

2011

Review of Kidd's "God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution" and Fea's "Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction"

Paul Otto

George Fox University, potto@georgefox.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/hist_fac

 Part of the [Cultural History Commons](#), and the [Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Published in Christians in Political Science Newsletter, January-February 2011, pp. 4-5 <https://sites.google.com/site/christiansinpoliticalscience/>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Department of History, Politics, and International Studies at Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Publications - Department of History, Politics, and International Studies by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolf@georgefox.edu.

Thomas S. Kidd. *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010.)

John Fea. *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? A Historical Introduction*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.)

It's complicated. Or so John Fea claims about the past. And indeed, his new work and Thomas Kidd's both demonstrate that questions about faith and the founding of the United States are not easily answered because of the complexity of the past. In popular venues, debates swirl around the question of whether or not the United States was founded as a Christian nation. Such debates are often tied to present-day concerns about the place of religion, and particularly Christianity, in the public square and the meaning of the separation of church and state. Unfortunately, such debates are rarely informed by good historical understanding. Those arguing for one position or the other often miss several crucial elements of historical thinking—the “5 Cs of Historical Thinking,” which Fea introduces to his readers. These include change over time, context, causality, contingency, and complexity. Popular, and some scholarly, inquiries of religion and the founding fail to appreciate these factors. Instead they seek simple solutions to complex problems—were the founders Christian or not? Did they go to church or not? Did the founding documents use Christian language or not? These and many other such questions try to reduce the multifaceted and changing world of the founders to a series of yes and no answers. In short, they lack nuance and historical insight. But Kidd and Fea, both Christians and trained historians, set out to demonstrate the complex role that Christianity played in early American society at the time of the founding and do so admirably.

Fea's book is didactic in nature, but this is not a criticism. Directly aimed at modern-day debaters, his work seeks to instruct its readers in the historical task, inform them of the nuanced history of religion in early America, and to challenge a number of common misinterpretations. His book is comprised of three parts—after a brief primer in historical research, Fea surveys the history of historical interpretations related to the question of America as a Christian nation, delves into several specific questions about the role of Christianity in early America, and looks at the religious beliefs of several founders. Fea demonstrates that American history has been shaped much more prominently by Christianity than many present-day detractors believe, but he also argues that Christianity often didn't play a role in American history in the way many modern Evangelicals would like to believe. A key element in Fea's book is his effort to highlight certain episodes commonly put forth in the modern-day debate and place them more firmly and accurately in their historical context. This, for example, is the reason he singles out a few prominent founders for consideration. Other instances include an exposition of Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli (1797) that asserted that the United States was not “founded on the Christian religion” and an extensive discussion of the many sermons preached by American ministers in favor of revolution. John Fea makes clear that religion and politics have long mixed in American society, but he also helps readers understand the way they mixed and equips them to better understand and answer the question “was America founded as a Christian nation?”

In contrast, Thomas Kidd sets out to write “a Religious History of the American Revolution,” that is interpretive and not didactic, but which covers much of the same territory as Fea's book. But like Fea, Kidd also argues that religion and politics intersected in complex ways in early America. Without claiming that all the founders, or even all the Americans at the time of the revolution, were Christians, he nonetheless claims that “the public spirituality shared by the revolutionary era's evangelicals, mainstream Christians, liberal rationalists, and deists established many of America's most cherished freedoms” (10). Chronologically organizing his work, he demonstrates the role of Christianity again and again in the founding era and the decades just previous. He examines the Great Awakening, the struggle for religious liberty, the Bishop Controversy, commonly held beliefs in Providence, notions of equality, slavery, disestablishment, virtue, and religious liberty. Not as pointedly as Fea, but no less effectively, Kidd highlights evangelicals and religious fanatics who didn't always live up to modern-day Christian expectations and likewise draws attention to critics of evangelicalism and orthodox Christianity such as Thomas Jefferson and Ben Franklin who were nevertheless friends of religion and often made common political cause with those whom they disagreed philosophically.

Both authors, then, take religion in early America seriously, approach their studies with sensitivity to Christian thinking, and offer nuanced discussions of religion and politics in early America. Both have messages to believers and non-believers today. Kidd puts it well when he writes that “advocates of a ‘Christian America’ tend to misunderstand or underestimate the extent to which Americans already held widely varying religious beliefs at the time of the founding” (254). Fea agrees with such a sentiment, and offers an additional conclusion that accords well with Kidd also: “If there was one universal idea that all the founders believed about the relationship between religion and the new nation, it was that religion was necessary in order to sustain an ordered and virtuous republic” (246).

Well researched, carefully argued, cogently written, these two volumes successfully transcend the tired debate between proponents of a Christian America and advocates of secular America. As John Fea and Thomas Kidd have so ably demonstrated, early American history was more complicated than that.

Paul Otto, Professor of History, George Fox University