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The Bible, the Founders, and Christian America

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Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers. By Daniel L. Dreisbach. Oxford University Press, 2017. Pp. viii, 331. $34.95 (hc)

Faith and the Founders of the American Republic. Edited by Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall. Oxford University Press, 2014. Pp. x, 366. $44.95 (pb) $115.00 (hc)

For at least eight decades, a story of doubtful veracity has circulated wherein a New Orleans lawyer acerbically responds to a legal query from a New York law firm (or the Federal Housing Authority, depending on the version). The attorney is asked to trace ownership of a piece of nearby land beyond the last known title from 1803 and responds with a history of Louisiana: it was purchased from France, who acquired it from Spain, who secured it by Columbus's exploration, which was underwritten by Isabella and Ferdinand, who were empowered by the Pope. Because the Pope is the Vicar of Christ, and Christ is the Son of God, God is therefore the original owner of Louisiana. The joke is funnier in writing, especially when typed up as a faux letter, and this reviewer is old enough to recall when such anecdotes were passed via the more laborious mimeographed sheets rather that effortlessly through email.

While the method of circulating such stories has changed, their motive has not. Questions of identity usually come down to questions of history and, more specifically, founding persons and events.

In the midst of our culture wars, Americans debate the character of their nation's origin. In this light, we may ask: what precisely is owed to religion, specifically to Christianity and the Bible? Can one even say that America was founded as a "Christian nation?"

Authors on both sides of the question have typically responded by providing intellectual biographies of key American "founders." The argument is implicit in the genre: Insofar as various influential founders are "believers" or not, then it follows that the country they founded reflected their beliefs. To the degree that the founders were *not* orthodox believers, then it would be wrong to suppose that their project was in any way "Christian." America would then reflect the skepticism of the eighteenth century and the "Enlightenment" more generally – including that movement's rejection of both revealed religion and any close partnership of church and state. Despite some evident methodological and logical shortcomings in this reasoning, many authors continue to focus on the personal religious opinions of the "founders."

For example, Kerry Walters's *Revolutionary Deists: Early America's Rational Infidels* picks the low-hanging fruit to make the case for a Deistic Founding led by first-rank founders Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine (the greatest polemicist of the Revolution). They also include "minor" figures like Ethan Allen, Elihu Palmer and Philip Freneau (called the poet of the Revolution). Matthew Stewart's *Nature's God: The Heretical Origins of the American Republic* likewise asserts a heterodox character for the Revolution and Founding but offers a more robust thesis: America's philosophical origins are rooted in the skepticism of Epicurus and traceable through Spinoza and Locke to the opinions of founders like Franklin and Jefferson. Like Walters, Stewart emphasizes Ethan Allen. He also rescues from obscurity Dr. Thomas Young, a prominent Boston patriot and John Adams's family physician, who was indicted for blasphemy.

A less radical alternative to the Deistic Founding is a middle ground of lukewarm and heterodox theism. This more inclusive approach emphasizes the common eighteenth century belief in divine providence and divine judgment but still makes rationalism

preeminent. According to its most recent proponent, political theorist Gregg Frazer, "theistic rationalism" is a more appropriate label not only for Jefferson or Franklin but also John Adams, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and lesser-known founders James Wilson and Gouverneur Morris. Frazer's compromise, though more persuasive in its broad strokes, still insists on the binary logic of an older macro-level intellectual history: the founders were either disciples of Christ or disciples of the "Enlightenment." Not only is this ham-fisted, there remains the questionable presumption that a particular founder's ecclesiastical or theological predilections have relevance for his political thought.

An even subtler argument against Christian America has been offered by historians Mark Noll (*America's God* and *In the Beginning Was the Word*), John Fea (*Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*) and Steven K. Green (*Inventing a Christian America: The Myth of the Religious Founding*). Like Frazer, they deploy vague and broad categories such as "the Enlightenment" or "Whiggism" as implicitly exclusive of Christian political thought. But to their credit, however, they do try to determine precisely what *Christian* political thought might be. For Noll, the answer lies in a dichotomy between the supposedly "biblicist" Protestant Reformers, Puritans, revivalists of the Great Awakening, and the more secular-minded leaders of the Revolution and Founding. Whereas biblicists supposedly derived their social and political thought from the Bible, the American revolutionaries and founders presumably did not. Noll's ideal biblicist not only roots his prescriptions explicitly in scripture, but he does so *exclusive* of secular arguments. Such reasoning is supposedly an extension of the biblicist's belief in the inerrancy of scripture.

That sounds appealing enough – so long as one does not look carefully at the actual political thought of Noll's ideal biblicists. Very few of the Puritans, magisterial Reformers, or revivalists argued political ideas *exclusively* from scripture. It is arguable whether prominent Protestant political prescriptions in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were even argued *primarily*

from scripture. The conclusions drawn from this dubious "before and after" approach can be quite startling. For example, Fea, Frazer, and Noll all discount the Christian bona fides of founder John Witherspoon because he taught natural theology. That might seem plausible only if one knows nothing about Protestant precedent and insists on seeing one's subjects using the dichotomies of early twentieth century historiography or Straussian political theory. To those who know something about the role of reason and natural theology in Reformed theology generally, and about Reformed scholasticism in particular, this casting of Witherspoon is ridiculous.

Fea and Green draw even more embarrassing conclusions. For example, Fea presupposes that commercial motives for settlement are self-evidently unchristian. One flippantly wonders if Fea has an equally Puritan criticism of "prayer book worship." A more sober question might be whether Fea has read the Virginia charters or the personal spiritual reflections of its founders? Fea likewise judges American resistance and revolution to be necessarily unchristian – despite the long history of Protestants advocating both resistance and revolution (using both sacred and secular sources) for *two centuries before the Stamp Act*. Were John Ponet or John Knox therefore part of the Enlightenment? Were they Whigs? Both Fea and Green even assert that religious establishment is unchristian. While almost all contemporary American Christians have accepted this revisionist argument invented by seventeenth-century American colonists who had to abandon some kind of establishment or else wanted to advance it, the association possess one notable flaw: if modern religious freedom is self-evidently Christian and Biblical, much of Christendom becomes necessarily unchristian and unbiblical!

One of the main problems with this continued insistence on binary analysis, whether subtler or ham-fisted, is that theological orthodoxy is presumed to advance the Bible's role in political thought while heterodoxy is presumed to neutralize, undermine, or oppose it. To the contrary, however, one can respect the wisdom or historical value of the Bible while demurring on theological

dogma or doctrine. Many seminal authors rooted significant elements of their political thinking in scripture though they themselves were heterodox (e.g. Locke, Grotius, Sidney, Milton, Harrington). The arguments of Noll, Fea, and Green simply do not comprehend with any nuance the interplay of secular and sacred sources in political arguments over three centuries. They implicitly or explicitly dismiss the use of scripture if the user deviates from traditional Protestant orthodoxy. Such sharp dichotomies and hermetically sealed categories of political thinking exist only in the minds of modern scholars. They did not exist in the minds of their subjects.

A far more inclusive and appropriate approach to early America was introduced by Carl Richard's *The Founders and the Bible*. Richard rightly states that to call all the founders "Christian" would hold true only if one adopted an "uncommonly broad definition of Christianity." Some did hold such a broad definition, of course. Jefferson, for example, declared in an 1860 letter to William Short that "Jesus did not mean to impose himself on mankind as the son of God." Despite such obvious departure from confessional or creedal Christianity, however, Richard argues that it would be likewise incorrect to characterize the founders as "twentieth-century secularists." Rather than separate the wheat from the chaff, Richard simply collects statements made by a broad range of founders and presents them thematically without much commentary or argument. He is agnostic on "Christian America" apart from his rejecting "Deism" as influential. To wit, too many of the Founders believed in divine intervention and (even in the case of Franklin or Jefferson) the efficacy of prayer to be considered Deists. Letting the founders speak for themselves and reveal the variety of their religious opinions leads one to the conclusion that most of them had a deep respect for the wisdom of the Bible, and a similar appreciation for Christianity – even if only as a means to salutary political or social ends and not as the only route to heaven.

Daniel Dreisbach's *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (2017) shares Richard's irenic approach. Dreisbach,

Professor of Justice, Law, and Society at American University, begins from the premise that while volume upon volume has been devoted to political theorists such as Locke or Montesquieu, and also to their influence on the American Revolution and Founding, considerably less attention has been paid to the influence of the Bible. Dreisbach intends to remedy that oversight.

Dreisbach makes two strategic moves in his monograph. First, he does not attempt focused spiritual or religious biographies of his subjects; he also makes no claim that any one was more significant than another – thus blunting arguments about how such-and-such pious founder (e.g. Patrick Henry) was more influential than such-and-such skeptical founder (e.g. Ethan Allen). Dreisbach goes even further to explain that he uses the term "founding fathers" or "founders" to denote *not particular persons* but rather "an entire generation or two of Americans from many walks of life who, in the last half of the eighteenth and the early nineteenth century articulated the rights of colonists, secured independence from Great Britain, and established new constitutional republics at both the national and state levels."[1] Asserting such an enormous data set is a brilliant rhetorical strategy to avoid talking about "the interior faith commitments" of particular persons, and also frees Dreisbach from making precise claims about unity or disunity among "the founders" as a group.[2] That said, the assertion is somewhat disingenuous. There is no effort to systematically assess the aggregate opinions of an entire generation (nor could one hope to do so). More importantly, there is almost nothing about "many walks of life" if one implies from that a diversity of race or status. Dreisbach's subjects are largely the same persons that populate most studies of the Founding and religion – prominent statesmen whose social and economic class distinguished and empowered them for political influence, and ministers from established denominations who preached political sermons. Nevertheless, Dreisbach's moderate ambitions are evident and appreciated. He seeks only to illustrate that the Bible was prominent in political discourse, that it was both respected and referenced in prominent political conversations, and that it had significant influence in public culture (i.e., letters, law,

and education). Like Richard, Dreisbach is agnostic on the question of "Christian America."

The second prudent move by Dreisbach is to assert that use of the Bible in political thinking is not exclusive of other sources (e.g., republicanism, liberalism, or classical antiquity) in political thought. Though Dreisbach does not explain why we ought to refuse the "zero-sum game" approach, the reasons should be evident enough. As stated above, the founding generation rarely saw *political thinking* in the dichotomous terms of Noll or Frazer. (Doctrinal or ecclesiastical questions, of course, might be seen in such exclusive terms.) Furthermore, a zero-sum approach presupposes a coherence and comprehensive character for "biblical" political thought and for its supposed competitors (e.g., classical or civic republicanism, Whiggism, Scottish or English Enlightenment, or British constitutionalism). Neither were hermetically sealed off from one another.

Presuming such dichotomies in the history of political thought actually cause Noll, Fea, or Frazer to resemble the "worldview" approach so popular among evangelical Christians today – the very group whom they oppose for defending "Christian America." In fact, the Christian tradition has a long and diverse history of political thought. Since the time of the Church Fathers, the sources relevant for answering political questions, whether in church, or state, or in the relationship of the two, have never been simply "either secular or sacred" A more generous "both-and" approach existed, particularly after Constantine.

Do these strategic moves by Dreisbach mean that his book therefore becomes more of a chronicle than an argument? Yes, but the accretion of so many layers of questionable interpretation makes Dreisbach's (and Richard's) more straightforward history quite welcome. That said, it would be incorrect to characterize Dreisbach's book as *mere chronicle*. Dreisbach has a recurring exercise in the book which I believe to be implicitly but pointedly directed at those such as Noll or Fea who have argued that the Bible was co-opted for political expediency. Dreisbach deploys both "basic biblical scholarship and political theory" to determine whether or not a text

was used consistent with its biblical context.[3] If they were, this undermines the idea that the Bible was leveraged insincerely.

The first part of *Reading the Bible with the Founders* provides an overview of how the Bible influenced culture: public culture, the more private culture of the "founding fathers," and political discourse more specifically. Here Dreisbach takes a route also taken by Noll in *In the Beginning Was the Word*, providing a summary of the cultural impact of the Protestant Reformation. Familiar contributions include the vast expansion of public literacy encouraged by a vernacular Bible. Dreisbach also briefly mentions relatively overlooked contributions such as the way in which the English Bible not only shaped the English language but also English nationalism. When one considers the ubiquitous character of the Bible in American homes, Dreisbach's point becomes almost self-evident: when boys and girls learn to read by using the Bible at home, school, and church, it not only shapes their discourse but grinds the lenses though which they see the world.

Dreisbach emphasizes, however, that there was not universal agreement on the Bible's use in schools. Jefferson, echoing Locke, felt that immature and untutored minds might misunderstand scripture. Of course, part of Jefferson's motivation was no doubt his preference for the moral over the metaphysical. Jefferson's motives came under withering fire from pious opponents during his presidential candidacy in 1800. William Linn (former chaplain to the US House of Representatives), for example, asked how children could be expected to have the "first elements of morality" if they did not possess the "first elements of religion" as their foundation.[4] Insofar as republicanism presupposed virtuous popular character, such questions were imperative. Jefferson also had concerns about religious liberty and toleration. He expressed a concern shortly before his death that Jewish youth should not be constrained to "a course of theological reading which their consciences do not permit them to pursue."[5] Jefferson was definitely in the minority on this question, however; Noah Webster famously advanced the use of the Bible in schools (though only after a religious conversion), as did Benjamin Rush and Fisher Ames, for example.

As for the Bible's influence in the lives of the founders themselves, Dreisbach offers little that is new, though he does rightly emphasize that "no generation of American statesmen was more theologically informed than the founding generation."[6] Theology was deliberately taught in undergraduate curricula. ("Mr. Jefferson's University" would break that mold by not hiring a professor of divinity.) Many prominent statesmen were privately tutored as schoolchildren by clergy. As children and as adults, they sat under preaching throughout the year. Though not tutored by ministers as a child, George Washington's sitting through countless Anglican worship services steeped him in the scriptural language of the Book of Common Prayer. Many founders could read the biblical languages and some formally studied theology. Some wrote their own translations, commentaries, or promoted the printing and distribution of Bibles. Even Jefferson's two private compilations of extracts from the Gospels (including not only "The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth" but also "The Philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth"), while heterodox and even scandalous, testifies to his respect for the Bible – albeit not for the ends promoted by his more pious contemporaries. In this section of the book, Dreisbach introduces another category of founders to whom he devotes considerable attention – ministers who participated in political discourse through the publication of sermons or pamphlets.

When addressing the Bible's role in political discourse in the concluding section of Part One, Dreisbach provides a comprehensive list of the Bible's diverse uses: to enrich common language; to enhance the power of one's rhetoric (e.g., Patrick Henry's famous "Give me liberty or give me death" speech); to define standards (e.g., casting the Hebrew commonwealth as a model republic or promoting a public fast); to illuminate the role of providence (i.e., assigning a divine hue or authoritative interpretation to events); or asserting the designs of God (Franklin's call for prayer at the Constitutional Convention, for example).

In Part Two, Dreisbach delivers on his promise to demonstrate whether or not the Bible was taken out of context for political

expediency. He chooses verses (e.g., Proverbs 14:34, Proverbs 23:2, Micah 4:4, and Micah 6:8) that were prominent in a variety of texts and contexts, from the more private (personal correspondence) to the public (the Liberty Bell). Notable details here include Paine inserting "making our fellow creatures happy" for "walk humbly with thy God" in Micah 6:8 and George Washington replacing "God" with a more direct reference to Jesus as the "Divine Author of our blessed Religion." There is also an entertaining excursus on the possibility that Benjamin Franklin's motion to begin Constitutional Convention sessions with prayer was, in fact, adopted by the august body. (All but one account of the convention insist that it was not adopted.) Perhaps most notable is how Dreisbach's exegesis of Proverbs 14:34 makes it difficult to assign the label of Deism to much of anything in the Founding. He also demonstrates how Washington's use of Micah 4:4 ("under his own vine and fig tree") over four dozen times demonstrates a variety of applications for the verse. The phrase not only implied prosperity but also safety and freedom of religion.

Dreisbach also provides an antidote to Noll and Fea's attack on the "Christian" character of the American Revolution by summarizing the Protestant precedent of resistance and revolution. While Dreisbach cannot be expected to provide a comprehensive summary of two centuries of political thinking, a few shortcomings are evident. Notably, Dreisbach makes the common error of focusing on Luther and Calvin, neither of whom were necessarily representative of the broader political thinking in the Lutheran or Reformed traditions respectively, particularly their earlier work on resistance or revolution. He also asserts that the English Reformation was a product of Henry VIII's dispute with Rome over his divorce, which ignores the deep interest in budding Protestant theology among Thomas Cranmer and other leaders of the Anglican church. Dreisbach more than makes up for this, however, with a long explication of the *Vindiciae Contra Tyrannos* – though the attempt to trace lines from it to Locke involve some very questionable secondary sources. Likewise, though Samuel Rutherford's *Lex, Rex* is a commonly cited work in Reformed political thought,

and Dreisbach examines its important arguments, its influence in America is entirely speculative. However, the real value of texts such as Rutherford's is to emphasize that Romans 13:1-7 was not understood by Protestants (especially Reformed Protestants) to be a text prescribing unconditional obedience to civil authorities. Recognizing that fact makes Jonathan Mayhew's 1750 exegesis of Romans 13 (arguably the most famous sermon of the Revolution, though preached 25 years before the first shot was fired), much less revolutionary in condoning revolution.

Dreisbach devotes special attention to the question of how the biblical or spiritual understanding of "liberty," especially as used in Galatians 5:1, was or was not cynically misused by patriots for political expediency – a charge levelled by Noll, Fea, and Frazer at revolutionaries. Dreisbach emphasizes that the rebellious colonists themselves were sensitive to this charge – their contemporary opponents leveled it against them too, of course. Dreisbach writes, "Many patriotic polemicists candidly acknowledged that they were appropriating biblical rhetoric about spiritual or *Christian* liberty to champion the cause of civil or *political* liberty, but they argued that biblical conceptions of liberty were sufficiently expansive to encompass or apply to the political liberty to which they aspired."[7] Dreisbach then demonstrates from the words of various ministers how they responded to the charge of misappropriation with precisely this defense.

The great virtue of *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* is found partly in what it says implicitly and partly in what it refuses to say. Dreisbach is implicitly arguing against multiple sets of opponents. He is pushing back against those who have overemphasized secular sources, those who have presumed that heterodoxy excludes biblical influence, as well as those who have insisted that a "Christian" Founding excludes secular sources in political reasoning. Dreisbach's recounting of the influence of the Bible in early America is irenic and appealing. He is not interested in smugly planting a flag for "Christian America." He understands his subjects as they understood themselves, and he does not impose on them the errant prejudices of contemporary scholarship.

A more detailed and biographical approach informs the collection of essays found in *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic* (2014). Edited by Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, Herbert Hoover Distinguished Professor at George Fox University, the book is divided into two parts. The first part ambitiously explores more popular generalities: "the Founders and _____" (e.g. Deism, Judaism, Reformed Protestantism, Islam, Race). While the Introduction discourages our continual attention to "famous founders" (e.g. Washington, Jefferson, Franklin, Madison) and encourages us to revisit "forgotten founders," there is plenty of attention paid to the *famous* founders in the first part of the collection. Only in the second part of the book are we turned toward the comparatively "forgotten founders" (Gouverneur Morris, John Hancock, Elias Boudinot, John Dickinson, Isaac Backus, John Leland) as case studies in religion and politics.

Darren Staloff launches the first part of the book with a contrarian essay on the contested role of Deism. Deism's influence is roundly dismissed in this collection on the aforementioned reasoning that relatively few founders (or Americans generally) rejected the efficacy of prayer or providence. Indeed, Staloff disqualifies Hamilton, Franklin, Madison, Washington, Jefferson, and John Adams from being labeled as deists but does emphasize how Deism was a source of gripping fear for many Americans at this time – particularly in Federalist New England. Unlike British Deism, however, American Deism was relatively friendly to Christianity. Notable exceptions include the hostility of Elihu Palmer or Tom Paine toward Christianity – the latter's being more ironic since Paine had "preached" the greatest Bible-based sermon of the Revolution, *Common Sense*.

Likewise, Staloff distinguishes between the American Enlightenment and the European Enlightenment. Whereas the European Enlightenment was hostile to Christianity, the American Enlightenment was more agreeable to Christianity. This agreeable character was reciprocal: American Protestants were more agreeable to their domestic version of the Enlightenment than European Christians were to theirs. Staloff characterizes religion in the

Founding as a blended disunity, one that accommodated even the *rare* American Deist. So while Staloff has blunted one challenge to the "Christian Founding" by denying the prevalence of American Deism, he has invited a different challenge by suggesting that American Protestantism accommodated the American Enlightenment. Scholars generally presume a great gulf to exist between those movements mainly because they do not distinguish an American from a European Enlightenment. Staloff's suggestion implies significant compromise on the part of both the American Enlightenment and American Protestantism; one wishes that he provided more than two breezy pages at the conclusion to sustain this argument.

Mark David Hall's own contribution summarizes what he calls the influence of the Reformed (or, more popularly, "Calvinist") tradition in America. Like Dreisbach, Hall takes cues from Sydney Ahlstrom, and asserts the dominance of Reformed Protestant theology at the time of the Revolution. Hall emphasizes the tradition's influence: prolific and popular Congregational, Presbyterian and Baptist churches, the ubiquitous *New England Primer*, the significance of John Witherspoon, the prevalence of ecclesiastical and civil covenanting, the availability of works of Reformed political theology, the founders' own study or citation of those texts, and the Reformed upbringing of many forgotten founders. In general terms, all of this cannot be contested. Most American Protestants were not in the Lutheran, "radical" (Anabaptist or Quaker), or pietistic traditions. Anglicans were Reformed insofar as the first generation of continental reformers influenced both the Edwardian and Elizabethan Churches, though Puritan dissent and nonconformity in the Caroline or Restoration Churches was intended to cast doubt on the Protestant bona fides of Anglicanism.

Theology is only prelude for politics, however, and Hall's intention is to demonstrate that there is a particular set of Reformed *political ideas* that influenced America's founders. It is this question of "influence," particularly Hall's brief reading of the Declaration, Constitution, and First Amendment, that proves to be his most significant but equally controversial argument. However

inconclusive the Reformed influence is on such famous documents, however, Hall has supplied a preliminary rebuttal to secular explanations of Revolutionary and Founding political theories – particularly among forgotten founders and ordinary colonists.

David Dalin and Thomas Kidd provide chapters on the founders' relationship to Judaism and Islam respectively. Dalin focuses on famous founders and their particular opinions of Jews and Judaism. Not surprisingly, we learn that their opinions were largely respectful, consistent with both American curiosity and pious regard for Jews as Old Testament believers. Dalin's summary is a helpful introduction, but doesn't provide much beyond the more famous founders. Dalin's is not the last word on the founders and Judaism in this volume, however. Other contributors (notably Dreisbach) note founders' fondness for the Old Testament and its so-called "Hebrew republic."

Kidd's exploration of American opinions of Islam is much richer than Dalin's, demonstrating how Muslims largely served as symbols of tyranny. Almost all Muslims in America were in slave populations, and Americans characterized Muslims as foreign pirates or despots and yoked them with equally feared Roman Catholic rulers. Islam was a political stereotype leveraged for opposing legal measures (e.g. "the absence of a religious test will enable Muslim magistrates in America"), satirizing one's opponent (e.g. "Muslims hate abolition, too"), or scoring a rhetorical point (e.g. "Muslim slaveholders are kinder than Southern slaveholders"). Kidd wittily opines, "Although one should hesitate to describe early Americans as conversant with Islam, they certainly conversed about Islam regularly."[8]

Subsequent chapters consider religion's role within particular political factions. Robert Calhoon and Ruma Chopra explore Loyalist arguments and Donald Drakeman examines Antifederalist writings. Calhoon and Chopra remind us that religious arguments were not confined to Patriot writings, nor were Patriots the only ones who believed a particular regime to be prescribed by the Bible. In addition to a helpful but familiar sketch of the various Anglican positions against Independence, Calhoon and Chopra

also explain the complicated position of Lutherans, Methodists, Quakers, and Moravians in the Revolution. Drakeman demonstrates that discerning religious motivations among the opponents of constitutional ratification is complicated at best. In terms of overt references, Antifederalists said very little about religion. On matters of church and state, their prescriptions are difficult to infer. This is not surprising, given the multitude of state ratification debates, the strategic maneuvering involved in those debates, and the simple fact that any amendment of specific rights (including prevention of religious establishment) applied only to the *federal or national government*. (There was not yet any incorporation doctrine, of course.) Hence, to oppose *national establishment* did not necessarily imply a desire for disestablishment at the state level.

Dreisbach's chapter, covering some of the same ground as his 2017 book, argues mainly against historians and political scientists who insist that references to Scripture or Christian themes are "conspicuously absent in the political discussions." He cites again, for example, Benjamin Franklin telling Samuel Cooper that Franklin's European audience simply did not recognize Biblical references unless prompted by specific citation. This ignorance, Dreisbach argues, afflicts modern scholars as well. As in his book, Dreisbach chronicles familiarity from childhood, the prolific "Bible projects," the weaving of Biblical language into ordinary discourse, citation of the Bible in political pamphlets. In this chapter, as in his book, one is still left to wonder what the *particular influence* of the Bible was. The social scientist longs to isolate the variable of the Bible in the Founding. If the Bible had not influenced the founders, particularly as a text with unique authority, what would have been lost or gained?

Part I concludes with a presentation of religion's role in discussions of race. Jonathan Sassi provides an ambitious timeline of race relations for those whom Jefferson categorized as "white, red, and black." Sassi's chapter is one of the most successful in shifting our focus away from the famous founders, and he provides a rich and broad social history. He demonstrates the schizophrenic character

of race relations, including the racial pride of American Indians who (like all human "tribes") wavered between cruel triumphalism and charitable coexistence. As for whites, both religion *and science* were to blame for either peaceful or antagonistic relations between whites and the American Indians. Hostility actually decreased thanks to both the Great Awakening and to Enlightenment notions of environmental psychological determinism. Just when peaceful coexistence seemed possible, however, the Revolution formed new racial battle lines and revived debates about the status of both blacks and Native Americans in the new nation.

Part Two of *Faith and the Founders* turns to the aforementioned "forgotten founders." It begins with an essay by Gregg Frazer that summarizes his argument about "theistic rationalists" and applies it to the case of Gouverneur Morris. Frazer argues that such founders were "theistic" insofar as they respected a personal and benevolent God to whom one could pray. But they were "rationalists" insofar as natural religion was held as superior to dogmatic or confessional Protestant Christianity. God-endowed reason was presumed to undermine doctrines or events that appeared irrational. Pious duty consisted mainly in public morality rather than doctrinal purity or scrupulous private conduct. Not surprisingly, Morris supported toleration, despised Calvinism, and appeared ambiguous about miracles. While he devoted himself to public service, he flouted modesty in his private conduct. On this last point, of course, one cannot conclude from Morris's case that theistic rationalism *condoned* immodest private conduct.

The essay by Gray Scott Smith which follows offers the notable contrast of John Hancock, who evidently lived a more devout life. Hancock was quick to appeal to biblical arguments and providentialist language, used his office as Massachusetts governor to advance faithful public observance, and served as a prominent philanthropist who led by Christian example. Where Smith's essay falters is in its speculation that Hancock's pastor, Samuel Cooper, defined Hancock's opinions of the virtue of wealth. His only support for this comes from Charles Akers, author of the only modern biography of Cooper. While Akers's biography of Cooper

is outstanding in many respects, it errs in overemphasizing one early sermon wherein Cooper advanced wealth as a divinely sanctioned expression of natural self-love. This reviewer has read through Cooper's published sermons and existing 178 manuscripts at the Huntington Library and New York Public Library. One looks in vain to find evidence that Cooper was a diligent apologist for wealth accumulation and thus a pious tool for his wealthy Brattle Street congregation. Akers wants Cooper to be that tool, but the evidence is just not there in Cooper's manuscripts, or anywhere else for that matter. Smith overreaches by recycling the unsupportable assertion of Cooper's modern biographer.

By contrast, Jonathan Den Hartog's exemplary biography of Elias Boudinot eschews reliance on the one modern biography of Boudinot and instead does the heavy lifting of archival research. The result is an insightful sketch of Boudinot as an example of Reformed Protestant participation in America's early politics. Like many "minor" founders, Boudinot possessed an impressive resume: delegate to the Congress of the Confederation, a US Congressman from New Jersey, director of the US Mint, and appointed positions now long forgotten. Den Hartog emphasizes his religious pedigree: he penned a refutation of Paine's *Age of Reason*, a biography of William Tennent, and a work on prophecy. Boudinot was also instrumental in the creation of the American Bible Society. As president of the Confederation's Congress, Boudinot continued the tradition of official declarations recognizing divine benevolence for the nation – a tradition then maintained by Washington and Adams as the first post-Constitution presidents. Boudinot also advocated abolition even if it led to secession. He also tied divine favor to particular policy. For example, he suggested that Federalist policies were God's own and continued to favor religious establishment. When it became evident to Boudinot that he was on the wrong side of such issues, however, he turned from politics to individual and local expressions of righteousness.

Jane Calvert's essay on John Dickinson returns us to the first rank of founders, and it is lamentable that Dickinson has never been given his due. Dickinson wrote *Letters from a Farmer in*

Pennsylvania – a work whose influence is second only to *Common Sense*. He served as a delegate in every formative gathering from the Stamp Act Congress to the Constitutional Convention and helped write the Articles of Confederation. Dickinson was also the only founding father between 1776 and 1786 to free his slaves. Though Dickinson served in the militia during the war, he opposed independence as a delegate to the Second Continental Congress, and declined to vote on the Declaration of Independence. Though perhaps the most important founder until 1776, Dickinson's hesitation to support independence undermined his legacy almost immediately. Historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries subsequently wrestled with whether Dickinson's Quaker faith played a role in his politics. Calvert argues that Dickinson advanced a "Quaker constitutionalism" that lay somewhere between the Whig revolutionary and the Tory loyalist. With the exception of a few lines about "invented mechanisms" for amending a constitution, however, Calvert does not demonstrate persuasively how Dickinson's constitutionalism is attributable to his Quakerism. Could not Dickinson's moderation just as likely be owed to his admirable prudence, distrust of reason over experience, and legal training at the Inns of Court? What Calvert more persuasively connects to Quakerism is Dickinson's commitment to participatory political deliberation and religious freedom, his insistence on preserving unity in political action, and his initial reluctance to fight.

Joe Coker concludes the collection with a careful study summarizing the Baptist contribution to early America as exhibited in the contrasting characters of Isaac Backus and John Leland. Coker carefully delineates the various types of Baptists in this period, demonstrates their explosive growth in the last few decades of the eighteenth century, and describes their political dissent in both Britain and America. He also elucidates the relationship of these clergymen with both Madison and Jefferson. While both Leland and Backus led their fellow Baptists in demanding religious liberty, they differed on the particulars. Backus wanted privileged status for Protestants (as opposed to Deists or Muslims, for

example) while Leland opposed any such preference. Backus and Leland also disagreed on the question of strict separation of church and state, with Leland again preferring the more "progressive" route of dissolving the partnership.

Faith and the Founders is a fine survey of various persons, religious traditions, and relevant political groups. Beginners who are content with a survey approach will find much to appreciate. Those already versed in the literature will likely discover new avenues for exploration. One comes away from *Faith and the Founders* with a clear appreciation of the varieties of religious belief existing at the time of the Revolution and Founding. In this way, the book resembles its subject. America is a kind of edited collection herself, and can only be understood as the work of many diverse contributors.

Endnotes

1. Daniel L. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 12.
2. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 18.
3. Dresibach, *Reading the Bible*, 16.
4. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 38.
5. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 39.
6. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 56
7. Dreisbach, *Reading the Bible*, 198.
8. Thomas Kidd, "The Founders and Islam," *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic*, eds. Mark David Hall and Daniel L. Dreisbach (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 85.