Respond to this Article

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The Framers and the Faithful

How modern evangelicals are ignoring their own history.

By Steven Waldman

Thomas Jefferson stood, dressed in a black suit, in a doorway of the White House on Jan. 1, 1802, watching a bizarre spectacle. Two horses were pulling a dray carrying a 1,235-pound cheese—just for him. Measuring 4 feet in diameter and 17 inches in height, this cheese was the work of 900 cows.

More impressive than the size of the cheese was its eloquence. Painted on the red crust was the inscription: "Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God." The cheese was a gift from religious leaders in western Massachusetts.

It may seem surprising that religious leaders would be praising Jefferson, given that his critics had just months earlier been attacking him as an infidel and an atheist. In the 1800 election, John Adams had argued that the Francophile Jefferson would destroy America's Christian heritage just as the French revolutionaries had undermined their own religious legacy. Adams supporters quoted Jefferson's line that he didn't care whether someone believed in one god or 20, and they argued that the choice in the election was: "God—And a religious president...[or] Jefferson—and no God."

But in a modern context, the most remarkable thing about the cheese is that it came from evangelical Christians. It was the brainchild of the Rev. John Leland—a Baptist and, therefore, a theological forefather of the Rev. Jerry Falwell and Franklin Graham. Even though Jefferson was labeled anti-religion by some, he had become a hero to evangelicals—not in spite of his views on separation of church and state, but because of them. By this point, Jefferson had written his draft of the Virginia statute of religious freedom, and he and James Madison were known as the strictest proponents of keeping government and religion far apart. Because Baptists and other evangelicals had been persecuted and harassed by the majority faiths—the Anglicans in the South and the Puritan-influenced Congregationalists in the North—these religious minorities had concluded that their freedom would only be guaranteed when majority faiths could not use the power of the state to promote their theology and institutions.

Each side of our modern culture wars has attempted to appropriate the Founding Fathers for their own purposes. With everything from prayer in school to gay rights to courtroom displays of the Ten Commandments at stake, conservative and liberal activists are trying to capture the middle ground and win over public opinion. Portraying their views as compatible with—even demanded by—the Founding Fathers makes any view seem more sensible, mainstream, and in

the American tradition. And in truth, you can find a Jefferson or Adams quote to buttress just about any argument. But there are a few facts that might actually be stipulated by both sides in the culture wars. First, the original Constitution really didn't say all that much about religion. God is not mentioned, and the only reference to religion is a ban on providing religious tests for holding office. (Ask why, and the arguments would resume with fury: Conservatives say the Founders left it out because they wanted the states to regulate religion; liberals say it was because the framers were secularists who wanted strict separation between religion and government).

Second, there was a widespread view among religious people of all flavors that the Constitution would be much stronger if it had a Bill of Rights that more explicitly guaranteed religious freedom. The 18th-century evangelicals were among the strongest advocates of this view and of the Bill of Rights, which declared that "Congress shall make no law regarding the establishment of religion." Throughout the states, evangelicals pushed hard for ratification of the Bill of Rights in the state legislatures. Indeed, part of what made Jefferson cheese-worthy in the eyes of a Baptist leader like Leland was his advocacy of a Bill of Rights.

Modern Christian conservatives concede that point and hail the First Amendment, but they argue that it by no means follows that either the Founders or the proto-evangelicals wanted a strict separation of church and state. They point out—accurately—that neither the Constitution nor the Bill of Rights includes the phrase "separation of church and state." And they argue that what the First Amendment intended to do was exactly what it says—and no more: prevent the "establishment" of an official state church, like the ones that had been prevalent in the colonies up until the time of the revolution. In the book *The Myth of the Separation*, religious conservative David Barton argues that the Founders simply did not support separation of church and state. Indeed, he maintains, this was a Christian nation founded by Christian men who very much wanted the government to support religion. The contemporary intellectual battle over the role of religion in the public square will be determined in part on who can own the history.

It is ironic, then, that evangelicals—so focused on the "true" history—have neglected their own. Indeed, the one group that would almost certainly oppose the views of 21st-century evangelicals are the 18th-century evangelicals. John Leland was no anomaly. In state after state, when colonists and Americans met to debate the relationship between God and government, it was the proto-evangelica1s who pushed the more radical view that church and state should be kept far apart. Both secular liberals who sneer at the idea that evangelicals could ever be a positive influence in politics and Christian conservatives who want to knock down the "wall" should take note: It was the 18th-century evangelicals who provided the political shock troops for Jefferson and Madison in their efforts to keep government from strong involvement with religion. Modern evangelicals are certainly free to take a different course, but they should realize that in doing so they have dramatically departed from the tradition of their spiritual forefathers.

New light

To understand why, we need to go back to the period known as the Great Awakening, a spiritual movement of the 1730s and 1740s that challenged the style and theology of the existing churches. The dramatic wave of revivalism started in New Jersey and western Massachusetts, where ministers such as Gilbert Tennent and Jonathan Edwards preached about the importance of personal born-again experiences. These isolated revivals became a mass movement with the arrival in the fall of 1739 of an English preacher named George Whitefield. A friend of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism, Whitefield had developed a following after writing about his conversion experiences and travels from depravity to salvation. He was described as handsome, yet one of his eyes was crossed inward, a sign, some said, of a divine mark. His voice was powerful, almost hypnotic. He attacked the Church of England for its lethargy and lack of emphasis on the simple message that only God's mercy keeps us from damnation. Churches banned him from their pews, so he went into the fields, where he drew worshippers by the thousands.

Whitefield was what we would now call an evangelical. “None but such as have a living faith in Jesus Christ, and are truly born again, can possibly enter into the kingdom of heaven,” he declared. Like modern evangelists, Whitefield used the latest media innovations to spread the gospel far and wide. In his case, that meant tapping into a burgeoning network of newspapers that had sprung up in the colonies—one of the most important being the *Pennsylvania Gazette*, a small publication purchased by Benjamin Franklin in 1729. For six months before Whitefield's arrival, the Gazette had printed dispatches about his preaching in England—the 20,000 who showed up at Kensington Common, or the time he delivered a sermon on a tombstone, or how he used tree limbs as pews. Once Whitefield arrived, Franklin offered saturation coverage of his every move, the huge crowds in Charleston and Wilmington, and the money he was raising for an orphanage in Georgia.

Franklin strongly disagreed with Whitefield's central message. A strict Calvinist, Whitefield believed that good behavior could not get us into heaven; Franklin, self-described Deist, did. But there was much about Whitefield, and the evangelicals, that Franklin liked. Whitefield relentlessly attacked the established clergy not only for its stodginess, but also for its lackadaisical attitudes toward moral evils. He denounced mistreatment of slaves, endorsed education for blacks, and established several charities. Because he was preaching in open fields, he drew people from a variety of denominations, classes, and even races.

When local clergy stopped giving Whitefield a place to speak, Franklin helped build a new hall for him—and for clergy of any other religion. Franklin boasted that it was “expressly for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion who might desire to say something to the people at Philadelphia; the design in building not being to accommodate any particular sect, but the inhabitants in general; so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mohammedanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his service.” For Franklin, evangelicals represented the democratic spirit railing against authority and insular institutions.

In part for this reason, the Great Awakening transformed the colonial approach to the separation of church and state. Throughout the colonies, churches divided into “Old Lights” and “New Lights,” with the latter group tending to oppose the established churches more vigorously. As the years proceeded, the Church of England and the official churches became closely linked in the public mind with royal tyranny in general. For the New Lights, opposition to the official church became opposition to English rule, and vice versa.

This idea, seeded by the Great Awakening, was revolutionary in itself. Most of Europe had for

centuries operated under the theory that the state took its authority from God. It had both the responsibility and right to intervene in religious matters. Conversely, the religious institutions tended to rely on the state to help enforce its doctrine. More important, most of the colonies had imported the idea that an official “established” church was an absolute necessity for promoting religion. In the South, it was the Anglican church, while in the North, the Puritan-influenced Congregationalist church was dominant. In both cases, there was a broad acceptance among the colonial elites of the idea that established churches were traditional and sensible. By equating political and religious persecution, the evangelicals helped lay the foundation for a radical political shift in the colonies.

One of the fastest growing of the evangelical groups was the Baptists, the current heart of the “religious right.” As the Baptist influence grew, so did the Anglican backlash against it. In May 1771, an Anglican minister and a sheriff interrupted one Baptist preacher's hymn-singing, put a horsewhip in his mouth and dragged him away from the meeting to be whipped in a nearby field. In Virginia, four Baptist preachers were imprisoned for their emotional sermons. “These men are great disturbers of the peace, they cannot meet a man upon the road but they must ram a text of scripture down his throat,” said a lawyer who argued the case against them. They refused to stop preaching and were sent to jail, singing hymns along the way. They preached to crowds through the barred windows of the jail.

As a result of this persecution, the evangelicals were strong supporters of revolution, believing that their fight for religious freedom would rise or fall with the war against political tyranny. After the revolution, they pressed their opposition to the official church establishments and their support for separation of church and state.

The first faith-based initiative

Historians on both sides of the modern culture wars have attempted to study the writing and passage of the First Amendment looking for clues about the Founders's intent. But to understand the role of broader public opinion, there's much more to be learned from the individual state fights over religious freedom. Right before the Declaration of Independence and for two decades after, state legislatures grappled with church-state issues with much greater specificity than the federal constitutional convention had. These battles were fought not only with a few elites in a committee room but also among a broad range of local landowners, merchants, and churchgoers. One of the most significant of these battles took place in Virginia.

After the revolution, there was a sense throughout the state that religion was in decline: Churches were struggling, and immorality was on the rise. Leaders of the dominant Anglican Church—which had turned into today's Episcopal Church—began pressing for state support of religion.

In 1784, Patrick Henry, the most popular leader in the state, campaigned for a law that would tax Virginians to support the promotion of Christianity. It is important to realize that Henry was not pushing to create a formal establishment of the Anglican church, and obviously Henry was no Royalist. He was taking the far more liberal view that religion in general should be aided. Under his proposal, voters could designate the denomination, or even the specific church, that their tax dollars would fund. Baptists could give money to the Baptist Church, and Presbyterians to their own church. Henry's bill even went so far as to provide that those who didn't want to support religion could have the option of targeting their tax dollars toward education in general.

The measure, “A Bill for Establishing a Provision for the Teachers of the Christian Religion,”

gained wide support. It was viewed as a gentle and flexible approach to encouraging religion—surely an important goal—while remaining consistent with the spirit of the revolution. Richard Henry Lee declared that "avarice is accomplishing the destruction of religion for want of legal obligation to contribute something to its support." A petition sent in by citizens in Amelia, Va., declared that "As every Man in the state partakes of the Blessings of Peace and Order" —and peace and order flow directly from the morality produced by religion—"every Man should be obliged to contribute as well to the Support of Religion." Even George Washington supported the approach. One major Virginia leader stood in opposition to Henry and this popular proposal: James Madison. Though not as well known as Henry, Madison had just played the central role in the constitutional convention and had growing influence within the legislature. He fervently believed that even though the assessment did not create a religious establishment, it posed a severe threat to religious freedom.

On Nov. 11, 1784, the tall, charismatic Patrick Henry and the frail, brainy James Madison faced off in the legislature. Henry argued that nations that had neglected religion had suffered and declined. Madison tried to counter by pointing out lands where religion had flourished without government support. Madison lost. By a vote of 47 to 32, the legislature voted for a resolution declaring that the people of the Commonwealth "ought to pay a moderate tax or contribution annually for the support of the Christian religion."

During a legislative hiatus that followed, Madison tried to turn public opinion by writing one of the most important documents in the history of American religious freedom, the "Memorial and Remonstrance." He asserted that even though the assessment would support Christianity in general—and that taxpayers could even designate which church they wanted their money to aid —it still was akin to an "establishment."

"Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects?" he asked. The bill, he said, was "an offense against God," and previous efforts throughout history to provide financial support for religion had backfired. "During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution."

Madison's paper was circulated widely throughout the state. He went from town to town arguing on its behalf, and at one point stopped by the home of John Leland, the Baptist leader who had earlier sent the cheese to Jefferson.

What soon became clear is that Madison did have allies in his radical view that even the gentle assessment constituted a threat to religious freedom: the evangelical Christians.

"This scheme should it take place is the best calculated to destroy Religion," declared one petition from evangelical Presbyterians in Rockbridge. "We shall be more likely to have the State swarming with Fools, Sots and Gamblers than with a Sober Sensible and Exemplary Clergy." A Baptist group in Duputy pointed out that because money would pass through the tax system the "Sheriffs, County Courts and public Treasury are all to be employed in the management of money levied for the express purpose of supporting Teachers of the Christian Religion." They added that it was sinful to "compel men to furnish contributions of money to support that Religion which they disbelieve and abhor." The Baptist General Association in Orange, Va., rejected the idea that government aid was necessary to help religion as "founded neither in Scripture, on Reason, on Sound Policy; but is repugnant to each of them." When the legislators returned to Richmond to vote on the measure, the tide had shifted. "The steps taken

throughout the Country to defeat the Gnl Assessment, had produced all the effect that could have been wished," Madison reported. "The table was loaded with petitions and remonstrances from all parts against the interposition of the Legislature in matters of Religion."

It's worth noting that the focus of the evangelical argument against state aid to religion was not merely fear of persecution. After all, the assessment law had made it clear that Baptists could funnel their taxes to Baptist churches. Rather, the evangelicals believed that Christians were to render unto Caesar what was his—that the religious and political spheres were meant, by Jesus, to be separate. One Baptist petition declared "We do... earnestly declare against [the assessment bill] as being contrary to the spirit of the gospel and the bill of rights."

They further argued that the approach ignored an important lesson of Christian history, that the greatest flowering of Christianity occurs without government support. "The Blessed author of the Christian Religion, not only maintained and supported his gospel in the world for several Hundred Years, without the aid of Civil Power but against all the Powers of the Earth, the Excellent Purity of its Precepts and the unblamable behaviour of its Ministers made its way thro all opposition," one petition declared. "Nor was it the Better for the church when Constantine the great, first Established Christianity by human Laws. True there was rest from Persecution, but how soon was the Church Over run with Error and Immorality."

With the evangelicals providing the political ground troops, the legislature then went even further, approving Thomas Jefferson's statute on religious freedom. The statute prohibited not only formal establishments, but also the use of government funds to aid any particular religion on the grounds that no man's taxes should be used to support religious beliefs with which he does not agree. "To compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves, is sinful and tyrannical."

A similar dynamic developed during the ratification of the Bill of Rights. The evangelicals provided the political muscle for the efforts of Madison and Jefferson, not merely because they wanted to block official churches but because they wanted to keep the spiritual and secular worlds apart. "Religious freedom resulted from an alliance of unlikely partners," writes the eminent historian Frank Lambert in his excellent book The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America. "New Light evangelicals such as Isaac Bachus and John Leland joined forces with Deists and skeptics such as James Madison and Thomas Jefferson to fight for a complete separation of church and state."

The infidel-evangelical alliance

Some religious conservatives today point to a slew of comments and actions from the Founding Fathers indicating their support for an intermingling of religion and state. These are not hard to find—in part for a reason rarely acknowledged by either side in the culture wars: The founders did not agree with one another on how to interpret the First Amendment.

John Adams, Patrick Henry, and others believed the First Amendment really was meant to block the formal establishment of an official church, but allowed much mixing of church and state. For instance, Adams endorsed national days of fasting and prayer and appointment of congressional chaplains. Jefferson and Madison were on the other end of the spectrum, demanding the clearest separation of church and state. As president, Jefferson reversed the practice initiated by Washington and Adams, and refused to have a national day of prayer. Madison agreed. He cited the appointment of chaplains as being a direct violation of the "pure principle of religious freedom," especially given how "strongly guarded as is the separation between Religion & Government in the Constitution of the United States."

Just as the Founding Fathers disagreed, so too did people of faith. Congregationalists and Episcopalians were the chief defenders of state-supported religion and more aligned with the views of Adams and Henry. It was the evangelicals who backed the more radical views of Jefferson and Madison. Leland, for instance, agreed with Jefferson's opposition to congressional chaplains. “If legislatures choose to have a chaplain, for Heaven's sake, let them pay him by contributions, and not out of the public chest,” he once wrote. Indeed, as Rabbi James Rudin notes in his new book The Baptizing of America, “Leland was even against the Sunday closings of U.S. post offices, feeling this represented government favoritism by officially recognizing the Christian Sabbath.”

In other words, the Founding Fathers were divided on separation of church and state—but most of the evangelicals weren't. They overwhelmingly sided with Jefferson and Madison.

On one level, this little-known alliance between Jefferson, Madison, and the evangelicals was pragmatic; for different reasons, they shared similar goals. But the connection went far deeper. When evangelicals smashed ecclesiastical authority—by, say, meeting in the fields without the permission of the local clergy—they were undermining authority in general. They were saying that on a deep spiritual level, salvation came through a direct relationship with God and that the clerical middleman was relatively unimportant. Jefferson and other enlightenment thinkers were glorifying the power of the individual mind to determine the truth—through evidence rather than merely tradition. As the historian Rhys Isaac put it, “Jefferson's system proclaimed individual judgment as sacred, sacred against the pressure of collective coercions; the evangelicals did the same for private conscience.”

Today's Christian conservatives often note that Jefferson's famous line declaring that the first amendment had created “a wall separating church and state” was not in the Constitution but in a private letter. But in that letter, Jefferson was responding to one sent to him by a group of Baptists in Danbury, Conn. We usually read Jefferson's side of that exchange. It's worth re-reading what the Danbury Baptists had to say because it reminds us that for the 18th-century evangelicals, the separation of church and state was not only required by the practicalities of their minority status, but was also demanded by God. “Religions is at all times and places a matter between God and individuals,” the Baptists wrote, warning that government “dare not assume the prerogatives of Jehova and make Laws to govern the Kingdom of Christ.” Government had no business meddling in the affairs of the soul, where there is only one Ruler.

The original intent

The evangelical wariness of the political world persisted for many of the next 200 years. The creation of the Moral Majority changed that. Angry about court rulings allowing abortion and banning prayer in school, Falwell and others argued that Christians should dive aggressively into the public realm in order to promote Christian values. The election of Ronald Reagan, the emergence of the Christian Coalition, and the enormously important role that religious conservatives played in the election of George W. Bush all seemed to validate that strategy. At this moment in history, the evangelical involvement in politics is so strong—and their advocacy of greater government support for religion so persistent—it's difficult to remember that this view is relatively recent.

What the mainstream media have missed is that this separatist strand of the evangelical movement never went away; it was just defeated and quieted. Look carefully, and the spirit of John Leland can be discerned in some modern evangelicals.

The popular commentator Cal Thomas and the author Ed Dobson, both former officials of the

Moral Majority, wrote a courageous book in 1999 called Blinded by the Might, arguing that proximity to power had prompted religious conservatives to abandon their principles and distracted them from their religious mission: “We have confused political power with God's power.” And the Baptist legacy reappeared after George Bush's election when a number of religious conservatives surprised pundits by suggesting that churches should not accept money from the faith-based initiative. Richard Land, the president of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said that while he hoped Bush's faith-based plan passed, he personally “would not touch the money with the proverbial 10-foot pole.” The fears expressed by Thomas, Dobson, and Land were the very same ones that Leland or Bachus would have had: that with government involvement will come government interference. Modern religious conservatives have mostly decided to go along anyway because they felt a greater good—the promotion of President Bush and the general encouragement of religion—outweighed the risks.

That moment of nervousness by some religious conservatives about the faith-based initiatives was largely ignored by the mainstream media because it was a minority opinion among contemporary evangelicals and didn't fit the agreed-upon playbook—the Christian right got Bush elected so surely it must like religious aid—but it indicated that this spirit of John Leland and Isaac Bachus is not entirely dead in the evangelical movement.

A small group of influential evangelical historians have, of late, tried to rebut the notion that the country was founded as a Christian Republic. Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch, the preeminent evangelical historians, wrote a book called The Search for Christian America in which they gently, but firmly, attempted to correct a number of misconceptions that modern religious conservatives have about their own past. “The tragedy is that we come to believe that we are attuned to the wisdom of the ages,” they noted, “when in fact the sound we really hear is but an echo of our own voice.”

So far these individuals—the ones we might call the Original Intent Evangelicals—have been overshadowed by higher-profile Christian conservative leaders like James Dobson, Pat Robertson, and Charles Colson. These leaders insist that the Founders meant only to block the establishment of an official state religion, not to stop all government support of specific religions. Therefore, they argue, the Constitution should be read to allow vouchers for schools that teach religion, prominent displays of the Ten Commandments in government offices, even open proselytizing by military chaplains. In some cases, they go even further. The GOP-controlled Virginia House of Delegates last year passed a measure that would amend the state constitution—and override language that Jefferson himself had written—to allow prayer and proselytizing on all public property (a Senate panel ultimately killed the measure). And a plank in the 2004 Texas Republican platform declares that “the United States of America is a Christian nation” and disparages “the myth of the separation of church and state.”

Contemporary religious conservatives can certainly find quotes from Founding Fathers to support their claims that government should aggressively support religion. They'll have a harder time finding quotes from 18th-century evangelicals. Falwell and company are free to chart a different course from earlier Christians, but they should do so with the knowledge that some very pious evangelical leaders believed this was a dangerous path. When the Rev. Falwell meets his maker, he may well get a pat on the back from Patrick Henry, but he's sure to get a tongue lashing, and a sermon, from the Rev. Leland.

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