

Noah Webster's views on the Separation of Church and State

Research and Writing by Tom Peters

Noah Webster (1758-1843) wore many hats during the course of his life: lexicographer, educator, author, publisher, editor, lawyer, and political commentator. His most famous work was *An American Dictionary of the English Language* which was instrumental in fashioning a distinctively American English dialect. His early work included *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, the first volume of which was his famous "Blue Backed Speller," a school book so popular it has never been out of print. In the 1780s he wrote extensively in favor of a new federal constitution, and later urged the Constitution's ratification.

Webster was well known for his religious and political conservatism, which makes him one of the most frequently quoted authors in religious right literature. Especially toward the end of his life, Webster's writings betray a deep sympathy for the "Christian nation" ideal. Understandably, however, most accommodationist literature is silent on Webster's views during what we have designated as the *founding period* in America (1776-1800); during these years Webster was anything but an accommodationist. On the contrary, during these years he was a passionate defender of separation of church and state.

As a young man Webster was a radical federalist that believed in a strong central government, the elimination of class distinctions, and the disestablishment of religion. His early writings are adamant on these subjects. In 1783, for example, Webster wrote a series of articles for the *Freeman Chronicle*, a popular political journal. In the November 3, 1783 edition of the *Chronical* Webster denounced religious establishment in no uncertain terms:

The very idea of a system of religious principles and a mode of worship, prescribed and established by human authority, is totally repugnant to the spirit of christianity. Every establishment is only a milder term for tyranny....It is an insult to humanity, a solemn mockery of all justice and common sense, to assume that right of entailing our opinion and formalities of devotion upon posterity, or to exclude them from the protection or emoluments of government for a non-conformity dictated by conscience.

In his biography of Webster, Harry Warfel quotes additional passages from this same article to summarize Webster's early view:

An established church, he declared, not only checks improvement "by making it the interest of knaves, fools, and rascals to embrace it for the sake of emoluments," but also produces jealousies out of which arise "tumults and massacres which have deluged kingdoms in blood and filled the christian world with rancor and animosity. All the dangers to which any government can be exposed by sectaries, must arise wholly from intolerance; and the Roman Catholics, when indulged the free exercise of their religion, make as good subjects, as peaceable citizens as any sect of protestants." The truth of this assertion finds verification in the long tranquil history of Pennsylvania, "an illustrious example of the happy effects of toleration" and "a living burlesque upon all establishments and restrictions," including New England's. Until the Deity publishes to the world a prescribed system of principles to direct our faith, Wester

continued, "*that civil magistrate who ventures in the least punctilio to abridge a man's liberty of thinking or worshipping according to the dictates of conscience, encroaches upon the prerogatives of heaven, and impiously attempts to wrest the scepter from the hands of Jehovah*" (Noah Webster: *Schoolmaster to America*, p. 48, emphasis our).

In a 1980 study of Webster, Richard M. Rollins documents at length how Webster's views changed over the course of his life. Here is Rollins description of Webster's beliefs circa 1783:

Separation of church and state was necessary in the new utopia. Webster saw the two as different forms of government; one dealt with the temporal happiness of man, the other with his spiritual redemption. The messengers of salvation should not be allowed to sit in judgement of commercial and political affairs, nor should those involved in politics have any voice in church matters, let alone actively support one specific sect. The two different types of government could not be reconciled, and to attempt to do so, he believed, was to attempt "to mix oil with water, or to make the most discordant sounds in nature...harmonize." He feared their cooperation, for each made it's subjects in its own field "sufficient slavish." But of the two, the clergy were by far the more dangerous. They hid their lust for domination behind the guise of saintliness and had consistently deceived people in the past. the "ambassadors of Christ" had too often "joined the terrors of eternal damnation to the iron rod of civil magistrates in order to extend an unlimited authority over the persons, the purses, and the consciences of their devoted vassals" (*The Long Journey of Noah Webster*, p. 31).

Accommodationists frequently point out the Biblical matter in his educational works to prove that Webster thought it was important to teach the Bible in school. Webster may well have embraced this idea toward the end of his life, but he took quite a different tack in his earlier publications. As his biographers note, the first edition of his spelling book contained far less Biblical material than previous spellers; he seems consciously to have *reduced* the importance of the Bible in education. This impression is confirmed by his own words. In the preface to his "Blue Backed Speller" (the first volume of *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*, 1783) he notes that the Biblical passages he selected for inclusion do not include the name of God:

Nothing has a greater tendency to lessen the reverence which mankind ought to have for the Supreme Being, than a careless repetition of his name upon every trifling occasion. Experience shows that a frequent thoughtless repetition of that sacred word, which, in our Spelling Books, often occurs two or three times in a line, renders the name as familiar to children as the name of their book, and they mention it with the same indifference. To prevent this profanation, such passages are selected from scripture, as contain some important precepts of morality and religion, in which that sacred name is seldom mentioned. Let sacred things be appropriated to sacred purposes (*The Autobiographies of Noah Webster: From the Letters and Essays, Memoir, and Diary*, Richard M. Rollins, pp. 76-77).

Similarly, he reduced the amount of Biblical material in his reader (volume three of *A Grammatical Institute of the English Language*). According to Warfel, Webster complained that:

The lack of [reading anthologies] had led to the use of the Bible as a textbook, a reprehensible practice for two reasons. First, the uniform, antique style prevents the acquisition "of a complete knowledge of words and of the modern manner of writing." Second, "such a common use of the Bible is a kind of prostitution of divine truth to secular purposes." Familiarity breeds disgust, levity, and wickedness, which lead to a profanation of the "awful solemnities of inspiration" (*Noah Webster: Schoolmaster to America*, p. 86).

Webster, in other words, used the Bible when he thought it was appropriate for spelling or reading instruction, but downplayed its religious content in education, and condemned its overuse in no uncertain terms. This is hardly the work of a man who was comfortable with teach Christianity in the classroom.

In 1808 Webster underwent a profound religious conversion that changed both his politics and his religious outlook (some biographers say that changes in Webster's beliefs can be detected as early as 1801). After this time Webster becomes skeptical of democracy, distrustful of government, and far more sympathetic to an alliance between church and state. After 1810, for example, he increased the amount of Biblical material in his speller and reader, and wrote many works suggesting that Christianity was necessary for the survival of America. As noted above, accomodationist publications quote almost exclusively from this second period of Webster's life. David Barton, for example, in his *The Myth of Separation*, takes all his Noah Webster quotes (or at least the ones we can trace back to specific works) from either Webster's *An American Dictionary of the English Language* (1828) or his *History of the United States* (1832). Both these works were written long after his religious conversion and reflect only his later thinking.

It's important to keep Webster's conversion in mind when assessing his contribution to the founding of America. Put simply, Webster was a separationist during the critical years when the Constitution and Bill of Rights were being written, debated, and ratified. *The only contribution he could have made to the debate during these years would have been a separationist one.* Accordingly, accomodationists cannot quote Webster's later writings as if they prove something about the Constitution. They don't. All they prove is that the later Webster was different from the early one. And without question, it was the *early* Webster that agitated in favor of the Constitution and Bill of Rights during the 1780s and 1790s.

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