

# CHRISTIANITY AND AMERICA'S FOUNDING

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Few debates cause more division than that of America's religious roots. An increasing number of Americans view our founding as purely secular and without Christian underpinning. But an objective and rigorous study of the Founding Era supports this conclusion: America's founding and our freedoms were made possible by a thorough-going Christian theological framework.

## **A Christian Theological Framework**

America's founding citizens and her leaders drew upon Christian principles to form a magnificent federal constitution that served our nation well, honored the moral law, and set the conditions for our nation to flourish for centuries to come. The Christian underpinnings were evident at every stage of our nation's formation: the Colonial period, the Revolution, and the Constitutional Era.

## **Christianity and the Colonial Period**

During the earliest stage of our nation's formation—the Colonial period—Christian influence was abundantly evident. Most of the colonies gave explicitly Christian rationales for their way of life. This was most obvious with the Puritans, who wanted to create a “shining city on a hill” (cf. Mt 5:14) but also evident in colonies such as Virginia, whose 1610 legal code urged “reverence to God” for “the glory of God.” Early colonial laws and constitutions were filled with sacred language, recognizing that God alone can endow legitimacy on a nation.

## **Christianity and The War for Independence**

As the Colonial period gave way to the Revolutionary Era, citizens drew upon their Christian theological framework to evaluate their situation with regard to a potential war. They framed their argument for “just cause” within a Christian theological framework. They took seriously the Bible's admonition to “be subject to the governing authorities” (Rom 13:1); thus, they justified their rebellion against England's “higher” authorities by arguing that it was legitimate for America's “lower” magistrates to lead an uprising against an unjust English regime. As a result, the Declaration of Independence was full of language about God as Creator, Supreme Judge of the world, and Protector of nations.

## **Christianity and The Constitutional Era**

As the Revolutionary era gave way to the Constitutional era, citizens and leaders continued to draw upon a Christian theological framework to shape their politics. The Founders were careful to temper their Christian convictions to the public square setting. They neither rejected the Christian religion as a proper framework for conceiving of government and justice, nor promoted Christianity as an official national religion when it came to establishing a federal government.



Through the Constitution, they created a political arrangement based on their understanding of God's will for governments.

Clearly, the framers of the Constitution and their constituents were influenced by Christianity more than any other religion or philosophy. Even though the Constitution was devoid of Biblical references it was underpinned by Christian principles even though it did not quote Christian Scripture.

Which Christian principles shaped the Founders' thinking? Four stand out:

First, the Founders believed that humans are created in the image of God. This belief caused them to view humans as reasonable beings who can discuss and debate social and political issues. It also informed the conscience of early opponents to slavery.

Second, they believed that human beings are inherently sinful (Federalist 51). This belief informed their view that humans will never arrive at a governmental utopia, and thus will always need laws, law enforcement, and a system of checks and balances.

Third, they believed that God is the source of moral standards and that legislation should be in agreement with moral law. True freedom could be exercised only within the bounds of the moral law; any other type of freedom was, ironically, enslaving. Thus, nearly every Supreme Court justice before John Marshall argued that the Court would strike down any law that conflicted with the moral law.

Fourth, they believed that religious liberty is a God-given right and must be protected. As Christians, they believed that the gospel is freely given and freely received, and thus God is opposed to governmental religious coercion. God, alone, is lord of the conscience—not the state.

### **America: A Nation Shaped by Christianity**

It is clear that not every Founder was a Christian (though nearly all were professing, Trinitarian believers), and that America was not founded as an exclusively Christian nation. However, it is abundantly clear that Christianity played a formative role in shaping our nation's founding. It is impossible to conclude that America was founded as a purely secular state.

Thus, we must reject claims that religion should have no place in the public square. Instead, let us recognize the Christian theological framework that fostered our principled pluralism, understanding that the Christian faith flourishes best without government support, on one hand, or government hostility, on the other hand. America was never meant to be theocratic, but its freedoms are the happy consequence of a profoundly Christian theological framework applied by its founding citizens and leaders to foundational documents and law.

