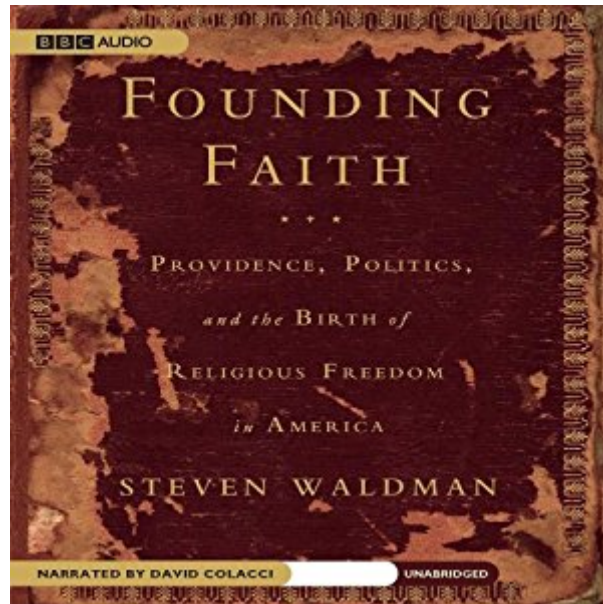


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Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, And The Birth Of Religious Freedom In America



Synopsis

The culture wars have distorted the dramatic story of how Americans came to worship freely. Many activists on the right maintain that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Many on the left contend that the Founders were secular or deist and that the First Amendment was designed to boldly separate church and state throughout the land. None of these claims are true, argues Beliefnet.com editor in chief Steven Waldman. With refreshing objectivity, Waldman narrates the real story of how our nation's founders forged a new approach to religious liberty, a revolutionary formula that promoted faith by leaving it alone. The spiritual custody battle over the Founding Fathers and the role of religion in America continues today. Waldman provocatively argues that neither side in the culture war has accurately depicted the true origins of the First Amendment. He sets the record straight, revealing the real history of religious freedom to be dramatic, unexpected, paradoxical, and inspiring. --This text refers to the Audio CD edition.

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Customer Reviews

As someone who, for the last quarter century, has researched and written about religious sensibilities in early America, I'm always astonished at the seemingly endless battle between those who insist that the Founding Fathers were orthodox Christians who founded a Christian nation (e.g., Tim LaHaye's *Faith of Our Founding Fathers*) and those who just as strenuously insist that the Founding Fathers were all Enlightenment secularists who loathed religion (e.g., Isaac Kramnick's *The Godless Constitution*). Although I think that there's more truth in the second than the first position, both of them are distortions, attempts to squeeze complex men and a complicated religious

ethos into neat, unproblematic boxes. It's refreshing that Steven Waldman refuses to compartmentalize in this way. His *Founding Faith* is a finessed treatment of the various influences, religious, military, pragmatic, and political, that coalesced to form the legal and cultural traditions of church-state separation. For Waldman, diminutive "radically pluralistic" Madison is the real hero of the story who "deserves the greatest thanks" (p. 200). But Waldman reminds readers that Baptists such as Isaac Backus and John Leland were some of the most ardent champions of separation (unlike many of their 20th and 21st century descendants); that Thomas Jefferson, villified both during his own lifetime and afterwards as an atheist, in fact greatly admired what he took to be the ethics of Jesus; and that the first Great Awakening was a potent force in encouraging political revolution and independence.

Highly useful book on the religion of the Founding Fathers, and their intent concerning religious freedom and the separation of church and state. *Founding Faith* is a fair and balanced book, puncturing liberal and conservative myths about the topic with equal cheer, and more importantly, placing the discussion squarely within the historical context of what the Founders were doing and what it was possible for them to accomplish. So were the colonies Christian? Yes, of course, and more, predominantly Protestant with considerable anti-Catholic bias. Most colonies did have an established church, mostly Anglican or Congregationalist, yet, after the revivalism of the Great Awakening period in the mid-1700s, the colonies were more religiously diverse than ever. The fear that the British Crown would force all the colonists to be Anglican was a factor in the Revolution. Some of the factors leading the young nation into religious tolerance were pragmatic. George Washington, for example, was trying to forge a unified fighting force out of a religiously diverse group of soldiers. He had to quell the level of anti-Catholicism because he was trying to persuade the French Catholics in Canada to join in the Revolution. Were the Founders Deists? No, they weren't, as even Jefferson and Franklin acknowledged the hand of Providence in the affairs of men. But neither were the five Founding Fathers that Waldman profiles orthodox Christians. Franklin flirted with a variety of religions, including Deism (the philosophy that God created the Universe like a watchmaker creates a watch, and then retreated from participation in his creation), but he also was interested in the Great Awakening and thought the influence of Christianity upon the morals of people was a good one.

This is a very special book. The author has done an utterly superb job of original research and elegant concise representation of the nuances in belief, practice, and circumstances with respect to

the matter of religion as confronted by the Founding Fathers, and especially Ben Franklin, John Adams, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison. We learn early on that freedom of religion was originally designed to apply only at the federal level--only later, when the North pushed through the Fourteenth amendment, did this get grandfathered upon the states. We learn throughout the book that the original evangelicals wanted separation of the church and state, and made common cause with the rationalists, both groups believing that individual liberty and freedom of personal conscience were the core values. Midway through the book we are confronted by the author with the reality that the diversity of faiths existent today in the USA render meaningless and unachievable any thought of America being a Christian or even a Protestant nation--pluralism rules. Religion was appreciated by the Founding Fathers for its generally good impact on civic morals. George Washington especially, in the Continental Army, demanded religious tolerance, authorized chaplains, encouraged officers and men to attend religious services, and generally communicated a sense that the American Revolution was a "holy war" with God standing firmly with the colonies against England and the Church of England. The author provides concise but no less shocking accounts of the early religious wars in America, with torture and execution and jail being imposed on Quakers and Baptists, Protestants against Jews and Catholics.

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