

If I can be misunderstood, I will be.

Poor me, I'm forever being abused & causing (or rather) occasioning it. If you feel the same way, strike out my name & put yours. But humor aside, this Thinksheet is about (1) the **ethics** of letters-to-the-editor editing (& in this sense is a letter to Bill Mills, whose CAPE COD TIMES post includes that department) & (2) an **instance** showing a particular style: The CCT publishes a letter of mine, then lets the public ventilate all over me in print without letting me reply in print even to letters patently misunderstanding my letter. This ventilation-without-regard-for-truth policy builds up against me at least a small sub-public convinced that I'm, on many issues, the opposite of what I am. Poor me, yes? But I am grateful to Bill Mills for the evocative publicity. Very educational. Here's the instance:

1 This 12.22.00 letter of mine begins with a two-sentence paragraph. The first sentence grounds the letter in (1) something recently of intense public attention, viz., the presidential election, & (2) something on the near horizon for all of us Americans, viz. the presidential installation--with sharp (oh, how sharp!) focus on the particular **book** "W." will have his right hand on when he takes the oath of office. The second sentence is even more offensive to antiChristians, for it makes a claim that for three generations American secularists (a.k.a. "humanists") have been trying to obscure, & it makes that claim by use of a term not common in the battle for American memory & the American mind, viz., "foundational."

2 When I see Bill Mill soon on the CCT religion panel, I hope to find out how many letter-responses he got to my letter. So far, he's printed four. Here is 12.28.00:

Constitution is clear on American religion

Reader Willis Elliott is so wrong when he states that Christianity is America's foundational religion.

Fact: Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.

Maybe Mr. Elliott should reread and memorize the First Amendment of the United States Constitution.

There are millions of Americans who are (and who have every right to be) Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, agnostic and atheist. These Americans must shudder when they read opinions such as Mr. Elliott's.

MICK CARLON
Centerville

The same day I e-mailed Mills, who did not print my letter:

"A letter today shows how an old thought can swallow up a new, unintentionally producing intellectual stagnation. As we all should know, the First Amendment enjoins Congress against legislating an official religion (an "establishment") for the United States. Nowhere in our nation's founding documents is there any mention of a "foundational" religion.

"The **legal** word "establishment" was familiar to your letter-writer, but the **cultural** word "foundational" was not. His

swallowing up "foundational" into "establishment" produced a mental confusion resulting

in his falsely accusing me of claiming what is patently untrue, namely, that Christianity is the established religion of our country.

"What I did affirm--namely, that Christianity is the foundational religion of the United States (the religion of the Founding Fathers, including the deists)--is an historical fact, not a matter of opinion. What now is to be made of this fact is, indeed, a matter of opinion."

This letter is for simple clarification, with no insult to the errorist who wrote the insulting letter about me--nor did I name him. And my first letter was generous toward "a person [whom I did not name] of undoubted good will" who had written the CCT to favor the public repression of Christmas. (Contrast a BOSTON HERALD Christmas column by Don Feder, a Jew: Because of "a liberal misinterpretation of the First Amendment, Christmas is fading from our culture.... I'm Jewish, so it ain't my holiday that's being stifled. But...Christianity is the

Christianity is nation's foundational religion

When George W. Bush is installed as our next president, he will have his hand on the Bible, the holy book of our Founding Fathers. Christianity is the foundational religion of the United States.

Why not on a stack of holy books, to honor the pluralistic fact that we are a nation of many creeds? Because this and numerous other rituals in our national political life are meant to remind all of us of this fact of our national history, that we are a nation whose foundational religion is Christianity.

A recent letter speaks for Americans who for various reasons want to obscure this huge historical fact. The price of this, which has been crescendoing for three generations, is a citizenry afflicted with historical amnesia. The amnesia is deepening as government officials at all levels increasingly ban the Christmas crèche from public property.

The letter to which I refer was written by a person of undoubted goodwill who is unwittingly furthering this amnesia. A pity. The writer is himself a victim of this amnesia. He's under the illusion that "Santa is a secular symbol, not a Christian symbol."

Fact: Santa is an early Christian saint famous for giving gifts, and his current appearance is the creation of the eminent Christian theologian who wrote "Twas the night before Christmas."

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religion of 86 percent of the American people....America is more Christian than Israel is Jewish." The notion that we are a secular nation is "contrary to the vision of our Founders." So "Merry Christmas," not "Happy Holidays": "keep Christmas in Christmas." And today on BookSpan, eminent literatus Norman Podhoretz, another Jew, said "America is a Christian nation," and efforts to obscure that fact should fail.

3 Two 1.1.01 letters mentioning me: This one labors under the same confusion of "establish" & "foundational" as the 12.28.00. Of special interest are these failures: (1) To see the intimate relationship of ritual & law; (2) To grasp the fact that it was not "Plato"; & (3) To understand the fact of canon, the unity of the Christian Bible.

The second letter is ironic and obscure. She agrees with me: "I can't imagine there's anyone who does not believe" that Christianity is our foundational religion (though I do not "base this on" the ritual use of the Bible in presidential inaugurations). She may not be entirely antiChristian, but she deplores the decimation of the Amerind "heathen." And what a pregnant possibility that "the conquerors let some of the heathen get away"!

4 Two 1.7.01 letters mentioning me:

U.S. has no religion, and that's by design

I am struck by the intense reader response to any development reminding us that America has no government-sponsored religion.

The writers have all argued that the preferred religion for us should be Christianity. Willis Elliott on Dec. 22 claims this is our foundational religion, but he doesn't substantiate it except to say that the next president will take the oath of office with a hand resting on a book containing the Old and New Testaments. Maybe George W. Bush is aware that Christianity is derived from Judaism, even if some of the rest of us have repressed that.

Contrary to what Mr. Elliott states, nothing in our origin as a nation that I know of supports our nation's having a foundational religion. Our history indicated the very opposite - that America is not to have a foundational religion. The founding fathers talked of God, but not of Jesus.

Mr. Elliott's argument is similar to those reader responses to the banning of prayer at public school football games earlier in the year. If this is a local Cape Cod phenomenon I must wonder if this protectiveness of Christianity is natural or determined by some sense of insecurity.

Government officials should not be accused of banning the Christmas crèche from public property. They just have to enforce the laws they swore to uphold when they placed their hand on that book and took the oath of office. We are a nation that is hospitable to people of any faith.

ERNEST LIVINGSTON
West Chatham

This one is wrong in saying that I did not "substantiate" my foundational-religion claim except by reference to the inaugural Bible-ritual: I referred to "numerous other rituals" & the fact that "the Bible [was] the holy book of our Funding Fathers." Who's "repress"ing that "Christianity is derived from Judaism"? Of course "we are a nation hospitable to people of any faith," but that fact existed long before the present effort to denude public life of Christianity.

The other letter today carps at my calling an "eminent theologian" the Christian author of "The Night Before Christmas" (with its reference to a Christian saint, "St. Nicholas"). Clement Moore was eminent, & didn't favor his private poem's going public for fear it would lower his eminence; & he was a theologian in the broad sense of seminary professorship, though his specialty was the Bible.

We're a nation of law, not a nation of ritual

I wish to state I am embarrassed by all the letters I see in the newspaper by my Christian co-religionists begging for handouts from the government as if the private support and observance of our faith is so weak that we are in danger of fading away.

Mr. Willis Elliott wrote Dec. 22 that the ritual of having the president sworn in with his hand on the Bible establishes Christianity as the American religion. I don't see the validity of that. What if someone started the rumor that George Washington couldn't find his Bible when he set out for his inauguration and grabbed a volume of Plato's Dialogues as a prop?

We are a nation of law, not ritual. I took a researcher's look at my copy of the Bible and found that the Old Testament part is three times thicker than the New Testament part. If Washington's Bible was anything like mine, then our foundational religion is three-fourths Jewish and one-fourth Christian. Hallelujah (a Hebrew word).

ERNEST PRINCIPAL
South Dennis

Christians wiped out the heathen natives

On Dec. 22 Willis Elliott wrote that Christianity is the foundational religion of the United States. He based this on the ritual use of the Bible when the president takes the oath of office.

In my history class we never talked about that. We knew that the Christians explored these shores in the 1600s to bring God to the heathen natives and subdue or eliminate them. When the idolaters were wiped out, Christianity remained supreme.

Christianity has to be the religion of America. Otherwise it wouldn't make sense to have sent the explorers in the first place.

I can't imagine there's anyone who does not believe this. Unless the conquerors let some of the heathen get away.

MINI HYDE
Brewster

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Poet Clement C. Moore was not a theologian

Willis Elliott's Dec. 22 letter, "Christianity is America's foundational religion," states that Santa Claus "current appearance is the creation of the eminent Christian theologian who wrote ' 'Twas the Night Before Christmas.' "

Clement C. Moore was not an eminent theologian, but a professor of Greek and Oriental literature at the Episcopal Seminary in New York City.

I was told by his great-great-grandson that Moore wrote the poem on impulse for his six children after they went to bed one Christmas. It was not written for the public.

FRAN O'CONNELL
West Dennis