

A Compact Road Map of American History

Part 2 of 3

By Rich Lusk

Civic Religion: American or Christian?

We have already traced out the basic contours of the shift in America from an ecclesiocentric, theocratic social order to a secular one. Building on Locke and Hobbes, the Enlightenment accomplished an astonishing coup of Christendom. That victory for the secularists was only possible because Christians were too busy fighting with each other to guard against the real enemies. But once the flag of secularism (you know, the one with stars and stripes!) was planted in the public square, it wasn't going to be removed easily.

At this point, before moving on, we need to examine more closely ways in which the original vision of the colonists was already becoming undone when America won her independence from Britain. While most of our so-called founding fathers were good and godly men, several were at best semi-Christians, or Deists, and many of them were openly hostile to the church. An anti-ecclesiastical spirit was definitely in the air. If I may exaggerate for the sake of effect: they loved *Christianity*, but hated the *church*.

As already suggested, a great deal of this can be traced back to the British empiricist and political philosopher Locke. Locke's philosophy was highly influential on several of our founding fathers and virtually required the privatization of religion. The new secular politics required a new, downgraded ecclesiology. His revamped view of the church was tailor made for liberal, individualistic democracies. Just as Hobbes political treatise included a hermeneutics, arguing the mantle of Israel was passed to the sovereign state rather than to the church, so Locke's political philosophy ensured religion would be subordinated to politics. Rodney Clapp, building on Kenneth Craycraft's analysis, explains:

Locke, Hobbes, and their followers presupposed a universal reason that resided in every sane and reasonable individual, prior to and beyond any distinctive religious convictions. This universal and secular reason would be the ground and final court of appeal for public matters such as government. Religion, then, would be relegated to the private sphere. It is only the individual's business and not that of the state – *or, note well, the church*. As Locke wrote, 'The Care . . . of each man's Soul belongs unto himself, and is to be left unto himself.' For Madison, the religious authority of the church reduced people to 'slavery and Subjection,' since in his estimate in no instance 'have churches been guardians of the liberties of the people.' And Jefferson inveighed against creedal or confessional Christianity, exactly because each assumes doctrines that are considered exclusively true quite apart from any given individual's opinions of them. So Jefferson called Athanasius and Calvin 'impious dogmatists' and 'mere usurpers

of the Christian name.’ But of what were Athanasius and Calvin impious usurpers? Exactly of Jefferson’s Lockean liberal ‘Christianity,’ which determined to set aside the revealed faith handed down by the church through history, and replaced it with a ‘tolerance’ based the universal reason professedly resident in every reasonable individual. For liberals, then, every person chooses his or her own faith. Liberal religious freedom is freedom of the allegedly autonomous individual (not the church); it is freedom to of the individual to hold religious convictions as private opinions.

But note well, Locke’s version of religious freedom does not allow bringing religious convictions into the public square since that would mean “imposing” them on society as a whole as though they had absolute authority.

Locke’s individualism should also be noted. Again, he said, “The Care . . . of each man’s Soul belongs unto himself, and is to be left unto himself.” Compare this with the wise words of Calvin: “[I]t certainly is the duty of a Christian man to ascend higher than merely to seek and secure the salvation of his own soul.” Calvin argued each man also has a stake in his neighbor’s salvation and well-being. Calvin believed we should always seek the common good, not just personal benefit. Locke, unfortunately, agreed with Cain, the first individualist, that only “Looking out for #1” really mattered. The rotten fruit of this mentality is littered all over the current American landscape.

Locke-d Out

Locke was the architect of the British Toleration Acts of 1689, which essentially did for Britain what the Treaty of Westphalia had done for the continent, namely, put religion in the sphere of private opinion. While Locke created social space for various Protestant bodies, since all could be expected to play by the rules of the liberal game, Roman Catholics were excluded. The fact that Romanists had a trans-national loyalty to their church (centered in the Pope) and therefore refused to totally interiorize their religion meant that they may not be very good citizens in the newly created secular political order. Because their church necessarily took up public space, they were considered a subversive presence in the secular state. Locke, and Jefferson following him, flatly denied the social or communal nature of Christianity. Rather, the church came to be understood as a semi-private theology club, a free association of like-minded individuals, who could come and go as they pleased. Of course, in such a context, the biblical images of church as kingdom, city, body, or nation, made no sense. Calvin’s ecclesial understanding of salvation had to be discarded.

This trend to privatization played itself out in the nascent nation of America. The founding fathers not only displaced the church with the newly formed nation, they put the founding documents in the place of Scripture. The privatization of the church meant the privatization of the Bible. A new hermeneutics was introduced to curtail public, social, and political application of Scripture. No longer would Scripture be the public voice of God to the nation. Secularization had to be complete. The god of American civil religion

would certainly not be the God of Scripture; but like the God of Scripture, he would be a very jealous god. Sebastian Mallaby explains:

The Founders . . . infused their precious ideas with the aura of scripture, hoping this would protect them from the wear and tear of everyday debate. George Washington pleaded that ‘the Constitution be sacredly maintained,’ while James Madison described the founding documents as ‘political scriptures,’ hoping they would acquire ‘that veneration, which time bestows on everything, and without which perhaps the wisest and freest government would not possess the requisite stability.’ And so Americans established a civil religion in place of a spiritual one. Their Protestant reverence for the Bible was transferred to the founding texts. The Founders’ civil religion has been preached enthusiastically by their successors. In 1837, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Constitution’s drafting, John Quincy Adams, paraphrasing from the instruction to the Israelites in Deuteronomy [6:7-6], urged his countrymen to ‘Teach the [Constitution’s] principles, teach them to your children, speak of them when sitting in your home, speak of them when walking by the way, when lying down and when rising up, write them upon the doorplate of your home and upon your gates.’

The Constitution, of course, is a fine document in many ways and embodies many principles of Christian political thought, developed over centuries of practice and reflection. But clearly this is a case of Americanism run amok. In the minds of some of our founding fathers, the American nation was turned into a replacement for the kingdom of God. But the American nation is at best a cheap parody of Christ’s true “Redeemer Nation,” the New and True Israel, the church of God.

The American Tug-of-War

Throughout the early days of America’s existence, we see a continual tug of war between the forces of historic Christendom and the emerging rationalism and individualism of the Enlightenment. Historians debate the issues: Was America founded as a Christian nation, in continuity with the Christian nations of Europe? Or is America the nation the Enlightenment created, the first secular body politic in history? The founding fathers were generally men of faith, but they drank deeply from the poisoned well of “free church” ecclesiology. The break with Britain in many ways meant a much larger break with the high church tradition of Christendom. In retrospect, given the current dominance of secularism, we can see things they could not have even imagined. We can see weaknesses they were not aware of. The real tragedy of America is found precisely here: Men of faith unwittingly gave the game away. They were swept up by larger forces they did not fully understand and could not control. In their desire to exorcise the demons of medievalism, they opened the door to secular demons seven times worse.

Again, Clapp, following Craycraft, helps us understand how Lockean liberalism worked itself out in America to a very secular conclusion. Locke placed the locus of religious liberty not in the covenanted community of the institutional church, as Christendom had,

but in the conscience of the private individual. Thus, the church was no longer free to exercise any public authority over its members. A few examples will illustrate.

Roman Catholic John Cardinal O'Connor's actions in the early 1990s make evident this shift to privatization. O'Connor, a faithful papist, stated forthrightly his church's policy that,

Where Catholics are perceived not only as treating church teaching on abortion with contempt, but helping to multiply abortions by advocating legislation supporting abortion or by making public funds available for abortion, bishops may decide for the common good such Catholics must be warned that they risk excommunication.

Expectedly, O'Connor's comments, temperate as they were, got hit by a barrage of criticism. O'Connor didn't even excommunicate anyone for their political actions – he only talked about doing so – and yet he was instantly subjected to fierce attacks from the media. O'Connor refused to play along with democratic liberalism's forced privatization of religion and paid the price.

This is not to say Roman Catholics have been immune to the plague of Americanism. Backtrack thirty years from O'Connor to John Fitzgerald Kennedy's presidential campaign in 1960. Protestants, especially evangelical Protestants, expressed grave concern over the prospect of a Roman Catholic in the nation's highest office. But they were greatly relieved when Kennedy insisted his religious convictions would be kept private and would have no bearing on how he acted politically. Kennedy claimed the separation of church and state was "absolute" and that his vision of America was of a place "where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners whom to vote for." The church, after all, was not viewed as politically relevant. He said, "I believe in a President whose views on religion are his own private affairs." In fact, for Kennedy being a good American was far more important than being a good Christian or Romanist: "I am not the Catholic candidate for President. I am the Democratic party's candidate for President who happens to be Catholic." JFK's deepest convictions were not shaped by God, Scripture, or his church, but by his commitment to Americanism. He was determined to be an autonomous individual, unfettered by the bonds of an ecclesial community.

The secularization of American public life does not mean all references to religion have been expunged from the political scene. Rather, democratic liberalism has resulted in something much more sinister. We still hear a good deal of talk about faith, God, prayer, and so forth. But all these notions must be left vague, undefined, and therefore from a Christian perspective, seductively idolatrous. They are treated as the common possession of all American citizens. Even ostensibly evangelical Presidents have fallen into this trap, thinking that America is destined to play some unique God-given role in the drama of history.

For example, at the 1988 Republican National Convention, President Ronald Reagan proclaimed: "I believe that God out this land between the two great oceans to be found by the special people . . . from every corner of the world who had that extra love of freedom that prompted them to leave their home." Reagan also applied ecclesiastical titles, such as "city on a hill" to the American nation, distorting the Puritan and biblical usages of the phrase. The idea, clearly, is that America is an elect people, chosen to bless the world in a special way. "In George Washington's political seed all the families of the earth will be blessed" seems to be the prevalent idea.

Regan's successor, George Bush, echoing Abraham Lincoln, called America, "the last, best hope of man on earth." When Bush called for a national day of prayer before the Gulf War, he declared this: "I have proclaimed Sunday, February 3, National Day of Prayer. In this moment of crisis, may Americans of every creed turn to our greatest power and unite together in prayer." Stanley Hauerwas comments: "Such a prayer sounds Christian. But it is idolatrous and pagan, the same sort of prayer Caesar always prays to Mars before battle." Bush may have very well prayed to the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ in his private prayer closet, but publicly he could not do this. Rather, he told every person to pray to his or her own god. In this peculiarly American theology, we citizens of this special nation have the right to pray *not* because we're in Christ, who gives us access to the Father, but because we're good, decent Americans. Surely god (or the gods) will hear such a fine upstanding people!

Patriotism and Idolatry: The Fine Line

Perhaps I should add a caveat at this point. None of this is to say that love for country per se is wrong. Patriotism is a good quality. But our loyalty to Christ must always be greater than our allegiance to the body politic. Ideally, there will be no tension between these two loyalties. But when there is, it's clear which takes precedence.

This runs counter to the modern ethos, which puts allegiance to one's nation at the top of the heap. Institutions like church and family are viewed at best as "mediating organizations" which are secondary to the state in importance and power. Lesslie Newbigin explains the situation in colorful terms:

If there is any entity to which ultimate loyalty is due [today], it is the nation state. In the twentieth century we have become accustomed to the fact that -- in the name of the nation -- Catholics will fight Catholics, Protestants will fight Protestants, and Marxists will fight Marxists. The charge of blasphemy, if it is ever made, is treated as a quaint anachronism; but the charge of treason, of placing another loyalty above that of the nation state, is treated as the unforgivable crime. The nation state has taken the place of God. Responsibilities for education, healing and public welfare which had formerly rested with the Church devolved more and more upon the nation state. In the present century this movement has been vastly accelerated by the advent of the 'welfare state.' National governments are widely assumed to be responsible for and capable of

providing those things which former generations thought only God could provide -- freedom from fear, hunger, disease and want -- in a word: 'happiness.'

Of course, the modern nation is, at the same time, so depersonalized that, as Alasdair MacIntyre has said, dying for this state is "like being asked to die for the telephone company."

Our True Homeland

Calvin was faced with just this sort of dilemma – a conflict of loyalties. He had to choose between church and nation. His beloved homeland of France remained firmly entrenched in Roman Catholicism. In fact, King Francis persecuted the Reformation movement with zeal. In the introductory preface of Calvin's *Institutes*, addressed to the King, Calvin shows he embraced the cause of Christ above the cause of his nation:

Even though I regard my country with as much natural affection as becomes me, as things now stand, I do not much regret being excluded. Rather, I embrace the common cause of all believers, that of Christ himself – a cause completely torn and trampled in your realm today, lying as it were utterly forlorn.

Calvin knew he served a greater King than Francis – the Lord Jesus. He knew the church of Jesus Christ was his *first* citizenship, and this ecclesial allegiance was to be maintained, whatever earthly, temporal loyalties had to be sacrificed.

We must learn the fate of the church does not rest in the hands of the American nation. In fact, the reverse is the case. While, the American church has been deeply intertwined with the nation as such for most of our history, stretching back to colonial days, it is now clear we must go our separate ways, at least in several important respects. The church must not act as a sponsor or underwriter for American bipartisan politics, secular education, institutionalized greed, etc. We must refuse to play the game on secularized American terms. We must also realize the twin responses offered by the American church thus far – namely, the sectarian response of withdrawal, ceding over the public square to the secularists, and the civil religionist response, covering over secularism with a thin veneer of talk about god and faith – have been disastrous. The American church today must position herself as a catholic counter-culture – publicly present in the world, yet stunningly distinct from it.

Needed: An American Augustine

The early medieval church faced a similar situation to the church in America at the dawn of the twenty-first century. After the conversion of Constantine, it appeared the fate of the church was bound up with the Roman Empire. Hence, when it became evident Rome would fall, many Christians panicked. Augustine rose to the occasion, with his monumental work *City of God*. Rather than fear the fall of Rome, Augustine saw it as a prime opportunity for the church. The city of man may crumble, but the church, the city of God, will keep marching on.

Referring to those who saw themselves as the last remnant of a Church which was headed for inevitable decline, [Augustine] laughed, ‘The clouds roll with thunder, that the House of the Lord shall be built throughout the earth: and these frogs sit in their marsh and croak – We are the only Christians.’

William Carrol Bark explains the vital role Augustine played in disentangling the church from Rome:

It remained for Augustine of Hippo, however, to accept the challenge of his time on the highest intellectual plane and state the case for the rising Christian culture in his powerful philosophy of history. He saw that it was necessary not only to reply to the gibes of the pagans, but also to scotch the popular identification of the welfare of Christianity with the welfare of Rome. Though he doubtless thought of the problem primarily and immediately as one of apology, he was unquestionably aware that the whole meaning of history for Christians was also involved . . . His recognition that Christianity must be cut loose from the Roman State was not timeserving; naturally in his philosophy of history the *civitas dei* would always be independent of the destinies of worldly states . . . His accomplishment was to prepare the minds of his more thoughtful contemporaries and successors for the possibility of a change in the political state of affairs as they knew it, and to enable them to adapt themselves to this change.

Augustine broke the ties that bound the church with the Roman Empire just in time for the church to emerge from Rome’s rubble with renewed vigor and health. Indeed, this was one of the keys that opened the door to the world of Christendom. Augustine effectively destroyed the popular identification of the welfare of Christianity with the welfare of Rome. He cut the tie binding together the fates of the Christian religion with the Roman state. The American church needs a new Augustine who can accomplish the same project in our day. The preservation of America is simply not necessary to the success of the kingdom of God. With or without America, the kingdom of God will march on until the earth is as “full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (Isa. 11:9).

Peter Leithart explains what this means:

If evangelicals and fundamentalists . . . are to formulate a public theology and practice, they must *first* formulate an evangelical catholic ecclesiology . . . A catholic understanding of the church would enable the nationalistic elements in evangelicalism and fundamentalism better to estimate America’s place in history. The religionization of national life that existed in the late eighteenth century is still with us. Edwards is still quoted approvingly and out of context in support of American nationalism. America is still viewed by some as something of a redeemer nation. American values and ways are still identified promiscuously with Christian values and ways. It is impossible to deny that God has used the American people and even the American nation as a political entity in remarkable

ways to advance the gospel, but we must avoid any hint that America is God's unique instrument in history. Instead, the church is God's chief instrument in history.

We should have a great appreciation for the role America has played in God's providence. America has become gloriously prosperous and correspondingly generous. Her armies have toppled tyrants the world over. She has provided as great a degree of religious freedom as the world has ever known. But America is not and never can be a substitute for God's own treasured nation, the church. Unfortunately, America's greatness has made it all too tempting to view her, rather than Christ's body, as the locus of God's presence. While America and the church have no doubt benefited from one another, the mutual relationship, especially as understood by American evangelicals, is in desperate need of redefinition and reconfiguration. *To be continued.*