How the Bible Helped Smash the Crown

The American Revolution was a rejection of earthly kings—and a turn toward an even more radical idea: that human equality rests on divine authority, not political power

A WOMAN PRAYS DURING A VIGIL FOR CHARLIE KIRK OUTSIDE THE HEADQUARTERS OF TURNING POINT USA IN PHOENIX, ARIZONA, ON SEPTEMBER 19, 2025. (JOE RAEDLE VIA GETTY IMAGES)

By Meir Soloveichik

Of all the radical ideas at the heart of the American founding, freedom of religion stands apart. Rarely in human history has a nascent nation rejected religious uniformity and bet instead on liberty, trusting that

faiths can live side by side, peacefully and equally. In doing so, America didn't banish faith, but made room for it to thrive in all its depth and diversity.

For this month's installment of our America at 250 series, a yearlong celebration of the country's big birthday, we're spotlighting faith and how it helped build our nation. You'll hear from Catholic magazine editor R. R. Reno on how his marriage to a Jewish woman drew him closer to God; from David Wolpe on two towering prophets of history; from Matthew Walther on the kaleidoscope of American religious life; and more.

Today, we kick things off with the great Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, who explains why the flourishing of biblical faith in the new country provided the basis for American equality. For, he writes, "In rejecting monarchy, Americans were not insisting that they had no king, but that their king was God." —The Editors

A rabbi and a minister march in a parade.

This is not the opening of a joke. It is, instead, the description of an event that marked the advent of a wholly new approach to the role of religion in society. A rabbi and a minister, joined in unison, comprised a sublime symbol of the role that faith would play in the nascent nation known as the United States.

On July 4, 1788, a parade was held in the city of Philadelphia in order to celebrate Pennsylvania's upcoming vote to ratify the Constitution. The outcome was anything but assured. Many patriots in America—Patrick Henry among them—had decried the proposed system, with its strong centralized government that wielded power over the states, as no different from the tyranny they had just fought against. One of the parade's attendees was a devout Christian by the name of Benjamin

Rush. Largely forgotten today, Rush was, at the time, the second-most famous Philadelphian after Benjamin Franklin and the most prominent physician in the United States.

It would be unfair to describe Rush as the Zelig or Forrest Gump of the American Revolution, but there is no denying that he had a knack for being in the right place at the right time. In 1775, he had advised an immigrant writer named Thomas Paine on a polemical pamphlet about the crisis in which America found itself—going so far as to suggest its title, *Common Sense*. He was a signer of the Declaration of Independence. His face is to be found near George Washington's at the center of John Trumbull's painting depicting the Battle of Princeton, at the turning point in the war. A devoted friend of both John Adams and Thomas Jefferson, he would help mend their friendship after their falling out over the French Revolution.

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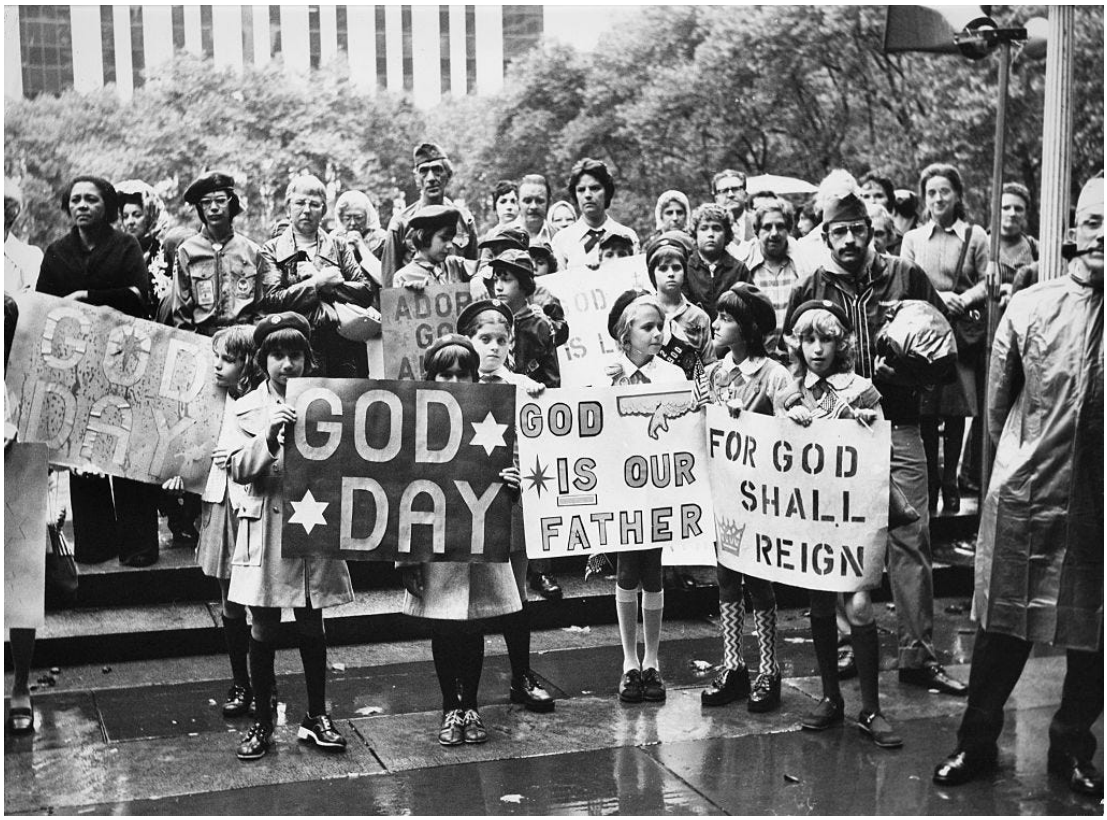
Rush was profoundly aware of the religious diversity in the fledgling country. His close acquaintances included not only the Congregationalist-turned-Unitarian Adams, and the largely deistic Jefferson, but also Jonas Phillips, a religious Jew who had served in the Pennsylvania militia during the Revolutionary War and who, with his wife, Rebecca, raised his 21 children (that is not a typo) in Philadelphia. Rush attended the wedding of Phillips's daughter Rachel and the bris of Phillips's son Aaron. His is the only eyewitness account we have of such Jewish ceremonies in America in that era.

The parade Rush witnessed in 1788 presented the diverse professions of the city—cobblers, wigmakers, sailors, etc. He was most taken by the clergy, which, as Rush reflected in a letter printed in the *Pennsylvania*

Mercury, “manifested, by their attendance, their sense of the connection between religion and good government.” But this, he added, did not mean that one particular form of faith was placed on a pedestal. Given the diversity of denominations among the 17 clergymen that participated, “pains were taken to connect Ministers of the most dissimilar religious principles together.” The parade was meant to highlight unity amidst religious difference.

This is interesting enough, but there was more: Rush approvingly noted that one of the clerical participants in the parade was not Christian at all. “The Rabbi of the Jews, locked in the arms of two ministers of the gospel, was a most delightful sight,” he exulted. “There could not have been a more happy emblem contrived, of that section of the new Constitution, which opens all its power and offices alike, not only to every sect of Christians, but to worthy men of *every* religion.” (Rush doesn’t name the rabbi, but it was most likely Jacob Raphael Cohen, who led the Mikveh Israel Synagogue in Philadelphia.)



A group of children hold placards as Christians and Jews observe the sixth annual God Day at Bryant Park in New York City on September 21, 1975. (Peter Keegan/Archive Photos via Getty Images)

Rush's description of the religious equality guaranteed by the Constitution was not a reference to the First Amendment, which had yet to be adopted. Rather, he spoke of Article VI's ban on religious tests for public office. Yet the new constitutional order did not demand a public square scrubbed of religion. On the contrary: The clergy were expected to march arm in arm, rabbi and minister, in a parade unimaginable elsewhere on Earth in 1788—or in 1888. Faith and freedom were to be civically celebrated together so that they reinforced each other. To many outside America, this may have seemed counterintuitive, as religion was associated with the power of the monarchical state. "In France," Alexis de Tocqueville would write in the 1830s, "I had seen the spirit of religion moving in the opposite direction to that of freedom. In America, I found them intimately linked together in a joint reign over the same land."

The parade described by Rush was a testament to the fact the events of 1776 were not merely political in nature. "The Revolution," John Adams wrote in 1818, "was effected before the War commenced. The Revolution was in the Minds and Hearts of the People. A Change in their Religious Sentiments of their Duties and Obligations." Adams knew a profound change that had taken place in the way Americans saw themselves, as well as their relationship with God, a change that continues to impact America. In order to see why this is so, we must look back to the years before July 4, 1776—and to the role that the Bible played in inspiring the events that changed the world.

The Hebraic Psalm That United the Congress

Only a few years before 1776, the colonists of America took it for granted that all men were *not* created equal; that there were those born to be subjects and those born to rule over them.

As the historian Eric Nelson documents in his book *The Royalist Revolution,* the original ire of the colonists over the taxes levied from across the ocean was directed entirely at Parliament. When, in 1768, Benjamin Rush visited London, he was awed by the sight of the throne of George III in the House of Lords. Here, he thought to himself, "is the golden period of the worldly man's wishes. His passions conceive, his hopes aspire, after nothing beyond this throne." His awe evaporated when he entered the House of Commons. "Here," he scornfully reflected, "the usurping commons first endeavored to rob the Crown of his supremacy over the Colonies and divide it among themselves."

The image of George III was everywhere in pre-Revolutionary America; as Gordon Wood noted in his groundbreaking *The Radicalism of the American Revolution,* the king's portrait was featured in the colonies more prominently than in England itself. As late as 1770, an enormous equestrian statue of the king was erected in New York at Bowling Green—to thank the monarch for Parliament's repeal of the Stamp Act. The royal visage was thought necessary in order to connect the colonies to their mother country across the sea. It was also assumed that only the king could serve as a symbol that would bind the colonies together—for what else could? What did the descendants of Puritans in New England, the Quakers in Pennsylvania, and the aristocratic Anglicans of Virginia have in common other than His Britannic Majesty? It was only as the revolution progressed that colonists' own experiences offered another answer.

The first Continental Congress convened in September 1774. One delegate, Thomas Cushing of Massachusetts, proposed that those attending begin with prayer. Adams reported to his wife, Abigail, that this proposal "was opposed by Mr. Jay of N. York"—that's John Jay, future first chief justice of the United States—"and Mr. Rutledge of South Carolina, because we were so divided in religious Sentiments, some Episcopalians, some Quakers, some Aanabaptists, some

Presbyterians and some Congregationalists, so that We could not join in the same Act of Worship."

Audience members raise their hands in prayer during the memorial service for Charlie Kirk in Glendale, Arizona, on September 21, 2025. (Jon Putman/Anadolu via Getty Images)

To us, the idea that Congregationalists, Episcopalians, and Presbyterians could be too divided to pray together may be amusing—given the future religious diversity of America, the theological divisions among Protestants could appear minuscule. But in Europe, people had been killing each other over theological divisions for many years, and Jay's argument against the prayer is understandable. But Samuel Adams stood up. He said that he was no bigot and "could hear a Prayer from a Gentleman of Piety and Virtue, who was at the same Time a Friend to his Country." An Anglican clergyman, Jacob Duché, was invited to lead a prayer, and he began by reading Psalm 35: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with them that strive with me: Fight against them that fight against me. . . . Say unto my soul: I am thy salvation."

John Adams wrote that evening to his wife: “I never saw a greater Effect upon an Audience. It seemed as if Heaven had ordained that Psalm to be read on that Morning. I must beg you to read that Psalm.” A passage from the Hebrew Bible, describing a divine defense from one’s enemies, so united the members of the new Congress that it seemed heaven-sent.

For the Catholic philosopher Michael Novak, this anecdote highlights the prominent role played by the stories, imagery, and ideas of Hebrew scripture in the American revolution. In contrast to Christian texts, which are devoted to describing a kingdom that is “not of this earth,” the tale of biblical Israel is all about a polity that is very earthly indeed. Thus, as Novak noted in *On Two Wings,* his account of the role of faith in the American founding, “practically all American Christians erected their main arguments about political life from materials in the Jewish Testament.” The story of the Jews offered early Americans a tale from which they could find inspiration in their own crisis.

It also offered another advantage. Focusing on Judaic texts allowed the revolutionaries to avoid exegetical issues pertaining to Christian theology. “Lest their speech be taken as partisan,” Novak added, “Christian leaders usually avoided the idioms of rival denominations—Puritan, Quaker, Congregationalist, Episcopal, Unitarian, Methodist, and Universalist. The idiom of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a religious lingua franca for the founding generation.” As a means of uniting the diverse group, Novak continues, “the language of Judaism came to be the central language of the American metaphysic—the unspoken background to a special American vision of nature, history, and the destiny of the human race.” Psalm 35 would serve as a symbol of the fact that patriots across America could indeed pray together.

The story of ancient Israel became one with which the revolutionaries would identify. Its description of 12 tribes bound by a common destiny overcoming tyranny would serve as a metaphor for the events of the

revolution, joining scattered colonists into a people. And one text above all would provide the biblical argument that would change America.

The Polemic That Changed the World

In January 1776, Thomas Paine published *Common Sense.* It's estimated to have sold between 75,000 and 100,000 copies that year, an astonishing number considering that only 2.5 million individuals lived in the 13 colonies at the time. To return to it today is to be struck by how biblical it is, drawing heavily on the Hebraic book of Samuel, wherein God takes the Israelite request for a king as an insult to him.

There is an irony. Paine privately denied the reality of revelation and scorned scripture as fantasy. (He would later voice his views on religion in *The Age of Reason*, ruining his reputation in America.) But America was a biblically literate land, and with Benjamin Rush's help, Paine wrote for his audience in *Common Sense*. The pamphlet—probably the most influential published polemic in the history of the world—changed the way in which Americans regarded their king and monarchy in general.

The essence of Paine's argument is easy to miss today. In rejecting monarchy, Americans were not insisting that they had no king, but that their king was God. "But where, says some, is the King of America?" Paine asks in *Common Sense;* "I'll tell you Friend, he reigns above, and doth not make havoc of mankind like the Royal Brute of Britain." Not all patriots approved of the pamphlet; John Adams thought its arguments overwrought and exaggerated. But Paine spoke for the many whose own sentiments were evolving. Subjects who had once revered their king were beginning to conclude that the texts of ancient Israel pointed to a new way of seeing themselves.

The tale of America is not merely that of a break with Britain; it is equally a tale of a group of colonists who came to conclude that their equality derived from the monarchy of the Almighty. Thus Benjamin Rush, who had himself stood in awe before the English throne, could

reflect in 1798 that "the history of the creation of man, and of the relation of our species to each other by birth, which is recorded in the Old Testament, is the best refutation that can be given to the divine right of kings, and the strongest argument that can be used in favor of the original and natural equality of all mankind." This sentiment would find its way into one of the most famous songs of American history, "My Country 'Tis of Thee," which was meant to be subversively sung to the tune of "God Save the King." It concludes:

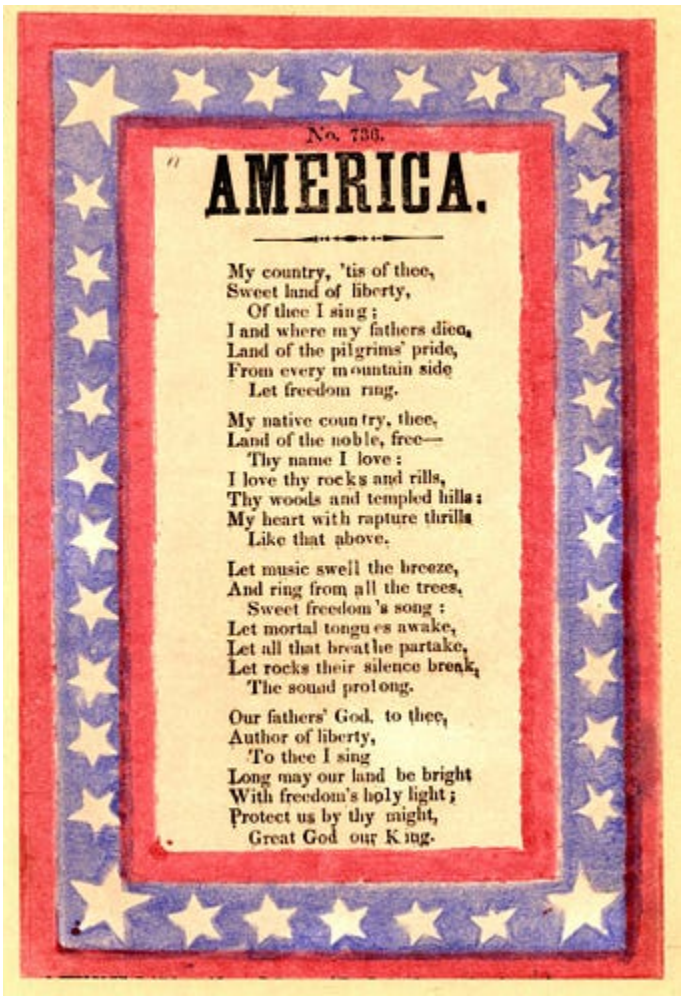
> Our fathers' God, to Thee,
> Author of liberty,
> To Thee we sing;
> Long may our land be bright
> With freedom's holy light;
> Protect us by Thy might,
> Great God, our king.

These words capture the essence of the American idea. I remember when I first understood this. It was as a child when I read the *Little House* books of Laura Ingalls Wilder. In *Little Town on the Prairie*, she describes a Fourth of July celebration she experienced as a child in De Smet, South Dakota. The Declaration of Independence is read aloud, invoking "the laws of Nature and Nature's God." Her father then leads all the assembled in singing "My Country 'Tis of Thee." The young Laura suddenly has a completely new thought:

> The Declaration and the song came together in her mind and she thought: *God is America's king.*
>
> She thought: *Americans won't obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why* (she thought), *when I am a little older, Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn't anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.*

> Her whole mind seemed to be lighted up by that thought. *This is what it means to be free. It means, you have to be good.* "Our father's God, author of liberty—" *The laws of Nature and of Nature's God endow you with a right to life and liberty. Then you have to keep the laws of God, for God's law is the only thing that gives you a right to be free.*

When Americans mark the 250th anniversary of July 4 next year, we will also, unknowingly, mark the moment when, after the approval of the Declaration, the Continental Congress created a committee of Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams to design a seal and symbol for the new nation. Their original design featured an image from Exodus: Moses and Pharaoh at the parting of the Red Sea. It was to be accompanied by a motto that would capture the revolution that had taken place in the minds of Americans, and the religious roots of that revolution: "Rebellion to Tyrants is Obedience to God."



(Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress)

The Coming of Religious Equality

Yet the religious roots of American equality did not immediately result in equality for American religions in the years following 1776. The new state Constitution of Pennsylvania banned non-Christians from serving in the legislature; other states banned Catholics and Quakers as well. Yet Americans were becoming increasingly aware of the tension between their newfound political theology of equality and this civic discrimination. The argument, as we have seen, was simply stated by Laura Ingalls Wilder: If Americans are free, and have no king, then they are guided by their consciences alone. A statute of religious freedom, composed by Jefferson, and shepherded through the Virginia legislature

by James Madison, made the case eloquently, arguing that "Almighty God hath created the mind free," and that therefore "all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness."

The discriminatory laws would soon fall by the wayside as a new Constitution banned all religious tests for federal office, a clause embodied, as Rush noted, by a rabbi and a minister walking arm in arm. The historian Michael Meyerson has insightfully argued that the years between the revolution and the creation of the Constitution marked a "second revolution" in America, in which religious equality was placed at the heart of the American creed. Today, reverent tourists visit Independence Hall and ponder the decision of the members of Congress to sign the Declaration—and therefore their own death warrants. But it is equally remarkable to ponder that when, in 1787, those assembled in the very same hall considered a new Constitution for the country, they passed the ban on religious tests with very little debate. Washington, in a famous exchange with the Jews of Newport, Rhode Island, would laud this clause as one which gives "to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance." That the fathers of the Constitution agreed almost universally on such a law when it could not have passed elsewhere on Earth is one of the great unmarked moments in the history of ideas.

READ
What the Bathroom at Balthazar Taught Me About America

As Americans gather to mark the 250th birthday of the United States, we will do so in a country that is profoundly religiously diverse, much more so than in 1776. Our politics is consumed by culture wars linked to religion—religious freedom is a subject dominating debates in the

Supreme Court. But the fact remains that shorn of biblical faith, no cogent explanation can be given for the doctrine of equality that lies at the heart of the American creed. Indeed, the other sources of antiquity to which the Founders turned for inspiration—the philosophers of Greece and the statesmen of Rome—denied human equality and held a worldview that there were those destined to rule and others born to serve. As the Yale legal scholar Stephen L. Carter reflected in *Civility: Manners, Morals, and the Etiquette of Democracy*, to this day "faith in God provides a justification for the equality that liberal philosophy assumes and cherishes but is often unable to defend."

Benjamin Rush was not the only one to provide an eyewitness account of the Philadelphia parade. The teenage Naphtali Phillips, son of Jonas Phillips, Rush's Jewish friend, was also there. According to his report, the parade that featured interfaith comity concluded with a civic celebration that included "a separate table for the Jews, who could not partake of the meals from the other tables; but they had a fill supply of soused [pickled] salmon, bread and crackers, almonds, raisins, etc." This unprecedented parade also featured kosher food—with lox, no less—a fitting testament to the way in which religion would be welcomed, in diverse form, in the new country.

Naphtali Philips gave his account in 1868, at the age of 95. He had been but a lad when he attended that parade and lived to see America tear itself apart over the issue of slavery. The Second Great Awakening had unfolded after the revolution, a revitalization of religious faith that inspired the abolitionist movement—faith bringing about a new birth of freedom. And after a great war, the promise of American liberty was constitutionally extended to the slaves whose own equality the Founders had ignored. In the 20th century, the Civil Rights Movement would also be fueled by faith, invoking not only the Declaration of Independence but the words of a spiritual: "Free at last! Free at last! / Thank God Almighty, we are free at last."

“As Americans gather to mark the 250th birthday of the United States, we will do so in a country that is profoundly religiously diverse.” (Mario Tama via Getty Images)

In a striking way, the public procession featuring a rabbi and a minister portended the story of faith in the American republic. Toward the end of his life, Jefferson suggested to an acquaintance that diverse denominations would disappear in the country he had helped create. “I trust,” he reflected in 1822, “that there is not a young man now living in the US. who will not die an Unitarian.” In this, he was entirely incorrect. Like the 1788 Philadelphia celebration, religion in America has always featured vibrancy and variety—and, as Tocqueville recognized, that very vibrancy has always been rooted in the freedom that lay at the heart of the American experiment.

The parade witnessed by a Christian doctor and Jewish boy also accurately predicted the way in which, despite debates over the relationship between church and state, celebrations of faith continue to be part of our civic life. The late Supreme Court justice Antonin Scalia recounted that on September 11, 2001, he found himself at a legal

conference in Europe. As all attendees gathered around the television to watch the president speak from the Oval Office, a European judge told Scalia how struck he was by the way in which the American head of state concluded with the prayer that God bless the United States. This, he said, would never occur in Europe.

Europeans may wonder at the way our politics is consumed by a culture war that is linked to differences regarding religion, but these debates endure in America because, unlike the largely secular continent across the ocean that was once the cradle of Christendom, faith continues to matter to so many millions of Americans. Even the much-discussed contemporary phenomenon known as the rise of the "nones"—Americans who do not belong to a faith at all—seems to have slowed. Few Americans today know the final lyrics of "My Country 'Tis of Thee," but when God is invoked in our public life, it is meant to remind us of the unique way equality emerged in America, the way religion impacted how Americans came to see themselves.

As we mark America's 250th anniversary, it is impossible to know with any certainty what the next decades will bring for our country. But looking back on the past, one prediction can be safely made. Religion in America has always defied the predictions of its demise, and on the 300th birthday of the United States, there will be citizens of this country who will rejoice in their equality—and thank the almighty monarch of America for it.