Thus wrote Benjamin Franklin in his 1782 pamphlet, "Information to Those Who Would Remove to America." At least one thing hasn't changed since Franklin penned those words: America remains a godly nation. Among advanced industrialized countries, it is easily the most religious. Some 60 percent of its citizens say religion is very important to their lives, about six times the percentage of the French. But the divine looms even larger in most Americans' hearts than those figures suggest. Some 90 percent say they believe in God--94 percent if you add those who revere a "universal spirit"--while less than 1 percent call themselves atheists or agnostics. It is very possible that an American might still live to a ripe old age without meeting an atheist or infidel.

Some say the mystery of American religiosity is contained in a paradox: America is a godly nation because it has kept church and state separate, at least in the sense set forth by the Constitution. "Congress," the First Amendment famously begins, "shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof . . . . " Perhaps the greater mystery, though, is that those two clauses did not produce conflicts during most of our history, even though religious sentiments and symbols liberally suffused the public square and much of civic life. But if most Americans have long approved of their civil religion, why have some in recent years found it so objectionable?

Much confusion and litigation have arisen from the perception that America's founders intended religion to be strictly a matter of private choice that should never impinge upon public life. That may be as much a misunderstanding of the founders' intent as the view that the founders intended to create an explicitly Christian nation. According to Purdue University historian Frank
Lambert, in his book *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America*, both extremes fail to acknowledge that America had two different sets of spiritual fathers. The "Planting Fathers," particularly the Puritans of New England, sought both to practice their own brand of Christianity and to found a Christian state. Establishing Congregationalism, they supported it with taxes and compelled their chief magistrates to govern "according to the rule of the word of God." The southern colonies, meanwhile, generally enforced Anglicanism, while the middle colonies worked out more pluralistic arrangements. But some 150 years after the Puritans signed their charters, a different group of national leaders, the Founding Fathers, hammered out a new national compact, this one guaranteeing that the state would have no voice in determining matters of conscience.

Clearly, much had happened in the years separating the Planting Fathers from the Founding Fathers. While many of the colonial elite had been touched by the skeptical scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment, even greater numbers of common folk were transformed by a powerful religious revival that swept through the colonies in the 1740s. Called the First Great Awakening, it emphasized individual religious experience and subtly challenged the authority of the established sects. By the time the Founding Fathers gathered in Philadelphia, most of them knew that the people of the new United States were too diverse to be forced into conformity with a national church.
Yet the founders never sought to drive religion from the public realm. The words they spoke, the symbols they embraced, and the rituals they established--from state-declared days of thanksgiving to prayers at the start of Congress to military chaplaincies--all made clear that even semiofficial acknowledgment of divine providence was not only acceptable but good. This public piety was distinctly nonsectarian and centered upon what might be called a benevolent theism. But as James Hutson, chief of the manuscript division of the Library of Congress, argues in his *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, whether they were old-line Calvinists or liberal deists, the Founders believed divine will legitimized their institutions and laws and made citizens more willing to respect them. Even Thomas Jefferson, who thought most Americans would become rationalist Unitarians within a generation or two, considered the acknowledgment of providential authority essential to public virtue.

Contrary to Jefferson's rationalist prediction, Americans became even more enthusiastically religious. As University of Notre Dame provost Nathan Hatch shows in *The Democratization of American Christianity*, during the 70 years after the Revolution, America became an avidly evangelical nation. Baptists, Methodists, and Disciples of Christ not only competed with the older churches but soon outpaced them. "The Congregationalists, which had twice the clergy of any other American church in 1775, could not muster one-tenth the preaching force of the Methodists in 1845," writes Hatch.

The Second Great Awakening further weakened clerical authority and blurred doctrinal lines. Populist, revivalist Christianity spread hand in hand with Jacksonian democracy, bolstering the American creed of liberty, individualism, and equality. At the same time, says Yale historian Harry Stout, "Evangelicalism became the extension of nationalism by other means." Just as western expansion acquired sanction as divinely ordained "Manifest Destiny," other national issues assumed theological dimensions. The fight over slavery pitted abolitionist Christians against pro-slavery Christians, each citing Scripture to support their positions. In his greatest speeches, Abraham Lincoln acknowledged God's providence and sought God's support of the Union.

As the 19th century closed, the Third Great Awakening got underway, this one inspiring
many of the Progressive reforms of the era. Whether fighting corporate monopolies or promoting women's suffrage, the reformers, writes Samuel Huntington in his new book, *Who Are We?*, "stressed the moral necessity of eliminating the gap between institutions and ideals and creating a just and equitable society." Later, civil rights leaders drew heavily on biblical language to attack the last institutional props of racial inequality. Yet even in the late 19th century, social and intellectual developments began to disturb the broad consensus behind America's civil religion. Waves of immigrants--many of them Jewish or Catholic--found America's civil religion too conspicuously Protestant for their own comfort. And as institutions like schools began to receive public funding, many wondered what prayers or even Bible reading was doing in the classroom.

"Unbelief." At the same time, the spread of Darwinian evolutionary principles and new "liberal" interpretations of religious texts sparked a reactive defensiveness among Protestants, with the fundamentalist movement its most militant expression, its leaders deplored a growing godlessness in the public sphere. Battle lines hardened as the 20th century progressed. To many Americans, the Cold War struggle against a militantly atheistic ideology required fortification of America's own religiosity. In the Eisenhower era, writes legal scholar Stephen Bates, "Congress opened a prayer room in the Capitol, made 'In God We Trust' the official national motto and required its inclusion on all currency, and added 'under God' to the Pledge of Allegiance."
But secularists scored victories, too. In its 1962 decision in *Engel v. Vitale*, the Supreme Court ruled that public schools could not sponsor specific prayers in the classroom. The next year, the court barred state-sponsored Bible readings in schools. And last year, the Ninth Circuit Court ruled that "under God" had to be dropped from the Pledge of Allegiance, a decision the Supreme Court overturned on a technicality last week.

The courts, however, are a clumsy instrument. Some scholars see the aggressive secularism of litigants going far beyond simple support for the First Amendment.

University of Tennessee-Chattanooga humanities Prof. Wilfred McClay, coeditor of *Religion Returns to the Public Square*, views hard-line secularists as determined to see "unbelief established as the only permissible expression by the state of any disposition toward ultimate things."

Ban all traditional expressions of ceremonial deism in the public sphere, McClay says, "and you are going to have a sizable minority of citizens who are going to feel alienated from their own country."

Perhaps even a majority. A Pew Research Center poll four years ago found that 70 percent of respondents believe it important to have a president with strong religious beliefs. Yet many Americans find that religious convictions are best kept under civil wraps. (Fifty percent say they are uncomfortable when politicians discuss how religious they are.)

Secularists often ignore the fact that civil religion has long served as a prod to civic conscience and as a check on national hubris. As McClay points out, "Expressions like 'under God' in the pledge suggest that the nation is under judgment and subject to higher moral principles. Even people deeply suspicious of civil religion ought to appreciate some sort of higher restraint."