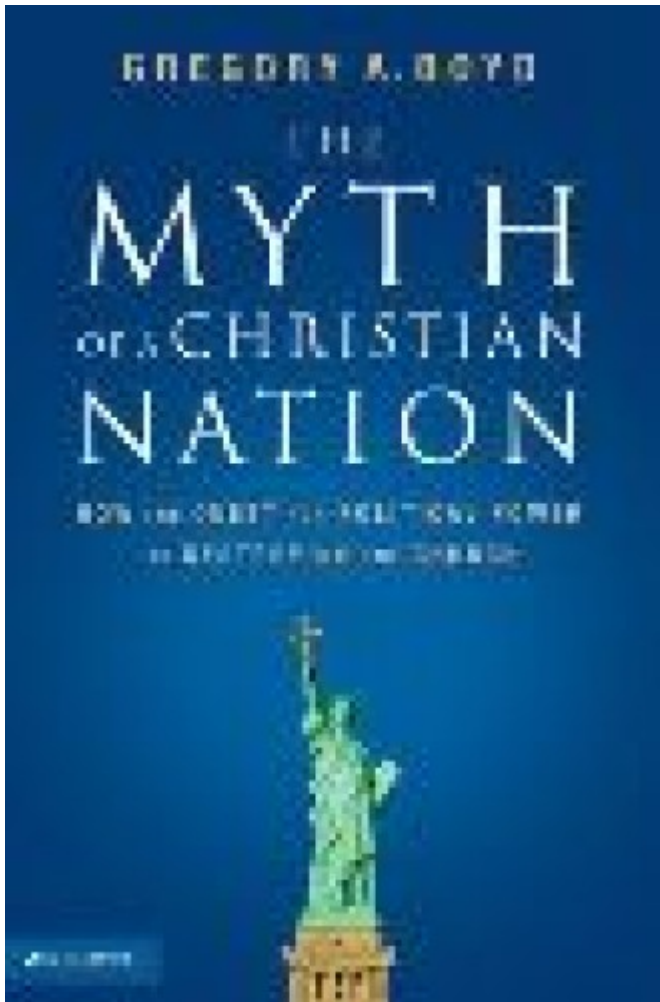


Faithful citizens

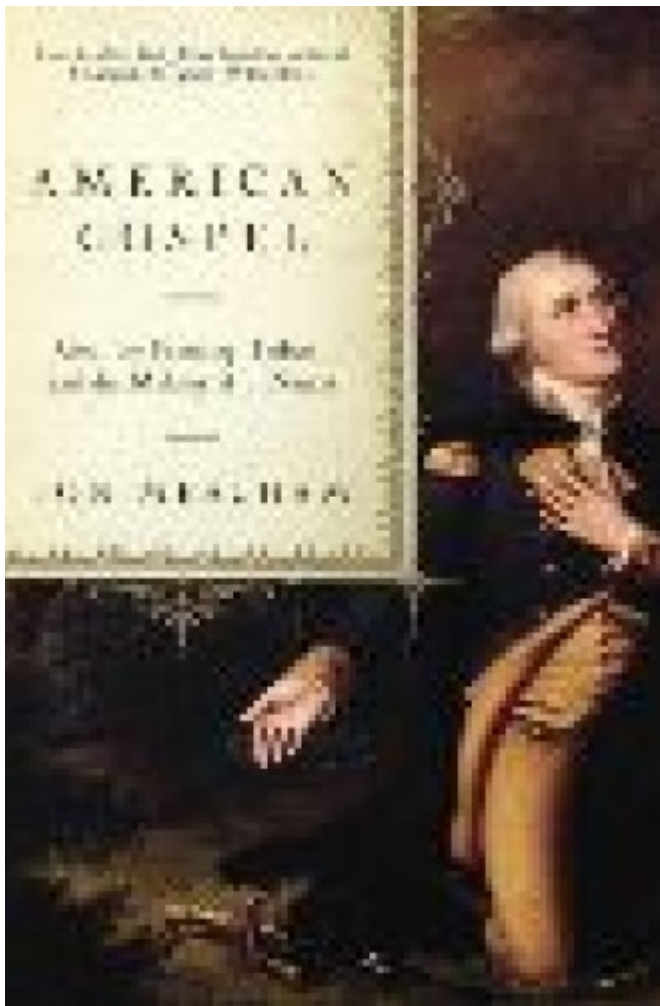
By [Gerald Sittser](#) in the [July 11, 2006](#) issue

In Review



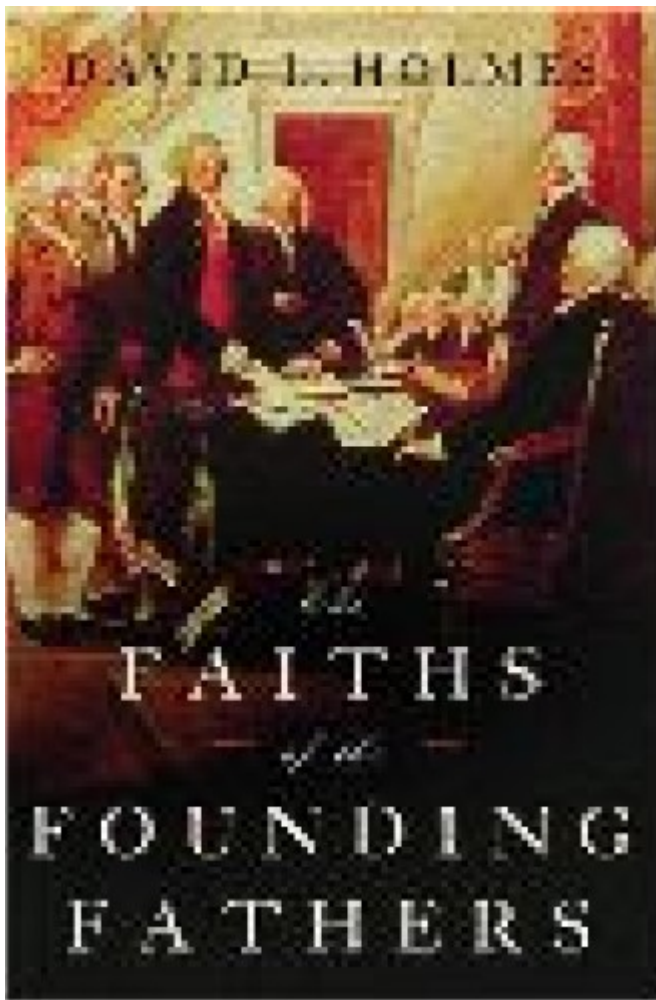
The Myth of a Christian Nation: How the Quest for Political Power is Destroying the Church

Gregory A. Boyd
Zondervan



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

Jon Meacham
Random House



The Faiths of the Founding Fathers

David L. Holmes
Oxford

I am a Christian, and I am an American. It has always been—and probably will always be—a confusing identity. In no other country does this dual identity—religious and national—pose so many problems and offer so much promise. It seems that we are still building that “city on a hill” to which John Winthrop referred nearly 400 years ago; we are still functioning as “God’s almost-chosen people,” as Abraham Lincoln put it; we are still asking God for blessing and guidance during moments of national transition (like presidential inaugurals) and times of crisis (9-11). America does seem to be a “nation with the soul of a church.” It is a peculiar identity.

How can we make sense of this identity? Three recently published books provide some illumination. The most scholarly is by David L. Holmes, a professor of religious studies at the College of William and Mary, who in *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* sketches the religious landscape during the constitutional period. Informative but never fastidious, he provides just the right amount of detail, including a useful bibliography at the end, arranged according to topic. He writes with clarity, conciseness and objectivity.

Holmes assesses the Founders according to their ecclesiastical involvement (such as attendance at worship services), participation in the sacraments (especially the Eucharist) and use of religious language. He acknowledges that radical deists like Thomas Paine played a pivotal role but points out that their religious beliefs did not necessarily carry the day.

Clearly the Founders had minds of their own, as is evidenced by the subtle religious differences among Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and James Monroe, who, contrary to popular opinion, were neither radical deists nor evangelical Christians. Holmes shows that the religious convictions of the wives and daughters of the Founders, which leaned in a more orthodox direction, played a decisive role as well.

Holmes outlines a typology by which to categorize the beliefs of the Founders and their families. Some, like Ethan Allen, were “non-Christian Deists”; others, like George Washington, were “Christian Deists”; still others—John Jay, for example—were “orthodox Christians.” In short, their religious views were hardly monolithic, though some form of Unitarianism represented the majority opinion. Holmes concludes the book by describing the beliefs of modern presidents, from Dwight Eisenhower to George W. Bush, proving that since World War II the presidents have moved in a more orthodox and even evangelical direction, which seems ironic considering the assumed rise of secularity in America. Holmes’s book is a model of accessible scholarship, and though it addresses a controversial topic, it actually generates more light than heat.

Gregory Boyd targets an evangelical audience with a book based on a series of sermons he preached in 2004 on “The Cross and the Sword” in response to America’s invasion of Iraq. The founding pastor of Woodland Hills Church in St. Paul, Minnesota, Boyd was surprised by the severity of the reaction: though some members of his congregation expressed gratitude, about 1,000 left the church.

He sets out to show that America is not, never has been and never will be a “Christian nation.” God is not on America’s side; Christians who think so are seriously mistaken, for they confuse civil religion with true Christianity. That many evangelicals believe that America was once a Christian nation and should be turned in that direction again, Boyd argues, has damaged the ministry of the church, both in this country and around the world. “A significant segment of American evangelicalism is guilty of nationalistic and political idolatry. To a frightful degree, I think, evangelicals fuse the kingdom of God with a preferred version of the kingdom of the world.”

Though Boyd concedes that America has accomplished some good, “we must never confuse the positive things that America does with the kingdom of God, for the kingdom of God is not centered on being morally, politically, or socially positive *relative* to other versions of the kingdom of the world. Rather, the kingdom of God is centered on being beautiful, as defined by Jesus Christ dying on a cross for those who crucified him.” It is one thing to be good, just or right, as it is culturally defined in America; it is another thing to be Christlike.

Boyd contrasts two kingdoms. “While all the versions of the kingdom of the world acquire and exercise power *over* others, the kingdom of God, incarnated and modeled in the person of Jesus Christ, advances only by exercising power *under* others. It expands by manifesting the power of self-sacrificial, Calvary-like love.” Dualisms appear throughout the book. Boyd forces us to choose sword *or* cross, kingdom *or* country, compromise *or* holiness, warlord *or* alien. “To the extent that we pick up the sword, we put down the cross.” Boyd summons readers to become disciples of Jesus Christ. “The distinct kingdom question is not, How do you *vote*? The distinct kingdom question is, How do you *bleed*?”

Boyd bears courageous witness to a truth that many American Christians utterly dismiss. What he argues so forcefully cannot be said often enough. Yet the book has weaknesses, too. One is that Boyd misses the fact that the people sitting in the pews live in two overlapping worlds. As much as Christ mandates that they exercise power *under*, they are forced by circumstances to exercise power *over*, too. They hire and fire employees, pass or fail students, defend the rich and prosecute the poor, and do a thousand other things that Jesus never had to do because of the unique nature of his mission.

Of course Christians should try to follow Jesus' example. But it is not easy; sometimes it might not even be possible. Then what? Perhaps Jesus' mission was unique for that very reason. To be sure, Jesus' sacrifice on the cross sets an example to follow. But it does something else, too. It provides the means of salvation for people who try but fail to live as he did. If there is an absolute in the Christian faith, it is not what is demanded of Christians but what is offered to them, which is the gift of God's grace in and through Jesus Christ. It strikes me as strange that Boyd did not emphasize this point more often.

The second problem is that though it's right to say that America is not God's chosen nation, that doesn't mean America is the opposite. There is a religious—even Christian—dimension to our national identity, like it or not, and though it has gotten us into trouble from time to time, it has also inspired great achievement. A civil religion permeates our history and national ethos. It might not be true Christianity, but it does have Christian elements in it. Can the two—true Christianity and national faith—forge a cooperative relationship for the sake of the common good?

John Meacham, the managing editor of *Newsweek*, thinks so. *American Gospel* explores public religion in America, which Meacham believes Americans of all persuasions must protect and nurture. Americans are more likely to succeed in this endeavor if they avoid the "extremes"—something Meacham abhors (as did the Founders). He prefers grace and civility over all forms of fanaticism, whether secular or religious.

The genius of the American system is that no one is forced to be, but everyone is free to be, religious. Though fragile, it has proven to be a durable system. Americans should never take it for granted, "for each generation faces the danger of extremism that Madison spoke of—and each generation must defeat it anew." Meacham prefers the "broad middle," which is founded upon a "collective cultural consensus," "common sense" and, of course, religious principles.

As Meacham argues, to impose religion on the American people violates the Constitution; but to oppose religion denies history itself, for religion has played an active role in shaping the nation's ethos. Meacham assumes that religious belief runs deep in human nature. "Humankind could not leave off being religious even if it tried." He believes that it is imperative, however, to distinguish between the private dictates of orthodox faith and the role of public religion. For example, Christian pastors can and should preach from the entire Bible; but presidents can quote only

those passages that address the nation as a whole. Sectarian faith has its place, but it must also leave room for public religion.

Using key episodes in American history as case studies, Meacham shows that Americans have not always gotten public religion right. The partisanship of northern and southern Christians before the Civil War illustrates his point. So does the hesitation that Americans displayed about declaring war on Germany before Pearl Harbor. Reinhold Niebuhr lamented that hesitation, contending that sometimes justice takes precedence over love. It is not always right to turn the other cheek.

Meacham also shows that many of America's presidents understood the importance of public religion. Madison attributed the success of the Constitution to the providence of God. Teddy Roosevelt observed that "from Micah to James" the religion of the republic "has been defined as service to one's fellowmen rendered by following the great rule of justice and mercy, of wisdom and righteousness." On D-Day FDR read a prayer for Allied soldiers, asking that God protect them and, failing that, receive them into his heavenly kingdom. Billy Graham, pastor to presidents, promulgated a form of public religion that differs from that of Jerry Falwell and Tim LaHaye, whose narrow vision of a Christian America, suggests Meacham, has engendered much ideological conflict.

Meacham makes a cogent case. Still, I wonder if he truly grasps the complex relationship between Christian faith (still dominant in America) and public religion. Alexis de Tocqueville argued in the 1830s that Christianity in its Protestant form functioned as the "first political institution" in the new nation because, though officially disestablished, it enabled the American people to use their freedoms responsibly, freedoms that the Constitution provided and protected. The system seemed to work remarkably well. "Thus, while the law allows the American people to do everything, there are things which religion prevents them from imagining and forbids them to dare."

De Tocqueville observed that Americans enjoyed more freedom than any other people on earth. Yet freedom, however important, was not their ultimate concern; the Christian faith was. "America is still the place where the Christian religion has kept the greatest real power over men's souls; and nothing better demonstrates how useful and natural it is to man, since the country where it now has widest sway is both the most enlightened and the freest."

Meacham believes that America has a bright future, but only if the center holds. Both rabid secularity and fanatical religion (especially conservative evangelicalism) pose the greatest threats. Is he right? Ironically, how America fares in the future might depend on the very faith that often engenders such extremism. Militant evangelicals like Falwell and LaHaye plan to win America back to God, a goal that Boyd vehemently opposes because he believes that they are fighting the wrong battle. If they would take the Christian faith as seriously as they claim, they would forsake the quest for power *over* and instead commit themselves to exercising power *under*. Perhaps it is not the future of American public religion that is at stake after all; what is at stake could be the future of American Christianity.