

Is Capitalism Christian

We hear more and more in this second decade of the 21st century about America as a Christian nation or not a Christian nation. As a Christian minister of 50 years I have decided to add my voice to the crowd. We Christians hear statements from our friends such as, “This country was founded as a Christian nation and it should remain one.” Or from the other side of the aisle, “American never was a Christian nation.” Or, “if American was ever a Christian nation is no longer a Christian nation, or it should not be. After all, don’t we have religious freedom in America?”

For a Biblically oriented Christian such as myself no doubt I will receive some criticism from other Christians on the position I am going to set forth in this book. My position is that the United States of America was never a totally Christian nation. It was until the 21st century a democratic republic based on Puritan AND Enlightenment principles in which a great deal of influence was practiced by Evangelical Christians. To begin with, if we agree that the foundations of American exceptionalism were laid down by the American Fathers then we will see considerable differences if we study the Fathers in history.

Of the four prominent American Fathers only one had beliefs that are in any way similar to present day conservative evangelicalism, John Adams. Jefferson was a deist. Franklin had little interest in a Christianity stressing individual salvation. Washington’s references to god are almost exclusively mentions of what he called “providence.” In considering the foundations of American Exceptionalism many people will find the influence of Benjamin Franklin a singular surprise. But I run ahead in this regard.

The Christianity of Europe before 1517 was a Roman Catholic faith based largely on the teachings of Scholastic Theology formulated by Thomas Aquinas and strangely named ‘Thomistic Theology.’ This religion depended heavily on the authority of the church and the fear of the people concerning the afterlife. This church taught, even if the leaders did not practice it, a holy separation from worldly matters. The two primary examples of worldly matters were politics and commerce. Their belief in the “divine right of kings” pretty much to care of the politics part. That left business or money. The medieval church taught that a true Christian should follow the saints in rejecting such worldliness and depend on the authority of the church led by a priestly elite to dictate morals and dispense the seemingly magical benefits of salvation. Death was common place for many reasons. To fear death was one thing but to go to hell was the ultimate fear. Only the clergy could lead you away from hell and confer the assurances of eternal life.

At this point it is important to describe the lives of the common people in Europe at the onset of the Reformation. For most of the people their lives were as follows: Every person and family had two bosses, the land lord and the priest. The landlord’s power was uncontested and was supported by the nobles who owned all of the land and allowed tenants to farm on them for a portion of the crops, a “share croppers” system. There was also a small rising class of craftsmen who formed themselves into “guilds.” A young man would begin working for an experienced craftsman known as a “Master” as an “Apprentice.” After a while he could graduate to a

“Journeyman” and travel around working for other Master Craftsmen. If he could raise the capital to open his own shop he then became a settled Master and carried on the system. Some example trades are reflected in present day names; a Taylor made garments, a Glover made gloves, a Carter transported things in his wagon or cart, a Cooper made wooden barrels, a Vinter made wine. A Weaver made cloth, a Fuller prepared fiber for weaving, a Potter made clay pots. There were more especially a variety of Smiths who worked in metals. A Black Smith worked in iron. A Silversmith in silver etc. The Master Carter morphed into Mr. Carter and so on. Sometimes the Guild supervised certification of craftsmen, but for the most part it was a dog eat dog environment unless the Protestant Work Ethic based on glorifying God and helping your fellow man was in place in consideration. The guilds were established well before the Reformation.

Religion was the other dominating force. Most of the people could not read and what we know as a Bible was nonexistent. They learned their Bible stories from looking at the stained glass windows of the churches. The priests would read the scriptures in Latin at the church service, the Mass. The priests were supervised by the Bishops and the Bishops reported to the Pope in Rome. Hell was much more threatening than mere physical death and the priests were the gate keepers of the afterlife in the eyes of the people. You could lose your farm, go hungry, be beaten and killed with no recourse to legal help. But what you feared most was eternal damnation. If a priest was available to hear your deathbed confession and absolve your sins and you did not sin again in thought, word or deed before you died then you were reasonably sure that you would not go to Hell. However, you would probably go to the great waiting room in the sky “Purgatory” and wait from your descendants to buy you out of Purgatory a few hundred or thousands years at a time by buying “Indulgences.” These were pieces of paper showing that a dead relative had received a reduction in his or her sentence of so many years and was purchased with the money of the poverty stricken peasant. Some other circumstances such as children who died in infancy resulted in going to “Limbo.” The average parent had no idea of what their future was, but was comforted by the fact that they were not in Hell. Infant baptism gave a person a sort of tentative reservation in heaven. The Lord’s Supper communicated God to the believer but it was necessary to repeat it weekly. Furthermore, the actual bread and wine was actually changed into the body and blood of Jesus. This was the miracle of “Transubstantiation.” If the Priest was corrupt then it did not work. You could change your country, for instance, move from Germany to France etc., but you could not change your church. The Roman Catholic church was everywhere. The average person kept his or her mouth shut and did as he or she was told. He or she had no affirmation of individual worth. Luther changed all that.

In 1517 Martin Luther, a well-known Professor of Theology and Roman Catholic priest in Germany, started the Protestant Reformation. It was Luther’s intent to reform the Catholic Church, but the ‘powers that be’ at that time would have nothing of it. They excommunicated Luther and burned his writings. His writings had been published in the forms of pamphlets or flyers by the many printing presses scattered through Europe. In God’s usual excellent timing the printing press had been invented in 1450 just 67 years before Luther started the Reformation. In a bold response Luther burned all of the Roman Catholic writing he could find at a public demonstration. Fortunately for Luther his prince of the state of Saxony, Frederick The Bold,

rescued him from certain death at the secret order of the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V, in Germany.

Luther's primary teaching was that every Christian believer could claim his or her own salvation by faith by believing in Jesus Christ personally. His primary scripture text was Romans 5:1-2:

"Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ: By whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God."

This eliminated the need for a Catholic Priest to personally forgive your sins and tell you how to conduct your faith life. It is difficult for today's believer to understand the impact of this on the believers of Luther's time. It was gigantic. They knew about Jesus dying on the cross for their sins, the pictorial evidence was all around them, the crucifix, stained glass picture church windows, the priest's sermons. But the individual taking responsibility for his or her sins in a private transaction with Almighty God was new, shocking, and liberating. In addition, it started the great literacy movement in Europe so that every believer could read the scriptures himself. The political and cultural revolution that followed was gigantic. In the past the Pope and the Holy Roman Emperor had usually shown a united front to the public. There was one secular leader and one spiritual leader over most everyone in Europe. Luther smashed all of that. He later realized that he had not expected such a gigantic response to his writings. However, Luther said, "Even if I knew that tomorrow the world would go to pieces, I would still plant my apple tree."

This was not merely a change in religion. It changes every part of life. It was an economic and social revolution that changed politics for ever and helped birth the modern Republic. When the Protestant Work Ethic migrated to America with its great melting pots and seemingly limitless natural resources it "went on steroids." If the Protestant faith was the father of the modern Republic, the Protestant Work Ethic was the mother. Thomas Jefferson knew this when he said, ""The last hope of human liberty in this world rests on us. We ought, for so dear a stake, to sacrifice every attachment and every enmity." (Thomas Jefferson to William Duane, 1811.)

Luther went on to teach about the sanctity of marriage and got married himself to Katharina von Bora. They had six children, one died in infancy and one at the age of 13, and raised four adopted children. Luther also translated the entire Bible into German and taught the "priesthood of all believers" which included the concept that the life's work of all Christians should be considered a calling from God. This gave a new place to the work of God's people. As a result, the tradesmen and farmers etc. became more productive and could soon live about the basic subsistence level. Since that had a little extra money they began helping each other in their different callings according to the Christian teaching that they now were able to read in their Bibles:

"Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another. (Romans 12:10) Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. (Romans 12:16) Owe no man any thing, but to love one another: for he that loveth another hath fulfilled the law. (Romans 13:8)"

The following Protestant Reformers took up the subject and before long a new economic system emerged – Capitalism. Capitalism meant working smarter and harder and helping each other become more productive. Therefore, capitalism was the child of Protestant Christianity as was brotherly love, democracy, and Christian Republics.

One may ask, what about the corruptions of Capitalism? Certainly these corruptions exist. I offer here an elementary explanation on the subject. The basic kernel of belief that a relationship with Jesus Christ instills a sense of worth in a person who can practice his or her calling to the glory of God and the benefit of others is the key. If a person is already assured of his or her self-worth due to the fact that Jesus has redeemed him then the motivation can exist to work in such a manner that reflects positively on Christ and by helping others, especially towards but not limited to other believers. When that is absent then a person's motive in prospering will be to amass more and more wealth to affirm his self-worth. They then become robber barons. No amount is ever enough money. Even though they can never spend all that money it is merely a way of keeping score. The more success the more I am affirmed. The money is just a way of keeping track of the score. This is corrupted capitalism.

Secular humanists are happy to point out that corrupted capitalism does not meet the needs of all people. But their remedy is for the government to collect the 'excess' and give it away under an entitlement scheme. This way the old maxim, "Give a man a fish and you feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and you feed him for a lifetime" (Maimonides) is avoided and unrestrained entitlement takes over and the government administering it ends up just as corrupted as the corrupted capitalist.

I will close with some dialogue from the bank run scene from *It's A Wonderful Life*

"We don't need Potter over here. I'll take mine now.

No, but you...you...you're thinking of this place all wrong.

As if I had the money back in a safe.

The, the money's not here.

Well, your money's in Joe's house...that's right next to yours.

And in the Kennedy House, and Mrs. Macklin's house, and, and a hundred others.

Why, you're lending them the money to build, and then, they're going to pay it back to you as best they can.

Now what are you going to do? Foreclose on them?

I got two hundred and forty-two dollars

in here and two hundred and forty-two dollars isn't going to break anybody.

Okay, Tom. All right.

Here you are. You sign this. You'll get your money in sixty days.

Sixty days?

Well, now that's what you agreed to when you bought you shares.

Tom...Tom... Did you get your money?

No.

Well, I did. Old man Potter'll pay fifty cents on the dollar for every share you got.

Fifty cents on the dollar!

Yes, cash!

Well, what do you say?

Now, Tom, you have to stick to your original agreement.

Now give us sixty days on this.

Okay, Randall.

Are you going to go to Potter's?

Better get half than nothing.

Tom!

Tom!

Randall, now wait a minute, wait...now listen...now listen to me.

I-I beg of you not to do this thing.

If Potter gets ahold of this Building and Loan, there'll never be another decent house built in this town."

In the words of Clarence the angel: "Strange, isn't it? Each man's life touches so many other lives. When he isn't around he leaves an awful hole, doesn't he? Remember, George: no man is a failure who has friends."

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