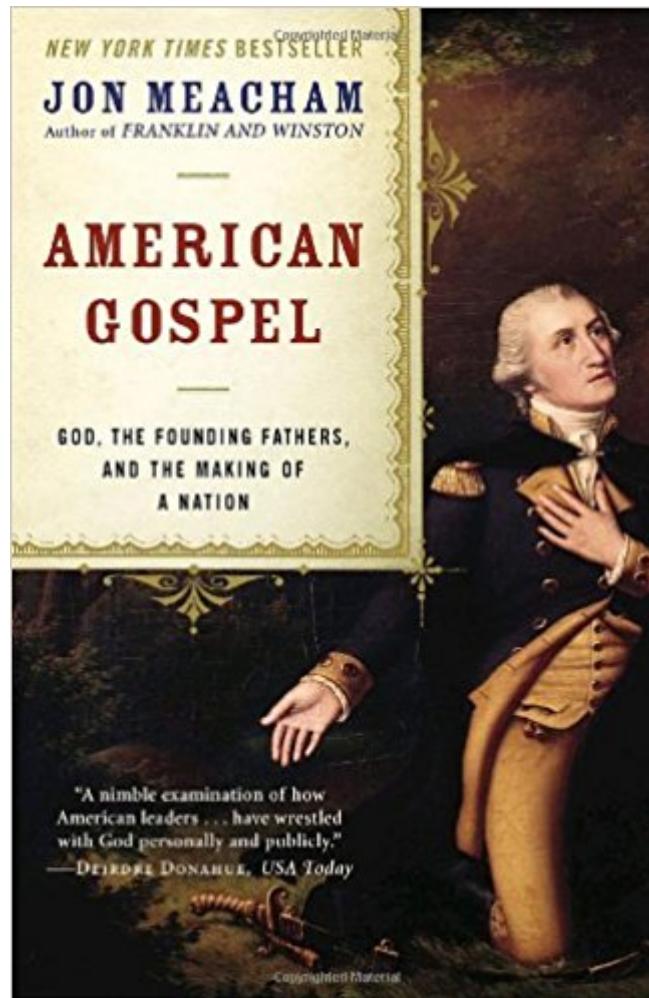




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# American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, And The Making Of A Nation



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Random House Trade Paperbacks; Reprint edition (March 20, 2007)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0812976665

ISBN-13: 978-0812976663

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.4 out of 5 stars 201 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #65,170 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #74 in Books > History > World > Religious > Religion, Politics & State #79 in Books > Religion & Spirituality > Religious Studies > Church & State #107 in Books > History > World > Religious > General

## Customer Reviews

Newsweek editor Meacham asserts at the start of this treatise on religion and its role in the nation’s development: “If totalitarianism was the great problem of the twentieth century, then extremism is so far the great problem of the twenty-first century.” Veteran narrator Gardner adopts an appropriate, professorial tone for the material, but the topic itself would have been better suited to an essay or an abridged audio. Meacham’s discussion, while compelling when focused on the founding fathers and the middle ground that they sought in their dealings with faith and freedom, falters when he

discusses later presidents and their religious views. In these segments, not even Gardner's charismatic delivery is sufficient to enliven the material, which meanders from references to God in Lincoln's inaugural address to Theodore Roosevelt's emphasis on "good works" and Woodrow Wilson's "ministerial zeal." However, Meacham's argument for a "sensible center" in religion and politics rings through loud and clear, and this rallying message, combined with his vivid re-creation of the nation's founding, may make it worthwhile for some listeners. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**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*

HistoryFrom the Hardcover edition.

This was a very compelling read that gives an honest look at God's role and religions role in American history. Some of the founders indeed had a complex attitude toward faith--namely Jefferson. But, as Meecham points out, Jefferson seemed to have a stronger faith--or at least reverence for God--than many historians credit him for having. Lincoln evolved over his life, that story is retold here. It also gets into Christianity's role among abolitionists and the Civil War, and fait's undoubtable role in the civil rights movement.

An excellent read that puts the concept of how the Founders saw "religion" as they considered our founding documents. They were conscious that the benefits of spiritual commitments were essential to the new nation's survival but knew that without freedom of worship, including freedom not to worship was also necessary. In no way did they see freedom of religion as an excuse for hostility toward religion in the public square.

Meacham is a gifted historian and not a bad lay theologian. Though not writing from an evangelical perspective, he is fair to evangelicals without pandering to them. Appendix A, a collection of source documents of (mostly) the Founders writing about religion, is helpful for deflating the myth that we are a Christian nation, while at the same time helping us see that many of the founding fathers were men of deep personal piety. I wish there were more chapters-- that he would have dealt with issues rather than eras. That would have made it easier to go back and reference specific points of history. And if the hard copy (I read it on kindle) has an index, I will probably buy it for future reference.

This is an interesting reflection on the role of religion in public life and government in the United States. Meacham's basic thesis is that the Founding Fathers "got it right." With respect to Jefferson (sometimes referred to as "Jefferson the atheist" in his own time) (page 4): "Jefferson surveyed and staked out an American middle ground between the ferocity of evangelizing Christians on one side and the contempt for religion of secular philosophes on the other. The right would like Jefferson to be a soldier of faith, the left an American Voltaire. He was, depending on the moment, both or neither; he was, in other words, a lot like many of us." Meacham goes on to note that (page 5) "Belief in God is central to the country's experience, yet for the broad center, faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding is that the sensible center holds."Meacham is quite critical of the Christian political activists, such as Jerry Falwell, who wish to impose their own

religious views on the larger public; on the other hand, he speaks admiringly of Billy Graham, after he ceased politicizing religion, as a better role model. The book begins with the roots of American history, which includes theocracy and religious intolerance in Massachusetts. Meacham is not sympathetic with this wedding of religion and politics. He is more positive about the experience in Pennsylvania. When he examines the development of the Constitution, he is fairly nuanced in noting that the Founders were religious--but did not want to impose their own faith on all. He author notes how Madison's Federalist # 10, by advocating a large republic, justified a system where no single religious grouping could exercise power over the republic, since there were so many different faiths. He then traces the role of religion and its linkages to politics over American history. He notes the place of religion for a variety of presidents, from Lincoln onward to contemporary times. He concludes with the following sentiments (page 243): ". . . a true Christian ought to be more interested in making the life of the world gentle for others than he should be in asserting the dominance of his own faith. . . . If the first shall be last and the last first, then who are Christians to exert power over others by the sword or the purse or the polling place?" This is an interesting work, making one think about the complex linkages between religion and government. The course of American history provides many examples--good, bad, and ugly--of how this has worked. I am not completely satisfied with Meacham's argument. Some of the narrative seems to drift away from the thesis he is advancing. Many examples are so brief that it is not fully clear how they mesh with his thesis. Nonetheless, in the end, this book is thought-provoking and provides a sensible perspective on the religion-government relationship.

This book is most timely, given the assaults upon Scripture and upon Christianity in particular so vividly obvious in current society. It is noteworthy that those who dispute that America was founded upon Biblical principles, will find some support in this book, but at the same time, the vital idea of God-given rights has created the 'freest nation on earth' confirms the importance of the Bible in American life: at its inception; and today. How else can gun owners today justify retention of arms in a society which has suffered so much from the people who utilise their arms to kill with impunity? The Founders were a disparate group of people who, in other circumstances might never have come together. Yet they did, and they made sacrifices, and one of America's greatest sacrifices was made by its then President on Good Friday, April 14, 1865 'at the time of Passover'. Writing in this way ensures the connotations between Scripture and fact are not lost; and cannot be glossed over. The sacrifice made at Calvary 2000 years before is graphically reinstated in the readers mind. Jon Meacham does this very well. All in all, this is one of the better books on this subject matter. Those

who desire to learn about the unbreakable - but certainly, shakeable - connection between the gospel and America should read this book.

I have just started this but, I can see this is a good read and I know I will learn things that I just haven't known about.

Jon Meacham presents a nicely nuanced view of how the founding fathers viewed religion and government, and how these views have been shaped by future presidents long after the Constitution was written. While separation of religion and state was certainly a central theme of the Constitution, religion continues to shape our policies, just on the fringe of the law, probably the right balance over the long run.

an easy read. good insight into religious beliefs of founders.

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