

Book Review: The Godless Constitution, by Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore

Review by John K. Chidester, originally composed for the Mount Vernon News on June 4, 1996

Is America a Christian nation and the Constitution a Christian document? If you listen to Pat Robertson and other voices of the new religious right, the answer is “yes.” But Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore say the correct answer is “no,” and they tell why in their book, “The Godless Constitution.”

Kramnick and Moore are both professors at Cornell University, Kramnick specializing in government and Moore in history, particularly the history of religion in American life. Both are alarmed by the growing political influence of the religious right, especially the Christian Coalition headed by Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed, and they offer their book as a candid polemic against what they call “religious correctness” and in favor of the Constitutional separation of church and state.

To make their case, Kramnick and Moore spend a considerable portion of their book reviewing American history, with a special focus on the framing of the Constitution. The big fight in 1787 and again in 1789 was over the inclusion in Article 6 of these words: “...no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” This exclusion of the “religious test” raised a howl of protest among many citizens, who feared disaster should a Quaker, Catholic or Jew (or even, God forbid, an atheist) be allowed to hold public office. Eleven of the 13 colonies had such religious tests in their constitutions, and religious discrimination was routine in countries the colonists had fled. The New England Congregationalists had only recently stopped hanging Quakers.

Among the champions of church and state separation, Thomas Jefferson was the most roundly vilified. Clergymen regularly referred to him as a “howling atheist,” a “confirmed infidel,” or the “Virginia Voltaire.” Yet the “godless Constitution” was ratified,

religious test exclusion and separation of church and state intact, and Jefferson was elected president. At least part of his success was attributable to the support of American Baptists, who had felt the sting of religious persecution and who originally were staunch advocates of a strictly secular government. (Moore and Kramnick take note of the irony that many Baptists nowadays subscribe to the political aims of the Christian Coalition.)

Moore and Kramnick also point out that most of the advocates of a godless Constitution and secular government were not personally godless but held deep religious convictions. Most notable among them was Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island and a hyperstrict Calvinist who believed that civil government could not so much as touch a religious practice without corrupting it.

In a final chapter on America's current political scene, Moore and Kramnick square off with the religious right. If America is in serious moral decline, they ask, and if Pat Robertson is right that 90% of Americans are Christian, then why isn't the general public, rather than the government, to blame for the moral decay? They also point with dismay to both the corruptibility of religious leaders who get into politics and the cynicism of politicians who exploit the religious fervor of others just to get votes. Lest anyone misunderstand their intent, Kramnick and Moore acknowledge and applaud the crucial role of religion and religious values in public life. But that, they say, is not the same as a religious government.

"The Godless Constitution" is well-constructed, thoroughly researched and provocatively argued. It should provide hours of fun for lovers of political wrangling.