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Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding. By Steven K. Green. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. Pp. 295. $29.95 (cloth). ISBN: 9780190230975.

In *Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*, Steven Green explores the ongoing debate over the role of the Christian religion in the founding of the United States. He argues that "religionist" authors such as Tim LaHaye and David Barton have pursued a conservative political agenda by making particularly strong claims about the founding of the nation by devout Christians. Religionists are seeking to "reclaim a presumed lost status" that reinforces their moral and political views (200). On the other hand, a group of "secularist" authors and jurists—including Gordon Wood, Isaac Kramnick, and R. Lawrence Moore—have emphasized the influence of Enlightenment principles on the founding documents and leaders. A third group of scholars have sought to find middle ground, arguing that the most heterodox founders—Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine—were not representative of American citizens or leaders at the nation's founding. These "accommodationist" scholars—such as Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark D. Hall, and Jeffry H. Morrison—argue that many founders were devout in their faith, but were inspired by both their faith and Enlightenment ideas in the founding of the United States. In his book, Green falls in this final group, acknowledging that many founders attended Christian churches, but he argues that their faith was not the primary motivating factor in many of the decisions that they made regarding the proper relationship between church and state.

Throughout the book, Green attempts to avoid what he sees as a major problem with both religionist and secularist accounts: cherry-picking of quotations to support their arguments and the overgeneralizing views based on selected incidents and statements. According to Green, most works that address the topic amount to little more than collections of quotations that support the perspective of the author, with no regard for the context in which the statements were made. Green argues that scholars on both sides of the debate have been guilty of pulling quotations out of context or of writing in broad generalizations. Green seeks to provide a more nuanced discussion of the issue. He proposes to do this by looking at his subject in stages. The first chapter examines the argument that religious liberty was a defining characteristic of British North America. In the next chapter, he explores the idea that colonial forms of Christianity inspired the nation's founding and its constitutional system. The third chapter studies the role of Christian faith and the Great Awakening as a motivating factor for independence from England. The fourth chapter takes a closer look at the language of the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution in order to identify the influences that shaped those documents. The fifth chapter investigates the nineteenth century effort to define the nation's identity and the resulting interpretation of the foundering generation that increasingly emphasized the role of religion in America's founding.

In the introduction to his book, Green clarifies that his reference to the "myth" of the Christian founding of America uses this term with a specific idea in mind. He does not use the term to imply something that is make-believe or fictitious. Rather, he uses the term *myth* to describe the origin narrative of a nation that serves to unite its citizen. Green points out the use of myths in many nations, including indigenous tribes in North America and ancient and modern nation-states in Europe and beyond. Origin stories help establish national identities and values. They bring unity to a group. Green's book argues that the concept of the United States' having a Christian

foundation was used by nineteenth-century authors to draw American citizens with diverse backgrounds toward a greater sense of national unity.

The first chapter addresses the prevailing storyline that America was established as a haven for religious freedom based on the fact that its first European settlers had fled religious persecution. Green argues that the opposite is true for most of the original colonies. In New England, the founders of the Plymouth Colony had fled persecution, but did not set out to establish religious toleration. They, like their puritan neighbors, sought to protect theological purity at the expense of religious freedom. In a similar manner, the founders of Virginia had established the Church of England. Dissenting religions existed within the colony because the colony lacked the resources to enforce uniformity, not because the leaders supported freedom of conscience. Likewise, it was pragmatism, rather than principle, that resulted in toleration within the Carolinas. The only colonies that sought to protect religious diversity were New York, Maryland, Rhode Island, and Pennsylvania.

Green argues that intentional religious toleration developed due to social, theological, and intellectual changes in the eighteenth century. The *Acts of Toleration* led to increasing religious diversity throughout the colonies. The social transformation meant that previously dominant religious groups had to acknowledge the presence and then the rights of newer groups. At the same time, the Great Awakening led to connections across denominations that emphasized the role of religious experience over doctrinal differences. Finally, Enlightenment ideas encouraged the liberty of the individual to determine their religious beliefs. In response to a number of factors that had contributed to an increasing toleration of diverse religious views, Congregationalists in New England reinterpreted the founding of those colonies as an active pursuit of religious toleration, despite the actual history of those colonies. This reinterpretation spread to other colonies, forming a unifying myth for the American colonies.

In chapter 2, Green turns his attention to the traditional narrative that the founding of the United States and its constitution are heavily inspired by the Christian faith. Again, Green argues that this tradition was a consciously created myth, albeit one with at least some foundation in historical fact. To be clear, Green concedes that puritans in New England played a key role in eighteenth-century intellectual thought. However, he argues that many contemporary religionists have overstated their influence.

To support his claim, Green explores the relationship between Covenant Theology and the civil compact view of government that is central to the development of the United States. A link between these two concepts dates back to at least the writings of Alexis de Tocqueville. Covenant Theology is a particularly important component of the reformed theological tradition held by the puritans in New England that describes God's special relationship with his people in the form of a covenant or agreement. Numerous commentators have noted a similarity between this covenant view and the republican emphasis on the consent of the governed. Green relies on a number of sources to state that the primary goal of the puritan migration was not to implement a new system of government. Rather, a mixture of religious, commercial, and social factors motivated their move to North America. In fact, the puritan concept of covenant was primarily limited to theological applications. Puritans adopted the view that rulers only governed by the consent of the people from the long history of English legal developments. He argues that the puritans actually adopted the political concept of the "compact" in order to explain the theological concept of the "covenant." While the traditional argument has been that puritan covenant theory led to the development of republican government values, Green argues that the opposite is the case: English republican values influenced the puritans' theological understanding of covenant.

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According to Green, the first generation of puritan settlers did not derive their theory of government from their theology. Instead, the second and third generation of New England intellectuals reinterpreted the contributions of the founding generation in the early eighteenth century in response to the restoration of the English monarchy. In their political protest to royal governors, ministers and civil leaders recast the purposes of the founding generation in terms that sounded republican tones more strongly. These themes grew more prominent as the colonies began to argue in favor of independence from the crown in the second half of the Eighteenth Century.

Green also challenges the notion that American law is built primarily upon a foundation of biblical teaching. Again, he acknowledges that there is some historical basis for this claim. Early colonial laws did cite the Bible as an authority. The puritans carried the concept of the Bible as a source of law with them when they migrated from England. Because the Bible was also cited in legal cases in England, this is not unique to British North America. However, contrary to the religionist narrative, Green argues that Enlightenment conceptions of natural law proved to be as influential in North America as the puritan notion of divine law. Green finds that as the Revolution approached, intellectuals—including New England clergy—quoted Enlightenment authors on natural law more often than they quoted puritans on divine law. Based on this evidence, Green sees Enlightenment writings as shaping the laws of the early United States more significantly than biblical teaching.

In chapter 3, Green analyzes claims that popular religion in the American colonies played an instrumental role in promoting the movement toward representative democracy, revolution against monarchy, and the forming of the United States Constitution. Proponents of the view that America was founded as a Christian nation often argue that the Great Awakening was important to uniting the British colonies into a social movement that transcended colonial boundaries. In addition, many also claim that the move toward an evangelical faith also prompted the acceptance of democracy. The Awakenings were largely led by lay people and often resulted in questioning the authority of clergy and other officials who opposed the revivals. Green cites prominent historians such as Perry Miller, Clinton Rossiter, Alan Heimert, William McLoughlin, and Gary Nash as contributors to this idea. Green acknowledges that the revivals of the Great Awakening were a transformative event in early American history, but argues that the revivals were scattered and regional, and that the social movement did not extend into a political movement. This counters the notion that a unified revival swept through all thirteen colonies, unifying the masses to question the prevailing social norms of their day.

What the revivals did provide to support the political changes within American society was a common language that could be appropriated by politicians. Green claims that many contemporary Christian nationalists read too much into the use of Christian imagery in colonial and early republic political rhetoric. He concedes that politicians and other commentators frequently referred to Providence and other religious themes during this period, but interprets this language as civil religion that taps into familiar concepts, but without any meaningful religious content. In other words, politicians used religious rhetoric to promote their views, without endorsing specific religious beliefs.

Perhaps the most helpful section of this discussion in chapter 3 is Green's exploration of the personal faiths of key leaders in the founding generation. According to Green, both sides of the debate over the role of religion in America's founding are guilty of misrepresenting this issue to score points. This debate is not insignificant, as the United States Supreme Court has relied on evidence of the founders' views in deciding cases involving the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment to the United States Constitution. Christian nationalists emphasize the faith of secondary leaders and claim that they are more important than less orthodox individuals such as Franklin, Jefferson, and Paine. On the other side of the debate, the founding generation is often characterized

as either deists or atheists, with a denial of personal Christian faith. In truth, the history is far more complex. Green points out that many of the early leaders in the American government were members of orthodox Christian churches. They claimed to have a sincere faith, even if they were influenced by Enlightenment ideas that minimized the possibility of miracles. Even those who were most inclined to deistic or atheistic views held great respect for the role of religion within society and occasionally used explicitly religious language. Green also points out the very real possibility that a key figure in the founding generation might have held orthodox religious beliefs, but also opposed the establishment of an official religion. In short, Green argues that it would be more productive to study the founding generation's views on religion's roles in government, rather than the personal faith of particular individuals.

In his fourth chapter, Green provides an in-depth review of the major founding documents of the United States—the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution—as well as significant actions of the Continental Congress with respect to religion. He concludes that proponents of Christian nationalism have misinterpreted these documents and actions in order to bolster their cases. With respect to the Declaration of Independence, Green points out two significant facts. The first is that the Declaration itself was not typically seen as an important document in the period between 1776 and the ratification of the Constitution. Celebrations of American independence from Britain emphasized the fact that the nation was independent and not the document that had accomplished that fact. It is only after the War of 1812 that the Declaration drew significant attention in celebrations of American independence from England. This suggests that many Americans in the early republic would not have considered the Declaration to be a seminal document in determining the relationship between faith and politics. In addition, Green argues that the religious language of the Declaration is more consistent with the Enlightenment and Deistic understandings of God than with the orthodox Christian views. Phrases such as "Nature's God" drew on the Enlightenment understanding that one could learn all that was necessary about God from nature, with no need to rely on revelation.

Before exploring the Constitution itself, Green spends several pages of chapter 4 exploring a series of actions that took place between the signing of the Declaration of Independence and constitutional ratification, and that are cited by proponents of Christian nationalism to support their claims regarding the role of religion in the founding of America. These include the naming of chaplains to lead prayers before sessions of Congress, occasional calls for days of thanksgiving, and resolutions regarding the public good that flows from religion. While Green acknowledges that these actions reflect a general openness to religion, he interprets them in two ways. First, he suggests that these actions represent the traditional view that "religion is central to a well-ordered polity," rather than an explicit endorsement of religion (177, quoting Derek H. Davis, *Religion and the Continental Congress, 1774–1789: Contributions to Original Intent* [New York: Oxford University Press, 2000], 64). Second, he suggests that some of the language was adopted to appease Continental Congress members, such as John Witherspoon, who represented more conservative religious beliefs. In short, Green argues that these congressional actions do not provide strong evidence of a Christian foundation of American government.

When Green turns his attention to the Constitution toward the end of chapter 4, he concurs with several scholarly opinions that it is essentially a "godless" document. As several commentators have noted, the only explicit references to religion are the ban on religious tests to hold office and the establishment and free exercise clauses of the First Amendment. Green goes further than to simply review the language of the document. He also reviews debates over the ratification of the Constitution in which Anti-Federalists criticized the Constitution for failing to invoke God and for not limiting office holders to Christians. When Federalists defended the Constitution, they

didn't suggest that the document created a Christian nation; instead, they argued that it was best to pursue equality of all religions within the new republic.

In chapter 5, Green explores the origins of the myth that America was founded as a Christian nation. Up until this point in the book, Green has been arguing that the myth does not fully line up with the historical evidence. In this chapter, he argues that the myth was created for specific purposes. Notably, he is careful to point out that the narrative was not created out of intent to deceive. Rather, a variety of factors caused authors, speakers, and others to reinterpret the past, primarily in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century.

Green points to several factors that influenced the retelling of the nation's founding with an influence on religious themes. The French Revolution and the Whiskey Rebellion led to concerns that naturalism could be carried to violent extremes and a desire to distance the American Revolution from this possibility. George Washington's death in December 1799 provided an impetus for reinterpreting the country's early history with an emphasis on the role of Providence—which was a common theme in Washington's address. Many eulogists and authors adopted biblical themes to describe Washington's role in the founding of the nation.

In the early nineteenth century, a new wave of revivals—commonly known as the Second Great Awakening—swept through much of the United States. These revivals brought an evangelical form of Christianity into greater prominence throughout the nation. As evangelicals sought to reform the nation and address a variety of social concerns, they reinterpreted the country's history through their own lens of religious experience. Because they were a generation or more removed from the founding era, they were less familiar with the deistic and naturalistic assumptions of the leaders of that generation and often understood language in a more evangelical tone than the original authors would have intended.

Finally, a group of legal scholars began to emphasize the importance of natural law. These scholars drew on Blackstone's commentaries on English law to argue that Christianity had been a part of the laws of England—and of the common law of England. Most notably, Joseph Story included this principle in his commentaries on the United States Constitution. Story and evangelical legal scholars promoted this view of the law, while trying to minimize the influence of Thomas Jefferson.

In a brief conclusion, Green emphasizes the point that historians like to understand the complex factors that influenced history. By contrast, most Americans today prefer to simplify the historical record into an uncomplicated narrative. The myth of the religious founding of America is one example of this tendency toward smoothing over nuance in order to tell a compelling story.

While Green's work does provide an excellent review of the major issues, his book does have its limitations. One of the most notable weaknesses is his overreliance on Perry Miller for the history of early New England and Virginia. Green does not reference a number of works that have been written since Miller's death. Authors such as David Hall, Michael Winship, and Francis Bremer have addressed important aspects of early American history that are relevant to Green's topic and serve as important corrections to Miller's scholarship.

At the same time, Green occasionally commits the same interpretative error that he criticizes in his conversation partners. In his discussion of New England puritans, for example, Green pulls quotations out of context and ignores the complexities of actions. He also ignores the diversity of thought and decisions between the various New England colonies, allowing Massachusetts to serve as a proxy for all New Englanders on the issues of church and state.

Despite these weaknesses, *Inventing a Christian America* makes an important contribution to our understanding of the ways in which clergy, intellectuals, and politicians developed a prevailing narrative of the founding of the United States as a Christian nation. They did so to support their agendas—political, religious, and otherwise. As contemporary Americans consider the future of

church-state relations in this country, they should do so with a realistic understanding of the influences that contributed to the founding of the country. Green's book provides an important correction against both the religionist and secularists interpretations of the founding, although it clearly focuses on correcting the errors of religionists.

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