

THE FOUNDING FATHERS AND  
THE DEBATE OVER RELIGION  
IN REVOLUTIONARY AMERICA

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A History in Documents

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AND

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OXFORD  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

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## The Founding Fathers and Religion

It might seem like Thomas Jefferson was destined to become president. When he ran in 1800, he had all the qualifications: author of the Declaration of Independence, a prominent diplomat, and vice president of the United States. But his opponents argued that he was not qualified because he was a heretic. Jefferson had only hinted at his unorthodox religious views, but he had said enough to make it clear that he did not think that one's personal theology should matter in politics. His opponents disagreed. Congregationalists in New England, affiliated with President John Adams's Federalist party, whispered that Jefferson was no Christian, and that his election would mean that America had turned its back on God. By mid-1800, the whispers had turned to angry polemics. Week after week, Federalist newspapers printed an ad urging Americans to ask themselves, "Shall I continue in allegiance to GOD—AND A RELIGIOUS PRESIDENT; or impiously declare for JEFFERSON—AND NO GOD!!!"<sup>1</sup>

Up to this point, the religious story of the election of 1800 might seem familiar, a prelude to today's stereotypical feuds between religious conservatives and secular liberals. But then the

1. *Gazette of the United States*, September 13, 1800.

story took a strange turn: Jefferson won the presidency, thanks in large part to support from America's most fervent evangelical Christians, the Baptists. Freshly energized by the Great Awakening of the 1740s, Baptists had begun to push for the disestablishment of America's state churches. These churches, either Congregationalist or Anglican (Episcopalian), had persecuted the Baptists because they refused to pay taxes to support the state churches, or to abide by state restrictions on their fervent revival meetings. In the cause of disestablishment, the Baptists found a champion in Jefferson.

Jefferson and his ally James Madison, in cooperation with the Baptists, had passed the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia in 1786. This victory set the stage for the adoption of the First Amendment to the Constitution, which guaranteed the "free exercise of religion" and forbade the establishment of a national church. Baptists were among Jefferson's staunchest political supporters, despite their differences with his personal theology. The Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut rejoiced when Jefferson was elected: "We have reason to believe," they told him, "that America's God has raised you up to fill the chair of State out of that good will which he bears to the Millions which you preside over." They even prayed that Jefferson would find redemption through Jesus Christ, and enter heaven when he died. To these Christians, the election of Jefferson was no victory for godlessness, it was a blessing from God (see document 5:4).

Over the past several decades, the role of religion in the Founding has been hotly debated, as Americans have taken their present-day differences over religion and projected them onto the Founders. Advocates on both sides see the debate as simple: America was founded either as a pious Christian nation, or a completely secular one, in which some Founders might have been privately spiritual,

but their religion had no effect on the Revolution, the Declaration of Independence, or the Constitution.

The Founders' religious views were more complicated than this. In fact, they passionately debated the role of religion in American society. But these debates often played out in complex ways that don't neatly map onto our present political divisions, with strange combinations of enemies and allies, such as evangelicals' support for the skeptical Jefferson. In particular, people in the Founding era debated the legitimacy of state churches, the ways in which government might support the interest of religion, and the desirability of theological tests for officeholders.

Some prominent Founders were Deists, men who were influenced by Enlightenment rationalism, an intellectual movement that began in Europe in the seventeenth century and spread to the American colonies a short time later. Though their numbers were never great, they had, as one historian has noted, "the right numbers in the right places," and they "won a surprising following from the eighteenth-century elite." Among them were Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, who embraced Deist principles despite their sympathy for the essence of Protestant Christianity. A number of other Founders were influenced by certain tenets of Deism, even if they did not criticize traditional faith as openly as committed Deists did. Many Founders, then, emphasized freedom of conscience, liberty of thought, and religious equality, and they favored morality over dogma, good deeds over pious words, and reason over revelation as the surest way to understand the world.<sup>2</sup> But

2. Jon Butler, "Coercion, Miracle, Reason: Rethinking the American Religious Experience in the Revolutionary Age," in *Religion in a Revolutionary Age*, ed. Ronald Hoffman and Peter J. Albert (Charlottesville, VA, 1994), 20–21.

many traditional, evangelical believers would have shared the Deists' beliefs on matters such as religious liberty.

While religion is often divisive, we should not discount the ways religion unified Americans in the Founding period. Whatever their views on Christian theology, and whatever their opinions on the proper church-state arrangements, hardly anyone during the revolutionary era doubted that religion, and especially moral virtue, was important to the life of the new American republic. The most recognizable Founding Fathers—Franklin, George Washington, Madison, Jefferson, and John Adams—were not overtly traditional Christians, but they lived in a heavily Protestant Christian society and took many Christian rituals and assumptions for granted. Days of prayer and fasting, religion-based proclamations, and references to the Christian tradition permeated their speeches and writings. This ubiquitous presence of religion did not even stop when the supposed infidel Jefferson assumed the presidency. The Founders struggled to find a balance between ensuring religious freedom and honoring the important place of religion in American society.

This book will introduce many of the essential controversies over religion in the Founding period, roughly from the beginning of the American Revolution in 1775 to the deaths of Thomas Jefferson and John Adams in 1826. We have chosen to feature documents related to major political controversies of the Founding, often written by widely recognized “Founders” such as Benjamin Franklin, Alexander Hamilton, and Patrick Henry. Thousands upon thousands of Americans—men and women, whites, African Americans, and Native Americans—helped make the Revolution what it was, but we have focused on high-profile statutes and political debates in the halls of legislatures, as well as the personal beliefs of the best-known Founders. As one scholar has recently noted, the term “Founding Fathers” usually refers to “the politicians, soldiers, jurists,

and legislators who held leadership positions during the American Revolution, the Confederation period, and the early Republic.”<sup>3</sup> For better or worse, these are the people around whom the debate over religion in this period normally centers, and this book offers a brief representative sample of documents showing their thoughts on religion and government. You will find certain lesser-known Founders here, but we do not pretend to have covered all the possible perspectives from the revolutionary era in this book.

The Founders lived in a world heavily shaped by religion. In the seventeenth century, the New England colonies (Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Rhode Island) and Pennsylvania had been founded with religious purposes in mind, usually as refuges for persecuted religious groups in England. The other colonies typically had been founded for commercial purposes, but except for a handful of Jews, it would have been difficult to find European people in the colonies who did not consider themselves at least nominally Christian. Many of the colonies also supported an “established” state church with tax funds. In New England, it was the Congregationalist church, while in the South, Anglicanism was usually the official state denomination.

By the early 1700s, many pastors in America were worried about widespread religious decline. Even in the Puritan colonies of New England, many of the second- and third-generation colonists seemed to care little for the demanding religion of the original colonists. They were distracted by lucrative commercial opportunities, and the British colonies were increasingly swept up into wars with Native Americans and/or other European powers, especially France and Spain. The increasing sense of desperation among religious leaders led to calls and prayers for a spiritual revival. They got what

3. R. B. Bernstein, *The Founding Fathers Reconsidered* (New York, 2009), 6.

they wanted, starting in the 1730s, with the advent of the First Great Awakening.

The Great Awakening was both an upsurge in religious fervor and an attack on the established religious authorities in the colonies. Key revivalist pastors preached the gospel of the new birth, the idea that people had to experience personal conversion and forgiveness through Jesus Christ in order to enter heaven when they died. An “evangelical” Christian, in the terms set by the Great Awakening, was one who believed in this gospel of personal conversion. Evangelicals believed that the Holy Spirit (the third person of the Christian Trinity) came to live in the soul of the converted, no matter that person’s race, gender, education, or social status. The emphasis on conversion and individual spiritual experience upset the traditions of many churches, which had previously been very pastor- and sermon-focused. If the pastors in question did not enthusiastically support the revivals, they could quickly find themselves under attack, facing questions about the state of their own souls.

The revivals quickly split colonial churches into factions. Even among supporters of the revivals, deep divisions erupted over the social consequences of the revivals. The radical revivalists promoted public roles for women, children, African Americans, and Native Americans, and assaulted the established state churches as insufficiently committed to revival. Suddenly, the Great Awakening had become not just the preaching of the new birth, but a popular assault on established power in the colonies. This was the greatest social upheaval in the history of colonial America, and it happened thirty years before the American Revolution.

Understandably, a number of historians have tried to argue that the Great Awakening was at least a prelude to, if not a direct cause of, the Revolution. Some, like Gary Nash, have contended that the Great Awakening’s attack on established power served as a “blueprint” for

the American Revolution. Others, like Jon Butler, have vehemently denied that the Great Awakening had any effect on the Revolution.<sup>4</sup> Most historians, however, seem to agree that the Great Awakening must have had some indirect effect. It energized the religious culture of the colonies and helped give a spiritual vocabulary to patriots who wished to justify the Revolution in moral and spiritual terms. To most patriots, the Revolution was not simply about taxes and parliamentary power; it was about the sacred cause of liberty. The awakenings also gave patriot leaders a new model of popular persuasion. Many of the most famous orators and writers of the revolutionary movement, including Patrick Henry and Thomas Paine, spoke and wrote in evangelical language and cadences, even if they were not evangelicals themselves.

The most direct political consequence of the Great Awakening was the challenge to America's state churches from evangelical groups such as the Baptists. Their fervent campaign against established churches was taken up by Thomas Jefferson and others driven by Enlightenment ideals of religious freedom, creating a massive campaign for liberty of conscience. That campaign helped to end most of America's state religious establishments by the time of Jefferson's death.

The events immediately precipitating the Revolution were not religious, but were political and financial. Americans had reached the height of their British patriotism in 1763, at the end of the Seven Years' War, or the French and Indian War, as it was known in America. In that war, the American colonists had helped the British defeat the hated Catholic powers France and Spain. The colonists rejoiced

4. Gary Nash, *The Unknown American Revolution: The Unruly Birth of Democracy and the Struggle to Create America* (New York, 2005), 12; Jon Butler, "Enthusiasm Described and Decried: The Great Awakening as Interpretative Fiction," *Journal of American History* 69 (1982): 324.

in the great victory over the “papists,” whom many associated with the malevolent spirit of Antichrist described in the New Testament.

The British triumph in the Seven Years’ War held the seeds of the empire’s disintegration in America. The British built up an enormous debt during the war, partly due to the exertions required to defeat the French and Spanish in America. They expected the colonists to help pay off the debt, and so in 1764 the British government inaugurated new taxes on trade goods like sugar. This program expanded in 1765 with the passage of the Stamp Act, which caused an outburst of popular anger against the British government. Harassment of British stamp agents made the law essentially unenforceable, and Parliament repealed the act in 1766, with the ominous caveat that they had the right to tax the colonists “in all cases whatsoever.” Colonists insisted that Parliament did not have the right to tax them, since they were not represented there.

The crisis with Britain escalated through 1770 and the “Boston Massacre,” during which British soldiers fired into an angry crowd, killing five. After two years of relative quiet, a second phase of hostility was precipitated by the 1773 Tea Act and the Boston “Tea Party,” in which colonists destroyed British East India Company tea by tossing chests of it into Boston Harbor. The British responded with the “Intolerable Acts” of 1774, which retaliated against the unruly Bostonians by shutting down Boston Harbor to ship traffic, and by replacing the Massachusetts provincial government with a new one fully under royal authority.

The Intolerable Acts led to a new level of resistance among Americans, culminating in the meeting of the First Continental Congress. Although it was originally intended simply to discuss resistance tactics, the Congress heralded the beginnings of a new American political system separate from Britain’s. From the outset, the business of the Congress was colored by religion. As seen in the

documents in chapter 1, the Congress featured prayers by its chaplain, Jacob Duché, and it regularly summoned Americans to days of prayer and fasting for God's assistance in the crisis with Britain. They also passed resolutions encouraging virtuous behavior among soldiers and citizens, assuming that a sinful people would invite the judgment of God in the war (see documents 1:1–2, 5). The religious influences on the Congress also appeared in attempts by Jefferson, Adams, and others to create a national seal for the country. All drafts of the seal, as well as the final version, included overt religious themes (see document 1:7).

The Continental Congress began meeting permanently in 1775, after the Revolutionary War began. In 1776, Congress began to take up the difficult question of America's independence and formed a committee, headed by Jefferson, to draft a declaration to justify it (see document 1:4). As Jefferson later explained, the Declaration "was intended to be an expression of the American mind, and to give to that expression the proper tone and spirit called for by the occasion. All its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day." Its language was rooted in British liberal thought, classical republicanism, and a general theism.<sup>5</sup> The Declaration struck a Deistic tone with its invocation of "Nature's God," suggesting a distant deity who had established the laws of nature and justice. But the Declaration also pointed toward a more traditional view of God with its reference to the act of creation ("that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator") as the basis for equal human rights. It also referred to God as the "Supreme Judge of the World," and the Congress concluded by committing themselves to the protection of "divine Providence." These references showed

5. Thomas Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson: Writings*, ed. Merrill D. Peterson (New York, 1984), 1500–1501.

that Jefferson and the Congress wanted to acknowledge God as the creator of mankind, the author of fundamental law, and the protector of the righteous. They included no doctrinal specifics, but the religious assumptions in the Declaration certainly accorded with the “harmonizing sentiments” of most Americans in 1776. These kinds of theistic premises for political principles were widely articulated by the Founders, such as in Alexander Hamilton’s *The Farmer Refuted* (see document 1:3). The Continental Congress also did not hesitate to promote the general interest of religion, as when they endorsed the publication of Robert Aitken’s Bible in America, to address a shortage of Bibles occasioned by the war (see document 1:6). In the Northwest Ordinance of 1787, they also encouraged new states to establish systems of education because “religion, morality, and knowledge” were necessary for good government (see document 1:8).

Many of the debates concerning the relationship between religion and government played out in the states. Once Americans declared independence, state governments had to craft state constitutions, most of which touched both on religious freedom and religion-based regulations, especially for officeholders. Several of the states also maintained state funding for churches, as they had in the colonial period. These state constitutions (see document 2:1) reveal the tensions between full religious freedom and the desire for religion to continue playing a prominent role in public life. Whatever religious freedom meant to Americans in the Founding period, few wanted religion to become an entirely private matter.

The rest of the documents in chapter 2 show how contested the balance between religious liberty and the public importance of religion could be. The two most celebrated confrontations over religious establishment and religious liberty took place in Massachusetts and Virginia, two of the great hotbeds of revolutionary

zeal. Strikingly, the two states arrived at very different conclusions about the proper relationship between church and state. Until the Revolution, both states had official, established state churches: Massachusetts had funded the Congregationalist church (the denomination of the Puritans), while Virginia had supported the Church of England (known after the Revolution as the Episcopal church). Both churches came under attack as a result of the Great Awakening. To the evangelical dissenters, religious freedom meant that government should not give preference to one denomination over another or interfere with individual theological views. The leading evangelical advocate for disestablishment prior to the Revolution was Massachusetts Baptist pastor Isaac Backus, who cogently argued that the patriots should not expect God to hear their prayers for liberty when they denied religious liberty to their own citizens (see document 2:2).

In Massachusetts, Baptists and other non-Congregationalists tried to end the state establishment of religion, arguing that government support only corrupted the church (see document 2:5). In the end, Massachusetts decided to maintain the Congregationalist establishment, but provided ways for dissenters to claim exemptions from the tax. The establishment's supporters argued that there was no contradiction between public support for religion and religious liberty for all (see documents 2:3–4).

In Virginia, the Episcopal church remained technically established after 1776, although the state stopped its funding indefinitely. In 1784, leading patriot Patrick Henry tried to create a “general assessment” for religion, in which people had to pay taxes to support churches, but the taxpayer could designate his preferred denomination (see document 2:7). This would have recognized the Christian diversity within the state, but required financial support to a specific church (exemptions would have been given to non-Christians). But

to the evangelical dissenters and leaders such as Jefferson and Madison, who had been influenced by Enlightenment ideals of religious liberty, the general assessment plan was unacceptable. The government should get out of the business of supporting churches altogether, they argued. Madison made this case most forcefully in his *Memorial and Remonstrance* against Henry's general assessment (see document 2:9). The joint campaign by Madison and the Baptists led to the adoption of Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in 1786, one of the signal moments for religious freedom in American history (see document 2:10). Although the principles of the Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom were ascendant, some Americans worried that this kind of robust separation of church and state would harm religion, leading the country down a path of vice, selfishness, and immorality. A widespread lack of public virtue, these critics believed, would ruin the country and invite the judgment of God (see document 2:11).

The concern for religious liberty and religious vitality also influenced the framing of the U.S. Constitution. Since the beginning of the Revolution, the nation had operated under the Articles of Confederation, but many leaders concluded that the government under the Articles was too weak. Accordingly, a convention met in Philadelphia in 1787, originally to revise the Articles. But Madison and others planned to use the convention to create a new Constitution.

The framers were immediately confronted with the question of what role religion would play in the new Constitution, as well as at the convention itself. In a famous episode (see document 3:1), Franklin moved that the convention begin its daily proceedings in prayer. As inoffensive as such a motion might have seemed, it could not garner a consensus and was tabled without a vote. Even such a simple proposal raised a host of potential problems: How would the convention choose a chaplain to offer the prayer? Would such

an action, relatively late in the convention's business, suggest growing desperation? What role should religion play in American politics, anyway?

On the question of prayer, and on religious questions generally, the convention tended to prefer silence and inaction. That meant that the Constitution did not mention God directly, and that the only direct reference to religion (before the adoption of the First Amendment) was the ban on religious tests for officeholders. Then, and now, the absence of God in the Constitution has been a source of vigorous debate.<sup>6</sup> Did the Founders intend to create a secular republic? Or was it an acknowledgment that religious pluralism made any commentary on God too controversial? Or was it simply an oversight? One dubious story recalls that when asked why the convention did not refer to God in the Constitution, Alexander Hamilton said, "We forgot."<sup>7</sup>

Whatever their reason for omitting God, it caused a lot of controversy. As the convention sent the proposed Constitution out to the states for ratification, many critics worried that the failure to acknowledge God would get the country started on the wrong foot. Others were concerned that the absence of a religious oath for officeholders (a test commonly applied in the states) would open the door for non-Christians to enter the government. Defenders of the ban said that it was not meant to promote paganism, but to stop the government from monitoring people's religious opinions (see documents 3:2, 5). Some critics proposed amendments to the Constitution's preamble to affirm America's dependence on God. Then

6. See, for example, Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton, NJ, 2003); James H. Hutson, *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic* (Washington, DC, 1998); and Isaac Kramnick and R. Laurence Moore, *The Godless Constitution: A Moral Defense of the Secular State*, rev. ed. (New York, 2005).

7. Hamilton quoted in Douglass Adair, *Fame and the Founding Fathers* (New York, 1974), 147n8.

officeholders would have to commit to that religious statement when they swore to uphold and defend the Constitution (see document 3:5). But all this was to no avail, and years later, critics were still lamenting how the Constitution ignored God (see documents 3:6, 9).

Opponents did not succeed in adding specific religious language to the Constitution, but after much debate about the wording (see document 3:7) the First Amendment did include clauses on religious establishment and religious freedom (see document 3:8). The Bill of Rights was ratified in 1791, after intense pressure from the Constitution's opponents, the Antifederalists, for more explicit protection of fundamental rights under the Constitution. The establishment clause prevented Congress from creating an established church or religion, although this provision did not prohibit the states from doing so. The First Amendment also guaranteed the "free exercise of religion," a victory for the combined forces of Enlightenment skeptics like Jefferson and his evangelical allies, especially the Baptists, who wanted to stop any form of government persecution of religious belief or practice.

Although the Constitution said little about religion, religious beliefs still shadowed and shaped the Constitution. Some of the framers, including Franklin, immediately began to suggest that the Constitution had somehow been blessed or given by God to America. Others rejected such notions, preferring to see the Constitution as the culmination of America's traditions of political wisdom and reason (see document 3:3). Talk of the divine, or providential, origins of the Constitution fostered the development of a broader American civil religion, in which the Revolution and Founding period were given a quasi-religious meaning. God had intervened to deliver the patriots from British tyranny, and now He had established the nation with the greatest governing document in human history, or so the thinking went.

Religious ideas undergirded the framing of the Constitution, despite its relative silence on the topic. The Constitution's advocates and opponents both agreed that good government had to account for flawed human nature. Indeed, one of the key debates in the ratifying conventions was whether the new Constitution would adequately restrain the passions of sinful men. Madison argued that the Constitution's system of checks and balances would ingeniously counter ambition with ambition, by playing the branches of government off of one another. Henry, the leading Antifederalist, disagreed, saying that the new government was far too powerful to be trusted. Evil men in office could easily destroy the freedom of the American people, he believed (see document 3:4).

If the framers meant to eliminate religion from American public life, one could certainly not tell it in the early years of the new federal government. The first Congress immediately began employing chaplains (see document 4:1). Although this required payments to the pastors who served as chaplains, Congress did not consider this an "establishment" of religion. But later in life, Madison questioned whether these kinds of concessions put the government in the undesirable position of promoting religion (see document 3:10).

The Founders included a presidential oath in the Constitution, and while it did not contain any religious language, many presidents have chosen to swear on a Bible and add "so help me God" after the oath. Even that is controversial: A lawsuit by atheist activists following President Barack Obama's election in 2008 tried to ban Obama from using the phrase "so help me God" following the oath, but a federal judge refused the request.

George Washington was the first president to place his hand on the Bible during the presidential oath. He set other precedents, too. Among them was his comfort with using religious language in official statements and proclamations. In his first year

in office, Washington initiated the presidential practice of calling for national days of prayer and thanksgiving. He made the last Thursday of November 1789 a day of thanksgiving (see document 4:2). Although Thanksgiving was only occasionally observed for decades thereafter, Abraham Lincoln reinstated the holiday in 1863, and in 1941 Congress made it an official federal holiday. John Adams followed Washington's lead and called for several national days of prayer during his term as president (see document 4:5).

Religion also played a central role in Washington's Farewell Address of 1796 (document 4:3). Washington was particularly concerned with the public effects of religion, which he saw as an indispensable support to virtue and morality. Only a benevolent, religious people could sustain the republic, Washington believed. He was concerned as he left office that he had begun to see vicious political factions emerge that he thought would ruin the republic, unless restrained by the charitable principles of faith.

But the fact that religion was important does not necessarily mean that the United States was a "Christian nation." In the remarkable Treaty of Tripoli of 1797 (see document 4:4), negotiated with the Muslim state of Tripoli in north Africa, the United States officially declared that it was "not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." No doubt this language was intended to assure Tripoli and the other Barbary states that religion did not pose an irreconcilable difference between them and America, and that the United States was not bound to hostility toward them simply because they were Muslims. But the treaty—negotiated under Washington and signed by John Adams—remains a notable demonstration that, at least for certain audiences, the new government did not consider America a Christian nation at all.

A great deal did depend on agendas and audience, however. The equally remarkable Treaty with the Kaskaskia Indians of 1803 (see

document 4:7) secured millions of acres in southern Illinois for the United States while providing government funds for a Catholic church and a priest for the Kaskaskia (who were Catholics already). Although this was a small investment, it nonetheless amounted to federal funding of religion. The treaty was signed by President Jefferson just one year after he famously wrote that the First Amendment erected a “wall of separation” between church and state.

Jefferson, aware of accusations that he was an unbeliever, struck a friendly tone toward religion in his First Inaugural Address (see document 4:6). He also routinely welcomed pastors to preach at Sabbath services in the chambers of Congress, and occasionally attended these services himself. He was in attendance when the evangelical missionary and antislavery activist Dorothy Ripley preached before Congress in 1806 (see document 4:8). Whatever the “wall of separation” meant to Jefferson, it did not preclude holding religious services in Congress.

Yet the battle for separation of church and state continued in the early years of the republic. As we have already noted, one key church-state controversy centered around the possible election of Jefferson as president in 1800. Jefferson tried to keep most of his personal beliefs private, but he was widely rumored to have unorthodox, or even anti-Christian, convictions. Opponents looked for documented evidence of Jefferson’s views and found some material in his *Notes on the State of Virginia* (1781), in which he argued that personal religious beliefs had no significance in the realm of politics. His opponents, such as William Linn, a chaplain to the House of Representatives, argued that Jefferson’s approach would undermine the religious foundations of society, leading to moral chaos (see document 5:1).

America also began coming to terms with religious diversity in the early republic. Although the country remained heavily Protestant, political leaders knew that other faiths were growing. Probably

no one did more to endorse the freedom of religious minorities than Washington. During his presidency, he made a point of writing letters to groups—including Baptists, Roman Catholics, and Jews—confirming that their religious liberty would be honored in the United States. To Washington, Catholics and Jews could fit easily into the republic because they shared a common biblical tradition with Protestants (in the Hebrew Scriptures), and because their religions inculcated virtue and benevolence, qualities essential to the life of the republic (see document 5:2).

Church-state issues also persisted because several New England states maintained financial support for established churches well into the nineteenth century. Evangelicals, especially Baptists, led by Jefferson's longtime friend and collaborator, Baptist pastor John Leland, continued to campaign against the establishments. Leland's 1791 *The Rights of Conscience Inalienable* (document 5:3) called for all governments—including those of the New England states—to stop policing religious beliefs, or preferencing one denomination over others. Leland's argument was born out of evangelical dissent, but its conclusions sounded a great deal like Jefferson's Enlightenment critique of state religions. Although Leland and Jefferson held very different personal religious beliefs, they both agreed that full religious freedom was an essential component of American liberty.

The friendship between Jefferson and the Baptists was on display in the famous correspondence that produced Jefferson's "wall of separation" metaphor (see document 5:4). As we have seen, the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut was delighted with Jefferson's election. In their 1801 letter to the president, they acknowledged that Jefferson could not end Connecticut's establishment, but they hoped that Jefferson's victory might signal a rising tide of religious liberty that would ultimately transform the New England states into bastions of freedom. Jefferson was pleased by

the letter, especially as it signaled a pocket of political support in a region that was overwhelmingly opposed to him. He replied gratefully, and essentially affirmed his agreement with the Baptists on church-state affairs. Jefferson knew that the First Amendment did not yet apply to the states, but nevertheless he asserted that the establishment and free exercise clauses built a wall of separation between church and state, at least at the national level. He also cited the national-state distinction as one of the reasons that he refused to call for days of prayer and fasting as president. The states, to Jefferson, had primary jurisdiction over religious affairs (see document 5:5). Jefferson never explained all the ramifications of the “wall of separation” metaphor, but he still registered his support for a basic church-state separation.<sup>8</sup>

Evangelical and Enlightenment pressure for church-state separation took its toll, as did the growing reality of denominational pluralism in New England. By the 1820s, the Congregationalist church was no longer the clear majority church there. Connecticut gave up its religious establishment in 1821, and Jefferson rejoiced at “the resurrection of Connecticut to light and liberty.”<sup>9</sup> Massachusetts held out the longest, but finally abandoned its religious establishment in 1833. By this time, the revolutionary legacy of disestablishment had been sealed as one of the great political accomplishments of the era. Founders like Jefferson, Madison, and even Adams, one of the long-time champions of establishment in Massachusetts, saw religious

8. Jefferson’s metaphor is still a matter of vigorous debate today. Some scholars argue that the separation of church and state has no historical foundation in the First Amendment. Others contend that church-state separation not only provided the basis for the First Amendment but also that the amendment clearly prohibits the government from even the most basic intrusion into the spiritual lives of its citizens. For a sampling of this voluminous literature, see the forum in the *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3d ser., 56 (October 1999): 775–824; and Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State* (Cambridge, MA, 2002).

9. Jefferson, quoted in Edwin S. Gaustad, *Neither King nor Prelate: Religion and the New Nation, 1776–1826*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), 49.

liberty as indispensable to the American experiment in freedom. Adams believed that his overt friendliness to religion in public life helped to seal his fate as a one-term president (see document 5:6).

The union between Baptist evangelicals and skeptics like Jefferson shows that the Founders' personal religious beliefs did not necessarily dictate their views on church-state issues. The Founding Fathers saw personal theology and public religion as different matters. One might assume that only people who held traditional beliefs would want a public role for religion, but consider the case of Franklin. He identified himself as a Deist, yet he was the one who pushed for prayer at the Constitutional Convention. Many discussions of religion in the Founding era seem to revolve around the personal beliefs of the Founders, and this is certainly a worthy topic. But we should remember that the Founders' personal beliefs only tell us so much about religion in the Founding period.

There is plenty of evidence to show that certain Founders, especially Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams, were influenced by liberal ideas about religion and the Bible that emerged from the European Enlightenment. This liberal strain raised questions about everything from institutional religion, to the authority of the Bible, to the divinity of Christ. Deistic notions of God as the impersonal author of creation and morality were more prevalent among the leading Founders than among the general population, but no one religious view dominated among the Founders, other than a general devotion to some kind of Protestantism. The Founders' personal views on theology ranged from Franklin's rather open Deism and criticism of traditional Christian doctrine (see document 6:3), to Henry's traditional Anglican faith and contempt for Deism (see document 6:5).

Chapter 6 offers a revealing selection of the Founders' own views on religion. Some of these Founders are well known, like Jefferson, while others, such as William Livingston, are almost entirely

forgotten today. These men held quite a variety of beliefs, and indeed, by the 1790s, religion in America was becoming ever more polarized. Thomas Paine, the brilliant essayist and author of *Common Sense*, became the most aggressive defender of Deism among the Founders by the 1790s, but other Founders, such as Henry, thought Paine's Deism represented a betrayal of the Revolution (see document 6:4). None of the Founders were atheists—not even Paine—but none of the most famous Founders were “evangelical” Christians of the sort produced by the Great Awakening, either. Even the relatively brief number of selections here should show the pitfalls of broad generalizations about the Founders as “secular” or “Christian.”

As you read the documents in this book, you will find that religion played a very important—and very complex—role in the era of the American Founding. Anyone trying to project current political disputes onto the revolutionary past quickly stumbles. Assumptions about the inevitable conflict between the secular and the religious do not seem to hold true for this period, or at least not in the way we expect them to.

Understanding the past often helps us see how we became what we are today, but it can also reveal forgotten possibilities. A close look at the Founding reminds us that religion has always played a central, yet contested, public role in America and helps us appreciate America's vital tradition of religious liberty and the free exercise of religion. But it also illuminates a time in which many secular and devout Americans found common ground on both the separation of church and state and a lively public role for religion.