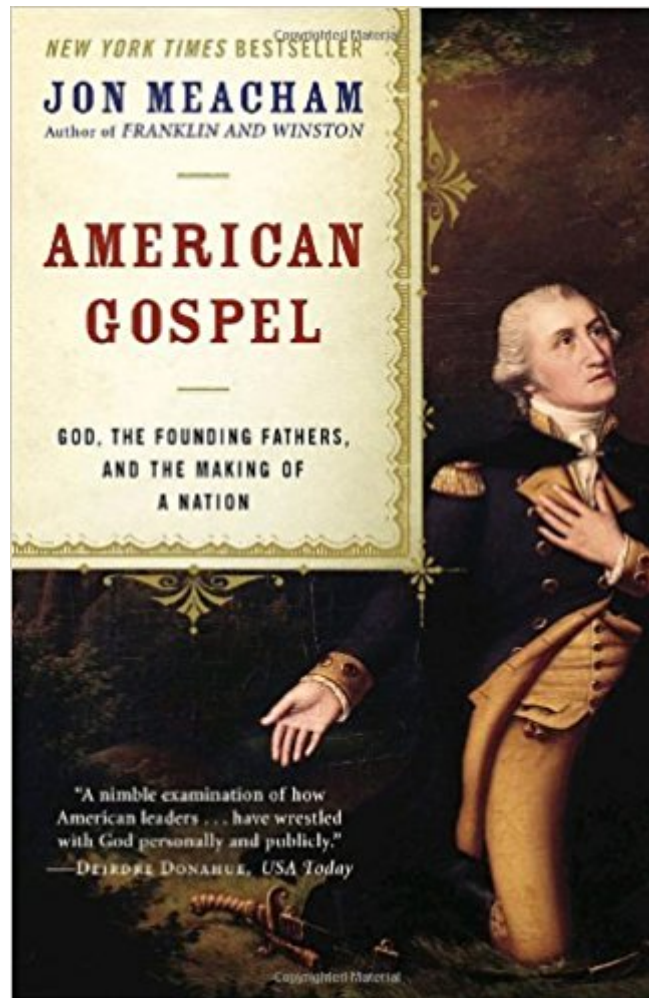




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# American Gospel: God, The Founding Fathers, And The Making Of A Nation



## 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

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## Customer Reviews

I just finished *American Gospel*, by Jon Meacham. I enjoyed it. I recommend it. It was just recently released. I got it from this week. It's not unusual that I'll set aside all the other books I'm reading to start a new book, but it's less common that I'll actually finish it. It is a well researched book about the influence of religion in American government. His premise is that the Founding Fathers created a kind of "public religion" in the words of Benjamin Franklin. The public religion was not specifically Christian, but broad enough to cover the Christian, the Jew, and the Deist. The Founding Fathers were classically educated as well. *Annuit Coeptus* is a paraphrase from Virgil. The Founding Fathers had a greater variety of religious beliefs than we realize. I find much truth in some of the ideas of Jefferson and Franklin, neither of which would be considered orthodox Christians in their

time or ours. I think Thomas Payne offers some good ideas, too. Christianity was more divided at the time of the revolution than it is today, and the importance of the differences was considered greater. One thing that is hard to recognize today is that not only was there a certain animosity toward Jews, or even Catholics, but the Protestant sects considered their differences important. In 1774, there was opposition to prayer in the Continental Congress, inspired in part by the Episcopalians' fear that having everyone join in a prayer would tend to treat all the religious traditions as equal. Many of the quotes we usually hear in debates whether the United States is a "Christian" nation are given here, but what is particularly useful is that they are put in context.

This book bypasses traditional partisan accounts of Church-State scholarship to deliver a truly entertaining read. It argues that the American state's relationship with religion, religious freedom, and democracy always has been more complex than we want to admit. After religious strife in England and the colonies, religious freedom intentionally was inserted into the Constitution. However, because the founders own idea of religious freedom was narrower than what actually exists in America today, pinpointing the First Amendment's exact and original intentions is challenging for the best and most well-intentioned scholars. This book also examines how subsequent American politicians dealt with and dealt with Church-State issues. I don't doubt that there was enough material for the author to stop after the 19th century, but to his credit he kept going---and did not abandon the quality of writing during the process. Franklin Roosevelt is considered the architect of modern liberalism. Yet, he adopted oratorical skills which are today more associated with fundamentalist preachers and the far right politicians who court them. Roosevelt campaign materials clearly illustrate that he knew establishing the association would provide substantial political returns. Likewise, another prominent Democratic president understood the importance of downplaying his religious affiliation. Regardless of his personal religious convictions, John Kennedy knew his presidential nomination and election hinged on opponents convincing voters that the Pope would rule through the White House if he were elected. That history has certainly proved otherwise is an irony. Because religion is such a personal issue, the topic tends to provoke conflict.

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