

Jon Meacham. *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation.*

New York: Random House, 2006.

Reviewed by Neal W. Kramer

Jon Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek*, makes a notable contribution to the crucial national conversation about the roles of religion in American public and political discourse in his new book, *American Gospel*. Many religious Americans have come to believe that religion has been virtually banned from the public square. Some have turned to the Founding Fathers to find justification for overt reliance upon sectarian religious politics, often quoting them out of context and thereby diminishing the force of their arguments. Conversely, some secularists have asserted that Jefferson's "wall of separation" between church and state, also understood out of context, is to be interpreted so broadly that any political religious expression must be interpreted as sectarian. Meacham tries to restore the proper context for this debate. His extended essay, not a scholarly book but an argument meant to outline and justify an educated opinion, focuses on defining this public gospel as a fusion of faith and freedom.

Meacham argues that freedom and faith have been linked since the earliest colonists arrived on these shores. From the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence, the majority of early Americans were convinced that liberty was a gift of Providence and therefore protected and ratified by the same source. At the same time, Americans were convinced that a state church based on European models was to be avoided. They were convinced that such churches fostered tyranny and were too closely connected to claims for absolute rule that had been made by monarchs like Louis XIV and, to a lesser extent, Charles I. Therefore, they sought to protect expressions of faith and prohibit the government from giving special treatment to any particular sect, Christian or Jewish.

Perhaps the most important contribution of the book, especially for nonhistorians, is its impressive collection of statements from the founders and later American leaders from all parties defining and employing the rhetoric of the American Gospel. This faith has two overlapping

characteristics: (1) its nonsectarian character, and (2) the free exercise of religion. Meacham demonstrates the nonsectarian character of the discourse by offering quotations from centrally important founders: Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Madison, and Franklin. He offers selections from official documents, military orders given by Washington, private correspondence, sermons, and varied other sources. The accumulated force of these quotations suggests a broader rather than a narrower conception of faith, even when terms like “Christian” are employed. For example, after a near riot in New York City that included Continentals, Washington issued this stern rebuke: “The general hopes and trusts that every officer and man will endeavor so to live and act as becomes a Christian soldier, defending the dearest rights and liberties of his country” (77). Washington uses the term here to define an elevated moral and ethical standard for troop conduct that is firmly grounded in faith in God. At the same time, it is not an invitation for any Jewish soldiers to convert. And it certainly is not meant to include only particular Protestant sects, excluding Catholics, Quakers, or other not-truly-Christian Christians.

Thus, the right to the free exercise of religion (words carefully crafted by Patrick Henry and James Madison) becomes a central feature of the American Gospel. This right was not meant to be limited to a few core sects. Franklin offers this wry justification: “When [the] professors of [a particular sect] are obliged to call for the help of the civil power [meaning state sponsorship], it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one” (69). This does not mean that religion per se does not deserve a special place in society or that it should not receive significant respect from the civil government. To the contrary, Meacham emphasizes the respect the founders and leaders of succeeding generations have had for the profound role religion plays in any nation that desires to remain free.

Meacham also shows how difficult this has sometimes been in our history. He details accounts of the persecution of small religious groups. He bemoans the religious justification of slavery. He details the challenges faced by presidents from Andrew Jackson to Ronald Reagan as they have used the American Gospel to unite the nation while still keeping matters of personal faith separate from government. He singles out the example of the founding of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints to detail the vexing character of the challenge. Official government persecution and prosecution of the Mormon faith is a clear example of the failure of the nation to live up to the standards of the American Gospel while providing nonetheless an environment in which a fledgling religion might still be protected enough to flourish after much trouble.

For Latter-day Saint readers interested in these issues, *The American Gospel* provides yet another way of thinking about the founding of the United States and its continuing importance in our public life. Meacham makes a well-argued case favoring a robust language of faith in the public square, without turning it into a matter of sectarian correctness. John Adams once said, “I hate polemical politics and polemical divinity” (18). To Jon Meacham, this is clear evidence of the wisdom of the founders.

---

Neal W. Kramer (neal\_kramer@byu.edu) is an instructor at Brigham Young University and a member of the Arts and Sciences Editorial Board at BYU Studies. His publications include “Art and Advocacy: Politics and Mormon Letters,” *Annual of the Association of Mormon Letters*, 1999 (Salt Lake City: Association of Mormon Letters, 1999): 1–8.