

**Reflections on the Red, White and Blue: A “Christian” Nation?
Psalm 138; Mark 3:20-35**

**Hyattstown Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)
July 1, 2018**

This may be the most patriotic season of any given year in America: The three summer weeks between Flag Day, on June 14, and Independence Day, on July 4. Old Glory—the Red, White and Blue—waves from porches and parades and little people’s hands coast to coast, sea to shining sea.

It was on June 14, 1776, that the Second Continental Congress of the United States formally adopted the American flag. A gentleman by the name of George Morris, of Hartford, CT, is credited with the first effort to recognize the occasion, in 1861. But a Wisconsin schoolteacher, Bernard Cigrand, in 1885 initiated what has become a day of appreciation across the country. His Stony Hill School is preserved as a national historic site. President Harry Truman proclaimed June 14 as America’s “Flag Day” in 1949.

It’s the nationwide display of popular patriotism that inspires my “Reflections on the Red, White, and Blue: A Christian Nation?”

Pertinent to the subject is the viewpoint of one of my more conservative contemporaries, a preacher named John Hagee, who has pronounced the following to Cornerstone Church, his congregation in Texas:

“They’re saying that the 10 Commandments have been taken out of the courtrooms and schoolhouses lest we offend the atheists. Let me be very clear. This country was not built for atheists, nor by atheists. It was built by Christian people who believed in the Word of God. To the atheists: If our belief in God offends you, move! There are planes leaving every hour on the hour, going every place on Planet Earth. Get

on one! We don't want you, and we won't miss you, I promise you. Our coins say "In God We Trust". President Obama told the foreign media that America is not a Christian nation. You're absolutely wrong. We were, we are, and always shall be a Bible reading, praying, Christian people."

According to the highly-respected Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 78% of Americans self-identify as Christians, active or inactive. 5% of Americans self-identify as Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, or other religions. 16% of Americans self-identify as unaffiliated with any faith, including agnostics and atheists. In other words, one of every five people whose path you may cross any given day are not Christian, and an increasing percentage of those who are Christian, especially among young people, are nominally connected at that. The religious landscape in America is both diverse and fluid. Boards of Education give serious consideration to closing their schools for Muslim holidays as well as Christian and Jewish holidays.

A Christian nation?

I would find it difficult to defend that notion with the Hindu family next door to us, our good friends who took up residence in the neighborhood before we did 25 years ago. I would find it difficult to defend that notion with the Jewish family next door on the other side of our home, whose eldest son's bar mitzvah we were honored to attend.

A Christian nation?.

The Texas pastor, and others who would support his view, seem ignorant of the facts. They seem also to be ignorant of the history of America's birth. According to the scholar Farrell Till, in an article entitled "The Christian Nation Myth": *"The primary leaders of the so-called founding fathers of our nation were not Bible-believing*

Christians: they were deists. Deism was a philosophical belief that was widely accepted by the colonial intelligentsia...Its major tenets included human reason as a reliable means of solving social and political problems and belief in a supreme deity who created the universe to operate solely by natural laws...Deists did not believe in the virgin birth, divinity, or resurrection of Jesus, the efficacy of prayer, the miracles of the Bible, or even the divine inspiration of the Bible.”

A Christian nation?

Till goes on to address a matter integral to this debate, namely the Separation of Church and State: *“Our founding fathers established a religiously neutral nation, and a tragedy of our time is that so many people are striving to undo all that was accomplished by the wisdom of (those) who framed for us a constitution that would protect the religious freedom of everyone regardless of personal creed.”*

A Christian nation?

To suggest that the facts of the religious landscape of America, or the facts of the founding of this country, answers the question in the negative, is not to question the integrity of any one of our 45 presidents, nor to negate the role and influence that we Christians are obligated by our faith to exercise in public affairs. It is simply to acknowledge the arrogance of the viewpoint, on a Sunday between Flag Day and the Fourth of July, that America's fortunes are a function solely of the Christian tradition and enterprise.

I believe that even Jesus himself prophesied against such parochialism, instead championing inclusiveness in human relations, as evidenced by his words as recorded in

the Gospel of Mark: *“Who is my mother and brother? Whoever does the Will of God is my mother and brother and sister.”*A Christian nation?

Recently, James P. Marsh, Jr., wrote a commentary entitled “Why I Sit Out ‘God Bless America’” when it is sung at a break in a major league baseball game. I noted that there was no lack of response to his column, both critical and supportive. The insights of a gentleman by the name of David Levin of Anne Arundel County seemed to me to be particularly instructive:

“Theologically it is conceited to petition God to bless oneself. God will choose to bless us of His own accord. He will either find our nation worthy of His blessing or not. He doesn’t need our help deciding.

Does anyone truly think God would forget to bless our nation if we didn’t jog His memory every seventh inning? If one is going to pray to God for anything, it should be to assist us as a nation to behave in a manner that would be worthy of His blessing, not making a demand of him to do so.”A Christian nation?

On such basic matters of our faith, and frankly, on such controversial issues of our faith, I sometimes turn to the wisdom of my friend William Sloane Coffin, deceased now, but still alive in the penetrating lessons of his preaching. Bill suggested:

“There are three kinds of patriots, two bad, one good. The bad ones are the uncritical lovers and the loveless critics. Good patriots carry on a lovers quarrel with their country, a reflection of God’s lover’s quarrel with the world.”

On a Sunday between Flag Day and Independence Day, perhaps the most patriotic season of any year in our notion, I endeavor to be one of America’s good patriots.