



Written by [Warren Mass](#) on April 28, 2014

Former Archbishop of Canterbury: Britain Now a Post-Christian Nation

In an interview with the British Sunday *Telegraph* on April 27, the former archbishop of Canterbury said that Britain is no longer a country of believers but rather has entered a post-Christian era.

However, in the interview, Lord Williams of Oystermouth (Rowan Douglas Williams) — who stood down as archbishop of Canterbury at the end of 2012 and became master of Magdalene College at Cambridge University in January 2013 — conceded that Britain's "cultural memory" was "quite strongly Christian."



Despite its strong Christian cultural memory, Lord Williams said that Britain is "post-Christian in the sense that habitual practice for most of the population is not taken for granted." He explained his reasoning: "A Christian nation can sound like a nation of committed believers, and we are not that. Equally, we are not a nation of dedicated secularists."

Lord Williams continued: "It's a matter of defining terms. A Christian country as a nation of believers? No."

"A Christian country in the sense of still being very much saturated by this vision of the world and shaped by it? Yes."

Lord Williams, noted *The Telegraph*, suggested that there may be "a further shrinkage of awareness and commitment" as a result of a lack of knowledge about Britain's Christian legacy among younger generations, under the age of 45.

The former archbishop's interview came soon after Prime Minister David Cameron wrote in an article for the April 16 *Church Times* (an independent Anglican newspaper): "I believe we should be more confident about our status as a Christian country, more ambitious about expanding the role of faith-based organizations, and, frankly, more evangelical about a faith that compels us to get out there and make a difference to people's lives."

In his article, "My faith in the Church of England," Cameron was careful to explain that he was not advocating second-class status for non-members of the Church of England:

First, being more confident about our status as a Christian country does not somehow involve doing down other faiths or passing judgement on those with no faith at all. Many people tell me it is easier to be Jewish or Muslim in Britain than in a secular country precisely because the tolerance that Christianity demands of our society provides greater space for other religious faiths, too.

The prime minister also warned about the practical consequences of living in a secular nation:

People who, instead, advocate some sort of secular neutrality fail to grasp the consequences of that



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neutrality, or the role that faith can play in helping people to have a moral code. Of course, faith is neither necessary nor sufficient for morality.

Many atheists and agnostics live by a moral code — and there are Christians who don't. But for people who do have a faith, that faith can be a guide or a helpful prod in the right direction — and, whether inspired by faith or not, that direction or moral code matters.

Cameron's comments became immediately controversial and generated a strong reaction from secular and atheist groups. In response to the article, the Liberal Democrat leader, Nick Clegg, an atheist, called for the separation of the Church of England from the state.

The article also prompted a letter to *The Telegraph*, signed by 56 prominent Britons, including authors, scientists, and broadcasters.

The signers accused Cameron of misrepresenting Britain: "Apart from in the narrow constitutional sense that we continue to have an established church, Britain is not a 'Christian country.'" They continued: "Repeated surveys, polls and studies show that most of us as individuals are not Christian in our beliefs or our religious identities. At a social level, Britain has been shaped for the better by many pre-Christian, non-Christian and post-Christian forces."

The current archbishop of Canterbury, the Most Reverend Justin Welby, defended Cameron during an Easter broadcast from Canterbury Cathedral. "We do need to be more confident," he said. "The confidence that [Cameron] expressed in Christian faith is something absolutely that we agree with."

"It is clear that, in the general sense of being founded in Christian faith," maintain Welby, "this is a Christian country."

A poll taken by ICM for *The Telegraph* after Cameron's comments appeared showed "substantial support for the Prime Minister's view," according to the paper. Among the poll's findings:

- More than half of those polled — 56 percent — regard Britain as a Christian country. Sixty percent of men and 73 percent of those over 65 agreed.
- Sixty-two percent of those identifying as practicing Christians said the rise of religious fundamentalism had made Christians afraid to express their faith.
- Sixty-two percent of people who hold Christian beliefs but do not worship regularly said they feel Christians are given "less protection" than other religious groups by the state.
- Fifty-two percent of respondents described themselves as either practicing or non-practicing Christians (14 percent practicing, 38 percent non-practicing), with five percent answering that they belonged to another faith group. Another 41 percent said they were not religious.

This discussion about whether or not Great Britain is a Christian country reflects a similar debate that has occurred in the United States.

Of course, a significant difference is that the reigning British monarch has the constitutional title of supreme governor of the Church of England, and 26 archbishops and bishops in that church have seats in the House of Lords, making it the officially established Christian Church in England. In contrast, the First Amendment provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The wording of the First Amendment was an obvious response to the fact that, under British rule, those who did not adhere to the Church of England had been persecuted, prompting the migration of



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Puritans, Separatists, Catholics, Quakers, and others to America. However, there is no indication that the Founding Fathers, in drafting the First Amendment, desired to remove Christianity from the public sphere; in contrast, they desired to remove government's influence over controlling religion.

While our nation has taken care from its inception to avoid the pitfalls of having an established church, the role of religion — especially Christianity — in our culture has long been recognized as having a positive effect on our society and even on government.

George Washington once wrote:

While we are zealously performing the duties of good citizens and soldiers, we certainly ought not to be inattentive to the higher duties of religion. To the distinguished character of Patriot, it should be our highest glory to add the more distinguished character of Christian.

John Adams, our second president, wrote:

Suppose a nation in some distant Region should take the Bible for their only law Book, and every member should regulate his conduct by the precepts there exhibited! Every member would be obliged in conscience, to temperance, frugality, and industry; to justice, kindness, and charity towards his fellow men; and to piety, love, and reverence toward Almighty God.... What a Eutopia, what a Paradise would this region be.

And Thomas Jefferson, our third president, noted:

God who gave us life gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the Gift of God?

Though Congress is prohibited from respecting an establishment of religion, each house of Congress, in recognition of the reliance on God's providence expressed by our Founders, hires a chaplain. A message on the website of the Senate chaplain's office says plainly: "Throughout the years, the United States Senate has honored the historic separation of Church and State, but not the separation of God and State." The message notes that the first Senate chaplain was elected in 1789.

As in Britain, the state of Christianity in America has been asked in many opinion polls. A Gallup poll taken in 2012 indicated: "The large majority of Americans — 77% of the adult population — identify with a Christian religion, including 52% who are Protestants or some other non-Catholic Christian religion, 23% who are Catholic, and 2% who affiliate with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints."

In "Is America a Christian Nation?" an article for ReligionNews.com on July 4, 2013, Jana Ries cites the book, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation?* In that work, John Fea noted that of the original states, Virginia was the only one that, like the federal Constitution, had a firm separation of religion and government. The other states all "constructed republics that were, in one way or another, explicitly Christian."

While America, like Britain and the rest of the Western world, has undoubtedly suffered a decline in Christian influence and values and a rise in secularism in recent decades, most practicing American Christians would probably agree that Lord Williams' statement that Britain's "cultural memory" was "quite strongly Christian" would apply to the United States, as well. Furthermore, regular church attendance in the United States exceeds the rates in Britain and elsewhere. A 2004 Gallup poll indicated 43 percent of Americans attended church regularly, as opposed to only 12 percent in the



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United Kingdom.

While Christianity in America may not seem prominent when viewed through the lens of the major media and the entertainment industry, it is very much alive, is practiced by a large number of ordinary Americans, and still exerts a positive influence over many American lives.

Photo of the Canterbury Cathedral



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