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## Book Review of Faiths of the Founding Fathers

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*Faiths of the Founding Fathers.* By David L. Holmes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2006. 225 pp. np.

The Founding Fathers have enjoyed a revival of interest in recent years, due in part to the publication of a number of splendid biographies of various founders. However, a significant aspect of this interest has emerged from the increasingly contentious debates in the United States over the proper relationship of church and state. Both sides in these high-profile debates—whether at the Supreme Court or in popular culture—have mined the writings of the founding generation for support. Recent efforts to characterize the United States as a “Christian nation” have depended heavily on a particular understanding of the religious character of America’s most prominent founders. At times, the debate over the religious views of the founders has turned into a battle of “dueling soundbites,” with nuance and context overlooked.

David Holmes has provided us with a lucid and compact account of the range of religious understandings of the late eighteenth century, which he characterizes as the “*faiths*” of the Founding Fathers. After providing a survey of the primary religious groups in late colonial America, Holmes turns his attention to the religious views of several of the most prominent members of the founding generation, including Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and James Monroe. In his chapter on George Washington, whose religious views have been hotly contested in recent years, Holmes provides a particularly judicious weighing of the available evidence.

Holmes concludes that “the religious beliefs of the founders seem to have fallen into three categories: Non-Christian Deism, Christian Deism, and orthodox Christianity” (p. 134). Because of the importance of Deism to eighteenth-century religious thought, Holmes devotes a chapter to what he calls “A Layperson’s Guide to Distinguishing a Deist from an Orthodox Christian.” Holmes argues that Deism had a profound influence on many of the founders, including Washington, Franklin, Madison, Adams, and Monroe.

Holmes’s book is not an exhaustive treatment of the religious views of the founding generation. Nor is it the final word. But it does provide a basic introduction to the subject with a useful emphasis on the importance of

context and an appropriate appreciation for the difficulty of reconstructing the interior lives of those who lived more than two centuries ago.

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