

REFLECTIONS

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When America Was a Christian Society

(First of a series of four articles)

A nation is established, functions, and continues to exist based on certain foundational principles. Some of these principles are stated explicitly, as in our nation's *Declaration of Independence* and *Constitution*. Others are tacit and are embedded in the collective conscience and inner values of the people. They guide the way people think, act, and conduct their lives, both in public and private matters. In short, they are an integral part of the culture of the country.

If the foundational principles are strongly implanted in the populace, the nation can overcome formidable obstacles and adversaries. If, however, they are weakened or are no longer valid, the nation loses contact with its roots; its spirit flags; it is vulnerable to outside forces.

America was founded on Christian principles. It was the teachings of Christianity – a belief in the kingdom of God and in a life to come, that each of us was created by God and redeemed by the Son who became man, that we all will be judged at the end of our lives based on how we conduct ourselves in this temporal state – which produced a public consciousness that declared the natural equality of all people, with inalienable rights, having innate dignity, and inviolable consciences. As Patrick Henry wrote in 1776: "It cannot be emphasized too strongly or too often that this great nation was founded not by religionists, but by Christians; not on religion, but on the Gospel of Jesus Christ."

This is not meant to imply that America was founded as a theocracy. It certainly was not. But rather there was a common set of faith-based principles that was shared by everyone. The early Americans identified themselves with numerous religious sects that were quite distinct, and on certain theological points were even opposed to one another. But, by and large, they were Christian. The shared beliefs among the populace allowed practical agreements to develop on concepts, such as freedom, the rule of law, human rights, and the consent of the governed, that formed the basis of American democracy.

For most of the two centuries following its founding, America operated as a Christian society. People regularly attended religious services, churches were an integral part of community life, behavior was regulated by reference to Christian tenets, family was given primacy over individual well-being, schools presented lessons on morals and virtues, and marriage was considered indissoluble. Although there were many exceptions, basically people pursued their ambitions, businesses conducted their activities, and the nation advanced its purposes within a Christian framework. The religious and social life of the nation, as well as of the individual, formed a unity.

Although separation of state and church prevailed, the two entities cooperated for the good of the nation and the maintenance of a democracy. While the state did not establish its own religion or give preference to one denomination over another, it did allow religious expression in the public sphere. Public schools for nearly a century

taught children with the McGuffey readers which contained stories praising God and extolling virtuous behavior, and later provided release time for voluntarily-chosen religious instruction; public officials in their official capacity attended religious services, the U.S. Senate and the House of Representatives from their inception have had full-time chaplains paid with public funds and begin each of their sessions with a prayer; the military services have chaplain corps; and Presidents have often in major addresses requested God's blessings on the nation.

The 1950s, in many ways, was the capstone of this era. World War II was over and the Korean War was drawing to a close. The veterans had returned to civilian life, and were working, marrying and raising their own families. The economy was vigorous and growing, the sales of individual homes and automobiles flourished, and college and university enrollments expanded rapidly because of the G.I. Bill. For the youth, it was a time of wholesome activities, with family values reinforced in the community. Pre-teens frequented Saturday movie matinees, often featuring westerns, singing "cowboys" and a serialized adventure. The teens had basketball games and sock hops, followed by a group going for pizza or ice cream. In the new medium of television, Milton Berle, Jack Benny, Ed Sullivan, Ozzie and Harriet, and The Honeymooners drew large audiences with family-oriented shows.

Perhaps, the most surprising TV star – at least by today's standards – was Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, who lectured weekly on the philosophy of life. Charismatic, engaging and informative, this smiling cleric's program drew up to 30 million viewers and received many awards, including an Emmy in 1952. The National Legion of Decency, which rated movies before their release and had millions of Catholics pledge annually to not view indecent or immoral films and to avoid theaters that showed them, was highly influential in limiting the production of morally offensive films in America. The Holy Name Society remained a strong and effective organization: in 1924, 100,000 men marched to the Washington Monument for an outdoor Mass and rally on the Mall; in 1950, 115,000 men in Pittsburgh marched to Forbes Field for a Eucharistic celebration. Overall, there was strong community pressure to maintain a wholesome social environment.

The leaders of business, industry, the media, and government were not necessarily pious individuals. But with the public strength that existed for virtue and morality, businessmen, media moguls and politicians made decisions in conformity with the general ethos of the people. They operated within a Christian framework. It is fair to say that as late as the 1950s, America was very much a Christian society.

PICTURE:

