

American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers and the Making of a Nation

By Jon Meacham

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421 pages

I was first introduced to Jon Meacham watching *Morning Joe* on MSNBC in the mornings. He would serve as a political and cultural commentator on issues facing our country and I often found his insights and comments well informed and challenging.

I picked up his book *American Gospel* at a local Barnes and Noble – intrigued by the title and I was pleasantly surprised by the quality of the book and the thoroughness of the discussion.

The primary focus of the *American Gospel* is the role of religion in the public life of America. Religious freedom and religious affirmation is sewn into the fabric of American public life and, as a society, must recover the commitment to religious freedom and recover the civic religion that unites American culture.

For those that are convinced that America is a uniquely and distinctly Christian nation, this book will be enlightening and challenging. Meacham weaves the thinking and writing of America's founders on the issues of religious liberty into his writing. He argues that many of the founding fathers were not orthodox toward the Christian faith but they held an unwavering commitment to the practice of civility and religious freedom in the public square.

I was profoundly impressed with the integration of early sources and writings by American founders in support of his propositions. I was also encouraged that the premise of his writing was that America could recover the sense of civility if it were to engage in the original vision of religious freedom.

Meacham does not limit his discussion of role of religion in the public arena to just America's founders. He traces the traditions of public religion in a series of historical vignettes that span the centuries from Washington to Lincoln, both Roosevelts, Kennedy and Reagan. The book does not deal with any of these figures (and their thoughts) in an in-depth way but provides a great survey of thought as expressed through political and public figures.

This book challenges preconceptions about the "Christian" nation and argues that we are a religious nation, not necessarily a Christian one. This is an important distinction for a pluralistic culture and I greatly appreciated his emphases.

Meacham's book is well argued and well sourced. In his appendixes, the author includes a series of documents written by a variety of our nation's founders and their views of religion in the public square. The second appendix includes the scripture verses that presidents used when taking the oath of office (which I found particularly interesting).

I enjoyed the reading and encourage others to read this book if they are wanting to explore the role religion in American life.

