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A Critique of the Historiographical Construal of America as a Christian Nation

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Abstract. The Christian America thesis has grown in popularity over the past thirty years. This essay will critique the Christian America thesis, and instead offer the assertion that America was founded as a nation with religious liberty. Six lines of critique of the Christian America thesis will be presented, and the essay will attempt to show the significance of religious freedom in the founding. America's history points to a mixture of sacred and secular ideas. The nation is defined more realistically by religious freedom rather than a Christian identity. Evangelicals can approach those who do not share their faith commitment in peace and respect, knowing that the culture will be conformed to Christ when religious freedom is enjoyed equally by all.

The thesis of this paper is that the historiographical construal of America as a Christian nation cannot be sustained. While Christian theology has served as a significant source for revolutionary and founding ideas, it was not the most important source. The paper will argue that America is not a Christian nation, but is a nation with religious liberty. First, I will outline how conceptions of the relationship between religion and the state evolved from the founding of the first New England colonies to the enactment of the Constitution. Next, a brief survey of important CA ('Christian America') authors and their works from 1977 to 2007 will be presented. This survey summarizes some of the major historical, philosophical, and theological themes articulated by important proponents of the CA thesis. I will also offer an acknowledgement in broad terms of the significance of Puritan theology as a source for the American notion of liberty. Finally, I will present the critique of the CA thesis from philosophical, historical, and theological perspectives.

There are a number of reasons why a broad critique of the assumptions undergirding the Christian America notion is important from an evangelical perspective. To begin any

justification for a work of this sort, the question should be asked: what is the point? Simply put, the mission of Christ's church in the world is at stake. The church is to fulfill the greatest commandment (Matt 22:36–40) as well as the Great Commission (Matt 28:18–20). Noll, Marsden, and Hatch affirmed that "a true picture of America's past will make Christians today better equipped to speak the gospel in evangelism and to put it to work in social concern."[1] Conversely, if Christians embrace an inaccurate perspective on the history of America, and ascribe to it an undeserved and unsubstantiated status, their mission to love God and love others through worship of Him and evangelism and social effort will fall far short.

An evangelical critique is also needed because CA does not seem faithful to the historical record, and affirming the notion further isolates evangelicals from culture. Embracing CA, though fraught with the good intentions of reestablishing "traditional moral values" in a culture that has largely abandoned them, involves cherry picking from the historical record. How can evangelicals be taken seriously in the culture if they are not serious about historical scholarship and integrity?

Finally, the notion of a Christian America potentially undermines one of the Constitution's most valued and cherished principles, that of religious liberty. Richard Pierard feared that the evangelicals who embrace CA are in danger of locking those with different religious faiths out of the culture. He referred to the fact that America has changed in the last century, transforming from a culture with a common Protestant consensus to one that is greatly diverse in its religious life. This transformation, as Pierard observed, has made "the principles that originally guaranteed liberty to Christians of every denominational persuasion equally

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[1] Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 21.

operative in our highly pluralistic age."[2] A denial of religious liberty to followers of all faiths would be a betrayal of what is widely agreed upon as among the main intentions of the founders.

Religious liberty is a fragile privilege. Evangelicals would do better to focus on this precious gift as one of the central aspects of our identity as Christian Americans. They will win the culture with a message that emphasizes religious liberty, and Christianity's role in enshrining it in the Constitution. All faith systems represented in America are indebted to this liberty. It follows that they are equally indebted to the Christian faith for helping to ensure their equal standing in the marketplace of ideas.

From 1630 to 1789, the American conception of religion's role in the state shifted dramatically. The New England colonies were founded during a period of Western history when it was taken for granted that the church and state should be unified. Religion and the state were viewed as partners, and this partnership had historically been viewed by Westerners as indispensable in securing order in society and providing the nation with an identity rooted in a Christian intellectual framework. Edwin Gaustad drew a contrast between the attitude of that time and our own when he wrote, ""[w]e of today ask where the state left off and the church began; they of yesterday can only shake their heads in wonderment at so meaningless a question."[3]

Still, during this period which witnessed the development of the thirteen British North American colonies, the Revolutionary War which separated those colonies from Britain, and the establishment of the fledgling United States of America, a fundamental shift had taken place.

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[2] Richard V. Pierard, "Standing the Founding Fathers on Their Heads," *Christian Century* 100 (April 20, 1983): 370.

[3] Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of the Founders: Religion and the New Nation, 1776–1826*, 2d ed. (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2004), 12.

The New England colonies had been established as Christian colonies. They viewed themselves in covenantal terms, both with God and with each other. Furthermore, they understood their journey from England to America in strongly biblical terms. John Winthrop urged his fellow colonists, that the Massachusetts Bay Colony would be as a city on a hill, called to be faithful to God or suffer His indignation.

By the time the Constitution was being drafted in the summer of 1787, these Puritan notions of chosenness and covenant were not part of the American value system. The fifty-five delegates to the Constitutional Convention had no intention of modeling the new nation on the Puritan model. What had replaced this idea was that of the freedom of the individual to decide how he would relate to his God, or even choose not to relate. John Noonan wrote that James Madison had practical and theological reasons for holding to religious liberty. He observed that, for Madison, "[t]he right to determine this duty [the duty to be religious] in conscience belongs to each person and is 'unalienable' for two reasons: first, the exercise of the right must depend on evidence, and each person will determine what evidence is sufficient for conviction; and second, the duty, as it runs to the Creator, can never be relaxed by any human being."[4] Not only were these important considerations, but Madison also sought to limit the dominance of one religious sect over others by encouraging freedom of conscience. No one religion ought to have dominant influence, just as no one political faction should monopolize public opinion. Madison said, "[e]xtend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other

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[4] John T. Noonan, Jr., *The Lustre of Our Country: The American Experience of Religious Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 72.

citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other."[5]

Frank Lambert posited three dynamics of change to account for this shift, which occurred between the founding of the Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 and the enactment of the U. S. Constitution in 1789: the Great Awakening, the Enlightenment, and radical Whig ideology. The Great Awakening made it possible for individuals to choose how they would worship God by decentralizing religious authority. The Enlightenment brought a new emphasis on human reason as an epistemological authority, alongside, and even superior to, divine revelation. Radical Whig ideology, articulated by the Commonwealth men of seventeenth and early eighteenth century England and undergirded by Locke's political philosophy, stressed complete political and religious freedom for the individual, and would provide the intellectual fuel for the American Revolution. Lambert summarized the effect of the shift saying, "religious freedom in the 'City upon a Hill' meant freedom from error with church and state, though separate working together to support and protect the one true faith. Those who believed differently were free to go elsewhere and sometimes compelled to do so. The Founding Fathers had a radically different conception of religious freedom. Influenced by the Enlightenment, they had great confidence in the individual's ability to understand the world and its most fundamental laws through the exercise of his or her reason."[6] The relevance of this shift to the central argument of the paper is simple: America was founded on the basis of religious freedom, not on the basis of the Christian religion.

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[5] James Madison, *Federalist*, no. 10, The Great Books of the Western World, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 43 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 51.

[6] Frank Lambert, *Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

Many of the most prominent and prolific writers, including such as Peter Marshall, Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Tim LaHaye, David Barton, Gary DeMar, John Eidsmoe, Mark Beliles, Stephen McDowell, Gary Amos, and Benjamin Hart were considered. Thirteen historical, philosophical, and theological themes were found to recur throughout CA writings. These included, historically: 1) the Christian faith of the founders, 2) the Christian character of the sources drawn from by the founders, 3) the Christian character of colonial documents and early state constitutions, 4) the Christian character of early colleges, and 5) the powerful Christian influence of the Great Awakening and radical Whig ideology on the revolutionary generation. The philosophical themes reviewed were, 1) the original intent of the founders may be accurately discerned by applying the same evangelical hermeneutical method as used when interpreting Scripture, 2) the original intent of the founders was to build Christianity into the heart of the nation, and 3) the role of the Enlightenment is not as significant as the role of Christianity in the founding. The theological themes for the CA thesis included, 1) a providential view of history, 2) American exceptionalism as evidence of God's unique blessing on the nation, 3) America as God's chosen nation, a new Israel, 4) liberty as a biblical notion finding its consummate application in the civic life of America, and 5) the Bible as the primary source of the founding national documents. Finally, the appeal to Christian Americans to lead the nation back to its Christian roots in order that God cause it to fulfill its purpose in the world appeared in all CA works surveyed.

It is not the contention of this paper that Christianity had nothing to do with the American national founding. Such an assertion is unhistorical. But the paper does contend that America's foundation owes debts to both Christian and secular sources. Thus, it argues not for a strong view of CA, but a weak view. As Noll wrote in his differentiation of the two views, "in the case of

United States, certain features of the national history stand out as exemplary, from the angle of Christian interpretation. At their best, the nation's traditions of democratic liberty fit well with biblical teachings on the dignity of all people under God. . . . And many people from other lands still look to America, and with considerable justice, as a promised land of economic, political, and religious freedom."[7] In addition to these considerations, it is important to acknowledge the distinctly Christian sources that contributed to the revolutionary and constitutional thought that ultimately brought the United States into existence.

According to Noll, Puritanism was the main force shaping American life from 1630 to the Revolutionary period.[8] Thus, Puritanism would be the most important theological source contributing to revolutionary thought. Far from being a local phenomenon limited to New England, Puritan theology would exert its influence throughout the colonies.

Puritan theology bequeathed a distinct value to the individual, something that was truly revolutionary. In addition to the obvious stress the Puritans placed on covenanted community, the Puritans also stressed that each individual was valuable to God, each person had full access to God through Christ. Because of this freedom, individual potential was unleashed upon the world. Suddenly, individuals had a reason to be productive, to contribute to society. God had placed a calling upon each life. Politically, this idea would translate into the notion of government by consent. Describing the significance of the Mayflower Compact, Page Smith wrote, "[i]n it the Pilgrims formed a 'civil body politic,' and promised to obey the laws their own

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[7] Mark Noll, *One Nation Under God? Christian Faith and Political Action in America* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 10.

[8] Ibid, 22.

government might pass. In short, the individual Pilgrim invented on the spot a new community, one that would be ruled by laws of its making."[9]

Because of this emphasis on liberty, Puritan theology logically entailed religious freedom. To be sure, uninhibited religious freedom was not given in the New England colonies—except Rhode Island. Roger Williams, founder of the Rhode Island colony and a committed Puritan, opposed persecution of all forms. William's eighth point in his "Bloody Tenent of Persecution" of 1644 was, "God requireth not a uniformity of religion to be enacted and enforced in any civil state; which enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the great occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls."[10] The 1663 charter of Rhode Island declared,

> . . . That our loyall will and pleasure is, that noe person within the said colonye, at any tyme hereafter shall be any wise molested, punished, disquieted or called in question for any differences in opinion in matters of religion and doe not actually disturb the civill peace of sayd colony, but that all and every person and persons may from tyme to tyme and at all tymes hereafter freely and fullye enjoye his and their own judgements and consciences in matters of religious concernments, they behaving themselves peaceably and quietly, and not using this libertie to lycentiousness and profanenesse, nor to the civill injurye or outward disturbance of other.[11]

Thus, Williams took the Puritan emphasis on the value of the individual before God to its logical conclusion. If the individual in covenant with the community and with God is given primary importance in Puritan theology, then it must follow that the individual should enjoy the freedom to worship as he chooses.

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[9] [9] Page Smith, ed., *Religious Origins of the American Revolution* (Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1976), 3.

[10] Roger Williams, "The Bloody Tenent of Persecution," in *Profile of America: An Autobiography of the U. S. A.*, ed. Emily Davie, with a foreword by Charles A. Lindbergh and introduction by Louis Bromfield (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1954), 88.

[11] *Charter of Rhode Island*, in *Profile of America: An Autobiography of the U. S. A.*, ed. Emily Davie, with a foreword by Charles A. Lindbergh and introduction by Louis Bromfield (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1954), 88.

These are a few of the salient points regarding the role of Puritan theology in American notions of freedom. They help show that Puritan theology is a source contributing to the American identity. Thus, Noll's encouragement to evangelicals to adopt a weak version of CA, one that acknowledges the existing Christian heritage without affirming that America is a Christian nation, is helpful.

Bearing in mind the centrality of religious liberty to the American identity, I will now offer a philosophical, historical, and theological critique of CA. The philosophical critique emphasizes the failure on the part of CA authors to avoid ambiguity in their use of important terms comprising their arguments. This failure necessarily led these authors to the flawed conclusion that America is a Christian nation. Two terms were examined: "Christian nation" and "Enlightenment."

"Christian nation" is an unwieldy term, and because of its ambiguity, it is difficult to make a case for it. It was found that there were four basic ways in which the term was classified: 1) it is a nation with a Christian consensus, 2) it was established on biblical principles, 3) the founders of the nation were Christians, and 4) the nation is a New Israel, exceptionally blessed with a special relationship with God and a special divine purpose in the world. While the most agreement among the authors was centered upon the idea that America was founded on biblical principles, there was still some significant disagreement between them on what exactly a Christian nation is. Several of the authors insisted that the Christian consensus of the eighteenth century was the key to understanding it. Others were equally insistent that this was immaterial. The most salient point of disagreement however, was over whether or not America is God's chosen nation. Marshall and Manuel were direct in their assertions that America is the New Israel. While others were willing to agree on American exceptionalism in general, few others

were willing to go as far as Marshall and Manuel. This lack of uniformity in the understanding of what "Christian nation" ought to mean led to great difficulty in the ability to demonstrate it as a historical or contemporary reality.

CA authors' use of the term "Enlightenment" was also found to be problematic. Amos and Hart were among those who explicitly equated the Enlightenment with a form of secularism that is strictly opposed to Christian theism. Unfortunately for these authors, to classify the Enlightenment in these terms is not accurate. The Enlightenment was not one thing, but a multi-faceted intellectual movement that must be understood in context. Henry May divided the Enlightenment into four categories: the "Moderate (it might be called Rational) Enlightenment," the "skeptical Enlightenment," the "Revolutionary Enlightenment," and the "Didactic Enlightenment."[12] It was the Moderate Enlightenment that was the most influential to the founding generation. According to May, it "preached balance, order and religious compromise, and was dominant in England from the time of Newton and Locke until about the middle of the eighteenth century [1688–1787]."[13] Newton and Locke were theists who affirmed the supremacy of God and the authority of special revelation, even though their ideas and methods were secular, in that they did not base them on the Bible. All this is to show that the Enlightenment is not so simply defined. The term, when not precisely and accurately defined, becomes a loaded term meant to evoke a strong emotional response rather than a clear and objective approach to its assessment on the reader's part.

When taken together, these terms as they are used by CA authors seem to be important to the conclusion that America is a Christian nation. But since the terms were either not precisely

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[12] Henry F. May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), xvi.

[13] Ibid.

defined and agreed upon, or were misunderstood and misapplied by those who advocated for CA, the conclusion cannot be logically sustained.

The historical critique of CA is centered upon two distinct, yet closely related, realities: the demise of the Protestant consensus in American society and the growth of religious pluralism. One of the important assertions of CA authors was that America is a Christian nation because it was founded in an atmosphere of Protestant consensus. The predominant worldview held by Americans at that time was a Christian worldview. Therefore, for many CA authors, America's founding is Christian. The problem with this assertion is that it does not account for the high value the founders placed on religious liberty. Religious pluralism was the intention of the founders, because they sought to guarantee not only the disestablishment of religion, but also its "free exercise"[14] in the First Amendment.

Proponents of CA are right in asserting that a Protestant consensus dominated American culture at the end of the eighteenth century. This consensus would endure into the twentieth century. Still, the founders who drafted the First Amendment valued religious liberty over any form of legal establishment of Christianity. Furthermore, due to a combination of influences which divided the Protestant churches, that consensus would eventually break down. These influences included the segregation of white and black Christians after the Civil War, immigration of Jews, Catholics, and Orthodox Christians, the spread of liberal Protestant theology, general disillusionment after World War I in America, the modernist-fundamentalist controversy of the 1920s, and the economic depression of the 1930s. Each of these factors served to cause Protestant churches to lose influence in the culture.

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[14] U.S. Constitution, amend. 1.

Nearly concurrent with the demise of the Protestant consensus arose a fundamental change in U. S. immigration policy in 1965 with the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act. Effectively overturning previous policy discriminating against people from eastern hemisphere nations, the 1965 act threw the doors open to people claiming different religious outlooks from the Protestant-Catholic-Jew paradigm. Diana Eck wrote that, "[t]oday our cultural differences are magnified with the new immigration. It's not just Swedes and Italians, Lutherans and Catholics, but Russian and Iranian Jews, Pakistani and Bengali Muslims, Trinidadi and Gujarati Hindus, Punjabi Sikhs, and Sinhi Jains."[15]

Religious pluralism has existed in America since the thirteen colonies were first settled. Because of the impact of the Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, pluralism spread to embrace more and more Christian traditions. By the twentieth century, pluralism had extended beyond Christian traditions and had come to include a significant Jewish population. Still, up until the early 1960s, America could still be defined in terms of a Judeo-Christian melting pot. After 1965, however, this description would prove to be far too narrow. Full religious pluralism has taken shape over the past few decades. As Waldman pointed out,

> [t]oday America is home to more Hindus than Unitarians, more Muslims than Congregationalists, and more Buddhists than Jews. In fact, there are more than twelve million non-Christians in America—about four times the entire population of the colonies when the Constitution was ratified. Immigration combined with continuous splintering of existing denominations to create a breathtaking diversity of sects. These 'facts on the ground' reinforce the Founders' pluralistic impulse and forever shut the door on the possibility that America could be, in any official sense, deemed a Protestant, or even a Christian, nation.[16]

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[15] Diana L. Eck, *A New Religious America: How a "Christian Country" Has Now Become the World's Most Religiously Diverse Nation* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2001.), 29.

[16] Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America.* (New York: Random House, 2008), 190.

Waldman's statement further emphasizes the significance of religious liberty in America. The First Amendment entails full religious freedom and therefore, true religious pluralism.

The theological critique centers around two assertions commonly made by CA authors, namely, that the Bible is the primary (if not the sole) authoritative source for the ideas which culminated in the founding documents, and that America is exceptional as a nation because of its singular Christian heritage (at least) or its status as God's chosen nation (at most).

To counter the argument that the Bible or Christian theology is at the core of America's founding, two points were made. First, the idea that the Bible is the primary source is put forth by Barton, Eidsmoe and others. Their source for this contention is Donald Lutz' survey of the public writings of the founders from the 1760s to 1805. The Bible was demonstrated by Lutz to have accounted for about a third of the citations used in those writings, alongside other sources belonging to the Enlightenment, radical Whig ideology, common law tradition, classical antiquity, and others. Barton, responding to Lutz' survey, quoted a *Newsweek* article by Kenneth Woodward and David Gates, wrote, ". . . some have even conceded that 'historians are discovering that the Bible, perhaps even more than the Constitution, is our Founding document.'"[17]

The problem with drawing this conclusion from Lutz' data is that, while it is true that the Bible is the single most cited source in eighteenth century writings, this does not in itself demonstrate that it is the primary source for America's founding concepts. For example, while Lutz did state where the many citations from the Bible came from, it was not his purpose to give the context in which they were quoted. Lutz did not specify whether the biblical texts were being

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[17] Kenneth Woodward and David Gates, "How the Bible Made America," *Newsweek*, 27 December 1982, 44; quoted in David Barton, *Original Intent: The Courts, the Constitution, and Religion* (Aledo, TX: WallBuilder Press, 1996), 226.

authoritatively or illustratively at any point. Second, while about a third of the citations are taken from the Bible, two thirds are taken from other sources, most of them secular. Added together, two thirds of the citations found in eighteenth century writings are taken from Enlightenment, radical Whig, common law, and classical sources.

To further emphasize this point, it was noted that Bernard Bailyn and Pauline Maier wrote that the Whig sources, especially those of John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon in *Cato's Letters*, were instrumental in bringing unity to the disparity of the sources. Puritanism, common law tradition, the Enlightenment, and classical antiquity were all sources for revolutionary thought. Still, the writings that brought these different sources into a unified whole were those of the radical Whig ideological tradition, and particularly those of Trenchard and Gordon.

The CA authors had little to say about Whig influence in general and Trenchard and Gordon in particular. According to Bailyn, however, their importance should not be underestimated. He wrote, "[t]he ultimate origins of this distinctive ideological strain lay in the radical social and political thought of the English Civil War and of the Commonwealth period; . . ."[18] Trenchard and Gordon did not appeal to Scripture but to reason, history, and experience.

Locke was classified by Lutz as being among the leading three sources outside the Bible, with most of his influence being felt in the 1760s and 70s. Locke appealed to Scripture often in his *Second Treatise*, but his appeals were always made illustratively, not authoritatively. This makes sense, especially after having seen in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that he placed reason above divine revelation as epistemological authority. His political philosophy expressed in the *Second Treatise* is consistent with his epistemology. Rather than appealing to revelation to base his ideas on individual liberty, social compact, government by consent, the

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[18] Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 23.

people's power to overthrow tyrannical government, and other views, he appealed regularly to reason. Thus, Locke's views were not based on Scripture, even though at points they are consistent with Scripture.

In critiquing the idea of American exceptionalism, it was argued that the notion itself cannot be sustained either by appealing to history or to theology. The notion itself is unbiblical, owing to the fact that only one nation in history has ever really been blessed exceptionally on the basis of its having been chosen by God—ancient Israel. Noll stated, "[a]fter the full revelation of God's glory in Christ, 'God's country' was made up of believers 'from every tribe and tongue and people and nation' (Rev 5:9)."[19] Furthermore, Noll wrote, "a providential interpretation of history that features a special divine covenant with the United States leads to very awkward conclusions."[20]

Not only is the idea of American exceptionalism unbiblical, it is unsubstantiated by history. Other nations have viewed themselves as the New Israel. Anthony Smith's study of the idea of national chosenness among European nations showed that it is almost as old as the history of Christendom itself. Fourth century Armenians, fifteenth century Russians, nineteenth century French, and the Boers of southern Africa each saw themselves in similar ways as the Puritans of New England. Also, the overshadowing presence of the British Empire in the history of the world helps to show that America has not been the only nation to enjoy predominance. No other nation except Britain had been as powerful or as blessed as it was at its peak, and no other nation deserved to be called exceptional. No other nation had such a sense of divine destiny that it had been chosen of God to evangelize the heathen nations wherever it colonized. Not since the

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[19] Noll, *One Nation*, 8.

[20] Ibid., 9.

Roman Empire had the world witnessed such predominance, militarily, economically, and diplomatically.

The fact of the British imperial presence in the world from the battle of Trafalgar in 1805 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914, specifically the Pax Britannica which ensured British expansion to every corner of the world, serves to undermine the assertion that there has been no other nation as blessed as the United States. The British could, and did, make the same claims to exceptionalism at the peak of their world prestige as proponents of CA do in reference to the United States. The fact that Scripture points only to Old Testament Israel as enjoying divine exceptionalism is evidence against the idea that America is exceptional. Furthermore, the fact that so many European nations have claimed the same exceptionalism as America was no proof that they were, in fact, exceptional. In the same way, the fact that many Americans have believed in their own exceptionalism cannot suffice as evidence. America cannot claim to be exceptional on any more reliable basis than other nations that have made the same claim.

This critique has attempted to show that logical reasoning, history, and theology cannot bear out the notion that America is uniquely Christian, or that America was singled out by God and exalted over other nations. Generally speaking, Protestant theology was a source in the founding. American society did experience a Protestant consensus in the first century or so of its existence. The United States has enjoyed singular opportunities for world leadership and expansion of the gospel in its history. These assertions make up a weak version of the CA thesis, and one may affirm them with care. Still, evangelical Christians can recognize that the Protestant consensus in America is gone and religious pluralism is the current sociological reality. They can seek to honestly assess not only the history of their own nation, but also the history of the ideas that have formed it—sacred and secular ideas. Finally, evangelicals must strive to apply

Christian doctrine appropriately to the study of history, and align their understanding of how God reveals Himself to nations with what the Bible, particularly the New Testament, teaches.