

REVIEW OF DAVID BARTON'S *AMERICA'S GODLY HERITAGE*

Gregg Frazer

I agree with David Barton on one three-part point in *America's Godly Heritage*: that the Founding Fathers did not erect a “wall of separation” between church and state, that they did not intend to do that, and that the Supreme Court has made a number of very bad decisions based on the spurious “wall of separation” idea. That said, I disagree with—and I believe the facts contradict—almost everything else that Barton says in this video. For purposes of this review, I will not comment on theological or scriptural problems, but will confine discussion to matters of fact, historiography, and presentation.

Let us begin with **monumental unsupported assumptions presented as fact**. The video begins with the claim that 52 of the 55 delegates at the Constitutional Convention were “orthodox, evangelical Christians.” Barton does not supply any source or basis for this astounding claim, but I strongly suspect that the source is M.E. Bradford’s *A Worthy Company*. It is, to my knowledge, the only “study” that attempts such a determination and that produces 52 as a result. The extent of Bradford’s evidence is simply a list of the denominational affiliations of the 55 delegates. Mere affiliation with a denomination is, of course, no evidence whatever of “orthodox, evangelical” Christianity. This is particularly true since, in order to get to 52, one must include the two Roman Catholics. If mere denominational affiliation is proof of orthodox Christianity, one must also wonder why Barton is concerned today, since 86% of today’s Congress is affiliated with Protestant or Catholic denominations (compared with just 75% of the national population). Today’s Congress is apparently more “Christian” than the American public.

A second monumental assumption is the claim that George Washington’s “miraculous” delivery in battle demonstrates God’s special hand on him. The original source for this story is

Mason Locke (Parson) Weems's embarrassing hagiography of Washington. To present one of Weems's stories as fact reflects very poorly on Barton's historiography. But even if one were to take this story as fact, one cannot assume without revelation that an event such as this indicates a special relationship with God. Hitler "miraculously" survived an attempt on his life, too – and claimed that God had spared him to finish his "ordained" work. God uses evil men as well as good to accomplish His purposes (Rom. 9:17, 22-23) and only through revelation can we affix a special relationship between God and His agent. Often, God simply works through history without any special relationship with the actors.

A third assumption is that the Court's decision in Church of the Holy Trinity v. U.S. (1892) reflects the view of the Founders or should be taken as more accurate or representative than other court decisions. The case was **100 years** after the Founding! Do we, simply on the basis of living 100 years earlier, have a better or more accurate understanding of the views of people in the early 1900s than people 100 years from now will have? Interestingly, the Court did not say what Barton reported, anyway; rather the statement was made by a state court in 1883.

Several monumental assumptions surround Barton's arguments concerning prayer in school. First, he argues that because of the Supreme Court decision in 1962 which struck down organized public prayer in public schools, 1963 is the beginning of the decline of America. He says that "since the removal of religious values" from America, a tremendous moral decline has occurred and 1963 is marked on his charts as "religious principles separated." Was organized public prayer in public schools the *only* expression or conduit of religious values in America? Can one court decision *really* separate religious principles and remove religious values from America? Did the Court outlaw churches? Families? Parachurch organizations? In fact, they

did not even outlaw prayer, but only organized public prayer that Barton himself admits was a “bland” and “to whom it may concern” prayer.

Second, Barton argues that we can demonstrate statistically the moral decline caused by the removal of organized public prayer from public schools by looking at numbers in selected categories since 1963 – “since the removal of religious values.” This assumes that there are no other explanations for America’s moral decline and for the disturbing numbers. This is the classic “correlation equals causation” fallacy and akin to declaring that leaves turn brown because squirrels gather nuts – they happen at the same time, so one must be causing the other. But there are, of course, a number of other possible explanations for America’s moral decline during this period. Among them are: a) the sexual revolution and invention of “the Pill,” b) lack of respect for authority engendered by the Vietnam conflict, c) the drug culture, d) racial unrest, and e) various media – specifically, sinful messages transmitted via movies, music, and television [which Barton himself blames for the loss of youth morality in his book].

Third, Barton attributes improved SAT scores to the growth of Christian schools and, more to the point, claims that the basic difference is that Christian schools utilize religious principles and public schools do not. First, *private* school students score higher – not just Christian school students. Second, must this be the effect of “religious” principles, or are there any other alternate explanations? For example, private schools (including Christian) are able to be selective in determining which students they serve. Almost all have entrance tests to fill openings and can “weed out” weak and troublesome students. Public schools must serve whoever shows up at their door. Third, Barton makes much of the fact that Christian schools spend less per student, but the real issue is arguably *how* money is spent, not *how much*. Public

schools waste large amounts of money on non-educational frills, projects, and bureaucrats – but this has nothing to do with religious values.

In addition to these assumptions, the video also contains a number of **glaring overstatements**. Barton identifies John Jay as “one of the three men most responsible for the Constitution He’s one of the three men that gave us the Constitution.” Jay did *not* even attend the Constitutional Convention! He was one of the three authors of *The Federalist Papers* (writing only 5 of the 85 essays), but the Constitution was already written. Jay’s writings indicate that he was a true believer in Christ, so one can see why Barton would want to magnify his significance regarding the Founding – but it is clearly overstated. While talking about what Chief Justice *Jay* said, Barton reports that the Supreme Court said we should elect Christians to office. The Supreme Court did not say that – *one member* of the Court did. It was Jay’s opinion, not that of the Court. After pointing out that Dallas high schools studied the Bible in 1946, Barton concludes that this reflects “everything that we had before.” No, it merely illustrates what *Dallas* had before; it hardly reflects on the nation. He follows with the statement that earlier court decisions said “you couldn’t have a school that didn’t teach Christianity and the Bible,” referring to his claims regarding Vidal v. Girard (1844). But the Court did *not* say that schools *must* teach Christianity and the Bible. According to his own slides, it said, “Why **may** not the Bible, and especially the New Testament be read and taught as divine revelation in the schools? Where **can** the purest *principles of morality* be learned so clearly or so perfectly as from the New Testament?”

After mentioning that polls show that 97% of Americans believe in God, Barton says that the Court sided with the 3% in their prayer decision and that “the philosophy of the 3% would be the philosophy under which the 97% would conduct their business.” As will be explained below,

the percentages are faulty, but even if they were correct, the decision did not replace one philosophy with another. Furthermore, the decision only affected the fraction of Americans that attend public school; it in no way impacted the “business” of the vast majority of people. Barton claims that Abraham Lincoln’s statement “my concern is to be on God’s side” illustrates a greater American concern for God a century ago. But George H.W. Bush said *exactly* the same thing during the Persian Gulf War. Besides, a quote from a president in time of crisis when he is trying to rally or comfort the people is not very reliable evidence of national – or even individual – commitment or piety. Finally, Barton says that separation of church and state only allows “salt and light” in the church; but it actually allows salt and light *anywhere* except *officially* in government, that is, with governmental backing. Even in government, hundreds of individuals and interest groups are salt and light – why must salt and light have institutional backing? The first-century Christians certainly did not have such support. This points up another problem: the almost exclusive emphasis on the government as the sole problem-solver and power broker. Indeed, Barton sounds like a liberal here, making government the only significant entity.

There is one type of glaring overstatement that permeates all of this video and Barton’s various works: he says “the Founders said” or “the Founders believed” or “the Founders wanted” or other broad, general references to “the Founders.” But the Founders were a diverse group of individuals who had various views about politics, religion, law, society and everything else. It is an overstatement and oversimplification to draw virtually any specific conclusion or make virtually any specific claim concerning “the Founders.” For one example: Barton says “this is what the Founders said” just before quoting George Mason at the Constitutional Convention. But this is just what *one* Founder said – and there would be great debate as to the appropriateness of citing him as representative of “the Founders” since he did not sign the Constitution. Barton

continually begins sentences with “they felt” or “they said” or “they understood.” But “they” did not do any of those things collectively. “They” differed.

Perhaps more troubling than his assumptions and overstatements are the numerous **misrepresentations** in the video. He says of John Quincy Adams’s education: “When John Quincy Adams was 14 years old, *under this system of education* [American], he received a congressional *diplomatic appointment* overseas to the court of Catherine the Great in Russia” and “*that was typical* for that time, *for that type of education*” [my emphases]. First, Adams actually studied **in France** in 1778-79 and **Holland** in 1780 before becoming a **secretary** to a diplomat in 1781. Nor was this “typical” for that time – being John Adams’s son had something to do with it. In making the case for George Washington’s promotion of Christianity, Barton twice quotes statements by Washington’s that “religion and morality” are indispensable supports for our government and society and that “national morality” is based on “religious principle.” But Washington said “**religion and morality**” are such supports – *not necessarily or specifically Christianity*. Washington talked about “**morality**” and “**religious principle**” – *not necessarily or specifically Christianity*. Barton appeals to William Blackstone and the Revolutionary writers’ use of him, but the Revolutionary writers misquoted Blackstone, who was a Tory who opposed the very concept of revolution, as well as the American cause in particular. They took him out of context and re-defined his terms to fit their cause.

When dealing with court cases such as People v. Ruggles and Runkel v. Winemiller, Barton uses the phrase “the court said” without clarification when moving between Supreme Court cases and state cases. This leaves the false impression that specifically Christian remarks made by state courts were made by the Supreme Court and reflect a definitive national decision. Barton makes the curious claim that earlier *rejected* versions of the First Amendment make the

intent of Congress clear. But if the earlier versions *had* expressed the intent of Congress, they would have passed. The fact that they did not pass indicates the opposite. What kind of logic says that what a group *really* wants is what they reject? Barton says that, in making its decision, the Court said: “This is what the Founders wanted: separation.” The Court did *not* say that; they were not concerned with what the Founders wanted. Barton is reading his original intent approach into the Court’s decision, but the Court in question did not accept the original intent doctrine. They were simply dealing with a contemporary case under contemporary interpretation – they made no statement about the preferences of the Founders.

In his discussion of the prayer in school decision, Barton says that polls show that 97% of Americans *believe in God* and then says: “That prayer was consistent with the beliefs of 97%” and: The Court said, ‘we side with the 3% against the 97.%’” First, this argument falsely equates *belief in God* with *support for organized public prayer in public school*. Not everyone who believes in God supports organized public prayer in public school. Second, the Court did not say what Barton claimed and did not consciously side with 3% against 97%--they did not know the percentages as that information was not relevant. America is not a majoritarian country; not one decision in American history has been made on the basis of a majority of the people. This is particularly true of Supreme Court decisions, in which the Court has the responsibility to apply the Constitution (which was not supported by a majority, either) irrespective of public opinion. Finally, Barton says: “When the Court says something is unconstitutional, what they’re saying is, ‘our Founding Fathers would have opposed this … they would not have wanted this – it’s unconstitutional because they would not have wanted it!’” Again, this is only true if one’s theory of constitutional interpretation is “original intent.” But the Court that made these decisions did not believe in “original intent” doctrine, so they were not making *any* statement

concerning the beliefs or viewpoints of the Founders. They did not consider the views of the Founders to be relevant.

Barton's claims about the percentage of quotes directly from the Bible or based on the Bible or from "men who used the Bible to write their conclusions" are gross misrepresentations that are too confusing and complex to explain briefly here. A few comments will have to suffice. First, his percentages are blown out of proportion. He notes that a study found the Bible to have the highest percentage of citations (34%) and he claims that another 60% came from "men who used the Bible to write their conclusions"; consequently, he claims that "94% of the quotes of the Founders were based on the Bible." First, neither the 60% number nor the 94% number come from the study – Barton made those up. Second, the study is careful to note that "reprinted sermons accounted for almost three-fourths of the biblical citations, making this nonsermon source of biblical citations roughly as important as the Classical or Common Law categories [10%]." Most importantly, while Barton appeals to this study during his discussion of the framing of the Constitution, the study says that during the debate on the U.S. Constitution, "the Bible's prominence disappears" and "(t)he debate surrounding the adoption of the Constitution was fought out mainly in the context of Montesquieu, Blackstone, the English Whigs, and major writers of the Enlightenment." Even at that, the percentages are misleading in and of themselves, as misapplication and misinterpretations of passages (abuse of the Bible) are counted the same as proper use. Satan quotes the Bible (e.g. Luke 3:10-11) too, but that does not indicate any righteousness or interest in promoting Christianity on his part.

Another disturbing element in the video is the inclusion of **false quotes**. The first is a supposed quote by Benjamin Franklin about spreading "the principles of Christianity." Franklin did not say it. Of course, the quote being false is bad enough, but equally disturbing is the

suggestion that Franklin's understanding or notion of Christianity is something to be affirmed. This is a consistent problem in Barton's works; he takes use of the word "Christian" or "Christianity" at face value and does not go beneath the surface to see what the person meant by the term. In Franklin's case, he rejected virtually all of the fundamental core doctrines of Christianity and constructed his own meaning for the term – which was basically the moral teachings of Jesus shorn of what makes "Christianity" Christianity. The next false quote is a supposed statement by James Madison about the value of the Ten Commandments. The third is a false quote supposedly by Thomas Jefferson extolling Christianity. Again, Jefferson had his own meaning for the term "Christianity" and simply quoting Jefferson using that word would be misleading even if the quote were authentic. Jefferson, like Franklin, denied every fundamental tenet of Christianity – but he did it more explicitly and succinctly in a list. Also included is a fabricated quote in which Patrick Henry supposedly claims that Christians founded the nation.

There is another troubling element to this penchant for false quotes. Having been confronted over the use of false quotes, Barton was forced to acknowledge their illegitimacy in some way on his website. There, he describes them as "unconfirmed" – as if there is some doubt about their legitimacy. In a computer age with search capabilities, we *know* that these quotes are false – the fact that they are listed as "unconfirmed" reflects a stubborn attempt to hold onto them and to suggest to followers that they *might* be true. That is made worse by the fact that under these "unconfirmed" quotes are paragraphs maintaining that the bogus quote is something that the person *might* have said. This reflects poorly on the quality of scholarship and concern for academic integrity.

Equally disturbing as these other elements are the **factual errors** in the video. Barton claims that having three branches and separation of powers are "ideas that the Founders took

directly out of the Bible,” but there is no evidence that the Founders got these ideas from the Bible. There is no mention of the Bible as the source for these ideas in either the *Notes of the Constitutional Convention* or in *The Federalist Papers* (written in part by James Madison, who Barton identifies as the “Father of the Constitution”). Instead, when they identified a source for these ideas, it was Montesquieu (e.g. see Federalist #47). He then says that they got the idea for tax exemption of churches from Ezra 7:24, but there is no evidence that the Founders got this idea from the Bible, either. In the defining case on the subject, McCulloch v. Maryland, the argument was that the power to tax is the power to destroy and, because of the Free Exercise Clause, state taxation of churches would threaten the existence of the exercise of religion. While making the claim that the First Congress based parts of the government on the Bible, Barton says they often cited the Bible by name and: “they’d put it in the government with a statement that said ‘well, if it’s in the Bible, that’s what we want in our government.’” But they never did that. The only time the Bible is mentioned in the *Annals of Congress* for the First Congress is requests from religious groups for Congress to protect new editions of the Bible from errors.

Stunningly, Barton says that the word “state” does not appear in the Constitution. “State,” of course, appears dozens of times – first in Article I, section 2. He says that Jefferson said that the wall of separation was one-directional and that Jefferson said of the wall: “it makes sure that Christian principles will always stay in government.” Jefferson did not say either of these things. Barton also calls the letter a “speech” multiple times, which exemplifies carelessness on his part. He says that delegates to the Constitutional Convention pointed to Elijah and to David as examples of biblical principles that they wanted to establish in America. With computer search capabilities, one can quickly see that that is not true.

Barton shows a statement by John Adams and then proceeds to make false statements about it. He reports that Adams said that our system will only work for those who “use the Word of God as their standard,” but Adams did not say that. In the slides that Barton shows as evidence for this claim, Adams said that passions must be bridled by “**morality** and **religion**” and that the Constitution was made only for a “**moral** and **religious** people.” He said nothing about the Word of God or, it should be noted, about *Christianity*, either. Barton claims that Washington “called for the First Amendment.” He did not; he generally suggested the utility of having a bill of rights. Barton claims that Washington said not to let anyone be called a “true American” if they tried to remove religion from politics. He did not say that. Washington said that a man could not rightfully claim “the tribute of Patriotism” if he tried to “subvert” religion or morality. The tribute of patriotism is quite different from being a true American and subverting religion or subverting morality is not the same as removing either of them from politics. Finally, in his discussion of who should hold public office, Barton says: “The Founding Fathers were emphatic about keeping Christian men in office.” On the contrary, the Founding Fathers collectively prohibited any religious test for office. John Jay and some state constitutions were emphatic about keeping Christian men in office, but the “Founding Fathers” were not.

This leads to one last area of concern in *America’s Godly Heritage* which can best be expressed as a question: **Who counts as a “Founding Father?”** This issue reappears frequently in Barton’s works. He seems to count anyone of whom he approves who was living at the time of the Revolution, the founding of the political system under the Constitution, or within fifty or sixty years of those times as a “Founding Father.” For example, he says that “the American Tract Society was started by the Founding Fathers.” First, not one of those listed as a Tract

Society founder signed the Constitution or the Declaration of Independence. By what standard are they “Founding Fathers?” Furthermore, the Society was started in **1825** – 36 years after the Constitution was ratified. Madison was the last living framer and he died in 1836. How many Founding Fathers were even alive in 1825? Similarly, in his discussion of Vidal v. Girard, he said it was decided in “the time of the Founders.” It was decided in **1844** – 55 years after the Constitution went into effect and, as was just mentioned, the last framer died in 1836! Barton refers to John Quincy Adams as a “Founding Father.” At the time of the Constitutional Convention, he was a 20 year-old just out of law school (he was 8 when the Declaration was signed) – by what standard is he a “Founding Father?” Barton also claims that the “Founding Fathers” established the New England Primer as a text, but the Founding Fathers did not establish *any* texts for schools – that was left to local communities to decide. Apparently, by Barton’s standards (whatever they are), local school boards were “Founding Fathers.” Finally, Barton says that the state constitutions indicate that the “Founding Fathers” wanted to be sure that Christians held public office. But the Founding Fathers, in Article VI of the Constitution, specifically disallowed *any* religious test for office. That would seem to be a strange and counterproductive prohibition to be put in place by those who want to ensure that Christians hold the various offices. If one conveniently picks state constitutions, one can also find some that established state churches, which Barton acknowledges that “the Founding Fathers” were against. So, those who drew up the state constitutions were not necessarily “Founding Fathers” and did not necessarily reflect the views of the Founding Fathers. Their views were much more parochial and do not represent the views of those who wrote the founding documents and established the new government.

America's Godly Heritage is a relatively early work by David Barton and I would like to be able to say that he has corrected his historiography and to affirm his later work as a significant improvement. Unfortunately, that is not the case. While he has distanced himself from a few of the specific inaccuracies in this video, his approach has not changed – except to find new avenues of misrepresentation and overstatement.

Gregg Frazer, Ph.D.
The Master's College
Santa Clarita, CA