

Free to believe: Individual conscience is by nature free

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 1, 2008](#) issue

The Fourth of July is certainly not a church holiday, but it is an opportunity for the church and the preacher to reflect on the history of the republic, the extraordinary group of leaders who gathered in Philadelphia to declare independence and their remarkable conclusion that at the heart of the American revolution would be individual liberty and freedom of conscience.

The nation has not always lived up to its principles of liberty. It never occurred to the men in Philadelphia that the right to vote should include women—although Abigail Adams surely imagined the day when it would. To secure the support of the southern colonies, the founders decided not to address the question of slavery. Yet the American experiment with freedom, especially with religious freedom, was still unprecedented, and it remains worth celebrating.

Steven Waldman, cofounder of [Beliefnet.com](#), begins his book *Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America* by describing Thomas Jefferson as he stood in the doorway of the White House on New Year's Day 1802 and received delivery of a 1,235-pound cheese. Painted on the crust was the inscription: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God." The cheese was a gift to the president from a Baptist church in western Massachusetts. Waldman points out that one year earlier the campaign of John Adams was attacking Jefferson as an infidel and atheist. The Baptists may have worried about Jefferson's faith, but they respected his defense of religious liberty—and hence the gigantic gift of cheese.

In a chapter titled "Christian America" Waldman says, "The new world was settled to promote Christianity. For more than 200 years, colonial governments actively supported the dominant faith. Less acknowledged today is a point well understood by the Founding Fathers: Nearly all these experiments in state-supported religion failed." From New England to Maryland to Virginia, most colonies passed legislation upholding a particular brand of Christian faith. But the established religions failed.

They failed, Waldman argues, chiefly because of the sheer religious diversity of the early settlers. They failed for another reason too, one that Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and the other founders pondered: individual conscience is by nature free and not to be violated by the state.

Some of the founders were orthodox Christians, some were closer to Unitarianism, some were Deists. Whatever their beliefs, they knew that for their experiment in nation-building to work, it could not have a state church, state support for religion, or state interference in the sacred territory that was each individual's conscience. "The Founding Faith," Waldman says, "was not Christianity, and it was not secularism. It was religious liberty—a revolutionary formula for promoting faith by leaving it alone."