The period of the American founding was filled with individuals of unusual interest as historical actors and unusual significance for the history of the United States. A recent burst of literary and televised attention has made John and Abigail Adams nearly as familiar to contemporary Americans as George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, or Thomas Jefferson. The roles of James Madison in crafting the Constitution and of Alexander Hamilton in putting the new nation on a sound financial footing continue to be studied, as do the actions of other larger-than-life figures from the Revolutionary era.

The same figures naturally attract attention with respect to issues of religion in public life, whether they be Washington praying (perhaps) at Valley Forge or delivering his Farewell Address on the importance of religion for a republic; Franklin calling the Constitutional Convention to prayer in imitation of fervent prayers during the War for Independence; Madison carefully parsing out the wording for the First Amendment of the Constitution; or Jefferson penning his famous opinion about “a wall of separation between church and state.” What these major founders said about religion, did with religion, or ruled out of bounds for religion continues to engage the attention of historians and mold public opinion. Especially in the last quarter century, when
religion has returned to political life with a vengeance, the views of the founders matter.

It is only a small step from the most popular or most studied founders to other founders. Their views on religion and politics were also influential, as revealed in winning historical detail in the finely crafted chapters that make up this book.

As set out clearly in the preface and in the first chapter by Daniel Dreisbach, it is artificial to limit “the founders” to a few individuals. Reasonable but historically distorting factors explain the overemphasis on relatively few founders and the underemphasis on a host of others who played key roles in hammering out the nation’s original documents and guiding the new republic through its early years. Such reasons include self-promotion by founders, the availability of archival material to historians (especially letters and other private documents), and the brevity of certain founders’ lives. The result, however, is a misunderstanding of the historical situation and, sometimes, mis-application in current debates over what “the founders” thought.

This book addresses the particular problems that result when the company of national founders is limited artificially. As the book’s authors demonstrate convincingly, several of our founding leaders possessed a more orthodox Christian faith than did their more famous contemporaries (most of whom were deists of one kind or another). But lest anyone conclude, that by pointing to these more orthodox figures, the book is intended as a right-wing contribution to contemporary culture wars, it is important to note the complexity of what the authors achieve. By broadening the notion of “the founders,” they draw in individuals who promoted a quite different kind of deism (Thomas Paine, author of the decisive piece of propaganda, Common Sense), or who adhered to a quirky individual religion (the Philadelphia physician Benjamin Rush), or who maintained a moderate Anglican position (the Virginia jurist and first U.S. Attorney General, Edmund Randolph). The historical payoff from studying a broad group of founders is to enrich rather than simplify our picture of what the founders “believed.”

On questions of church-state relations, a similar complexity comes to the fore. Some of the founders discussed here wanted more space for religion in public life, but some did not. What they shared in common,
however, was that their positions on sensitive church-state matters often differed considerably from those maintained by Jefferson and Madison, who in some recent jurisprudence have been read as representing the entire founding generation.

Individuals treated in the chapters include not only Abigail Adams, Patrick Henry, Oliver Ellsworth, Hamilton, Paine, Rush, and Randolph, but also several other influential early American leaders. John Jay of New York, for example, was a co-author (with Madison and Hamilton) of *The Federalist Papers*, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, and an influential diplomat. Roger Sherman of Connecticut was the only American to sign the nation’s four constituting documents (the Articles of Association, the Declaration of Independence, the Articles of Confederation, and the Constitution). Mercy Otis Warren was the nation’s first female playwright and the author of one of the most notable histories of the American Revolution. John Adams’s cousin, Samuel Adams, was both a firebrand leader of the Sons of Liberty in Boston and a careful negotiator in the Continental Congress. The thoughts of all these individuals on the role of religion in the new United States made a difference in their lifetimes. Now, with the publication of this outstanding collection, they and their opinions should make a difference in helping Americans in the twenty-first century understand the complex role of religion in our nation’s first years.
Two weaknesses in much of the scholarship on the American founding inspired this collection of essays. First, there has long been a tendency to discount or ignore the role of religion in the American founding in general, and in the political thought of influential founders in particular. Second, much that has been written about the founders has emphasized the thoughts, words, and deeds of an elite fraternity of famous founders, ignoring a large company of now forgotten men and women who made salient, consequential contributions to the construction of the American republic and its institutions. In the course of their study, the editors have come to believe that religion played a vital role in the American founding project and that limiting the study of this period to the contributions of a select few famous figures impoverishes an understanding of the founding. This volume, which builds on the editors’ prior collaborations, was conceived in order to redress these weaknesses in much of the existing scholarship.

Why is it that since the mid-twentieth century scholars have often discounted or ignored the role of faith in the founders’ lives and political thought? It might reflect the inclination of many intellectuals to emphasize the strictly rational and avoid transcendent themes in their work. Some writers might be protecting their audiences from views on God and religion that offend twenty-first-century, secular sensibilities. George Washington, for example, warned that one who labors to subvert a public
role for religion and morality cannot call himself a patriot, yet this ad-
monition from his Farewell Address is seldom mentioned in the scholar-
ly literature. Such rhetoric, unexceptional in its time, is discordant with
the secular ethos of our time. Other founders held views similarly out of
step with secular academic and popular sentiments of the twentieth and
twenty-first centuries, such as advocating state support for Protestant
denominations and restricting the civil and religious rights of Catholics,
Unitarians, atheists, and Jews.

Another explanation for the inattention given to the founders’ faith
has to do with a lack of familiarity with religion and religious themes—a
form of “religious illiteracy”—among secular scholars. Many Washing-
ton scholars, for example, have asserted that the Virginian rarely quoted
or mentioned the Bible. Harvard historian Samuel Eliot Morison, win-
der of the Pulitzer and Bancroft Prizes, stated, “I have found no trace of
Biblical phraseology” in Washington’s letters. That such an ill-informed
statement could be made by a serious scholar is remarkable, indeed. Even
a cursory review of Washington’s papers reveals scores of quotations
from and unmistakable allusions to the Bible. One finds in Washington’s
correspondence dozens of references to the ancient Hebrew blessing in
which every man sits in safety under his own vine and fig tree (Micah 4:4;
1 Kings 4:25; Zechariah 3:10). He was fond of the biblical description of
an age when nations will convert “swords into plowshares” and “spears
into pruninghooks” (Micah 4:3, Isaiah 2:4; Joel 3:10). He incorporated
Solomon’s proverbs into the advice he dispensed. In an April 1789 missive
to Philadelphia’s German Lutherans, Washington quoted Proverbs 14:34,
which speaks of “that righteousness which exalteth a nation.” Again, a
widespread biblical or religious “illiteracy” is one explanation for the fail-
ure of modern scholars to account adequately for the place of religion—
specifically Christianity—in the lives of the American founders.

Limiting the focus to the perspectives of five or six elite founders is
another unfortunate tendency exhibited by authors writing on the found-
ders’ views of Christianity, religious liberty, or church-state relations.
These celebrated founders were among those most influenced by the En-
lightenment and most likely to embrace church-state separation. It is true
that founders like Thomas Jefferson and James Madison (those most likely
to be discussed) were influential, but their religious views and their views
on church-state relations are among the least representative of the founders. Other founders often covered in the leading scholarship include Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen, George Washington, and John Adams, all of whom were probably heterodox in their religious beliefs and who, with the exception of Washington and Adams, were ardent critics of the ecclesiastical establishments of their day.

A good example of this tendency is Edwin S. Gaustad’s Faith of Our Fathers, which explores the founders’ attitudes toward religion by carefully considering only the views of Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, Adams, and Washington. More recently, Steven Waldman’s Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America also focuses on these “five main characters.” David L. Holmes’s The Religion of the Founding Fathers dedicates individual chapters to the same five men, with an additional chapter on James Monroe. In a revised edition, retitled The Faiths of the Founding Fathers, perhaps chastened by criticism of his narrow definition of the founders, Holmes includes chapters on “Wives and Daughters” and “three orthodox Christians.” Popular author Brooke Allen, in Moral Minority: Our Skeptical Founding Fathers, likewise devotes chapters to Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, and Madison—although she includes a chapter on Alexander Hamilton as well. A similar approach is taken by Frank Lambert, Richard Hughes, Steven J. Keillor, and many others.

These authors typically concede that not all Americans in the founding era were as “enlightened” as these famous founders, but then they proceed to attribute the views of these select elites to the founding generation. More orthodox founders, and those who desired closer cooperation between religion and the polity, are largely ignored. These founders are occasionally discussed in books intended for popular religious audiences or in rare, specialized academic articles and monographs, but their views are regularly neglected in mainstream discourse on church-state issues. The net result of this selective approach to history is the distortion of the founders’ collective views on religion, religious liberty, and church-state relations.

If concerns about this distortion were merely of academic interest, it would still be necessary to address it simply to set the record straight. This distortion, however, is of more than academic interest because the
founders’ views carry significant weight in contemporary political and legal discourse. To provide one concrete example, United States Supreme Court justices have made it clear that “no provision of the Constitution is more closely tied to or given content by its generating history than the religious clause of the First Amendment. It is at once the refined product and the terse summation of that history.” Of the justices who have written at least one religion clause opinion, 76 percent have appealed to the founders or founding era history to shine light on the meaning of the religion clauses, and every one of the twenty-three justices who have authored more than four religion clause opinions have done so. Yet, like the scholars mentioned above, justices have been selective in the founders to whom they have appealed. Collectively, when justices appeal to specific founders to cast light on the meaning of the religion clauses, 79 percent of their appeals have been to Jefferson or Madison, while only 21 percent of their appeals have been to one of thirty-one other founders. This is particularly remarkable, given that Jefferson was not directly involved in writing or ratifying the First Amendment (he was serving as the American minister to France when the first federal Congress framed the amendment).

The proclivity of justices and students of the founding era to focus on a relatively limited company of famous founders when it comes to religion and church-state issues is understandable in some respects. Jefferson, Madison, Adams, Washington, Franklin, and Paine are among the more interesting founders. They are also among the most articulate and prolific writers of their generation. And few would deny that they were influential. It also makes sense to study these famous figures if one is interested in the seeds of modern separationism in America. One should be careful, however, not to generalize from their views to those of the founders as a whole.

This volume’s predecessor, The Founders on God and Government (2004), brought together respected scholars of history, political science, and law to write essays on prominent founders such as Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin, as well as a few lesser-known founders like John Witherspoon, James Wilson, George Mason, and the Catholic Carroll family of Maryland. In the current volume we broaden the discussion by offering essays on (in alphabetical order) Abigail Adams,
Samuel Adams, Oliver Ellsworth, Alexander Hamilton, Patrick Henry, John Jay, Thomas Paine, Edmund Randolph, Benjamin Rush, Roger Sherman, and Mercy Otis Warren. We are, again, delighted that eminent historians, political scientists, and law professors have agreed to write essays for this collection.

Most of the subjects of the essays in this volume are, indeed, “forgotten founders.” True, the names of Abigail Adams, Samuel Adams, Alexander Hamilton, and Patrick Henry, unlike the subjects of some chapters in the book, are familiar to many Americans, but few can recount in meaningful detail their contributions to the American founding. If not their names, then certainly their roles in creating the American nation are now forgotten. As Daniel L. Dreisbach suggests in his chapter, the fact that many founders are now forgotten does not necessarily mean that they are unimportant. Indeed, he argues that factors other than a selected founder’s actual contributions to the founding project may explain why he or she was remembered or forgotten by subsequent generations. One such factor, for example, is whether an important founder left a paper trail—public papers, a journal, or a memoir—documenting his or her salient contributions to the nation. Scholars of a later age must have a record with which to re-create and analyze the past.

Each of the founders profiled in this volume, we contend, contributed in important ways to the founding of the American republic. Their religious convictions as well as their approaches to religious liberty and church-state relations varied, but when we consider their perspectives, along with those of the founders examined in our earlier volume, a more complete picture of “the founders’ views” begins to emerge. We recognize, of course, that “the founders” held a range of views on these matters, but as these essays suggest, there were areas of consensus. To be sure, an even more complete picture will require consideration of additional founders, which is something we hope to facilitate in future scholarship.

Our contributors come from a variety of disciplines, and we offered them the freedom to pursue their subjects according to the canons of their disciplines. We asked all the authors, however, to provide a brief biographical sketch of the profiled founder and, where possible, to identify the founder’s religious beliefs and denominational commitments.
We also wanted each chapter to consider the scholarly treatment of the profiled founder, giving special attention to whether his or her understanding of religion and its public role has been adequately studied, to explore the relationship of the subject’s religious beliefs to his or her political ideas and actions, and to discuss the founder’s views of religious liberty and church-state relations. We should note that the contributors themselves hold a variety of religious beliefs (including unbelief) and significantly different views on how church and state should relate in America today. Whether or how the founders’ views should inform contemporary questions of jurisprudence and politics is a matter we leave for another day.

Many of the chapters in this volume were presented at a conference entitled “Religion and the American Founding” held at George Fox University in the spring of 2007. We are grateful to the Council for Christian Colleges and Universities for a grant that supported the conference and the publication of this volume. We are also thankful to the Intercollegiate Studies Institute for sponsoring several of the speakers at this conference and at a debate engaging Derek H. Davis, Steven Green, Barry Alan Shain, and Mark David Hall on the question “Did America Have a Christian Founding?”

On a personal note, Daniel L. Dreisbach thanks American University for a sabbatical leave in the 2006–2007 academic year and its continuing support of his research, which made possible his contributions to this volume. He also thanks the faculty and fellows at the James Madison Program in American Ideals and Institutions in the Department of Politics at Princeton University, where he spent his sabbatical as the William E. Simon Visiting Fellow in Religion and Public Life. For their endless patience and good humor during the course of this and other projects, he thanks his wife, Joyce, and two daughters, Mollie Abigail and Moriah Esther. Mark David Hall, as always, is grateful for the love and encouragement provided by his family: Miriam, Joshua, Lydia, and Anna. He is thankful, as well, for the support of George Fox University and the Earhart Foundation. Research assistance from Janna McKee and Deanne Kastine and secretarial help from Vetta Berokoff contributed significantly to the success of this volume. He would also like to thank archivists at the Connecticut State Library, the Library of Congress, and Yale University
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Mark David Hall
Jeffry H. Morrison

Notes


Washington, letter to William Vans Murray, Dec. 3, 1797, in WGW, 36:88; Wash-


9. Steven Waldman, Founding Faith: Providence, Politics, and the Birth of Religious Freedom in America (New York: Random House, 2008), xiii. Waldman has individual chapters on these five men, and he discusses a variety of other founders. However, he often generalizes from Franklin, Adams, Washington, Jefferson, and Madison to all founders, such as when he addresses the “Conservative Fallacy” that “most Founding Fathers were serious Christians” by remarking that “if we use the definition of Christianity offered by those who make this claim—conservative Christians—the Founders studied in this book were not Christians” (193). This claim may be true for his “five main characters,” but it is highly debatable with respect to founders such as Samuel Adams, Fisher Ames, Isaac Backus, Elias Boudinot, Charles and Daniel Carroll, Samuel Davies, Timothy Dwight, Oliver Ellsworth, Patrick Henry, John Jay, John Leland, Henry Muhlenberg, Robert Treat Paine, Roger Sherman, Noah Webster, John Witherspoon, and many others who are mentioned (albeit often in passing) in his book.


14. See Frank Lambert, The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003), 161, and generally 159–296. Lambert moves easily from the proposition that Franklin, Jefferson, Paine, Adams, Hamilton, Madison, and Jay “rejected the faith of their Puritan fathers” to the claim that the “significance of the Enlightenment and Deism for the birth of the American republic, and especially the relationship between church and state within it, can hardly be overstated.” Leaving aside the fact that Paine was born an English Quaker and Hamilton was a bastard from the West Indies, thus making one wonder whose faith they rejected, Lambert’s account of “the found-
ers” rests almost entirely on the writings of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Franklin. Although he mentions Jay, he gives no evidence that Jay rejected orthodox Christianity. See also Richard T. Hughes, Myths America Lives By (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003), 50–57, who supports his claim that “most of the American founders embraced some form of Deism, not historically orthodox Christianity,” with extensive quotations from Jefferson, two quotations from Paine, and one quotation each from Franklin, Madison, and John Adams; and Steven J. Keillor, This Rebellious House: American History and the Truth of Christianity (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1996), 85, who supports his claim that “many of America’s ‘Founding Fathers’ were not Christians in any orthodox sense” with references to Adams, Franklin, Paine, and Allen (and, by implication, Washington and Jefferson).


18. Ibid., 569.