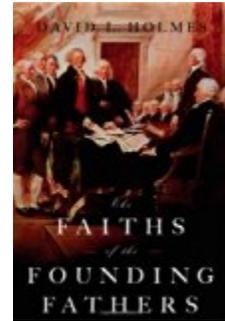


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David L. Holmes. *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. x + 225 pp. \$20.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-530092-5.

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Recovering the Founders' Deism

Responding to recent claims about the deep commitment to Christianity among America's Founding Fathers, David L. Holmes sets the record straight in this comprehensive examination of the Founders' religious beliefs and behaviors. The men who conducted the American Revolution, ratified the U.S. Constitution, and served as president during the nation's early years espoused a variety of different beliefs, grouped by Holmes into three main types—non-Christian Deism, Christian Deism, and Christian orthodoxy. Holmes shows that only Samuel Adams, Elias Boudinot, and John Jay anticipated salvation through Christ, embraced the Trinity of the Godhead, and engaged regularly in prayer and Bible devotion. Most of America's early leaders were Deists of one form or the other whose religious beliefs and practices do not match the claims about them advanced by Tim LaHaye, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, and other evangelical myth-makers.

One of the great strengths of this book is its careful exploration of the religious practices of the first four presidents of the United States. Holmes tells us which churches these men attended and how often, so far as the records tell, and whether or not they took communion. With evidence from letters and journals about their personal religious feelings and acts of devotion, Holmes highlights the names for God these men invoked, and the changes that occurred in their religious beliefs and behaviors over the course of their lifetimes. Contrary to the picture drawn by the first president's early mythographer Parson Weems, Holmes reveals George Washington to have been a Deist who attended Episcopal worship

in times of crisis but avoided communion and numerous opportunities for confirmation. Holmes presents John Adams as an avid Unitarian. Thomas Jefferson remained an Episcopalian throughout his life but rejected miracles, sacraments, and priestly authority. James Madison attended church infrequently during and after his presidency, avoided communion, and was never confirmed. James Monroe was the least religious of all. Although his wedding and funeral were conducted in Episcopal churches, there is little evidence that he attended church with any frequency or had much interest in religion.

The simplicity of Holmes's argument is a weakness as well as a strength. Relying heavily on the term "Christian orthodoxy," he uses it as a foil against which the Deism of most of the Founders can clearly be discerned. Many historians of Christianity would not align their own interpretive framework so firmly as Holmes does with that of the theological victors at Nicea. While Holmes succeeds in making his point about the Founders' Deism, his insistence on a normative definition of Christianity deflects attention away from the considerable role that Protestant Christianity played in the historical development of Deism, and away from the Founders' understanding of Christianity as a religion of nature and history. By making "orthodoxy" so much a part of his argument, Holmes plays into the theological warfare that evangelicals love, even if he defeats them in a skirmish over the Founders' feeling for the mystery of the Trinity. Evangelicals like LaHaye are more interested in the Founders' sense of America's divine destiny anyway, and Holmes does not dispute or even address the Founders' Christian sense of

American nationhood.

Leaving theological battle over the Founders aside, historians owe a great debt to David Holmes for laying out the Founders' religious beliefs and practices so clearly

and meticulously, and for showing how significant the influence of Deism was in America prior to the upsurge in evangelicalism known as the Second Great Awakening.

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