

This Is the Book America Was Founded Upon

When asked to identify the “Founding Fathers,” Americans typically name a few prominent political leaders and military heroes—figures like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton. A more difficult question is: Who are America’s *intellectual* founding fathers? That is, whose ideas informed the American founding principles in republican self-government and liberty under law?

The standard history books report that the American founders in the last third of the 18th century drew on diverse intellectual sources, most prominently British constitutionalism, classical and civic republicanism and Enlightenment liberalism. One could fill the shelves of a substantial library with all the books written on how John Locke and Baron de Montesquieu, the authors of the influential *Two Treatises of Government* and *The Spirit of the Laws*, respectively, “founded” America.

Strangely missing from this list, however, is the Bible, the text sacred to the Christian faith and the most venerated, authoritative and accessible book in 17th and 18th century America. It is a remarkable omission, indeed, given that several of the colonies were founded as Bible commonwealths. And even as late as the founding era, the Bible continued to hold a place of reverence in American culture. Most Americans of the age were intimately familiar with the Bible not only because of its place in religious life but also because it had been critical in their general education. Many Americans of this generation learned to read with a Bible opened in front of them. The Bible, in short, shaped significant aspects of American public culture, including language, letters, arts, education and law.

Drawing attention to the Bible's vital contributions to the founding is not meant to diminish, much less dismiss, the substantial contributions of Locke, Montesquieu, and other secular theorists who influenced the founders' political pursuits. Rather, acknowledging the Bible's often ignored role in the founding enriches one's appreciation of the multiple, diverse influences that informed the ambitious enterprise of securing political independence and establishing new constitutional republics committed to political liberty and self-government constrained by the rule of law.

The founders, as I document in my new book "Reading the Bible with the Founding Fathers," lived in a biblically literate society. Their many quotations from and allusions to both familiar and obscure biblical texts confirm that they knew the Bible from cover to cover. Biblical language and themes liberally seasoned their rhetoric. The phrases and intonations of the King James Bible, especially, influenced their written and spoken words. Its ideas shaped their habits of mind.

The Bible left its mark on their political culture. Legislative debates, pamphlets and political sermons of the age are replete with quotations from and allusions to the Bible. Following an extensive survey of American political literature from 1760 to 1805, political scientist Donald S. Lutz reported that the Bible was cited more frequently than any European writer or even any European school of thought, such as Enlightenment liberalism. Approximately one-third of all citations in the literature he surveyed were to the Bible. The book of Deuteronomy alone was the most frequently cited work, followed by Montesquieu's "The Spirit of the Laws." In fact, Deuteronomy was referenced nearly twice as often as Locke's writings, and the Apostle Paul was mentioned about as frequently as Montesquieu.

Many in the founding generation regarded the Bible as indispensable to their political experiment. This should not surprise us, because 98 percent or more of Americans in the

founding era were affiliated with Protestant Christianity, which has traditionally viewed Scripture as authority in all aspects of life. Although the founders held a wide range of theological views and some even doubted the Bible's divine origins, there was broad agreement that the Bible offered valuable insights into human nature, civic virtue, social order, political authority and other concepts essential to the establishment of a new political society. The Bible, many believed, provided guidance on selecting righteous political leaders and the rights and responsibilities of citizens, including the right to resist a tyrannical ruler. Many founders thought the Bible was essential for nurturing the civic virtues that give citizens the capacity for self-government. Many also saw in the Bible political and legal models—such as republicanism, separation of powers and due process of law—that they believed enjoyed divine favor and were worthy of emulation in their polities.

Despite this evidence of the Bible's influence, both scholarly and popular works give little attention to the Bible and its impact on the founding generation. Not content to simply ignore the Bible's substantial contributions to late-18th century political culture, some historians contend that the founding era, sandwiched between two great spiritual awakenings, was an enlightened age when rationalism was in the ascendancy and the Bible was, if not rejected outright, relegated to the sidelines.

Why has so much modern scholarship missed or dismissed the Bible's role in the founding? Often the most important things in life, like the air we breathe, do not receive the attention they merit because they are so pervasive and so much a part of our very existence that they are taken for granted.

Biblical illiteracy, especially a lack of familiarity with the distinct phrases and cadences of the King James Bible, may explain the failure of some scholars to recognize biblical language in the founders' political discourse. The founders

often quoted the Bible without using quotation marks or citations, which were not necessary for a biblically literate society but the absence of which fail to alert a biblically illiterate modern audience to the Bible's invocation.

Also, scholars trained in the modern academy with its emphasis on the strictly rational and the secular may discount biblical themes because they find them less noteworthy or sophisticated than the intellectual contributions of the Enlightenment. There may even be a discomfort with or (perhaps) hostility toward explicitly religious material and themes. Some fear that the mere acknowledgement of Christianity's and the Bible's influence on the American founding will diminish the Enlightenment's influence and buttress the alleged theocratic impulses of some 21st century citizens.

Moreover, some commentators find a focus on the God of the Bible and biblical religion divisive or even offensive to 21st century secular sensibilities. In an admonition seldom mentioned in the scholarly literature, for example, George Washington warned in his "Farewell Address" of September 1796 that one who labors to subvert a public role for religion and morality cannot call oneself a patriot. Such rhetoric, unexceptional in its time, is discordant with the secular ethos of our time. Other founders held views similarly out of step with secular academic and popular sentiments of the 21st century, such as advocating state support for the Christian religion.

Does it matter whether the Bible is studied alongside other intellectual influences on the founding fathers who established an independent constitutional republic committed to liberty and representative rule by the consent of the governed? Yes, it matters if one wants to understand the broad range of ideas that shaped the founders' political thoughts, actions and deeds. An awareness of the Bible's contributions to the founding provides insight into the identity of the American people and their experiment in republican self-

government.

Indeed, the widespread biblical illiteracy of the modern age inevitably distorts the conception Americans have of themselves as a people, their history and their bold political experiment. The public's "increasing unfamiliarity with the Bible," political theorist Wilson Carey McWilliams lamented, "makes it harder and harder for Americans to understand their origins and their mores, or to put words to their experiences. ... Lacking knowledge of the Bible, Americans are likely to be literally inarticulate, unable to relate themselves to American life and culture as a whole."

This danger alone should inspire Americans to study the Bible and its role in the life of the nation. {eo}

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