

Week Two Handout

“Religion and American Foreign Policy through Christian Eyes”

Dr. James C. (Jim) Wallace



Colonial America: Is America a Christian Nation?

A Message from Jim:

Today, since I am away from the class, I am showing an important video that discusses in a serious and a thoughtful way the question, “Is America a Christian Nation?”

The video is a lecture given by Professor Hugh Heclo at Boston College in 2004. The lecture received so much attention and discussion that he later wrote an academic article published in 2007 in the renowned American Political Science Quarterly. I have made copies of the full journal article available to you for those that are interested in a more in-depth examination of the subject.

Here is the speaker’s background:

Professor Hugh Heclo

Clarence J. Robinson Professor of Public Affairs
George Mason University

- Former professor of government at Harvard University and at George Washington University
- 2002 recipient of the American Political Science Association’s John Gaus Award for Lifetime Achievement

Professor Heclo answers the core question by examining seven dimensions of the arguments and answers them “yes – no – no – no – sort of – sort of – and no way”!

Here is how he breaks down his answer:

1. America is a Christian nation if “Christian” is defined demographically.
2. America is not a Christian nation in terms of the way Americans regard the “relevance of Christianity to their everyday lives.”
3. America is not a Christian nation in terms of how Americans uphold Christian creedal commitments.
4. America is not a Christian nation in terms of how they behave.
5. America is “sort of” a Christian nation in terms of its legal and institutional structures.
6. America is “sort of” a Christian nation in terms of its moral/republican ethos.
7. America is definitely not (“no way”) a Christian nation in terms of “Christianity’s view of the question.”

Discussion Questions:

Around your tables, take the remaining 10 minutes to discuss the following questions.

1. What do you think of Professor Hecló's basic arguments? Do you agree or disagree with part of it or all of it?
2. Would you define America as a "Christian nation"? Why or why not?
3. Which of his seven arguments do you find the most compelling? Which dimension of being a "Christian nation" do you think is most critical for your understanding of the term?
4. How will this video make you think differently in the future about the question "Is America a Christian Nation?"