### **THE CORNER RELIGION**

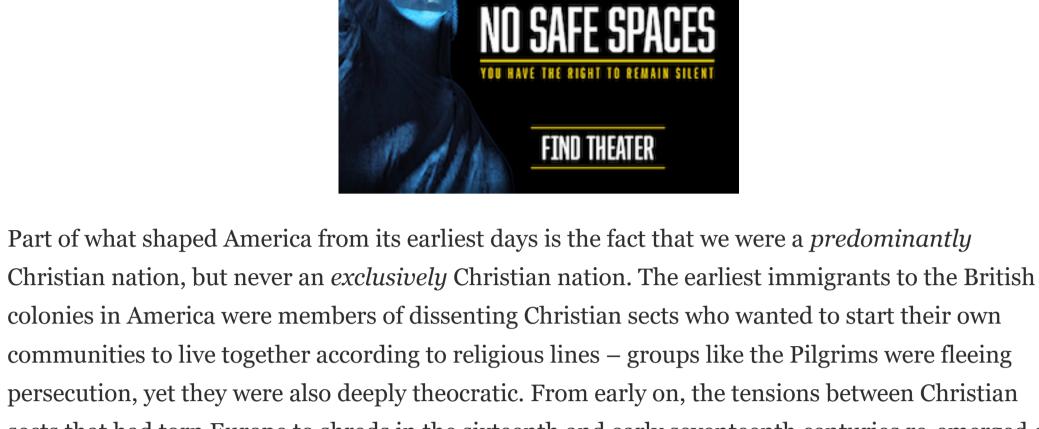
## The Christian America Paradox



nature of a society that combines religious pluralism (as a matter of both legal right and social norm) with a shared belief in the secular values of the Enlightenment means that the government can do little to support or maintain that heritage. And there are significant reasons to doubt that either Enlightenment values or robust pluralism would long survive in an America that loses its Christian character. NOW PLAYING

You could call it the Christian America paradox: few things have contributed more to the nation's

culture and identity than the broadly shared Christian faith and worldview of its people, yet the very



sects that had torn Europe to shreds in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries re-emerged on our shores, but in the long run, those tensions tended to push the new colonists not in the direction of religious war but towards accepting the need for pluralism. At the time of the Constitution, many states still had state religious establishments, but the new federal government was barred, in the First Amendment, from erecting its own, or from requiring religious tests for public officials. The paradox can be seen in the fact that the Declaration of Independence, which forms the ideological bedrock of our system, directly invokes the Creator as the source of our inalienable human rights and concludes with "a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence," while the Constitution, which creates and constrains our federal government, makes no mention of God. Tolerance of non-Christian minorities, while also fitful, was set in the template from the earliest

days, witnessed by President Washington's famous Letter to the Hebrew Congregations of Newport, Rhode Island. Rhode Island was also the scene of one of the major shifts in the nation's religious demographics: the ban on Catholic Mass in the state wasn't lifted until French troops liberated Newport from British occupation, yet today, it's the most Catholic state in the Union. And Washington himself, in a section of his Farewell Address that owed much to the pen of Alexander

Hamilton, would warn his countrymen of the need for faith to preserve the civic virtue that underlay

The name of American, which belongs to you in your national capacity, must always

discriminations. With slight shades of difference, you have the same religion, manners,

the new nation *and* to prevent the country from falling into warring tribes and factions:

exalt the just pride of patriotism more than any appellation derived from local

habits, and political principles...Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to

that man claim the tribute of patriotism, who should labor to subvert these great

political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports. In vain would

pillars of human happiness, these firmest props of the duties of men and citizens. The

mere politician, equally with the pious man, ought to respect and to cherish them. A volume could not trace all their connections with private and public felicity. Let it simply be asked: Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths which are the instruments of investigation in courts of justice? And let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion. Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that national morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle. Washington didn't mention Christianity specifically, except to allude generally to "the same religion" – but of course, he didn't have to. Much has been written about how the common Christian moral and cultural heritage contributed to our original institutions. de Tocqueville, in his famous study of early American democracy, thought it essential. And in times of crisis, the ability to communicate with each other in the common language of shared Christian morals has been essential to reforming those institutions as well. It is nearly impossible to imagine abolitionism or the civil rights movement if they could not draw upon the authority of Christian scripture and

teachings to call their fellow citizens to recognize a higher moral standard than "this is what the law

currently allows." As I detailed a few years back, these were explicitly intra-Christian arguments

(go read nearly anything written by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, jr., for example), and their

Even today, America remains more Christian, and more religious, than most of the countries of

those of other faiths, and that does matter (one of the great fallacies of politics is that it can be

separated from questions of right, wrong, justice, fairness, and other fundamental questions on

Europe, and that gives our politics a distinctive flavor. Christian moral teachings are different than

ultimate success at persuasion depended upon that.

generally had a poor track record.

which faith informs us). Pragmatically, for Republicans and conservatives, churchgoing Christians remain much more likely to align politically on the right side of the political spectrum. Again, this is not exclusive: it's not hard to find leading conservatives (this magazine's writers offer many examples of this) who are non-religious, or Jewish, and some hail from other non-Christian faiths. Even our political nomenclature spurns "Christian" as a modifier for party names, unlike in Europe. But both in its connection to the political-economy traditions of Protestantism and in how Christianity transmits ancient teachings and imposes a common, external constraint on reinvention of moral standards, Christian practice and heritage are still a key glue that bind Americans to the political Right, as well as fertilizer for the broader cultural soil in which American classical liberalism has flourished. Whereas, with the conspicuous exception of Orthodox Judaism, efforts to make an ongoing common cause with non-Christian religious groups along these lines have

FIND THEATER Meanwhile (especially among white Americans) the rising faction of "nones" (atheists, agnostics, even the growing number of people who are just unlettered in faith) are disproportionately to be found on the left side (moreso even than non-Christian religions). And the political and cultural battles of recent years have illustrated that – precisely because they do not see themselves as a faith

community in need of reciprocation – irreligious progressives are far less willing to accept the neo-

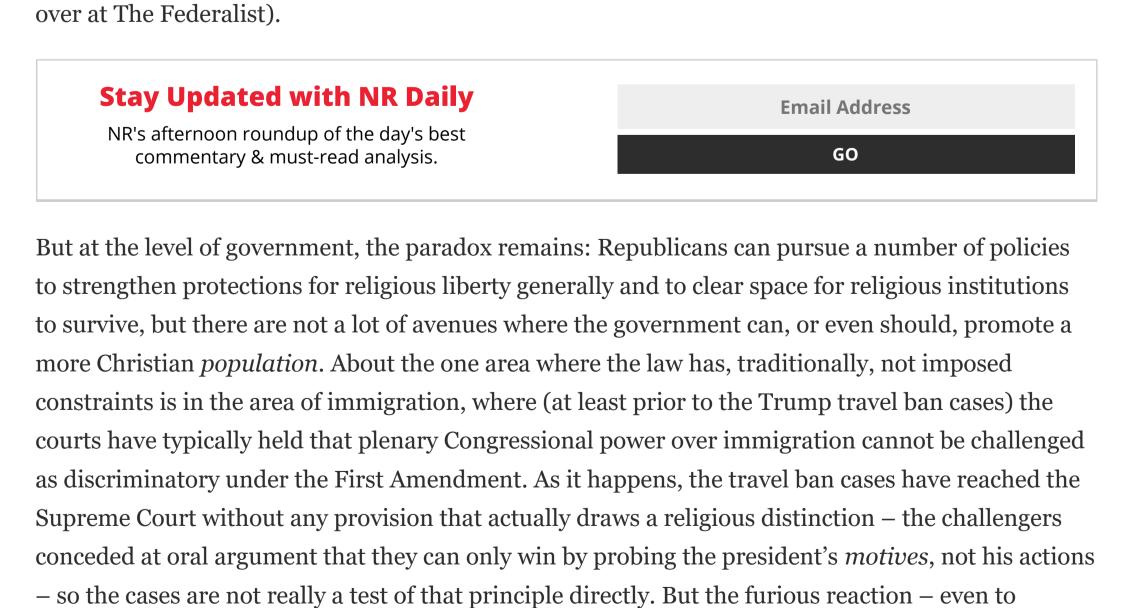
Westphalian settlement of mutual tolerance among religious groups that has allowed pluralism to

flourish in America. And ideological progressivism is not only broadly hostile to Christianity, but

ultimately hostile to the Lockean tradition of the Enlightenment as well. (The question of whether

ongoing debate on the Right over Jonah Goldberg's book – see John Davidson vs Robert Tracinski

the Enlightenment can be defended without the Christian tradition has been the subtext of the



treating Syrian Christians as an oppressed group, when the Obama Administration had previously

identified them as facing genocide – demonstrates that even in immigration policy, it would not be

politically feasible to take on an explicitly pro-Christian bias or even protect persecuted Christians

as such, and elements of our legal system would rebel at such a step even if it meant rejecting

If anything, when you imagine what an explicitly pro-Christian immigration policy would

look like, it's actually one that would head in nearly the opposite direction from what the

current Administration is pursuing. There remain sources of religious Christian

binding Supreme Court precedents.

immigrants from Europe - Poland, for example - but they are more the exception than the rule, while efforts to restrict large-scale unskilled immigration tend to have a disproportionate impact on immigration of Christians from Latin America, the Caribbean, parts of Africa, and the Philippines. We could do better than a policy that explicitly favored Christian immigrants – I'm not proposing anything of the sort – but it is likelier that we will do worse instead. Of course, for Christians in the United States who want to preserve the role that Christians and Christianity have played in the nation's past, the real lesson is that the hard work of preserving the specific role of the Gospel in America has to be done in the culture, not the halls of government – and in raising families to carry on the faith. Looking to Washington for salvation, or even help, is not the answer. But Washington may depend on it. RETURN TO THE CORNER

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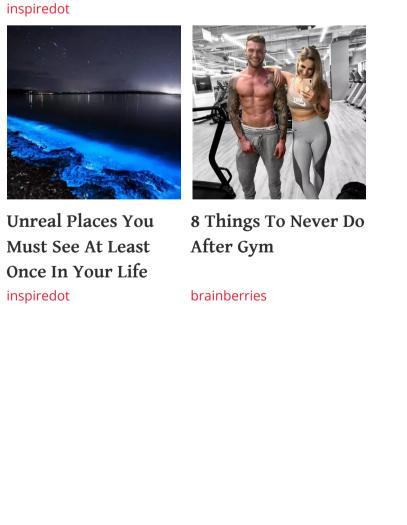
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