

Healthy limits: On the importance of faith and the dangers of extremism

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [August 8, 2006](#) issue

On the heels of denominational meetings this summer, [“Everything you wanted to know about Christianity”](#) is just what I needed. I take my denominational responsibilities seriously. I value the theological traditions. I attend the meetings, serve on the committees and engage in the debates. Sometimes what the enterprise needs most is a little humor, a little of the laughter that God must indulge in when human beings take themselves too seriously. Only people who are secure can laugh at themselves and poke fun at their own foibles.

A healthy sense of human limits is an important feature of political engagement too, as David Heim suggests in his article on the religious left (page 26). A similar point is made by former secretary of state Madeleine Albright in her book about religion and statesmanship, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*. “We would be well advised,” she writes, “to recall the character of wartime leadership provided by Abraham Lincoln. He did not flinch from fighting in a just cause, but he never claimed a monopoly on virtue. . . . He rejected the suggestion that he pray for God to be on the side of the Union, praying instead for the Union to be on God’s side.”

Another helpful book on religion and politics is Jon Meacham’s *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. Meacham argues that the founders understood the importance of religious faith in the political arena but also knew about the dangers of religious extremism and absolutism.

When the founders gathered for the inaugural session of the Continental Congress in 1774, their first fight was about religion. Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts wanted to begin with prayer. John Jay and John Rutledge objected. Samuel Adams proposed a compromise. Meacham observes that the founders could have ruled out all religion and created a totally secular state. They didn’t choose that route because they understood how important religious faith is for the formation of values and for the

well-being of society and government. But they also understood how religion can be used to malign and divide.

The majority of the founders were Christians, although they exhibited considerable theological diversity. They agreed on the importance of the freedom of religion—not knowing how this principle would eventually lead to a nation of great religious diversity. Meacham reports that when the U.S. made a treaty with the Muslim state of Tripoli in 1797, “the Founders declared that ‘the Government of the United States is not in any way founded on the Christian Religion.’” There’s something to bring up the next time you hear someone argue that the nation is a Christian republic.