

GOD OF LIBERTY

*A Religious History of the
American Revolution*

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INTRODUCTION

“Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God”

Religion and the American Revolution

THE EVANGELICAL CHAPLAIN David Avery of Franklin, Connecticut, saw his first action of the Revolutionary War at the Battle of Bunker Hill. That June in 1775, minutemen from New England seized Bunker Hill and Breed’s Hill in Charlestown, Massachusetts, just to the north of British-occupied Boston. Under the cover of darkness, the colonial troops hastily built fortifications atop Breed’s Hill that would allow them to bombard the British army across the river. The sight of the fort so provoked the British that they decided to assault the insolent militiamen and drive them from the Charlestown heights. The British navy barged Charlestown, setting the small town’s wooden buildings ablaze, while 2,300 British infantrymen crossed the narrow Charles River to attack the 1,500 colonists occupying the hill.

As the redcoats began to ascend Breed’s Hill, Avery stood on nearby Bunker Hill and raised his arms toward heaven, praying for God to bless the American forces. For a time, his prayers seemed to work: The first American volleys unleashed terrible destruction on the British, who retreated. They regrouped and assaulted the hill once more, only to be repulsed by a volley that to one of the surviving British soldiers sounded like an “uninterrupted peal of thunder.” As the British surged forward for a

third assault, the American commander reportedly shouted for the Americans not to “fire until you can see the whites of their eyes.” The militiamen began shooting only at close range—but they had begun to run out of ammunition. Some drew back from the charging British, while others tried firing nails or pieces of scrap metal from their guns or bludgeoning the redcoats with their muskets. But in hand-to-hand combat, the militiamen were overwhelmed by British swords and bayonets, and the Americans called for a general retreat. Avery lost a close friend, Dr. Joseph Warren, the young physician and leader of the Massachusetts Provincial Congress, shot dead during the withdrawal. The colonial troops took severe losses in the battle, but the British losses were even greater: With over 1,000 casualties, it was the bloodiest clash for the redcoats during the war.¹

Avery found the battle to be truly horrific. “To us infantile Americans, unused to the thunder and carnage of battle, the flames of Charlestown before our eyes—the incessant play of cannon from their shipping . . . all heightened the majestic terrors of the field, exhibiting a scene most awful and tremendous.” Yet Avery came to see the British army’s costly victory at Bunker Hill as a sign of divine favor for the Patriots. God, Avery averred, “was our Rock and fortress: he covered our heads with an helmet of salvation.” For this evangelical chaplain, it was God who had broken up the formidable British army, who had covered the Americans’ retreat, and who had turned what should have been a rout of the Patriots into a brave defense by the Americans. Through counseling, preaching, and praying, Avery helped troops understand that God remained with them, even in defeat.²

As a young man, Avery had experienced salvation under the ministry of the celebrated evangelical preacher George Whitefield; he had gone on to be tutored by the pastor and founder of Dartmouth College, Eleazar Wheelock, and had graduated from Yale and served for a time as a missionary to the Oneida Indians. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, he had himself become a luminary among evangelicals, preaching in the emotional style of Whitefield while embracing the Calvinist theology of Jonathan Edwards, the brilliant pastor and theologian of Northampton, Massachusetts.³

“REBELLION TO TYRANTS IS OBEDIENCE TO GOD”

The news of the opening of the war at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts, in April 1775 compelled Avery to leave his congregation in Vermont to serve the Patriot cause. Fellow evangelical chaplain Thomas Allen had exhorted him to “appear valiantly on God’s side and your country’s side, against sin and against American foes. Oh pity the souls of your fellow soldiers, many of whom no doubt remain under the dominion of spiritual death.”⁴ In the army Avery spent most of his days praying with sick and dying soldiers, who were facing the threat of mortal disease more often than enemy fire. He occasionally served on reconnaissance and sentry duty, too. He was one of more than a hundred chaplains in the Continental Army, where faith played a vital role.

After the battle of Bunker Hill, Avery fled with General George Washington through New York and New Jersey during the bleak fall of 1776. Washington had evacuated New York City, just barely escaping capture by the British that August. Following defeats at White Plains and Fort Mifflin in New York, Washington’s army retreated into New Jersey and Pennsylvania. It was the darkest time of the war, and many began to wonder whether Washington had what it took to lead the Americans to victory. And some Americans might have wondered whether God did indeed see the justice of their cause.

On Christmas night of 1776, Avery crossed the Delaware River with Washington and witnessed the surprise attack on the Hessians—mercenaries hired by the British army—at Trenton, New Jersey. The unexpected victory was Washington’s great moment of redemption. Although Americans would later remember the terrible weather on the night of the crossing before the attack, Avery and other American soldiers struggled much more with the conditions of the return trip back across the Delaware on December 26. The second crossing was so rough Avery feared he might die. “We were greatly distressed with a very cold storm of rain, hail, and snow, which blew with great violence. . . . I was extremely chilled, and came near perishing before I could get to a fire.” Avery also saw Washington’s critical victory at Trenton as orchestrated by God. Adverse weather and fierce British troops could not ultimately stop what Avery saw as a holy struggle for freedom.⁵

Avery was present, too, when British general John Burgoyne surrendered his great army to the Americans at Saratoga, New York, in October

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1777. Burgoyne had hoped to invade upstate New York and cut New England off from the rest of the colonies—a move that Avery and others feared would allow the British to unleash French Catholic and Native American forces from the north to overrun the colonists. The French Catholics of Canada remained an ominous presence to many Protestant Americans throughout the war, even though in 1778 France would ally with the Americans and enter the war against Britain. Burgoyne’s humiliating defeat led Avery to call for “the highest thanks of all Americans to the God of armies.”⁶ Such victories buttressed the beliefs held by Avery and legions of Americans of all denominations that the Revolutionary War was not simply about unfair taxes and colonial politics. The conflict summoned Americans to support God’s sacred cause of liberty.

It was not only the most traditional, evangelical believers who found religious meaning in the American Revolution and in the founding of the American nation. Nor would their faith in the spiritual significance of the nascent country abate when the war was over.

After the final victory at Yorktown, after the framing of the U.S. Constitution, and after the presidency of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, in America’s third nationwide election, would defeat the sitting president, John Adams, in what Jefferson called the “Revolution of 1800.” Jefferson’s election was the final event of the revolutionary era, because it represented the Constitution’s first peaceful transfer of presidential power from one party to another.

Nine months after the new president’s inauguration, on New Year’s Day, 1802, the Baptist evangelist John Leland delivered a prodigious gift to Jefferson: a 1,235-pound block of cheese. What newspapers rightfully declared to be a “mammoth” cheese came from the preacher’s own farming community in Cheshire, Massachusetts, which seems to have voted unanimously for the deist Jefferson in the 1800 presidential election. The cheese’s red crust was adorned with the motto “Rebellion to tyrants is obedience to God.”⁷

Two days after the presentation of the cheese, on Sunday, January 3, Leland delivered an effusive sermon before the president and a joint session of Congress. Not all in attendance were impressed with the clergyman. A Fed-

eralist congressman hostile both to Jefferson and to Leland’s evangelicals, writing in his journal, called Leland a “cheesemonger” and a “poor, ignorant, illiterate, clownish preacher.” Leland spoke on the text “Behold a greater [one] than Solomon is here,” a not-too-subtle glorification of his beloved president. The embarrassed Federalist congressman groaned that “such a farrago, bawled with stunning voice, horrid tone, frightful grimaces, and extravagant gestures . . . was never heard by any decent auditory before.”⁸

To say that Jefferson and Leland made religious odd fellows is an understatement. Leland had devoted his life to saving souls and would estimate at the end of his career that he had preached about 8,000 sermons. An evangelical, Leland simply confessed, “My only hope of acceptance with God is in the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ.” Jefferson, on the other hand, did not believe that the blood of Jesus would save him or anyone else, although he attended church regularly as president. He always professed to be “sincerely attached” to the teachings of Jesus, but he did not believe that Jesus ever claimed to be the Son of God. He similarly thought the doctrine of the Trinity was nonsense, the “mere Abracadabra of . . . the priests of Jesus.” What, then, led Leland to admire Jefferson so much that he would think to give him that big cheese?⁹

The answer to this question goes a long way toward explaining how religion, both during the Revolution and afterward, provided essential moral and political principles to the revolutionaries and forged the new American nation. Although Jefferson and Leland could not have been more opposed in their personal religious views, they shared the view that the state should assure religious liberty for all its citizens. Indeed, the Baptists of New England saw Jefferson as something of a political savior. Religious dissenters like the Baptists had long suffered persecution in Congregationalist New England, even after they and their fellow New Englanders had fought for liberty in the Revolution. Jefferson had championed religious freedom in Virginia, where Leland, as a traveling preacher, had come to know and love the future president. Jefferson the skeptical deist and Leland the fervent evangelical both believed that government should afford liberty of conscience to its citizens and should not privilege one Christian denomination over another. Their shared beliefs about the unfettered place of religion in public life made fast friends of

men from theologically opposite religious traditions. To modern American eyes, this public friendship seems a most improbable alliance.

Not all conservative Christians liked Jefferson, to be sure. Many hated him because they saw him as an infidel. One even called him a “howling atheist.”¹⁰ But these critics did not represent America’s emerging model of church-state relations. Jefferson and Leland did.

The link between Jefferson and Leland indicates that at the time of the founding of the United States, deists and evangelicals (and the range of believers in between) united around principles of religious freedom that were key to the success of the Revolution and that aided in the institution of a nation. The alliance of evangelicals and deists was fragile and hardly unanimous, but it proved strong enough to allow Americans to “begin the world over again,” as Tom Paine put it.¹¹

Only public religious beliefs—that is, religious beliefs that had public, political implications—united revolutionaries, because the personal faiths of the colonists were too diverse to unify them. In 1776 America was already a nation of many religious persuasions, and just like today, differing personal beliefs divided people. In the public realm, however, five religious ideas connected far-flung and widely varied Americans. The first idea is represented in the alliance of Leland and Jefferson: the disestablishment of state churches. All across America during the Revolution, it would be evangelicals who led the charge against state-supported religious establishments, but they often gained critical assistance from liberal Christians or deists like Jefferson who shared their goals. From the Baptists of New England to the Presbyterians of South Carolina, dissenters against the state-sponsored churches sought to prevent governments from preferring or officially establishing any Christian denomination and from taking notice of religion in law.

Jefferson was also an architect of the second major point of agreement between deists and evangelicals: the idea of a creator God as the guarantor of fundamental human rights. In European traditions, kings and their defenders had often used Christian doctrine to uphold the political hierarchy. But in America, revolutionaries began to appropriate the idea of common creation as the primary basis for the political liberties of all humanity. Of course, the most famous articulation of this idea came in Jefferson’s Declaration of Independence, which proclaimed that “all men are

created equal” and that “they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights.”¹² This principle of rights by creation was critical to the Patriots’ efforts to liberate themselves from the British government.

The doctrine of the common creation of all people would also prove to be one of the most cogent arguments against slavery. At the time of the Revolution, and for tragic decades thereafter, many American leaders tried to restrict the concept of God-given equality to white men. However, from 1776 onward, some Americans would take Jefferson’s language of equal rights and use it for more politically challenging ends than the founders intended. If, as the Bible taught, all humans descended from a single, God-initiated origin, then what principle could justify racial slavery? Sadly, such logic remained a minority position among white American Christians, especially in the South, through the Civil War. Nevertheless, the doctrine of rights guaranteed by creation, widely shared among deists and evangelicals, would set American slavery on a path to extinction.

Beyond the principles of disestablishment and rights by creation propounded by both deists and evangelicals, a wide spectrum of Americans in the revolutionary era also believed in a third precept: the threat to the polity posed by human sinfulness. Because of their doubts about the goodness of human nature, they saw centralized government power as dangerous. This conviction heavily influenced both the decision to revolt against the British state and the nature of a new American government. Although most of the founders did not share the Calvinist conviction that humans were entirely depraved creatures, most revolutionary Americans did believe that the best kind of government divided the powers of government so that no one state entity possessed too much power. Older European political theory held that God vouchsafed political sovereignty in a monarch, a notion that Patriots rejected. Americans of this era shunned any central consolidation of power because, as James Madison put it in *Federalist* No. 51, men were not angels.

The belief in human sinfulness was a staple of both Calvinism and classical republican ideology—a political tradition that was identified with the republics of ancient Greece and Rome and that emphasized the importance of checks and balances in political power and the need for a virtuous people to preserve liberty. Most historians see the founders’

belief in classical republicanism as a primary driver of the Revolution. Although republican ideology emphasized the virtuousness of landed, independent men, it also highlighted the ever-present danger of corruption among people because of their craving for domination over others.

The confluence of republican and Calvinist doubts about human nature took full force in the framing of the Constitution. Madison, having attended Calvinist-leaning Princeton, knew well the doctrines of original sin and human depravity. Although he believed that humans had a natural capacity for good, he nevertheless came to the Constitutional Convention in 1787 with a plan of government that would account for human sinfulness while also creating a government that could act effectively against threats to the national interest.

A fourth and related moral principle of many and various revolutionary Americans held that a republic needed to be sustained by virtue. Americans were convinced that political integrity had crumbled in England in the 1760s and 1770s, which led the British to assault the colonists' liberties. In a republican system, if sovereignty was given over to "the people," then those people must be willing to act benevolently, always keeping in mind the public good. Centralized government power might prevent people from running wild, but such political authority risked becoming tyrannical. If the people of the Republic acted selfishly, then anarchy would ensue, opening the door for the rise of an autocrat who would deprive people of their liberty.

During the Revolution, a new blend of Christian and republican ideology led religious traditionalists to embrace wholesale the concept of republican virtue. Conservative Protestants had traditionally been uneasy with the ideal of republican virtue, because its defenders often held a high view of the human potential for goodness independent of the practice of Christianity. But by the 1770s, even Calvinists and other conservative believers agreed with Samuel Adams when he declared that if they remained virtuous, Americans could create a "Christian Sparta," a unique amalgamation of the Christian and classical republican traditions.¹³

The fifth and final salient point of agreement between deists and evangelicals in the Revolution was the belief that God—or Providence, as deists and others might prefer to deem it—moved in and through nations. This

long-held view had flourished in Britain during its seventeenth- and eighteenth-century conflicts with Europe’s Catholic powers, especially France. As recently as the end of the Seven Years’ War with France in 1763, most British American colonists believed that God had shown particular favor to the British Empire, of which they were then still a vital part, and many of them considered the Catholic French to be aligned with Antichrist.

With the onset of the revolutionary crisis, a major conceptual shift convinced Americans across the theological spectrum that God was raising up America for some special purpose. Britain, they believed, had abandoned its providential role, descending into corruption and evil. This change of heart hearkened back to the earlier Puritan notion that America could be what John Winthrop called a “city on a hill,” a witness of virtue and Christian probity to the rest of the world.

Starting with the war’s opening shots at Lexington and Concord in 1775, Americans like Avery infused the unfolding Revolution with prophetic and providential significance. Baptist leaders Isaac Backus and James Manning believed that the Revolution was an “important step towards bringing in the glory of the latter day” that would inaugurate the Kingdom of God on earth. Although the Episcopalian Washington would not go as far as Backus and Manning, he nevertheless insisted that all Americans should see the hand of God in the war: “The great author of the universe,” as he put it, had intervened to ensure America’s victory. There exists quite a difference in faith and emphasis between associating the war with general Providence and seeing it as the fulfillment of Christian prophecy, but such assertions reflected the new civil spirituality developing in America. During and after the Revolution, many people conflated America’s political affairs with divine purposes, which lent an aura of redemptiveness to the war and to the agenda of a fledgling nation.

This civil spirituality served as a transcendent framework in which to define, justify, and fight a war and establish the new American nation. It united the continuum of American believers around the proposition that “the cause of America” had become “the cause of Christ”—or at least of Providence. Civil spirituality could also mask morally complicated or questionable matters with the veil of divine approval. Americans did, of course, define civil spirituality in very different ways, which would lead to an

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enduring conflict about the place, role, and definition of God in the nation's identity and affairs. Some founders envisioned America as a specifically Christian nation, while others embraced a more general American religiosity. Even in the early years of the Republic, these differing specifics would threaten to divide Americans irreparably, such as during the ratification of the Constitution and the presidential election of 1800.¹⁴

Yet the five religious principles on which the revolutionaries agreed were not mere slogans. They provided inspiration to both prominent political leaders like Jefferson and preachers like Avery. They vitally bound together Americans of widely differing religious opinions. If not for their common view of the relation of church and state, Leland and Jefferson might have despised one another. But their union, and the joining of countless other Americans of contradictory private beliefs, forged an unusually free nation in which the exercise of religion could flourish. Common public religious values also gave ballast to a new country that badly needed stability.

In our own time, more than two centuries after the revolutionary era and even in the midst of today's intense conflict over the definitions of morality and values, propositions based on faith actually undergird many of America's greatest political tenets. Many Americans now see religion as something that only divides us and that perhaps should be excluded from public conversation. Others call for a return to the sectarian Christian nation that supposedly existed at America's founding, a time when they believe most leaders were devout, evangelical Christians. But a closer examination shows that at the nation's founding, American religion was both diverse and thriving. In its nascent and most vulnerable moments, from the conflicts on Avery's Massachusetts battlefields to the framing of the new government that Jefferson would later lead, public spirituality united revolutionary America. The public spirituality shared by the revolutionary era's evangelicals, mainstream Christians, liberal rationalists, and deists established many of America's most cherished freedoms. *God of Liberty* will explore those principles of public spirituality and their essential connection to the success of American civil society.

CHAPTER 2

“The Sacred Property of Every Man”

Radical Christians and the Struggle for Religious Liberty in America

JOHN WALLER, known to friends as “Swearing Jack,” was a typical Virginia gentleman—brawling and vulgar—until he encountered the Baptists. At first Waller despised the radical evangelical sect because it stood against the profanity and violence that characterized Virginia’s elite society. As a lawyer, Waller had actually participated in the prosecution of one of these annoying preachers, Lewis Craig. But when he encountered the evangelical itinerant in court, something about Craig caught Waller off guard. The minister possessed a quiet strength and fortitude that Waller had never beheld. His curiosity stoked, Swearing Jack began attending the Baptists’ meetings, and after seven or eight months he became convinced that God loved him and would save him from an eternity in hell. Accepting Christ’s offer of forgiveness, he was publicly baptized by immersion in water, forswearing the Anglicanism of his birth for a faith that cast him out of the colonial gentry.

After paying off his gambling debts, Waller began preaching. But in Virginia, preaching was illegal without a state license. The onetime gentleman lawyer was arrested for the first time in 1768 for disturbing the peace, thanks to his habit of confronting people with passages from the

Bible. Now known as a troublemaker by the authorities he had once represented, Waller finally incurred the full wrath of Virginia's establishment in 1771, when he was preaching at an outdoor meeting in Caroline County. The sheriff confronted Waller in the company of the local Anglican minister, who reportedly jammed the end of a horsewhip in Waller's mouth, after which the sheriff's posse hauled Waller out of the meeting and brutally whipped him. They left him covered with blood, but Waller cleaned himself off, returned to the stage, and continued preaching. He counted himself blessed to suffer for the cause of Christ, and Christian liberty, in an unfree place like colonial Virginia.

James Madison, a bookish and idealistic twenty-two-year-old graduate of the College of New Jersey in Princeton, watched and worried as the persecution of Baptists like Waller unfolded in Virginia. He wrote to a friend in Pennsylvania in 1774 asking him to pray that liberty of religious conscience would be given to all citizens of the colonies. Madison had grown up in a traditional Anglican family, and in the early 1770s he seemed still to accept and practice the faith of his birth. He did not, however, approve of the Anglican church's treatment of evangelicals like Waller, which he saw as a "diabolical, hell-conceived principle of persecution."¹

Madison embraced notions about church-state relations that had emerged from the Enlightenment, with its emphasis on toleration and pluralism, but his theories about religious freedom were put to a practical test as he monitored the persecution of Virginia's evangelicals. On the issues of church and state, Madison and many other founders of the American Republic were profoundly influenced by the seventeenth-century English philosopher John Locke, who argued that civil authorities should never try to coerce people into holding uniform religious opinions and should only regulate religious practices in the interest of the state's well-being. Madison believed that Virginia's civil authorities had trespassed from their proper jurisdiction by policing the private beliefs of the evangelicals. He reported in disgust to his Pennsylvania friend that five or six Baptist pastors remained in local jails, simply for unlicensed preaching of essentially orthodox Christianity. Madison wrote that wild stories promulgating the "monstrous effects" of evangelical dissent were derailing efforts to promote religious freedom. The colonial Virginia government

supported the clerics and parishes of the Anglican Church with tax funds and legal protection, and the established church's defenders did not look kindly on the evangelical interlopers. Madison lamented that many of the legislators were so devoted to the Anglican establishment that they would not “hear of the toleration of dissentients.”²

James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were the best-known advocates for religious freedom in the revolutionary period, but their views on religious freedom were formed well before the conflict with Britain, when they were young men reacting to the persecution of the Baptists. Enlightenment writers such as Locke played a major role in framing the ideal of religious liberty for these famous founders, but it was mainly the evangelical dissenters from the established churches who fought on the front lines of the struggle for freedom to worship God in their own way. They were the ones who suffered humiliation, fines, and imprisonment, and their tribulations helped Jefferson and Madison solidify their convictions against religious oppression.

The revolutionary era, then, saw an unlikely alliance of evangelicals, Enlightenment liberals, and deists working together to win religious freedom. In this coalition, Jefferson and Madison were the best political advocates, but to give weight to their cause they relied on the masses of evangelical believers in Virginia. As the revolutionary crisis began to unfold, Madison, Jefferson, and the evangelicals all speculated that it might represent their opportunity to establish unequivocal religious freedom in Virginia. Madison anticipated harsh opposition from the forces of the established state church. “The clergy are a numerous and powerful body, and have great influence at home [in England] by reason of their connection with and dependence on the bishops and crown,” he wrote, “and will naturally employ all their art and interest to depress their rising adversaries; for such they must consider dissenters who rob them of the good will of the people and may in time endanger their livings and security.”³ The leaders of the state church would not give up their long-held privileges easily.

In the medieval period, Europeans had simply assumed that a union between church and state, and the persecution of those who challenged it, was a natural, even God-sanctioned state of affairs. The law changed somewhat

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in 1689, when Britain adopted the celebrated Act of Toleration, a law that should have freed dissenters from state persecution, allowing them to be “tolerated,” if not completely free. The law offered them only second-class status in English society and politics. Dissenters in the colonies also remained under a variety of legal restrictions; they also often had to pay taxes to support the established church, even though they did not attend it. Now, in the years leading up to the American Revolution, Enlightenment liberals and dissenters were clamoring for full religious liberty—which meant the elimination of official state churches, religious taxes, and religious tests for service in public office. But the dissenting evangelicals, and most of their liberal allies, hardly imagined that separation of church and state meant that religion should be only private, personal, and apolitical. That concept would only appear more recently, in the twentieth century.

Protestants in colonial America normally did not believe in religious liberty. They believed that the state should support a particular Christian denomination—either Anglican or Congregationalist—and should ban non-Christians and heretics from holding public office. Some colonies, like Pennsylvania, did provide religious freedom in a sense that we would recognize today, as Quaker leader William Penn refused to make Quakerism the official church of the colony and freely allowed all kinds of Christians, as well as Jews, to settle in the colony. Maryland, too, practiced an early kind of religious liberty. Its founder, the Catholic Lord Baltimore, mandated that the proprietary colony offer religious liberty to Protestants, in order not to offend the prevailing English sentiment of anti-Catholicism. But America’s original founders did not typically come to the continent’s shores to establish religious liberty in the modern sense. Given their background of persecution in England, one might imagine that the Puritans of New England would look more favorably on religious freedom, but in Massachusetts the Puritans’ idea of religious liberty extended only to the freedom given non-Puritans to leave the colony. All who stayed were expected to attend church and conform to Puritan standards of public morality.

Traditionally, European Christians believed that nations needed to honor institutional Christianity by law, or else risk the health of society and invite the judgment of God. Most European immigrants to America

believed that the Bible clearly outlined not only the essentials of Christianity, but which denomination was most faithful to the biblical model—usually the one to which those particular immigrants adhered. Thus, Massachusetts and Connecticut established the Congregationalist (Puritan) Church by law, whereas many of the mid-Atlantic and southern colonies made the Anglican Church their official denomination.

With the institutionalization of a particular denomination, many of the colonies' legislatures banned religious outsiders. Early Virginians, for instance, outlawed Quakers, who were perceived as dangerous, heretical visionaries by many English Protestants. Virginia also barred Catholics from holding office and forbade “popish priests” from entering the colony. As a result, Maryland became a land of exile for a variety of Christian groups, many of whom had left Virginia because of the colony's attempts to enforce conformity to the Church of England. No one outpaced the Puritan colonies in trying to maintain a religiously orthodox population. Anglicans, Baptists, Quakers, and Catholics—all were unwelcome in seventeenth-century Massachusetts or Connecticut. Neighboring Rhode Island became a stew of sectarianism, full of outcasts and refugees fleeing Puritan justice, and it was so notorious for its dissension that for the Puritans the term “Rhode Islandism” became synonymous with religious disorder.⁴

The colonies' attempts to maintain religious conformity did not wholly succeed, even among the Puritans. Some critics, such as Anne Hutchinson, rose from the Puritans' own ranks. Hutchinson, a charming English woman who worked as a midwife, pushed her husband William to move the family to Massachusetts in 1634, following their beloved pastor, John Cotton, who had left their native Lincolnshire for Boston. The Hutchinsons anticipated that Puritan Massachusetts would be a welcoming refuge for them, and Anne, talented and devout, began hosting spiritual weekday meetings at the Hutchinsons' home in the spring of 1635. The meetings began as opportunities for Anne to reprise Cotton's sermons for women unable to attend on Sundays, but they quickly evolved into something more. Men began attending too, and some who had attended Sunday also joined Hutchinson's weekday meetings. Attendees asked Anne to clarify difficult points of theology and to comment on the sermons of both Cotton and his copastor John Wilson.

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Anne Hutchinson deeply valued Cotton's strong emphasis on salvation by God's grace alone, even as she worried about Wilson's relentless demands for Christians to practice good works. Wilson would have readily conceded that salvation came by grace alone, but he believed that grace did not negate the requirement that Christians perform godly deeds. Soon Hutchinson began chastising Wilson and other Boston ministers for implying that godly deeds somehow contributed to one's salvation. Hutchinson, like many radical Puritans, believed that conversion occurred in a sudden, unpredictable encounter with the Holy Spirit. Her downplaying of external morality earned her the epithet of "antinomian" ("against God's law") from contemptuous Puritan authorities. Put on trial before the General Court of Massachusetts, she indiscreetly testified that she had received her views by the immediate revelation of the Spirit. To her judges, such revelation sounded like the stuff of Quakerism, and she was banished in 1637 to the outer darkness of Rhode Island.

After Hutchinson's husband died in 1642, she and her children made their way south to the Dutch colony of New Netherlands. While she was living on Long Island, her family fell under attack from Native Americans, who killed her and five of her children. She may have been burned alive. Her Puritan adversaries took the circumstances of her death as a vindication of their cause. One of her most bitter antagonists, Thomas Weld, wrote that her death was a

most heavy stroke upon herself and hers. . . . Some write that the Indians did burn her to death with fire, her house and all the rest named that belonged to her. . . . I never heard that the Indians in those parts did ever before this, commit the like outrage upon any one family, or families; and therefore God's hand is the more apparently seen herein, to pick out this woeful woman, to make her, and those belonging to her, an unheard of heavy example of their cruelty above others. Thus the Lord heard our groans to Heaven, and freed us from this great and sore affliction.⁵

To Weld, Hutchinson's dissenting ways had finally incurred the wrath of God.

Like Hutchinson, the celebrated dissenter Roger Williams emerged from the Puritan community. He came to Massachusetts as a Puritan pastor, but the mercurial Williams soon began to criticize the Puritans for not formally separating from the Church of England and for compelling all residents to attend Congregationalist churches. Banished from Massachusetts, Williams founded Providence, Rhode Island, in 1636; there he crafted that colony’s famously expansive policy on religious freedom. In Rhode Island, all denominations, and even non-Christians, could practice their faith freely. Williams himself soon became a Baptist, influenced by the testimony of English Baptists in favor of the separation of church and state. Although Williams, seemingly incapable of maintaining a denominational identity, soon gave up on organized religion altogether, he set the example of Baptist dissent against the colonial establishments of religion.

Williams established himself as a pioneering advocate for the separation of church and state because he feared that the state’s meddling would corrupt the church. More than a century and a half before Jefferson penned the phrase, Williams spoke of a wall separating the church from the world. Whereas many Puritans envisioned their colony as a nascent Christian nation (or commonwealth) similar to Israel of the Old Testament, Williams argued that the coming of Christ had rendered all nations “merely civil” in nature, not spiritual. Thus, according to Williams, God instituted civil governments to protect people’s lives and liberty, but not to police the affairs of the soul. In his vision of church and state, Williams made a strong distinction between converted and unconverted people: The two groups shared common interests in civil society, but a pure church could not allow any unregenerate persons into its membership or expect civil rulers to shepherd the church. Williams viewed the very existence of state churches as signs of the wrath of God against disobedient Christians.⁶

The Puritans disagreed with every element of Williams’s theology of the public role of religion. To Williams, the church was so sacred that state support would soil it. To the Puritans, religion was so important that it demanded state support. They did not doubt that God’s expectations of righteousness extended beyond the realm of individuals and families and

into the sphere of societies. Godly governments would publicly promote truth and purity. The Puritan colonies, accordingly, sought to prevent the incursions of religious outsiders, sometimes using the most severe tactics to do so. Between 1659 and 1661, for instance, the Massachusetts Bay Colony's authorities hanged four Quakers whom they had earlier banished and who had ventured back into the colony's borders. The colonies typically only exiled dissenters, however; death sentences were infrequent and came after failed attempts to exile the unwanted evangelists and make them stay away.

By any estimation, most of the early colonies did not embrace religious freedom. In the late seventeenth century, however, established churches in both Britain and America faced growing pressure to tolerate other Christians. In 1660, Charles II assumed the vacant English throne, his father Charles I having been deposed and executed by Puritan revolutionaries in the 1640s. Charles II was not sympathetic to Puritans, including those in New England, and in the 1680s he tried to consolidate all New England under one royal authority. James II succeeded his brother Charles II in 1685 and proved even more hostile toward the Puritan colonies. The Glorious Revolution of 1688–1689, in which James II was ousted in favor of William and Mary, relieved much of the royal threat against the Puritan colonies—but it also signaled a major step toward liberty for Christian minorities. Although the 1689 English Act of Toleration mandated the right of private religious conscience for Protestant dissenters, the status of official church-state relations under the Toleration Act remained uncertain. In Massachusetts, the government was forced by a new charter of 1692 to tolerate the presence of all Protestants, including Anglicans, Quakers, and Baptists. With this change, the age of exclusionary Puritanism had come to an end.

Nevertheless, Massachusetts maintained a state-supported Congregationalist establishment for another 140 years. After 1692, dissenters were free to believe what they wanted, but Massachusetts and most other colonial governments still insisted they support an official church through taxes paid by all citizens, regardless of their denomination. Church establishments, whether Congregationalist or Anglican, persisted in most of the colonies after the Glorious Revolution, although the tax burden of

supporting those establishments could be fairly light in colonies like New York and South Carolina.

The Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century fundamentally challenged the concept of state-supported churches and ministers, with the revivalist revolt bringing into question the spiritual legitimacy of those churches and their pastors. To be sure, some moderate evangelicals had no intention of subverting the established order, for they themselves were supported by it. Some radicals, however, came to believe that essential to Christian liberty was the freedom to preach openly in any parish and to be able to financially support a church and pastor of one's choice, instead of being forced to pay a state-sanctioned minister's salary and fund his church. In New England, many of these radicals became "Separates" and started their own churches, which endorsed and promoted the revivals. Under the terms of the state establishments of religion, these churches were illegal: No one could found a church without state approval. The major season of imprisonments and fines against Separate churches in New England would not last beyond the late 1740s, but the issue of unfair taxation would remain the primary grievance of the dissident evangelicals.

The radical Separates also agitated for the right of laypeople to preach. College-educated men had traditionally monopolized the Protestant ministry, but the revivalist surge of the 1740s brought their dominance under fire. If the most important spiritual credential was conversion, the radicals reasoned, then why could a Spirit-filled layperson not preach? He (or she) might even preach better than an educated, ordained minister, especially if that minister had not personally experienced the new birth they believed salvation required.

One of the earliest instances of separation in Connecticut demonstrated the radical evangelists' agenda. In Canterbury, Connecticut, in 1741, at the height of the Great Awakening, the Congregationalist church dismissed its pastor, leaving the pulpit open for both radical itinerants and Spirit-filled laymen to do their work. By the next year, the Canterbury church was burning with revivalist fire. A critical observer scoffed that the church was "in worse confusion than ever" and that "many were exhorting and making a great hubbub."⁷

Leading the Canterbury movement were the brothers Elisha and Solomon Paine, who resisted the state church authorities at every turn. Although they had both attained prominent positions in law and politics, they lacked the education usually possessed by clerics; nevertheless, they claimed the right to preach. Angry Massachusetts authorities threw Elisha in jail in 1743 for violating anti-itinerancy laws there; the evangelist refused to pay bail because he believed he had done nothing wrong. Hardly chastened by his imprisonment, he continued to preach throughout New England upon his release.

Back in Canterbury, the local Windham Ministerial Association forced on the church a new antirevivalist pastor, James Cogswell. Elisha Paine ended up in jail again when he wrote a letter publicly rebuking the local ministers for their choice. Many in the local association were moderate evangelicals, but they could not countenance the disorderly behavior of laypeople like the Paines. Pastor Cogswell complained that Elisha had cornered him after service one Sunday and told him that he would rather be physically tortured than sit through Cogswell's sermons. Elisha was not just complaining about the pastor's preaching style; in his estimation, Cogswell taught that people could be saved through good works, neglecting the role of the Holy Spirit in conversion. In sum, Cogswell "talked like the Papists," Elisha declared. The crisis between the Paines and the Windham Association came to a head in 1745 when fifty-seven of the Paines' supporters withdrew from the established church and signed a new church covenant, thus opening an unauthorized congregation.⁸

In the face of fierce opposition in towns like Canterbury and colonies such as Connecticut and Massachusetts, the Separates continued building the American case for religious liberty. Solomon Paine, the pastor of Canterbury's new Separate church, became one of the key advocates for the rights of religious dissenters in New England, leading more than three hundred Separates in presenting a petition for religious liberty to the Connecticut legislature in 1748. Anticipating Jefferson's phrase in the Declaration of Independence, they called freedom of conscience in matters of religion an "unalienable right" given by God, and they asked the Connecticut legislature to enact "universal liberty" and to stop persecut-

ing the evangelical dissenters. The legislators refused them. Nevertheless, Solomon Paine and the Separates had put the legislature on notice that it could not fairly claim to defend the colonists’ freedoms as long as it did not respect the Separates’ liberty of worship.⁹

Evangelical Baptists drew the most ire from colonial religious authorities. These radicals saw baptism for adult converts as the biblical solution to preserving the pure church they sought. Infant baptism, the practice of the Congregationalist and Anglican established churches, brought many people into the church as children who never experienced the life-transforming event of conversion—experiencing God’s grace personally—as adults. In some Congregationalist churches, these baptized but unconverted adults were accepted as “halfway” members who had the right to baptize their children but not take the Lord’s Supper (communion). Other churches allowed unconverted people of good morals all the privileges of normal church members. Baptists came to believe that membership in the church required clear evidence of conversion, or being born again, which would be recognized by public baptism, often in a local pond or river. Although no one could ever hope to have a church made up only of the truly saved (no one but God knew a person’s heart and whether he or she had truly accepted Christ as savior), Baptists anticipated that making membership conditional on conversion and adult baptism would maintain as pure a church as humanly possible.

Baptist pastor Isaac Backus became one of the eighteenth century’s greatest champions of religious liberty. His spiritual development illustrates the trajectory followed by many from Congregationalist to Baptist. Backus, a farmer from Norwich, Connecticut, had experienced the new birth during the Great Awakening, partly through the influence of the radical itinerant James Davenport. Norwich’s pastor, Benjamin Lord, supported the Great Awakening but worried about the role of lay preachers who ranted about the power of the Holy Spirit. In 1744, as the fervor of the revivals began to subside, Norwich’s congregation began to feud about the proper standards for church membership. Lord sought to de-emphasize the role of personal testimonies of conversion, while Backus and his radical followers began to believe that Lord did not desire a pure congregation of saints. By mid-1745, thirteen members, including Backus,

had stopped coming to the church, telling Lord that they no longer wished to be a part of a corrupt congregation. One woman simply explained that she did not have to attend the church “any longer than I am edified.” The Separates went on to form their own congregation in the western part of Norwich.¹⁰

Backus had no college degree, but he began traveling widely and preaching to radical evangelical audiences. When he visited Titicut, Massachusetts, he generated such a warm response that people asked him to stay and start a new church, which he did. Solomon Paine and others came to ordain Backus to the ministry, for none of the established ministers would participate. Paine himself had received ordination from his Separate congregation in Canterbury. As was the case elsewhere, the Titicut Separates faced fines and the threat of imprisonment for their refusal to attend or support the colony’s established church. Backus ran into his own divisive issue: the proper role of baptism in the church. Some within his congregation converted to Baptist principles, but Backus wavered until finally coming out in favor of what came to be called believer’s baptism, that is, receiving rebaptism by immersion. Through forming Baptist associations and clamoring for religious liberty, Backus would help launch the Baptists into a religious phenomenon that by the time of the Civil War would make them, along with the Methodists, one of the two largest Protestant denominations in America. In the years leading up to the American Revolution, as the denomination grew in numbers and presented an increasing threat to state-sponsored religious power, the Baptists would increasingly decry the demands of the religious establishment.

The Baptist movement expanded well beyond New England, too, as northeastern Baptists soon began to send missionaries to the South. As hard as it may be to imagine today, in the colonial period New England was the most heavily churched area of the country, and the South was the least. The paucity of congregations in the South had long bothered many religious leaders in the North, and evangelicals emerging from the Great Awakening felt obliged to send missionaries to the benighted region. No evangelical group was more effective at evangelizing the eighteenth-century South than the Baptists.

A preacher named Shubal Stearns would become New England’s primary missionary set on redeeming the South. Stearns followed a religious path similar to the one Isaac Backus had trodden. He had been converted during the revivals of the early 1740s, and he had helped lead a separation from the Congregationalist church in his hometown of Tolland, Connecticut. Attracted by the promise of church purity, Stearns accepted Baptist principles and received believer’s baptism in 1751, the same year as Backus. Stearns soon became the minister of Tolland’s new Baptist church, but because he felt the southern colonies desperately needed the Baptists’ gospel, he and his family moved to Sandy Creek, North Carolina, in 1755.

Stearns developed a reputation as a captivating evangelist with mystical powers. One of his converts, Tiden Lane, first encountered Stearns at an outdoor revival meeting where Stearns was preaching under a peach tree. The preacher locked his gaze upon Lane, leading the other man to think that Stearns might have an “evil eye.” As Stearns was exhorting the crowd, Lane began to swoon, and he fell down, unable to move. Another convert, Elnathan Davis, went to a baptismal service with his roughneck friends, presumably to mock the Baptists. His cohorts became too frightened to draw close, but Davis ventured forward and marveled at the sight of so many people trembling and crying. He tried to run away, but Stearns’s voice charmed him. Soon he began to shake, too, and he fell over, immobile, terrified that he would be damned to hell. Through the Baptists’ counsel he came to believe that he too could be saved. Stearns baptized Davis, who immediately began preaching as a Baptist minister. Although Stearns’s Sandy Creek Baptists remained a minority among the South’s settlers, they had begun the long process of making the southern backcountry into the Bible Belt it is today.¹¹

The Baptists and other growing evangelical denominations threatened the religious establishments of the South, just as they had those of the North. To some, radical evangelical faith seemed to foster political democracy. A cranky Anglican parson, Charles Woodmason, who traveled widely in the southern backcountry in the 1760s, wrote that the evangelicals poisoned the minds of North Carolinians, instilling “democratical” notions in them, making them hostile to the Anglican establishment, and

telling them that “they owe no subjection to Great Britain.” The evangelical dissenters in North Carolina did seek exemption from taxes to support Anglican parishes, but the colonial government rejected the bid and actually increased taxes for Anglican support in the 1760s. The growing anger of North Carolina evangelicals fed into the “Regulator revolt” of 1766–1771, when backcountry farmers rose up against financial and judicial abuses of the provincial government. Herman Husband, a key leader of the Regulation, had been converted under evangelist George Whitefield’s ministry and later became a Quaker. He loathed the civil and ecclesiastical oppression he saw in the British Empire and in the North Carolina government, and he anticipated the day when the people could bring about proper reform in church and state, which would bring on the millennium and the “utter downfall of Mystery Babylon.” Like other Protestants of different stripes, Husband associated tyranny with the spirit of Antichrist.¹²

Nowhere did the clash between evangelical dissenters and the Anglican establishment become as acute as it did in the colonial Virginia that young James Madison would inhabit. Evangelical Presbyterians from Pennsylvania and New Jersey began preaching in Virginia in 1743, generating emotional revival meetings and inciting a number of defections from Anglican congregations. Patrick Henry, the Anglican rector of St. Paul’s Parish in Hanover, Virginia, and the uncle of the Patriot leader Patrick Henry, angrily denounced the Presbyterians’ work. Henry heard reports that the evangelicals questioned the salvation of Virginia’s Anglican parsons, including that of Henry himself. Unlike the somber Parson Henry, the evangelicals screamed in their meetings, calling the unconverted “Damn’d double damn’d . . . Lumps of hellfire, incarnate Devils, 1000 times worse than Devils.” People fell into convulsions under these verbal assaults, exhibiting the kind of extravagant behavior that ministers like Henry would never tolerate in Anglican services.¹³

Virginia’s Anglican authorities particularly resented the way roving itinerants entered their parishes without permission. One such itinerant was Samuel Davies, an evangelical Presbyterian from Pennsylvania who came to Hanover, Virginia, in 1748 and went on to lead the Virginia dissenters’ fight to preach freely. Like other dissenters, Davies pointed to the

freedom guaranteed by the 1689 Act of Toleration in England as the grounds for evangelical rights in Virginia. Davies tried to comply with the regulations imposed by the Virginia establishment by securing licenses to preach at various meetinghouses in Hanover County. Davies envisioned an alternative parish system of Presbyterian churches that would be recognized by law in the colony. People had the right to choose their own doctor, Davies reasoned, and they were “entitled to the same liberty in choosing a physician for their souls.”¹⁴

The Presbyterians’ challenge to the Anglicans’ dominance was only one sign of growing hostility toward Virginia’s established clergy. Some elite Anglican vestrymen (the church’s lay officers, who also filled most of the key political posts in the colony) had also begun to clash with their parsons. Debates over the Anglican clergy’s salaries had led the Virginia legislature to pass the Two Penny Act in 1758, which authorized cash payments to replace allowances of tobacco—the means by which most ministers had previously been paid—at the rate of two cents per pound, well below the current market price of tobacco. Functionally, this resulted in a reduction of pay for the clergy, some of whom protested to the Privy Council in London, which then invalidated the Two Penny Act, leading several parsons to sue to recoup their losses. Hanover County officials recruited the young lawyer Patrick Henry to defend the parish’s interests against the ministers’ lawsuit. Henry was an Anglican like his uncle, but he stood against the clergy in this case and fumed against the Privy Council’s heavy-handed ruling. In his brief against the clergy, Henry characteristically raised the stakes of the issue when he proclaimed that the king, by invalidating a reasonable colonial statute, had degenerated into a “tyrant.” Like other Patriots, such as John Adams, Henry feared that the British government would use the power of the church to dominate the colonists politically, and he employed this local issue to address larger concerns about American liberty.¹⁵

The Anglican establishment in the colonies, nervous about the loss of power, grew vindictive toward dissenting competitors. Although the Anglicans reduced their active persecution of Presbyterians in the early 1760s, reluctantly accepting their presence, ecclesiastical violence returned with a vengeance later in that decade, when Shubal Stearns’s Baptists

began to make serious inroads among Virginia's populations. Baptist preachers like John Waller routinely endured beatings and insults and occasionally suffered imprisonment. The Presbyterians had followed Davies's example by trying to fulfill every legal requirement while advocating fuller freedom—but the Baptists refused to comply with license and tax regulations and seemed to flourish in the face of oppression by the provincial government.

Baptists affiliated with Stearns's Sandy Creek, North Carolina, network of churches had begun to infiltrate Virginia in the late 1750s. By the late 1760s, they had begun to pick off key converts like Waller, who himself faced severe persecution from civil and ecclesiastical authorities. The Baptist itinerants remained steadfast despite the threats against them, and many developed reputations for having mystical powers. Waller, for instance, not only possessed a mesmerizing preaching style but was also reputed to have once miraculously healed a woman by prayer and anointing with oil. Other Baptist pastors had portentous dreams that foretold of their persecution in Virginia. James Ireland, like Waller another former rake converted by the Baptists, was warned in a dream of coming trials sometime before he was arrested and imprisoned in Culpeper, Virginia, where he continued to preach to his followers through a grate in the wall. His opponents, enraged, beat and whipped his friends. Some hooligans even urinated on him as he exhorted. Others attempted to suffocate him by burning "brimstone and Indian pepper" at the cell window. Ireland was one of about thirty-four Baptist itinerants imprisoned in Virginia in the 1760s and 1770s; their ill treatment only cemented the Baptists' resolve to seek full liberty to preach their gospel.¹⁶

James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were two of the Enlightenment liberals who rallied to the cause of the harshly persecuted Baptists. Even skeptics like Jefferson joined evangelicals and rationalist Christians to support disestablishment; they could all agree that their colony's treatment of religious dissenters was deplorable. Protests by Anglicans against the persecution of evangelicals appeared as early as 1771. A writer calling himself "Timoleon" (the name of a general and statesman of ancient Greece) argued in the *Virginia Gazette* that the dissenters should enjoy protection

under English law. It was insufficient cause, he wrote, to imprison the evangelicals simply because some saw them as “a pack of ignorant enthusiasts.” Timoleon argued instead that multiple denominations made Virginia society healthier. “Liberty of conscience,” he concluded, “is the sacred property of every man.” No politician or clergyman could take it away without becoming a tyrant.¹⁷

In early 1776, as the move toward American independence grew in urgency, Jefferson and Madison began to collaborate with the evangelical dissenters. During the months before the July Declaration of Independence, Virginia and other American colonies began to organize governments free of the British aegis. The new governments needed statements of basic liberties, and Madison helped craft Virginia’s that May. The Virginia Declaration of Rights became the basis for a governmentally sanctioned effort in Virginia to shed its establishment and abandon its tradition of persecution. Although delegate George Mason had proposed that the Declaration of Rights should provide full toleration of dissenters, Madison persuaded the convention to approve an even more expansive statement of the “free exercise of religion” for all. Mason’s “toleration” implied that the government still wielded authority over the conscience, but Madison’s “free exercise” implied a natural right to religious liberty that was not subject to changing political winds. This same language would be adopted fifteen years later in Madison’s First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.¹⁸

Madison also tried to insert language in the Declaration of Rights that would have prevented anyone from receiving any “peculiar emoulements or privileges” on the basis of religion, but the clause was rejected. Patrick Henry, who introduced Madison’s proposal, was asked directly whether it meant to disestablish the church, and he denied that it would have done so. At this point in the revolutionary era, most of Virginia’s political leaders still wanted to foster the coexistence of an Anglican establishment and the free exercise of religion, which in practice meant a halt to the active persecution of the Baptists.¹⁹

Baptists and Enlightenment liberals would not be satisfied until they ended the state’s establishment of religion. In late 1776 Jefferson and Madison worked on a committee that addressed petitions for religious

freedom from Baptists and others, which flooded the Virginia legislature after the adoption of the Declaration of Rights earlier in that eventful year. Jefferson, recognizing the profound effect of the evangelical movement in his home state, would recall that

by the time of the revolution, a majority of the inhabitants had become dissenters from the established church, but were still obliged to pay contributions to support the pastors of the minority. This unrighteous compulsion to maintain teachers of what they deemed religious errors was grievously felt during the regal government, and without a hope of relief. But the first republican legislature which met in '76 was crowded with petitions to abolish this spiritual tyranny. These brought on the severest contests in which I have ever been engaged.

Jefferson and Madison helped end legal penalties against dissenters and temporarily stop state funding for the Church of England (which would be called the Episcopal Church after independence was achieved). But Jefferson's, Madison's, and the evangelicals' greatest victory for religious freedom lay in the future. Support for some kind of religious establishment remained strong in Virginia, and the moment for establishing full religious freedom in the state did not come until ten years later, in 1786, when Madison and the Baptists won approval for the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom.²⁰

The movement for religious liberty would succeed in America because evangelicals, rationalists, and deists fought for it together. The settlers of the American colonies, with few exceptions, did not hold a modern view of religious freedom. That principle had to be crafted in the era of the Revolution. Even though Jefferson and Madison eagerly cooperated with evangelicals in the name of religious freedom, no one should mistake either of the two founders for an evangelical. Although Madison was quite serious about his Anglican faith during the early years of the Revolution, he drifted toward deism or Unitarianism later in life. Jefferson

“THE SACRED PROPERTY OF EVERY MAN”

would also make clear his skepticism about the Bible and traditional doctrines such as that of the Trinity. Nevertheless, these two religious rationalists were so appalled by Virginia’s persecution of dissenters that they mobilized on their behalf to advocate for religious liberty in their state and nationwide.

Even before the advent of the American Revolution and the Virginia Declaration of Rights, the stage had been set for the cooperation of evangelicals and more liberal Christians, not only in the Patriot cause but also in the struggle to disestablish the state churches. The evangelicals wanted disestablishment so they could freely preach the gospel; the rationalists and deists wanted disestablishment because they felt an enlightened government should not punish people for their religious views. The combination of the two agendas would transform America, helping make it both intensely religious and religiously free.