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April 17, 2009: America is not a Christian Nation

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Title: America is not a Christian Nation

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4/17/2009--President Barak Obama stirred up controversy by his statement at a news conference in Turkey that America is not a Christian nation. On one level, controversy over this statement makes no sense. Whatever the Establishment Clause means, it certainly means that much. There is not one vote on the Supreme Court today that would allow Congress to declare that we are one nation "under Christ". Every Justice at one time or another has declared a willingness to prohibit sectarian symbols sponsored by government. So, why the controversy? Of course America is a Christian country in absolute numbers and in its history. Most Americans are Christians and despite growing secularization and religious pluralism, that is going to remain true for quite some time. Our national habits of mind, such as our exceptionalism and our desire to save the world, are gifts of our Protestant heritage. But still, we are not a Christian nation in any official sense. Religious conservatives don't really believe that Obama's statement is untrue. Most such persons—Justice Scalia is a perfect example—would say we are a Judeo-Christian nation or perhaps a monotheistic nation. Even if that extension strikes the secularist as arbitrary, it still does not make us a Christian nation. So, Obama's statement is still accurate. I think what is bothering some religious people, or at least some of those I speak with, is the sense that there are only two choices open to us as a nation. Either we are a Christian nation or we are a nation of materialism, post-modern humanism and nihilism. I don't mean to use those words as smears. I mean to identify some very specific habits of mind. The late Richard Rorty fits here. So does Christopher Hitchens. And many secularists are guilty of supposing that government may not only not establish religion but may not oppose these philosophic positions either. My argument in the manuscript I have not yet found a publisher for is that government may indeed oppose these schools of thought and should do so. Government may endorse the objectivity of values. I even go further and suggest that government may use some traditional religious symbols in doing so. Given that reassurance, many people can accept that we are not a Christian nation.