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**Mark Weldom Whitten. *The Myth of Christian America: What You Need to Know about the Separation of Church and State*. Macon, GA: Smith and Helwys, 1999. Pp. 121. (No Price Listed.)**

[1] It seems uncharitable to be less than enthusiastic about a book so well intentioned and fundamentally right-headed as Mark Whitten's *The Myth of Christian America*. Professor Whitten, who teaches religion and philosophy at Montgomery College in Houston is president of the Houston Chapter of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. His stated purpose is

to communicate the constitutional philosophy and principle of church-state separation to "pastors [and] laypersons . . . [and] to counter the mythology and misinformation that is widely perpetrated among conservative Christians today [who argue that] our Founding Fathers intended to establish the United States as a "Christian nation." . . . This misinformation also contends that "Christian" denominations merit special privileges and protections from the state that are not the rights of other religions and therefore, that church-state separation is a "myth" - a falsehood or a lie.

[2] Whitten's book confronts an argument that I would have thought not worthy even of being taken seriously - that the framers of the constitution intended to create a Christian nation and to give constitutional preference to Christian worship and practices. To his credit, the author does take seriously the arguments advanced for that proposition, and patiently lays out their misrepresentations of history, faulty constitutional principles, and serious dangers to religious faith of all kinds. He brings to bear a good knowledge of constitutional history, case law, legal scholarship, and contemporary theology. These arguments are contained in ten brief chapters, each fewer than ten pages in length. The brevity of the chapters precludes any in-depth analysis, and their organization is sometimes puzzling. Each brief chapter is followed by a list of questions, intended for congregational or other group discussions. Whitten's own argument is followed by an appendix of relevant documents, including excerpts from the US constitution, the classic statements by Jefferson and Madison, and such contemporary additions as the eloquent 1988 Williamsburg Charter.

[3] The book's essential argument is moderate and sensible, quite rightly recognizing that church-state separation does not "require the total divorce of religious persons, values, and agendas from the public sphere or the political arena." The author recognizes the important difference between public life and the more limited role of government itself. Far from being hostile to religious expression, Whitten seems most concerned to protect it from what he believes would be its inevitable debasement by entanglement with government. Behind his argument, although never quite explicit, seems to be the profound commitment to soul liberty at the heart of the American Baptist tradition.

[4] My criticism is neither with Prof. Whitten's intent nor his conclusions, but with the style, which strikes me as ineffective and therefore unsuccessful. Although he intends to address an audience of non-specialists, his book consists of a bewildering mixture of technical constitutional doctrine, case law without context, legal quotations, and far too few concrete examples and narrative. The book unfortunately falls between categories of likely audiences. It is far too casual in its analysis and scholarship to satisfy serious scholars of church/state relations, nor was it intended for them. On the other hand, it strikes me as too "academic" to be an effective tool of congregational discussion groups. Whitten's sentences are sometimes obscure; he peppers the book liberally with quotations from constitutional scholars that only someone like this reviewer could love, and he frequently digresses into issues of constitutional theory not strictly necessary for his argument. In contrast to the academic style of his text, the discussions at the end of the chapters strike me as patronizing to his readers. I would have thought that narratives concerning the relevant constitutional cases would have more powerfully conveyed his point than quotations from judges and lawyers. I am not optimistic that this book will attract the audience for whom it was meant, and that is shame, because the author has the courage to tell religious readers that faith is best preserved - indeed only preserved - in freedom.

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