The New York Review of Books

VOLUME 53, NUMBER 10 · JUNE 8, 2006

Review

American Religion: The Great Retreat

By Gordon S. Wood

American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation
by Jon Meacham
Random House, 399 pp., $23.95

The Faiths of the Founding Fathers
by David L. Holmes
Oxford University Press, 225 pp., $20.00

It's never been easy to reconcile religion with politics. We know that not only from the bloody sectarian strife taking place today in Iraq but also from the passionate disputes we ourselves are having at the present time—though as yet we haven't been bombing one another. From stem cell research to intelligent design, from prayer in the schools to the mention of God in the Pledge of Allegiance, issues of religion and politics bitterly divide Americans. While some think that the country has forgotten God and its Christian heritage, others fear that the government and the culture are being taken over by religious enthusiasts out to create a theocracy.

Inevitably, over the past decade or more the disputants on both sides have flooded the country with books on religion and government, each pushing their own positions, with most of them having much to say about what the Founders intended the role of religion to be. Indeed, showing that the Founders would have approved of the writer's position seems to be essential to any argument over religion and government.

The two books under review are attempts to intervene in the current heated controversies. Both of them seek to reconcile national differences and bring Americans closer together by recounting the actual history of religion in America, especially at the founding of the nation. As both writers would agree, we Americans have a very unusual religious tradition. We are not born into our religion in the way we are born into citizenship. Religion is very much a voluntary affair, a matter of free choice. There is no religious establishment here and not much formal connection between religion and government; in fact, over the past generation there has been an almost obsessive concern to keep religion apart from the public culture and affairs of the state.

Yet this voluntarism and this separation of church and state have not led to religious indifference or religious apathy. Indeed, with the exception of Ireland, the United States is the most religious society in the Western world. Nearly 90 percent of Americans say they consider themselves religious believers of one sort or another, about 80 percent identify with some Christian faith, 79 percent believe in the Virgin Birth, 78 percent say Jesus physically rose from the dead, 48 percent claim to have had a "born again" Christian experience, and more than 40 percent of Americans say that they are weekly churchgoers, although those who actually attend church may be closer to 25 percent. At any rate there is an enormous number of different religious

groups, over 1,500 by one count, with seventy-five different kinds of Baptists alone. Even in the face of the relentless "secularization" of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, religion in America still flourishes. And, except for being freed of tax, it flourishes without the support of the government or the state, without any of the traditional establishments that have maintained religions elsewhere in other nations. How did such an unusual religious culture develop? What historical circumstances created this remarkable religious world?

It was not that way at the outset. At the time of the first settlements in the seventeenth century most of the colonists who migrated to the New World brought with them the traditional attitudes of Europeans about religion. Religion was all-encompassing, and despite the advances of science in the seventeenth century it was still the major means by which most people explained the world. Most of the migrants to America, like most Europeans at the time and like many people elsewhere in the world today, assumed that the well-being of the state depended upon there being religious uniformity within it. They assumed that there existed a single orthodox religious truth to explain the world and that it was the responsibility of the state to enforce that truth. Most settlers could scarcely conceive of any real separation of church and state; religion and government were two parts of one whole whose ends were the same—the glory of God for the one commonwealth. Religion was so important to the welfare of the public that the state necessarily had a major responsibility to support it in every possible way—from gathering tithes and paying the clergy to punishing heretics and dissenters.

It is true that the Puritans who came to Massachusetts Bay in 1630 were fleeing from the persecutions of Archbishop Laud and the hierarchical Anglican Church of England. But they were not seeking religious toleration or liberty in any modern sense. They simply wanted to practice the orthodox religious truth as they saw it, and once in control of the churches of Massachusetts Bay they established just as much religious uniformity in the New World as Archbishop Laud had sought in the Old World. They required all inhabitants to attend their Puritan churches and quickly stamped out all dissent by either exiling or hanging the dissenters. Because the church structure they favored was based on congregations, and thus ideally suited to the localizing tendencies of American life, the Puritans of Massachusetts were remarkably successful in establishing their religion; indeed, their Congregational religious establishment in Massachusetts eventually became the longest-lasting of any in the United States, maintaining itself until 1833.

Elsewhere, however, circumstances in the New World conspired to transform traditional European religious establishments. The English colonists in Virginia aimed only at erecting the kind of church they had known in the Old World—an overseas branch of the Church of England. But no archbishops or bishops came to America, and therefore the elaborate hierarchy of the Church of England was not duplicated in Virginia or any place in the New World.

In some of the colonies the presence of several sects within the same community forced changes in thinking. The colony of Maryland, for exam-ple, was settled as a refuge for English Catholics. But since the Catholics never made up a majority of the colonists, the Catholic proprietors of Maryland, the Calvert family, felt pressed in 1649 to issue Maryland's famous act of toleration. The act stated that in order to ensure public tranquillity—and for that reason alone—all Christians who accepted the Trinity were granted the right to practice their religion freely.

This was not a modern document. It said nothing about separation of church and state

or about the freedom of individual conscience. It was simply a limited, pragmatic instrument designed to meet the exigencies of maintaining order in a community where several religions existed. The act tolerated only those groups that it had to tolerate; it forbade calling religious groups names "in a reproachful manner," and punished with death all blasphemers and deniers of the Trinity.

The middle colonies of New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania contained even more religious diversity. These religious groups included Anglicans, Congregationalists, Baptists, Quakers, Presbyterians, Lutherans, Huguenots, Dutch and German Reformed, and even some Jews. Without doubt this pluralism, this multiplicity of peoples and faiths, was the basic fact shaping the character of religious life in early America. The sheer diversity of ethnicities and religious groups (the two were virtually indistinguishable in early America) made it very difficult to erect any sort of religious establishment and to enforce uniformity and orthodoxy, although successive governments in New York and New Jersey tried.

Two colonies in the seventeenth century were actually founded on the visionary principle of religious freedom. In 1681 the English crown granted to the Quaker aristocrat William Penn a huge tract of land that became the colony of Pennsylvania and a refuge for the persecuted English Quakers. Part of Penn's dream of establishing a community of brotherly love was the rejection of any religious establishment. But the rejection of a religious establishment and the allowing of religious freedom to the colony did not mean any separation of religion and government. "Government," Penn wrote, "seems to be a part of religion itself, a thing sacred in its institutions and purpose." And his conception of the role of the government in regulating morals, punishing blasphemers, and supporting the Sabbath was little different from that of the Puritans of New England.

Penn sees Gvmt. itself as sacred!

In early colonies, Gvmt. not intended to be seperate from church, but to enforce religiously-driven laws (to create "City on the Hill")

A similar situation developed in seventeenth-century Rhode Island, where Roger Williams, a renegade from Puritan Massachusetts, sought to build a religious community of Puritan dissidents uncontaminated by state corruption. "God," Williams wrote, "requireth not an uniformity of Religion" nor a church establishment. In fact, said Williams, the inner spirit of people needed to be protected from the state, and thus a "wall of separation" had to be erected to insulate the church from worldly affairs. Williams, however, fully expected the state to enforce moral discipline in the colony.

Despite these anomalies, however, most American colonists as late as the mid-eighteenth century continued to believe that religious truth was unitary and the responsibility of the state was to support it. But the presence of many different sects within the same community slowly and begrudgingly compelled people into toleration. At the same time Enlightenment theorists like John Locke were offering intellectual and philosophical justifications for toleration and freedom of conscience that weakened the traditional beliefs in orthodoxy and the establishment. Everywhere the state-supported churches in the colonies were surrounded by growing numbers of dissenters whom the churches were forced to recognize and tolerate. Yet despite concessions to toleration, older assumptions remained strong almost everywhere; everyone in the community still had the obligation to support religion, and if that religion were not that of the established church, it could only be that of one of the Christian sects explicitly recognized and tolerated in law. No one, including Jews, was molested or hanged anymore for his or her religious beliefs, but in almost every colony all except Protestant Christians suffered political discrimination.

The Great Awakening—a series of revivals that swept through communities up and

down the North American continent in the middle decades of the eighteenth century—further altered the American religious landscape. Much of the revivalism was carried on by itinerant ministers who invaded established parishes and challenged the authority of the traditional clergy. In the process communal churches were shattered, people were cut loose from ancient religious bonds, and the individualistic logic of Protestantism was emphasized as never before. The ideas of orthodoxy and uniformity lost more and more of their meaning for Americans. Revivalist clergymen urged the people to trust only in "self-examination" and their own private judgments, even though "your Neighbours growl against you, and reproach you." Some revivalist preachers went so far as to assert the "absolute Necessity for every Person to act singly...as if there was not another human Creature upon Earth." The burden of people's new religious attachments now rested clearly on themselves and their individual decisions.

The consequences of the Awakening were radical. It accelerated developments that had been in motion since the seventeenth century. It transformed further the role of the clergy, it fragmented as never before the institutional churches, and it undermined even more the traditional belief that religion was a communal obligation. Religion in America became less a matter of rituals and rites and more a matter of personal conversion. The clergy became less a priestly group of ministers performing sacerdotal duties to a fixed community and more a group of evangelical preachers seeking to persuade individuals to come and be saved. The clergy were now to be judged not by the well-being of the society they presumably served but by the number of individual souls they saved. Consequently the clergy became even more dependent on the people they were trying to persuade. Under these circumstances it was hard to think of church and society having much unity.

The American Revolution furthered the transformation of American religion. It endorsed the Enlightenment's faith in liberty of conscience and continued to erode the already weak connection between church and state. But it did not reject the role of religion in the culture.

This is where the story gets controversial and where the authors of the two works under review have concentrated much of their energy. Jon Meacham, the managing editor of *Newsweek*, gives a full and very readable account of what the Founders were up to. Meacham knows that the present issue of religion and public life arouses intense passions. The secular-minded today, he writes, cite Jefferson's "wall of separation between church and state" and assume the conversation should stop there. For their part the conservative Christians defend their forays into public life by quoting the Founders on religion, "as though Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Franklin were cheerful Christian soldiers." This division over religion is wrongheaded, Meacham says, and we can end it by "recovering the sense and spirit of the Founding era." He thinks the Founders have something to say to us on the issue of religion in public life. They believed in both faith and freedom, and so can we today, "for their time is like our time," and their struggles have "a particular resonance for our era."

Meacham's laudable aim is compromise: let's accept a little of each side's position seems to be his theme. He admits that "belief in God is central to the country's experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion." Thus "the legacy of the Founding," he says, "is that the sensible center holds.... The Founders believed themselves at work in the service of both God and man, not just one or the other." They worked out a balance between God and government, and so presumably can we. They created what Meacham calls our "public religion," which

has successfully sustained us through the subsequent centuries and will, he trusts, get us through our present turmoil.

David L. Holmes in his book lends support to this balanced view of the Founders. Holmes, who is a professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, is eager to demonstrate that the major Founders— Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Franklin, and Monroe—were both religious and not-so-religious. All but Franklin continued to worship at least occasionally in the Christian church of their ancestors; when Franklin went to church in Philadelphia, he tended to go to Christ Church, one of the three Episcopal churches in the city. At the same time, however, all these Founders were to one degree or another influenced by deism, the enlightened eighteenth-century set of beliefs that assumed the existence of an active rewarding and punishing God and perhaps a hereafter, but denied the divinity of Christ.

Deism – 18th century beliefs recognizes God (active rewarding + punishing so consequences for heaven) but denies that God is active in the world (including rejecting divinity of Christ)

Holmes seems to be a confirmed classifier; he has created several religious boxes into which he places each of the Founders. He capitalizes Deism and treats it as if it were a working faith, for example; in doing so, he turns what was for most only a vague persuasion into what is virtually another religious denomination to which people belonged. He sets forth "a layperson's guide" for classifying correctly the Founders' religious views and posits "three categories: Non-Christian Deism, Christian Deism, and orthodox Christianity." In order to place the Founders in the right category, says Holmes, we must look, first, at their actions: Did they attend church or serve as members of a vestry? Second, were they baptized or confirmed in their faith? Third, how active were they in their churches? Did they participate in the sacraments, including Holy Communion? And fourth, what kind of religious language did they use?

By Holmes's reckoning Thomas Paine and Ethan Allen were Non-Christian Deists; they both scorned Christianity, Paine saying that "of all the systems of religion that ever were invented, there is none more derogatory to the Almighty, more unedifying to man, more repugnant to reason, and more contradictory in itself than this thing called Christianity." Since Washington, John Adams, and Madison attended church regularly and remained affiliated with one orthodox Christian denomination or another, they were Christian Deists. Since Patrick Henry, Samuel Adams, and John Jay not only attended church but accepted the divinity of Jesus, they were orthodox Christians. Classifying Franklin and Jefferson is more difficult. Franklin did not often go to church and doesn't seem to have believed in the divinity of Christ, but he had no strong dislike of organized religion; indeed, he thought it was good for people. "Franklin," writes Holmes, "was also among those Deists who remained open to the possibility of divine intervention or special providence in human affairs"—a view shared by most of the Founders, especially Washington.

Jefferson was very different from the other Founders. He had a visceral contempt for organized religion and for clergymen, believing that they were always in alliance with despots against liberty. "To this effect," he said, "they have perverted the purest religion ever preached to man, into mystery and jargon unintelligible to all mankind and therefore the safer engine for their purposes." The Trinity was nothing but "Abracadabra" and "hocus-pocus...so incomprehensible to the human mind that no candid man can say he has any idea of it." Ridicule, he said, was the only weapon to be used against it. Nevertheless, "despite his heterodoxy," Holmes says, "Jefferson remained outwardly an Anglican and Episcopalian throughout his life." Jefferson was known for hypocrisy, but in this case his outward display of religious observance seems to have come from his deep dislike of personal controversy.

All of Jefferson's scathing comments about the clergy and their perverted views of Christianity, which he kept up throughout his life, were confined to private letters to people that he presumed shared his views. Earlier in his career, however, he had published several indiscreet comments on religion that got him into trouble. In his *Notes on the State of Virginia,* first published in 1785, he assailed the established church of Virginia and wrote that "it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg." And in the preamble to his famous statute for religious freedom in Virginia, passed in 1786, he stated "that our civil rights have no dependence on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry."

These public comments, which were drastically out of line with prevailing public opinion, created a storm of criticism and in the election of 1800 led to his being called "a French infidel" and an "atheist"—certainly the most effective charge his opponents ever made against him. Although Jefferson, like all the other Founders, had no doubt of the existence of God, he publicly suffered these charges of atheism and infidelity in silence, dismissing them privately as the characteristic carping of bigoted Federalist clerics. Yet he very much wanted to win over to his Republican cause all those ordinary religious people who had voted for his opponent; and to do so he knew he had to offset the Federalist accusations that he was an enemy of Christianity. Consequently, he knew very well what effect he, as president, would have by attending in January 1802 a church service held in the chamber of the House of Representatives. His presence at the religious ceremony attracted wide public no-tice and surprised the Federalists. Jefferson continued to attend church services in the House chamber and made available executive buildings for church functions. As both Holmes and Meacham point out, however, Jefferson's behavior was not really new: Jefferson had always been a regular churchgoer, had been baptized and married in his parish, had served on his local vestry, and had attended church services in government buildings in Virginia.

In 1803, upon receiving a copy of Joseph Priestly's *Socrates and Jesus Compared*, Jefferson was provoked into setting down his own similar thoughts in what he called his "Syllabus of an Estimate of the Merit of the Doctrines of Jesus, compared with Those of Others." He sent copies of this thousand-word essay to Priestly, to Benjamin Rush, who had asked him about his religious views, to his friend John Page, and to members of his cabinet and family. He followed up this essay with a scissors-and-paste version of the New Testament in which he cut out all references to supernatural miracles and Christ's divinity and kept all the passages in which Jesus preached love and the golden rule. He called this collection "The Philosophy of Jesus." He told a friend that these works, which came to be called the Jefferson Bible, were "proof that *I am a real Christian*, that is to say, a disciple of the doctrines of Jesus, very different from the Platonists, who call *me* infidel." Although he never published these works, word did get out that Jefferson had changed his religious views, a rumor that Jefferson was at great pains to deny.

Jefferson as a Founder has taken on a special significance for us because of his famous 1802 letter to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut, which Meacham includes in an appendix. In this letter to the Baptists, who of course had a deeply felt opposition to any state involvement in religion going back to Roger Williams, he said that the First Amendment of the federal Constitution erected a "wall of separation between Church & State." In *Everson* v. *Board of Education* (1947) Justice Hugo Black invoked Jefferson's phrase in what was the first major statement by the Supreme Court on the establishment clause. This set in motion a series of ever more confusing decisions over the next sixty years as the Supreme Court struggled to

maintain this wall of separation. The Court has labored to define what is permissible and what is impermissible in what has become an increasingly capricious relationship between church and state. School prayers are impermissible if sponsored by the administration, but perhaps not if they are sponsored by the students. Observing religious holidays in the public schools is impermissible, but excusing students from attending school on their religious holidays is permissible. In this perplexing atmosphere teachers in the public schools have become so uncertain about what is permissible and what is not that they often avoid even talking about religion at all, which is what has led many Americans to complain that religion has been driven from the public square.

James H. Hutson, chief of the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress and the author and editor of several distinguished works on the Founders and religion, created his own storm of controversy when in 1999 he concluded from laboratory examination of the Danbury letter that Jefferson had an exclusively political object in writing the letter and did not have in mind the kind of high and impenetrable wall between church and state that modern jurists have maintained. Indeed, says Hutson, the fact that Jefferson wrote the letter two days before he attended religious services in the House chamber suggests that his wall of separation was never intended to banish religion from the public arena.[*]

A young historian, Johann N. Neem, in a soon-to-be published paper has argued very persuasively that Jefferson's wall of separation was not the crucial point of the letter. For Jefferson, the wall was simply a means toward a larger end. It would give time for reason and free inquiry to work its way to the ultimate enlightenment he favored. In other words, the wall might protect the Baptists from the Standing Order of Connecticut Puritans in the short run; but Jefferson thought that in the long run both the Baptists and the Standing Order, like all religions based on faith and not reason, were slated for extinction. Indeed, as late as 1822 Jefferson continued to believe that "there is not a *young man* now living in the United States who will not die an Unitarian."

Of course, he could not have been more wrong. He didn't seem to understand the political forces behind his and Madison's success in getting his bill for religious freedom through the Virginia legislature. He may have thought that most Virginians accepted the enlightened thinking in his preamble, but the bill would never have passed without the overwhelming support of growing numbers of dissenting evangelical Presbyterians and Baptists in the state who hated the Anglican establishment so much that they didn't care what the preamble said. The principal source of our separation of church and state was never enlightened rationalism, important as that is to us today, but rather the growing realization by the various competing religious groups that it was better to neutralize the state in matters of religion than run the risk of one of their opponents gaining control of the government.

By the early decades of the nineteenth century the popular evangelical Christianity of the Second Great Awakening was sweeping the country. Indeed, the religious transformation that took place as a result of the Revolution could not have been more radical. Ordinary people asserted themselves during the Revolution in unprecedented numbers, and they brought their egalitarian religious enthusiasm with them. The older state churches that had dominated colonial society for a century and a half—the Anglican, Congregational, and Presbyterian—were suddenly supplanted by new, and in some cases unheard of, religious denominations and sects. By the early nineteenth century, enthusiastic groups of revivalist Baptists and Methodists had moved from

After American revolution, often established put in nail in the coffin of established religions as majorities/dominant.

the margins to the center of American society. But even more remarkable than the rapid growth of these religions with Old World roots was the unexpected emergence of new sects and utopian religious groups that no one had ever heard of before—Universal Friends, Universalists, Shakers, and a variety of other splinter groups and millennial sects. Almost overnight the entire religious culture was transformed and the foundations laid for the development of an evangelical religious world of competing denominations that was unique to Christendom.

We can't solve our current disputes over religion by looking back to the actual historical circumstances of the Founding; those circumstances are too complex, too confusing, and too biased toward Protestant Christianity to be used in courts today, and most of them are remote from or antagonistic to the particular needs of the twenty-first century. Meacham is wrong when he says the story of the Founding has "a particular resonance for our era" and that the Founders' "time is like our time." Despite all our current concerns about theocracy, religion then was much more powerful and pervasive than it is today, even though the percentage of church membership may have been smaller then than now; indeed, as Holmes correctly points out, the overwhelming religiosity of the Revolutionary era made the Founders appear "less devout than they were." Jefferson and Madison and other rationalists were on the defensive against the forces of popular Christian enthusiasm. Franklin was only being wise in advising a friend in 1786 not to publish anything attacking traditional Christianity. "He that spits against the wind," he said, "spits in his own face." By contrast today it is the devoutly religious people who feel beset and beleaguered by an increasingly secularizing culture.

Despite Meacham's claim, the Founders did not really "succeed" in assigning "religion its proper place in civil society." Meacham can make that claim only because judges in the twentieth century have succeeded in incorporating the First Amendment into the Fourteenth Amendment and then relating it to the states, which was never intended in 1787. Like so many others who write about these matters, Meacham forgets the acute sense of a limited federal government that most late-eighteenth-century Americans had; and he tends to ignore the fact that the First Amendment then applied only to the federal government and not at all to the states. It is true that the treaty with Islamic Tripoli in 1796 stated that "the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian Religion," but that was not true of the various state governments; at the beginning they were very much states founded on Christianity, as they proclaimed. President Andrew Jackson may have been scrupulous about involving the national government in religious matters, but he had no scruples about the state governments promoting Christianity. Meacham even seems to believe that the country's motto, "*E Pluribus Unum*—'out of many, one,'" referred merely to "the pluralistic nature of the American experiment," and not to the fact that thirteen independent states had come together to form a nation. At the outset the United States of America, which then was always plural, resembled much more the present-day European Union than it did today's relatively centralized nation. That fact makes an enormous difference in the way we interpret the Founding.

Although all the Revolutionary state constitutions of 1776 affirmed in one way or another the Enlightenment belief in religious freedom, most of them did not abandon their traditional role in religious matters. To be sure, the official establishment of the Church of England that existed in a half-dozen colonies was immediately eliminated in 1776–1777. But the Revolutionary constitutions of Maryland, South Carolina, and Georgia authorized their state legislatures to create in place of the Anglican Church a kind of multiple establishment of a variety of religious groups, using tax money to

support "the Christian religion." Many of the state constitutions provided for religious tests for officeholders. Six states—New Hampshire, Connecticut, New Jersey, the two Carolinas, and Georgia—required officeholders to be Protestant. Maryland and Delaware said Christians. Pennsylvania and South Carolina officials had to believe in one God and in heaven and hell; Delaware required a belief in the Trinity. And Connecticut and Massachusetts continued their Congregational establishments into the second and third decades of the nineteenth century.

We do not, and cannot, base American constitutional jurisprudence on the historical reality of the Founding. Our constitutional jurisprudence accepts a fiction involving the Founders' intent—it may have become a necessary legal fiction as the country's laws have taken shape but it is a fiction nonetheless. What Founders' intent should we choose to emphasize? That of the deistic Jefferson and Madison? Or that of the churchgoing Washington and Adams, with their sympathies for religion? Or that of the countless numbers of evangelical Protestants who captured control of the culture to an extent most of the Founding elite never anticipated?

Jefferson may have remained oblivious to what was happening, but other members of the elite came to know better. In 1811 the distinguished jurist James Kent, the chancellor of New York, actually acknowledged in a notable blasphemy case, *The People of New York* v. *Ruggles*, the legal connection between his state and religion. Kent recognized that New York had no formally established church, that its constitution guaranteed freedom of religious opinion, and that it had no statute prohibiting blasphemy. He nevertheless declared that to revile with contempt the Christian religion professed by almost the whole community, as Ruggles had done, was "to strike at the roots of moral obligation and weaken the security of the social ties."

1811 - NY — recognizes that common Christian religion is the basis of society. - sounds like what Tocqueville observed Maybe Tocqueville was here for & followed this case?

Like some of the Founders, Kent despised religious enthusiasm and in private he called Christianity a barbaric superstition. That he was nonetheless willing to declare Christianity to be part of the common law of the state of New York is a measure of just how intimidating the evangelical climate of the Second Great Awakening could be. For all the influence of evangelism in the White House and in the red states today, we live in a very different world.

Notes

[*] Hutson's essay and several responses appeared in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, Third Series, Vol. 56 (October 1999), pp. 775–824.