

American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation

Jon Meacham

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The American Gospel-literally, the good news about America-is that religion shapes our public life without controlling it. In this vivid book, New York Times bestselling author Jon Meacham tells the human story of how the Founding Fathers viewed faith, and how they ultimately created a nation in which belief in God is a matter of choice.

At a time when our country seems divided by extremism, American Gospel draws on the past to offer a new perspective. Meacham re-creates the fascinating history of a nation grappling with religion and politics-from John Winthrop's "city on a hill" sermon to Thomas Jefferson's Declaration of Independence; from the Revolution to the Civil War; from a proposed nineteenth-century Christian Amendment to the Constitution to Martin Luther King, Jr.'s call for civil rights; from George Washington to Ronald Reagan.

Debates about religion and politics are often more divisive than illuminating. Secularists point to a "wall of separation between church and state," while many conservatives act as though the Founding Fathers were apostles in knee britches. As Meacham shows in this brisk narrative, neither extreme has it right. At the heart of the American experiment lies the God of what Benjamin Franklin called "public religion," a God who invests all human beings with inalienable rights while protecting private religion from government interference. It is a great American balancing act, and it has served us well.

Meacham has written and spoken extensively about religion and politics, and he brings historical authority and a sense of hope to the issue. American Gospel makes it compellingly clear that the nation's best chance of summoning what Lincoln called "the better angels of our nature" lies in recovering the spirit and sense of the Founding. In looking back, we may find the light to lead us forward.

"In his American Gospel, Jon Meacham provides a refreshingly clear, balanced, and wise historical portrait of religion and American politics at exactly the moment when such fairness and understanding are much needed. Anyone who doubts the relevance of history to our own time has only to read this exceptional book."-David McCullough, author of 1776

"Jon Meacham has given us an insightful and eloquent account of the spiritual foundation of the early days of the American republic. It is especially instructive reading at a time when the nation is at once engaged in and deeply divided on the question of religion and its place in public life."-Tom Brokaw, author of The Greatest Generation

"An absorbing narrative full of vivid characters and fresh thinking, American Gospel tells how the Founding Fathers-and their successors-struggled with their own religious and political convictions to work out the basic structure for freedom of religion. For me this book was nonstop reading."-Elaine Pagels, professor of religion, Princeton University, author of Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas

"Jon Meacham is one of our country's most brilliant thinkers about religion's impact on American society. In this scintillating and provocative book, Meacham reveals the often-hidden influence of religious belief on the Founding Fathers and on later generations of American citizens and leaders up to our own. Today, as we argue more strenuously than ever about the proper place of religion in our politics and the rest of American life, Meacham's important book should serve as the touchstone of the debate."

-Michael Beschloss, author of The Conquerors

"At a time when faith and freedom seem increasingly polarized, American Gospel recovers our vital center-the middle ground where, historically, religion and public life strike a delicate balance. Well researched, well written, inspiring, and persuasive, this is a welcome addition to the literature."-Jonathan D. Sarna, Joseph H. & Belle R. Braun Professor of American Jewish History, Brandeis University, author of American Judaism: A History

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From Reader Review American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation for online ebook

Skylar Burris says

Jon Meacham appears to take a genuinely moderate approach to his examination of the role of religion in American history. He argues that America was not founded as a Christian nation, but he also declines to classify it as a purely secular nation where religion must be expunged from the public sphere. In clear, concise language, he relates the role religion played in America from the founding of Jamestown to Ronald Reagan, although he is rather sporadic in his approach, often flying through great expanses of history, including the Great Awakening (a rather strange omission for a book on religion and America). He argues that America has both "public" and "private" religion, the private religion being specific (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, etc.), and the public religion being a type of general deism. He concedes that, on the whole, religion has been a positive influence on America.

While I appreciate that he approaches the role of religion with a moderate tone, I'm not sure I find his overall characterization of America or its founding fathers as religiously moderate convincing. Firstly, the founding fathers well may have been moderate for their own day, but they would hardly be considered so in ours. What if a modern President, as Abraham Lincoln once did, suggested that a present war was God's punishment for the national sins committed by Americans? (Indeed, Meacham himself, in the pages of *American Gospel*, reacts in horror at Jerry Falwell's extremism for suggesting our national sufferings in 9/11 were the consequence of our national sins.) What if a modern president were to make the kind of religious proclamations, today, that past presidents once made without concern that the public would scream, "Separation of church and state"? George Bush nearly sent people into fits merely by using words like "good" and "evil," but "moderate" politicians such as Ben Franklin routinely said things such as "We had daily prayer in this room of the divine power. Our prayers, sir, were heard, and they were answered." Meacham is right that the founding fathers were not sectarian zealots in their own time; what he fails to consider is the likelihood that they would be considered so in ours.

Secondly, Meacham's middle of the road approach fails to grasp how important the extremes of religious zeal were in bringing about major changes in United States history: abolition, the temperance movement, women's rights, and the Civil Rights movement—all major American political movements that were not fueled by moderate mainline attitudes, but by evangelical piety. Real historical change rarely results from moderation. Meacham makes some passing attempt to distinguish the use of the churches for the civil rights cause and the use of churches by conservative Christians to affect political change, but the distinction is quite spurious. Meacham's religious "extreme" appears to be those who use religion to further causes of which he doesn't personally approve; his religious "moderates" are those who use religion to further causes of which he does happen to approve. At any rate, the fact remains that, in U.S. history, religion has long mingled with politics, and it is not moderate and general religion, but deeply felt and specific religion, that has most often affected true change.

None of this is to suggest that America is a nation where Christians routinely strive to "force" their belief on others. Not even the most fundamentalist of American Christian denominations today advocates anything like a theocracy or the imprisonment of dissenters or the execution of homosexuals or religious tests for office. That is to say, one can be evangelical, zealous, or "extreme" in one's religion and still believe in religious tolerance and liberty; in fact, it is the most evangelical sects of Christians that have historically, traditionally supported the separation of church and state and not the presumably moderate "mainline" Christian denominations, which have tended, rather, to be established state churches.

America may not be a "Christian nation," but it is a nation OF Christians, many of whom are quite zealous compared to Christians in the rest of the western developed world. America boasts a more vibrant, more seriously held Christianity than any other western nation, with evangelicals numbering around 25% of the population. In America, church attendance greatly outstrips attendance in European countries with established churches. What America offers is not "moderation" in religion at all, but liberty, which is what makes real zeal possible. Established religion erodes zeal and slowly kills Christianity. But liberty gives birth to "extreme" religion, life-changing religion, nation-changing religion. What makes America unique is not that we are full of religious moderates or even that our founding fathers were religious moderates, but that most of our religious "extremists," unlike the religious extremists of most other times and cultures, have traditionally recognize that liberty is a friend of true religion.

So, while I appreciate that Meacham does not falsify history to fit it into a mythological Christian-nation mold as do too many fundamentalists, and while I appreciate that he does not wish to eradicate all vestiges of faith from the public sphere as do too many secularists, I ultimately find his thesis of moderations somewhat bland and lacking in historical insight. I had great hopes for the book from its opening pages, but it soon began to fall flat.

Bryson Leake says

Jon Meacham's "American Gospel" is a book which shows us different aspects of religion and religious views during various time periods through the lense of the founding fathers. The book starts during the colonial time speaking of Historical figures including Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington. It progresses into later time periods speaking of other important American figures such as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, and Martin Luther King Jr. Meacham uses these figures and examples of their experiences to make the claim that religion and government should be intertwined. Meacham argues that the US government should embrace religious freedom as the founding fathers did. Throughout the first chapter of the book, Meacham tries to show that religious freedom has been a core concept of America since its creation. He acknowledges that religious freedom wasn't the reason for the first settlers to come to America. On page 41, Meacham says "The first permanent English settlers arrived in search of gold not Gold." Meacham tries to use this information to show that before the creation of America's government, religious freedom wasn't apart of America. Although this may clear up some ideas about America's founding, in the end, it is somewhat contradictory to Meacham's argument. By opening the book with a segment about the lack of religious freedom in the early days of America, then proceeding to talk about how the founding fathers were religiously tolerant, this makes Meacham's work inconsistent, occasionally confusing and hard to follow. On page 55 of the book, Meacham states the concept of religious freedom began to become accepted around the late 17th century. This is because of the Enlightenment and the Great Awakening happening during the time period. The founding fathers applied the concept of religious freedom to the Government's creation. They managed to use the term "God" in the Declaration of Independence without deliberately referencing any specific god or religion. Instead they also reference "nature" and a "creator". They did this considering the concept of religious freedom. This is also why they didn't reference God at all in America's founding document, the U.S. Constitution. If the Founding Fathers wanted Religion to be tied in to the Government, they would have explicitly included this detail in the Constitution. Instead, they excluded the detail to allow people to believe what they want so that the chance of an oppressive or dominant rule that could be established would be lowered. This further shows evidence to why religion and government should be kept separate. On pages 56 - 61, Meacham tries explaining the diversity within the founding fathers. He goes into considerable detail about the complexities of their beliefs, especially the belief of Thomas Jefferson. Though they may have different religious beliefs, they are still not very diverse

because they are all still different Christian sects. In order for the Founding Fathers to be truly diverse, other religions outside of Christianity would need to be represented. The Founding Fathers couldn't have accurately predicted the religious diversity represented today, therefore integrating religion into government would be too difficult and unfair for many people. Meacham's work can also be hard to follow due to his constant movement between ideas. Though Meacham will stay within a certain time period, he will move from one area to a different, very loosely related topic that can make it hard for the reader to follow his writing style. For instance, on pages 123 to 126, Meacham talks about slave owners using the Bible to justify their actions. On page 127, Meacham uses a rough transition to speaking about "The 17th century battle between the Catholic hierarchy and Galileo on whether the Earth revolved around the sun or vice versa." This transition amongst others can occasionally make Meacham's work a bit more unappealing. Though his work may be hard to follow, Meacham still makes very compelling points about religion and brings up interesting religious perspectives. He speaks about religion's effect on leaders, decisions, opinions, and events such as Martin Luther King's peaceful protests, Lincoln emancipating the slaves, the people's opinion on John F Kennedy, and America's involvement in WWII. He shows us that religion plays a major role in American society even if it isn't apart of our government. Meacham's writing brings ideas to your attention you normally wouldn't recognize. This book is good for anyone who likes American history or anyone who likes to look into the subtext of ideas. If you like to learn about different religious ideas, events, and their impact on today's society, then this is the book for you. Meacham, working as an editor and journalist for the Times, is a very educated historian. His insights on religions on American History and religion may sometimes be hard to follow, are always fascinating, highlighting key historical events. Though you may not always agree with Meacham's views, each chapter is full of new events and content for you to learn about.

Valerie says

I don't give too many 5 star ratings, but American Gospel was most deserving. This scholarly and thoughtful book about religion in American is a good refresher course in the American history and includes many facts not commonly taught. Starting with the colonists at Jamestown and ending with September 11, Meacham discusses how faith and religion played a part in the founding and development of our country. The last chapter is one of the best essays on the place of religion in America that I have ever read. Whether you are a person of faith or not, I highly recommend this book.

Matt says

"In God We Trust", the official motto of the United States of America, emblazoned on places as important as the Supreme Court and as basic as an off-colour Lincoln penny. That simple, but powerful, sentiment fuels Meacham's exploration of the basis of religion in America, offset by the Founding Fathers' constitutionally entrenched separation of Church and State. By no means was this division as longstanding as the presence of people in the original colonies, for the early residents had fled England because of religious persecution and organised their settlements with a strong set of Christian beliefs. Meacham tackles discussions by those who attended the Constitutional Conventions, where early ideas of religion and faith within the new America proved somewhat divisive. Some wanted to entrench Christianity in their new country, as it was imbued in all laws and proved to be largely practiced throughout the Thirteen Colonies. However, Thomas Jefferson argued strongly that the country should be a more inclusive and less entrenched nation, possibly tied to his less than stalwart views on a Higher Being. The Founding Fathers knew that the country they sought to create would be one built on tolerance and, while not ridding the state of Christianity, ensured religious

openness with the Bill of Rights and the First Amendment. Meacham explores how Washington steered the state through its early years, balancing on this precarious thread, which proved successful. Other presidents handled the religious debate with less aplomb, outwardly espousing the Christian God to save them in their time of need. Of greatest interest is Meacham's exploration of the three presidents who saw America through the tumultuous war years. Lincoln, whose various speeches sought to steer away from seeking God's blessing and sought instead to place his trust that the 'right' answer would come to pass. Woodrow Wilson and FDR took a more preacher-cum-president approach, seeking Americans to pray for success over their foes and vilifying those who did not fall into line or spoke out against these pleas to the Christian God. One might extrapolate this and look to Bush 43, whose fabrication of facts and declaration of a War on Terror bred xenophobia and a degree of Islamophobia that still simmers to this day. The American State also had periods where public sentiment clashed with the inherent beliefs of some religious groups, namely acceptance of abortion and the ongoing debate over capital punishment. Meacham effectively argues that America weathered this storm and its leaders, while sometimes left to grit their teeth, never lashed out against all that was going on. These personal beliefs did not bring the country to its knees, nor did it create chaos amongst the masses, some of whom would not have worshiped the same God as their leaders. Meacham looks to the latter part of his book to explore public religion, which differs greatly from the personal tenets that Americans held in their hearts. Acknowledgement of religious holidays (Christmas and Easter), as well as the Judeo-Christian set of legal beliefs are two strong examples of this. These public ideals remove the neutrality that would be required for a complete separation between Church and State, though it does not adversely affect the citizenry, at least to the point of any violation of certain beliefs. This might seem like a minor point, but Meacham makes it nonetheless, wishing to keep all discussions aboveboard. Worthy of a brief mention, Meacham does touch on the judicial branch, which acted as a shepherd in guiding the state through some of its more trying times, ensuring that the First Amendment's freedoms were never curtailed, but that there was a balance to ensure the greatest cross-section of the population could live free from intrusion. While religion and the state remains a highly divisive issue and one that can spark many concerns, Meacham come to the conclusion that America's personal gospel is one of acceptance and openness, even when its leaders may seek to push the envelop and subtly turn the country into an 'us' versus 'them' battle. This is by no means a simple topic to digest, though Meacham has done a brilliant job in educating the masses.

Having recently completed a book that explored the depths of the First Amendment, I thought it a good idea to take some time to explore this topic. Meacham does a fabulous job in laying out his arguments clearly, with strong examples pulled from history, documents, and documented reports. He takes the entirety of the American political experience and focusses the Church versus State argument through the various political eras without weighing things down with too much information. Meacham's primary argument or freedom and acceptance flows throughout, while offsetting this with an equally compelling belief that one would have to live under a rock not to see the long-standing Christian values that shine through all laws and speeches made by political leaders. With two hundred and forty years of experience, America's views have held firm, though history has tossed enough tests into its path to force a few course corrections. But, as with any belief system, a reevaluation is always useful to match the flavour of the times.

Kudos, Mr. Meacham for another stellar political analysis. I wish I could do your work justice with my review. You take on so much and yet make it seem so effortless.

Like/hate the review? An ever-growing collection of others appears at:
<http://pecheyponderings.wordpress.com/>

Kate says

When I hear the claim that America needs to get back to being a "Christian nation," it makes me uncomfortable, and the reason is that the "gospel" of American public religion and the gospel of true Christianity are two different things. American public religion is based on the "God of Nature" of many of the Founding Fathers; even the Christian ones signed on to a view of the public God of America who is similar to the God of Christianity but does not, at least as far as I can tell, require and mediator. Orthodox Christianity requires a mediator, specifically Jesus Christ. True, Christianity and Christian people played a significant role in the history of our nation; but this has not been at any point in its history a specifically "Christian nation," and I think it is confusing to label it as such.

Meacham's book clearly lays out the history of religion in America and examines the contours of the American Gospel. He is widely read and uses original sources deftly to provide the reader with a clear overview of this important topic.

Kevin Press says

It probably won't come as a surprise that I found Meacham a bit dismissive of atheism, but this book is very worthwhile just the same. It explains the misperceptions many of us have about the notion of a separation of church and state in the U.S. Meacham argues convincingly that it is practically impossible to separate the two. The Founding Fathers' notion of God-given, or natural rights are fundamental to our understanding of the U.S.

But it is just as incorrect to describe the U.S. as a Christian nation as it is to describe it as a secular nation. It is a republic that guarantees freedom of religion. In that way, it respects all religions equally (including the right not to believe). Meacham illustrates all this with multiple examples over three different centuries of U.S. politics, from pre-1776 to Ronald Reagan.

Really impressive.

Steven Peterson says

This is an interesting reflection on the role of religion in public life and government in the United States. Meacham's basic thesis is that the Founding Fathers "got it right." With respect to Jefferson (sometimes referred to as "Jefferson the atheist" in his own time) (page 4): "Jefferson surveyed and staked out an American middle ground between the ferocity of evangelizing Christians on one side and the contempt for religion of secular philosophes on the other. The right would like Jefferson to be a soldier of faith, the left an American Voltaire. He was, depending on the moment, both or neither; he was, in other words, a lot like many of us." Meacham goes on to note that (page 5) "Belief in God is central to the country's experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding is that the sensible center holds."

Meacham is quite critical of the Christian political activists, such as Jerry Falwell, who wish to impose their own religious views on the larger public; on the other hand, he speaks admiringly of Billy Graham, after he ceased politicizing religion, as a better role model.

The book begins with the roots of American history, which includes theocracy and religious intolerance in Massachusetts. Meacham is not sympathetic with this wedding of religion and politics. He is more positive about the experience in Pennsylvania. When he examines the development of the Constitution, he is fairly nuanced in noting that the Founders were religious--but did not want to impose their own faith on all. He author notes how Madison's Federalist # 10, by advocating a large republic, justified a system where no single religious grouping could exercise power over the republic, since there were so many different faiths.

He then traces the role of religion and its linkages to politics over American history. He notes the place of religion for a variety of presidents, from Lincoln onward to contemporary times.

He concludes with the following sentiments (page 243): ". . . a true Christian ought to be more interested in making the life of the world gentle for others than he should be in asserting the dominance of his own faith. . . . If the first shall be last and the last first, then who are Christians to exert power over others by the sword or the purse or the polling place?"

This is an interesting work, making one think about the complex linkages between religion and government. The course of American history provides many examples--good, bad, and ugly--of how this has worked. I am not completely satisfied with Meacham's argument. Some of the narrative seems to drift away from the thesis he is advancing. Many examples are so brief that it is not fully clear how they mesh with his thesis. Nonetheless, in the end, this book is thought-provoking and provides a sensible perspective on the religion-government relationship.

Scott Rhee says

"The atmosphere of our country is unquestionably charged with a threatening cloud of fanaticism, lighter in some parts, denser in others, but too heavy in all." ---Thomas Jefferson, 1822

"Our fathers founded the first secular government that was ever founded in this world. The first secular government; the first government that said every church has exactly the same rights and no more; every religion has the same rights, and no more. In other words, our fathers were the first men who had the sense, had the genius, to know that no church should be allowed to have a sword; that it should be allowed only to exert its moral influence." ---Robert Ingersoll, 1876

"If there is one thing for which we stand in this country, it is for complete religious freedom and for the right of every man to worship his Creator as his conscience dictates. It is an emphatic negation of this right to cross-examine a man on his religious views before being willing to support him for office. Is he a good man, and is he fit for office? These are the only questions which there is a right to ask..." ---Theodore Roosevelt, 1908

It irks me when I hear anyone say that the United States of America is a "Christian nation". More often than not, the words are being spoken by right-wing fundamentalists whose myopic interpretations of Scripture are being used to justify their own often very non-Christian stances on a subject.

Not to mention that the very words "Christian nation" blatantly implies a disregard and dismissal of any and all other religions to be found in this country; as if Christianity were the only religion of note or value.

The very words “Christian nation” are used by people who clearly forget that our Founding Fathers believed that a separation of church and state was so necessary that it was written into the First Amendment of our Constitution.

As someone who (occasionally) considers himself a Christian, I take umbrage against the words “Christian nation” because they are words, more often than not, being utilized for political purposes to push agendas that I neither agree with nor consider very “Christian”, based on my own personal understanding of Christ’s teachings. Indeed, it sometimes seems that Christianity has been “hijacked” by the political---and generally religious---Right as a political tool to confound the---generally secular---Left.

But this is not a new problem. All the old problems are simply seen as new again because Americans have a very short memory, and they don’t learn from history.

Historian Jon Meacham’s book “American Gospel” is an immensely readable, fascinating, and objective historical overview of the conflict between politics and religion, between the religious and the secular, between private faith and public faith. It’s a short book (roughly 250 pages of text, with another 200 pages of end notes, appendices, and bibliography) that covers American history from the 16th-century to the Reagan Era and our attempts to meld and control religion and government.

Interestingly enough, Meacham’s book, published in 2006, does not cover the Bush Administration; he ends with the presidency of Ronald Reagan. It is, according to an afterword, a purposeful decision. He did not wish to cause problems or incite negative views of a sitting president. I admire his respectful decision, although, I will admit, it would have been interesting to read about the Bush presidency, which has, wittingly or unwittingly, ushered in a frightening era of radical religious fundamentalism.

To be fair, of course, President George W. Bush simply opened the door for people of faith to be more vocal about their religious views because Bush seemed like the first president to unashamedly espouse fundamentalist Christian views and speak openly about his faith. His openness excited Christians and terrified liberals and secularists.

There is nothing wrong with being open about one’s faith and espousing it. And, to be clear, Bush obviously wasn’t the first president to do so.

The problem becomes a question of fundamentalism.

American Extremism

If I had to articulate one major take-away from reading “American Gospel” it is that religion and politics can be a fruitful and healthy marriage as long as extremism on either side is kept in check, which is what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they wrote the Constitution.

Meacham writes, “If totalitarianism was the great problem of the twentieth century, then extremism is, so far, the great problem of the twenty-first. It need not be this way. Extremism is a powerful alliance of fear and certitude; complexity and humility are its natural foes. Faith and life are essentially mysterious, for neither God nor nature is easily explained or understood. Crusades are for the weak, literalism for the insecure. (p.17)”

It is perhaps odd that extremism in the U.S. should still be an issue, especially considering our rich history with religious extremism. It was, after all, a reaction to a perceived religious extremism of the British

government that led many early colonists to the New World. While certainly not all colonists were fleeing religious persecution, a great many looked toward the New World as a place where they could, hopefully, be free to worship and believe according to the dictates of their own conscience and NOT the dictates of the British government.

Ironically, according to American history, the persecuted sometimes became the persecutors. Some of the first colonial settlements devised laws that were highly restrictive regarding religious worship. Connecticut, in 1650, made worshipping “any God but the Lord God” punishable by death.

Several famous incidents within the colonies involved religious zealotry and religious extremism, some of which ended in tragedy. All of these were first and foremost on the minds of the Founding Fathers when they met to create the Constitution. They noted “a consistent theme: civil societies dominated by compulsory religious rigidity were unhappy and intolerant, while religious liberty seemed to produce more prosperous, stable, and popular cultures. (p. 57)”

In Article XVI of the Virginia Declaration of Rights, using language similar to what would be used in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, writers George Mason and Patrick Henry decreed, “That religion, or the duty which we owe to our Creator, and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence; and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience, and that it is the mutual duty of all to practice Christian forbearance, love, and charity, towards each other. (p. 69)”

It is peculiar to secularists and, perhaps, integral to religious fundamentalists that the Founding Fathers would even create these documents using such religious language; liberally using words like “our Creator” and “Christian” throughout.

Their choice to do so has helped to incite a never-ending debate between secularists and religionists, neither side fully realizing or understanding how carefully crafted and nuanced such documents truly were.

Works in progress

“Properly understood, both religion and America were forged through compromise and negotiation. They are works in progress, open to new interpretation, amendment, and correction. It would be wrong to give up hope that things can get better, our conversations more civil, our culture more tolerant, our politics less virulent. The acts of reading, of contemplation and discovery, of writing poems and finding cures and composing symphonies are, for the religious, acts of piety, and of thanksgiving. For the secular, such things may be about the wonders of nature, or of rationality, or of logic. So be it: the point is that we are all on the same odyssey, if for different reasons. In either case, the story is about moving forward, through the darkness, searching for light. (p.18)”---Jon Meacham

The Founders, to the chagrin of secularists, were not completely atheists. They were, however, to the chagrin of Christian fundamentalists, not completely Christian, either. They all met somewhere in the middle, and that has made all the difference.

Heeding the warnings and the dangers of religious extremism throughout history, the Founders were extremely hesitant about making Christianity a state-sanctioned religion. Pre-Revolutionary public language was quite often steeped in overtly Christian language, and making open professions of one’s faith and belief in Christ’s divinity was common.

The Founders, in their declaration of independence from Britain, however, “were also making another declaration: that Americans respected the idea of God, understood the universe to be governed by moral and religious forces, and prayed for divine protection against the enemies of this world, but were not interested in establishing yet another earthly government with official ties to a state church. (p. 78)”

It is difficult for a twenty-first century mind---one programmed to believe or accept anything and everything---to comprehend just how revolutionary this concept of the establishment clause was to an 18th-century mind.

The idea that the U.S.A. is a “Christian nation” is completely antithetical to the Founders’ deepest intentions.

Meacham writes: “The intensity with which the religious right attempts to conscript the Founders into their cause indicates the importance the movement ascribes to historical benediction by association with the origin of the Republic. If [Jerry] Falwell and his seventy performers, or Tim LaHaye in his *Faith of Our Founding Fathers* can convince enough people that America was a Christian nation that has lost its way, the more legitimate their efforts in the political arena seem. The problem with their reading of history is that it is wrong. There is no doubt, as we have seen, that the Founders lived in and consciously bequeathed a culture shaped and sustained by public religion, one that was not Christian or Jewish or Muslim or Buddhist but was simply transcendent, with reverence for the “Creator” and for “Nature’s God”. To hope, as some secularists do, that faith will one day withdraw from the public sphere, if only this presidential candidate or that Supreme Court nominee comes to power, is futile. Humankind could not leave off being religious even if it tried. The impulse is intrinsic. (p. 233)”

What the Founders accomplished was both unprecedented and incredible: the Great Experiment that is our country is founded on the principle that, regardless of one’s religious views---and that includes those of us who choose to have none---we are not only equal under the Law but that no one is (to quote George Orwell from “Animal Farm”) “more equal” than others in the eyes of God.

Brian Eshleman says

Rational, wise, balanced, gracious, these are not words that often surround or explode from the subject. They are, however, fitting descriptors for the author's tone in this book. This is fitting, somehow, since he seems to take the same approach to his biographical subjects.

Brandon Escalona says

Jon Meacham’s *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* gives a very extensive account of the role of religion throughout the history of the United States of America. This covers all the way from when the English Puritans were aboard the Mayflower in 1620, making their journey over to what will later become America, to the founding of America, all the way to the mid 20th century. Within the chapters, different topics are split into subsections, which range from a few paragraphs to a few pages in length. With this comes many different arguments about the various aspects of religion. However, throughout all of his discussions, Meacham consistently decides to take the middle ground. For example, he states that “belief in God is central to the country’s experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding is that the sensible center holds” (5).

Even though Meacham makes various arguments in his book, there is one claim he continues to make from beginning to end: the benefits of religion throughout history have outweighed the costs. He extensively backs up this statement with a plethora of supporting evidence. In my opinion, one of Meacham's strongest argument that helps strengthen his thesis is that humans naturally need someone to look up to when times get hard, which in this case, is God. This is an especially strong point since—according by Meacham—it is something that everybody can relate with. Additionally, it supplies a way that belief in God is able to improve the lives of the religious while not interfering with the nonbelievers. To make this point even stronger, Meacham follows up with a statement about the Founders' belief: "religion, for all its faults, was an essential foundation for a people's moral conduct and for American ideas about justice, decency, duty, and responsibility" (27). After discussing the Founders' belief, he added in an opposing view, and went over how non-religious people still conducted themselves in a moral manner. This very well constructed argument in the Introduction Chapter, which included evidence and analysis, combined with the extensive 28-page bibliography included at the end of the book, leads the reader to believe that the rest of the book will also be filled with interesting arguments complete with an in-depth analysis for each. However, as I quickly found out, that is completely false.

The majority of *American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* is very poorly written in multiple aspects. One of the major flaws is an overuse of quotes and lack of analysis. This causes the book to be very boring in my opinion due to it just becoming a list of quotes. Very frequently, there is a new quote that is unrelated to Meacham's almost non-existent argument after every two sentences, which leaves no room for analysis. There are even multiple quotes that take up more than a whole page, with little to no analysis afterwards.

Furthermore, Meacham tends to be extremely disorganized in structuring the information within each of the subsections. He jumps around from topic to topic, rarely leaving any analysis or transition between them. For example, Meacham was discussing Article XVI of the Virginia Declaration of Rights under a subsection titled "Diabolical Persecution." The main focus of that subsection was George Madison asking Patrick Henry to change a phrase in the document from "all men should enjoy the fullest toleration in the exercise of religion" to "all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion" (69). The vote occurred on Wednesday, June 12, 1776. This subsection seems to flow smoothly at first. However, at the end of the paragraph that mentioned the vote, Meacham's only analysis to the quote he gave was "It was indeed" (70). The very first sentence of the following paragraph, with no transition nor additional analysis in between, is "The months between the autumn of 1775 and the spring of 1776 were dark ones for Jefferson" (70). This paragraph is unrelated to the rest of the subsection. In the entire part that comes before it, Meacham never mentions Jefferson even once, making the sudden change even more confusing.

Meacham's writing style takes away a lot of the persuasive power his arguments might have had. In addition to having holes in the analysis that is meant to support his claims, failure to analyse evidence against his claim hurts his assertion. Often, Meacham will supply an opposing person's point of view and reasoning, like a good argument should include. However, the lack of analysis and a rebuttal to it causes Meacham to almost nullify the point he is trying to get across to the readers.

If his arguments weren't already bad enough, many of them are based off of false assumptions about religion in the past. According to another reviewer of Meacham's work, Gordon S. Wood, a Professor of History Emeritus at Brown University, Meacham incorrectly assumes that the Founders lived in a time similar to our own. Additionally, Wood states that Meacham "tends to ignore the fact that the First Amendment then applied to only the federal government and not to all the states."

Through reading this book, my knowledge of American history has grown by a decent amount. On the other hand, Meacham has not deepened my understanding of American history in any noticeable way. This is due to him covering many unrelated topics for short amounts of time without any analysis. It seemed more like a brief overview of events like the Founding of America and World War 2 as opposed to a history book.

I would only recommend *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation* to people who either aren't bothered by an overuse of quotes and lack of analysis, want to appear as an

intellectual as a result of buying a history book written by a winner of the Pulitzer Prize, are rich enough to buy books for their collection without ever reading them, or people who have read every other history book that exists and have none left to read. Other than that, I wouldn't recommend this book to anyone.

Josh Tatum says

Don't get me wrong, this book covers all the basic points of American religious history. Meacham does a decent job of telling the important - not just the popular - stories of the American religious experience; however, it is written like a Newsweek feature piece. It uses broad sweeps and makes broad generalizations, supported by the evidence that suits the author. Meacham's thesis is stereotypically Episcopalian: when confronted with a choice, Americans chose the middle. While it is true that a more radical position on either side of the one chosen can be found, this thesis does not stand in the face of history. Whether it be the Blaine amendments of the late nineteenth century, the religious zeal of the Great Awakenings, or the First Amendment itself, the U.S. has not always simply taken the Middle Way, and Meacham's preconceptions blind him to the courageous and sometimes dangerous stances the American populace has taken at points in history.

Bernard A. says

In my years as a minister, I came to believe that The United States of America was founded as a Christian nation and, somehow, fell away from the true faith. As most Fundamentalists, I believed that America is the New Israel, chosen by God to be a haven of holiness and a light to the world, the Shining City on a Hill.

It took me years to break out of that mindset. In "American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation," Jon Meacham puts order to what I had put together on my own. America was, in fact, founded as a nation where all religions could exist in peace. Americans would be free to worship--or not worship--as they chose, not as dictated by the government.

Freedom of religion had long been a sticking point in America. Roger Williams and Ann Hutchinson were expelled from Massachusetts because the Puritans had established a colony that granted freedom for their own religion, not anyone else's. Later, Virginia law decreed that parents could have their children taken away if they did not baptize their children in the Anglican religion. These and other stories showed the Founders that, "civil societies dominated by compulsory religious rigidity were unhappy and intolerant, while religious liberty seemed to produce more prosperous, stable, and popular cultures.

The Founders' own views on religion would not track well with the prevailing conservative view of today's American Church. In the treaty with Tripoli, President John Adams wrote that America was not founded on the Christian religion. Franklin and Jefferson did not believe in the divinity of Jesus and, "the Holy Trinity was seen as an invention of a corrupt church more interested in temporal power than in true religion."

In the recent Presidential election, religion again became a national issue, from Romney's Mormonism to the religious objections to contraception. Once again, the myth that America was founded as a Christian nation was proffered as truth by the revisionist history of religious ultra-conservatives. "American Gospel" combats this ignorance with clear, well-researched history. Anyone who is repulsed by what is going on in the American church needs to read this book.

Andrew Georgiadis says

A deeply researched work with profoundly un-intellectual conclusions

Religious moderation is the preachment in these pages. To disavow religion in public life would be contrary to the delicate balancing act performed by the Founders, who were occasionally agnostics but more likely Christians or Deists, and skeptics all. Our greatest minds were motivated to varying degrees by religious faith – and now we have a work where Meacham boldly supports it as a core of the American experience (i.e. nothing substantive needs to change in our public discourse). *But 18th century knowledge of evolution and cosmology and physics and biology and germ theory was hopelessly primitive! We have abandoned these regressive ideas and surely Meacham's thesis reflects this!* the reasonable among us might rejoinder. *Shhh* say the promulgators of religious moderation, Meacham unfortunately among them. *It's part of our history. Hush now.*

Curiously, he makes no mention of the current public support enjoyed by religious organizations, most visibly in the form of tax incentives. It would prove enlightening to see how he squares this fact with the sentiments of the book. “God” should not be stricken from public life, he argues. Americans are deeply religious. They are not consummate followers of church doctrine, but Americans’ faith remains important to the daily lives of a majority in this country. The separation of church and state and the freedom from religion would seem to exclude religious organizations from public support. It is why churches of Flying Spaghetti Monsterism (FMSism) do not enjoy tax breaks.

Meacham makes a host of platitudes towards the cause of ecumenism, tolerance, and maintaining our collective faith. This tepid religious moderation provides no easy answers for the most pressing of real-world, modern questions to which the faithful among us have no useful things to say. Perhaps facing hard questions was simply too ambitious for a work of this kind. The axiomatically praised Reagan and Carter are not carrying the torches of the Deists Jefferson and Lincoln, with their unhelpful apocalyptic theology. Our next generation of American heroes in religious thought needs to have ideas compatible with modernity. That is to say: nonreligious thought.

Colleen Browne says

Although by no means an exhaustive review of the subject, Meacham's book does a great job of explaining the difference between what he calls the public God and the private God. The public God is the god of nature referred to by Jefferson, Lincoln, TR, FDR, and most of the leaders in our history. It refers to kind of a generic god that is not specific. It can be Christian or non-Christian, or even atheist. He also discusses the Evangelicals of the last 40 years or so who have attempted to push the lie that the Founders were Christians who created a Christian nation.

This book is a balanced, well researched (like all of Meacham's work) book. If I have a criticism it is his discussion of Reagan. Always worshipping at the alter of Reagan, he (not for the first time) trips over himself expounding on the greatness of Reagan. For example, he talks about Reagan preaching tolerance and against racism but ignores the fact that Reagan announced his 1980 candidacy in Philadelphia, Mississippi the site of the 1964 murders of civil rights workers and his use of the racially charged term "welfare queens".

I could go on. I guess for Meacham Reagan's words rather than his actions defined him.

Sarah says

"The preponderance of historical evidence, however, suggests that the nation was not "Christian" but rather a place of people whose experience with religious violence and the burdens of established churches led them to view religious liberty as one of humankind's natural rights--a right as natural and as significant as those of thought and expression."

This one was a complex reading experience for me. The authors says from the get go that this is not an in-depth history, it is an essay on religion and its role in American public life, and he covers such vast swath of time that by necessity he must skim across the events. I learned a few things I had not known (that Jews settled in the colonies in 1654, that slaves, some of them Muslim, were brought to Jamestown in 1619), and yet I feel that this topic of religion, and the many things in civil life it touches on, required deeper argument and analysis. I found this book both fascinating and frustrating, and also think I might have reacted differently to it if I had read it closer to when it was published, and not now, in 2017.
