

The Separation of Church and State: Myths, Mantras, Mandates

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Abstract

The topic of the Roundtable Discussion "The Separation of Church and State: Decline and Fall?" carries with it an implied assumption: that there has always been a separation between church and state in America and that it is threatened today. Previous scholarship, cultural debates, political harangues, and religious sentimentalism have explored the legal and historical sides of the debate yet the same answers are always reached: there either has or has not been a separation of church and state in America's history. Indeed, often scholars have seen a definite connection between both church and state that evolved into a strict secular separation between church and state.

This study examines the issue from the mythical side as opposed to the political, historical, or legal aspects of the issue. The mythos surrounding the phrase "Separation of Church and State" reveals a nationalistic religion struggling to emerge in America. As this nationalistic religion evolves, religious mantras and legal mandates backed with religious fervor resound throughout American history. This paper argues that, when these phrases are studied collectively, there has never been any real separation of church and state in America. Instead, there has always been a close connection between church and state, as revealed by the religious use of myths, mantras, and mandates that reveal a nationalistic religion that has wavered between the secular and the sacred.

Introduction

The phrase "the separation of Church and State" has become a statement of religious importance in American democracy, culture, and politics. A whole mythos has emerged around the phrase as used in the public debate of today. Politicians, preachers, and pundits from both the left and right invoke the phrase as if it were a mantra, thus indicating a sacred meaning. Separationists—those who insist that the state should have absolutely no involvement in religion—and accommodationists—those who argue that the state should not sponsor a particular religion or sect but can foster religion generally—have emerged as liberal and conservative camps, respectively. Each side fights to install its mythical definition as a mandate for public policy, religious purpose, and judicial law. As the battle wages on today, a question arises: Is this an indication of the decline and fall of the separation of church and state or is this simply another episode in the history of the debate? ¹

A different perspective may shed new light on an already shadowy topic. Both the idea of and the phrase "separation of Church and State" have a religious and judicial history stemming from the founding of America all the way to the present. John F. Wilson separates this history into six eras in which the phrase takes on different meanings: 1) the seventeenth century colonial period when establishment was the mandate; 2) 1700-1760s, where the emerging pluralistic religious culture challenged this establishment; 3) 1760-1820, where the first "consistent political

¹ Derek H. Davis, *Religion and The Continental Congress, 1774-1789: Contributions to Original Intent* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 10-14.

argument toward the ‘independence’ of church and state emerges with Jeffersonian passion for religious freedom” which James Madison finalized in the First Amendment; 4) 1820-Civil War, when immigrant Catholics and Jews threatened the Christian evangelical hegemony of the early republic; 5) post-Civil War, where the disestablishment of Protestant religious consensus left a void for an emerging state religion; and 6) post World War I where church-state issues became a theological-religious issue, evidenced in a political struggle within an ever more pluralistic society, and thus became a constitutional issue as well. To these six eras should be added a seventh, where the new 1980s political surge of the Christian Right has brought the matter of Church and State to the forefront of political and religious debate.²

Interestingly, each of these periods roughly coincides with the times of religious awakenings that occurred in American history. William G. Loughlin separates the revivals into the following periods. The Puritans brought with them their notion of Church and State and defined the idea from 1610-1640. The First Great Awakening occurred from 1730-1760 and the Second Great Awakening took place from 1800-1830. A brief “business man’s” revival took place from 1857-58. Another revival movement hit America from roughly 1890-1920, and a final wave of revivalism began in the 1960s. To these may be added the emergence of the current religious and conservative Right beginning in the 1980s. Loughlin argues that these revivals were “periods of fundamental ideological transformation” that were the byproducts of “an outmoded, dysfunctional world” that led to changes in the social, ecological, psychological, and economic dynamics of American culture. In other words, as the times changed and the previous cultural mythos as set forth by the dominant religious view of the period could not sustain the culture, a new religious mythos developed. Robert Bellah, in his seminal 1967 article “Civil Religion in America,” stated that “the separation of church and state has not denied the political realm a religious dimension.” This paper demonstrates the veracity of Bella’s assertion by describing the connection of the religious mythos with the issue of church and state within the two coinciding templates outlined above. Myth, mantra, mandate—these terms imply a religious

² John F. Wilson, ed., *Church and State in American History*, Studies in History and Politics (Boston, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1965), “Introduction,” quote from xvii.

dimension to the cultural and political war surrounding this phrase “the separation of Church and State.”³

Some definitions are in order. Technically, myth is an expression of a sacred phenomenon from the origins of time in words that validate all there is and “functions as a model for human activity, society, wisdom, and knowledge.” Myths have “an extraordinary authority” that takes one back to the primal beginnings and are manifest in sacred speech, acts, symbols, and places, thus their religious significance. Important for this discussion, however, is that myth can be used for political control over others. In the past as well as the present, politics and religion are both associated with justice. As will be noted below, when Americans of both stripes cite Jefferson’s “wall of separation between Church and State” (which misstates what the Constitution actually says about the separation of these powers) as if the phrase was set in stone tablets of old, then they use the term as a myth because it says what they believe rather than what the “sacred text” of the Constitution actually means. In essence, myth is what a society chooses to believe despite the facts in order to give stability to their lives.⁴

Mantra, according to Frederick M. Smith, is “a sacred utterance, incantation, or invocation” used to bring about a “prescribed effect.” One example of mantra comes from Hindu theology where the words of the Vedas are, because of their divine origin, “elevated to the status of mantra.” Jaroslav Pelikan argues that the Constitution and the Bill of Rights are American Scriptures thus, for example, when the Trinitarian phrase “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness” is cited, either in America’s past history or in the present political debates, it is used as a mantra.⁵

³ William G. Loughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform: An Essay on Religion and Social Change In America, 1607-1977* (Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 2, quote from 8. I am citing the reprint of Robert N. Bellah’s “Civil Religion in America,” in *Daedalus*, V. 117, n 3 (Summer 1988), 97-118, quote from 100.

⁴ Kees W. Bolle, “Myth: An Overview” and “Myth and Politics,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsay Jones, Ed. in Chief (Detroit, MI, and New York: MacMillan Reference, USA, 2005), 9: 6359-6361. For the political implications of myth see Wendy Doniger, *The Implied Spider: Politics & Theology in Myth*, American Lectures on the History of Religions, American Academy of Religions, New Series, Number 16 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 18ff. Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2002), 11, points out the twentieth-century mythic dimension of Jefferson’s wall metaphor.

⁵ Frederick M. Smith, “Mantra,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., Lindsay Jones, Ed. in Chief (Detroit, MI, and New York: MacMillan Reference, 2005), 8: 5676-5677. Jaroslav Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible & the Constitution*, John W. Kluge Center Book, Library of Congress (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

The American Scripture

Myth derives from or is associated with sacred stories or scriptures from earlier, pre-historical times. These primordial myths play an important role in the society because, as Mircea Eliade argues, “the way in which a reality came into existence is revealed by its myth.” In the broader context of religious studies, a scripture is viewed as a collection of ancient myths be it the Vedas, the Hebrew Bible, or the New Testament. Believers use these scriptures for edification and therefore employ verses from them in the sense of myth, mantras, or mandates. For example, the New Testament phrase “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and ye shall be saved” can be interpreted as a myth (I believe in the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus), as a mantra (repeated over and over for the sustenance of faith), and a mandate (you must believe in the Lord in order to be saved). Ritual recitation of the myths recreates the time of origins, rejuvenates the present, and thus ensures the perpetuation of the society as the gods intended it.⁶

In America’s cultural war over the separation of Church and State, the sacred time of creation for America is the colonial days, specifically the times of the Puritans and then the Revolutionary and early Republic eras. In what Jon Meacham calls the creation of “public religion,” the “sacred origin of individual rights, the virtue of the populace...and the American sense of duty” emerged. The mythos of the Chosen Nation begins with the Puritans who, like the original couple in Genesis 2-3, lived in sacred time and manifested the way life should be lived. In mythical Primordial Time, the gods walked about on the earth. Numerous scholars and pundits from right to left on the politico-religious spectrum refer to the Founders of America as if they were gods. Indeed some scholars even use the phrase “gods” when referring to them. The very citation of this founding era by later Americans, the ritual recitation of the Declaration of Independence on civic holidays, as well as demands that schools receiving federal funding must set apart a day for celebrating the Constitution, demonstrate the mythical status of the founders and the documents.⁷

⁶ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred & the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, Willard R. Trask, transl. (San Diego, CA; New York; London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959), ch. 2, quote from 76.

⁷ Richard T. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By* (Urbana and Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), ch. 1, and Winthrop Hudson, “This Most Favored Nation: Reflections on the Vocation of America,” in James E. Wood, ed., *Readings on Church and State*, J.M. Dawson Institute of Church-State Studies (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 1989), 87-98. Jon Meacham, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* (New York: Random House, 2006), 10, 27. See David Waldstreicher, *In the Midst of Perpetual Fetes: The Making of American Nationalism, 1776-1820*, Omohundro Institute of Early American History and Culture (Chapel Hill,

Pauline Meier and other scholars assert that the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution are indeed a secular scripture for Americans. Jaraslov Pelikan makes a stronger case for the Constitution as the “normative American Scripture.” With the “reduction in the private authority of Christian Scripture, and especially its public authority, American Scripture has been called upon to fill the gap.” Pelikan goes so far as to assert that The Ten Amendments can be equated to the Ten Commandments and that the Bill of Rights can be seen in its relation to the Constitution as the New Testament is to the Old Testament. He then demonstrates clearly that the hermeneutics of interpretation for both the Bible and the Constitution are the same.⁸

As Derek H. Davis notes, early in American history Congregationalist ministers Abraham Williams and Stanley Griswold both referred to the Constitution as a sacred text. Davis then demonstrates that constitutional scholars, just like biblical scholars, must exegete constitutional terms that are vague, ambiguous, and undefined. Just as biblical scholars resort to methods to illuminate the ancient context, constitutional historians likewise use similar methods to find the original intent of the text. Similarly, just like a scripture is seen as a fluid text, so also the constitution, thus interpretive methods must be employed to find the proper current explication of the text. When Americans cite specific phrases from the Constitution they are in essence repeating “Bible” verses from the American Scripture.⁹

Modern day conservative politicians and ministers confuse these American scriptures with other sacred documents. For example, the late Rev. Jerry Falwell, known for his literalistic and authoritative interpretation of the Bible, cites the Constitution before the Bible in a litany of artifacts that demonstrate, for him, America’s Christian heritage. He also culls mantra-like phrases from American coins, postage stamps, the national anthem, the charter for the Jamestown colony, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, and other sacred (and secular!) iconography of American political culture as if they were scripture. Perhaps alluding to the Ten Commandments, Pat Buchanan asserts his conservative political/moral agenda by suggesting ten

NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), throughout. David Barton, *The Myth of Separation: What is the Correct Relationship between Church and State?* (Aledo, TX: Wallbuilder Press, 1992), 93-100. Jeffrey F. Meyer, *Myths in Stone: Religious Dimensions of Washington, D.C.* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA, and London: University of California Press, 2001), throughout. Catherine Albanese, *Sons of the Fathers: The Civil Religion of the American Revolution* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1976), 193, cited in Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress*, 66.

⁸ Pauline Maier; *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997). Meyer, *Myths in Stone*, ch. 3. Pelikan, *Interpreting the Bible & the Constitution*, 6, 13, 21, quote from 7. Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 102.

⁹ Davis, *Religion and The Continental Congress*, 3, 8, 20, 209

amendments for America to ratify. Why not seven or thirteen? The symbolic biblical sacredness of the number ten is hard to dismiss.¹⁰

When the phrase “separation of Church and State” is examined within various eras in American history a pattern emerges. Each period is threatened by chaos, dominated by an overarching Christian theology, and coincides with a revival fostered by a particular religious institution and its mythology. “Priests” emerge who cite various ancient mythical “fathers” as the forebears of the emerging mantras related to the understanding of church and state. The prevailing institution then determines the “mandated” understanding of church and state relations. As the disparate colonies became a tentative nation and then struggled to the present day America, an emerging sense of a nation fighting for a national religion becomes apparent as the citizens decide how to understand the church-state relationship within the parameters of nationalism. The thesis of this paper is that the struggle over the separation of church and state, as seen through the nation’s myths, mantras, and mandates, is a struggle for a national religion.¹¹

The Colonial Era

The chaos of the Reformation coupled with the turmoil of the English throne and the purification of the Anglican Church led to the Puritan revival. The mythical belief that God was forming a new nation was coupled with the mantras of “chosen nation,” “covenant,” and “establishment.” John Winthrop’s “city upon a hill” metaphor reinforced the emerging myth and mantra of “a new Israel.” A mandate of religious conformity soon emerged with a political reason: this new Christian Nation would be unified civilly only if the Church and State were intertwined. Today these “founding myths” are cited by preachers and scholars from both the left and right. Still, Rev. Jerry Falwell and David Barton cite documents such as The charter of the Jamestown colony, the Fundamental Orders of Connecticut, and the Mayflower Compact as if they were sacred scriptures. These and other documents such as The “Articles, Lawes, and Orders, Divine, Politic, and Martiall for the Colonie in Virginia,” the institution of Maryland as a Catholic colony, William Penn’s “Preface to the Frame of Government of Pennsylvania,” and the Constitution of Carolina all insisted on the establishment of religion. The authors of these

¹⁰ Jerry Falwell, *Listen, America!* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1980), 20-33; Patrick J. Buchanan, *Right From the Beginning* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1990), 356.

¹¹ For the importance of myth, founding fathers, and their use in state religion see Lloyd Kramer, *Nationalism: Political Cultures in Europe and America, 1775-1865* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1998).

documents emerge as the pre-founders of America. The notion of America as a godly nation, where the God of the biblical Moses led both groups of settlers in a sacred exodus to the new land, rests upon the history and religious myths of the Puritan settlement.¹²

With more colonies came a diversity of Christian sects that favored religious freedom more than established religious. Still, each separate colonial government supported its own “established” religion. Church and State remained intertwined but not for long because the growing diversity of religions portended a clash between established religions and religious freedom. Davis sums up the situation well: “most of the colonists had no intention of tolerating any religion other than their own.”¹³ Still, the chaotic clash of diversity with conformity was about to begin.

The Second Era: From Great Awakening to Revolution

Several factors ushered in the era of the Great Awakening. The decline of religion in general coupled with the pluralistic threat to established religion fostered the chaotic second era of church and state understanding. Overall, the colonists questioned the authoritative institutions and leaders especially concerning the threat of Anglican episcopacy manifest in the placement of Governor Andros in Boston and the missionary efforts of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. The rise of other denominations, many of disparate ethnicities, challenged the dominance of the established English religions of Congregationalism and Anglicanism. These factors, coupled with the rise of a merchant class in the north, the changing Tidewater society of Virginia, and the consumer revolution, threatened the old social order. All of these issues led into the first Great Awakening which further weakened the authority of the established churches and brought about a new sense of individualism. The dominant myth of God’s Chosen nation was still intact but the mandate of the establishment of the chosen religions of Congregationalism and

¹² Falwell, *Listen America!*, 31, 33. Barton, *The Myth of Separation*, 85. For the specific documents see Wilson, *Church and State*, 8-31. Edwin Scott Gausted, “A Disestablished Society: Origins of the First Amendment,” in Wood, *Readings in Church and State*, 29. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, ch. 1. Hudson, “This Most Favored Nation,” in Wood, ed., *Readings in Church and State*, points out that Franklin and Jefferson both cited the phrase “new Israel” in their documents. For religious conformity see Sidney E. Mead, *The Lively Experiment: The Shaping of Christianity in America* (Evanston, NY, and London: Harper & Row, 1963), ch. 2.

¹³ Davis, *Religion & the Constitution*, 27.

Anglicanism was shifting to the dream behind the new mantra of “liberty” of all to worship freely.¹⁴

With the threat of British legislation without representation and its concomitant Anglican hierarchical bishop looming ahead, new mantras arose: “life and liberty” and the “liberty of conscience.” Rather than state establishment of religion the colonists cited the Bible, natural law, covenants, charters, and statutes in order to introduce a new mandate: government assurance of religious freedom as noted in such documents as *The Connecticut Establishment and Provision for Dissent*, “The Confession of Faith in the Christians Called Mennonites,” and Samuel Davies’ work “On Behalf of Dissenters in Virginia.” Religious and secular theologies merged in Connecticut where a royal decree allowed for religious dissent in 1708. The Mennonites pledged to serve both God and king and Presbyterian revivalist Samuel Davies, fighting on behalf of other non-established preachers, asked the Bishop of London for licenses for ministers to preach in Virginia. While the established churches were separating from their governments other denominations were establishing their freedom to worship with the blessings of their governments. Inspired by the Enlightenment and its prophets including Voltaire and Locke, a new religious myth began to develop. It did not become fully apparent until the revolution itself, but its incubation was initiated by the Awakening: the new mythos and mantra of “natural rights” as given by God demanded that church and state be separate.¹⁵

Still, all was not right in the religious world of the colonists. Despite the Awakening, church association declined further: approximately 80-90% of the population was not affiliated with a church or was against the institution altogether. The Awakening brought no answers for the problem of sectarian pluralism and the Enlightenment, reason, and Deism weakened the established religions of the colonists. Since the churches could not resolve the issue a new hope emerged: maybe the state could ensure this right. Ironically, it was the established churches that

¹⁴ Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 30, 34. Wilson, *Church and State*, 32. Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 123. Lambert suggests that a market place of religious competition dominated the issues of religion and state. Loughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 52, also includes the westward migrations and the decline of Calvinistic theology. For societal changes see Richard Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and Social Order in Connecticut, 1690-1765* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967) and Allan Kulikoff, *Tobacco & Slaves: The Development of Southern Culture in the Chesapeake, 1680-1800* (Chapel Hill, NC, and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986).

¹⁵ Wilson, *Church and State*, 32-42. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, enlarged ed. (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 1992), 246-254. Gausted, “The Disestablished Society,” 30-32; Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 19-89; Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 38.

advocated for the disestablishment of church and state. Thus, the fervent religious individualism of the Awakening and a growing need for disestablishment fed the fires of the revolution, which, as noted by Davis, was fought over the right to worship freely.¹⁶ A new mythos was emerging, one that was not inherently religious: “inalienable rights” (yet another mantra), as given by God (thus a new mythology), mandated the right to freely choose one’s religion. Voltaire, Locke, and others became the new founders.

1760-1820

The transitions of the nineteenth century can best be explained by the tenets of nationalism. Lloyd Kramer points out that “Nationalism...gives people powerful stories to help them explain the meanings of their lives.” Nations need heroes and martyrs and these larger than-life-characters are recalled through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Indeed, in the early Republic selective memory overruled actual historical events manifesting what Hayden White explains as history becoming mythology. Kramer further points out that language, history, religion, literature, and public symbols are combined into a nationalistic culture. As will be seen below, the emerging nationalism of America was manifest in rituals, icons, festivals, and monuments that evoked religious meanings. National documents replaced the Christian scriptures. Education was nationalized and intellectuals took over the roles of theologians. Nation fused with religion, serving the nation equated serving God, and thus the nation served as the salvation for the people.¹⁷

In the period of the Revolution a new nation emerged, a nation without any official state mythos, culture, history, or even consistent geographic boundary. New leaders—the Founding Fathers—emerged in the likes of Franklin, Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Hamilton, as well as others. The myth of Nature’s Nation appears in the new “American creed,” the Declaration of Independence, because the document was laden with enlightenment ideas. As the new nation progressed a Constitution grounded in Deism was crafted. Thus, Deism and its concomitant rational, reasoned thought, seemed to be the new national religion. An emerging demarcation

¹⁶ For these conditions see Gausted, “A Disestablished Society,” 32-38; Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 30, 34; Mark A. Noll, George M. Marsden, and Nathan O. Hatch, *The Search for Christian America*, exp. ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 53, 60; Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 63, 65. Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress*, 151.

¹⁷ Kramer, *Nationalism*, throughout, quote from 1. Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, MD, and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, 1985), 101-106.

between church and state was given a divine voice in Jefferson's now famous "wall of separation" image in his letter to the Danbury Baptist Association. This metaphor was ameliorated somewhat by Madison's "line of separation," which, according to Mead is the more accurate metaphor of the times, but the mandate of absolute separation of church, as prescribed in the mythos of Nature's Nation and Deism loomed over the new nation. The mantras of complete separation were the dominant theology of the day. Or were they? As Hamburger points out, the Jeffersonian metaphor would not be recalled until years later. Was church actually separate from state at this time?¹⁸

"Freedom of religion" emerged as a common mantra as Federalists and Republicans waged their political war, producing a similar mantra of "religious liberty." Yet the fear of Deism created a counter movement to retain the basic tenets of Christianity for good government, an idea promoted by all the Founders, as critical for a law-abiding nation. The religion flourished but the theology failed. Millennial eschatological theology now merged with political philosophy, thus loyalty to Christ equaled loyalty to the new nation. With this, the myth of the Christian Nation arose at the same time as the Myth of the Millennial Nation in the Early National Period. While grounded in Christian sympathies, these myths demonstrate the rising American, civic mythos that permeates our culture today. While "freedom of religion" was the mantra, there was anything but a complete separation of church and state.¹⁹

As Mircea Eliade notes, "myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural beings, a reality came into existence." The supernatural aspect of the founding of America through the Constitution was noted in the early 1800s as the Founders looked back upon the events and recalled the leading of a higher Spirit to the creation of the new nation. The writers of the Declaration of Independence, fifty years after the revolution, were heroicized and the document itself achieved a "certain holy quality." The eminent mythologist Joseph Campbell notes that, "If the deeds of an actual historical figure proclaim him to have been a hero, the builders of his legend will invent for him appropriate adventures in depth." While earlier historians reported the exploits of the Founders in everyday terms, historians from 1810-1820 canonized the Founders such as Franklin, Jefferson, and Washington as civic saints. Parson Weems led the way in the

¹⁸ Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 6, 53. Wilson, *Church and State*, 75, 78. Mead, "Neither Church Nor State: Reflections on James Madison's 'Line of Separation,'" in Wood, *Readings on Church and State*, 41-42. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 10.

¹⁹ Lambert, *The Founding Fathers*, 247; Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 53; Noll, et al, *Search for a Christian America*, 63; Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 6, 53.

sanctification of Washington who was proclaimed a saint, savior, and even a god for the new nation. Washington, once known for his Deism, was now proclaimed a Christian and was placed on the nation's cultural mantle beside the biblical characters of Noah and Moses. Washington's Valley Forge incident and Patrick Henry's "give me liberty or give me death" speech were painted in nationalistic mythology. The myth of origins of the new nation were taking root within the evangelical Christian mythology and the sacredness of their place in time was now separated from the profane life of the ordinary. The chaos of the pre-Revolutionary and the Federal period was subdued by this new cosmogony of the early 1800s. The emergent hierophany inserted the sacred in the once profane history of the past and a fixed point of origins—the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—was now known. Chaos had been turned into Cosmos as church melded with the emerging state.²⁰

Indeed, these stories were even told in the national language, as evidenced by the publication of Daniel Webster's new *American* dictionary. Within this new civil society, writers such as Mercy Otis Warren "enshrined the Declaration's author" in a growing sense of nationalism. Whether Jefferson's "wall" of separation of Church and State was as popular for this period as some modern scholars assert, evangelicals sent him letters praising his stance on the separation of church and state. Ironically, the scripture of the evangelicals was now replaced with two new sacred texts: the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Evangelical scholar Mark Noll sums up this paradox: Providence was losing credibility because [the idea of] "God was at odds with himself."²¹

New myths of the Founders and new mantras of "freedom of religion" and "religious liberty" were ritualized by an emerging Christian consensus leading, ironically, to the national mandate of separation of church and state. This was the first pall of the bell ringing in the

²⁰ Mircea Eliade, *Myth And Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 5, and throughout, and, *The Sacred & the Profane*, throughout. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Bollingen Series XVII (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1949, 1968), 321. Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings: Politics and ideas in the Making of the Constitution* (New York: Vintage Press, 1996), ch. 1. Maier, *American Scripture*, ch. 4, quote from 175. Ray Raphael, *Founding Myths: Stories That Hide Our Patriotic Past* (New York and London: The New Press, 2004), 128-150. Meyer, *Myths in Stone*, 146-150.

²¹ Kramer, *Nationalism*, ch. 3. Barton, *The Myth of Separation*, 29-30, 126-127, and 134, cites Webster's dictionary as if it were a sacred text unto itself. Lambert, *The Founding Founders*, 272, 284, who says the letters sent to Jefferson indicate the popularity of his wall of separation. But if the metaphor was not recognized until later in the century and then institutionalized in the famous 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* case, then it could not have had this impact on those in the early to mid-nineteenth century. See Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 1-11. Mark A. Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 26, argues that the Bible was replaced by the Declaration and the Constitution.

transformation from a Protestant, evangelical, Christian nation to a nation built on Christian ideals but evolving into a civic state with its own religious scriptures and saints. At this point in American history, as Bellah asserts paradoxically, the emerging civil religion was “clearly not itself Christian...But the civil religion was not...ever felt to be a substitute for Christianity.”²²

1820s-Civil War

As the new nation coalesced tenuously the divide between the agrarian South and industrial North widened. Slavery pushed the divide further and a rising middle class pushed apart the social boundaries that had ruled for two centuries. While a semblance of strict separation of church and state permeated the nation into the mid-1800s the Protestant hegemony enjoyed the support of the state. The myth of the Christian nation was evidenced in a slow rise of court cases concerning religious issues. Barton notes several—*Updegrath v. The Commonwealth*; *The People v. Ruggles*; *Commonwealth v. Abner Kneeland*; *Vidal v. Gerard’s Executors*, and others—as proof. In all of these cases judges writing for the majority based their decisions on Christian principles evinced in a new mantra: America “had always been a Christian nation.” For Barton and modern day conservative pundits, this judicial opinion is clear evidence of no separation of church and state at this time, a connection that, to them, should indeed be perpetuated today if we are to keep to the original intent of the founders. Gausted, however, questions this myth when he notes that most church and state cases in this time were in the individual states which is where the Founders wished to keep the church-state problem. Still, the Christian nation myth was not just perpetuated in the courts. Such notables as Daniel Webster, in a speech at Plymouth in 1820, proclaimed that, since Christians landed there, a Christian foundation was laid for the emerging nation This was indeed a mandate, albeit an implicit one, that the state was in some way connected to the church.²³

Despite this ecclesiastical tie to the state, Protestants also insisted on the separation of church and state because of the threat of Catholicism. The legacy of Catholicism included the history of a state church. Protestants unified their opposition to church and state alliance thus becoming the “moral voice of the nation.” A “republican protestantism” emerged, according to

²² Bellah, “Civil Religion,” 104-105.

²³ Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 10. Barton, *The Myth*, ch. 4 and 134. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 34. For Webster’s exaggeration, see Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, 87, who notes that less than a third of the Mayflower passengers were Pilgrims.

Wilson, seemingly contradicting the Protestant call for separation of church and state. This contradiction is clarified however, when it is recalled that the nation was seen as a Protestant Christian state that did not want the threat of a Catholic church-state alliance. Thus, Protestantism was the National Religion at this time. Emerging from the confusion was a myth of a state religion built on Protestant Christian values.²⁴

The appearance of a National Church frightened some Christians leading to the rise of denominations to counter this trend. Competition between denominations led to a decrease in church membership of 177%. The religious chaos increased as the churches lost their theological intellectuals leading to new secular heroes who were sacralized and whose words and legacy were lauded in Christian terms. For example, Jeffrey Meyer notes that Americans did not want to see the real Washington but instead wanted their iconography to fit what they thought a hero looked like. Washington needed to “conform to the mythic paradigm that existed in their imaginations.” Along with this, the emerging state religion added a new mantra, “In God We Trust,” to the money in the Civil War. As America split into warring factions, it needed a hero. Washington suddenly became a saint, savior, and even a god for the people. The Civil War also brought about a “national anthem” written by Julia Ward Howe: “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.” This hymn even equated John Brown’s revolt with Jesus’ sacrificial death.²⁵

The subtle yet necessary shift from sectarian to state theology is perhaps best seen in the spiritual importance of President Abraham Lincoln. While theologians of both pro-slavery and abolitionist forces could not resolve their religiously justified differences, Lincoln saw the religious implications of the war on slavery. Noting that, while both sides claimed Divine sanction, he wisely suggested that only one side would be proven right. Vilified by both sides in the issue, he read the Bible throughout the Civil War and resolutely guided the nation through its worse crisis as if led by a Divine Hand. Indeed, he felt as though he and the nation’s destiny were in God’s hands. Mark Noll writes that Lincoln, “a layman with no standing in a church and no formal training as a theologian, nonetheless offered a complex picture of God’s rule over the world” while “the country’s recognized rulers offered a thin, simple view of God’s providence.”

²⁴ Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 191, quote from 213. Wilson, *Church and State*, 88. Martin E. Marty, “Living With Establishment and Disestablishment in Nineteenth-Century Anglo-America,” in Wood, *Readings on Church and State*, 57-67. Conrad Cherry, “Nation, Church, and Private Religion: The Emergence of an American Pattern,” in Wood, *Readings on Church and State*, 101.

²⁵ Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 108, 129. Noll, et al, *Search for Christian America*, 92, 107-110. James W. Loewen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong* (New York: Touchstone, 1995), 176. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 14. Meyer, *Myths in Stone*, 138, 146-147.

Discussing the address at Gettysburg, Joshua Wolf Shenk notes that “the holy entity Lincoln discussed at Gettysburg was a national idea.” Shenk then describes the reluctant theologian Lincoln as an example of “saintliness and enlightenment.” During the war Lincoln questioned the American myth of the chosen nation, stating instead that America was *becoming* a chosen nation. After the war Lincoln emerged as an icon of the new secular state religion while the religious authorities fell from grace. The Protestant Christianity of America’s past was losing face as Lincoln’s theology—what Jon Meacham calls a theocratic vision—in essence became the new state religion.²⁶

Reconstruction to World War I

In this era the secular religious state coalesced and with it came new myths, mandates and mantras. Chaos abounded after the Civil War with the changes from a rural and agrarian society to an urban an industrial economy and the emergence of science over religion. On top of that, America’s imperialism emerged and big business dominated politics and the common worker. Immigrants and their faiths threatened the status quo with a new pluralism. The old Protestant Christian line of separation between church and state was stretched to the limit and its narrow, sectarian boundaries bulged with new diversities.

Revivals, as William Loughlin notes, resolve social tensions and the services of Dwight L. Moody and Billy Sunday brought a Christian spiritual relief to the tense nation. Sunday’s revival introduced a new patriotic religion closely connected with the Gospel of Wealth. Sunday’s strict business-like approach and his urban focus only proved that, as Mead points out, the state, Christian, religion promoted business and acquisition. Social Darwinism weeded out the indigent and justified the Gospel of Wealth. Catholics, Jews and “non-Christian” denominations such as the Mormons, were not included in this blessing. On the other hand, the much quieter revival of the Social Gospel questioned many of Sunday’s pro-business affiliations. Still, Sunday and those of the Social Gospel fought against the social ills of the day. Crimes, as Wilson points out, were now called sins.²⁷

²⁶ Noll, *The Civil War*, ch.5, quote from 87-88. Joshua Wolf Shenk, *Lincoln’s Melancholy: How Depression Challenged a President and Fueled His Greatness* (Boston, MA, and New York: Mariner Books, 2006), ch. 10, quotes from 201-202. Meacham, *American Gospel*, 129.

²⁷ Loughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reform*, 8. Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 56, 135-139. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 45. Robert F. Martin, *Hero of the Heartland: Billy Sunday and the Transformation of American Society, 1862-1935* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 2002).

Politically and religiously, the nation was in a period of transition. The state reflected the evangelical fervor, retaining vestiges of the Protestant faith as late as 1891 when the court ruled the state could establish a church or creed based on the Constitution. Still, the total separation of church from state was on the horizon. Congress, not the churches, would enforce the social norms espoused by the evangelical and liberal religious leaders. The emerging religious power of the nation was manifest in the Fourteenth Amendment which dodged the Bill of Rights' intention that states would determine issues of church and state. Now the Federal Government would decide these cases. Samuel Spear, writing in 1876, confirmed this trend when he referred to the "American doctrine of government." The doctrine, however, was still predominately mainline Protestant Christianity as witnessed in court cases that ruled against the Mormons in 1862, 1879, and 1890 where Jefferson's wall of separation was now cited as secular dogma. Christian denominations sold their souls and became associated with nationalism and voluntary associations increasingly depended on the Federal government, not the Spirit of God, to legislate their sectarian causes. Mead asserts that in these events there "occurred an ideological amalgamation of this Protestantism with 'Americanism' that lasted until 1963." Hughes points out that capitalism was founded on the myths of the nation, thus this economic system was deemed ordained of God. From this emerged the myth of the Gospel of Wealth, with new priests such as Andrew Carnegie, where both the American political and economic system were intertwined with Christianity. Still, the battles over education, with Jews and Catholics questioning the Protestant stronghold on the institution, indicates that the state was increasingly moving away from its Protestant roots.²⁸ In this time of transition, these changes demonstrate that the state, with its sacred shrines and scriptures and fathers was now mandating the causes of the Protestant nation yet also separating itself from its Christian past.

Despite the assertions of today's scholars and pundits of both the left and right, Jefferson's "wall" metaphor is only now cited by lawyers and justices as if it were holy writ. Hamburger underscores how the phrase "separation of church and state" became a mantra for the nation in this time when he asserts that by the 1870s it "had become an almost an irresistible dogma of Americanism" and into the twentieth century "the separation of church and state

²⁸ Akhil Reed Amar, *The Bill of Rights: Creation and Reconstruction* (New Haven, CT, and London: Yale university Press, 1998), throughout. Spear is cited in Wilson, ed. *Church and State*, 128. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout The Land*, 45. Mead, *Lively Experiment*, 99, 157, quote from 134. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, 126ff. Wilson, *Church and State*, xvii and 119.

acquired the status of constitutional law.” Indeed, President Grant proposed an amendment guaranteeing separation that was eventually voted down. Still, the mantra of separation almost became mandated law. As the Constitution was reexamined in this era, history was remythologized to support the total separation of church and state.²⁹ Thus, a change in myth occurred, from the Christianizing of the Founders to the secularization of them. The wall of separation was becoming more material than ideological. Myth was becoming mandate.

These cultural shifts are manifest in the emerging national architecture of this period. It was during this time that Washington, D.C., became what Jeffrey Meyer calls the “mythic center” of the nation. The huge dome of the capitol building—designed after the great European ecclesiastical domes such as Saint Peter’s Basilica—was finished as the Civil War ended. Washington Cathedral, the “national temple,” and the National Archives, a “temple” which “houses the scriptural basis” of American government, were completed in this era. Indeed, the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were rescued from obscurity in a box and “enshrined” in the Library of Congress in 1922 as the sacred scriptures of the nation. The Washington Monument, described as a religious obelisk by Meyer, begun in 1833, was hurriedly finished as the anniversary of the nation loomed in 1876 and it was finally dedicated in 1888. In 1922 work on the Lincoln Memorial was begun as well. With a sacred city now emerging the secular state now had a place for pilgrimage for the national faithful who wished to venerate their pantheon of ancestors. The sacred importance of the city was not missed by Rev. Jerry Falwell who notes the religious symbolism of the city and the iconography of the Capitol Building itself. A new religion of the state was emerging. New heroes, temples, scriptures, and priests were appearing. The separation of church from a *Protestant Christian* state was becoming a reality as the nation literally constructed its own secular religion and holy city.³⁰

New symbols of a state religion also emerged, symbols that could be interpreted as creeds. For example, the hymnody of the time reflected a nationalistic bent. According to Gausted, the hymn “He Leadeth Me” was written to meld together the progress, Providence, and even the theory of evolution that were dominant ideas of the times. While President Grant frequented church only to appease his wife, noted hymn writer Fanny Crosby composed the hymn “Safe in the Arms of God” for his funeral. Episcopal priest Rev. Daniel C. Roberts wrote a

²⁹ Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 271, 285, 336.

³⁰ Meyer, *Myths in Stone*, 33, 45, 80-82, quotes from 81, chs. 5 and 6. Maier, *American Scripture*, xii. Falwell, *Listen America!*, 47ff.

prayer entitled “God of Our Fathers” which the denomination published as the “National Hymn.” In what is surely a national creed, a Baptist minister wrote “The Pledge of Allegiance” in the hope of national unity. When Theodore Roosevelt tried to remove the phrase “In God We Trust” from American money a national outcry developed because the phrase was deemed an affirmation of national faith.³¹

World War I to the 1960s

Emilio Gentile demonstrates that the twentieth century was the “most fertile period for the sacralization of politics and America was no exception. In the wake of the First World War Americans lived under the myth of the innocent nation in the era of imperialism and war. In this age of pluralism, and, despite the rise of the secular state, Americans still viewed their nation as a Christian one thus it is ironic that the famous 1947 court case of *Everson v. Board of Education* is universally seen as the turning point in the history of the separation of church and state. In the battle over religion in public education or the public support of private, religious schools, Jefferson’s metaphorical “wall of separation” was finally converted from a mantra to a mandate. Hamburger notes that, by 1950, the idea of separation was an “irresistible American dogma” and Americans “treated its constitutional legitimacy as sacrosanct.” The very next year, in the *McCullum v. Board of Education* case, a nearly unanimous vote of eight to one ushered in what Justice Stewart, remarking in another case, called “a religion of secularism.” In this era of nativism justices increasingly cited the Fourteenth Amendment, not the usual trinity of American scriptures—The Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—in their decisions in a spate of education cases. “Separation of church and state” was now a doctrine of the national religion. Myth, mantra, and mandate were rolled into one phrase.³²

Mythologization in and of this time is apparent in comments and observations from several pundits. Rev. Jerry Falwell laments that the Supreme Court’s 1947 decision was “radically at odds with the [First] amendment’s historical origins” yet, as Rakove points out, the insistence upon “original meaning” is another way of suggesting a mandate. Falwell claims he

³¹ Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 142. James P. Moore, *One Nation Under God: The History of Prayer in America* (New York and London: Doubleday, 2005), 190, 202. Mead, *The Lively Experiment*, 146.

³² Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, George Stanton, transl. (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), xvii. Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*, ch. 6. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, ch. 5, quote from 83. Barton, *The Myth of Separation*, 43, and Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 439, 454, quote from 447, represent the gamut of writers who see the 1947 case as the beginning of the absolute separation of church and state. Wilson, *Church and State*, 188.

knows the original intent of the Founders and thus wants to mandate his interpretation. Falwell goes on to say, correctly, that the wall metaphor was enshrined in 1947.³³

While the word “separation” is not in the Constitution, its status as a mantra was, in essence, legalized. In the 1947 case Justice Hugo Black mythologized the “wall” metaphor when he stated “The First Amendment has erected a wall between church and state. That wall must be kept high and impregnable.” This enshrinement was echoed in court cases of 1934 and 1947 where, according to Henry J. Abraham, the Free Exercise clause and the Establishment Clause, respectively, were nationalized. Hamburger summarizes that most Protestants in this time “understood the U. S. Constitution to guarantee their distinctively Protestant concept of separation” and this only demonstrates further that, for the nation, confusion abounded in regards to separation of church and state.³⁴

Two court cases illustrate the reliance of the mythical “traditions” in the judiciary. In the 1952 case *Zorach v. Clausen*, the court ruled that students could be dismissed from public schools for religious education. The majority justices cited the “traditions” of our nation bending to sectarian needs. Ten years later, in *Engel v. Vitale*, the majority of the court stood against school prayers, while dissenting Justice Potter Stewart saw no difference between school prayers and the Presidential Day of Prayer. He therefore argued American traditions allowed reciting the Regents’ Prayer in public schools. In both of these cases the mythical traditions were cited for and against religion in schools. Clearly a process of mythologization of the past was in full swing.³⁵

Today the 1950s are mythologized as an Edenic time by Pat Buchanan and Rev. Jerry Falwell. While the Supreme Court’s decisions seemingly took away the “core values” of America, as conservatives claim, the Eisenhower and Kennedy years were deemed by these conservatives as a patriotic time of national unity, family values, military heroes, and hard work. New priests emerged utilizing the press and crusades rather than the enthusiastic revival techniques of past American revivals. Rev. Billy Graham, Norman Vincent Peale, and Bishop Fulton J. Sheen preached the mythic can-do American way of positivism and success, military

³³ Falwell, *Listen America!*, 8, 44. Jack N. Rakove, *Original Meanings*, 9.

³⁴ Henry J. Abraham, “The Status of the First Amendment’s Religion Clauses: Some Reflections and Limits,” in Wood, *Readings on Church and State*, 110-111. The cases he lists are *Hamilton v. Regents of the University of California*, 1934, and *Everson v. Board of Education*, 1947. Justice Hugo Black’s comments are from Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 95. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 11, quote from 372.

³⁵ Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 77, 80.

might, and capitalism. The civil religion of America was already apparent in the 1940 court case *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* where the salute to the flag was described as a ritual for national unity. The sectarian state, as Thomas J. Curry terms it, jelled further when Congress passed two national holy days: the National Day of Prayer in 1952 and the Memorial Day celebration in 1958. In a response to the godlessness of Communism, the Congress, guided by President Eisenhower, inserted the phrase “under God” into the Pledge of Allegiance, thus increasing its national creedal status. Religion was now identified with patriotism.³⁶

This phrase “one nation under God” today has assumed a mantra-like status as liberals incorrectly remind America that the phrase has not always been a part of American traditions (it was in Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address) while conservatives cite it as evidence of America’s Christian values. As evidence one can see a multitude of church signs during the July Fourth season with such phrases as “One nation under God” and “This nation was built on the Gospel of Jesus.” These signs reflect the power and perseverance of the 1950s patriotic myth that conflated religion with Americanism, God with country, and flag and cross. Miller’s observation is quite on the mark: there was an “inclination to make religion a servant of national power and national ideology in the cold war” in this time.³⁷

1980-Today

Journalist Michelle Goldberg recently traveled around the nation attending conservative Christian conferences where she noticed an underlying political agenda. The Christian right was intentionally aligning itself with conservative Republican politicians in an alliance to bring America back, in their mind, to its Christian roots. Goldberg persuasively argues that, in response to the perceived threat and potential chaos of the liberal victory of Bill Clinton, a new revival is afoot in America today. Unlike past revivals in American history, this revival “is a

³⁶ Falwell, *Listen America!*, 18; Buchanan, *Right from the Beginning*, 15, 29, 343. Hughes, *Myths*, 170-72. Loughlin, *Revivals, Awakenings, and Reforms*, 179-190, gives the background of the 1950s. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 116-17, notes the importance of the *Minersville School District v. Gobitis* case. Thomas J. Curry, *Farewell to Christendom: The Future of Church and State in America* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 108. Hudson, “The Most Favored Nation,” 90. Stephanie Coontz, *The Way We Never Were: American Families and the Nostalgia Trap* (New York: Basic Books, 1992), effectively refutes the conservative myth of the 1950s.

³⁷ The author saw church signs with these words on them for the week of July Fourth, 2007, near Burlington, NC. Gregory A. Boyd, *The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), ch. 8. William Lee Miller, “Religion and Americanism,” in Wood, *Readings on Church and State*, 181.

conflation of scripture and politics that sees America's triumphs as a confirmation of the truth of the Christian religion, and America's struggles as part of a cosmic contest between God and the devil." She describes this movement as "Christian nationalism." Gregory A. Boyd goes further, warning that this movement "constitutes a *new nationalistic religion*—what we might call 'the religion of American democracy.'"³⁸

If this indeed the case (Goldberg ameliorated her position somewhat in the 2007 edition of her book), then one conclusion that can be reached is that America is no longer caught in between two groups, one that espouses an America based on Christian values and one preferring a secular state. Instead, two secular states are emerging: one a fascist, totalitarian theocracy run by the Christian far right, and the other a secular civil society based on democratic rationalism. Each has its own set of myths, mantras, and mandates.³⁹

The current religious mythologization of American history still centers around the mantra of "separation of church and state." Both the right and left look back upon the Founding Times and interpret them according to their particular agenda. The right sees a Christian foundation of the American government while the left argues for a distinct, secular state. Fears of a conservative Christian takeover drive the left to categorize the Founders as strict Deists and atheists who called for a definitive wall between church and state. Indeed, Thomas Jefferson is invoked by the left as if he wrote the Founding Documents himself. Both sides produce proof-texting quotations from the Founders often citing the exact same phrases that "prove" their Christian beliefs or their secular base. The nation is terribly polarized, exacerbating a chaotic confusion that generates new and conflicting mythologies to stabilize these contemporary problems.⁴⁰

In what Emilio Gentile would call the "sacralization of politics," this religio-political revival arose in response to the chaos of the 1960s through the 1980s. Conservative preachers and politicians today pine for a perceived religious morality of the past. In the wake of

³⁸ Michelle Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming: The Rise of Christian Nationalism* (New York and London: W.W. Norton, 2006, 2007), 6. Boyd, *The Myth of Christian Nation*, 150.

³⁹ Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming*, throughout, connects Christian nationalism with fascism.

⁴⁰ Compare James H. Hutson, *The Founders on Religion: A Book of Quotations* (Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2005), with Barton, *The Myth of Separation*. For the popular mythologies, compare Falwell, *Listen America!*, Buchanan, *Right from the Beginning*, and Pat Robertson, *The Turning Tide* (Dallas, TX and London: Word, 1993), to Bill Press, *How the Republicans Stole Religion: Why the Religious Right is Wrong About Faith and Politics, and What We Can Do to Make it Right* (New York: Three Leaves Press, 2005), and Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming*.

communism, abortion, women's rights, welfare, Eastern religions, the "God is dead" scare, Viet Nam, lack of school discipline, pornography, and host of other ills, calls for revivals abound. Rev. Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority, Patrick Buchanan's conservative political agenda, and Pat Robertson's Christian Coalition hearken back to the American past where the Christian religion ruled America. This return to a Christian America links the founding documents to the Bible. The author saw this phenomenon when Dr. Charles Lampe's "Dead Sea Scrolls Back to the Bible In America" tour came to High Point, North Carolina, in Spring, 2005. While the exhibit claimed to showcase the Dead Sea Scrolls, it also featured several ancient Bibles and manuscripts. Their program described each document but then, curiously, included patriotic religious pictures and descriptions of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The implication from this exhibit was that the American documents were part of a sacred tradition with roots back to the Dead Sea Scrolls.⁴¹

However, conservative religious historians Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch rebut this mythical interpretation of the American history. In their opinion, early America was not predominately Christian because it did not ascribe to scriptural ideals. They do suggest, however, that critics of American history turned the American myth of Innocence into the Myth of Guilt in the 1960s. Thus, for Noll, Marsden, and Hatch, the current American myth of nationalistic Christian origins has arisen to assuage the myth of guilt. Other conservative, evangelical writers, such as Gregory Boyd, have followed suit, chastising the Christian Right for its complicity with the Republican Right. Even political supporters of the Christian right have recently retraced their steps into this Christian Nationalism.⁴²

In all of these cases, the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are invoked as if they are the scriptures. This phenomenon of dependence upon documents considered sacred by both the Right and the Left reveals that both are on a quest for a secular state. The iconic, scriptural status of the founding documents, however, was not the original intent of the Founders. As they struggled to replace the Articles of Confederation with a Constitution amended with a Bill of Rights, the Founders were less concerned with precise, "scriptural" mandates and definitions than with providing for a "more perfect union," that is, the

⁴¹ Gentile, *Religion as Politics*, xiv.

⁴² For these conditions see McLoughlin, *Revivals*, 193-206, and, Noll, et al, *The Search for Christian America*, 13-14, as well as 121-122. Falwell, *Listen America !*, 2-12. Goldberg, *Kingdom Coming*, "Epilogue." Boyd, *Myth of a Christian Nation*.

creation of a new state. Indeed, as Jack Rakove demonstrates, there was a range of meanings in the vague words of the Constitution, a fact which James Madison emphasized as he spoke to colleagues on June 26, 1787: “In framing a system which we wish to last for ages, we shd. not lose sight of the changes which ages will produce.” The main reason for the Constitution was to bring calm to the chaos of the early American Republic, not to precisely define the relationship of church and state which was a matter for the states to decide. These two small but important distinctions have been ignored or forgotten by both parties in the current debate.⁴³

Conclusion

Throughout American history chaotic times were addressed by religious and political leaders. Such travails were periods of cultural “strain,” to use Clifford Geertz’s term, where the current “cultural symbol-systems” were no longer adequate to explain the “social and psychological processes” of the present time. In essence, because of the increasing lack of confidence in the present authority structures, cultural chaos pervades and a new system of symbols is necessary to explain the emerging ideology and thus calm the chaos. Thus, “It is the confluence of socio-psychological strain and an absence of cultural resources by means of which to make sense of the strain, each exacerbating the other, that sets the stage for the rise of systematic (political, moral, or economic) ideologies.” Within this chaotic strain, if the society does not change or rethink its myths, as David Leeming warns, then it risks the stagnation of its culture and religion and thus can be “distorted for self-serving or political purposes.” Within a period of cultural strain where authorities are in question, as noted by Eliade, myth “supplies models for human behavior” and myths “give meaning to life.” Myths recreate the primordial past and bring hope and optimism to those caught up in the throes of chaos. In short, cultures must change their myths as the times change so that the new myths can address new crises and situations.⁴⁴

What lessons does this history of the phrase “separation of Church and State” offer America today? As sober minds from the conservative, evangelical right and the secular left reexamine today’s political and religious issues, one reaffirmation of Madison’s understanding of the Constitution becomes clearer. Rather than seeing the issue as the decline and fall of the

⁴³ Rakove, *Original Meanings*, throughout, quote from 34-35.

⁴⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), chs 4 and 8, quotes from 204, 216, 218, 220. David Leeming, *Myth: A Biography of Belief* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 19. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, throughout, quote from 2. Doniger, *The Implied Spider*, 1-2 and throughout.

separation of church and state, the current battle is just one in a continuation of democratic political struggles to define religion's role in American culture. Lambert suggests that the Founding Fathers left open the possibility that America could become a Christian nation, not by government coercion but through the competition in the religious market. This assertion gains credence when the political actions of the Christian Right and the recent counter-attacks of the moderate evangelicals and the Liberal Left are considered. While Hamburger asserts that the modern myth of separation of church and state has been a strong foundation of America since the eighteenth century the issue is not that clear. Gausted seems to understand the complexity of the matter when he suggests that "history must judge whether it was the fathers of this country in 1789, or a majority of the Court today, which has strayed from the meaning of the Establishment Clause." In essence, the battle over which myth dominates American politics and religion is still waged today. The phrases "separation of church and state" and "no separation of church and state" are recited religiously by both sides, each of which seeks to mandate their own mythical interpretation of the mantra. Historically speaking, this see-saw debate has been fought since the founding of the nation.⁴⁵

Perhaps James Madison was omniscient when he suggested that each generation would have to iron out the wrinkles separating church and state. Whether that makes him part of a Divine Plan or just a brilliant secular theorist, his ideal is still at work today in America. Still, as both sides wrangle over the minutia of the Constitution and the Bill of Rights, the myths, mantras, and mandates tell the story. Throughout American history each generation has decided its own definition of "the separation of church and state." Each generation has created its own myths, manifest in new mantras, and legalized them as mandates. Behind it all has been a democratic form of government, which only supports the notion that, throughout the history of America, there never has been a real separation of church and state, only the democratic ebb and flow that combines a Protestant Christian America with a secular, civil religion.

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⁴⁵ Lambert, *Founding Fathers*, 241. Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*, 191. Gausted, *Proclaim Liberty Throughout the Land*, 84.

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