

2012 Shurden Lectures explore American history

Contributed by Jeff Huett

Lambert: America is both religious and secular, sometimes in tension

MACON, GA — Strong defense of the separation of church and state and religious liberty is necessary today because of the false claims of so-called evangelical historians and their concerted effort to re-write history said Purdue University history professor Frank Lambert in a series of lectures sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee April 17-18 on the Mercer University campus.

Lambert's three presentations, comprising the annual Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State, addressed three claims made by the "ultra conservative, highly partisan sectarians" that play the role of historians.

"They have all the answers. No historical examination is necessary," Lambert said in a mocking tone.

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The claims made by the evangelical "historians" include that America was founded as a Christian nation by Christian men on Christian principles; secular ideas and concerns are disregarded as having any role. Second, modern-day liberals and secularists, especially academic historians, are the ones who have distorted the place of religion in American society. Third, partisan sectarian "historians" claim that the separation of church and state is a myth created by liberals and secularists because it is not in the Constitution.

Lambert said these authors of bad history include Tim LaHaye, David Barton, William Federer and John Eidsmoe. "Rather than being historians, these are partisans. And when they write, they write as partisans, not historians who are trying to understand and explain history in context," he said.

Lambert said the evangelical "historians" make the case for the United States as a Christian nation by finding every possible quote that has anything to do with religion said by people they regard as the nation's founders. They claim incorrectly that delegates to the Constitutional Convention were guided by the Bible and by the Puritan model of a "city upon a hill," Lambert said. In fact, at the convention, the delegates granted Congress no power over religion. That does not mean, however, that the delegates thought religion was unimportant, Lambert said.

They thought religion should be lodged in the hands of the people and it ought to be put on a voluntary basis. It should not be a department of state," he said.

Lambert then described an example of a Christian state conceived in America — the Christian commonwealth in Massachusetts Bay Colony.

He said the colony was designed around the principle of religious uniformity. They were substituting their Puritan religious beliefs for the uniformity of the Church of England.

In Massachusetts Bay Colony, Scripture was the blueprint of the society for politics and economics, and church and state were separated but closely interrelated. Lambert said sovereignty rested with "visible saints" who were the only ones who could vote or hold office in civil society.

Lambert said there was much to admire about the colony because it was a society knitted by love; it promoted education; and because of the Puritan work ethic, it prospered. It eventually failed because of a clash between uniformity and dissent.

In his second lecture, Lambert described a society polarized in many different ways, including over the place of religion in American public life.

"On the one hand are those from the far religious right who think that everything ought to be phrased in religious language. They deny any kind of secular influence and they blame secularists for undermining religion and religious freedom," Lambert said. "On the other hand are secularists who want to deny that religion has played an important part in American history, which is equally ridiculous and distorted."

Borrowing a construction from author George Marsden, Lambert described American society as both religious and secular. Sometimes they are in tension, even in tension within individuals, he said.

Lambert said American society often takes a view of "either/or" history. "History does not work that way — it is both/and," he said. Also, he said, religious people have claimed that the nation has lost its way and on the opposite side, there are secularists who claim that the world's problems are always about religion.

To comprehend the secular/sacred tension and even science and faith, Lambert said an understanding of the two most transformative intellectual currents that flowed through America in the 18th century is necessary — The Great Awakening, which was a religious revival, and Enlightenment.

Both The Great Awakening and Enlightenment challenged traditional thought, challenged received wisdom and centered on individual experience, Lambert said.

The Great Awakening was based on a simple message. "There was 'one thing needful,' a spiritual new birth," Lambert said. It introduced religious choice in America, bringing unity but also dividing Christians.

At the same time in the 18th century, the Enlightenment refused to believe that things are the way they are in the world simply because God wanted it that way, Lambert said.

In his third lecture, Lambert focused on the convention of 1787 that drafted the U.S. Constitution. Lambert asserted that Americans tend to view the convention reverentially through a popular constructed memory of the past, but historical facts are always a bit different than the myths we create about ourselves.

The delegates were gifted and far-sighted people, Lambert said, but they were also fully human. "Principled, yes," Lambert said, "but also protecting private interests and special interests, just like we do today."

James Madison made sure the principle of separation was at the heart of the Constitution, according to Lambert. Not only did the document separate the three branches of government, but it also separated power of the central government from the states and it kept a separation of church and state without using those exact words.

The delegates at the convention in 1787 were aware of the religious landscape in America. The majority of men were professing Christians, but few spoke publicly of Jesus or Christ and would have disagreed on biblical interpretation. They saw the dizzying religious diversity growing in America, but the last thing they wanted to do in Philadelphia was fight over religion. "In essence," Lambert said, "they ignored religion as much as they possibly could."

The delegates believed in freedom of conscience and religious liberty — not mere toleration, but true religious liberty. "What they did with that conviction of religious liberty ended up in the most radical part of the U.S. Constitution, and that is the separation of church and state," Lambert said.

Lambert said the delegates feared the intermingling of church and state. "The delegates for the most part were well-read, and they knew history. And they knew what happened when church and state were conjoined, and they thought that damage was done to both," Lambert said. "So, they saw throughout history the unholy bargain of priest and king, of church and state, and they did not want anything to do with that." This led them to largely ignore the religious landscape of America at the convention.

Lambert pointed out that religion was barely mentioned during their discussions. It came up only twice: once in a heated debate over the election of Congress when Benjamin Franklin made a motion to pray — which failed — and again during the debate over the question of religious tests for officeholders. According to Lambert, the delegates' decision to include a prohibition on such a test created a country that separated church and civil authority, leaving religion to the states and to individuals.

Lambert concluded with James Madison's reflections on America near the end of his life. Madison noted that churches were numerous and that all religious views were expressed "with an energy unheard of where there was an established church that enjoyed state support."

"So, in Madison's view," Lambert said, "separation of church and state worked for the benefit of the spread of the Gospel."

[Click here](#) for more information on the Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State, including information on previous lectures.