

Unlikely allies weave myth of Christian America, historian says

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DALLAS—A seemingly unlikely alliance between conservative Christian evangelicals and Mormons recasts American history as the founding of a distinctively Christian republic, Stephen Stookey told a gathering of church historians.

Self-styled historian David Barton and conservative provocateur Glenn Beck—both inspired by the late Mormon conspiracy theorist W. Cleon Skousen—use tactics of half-truth and faulty scholarship to create a mythical America constitutionally established as a Christian nation, said Stookey, professor of church history and director of the master of arts in theological studies program at [Dallas Baptist University](#).

Stephen Stookey “Defenders of Christian America historiography claim they are merely recovering accurate American history from revisionists who seek to expel Christian voices from the public square and expunge all vestiges of Christian influence from America’s past, present and future,” Stookey told the annual meeting of the [Baptist History & Heritage Society](#), May 20 at DBU.

Some efforts to secularize, minimize or ignore America’s religious heritage certainly exist, he acknowledged.

“However, in reacting to perceived revisions of American history, Christian America advocates recast American history, creating a quasi-mythical American tale—a story with just enough truth to give the air of credibility but riddled with historical inaccuracies,” said Stookey.

Proponents of Christian America presuppose the United States “was, is and should continue to be a constitutionally established Christian nation,” he explained. Any evidence to the contrary is ignored or recast, he said.

“Supportive data is either exaggerated or manufactured,” Stookey said. “In short, this camp presumes an inerrant historical understanding of America, as well as the original intent of the Constitution.”

Christian America advocates use out-of-context quotations and some outright falsehoods to give the Founding Fathers impeccable Christian pedigrees, ignoring or at least minimizing Enlightenment influences, he said.

“The historical reality is that the Founders were a varied collection of orthodox Christians, nominal (church) attenders, Christian moralists, deists and nonbelievers,” Stookey said.

While some advocates of the Christian America position long have existed, in recent years, they have moved into new prominence, he noted.

“Once a marginal group at the fringes of American culture and politics, dependent upon mimeographed newsletters and self-published books, this camp now enjoys significant access to public discourse via the Internet, publishing houses, television news networks and mainstream churches,” he said.

Proponents of the Christian American position gain credibility by dazzling with documentation—extensively footnoting their position papers with quotes carelessly copied from secondary or tertiary sources, he noted. Sometimes, quotes are abridged so much they imply the opposite of what originally was stated.

Barton, founding president of [Wall Builders](#) in Aledo, leads the pack, abetted by popular pundit Beck on Fox News, he maintained.

“Barton is a charismatic personality whose presentation is a spirited recitation of alleged quotations from and stories about America’s Founding Fathers,” Stookey said. “Barton’s historical blitzkrieg leaves little doubt in the minds of the undereducated listener as to America’s origins as a Christian nation.”

Barton capitalizes on real fear of moral failure and cultural chaos, he noted.

“It is clear that Barton has tapped into a collective angst within conservative ranks, particularly among conservative religiously motivated citizens,” Stookey said. “The story of a stolen Christian heritage plays well among those who see America in the grips of a post-Christian culture. One’s political enemies are not simply political foes but enemies of God, agents of Satan. Fears of Islamic aggression find refuge in a Christian Constitution that should preference Christians.”

Barton has been a frequent guest on Beck’s programs and events Beck has sponsored, including the “America’s Divine Destiny” event, held the night before Beck’s massive Restoring Honor rally.

“The alliance between a conservative evangelical political activist and a Mormon political pundit is not so odd when it comes to the Christian America story,” Stookey said.

“A Christian foundation for the United States is crucial to the Mormon narrative of Joseph Smith’s revelations leading to the establishment of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and America as God’s elect nation. It is in America, per Mormon doctrine, where the New Jerusalem will be established. Barton benefits from the partnership by gaining significant national exposure.”

Both Beck and Barton owe inspiration to Skousen, a former FBI agent and professor at Brigham Young University who became a frequent speaker on the John Birch Society circuit in the 1970s, Stookey observed. Skousen

frequently is cited in the works of evangelical Christian America advocates like Barton, he noted.

“Skousen argues that the genius of America is found in the production of wealth through free market capitalism and natural law. His writings decry the decline of America’s Christian foundations, presenting the nation as a constitutionally established Christian nation. There is striking parallel in Skousen’s works and Barton’s *The Myth of Separation*,” he said.

“Skousen, like Barton, employs spurious historical material, skewed historical interpretation and Mormon-nuanced understandings of the past, present and future trajectory of the United States.”

According to Skousen’s perspective, “America is on the precipice of the great cleansing predicted in Mormon eschatology before the Kingdom of God is established in America,” Stookey said.

Three factors lead Christian evangelicals to buy into the Mormon-influenced vision of Christian America expounded by Skousen and promoted by Beck, Stookey asserted:

- **Historical ignorance.** “In general, Americans tend to have minimal knowledge about the details of American history. We highly value our Founders and want to think the best of them. We are familiar with elements of Christianity’s history in the United States. Thus, it is easy to assume a golden age of Christianity once existed in the colonial and early federal period of our national story,” he said.

- **Cultural tension.** “The social upheaval of the mid-20th century has left many grasping for reasons as to why the moral compass of America appears off kilter,” he said. Liberal academicians, activist judges and liberal preachers offer easy targets. “Fear is a powerful motivator of the undereducated.”

- **Political tensions.** “The alleged culture wars appear to have accentuated political divisions—between Democrats and Republicans and within parties,” he said.

Stookey voiced tentative hope that the “God gap” may be narrowing as a centrist movement begins to take shape in evangelical circles. “Subtle signs have pointed to this eventuality. An understanding of Christianity and public life is emerging that does not fit easily within the polarizing labels of liberal and conservative, Democrat or Republican.”

But as proponents of the Christian America position continue to assert their influence, Baptists should respond by examining their own heritage and claiming its distinctive contributions to religious liberty, Stookey asserted.

“We need informed and courageous Baptists to challenge our communities to engage in truly civil discourse—to remember who we are and act like it,” he said.