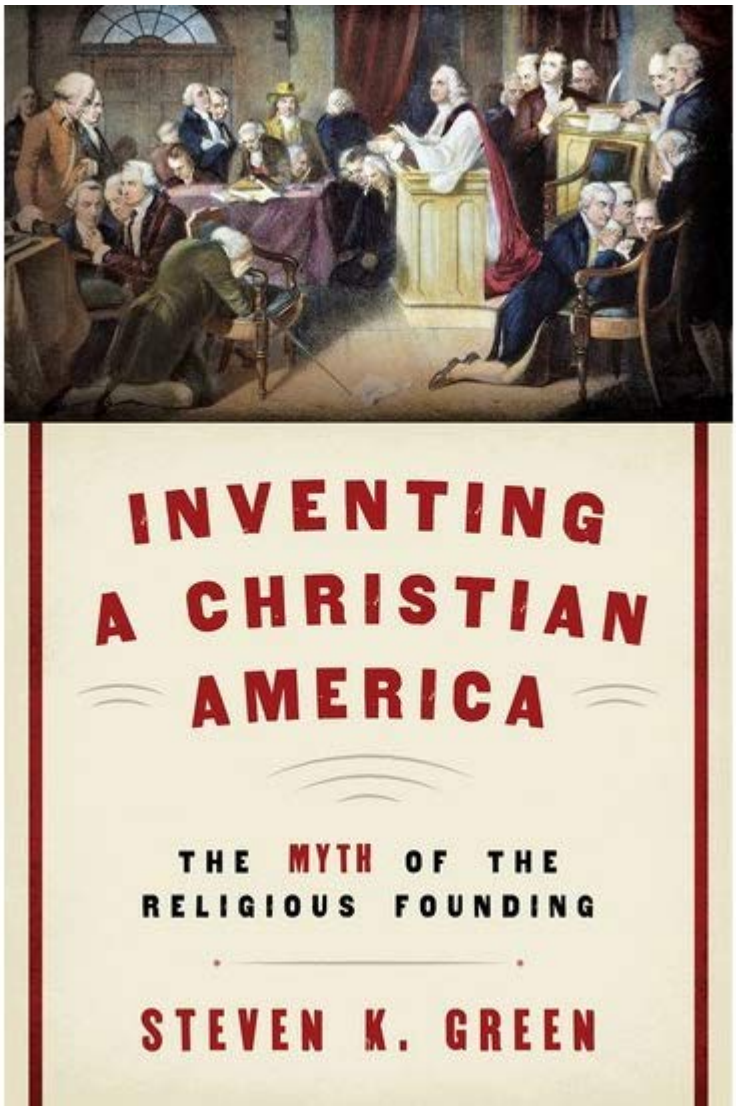
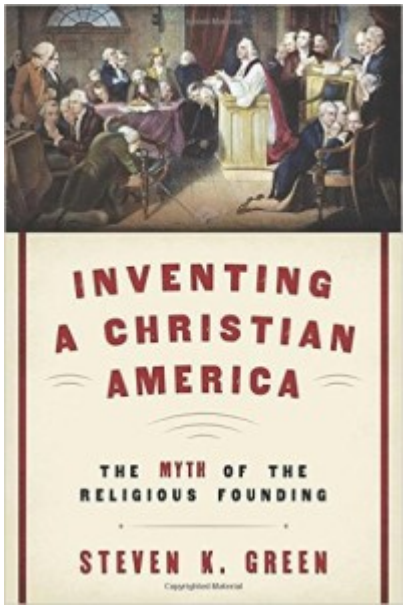
Defining A “Christian Nation”: or, A Case of Being Careful What You Wish For



Steven K. Green’s *Inventing a Christian America* is an unusual work: one that re-tells an important early American narrative while providing a methodological model for historical debate. Basing his study on an array of primary and secondary sources, Green—Fred H. Paulus Professor of Law and Affiliated Professor of History at Willamette University, author of works on separation of church and state, and frequent contributor to litigation on religious freedom—demonstrates how easily the historical inventions of one era may become the historical facts of another. This tendency is especially common for the history of the American founding given, as Green argues, the almost irresistible connection between myth-making and nation-building as intellectual constructs.



Steven K. Green, *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 295 pp., $29.95.

Green writes that he "seeks to unravel the myth of America's religious foundings," a process that is "crucial if our nation is to come to grips with its religious past and its pluralistic future" (vii, viii). In his introduction he sets out the three goals of his study: to examine the terms of the debate between what he calls the "religionists" and the "secularists"; to identify some of the errors of analysis and method by the former; and to explain that by the term "myth" he is referring to the efforts of early nineteenth-century writers "to forge a national identity, a process that sought to sanctify the recent past" (15).

Green addresses these points in a running critique of the work of historians who, to summarize an often complex position, have argued that the United States was intentionally established as a Christian nation, that first national documents are replete with Christian references demonstrating the intention of the Founders (both well known and "forgotten") to establish a government based on God's higher law (rather than Lockean contract theory alone), and that the Founders' preferred form of Christianity was Protestantism. His work joins others exploring this "religionist" scholarship, especially two useful anthologies edited by Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffry H. Morrison (*The Founders on God and Government* and *The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life*).

In his four central chapters, Green expertly weaves together his take on the "Christian nationalist" argument with a narrative aiming to historicize major issues in early American religion and constitutional politics. These include the emergence of the idea of America as a religious haven; the transition from Puritan covenant to civil contract in American governance; the disconnect between the religious statements of the Founders and the foundations of civil government; and the emergence of the democratic consensus regarding the origins of constitutional authority, especially in the U.S. Constitution. In his

culminating fifth chapter, Green surveys the influence of the writings of biographer William Weems, clergyman Lyman Beecher, Supreme Court Justice Joseph Story, and novelist Nathaniel Hawthorne in promoting the myth that the United States was founded as an expressly Christian nation and that the Founding Fathers, especially George Washington, were unusually pious.

Green shows effectively how Antifederalists' fears of the irreligious character of the U.S. Constitution reflected their understanding that the new government was *not* expressly Christian: just the opposite of what the "religionist" school has concluded. And while prominent clergy "believed that providence had been instrumental in creating the new nation, they acknowledged that the source of authority for the new government rested with the people" (191). Green deftly explores the impact of the Second Great Awakening on the changing character of American Christianity in subsequent decades, far removed from the ecclesiastical mainstream of the Revolutionary era: "By mid-nineteenth-century America, 'Christian' meant not only Protestant but evangelical in belief and practice. Washington [an Episcopal rationalist] had been 'born again' in his death" (208).

In the manner of a legal brief*, Inventing a Christian America* is elegantly written, densely argued, and persuasive. But like any "forensic" work—that is, work designed to prove a case—it has its limitations. For one thing, Green focuses exclusively on the religionists' arguments, leaving aside those of the secularists. A prime example of the latter is Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore's *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State*, itself a forensic-style work, originally subtitled "The Case Against Religious Correctness," and distinctly less nuanced than Green's. Indeed, one of the difficulties of writing about religion and the Founding is that secularists have their own founding myths: among these, that the patriots were indifferent to religion in the conflict with Great Britain; that the Founders were largely Deists; and that the absence of any references to God in the U.S. Constitution is the *prima facie* evidence that Americans aimed to create a nation free of religious content. Evidence in recent work on the Revolution, such as T.H. Breen's *American Insurgents, American Patriots: The Revolution of the People,* suggests that these conclusions are wide of the mark.

For another thing, Green does not discuss the *states'* constitutional provisions regarding religion before and after the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1788. In his short survey *Church and State in America*, James Hutson stresses that under federalism issues relating to religion and churches were left to the states, while separation of church and state did not become constitutional doctrine until the Supreme Court's *Everson* v. *Board of Education* decision in 1947. An important new article by Vincent Phillip Muñoz ("Church and State in the Founding-Era State Constitutions") sets out the specific provisions of the states' founding-era declarations of rights and constitutions concerning religion, any number of which permitted government regulation of worship or conditions for office-holding (while, it should be noted, also emphasizing religious freedom and, in several cases, barring clergyman from holding

political office).

In fact, as Green's study suggests but does not explore, a key conceptual problem with the Christian-nation thesis centers on the Founders' use of the term "Christian," and, for that matter, "Protestant," "religion," and "church." It's fair to say that, in keeping with the tradition of kingdoms and nation-states, the creators of an explicitly Christian republic would have been precise about *which* religious institution they preferred to ally with. But instead, the sources are full of generalities. Several state constitutions, for example, required office-holders to adhere to belief in the Trinity, in the divine inspiration of the Scriptures, in "Christianity," or the "Christian religion," or to be Protestants, but made no reference to specific denominations or their clergy. Abstract and generic references pepper Green's sources, comprising a body of discourse that historians used to call "civil religion" and that Jon Meacham has more recently called "public religion." Of course, nearly all of the Founders, prominent and not so prominent, were Protestant, by identity if not church-attendance, and many assumed that belief in Providence was a key ingredient of virtue, that piety was the glue that tied Americans together, and that God was on Americans' side. But such sentiments are far removed from any intention to create a constitutional agreement between government and an organization called a "church," or, for that matter, to elevate clergy to positions of influence within the government, as would be expected in a religious state.

In short, then as now, the United States was home to myriad church-*es*, denominations, religious societies, and sects—the words were often used interchangeably—that adhered to widely diverging interpretations of the Scriptures and organized themselves in substantially different ways. In fact—the crux of the matter—there was no, and is no, such institution as the "Christian Church" or the "Protestant Church" with which the United States and individual states *could*, or can, make an official compact. Had such a compact been possible, there seems little doubt that it would have been between the government and *orthodox* churches. Under such a regime, controversial sects like the Methodists—the most popular denomination in America by the Civil War but stereotyped as Loyalists and charlatans in the founding era—along with the offshoots of the Second Great Awakening, whose descendants form the bulk of Protestant church membership today, likely would have been denied voting rights and access to political office.

Green concludes his book with the warning: "So long as proponents of America's Christian origins fail to see the narrative as a myth, they will be unable to appreciate the true import of America's religious heritage" (243). Something of a jeremiad, Green's study is also an important exercise in historical method: a model of history-as-debate, based on a lucid and consistent reading of the sources and a clear conviction that getting the story right matters. Given his approach, he can't be blamed that the story of religion and the founding continues to be only partially told.

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