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Idea Exchange / United States a Christian Nation? /

America is a Multifaith Nation

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Question: Is the United States a Christian nation?
 Answer: The short answer is this: America is a multifaith nation.

Enduring Question

[Is the United States a Christian Nation?](#)

[America is a Multifaith Nation](#)

[The United States is a Pluralistic Nation with a Christian Heritage](#)

This response, while concise, is incomplete, for it is merely a naked assertion—that is, a declaration, affirmation, averment—standing alone. To assert is not to prove. To become an argument, this skeletal statement—this unsupported asseveration—must be fleshed out with the thew and sinew of reason and evidence. For this purpose, the author will employ his "CLEAR Argument Paradigm"—where "CLEAR" stands for Claim (Position), Limits (Qualifier), Evidence (Reasons, Grounds), Assumptions (Warrants & Backing), and Rebuttal (to objections). In a nutshell, the argument is as follows:

America is now a multifaith nation, a post-Christian nation, and no longer a "Christian nation" (Claim), although America arguably was once so, if the 1892 United States Supreme Court decision, viewed in isolation, is invoked as proof: "[T]his is a Christian nation"[1] (Limits). Yet First Amendment jurisprudence—especially landmark decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court—defines America as a multicultural, pluralistic and thus multifaith society, such that the constitutional decree of the Free Exercise Clause embraces any faith (Evidence), assuming that such precedents command the highest legal authority and articulate normative social policy (Assumptions). Even if it is objected that America is a Christian nation by way of its historical heritage, and that America is still predominantly Christian, its demography is such that America is irreversibly a multicultural—and thus a multifaith—society (Rebuttal).

The argument will now be presented more fully:

Claim. America, once a "Christian nation" is now a post-Christian nation, and thus a multifaith nation. This claim is cognizant of the fact that a majority of Americans today still consider America to be a Christian nation, according to studies that will be cited below. This tension—between the claim being made here and the continued prevalence of the notion of America as a Christian nation—is not so much a contradiction as it is a paradox. Here, the paradox is the disparity between America's imagined reality and its social reality.

Limits: If the question had been posed in the past tense—i.e. Was the United States a Christian nation?—then the answer would be a resounding "Yes." Historically, America was once a "Christian nation"—and still is, to a limited degree. If viewed in isolation, then the 1892 United States Supreme Court's decision in Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States may be invoked as legal recognition of that historical, cultural, demographic and political and ideological fact, in which Justice Brewer, voicing a unanimous decision, announced:

If we pass beyond these matters to a view of American life as expressed by its laws, its business, its customs and its society, we find everywhere a clear recognition of the same truth. ¶ These, and many other matters which might be noticed, add a volume of unofficial declarations to the mass of organic utterances that this is a Christian nation.[2]

Such a declaration may be cited in support of the argument that America is a "Christian nation" by virtue of its Christian heritage. While true historically, times have changed, along with America's ethnic and religious profile, since Justice Brewer's day.

Evidence: America's religious profile has changed dramatically: the U.S. is no longer a Protestant-majority nation. Mid-2012 marks "the first time ¶ that the Protestant share of the [American] population has dipped significantly below 50%." [3] Of course, together with Catholics (22%), Mormons (2%) and Orthodox Christians (1%), Christians are still the majority at 73%. Non-Christian groups—i.e. "other faith" (6%), unaffiliated (nearly 20%) and "don't know" (2%) Americans

—now comprise over one-fourth of the nation's population (27%).

Ever since Justice Brewer's declaration that America is a "Christian nation," the Courts have taken cognizance of America's changing religious landscape. First Amendment jurisprudence—especially landmark decisions by the U.S. Supreme Court—defines America as a multicultural, pluralistic and thus multifaith society, such that the constitutional decree of the Free Exercise Clause embraces any faith. A century later, the U.S. Supreme Court has affirmed that America is a multifaith nation. In a 1989 case over the constitutionality of two recurring holiday displays—a crèche depicting the Christian Nativity scene placed on the Grand Staircase of the Allegheny County Courthouse and an 18-foot Chanukah menorah or candelabrum placed just outside Pittsburgh's City-County Building next to the city's 45-foot decorated Christmas tree—Justice Blackmun acknowledged that Justice Brewer's declaration that America is a "Christian nation" may well have been true in his own day. But times and circumstances have changed dramatically. While granting that the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights may have originally been enshrined in the U.S. Constitution in order to protect Christian diversity, Justice Blackmun noted that the free exercise of religion now guarantees religious freedom for all faiths (and non-faiths) in America:

This Nation is heir to a history and tradition of religious diversity that dates from the settlement of the North American Continent. Sectarian differences among various Christian denominations were central to the origins of our Republic. Since then, adherents of religions too numerous to name have made the United States their home, as have those whose beliefs expressly exclude religion. Precisely because of the religious diversity that is our national heritage, the Founders added to the Constitution a Bill of Rights, the very first words of which declare: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . ." Perhaps in the early days of the Republic these words were understood to protect only the diversity within Christianity, but today they are recognized as guaranteeing religious liberty and equality to "the infidel, the atheist, or the adherent of a non-Christian faith such as Islam or Judaism."^[4]

Thus, under color of law, every faith-community in the United States enjoys freedom of religion as a fundamental right. First and foremost, this is a legal protection guaranteed for all Americans in good standing. A "Christian nation," by definition, would render all other faiths secondary in status, which violates the notion of equality of justice and opportunity for all Americans.

Assumptions: Backing evidence and reasons in any complete argument are underlying assumptions and values, whether these "truths" are explicitly stated or not. Of course, the decisions of the U.S. Supreme Court stand as judicial precedents and command the highest legal authority and articulate normative social policy. Yet these decisions interpret and apply the law, from the U.S. Constitution to a broad spectrum of statutes, which, one and all, are based on social policies. Such policies are typically grounded in fundamental values that form the bedrock of American society. To a degree, those values are in flux.

Rebuttal: If the objection is raised that America was founded as a Christian nation and therefore remains, at its historical and ideological core, a Christian nation, there is evidence that the Founding Fathers—the Framers of the Constitution—envisioned religious diversity in America that transcended Christian boundaries. The Supreme Court's 1892 dictum that America is a "Christian nation" was formulated over a century after the nation's founding on July 4, 1776 (Declaration of Independence). Thomas Jefferson, the principal author of *The Declaration of Independence* and third President of the United States, wrote in his Autobiography, regarding the *Virginia Act for Religious Freedom* (Va. Code Ann. Â§ 57-1, January 16, 1786), the following comment as to the scope and purpose of the Act:

The bill for establishing religious freedom, the principles of which had, to a certain degree, been enacted before, I had drawn in all the latitude of reason & right. It still met with opposition; but, with some mutilations in the preamble, it was finally passed; and a singular proposition proved that its protection of opinion was meant to be universal. Where the preamble declares that coercion is a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, an amendment was proposed, by inserting the word "Jesus Christ," so that it should read "a departure from the plan of Jesus Christ, the holy author of our religion." The insertion was rejected by a great majority, in proof that they meant to comprehend, within the mantle of it's [sic] protection, the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and infidel of every denomination.^[5]

Here, "protection of opinion" was "meant to be universal" as the right of religious freedom extended to Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and to the adherents of all faiths and persuasions. Similarly, John Adams, third President of the United States, declared in the Treaty of Tripoli (Article 11) that the United States of America is not intrinsically a Christian nation, since its government did not ground itself upon Christianity:

As the Government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion; as it has in

itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquillity, of Musselmen; and as the said States never have entered into any war or act of hostility against any Mehomitan nation, it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries.[6]

Article 11 was written by Joel Barlow, U.S. Consul General of Algiers. In his speech in Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009, President Barack Obama invoked the Treaty of Tripoli in his outreach to Muslims:

I also know that Islam has always been a part of America's story. The first nation to recognize my country was Morocco. In signing the Treaty of Tripoli in 1796, our second President, John Adams, wrote, "The United States has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Muslims." And since our founding, American Muslims have enriched the United States.

True, President Obama's views may not represent the views of the American majority. But his views do represent current American policy and, predictably, the future trend of American self-identity and national purpose.

Conclusion: The presenting question—"Is the United States a Christian nation?"—is a close one. The majority of Americans today continue to regard the United States as a Christian nation, and that this belief, rather than waning, is waxing strong. In a 2010 study, "America as a 'Christian nation'? Understanding religious boundaries of national identity in the United States," authors Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld have argued that belief in America as a "Christian nation" is on the rise.[7]

There is a good explanation for this burgeoning belief in Christian America, however. Straughn and Feld account for this social phenomenon as a process of "selective intensification"[8] in which "the only significant rise in CA [Christian America] took place among Christian Americans." [9] This growing salience of Christianity to American identity is largely a reflex of Christian response to the traumatic events of 9/11 or the war in Iraq.[10]

Yet America's religious landscape has changed dramatically. The 2010 U.S. *Religion Census: Religious Congregations & Membership Study* (RCMS) was released on May 1, 2012. Besides its survey of Christian divisions and denominations across the U.S., the RCMS provides Jewish data for 3,464 congregations (of Conservative, Orthodox, Reconstructionist, and Reform traditions), Muslim data for 2,106 mosques, Buddhist data for 215 bodies (grouped by four traditions), Hindu data for 127 bodies (also grouped by four traditions), and coverage of Baha'i, Jain, Sikh, Spiritualist, Taoist, Zoroastrian, and Shinto traditions. The RCMS revealed, *inter alia*, the following data on America's changing religious landscape:

- Mainstream Protestant churches lost an average of 12.8% of adherents in the first decade of the 21st century.
- Catholic churches had 5% fewer active members.
- Islamic centers are on the rise, with 2,106 mosques nationwide, including 166 mosques in Texas, 118 in Florida and 50 in North Carolina, reported in 2010.
- Buddhist congregations found in all 50 states.
- Hindu temples were reported in 49 states.
- The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints experienced the greatest growth over the previous decade, gaining nearly 2 million for a total of 6.14 million adherents in 13,600 wards and branches, as their congregations are called.

These statistics are highly significant. They demonstrate that America's changing demographics is part and parcel of its social evolution, which necessarily involves a transformation of America's collective perception of itself. These trends are further confirmed by the Pew Research Center's 2012 report (cited above) that America is no longer a Protestant-majority nation. Recent demographics show that America is increasingly—and irreversibly—emerging as a multiracial, multicultural, and thus multifaith society. This, in turn, exerts an influence on America's world role, both actual and imagined:

The subsequent history of the religious idea of America, therefore, can be analyzed, in part, as an evolution—protracted and painful—in the idea of the place of race and ethnicity in American life, *as religiously valued*. The evolution of American thought, with respect to the idea of America itself, is roughly a progression from religious—and often racial—particularism to universal inclusivism. That is to say, the religious idea of America represents a transformation of Protestant ethnoreligious homogeneity to multiethnic and multireligious plurality, reflecting a direct, albeit delayed and long-overdue, response to America's changing demography and religious landscape. Religious myths of America—true to changed historical circumstances and social dynamics—eventually give way to new myths and visions of America. The process of remythologizing therefore reflects progress in the social evolution of America.[11]

Some lament the fact that America, once a Christian nation, is losing her heritage, even her very "soul." This loss, however, may be a gain, if "multifaith" is not opposed to all things Christian. A multifaith nation necessarily includes a "Christian nation," but is not limited to that single faith-perspective. America has not lost its Christian heritage, for that is a fact of its history. Justice Brewer's truism that "this is a Christian nation" is time-stamped, dated and now antiquated. It was true then, and true now—in the minds of the majority of today's committed church-goers. Today, Justice Brewer's truism would now be construed as triumphalism that is more of a wish-image than reality. Added to the spires of American churches today are the domes and minarets of mosques, the towers of synagogues, and the *shikharas* of Hindu temples. Robert Wuthnow, in "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': American Identity and American Democracy," points out that "diversity is not an ideology, nor a cult of liberal academia, but a very real, challenging fact of our national life." "Multiculturalism," he goes on to say, "is not a doctrine preached, but a reality lived."^[12] This social fact heightens the "significant tension in American culture between a long-standing and deeply held view among sizable numbers of Americans that America is a Christian nation, on the one hand, and norms of civic liberty that recognize the reality and rights of non-Christian groups, on the other."^[13]

America, once a "Christian nation," is now a post-Christian nation, and thus a multifaith nation. "Designating a society, community, etc., in which several different religious faiths coexist"—that's the meaning of "multi-faith" according to the Oxford English Dictionary. Today America is a demographic microcosm of the world. Americans need to "catch up" to their own social reality. Despite the social fact of America's increasing religious diversity, there is still a strong belief, especially among frequent churchgoers, that America remains a "Christian nation." Strange to say, Americans do not universally embrace a "religious cosmopolitanism" that reflects America's changing religious landscape. Even so, over time, the belief in America as a "Christian nation" will predictably transition to a consensus that America is a multifaith nation, where social reality will reshape America's collective identity and world role, both actual and imagined.

Notes:

[1] Church of the Holy Trinity v. United States, 143 U.S. 457, 471 (1892).

[2] Ibid.

[3] Pew Research Center's Forum on Religion & Public Life's October 9, 2012 report, "'Nones' on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation"; <http://www.pewforum.org/unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx>. Accessed date December 7, 2012.

[4] County of Allegheny v. ACLU, 492 U.S. 573, 589–590 (1989) (citations omitted).

[5] Thomas Jefferson, *The Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson, 1743–1790*. Edited by Paul Leicester Ford. New Introduction by Michael Zuckerman (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 71.

[6] Treaty of peace and friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli, of Barbary (ratified by the Senate with John Adams' signature on 10 June, 1797), emphasis added.

[7] Jeremy Brooke Straughn and Scott L. Feld. "America as a 'Christian nation'? Understanding religious boundaries of national identity in the United States." *Sociology of Religion* 71, no.3 (October 2010): 280–281.

[8] Ibid, 295–297.

[9] Ibid, 298.

[10] Ibid, 302.

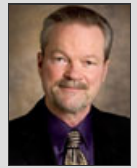
[11] Christopher Buck, *Religious Myths and Visions of America: How Minority Faiths Redefined America's World Role* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO/Praeger, 2009), 205.

[12] Robert Wuthnow. "Religious Diversity in a 'Christian Nation': American Identity and American Democracy." *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*. Edited by Thomas Banchoff (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 251.

[13] Ibid, 160.

About the Author

Dr. Christopher Buck (PhD, University of Toronto, 1996; JD, Thomas M. Cooley Law School, 2006), is a Pennsylvania attorney/independent scholar and a part-time instructor at Pennsylvania State University (Greater Allegheny). He has taught at Michigan State University (2000–2004), Quincy University (1999–2000), Millikin University (1997–1999), and Carleton University (1994–1996). Widely published, Buck also has authored book chapters as well as journal and encyclopedia articles on topics ranging from the comparative phenomenology of religions to African American studies. For use as classroom teaching tools, Buck is known for his "DREAMS" world religions paradigm—Doctrinal, Ritual, Ethical, Artistic, Mystical and Social dimensions of religion (with sub-dimensions)—for describing and comparing world religions, and for his "CLEAR" argument paradigm—Claim, Limits, Evidence, Assumptions and Rebuttal—a model to assist students in writing their own arguments. Buck's biography of Alain Locke—the first African American Rhodes Scholar (1907) and who Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in a 1968 speech, compared to Plato and Aristotle—presents Locke's philosophy of democracy in nine dimensions. Buck later edited and introduced previously unpublished essays and speeches by Alain Locke. In June 2011, Buck presented "Locke: Pioneer in Multiculturalism & Race Amity" at the National Race Amity Conference in Boston.



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