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“A wise man will hear, and will increase learning.” - Proverbs 1:5

Hiding the Faith of the Founders

A Refutation of Chris Pinto

I was recently asked to give a few comments on a video by Chris Pinto entitled The Hidden Faith of Our Founding Fathers. As I had not previously watched this three hour polemic, I was forced at the time to answer only in generalities and to promise to look into the matter more fully at a later date. I have now had opportunity to watch Mr. Pinto's film, and I must confess that I was appalled by its content. Mr. Pinto asserts that the founding fathers of America were not Christians at all but rather what he refers to as theistic rationalists who were heavily influenced by both Jesuits and Masons. This claim, however, is not what I found to be so appalling. I fully expected to hear Mr. Pinto wax eloquent on that topic. What I did not expect was the absolute ineptitude of his scholarship. I have been debating secularists on the topic of our nation's Christian heritage for thirteen years, and I have never before been presented with an argument so flagrantly *ad hoc* as the one put forth by Mr. Pinto.

To list all of the errors of research present in this film would fill an entire book, so let me focus on the document that Mr. Pinto refers to as “the clearest declaration that the original founders of the United States of America did not believe that they were setting forth a Christian Nation” – The Treaty of Tripoli. To make this claim, Mr. Pinto had to ignore some rather significant evidence, and I trust that this analysis will suffice to demonstrate that Mr. Pinto's portrait of our founding fathers is grotesquely and I can hardly help but say intentionally flawed.

The Treaty of Tripoli was in June of 1797 to establish terms of peace between America and the Muslim nation of Tripoli which had been attacking American merchant ships. Article 11 of that treaty bears the infamous phrase “the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion.” In his video, Mr. Pinto makes several assertions about this phrase. He claims:

- 1) That this phrase was written specifically by the founding fathers of America.
- 2) That this phrase was intentionally included in the treaty by the founders in order to declare the non-Christian nature of our government.
- 3) That this phrase was unanimously approved by the Senate.
- 4) That this phrase was not opposed because nearly all of the founding fathers were infidels.
- 5) That there were no Christians in the early government of our nation.
- 6) That the text of Article 11 was written personally by George Washington.
- 7) That the treaty of Tripoli was the first treaty written between America and a non-Christian nation.

Now, I have studied the Treaty of Tripoli in great detail since it has been the subject of many of my discussions with various atheists, and I have to admit that I have never been presented with a description of this treaty as intellectually dishonest as that put forth by Mr. Pinto. Of his seven claims, there is only one which bears any resemblance to the truth. Here are the actual facts about Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli which Mr. Pinto seems to have deliberately ignored:

- 1) **Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli was not written by any of the founding fathers of America.** In fact, it was not even written by an American at all. Article 11 is actually a letter that was written from the Dey of Algiers to the Pasha of Tripoli encouraging him to pursue friendly relations with the Americans.¹
- 2) **Article 11 was not included in the treaty by the founders.** On the contrary, the treaty was fully written, signed, translated and bound into a book before it ever crossed the Atlantic to be ratified by the Senate.²
- 3) **The treaty was unanimously ratified by the Senate.** However, it was not ratified until after it had already been signed.³ The Senate did not have an option of debating the text of Article 11. Their only choice was to ratify the treaty as a whole or reject it altogether and continue the war against Tripoli. Since the declaration of Article 11 was merely a letter from one Muslim king to another which did nothing to restrict or define the actual nature of the American government, there would have been no reason to reject the treaty on the grounds of that letter alone.
- 4) **The majority of the founding fathers were definitely not infidels.** To level this charge of infidelity, Mr. Pinto relies on a sermon which he supposes to be the words of Mr. Bird Wilson, a nineteenth century preacher and son of James Wilson, one of the founding fathers. In reality, however, the sermon which Mr. Pinto quotes was not given by Bird Wilson at all. According to the Evangelical Magazine and Gospel Advocate which ran a copy of the sermon printed in the Albany Daily Advertiser, it was actually preached by Henry R. Wilson⁴, and according to the records of the Reformed Presbyterian Church, a very similar sermon was presented by James Renwick Willson.⁵ Neither of these men had firsthand knowledge of the faith of our founding fathers. There is no original source material which associates this sermon with Bird Wilson who would have had firsthand knowledge. In addition, one of the portions of the sermon that Mr. Pinto quoted relies on the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention which were said to have been published by Charles Thomson. However, as Mr. Pinto correctly pointed out in an earlier segment of the film, Secretary Thomson never published a book on the proceedings of the Convention.
- 5) **There were many founding fathers who made solid professions of faith in the work of Jesus Christ for their redemption.** The list of these men would include such names as Samuel Adams, Elias Boudinot, Charles Carroll, John Dickinson, Elbridge Gerry, Patrick Henry, Samuel Huntington, John Jay, George Mason, Thomas McKean, Frederick Muhlenberg, Robert Treat Paine, Benjamin Rush, Roger Sherman, Jonathan Trumbull, John Witherspoon and many, many more.⁶ It is apparent from the text of Mr. Wilson's sermon that his definition of Christianity is not faith in Jesus Christ but rather an unswerving adherence to the doctrine of Calvinism. It is

¹ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1795n.asp

² *Ibid*

³ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp

⁴ <http://books.google.com/books?id=-zMrAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA411#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁵ <http://www.covenanter.org/JRWillson/jamesrenwickwillson.htm>

⁶ <http://www.wallbuilders.com/libissuesarticles.asp?id=8755>

this measure of Christianity by which Mr. Wilson pronounces the founding fathers to be infidels.⁷

- 6) **Article 11 was not drafted by George Washington.** As I have already mentioned, Article 11 was actually a letter written from one Muslim ruler to another. It was definitely not written by George Washington. To support this claim, Mr. Pinto relies on a statement from the “historian” Moncure D. Conway. However, Mr. Conway was not a historian at all but rather a disgruntled Unitarian pastor who eventually abandoned all Christian theology in favor of humanism and free thought.⁸ Mr. Conway’s comments on the Treaty of Tripoli begin with his declaration that “President Washington the first time that he ever came in treaty with a non Christian people (Tripoli) sent to the Senate (1776) a treaty which opened with the following...” Mr. Conway then proceeded to quote the entirety of Article 11 verbatim. The errors contained in this statement, some of which were conveniently edited out of Mr. Pinto’s version of it, are so obvious as to cause me to wonder if Mr. Pinto’s video is a deliberate fraud.
- 7) **The Treaty of Tripoli was not America’s first treaty with a non-Christian nation.** Mr. Conway claims that the Treaty of Tripoli was the first treaty that President Washington signed with a non-Christian nation, but the Treaty of Tripoli was actually the third of the Barbary Treaties. It was preceded by the Treaty with Algiers signed during Washington’s presidency in 1795⁹ and the Treaty with Morocco ratified by the Continental Congress in 1786.¹⁰ Neither of these treaties contained the text of Article 11. Furthermore, the Treaty of Tripoli was not submitted to the Senate in 1776 by George Washington as Mr. Conway claims but rather by John Adams in 1797.¹¹ In 1776, there was neither a Senate to receive the treaty nor a President to present it to them nor even an Ambassador to treat with Tripoli in the first place. For Mr. Pinto to quote Mr. Conway as an authoritative historian should give anyone pause in considering if Mr. Pinto himself is deserving of such a label.

Thus the document which Mr. Pinto declares to be the strongest evidence against the Christian beliefs of the founding fathers is found to be no evidence at all. It was not written by the founding fathers; they did not choose to include it in the Treaty of Tripoli; there was no reason for them to object to it, and his evidence to the contrary has been shown to be false.

Now, some may say that I have been a bit too hard on Mr. Pinto in this article. I have suggested that his research is inept, that his arguments are *ad hoc*, that his portrait of the founding fathers is intentionally flawed, that his description of the Treaty of Tripoli is intellectually dishonest, that he has deliberately ignored the facts, that his video may be a deliberate fraud and that he may not be deserving of the label of a historian. These are very bold statements, and I hesitated to use such inflammatory language. My first inclination was to assume that Mr. Pinto was simply duped by the flawed scholarship of other men who have made similar claims, but then I came across his response to Dr. Catherine Millard’s critique of his video.¹²

⁷ <http://books.google.com/books?id=-zMrAAAAAYAAJ&pg=PA363#v=onepage&q&f=false>

⁸ http://encyclopediavirginia.org/Conway_Moncure_Daniel_1832-1907

⁹ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1795t.asp

¹⁰ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1786t.asp

¹¹ http://avalon.law.yale.edu/18th_century/bar1796t.asp

¹² <http://www.worldviewweekend.com/worldview-times/article.php?articleid=7260>

Dr. Millard provided Mr. Pinto with original source information on the Treaty of Tripoli to prove that Article 11 was a letter from Dey of Algiers to the Pasha of Tripoli. Mr. Pinto's response was that it was the English translation of the Treaty that was ratified by the Senate and not the Arabic original. This is completely false. The source provided by Dr. Millard stated very clearly that the treaty was bound into a book containing both the Arabic original and the English translation on opposing pages. Thus, the Senate would have had the Arabic original in front of them when they voted; and being (as Mr. Pinto admits) classically educated men, these Senators would have been quite capable of reading that original and recognizing that Article 11 was a letter from the Dey of Algiers. The treaty which was signed, voted on and ratified was the Arabic original not the hastily compiled English translation.

But Mr. Pinto did end his response with his insistence that the Senate voted only on the English translation of the treaty. Had he done so, I would very likely have been more lenient in this article. Instead, Mr. Pinto proceeded to repeat his quote of Mr. Conway's claim that President Washington personally wrote the entirety of Article 11. This time, however, Mr. Pinto included a link to the actual text of Mr. Conway's comments. That he was able to provide such a link proves that it was Mr. Pinto himself who edited the quote of Mr. Conway which was included in the video. He was not merely repeating flawed secondhand information. He must have personally recognized Mr. Conway's error and intentionally left it out of his version of the quote. Even in his response to Dr. Millard, Mr. Pinto presented an edited version of the quote rather than the original.

It is for this reason that I have abandoned the leniency that I would have preferred to give Mr. Pinto. He has not been merely deceived by the faulty research of others. Rather, he appears to be the one attempting to deceive those who follow him. As I stated previously, I could fill an entire book with refutations of the errors in Mr. Pinto's video, but I trust that this one example will serve to warn his followers against taking anything that this man says at face value.

(There are two additional responses to Mr. Pinto's video that are well worth reading. Col. John Eidsmoe of the Foundation for Moral Law wrote an excellent refutation which is available on the Foundation's website,¹³ and Mr. David Barton wrote a refutation of Mr. Pinto's challenge to his quote from John Adams.¹⁴ Both of these articles are excellently researched and well written.)

¹³ <http://morallaw.org/blog/2012/01/hidden-faith-of-the-founding-fathers-who-were-they-hiding-it-from/>

¹⁴ <http://www.wallbuilders.com/LIBissuesArticles.asp?id=89988>