



The Barton Lies Debunked

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The past few months have been pretty rocky for “Christian nation” advocate David Barton.

The Texas-based Barton, who has posed as a historian for the past 20 years and claims to have proven that church-state separation is a “myth,” suffered a humiliating blow in August when the publisher of his latest work, Thomas Nelson, announced that the firm was withdrawing the volume, having lost confidence in its accuracy.

The controversial book, *The Jefferson Lies*, purported to tell the “real” story behind our nation’s third president. According to Barton, Thomas Jefferson was for most of his life an orthodox Christian who freely blended church and state and never seriously backed a wall between the two.

The audacity of the claim was apparently Barton’s undoing. Although Barton has long been a thorn in Americans United’s side, his downfall came from an unlikely source: a band of conservative Christian scholars who grew weary of his abuse of history.

Warren Throckmorton and Michael Coulter, professors at Pennsylvania’s Grove City College, earlier this year published a detailed refutation of Barton’s book titled *Getting Jefferson Right: Fact-Checking Claims About Our Third President*. The book marked the beginning of the end for Barton.

Americans United, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the late scholars Robert S. Alley and Edwin S. Gaustad and other critics had been deconstructing Barton’s history for years. What made the Throckmorton/ Coulter broadside so powerful was its source: Grove City is a conservative Christian institution. Its website says, the “ethical absolutes of the Ten Commandments and Christ’s moral teachings guide the effort to develop intellect and character in the classroom, chapel, and cocurricular activities.”

Throckmorton said he began looking into Barton’s work in October of 2010. At the time, the psychology professor was doing some research about a bill in Uganda that would have imposed the death penalty on gays. He had come across references to Bryan Fischer, a staffer at the Tupelo, Miss.-based American Family Association, who has argued that the First Amendment doesn’t protect non-Christians.

As he took a closer look at Fischer, Throckmorton began seeing references to Barton.

“I found that many of Fischer’s ideas were derived from Barton’s writings,” Throckmorton said. “That led to a closer look at key claims Barton made frequently in his speeches and books.”

Throckmorton told *Church & State* that he and his colleague Coulter were dismayed by the poor quality of Barton’s scholarship.

“Barton is often introduced as a Christian historian and is cited by politicians and policy makers who conduct their work in the name of Christ,” Throckmorton said. “To me and my colleagues, the first goal of any scholar, Christian or not, is to get the facts right.

“That is what Michael Coulter and I tried to do with our book on Jefferson,” Throckmorton continued. “We examined the claims made by Barton about Jefferson and found that they were off. Christians often fault others for disregarding objective facts. However, Christians are the offenders in the service of political objectives.”

Throckmorton and Coulter aren’t the only ones focusing on Barton. Jon Fea, associate professor of American history and chair of the history department at Messiah College in Grantham, Pa., is also a Barton critic.

Fea, author of *Was America Founded As a Christian Nation?: A Historical Introduction*, praised Throckmorton and Coulter for doing “a solid job of dismantling the faulty historical work of David Barton in *The Jefferson Lies*.”

Once under the critical microscope, Barton’s troubles quickly piled up. The hammer really fell on Aug. 8, when National Public Radio’s Barbara Bradley Haggerty aired a devastating report on Barton and his claims.

Haggerty enlisted Barton critics to fact-check his claims. Their research showed the claims to be spurious. (Two examples: Barton asserts that the Constitution is laced with biblical references and that Thomas Paine advocated teaching creationism in schools. The Constitution contains no biblical citations, and Paine died in 1809 – 50 years before Charles Darwin outlined the theory of evolution in *On The Origin of Species*).

Around the same time, *World*, an evangelical Christian magazine, reported that Jay W. Richards, a senior fellow at the Discovery Institute,

a group that promotes “intelligent design” creationism, asked 10 conservative-Christian college professors to examine Barton’s work.

“Their response was negative,” reported *World*. “Some examples: Glenn Moots of Northwood University wrote that Barton in *The Jefferson Lies* is so eager to portray Jefferson as sympathetic to Christianity that he misses or omits obvious signs that Jefferson stood outside ‘orthodox, creedal, confessional Christianity.’ A second professor, Glenn Sunshine of Central Connecticut State University, said that Barton’s characterization of Jefferson’s religious views is ‘unsupportable.’ A third, Gregg Frazer of The Master’s College, evaluated Barton’s video *America’s Godly Heritage* and found many of its factual claims dubious, such as a statement that 52 of the 55 delegates at the Constitutional Convention were ‘orthodox, evangelical Christians.’”

Not long after that, *First Things*, a publication that highlights conservative Catholic thought, blasted Barton for his take on John Locke, the 17th-century political philosopher whose writings on religious liberty influenced the Founding Fathers.

Blogger Greg Forster charged that Barton is guilty of “numerous distortions” and “a number of incidental factual errors” about Locke.

Even Break Point, a ministry founded by the late Charles W. Colson, decided to cut Barton loose. In an Aug. 21 column, ministry official Tom Gilson chided his fellow evangelicals for so readily swallowing Barton’s line.

“With a bit of care, any of us could have known of the serious questions that have surrounded Barton’s work for a long time,” Gilson wrote. “These recent revelations are nothing new, except in the degree to which conservative Christian scholars are involved in calling him to account.”

Gilson noted that Barton has frequently attacked some of his critics because they are liberals and asserted, “But the ideology defense is no help when it’s conservative Christians making a case against Barton – especially when it’s a case as verifiable as this is proving to be. It’s not political opinion that’s stacking up against him now. It’s well-documented facts.”

A few days later, American Vision, an openly theocratic outfit based in Georgia that has in the past lauded Barton, joined the critical chorus. Writing on the group’s website, Joel McDurmon concluded that

Barton's book was studded with "exaggerated and outright dishonest claims."

Writing in *The Atlantic*, journalist Garrett Epps summed up the matter with a certain refreshing bluntness, observing, "For at least the past 20 years, Barton has been a tireless producer of books and pamphlets designed to demonstrate that America was founded by Christians and should be governed by Christians, that the separation of church and state is a myth, and that Protestant Christianity should be a part of government.

"In that time," Epps continued, "he has come to occupy a position of influence within the Republican Party. His success is appalling, first because he is not a historian of any kind (his sole degree is from Oral Roberts University in religious education), and second because, even by the standards of today's right wing, he is an obvious crackpot."

For Americans United, Barton's sudden fall from grace was a vindication. AU has been debunking Barton's claims since early in 1993, when an AU supporter in California mailed the organization a videotape of Barton that had been appearing on public-access television.

The rather crudely produced program featured the lanky Barton bounding around what appeared to be a home library while arguing that the United States was founded to be a "Christian nation" and church-state separation is a "myth."

The tape, titled "America's Godly Heritage," was based in part on a book Barton had self-published titled *The Myth of Separation*. AU tracked down a copy of the tome as well as an earlier Barton work, *America: To Pray Or Not To Pray?* The simply produced paperbacks bore all the signs of a home-based publishing operation.

Not only did the books look bad, the arguments within them were atrocious. *The Myth of Separation* recycled many of the same assertions that surfaced in Barton's tape and was littered with outright errors, half-truths and distortions.

America: To Pray Or Not To Pray was a real howler. In the book, Barton attempted to "prove" that the United States had gone into decline since 1962 – the year the U.S. Supreme Court struck down government-sponsored prayer in public schools.

The book consisted of a series of charts. Barton would show how, say, the rate of violent crime and venereal disease has increased since 1962 and pin this on the prayer ruling.

So began a nearly 20-year on-again/off-again bout between Barton and Americans United. In its first story on Barton, which ran in *Church & State* in April of 1993, AU noted that Barton had ties to extremist groups. In 1991, he twice spoke to white supremacist organizations. AU even obtained a letter from a Barton aide admitting Barton had talked to the groups but asserting that he didn't know of their far-right, racist views.

In 1996, Americans United discovered that Barton has issued a "fact sheet" admitting that nearly a dozen quotations he had attributed to Founding Fathers in *The Myth of Separation* could not be confirmed. Barton later pulled the book, added more material to it and re-issued it under the name *Original Intent*.

Remarkably, none of this slowed Barton down. In fact, he and his "Wallbuilders" organization began a rapid rise among the Religious Right. Barton began appearing at national conferences, where he would present his cut-and-paste version of history to adoring audiences.

Along the way, he became aligned with people like TV preacher Pat Robertson, Focus on the Family founder James C. Dobson, former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee, former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich and other leaders of the religious and political right. They lauded Barton as a premier Christian historian.

Time magazine in 2005 named Barton one of the nation's most influential evangelicals. He was soon chosen as vice-chairman of the Texas Republican Party. In 2010, Barton's reach grew even wider after he was adopted by Glenn Beck and given air time on the Fox News Channel.

As Barton's stature grew, he attracted more critical attention. In 2006, freelance writer and researcher Chris Rodda published *Liars for Jesus: The Religious Right's Alternate Version of American History*, an exhaustive, 500-page work based on extensive research and primary sources that debunked Barton's claims. The tome, which Rodda self-published, was an important corrective to Barton's claims, but, not surprisingly, did not sway his Religious Right fan base.

After *The Jefferson Lies* was pulled by Thomas Nelson, a Barton associate, Rick Green, posted a public challenge online daring anyone

to find errors in the book. Rodda immediately replied, offering to provide a long list.

Green at first refused to acknowledge Rodda's message and then began attacking her.

Personal attacks seem to be a huge part of Barton's defense. Green has labeled Throckmorton, Coulter and other university critics "academic elites" and even invoked Adolf Hitler and Saul Alinsky, a 20th-century political organizer known for his radical views.

"These elitist professors and reporters attacking David Barton know that most people will not actually go read the supporting material behind David's books...certainly not the bloggers and reporters who have so quickly jumped on the attack wagon," Green wrote on his website. "They are exactly the 'least intelligent' Hitler was able to fool, Alinsky taught radicals to fool, and now even Christian 'leaders' are joining."

But that argument is wearing thin. As Fea noted on his blog, "When legitimate historians criticize [Barton's] work, he paints them as godless and liberal. But can all these historians and critics be wrong? Apparently David Barton is the only one out there who has correctly interpreted Thomas Jefferson.

"This kind of arrogance," Fea continued, "not only shows a deep disrespect for the work of historians, many of whom have devoted their lives to the study of Jefferson, but, perhaps more importantly, it is an embarrassment to the Christian church."

Can Barton recover from this debacle? As of this writing, his main supporters appear to be Huckabee and Beck (who no longer has a show on Fox). Beck has reportedly offered to republish *The Jefferson Lies* and allow Barton to add material to the tome responding to his critics.

But to date, Barton's responses consist mostly of reiterating the arguments in his book. On his personal site, wthrockmorton.com, Throckmorton has been dissecting Barton's replies one by one.

A good example is Barton's insistence that Jefferson personally helped finance one of the first Bibles printed in America. Barton asserts that Jefferson, John Adams and other founders joined to "help fund that Bible."

In fact, Jefferson merely placed an order for a copy of the Bible, in the same way that a person today might buy a book through Amazon.com. This isn't surprising, as Jefferson enjoyed analyzing and comparing various Bible translations.

Barton insists that Jefferson's decision to buy this Bible made him an "investor" in the project – and his clear implication is that there was some evangelistic purpose behind this. In fact, the truth is much more prosaic: Jefferson simply purchased a Bible from a man who was selling them, paying for it through a type of installment plan.

Since few people take the time to examine Barton's claims in this level of detail, Throckmorton believes the country has probably not heard the last of the Texas revisionist.

"I think he can survive as long as people who are leaders do not examine his work objectively," Throckmorton said. "The criticism we have received has come from those who have not read our book and from Barton himself.

"Barton has been moderately successful in making his critics the issue," Throckmorton continued. "His followers have not carefully examined our evidence and have bought into the *ad hominem* attacks. People outside of evangelical circles and mainstream historians have been raising questions for years. It is a sad fact of social psychology that we look to people within our own communities for information. Christians need to step up and get this right."

<https://www.au.org/church-state/october-2012-church-state/featured/the-barton-lies-debunked>