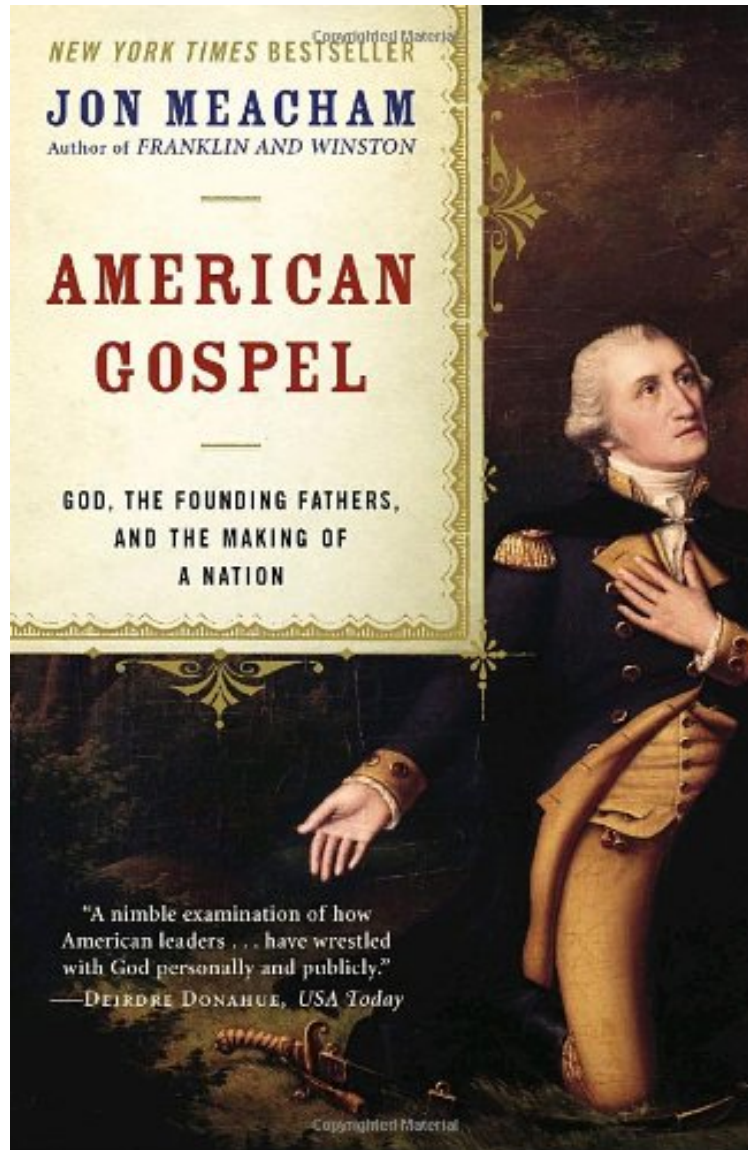


(Download) American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation

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

Jon Meacham

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**Jon Meacham : American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation:

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. the better it will be at keeping a particular extreme cause ...By Carla

BuckZander Levy Jon Meachams 2006 novel, *American Gospel*, is a provocative reiteration of the history on the role religion has played in the government of the United States. Meacham covers several U.S. historical events, from the settlement of the original American colonies to the present, consistently suggesting that in America, the benefits of God have outweighed the costs (31). His claim is well-developed, arguing that although there is an individual freedom to worship any religion, the United States also has a free public religion, a common set of beliefs on justice, decency, duty, and responsibility (27) that is meant to inspire and unite our nation. Meacham adamantly argues that the U.S. public religion is not strictly Christian, counter to what some secularists today believe, and that the American nation was designed to keep religious extremism in check. As a whole, writer Jon Meacham establishes that our Founders did not found us specifically as a Christian nation, but still knew that public religion was essential to a well functioning republic. Meacham first describes the actions of the early religious groups who immigrated to America for religious freedom. The irony is that many such groups searching for the freedom to worship soon used their power in America to impose intolerant laws against those who worshipped differently. According to Meacham, those who immigrated to the colonies whose freedom of religion was a driving force soon found themselves doing unto others what had been done unto them (41). Meacham highlights exceptions to this in Pennsylvania and Maryland, tracing back the origin of separation between church and state (54) to Roger Williams in Rhode Island, who suggested it would protect the Church from ever being perverted by the state. The pictures of the early colonies Meacham presents on page 38 are also a mixed bag of religious understanding and intolerance, but shows there was a wide variety of religions that wished to be respected. It is by discussing the country's foundations that Meacham introduces the essence of his argument. Meacham asserts that the Declaration of Independence was a religious document, since it stated that a Creator gave us unalienable rights that no government can take away. And if the government does not respect those rights, God gives us the right to rebel. On the other hand, the Constitution was a secular document, meant to rein in extremism through checks and balances. And in none of the Founding Fathers words and actions is there evidence our country was to be mainly Christian. In fact, according to Madison, the more diverse from a religious standpoint our society is, the better it will be at keeping a particular extreme cause from overwhelming the general good (93). The Founders knew the danger of any one entity or religion becoming too powerful. Meacham continues the book with a survey of religious forces used by leaders in American history. Throughout our past, from the Civil War to Vietnam, there has been a continued push of voices by religious activists arguing to make the U.S. a more Christian country, many insisting that those were the Founders intentions. But the voices of our leaders, especially those who are familiar with history such as Eisenhower, Lincoln or F.D.R., continued to reiterate what the Founders intended: this nation should not advance any one religion, but the sentiments of many beliefs on how to connect and unify our country. Lincoln used said religious ideas during the Civil War to argue that both the Union and the destruction of slavery were for a holy cause (152). Roosevelt used public religion in his speeches to give hope during the Depression, and even Johnson used religious imagery from the Bible in order to push forth the case of civil rights as a moral imperative (197). In all of these cases Meacham describes, our leaders used their platform of political power and religious ideals as a positive force, bringing hope to their listeners and demanding action. It is when speaking about the rise of Jerry Falwell and the religious right that Meacham seems to spread alarm around one of the causes of his argument. The movement of extremism not only pushed a Christian sect to become a political force, it claimed its legitimacy by doing a retroactive baptism (243). Despite no historical evidence, the power of this movement has grown over time, as have groups adamantly dedicated to a completely secular country. It is this polarization and our extremism that Meacham claims is one of the major issues for the 21st century. Overall, Meacham's novel is an interesting work that helps the reader apprehend the complex linkages between religion and government. Meacham always appears nuanced when describing such points as well; detailing the Founders as considerate, yet never completely knowing the right course of action. His writing is not perfect however, giving examples and quotes that are so brief that they don't combine well with the thesis, with the narrative also at times drifting away into unnecessary tangents. Nonetheless, *American Gospel* is an interesting read for those interested in the Founders beliefs, providing a sensible perspective on the religion-government relationship.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. A New Perspective By jles021

Jon Meacham's *American Gospel* discusses the role of religion throughout our country's history, and how it has shaped our lives today. This historical novel illustrates some of America's most important moments in history, to which is followed by Meacham's commentary and beliefs about our nation and its faith. Though the most predominant of Meacham's claims is his belief in Public Religion, the idea where religion can affect a political system and everyday life indirectly, without complete control over an individual's public life. *American Gospel* gives a decent amount of historical content. Meacham first covers his version of the creation of America, and explains the first settlers' real motives when braving the journey to America. He then talks about the Revolution, and the documents that were written as a result of the war, such as the Constitution. Presidents such as Lincoln, Kennedy and Reagan are discussed, as Meacham feels they were unique, and had a major effect on this country. The Civil War is briefly discussed, followed by former president's contributions to the civil rights movement. While a great deal of history is covered, Meacham sticks to the theme about religion, showing how faith had major impacts on these events. Personally, I am a strong believer in separation of church and state. Though I understand why religion was effective in the past, public

religion would help all Americans. There are many religions and faiths across the country, and choosing one is beneficial for only a select amount of people. I understand what Meacham is trying to get across: religion is something that brings a nation together. Although, considering that only 62% of Americans claim they are a part of a church congregation leaves many wondering about the other 40%. Meacham had stronger evidence that public religion worked in the past, more so than his evidence of how it can work in the present. Amid America's creation, public religion made much more sense and was more effective than it would be today. America's population in its early days was highly Christian, as Christians were the first people to migrate over. John Locke was one of the first people to conceive the idea of separating church and state. Meacham also claimed that religion is a way to bring unity to a country, which he reasoned by reciting and analyzing Roosevelt's mass prayer during World War II, which was, at the time, one of the largest single mass prayers in human history (171). Such evidence made Meacham's claims more prominent, and believable, that public religion helped form the nation we live in today. The only prevailing evidence that public religion could work today is when Meacham talks about Reagan's presidency, as he is a recent example of Public Religion. Meacham claims that a key factor to president Reagan's success was his religious faith, and how he could use it to connect with other Americans, making him more personable. Meacham's real purpose for extensive coverage of Reagan was because the former president believed in the idea of Public Religion that Meacham is basing this novel after. Meacham quoted Reagan saying So, I tell you there are a great many God-fearing, dedicated, noble men and women in public life. Yes, we need your help to keep us ever mindful of the ideas and the principles that brought us into the public arena in the first place (224). Although this was an exception, Meacham's writing appeared weaker when he was examining Public Religion working in the future. He covered much more of the past, than he did of the present. From this novel, I learned that if it were not for religion, our country would not be as powerful as it is today. I used to wonder why religion even existed in politics in the first place, but after reading American Gospel, the role that it plays is now clear. I understand why presidents, and politicians did what they did, whether it be strategies, ways to appeal to people, or new ideas, especially during the creation of our country. The novel taught me about historical inaccuracies, myths, and motives of our early nation. I enjoyed Meacham's book, and found it interesting, even though I did not completely agree with it. It offered new views of historical context, backed up with clear evidence for most of his claims, thus making it a great piece of writing.

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. it was all for the greater good of the country

By Customer Since the founding of the United States of America, one of the biggest principles has always been the separation between church and state. The Founding Fathers believed that the government should not have authority or dictation over the citizens' right to worship and follow whichever religion they desire. In recent years, this separation between church and state has become a struggle to maintain. In John Meacham's *The American Gospel*, he makes a noteworthy contribution to the controversy and discussion around the role of religion in America. Meacham's main arguments are based around his belief that when it comes to religion in America, the positives have outweighed the negatives. Meacham chooses to focus on the roles of faith and freedom of America. To support these claims, he makes credible arguments, providing quotations from the Founding Fathers. Meacham believes that faith and freedom have been conjoined since the founding of the country. He tells the story of how the Founding Fathers viewed faith, and recognized God, while also being able to create a nation where religion and belief in God is a personal choice. Meacham's thesis is mostly strong, however, his claim about how the benefits of religion outweigh the costs, contains evidence that weakens his argument. Meacham argues that although people suffered, it was all for the greater good of the country. I do not believe that sacrificing people's happiness and natural human rights for the greater majority is logical. Meacham provides examples of some of the costs he believes were outweighed by the benefits, It was neither easy nor quick: the destruction of Native American cultures, the ravages of slavery, the horrors of the Civil War, and the bitterness of Jim Crow attest to that. (31) Instead of choosing to look at the individual harm and destruction our country inflicted, like most Americans, Meacham chooses to look past it since he believes the benefits outweigh the costs. Meacham is able to cover a very wide breadth throughout his book. He begins with his strongest argument, where he analyzes the Founding Fathers' ability to create an equal balance between church and state. He states how according to Thomas Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence, they ensured that all men are created equal (Meacham 7). Meacham provides evidence that since our country was founded on men being equal, this led to religious freedom. Madison states that we cannot deny equal freedom to those minds that have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us. (Meacham 11) Through this evidence, Madison is clearly stating that although he may believe in a certain religion, he doesn't believe that taking away religious freedom and forcing people to believe what he does is the right idea. He will give people the option of following his faith in hope that eventually they will follow his religion and ultimately share the benefits with him.

Author Jonathan Woods, reviewed Jon Meacham's *The American Gospel*, and provides valuable insight in understanding Meacham's claims. Contrary to the beliefs of Meacham, Woods believes that the Founding Fathers had nothing to do with the separation between church and state. Woods claims that although there is no formal connection between the two, there are still many Americans who attend church or practice a religion. He then goes on to mention the reasoning for the separation between church and state. Everywhere the state supported churches in the colonies were surrounded by growing numbers of dissenters whom the churches were forced to recognize and tolerate. (Wood 3) He is proving that combining the two led to an

array of problems, and therefore keeping them separate was the wisest decision. Later on the American Revolution and Great Awakening allowed the church and state to be separated while still allowing people to practice religious freedom. He then goes on to claim that we do not, and cannot, base American constitutional jurisprudence on the historical reality of the founding. (7) In this claim he is stating that we can't believe that the Founding had anything to do with the separation of church and state. Meacham claims the Founders succeeded in assigning religion to its proper place in civil society (6), however Woods believes this is not true and can only be claimed because of the misconception in incorporating the First amendment into the fourteenth amendment, and then relating it to the states which was never intended. He claims that Meacham forgets that back then the First Amendment only applied to the federal government and not to all the states (Woods 6). He is implying that Meacham did not do enough research on his claims regarding the separation of church and state having to do with the Founding Fathers. Woods commentary is both very persuasive and beneficial to the reader because he is able to both provide his own research, and he is able to pick out Meacham's mistakes and correct him. Although Meacham's quotations do provide clear evidence to prove his claims, they end up being very excessive and take up the majority of the book. Rather than being a novel, his writing turns into more of a drawn out essay. If he had added less quotations and more of his own analysis, the book would be far more entertaining to read. After finishing the novel, I gained a new perspective on the role of religion in America, and feel very informed about many of the events that led to our country being the way it is today. I had never been fully informed or aware of how important the role of religion has been in America and how much history was behind it. Although at times his novel consisted of excessive amounts of quotes, Jon Meacham did a quality job of providing the reader with new insights and perspective. I would recommend this book for people who are seeking a new perspective on the role of religion in America. Since Meacham's claims are somewhat controversial, this novel would suit someone who is well educated on the founding of America and can read the novel, while understanding which of Meacham's claims are false, and which ones are able to offer a new insight to the role of religion in America.

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 From the Hardcover edition.

From Publishers Weekly Historian and Newsweek editor Meacham's third book examines over 200 years of American history in its quest to prove the idea of religious tolerance, along with the separation of church and state, is "perhaps the most brilliant American success." Meacham's principal focus is on the founding fathers, and his insights into the religious leanings of Jefferson, Franklin, Adams and Co. present a new way of considering the government they created. So it is that the religious right's attempts to reshape the Constitution and Declaration of Independence into advocating a state religion of Christianity are at odds with the spirit of religious freedom ("Our minds and hearts, as Jefferson wrote, are free to believe everything or nothing at all-and it is our duty to protect and perpetuate this sacred culture of freedom"). Meacham also argues for the presence of a public religion, as exemplified by the national motto, "In God We Trust," and other religious statements that can be found on currency, in governmental papers and in politicians' speeches. Subsequent chapters consider a wartime FDR and a Reagan who grew increasingly enamored of Armageddon. All are well-written, but none reach the immediacy and vigor of the chapters on the nation's birth. Two extensive appendices reprint early government documents and each president's inaugural bible verses. Meacham's remarkable grasp of the intricacies and achievements of a nascent nation is well worth the cover price, though his consideration of Reagan feels like that of an apologist. Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. Advance Praise for American Gospel 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 From the Hardcover edition. About the Author Jon Meacham received the Pulitzer Prize for his 2008 biography of Andrew Jackson, American Lion. He is also the author of the New York Times bestsellers Thomas Jefferson: The Art of Power, American Gospel, and Franklin and Winston. Meacham, who teaches at Vanderbilt University and at The University of the South, is a fellow of the Society of American Historians. He lives in Nashville and in Sewanee with his wife and children.