



# So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State

*Forrest Church*

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Today's dispute over the line between church and state (or the lack thereof) is neither the first nor the fiercest in our history. In a powerful retelling of the birth of the American body politic, religious historian Forrest Church describes our first great culture war—a tumultuous yet nearly forgotten conflict that raged from George Washington's presidency to James Monroe's. On one side of the battle, the proponents of order—Federalists, Congregationalists, New Englanders—believed that the only legitimate ruler of men is God. On the other side, the defenders of liberty—republicans, Baptists, Virginians—cheered the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, and believed that only the separation of church and state would preserve man's freedom. Would we be a nation under God, or with liberty for all?

In this vigorous history, Forrest Church offers a new vision of our earliest presidents' beliefs, reshaping assumptions about the debates that still reverberate across our land.

## So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State Details

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## From Reader Review So Help Me God: The Founding Fathers and the First Great Battle Over Church and State for online ebook

### Derek says

An excellent examination of the nation's early struggle with the relationship between Church and state. The author perceives the issue of one between order (those who wanted a blurred boundary) and liberty (those who wanted a very distinct and rigid separation). He explores at length both the private faith of the first five presidents and the attitude of their administrations towards the relationship between Church and state. Very detailed, but very readable.

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### Chris says

Very interesting stuff. The founding fathers were quite diverse in their views, and although its hard to compare apples and oranges because of the 200+ year time difference, most of them were quite secular in their views, primarily in order to protect freedom of conscious. Most (Washington, Jefferson, Madison) were almost certainly Diests, so Jesus wasn't divine. Certainly couldn't consider them Christians, although all saw what to them were the obvious societal benefits to a largely Christian nation. Anyway, pretty good read.

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### Mark says

Best history I've ever read - Church's style is descriptive and riveting. It covers the first five president's progress navigating the genesis of our government's relationship of church and state. Providence is retrospectively clear when one sees how huge the stakes were, and how precariously close disaster loomed as federalists and republicans battled for our nations soul.

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### MsChris says

I really enjoyed this book. The writing is clear and easy to read. Makes history enjoyable even for those of us who don't usually enjoy it. My only frustration with it was that he jumps back in forth in time a lot, which can be frustrating and confusing at times.

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### Dick Pickett says

Church's views on the history of church and state miss the mark. For example,

"Not only America's slaves but also American women, laborers, racial minorities, homosexuals, indeed every class of citizen who rightly demand a fair share of the liberty, equality, and happiness that he wrote into the nation's promise, owe America's most multifaceted president some part of their liberation." Forrest Church on Jefferson, p. 442

Thomas Jefferson to Edmund Pendleton  
26 Aug. 1776 Papers 1:505

The fantastical idea of virtue and the public good being a sufficient security to the state against the commission of crimes, which you say you have heard insisted on by some, I assure you was never mine. It is only the sanguinary hue of our penal laws which I meant to object to. Punishments I know are necessary, and I would provide them, strict and inflexible, but proportioned to the crime. Death might be inflicted for murder and perhaps for treason if you would take out of the description of treason all crimes which are not such in their nature. Rape, buggery &c. punish by castration. All other crimes by working on high roads, rivers, gallies &c. a certain time proportioned to the offence. But as this would be no punishment or change of condition to slaves (me miserum!) let them be sent to other countries. By these means we should be freed from the wickedness of the latter, and the former would be living monuments of public vengeance. Laws thus proportionate and mild should never be dispensed with. Let mercy be the character of the law-giver, but let the judge be a mere machine. The mercies of the law will be dispensed equally and impartially to every description of men; those of the judge, or of the executive power, will be the eccentric impulses of whimsical, capricious designing man.

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### **Jared says**

This is the single best volume concerning the founding fathers and their ideas about the separation of church and state I have ever encountered. It is both comprehensive and objective with the added bonus of being very well written.

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### **Russ says**

Excellent book for those interested in the early history of our country. Surprisingly, perhaps, the founding fathers broke with European tradition and purposely did not include a deity or national religion in the Constitution. Their belief was that "liberty" above "god" would protect freedom of religion. This book details the attempts by then strong religious sects through the first five presidencies to force their own religious views on the country through the federal government.

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### **Dwight says**

Been wanting to read one of these good 'founding father' histories. This looks like a good one. Just from reading the introduction I'm struck with how much more seemingly open our society was then than now: They apparently knew who the believers and non-believers were, and it wasn't a problem (James Madison was a noted and public agnostic, apparently). I fear we're many decades away from being seeing anyone run for national office as an avowed "secular humanist".

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### **Jim Hansen says**

Wonderful way to introduce us to our founding concepts and a great way to engage in discussions with people who have very different views about the values behind our founding

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## Mc Lovin says

this is the best book

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## Robert Rose says

The more things change the more they stay the same. Forrest Church's masterful recounting of America's first "culture war" is eerily familiar. The contemporary clash between the religious right(which is neither)and the rest of us already took place in America at the end of the Eighteenth and the beginning of the Nineteenth Centuries. Who knew? Fortunately, Forrest Church did, and he wrote it down.

Does freedom of religion mean freedom from religion? Contrary to popular myth, many of the founding fathers thought so. I learned that of the first five Presidents only one, John Adams, was a member of a church, and none of the first five Presidents believed in the divinity of Jesus--hardly the story one gets from the "America was founded as a Christian nation" crowd.

Church consideres each of the first five Presidents in the light of their personal relationships to religion as well as the battles and confrontations that took place over religion during each of their administrations, all in all a fascinating new way to look at the beginning of America's political history.

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## Shirley says

This book was very interesting in light of the current involvement of many churches in politics and vice versa. Our early founders faced many of the same dilemmas as we do. Church's writing, however, made it hard for me to read quickly. I had to keep rereading. He has written in the style that one of the founders might have written, clever but not a quick read. It included many important insights on our early presidents, and it was deep with the author's theological understanding.

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## Betsy says

A bit too detailed and the author liked to use BIG WORDS! But I learned a lot in reading this book which takes you thru the "church v state" scenario of the 1st 5 presidents.

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## Mary says

jA recap of the history we learned in high school, but with an emphasis on the ways the five first presidents dealt with the question of religion and government. the insistence they all showed on keeping them separate, but the opposition from others in the churches and the government who felt the nation couldn't be safe

without a strong Christian focus. The Baptists and Methodists were the firmest in separation--the Episcopal and astonishingly, the Unitarians, were more inclined to seek the church's involvement in the government. Actually, it appears that none of these five was a devout churchman--even Adams, believer that he was, was suspicious of organized religion. Probably none of them was a believer in the divinity of Jesus.

A fascinating book, and touched, too, on the crises that threatened the new country--the Alien and Sedition Acts, the War of 1812, and the ever-looming problems of Native Americans and Negro slaves--not to be settled in the lifetimes of these five, and almost treated by Jefferson as if he hoped they would just go away! As Forrest Church was completing this book, his cancer recurred and he was close to death.

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## **Bart Breen says**

Excellent Read with Good Insight

I was attracted to this book because of the Author and some prior experience I've had with other writings of his. The first book I reviewed here on Amazon was the Jefferson Bible with a forward by Forrest Church and I recall at the time being struck by the polarized reviews and voting patterns that I observed by those responding to that work and how much of it centered upon the importance of Jefferson's Bible and what it said about the religious views of that vital founding father and the original intent of the founders in terms of religion and its impact upon American society. I was struck at the time as to how easy it was for the different points of view to polarize with little middle ground and how focused the dissent was upon the point of view of the reviewer. It was almost as if their need to incorporate Jefferson or any Founding Father into their "camp" trumped objective history.

I read this book after having done more study and reading in the field, and in particular I read the entire correspondance between John Adams and Thomas Jefferson and I was particularly interested in how well what I gathered from that primary source would compare with this secondary interpretation. In fact, based upon my conclusions from reading Church's take on Adams and Jefferson I was determined that I'd have a pretty good base on what to conclude on his information related to Washington, Madison and Monroe as I am not as familiar with their religious and constitutional views despite having done some reading in this field in the past as well.

My conclusion is that Church has a very good handle and makes a fair and reasonable presentation that to me rang true in those areas where I was equipped to make that observation.

Church is a Unitarian/Universalist Minister and it might be easy to dismiss him on that basis as biased toward finding religion wherever he looks. I found him to be reasonable in his treatment of each of the men and willing to deal objectively with their personal and public faith and willing to accept that being human, they at times were inconsistent and at times willing to make compromises to promote their own political careers and cater to the necessities of the day where religion was prevalent and entangled in public policy.

The only real complaint I have, and it is the basis for the 4 star evaluation rather than the 5 I would have given it if I could, is that although there are end notes that provide sources for the more serious reader to explore and check, the lack of in-text notation leaves the reader having to rely upon the author's judgment to a great degree. The emphasis is upon flow and readability and Church does a good job in this regard. I think people taking the time to read this focused a book are going to want to be able to see the sources without having to continually turn to the back to see if there is a source in the first place and then once located by page to determine where on the page the source is incorporated. Any serious reader wishing to use this book for resource or reference will find this a frustrating element.

Worth the time and effort to read and reasonably objective in my opinion.

Bart Breen

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