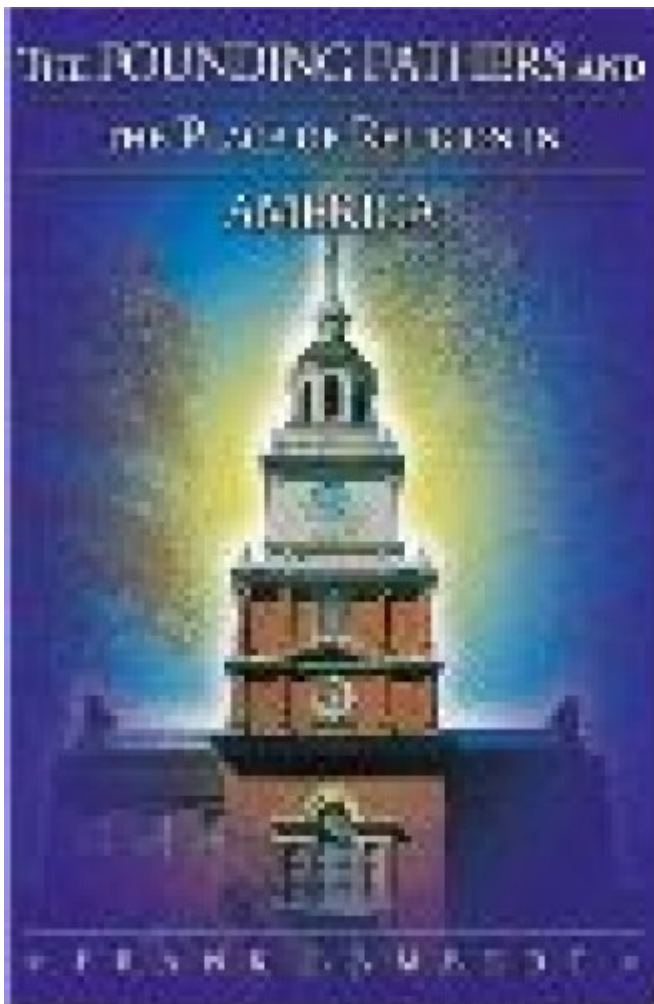


The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America/God and the Constitution

reviewed by [Andrew Murphy](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

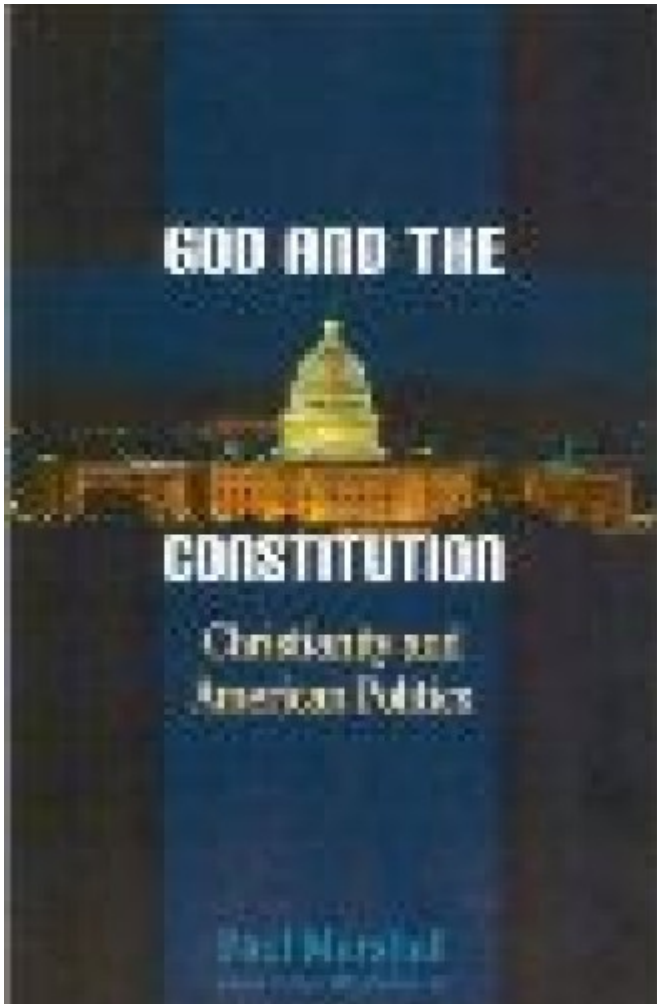
In Review



The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America

Frank Lambert

Princeton University Press



God and The Constitution: Christianity and American Politics

Paul Marshall
Rowman & Littlefield

The cover of Frank Lambert's book shows Philadelphia's Independence Hall; Paul Marshall's, the U.S. Capitol. This invocation of, respectively, the historical and contemporary seats of American political power tells us a great deal about our tendencies to equate the United States with the buildings in which its official business is transacted. It tells us less, however, about the two books. The events that took place at Independence Hall occupy only two of the ten chapters in Lambert's engaging account of religion in early American life. And Marshall presents the first half of his discussion of religion and politics as "describ[ing] briefly an ongoing development of human life and society throughout biblical history"; he claims to offer "some general ideas relevant to political life." But then why the "American" in the title, and why the photo of the Capitol?

Lambert's book epitomizes the virtues of narrative history, not least in the clear and straightforward prose style that propels the narrative from Jamestown through the elections of 1800. In addition, Lambert, professor of history at Purdue University, provides a compelling organizing principle, tracing the "radical change in the meaning of religious freedom" evidenced by the vast political and religious distance between the "Puritan Fathers" or "Planters" with their city on a hill and the "Founding Fathers" with their godless Constitution. Lambert structures his narrative around this contrast and is especially skillful at simultaneously sketching a large portrait of historical change over time and filling in that picture with evocative vignettes and first-person accounts.

The book's main sections—on religious regulation, religious competition and religious freedom—trace in great detail the ways in which the Founders turned from the ideals of the Planters of Massachusetts and Virginia. Its epilogue touches on a number of contemporary issues that Lambert's historical analysis has illuminated. I'm not certain that Lambert's book significantly surpasses Thomas Curry's *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment* (Oxford University Press, 1986), but it's good to have two fine books on this important topic.

The main strength of *The Founding Fathers*—the clarity of its central contrast between Planters and Founders—is also its chief weakness. The earliest generation of American founders, according to Lambert, were those "Puritan Fathers" for whom "intolerance in the name of Christian purity was not only defensible but mandatory." Focusing his first three chapters on the English background to colonization, Virginia and Massachusetts helps him make this argument. But what about such states as Pennsylvania? Lambert writes that "[w]ith the notable exceptions of Rhode Island and Pennsylvania, religious regulation, if not monopoly, was the goal in most colonies." True. But these are two extremely important exceptions, as were New York and New Jersey. Calling the first group of settlers "Puritan Fathers" doesn't entirely do justice to the religio-political complexity that characterized American colonization from its very beginning. Roger Williams founded Rhode Island almost a decade before William Penn was born, and 50 years before Penn crossed the Atlantic. Virginia and Massachusetts notwithstanding, religious freedom had formed a central part of the colonial experience for 150 years by the time the framers of the Constitution gathered in Independence Hall. And if diversity and religious liberty characterized the American religious landscape from the beginning, then those

framers' rejection of religious monopoly may represent a less radical transformation than Lambert suggests.

Marshall begins by declaring that he “does not try to give definitive answers to contemporary issues.” We might be forgiven a sense of surprise, then, upon encountering arguments against abortion (specifically partial-birth abortion), against biblical justifications to support Third World debt forgiveness and against liberation theology—not to mention a rather predictable attack on Hillary Clinton, whom Marshall groups with Marx and Rousseau as figures who seek “a new age inhabited by new people.”

It is difficult—despite its remarkably expansive title—to gain any meaningful insight into either the Constitution or American politics from this book. Marshall's first chapter, “Attacks on Religion in American Public Life,” is déjà vu all over again. Stephen Carter presented much the same critique in *The Culture of Disbelief* ten years ago, as did Richard John Neuhaus in *The Naked Public Square* nearly ten years before that, and there is little reason to think that things have changed much since. Just as troubling as these attacks on religion in public life is Marshall's singularization of the Christian (let alone the biblical) tradition.

Marshall, a senior fellow at both the Claremont Institute and the Center for Religious Freedom at Freedom House, consistently uses or implies the singular definite article when talking about lessons from the Hebrew and Christian scriptures (“biblical religion,” “biblical teaching,” “the biblical tradition,” “the biblical depiction of God's call on humankind”). This unfortunate word choice reduces a complex, diverse crosscutting set of texts, commentaries, practices and belief structures over two millenia into a single “teaching” or “tradition.” Not only is this usage misleading, but it tends to drain the vigor and life from a vibrant set of debates. What we call the “Christian tradition” is and always has been hotly contested terrain, often less a coherent “tradition” than a family of approaches both intimately related and sharply at odds on a range of issues.

God and the Constitution is filled with bold rhetorical flourishes. Consider the following:

“We have rights because God has given us rights.”

“Justice is a fundamental aspect of the way the world is made.”

“While we should never be complete conservatives, we should always want to conserve in our politics. While we should never be committed to liberalism, we should always treasure individual freedom as one of God’s greatest gifts.”

“The power that lies at the heart of the political order can be and often is misused, but it is itself a gift to be used wisely.”

Such statements often turn out to be curiously self-serving. Though Marshall argues that we have rights because God has given us rights, the nature of those rights is presented in purely negative terms, as things that government should not do. Marshall expressly rules out any positive economic or social rights, such as those advanced by some United Nations conferences or international women’s groups, who, Marshall says, “seem never to have met a right they didn’t like.” In fact, Marshall maintains that the structure of universal, God-given rights “is in fact the structure of most American Constitutional rights.” We Americans should all, I suppose, consider ourselves fortunate that, unlike the United Nations, Asian nations or feminists, our political tradition has effectively read the structure of rights inherent in God’s own mind.

It is as American as Independence Hall and the Capitol building to argue over religion and its role in our politics and public life. Such debates, like the two buildings, stand at the heart of our nation’s past as well as its present. But in looking to the future, I find much more to be gained from Lambert’s patient excavations than from Marshall’s broad generalizations.