

BOOKS

WHAT ARE THEY READING?



Oregon law professor debunks 'myth' of religious founding

By **PATRICK WEBB**
Special to *The Daily Astorian*



Steven K. Green

The kerfuffle over the Kentucky county clerk who refused to issue marriage licenses to gay couples for religious reasons has rekindled the argument about America's origins.

Republican presidential candidates and others who rushed to her defense used the argument that the "United States is a nation founded on Christian principles" and today's society would be better "returning" to them.

Author Steven K. Green has a different viewpoint, as the title of his latest book proclaims. "Inventing a Christian America" has the subtitle, "The Myth of the Religious Founding."

Green is a professor of law and history at Willamette University in Salem. His previous books have covered church-state relations, the concept of religious freedom and Supreme Court decisions.

Carefully argued

In his work published earlier this year, Green offers a carefully argued route to understanding what was in the minds of those who drafted the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, men who hired a chaplain to inspire their deliberations, then kept faith out of the finished documents.

"People are not wrong to consider the evidence of religious influences in the nation's founding; nor should these influences ever be diminished or ignored," he writes. But people should not place them in a kind of grand narrative.

"So long as proponents of America's Christian origins fail to see the narrative as a myth, they will be unable to appreciate the true import of America's religious heritage."

In chapters rich in historical detail and perspective, Green describes how the much-revered Founding Fathers were believers, almost to a man. But the creative minds who fashioned a successful revolution against the tyranny of an English monarch had tasted religious intolerance in the colonies. They had seen what fledgling colonial jurisdictions became when one dominant Christian faction sought to dominate all others with discrimination or persecution.

So these enlightened men acknowledged a "supreme being," but worked hard to keep him out of the governing process.

Firm rebuttal

And Green gives a polite but firm rebuttal to those who try to give the founding a higher, transcendent meaning.

These include U.S. Air Force attorney Gary Amos, who wrote "Defending the Declaration," in 1989, in which he claimed, "every key term in the Declaration of Independence had its roots in the Bible, Christian theology and the Western Christian intellectual tradition."

As evidence such views persist, Green points to more recent comments, like Iowa GOP congressman Steve King's 2013

'The idea of America's religiously inspired founding was a consciously created myth.'

Steven K. Green

author, 'Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding.'

quote that, "our Founding Fathers were moved about on this continent by God like men on a chess board."

Green — and Thomas Jefferson — would beg to differ.

"Jefferson was a devotee of the Enlightenment and its emphasis on rational thought," writes Green. "An admirer of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton and John Locke, Jefferson believed that reason — not revelation revealed through scripture or church doctrine — was the means to achieve human knowledge, including truth."

Jefferson noted Pennsylvania and New York were examples of colonies which did not establish a state religion, yet religion still flourished. "Liberty of conscience was the only viable alternative to ensure that religious differences did not undermine the important task of forging a new, united nation," Green writes.

Myth persists

But the "myth" of a Christian bias persists.

"Central to the idea of America's religious founding are additional claims that Christian ideals and principles, whether they are termed Calvinist, evangelical or simply Protestant, laid the foundation for the revolutionary propulsion and inspired the founders in the drafting of the instruments of governance."

So Green pores over the two most revered documents in American history in search of deity.

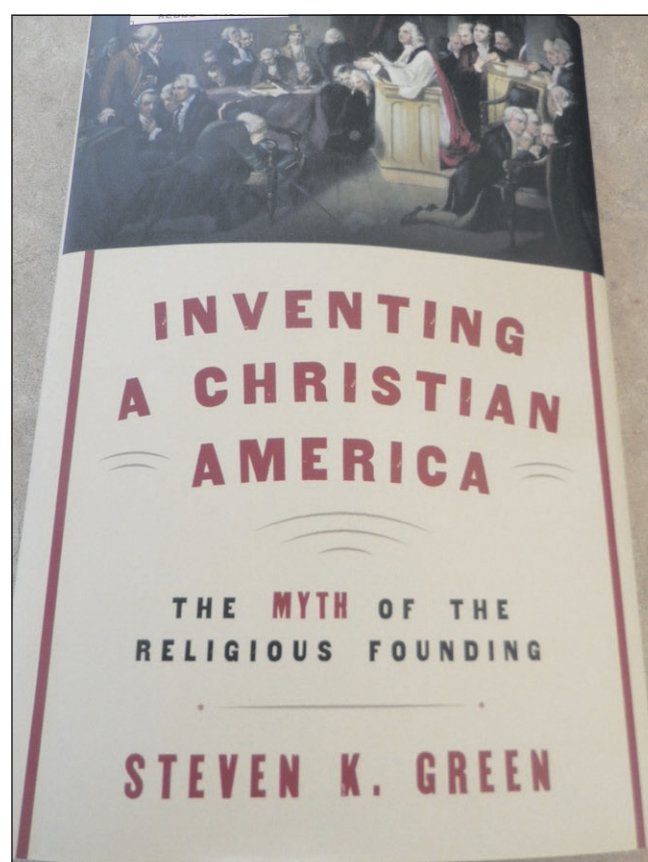
The Declaration of Independence contains four references to a supreme being. All have an Enlightenment "feel," Green says.

- "all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights;"
- giving colonists, "the separate and equal station of which the laws of nature and of nature's God entitle them;"
- an appeal "to the supreme judge of the world;"
- "a firm reliance on the protection of divine providence."

In contrast, the Constitution of the United States contains no references to God or faith, except to order that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States." (It was signed "in the year of our lord" and it exempts Sundays from the time allowed when vetoing a bill, but Green dismisses these as simply 18th-century traditions.)

Lack of First Amendment analysis

Green appears to relish quoting the contemporaneous reactions to the "no religious test" clause in detail, but the one weak area in this work is the lack of analysis of the First Amendment to the Constitution, which separates church and state: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." He sidesteps, instead referring readers to other texts.



'Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding.'

So where did the Christian "myth" — as Green labels it — come from?

The answer is Americans in the first three decades of the 1800s, who lived through a period of two significant religious revivals. He argues that they sought to rewrite history to fit their image of what they believed America should be, a version of a "chosen" people creating a model Christian society.

"The idea of America's religiously inspired founding was a consciously created myth constructed by the second generation of Americans in their quest to forge a national identity, one that would reinforce their ideals and aspirations for the new nation," Green writes.

Many bestow laudable traits on the Pilgrims, fleeing religious oppression in England to create a refuge for dissenters in the New World. The Puritans who followed have been painted like Israelites who fled Egypt, "replicating the exodus to a promised land," and their religious intolerance is overlooked or glossed over.

In conclusion, Green argues that many embrace the "myth" because it allows them to enjoy a simplified but elevated view of the founding. "Today, people from many walks of life, not solely religious conservatives, desire a grand and uncomplicated story about the nation's beginnings."

He writes that the United States is not alone in winning democratic self-governance, but merely doing so does not make it distinct. "Aligning America's origins with God's providential plan for humankind does."

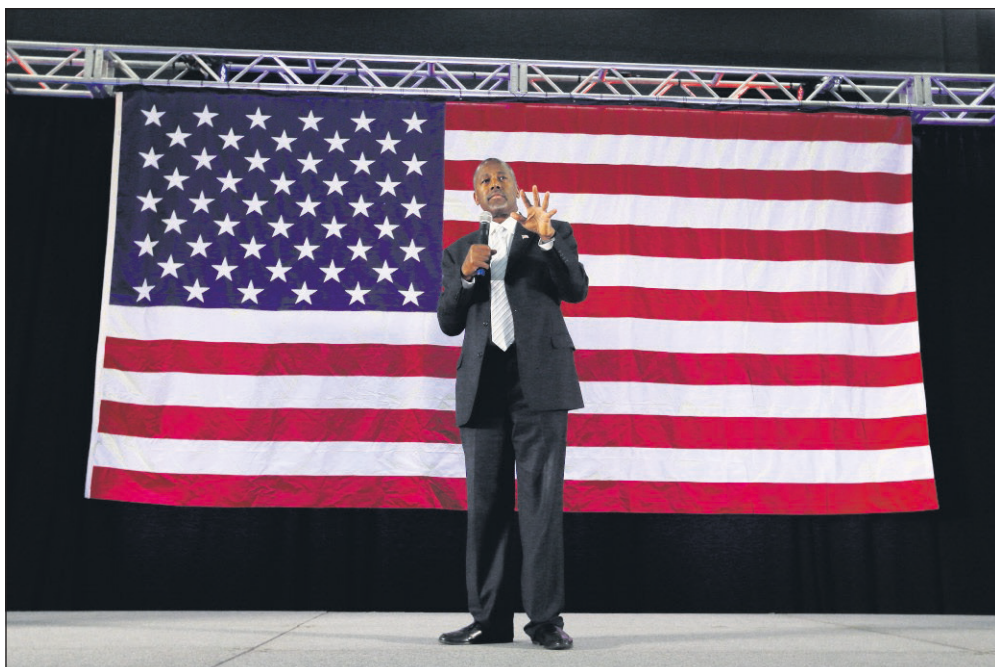
Patrick Webb is a North Coast writer and former managing editor of *The Daily Astorian*. His 1998 master's thesis at the University of Nebraska highlighted how newspapers write about religion.

BOOK REVIEW

'Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding.' by Steven K. Green.
Oxford University Press, 295 pages, 2015

Carson blames 'PC culture' for Muslim comment flap

By **DAN SEWELL** and **JULIE CARR-SMYTH**
Associated Press



Carlos Osorio/AP Photo

Retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson, a Republican candidate for president, addresses supporters at Spring Arbor University in Spring Arbor, Michigan, on Wednesday.

CEDARVILLE, Ohio — Republican presidential candidate Ben Carson has blamed "P.C. culture" for the political fallout over his statement against electing a Muslim president.

Carson told reporters in Ohio that his view is that anyone wanting to be president must embrace the Constitution and American principles. He added that he would oppose a Christian for president who wanted to establish a theocracy.

Asked how his campaign can recover from the controversy, the retired neurosurgeon replied: "The only way we fix that is fix the P.C. culture in our country," referring to political correctness.

"We fix America, and we get people who actually start listening ... and stop trying to fit everything into a P.C.

model," he said. Carson's remarks came amid a backlash over his comments last weekend that

Muslims shouldn't serve in the presidency. In an interview with Fox News, Carson then retreated slightly, saying he would be open to a moderate Muslim who denounced radical Islam as a White House candidate. But he also

'They don't even care if you agree with them as long as you sit down and shut up.'

Ben Carson

Republican presidential candidate, on progressives

said he stood by his original comments, saying the country cannot elect people "whose faith might interfere with carrying out the duties of the Constitution."

The Constitution clearly states "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

On Tuesday in Ohio, Carson called the Muslim president question "a theoretical issue" that's distracting from important national and international problems, from U.S. income inequality to the Syrian refugee crisis.

Carson received a standing ovation at Cedarville

University, a Bible-based college near Dayton, when he said political progressives are leading this push for political correctness in an effort to stifle those who disagree with them.

"They don't even care if you agree with them as long as you sit down and shut up," he said to rousing applause.

Carson said Thomas Jefferson would "stroke out and die" if he saw how expansive the U.S. government has become. He urged evangelicals to use their personal "spheres of influence" to get family and friends to express their beliefs and to get out and vote.

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