

When the founding fathers gathered in Philadelphia and wrote the Constitution, they included in Article VI an explicit ban on religious tests as a requirement for holding public office; when the Bill of Rights amended the Constitution, the First Amendment ensured freedom of religion and banned the federal government from ever establishing a religion for the United States. Although this is commonly known across the country, controversies still arise over what the founders intended when they imbedded such clauses into the very fabric of our government and what their vision was for American religious life. These controversies usually erupt when one group or another claims that their view of the proper role of religion in American political and social life is the correct one and the views of others are not only wrong but opposite those of the hallowed founders. This of course is one of many instances where a trusted, skilled historian can shed some light on an issue and provide the information necessary for informed debate. William and Mary professor David Holmes' book [The Faiths of the Founding Fathers](#) does just this. His work is not only enlightening but a great demonstration of the historian's craft. Through a careful analysis of the cultural context, actions, and writings of several members of the founding generation, Holmes reveals the religious sentiments of the men (and women in their lives) who would ensure future generations a religious liberty contemporary partisans seem to not understand.

Holmes notes the extensive disagreement between academics and many Americans regarding the faiths of the founders. Many on the Left focus on the Deist beliefs of the founders while the religious Right try to portray the founders

as sharing their particular religious outlook (Holmes, 134). Holmes astutely points out that this is not a new phenomenon. Shortly after President Washington's death, evangelical writers attempted to write biographies of him that portrayed him as having orthodox and devout Christian beliefs (Holmes, 68). Unfortunately for these writers further analysis of their work shows they depend on fabricated stories from unreliable sources (Holmes, 70). Since writers up to today still write such inaccurate portrayals, the field of history needs someone to use the sort of methods Holmes does to discard historical myths to uncover (to the furthest extent possible) the truth.

Holmes explains on pages 134 – 140 how he approached his study of the founders' faiths and provides a blueprint for any student of history of how to conduct sound historical research. First of all, he understood the context of the era about which he was writing. Instead of using modern political schema (e.g. "conservative" or "liberal") to understand the founders, he used the cultural and political life of the seventeen and early eighteen hundreds to understand the influences on and statements of the founders. Statements often misquoted today by partisans had different meanings, intentions, and connotations at the time they were written than they would now. If one is to understand what Thomas Jefferson or John Adams meant when they wrote something, they need to understand the times in which they were written. Secondly, Holmes uses a systematic approach to his extensive analysis of every historian's favorite tool: primary sources. His approach was to analyze the actions of the founders in their local church (did they attend services, did they take on leadership roles within the community),

uncover their participation in the sacraments of that church (did they take communion, were they confirmed), analyze to what extent were they active or inactive in church activity (and what practices in particular did they abstain from and what would be the symbolism behind that action or inaction), and carefully dissect their use of religious language (to determine their use of orthodox Christian terminology or Deist ones). Using his knowledge of the era and collection of primary source material, he was able to dispassionately explain the world in which the founders lived and their beliefs, providing clarification for why (at a time when established religions were normal) the United States had no established church.

Holmes sets up the religious climate of early America by explaining the religious landscape of the time. America, like Europe, was a place where an established Church was commonplace and subsequently the government's favoritism and support for that Church was ordinary. Nine of the thirteen colonies had established Churches, even though America had a plethora of Christian denominations living in it (Holmes, 9). For example, Virginia (home to several founders) was an Anglican colony, counties were drawn up around parishes (Holmes, 36). This did not stop the spread of the popular enlightenment philosophy of Deism (which many of the founders found during their college years or in their personal studies). Deism differs from orthodox Christianity in many ways – usually around rejecting beliefs such as Christ's divinity, emotion and mystery in religion, and the existence of miracles. Each of the founders encountered and practiced Christianity and/or Deism in their own unique way that

would proceed to shape their beliefs not only regarding religion but religious liberty.

Few of the founders' beliefs were identical. Thomas Paine, like many deists, believed in a rational God distant from human activity instead of miracle-working interventionist common to most strands of orthodox Christianity (Holmes, 47). Although many of the founders criticized Christian beliefs and practices they found irrational, Paine went further in that he did not practice Christianity at all though he stopped short of being an Atheist (Holmes, 42). Benjamin Franklin left behind the Puritan beliefs common to the Boston of his upbringing, lacing his Poor Richard's Almanack with Deist-inspired sayings (Holmes, 54). He differed from Paine in his belief in a benevolent creator God and his occasional attendance at Christian worship (Holmes, 55). George Washington was a Deist who continued to attend Episcopal worship services but did not receive communion or confirmation (Holmes, 62 – Holmes notes this was a sign that he accepted certain aspects of Christian belief but rejected more mystical beliefs and institutional practices). John Adams was a Unitarian when its split from Congregationalism was in its infancy; he subsequently rejected the notion of the Trinity or the divinity of Christ (Holmes, 73). He did, however, believe in Jesus as a savior and in biblical miracles (Holmes, 77). Thomas Jefferson did not, rather he saw Christ as an example of good living and moral reform (Holmes, 83). Jefferson went so far as to write a New Testament that left out the miracles attributed to Christ and emphasized his ethical teachings (Holmes, 83). He too rejected the idea of the Trinity (Holmes, 87). Though he was anti-clerical, he still

attended Episcopal services and contributed to the building of churches – believing that religion served a public good (Holmes, 84). Little is available on the beliefs of Madison and Monroe but using existing writings Holmes tabs Madison as a Deist Episcopalian (Holmes, 98) and Monroe as an Episcopalian who had his children baptized but was privately a skeptic and embraced Deist thought (Holmes, 107).

This does not mean all of the founders were either strict Deists or a blend of Deism and Christianity. Patrick Henry was an active Episcopalian (Holmes, 141), so was John Jay (Holmes, 159), and Samuel Adams was a faithful Congregationalist (Holmes, 145). Also, most of the wives and daughters of many of the founders who embraced Deism remained orthodox Christians (Holmes, 109). Thus the religious landscape in which the founders lived was a diverse one. By the end of Holmes' work, readers are left with a much more nuanced understanding of this fact and are in a better position to understand American religious liberty.

There is no one answer for why the founders never established a Church in America. Although many colonies (and later states) had established Churches for a time, different Churches were established in different places, sometimes the religion of the majority of people and the established Church were different, sometimes there was no established Church (Holmes, 21). In any case, it would be nearly impossible to establish a Church for the United States since so many people and the founders themselves held myriad beliefs – no one belief could dominate. Deist beliefs in reason and equality influenced belief in the freedom of

press, importance of universal education, and the belief in separation of Church and State, as did various events in the lives of the founders (Holmes, 48).

Franklin was turned off by the rigidity of Puritan Boston and grew to feel no religion was one hundred percent right or wrong; therefore toleration was key to society (Holmes, 56). John Adams was contemplating life as a minister but a local scandal involving the trial of a preacher for the content of his sermons impacted not only his career decision to become a lawyer but his understanding of what a state religion would bring (Holmes, 76). Jefferson believed that religion was good for society but believed in religious freedom, especially since he himself held non-orthodox views (Holmes, 86). Madison witnessed religious persecution by the established Anglican Church, leading him to believe in religious freedom (Holmes, 93). It therefore became impossible for one religion or denomination to gain official favor over another.

Holmes' work is enlightening and instructive on how to conduct historical research, but it is not perfect. Although the religious Right's attempts to claim the founders as their own and demand all others follow is well documented, Holmes mentions but does not go in depth on similar misuses by the Left outside of providing a few sentences and a quote on the matter. The reader is left to wonder just how contentious this debate (which served as an inspiration for the book) really is. Is one side worse than the other, what are their interpretations of the evidence presented in this work, and why do they feel the way they do? These questions are not addressed in the depth they could have been. Although he certainly did not want to make the book about contemporary disagreements

on the subject, since it obviously inspired his work it would have been insightful to have more space dedicated to the issue that brought about the book. His epilogue is dedicated to tracing the rise in political importance of not only the religious beliefs of Presidents but of the religious Right; here he had the opportunity to bring his writing to the present issues surrounding misinterpretations of the beliefs of the founders to suit modern biases and agendas – shedding light on the misuse of history. Instead it focuses intensely on the beliefs of each President since Gerald Ford without fully addressing the issue that inspired his work in the first place. Readers may be interested to find out about Ronald Reagan's church attendance, but the chapter loses focus in such minutiae.¹

A clearly written, well-researched, historically sound work, Holmes' book is a great (and short – under 200 pages) way to gain useful insights into the beliefs of the founding fathers. In an age where everything is politicized, including religion, Holmes' work provides a reasoned, realistic, trustworthy insight into the men whose intentions partisans claim to know and represent the fulfillment of. In an age where some would envision the founders to (if they were alive today) be congregants at the First Southern Baptist Church of Waco or the Camus reading club at the local artisanal coffee store, Holmes' work returns us to the pre-industrial, agrarian, 1700's world the founders *actually* inhabited. Also, in an age where religious liberty itself is being attacked, Holmes' work serves to remind us

¹ Also on page 177 there is a typo – the Gulf War is stated to have started in 1981 instead of 1991.

why such liberty was so important to the men who granted it to not just the elect
– but to all Americans.

Work Cited

Holmes, David. The Faiths of the Founding Fathers. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006.