

On America

The Founding Fathers

The founding fathers' religion wasn't always worn on their sleeves. Looking back, it's quite difficult to tell where some of our nation's great leaders fell on the religious scale. Deism was popular at the time – the belief in God as the creator of all things, but not as a miracle worker or one that answers to prayer.

Sure, there are the books written and speeches given. But often personal letters and eyewitnesses are a more accurate gauge of belief. As with any time period, there are sometimes those who aren't what they seem or claim to be on the surface. The widespread existence in 18th-century America of a school of religious thought called Deism complicates the actual beliefs of the Founders. Drawing from the scientific and philosophical work of such figures as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Isaac Newton, and John Locke, Deists argued that human experience and rationality—rather than religious dogma and mystery—determine the validity of human beliefs. In his widely read *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine, the principal American exponent of Deism, called Christianity “a fable.” Paine, the protégé of Benjamin Franklin, denied “that the Almighty ever did communicate anything to man, by...speech,...language, or...vision.”

Einstein, too, often mentioned God and religion as a matter of expediency, yet he was an atheist/pantheist, not a Christian or a believer in the religious traditions of the Jews.

These are the men that fought for religious freedom and the separation of church and state. In fact, God, Jesus Christ, and Christianity are not stated once in all of the Constitution, and it is clearly done so on purpose.

Some, such as John Jay, were devout Christians and considered the USA to be a Christian nation.¹ However, others such as Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, etc., held deistic beliefs and fought for complete separation of church and state. The Founding Fathers were not unified in their religious beliefs. The most impressive of the Founding Fathers were secularists. Alexander Hamilton publicly attacked Thomas Jefferson as an atheist.

Remember, the founding fathers understood their history. They'd seen how the Christian governments of Europe took advantage of the individual freedom of its citizens. They'd seen they constant internal bickering and wars amongst Christian factions.

One can differentiate a Founding Father influenced by Deism from an orthodox Christian believer by following certain criteria. Anyone seeking the answer should consider at least the following four points.

1. First, an inquirer should examine the Founder's church involvement. However, because a colonial church served not only religious but also social and political functions, church attendance or service in a governing body (such as an Anglican vestry, which was a state office in colonies such as Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina) fails to guarantee

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Jay#Religion

a Founder's orthodoxy. But Founders who were believing Christians would nevertheless be more likely to go to church than those influenced by Deism.

2. The second consideration is an evaluation of the participation of a Founder in the ordinances or sacraments of his church. Most had no choice about being baptized as children, but as adults they did have a choice about participating in communion or (if Episcopalian or Roman Catholic) in confirmation. And few Founders who were Deists would have participated in either rite. George Washington's refusal to receive communion in his adult life indicated Deistic belief to many of his pastors and peers.
3. Third, one should note the religious language a Founder used. Non-Christian Deists such as Paine refused to use Judeo-Christian terminology and described God with such expressions as "Providence," "the Creator," "the Ruler of Great Events," and "Nature's God." Founders who fall into the category of Christian Deists used Deistic terms for God but sometimes added a Christian dimension—such as "Merciful Providence" or "Divine Goodness." Yet these Founders did not move further into orthodoxy and employ the traditional language of Christian piety. Founders who remained unaffected by Deism or who (like John Adams) became conservative Unitarians used terms that clearly conveyed their orthodoxy ("Savior," "Redeemer," "Resurrected Christ").
4. Finally, one should consider what friends, family, and, above all, clergy said about a Founder's religious faith. That Washington's pastors in Philadelphia clearly viewed him as significantly influenced by Deism says more about Washington's faith than do the opposite views of later writers or the cloudy memories of a few Revolutionary veterans who avowed Washington's orthodoxy decades after his death.

Thomas Jefferson

At birth, Thomas Jefferson was baptized into Christianity, but he later rejected Christianity and became a freethinking deist.

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/how-thomas-jefferson-created-his-own-bible-5659505/>

In 1779 Jefferson proposed "The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom", which was adopted in 1786. Its goal was complete separation of church and state; it declared the opinions of men to be beyond the jurisdiction of the civil magistrate. He asserted that the mind is not subject to coercion, "that our civil rights have no dependence on religious opinions," and that the opinions of men are not the concern of civil government.

In 1787, Jefferson wrote to his nephew,

*Fix Reason firmly in her seat, and call to her tribunal every fact, every opinion. Question with boldness even the existence of a God; because, if there be one, he must more approve the homage of reason than of blindfolded fear. ... Do not be frightened from this inquiry by any fear of its consequences. If it end in a belief that there is no God, you will find incitements to virtue in the comfort and pleasantness you feel in its exercise and in the love of others which it will procure for you.*²

² http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/jefferson_carr.html

Though he had a lifelong esteem for Jesus' moral teachings, Jefferson did not believe in miracles, nor in the divinity of Jesus. In a letter to deRieux in 1788, he declined a request to act as a godfather, saying he had been unable to accept the doctrine of the Trinity "from a very early part of my life."³

During the 1800 presidential campaign, Jefferson was accused of being a "howling atheist" and an infidel. After the campaign, he became more reluctant to have his religious opinions discussed in public.⁴

Following the Revolution, Jefferson played a leading role in the disestablishment of religion in Virginia. Previously as the established state church, the Anglican Church received tax support and no one could hold office who was not an Anglican. The Presbyterian, Baptist and Methodist churches did not receive tax support. As Jefferson wrote in his Notes on Virginia, pre-Revolutionary colonial law held that "if a person brought up a Christian denies the being of a God, or the Trinity ... he is punishable on the first offense by incapacity to hold any office."⁵

In an 1820 letter to his close friend William Short, Jefferson stated, "it is not to be understood that I am with him [Jesus] in all his doctrines. I am a Materialist; he takes the side of Spiritualism; he preaches the efficacy of repentance toward forgiveness of sin; I require a counterpoise of good works to redeem it."⁶

In a letter to John Adams, dated April 11, 1823, Thomas Jefferson wrote,

*The day will come when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter. ... But we may hope that the dawn of reason and freedom of thought in these United States will do away with all this artificial scaffolding....*⁷

On one hand Jefferson affirmed, "We all agree in the obligation of the moral precepts of Jesus, and nowhere will they be found delivered in greater purity than in his discourses,"[56] that he was "sincerely attached to His doctrines in preference to all others,"[57] and that "the doctrines of Jesus are simple, and tend all to the happiness of man." [58] However, Jefferson considered much of the New Testament of the Bible to be false. In a letter to William Short in 1820, Jefferson described many biblical passages as "so much untruth, charlatanism and imposture".⁸

³ Clark, J. C. D. The language of liberty, 1660-1832. p. 347. (letter to J.P.P Derieux, July 25, 1788, Papers vol 13, p 418)

⁴ <http://www.constitution.org/tj/jeff10.txt>

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, Notes on the State of Virginia.

⁶ The character of Thomas Jefferson: as exhibited in his own writings By Theodore Dwight, Pg. 363.

⁷ http://www.beliefnet.com/resourcelib/docs/53/Letter_from_Thomas_Jefferson_to_John_Adams_1.html

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<https://books.google.com/?id=z-pv0i1qHIYC&pg=RA1-PA329&lpg=RA1-PA329&dq=so+much+untruth,+charlatanism+and+imposture>

In the same letter Jefferson states he describes Paul as the "first corrupter of the doctrines of Jesus".⁹

Jefferson loved what he considered to be the pure teachings of Jesus.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=kNlcAQAAIAAJ&pg=PA210&lpg=PA210#v=onepage&q=&f=false>

Jefferson also denied the divine inspiration of the Book of Revelation, describing it to Alexander Smyth in 1825 as "merely the ravings of a maniac, no more worthy nor capable of explanation than the incoherences of our own nightly dreams".[61] From his study of the Bible, Jefferson concluded that Jesus never claimed to be God.[62]

John Adams

- "The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion."¹⁰
- "All sober inquirers after truth, ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue."¹¹
- "I had forgotten the custom of putting Prophets in the Stocks....It may be thought impiety by many, but I could not help wishing that the ancient practice had been continued down to more modern times and that all the Prophets at least from Peter the Hermit, to Nimrod Hews inclusively, had been confined in the Stocks and prevented from spreading so many delusions and shedding so much blood."¹²
- "I wish You could live a Year in Boston, hear their Divines, read their publications, especially the Repository. You would see how spiritual Tyranny and ecclesiastical Domination are beginning in our Country: at least struggling for birth ..."¹³

John Adams signed the Declaration of Independence, was the 1st vice president of the USA, and was the 2nd president of the USA.

John Adams was raised a Congregationalist, but his thoughts about religion changed over time. According to Everett, "Adams strove for a religion based on a common sense sort of reasonableness" and maintained that religion must change and evolve toward perfection.¹⁴

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<https://books.google.com/?id=1mIFAAAAQAAJ&pg=PA156&lpg=PA156&dq=roguery+of+others+of+His+disciples>

¹⁰ <https://www.usconstitution.net/tripoli.html>

¹¹ John Adams, Thoughts on Government, 1776.

¹² Letter to Thomas Jefferson, 3 May 1812.

¹³ Letter to Thomas Jefferson, 25 June 1813.

¹⁴ Robert B. Everett (1966), "[The Mature Religious Thought of John Adams](#)," pp. 49–57, Proceedings of the South Carolina Historical Association.

John Adams did not agree with Thomas Paine's criticisms of Christianity—at least, not initially. In his diary, he wrote, "The Christian religion is, above all the religions that ever prevailed or existed in ancient or modern times, the religion of wisdom, virtue, equity and humanity, let the Blackguard Paine say what he will."¹⁵

However, as he grew older, he moved away from the Puritan sentiments of his youth, and he blamed institutional Christianity for causing much suffering. He became a Unitarian (rejecting the divinity of Jesus).¹⁶

<http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/pdfplus/10.1086/482479>

To Thomas Jefferson, he wrote,

"The human Understanding is a revelation from its Maker which can never be disputed or doubted. There can be no Scepticism, Pyrrhonism or Incredulity or Infidelity here. No Prophecies, no Miracles are necessary to prove this celestial communication. This revelation has made it certain that two and one make three; and that one is not three; nor can three be one. We can never be so certain of any Prophecy, or the fulfillment of any Prophecy; or of any miracle, or the design of any miracle as We are, from the revelation of nature, i.e. nature's God that two and two are four. Miracles or Prophecies might frighten Us to lie; to say that We believe that 2 and 2 make 5. But we should not believe it. We should know the contrary.

....

"God has infinite Wisdom, goodness and power. He created the Universe. His duration is eternalHis presence is as extensive as Space. What is Space? an infinite, spherical Vacuum. He created this Speck of Dirt and the human Species for his glory: and with the deliberate design of making nine tenths of our Species miserable forever, for his glory. This is the doctrine of Christian Theologians in general: ten to one.

"Now, my Friend, can Prophecies, or miracles convince You, or Me, that infinite Benevolence, Wisdom and Power, created and preserves, for a time, innumerable millions to make them miserable forever; for his own Glory? Wretch! What is his Glory? Is he ambitious? does he want promotion? Is he vain? tickled with Adulation? Exulting and triumphing in his Power and the Sweetness of his Vengeance? Pardon me, my Maker, for these awful Questions. My Answer to them is always ready: I believe no such Things. My Adoration of the Author of the Universe is too profound and too sincere. The Love of God and his Creation; delight, Joy, Triumph, Exultation in my own existence, 'tho but an Atom, a Molecule Organique, in the Universe; are my religion. Howl, Snarl, bite, Ye Calvinistick! Ye Athanasian Divines, if You will. Ye will say, I am no Christian: I say Ye are no Christians: and there the account is ballanced. Yet I believe all the honest men among you, are Christians in My Sense of the Word." -- letter to Thomas Jefferson, 14 September 1813

¹⁵ ["July 26. 1796. Tuesday. \[from the Diary of John Adams\]"](#). Adams Papers, Massachusetts Historical Society. Retrieved September 29, 2018.

¹⁶ [John E. Ferling](#) (1992), [John Adams: A Life](#).

"We have now, it seems a National Bible Society, to propagate King James's Bible, through all Nations. Would it not be better, to apply these pious Subscriptions, to purify Christendom from the Corruptions of Christianity; than to propagate those Corruptions in europe Asia, Africa and America!" -- letter to Thomas Jefferson, 4 November 1816

James Madison

James Madison was baptized an Anglican Christian, but he later became an avid consumer of deist writings and paid little attention to religious matters. He believed in religious liberty and a complete separation of church and state.

Upon the passage of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom in 1786, James Madison wrote to its author, Thomas Jefferson: "I flatter myself we have in this country extinguished forever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind."

In 1819, Madison said, "The number, the industry, and the morality of the priesthood & the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State."¹⁷

James Monroe

James Monroe was raised in a family that belonged to the Church of England when it was the state religion of Virginia (before the Revolution). As an adult, he attended Episcopal churches. However, "When it comes to Monroe's thoughts on religion," historian Bliss Isely notes, "less is known than that of any other President." No letters survive in which he discussed his religious beliefs. Nor did his friends, family or associates comment on his beliefs. Letters that do survive, such as ones written after the death of his son, contain no discussion of religion.¹⁸

Monroe was raised in a family that belonged to the Church of England when it was the state church in Virginia before the Revolution. As an adult, he attended Episcopal churches. Some historians see "deistic tendencies" in his few references to an impersonal God.[131] Unlike Jefferson, Monroe was rarely attacked as an atheist or infidel. In 1832 James Renwick Willson, a Reformed Presbyterian minister in Albany, New York, criticized Monroe for having "lived and died like a second-rate Athenian philosopher."¹⁹

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<https://books.google.com/books?id=68Zg3VqSKMoC&pg=PA432&lpg=PA432&dq=%22The+number.+the+industry.+and+the+morality+of+the+priesthood+%26+the+devotion+of+the+people+have+been+manifestly+increased+by+the+total+separation+of+the+Church+from+the+State.%22&source=bl&ots=Ac77JyM-ZV&sig=ACfU3U37rh2pWrvdKgoBy6PHf2TRpjB1bw&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKEwikfGLlrDiAhVPop4KHXi7Bj4Q6AEwA3oECAgQAQ#v=onepage&q=%22The%20number%2C%20the%20industry%2C%20and%20the%20morality%20of%20the%20priesthood%20%26%20the%20devotion%20of%20the%20people%20have%20been%20manifestly%20increased%20by%20the%20total%20separation%20of%20the%20Church%20from%20the%20State.%22&f=false>

¹⁸ Bliss, Isely (2006). *The Presidents: Men of Faith*. pp. 99–107.

¹⁹ <https://web.archive.org/web/20100705081149/http://www.covenanter.org/JRWillson/princemessiah.htm>

Benjamin Franklin

Benjamin Franklin's parents were pious Puritans, and he was baptized in a Puritan congregation in 1706. He was influenced by Cotton Mather's book, *Bonifacius: Essays to Do Good*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20110726104638/http://franklinpapers.org/franklin/yale.jsessionid=9379F5D050E36AA9D1F95700EE223865?d=-363718316&d=1379669530&vol=1&page=101a>

Franklin grew up in a devout Puritan family in colonial Boston, but by his teen years the bookish boy began to doubt key aspects of his parents' Calvinist faith. Abandoning Christianity altogether, however, was not a realistic option for someone as immersed as Franklin in the Bible's precepts and the habits of faith.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20090528094815/http://www.historycarper.com/resources/twobf1/m7.htm>

By 1728, Franklin had abandoned Puritan ideas like salvation, the divinity of Jesus, and other religious dogma. He became a deist. However, he still considered himself to be a Christian.

<http://www.usgennet.org/usa/topic/preservation/bios/franklin/chpt4.htm>

Benjamin Franklin continued to believe that organized religion was useful/necessary for motivating men to be good, but he rarely attended religious services himself.²⁰

A month before his death, Franklin wrote,

As to Jesus of Nazareth, my Opinion of whom you particularly desire, I think the System of Morals and his Religion, as he left them to us, the best the world ever saw or is likely to see; but I apprehend it has received various corrupt changes, and I have, with most of the present Dissenters in England, some Doubts as to his divinity; tho' it is a question I do not dogmatize upon, having never studied it, and I think it needless to busy myself with it now, when I expect soon an Opportunity of knowing the Truth with less Trouble. I see no harm, however, in its being believed, if that belief has the good consequence, as it probably has, of making his doctrines more respected and better observed; especially as I do not perceive that the Supreme takes it amiss, by distinguishing the unbelievers in his government of the world with any particular marks of his displeasure.²¹

Franklin adhered to a religion that we might call doctrineless, moralized Christianity. Traditional Christians today would likewise argue that authentic faith is based upon true beliefs about God, Jesus and the Bible. But the "deist" Franklin was convinced that in crafting a doctrineless, moralized Christianity, he was redeeming the best of traditional religion by channeling it toward the ideals of love and charity.

²⁰ Franklin, *Autobiography*, ed. Lemay, p. 65.

²¹ Carl Van Doren, *Benjamin Franklin*. (1938).

Alexander Hamilton

https://www.jstor.org/stable/1920511?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

Alexander Hamilton was not on Jefferson's level.

George Washington

George Washington was raised a Protestant, and he went to church as a child. However, he did not attend regularly as an adult, or participate in religious rites. He often left services before communion – and when called out on it, stopped attending that church on communion days.

https://books.google.com/books?id=_xISAAAYAAJ&pg=PA394&dq=sprague+annals+abercrombie+washington#v=onepage&q=sprague%20annals%20abercrombie%20washington&f=false

George Washington used Deist terms such as “Providence” and “supreme architect” in his speeches and writings. He did not speak of “Jesus” or “Christ.”

<https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Washington/05-09-02-0230>

George Washington advocated for religious freedom. On his deathbed, he did not call any priest or minister. He left a legacy of honesty and character, not of religious faith.

Thomas Paine

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Paine

Thomas Paine was the author of the pamphlet *Common Sense*, which shaped the demand for American independence from Great Britain.

His ideas and achievements have a consistent and deep resonance. Paine anticipated the American Civil War, the welfare state and the United Nations. He turned ‘democracy’ into a non-pejorative term – from ‘mob rule’ to ‘rule of people.’ He twice tried to eliminate slavery from America (first in the Declaration of Independence, and again during the Louisiana Purchase), and he was one of the first men to use the phrase ‘United States of America.’

More broadly, he popularised the idea of rights for humans, repeatedly asking Quo Warranto? At his essence, he was a modernist who understood that people had the power to shape the world, an outlook that reaped remarkable dividends during an epoch of profound social and political fluidity.

In *The Age of Reason*, Thomas Paine wrote,

*Whenever we read the obscene stories, the voluptuous debaucheries, the cruel and tortuous executions, the unrelenting vindictiveness with which more than half the Bible is filled, it would be more consistent that we call it the word of a demon than the word of God.*²²

²² <http://www.ushistory.org/paine/reason/reason4.htm>

Documents

The Declaration of Independence

The genius behind the Declaration of Independence was Thomas Jefferson, the freethinker. It was written in 1776.

The most important assertion in this document is that “to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.”

Note that the power of government is derived not from any god but from the people. No appeal is made in this document to a god for authority of any kind. In no case are any powers given to religion in the affairs of man.

Remember, too, that this document was not written to form or found a government but was stating intent in a way that was meant to appeal to an audience with European sensibilities. Only four times is there any reference at all to higher powers — “Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God,” “Supreme Judge of the world,” “their Creator,” and “divine Providence” — and in all four cases the references to a higher power appeal to the idea of inherent human dignity, never implying a role for a god in government.

The Constitution

The intellectual foundation of the Constitution came from John Jay, Alexander Hamilton, and James Madison.

The Constitution of the USA makes no reference to a god or to Christianity. The only reference to religion is found in Article VI:

... [N]o religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.

In the First Amendment:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

Our founding fathers explicitly and clearly excluded any reference to “God” or “the Almighty” or any euphemism for a higher power in the Constitution. Not one time is the word “god” mentioned in our founding document. Not one time.

The Federalist Papers

Origins of modern confusion

...

Our national obsession with God in politics is actually a recent phenomenon and would seem completely alien to any of our founders. "In God We Trust" was first placed on United States coins in 1861, during the Civil War. (More about that in a bit.) Teddy Roosevelt tried to remove the words from our money in 1907 but was shouted down. Only in 1956 was that expression adopted as the national motto by the 84th Congress. The clause "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance was inserted only in 1954, when President Eisenhower signed legislation to recognize "the dedication of our Nation and our people to the Almighty." But conservatives, ignorant of our history, or willfully ignoring it, wish us to believe that the pledge always referenced God. Here is Sarah Palin's take, defending the "under God" clause: "If the pledge was good enough for the founding fathers, its *[sic]* good enough for me and I'll fight in defense of our Pledge of Allegiance." One wonders if she thinks the founders were alive in 1954. I guess if Noah could live to be nearly 800 years old....

That we are a secular nation was obvious to past generations, so much so that in the mid-1800s several groups formed to rectify what they considered a mistake of our forefathers in founding our country on principles of reason rather than faith. Perhaps the most prominent was the National Reform Association, established in 1863 for the purpose of amending the preamble to the Constitution to acknowledge God and Jesus Christ as the sources of all government power, because the original document does not.

The National Reform Association believed that the Civil War was evidence that God was punishing the country for their failure to put God into the Constitution (nothing to do with slavery, of course). Also, note that this apparent knowledge of God's mind is reminiscent of Pat Robertson's claims about God's wrath in Haiti, Florida and anywhere else he believes the devil has taken hold. Anyway, in their 1864 convention the National Reform Association agreed on a preamble that would replace "We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union..." with "Recognizing Almighty God as the source of all authority and power in civil

government, and acknowledging the Lord Jesus Christ as the governor among the nations, his revealed will as the supreme law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government....”

They presented their suggestion to President Lincoln, who avoided it like a dirty diaper. The Congress also dodged the idea but threw the group a bone by agreeing to put “In God We Trust” on our currency, in an act of pure political pandering. So “In God We Trust” was first placed on United States coins in 1861 during the Civil War. From the Treasury we also find out:

The use of IN GOD WE TRUST has not been uninterrupted. The motto disappeared from the five-cent coin in 1883, and did not reappear until production of the Jefferson nickel began in 1938. Since 1938, all United States coins bear the inscription. Later, the motto was found missing from the new design of the double-eagle gold coin and the eagle gold coin shortly after they appeared in 1907. In response to a general demand, Congress ordered it restored, and the Act of May 18, 1908, made it mandatory on all coins upon which it had previously appeared. IN GOD WE TRUST was not mandatory on the one-cent coin and five-cent coin. It could be placed on them by the Secretary or the Mint Director with the Secretary’s approval.

The motto has been in continuous use on the one-cent coin since 1909, and on the ten-cent coin since 1916. It also has appeared on all gold coins and silver dollar coins, half-dollar coins, and quarter-dollar coins struck since July 1, 1908.

For much of our existence, the United States never included God in its motto, on its currency, or in any document creating the Republic. We were born a secular nation and must remain one to sustain our future, unless we want to go the way of ISIS.

Our founding fathers understood well the extraordinary danger of mixing religion and politics; we forget that lesson at our great peril. If we forget, just glance over to the Middle East. I tremble in fear for my country when the majority of conservatives believe we are a Christian nation; that frightening majority has forgotten our history, ignored our founding principles and abandoned our most cherished ideal of separating church and state. In mixing religion and politics, the religious right subverts both. And the world suffers.