicians. Christianity in America was just another religion, or belief system, as religion was now called. But, the Court went even further. Following a spurious interpretation of a few Jeffersonian comments in a letter to a Baptist church, the Court claimed that there must be a "wall of separation" between religion and the state. This new Court doctrine rested upon a subtle substitution of the word religion for the word church in its discussion of Jefferson's view. The Court's redefinition of religion has affected much in society, including prayer in schools, religious symbols in public places and more. Someone has written that the effect of the Supreme Court's re-interpretation of the religion clauses has changed the founders' idea of "freedom of religion" into the notion of "freedom from religion." This is an apt characterization of recent developments.

To summarize and emphasize, by the late twentieth century, largely due to Supreme Court decisions which reflect American society as a whole, there has been a second significant change in the centuries-old paradigm about the relationship between church, state, and society as a whole. The notion of America as a "universal Christian community" has been jettisoned. The effects of this are as far-reaching as Roger Williams' "disestablishment" principle. This development leads naturally to the question of how Christians should view statecraft in a non-Christian age in America.

#### **VII. Christians and Statecraft in a Non-Christian Age**

Surely all that has been said here could cause serious confusion in the minds of many dedicated American Christians. They have, after all, believed for a long time that America is a Christian nation. Some will insist that America is still a Christian nation. Others will agree that it once was, but then will urge a return to the days of a Christian America, even if they have to achieve it forcibly—by legislation or by court order. Still others will be glad to say that America never was Christian; belief that it was Christian, they say, has no basis in fact.

What should be, what can be, the place of Christianity in America today?

To go beyond *Blinded By Might*, however, to provide some grasp of how Christianity can influence America, a sharp distinction must be made between the idea of “state” and the idea of “nation.” They are not the same thing. This is a crucial distinction. Let us explore this difference.

### **A. Can There Be a Christian State?**

Though there have been dozens of books written on this subject over the past decades, it appears that the case for the idea of a Christian state is weak. The idea or concept of state means here that a governing institution in a society is one that has a “monopoly of the power of the sword” over people and territory. In this sense, the state is a fundamental, irreducible human institution. It cannot be melded or mixed together with others, such as religious ones. The state’s purpose is to provide for peace, security, and justice, both within the borders and without. Justice is a central duty of the state. To do justice means to apply the law evenly, fairly, and equitably to all inhabitants of the nation. And, law is not merely the collective whims of a ruler, rather, it is the universal law of God written on the hearts of all men since the beginning of time. This is a point also made clear by St. Paul (Rms. 2:14-15).

To repeat, the question is whether this entity, the state, can be distinctively Christian? The best answer is, no! Here are some of the reasons why. First, the purpose of the state is the same for all human communities whether the inhabitants be all Christians or whether there be no Christians at all. The Bible makes it clear that all governments are ordained by and under the rule of the Sovereign Creator God. Indeed, it is clear in it that He uses states for His purposes—such as for punishing other states. Moreover, believers are commanded by Christ to pay taxes as he did (Matt. 17:24-27). St. Paul affirms this (Rms. 13:6) and requires believers’ to pray for those who rule over them (I Tim. 2:1-3). It is interesting to note that those who ruled over New Testament Christians certainly were not other believers. Finally, there is nothing in any of the New Testament comments on existing governments and governors that suggests they be overthrown in favor of some new, distinctively “Christian state.”

It must be noted, too, that the Church Fathers and creeds from the earliest days acknowledge the existence of states to be one of God’s blessings to all men, whether they as unbelievers acknowledge it or not. Of course, they echo St. Paul in all of this (West. Conf. 23.4).

The point here is that Christians, in and out of government, today must imprint on their minds the fact that a state as governing institution cannot be distinctively Christian. This will be a challenge for some people because they have been conditioned to think otherwise. Lingering doubts about this

proposition will be cleared up with a consideration of the concept of nation.

### **B. Can There Be a Christian Nation?**

The answer to this question is clearly, Yes! Whereas the **state** was defined above as the governing entity, **nation** should be defined as the whole community of people who inhabit a territory governed by a single state. It is tied together by a number of other factors as well—language, blood, customs, religion, and more. These factors are frequently referred to collectively as the nation’s culture. From this definition it is possible to see that non-governing parts of a nation could be Christian, or deeply influenced by Christian principles. For example, the Christian rule, “Love your neighbor as yourself” could be widely practiced. Again, the Christian moral principle of sexual purity could be widely practiced, voluntarily of course, in a nation. Indeed, the Christian religion itself—worship of God, preaching of the Gospel, and more—could be very widely practiced in a nation. And, if Christian principles permeated a national culture sufficiently, one might say that such a nation was Christian.

How could a national culture become Christian? There seem to be two possibilities. One system was tried for centuries. In it, the state tried to use its power to force Christianity on to the nation, including formal worship. As evident in an earlier part of this essay, however, this system failed. Hear Roger Williams again, “Forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God.” Forced religion, state-sponsored religion, caused all sorts of religious wars and all kinds of persecution for a dozen centuries, and, to no avail ultimately. Again, a seventeenth century commentator captured the essence of the problem when he observed, “You can coerce my body but you cannot coerce my soul.”

There is a second way that a nation may become substantially Christian. Americans tried it, beginning in colonial times. Once churches were disestablished, and the free exercise of religion was assured in state constitutions and the federal Bill of Rights, Christianity flourished in America. It flourished to a degree unknown in the world before. This success is documented in the nation’s language, speeches, revivals, and more, discussed in some detail above. Foreign observers also noted this remarkable development of Christianity in America . Frequently quoted on this matter is the French observer DeTocqueville who visited vast portions of the United States in the 1840s. He never saw such vitality of religion anywhere, he said, like that which he saw in America. Indeed, the growth and influence of Christianity in America through the nineteenth century and beyond was so great that virtually everyone thought of America as a “universal Christian community,” or to use other language, a “Christian nation.” As noted, however, this condition deteriorated rapidly by the middle of the twentieth century,

thanks largely to the Supreme Court reflecting a changing society with its views in a long series of cases.

If the state, the governing entity in society, cannot be specifically Christian, and, on the other hand, the society as a whole, the nation, can be Christian, how should Christians live out their lives in this situation?

*Blinded By Might* makes it clear that most people involved on the Religious Right still believe that a new age has arrived in which they can use the power of the state to achieve their laudable social goals. As noted, the Religious Right thought they were doing this during the Regan Revolution, and subsequently, they thought they were doing this in the movement that created the “Contract With America” in Congress.

A main point of this essay, based upon biblical principles and historical experience, is that attempts to use state power by the Religious Right to achieve its goals is ill-founded, that is, not an acceptable way for Christians to attempt reforms of the culture. How, then, should a Christian relate to the state?

### **C. Applying Wisdom From St. Augustine to American Public Policy**

In the matter of shaping the culture by influencing public policy, leaders of the Religious Right especially, indeed, all Christians, would do well to go back to St. Augustine again and listen to what he had to say. His argument was rehearsed earlier, but the heart of it needs to be repeated for emphasis. Christians, he notes, are citizens of the City of God and also citizens of the City of this World. They have a kind of dual citizenship, though their ultimate allegiance is to God alone. He recognizes the legitimate power of the state to rule men’s lives in this world, just as St. Paul taught in Romans and elsewhere. Pray for “those who rule over you,” and pay taxes cheerfully. But, he has more to say that directly affects current efforts of the Religious Right and other American Christians. The core of his wisdom, about how Christians should relate to the society in which they live, is this: “Make common cause with them in so far as you are able.”

What does this mean as a practical matter?

It certainly does not mean that Christians should demand certain action or legislation from the state. Nor does it mean that they should take over the state’s apparatus—which appeared to be a goal of some on the Religious Right. With this power they hoped to impose their views on society. Such action would amount to “forced worship,” which Roger Williams reminded us long ago is not acceptable.

St. Augustine’s “making common cause in so far as we are able” certainly does mean that

Christians should go into government as they always have in America. There they can do much to insure that principles of justice, known by all men in their hearts as part of God's grace, are observed and practiced throughout the whole society. At one level, this means that the Christian lawmaker would work with other lawmakers to insure peace and safety, those elementary requirements of a civilized society. Further, with the phrase, "Do good to all men" echoing in his ears, the Christian lawmaker will want to care for the widow and orphan. And, there are a thousand other things he can do as he makes common cause with other lawmakers. On another level, the Christian lawmaker should work to preserve conditions conducive to the "free exercise of religion." This may mean the passage, or repeal, of certain laws. But, while laws protecting the free exercise of religion are very helpful to Christianity, they should be applied evenhandedly among all religious elements of society. This is what justice, fairness, and equity mean and are duties of all lawmakers. Need it be said again that passage of laws favoring only Christianity would be the "establishment of religion?" or, re-establishment of religion?

Christians as lawmakers understand, and Christian leaders who seek to influence lawmakers need to understand, that politics is the art of governing and that it requires compromise. This need not be a sticky matter, though very complex moral questions do arise from time to time. The Christian lawmaker must first separate obvious moral issues from other issues. Likely, the number of genuinely difficult moral issues in public policy are few. Abortion, for example, is an obvious moral issue in the political arena today. Serious biblical Christians should have little difficulty in concluding that abortions take the life of unborn children and thus is tantamount to murder. Thus, as a matter of policy the Christian lawmaker should oppose abortion in society. Opposition is the easy part. Christian lawmakers should also attempt to insure that no state power is used to support abortions. Indeed, this may well be one of those issues on which all men of good will may reflect God's law in their hearts and see the need to protect the unborn by law. Much law making involves non-moral matters and matters on which even Christian men may reasonably differ. In this, the art of politics, the art of compromise, must be observed, honorably.

"Making common cause in so far as we are able" does not touch law making only. Beyond the courts and legislatures, Christians should work hard to live out the cultural mandate, to form and shape institutions and conditions which are God-pleasing and God-honoring. The list of possible examples is very long, but a few examples here will illustrate the point.

By teaching and by example, Christians should demonstrate good family life, biblically based family life. This means a family in which there are clearly defined roles for fathers, mothers, and children. The family is the home and haven for its members, the place where they learn and practice the time-

honored skills for a peaceful, satisfying life—morality, hard work, love, care for each other, and more. Not only should Christians demonstrate such family life, they should actively go into the community and teach others about its virtues and rewards.

Christians have much to teach society about business. Christians should practice “sanctified capitalism.” There is not room for any socialism in a biblical view of society because socialism elevates and exaggerates the role of the state in relation to other God-ordained institutions. As has been written about elsewhere, capitalism can be a God-honoring business system. But, mere capitalism will not do for Christians. It must be sanctified in the sense that the chief end of business cannot be profit. Yes, profit is a crucial element in business enterprises, but ultimately Christians must consider many other factors as well. To be specific, if one has a vision for a new business which can succeed only if laborers can be paid a very low wage, a kind of minimum wage, then it may be doubted whether this is an exercise in “sanctified capitalism.” Moreover, a Christian business person will encourage good moral habits, honesty in transactions, sensitivity to religious and family needs of employees, the production and sale of sound and safe products and services, and much more. All of this elevates the level of civility in society, therein making it a better place in which to live—indeed, even contributing to the building of a Christian nation.

In addition, Christians can permeate government schools and help to restrain evil impulses there. They can insist on the teaching of traditional morality and accurate history. They can oppose degenerate artistic impulses when they appear. Moreover, Christian teachers can live out their religious commitment in the classroom, both in precept and example. Those who say otherwise are uninformed. From a slightly different angle, Christians as taxpayers and school board members can do much to elevate the common good and also insure the free exercise of religion. Surely, men of good will, by the grace of God, would make common cause with honestly motivated Christians in many of these matters. Government schools would be much better as a result.

### **VIII. Conclusion**

Millions of Christians in America already follow the practices mentioned here. To the extent that they do, and have for generations, they have exerted Christian influence on American society. In this, they are helping to retain, or advance, Christianity in the nation.

Christian influence on American culture can, in fact, become even greater, but there is only one way that will happen. It will not happen through attempts by Christians to take over the apparatus of the state and force their principles on others, no matter how noble these principles may seem to be. No, Christian influence will only grow more in America when the Gospel is preached more effectively and

when more Christians, in and out of government, live out their lives more in tune with biblical morality. Serving God and seeking our neighbor's welfare over our own is the heart of the matter. Indeed, if more millions of Christians in America did this, the nation would be on its way to being a substantially more Christian civilization and nation.

To conclude, State-sponsored religion, whether in the hands of the Religious Right or Constantine the Great in the fourth century, does not enhance or promote the cause of Christianity ultimately. "Forced worship stinks in the nostrils of God," as Roger Williams said. The cause of Christianity, which includes a leavening influence on society, can only occur when Christians have free exercise of religion. Having this, they can preach the Gospel, and live their lives Christianly—in their families, businesses, schools, and other institutions. And, very importantly, they can work vigorously within government structures—making common cause in so far as they are able. In this way the Kingdom comes.

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### **A Bibliographic Note**

This essay is based upon 30 years of reading, writing, and speaking on facets of the church-state question. Some of what has been written here appeared in these venues. Several of these will be quoted or paraphrased. Additional items that have been used for this essay will also be noted.

Early studies focused on liberty of conscience and one result of this was my *Liberty of Conscience: The History of a Puritan Idea* (Presbyterian and Reformed, 1972, 1992). Its last chapter discusses the development of the First Amendment's "religion clauses." Augustinian-Constantinian materials appeared first in a symposium paper, entitled "American History: A Tale of Three Cities," presented at Geneva College, April 1974. Other elements were developed for a presentation entitled "Some Comments on 'Civil Religion' in America," given at Bethel College, St Paul, October, 1974. These and other related topics and applications were developed and used in conjunction with several courses offered in Grove City College over the years, including the college's Religion-Philosophy Core Course, and a seminar on Puritanism-Calvinism.

The lead piece is Cal Thomas and Ed Dobson, *Blinded By Might: Can the Religious Right Save America?* (Zondervan, 1999). Bits and pieces of it are quoted as noted in the text proper. Another very useful book on this subject is Michael Bauman and David Hall, *God and Caesar: Selected Essays*. . . (Christian Publications, Camp Hill, 1994). Useful as confirmation of long-held views on facets of earlier church-state relations were chapters on Erasmus, Hugh Latimer, and Erastianism. Especially useful was Chapter 6, "The Theocratic Impulse in American Protestantism: The Persistence of the Puritan Tradition" (p. 115 ff.). Observations in it about the "Reconstructionist" impulse are very pointed, especially on the church-state issue. And, those of us in the Dutch Reformed tradition appreciate the essay on the nineteenth century reformer Groen Van Prinsterer, gifted critic of the French Revolution and advocate of a Biblical view of culture.

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