Faith and Politics: Religion in the Public Square
THE MARYVILLE SYMPOSIUM
Conversations on Faith & the Liberal Arts

The Proceedings

Faith and Politics:
Religion in the Public Square

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Introduction

Ronald A. Wells
Maryville College

As we begin this third annual Maryville Symposium, a fair question to ask is: why should a small liberal arts college host a scholarly meeting on “Faith and Politics: Religion in the Public Square” under the heading of “Conversations on Faith and the Liberal Arts?”

The short answer is this: the Symposium springs from the twin pillars of Maryville College’s identity, that is, liberal arts consciousness formed in a church-related context. On the one hand we join other liberal arts colleges in supporting the ideal of the free and unfettered pursuit of truth in all academic disciplines. We are unafraid of where ideas might lead us. At the same time, the church-relatedness of the college invites the perspectives of faith-based inquiry. Even as we are unafraid of where ideas lead, we are unembarrassed that faith is part of the mix in the education and the scholarship to which this community of learning aspires.

We are not unaware of the tensions and contradictions that this conjunction might leave us with. But, we choose to embrace those tensions, and not give up just because it is hard. In American higher education, a majority of liberal arts colleges, despite the religious roots of most of them, have elected to distance themselves from their religious heritages. They say that to strive for academic quality must mean keeping religious viewpoints marginalized, in what one scholar has called “the God box,” i.e., the religion department and the chaplain’s office, and/or in the real of private belief. We are also note that a
minority of liberal arts colleges takes the opposite tack; that is, they believe that faith-based ideas must lead the discussion, and, in some cases, be the essential filter through which all academic work must be done. For them, “God” is not in the box but on the throne of the college.

Maryville College and this Symposium take a determinedly moderate approach in this regard. We embrace the tensions involved, and acknowledge that the seeming paradoxes are hard to resolve, if they can ever be fully resolved. There are many other colleges in North America committed to this moderate approach, a third way. They tend to be gathered in the Lilly Fellows Project. It was President Gibson’s hope, and now President Bogart’s hope, that we might join in that on-going discourse, and that our Maryville Symposium might play a modest part in it.

We are encouraged to go ahead in this respect by the recent work of the British social philosopher, Phillip Blond, who has written that in term of institutions of higher learning in our time, we are now both “post-religious” and “post-secular;” by which he means that we are passed the time of accepting as valid either militant fundamentalism or patronizing secular liberalism.

This year our “big idea” is “Faith and Politics: Religion in the Public Square.” It had been our hope to do this theme in a non-election year, but we were unable to meet here last year. It seems like the subject is still quite relevant this year. We want to look at the various ways in which religion and public life have interacted in American history, and what principles we might offer that may guide the proper interaction of the two. There are of course many facets to these questions that our distinguished speakers and able commentators will take up over the next days. I look forward to it very keenly.

So, “Faith and the Liberal Arts;” For me, the operative words are “Conversations on….” This weekend, and in future Symposia, we hope to continue this way of going about it: civil conversations between colleagues; conversations that are meant to open discourse, not close it; to seek what can be learned not
what is to be told; to include rather than exclude; to value new conversation partners.

Those making presentations this weekend have agreed to come to share their ideas with you all. Later this fall, I will receive the revised versions of the papers and of the invited comments and conclusion. Early in the New Year we will publish The Proceedings, thereby continuing this weekend’s conversations in many other places.
The Place of Religion in the Contemporary Public Square

Wilfred M. McClay
University of Tennessee, Chattanooga

I am both honored and delighted to be here with you this afternoon, on this wonderful occasion. It is, however, a rather daunting task to be asked to speak on the place of religion in American public life. The question is so rich, so complex, and often so divisive, even contentious. It brings together the two things that American folk wisdom teaches us, from a very early age, that we should not discuss in polite company: religion and politics. And indeed, one widely held, and widely respected, view of the matter is that one should say as little as possible in public about either religion or politics. While there are times when this is good advice, and represents the acme of prudence, it will hardly do for us as a general principle. A form of “civility” that is achieved only by our remaining studiously silent about the things that matter to us most, and are most fundamental to the health of our civil society, is not really civility, but merely an uneasy and impoverished social peace. Nor is this the kind of society that our Constitutional order envisioned. The first item in our Bill of Rights makes it clear that the Framers placed religion in a very high place—not only as the first and most fundamental of our freedoms, but as a mental and moral and social right whose “free exercise” we also are promised.

The question can be made a little more manageable, too, by our making some distinctions. One can, to begin with, talk about the “place” of religion either descriptively or prescriptively, as the place religion occupies or as the place it ought to occupy. The two are impossible to separate, of course,
and I will do some linking of them in what follows. But the distinction is a useful one to make at the outset.

I also have assumed in what follows that we are speaking of an American public square, although neither the title of the symposium nor the title of my talk specifies that. As you’ll see, I am a typical historian in regarding these questions as being highly context-sensitive in character. I will have nothing to say about, for example, the issue of Turkish women being allowed to wear head coverings in public or French women being proscribed from doing so. I find it very difficult to talk about the particular texture of American religious life, and our view of religious liberty in this country, without taking into account certain highly particular aspects of American history and society.

This brings one to a last distinction, revolving around the place of Christianity in one’s thinking. One can talk about the “place” of religion in American life from the standpoint of an American citizen, irrespective of one’s belief or unbelief. Or one can talk about the place of religion in American life specifically from the standpoint of a Christian believer. The two are not necessarily the same, nor are they necessarily at odds. And there is a wide variety of points of view within each perspective. But it is useful to think about them separately, and sometimes to employ different language to do so.

What I will do in what follows is to try, in a very rough way, to do first the one, then the other. I should like first to address myself in a general and detached way to the phenomenon of religion in public, using the concept of “civil religion” to illuminate the way. Then I will take a look at the latter, how to think Christianly about the role of one’s own faith in the public square, viewing the matter through a consideration of the career of the man who was mainly behind the emergence of the term “public square” in our discourse about these matters: the late Richard John Neuhaus. Then, finally, we can consider how the two different perspectives may combine, or clash, and then take up the discussion ourselves.
I will begin by asking you to think back to the situation approximately nine years ago. In the immediate wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11, Americans suddenly found themselves faced with an unexpected choice between radically different perspectives on the proper place of religion in modern Western society. The alternative perspectives were not new. But the urgency with which they were felt, and the intensity with which they were articulated, marked a dramatic departure. Coming at a moment when Americans had been gradually rethinking many settled precedents regarding religion and public life, it seemed to give a sharper edge to the questions being asked.

For many intelligent observers, there was only one logical conclusion to be drawn from these horrifyingly destructive acts, perpetrated by fanatically committed adherents to a militant and demanding form of Islam: that all religions, and particularly the great monotheisms, constitute an ever-present menace to the peace, order, and liberty of Western civil life. Far from embracing the then-growing sentiment that the United States government should be willing to grant religion a greater role in public life, such observers took 9/11 as clear evidence of just how serious a mistake this would be. The events of 9/11 seemed to confirm their contention that religion is incorrigibly toxic, and that it breeds irrationality, demonization of others, irreconcilable division, and implacable conflict. If we learned nothing else from 9/11, in this view, we should at least have relearned the hard lessons that the West learned in its own bloody religious wars at the dawn of the modern age. The essential character of the modern West, and its greatest achievement, is its tolerant secularism. To settle for anything less is to court disaster. If there still has to be a vestigial presence of religion here and there in the world, let it be kept private and kept on a short leash. Is not Islamist terror the ultimate example of a “faith-based initiative”? How many more examples did we need?

To be sure, most of those who put forward this position were predisposed to do so. They found in 9/11 a pretext for restating settled views, rather than a catalyst for forming fresh ones. More importantly, though, theirs was far from being the
only response to 9/11, and nowhere near being the dominant one. Many other Americans had a completely opposite response, feeling that such a heinous and frighteningly nihilistic act, so far beyond the usual psychological categories, could only be explained by resort to an older, pre-secular vocabulary, one that included the numinous concept of “evil.” There were earnest post 9/11 efforts, such as the philosopher Susan Neiman’s thoughtful book *Evil in Modern Thought*, to appropriate the concept for secular use, independent of its religious roots. But such efforts have been largely unconvincing. If 9/11 was taken by some as an indictment of the religious mind’s fanatical tendencies, it was taken with equal justification by others as an illustration of the secular mind’s explanatory poverty. If there was incorrigible fault to be found, it was less in the structure of the world’s great monotheisms than in the labyrinth of the human heart—a fault about which those religions, particularly Christianity, have always had a great deal to say.

Even among those willing to invoke the concept of evil in its proper religious habitat, however, there was disagreement. A handful of prominent evangelical Christian leaders, notably Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, were unable to resist comparing the falling towers of lower Manhattan to the Biblical towers of Babel, and saw in the 9/11 attacks God’s judgment upon the moral and social evils of contemporary America, and the withdrawal of His favor and protection. In that sense, they were the mirror opposites of their foes, seizing on 9/11 as a pretext for re-proclaiming the toxicity of American secularism. They were arguing for a separation of religious identity and national identity, from a position mainly concerned to preserve the integrity of religion.

Their view was not typical, however, and in fact, was so widely regarded as reckless and ill-considered. The more common public reaction was something much simpler and more primal. Millions of Americans went to church, searching there for reassurance, for comfort, for solace, for strength, and for some semblance of redemptive meaning in the act of sharing their grief and confusion in the presence of the transcendent. Both inside and outside the churches, in windows and on labels, American flags were suddenly everywhere in evidence, and the strains of “God Bless America” seemed everywhere to be
wafting through the air, along with other patriotic songs that praised America while soliciting the blessings of the Deity. The pure secularists and the pure religionists were the exceptions in this phenomenon. For most Americans, it was unthinkable that the comforts of their religious heritage and the well-being of their nation could be in any fundamental way at odds with one another. Hence it can be said that 9/11 produced a great revitalization, for a time, of the American civil religion, that strain of American piety that bestows many of the elements of religious sentiment and faith upon the fundamental political and social institutions of the United States.

Such a tendency to conflate the realms of the religious and the political has hardly been unique to American life and history. Indeed, the achievement of a stable relationship between the two constitutes one of the perennial tasks of social existence. But in the West, the immense historical influence of Christianity has had a lot to say about the particular way the two have interacted over the centuries. From its inception, the Christian faith insisted upon separating the claims of Caesar and the claims of God—recognizing the legitimacy of both, though placing loyalty to God above loyalty to the state. The Christian was to be in the world but not of the world, living as a responsible and law-abiding citizen in the City of Man while reserving his ultimate loyalty for the City of God. Such a separation and hierarchy of loyalties, which sundered the unity that was characteristic of the classical world, had the effect of marking out a distinctively secular realm, although at the same time confining its claims.

For Americans, this dualism has often manifested itself as an even more decisive commitment to something called “the separation of Church and State,” a slogan that is taken by many to be the cardinal principle governing American politics and religion. Yet the persistence of an energetic American civil religion, and of other instances in which the boundaries between the two becomes blurred, suggests that the matter is not nearly as simple as that. There is, and always has been, considerable room in the American experiment for the conjunction of religion and state. This is a proposition that committed religious believers and committed secularists alike find deeply worrisome—and understandably so, since it carries with it the risk that each of the respective realms can be contaminated by the presence of its
opposite number. But it is futile to imagine that the proper boundaries between religion and politics can be fixed once and for all, in all times and cultures, separated by an abstract fiat. Instead, their relationship evolves out of a process of constant negotiation and renegotiation, responsive to the changing needs of the culture and the moment. It is, to repeat the term I used before, highly context-sensitive.

Experience suggests, however, that we would be well advised to steer between two equally dangerous extremes, which can serve as negative landmarks in our deliberations about the proper relationship between American religion and the American nation-state. First, we should avoid total identification of the two, which would in practice likely mean the complete domination of one by the other—a theocratic or ideological totalitarianism in which religious believers completely subordinated themselves to the apparatus of the state, or vice versa. But second, and equally important, we should not aspire to a total segregation of the two, which would in practice bring about unhealthy estrangement between and among Americans, leading in turn to extreme forms of sectarianism, otherworldliness, cultural separatism, and gnosticism, a state of affairs in which religious believers will regard the state with pure antagonism, or vice versa. Religion and the nation are inevitably entwined, and some degree of entwining is a good thing. After all, the self-regulative pluralism of American culture cannot work without the ballast of certain elements of deep commonality. But just how much, and when and why, are hard questions to answer categorically.

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Let’s take a closer look at the concept of “civil religion.” This is admittedly very much a scholar’s term, rather than a term arising out of general parlance, and its use seems to be restricted mainly to anthropologists, sociologists, political scientists, and historians and the like, even though it describes a phenomenon that has existed ever since the first organized human communities. It is also a somewhat imprecise term, which can mean several things at once. Civil religion is a means of investing a particular set of political/social arrangements with an aura of the sacred, thereby elevating their stature and
enhancing their stability. It can serve as a point of reference for the shared faith of the entire state or nation, focusing on the most generalized and widely held beliefs about the history and destiny of that state or nation. As such, it provides much of the social glue that binds together a society through well-established symbols, rituals, celebrations, places, and values, supplying the society with an overarching sense of spiritual unity—a sacred canopy, in Peter Berger’s words—and a focal point for shared memories of struggle and survival. It can sometimes take on some of the spontaneous characteristics of a folk religion, but it also can be highly artificial and self-consciously wrought. Although it borrows extensively from the society’s dominant religious tradition, it is not itself a highly particularized religion, but instead a somewhat more blandly inclusive one, into whose highly general stories and propositions those of various faiths can read and project what they wish. It is, so to speak, a highest common denominator.

The phenomenon of civil religion extends back at least to classical antiquity, to the local gods of the Greek city-state, the civil theology of Plato, and to the Romans’ state cult, which made the emperor into an object of worship himself. But the term itself appears in recognizably modern form in Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Social Contract*, where it was put forward as a means of cementing the people’s allegiances to their polity. Rousseau recognized the historic role of religious sentiment in underwriting the legitimacy of regimes and strengthening citizen’s bonds to the state and their willingness to sacrifice for the general good. He deplored the influence of Christianity in this regard, however, precisely because of the way that it divided citizens’ loyalties, causing them to neglect worldly concerns in favor of spiritual ones. Christians made poor soldiers, because they were more willing to die than to fight.

Rousseau’s solution was the self-conscious replacement of Christianity with "a purely civil profession of faith, of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogma, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen and faithful subject." Since it was impossible to have a cohesive civil government without some kind of religion, and since (as he believed) Christianity is inherently counterproductive to or subversive of sound civil government, he
thought the state should impose its own custom-tailored religion, which provides a frankly utilitarian function. That civil religion should be kept as simple as possible, with only a few, mainly positive beliefs: the existence and power of God, the afterlife, the reality of reward or punishment, etc., and only one negative dogma, the proscribing of intolerance. Citizens would still be permitted to have their own peculiar beliefs regarding metaphysical things, so long as such opinions were of no worldly consequence. But “whosoever dares to say, ‘Outside the Church no salvation,’” Rousseau sternly declared, “ought to be driven from the State.”

Needless to say, such a nakedly manipulative approach to the problem of socially binding beliefs, and such dismissiveness toward the commanding truths of Christianity and other older faiths, has not attracted universal approval, in Rousseau’s day or since. Nor has the general conception of civil religion. It is not hard to see why. One of the most powerful and enduring critiques came some two centuries later, from the pen of the American scholar Will Herberg, whose classic 1955 study Protestant Catholic Jew concluded with a searing indictment of what he called the “civic” religion of “Americanism.” Such religion had lost every smidgen of its prophetic edge; instead, it had become “the sanctification of the society and culture of which it is the reflection.” The Jewish and Christian traditions had “always regarded such religion as incurable idolatrous,” because it “validates culture and society, without in any sense bringing them under judgment.” Such religion no longer comes to prod the indolent, afflict the comfortable, and hold the mirror up to our sinful and corrupt ways. Instead, it “comes to serve as a spiritual reinforcement of national self-righteousness.” It was the handmaiden of national arrogance and moral complacency.7

But civil religion also had its defenders. One of them, the sociologist Robert N. Bellah, put the term on the intellectual map, arguing in an influential 1967 article called “Civil Religion in America” that the complaint of Herberg and others about this generalized and self-celebratory religion of The American Way of Life was not the whole story.8 The American civil religion was, he asserted, something far deeper and more worthy of respectful study, a body of symbols and beliefs that was not merely a watered down Christianity, but possessed a
“seriousness and integrity” of its own. Beginning with an examination of references to God in John F. Kennedy’s Inaugural Address, Bellah detected in the American civil-religious tradition a durable and morally challenging theme: “the obligation, both collective and individual, to carry out God’s will on earth.” Hence Bellah took a much more positive view of that tradition, though not denying its potential pitfalls. Against the critics, he argued that “the civil religion at its best is a genuine apprehension of universal and transcendent religious reality as seen in or...revealed through the experience of the American people.” It provides a higher standard against which the nation could be held accountable.

For Bellah and others, the deepest source of the American civil religion is the Puritan-derived notion of America as a New Israel, a covenanted people with a divine mandate to restore the purity of early apostolic church, and thus serve as a godly model for the restoration of the world. John Winthrop’s famous 1630 sermon to his fellow settlers of Massachusetts Bay, in which he envisioned their “plantation” as “city upon a hill,” is the locus classicus for this idea of American chosenness. It was only natural that inhabitants with such a strong sense of historical destiny would eventually come to see themselves, and their nation, as collective bearers of a world-historical mission. What is more surprising, however, was how persistent that self-understanding of America as the Redeemer Nation would prove to be, and how easily it incorporated the secular ideas of the Declaration of Independence and the language of liberty into its portfolio. The same mix of convictions can be found animating the rhetoric of the American Revolution, the vision of Manifest Destiny, the crusading sentiments of antebellum abolitionists, the benevolent imperialism of fin-de-siècle apostles of Christian civilization, and the fervent idealism of President Woodrow Wilson at the time of the First World War. No one expressed the idea more directly, however, than Senator Albert J. Beveridge of Indiana, who told the United States Senate, in the wake of the Spanish-American War, that "God has marked us as His chosen people, henceforth to lead in the regeneration of the world."9

The American civil religion also has its sacred scriptures, such as the Mayflower Compact, the Declaration, the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Gettysburg Address, the
Pledge of Allegiance. It has its great narratives of struggle, from the suffering of George Washington's troops at Valley Forge to the gritty valor of Jeremiah Denton in Hanoi, to the tangled wreckage of Ground Zero. It has its special ceremonial and memorial occasions, such as the Fourth of July, Veterans Day, Memorial Day, Thanksgiving Day, and Martin Luther King Day. It has its temples and shrines and holy sites, such as the Lincoln Memorial and other monuments, the National Mall, the Capitol, the White House, Arlington National Cemetery, the great Civil War battlefields, and great natural landmarks such as the Grand Canyon. It has its sacred objects, notably the national flag. It has its organizations, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion, the Daughters of the American Revolution, and the Boy Scouts. And it has its dramatis personae, chief among them being its military heroes and the long succession of Presidents. Its telltale marks can be found in the frequent resort to the imagery of the Bible and reference to God and Providence in speeches and public documents, and in the inclusion of God's name in the national motto (“In God We Trust”), on all currency, in the patriotic songs found in most church hymnals.

The references to God have always been nonspecific, however. From the very beginnings of the nation's history, the nation's civil-religious discourse was carefully calibrated to provide a meeting ground for both the Christian and Enlightenment elements in the thought of the Revolutionary generation. One can see this nonspecificity, for example, in the many references to the Deity in the presidential oratory of George Washington, which are still cited approvingly today as civil-religious texts. But there is no denying that civil-religious references to God have evolved and broadened even further since the Founding, from generic Protestant to Protestant-Catholic to Judeo-Christian to, in much of President George W. Bush's rhetoric, Abrahamic and even monotheistic in general. But what has not changed is the fact that such references still always convey a strong sense of God's providence, His blessing on the land, and of the Nation's consequent responsibility to serve as a light unto the nations.

Every President feels obliged to embrace these sentiments and expresses them in oratory. Some are more enthusiastic than others. Yet it is clear, given the force-field of
tensions within which civil religion exists, that it has an inherently problematic relationship to the Christian faith, or to any other serious religious tradition. At its best, it provides a secular grounding for that faith, one that makes political institutions more responsive to calls for self-examination and repentance, as well as exertion and sacrifice for the common good. At its worst, it can provide divine warrant to unscrupulous acts, cheapen religious language, turn clergy into robed flunkies of the state and the culture, and bring the simulacrum of religious awe into places where it doesn’t belong.

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Even today, over nine years after the attacks, a substantial flow of visitors continues to make pilgrimages to the former World Trade Center site in lower Manhattan. It remains an intensely moving experience, even with all the wreckage cleared away and countless pieces of residual evidence removed or cleaned up. One still encounters open and intense expressions of grief and rage and incomprehension, in the other visitors and perhaps in oneself. It has become a shrine, a holy place, and has thereby become assimilated into the American civil religion, which is one reason why the controversy over the building of a large mosque in the immediate vicinity has been so heated. Yet for five years the site’s single most moving sight, its most powerful and immediately understandable symbol, was the famous cross-shaped girders that were pulled out of the wreckage, and raised as a cross. (The so-called Ground Zero Cross was moved in 2006 from the WTC site to St. Peter’s Church, which is directly across the street, and is to be returned to the site when a planned WTC museum is constructed there.)

What, one wonders, did that cross mean to the people viewing it, many of whom were not Christians and not even Americans? Was it a piece of nationalist kitsch, or a sentimental relic? Or was it a powerful witness to the redemptive value of suffering, and thereby a signpost pointing toward the core of the Christian story? Or did it subordinate the core of the Christian story to a more generic religious meaning, one that in some sense traduced its Christian meaning? Or, most important for our purposes, did it subordinate the core of the Christian story to the American one, and thus traduce its Christian meaning?
In addressing ourselves to such questions today, it is nearly inevitable that we have recourse to the ideas and terminology of Richard John Neuhaus, especially as expressed in his 1984 book *The Naked Public Square*—one of the most significant books published in this country during the past thirty years, and a book whose momentum is far from being spent. That does not mean, however, that it has always been adequately understood. When a book achieves the influence and visibility of *The Naked Public Square*, and especially when its marvelously evocative title has become shorthand in the discourse of most educated people, it is likely to face certain problems in this regard. These may look like “nice problems to have,” but that does not mean they aren’t genuine problems. Often such books become fixed in the public mind in their most stereotypical or capsulized form, associated with arguments or perspectives that are but a poor reflection at best of what the books actually argue, and influencing public opinion in ways that their authors never quite intended.

Having a memorably evocative title is an especially mixed blessing, since it can too easily become a way of compressing a complex argument into a oversimplifying sound bite. This is good for notoriety but bad for understanding. The next thing you know, your argument is being passed around far and wide, but sealed inside the potent simplification, like a celebrity who is condemned to live trapped inside the artificial bubble of his fame.

All which is a way of making the point that those of us who actually read *The Naked Public Square* often find it is not the book that we think we “know about.” It is a far richer, subtler, more nuanced work, at once more bold and more tentative than its now-familiar tagline can convey, a book defying easy summation, with no easy party-line reassurances to offer any of the combatants in our culture wars. Its perspective is lofty and its intellectual reach embraces almost every significant theological or political issue relating to the relationship between church and state over the past 2,000 years. As a consequence, it often operates on a very high level of abstraction. And yet it also crackles with insight into the nitty-gritty particulars of American politics and culture. Its wide scope reach did not come at the
expense of a secure grounding in the specificities of time and place.

It was not, to begin with, a simple critique of secularism per se. Neuhaus’s arc of reconsideration was longer and more complex than that. For him, the task at hand was not the dethronement of science or the overturning of the Enlightenment, let alone the political defeat of garden-variety American liberalism per se. Instead, the goal was and is the decoupling of liberal democracy from the iron logic of secularization, and the recovery of an insight that, he argued, was apparent to most of the Founders of the American republic, but which liberal political philosophers and theologians have tended to bury and secular Europe has lost---that the health of democratic institutions depends as much on the free and vibrant public presence of the biblical religions, and their culture-forming influence, as it does on the constraints placed on that religion’s ability to exercise direct political power.

A right understanding of Neuhaus’s argument needs to balance both sides of this formulation. In other words, he argued, our choices should not be restricted – and in the end cannot be restricted – to either the complete privatization of religion or the complete integration of church and state. The separation of church and state is not, and cannot be, absolute, and it does not--and cannot---require the segregation of religion from public life. This is a complicated argument, and its working-out in public policy is bound to be complicated too. But it is a direct challenge to the idea that a commitment to official secularism as national policy is the logical, nay inevitable, consequence of our commitment to liberal democracy. That, I believe, is the key thrust of this book, and it stands as much in need of explanation and articulation today as it did twenty-six years ago.

The book does something more. *The Naked Public Square* argues that liberal democracy is inconceivable and unsustainable without a prior commitment to a certain conception of the human person---a belief that men and women are created in the image of God, that their dignity and their rights arise out of this condition, as endowments from their Creator, and therefore are not to be conferred upon them, or taken from them, by the state or by anything or anyone else, including
themselves. I don’t think there is any way of getting round the fact that this is a fundamentally religious assertion. But it is an assertion to whose consequences many secularists would readily assent, circa 1984, since it undergirds the notions of universal human rights and human dignity that they, too, cherish. One can agree to disagree about the metaphysics, so long as the physics work out right.

Much has changed in twenty-five years. We now find ourselves in an era in which the process of manufacturing human beings strictly for medical and quasi-medical uses is no longer a futuristic pipedream but an activity that our major universities are eager to associate themselves with, and in which the concept of “transhumanity” is now being raised as a topic for serious discussion. It may be that the common ground is rapidly eroding. Why indeed, unless we have some religious reason for doing so, should we accept the notion of inherent human dignity, let alone human rights and human equality? Why should we continue to accept the notion of inherent human limitations, such as the inevitability of death and debility, and forgo the enhancements of strength, agility, intelligence, sexual prowess, and other characteristics that might be entailed in comprehensively remaking ourselves as individuals, or even as a species? And who is to decide when a blob of protoplasm is to be considered a person, and when it is to be deemed a mere blob of protoplasm? Can “public reason” provide a resolution of these matters, without making invoking---or negating---specifically religious assertions?

There is real reason to doubt whether it can do that. And this may help explain why, in moving from The Naked Public Square to what would be his final book, Neuhaus seems to have moved past the deployment of secular ideas, and begins to place the American story in a more Biblical context. The change was striking. We are talking about his book, American Babylon. Its subtitle is Notes of a Christian Exile. But what did these things mean? “Are we in Babylon?” Neuhaus asked. “Are we in exile?” The answer, it turns out, is yes and no. No, America is not the Babylon of the world’s nations. Indeed America still is for him, with all its decadence and disorder, a very great and exceptional nation, the source and bulwark of much that is good in the world, a nation whose story is “part of the story of the world,” a world
that is, for all its fallenness, worthy of our love and allegiance.\textsuperscript{12} Neuhaus loved Lincoln’s formulation, that America was an “almost-chosen” nation, a formulation that satisfied him far more than it satisfies me. But he liked it because it conveyed how there is much to support the idea that America has a special role to play in history, but that it is not the Biblical Israel, and certainly not the New Jerusalem.

In this sense, Neuhaus would say that yes, America Babylon is Babylon in the sense that all the world is Babylon. Or in Neuhaus’s own words:

America is Babylon not by comparison with other societies but by comparison with that radically new order sought by all who know love’s grief in refusing to settle for a community of less than truth and justice uncompromised.\textsuperscript{13}

To make sense of such a situation, one can no longer look to secular social science, which knows nothing about what it means to dwell in the living reality of the not-yet. It cannot explain what Neuhaus declares to be his fundamental purpose in writing American Babylon: “to depict a way of being in a world that is not yet the world for which we hope….exploring the possibilities and temptations one confronts as a citizen of a country that is prone to mistaking itself for the destination.”\textsuperscript{14} Instead, he urges that we look to the prophetic counsel that the prophet Jeremiah related to the exiles living in the original Babylon:

Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.\textsuperscript{15}

If we understand it rightly, the promise of what is to be, the world to come, only intensifies our commitment to the earthly city. We are to serve it faithfully and effectively. Yet, as in the story of the Biblical Daniel, himself an exile in Babylon,
we can be faithful and effective servants only up to a point, the point where our worship is being corrupted or misdirected and we are commanded to serve false gods. Then a parting of ways, perhaps even eventuating in the fiery furnace, is our only choice. But the story of Daniel just as clearly teaches that one does not declare such things lightly, and one must be willing to go a very long way in patience before making that choice.

For those whose primary allegiance is to the City of God, every foreign country is a homeland, and every homeland is a foreign country. America is our homeland, and, as the prophet Jeremiah says, its welfare is our welfare. America is also—and history testifies that this is too easily forgotten—a foreign country. Like every political configuration of the earthly city, American too is Babylon. And so as Christians we too must learn to live here, and to sing, as in Psalm 137, the songs of Zion in a foreign land—and not make the mistake of thinking that the civil-religious songs are interchangeable with those songs.16

So what Neuhaus is balancing is an intense love of America with an intense awareness of America’s inadequacies, both general and specific. He expressed the love once in a famous sentence: “When I meet God, I expect to meet him as an American.”17 In so speaking, and as a Canadian-born naturalized American, he was not being a jingo, but instead insisting upon the scandal of particularity, that what we are is inseparable from the very particular things that comprise our earthly identities. Indeed, Neuhaus severely faults the American tendency, which he ultimately traces to Protestantism, toward a Gnostic abstractionism, the presumption that one can escape one’s time and place, including one’s identity as an American. But he insists upon the importance of the place of the American experiment, as he liked to call it, in establishing an earthly realm in which the idea that we are creatures of God with inalienable rights with which we are endowed by our Creator. Thus is America an exceptional nation in the story of the world.

The general inadequacy of America is that inadequacy shared by all earthly nations: they are Babylon, every one of them, and are not, and cannot be, transformed
into the City of God. In this respect, America is no worse and no better.\textsuperscript{18}

But he acknowledges that there is a specific inadequacy of America, one peculiar to its makeup and history, and related to its prominence in the story of the world. It has to do with its tendency to exaggerate America’s very real virtues, and its place within the story, and mistake its provisional goods for real and enduring ones, errors that lead America to the very grave error of “mistaking itself for the destination,” for the world for which we hope, rather than the Babylon for whose welfare we strive but in whose ultimate perfectibility we fervently disbelieve.\textsuperscript{19} This is a version of what Reinhold Niebuhr called “the irony of American history,” by which he meant the way in which the country’s genuine virtues were precisely the source of its genuine vices.

One final observation that stems from this, and suggests something very important that we as Christians, and particularly those of us who are Protestant Christians, can take away from this discussion. Neuhaus makes the shrewd observation in \textit{American Babylon} that our tendency as Americans to confuse Washington with Zion may have something to do with the way that Christianity has been conceived and institutionalized here. “American theology,” he says, “has suffered from an ecclesiological deficit, leading to an ecclesiological substitution of America for the Church through time.”\textsuperscript{20} That this would coexist with our Emersonian penchant for free-floating individualism is no paradox, but quite logical and consistent. That this would tend to support a disproportionately large role for the American civil religion seems almost inevitable.

I think Neuhaus had hold of something profoundly important here, one of the central riddles of Christianity in America. It is certainly the case that the American Protestant tradition, particularly in its evangelical form, suffers from a perilously weak ecclesiology, and has since the days of the Great Awakening. The energy of revivalism, a source of so much of its strength, is also a source of its vulnerability. Nothing has more severely impaired the Church’s ability to be a “people” apart from the culture in America, and thereby serve as a sign of contradiction and a signpost to Zion, than its inability to function as a cohesive institutional entity. When faith becomes radically
individualized, it becomes far less culturally effectual, and ceases to be fully reflective of the Gospel in its wholeness and power. And by the same token, a strengthened Church would give moral strength to the nation, precisely by counteracting its Babylonian tendencies and reminding it of its first principles. It should be able to speak those concerns in a way that respects the manner of discourse appropriate to the public square. But it should be able to speak those concerns openly and boldly rather than remaining silent about them. It should be able to do so for two reasons. First, as a matter of freedom: because the genius of American pluralism at its best is expressed in the fact that, to very large extent, our deepest particular loyalties and our larger national loyalties are not viewed as mutually exclusive.

Second, as a matter of virtue: because we serve the goal of responsible citizenship best by visibly upholding the principle that there are things higher and more important than merely being a citizen. None of which means, however, that negotiating the twists, turns, and paradoxes of a faithful Christian life will ever be easy, or ever be reducible to a formula. The place of religion in the contemporary public square will continue to be a vital but contested one, constantly under negotiation and renegotiation, constantly shifting ground, rethinking precedents, and incorporating new and changing realities. The outcome that seems least likely is that it will go away any time soon.

2 Falwell and Robertson made their statements on Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network television show, “The 700 Club,” on September 13, 2001. Their discussion was covered the following day by John F. Harris of the *Washington Post* in “God Gave Us ‘What We Deserve’, Falwell Says,” page C03, also found at http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A28620-2001Sep14.
4 An excellent introduction to current thinking on the subject is John von Heyking, ed., *Civil Religion in Political Thought: Its Perennial Questions and Enduring Relevance in North America* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010). Although the term “civil religion” generally traces back to Rousseau, its modern usage is grounded in the work of Emile Durkheim; see notably his *Elementary


9 Albert Beveridge, “In Support of an American Empire,” a speech delivered to U.S. Senate on January 9, 1900, which can be found at Congressional Record (56th Cong., 1st Session) Volume 33, 705, 711.


12 Ibid., 30.

13 Ibid., 2.

14 Ibid., 3.

15 Ibid., 15-16.

16 Ibid., 26.

17 Ibid., 27-28, 55.

18 Ibid., 5.

19 Ibid., 3.

20 Ibid., 41.
Response to Wilfred M. McClay

William J. Meyer
Maryville College

Let me begin by thanking Wilfred McClay for his thoughtful paper and for its elegant style. The question concerning the role of religion in contemporary public life is indeed a challenging one, and his paper gives us a rich set of issues to contemplate and discuss. In reflecting on a post-9/11 world, Professor McClay organizes his analysis around two distinct questions: first, he examines the place of religion in American public life from the standpoint of a citizen as such; and, second, he takes up the question specifically from the perspective of Christian faith. My response will follow in accord with his structure.

Regarding the first question, McClay identifies and rejects two polar alternatives, namely, a secularism that seeks to privatize religious convictions and a religious evangelicalism or fundamentalism that seeks to demonize the secular character of modernity altogether. As McClay writes, “The pure secularists and the pure religionists were the exceptions” or outliers in the post-9/11 context. The more hopeful middle alternative, he suggests, is found in the abiding notion of American civil religion. Yet, at the end of the day, McClay concludes that civil religion too is “inherently problematic.” Thus, if I have understood the implications of his analysis correctly, he does not offer a substantive proposal for how religion fits into the American public order from the perspective of citizenship. Instead, he shifts gears at this point to the specifically Christian
outlook of Richard John Neuhaus. But before shifting gears, I would like to devote further attention to this difficult first question.

To untangle the proper place of religion in the American public order, I would propose, requires untangling the multiple threads of modernity, which are illustrated by the multiple and ambiguous meanings of our use of the terms “secular” and “secularism.” On the one hand, the modern world affirmed a formal commitment to resolving public questions by means of appeal to reason and common experience rather than by appeal to the authority of religious tradition or by appeal to the authority of political power. This modern formal commitment is perhaps best summed up in Immanuel Kant’s 1784 essay “What is Enlightenment?” In response to this question, Kant memorably answered: “Have courage to use your own reason, that is the motto of the Enlightenment." This formal commitment to use our own reason encourages us how to think, not what to think; this habit of mind is what we teach in the modern liberal arts context, by encouraging students to think critically for themselves, both as citizens and as individuals. This same formal commitment and habit of mind, I would add, is what underlies or ought to underlie our understanding of the secular democratic state—a body politic that seeks to resolve questions by way of public conversation and argument rather than by appeals to religious or theocratic authority. Hence, a secular state can indeed be informed by a vital religious culture insofar as religious voices, like all other voices, are committed to the way of reason and conversation rather than to appeals to authority or special revelation. In his paper, Professor McClay states: “the self-regulative pluralism of American culture cannot work without the ballast of certain elements of deep commonality.” I would suggest that this “deep commonality” lies or ought to lie in our shared formal commitment to public conversation, which is embodied in a commitment to a secular rather than to a theocratic or religiously established state. In short, “secular” means a formal commitment to the way of reason and conversation rather than to the way of authority and tradition.

The modern world, in addition to its formal commitment to public reason and conversation, also tended to affirm certain
substantive conclusions about religion, namely, that it is non-rational, and thus needs to be limited to private life, and/or, more radically, that religion is a harmful illusion that ought to be abandoned altogether. Hence, the modern world tended to affirm a substantive worldview that putatively makes coherent sense of the world and our place within it without any reference to the question of God. In short, the modern world has tended toward atheism or secularism, which is a substantive worldview that implicitly or explicitly denies the reality of God and the truth of religious claims. Though one can think of many examples, the worldview of modern secularism is perhaps most vividly illustrated by Auguste Comte’s “religion of humanity,” in which humanity, rather than God, is worshipped and identified as the ultimate source of meaning. Or, if one prefers a more contemporary example, one can think of Richard Dawkins and the new atheism.3

My key point, again, is that one must distinguish the modern world’s formal commitment to public reason and conversation, as embodied in a secular democratic state, from its substantive conclusions about religion, as embodied in a worldview of secularism, for it is this distinction that enables one to understand and articulate the role of religion in the American public order. What “separation of church and state” properly means is not that religion should be excluded from public life but, rather, that the state and its laws should not explicitly take sides in the full and free debate about ultimate questions. Our answers to those ultimate questions will indeed inform our public values and, by implication, our public laws. Thus, Neuhaus is right to argue that the public square should not be naked or devoid of religion. But neither should American citizens be required to accept theism in the form of civil religion as a requirement or concomitant of citizenship. For instance, I would argue that we should go back to the original 1892 version of the Pledge of Allegiance, which read: “one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all” rather than requiring school children to recite the 1954 civil religion and Cold War version, which reads, “one nation under God, indivisible, ....”4 In a secular democracy, one committed to reason and conversation, one does not use the power of the state to compel religious expression or conviction; rather, religion should be one vital
voice in the public conversation. Our religious convictions or ultimate values should be implied in our public laws, but they should not be explicitly prescribed or preached by the laws or recitations of the state. Thus, America can have a vital secular democracy informed by a vibrant religious culture; America can embrace secular democracy without embracing secularism as a worldview; America can affirm both religious freedom and religious disestablishment.

At the end of the Cold War, Harvard professor Samuel Huntington argued that the world was moving toward a “clash of civilizations” along fault-lines that lie between different civilizations. I would suggest that the underlying clash of the twenty-first century is occurring more within civilizations rather than between them. The key fault-line within each civilization is between those who embrace the modern formal commitment to reason and conversation, as embodied in the liberal arts and in a secular state, versus those who reject reason and conversation in favor of authority, tradition, and, for some, religious violence. The current debate over the Islamic community center in New York illustrates this divide between those who embrace interreligious conversation and understanding and those who appeal to religious scriptures and traditions as ultimate sources of authority and division.

Turning now to Professor McClay’s second question, pertaining to the perspective of Christian faith on public life, I agree with him that Christians should offer both a prophetic faith, one that critiques American exceptionalism and its idolatrous tendencies, and a theistic faith, one that articulates an ultimate source of meaning that includes but also transcends the world and one that prescribes an ethic of liberty, love, and justice for all. Yet, I part company with Neuhaus’s embrace of the “scandal of particularity” and with McClay and Neuhaus’s diagnosis, or at least understanding, of an “ecclesiological deficit.” What is needed is not a church that appeals to the uniqueness and particularity of its tradition, but rather a church that makes public arguments (explicitly through its words and implicitly through its deeds) for the reality and centrality of God, for the interrelatedness of all things, and for an ethic of “love incarnating itself as justice.” It is noteworthy that Neuhaus
turned to the pre-modern authority and tradition of Roman Catholicism as his answer to the ecclesiological deficit. In contrast, I would argue for the need for a public church, one that simultaneously proclaims a vital Christian faith and embraces the modern formal commitment. As the nineteenth-century American philosopher (and Episcopalian) Charles Peirce nicely put it, “the raison d’être of a church is to confer upon men [and women] a life broader than their narrow personalities, a life rooted in the very truth of being. To do that it must be based upon and refer to a definite and public experience.” Within the context and conversation of the American public order, Christian faith must vigorously articulate and credibly support its claims about God as the source and aim of all life. For again, as Peirce insightfully notes, whatever allegiance we may owe “to the Church, the truth claims [our] paramount allegiance; and above the importance of any particular truth, or body of truths, is that of the right methods of reaching the truth.” Those right methods, Peirce and I would submit, are ultimately rooted in a commitment to “free inquiry” and public conversation rather than to ecclesiological particularity, authority, or tradition.7

2As contemporaries of Kant and the Enlightenment period, I would argue that at least some if not all of the American Founders shared this modern formal commitment to reason rather than to the authority of crown or church.
4For a discussion of the Pledge of Allegiance, see “Historic Documents” at http://www.ushistory.org.
6Schubert M. Ogden, The Understanding of Christian Faith (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 73.
Response to Wilfred McClay

Lisa Diller
Southern Adventist University

Thank you, Professor McClay, for reminding us that we actually really need the voice of the avowedly religious in the public square as a prophetic reminder to us all that we have not yet lived up to our highest ideals. I come from a tradition, the Seventh Day Adventist Church, where we have a strong concern about the role of religion in politics. Our suspicion, rooted in our understanding of Scripture, that even Christianity, when it seeks to make its way in the political sphere, ends up abusing its power, trafficking in coercion. Those of us who are within these sorts of quietist streams of Protestantism do well to remember that at its best, religion can intensify our ability to serve the pagan city—as long as we remain chastened, never forgetting that we are always strangers and foreigners in these earthly kingdoms.

The direction in which I would like to prompt the conversation, however, comes from the acknowledgement that McClay makes in his first page: that it may be one thing to talk about religion in the public square from the perspective of an American citizen, and a different one altogether to talk about it from the standpoint of a Christian. I believe this recognition of particularity is crucial. And I think that it is very helpful to say clearly that in the context of the U.S., what we have meant by religion, and therefore about freedom of religion, the nature of the state and the role of religion in the public square, is Christianity, or something very near like it. That civil religion illustrated by the cross-shaped wreckage at Ground Zero,
McClay points out, is actually Christianity, not “religion” in some generic sense.

The defense of religious participation in civic life, then, has been a defense of Christianity and its role in the public square (with maybe a nod toward Judaism in the last half century). John Sommerville’s recent work has helped me understand why we sometimes have difficulty with defining what it is we actually mean by “religion.” McClay’s warning that we have a particular context finds support in Sommerville’s admonition that we are also ‘in’ a particular language, English, and that ‘religion’ means to us what the dominant response to the divine supernatural is in our own culture, the one in which that language developed—Christianity. So when we talk about freedom of religion and its limits, we are thinking in boundaried terms that delineate this specific way of organizing our relationship to the divine/supernatural. We may actually lack the language to speak in ways that offer similar scope and protection for other groups and individuals whose rituals/beliefs cannot be so clearly defined.

Even the term “secular” is an idea developed within the Latin Church’s context and so it is natural that when we think of separating the “claims of Caesar and God,” we are thinking of priorities and practices that grew up within the Christian context. The whole notion of “separation of Church and state” presupposes a “church,” not a mosque or a Sikh Temple. Those who propose a neutral, secular space within which to debate political and civic ideals, are able to do so partly because Christianity has long had a notion that there was a ‘secular’ separate from a ‘sacred.’ This is more challenging for other spiritual traditions, those who don’t define out a secular sphere from the realm of the supernatural—and to the extent that they try to do this, they are cooperating with a form of Christian modernity that assumes one’s ability to segregate a part of oneself for the purposes of a pluralistic conversation.

Richard Neuhaus’s reference to the “bibical” religions seems to indicate a willingness to include Judaism, which is something more than most people would have done as recently as seventy years ago in the U.S. Does he limit that “free and vibrant public presence” to Judaism and Christianity? The
things that *The Naked Public Square* argues are needful and useful for civil religion—the dignity of humans as created in the image of God and rights that can’t be taken by the state because of that dignity—are ideas and beliefs that exist in other traditions. Can the civil religion of our country include “calls for self-examination and repentance, as well as exertion and sacrifice for the common good” that come from Buddhist or Santeria sources? Or should we stick with the monotheistic faiths, with some room perhaps for the atheistic versions of Confucianism or Hinduism?

Chris Beneke’s work on the nature of religious pluralism in eighteenth century North America reveals the extent to which this particular country developed a strong sense of the need to take each religious tradition (again, in this context, primarily Protestant denominations) seriously and allow them scope for activity and political speech. Beneke argues that from the very beginning America maintained a commitment to pluralism and equality that did not exist in Europe. The facts of diversity and multiple denominations meant that early laws had to take these into account—pretty soon this meant that they used egalitarian language to do so and very quickly moved to rhetoric that went beyond toleration to equal recognition. He notes that “the codification of equal rights was followed by social integration and the extension of public recognition….Equal recognition was …at the heart of the matter.”

This remains, of course, the tension in issues such as the Islamic Center in Manhattan: can other groups have equal recognition in the public square and not simply rights to practice quietly and privately? Can they legitimately contribute to our civil religion? Beneke points out that “because Americans have generally proved so ready to conceive of themselves as both ecumenical servants of the republic and devotees of particular churches, they have been able to make religious pluralism central to their national identity.” It remains to be seen whether we can continue to hold such multiple identities when the particular religious belonging is wider than Christianity.

My own view is that as Americans we have opened ourselves up to true equality, even against the naysayers and doomsday predictors; not just legally with respect to private religious practice, but as equal participants in public discourse.
We’ve done it with respect to Dissenters, Catholics and Jews, and I believe our polity is strong enough to do it with respect to other faith traditions as well. Not only that, but if we think the sort of liberal democracy that we champion can actually benefit the world, we have to demonstrate that it can function with a truly global diversity, instead of implying that everyone must first take on a Christian worldview before they can take advantage of liberalism.

Charles Taylor has been teasing these ideas out at some great length in *A Secular Age*, and in follow-up essays, and his exchanges with Robert Bellah on the Immanent Frame website in 2008 do more to explicate these themes than I can do justice to here. Suffice it to say that the concern with finding what holds us together as citizens of a polity without defining that “something” in explicitly religious, lay/secular or ethnic terms is a very complicated task. It is one that is fraught with the danger of violence from both rigid Enlightenment advocates as well as fundamentalists. Our concern about the use of power is a legitimate one, and it would seem that one of the primary ways to keep naked political coercion in check is to include as many people in the conversation, widening the contributions to our complex national identity.

Seventh-day Adventists may offer an interesting example of a group whose theology includes an extremely negative eschatological role for the U.S.—arguing that its power will be used for Babylon-like religious coercion—while most North American Adventists themselves are very traditional in their practices of patriotism and political loyalties. So it is clearly possible to be chaste in our patriotism with respect not just to the U.S. but also to all earthly nations. But we can also, as McClay channeling Neuhaus indicates, remember that we can’t escape our specific context. We are Americans, and as such we share our citizenship with a very diverse group of people. Are we going to include them as we speak truth to power, as we chasten the naked political ambitions of the state, as we confront the secular, the anti-religious in the public square? Or do we Christians want to be the only ones who get to say what response those who believe in a Creator, in the supernatural, in the “enchanted world” as Taylor calls it—a world beyond the material here and now—might have in the political arena?
The state can be neutral with respect to diversity (of the religious variety as well as others), but we who are Christians are not. And, perhaps because of this, to self-avowed “secular” people, all religious people are potentially very threatening. As we make our case for how we can be of use to the state, for why our contributions are needed in the public square, we should be open to being clear to what extent we are arguing for what is actually religious participation in public life, not Christianity alone. Charles Taylor chastens those who would prioritize and privilege a “secular” way of knowing and reasoning above a (potentially dangerous) religious way of knowing and reasoning.8 If we are to buttress such claims, we have to do so, I would argue, in a way that includes more than our own religious tradition, or else we do actually justify the secularist critique of confessional engagement in civil society.

This recognition of traditions outside our own is not only good for the secularists among us. It is also good for the Church. We have to make our claims as the Church, as strangers in a strange land, and we can be more aware of that if we have the entire multifaceted scope of human religious experience standing beside us as we try to participate in a just society, as we contribute to a polity that takes the humanity of men and women seriously. We will more legitimately make the case for the nation’s need for the church in the public square when we make space for other faiths to join us there, standing shoulder to shoulder in chastising the less-than-humane, the materialist, the naked aggrandizement of our pagan nation. In doing so, we may actually re-discover the sacred. Because the ugly truth is that the nation state is so often more real to us than the cross, and we Christians have often buffered ourselves from the reality of the enchanted world we inhabit, where the divine is actually at play both in the cosmos as well as in the souls of our fellow humans.9

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1 C. John Sommerville. *Religion in the National Agenda: What we mean by religious, spiritual, secular.* (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2009), 14-22.
3 Sommerville, 86-89.

5 Beneke, 222.


7 Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 42, 270.

Religious Faith and the Politics of Hunger

James L. McDonald
Bread for the World

The reality of hunger—internationally and domestically—is staggering, but millions of U.S. Christians, along with other people of faith and conscience, are deeply involved in efforts to address hunger and lift poor people out of poverty. Through their churches, denominations, and church-related development organizations, U.S. Christians provide financial support, volunteer time, or work for agencies that improve the lives of poor people in this country and around the world. Each year 1.6 million U.S. Christians travel to developing countries on short-term mission trips to build schools, churches and health clinics. Here at home they provide food, serve meals, teach reading and math, and provide medical care and legal services. More than three quarters of U.S. congregations report that they and their members are involved in feeding programs of one kind or another: food pantries, soup kitchens, food banks and the like.

This paper lifts up the importance of the politics of hunger for people of faith. There is a strong Biblical foundation and common theological ground for Christians to join together in a quest to end hunger and poverty that embraces both charity and justice. Most U.S. Christians are focused primarily on the charitable response to hunger, giving questions of public policy scant or limited attention. But the presence of chronic widespread hunger in our time is primarily a political problem, which requires attention to public policies and resource allocations. The paper argues that Christians have an important role to play as advocates for public policies that will change the
politics of hunger. When Christians join together as a collective voice calling for an end to hunger, they can be catalysts of major changes in public policy.

The Reality of Hunger

We live in the toughest economic times any of us can remember. But these are even tougher times for poor people, in the United States and around the world. The economic crisis we are living through and struggling with has fallen disproportionately on the world’s poorest people. Until recently the world had been making progress against hunger. In 1970, one in three people around the world went to bed hungry. By 2000, the number of hungry people was one in six. Over those three decades the number of hungry people in the world had been reduced in absolute terms, from 970 million to 800 million, even as the world’s population was rising. In places like China, Chile, Ghana, Vietnam, Brazil, Botswana and Thailand, significant numbers of people have been moving out of poverty and chronic hunger has decreased. This great exodus from poverty could be understood as the experience of God’s liberation in our time, the Exodus Story of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. There is still far too much hunger and poverty in the world, and in the countries named above, but it is important to understand that ending hunger is not an impossible dream. It is feasible and achieving it is sacred work.

The world knows a lot about what it takes to end hunger. The main ingredient is political will, something that ebbs and flows. When a nation’s leaders focus on the problem of hunger, good things happen. It takes the engagement of the whole society – government, the private sector, nongovernmental organizations, religious leaders and ordinary citizens – to make an economy work for everyone, including the most vulnerable. But political leadership is a key element, and people of faith, using the power of their moral voice, can catalyze and motivate that political leadership to step up and do something about hunger.

Poor people in developing countries spend as much as seventy percent of their incomes on food, and mostly on basic commodities such as corn, wheat, sorghum, and rice. So when
the prices of those products, along with the price of oil, soared in 2008, it drove millions of people into poverty, or back into poverty. And even though fuel prices have dropped dramatically and food prices have come down somewhat, the price of food—especially basic food—is still much higher today than it was before 2008. It is likely to remain higher for the foreseeable future. The global recession that began in 2008 added to the burdens faced by poor people. Today more than one billion people worldwide suffer from hunger and malnutrition.

The Great Recession of 2008 and 2009 also hit the United States hard, moving millions more people into poverty and hunger as they lost jobs, houses, savings and investments. In 2009, there were nearly 49 million people in this country – and nearly one in four children – who were living in households that struggled to put food on the table. That represents a 30 percent increase in just three years.

Hunger in the United States is a more hidden phenomenon. It is not as dire, debilitating and destructive as in much of Africa, Asia and Latin America, but its effects are still deeply disturbing and damaging. For some perhaps, panic sets in towards the end of the month when the money runs out, or when the car breaks down or a health crisis occurs. In some households, the family may only have one meal a day, or the mother may go without food so her children can still have something. Sometimes even children go without, for days at a time. And we know that hunger and malnutrition have serious, often life-long, consequences for children and their development.

People are hungry because they do not have enough income to feed themselves and their families. In the United States 40 percent of the people who come to food banks are working families whose wages do not pay them enough. The 2009 U.S. Census Bureau report showed that 40 million Americans live at or below the official federal poverty line of $21,834 for a family of four. If you consider all whose incomes are 200 percent of the poverty line, then 100 million people, almost one-third of the entire U.S. population, live on the edge of poverty. Poverty rates are nearly double among African-Americans and Latinos. The unemployment rate among young
African-American men, ages 18-35, hovers around 50 percent, regardless of what is happening to the rest of the economy.

**Public Policy Advocacy -- Grounded in Scripture**

Christians have a scriptural basis for reflection and action, and a model for action in the person of Jesus. We have the example of the prophets, and of Jesus engaging the political powers of his time. The Bible makes it clear that the witness of Christians to the Gospel needs to include advocacy with governments about their policies toward poor and hungry people.

The Bible is full of stories of hunger and bread, faith and feeding: the story of manna in the wilderness, the gleaning laws in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, the prophets’ calls to Israel to remember the orphan, the widow, the sojourner, the alien, the poor – the most vulnerable. In the words of Isaiah (58:10):

> If you offer your food to the hungry
> and satisfy the needs of the afflicted,
> then your light shall rise in the darkness
> and your gloom be like the noonday.

Jesus’ earthly ministry had hunger, bread and feeding as central elements. The feeding of the multitudes is mentioned in all four Gospels and twice in Matthew (chapters 14 and 15) and Mark (chapters 6 and 8). The Last Supper – a meal shared among friends (and enemies, in the person of Judas) – became a holy act that fed them physically and spiritually, and reminds Christians not only of Jesus and his ministry, but makes his presence real for them and strengthens their lives and ministry.

Christians reaffirm the connection between hunger, bread and feeding every time they say the Lord’s Prayer – “Give us this day our daily bread.” It’s an expression of compassion, caring, and an understanding that Christ has called those who follow him to share our bread with the hungry. But the Bible also clearly says that faith is not just about charity and personal behavior. It’s about justice and the character of our society and the priorities of our government. Moses didn’t go to Pharaoh to ask for compassion and understanding. He demanded justice and liberation. The laws of Moses were not so much about personal
ethics as they were about creating a just, equitable society. The prophets took their demands to Israel’s kings, the governments of their day, and berated them for their shabby treatment of, and disregard for, the poor and vulnerable. “You know, O mortal ones,” said Micah (6:8), “what the Lord requires of you, but to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.” “Let justice roll down like waters,” said Amos (5:24).

The vision of the future painted by all the prophets was not so much about personal goodness as it was about a kingdom, a country, a world. It is a vision of social responsibility, peace and justice. It’s this realm where God is at work, and which God asks people of faith to shape. In his earthly ministry, Jesus began by affirming that vision and connecting himself to it, quoting the words of Isaiah: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor, release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable day of the Lord.” (Luke 4: 14-21)

Jesus didn’t just feed people, he overturned the laws of the Sabbath – political and religious laws – to feed the hungry and heal the sick. And he took his ministry and his message right into Jerusalem, to the very center of religious and political power and authority. His messages of personal responsibility – “Repent and believe the good news of the Gospel” and “the Reign of God is at hand.” – were connected to a political and social reality.

In the story of the Last Judgment (Matthew 25: 31-46), those who stand before the throne are nations, not individuals, not churches. Jesus asks those who follow him to move into the public arena and help to shape the policies and priorities of the nations. In the sweep of history, God sent Jesus to save the whole world – not just some people, or certain types of people, or certain groups, but the entire world. Nations are judged according to how they care for “the least.”

This is an extraordinary claim. When it comes to judging nations, God cares first and foremost what nations did for those who suffer. God does not judge nations according to their political philosophies, the form of their governments, the power
of their economies, or the might of their armies. Not even their creativity, inventiveness, or intellectual sophistication count on the Last Day. What counts is their stewardship of God’s gifts and what they did for those who were hungry, thirsty, naked, or sick, for the prisoner and the stranger in their midst.

The problem of hunger is mostly a political issue. We have enough food in the world. We know what it takes to end hunger. We’ve made progress against hunger and we can end hunger in our time. What we lack is the political will to make it happen. The actions and activities of governments far outweigh the actions and activities of churches and charities, here in the United States and around the world. The food bank movement in the United States burgeoned in the early 1980s, when deep cuts were made in U.S. government’s anti-poverty programs. If Christians are going to address the problem of hunger, we’re going to have to move beyond the kind of charity that reinforces poverty to the kind of assistance that allows people to stand on their own two feet.

Churches and charities in the United States were able to mobilize about $37 billion last year in works of compassion and charity, at home and abroad. But last year, the U.S. government spent $100 billion on our national nutrition programs alone – including food stamps to WIC to school lunches and breakfasts, Meals on Wheels and other senior feeding programs – and about $22 billion on poverty-focused international assistance. One vote in Congress to cut Food Stamps, WIC, or some other nutrition program can practically wipe out all the good things that Christians try to accomplish through our private efforts.

On the other hand, when Christians unite to push for changes in public policies, significant changes can occur. In 1999 and 2000, Bread for the World provided leadership to the U.S. expression of Jubilee 2000, a campaign to address the problem of burgeoning debt in the world’s poorest countries. Bread’s efforts were part of a global campaign in over 60 countries that put pressure on rich, industrialized countries like ours as well as on international financial institutions like the World Bank and IMF to do more. Since then, the United States has provided more than $1 billion toward an international plan
that has now leveraged more than $60 billion in debt relief for more than two dozen countries, many of them in Africa. We were also able to convince policy makers to change their policies so that the savings from debt relief went toward poverty reducing measures like education and health, roads and wells, agriculture and small business development.

Governments have adopted new accountability measures to cut down on corruption and waste. In some cases it is as simple as broadcasting government allocations for education in each school district over the radio so people can keep track of the money and make sure it gets to where it is supposed to go. In other cases, it has meant that governments have made a bigger effort to involve local citizens groups in the planning and implementation of programs. This too is part of the work of Christ, because it means not only that more people are fed, but that people are being given the tools, resources, and hope they need to be able to grow their own food, feed and educate their children, and fight the diseases that decimate their communities. The effort to affect public policy can be very powerful.

Church and State: Common Ground Among Disparate Traditions

Within the Christian tradition, there are various understandings of how the Christian Church should engage the State. But Mark Amstutz shows us that there is common ground among the various strands in defining the role of Christians in public life. He identifies and examines four core principles shared by every tradition within the Christian church: The dignity of persons, the universality and persistence of sin, the need for a limited state, and the imperative for the church to claim and exercise its unique role.

Human Dignity. The dignity and worth of every human being is rooted in the Creation story itself. Humans have been created in the image of God. God’s love is universal. God shows no partiality, but extends grace and mercy to all. Human beings were created with the freedom to choose, to act, and to love, making them co-creators with God. God’s desire for every human being is to live fully in loving relationship to God and to
one another. The dignity of persons is the basis for the pursuit of justice.

**Human Sin.** Sin is the universal human condition. It comes from the failure to love God, neighbor and self. Sin also manifests itself collectively in the institutions and social arrangements at work in every society. The pervasiveness of sin requires human beings to embrace humility, confession, listening and a willingness to change. In the political realm, sin means that we need to establish and operate within systems of mutual accountability.

Only God can save us from our sin and redeem the world. We must try to discern and live in accord with God’s work of redemption. Human efforts to seek justice and the common good are approximations and incomplete. Though our knowledge is partial and our actions are flawed, we are compelled nonetheless by God’s grace in Jesus Christ to love and serve our neighbors, near and far.

**The Limited State.** The imperative of limited political authority is grounded in human dignity and the sovereignty of God. Governments are human institutions, established to promote and uphold basic human rights, maintain order, and serve the common good. Government authority is not absolute but is subject to a higher set of laws and divine judgment. God is the final arbiter of history and will judge the nations based on how they have treated “the least of these.” (Matthew 25)

Amstutz notes, “The idea of a strong but limited state is not only consistent with biblical faith but also consistent with modern democratic practices that emphasize the role of an energetic civil society.” He defines civil society as the mediating institutions – churches, associations, advocacy networks, and other nongovernmental organizations – that foster the social relationships within countries and determine the values, practices and character that underlie the culture.

**The Mission of the Church.** The mission of the Church is to proclaim the Good News of the Gospel in word and deed. Amstutz notes that each tradition has its own distinctive
approach to that task, with slightly different emphases. These
differences affect the way each tradition engages in public life.
But in every tradition, the Church reserves to itself a role and
responsibility separate and distinct from any government,
political party or political leader. The church must protect its
autonomy and refrain from engaging in partisan politics.

Amstutz suggests there should also be a proactive role
for the church in relationship to the state. The church, he says,
should keep a basic set of moral values and biblical norms in
front of decision-makers as they shape public policy.

**Bread for the World – Christians addressing the politics of hunger**

Bread for the World (hereinafter Bread) is a model of
Amstutz’s last point. Bread is a collective Christian voice urging
our nation’s decision makers to end hunger at home and abroad.
Bread members work to change policies, programs and
conditions that allow hunger and poverty to persist. It does more
outright lobbying on poverty issues than any other organization
in the country. Its grassroots network is active in every
congressional district and mobilizes hundreds of thousands of
thoughtful constituent contacts with Congress each year. Bread
plays a significant role in U.S. church life, often leading the
engagement of diverse religious bodies on public policy issues
that are important to poor people. Bread’s staff includes strong
teams for lobbying and policy analysis, media and
communications, grassroots organizing, administration and
fundraising, and the enlistment of other organizations in
advocacy. Bread for the World Institute, a 501(c)(3) affiliate,
does analysis on hunger and how to solve it. It provides
education on faith, policies, and advocacy methods throughout
Bread’s network and beyond.

In the United States, the impetus for expanded action for
hungry people has seldom come from political leaders. Rather, it
has come from concerned citizens and religious communities at
the grassroots. In 1974, the Reverend Arthur Simon founded
Bread for the World. He was a pastor in a low-income
neighborhood. Art’s church helped needy families in the
community and contributed to international relief, but he
understood that structural change needed to come via public policy and that members of Congress respond to their constituents. A lobbyist’s viewpoint gains weight with a lawmaker when the message also says, “I am a voter in your district.” The Washington-based advocacy staff of Bread may be able to influence legislation by talking with members of Congress or their aides. But legislators’ estimates of voter support are more influential. Now with 90 staff and a budget of more than $12 million annually, Bread for the World is able to mobilize roughly 250,000 letters, emails and phone calls to Congress each year. One of Bread’s distinctive strengths is an extensive network of committed grassroots activists. Bread has a membership of 72,000. It has an activist network of some 20,000 who are more deeply engaged with Bread. Its activist base also includes a growing group of online activists.

Among Bread’s network of activists are approximately 900 grassroots leaders, who are committed to the long-term work of strengthening Bread’s capacity. Their commitment goes beyond writing a letter or attending a workshop or event. They work to involve others in Bread’s mission. Some spearhead the Offering of Letters in their own churches. Some write letters to the editor. Some take the lead on a Bread Quick Line or organize a local Bread group.

Bread has a network of nearly 4000 churches that touch at least a million Christians across more than 50 denominations. Some 1,500 of these congregations are considered members because they either conduct an Offering of Letters or contribute financially. An additional 2,500 congregations celebrate “Bread for the World Sunday,” which lifts up the possibility and feasibility of ending hunger in God’s world. Nearly 800 congregations consider themselves “covenant churches,” indicating a deep, sustained commitment to Bread’s mission.

The congregations that Bread touches reflect the religious spectrum and have varying degrees of engagement. Some are interested in lifting up the issue of hunger but are not ready to conduct an Offering of Letters. Others conduct Offerings of Letters and/or celebrate Bread for the World
Sunday once a year. Some are fully engaged with Bread as part of a larger commitment to peace and justice ministries.

To Bread members and activists, the call to act on behalf of poor and hungry people is clear, urgent and powerful. But many Christians do not yet see the connection between their faith, their citizenship, public policy and hunger. Bread helps Christians understand those connections and shows them how Bread can provide a way for Christians to answer God’s call and live out their faith. Embracing advocacy for poor and hungry people helps the Church preach the whole Gospel and complete its hunger ministries.

Bread has an unparalleled ability to educate and mobilize a faith-motivated, politically savvy, well-informed and deeply committed grassroots network. The uniqueness and strength of Bread’s grassroots network sets it apart from virtually every other organization that focuses on hunger and poverty.

**An Expanding, Broader Movement to Address Poverty and Hunger**

More generally speaking, religious communities form a core constituency against hunger. Many national religious bodies have strong programs of assistance to hungry people, and most of them also make some effort to teach their people about relevant public policies. More than 90 percent of Bread for the World’s members are Christian people who work for global justice as part of their religious lives. MAZON, the main Jewish anti-hunger organization, includes an advocacy component in 40 percent of its grants. At the community level, more than three-fourths of religious congregations engage their people in assistance to hungry people.

Though religious leaders could do more to emphasize justice for hungry people, religious bodies are a stronger, more consistent voice on hunger policy issues than any other set of institutions in the United States. The record of U.S. churches in advocacy for hungry people demonstrates the possibility of mobilizing ‘non-poor’ groups in working for ‘pro-poor’ policies.
One of the most hopeful developments in the U.S. politics of hunger is that agencies that directly assist poor and hungry people are becoming more active in the politics of hunger. The global economic slowdown and adjustment policies of the 1980s convinced many U.S.-based international charities to speak up within the United States for the people they serve in poor countries. InterAction, which includes nearly all U.S. charities that work overseas, now leads campaigns to increase U.S. funding for international relief and development. Catholic Relief Services, Church World Service, Oxfam, World Vision, CARE and other private voluntary organizations have also developed strong advocacy programs of their own.

A parallel movement is coalescing among the charities that help hungry people in the United States. The major church-based assistance networks – Catholic Charities, Lutheran Services in America and the Salvation Army – speak out on policy issues that affect the people they serve. Over the last decade, Feeding America (formerly called America’s Second Harvest) – a national network of food banks that supports about 60,000 direct service agencies – has developed a strong program of advocacy for hungry people within the United States. About a million workers – mostly volunteers – provide help to hungry Americans in these agencies, and Feeding America has begun to engage them as advocates on domestic hunger. Feeding America has also become more open to work on international hunger as well.

Meanwhile, governmental institutions in the United States are reaching out to work more with community groups. The Faith-based Initiative embraced by both the Bush and Obama administrations is part of a much larger trend in this regard. Governments around the world are connecting in new ways to nongovernmental organizations, and some non-governmental groups are using this opening to push for improvements in public programs. For example, churches and charities all over the world have worked together to monitor the implementation of debt relief. Grassroots groups in poor countries are pushing from below to make sure that it really benefits poor and hungry people, and international charities like Oxfam and World Vision help them with advocacy funding and
political backing in Washington and European capitals. Yet religious and charitable organizations are not strong enough to win the progress against hunger that is possible. Commitments from major foundations – notably Gates, Hewlett, Kellogg, Rockefeller, Ford, Annie E. Casey, McKnight, and Knight – are also an important catalyst.5

In another promising development, leaders from a diverse array of institutions have recently come together as the Alliance to End Hunger. The purpose of the Alliance is to engage diverse institutions more deeply in an effort to win the shifts in U.S. public will that could dramatically reduce hunger in the United States and internationally. The Alliance includes more than eighty large institutions, including Christian, Muslim and Jewish groups, foundations, corporations, government agencies, and universities. The Alliance has funded public opinion surveys and efforts to raise the hunger issue in U.S. presidential elections, cultivated anti-hunger champions in Congress, and promoted the development of hunger-free communities through political commitment and broad community participation.

The American public shows increasing readiness to support stronger efforts to reduce hunger. A nationwide survey of U.S. voters commissioned by the Alliance to End Hunger found that most U.S. voters want their government to do more to reduce hunger in our country and around the world, but that the traditional way hunger has been discussed – by Democrats, Republican and most advocacy organizations – is unappealing and often ineffectual. Voters reject one-dimensional calls for more funds to help hungry people or tougher insistence that poor people take responsibility for themselves. Voters are skeptical of promises to resolve the problem totally, and an excessive focus on the neediness, not the potential, of the poor. Voters want initiatives designed specifically to promote independence, approaches that involve both governmental and nongovernmental organizations. Both political parties have the potential to take advantage of this deeply rooted, emotional topic.
Recent Alliance polling also indicates that there are certain groups who are most likely to make fighting hunger their top voting issue. One of them is those who are hungry or at risk for hunger. This group is just as eager to see hunger addressed internationally as domestically. The polling also indicates that older women, regardless of race, and African Americans, particularly African American women, are more likely to see hunger and poverty as top voting issues. The polling also showed that Latinos and young people are more likely to embrace hunger as a voting issue.

Bread has been working closely with African American churches for more than 20 years. We have built strong relationships with the leadership in many African American denominations, including the three women's missionary societies of the AME, AME Zion and CME denominations. We know that thousands of letters are written each year in support of Bread’s Offerings of Letters, primarily through national, regional or state gatherings. Bread is not as well known and embraced in local African American congregations.

Bread’s outreach to Latino churches is more recent than to African American congregations. Over the last six years, we have begun to develop deeper relationships with Latino religious leaders and congregations, especially among Catholics and Pentecostals. We have had consultations with Latino church leaders to build relationships and understand better how we can work together. We are producing more of our materials in Spanish as well as English. The political will to end hunger must come from above and below. Grassroots efforts can be highly effective, but only governments have the ability to launch major initiatives to fight hunger and poverty.

What makes Bread strong after more than thirty-five years is the dedication, commitment, faith and passion of our 72,000 members. Every year people in churches and college campuses across the United States take a Sunday or two to learn about an issue before Congress that could make a difference in the lives of poor and hungry people. And then they write a letter to their members of Congress, asking them to support legislation that Bread has helped shape.
Those letters make a difference. Year after year, Bread members have won far-reaching changes for hungry and poor people. The U.S. government has tripled funding for effective programs that help developing countries in Africa and other poor parts of the world, and this would not have happened without the persistent advocacy of Bread for the World members. Bread’s advocacy leadership has produced some impressive results:

- Twenty million more African children are in school. Bread led the legislative coalition of the Jubilee Campaign. Congressional forgiveness of generations-old debts allowed funds to expand educational opportunities.
- More than 8 million low-income pregnant women and young children receive nutritious food each year in the United States. A core issue for Bread since its beginning has been expansion and improvement of the WIC program, which provides vital nutrients to low-income pregnant and nursing women and children up to age five. This program is one of the most important safeguards against hunger in the United States.
- More than 100 million children are immunized annually. Bread helped craft and pass the legislation to establish the Child Survival Fund. Since its founding, the number of young children dying each day of malnutrition and preventable diseases has fallen from 40,000 to 26,400.

Conclusion

The solution to world hunger is not a matter of charity alone. It requires justice. The word “charity” in the King James sense means “love,” but in this day and age charity has come to mean the giving of the haves to the have-nots. Charity only flows one way, from the wealthier donor to the needy recipient. It is a transaction. With charity, no one is changed, no circumstances are changed, and no relationship is changed between donor and recipient. Charity salves the conscious of the privileged, but it maintains an unacceptable status quo for those in need.

Doing justice means transformation. Everything is changed; the people, the circumstances, and the relationships.
Justice is the act of establishing or restoring broken relationships that respect the dignity and honor the worth of each person. Justice involves a partnership between the parties involved. Each comes to the table as an equal in God’s eyes. Each brings something to the table. The solution to the problem is negotiated, and each must change to accommodate the new relationship. In doing justice there is a New Creation.

The Scriptures show us the way in which communities figured out a new way to help those who were hungry. In Deuteronomy, the community established gleaning laws, a form of public policy. In the book of Acts, the early apostles reacted to public criticism of their program and established a diaconate to change the way they carried out their responsibilities to hungry people and ensure fairness. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus’ leadership transformed a disparate group of hungry people into a community of compassion and justice. Compassionate laws, better public policies, and moral leadership – each of these is needed to address hunger in this country and around the world.

Christians and other people of faith have an important role to play today in the shaping of public policies to end hunger and poverty. As citizens and as constituents, they are part of the U.S. political system. Their actions and inactions, engagement and apathy are reflected in the political calculations and public policy decisions of lawmakers and other national leaders. As people of faith, they have a recognized voice of moral authority that can result in more compassionate laws and better public policies to support the efforts of hungry and poor people to feed themselves and lift themselves out of poverty.

We live in an extraordinary time of opportunity and challenge. Over the last four decades hundreds of millions of people have escaped from poverty and hunger. But the current global economic recession has slowed and even reversed some of that progress. Even so, the possibility of continuing to make dramatic progress is tantalizing within reach. This is a moment when Christians should come out from under their bushel baskets and let their light shine!
1 This figure comes from comparing statistics from the National Center for Charitable Statistics (NCCS), the national clearinghouse of data on the nonprofit sector in the United States, and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University. Both estimate total charitable giving in 2009 to be just over $300 billion. Both estimate that giving to international affairs and to human services represents about 12 to 14 percent of the total. Cf., http://nccs.urban.org/statistics/quickfacts.cfm and http://www.philanthropy.iupui.edu

2 See Sandra F. Joireman, ed., Church, State, and Citizen: Christian Approaches to Political Engagement (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), which discusses how Christian attitudes toward engagement in the realm of politics have been shaped by the historical and theological roots of seven Christian traditions: Catholic, Lutheran, Reformed, Anabaptist, Anglican, Evangelical, and Pentecostal.


4 Amstutz, Church, State, and Citizen, 176.

5 These are the top eight foundations for both domestic and international poverty work. There are many more. For a more complete list see: http://foundationcenter.org/focus/gpf/poverty/
Faith and the Founders of the American Republic:
Distortion and Consensus

Mark David Hall
George Fox College

The faith of America’s founders, and the role of religion in the republic, has been a source of controversy since the nation’s inception. Debates are particularly fierce when they concern religious liberty and the proper relationship between church and state. Arguments on these questions are often framed in terms of the founders’ views, but their positions are regularly distorted. A common error is to generalize from the views of a few famous founders in order to argue that the founders as a group were deists who desired a strict separation between church and state.

A good example of this phenomenon is Edwin S. Gaustad’s *Faith of Our Fathers*, which explores the founders’ attitudes toward religion by carefully considering the views of Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, and George 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. 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, Geoffrey R. Stone, and many others.⁵

With slight variations, these authors tell the following story: the founders were deists who believed in a creator god who established moral standards, but they rejected traditional Christian doctrines on issues such as the trinity, incarnation, atonement, and the Bible’s divine origin. Most abandoned their ancestors’ intolerant views and embraced religious liberty. Although some founders thought the state should support religion, the separationist views of Jefferson and Madison were written into the Constitution and First Amendment. Puritanical forces held out the longest in New England, but by 1833 even Massachusetts disestablished its state church.

Jurists, scholars, and popular writers who make these arguments usually concede that not all Americans in the founding era were as “enlightened” as the famous founders, but they often 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 specialized academic articles and monographs, but their views are regularly neglected in mainstream discourse.⁶

In this essay I first address the claim that most of the founders were deists. I show that there is little evidence to support this assertion. I then move to the even more implausible claim that America’s founders desired to build a wall of separation between church and state. I contend that not only is there little evidence to support this argument; there is a great deal of evidence against it. After discussing three aspects of church-state relations about which most founders agreed, I conclude by considering implications of my argument particularly relevant for those of us at liberal arts colleges.
Distortion #1: The Founders Were Deists

“[T]he founding fathers themselves, largely deists in their orientation and sympathy...”
--Edwin Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America*

“[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.”
--Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*

“[M]ost of the American founders embraced some form of Deism, not historically orthodox Christianity.”
--Richard Hughes, *Myths America Lives By*

“[D]eistic beliefs played a central role in the framing of the American republic” . . . “[t]he founding generation viewed religion, and particularly religion’s relation to government, through and Enlightenment lens that was deeply skeptical of orthodox Christianity.”

“[T]he Founding Fathers were. . . skeptical men of the Enlightenment who questioned each and every received idea they had been taught.”
--Brooke Allen, *Moral Minority*

“[M]any of America’s ‘Founding Fathers’ were not Christians in any orthodox sense”
--Steven J. Keillor, *This Rebellious House: American History and the Truth of Christianity*

These claims are clear and powerful. But what evidence exists to support them? There are less than a handful of cases where founders publically embraced deism or rejected orthodox Christian doctrines. In 1725, during first English sojourn, Franklin published an essay that revealed deistic sentiments, but he quickly regretted doing so and throughout his adult life he kept his skeptical views private. Ethan Allen published *Reason the Only Oracle of Man*, the first American book advocating deism, in 1784. A decade later, Thomas Paine published his defense of deism entitled *The Age of Reason*, but he was born and raised in England and lived only 20 of his 77 years in America, so one can reasonably ask if he should be counted as
an American founder. Allen’s book sold fewer than 200 copies, and after its publication he played no role in American politics. Paine wrote and published his volumes in Europe, and when he returned to America in 1802 he was vilified because of them. These cases suggest that whatever attraction deism had among a few elites, expounding such views in public was quite imprudent.9

John Adams and Thomas Jefferson clearly rejected orthodox Christianity, but they went to great lengths to keep their religious views far from the public’s eye. Virtually all of the texts that reveal their true beliefs were letters written to family members or close friends that were marked “private,” and in some cases they were never sent (presumably because they were not sure the recipients could be trusted). Jefferson’s relatively minor lapses from this rule of secrecy, such as when he wrote in Notes on the State of Virginia that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg,” came close to costing him the election of 1800.10

The other three founders regularly referred to as deists are Washington, Madison, and Hamilton. Yet to my knowledge no writer has ever produced a public or private letter, journal entry, or text showing that these men rejected orthodox Christianity or embraced deism. The case that they did so is almost entirely negative. It rests on some combination of observations that they: seldom used familiar biblical appellations for God or Jesus Christ, did not regularly attend church, chose not to become communicants, and/or committed immoral acts.11 Some of these charges are suspect, yet even if they are true they do not necessarily show that these men embraced deism or rejected orthodox Christianity.12 And in the cases of Washington and Madison there are solid works arguing that their religious views and practices were well within the bounds of orthodox Christianity.13

Before proceeding, it should be noted that if deism includes the belief that God does not interfere in human history, then a good case can be made that none of the men mentioned above were deists as all spoke or wrote of God intervening in the
affairs of men and nations. However, some definitions of deism allow for God’s intervention in human events, and if we use one of these it is possible to make a plausible case that five famous founders (six if one counts Paine) were deists. Yet if these men were not representative of other founders, this finding suggests little with respect to the founding generation.

Consider for a moment the background and experiences of the six founders regularly discussed by scholars on these issues. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison were southern Anglican plantation owners. Alexander Hamilton was born and raised in the British West Indies, and Thomas Paine was born and raised in England. In an era where few people travelled internationally, Jefferson and Adams spent significant time in Europe, and Franklin lived most of the last thirty-five years of his life in Britain and France. The only member of a Reformed church among the famous founders is John Adams, but like some of his fellow Congregationalists (primarily in and around Boston) he was moving toward Unitarianism.

By way of contrast, in his magisterial history of religion in America, Sydney Ahlstrom observed that the Reformed tradition was “the religious heritage of three-fourths of the American people in 1776.” Similarly, historian Harry Stout states that prior to the War for Independence “three out of four colonists were connected with Reformed denominations (mostly Congregational and Presbyterian).” These figures may be high—neither scholar explains or defends them—but a plethora of studies demonstrate that Calvinist churches dominated New England and were well represented throughout the rest of the nation. With the exception of John Adams, these Americans are unrepresented by the six famous founders regularly discussed by those who contend the founders were deists.

Adams was certainly not the only member of a Reformed congregation to embrace deism in the founding era, but an excellent argument can be made that he is quite unrepresentative of civic leaders from the Reformed tradition. Recently, I have had occasion to look fairly carefully at the religious views of a number of founders from this tradition. I
have found virtually no reason to doubt, and much evidence to indicate, that the following Reformed founders were orthodox Christians (and in many cases even good Calvinists): Samuel Adams, Elias Boudinot, Eliphalet Dyer, Oliver Ellsworth, Matthew Griswold, Benjamin Huntington, Samuel Huntington, William Paterson, Tapping Reeve, Jesse Root, Roger Sherman, John Treadwell, Jonathan Trumbull, William Williams, James Wilson, John Witherspoon, and Oliver Wolcott.17

One might object that these seventeen founders do not represent the entire founding generation, which is true, but they are a better representatives of the 75% of Americans who might reasonably be classified as Calvinists than the five or six most famous founders. It is likely that, if one were to focus on elite Anglicans, one would find more evidence of deism in the era, but (1) there were not many elite Anglicans in America and, (2) one would find indisputably pious and orthodox men such as John Jay, Patrick Henry, and Henry Laurens in this group. Because most founders did not leave many letters, diaries, or other documents that shed light on their religious convictions, it is often difficult to discern much more than which church particular founders attended and/or joined. But students of the founding era should be careful not to read too much into this lack of evidence—and they should certainly not extrapolate from the absence of texts to the conclusion that these founders embraced deism.18

Space constraints make it impossible to present evidence that the examples of “orthodox” founders listed above were, in fact, orthodox Christians. Admittedly, the case is stronger for some than others. Yet my argument here is not that most founders were orthodox and pious, but that there is precious little evidence to suggest that most of them were deists. Scholars who contend that “most of the American founders embraced some form of Deism, not historically orthodox Christianity” must either find additional evidence to support such assertions or show that Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, Hamilton, and Paine represent the religious views of their fellow founders. If they cannot, they should limit their claims to these men—and if they are careful scholars they should, in the absence of more compelling evidence, remove Washington, Madison,
and Hamilton from their lists of famous founders who were deists.

**Distortion #2: The Founders Desired the Strict Separation of Church and State**

Questions regarding the religious beliefs of America’s founders are important and interesting, but distortions of their views concerning the proper relationship between church and state have had far more profound implications for contemporary law and public policy. For instance, 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% have appealed to the founders and/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 reference specific founders to cast light on the meaning of the religion clauses, 79% of their appeals have been to Jefferson or Madison, while only 21% of their appeals have been to 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 Congress framed the amendment).

Not only have justices tended to favor a limited number of founders, they have focused disproportionately on select texts such as Madison’s *Memorial and Remonstrance* (1785) and *Detached Memoranda* (c. 1817) and Jefferson’s *Bill for Religious Liberty* (1786) and letter to the Danbury Baptist (1802) when arguing that the founders desired the strict separation of church and state. It is not unreasonable for jurists, academics, and popular writers to cite these documents if they think them to be eloquent, progressive, or correct. However, if they believe that these texts represent the founders’ views on church-state relations, they need to show that the documents actually reflect
such a consensus. In fact, in many respects these texts do not even characterize the actions taken by Jefferson and Madison, and documents such as Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists and Madison’s Detached Memoranda are quite unrepresentative of the founders’ views on church-state relations.21

Madison and Jefferson were indisputably great men who had significant influence in the founding era and whose ideas have come to have an important impact on church-state relations in America. But they did not act alone. Let me briefly discuss just one of their colleagues, Roger Sherman, in order to help make two points: first, even if scholars want to limit discussions of America’s founders to “important” or “key” founders, this relatively small group should be expanded beyond the famous founders mentioned above. Second, with respect to the influence on the First Amendment, I hope to highlight the absurdity of focusing on the “contributions” of a man who was not immediately involved in framing or ratifying the amendment (Jefferson) and ignoring the contributions of a founder who was intimately involved in the process (Sherman).

Roger Sherman was the only founder to sign the Declaration and Resolves (1774), the Articles of Association (1774), the Declaration of Independence (1776), the Articles of Confederation (1777, 1778), and the Constitution (1787). He was on the five-man committee that drafted the Declaration of Independence, and he was a critical participant in the Constitutional Convention of 1787. David Brian Robertson has recently demonstrated in my discipline’s premiere journal that Sherman often outmaneuvered Madison at the Federal Convention, and he suggests that the “political synergy between Madison and Sherman . . . very well may have been necessary for the Constitution’s adoption.” Throughout his years of national service Sherman remained active in the upper house of Connecticut’s General Assembly and as a justice on the state’s Superior Court. In 1783 he and the aptly named Richard Law revised all of Connecticut’s statutes. Among Sherman’s contributions was a religious liberty statute entitled “An Act for securing the Rights of Conscience in Matters of Religion, to Christians of every Denomination in this State.”22
Like Madison, Sherman was elected to serve as a Representative in the first federal Congress. Although he did not believe a bill of rights was necessary, he served on the eleven-person committee that reported constitutional amendments to the House where he penned the only handwritten draft of the Bill of Rights still in existence. After the first major House debate on the proposed amendments, he, Egbert Benson, and Theodore Sedgwick were appointed to a committee to “prepare an introduction to and arrangement of Articles of Amendment.” After further changes were made in both houses, Sherman, Madison, and John Vining constituted the House delegation to a conference committee that reconciled the House and Senate versions of the Bill of Rights. Madison may have headed the House delegation, but he faced a Senate delegation led by Sherman’s protégé, Oliver Ellsworth. One of Sherman’s most important contributions was to convince his colleagues to place the amendments after the original text of the Constitution, not within the document as proposed by Madison.

Given Sherman’s importance in the founding era and his intimate involvement in drafting the First Amendment, it is noteworthy that when Supreme Court justices have used history to interpret the First Amendment’s religion clauses they have made 189 distinct references to Madison, 112 references to Jefferson, but have mentioned Sherman only three times. Similarly, academic literature on the founders’ views of religious liberty and church-state relations has virtually ignored Sherman. One reason for this neglect is that Sherman falls outside the popular narrative insofar as he was a serious a Calvinist who thought the state should encourage and support Christianity. Even more worrisome to supporters of the strict separation of church and state, there are good reasons to believe Sherman’s views on church-state relations are far more representative of his fellow founders than those found in Jefferson’s letter to the Danbury Baptists or Madison’s Detached Memoranda.

Distortion #3: False Complexity

Before discussing widely shared views held by America’s founders regarding church-state relations, one last distortion should be mentioned. Like many distortions it
contains an element of truth, in this case more truth than the first two distortions discussed in this essay. But it is, nevertheless, misleading. Some jurists, scholars, and popular authors contend that one cannot speak of the founders’ view of a particular issue because they were individuals who differed among themselves. This is certainly true, and on some matters large number of founders can be found on different sides of a particular controversy. With respect to religious liberty and church-state relations in the founding era, however, there were broad areas of agreement among America’s political leaders.25

To argue that one cannot generalize about the founding generation because founders like Sherman and Jefferson had different views is similar to saying that because Michael Steele and Barak Obama have political disagreements that one cannot generalize about the political commitments of African-Americans today. Of course one must be careful and nuanced when discussing these commitments, but clearly one can make meaningful claims about, say, the voting behavior of African-Americans. In the same way, it is possible to identify three significant areas of consensus among America’s founders with respect to religious liberty and church-state relations.26

Consensus #1: Religious Liberty Must Be Protected.

We begin with the least controversial claim, that the founders were committed to providing extensive protection to religious liberty. For many, this conviction was based upon the theological conviction that men and women have a duty to worship God as their consciences dictate. A good illustration of this is George Mason’s draft of Article XVI of Virginia’s Declaration of Rights. It reads:

That as Religion, or the Duty which we owe to our
divine and omnipotent Creator, and the Manner of
discharging it, can be governed only by Reason and
Conviction, not by Force or Violence; and therefore that
all Men should enjoy the fullest Toleration in the
Exercise of Religion, according to the Dictates of
Conscience, unpunished and unrestrained by the
Magistrate…
James Madison, in his first significant public act, objected to the use of “toleration” in the article, believing that it implied that religious liberty was a grant from the civil state that could be revoked at will. The Virginia Convention agreed, and Article XVI, which had profound influence on subsequent state constitutions and the national bill of rights, was amended to make it clear that “the free exercise of religion” is a right, not a privilege granted by the state.27

By the end of the revolutionary era every state constitution offered significant protection of religious liberty. The federal constitution of 1787 did not, but only because most of its supporters believed the national government did not have the delegated power to pass laws interfering with religious beliefs or practices. In face of popular outcry, the first Congress proposed and the states ratified a constitutional amendment prohibiting Congress from restricting the free exercise of religion. The exact scope of religious liberty protected by this provision is subject to debate, but at a minimum it prohibits Congress from, in the words of James Madison, compelling “men to worship God in any manner contrary to their conscience.”28

Consensus #2: States Should Have Established Churches Only If They Promote True Religion

Americans in the late eighteenth century were thoroughly familiar with what it meant to have an established church. England had (and still has) an established church and at least nine of the original thirteen colonies did as well. Although establishments took a variety of forms, they generally entailed the state providing favorable treatment for one denomination—treatment which almost always included financial support. After independence most states either disestablished their churches (particularly states where the Church of England was previously established) or moved to a system of “plural” or “multiple” establishments. In either case arguments were usually framed in terms of which arrangement would be best for Christianity.

A good illustration of the last point may be found in two petitions from Westmorland county that arrived at the Virginia General Assembly on the same day regarding Patrick Henry’s
1784 proposal to provide state funds to a variety of churches. The first supported Henry’s bill arguing, much like public sector unions today, that state subsidies are necessary to keep salaries high enough to attract the best candidates into the ministry. Opponents of Henry’s plan disagreed, responding that assessments were against “the spirit of the Gospel,” that “the Holy Author of our Religion” did not require state support, and that Christianity was far purer before “Constantine first established Christianity by human laws.” Rejecting their fellow petitioners’ arguments that government support was necessary to attract good candidates to the ministry, they argued that clergy should

[M]anifest to the world “that they are inwardly moved by the Holy Ghost to take upon them that Office,” that they seek the good of Mankind and not worldly Interest. Let their doctrines be scriptural and their Lives upright. Then shall Religion (if departed) speedily return, and Deism be put to open shame, and its dreaded Consequences removed.29

This petition was significantly more popular than James Madison’s now famous “Memorial and Remonstrance” which was written in the same context. Madison’s memorial has often been referenced to shine light on the First Amendment, and has even been reprinted twice as an appendix to U.S. Supreme Court religion clause opinions. It is regularly treated as a rationalist, secular argument for religious liberty, but as in the Virginia Declaration the right to religious liberty is treated as unalienable “because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.” As well, Madison argued that “ecclesiastical establishments, instead of maintaining the purity and efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation” and “the bill is adverse to the diffusion of the light of Christianity.”30

America’s founders were committed to the idea that religion (by which virtually all of them meant Christianity) was necessary for public happiness and political prosperity. This view was so widespread that James H. Hutson has called it “the founders’ syllogism.”31 The only question, with respect to establishments, was whether they helped or hurt faith. Thomas
E. Buckley, in his excellent study of church-state relations in postwar Virginia, notes that “the key to understanding the nature of the religious settlement in Virginia rests with the dissenters, the members of the evangelical churches, for they wrote and signed the overwhelming majority of the memorials which engulfed the legislature that year…” These evangelicals opposed state funding of churches largely because they concluded that it hurt rather than helped true Christianity.

Consensus #3: Religion in the Public Square

In 1802, Thomas Jefferson penned a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in which he famously commented that the First Amendment created a “wall of separation between Church & State.” This metaphor lay dormant with respect to the Supreme Court’s establishment clause jurisprudence until 1947, when Justice Hugo Black seized upon it as the defining statement of the founders’ views on church-state relations. As appealing as the wall metaphor is to contemporary proponents of separating church and state, it obscures far more than it illuminates. Leaving aside the fact that Jefferson was in Europe when the Constitution and Bill of Rights were written, that the letter was a profoundly political document, and that Jefferson only used the metaphor once in his life, it is not even clear that it sheds useful light upon his views, much less those of his far more traditional colleagues.

Jefferson issued calls for prayer and fasting as governor of Virginia, and in his revision of Virginia’s statutes he drafted bills stipulating when the governor could appoint “days of public fasting and humiliation, or thanksgiving” and to punish “Disturbers of Religious Worship and Sabbath Breakers.” As a member of the Continental Congress he proposed that the nation adopt a seal containing the image of Moses “extending his hand over the sea, caus[ing] it to overwhelm Pharaoh” and the motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.” He closed his second Inaugural Address by encouraging all Americans to join him in seeking “the favor of that Being in whose hands we are, who led our forefathers, as Israel of old…,” and two days after completing his letter to the Danbury Baptists he attended church
services in the U.S. Capitol where he heard John Leland, the great Baptist minister and opponent of religious establishments, preach.35

The point of the preceding paragraph is not that Jefferson was an orthodox Christian who wanted a union between church and state. He was a deist, and his public arguments and actions demonstrate that he favored a stricter separation between church and state than virtually any other founder. Yet even Jefferson, at least in his actions, did not attempt to completely remove religion from the public square. And what Jefferson did not completely exclude, most founders embraced.

This point may be illustrated in a variety of ways, but a particularly useful exercise is to look at the first Congress, the body that crafted the First Amendment. One of Congress’s first acts was to agree to appoint and pay congressional chaplains. Shortly after doing so it reauthorized the Northwest Ordinance (originally passed by the Confederation Congress), which held that “Religion, Morality, and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, Schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged.” More significantly for understanding the First Amendment, on the day after the House approved the final wording of the Bill of Rights, Elias Boudinot, later president of the American Bible Society, proposed that the president recommend a day of public thanksgiving and prayer. In response to objections that such a practice mimicked European customs or should be done by the states, Roger Sherman “justified the practice of thanksgiving, on any signal event, not only as a laudable one in itself, but as warranted by a number of precedents in holy writ: for instance, the solemn thanksgivings and rejoicings which took place in the time of Solomon, after the building of the temple, was a case in point. This example, he thought, worthy of Christian imitation on the present occasion; and he would agree with the gentleman who moved the resolution.” The House agreed and appointed Boudinot, Sherman, and Peter Sylvester to a committee to communicate with their counterparts in the Senate. Congress’s eventual request resulted in George Washington’s famous 1789
Thanksgiving Day Proclamation. The text of his proclamation is worth quoting at some length:

Whereas it is the duty of all Nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey his will, to be grateful for his benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor.

I do recommend and assign Thursday, November 26th, to be devoted by the People of these States to the service of that great and glorious Being, who is the beneficent Author of all the good that was, that is, or that will be.

And also that we may then unite in most humbly offering our prayers and supplications to the great Lord and Ruler of Nations and beseech Him to pardon our national and other transgressions, to enable us all, whether in public or private stations, to perform our several and relative duties properly and punctually; to render our national government a blessing to all the People.

Similar proclamations were routinely issued by the Continental and Confederation Congresses and Presidents Washington, Adams, and Madison. Jefferson, it is true, refused to issue these proclamations, yet as suggested above he “employed rhetoric in official utterances that, in terms of religious content, was virtually indistinguishable from the traditional Thanksgiving Day proclamations.”

America’s founders did not want Congress to establish a national church, and many opposed establishments at the state level as well. However, there was widespread agreement that governments could promote and encourage Christianity, and that it was appropriate for elected officials to make religious arguments in the public square. There was virtually no support for contemporary visions for separating church and state that would have political leaders avoid religious language and require public spaces to be stripped of religious symbols.
Conclusions

The most obvious implication of this essay is that if we hope to speak about “the founders’” views that we must do more than look at five or six famous founders, no matter how brilliant and important they were. Jurists, scholars, and popular writers should consider carefully the views of other founders—particularly if there are good reasons to believe that these views were more widespread than those held by their more famous colleagues. Even writers who believe that history is made by a few great men and women should see the necessity of considering the views of founders like Roger Sherman—and Sherman is far from being the only non-famous founder whose contributions are regularly neglected by students of the founding era.37

I presume that it is not particularly controversial to contend that one should not generalize from the views of a few unrepresentative individuals to an entire group, but this is exactly what many writers have done. The reasons they have done so contain lessons particularly relevant for those of us at liberal arts colleges. It seems to me that some combination of advocacy, dishonesty, gullibility, laziness, cowardliness, and/or carelessness helps explain why authors repeat claims that the founders as a group were deists who desired the strict separation of church and state. These are strong words, and I do not wish to question the integrity of any specific person quoted in this essay. Yet if my argument is correct, it is only reasonable to consider how respected scholars, jurists, and writers could make these inaccurate claims.

Dishonesty seems particularly prevalent in arguments regarding the founders’ views of church-state relations. Advocates of the strict separation of church and state have an enormous incentive to pretend that the founders shared Jefferson’s and Madison’s views. Attorneys and jurists are famous for engaging in “law office history,” and it seems clear many have done so on this issue. Obviously good teachers, scholars, and writers should not be dishonest—even if they are profoundly committed to a particular cause.
In other instances, it may be the case that individuals who make erroneous claims about the founders and religion are simply gullible or lazy. Authors who are not experts on the subject but who venture to write on it anyway are particularly likely to rely uncritically on a few secondary sources or selectively edited collections of primary sources. This should serve as a caution to those of us who are tempted to hold forth on subjects about which we know little. Either we should refuse to do so, or we should take the time to do the basic primary source research ourselves. At a bare minimum, we should consult the best secondary works, and ideally works from different perspectives.

Christian academics may be inclined to deemphasize the influence of faith on the founders or their willingness to permit civil authorities to encourage Christianity because of the fear that they will be lumped together with religious polemists (perhaps “popularizers” is a better word) who write on these subjects. Authors such as Peter Marshall, David Manuel, John Eidsmoe, Tim LaHaye, Gary Amos, Richard Gardiner, and David Barton may make some good points, but they overstate their claims, offer poor historical arguments, and/or ignore scholarly conventions. Being associated with such polemists can be devastating for academics at non-religious institutions, and it can even create difficulties for those at Christian colleges and universities. Yet one would hope that scholars in general and Christian scholars in particular, would have the courage to follow evidence wherever it leads.38

Finally, in many instances scholars begin with defensible claims to the effect that “key” founders were deists or separationists, but then carelessly slide into broader comments about “the founders” as a group. Jurists, scholars, and popular writers are naturally drawn to brilliant, eloquent, progressive, and influential founders. Conceding for the sake of argument that the five or six famous founders are, in fact, the most important and influential founders in the era, it still does not follow that their views are representative of other founders or that they were written into documents such as the Declaration, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. At a minimum, scholars who choose to focus on the views of five or six founders should make
it clear that they are not exploring the views of the founding generation. As well, they should explain why the views of someone such as Thomas Jefferson are more relevant for understanding a text like the First Amendment than those of Roger Sherman and others intimately involved in crafting the amendment.

In closing, let me make it clear that I am not arguing that we should uncritically embrace the founders’ views on church-state relations or on other matters. As a theory of constitutional interpretation originalism has significant problems, and America has obviously changed a great deal since the late-eighteenth-century. My concern is primarily with bad historical arguments. Although falsehoods may serve a useful purpose (at least in the short term), they have no place in arguments made by men and women concerned with truth. This should be especially true for those of us at liberal arts institutions, at least one major purpose of which is, in the words of Cardinal Newman, to “educate the intellect to reason well in all matters, to reach out towards truth, and to grasp it.” Newman undoubtedly had more eternal truths in mind, but surely this sentiment applies to the writing and teaching about religion and the American founding.39

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2 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 is plausible for his “five main characters,” but it is highly debatable with respect to 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, William Paterson, Roger Sherman, John Witherspoon, and others who are mentioned (albeit often in passing) in his book.


5 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 founders” rests almost entirely on the writings of Jefferson, Madison, Adams, and Franklin. Although he mentions Jay, he gives no evidence that he 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; Steven J. Keillor, *This Rebellious House: American History and the Truth of Christianity* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 85, who defends his proposition that “many of America’s ‘Founding Fathers’ were not Christians in any orthodox sense” with references to Adams, Franklin, Paine, and Ethan Allen (and, by implication, Washington and Jefferson); Geoffrey R. Stone argues that “deistic beliefs played a central role in the framing of the American republic” and that the “founding generation viewed religion, and particularly religion’s relation to government, through and Enlightenment lens that was deeply skeptical of orthodox Christianity.” Stone supports his argument by exploring the beliefs of Franklin, Jefferson, John Adams, Washington, and Paine. Stone, “The World of the Framers: A Christian Nation?” *University of California Law Review* 56 (October 2008), 7-8; Darryl G. Hart writes that “most of the so-called Founding Fathers, from Jefferson and Adams to George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and James Madison were generally indifferent to most of the claims of the denominations, from the vicarious atonement to the real presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper.” *A Secular Faith: Why
Christianity Favors the Separation of Church and State (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee: 2006), 73.


By “founders” I mean civic leaders in the America from roughly 1765-1791 (the Stamp Act Congress to the ratification of Bill of Rights).
Rights). For reasons of space I exclude clergy and others who had an important impact in the era but did not or could not hold political office. Clergy played a prominent role in the American founding, and some of them were deists or leaned heavily in that direction (e.g., Ebenezer Gay, Charles Chauncy, Jonathan Mayhew, and Elihu Palmer). However, there is little reason to doubt that the vast majority of clergy in the era were anything other than orthodox Christians. Mark A. Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 138-45. Space constraints also prevent consideration of women and African Americans even though Gary L. Gregg and I argue that both of these groups can reasonably be considered founders in *America’s Forgotten Founders* (Lexington: McConnell Center, 2008), 1-8, 144-50. It is highly unlikely that there were many deists in either group. By “orthodox Christian doctrine” I mean basic Christian beliefs as defined by the Apostles’ Creed.


There may be other examples of founders who publically embraced deism, but the possibilities of which I am aware such as Nathaniel Peabody, Joel Barlow, Philip Freneau, and Noah Webster (before 1808) are either not clearly founders or it is not evident that they publically rejected the basic tenets of orthodox Christianity.


It is also possible to find observations from contemporaries that question the commitment of these men to orthodox Christianity. For instance, Bishop Meade recollected that: “I was never at Mr. Madison’s but once, and then our conversation took such a turn though not designed on my part as to call forth some expressions and arguments which left the impression on my mind that his creed was not strictly regulated by the Bible.” Such evidence should not be dismissed, but it needs to be treated with care. In this case, one should be careful not to read too much into an “impression” made by someone who visited Madison’s home only once, and it is not self-evident what Meade
meant by Madison’s creed not being “strictly regulated by the Bible.”
Quoted in
in James H. Hutson, Forgotten Features of the Founding: The
Recovery of Religious Themes in the Early American Republic
(Lanham: Lexington Books, 2003), 158. Similar arguments can be
made about a handful of other less-famous founders, including
Gouvernor Morris, Richard Henry Lee, and James Monroe.
12 The argument that these men used “God words” like “Providence” or
“Supreme Judge of the Universe” seems particularly weak as one can
find many instances of indisputably orthodox men, churches, and
Christian organizations referring to God with such words. It is not
clear what even serious moral infractions (if true) prove as Christians
have long recognized that even saints sin (e.g. Romans 7:15-25).
13 See, for example, Garrett Ward Sheldon, The Political Philosophy of
James Madison (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001) and
Michael Novak and Jana Novak, Religion, Liberty, and the Father of
14 See, for instance, the Declaration of Independence (“with a firm
reliance on the protection of divine providence . . . ” Dreisbach and
Hall, Sacred Rights, 222), Franklin in the Constitutional Convention
(“In the beginning of the Contest with G. Britain, when we were
sensible of danger we had daily prayer in this room for the divine
protection.—Our prayers, Sir, were heard, and they were graciously
answered. . . the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this
truth—that God governs the affairs of men.” Ibid., 348-49); and
Madison in Federalist #37 (“It is impossible, for the man of pious
reflection, not to perceive in [the Constitutional Convention] a finger of
that Almighty Hand, which has been so frequently and signally
extended to our relief in the critical stages of the revolution.”). Ibid.,
350.
15 Of course the religious views of none of these founders was static.
Franklin was raised in the Reformed tradition, rejected it at an early
age, but seemed more accepting of traditional Christian beliefs and
practices toward the end of his life. Madison seems to have been a
pious young man, and Hamilton apparently had a sincere late-in-life
conversion experience. For details on the religious views of these
founders see Daniel L. Dreisbach, Mark David Hall, and Jeffry H.
Morrison, eds., The Founders on God and Government (Lanham:
Rowman & Littlefield, 2004) (containing essays on Washington,
Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin) and Dreisbach, Hall, and
Morrison, The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life (Notre
Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2009) (containing essays on
Paine and Hamilton). Hamilton immigrated to America in 1773 at the
Jefferson was in France from 1785-1789 and Adams in Europe, with a brief interruption, from 1778-1788.


17 Mark David Hall, “Vindiciae, Contra Tyrannos: The Influence of the Reformed Tradition on the American Founding,” paper delivered at the annual meeting of the American Political Science Association, September 2010; *The Old Puritan and a New Nation: Roger Sherman and the Creation of the American Republic* (book manuscript under review); and *The Political and Legal Philosophy of James Wilson, 1742-1798* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997).

18 In contrast to the famous founders, most founders left relatively few papers of any sort for future scholars to study. Indeed, this is one reason some founders are famous and others are not.

19 Associate Justice Wiley B. Rutledge, in *Everson v. Board of Education*, 330 U.S. 1, 33 (1947). Rutledge, in his opinion, cited Jefferson and Madison 39 distinct and separate times to shine light on the meaning of the First Amendment, and Black in his majority opinion cited them five times. Both Black and Rutledge agreed that the First Amendment requires the strict separation of church and state, although they disagreed on the outcome of this particular case. Mark David Hall, “Jeffersonian Walls and Madisonian Lines: The Supreme Court’s

20 Hall, “Jeffersonian Walls and Madisonian Lines, 572, 569. Scholars, like justices, regularly embrace this distortion. See, for example, the literature cited in Mark David Hall, “Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance, Jefferson’s Statute for Religious Liberty, and the Creation of the First Amendment,” 1-10, (mss. in possession of author) and many of the works cited in the first section of this essay.

21 Hall, “Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance,” passim.


24 Hall, “Jeffersonian Walls and Madisonian Lines,” 568–69. Similarly, Jefferson’s Statute for Religious Liberty has been cited 15 times in religion clause opinions, whereas Sherman’s statute has never been cited

25 For instance, Vincent Philip Munoz writes: “originalist scholarship and jurisprudence tend to assume that the leading Founders shared a uniform understanding of the separation of church and state. This book attempts to show that that assumption is mistaken. Because the leading Founders disagreed, no one Founder can be cited to represent “the Founders’ position.” Munoz, *God and the Founders: Madison, Washington, and Jefferson* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 4.

26 Steele, a Republican, was lieutenant governor of Maryland from 2003-3007 and was appointed to head Republican National Committee 2009. Since 1970 approximately 90% of African-Americans vote Democratic in any given election.


29 Ibid., 307–08

30 Ibid., 309-313. Madison may have used this language simply for rhetorical purposes, but the fact that he thought these arguments would be effective says much about the political culture of eighteenth century Virginia.

31 Specifically, the syllogism refers to the connection between virtue and morality, republican institutions, and religion—and by religion the founders meant some version of Christianity. See James H. Hutson,

32 Thomas E. Buckley, Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776-1787 (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1977), 175.
33 Dreisbach and Hall, Sacred Rights, 528, 534.
35 Ibid., 251-52, 229, 530; Dreisbach, Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation Between Church and State, 9-24.
36 Dreisbach and Hall, Sacred Rights, 472-73, 445-71; Documentary History of the First Federal Congress, 11: 1500; Dreisbach, Thomas Jefferson and the Wall of Separation, 57.
37 Other significant founders who are routinely ignored in popular and even scholarly discourse are discussed in Gregg and Hall, America's Forgotten Founders and Dreisbach, Hall, and Morrison, The Forgotten Founders on Religion and Public Life.
38 Marshall and Manuel, The Light and the Glory; Eidsmoe, Christianity and the Constitution, LaHaye, Faith of Our Founding Fathers; Gary Amos and Richard Gardiner, Never Before in History; and Barton, Original Intent.
I begin my response to Professor Hall’s paper by simply reviewing his argument.

1. In spite of the claims of many a scholarly historian and popular writer, “there is precious little evidence to suggest that most of [the founders] were deists.”

2. The desire of the founders of the United States to build a “wall of separation” between church and state is even more implausible.

3. Too many contemporary interpreters and commentators introduce “false complexity” into their understanding of the founders: “on some matters large number of founders can be found on different sides of a particular controversy. With respect to religious liberty and church-state relations in the founding era, however, there were broad areas of agreement among America’s political leaders.”

4. Hall then turns from critical appraisal of others’ interpretations to his own reconstruction. The fact is, he says, that the majority of the founders shared at least three areas of broad consensus regarding proper relations between church and state:

   a. “[T]he founders were committed to providing extensive protection to religious liberty. For many, this conviction was based upon the theological conviction that men and women have a duty to worship God as their consciences dictate.”
b. “America’s founders were committed to the idea that religion (by which virtually all of them meant Christianity) was necessary for public happiness and political prosperity. . . . The only question, with respect to establishments, was whether they helped or hurt the faith.” That is, for some if not many founders, establishment of religion was not automatically out of the question; what they cared about, Hall insists, was that their state should take that course which would assist “religion” to flourish.

c. The third consensus, on the proper place of religion in the public square, is described this way:

America’s founders did not want Congress to establish a national church, and many opposed establishments at the state level as well. However, there was widespread agreement that governments could promote and encourage Christianity, and that it was appropriate for elected officials to make religious arguments in the public square. There was virtually no support for contemporary visions for separating church and state that would have political leaders avoid religious language and require public spaces to be stripped of religious symbols.

So Professor Hall reaches his conclusion. “The most obvious implication of this essay is that if we hope to speak about ‘the founders’ views than we must do more than look at five or six famous founders, no matter how brilliant and important they were.”

It is hard to object to this obvious implication. Yet it is the unobjectionableness of this conclusion, that is to say, its moderation, its gentle and agreeable character, that gives me pause. For, unless I have badly misunderstood the paper, this is the only conclusion Hall draws out from his argument. It is a conclusion he amplifies, with speculation as to why so many interpreters and commentators arrive at distorted views of the founders, but no other and certainly no non-obvious implications are rendered explicit.
What Hall does make explicit at the end of the paper is how closely he wishes to circumscribe the scope of his argument. He states: ‘let me make it clear that I am not arguing that we should uncritically embrace the founders’ views on church-state relations or on other matters... My concern is primarily with bad historical arguments.’ To this I say: fair enough. For the political scientist as historian, accountable to ones’ professional peers, such is responsible investigative practice. But, be warned: I have no professional competence in the tangled history of religion and politics in the United States. I am in no position to advise on the responsibility of those historical claims about the founders that underlie Professor Hall’s premises. Perhaps some of you are able to assess the claims, but I must take them on trust for now.

In the absence of historical competence, one thing I do bring to the encounter is an ordinary desire for the public good, informed in part by philosophical and theological interests. Now philosophical-theological treatment of historical arguments is a tricky business, to say the least, but insofar as I bend the demands of those disciplines to purposes of the present encounter, I hope they will widen the conversation among us rather than constrict it. In the course and the discourse of public life we are all amateurs; and, if I may dare to say, our obligations to each other in public life can be fulfilled, if they can be fulfilled, only cooperatively.

For this reason I ask, can historians as citizens, that is, as persons obligated in multiple and perplexing ways to wide and very heterogeneous publics, fulfill the obligations of citizenship by drawing carefully circumscribed historical conclusions from historical arguments? I expect the question sounds preposterous, but it is not utterly preposterous. A citizen may well contribute to the public good precisely as an historian, since, as Hall points out, responsible historical arguments have an intrinsic worth. A society might value that service so highly that it releases the citizen-historian from other obligations and provides opportunities for one to concentrate on the specialized set of responsibilities that attach to doing historical inquiry. Indeed this prospect helps us see why, in any society that allows specialization and the development of expertise, the fulfillment of obligations is fundamentally cooperative, even (in some
important cases) collective. It also shows why in the final analysis my question is preposterous, even if not utterly so. Of course historians cannot fulfill all that is required of them simply by doing good history, any more than I can, doing (one hopes) good theology or philosophy. Neither can, nor must, all our obligations be met in every moment of a well-balanced life.

In other words, in what follows I don’t blame Professor Hall for not having answered the questions I raise. Professor Hall plays strictly the role of historian in his paper; accordingly we do right by him to expect of his performance responsible history, and to interpret it in light of that. Nevertheless, when I (and perhaps others of you) seek to engage his argument, not as between professional historians but as between amateurs of public life, the argument looks incomplete. For it seems studiously to avoid proposing any implications for how we ought to conduct our religious and political life today in those public spaces where we discover our co-operative responsibilities to one another. Refreshing as that may be when one thinks of the barrage of preachy books on the founders, since public life is so entwined with obligation, I think we’re also right to look for normative conclusions. I still want to ask Professor Hall (that skilled amateur of public life, I mean), why are you a student of American religious history? Why do you concern yourself with historical arguments about the religious-political commitments of the American founders, and not any of the countless other intriguing things an historian could study? One does not have to concern oneself with the commitments of the founders to be a good historian, so, what’s in it for you presently that you have not yet made explicit to us? These are questions about purpose, of course. They ask about the good of being an historian rather than about being a good historian. I imagine Professor Hall is all in favor of such query, so I hope that in the discussion time he will share at least some of his ideas about possible normative implications of his argument.

(Let me acknowledge here, if it is not already clear, that I admit and respect a legitimate gap between what Professor Hall offers in the capacity of an historian and what an audience would seek as “amateurs of public life.” Not being a professional historian myself, for better or worse, I can honor the gap only in the breach – and argue that this, too, is legitimate.)
The foregoing query regarding purpose is informed by a pragmatist theory of inquiry which admits that ultimately all interpretations are incomplete. An interpretation is measured not only by the past to which it refers and that it reconstructs, but also by the present purposes and future aspirations which it informs and, perhaps, reforms. It’s on this basis that John Dewey famously said that often enough we do not solve our problems; instead, we just ‘get over’ them as an ever-emerging present raises new problems and renders old ones less relevant. I raise my second query in that Deweyan spirit.

Professor Hall began his paper noting that:

The faith of America’s founders, and the role of religion in the republic, has been a source of controversy since the nation’s inception. Debates are particularly fierce when they concern religious liberty and the proper relationship between church and state. Arguments on these questions are often framed in terms of the founders’ views, but their positions are regularly distorted (1).

Attempting to gain a less or undistorted sense of who the founders were and what they believed is one way to settle harmful controversy. Looking back on my previous query, it would seem that maybe here lays the way Hall means to contribute to discussion of the normative legal implications of the views of “the founders” on religion and public life. If Supreme Court Justices have justified their decisions by allusion to the intentions of “the founders,” and if we accept Hall’s arguments as to who counts as a founder, then he knocks an important support out from under the position of strict church-state separationists who uphold those decisions as binding precedent. For us, Hall’s argument is a knockout to strict separationism if (and only if) we, too, accept that the Justices’ rule of justification by reference to the intentions of the founders – whomever that circle is thought to include – is the right way to resolve present arguments about how we may constitute ourselves as a united states of America in real continuity with the polity of our predecessors.

Of course, attempting to gain a less or undistorted sense of the positions of the founders is not the only way to settle
harmful controversy. Another way may come from asking whether the arguments should be framed in terms of the founders’ views at all. Is it relevant (how is it relevant? to what extent?) to debate whether deists or theists were the majority among the founders when a staggering percentage of us today cannot distinguish Sunnis from Shi’ites, and indeed, Sikhs from Muslims from Baha’is from Greek Orthodox . . . and so on? Is it relevant (how is it relevant? to what extent?) to our present problems to ponder various eighteenth and early nineteenth century views on the proper relation of so-called “religion” and the so-called “public square” when what we experience today is an array of diverse yet overlapping religious publics? Are the founders relevant today (how are they relevant? to what extent?) if, as some contemporary philosophers and theologians hypothesize, we are in the process of a second great ‘axial age,’ when all religious traditions must radically reform themselves in order to adapt to the challenges of a global and profoundly pluralistic society, a society in which there are genuinely different conversations going on, but few ‘tried and true’ resources to connect them, where connection could be beneficial? Again my hunch is that Professor Hall may have some interesting thoughts on these matters. I hope he may take some time to share them with us, for surely they are implications of his argument particularly relevant for those of us at liberal arts colleges.
Response to Mark David Hall

Julie Meadows
Presbyterian College

I should start by noting that I am not a historian, so my response to Mark David Hall’s paper will have to work on somewhat different grounds from his own careful historical argument. I will do my best to avoid dishonesty, however, and to provoke the kind of serious exchange of ideas that I like to imagine, on what I now realize are somewhat shaky grounds, the founders hoped would take place. And, although my own field is Christian Social Ethics, I’m also not an ‘orthodox’ Christian. This means that I frequently find myself confused by conversations that seem to make sense to just about everybody else. This can be a helpful sort of confusion to have, though, because it means that I’m in a position to raise questions about things that other Christians might take for granted. In particular, my denomination, the Religious Society of friends, or Quakers (of the kind who worship in silence) has emphasized a set of worship and community practices over a set creed or a profession of belief.

My questions today have to do with three aspects of the debate Mark David Hall describes, and they deal with politics, education, and the meaning of ‘Christianity.’ This is obviously too much to take on in a short response paper, but I’ll do my best to explain what my questions are, and to show how they relate to one another.

Question one: What is at stake in attempts to lay claim to ‘the founders,’ as Christian or as deist? While these
arguments are couched in historical terms, and certainly pretend to be arguments about the empirical ‘facts’ of history, I don’t think that their main aim is historical. They are political arguments, narratives whose primary purpose is to tell us who we are and what direction we should be moving in. They are arguments about what it means to be “American,” and, for those who would claim America as a Christian nation, about the character of the God who they worship. These are high stakes indeed.

Andrew Murphy’s careful analysis of the role of the jeremiad in American political speech is helpful here. American jeremiads are about the present political situation, are theological in scope, and are constructions of the past in the service of political aims. They are narratives of decline, chastisement, and renewal. They tell us what is wrong with the present, when and why we got off course, and how looking to our beginnings can help us get back on track again (Murphy 2009, 7-8). They also delineate an “us” from a “them”. “In doing so,” Murphy writes, “they tell us far more about the present situation in which their rhetoric is produced, deployed, and consumed than about the past that they supposedly describe and evoke” (Murphy 2009, 120).

The jeremiad relies on a belief in America’s status as God’s ‘hosen Nation, with a special role to play in bringing about the salvation of the world. It is an argument not only about what people should do, but about who God is. “In other words,” Murphy writes, “the American jeremiad is not just a historical or political argument but a theological, even a cosmological, one” (Murphy 2009, 10).

As political narratives, jeremiads are selective, emphasizing certain details while hiding others for the sake of a coherent – and thus persuasive – story. Jeremiads retell the past, but the past they retell is always to some extent a construction. Murphy observes that “[t]he ‘plain facts of American history’ often turn out, upon closer examination, to be deeply contested…The question ‘what counts as a relevant or persuasive fact?’ is itself a political question” (Murphy 2009, 130, 129). This is not to sanction irresponsible histories, on either side of
the debate about the founders, but to complicate the problem: what happens when bad history becomes part of a larger political argument about the presence or absence of God in the world? Can such an argument ever be resolved?

Murphy identifies two major types of distinctively American jeremiads. Traditionalist jeremiads, whether liberal or conservative, focus on what people in the past did (Murphy 2009, 110). They seek to return the country to its ‘true self’ by returning its people to those lost ways of life. Progressive jeremiads, in contrast, appeal to ideals and principles that were articulated in the past but have not been lived up to. Progressive jeremiads are less concerned with past practice and more focused on future possibilities.

Murphy considers either forms of successful jeremiad – that is, one that resonates with, unites, and mobilizes a group of people – to be “a democratic moment, in which individuals enter the political system to act upon their deep concern for the health of their community” (Murphy 2009, 112). Ultimately, however, he faults the traditional jeremiad for its failure to acknowledge the pluralism of contemporary America.

The conservative attempts to claim the ‘founders’ as Christian would fit into this type of jeremiad. Implicit in the project of excavating this set of ‘historical facts’ is the claim that the religious convictions of the founders are and should be a model for the present citizens of this nation, and that their intentions for the nation should govern our own. Glossed over by this narrative are not only the tremendous changes in the United States between then and now, but also the diverse understandings of “Christian” in the colonial period, a diversity of beliefs which itself was crucial to the formation of the nation and especially to the separation of church and state, which as Hall notes was a Christian, not a secular, development.¹

Yet Murphy does not pronounce victory for the progressive jeremiad. “These competing narratives,” he says, “are not easily resolved, and are likely ‘unresolvable’” (Murphy 2009, 129). Democratic citizens need to be able to recognize both types of political narrative. “As democratic citizens…we
can and should approach each type of jeremiad with a clear understanding of the partiality of narrative and an acknowledgement that any “American past” is a construction, a partial set of insights created in the service of someone’s political agenda” (Murphy 2009, 141). Both reverence for the founders and the urge to frame a narrative that relates our experience to theirs are valuable parts of American democracy.

**Question two:** Where do the active citizens that democracy requires come from? What kind of education do they need? In my own work, I look at justice as something that is brought into being as it is practiced, rather like music sounds while it is being played, and ceases when we cease to create it. (This is not my metaphor, but a comparison with a long and rich genealogy in political philosophy.) The “what” of education cannot simply be a list of facts, if our task is to live together well and justly. Here Murphy’s account turns out to have something in common with Hall’s paper – a call for educated citizens who can judge better what arguments are sound. But the question of how American citizens should be educated is also a deeply contentious one, as recent reporting on the Texas State Board of Education’s curriculum review meetings has illustrated. Is a good citizen someone who knows ‘our’ tradition, and works to return the nation to its Christian origins? Or is it someone who is liberated from tradition and trained to think for oneself?

Both views are problematic. Traditionalists tend to overlook the diversity and disagreements of the past in order to tell a more compelling narrative of our departure from an imagined era of unity. Secular liberals, on the other hand, tend to view religion with suspicion as necessarily impeding a person’s ability to think clearly and to communicate with non-religious citizens. They further tend to require that religious commitments be voluntary, failing to see that such a claim is deeply problematic. From such a perspective, the commitments that make our lives both meaningful and moral are entirely arbitrary. But this is a false dichotomy. Education – and scholarship – requires both moral and intellectual virtues. What kinds of habits do we need in order to do justice to one another?
These positions have their parallels contemporary political rhetoric, one side appealing to our passions with little regard for the truth of its claims, the other tepidly asserting rational arguments. Neither extreme can combat the dangerous and unprecedented invasion of moneyed interests in the public sphere, a development that threatens the very notion of democracy, but that seems interested to continue it as a sham. Nor do they begin to address the social conditions that militate against the democratic involvement of America’s people. What kind of story do we want to tell in circumstances like these? Can it sing about justice without oversimplifying our past or our present?

**Question three:** What does it mean to be a Christian nation? What does it mean to be a Christian? Again, these might seem like foolish questions, but from my perspective their answers are not at all obvious. Has Christianity changed since the founding era, as democracy has? Here I turn for help to the work of Ted Smith, who is both a Presbyterian minister and a very careful scholar. In his fascinating study of *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice*, Smith tells a different kind of story about the relationship between Christianity and democracy. Focusing on the transformations that followed the Second Awakening rather than the intentions of its authors, Smith narrates the complex relationship between democratic practices and the new measures for revival that emerged in the 1820’s and 1830’s. Smith shows how a loose constellation of preaching techniques “fit and furthered new social realities” (Smith, 6).

The resulting picture is complex, but it shows us a nation that is deeply indebted to Christianity without authorizing any particular group of Christians to claim right of possession. It illumines, rather than obscures, the variety and depth of change that followed the founding era, presenting each of the practices it examines as itself a site of negotiation and argument, anxiety and promise. This, too, is a theological argument, but one that carefully avoids the oversimplifications involved in “narratives of progress and decline” (Smith, 13). Such narratives, according to Smith, do justice neither to the complexities of practices nor the ways of God.
To conclude, let me offer thanks again for the paper that spurred these reflections. I respect and appreciate Mark David Hall’s call for us to take the time and care to get our stories straight. I have left aside much else that could be discussed in his paper. I have asked, and suggested tentative responses to three questions: What is at stake in debates over the religion of the founders? How are citizens capable of maintaining democracy to be educated? And, lastly, what does it mean to be a Christian nation?


1 See, for example, Andrew R. Murphy’s argument in Conscience and Community that “[f]ar from being the achievement of disinterested secular rulers, seventeenth-century toleration was embraced by religious extremists as the only way to rid their congregations of the corrupting influence of civil power” (Murphy 2001, 13).

2 See, for example, Russell Shorto’s article, “How Christian Were the Founders?” which explores both sides of the Texas debates and their influence on American public education nationally (Shorto, 2010).
Religious Faith and the American Presidency

Gary Scott Smith
Grove City College

Today a debate rages over the place of religion in American public life. What role did Christianity play in the founding of the United States? Should the government aid Christianity or refuse to support it in any way? Does the concept of church-state separation mean that religion must be totally divorced from government at the local, state, or federal level? During the last decade, hundreds of editorials, op-ed pieces, newspaper and magazine articles, television talk shows and news programs, dozens of books, and numerous academic conferences have examined these questions. Controversy has erupted over Bible reading and prayer in public schools, the Pledge of Allegiance, the display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings, and a host of other issues. George W. Bush’s faith-based initiatives and foreign policy raised strong concerns about the separation of church and state, the use of religious language, and God’s relationship with the United States. The faith of contenders for the Republican and Democratic presidential nominations in 2008 was closely scrutinized.

Numerous indicators (recent elections, polls, levels of church attendance and charitable giving, and the numbers and impact of parachurch organizations) suggest that religious faith continues to be very important in the United States. Almost all Americans profess believe in God. Sixty-three percent of us belong to a church, synagogue, or mosque, and about 40 percent of us attend religious services on an average weekend. Recent polls also indicate that the majority of Americans want religion
to have a greater influence in the nation’s life.¹ Many protest that the secularization of the media, public education, and the business world has gone too far and call for a rejuvenation of religious values in the public square.

Recent years have witnessed a spirited debate between those who argue that the United States’ founding and history until the 1960s was infused with Christian principles and directed by godly leaders and those who see its creation and development as guided by more secular ideologies and statesmen.² Many proponents of the first position contend that the United States is obligated to follow biblical norms in its public life. They complain that “today’s politicians are more apt to talk about the vague ‘faith’ aspects of religion rather than about religion as a standard of right public action.”³ Others counter that biblical teachings and denominational doctrines are potentially divisive, irrelevant to the public arena, and should be confined to private life. Policymaking should be based on objective, scientific, pragmatic, prudent, “neutral,” factors, not religious presuppositions or values. They insist that the intrusion of religious commitments into policymaking “is disturbing, if not downright dangerous.”⁴

The United States’ elite culture, especially its media and universities, Wilfred McClay claims, “is now almost entirely committed to . . . secular discourse.” Supreme Court decisions have significantly reduced the opportunity to publicly display “traditional religious symbols and sentiments” and helped to produce a “naked public square.” Religion has been “confined to a sort of cultural red light district.” People can believe what they want in private as long as they do not try to use their beliefs as a basis for public action. Others counter that “secularism’s seeming hold over the moment” is “illusory, unpopular, elitist and doomed to fail.” They contend that religion is an “essential player in public life.”⁵ As a result, questions about whether and how government officials can express their religious convictions have become increasingly contentious.

The religious views and values of presidents are very important to many Americans today. In a recent poll, 72 percent of respondents said that want the president to have strong religious beliefs.⁶ While the Constitution prohibits religious tests
for holding political office, it cannot prevent Americans from imposing a religious litmus test on candidates. “One day, a truly secular candidate might be able to run for president without suffering at the polls,” writes Franklin Foer in *The New Republic*. “But that day won’t be soon.”

Nevertheless, as former Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy once observed, in Washington “only two kinds of religion are tolerated: vague beliefs strongly affirmed and strong beliefs vaguely expressed.” “The lesson for candidates seems to be: if you want to be president of all the people, invoke a generic deity everyone can salute.” Two *Newsweek* authors conclude, “history offers little evidence of direct interplay between faith and presidential leadership.” Similarly, a leading religious conservative laments that professing Christians “may still hold office, provided they either aren’t sincere about their faith or they keep it locked in the closet.”

My study of 14 presidents demonstrates, however, that faith significantly affected how numerous occupants of the Oval Office performed their duties. Their faith influenced their philosophy of governing, relationship with religious constituents, electoral strategies, and approach to public policies. Moreover, it helped shape their convictions and character as well as their views of the separation of church and state, civil religion, and American chosen-ness. “Despite our much-vaunted separation of church and state, America has always had a quasi-religious understanding of itself, [as] reflected in . . . the providentialism of George Washington, the biblically based optimism of Thomas Jefferson, Abraham Lincoln’s emphasis on redemptive suffering, the focus on civic righteousness and biblical morality by Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Jimmy Carter, and the belief of Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John F. Kennedy, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush that Nazism, Communism, or terrorism must be opposed on a global scale because these ideologies embodied evil.”

Despite the vast evidence that presidents’ faith deeply affected their lives and their administrations, many scholars have ignored this fascinating and fertile subject. They have also disregarded the fact that religion matters enormously to many Americans. Secularism, disinterest in religion, or overreactions
to popular portrayals of Washington and Lincoln as pious, devout, orthodox Christians have all contributed to this neglect.

My book explores the “profound, troubled, and inescapable interaction” between religious faith and politics in the United States.\(^ {12} \) It argues that religion has played a major role in the lives and administrations of numerous presidents. I analyze both the personal beliefs and the public policies of presidents. While I examine the specific content of their religious convictions (what they believed about God, Christ, human nature, the Bible, prayer, providence, salvation, life after death, and other topics), I do not try to measure “how religious” they were. I take their religious beliefs seriously and assess how they affected their presidencies. While I have investigated and reported what scholars, friends, associates, and critics have said about the religious beliefs of presidents, I have especially scrutinized their own words in both their public and private statements.

When individuals “profess or appear to be acting from religious motives,” William Martin argues, it is tempting to ignore them as ignorant, insincere, or insubstantial or to try to discover their “‘real’” motives, which must involve money, power, or fame.\(^ {13} \) Although presidents have used religious rhetoric to justify economic and political policies, bolster social control, and appeal to prospective voters, their religious beliefs have also helped direct their actions and influence their responses to important events. Religious convictions are not simply the product of social, economic, and political forces. They can furnish ideals and inspire actions. While recognizing that numerous factors and varied motives affected presidents’ thinking and behavior, I argue that religious beliefs have been a key ingredient in the mix for many of them.

A 2004 poll found that Americans were evenly divided about whether a president’s faith should guide him in making political decisions. Some protest that presidents have promoted certain policies that reflect the priorities of particular religious communities and complain that they have favored some religious groups over others. Others object that overly pious presidents (like George W. Bush) have tried to demolish the wall of separation between church and state, impose their values on
Americans, and use federal funds to finance religious goals and programs. Still others want presidents to emphasize widely shared religious values and advance policies that embody these convictions.

Speaking to 15,000 people at an ecumenical prayer breakfast during the Republican National Convention in Dallas in August 1984, Ronald Reagan declared, “The truth is, politics and morality are inseparable. And as morality’s foundation is religion, religion and politics are necessarily related. We need religion as a guide. We need it because we are imperfect, and our government needs the church because only those humble enough to admit they’re sinners can bring to democracy the tolerance it requires in order to survive.”

Reagan’s remarks prompted a firestorm of protest. Many accused the Republican of violating the “traditional separation of church and state.” Charles Krauthammer contended in Time that Reagan had crossed “the line that in a pluralist society divides civil discourse from demagoguery.” The general secretary of the National Council of Churches insisted that Reagan’s position fell “far short of the standard of tolerance for the beliefs of others which must undergird religious freedom in a diverse society.”

This strong negative reaction was undoubtedly due in part to the fact that his words were spoken during a political campaign and that many critics abhorred Reagan’s support of political policies favored by the religious right (evangelical and fundamentalist Protestants and conservative Catholics).

Reagan, however, was not the first president to make this argument. George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, and numerous other presidents also maintained that politics and morality were indivisible and that religion was the principal foundation of morality. Nor was Reagan the first chief executive whose religious rhetoric provoked controversy.

Scholars today uniformly praise Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address as one of the greatest American political documents and as the “most far-reaching” reflection on Providence by “a major figure in American public life.” However, the Washington Daily National Intelligencer predicted the day after Lincoln delivered the address that it was likely to
irritate those who advocated strict separation of church and state. And it did. The New York World, for example, complained that the president’s theology strongly smacked of “the dark ages” and accused him of “abandoning all pretense of statesmanship” and taking “refuge in piety.”

The objections of many pundits, politicians, and even some religious leaders to Reagan’s and Lincoln’s speeches raise a larger issue: what is the proper relationship between religion and politics? Is it appropriate for a president’s religious convictions to direct him in performing his duties and devising and implementing his policies? Does the concept of the separation of church and state require presidents to confine their religious values to their private lives and operate from a secular perspective in fulfilling their responsibilities? George W. Bush’s frequent testimony to his Christian faith, support for faith-based initiatives, opposition to gay marriage, abortion, and the use of new embryonic stem-cells in research, and claims of critics that Bush believes God led him to invade Iraq recently evoked much debate. I examine these questions by exploring the faith of 14 American presidents. I focus on those chief executives for whom religion was an important issue because of their own beliefs, the issues they confronted, the elections they participated in, and/or the times in which they lived.

Religion and politics have been deeply intertwined throughout American history. Interaction between them “has been a staple of American life.” From the Pilgrims on, many Americans have considered themselves chosen by God for special blessings and responsibilities. Its leaders have repeatedly asserted that the United States has a divine mission to promote freedom, peace, and justice in the world and serve as a haven for the persecuted and oppressed and a land of opportunity for the ambitious and devout. All 43 presidents including Barack Obama “have been friendly toward organized religion.” Thirty-three have been church members, and all of them attended church at least occasionally and “considered themselves in some sense to be Christians.” Every inaugural address, except George Washington’s second one, acknowledged God and invoked His blessing on the nation. Presidents have employed religious language and images to express heart-felt convictions, unify and inspire citizens, woo voters, and help legitimate their policies.
There is a long and rich tradition of both scholarly and popular analysis of American presidents. Many of our nation’s best and brightest historians, political scientists, and biographers have examined their backgrounds, ideological commitments, campaigns, improprieties, and legacies. Few scholars, however, have analyzed the specific nature of presidents’ religious convictions or the impact of these beliefs on their thinking and actions. Most students of the presidency have paid little attention to the religious convictions of presidents and the relationship of their administrations with religious constituencies. They have also largely ignored the role religion has played in formulating and implementing their policies or in the elections that sent them to the White House.

From Parson Weems’ Life of George Washington in the early nineteenth century to the present, authors have discussed the faith of an individual president or all the presidents. Most of these authors have been committed Christians who portrayed their subjects as virtuous, pious, and theologically astute. A few have been enemies of organized religion who sought to prove that the presidents were not very devout or orthodox. Usually simplistic, superficial (especially ones that discuss all the presidents), and unsophisticated, these popular works have either exaggerated or depreciated the faith of the nation’s chief executives, often either lionizing or demonizing their subjects.22

Despite the significant role religion has played in the lives of many presidents, their recent biographers have given very little attention to their faith. Perhaps because of their own ideological perspectives, these authors have largely ignored the religious commitments of their subjects. “Religion,” argues Garry Wills, “embarrasses the commentators. It is offbounds” for many journalists and scholars.23 Religious perspectives have been treated with “stereotyping, condescension, dismissal, ignorance, [and] neglect.” Religion has been “caricatured in history books, left out of TV documentaries on public issues,” portrayed in stock negative images by columnists and editorialists, treated as a curiosity, or welcomed when it is ‘our kind,’ i.e., ‘progressive.’24 James Wall, a former editor of Christian Century, contends that most members of the academy and the media have “either personally rejected a religious
worldview, or, if they still” retain “any religious belief,” know
that it is “not acceptable to admit such a belief in polite society.”
The rational, logical, modern worldview prevails. It says, “if
you do have religious faith, for God’s sake keep quiet about it.”
To many scholars and pundits, the religious views and values of
the presidents are either avocations with no more relevance to
their public lives than stamp collecting or bird watching or pious
cant spoken to satisfy public expectations, which does not
express deep conviction or have major formative influence.
Whether or not it was genuine, their faith was a private matter
that had little impact on their presidencies. When scholars
have analyzed presidents’ religious convictions, most have
treated them as derivative, as the result of social, political, or
economic factors. For a variety of reasons, including the debate
over how George W. Bush’s faith affected his presidency,
historians and political scientists have recently begun to pay
more attention to the relationship between religion and the
presidency.

Nonetheless, scholarly treatment of Ronald Reagan
illustrates my general point. After his death in June 2004,
numerous religious leaders, politicians, associates, and family
members accentuated the importance of Reagan’s faith. Editorials, television and radio talk shows and news programs,
newspaper and magazine articles, and sermons all discussed his
faith in God. Speaking for many, his son Ron, Jr. declared at
Reagan’s funeral that his father was “a deeply, unabashedly
religious man.” His wife Nancy praised his “strong,
unshakable religious beliefs.” As president, Reagan claimed
that his relationship to God was vital to him and strongly
influenced his perspective on life. He spoke frequently to
religious groups, repeatedly discussed spiritual and moral issues
in his public addresses, wrote about his personal faith in
hundreds of letters, and spent a significant amount of time with
Protestant and Catholic religious leaders. Nevertheless,
biographers, historians, and political scientists have paid scant
attention to Reagan’s religious background, convictions, or
rhetoric. They have overlooked his considerable knowledge of
Scripture, commitment to prayer, and friendships with pastors
and priests. While discussing specific issues such as Reagan’s
lack of church attendance, interest in the biblical battle of
Armageddon, superstitious habits, and mystical experiences and
his wife’s fascination with astrology, other journalists and scholars have also largely ignored the nature and importance of his faith. Moreover, much of the analysis of Reagan’s religious commitments has been negative. Critics accuse Reagan of disingenuously constructing his message and rhetoric to appeal to religious conservatives. Like any politician, Reagan wanted to win elections and was sensitive to the potential impact of his proposals and policies. Nonetheless, during his presidency he remained remarkably true to his core principles and values, which were significantly shaped by his religious commitments. Few scholars, however, have examined the nature of Reagan’s faith or how it affected his performance and policies as president.

Presidents have been thought to embody, represent, and speak for the American people, and religious elements have helped shape how they played this role. In a sense, the president has been both the nation’s pastor and prophet, called on at times to comfort and assure Americans and at others to challenge and inspire them. Although the Constitution forbids a religious test for the presidency, most Americans have been interested in the religious convictions of their presidents. They have wanted their chief executives to possess and display a substantial religious faith, especially on important public occasions and in times of crisis. Although not required to say them, many presidents have ended their oath of office with the words “So help me God.”

Most Americans have wanted their presidents to affirm transcendent principles and promote traditional morality while avoiding a sectarian religious agenda and religious fanaticism. Many have also desired presidents to be moral exemplars, to set high standards for ethics and excellence. Franklin Roosevelt maintained that the “president sets the moral tone for our nation. He is a mirror in which we see what kind of people we are.” “When there is a moral issue involved,” Harry Truman proclaimed, “the President has to be the moral leader of the country.” Many presidents have regarded themselves as divinely appointed leaders called to help the United States both to model true religion, individual liberty, and political democracy and to export it to other nations. Many presidents
have been guided, in some cases in large part, by their personal religious commitments in performing their duties.

Even though hundreds of volumes have been written about America’s presidents, we do not know much about the precise nature of their faith or how it affected their performance and policies. I sought to fill this void by providing an in-depth analysis of the religious convictions and practices of 14 presidents who lived in different historical eras and had different denominational backgrounds: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Quincy Adams, Abraham Lincoln, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, Dwight Eisenhower, John Kennedy, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, and George W. Bush. The religious affiliation (defined by either membership or church attendance) of this group is three Presbyterians, three Episcopalians, two Methodists, one Dutch Reformed, one Catholic, one Baptist, one Disciples of Christ, one Quaker, and one Unitarian. I selected these individuals because either they were the most deeply religious American presidents (Adams, Lincoln, McKinley, Wilson, Carter, Reagan, and Bush), or because their perspectives on religion significantly influenced key public policies (Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Reagan, and Bush), or because their religious faith differed substantially from mainstream Protestantism (Jefferson, Hoover, and Kennedy), or because their elections or administrations involved major controversies about religious issues (Jefferson, Hoover, and Kennedy), or because their religious views and values helped shape the way he formulated and promoted several specific policies. In addition, chapters examine how presidents dealt with religious constituencies, interest groups, and leaders, evaluated religious issues (such as religious liberty, government support for religion, and the connection between religion, public morality, and civic duty), and appraised key public policy matters (such as
While numerous factors influenced the thinking and actions of these 14 presidents, their religious convictions affected the rhetoric they used, the policies they pursued, and the ways they promoted them. These chief executives drew effectively on elements of their own personal faith and the nation’s civil religion to help gain support for many of their policies. “The dynamic relationship between a president’s religious faith and the public policies he pursues and the political actions he takes” has often shrouded in myth and misconception. By carefully examining the religious convictions of 14 key presidents and how they affected their work, I seek to help both scholars and ordinary Americans better understand and participate more fruitfully in the frequently heated, always interesting, and vitally important dialogue about the relationship between religion, politics, and public policy in contemporary America.

Of these 14 presidents, only Wilson was the son of an ordained minister, but many of them had religiously devout fathers and mothers (especially Lincoln, Theodore Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Reagan). Although some of them attended colleges with strong religious traditions (Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and Reagan), none of them majored in religion or philosophy. Moreover, none of them attended seminary, did graduate work in religion or theology, took a course in Christianity and politics, or read extensively about this subject. Their personal correspondence and autobiographies suggest that none of them thought deeply or communicated regularly with others about religion and government. Nevertheless, their faith helped shape their character, political philosophy, and style of governing. It also affected their relationships with religious groups and many of their policies. The policies they pursued to achieve biblical ends differed substantially, however, because of the religious traditions to which they belonged; their personalities and interests; their political parties, platforms, and perspectives; and the way they interpreted the Bible and conceived their political duties.
Despite their differences, all 14 presidents emphasized the nation’s religious heritage, trumpeted the value of religion, called for spiritual renewal, and underscored the relationship between religious faith and morality. They all stressed the importance of civic righteousness, most notably Theodore Roosevelt, Wilson, and Carter, three of the nation’s most biblically literate presidents. From George Washington to George W. Bush, they argued that God rules the universe, that the dictates of reason and revelation reinforce one another and supply a basis for both individual morality and public policy, and that religious faith best sustains the nation’s constitutional democracy and provides the strongest safeguard and support for republican virtue and liberty. They all accepted Washington’s exhortation in his general order of July 2, 1776: “Let us therefore rely upon the goodness of the Cause, and the aid of the supreme Being, in whose hands Victory is, to animate and encourage us to great and noble Actions.” All 14 used religious motifs to define and defend the nation’s goals and purposes. Most of them argued that faith in God was essential to sustaining America’s traditional values, strengthening its resolve, and solving its problems. Both Roosevelts, Wilson, Eisenhower, Kennedy, Reagan, and Bush emphasized patriotic piety, conventional morality, and the evils of autocracy, fascism, communism, or terrorism. Wilson and Franklin Roosevelt saw German leaders during World Wars I and II as enemies of true religion. Eisenhower viewed the U.S. struggle with the Soviet Union as “a war of light against darkness, freedom against slavery, [and] Godliness against atheism.” Reagan denounced the Soviet Union as an “evil empire.” Bush declared Iraq, Iran, and North Korea to be an “axis of evil.” All seven viewed the United States as carrying out a godly mission by striving to defeat these wicked forces and create a more righteous international order.

Although the subjects of this study all affirmed many central Christian tenets, they disagreed about some major doctrines, most significantly the deity of Jesus Christ, the basis for salvation, and human nature. Some presidents openly declared Jesus to be their savior (Wilson, Carter, and Bush), whereas Jefferson and John Quincy Adams expressed doubts about his divinity. Some asserted that salvation was by grace through faith (Wilson, Carter, Reagan, and Bush), while others insisted that it depended primarily on good works (Washington,
Jefferson, Adams, and Theodore Roosevelt). Some contended that people were naturally inclined toward evil (Carter and Bush), others saw individuals as essentially good (Jefferson, Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, and Reagan), and still others maintained humans were a mixture of good and bad (Washington, Lincoln, and Eisenhower).

Many of these presidents had deeply held religious beliefs, but they expressed their faith in different ways. Except for Wilson, Carter, and Bush, they were intensely private about religious convictions. These three presidents, Adams, and Lincoln were the most personally devout. Of these 14 chief executives, only Jefferson, Adams, and Wilson extensively studied Christian theology. Although all of them highly regarded and read the Bible, Jefferson, Adams, Lincoln, Wilson, Carter, and Bush read it most faithfully and knew it the best. Only Franklin Roosevelt and Reagan did not attend church regularly while president. To gain public approval, set a good example, obtain personal strength and inspiration, glorify God, fulfill a religious duty, or continue a lifelong pattern, the others worshiped almost every Sunday. All fourteen testified that they valued prayer and frequently sought divine guidance in making decisions and leading the nation. They all declared that they needed God’s counsel to carry out their momentous responsibilities. Their faith helped these presidents (Kennedy to a much lesser extent) gain perspective, establish priorities, be confident about their decisions, endure trials, and accept defeats. These presidents also regularly employed religious rhetoric in their speeches to comfort the grieving; challenge citizens to promote justice, righteousness, and compassion; appeal to commonly held spiritual values; win support for their campaigns or policies; and invoke God’s blessing on America and thank him for his guidance.

These presidents have been both lauded and lambasted for their faith. Although many have praised their personal piety and the influence of their religious convictions on various actions and policies, others have complained that some chief executives have mistakenly (and dangerously) claimed to know God’s will on vital issues or that their faith influenced them to adopt policies that have harmed the nation. The faith of some presidents has been widely acclaimed (Washington, Lincoln,
Theodore Roosevelt, and Eisenhower), whereas the faith of others has frequently been assailed (Jefferson, Kennedy, Carter, and Bush). Opponents protested that the religious commitments of these four latter presidents (deism, Catholicism, evangelicalism) threatened the nation. As the scholarly community and the culture became more secular and skeptical, substantial concerns were raised about the religiosity of some twentieth-century presidents. “A lot of people are worried about Presidents’ taking their cues from on high,” journalist Hugh Sidey wrote in 1984. “Woodrow Wilson’s fervor sank his marvelous ideas about peace. Jimmy Carter’s conviction that he had a special relationship with God and could get answers through prayer instead of the National Security Council may have been the biggest cause of his ineptitude. Reagan is at his worst when he is thumping his Bible and counting God among his Cabinet.” Many accused Bush of believing that God directs his policy making. Critics also complain that presidents have often used the Bible selectively and inappropriately to advance their own political interests, ignored many of its central teachings, and frequently quoted it out of context. Instead of using the Bible to scrutinize and criticize American actions, detractors protest, they have generally employed it to justify them. They wanted “God on their side” to help them legitimate their ideas and used “only enough of the Bible . . . [to] accomplish their political objectives.” Moreover, critics allege, they have portrayed God as sanctifying and expediting America’s agenda.

My study demonstrates that the worldviews of its 14 subjects (in many ways, Kennedy is an exception), as informed in part by their faith, helped shape their philosophy of governing and selected policies. All of them saw God as the world’s creator, sustainer, protector, and judge. They believed that he directed human affairs and acknowledged him as the ultimate source of authority. These presidents asserted that nations were required to obey God’s transcendent standards and faced his condemnation when they did not. They concurred that God created the world with a moral structure and gave human beings a moral nature. These chief executives insisted that God instituted government to provide order and ensure justice. Human rights, all fourteen asserted, were a gift of God that government must protect. Although they were elected by the
American people, they believed that their authority ultimately came from God. Therefore, in carrying out their duties, they strove to be responsible to both. These presidents tended to depreciate denominational and doctrinal differences and stress the importance of morality, character, good works, and social justice. Some were more optimistic than others, but they all displayed an unshakable confidence in God and the nation’s people, institutions, and values.

Some maintain that presidents should confine their religious convictions to their private lives and prevent them from intruding on their work. Voicing this concern, the national director of the Anti-Defamation League argued that when Bush prayed “as a private person practicing his own faith, God bless, but when it becomes part of the official function of the president,” it is “inappropriate.”48 Others counter that committed Christians, Jews, and Muslims, like other citizens, should be able to support or oppose political policies based on their personal perspective of what is morally right, prudent, feasible, and good for society. The president, they avow, has the same right as any other American to take his private faith into the public arena. The Constitution, argues historian Martin Marty, does not mandate that faith in Jesus “or action based on faith in him, or faith in other prophets or messiahs” has to “be boxed in, shelved and forgotten in the zone called private.”49 Those with deeply held religious convictions should not be disqualified from public office or from expressing and acting on their commitments.50 Is it “really so preposterous,” others add, for a “person who represents the will of the public . . . to discuss his personal convictions?” Is it inappropriate for a country where 90 percent of the citizens believe in God to “elect a leader who shares this fundamental belief?”51

Like other Americans, presidents should be able to express and act on their religious convictions. They bring to their public service the totality of who they are as people, which is shaped in part by their faith. Although none of them tried to “impose” his personal religious views on the citizenry, the subjects of my study believed that their ideological commitments should direct their actions and policies. The influence of their faith is evident in many ways, including Washington’s quest to guarantee religious liberty, Jefferson’s to ensure peace, Lincoln’s
to end slavery, Theodore Roosevelt’s to settle the 1902 coal
strike, Wilson’s to devise the Treaty of Versailles, Franklin
Roosevelt’s to remedy the ills of the Great Depression,
Eisenhower’s to reduce armaments, Kennedy’s to procure Black
Civil Rights, Carter’s to promote human rights around the globe,
Reagan’s to combat communism, and Bush’s to encourage faith-
based initiatives.

These fourteen presidents provided governmental
support for religion in numerous ways. All of them except
Jefferson proclaimed days of public prayer and thanksgiving to
God, deeming them constitutionally permissible and beneficial.
They officially recognized Christian, Jewish, and, more recently,
Muslim holidays. Many of them prayed in the White House with
religious groups. Eisenhower and all his successors spoke at the
national prayer breakfasts in Washington that began in the
1950s. These presidents typically endorsed such practices as
chaplains in the military and Congress, the inclusion of the
phrase “under God” in the Pledge of Allegiance, prayers by
chaplains at inaugurals, prayer in the public schools, and
government funding of private religious schools. Several of
them held their own worship services before their inauguration
ceremonies.

While strongly promoting scriptural values of
righteousness, peace, justice, and compassion, all fourteen
presidents respected the separation of church and state.
Although they celebrated the nation’s Judeo-Christian heritage
and emphasized the importance of religion to the well-being of
the nation, they did not use the power of their office to push any
distinctively sectarian beliefs, practices, or aims or to give
special privileges to their own denominations. They all asserted
that religious faith helped promote virtue, civility, and social
order and wanted the federal government and religious groups to
work together to elevate the nation’s morality and remedy its
social ills.

All of these presidents insisted that the government
could supply “friendly aid” to religious groups as long as it did
not favor some over others. Some of these presidents led the
nation in prayer (Roosevelt on D-Day and Eisenhower at his first
inaugural), and many of them repeatedly exhorted Americans to
pray about domestic and foreign issues. Most of them gave more government support to religion than members of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State argue is permitted by the Constitution or prudent.52

The tremendous responsibilities and pressures and the trials and tribulations of the presidency inspired many of these fourteen chief executives to develop a stronger faith. Crises often drive people to a deeper appreciation of their religious heritage and a closer relationship with God. Many of these presidents testified that the burdens of the office prompted them to seek God’s guidance and assistance more than ever before. Their faith was important to many presidents and helped inform the way they viewed the world, fulfilled their responsibilities, made decisions, and chose and implemented policies.

In the final analysis, we must be careful not to make too much or too little of the influence of presidents’ faith on how they performed their duties. Scholars have tended to take it into account too little; some critics and admirers have given it too much attention. The faith of presidents has been viewed and valued differently in various eras in American history, depending on how positively religion was perceived at the time and how the faith of particular presidents fit with the general religious climate and was judged to have affected their work. Because of the nation’s religious pluralism, separation of church and state, and demands of civil religion, presidents have struggled to be true to their own religious convictions while trying to satisfy the frequently competing expectations of various constituencies. On the whole, the faith of these presidents increased their courage and confidence, helped them persevere during monumental trials, made them better leaders, and encouraged them to pursue policies that promoted justice, righteousness, and compassion.

Many of the contestants in this animated, often contentious debate over religion, politics, and public policy pay insufficient attention to American history. Blatantly partisan and driven by ideological agendas, they often ignore the past. When they do use history, they typically employ it selectively to bolster their side of the argument. Either they exaggerate or minimize the faith of the founders and presidents, or they highlight statements or actions that are unrepresentative or apocryphal. I
hope that my study will provide a historical context that sheds more light and reduces the heat of this debate. I have sought to describe the faith of these presidents in the context of their times; to discuss their own statements as well as those of their admirers, critics, and more dispassionate scholars; and to reach balanced, judicious, and accurate conclusions. I have aimed to steer a course between those who depict the founders and many presidents as devout, conventional Christians and those who portray them as deists, skeptics, and secularly minded men. Faith—although not always orthodox, Christian faith—had a powerful influence on the thoughts and actions of many presidents. Comprehending this can help Americans, whether they are politicians, religious leaders, journalists, lobbyists, or simply concerned citizens, better evaluate and participate more thoughtfully and effectively in this fascinating debate. This, in turn, can help our nation pursue the ends we all care about: advancing justice, peace, equality, compassion, and virtue.


5 Wilfred M. McClay, “Two Concepts of Secularism,” in Heclo and McClay, eds., Religion Returns, 33-4; first three quotations from 33, last two from 34.

6 Another Pew poll conducted in 2000 reported that 70 percent of Americans, about the same for Democrats and Republicans, want the president to be a person of faith. Both polls are cited in Cathy Young, “Beyond Belief,” Reason, 36 (Oct 2004).


17 Mark A. Noll, “Lincoln’s God,” Journal of Presbyterian History 82 (Summer 2004), 86. See also Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder,
Civil Religion and the Presidency (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1988), 106.


24 Discussant: James M. Wall in Rosenbaum and Ugrinsky, *Jimmy Carter*, 120. Wall concludes, “these leaders encouraged the incorrect impression that a President Carter just might function in the White
House with an open line not to Rome, as they feared with John Kennedy, but to Heaven itself.”


28 Ron Reagan, Jr., Eulogy for Ronald Reagan, June 14, 2004, http://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches. His other son Michael testified, “I believe that his determination and perseverance came from his relationship with the Lord. He played an important role in pointing me to God. I am secure in the knowledge that he is with his Lord and Savior Jesus Christ in heaven” (http://reaganranch.yaf.org).


Gaston Espinoza, “Religion and the Presidency of William Jefferson Clinton,” in Espinoza, ed., Religion and the American Presidency, 431-69; and “Excerpts of Remarks Made at the Ministers’ Leadership Conference at Willow Creek Community Church, South Barrington, Illinois, Aug. 10, 2000, http://www.presidency.uscb.edu. These individuals are omitted either because they made a sharp distinction between their private faith and public duties or because they served in close proximity to other presidents whose faith was more significant because of their personal commitments, historical circumstances, or policies. On J. Q. Adams, McKinley and Hoover, see my essays at http://www.visandvals.org/


43 Carter, however, displayed much less personal piety than many other presidents whose faith was not nearly as strong. Ribuffo suggests that “because he was so pious, Carter felt little need for official declarations of piety.” See Leo P. Ribuffo, “God and Jimmy Carter,” in M. L. Bradbury and James B. Gilbert, eds., Transforming Faith: The Sacred and Secular in Modern American History (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1989), 151.


Few Americans, except outspoken secularists, want a naked public square. Mainline, evangelical, and fundamentalist Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and Muslims all insist that public life should rest upon basic religious values. While Americans disagree about whether public buildings should be allowed to display the Ten Commandments, most of them concur that their principles—reverence for God, honesty, fidelity, integrity, and respect for life and property—should direct corporate as well as individual life. Two Christian intellectuals have especially promoted this argument: Richard John Neuhaus, editor of the journal *First Things*, and author of *The Naked Public Square* (1984) and Yale Law School professor Stephen Carter who penned *The Culture of Disbelief* (1993) and *God’s Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics* (2000). They contend that the effort to broaden the concept of the separation of church and state in order to eliminate religious perspectives, values, and symbols from public life and to inhibit the participation of religious groups in discussions of public policy is at odds with the First Amendment as it has been understood throughout American history. In *Divided by God: America’s Church-State Problem and What We Should Do About It*, New York University law professor Noah Feldman argues that the current debate over religion in the public arena is largely between two camps he labels “legal secularists” and values evangelicals.” He insists that almost all Americans want to ensure that the nation’s religious division and diversity does not pull us apart. “Values evangelicals think that the solution lies in finding and embracing traditional values we can share,” while “legal secularists think that we can maintain our national unity only if we treat religion as a personal, private matter.” He proposes a bargain—greater tolerance for the public expression of religion “in exchange for tighter restrictions on government funding” of religious institutions and activities. He urges values evangelicals to “reconsider their position in favor of state support for religious institutions and re-embrace the American tradition of institutionally separated church and state” because “state funding actually undercuts, rather than promotes, the cohesive national identity that evangelicals” want to restore. See also Michelle Goldberg, *Salon*, July 23, 2005, http://web.lexis-nexis.com.
Response to Gary Smith

Kara E. Stooksbury
Carson Newman College

The appropriate role of religion in American public life has been debated since the nation’s founding. Religion, particularly the Christian tradition, continues to be an important part of American political culture and as a result, is implicated in debates over controversial public policies. The importance of religion in American society is even reflected in the electorate’s evaluation of presidents and presidential candidates. Indeed, there has been recent discussion about the religious views of President Barack Obama since the release of a public opinion poll indicating that currently more Americans incorrectly believe that he is a Muslim than they did during the 2008 presidential campaign.¹ A great deal of presidential scholarship has focused on the determinants of presidential decision making, but what role does religion play in the decision making process? This question is at the center of Gary Scott Smith’s paper, “Religious Faith and the American Presidency.” Smith analyzes the beliefs and public policies of fourteen presidents by examining their public and private statements. He states that faith has inspired and influenced the ideals of many presidents, and that “their religious beliefs have been a key ingredient in the mix for many of them.” The paper draws on his book, Faith and the Presidency.²

While it should seem obvious that deeply held religious convictions can influence political decisions, Smith’s research seeks to fill the void in the presidency literature concerning the role of faith in presidential decision making. He asserts that this facet of presidential decision making has not received much
scholarly attention due to the ideological perspectives of researchers who are hostile to the idea. While I think this is true to an extent, I do not think it is the only explanation as to why scholars have neglected the topic. Since presidents are politicians, their behavior often does not evince consistent religious devotion. Ronald Reagan, for example, claimed that his faith was important to him, yet never attended church while he was president. Conversely, Bill Clinton attended church regularly, yet was guilty of multiple extramarital dalliances. Thus, the behavior of presidents would understandably lead some to overlook the role of faith in their lives.

Since the publication of Smith’s book in 2006, much more literature on faith and the presidency has emerged. Scholars either finally found religion, or George W. Bush’s presidency spurred scholarly interest in the topic. Historian Arthur Schlesinger contends that “George W. Bush’s presidency is the first faith-based administration in American history.” Just as Hilary Clinton’s active role as First Lady spawned a wave of scholarly research on the political impact of the presidential spouse in the White House, Bush’s presidency has drawn attention to the role of faith in presidential administrations.

Determining the extent to which faith influences decision making can be problematic as it is almost impossible to know with any degree of certainty the motives behind a political decision. Smith acknowledges those limitations and attempts to overcome them by examining the public statements of the presidents as indicators of their religious views. According to Hutcheson, however, “[a]part from the founding documents, the verbal expressions of civil religion in American history… come almost entirely from the public statements of presidents.” Thus, examining the public statements of presidents can be problematic in terms of separating statements of personal religious faith from public statements made in the context of American civil religion given that the President is the “principal prophet, high priest, first preacher, and chief pastor of the American nation.” Smith provides examples of presidential action that could fall into this category including speaking at national prayer breakfasts. As Smith points out, religious faith continues to be very important to Americans and certainly both presidents and presidential
candidates realize the potential political gain from such statements.

Another limitation in attempting to determine the role of faith in presidential policy making involves comparing presidents from different time periods as the role of the Chief Executive has changed tremendously over time. For instance, early presidents did not intervene in legislative matters in the nineteenth century. During the twentieth century the actions of presidents Theodore Roosevelt, William Howard Taft, and Woodrow Wilson began to change that. Even at the end of Franklin Roosevelt’s life, “the president’s involvement in legislation was no longer insult, but not yet institution”; Harry Truman altered the president’s role by sending legislative initiatives to Congress almost weekly. By the time Dwight Eisenhower was elected, legislators not only accepted, but demanded a presidential agenda” (424). Thus, it’s important to understand how presidents act on their faith within the context of the historical evolution of the institution because modern presidents have more tools by which to implement their beliefs.

Smith’s analysis indicates that for the fourteen presidents he studied, faith influenced their decisions; however, Smith does not actually define the term public policy nor does he provide a clear idea of what types of policies those presidents pursued based on religious motives. Are presidents more likely to incorporate their faith in domestic policy issues or foreign policy issues? Wildavsky suggests that there are two presidencies regarding the executive’s relationship with Congress: one that operates in the realm of foreign affairs and another that is confined to domestic issues. The argument is that presidential powers are stronger and less constitutionally constrained in foreign policy; thus, a president has more influence in those issues than in domestic issues. Berggren and Rae examined the relationship between the role of presidential faith and the style and direction of presidential leadership through an analysis of the “evangelical” style of leadership in foreign policy exhibited by both Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush. They concluded that under certain circumstances, an evangelical style may be beneficial despite assertions to the contrary made by Neustadt who equated the evangelical style with failure. He did so because presidents who are influenced by
their faith dislike political bargaining which is essential to success. They suggested that this style was consistent, however, with other studies of presidential leadership and had not been given enough sufficient scholarly attention. Thus, knowing that a president has acted on the basis of his faith is important; however, these types of studies can be enhanced by determining whether presidents implement their faith in the context of domestic or foreign policy. If presidents are more likely to incorporate their faith in foreign policy, there are implications for foreign relations. A poll in The Economist suggests that citizens of other countries find the American emphasis on religion troubling and that it helps reinforce negative ideas about American exceptionalism.11

Smith asks whether the concept of separation of church and state requires presidents to confine their religious values to their private lives and operate from a secular perspective in fulfilling their responsibilities. In our contemporary political climate where 60% of Americans claim to want religious political leaders12, it’s difficult for presidents to confine those values; especially when in the 2008 presidential candidates were invited to Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church for a discussion of their faith televised on CNN. Election polling data demonstrates that individuals who regularly attend religious services, regardless of their denomination, are more likely to vote for Republican candidates. Even though Democrats have attempted to close the so-called “God gap,” Republicans are still viewed as friendlier toward religion. It seems that perhaps at a minimum, presidential candidates must acknowledge God and speak to their faith, at least to the point that it conforms to our civil religion. However the extent to which presidents could and should promote religious-based policymaking has implications for both faith and politics.

In sum, Smith’s research, by offering an objective view of the role of religious faith in presidential decision making, helps us better understand this aspect of the presidency. This type of scholarship also raises questions about the extent to which presidents are truly inspired by their faith in developing policy and whether they are more successful in the context of foreign or domestic policy.
1 Pew Forum for Religious and Public Life. “Growing Number of Americans Say Obama is a Muslim.”
8 Aaron Wildavsky. “The Two Presidencies” Trans-Action, IV (December, 1966) While the two presidencies thesis has generated a great deal of scholarship countering Wildavsky’s claim, the general point here is that more information is needed about the context of the policy decisions.
Response to Gary Smith

Paul Yandle
Middle Tennessee State University

Gary Scott Smith has written in depth on faith and the presidency with the hope of informing discussion about the role of faith in the public square. It is an honor to be asked to respond to Dr. Smith’s paper and engage, even if indirectly, to the national discussion to which he has contributed. Since I am an evangelical who did his Ph.D. work at a state-supported institution and currently teaches at one, I have long been interested not only in the current relationship between church and state but also in how it has evolved since 1787. Scott’s paper complements his book *Faith & the Presidency*, which is one of the most scholarly of the handful of works I have perused on the matter. It is certainly the most meticulously cited of those with which I am familiar.

It is important how citizens in a republic view their past, and it is important how I as a historian teach it. Certainly United States historians know that Americans fight over interpretations of the past all of the time as we debate a wide variety of topics including the nature of race relations, the role of the United States in the world and, of course, the interaction between church and state. The debates can be confusing, and the nature in which they are held can often do more harm than good. In the academy and in the public at large, people on both extremes of the “culture wars” often argue selectively. Letters to the editor and other statements of opinion in various media tend to point out of context to a few quotes or founders best suited to support particular arguments on the role of religion in public life.¹
Many of us enter the classroom amid this fray with the hope of giving students the tools they need to clarify matters. Perhaps other teachers at this symposium have had classroom experiences similar to some of mine, including one where a student asked a question about the Bible and slavery (during a lecture on the Old South), another when a student asked the meaning of the word “revival” (during a lecture on the Great Awakening), still another in which a student commented that the story of the harvest feast with the Plymouth Pilgrims and the Wampanoag Indians is “just a nice story to tell kids.” Such questions can be unnerving, as they can often be surprisingly volatile in classrooms with students of a variety of different backgrounds. Complicating the problem is that fact that in survey classes, a historian cannot be an “expert” at everything the course is designed to cover. How do I provide information on the spot that is honest to the best of my knowledge, well-informed and judicious?

Keeping in mind my experiences, I know that Smith has a tough row to hoe with his work. As he himself notes, he has to pull out of the past people who were often private about their beliefs, whose beliefs changed over time, and who made public as well as private statements with their reputations in mind. He also has to weed through conflicting interpretations of presidents’ lives and characters. And, he has to deal with the fact that his thoughts on the matter are published, which means that he cannot escape from them.

Thankfully, Smith has given us in his scholarship a judicious analysis not only of the actions of presidents in relationship to their faith practices, but also of competing views on the lives of various presidents. His look at varying interpretations others have given of individual presidents through the years is as valuable as his own study of various presidents’ words and careers. I appreciate his analyses of the battles over what a particular president did or did not believe. George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln have been particularly susceptible to differing interpretations of their lives and beliefs, and Smith weighs in on what we do and do not know about the three men quite well. His analyses are extremely valuable for people who may be unaware of the sources of
divergent views of presidents and their faith practices over years, decades and (in the case of Washington), even centuries.

One theme I would like to see explored further by Smith and others who examine faith and the public arena centers on the differences in the way people thought in America before and after the turn of the twentieth century. Smith mentions the opinion of some contemporary Americans “that presidents should confine their religious convictions to their private lives and prevent them from intruding on their work.” As an example, he cites one person’s contention “that when Bush prayed ‘as a private person practicing his own faith, God bless, but when it becomes part of the official function of the president,’ it is ‘inappropriate.’” Many contemporary Americans make similar arguments, suggesting that there should be a wall of separation not only between church and state but also between the public and the private. My strong impression is that during the years surrounding the founding of the United States, most Americans did not make such divisions.

Whether their positions were grounded in a form of the Enlightenment, classical republicanism or the Judeo-Christian tradition, most thought in terms of truth to be discerned that affected all of life (though they may have disagreed on whether through the truth was self-evident, discerned through reason or revealed). I suspect that the failure to take this difference into account is one of the reasons that many of the arguments over the nature of public and private spheres today are flawed. There exists not just a misunderstanding of the events surrounding a given presidency but also an ignorance of the manner in which people viewed humanity, the world and the truth during the time that a given president sat in office. In the process of cherry-picking quotes, many people arguing in favor of a strong synergistic relationship between church and state may misunderstand the differences between, for example, deists who eschewed revealed truth and Christians who actively sought revealed truth, pointing to any reference to God by any founder as evidence of orthodox Christian faith, regardless of what that founder believed. People who are secularist in their orientation often try to place the views of unorthodox founders within the context of their own presumption that there is no place for faith and reason to meet – or that there is no such thing as universal
truth to be found. Consideration of the spiritual and intellectual context in which Americans lived before the Civil War could lend further credence to Martin Marty’s assertion, noted by Scott in his symposium paper, that the Constitution does not require people to segregate their beliefs from their public lives.

Smith’s chapter on Thomas Jefferson is a good example of Smith’s demonstration of the importance of context. Smith refers to Thomas Jefferson’s 1802 letter to the Danbury Baptist Association, a letter often cited for its description of the First Amendment as placing a “wall of separation between church and state.” How high was that wall in Jefferson’s mind? It is hard to say. Smith’s presentation of surrounding events, and his pointing out of the fact that Jefferson knew that his words would be publicized, reminds us that it is often hard to judge motives and nuances behind a single piece of writing. When one factors in the differences in which people viewed the world in 1802, 1900 and 2010, one can see that interpreting the thoughts of an author from a previous generation can be tricky. In addition, presidents were and are quite often inconsistent in their words and actions, and their beliefs can change over time. Jefferson constantly defies scholars searching for consistency in his public life.

Another thing that Smith hints at is the fact that in the United States’ early years, the federal government largely left alone the relationship between church and state at the state level. A large number of state constitutions in antebellum America plainly contained Christian references to God and faith-based tests for offices at the state level, with little or no notice from the federal government. The use of such references in revised and completely revamped state constitutions continued for some time after the Civil War. Smith has helped lay a strong foundation on which other scholars can build as they study how the church-state debate has changed at every level of government, how the relationship between the federal and state governments has changed over time, how interpretations of the U.S. Constitution have changed and how amendments to the Constitution – and differences over the meaning of those amendments – have complicated that debate.
Smith’s work reveals why scholarship is so crucial to discussions of the relationship between faith and public action. One advantage that people who work in the humanities can bring to the table is their emphasis on understanding the perspectives not only of their contemporaries but also the views of their forebears. A well-informed debate that cites the past requires an immersion into the language and polemics of the period discussed. Selective quotation does not work at a deep level.

We may not be able to discern, in many cases, what many of our presidents believed at any given time. But Smith has convincingly shown that some sort of religious belief has informed the presidencies of fourteen men. We cannot know everything they thought, but the evidence is overwhelming that they thought that a supreme being had impact on their lives and work. Smith ends his larger work and his paper for this symposium expressing his “hope that my study will provide a historical context that sheds more light and reduces the heat of this debate.”4 His study certainly provides good historical context. Whether the heat of the debate rises or falls remains to be seen.

1 Waldman, Founding Faith, x; Smith, Faith & the American Presidency, 430.
2 Smith, Faith & the American Presidency, 419.
3 Smith, Faith & The American Presidency, 76-79.
4 Smith, Faith & the American Presidency, 430.
A Place for Faith in the Public Square?

John D. Coats
Lee University

Two centuries after Thomas Jefferson penned the words and a half century after Justice Hugo Black popularized them in *Everson v. Board of Education* (1947), "building a wall of separation between Church and State" has become the central point of contention in the debate over the role of faith in the public square. Jefferson's wall was meant to guard the American people from state-sponsored religion, but over time it came to somehow suggest that faith be excluded from the public square. As new battlements were added and gates closed, Jefferson's metaphorical barrier has come to obscure, separate, and antagonize. Staking the high ground on one side of the wall are the strict secularists, arguing that religion contaminates public affairs and should be a strictly private matter. On the other are those who argue that the United States should remain, as the founders created it, a specifically Christian nation. And somewhere between those poles stand most Americans. While they support the idea of separation, they aren't entirely sure what that means; or perhaps they have a personal understanding that is far different than established legal or academic definitions. In all cases, in modern America a wall of separation is a widely accepted metaphor that has broad ranging implications and multiple definitions.

It is certainly clear that Black's "high and impregnable" wall did not exist in Jefferson's day. The first amendment's establishment clause imposed restrictions on the federal government; it was not meant to privatize religion. As critics of strict separation are quick to point out, there are many examples
from the period where government officials openly supported the Christian faith. Well into the nineteenth century several states continued to use public funds to support state-sponsored churches, religiously specific public proclamations were common, and the Danbury letter itself was sent by Baptists who opposed the legally established Congregationalist church in Massachusetts. How did Jefferson view such breaches in the wall? Consider his Second Inaugural Address, where he said:

In matters of religion I have considered that its free exercise is placed by the Constitution independent of the powers of the General Government. I have therefore undertaken on no occasion to prescribe the religious exercises suited to it, but have left them, as the Constitution found them, under the direction and discipline of the church or state authorities acknowledged by the several religious societies.³

Jefferson clearly differentiated between federal and state roles, therefore it made sense that he had proclaimed days of fasting and prayer as governor of Virginia, but avoided such actions as president.

One response to the question of Jefferson's apparent religiosity is to fall back on the notion that he, like most of the founding generation were deists. His religious rhetoric was not an expression of any particular and abiding faith, but the vague, less contentious belief in a less personal higher power. Mark David Hall's essay ("Religious Faith and the Founders of the American Republic") suggests that American scholars have led the general public to believe that the founding generation were deists who rejected traditional Christian orthodoxy. This deistic worldview caused them to desire a strict separation between church and state, as evidenced by a 'godless' Constitution and the establishment clause of the First Amendment. In no uncertain terms, Hall refutes this view of the founding generation, which he finds rooted in poor methodology and motivated by particular agendas.

Hall rightly notes that many recent studies suffer from an essential error in method. Namely, those that hold that the
founders were deists have made a universal generalization from the beliefs of a particular group of men. As Hall makes clear, historians work with limited, not universal, generalizations; that is, they take special care not to draw broad conclusions from narrowly focused studies. We certainly would not generalize about presidential history by studying only Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, and the two Roosevelts; why then should we attribute to the founding generation the worldview of its five most famous members? Instead, Hall argues that there is clear evidence that some seventeen founders were Reformed, orthodox Christians, and those founders are a better representation of the beliefs of the founding generation than the high profile deists. In light of Hall's work, scholars who consider the deism of the founding fathers should do so within the broader culture of orthodox Christianity.

Still, while I tend to agree in every aspect with both Hall's technical critique (don't generalize) and his specific finding (that the founders, like most Americans, accepted the tenets of orthodox Christianity), I am still left with the somewhat uncomfortable reality that the big five (or perhaps six) were outside orthodoxy, that they were indeed deists. While the deists appear to have been in the minority, they had a special place and influence in American history. As Wilfred McClay so clearly describes in his essay, our American civic religion has made Jefferson, Madison, Franklin, Adams, and Washington founding members of our pantheon. To be truthful, as a Christian, I find myself wishing that Roger Sherman (a Reformed founder) was on our lips, our currency, and Mt. Rushmore, but sadly he did not reach the station in the public consciousness that would elevate him to such heights. Instead, the deism of our most famous founders has been readily appropriated by those who would argue for a strict separation of church and state.

As Hall explains, the views of Jefferson and Madison have been used to back an increasingly formidable wall of separation between church and state. Using select texts, the courts have found that strict separation was commonly held by the founders. Hall suggests that they should again be more careful in their method; the founding generation valued religious liberty and believed that true Christian religion should be encouraged and played a valuable role in the public square. To
cite select works of Jefferson or Madison as widely representative is dishonest. Rather, advocates of strict separation should use these works to show that some members of the founding generation advocated a standard that over time has become the law of the land.

The importance of the founders' intent on constitutional interpretation is clearly a point of considerable debate, but the court's decisions in the last fifty years have consistently expanded the first amendment establishment clause to mean a strict separation of church and state. Justice John Paul Stevens perhaps best captured separationist sentiment when he wrote, "Whenever we remove a brick from the wall that was designed to separate religion and government, we increase the risk of religious strife and weaken the foundations of our democracy." Stevens highlights two points often held by separationists. First, that religion can be dangerous. Second, that allowing religion into the public square would undermine our liberties. Both assertions suggest that people of faith have little to contribute in the public square.

Wilfred McClay contends that faith, and more specifically the Christian tradition, does have a valuable role in the public square. No stranger to this topic, McClay accesses the issues through the concept of civil religion and the work of Richard John Neuhaus. McClay reminds us that much of the debate over the place of religion has been defined, the way such debates often tend to be, by the voices as its poles. On one extreme are the strict secularists, ideological totalitarians who argue that religion undermines peace and liberty, therefore it should be banished from public life. On the other are those Christians who would create in the United States a government of Christians, by Christians, and for Christians--a sort of neo-theocracy.

McClay argues that America's civil religion plays a critical role in creating a common ground between people of faith and a secular culture. Those who champion a complete barrier between church and state can respect what McClay calls our civil sacred scriptures without violating the strict wall of separation. Documents are placed in their proper context, and then considered for their progressive content; religious zealots
spurred by the threat of mutiny may have created the Mayflower Compact, but it also foreshadowed the Constitution. Christians look at the same documents and take pride in the Pilgrim's faith (be it ever so different than their own), as well as the covenant itself.

McClay then turns to a pair of works by Richard John Neuhaus, *The Naked Public Square* and *American Babylon*. Neuhaus argues that our liberal democracy is part of a culture that is dependent on rights given to us by the Creator in whose image we are formed. These values then provided a shared moral point of reference upon which disputes should be heard. The alternative to this common foundation, state-sponsored secularism, is an empty vessel. Christians have a responsibility to shape culture, but should do so in a way that allows for pluralism in the public square. Neuhaus's also warns, however, that America is not the promised land and Washington is not Zion. Regardless of how successful we are in shaping culture, and therefore politics, we cannot forget that we might still lose our way—and perhaps not even know we are lost.

Most Christians are thoughtful, reasonable people who want to engage in an open, civil debate; unfortunately, the general public may not share this understanding. Instead, they come to the reasonable conclusion, given their sources, that many Christians who want a place in the public debate have walked in lockstep with Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson and Ralph Reed. Sadly, my own discipline betrays us here. History texts don't consider the nuances of Neuhaus, they don't explore the faith that motivates the evangelical movement, but they will take note of those who seek to impose their particular religious views. Even a mainstream evangelical figure like Billy Graham is reduced to an apologist for Nixon or an artifact of the Cold War and mass media. It is difficult to find in any historical text the great evangelist who faithfully proclaimed the simple gospel message of sin, repentance and salvation. Christians, then, face a significant challenge in overcoming stereotypes if they are to be welcome into the public square.

But do Americans want religion in the public square? That Americans embrace the idea of separation is evident; a survey conducted this year found that two-thirds of respondents
agreed that the First Amendment required a clear separation of church and state. However, when given specific cases, even more supported a national day of prayer (76%) and student-led prayer at public school events (80%). Furthermore, almost half of respondents said that in the upcoming elections this November that the religious affiliation of the candidate was important to them.5 While the poll does not attempt to specify what separation of church and state means, one can imagine that any specific definition would lower the approval ratings. The respondents' answers to specific issues certainly suggest that they might not agree with the U.S. Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals (which found in 2002 that the Pledge of Allegiance's "under God" phrase breached the church-state wall).6

So, the Jefferson-Black wall of separation is widely supported, but broadly defined by the public. Jefferson's wall of separation has also expanded well beyond the question of an established state religion or even the exclusion of religion from the area of civil government. One need look no further than higher education to understand how easily the privatization of religion has extended in our society. This is in part because of the academy's embrace of Rousseau's Enlightenment over its Scottish counterpart, but also because the high and impregnable wall extends into our schools. Universities have embraced the absolute secularist view that religion should fade into obscurity as mankind progressed to a higher, more rational state. I suspect that this notion of progress was never as clear as the educated elite suspected, but it does seem that for many the underlying story of western civilization has been the triumph of reason over religion and science over superstition. We had moved past the inquisitions of Galileo, past the Salem witch trials, past the time when American universities required the study of the Bible. A secular standard had triumphed in academic life which tolerated any rational argument that did not, and by its very nature would not, appeal to the supernatural. In public life too, proponents of strict separation appeared to be victorious; state and federal courts followed the Everson case by deciding against prayer and Bible reading in public schools, censoring private religious displays in public areas, and removing religious symbols from public spaces. Religion was being increasingly privatized, and those who chose to cling to superstition were being culturally
marginalized, intellectually segregated, and left as a straw man for the enlightened.

Is it not ironic that scholars often have discussions about faith, not in the public square, but rather in the security (or, perhaps the confines) of church-sponsored colleges and universities, in the comfort of institutions like the Conference on Faith and History, or in the safety of the classroom? That is, I'm unsure how welcome our conversation might be in what should be the most open minded forum--the American academy. This is especially true if we were to move past the popular deism of some founding fathers, the vague public affirmations of faith uttered by our presidents, or the support of broadly popular social causes. To proclaim a more specific Christian worldview immediately sounds warning bells in the halls of many a college campus. To argue that Christianity has a fundamental and continuing contribution to freedom, democracy, and justice would be more alarming yet.

Perhaps this fear of Christianity, or at least academia's tendency to privatize it, explains the marked absence of faith's place in presidential studies. Gary Smith was motivated by the uneven quality of scholarship on the subject. He suggests in his essay on faith and the American Presidency that, once again, the debate has been defined by the extremes. Some seek evidence of orthodox Christian faith in the White House, while others seek to downplay the presidents' faith or ascribe to it ulterior political motives. Carefully avoiding the tendency of those studying the founding generation to generalize from particular data, he selects fourteen presidents for his study. Choosing them for their religiosity, the influence of religion on their policies, or because their faith differed from mainstream Protestantism, he argues that faith played an important role in their public policy, political philosophy, and relationships with interest groups.

Smith's finding should not surprise people of faith. Indeed, I would be shocked if the presidents had somehow closeted their faith in the White House. Instead, Smith finds that they held diverse theological positions and disagreed on specific policy directions, but all promoted "scriptural values of righteousness, peace, justice, and compassion". Smith also finds that presidents in his sample consistently emphasized the
importance of religion in the nation's life, from our religious heritage to the relationship between religion and morality. Smith also confirmed that the presidents take great care not to endorse any specific denomination and have a deep respect for the separation of church and state. Yet they also celebrate the nation's religious heritage, emphasize the importance of religion to the well-being of the state, and proclaimed public days of prayer and thanksgiving.

Presidents, regardless of their personal beliefs, have carefully created civil-religious references to God that balance on the wall of separation. Take, for example, a portion of a speech made by Bill Clinton at a White House interfaith breakfast, "I am honored that all of you are here not for a political purpose. We come here to seek the help and guidance of our Lord, putting aside our differences, as men and women who freely acknowledge we don't have all the answers. And we come here seeking to restore and renew and strengthen our faith." Clinton skillfully opens space between politics and religion, acknowledges a broadly defined deity, and shows a sensitivity to the importance of faith. He is specific but general, suggestive but not definite, speaking to a prayer breakfast but very conscious that he leads a diverse republic.

Smith argues that one of the more interesting, and unexplored, areas in presidential studies is the relationship of the president with particular interest groups and religious organizations. James McDonald and his organization, Bread for the World, would fit within this area as they challenge people of faith to end hunger in the world. His essay ("Religious Faith and the Politics of Hunger") argues that Christians must move beyond traditional notions of charity to support organizations that lobby governments to stir the political will that can bring meaningful change.

My greatest concern with McDonald's argument is that it devalues private acts and might undermine Christians' personal sense of responsibility. In describing the dangers of charity, he writes "With charity, no one is changed, no circumstances are changed, and no relationship is changed between the donor and recipient. Charity salves the conscious of the privileged, but it maintains an unacceptable status quo for those in need." Perhaps
it's an issue of semantics, but I find this a singularly negative view of traditional charity. We know that many an American writes a check for a food drive and rests, self-satisfied with their benevolent act. However, other families contribute to a food bank by carefully considering purchases, traveling together to stock shelves, and interacting with the people receiving the gift. Such an act of charity can transform the check writer into a person that spends a lifetime working with the poor, or perhaps even working as an underpaid lobbyist for an organization dedicated to changing public policy. Charity can be impersonal, but it need not be so. It can be soulless, but it can also be transformative.

My other concern is that all of the problems McDonald connects to a spiritually barren version of charity would be magnified if Christians came to see government as the chief means to achieve a just and equitable society. If writing a check is an act devoid of humanity, then how much more so the monthly deduction taken from one's paycheck? Handing over to the government our responsibility for the hungry removes us a step further from our duty to do unto others as we would have them do to us. Already the government, informed by our charism, has taken on many critical social services in society. However one wonders if people and communities of faith do not turn too quickly to WIC, SNAP, and other social welfare programs, rather than to our own resources.

This is not to say that we should not lobby our government (or become part of said government) in an effort to bring about change. As Christians we are to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's, and we are called upon to meet that responsibility even when the government does not follow our wishes or act in a godly manner. However in our republic we have ownership of Caesar's government. Therefore we can help shape how our tax dollars are spent. In a government with an annual budget of over one trillion dollars, we already commit large sums to social welfare programs meant to care for the aged, impoverished, and the sick: $696 billion for Social Security, $452 billion for Medicare, $290 billion for Medicaid--we even set aside $11 billion for disaster relief. None of these programs completely, or even efficiently, meets the needs of the disadvantaged, however McDonald does not suggest that simply
finding more funding will make government programs more effective. He rightly argues that Christians should urge lawmakers to rethink policy from the perspective of the poor and hungry. He challenges us to broaden our perspectives, both domestically and internationally.

We know the importance of food aid, but must also advocate policies that will allow developing nations to prosper and independently meet their needs. His example of debt relief policies speaks to this goal. Debt relief is a long-standing practice in U.S. policy (usually meant to ensure political stability), but Bread for the World helped lawmakers see it as an opportunity to fight poverty--savings from debt relief went to poverty-reducing measures. Likewise, Bread for the World has worked to ensure that government-to-government aid actually reaches those in need. Accountability is crucial. People of faith, and especially the middle class in the United States, often lead lives divorced from the reality of hunger. McDonald understands that educating people in the pews is as important as lobbying those in the halls of power. In all cases, private and public, his call to action is, as it has been for centuries, timely.

All four main presenters in this year's Maryville Symposium suggest what many of us know and live out, that a faith-based worldview does not allow for an absolute separation of church and state. Why is this? It's because faith is a part of a believer's life that influences all of our decisions, from how we understand salvation to how we make decisions as elected officials. When we look at the world we do so through the eyes of faith. Our faith reinforces calls for mercy and justice, and it reminds us that our sin and failure have consequences.

The proposition that Christianity has a vital place in a pluralist public square is an idea I accept; but I am not the person who needs to be convinced. Moreover, Christian scholars carry a special responsibility in protecting faith's seat in public debate. C.S. Lewis argued that educated Christians have a duty to protect our less-educated brethren. For those of us who are scholars and teachers, we need to inform the family of faith so that they can engage the world of ideas in a thoughtful way. We should not silence our voices, but should each find that place where we
can, in good conscience, engage our culture for the common good.