



## The Faiths of the Founding Fathers

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## **The Faiths of the Founding Fathers** David L. Holmes

It is not uncommon to hear Christians argue that America was founded as a Christian nation. But how true is this claim?

In this compact book, David L. Holmes offers a clear, concise and illuminating look at the spiritual beliefs of our founding fathers. He begins with an informative account of the religious culture of the late colonial era, surveying the religious groups in each colony. In particular, he sheds light on the various forms of Deism that flourished in America, highlighting the profound influence this intellectual movement had on the founding generation. Holmes then examines the individual beliefs of a variety of men and women who loom large in our national history. He finds that some, like Martha Washington, Samuel Adams, John Jay, Patrick Henry, and Thomas Jefferson's daughters, held orthodox Christian views. But many of the most influential figures, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John and Abigail Adams, Jefferson, James and Dolley Madison, and James Monroe, were believers of a different stripe. Respectful of Christianity, they admired the ethics of Jesus, and believed that religion could play a beneficial role in society. But they tended to deny the divinity of Christ, and a few seem to have been agnostic about the very existence of God.

Although the founding fathers were religious men, Holmes shows that it was a faith quite unlike the Christianity of today's evangelicals. Holmes concludes by examining the role of religion in the lives of the presidents since World War II and by reflecting on the evangelical resurgence that helped fuel the reelection of George W. Bush.

An intriguing look at a neglected aspect of our history, the book will appeal to American history buffs as well as to anyone concerned about the role of religion in American culture.

## **The Faiths of the Founding Fathers Details**

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## **From Reader Review The Faiths of the Founding Fathers for online ebook**

### **Joe says**

An overview of the religious environment in Colonial America, and the views of many of the key figures. Shatters many of the myths we've been taught: while Christianity (in its various forms) was the predominate religion, many of the Founding Fathers were Deist, and were adamant about separation of Church and State.

Fairly academic is in approach, it's pretty readable and makes a very strong case for the author's views. Some excellent ideas on why men of the era were Deist while their wives were generally orthodox Christians, though that subject is only touched on lightly (the author states it was beyond the scope of that book). Essentially, the Deist views were taught in college, where women were not allowed. Also, the church was a social opportunity for the women who had to stay at home (unlike the working men), and provided a greater comfort for suffering (very high infant mortality rate; while the men grieved, they could go back to work and socializing; women stayed at home and continued grieving).

An excellent conclusion is while a few of the Founding Fathers were what today would be called Christian, most (such as Jefferson, Adams, Monroe -- and even Washington!) would most likely be shunned by the religious right today.

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### **Anna says**

I thought this was an interesting book. A pretty easy read, given the topic and overall academic writing style. I learned a great deal and was fascinated by how many religions existed in the United States 200 years ago. It was also very interesting to hear the roots of Unitarianism, how the split between Roman Catholicism and Luther/Protestant religions emerged and morphed in the Americas, and the influence of the Enlightenment and France on a religion called "Deism". For history and religious buffs, this is a must read. The only part of the book that was less than impressive or interesting was the section on the Founding Father's wives and daughters and their religions. It had little information, unfortunately, although the opening chapter on it was good. The other critique I have is that the author likes to make a case for why the Founding Father's weren't overly Christian at the end of each chapter -- a bit gratuitous and dissertation-like, but no book is perfect!

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### **Jon says**

I came to this book after becoming familiar with Holmes's volume on the faiths of the postwar presidents. In this volume, Holmes discusses the religious beliefs of the first five presidents of the United States, as well as a set of others responsible for the foundation of our nation. He also gives background to the state of religion in the United States and the colonies during the Revolutionary period. In all, he aims to be debunk myths that have sprung up around the founding fathers with regard to their religious beliefs, enough to anger both evangelicals and some atheists. Proving exactly what the first five presidents believed, however, is perhaps more difficult than might be initially supposed. This is because we are limited by what these men left behind in their writings and by what others say about them, and these things do not necessarily speak to what went

on in these men's minds.

Holmes makes the claim that the first five presidents of the United States were Deists. This claim is easily proven in the case of a man like Thomas Jefferson, whose views on religion and Christianity are fairly well known and represented in the writings that he left behind. Such a claim is a bit more difficult in the case of someone like George Washington, whose views and actions in some ways contradict such an interpretation, or someone like James Monroe, who was simply silent on religious matters.

Holmes begins by discussing the religious culture of the times. Most Americans were religious, and most were protestants of some sort. Anglicanism actually had a much larger hold on the country than I had realized, and Catholicism, which one tends to learn in school was well-founded in Maryland, actually had little hold (the leaders of Maryland were Catholic, but the people were Anglican). Unorthodox views were heavily present in Rhode Island and in Pennsylvania, where there tended to be greater freedom of religion. Deism was popular among the educated classes and supplanted the teachings of denominations at many of the denominationally sponsored universities during this time. Hence, the nation's leaders were often Deistic in their persuasion--or at least heavily influenced by such ideas (the latter is much easier to prove than the former).

Next, Holmes moves on to the individual men. There seems little doubt that Franklin and Jefferson were Deists, though both men saw the Bible as a source of great wisdom and believe in a power that had forged the universe. Washington, however, was a churchgoer who encouraged others to go to church. Holmes sees Deistic tendencies in Washington because the man rarely talked of Jesus (he used, rather, terms Deists would more often use to talk of God, such as Grand Architect) or of personal salvation, and there is some evidence that he did not take communion. His attendance at church, furthermore, was sporadic (though his lack of attendance usually occurred when he was living in the country, far from available churches). I came away feeling like Washington could have as likely been a lukewarm Christian as a Deist. What is clear, though, is as Holmes points out, Washington's myth was rewritten by later generations to make him into a more religiously Orthodox man than he actually was.

John Adams and his wife were Unitarians. For Holmes, these seem more or less to equate with Deist. Holmes splits Deists into two camps: Christian Deists and non-Christian. As such, Adams falls into the former camp, save that Unitarians aren't technically Christians, if we are to follow the line of thinking that Christians must believe in the Trinity and other orthodox beliefs (Unitarians rejected the Trinity among other beliefs). As a Unitarian, Adams believed essentially in Arianism, the idea that Christ was a created being rather than coeternal with God from the beginning. However, unlike Jefferson, Adams believed in miracles and other various aspects of scripture. Still, Adams has as much trouble with the ideas of overly religious people as he did with overly Deistic people, such as Thomas Payne.

Madison's beliefs are a bit more difficult to fathom out, but his heavy association with Deists suggests that he leaned toward this set of beliefs, at least during the years in which he was on the political stage. Later in life, he apparently returned more toward orthodox Christianity. Monroe's silence, for Holmes, is an argument for Deistic beliefs, something I find a bit hard to buy as an argument (just because someone doesn't talk religion doesn't mean the person is fill-in-the-blank of what you want him to be). Also pointing to Monroe's possible Deist impulses was his membership in the Freemasons, an organization among with Deism was popular.

While the men may have been Deists, most of their wives, save for a few notables, fell more into the orthodox Christian camp. Holmes speculates on reasons that men made up most of the Deistic movement, while women stayed more closely aligned with churches. Holmes then turns to men who were very clearly Christian in outlook who helped forge the country: Samuel Adams and John Jay among them. He spells out

how to "spot" a Deist versus a Christian. And then he closes with a chapter on our contemporary presidents. What is clear is that in the early Republic, while presidents tended to go to church (even if nonbelieving), they were not as outspoken about religion compared with the general population as our contemporary presidents are (who often espouse quite staunchly Christian beliefs in order to appeal to the electorate).

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### **Keith says**

Interesting book that seems well researched and cited. My only issue is that the author seemed desperate to place all the major characters into the Deist camp. I have no problem with them being Deist, or not, but it seemed clear early on that there was an agenda here. He highlighted three "founding fathers" that he felt were orthodox, but seemed to be deliberately attempting to have those be some of the less well known actors. All of the most famous, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, etc. were lumped into the same category while he at the same time repeated the mantra that it's impossible to pin down and truly characterize their, or any historical figures, true beliefs.

Worth it for the insights into how they acted if not it's conclusions, it's an easy read, and it's short.

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### **Elyse says**

This book confirmed what I suspected; except for a few, the Founding Fathers were not what current society would define as Christian. Most subscribed to some form of Deism. They were profoundly influenced by The Age of Enlightenment and were skeptical of the mysteries of Christianity. Not so the Founding Mothers. Except for Abigail Adams (who like her husband was Unitarian), most wives were orthodox believers. The author, a professor of religious studies at William & Mary, wrote, "...the founding generation held certain convictions in common. Most believed in a guiding Providence and in a life after death. These affirmations separated them from the radical Deists of their time. They respected the ethical teachings of Jesus. Many believed that simple virtue and morality were of greater importance than adherence to a particular set of religious doctrines. Above all, they valued freedom of conscience and despised religious tyranny."

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### **Pete says**

This book offers a clear, concise evidence-based corrective to claims that the "founding fathers" were Christian, let alone evangelical Christians. Most were Deists of one level of commitment or another, who, among other convictions, did not accept the divinity of Christ, the Trinity or the workings of God in human affairs, and had neither belief nor interest in a personal relationship with Christ. Heresy to some today, but Holmes draws upon extensive evidence--from letters to church habits to their own testimonials--to show the fact. And all the while, he remains careful and reflective, sensitive to the feelings he is treading on. The chapters on Washington, Jefferson, Monroe (especially) and distinguishing a Deist from a Christian are particularly interesting. As brief as it is as a scholarly summary for lay readers, though, its mini-biographies feature too many unnecessary details and lack story-telling power.

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## **Robert Justice says**

This took me a while to get through, but it was worth it!

Going through each individual father (Washington, Jefferson, Adams, etc) Holmes traces the evidence for each founding father's individual belief.

The main thesis Holmes is driving at is that the vast majority of the founding fathers were not necessarily orthodox Christians as many modern-day Americans tend to believe, but rather a form of religious thought known as deism. As such, the vast majority of the fathers, while believing in a deity that created the world and defined the boundaries of natural law, did not believe in the reliability of the Bible or in the full deity of Jesus. Thomas Jefferson, in particular, cut out the portions of the New Testament that allowed for the supernatural.

The terms "Nature's God" and "the Creator" were very basic deistic names for their own idea of God, and it was this belief that most helped to mold the ideas of the Declaration of Independence.

However, the fathers were not completely left without an orthodox Christian witness. Samuel Adams, known to history as the "Father of the Revolution", was an incredibly pious Christian who upheld the authority of Scripture, the deity and atoning death of Jesus Christ, and the reality of the Godhead.

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## **Shauna says**

A balanced, objective description of what the title suggests. Straight, no fluff. I had been under the impression prior to reading this book that the Founding Fathers were all fairly religiously devout, which turns out not to be the case, although all held to various tenets of Christianity to varying degrees. I enjoyed the epilogue which describes the religious background, beliefs, and practices of Presidents from Ford through George W. Bush. The image of little Bill Clinton going to church every Sunday by himself makes me sad. Overall, a good read if you want some reliable information with which to decide for yourself whether the US is really a nation founded on Christian principles, an issue on which people nowadays are often divided. The book doesn't provide a "yes" or "no" answer to that question.

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## **John says**

A reasonably accurate history of religion in American politics. Sorely needed in this age of David Barton's insanity and revisionist history.

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## **Jared says**

Pretty good book. Holmes does a good job with his research, but I would SLIGHTLY challenge the framework he uses to understand everything he writes about. I do not like how he tries to understand everything through the philosophy/theology of "deism". By the time Holmes gets done with this theory, he has stretched deism so far that it does not even resemble the original theory of deism anymore. You can see the author doing this as he goes through and talks about "Christian Deism" and "Episcopalian Deists"...that does not make much sense to me.

Instead, I would argue that Unitarianism is a far superior theory to understand the religious faith and

viewpoints of the Founding Fathers through. Now within Unitarianism there were clearly differences...the John Adams type of Unitarianism is much different from the Thomas Jefferson type of Unitarianism. But it simply "fits" better than stretching Deism to cover all these cases. Deism should only be applied to Thomas Paine, Ethan Allen and (perhaps) Benjamin Franklin.

Now, surely the Unitarians were very similar to the Deists and they used much the same language, but the theories are different when it comes to the ability of a deity to involve itself in the world and the ability of a deity to send Jesus as a "savior" or prophet. I honestly think theological unitarianism is the key to unlocking this mystery.

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## **Libertine says**

This book is a balanced look at the religious views of the Founding Fathers (and Mothers) of the USA. It takes the view that while the founders clearly intended the separation of church and state, they were not all of one mind about religion in their private lives. The author roughly groups them in several categories: non-Christians, Christian Deists, Unitarians, and Orthodox Christians of varying degrees of liberality/conservatism.

The first chapter is an overview of the religious climate in the American colonies in 1770, and shows how some denominations differed in belief and practice from these same denominations today. Next, he covers the Anglican tradition, focusing on how this was a common factor in the upbringing of the founders from Virginia.

The next two chapters deal with Deism, the first being an overview of this philosophy and its relationship to the Enlightenment. The second covers the varying degrees of influence Deism had on the founding fathers.

The next six chapters cover the religious backgrounds and later beliefs and practices of several founders: Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, none of whom could be categorized as orthodox Christians.

The eleventh chapter covers the religious beliefs of women close to the founding fathers: Martha Washington, Eleanor Parke Custis Lewis, Abigail Adams, Martha Jefferson, Martha Jefferson Randolph, Maria Jefferson Eppes, and Dolley Madison. This chapter also discusses why Deism was less common among women during this time and why orthodox religion may have been more appealing to most women.

In the twelve chapter, there is a guide on how to distinguish a Deist from an orthodox Christian when reading material about people from this time period.

Chapter thirteen covers the religious beliefs of three prominent orthodox Christians of the time: Samuel Adams, Elias Boudinot, and John Jay, comparing and contrasting them with the founders mentioned above.

The book concludes with thumbnail sketches of the religious backgrounds and beliefs of Gerald Ford, Jimmy Carter, Ronald Reagan, George Bush senior, Bill Clinton, Hillary Rodham Clinton, and George Bush junior.

I enjoyed this book immensely, subtracting a star only because the book could have gone into more detail.

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### **Bill says**

This fine book shows the religious landscape in the colonies in the late 18th century, demonstrates where the Founding Fathers' beliefs fit into that landscape, and counters claims that the Founders created a "Christian nation." Holmes arguments about Founders' beliefs rest both on what they wrote and on their behavior - when they went to church, what churches they attended, their recorded habits of prayer and sacraments - thus avoiding relying on later authors' assessments of Founding Fathers' theological positions. Holmes shows that these men were mostly deistic, though their wives were sometimes more conventionally Christian in their behavior. One can infer from Holmes's book that if early presidents had been chosen today, with all voting - not just property-holding white men - the nation would have taken a different path.

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### **Scott says**

Assigned for a class on religion in the US, this book was meant to educate on the founding fathers and did not disappoint.

The book goes through a brief history of Colonial religious life, laws, and belief before delving into the founding fathers. David L. Holmes focuses on five "unorthodox" founding fathers including Washington and Benjamin Franklin as those who weren't of the mold that the Christian Right would have us believe. He also discusses their wives, some orthodox Christians, and then discusses the role of religion in the second half of the 20th century.

A great book for any person interested in how the religious liberties in the US came to be and why the discourse of religion is the way it is today.

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### **Paul Bassett says**

Professor David Holmes has given us a jewel in his book "The Faiths of the Founding Fathers". Other reviewers have given very capable overviews so I won't repeat what has already been written. But what surprised me, and pleasantly so, was the author's exposition of how little Deism played in the overall life of the colonies. That is an idea which is refreshing because it flies in the face of the modernist humanist evaluations of the period which would like to see Deism as having been the dominant theology of the Founders.

As evidence, Dr. Holmes notes that Calvinism was far and away the dominant influence in that place and time: "As of 1770, two-thirds of the institutions of higher education in the American colonies were of Calvinist origin." He then notes that that percentage actually continued to grow such that at the time of the Revolution that percentage was actually 70%! And the reason for that is that "80 percent of American Christians in the colonial period...were significantly influenced by John Calvin's teachings." When one adds in the Lutherans, Roman Catholics and various other sects not "significantly influenced" by Calvin it becomes quickly apparent that it was numerically impossible for Deism to be the dominant influence some

have hoped it was.

But Deism was espoused by a few whose names have become synonymous with our founding – men such as Franklin, Washington and Jefferson. But Dr. Holmes shows how Franklin’s decision for Deism was made during his teen years (how many of us would like to be described by our teenage decisions!) and that he is famously remembered for stopping the Constitutional Convention by a call for a day of prayer – a practice that was superfluous to any self-respecting Deist. And to include Jefferson in the Deist’s camp is to ignore his claim that “I am a Christian...” which Dr. Holmes documents.

I hope not to spoil your adventure by telling you how Deism came to this country but suffice it to say that it was through “men only” institutions. All of which leads Dr. Holmes to discover that while Deism may have been on the lips and pens of some of our Founders, their wives and children maintained their orthodox traditions. And that explains why Deism was subsumed into Unitarianism or evaporated altogether very early in the 19th century. So it appears from the evidence that while Deism was a popular fad, it was short-lived and merely that – a fad.

This book should be commended to any student of American history. It is very accessible while providing significant intellectual heft.

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### **John Hays says**

This is a fascinating book that helps us better understand the religious views of six of the most influential founders of our nation: Franklin, Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Monroe.

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### **Linda says**

A must-read for all politicos who use the founding father documents as a basis for orthodox religion-based justifications for all manner of issues...Deists unite. And thanks to the William and Mary professor who researched and wrote the book. And just for the record, if you have an opportunity to visit Highland (owned by the College of William and Mary) near Charlottesville, please do so to learn more about Monroe and his daughter Eliza and their French connections.

One quote to consider:

"When Hamilton was asked why the members of the Philadelphia Convention had not recognized God in the Constitution, he allegedly replied, speaking for many of his liberal colleagues, "We forgot." ... Gordon Wood

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### **Bill Main says**

I have set out to study the Constitution and its period especially in mind of currently and past amendment discussions. Upon doing so, I found that this particular topic needed clarification. I read this book at the same time as "Was America Founded as a Christian Nation" by John Fea. By reading them both I hoped to get an idea of both sides of the topic. I got so much more. I had to put that particular study aside and read again "Jesus and the Rise of Early Christianity" by Paul Barnett. This along with the history sections in my study

Bible refreshed in my mind the age and depths of Christian sects and human abuses in each. Back to finishing the founder study, found so much more than just beliefs, but their lifestyles and influences. It all matters when one comes to a view on the matter. I enjoyed the experience

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### **Walker Starr says**

Well written, but I was hoping for some observations or analysis on the effect of the faiths of relevant founders on public policy. Still, a good read.

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### **Judy says**

Because I'm interested in both religion and history, I'm always struck by comments in contemporary America about the religious views and values of the Founding Fathers. The conversation often indicates that many Americans today believe that the Founding Fathers share their views of Jesus, the Bible, and religious doctrines and that after a change of clothes, any of the Founding Fathers would be comfortable sliding into a pew beside them, sharing a hymn book, and discussing the morning's message. Nothing could be further from the truth. In this gem of a book, David L. Holmes, the Walter G. Mason Professor of Religious Studies at the College of William and Mary, examines the religious views and beliefs of the some of the leading Americans during and after the Revolutionary War, the writing of the Constitution, and the early National Period of our history and places their religious beliefs into the religious environment of their era.

In order to understand the religious traditions of individuals like Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe, Holmes investigates the religious culture of the late colonial period and details the most influential religious groups in each colony. He also discusses the forms of Deism that existed in the American colonies and early American Republic and highlights the impact that Deism had on the educated men and women of the Revolutionary Period.

Using both their words and drawing conclusions from their actions, Holmes concludes that Martha Washington, Samuel Adams, John Jay, Patrick Henry, and the daughters of Thomas Jefferson believed in the orthodox Christian views of the period. But not so for George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John and Abigail Adams, James and Dolley Madison, and James Monroe. As a group, these latter individuals were respectful of Christianity and believed that religion played a beneficial role in society. However, also as a group, they admired the teachings of Jesus as an ethical code, but downplayed or denied his divinity. Several, especially John and Abigail Adams held Unitarian beliefs, and a few were agnostic. While each of the individuals in this latter group attended mainstream Christian churches, their beliefs, obviously, were radically different from the beliefs of contemporary evangelicals.

In summing up his conclusions, David Holmes noted that "whatever their private beliefs, most maintained formal affiliations with Christian denominations. In the spirit of the times, some questioned doctrines that they believed could not be reconciled with human reason. As a result, they rejected such Christian teachings as the Trinity, the virgin birth, the resurrection, and the divinity of Jesus. Yet orthodox Christians participated at every stage of building the nation and many of their founders' wives and daughters displayed an orthodox Christian commitment. Despite this diversity of belief, the founding generation held certain convictions in common. Most believed in a guiding Providence and in a life after death....They respected the ethical teachings of Jesus. Many believed that simple virtue and morality were of greater importance than adherence to a particular set of religious doctrines. Above all, they valued freedom of conscience and despised religious tyranny. ...In the circle of the founding fathers, both men and women embraced these religious ideals." Definitely a thought provoking book about a controversial dialogue in American society.

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## **Beverly says**

David Holmes argues in this book that George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, James Monroe, and Benjamin Franklin were Deists and not orthodox Christians. At most this is a summary with very little supporting evidence to his argument. I would have thought the book was better if he had argued the case using the founding father's own words. Very little of that was done. Of course, I have no trouble believing Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were Deists, I've read enough on them to know God was not a personal being to them. The case for Washington being a Deist was weak, in my opinion. It was mostly based on the fact that he was not confirmed and did not receive communion in the Episcopal Church. John Adams and his wife Abigail were apparently Unitarian so they probably were what Holmes categorizes as Christian Deists.

Its an interesting read, just not enough meat to it.

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