



Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America

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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.

This fast-paced narrative begins with earlier settlers’ stunningly unsuccessful efforts to create a Christian paradise, and concludes with the presidencies of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison, during which the men who had devised lofty principles regarding the proper relationship between church and state struggled to practice what they’d preached. We see how religion helped cause, and fuel, the Revolutionary War, and how the surprising alliance between Enlightenment philosophers such as Jefferson and Madison and evangelical Christians resulted in separation of church and state.

As the drama unfolds, *Founding Faith* vividly describes the religious development of five Founders. Benjamin Franklin melded the morality-focused Puritan theology of his youth and the reason-based Enlightenment philosophy of his adulthood. John Adams’s pungent views on religion—hatred of the Church of England and Roman Catholics—stoked his revolutionary fervor and shaped his political strategy. George Washington came to view religious tolerance as a military necessity. Thomas Jefferson pursued a dramatic quest to “rescue” Jesus, in part by editing the Bible. Finally, it was James Madison—the tactical leader of the battle for religious freedom—who crafted an integrated vision of how to prevent tyranny while encouraging religious vibrancy.

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.

An interactive library of the key writings by the Founding Father, on separation of church and state, personal faith, and religious liberty can be found at www.beliefnet.com/foundingfaith.

Praise for Founding Faith

“Steven Waldman, a veteran journalist and co-founder of Beliefnet.com, a religious web site, surveys the convictions and legacy of the founders clearly and fairly, with a light touch but a careful eye.”—New York Times Book Review

“Waldman ends by encouraging us to be like the founders. We should understand their principles, learn from their experience, then have at it ourselves. “We must pick up the argument that they began and do as they instructed – use our reason to determine our views.” A good place to start is this entertaining, provocative book.”—New York Times Book Review

“Steven Waldman's enlightening new book, "Founding Faith," is wise and engaging on many levels, but Waldman has done a particular service in detailing Madison's role in creating a culture of religious freedom

that has served America so well for so long...."Founding Faith" is an excellent book about an important subject: the inescapable—but manageable—intersection of religious belief and public life. With a grasp of history and an understanding of the exigencies of the moment, Waldman finds a middle ground between those who think of the Founders as apostles in powdered wigs and those who assert, equally inaccurately, that the Founders believed religion had no place in politics."—*Newsweek*

"Well-wrought, well-written and well-reasoned—a welcome infusion of calm good sense into a perennially controversial and relevant subject."—*Kirkus*

"*Founding Faith* takes up two central questions about religion in early America. First, what did such Founding Fathers as Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and James Madison usually believe? And second, how did it come about that the First Amendment to the Constitution guarantees that "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"? The answers to these questions carry implications for our lives today, since at stake is the flash-point principle of the separation of church and state." —*Washington Post*

"There is a fierce custody battle going on out there for ownership of the Founding Fathers. *Founding Faith* strikes me as a major contribution to that debate, a sensible and sophisticated argument that the Founders' religious convictions defy our current categories."

—Joseph Ellis, author of *American Creation*

"Steven Waldman does a great job describing the nuances of the Founders' beliefs and the balances they struck, thus rescuing them from those on both sides who would oversimplify their ideas."

—Walter Isaacson, president of the Aspen Institute and author of *Benjamin Franklin: An American Life*.

"This is a history every American should know, and Waldman masterfully tells it."

—Jim Wallis, author of *The Great Awakening*

"Steven Waldman recovers the founders' true beliefs with an insightful and truly original argument. It will change the way you think about the separation of church and state."

—George Stephanopoulos, chief Washington correspondent, *ABC News*, and anchor of *This Week*

"Steve Waldman makes the strong case that the culture wars have distorted how and why we have religious freedom in America. Americans can be inspired by this story—the extraordinary birth story of freedom of religion."

—William J. Bennett, author of *America: The Last Best Hope*

"An unusually well-balanced book on an unusually controversial subject. Not every reader will agree with Waldman that, of the Founding Fathers, James Madison's conclusions about religion and society were best. But all should be grateful for the way Waldman replaces myths with facts, clarifies the complexity in making the Founders speak to present-day problems, and allows the Founders who differed with Madison a full and sympathetic hearing. An exceptionally fair, well-researched, and insightful book."

—Mark A. Noll, University of Notre Dame, author of *America's God*

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Linda Banks:

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Curtis Hernandez:

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