

THE EVOLUTION OF AMERICAN CONCEPTIONS OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION
IN THE STATE: 1630–1789

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Just over one and a half centuries prior to the enactment of the U.S. Constitution in 1789,¹ the Massachusetts Bay Colony established how the relationship between religion and the state would be defined there. In 1630, Governor John Winthrop explained this model in his sermon entitled *A Model of Christian Charity*. He said that the colonists who were about to establish Massachusetts Bay were entering into a covenant with God. Winthrop's expectation was that if they were obedient to the covenant, God would "please to heare us, and bring us in peace to the place wee desire, [and] hath hee ratified this Covenant and sealed our Commission. . . ." ² If they were to fail in their commitment to the covenant, God would "surely breake out in wrathe against us, be revenged of such a perjured people and make us knowe the price of the breache of such a Covenant." ³ In short, the Puritans were establishing a Christian colony: religion and the state would be unified on the basis of a covenant with God.

A great shift in the American conception of religion's role in the state would take place over the course of the next 160 years. In 1787, when the delegates to the Constitutional Convention met in Philadelphia, they did not intend to follow the Puritan model. Rather than uniting religion and the state, thereby creating a Christian nation, the Convention intended to establish an environment in the new republic wherein the state would not interfere with the individual consciences of its citizens in religious

¹ The Constitution was drafted in 1787 and the ratification process began after it was signed by the delegates of the Constitutional Convention on September 17 of that year. After the required nine states had ratified the Constitution, the document went into force and the government began to function. Thus, the First Congress assembled on March 4, 1789, and the Constitution went into effect on that day.

² John Winthrop, *A Model of Christian Charity*, in *God's New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, rev. ed., ed. Conrad Cherry (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 39.

³ *Ibid.*

matters. Religious freedom⁴ would be guaranteed in the United States. The English philosopher John Locke (1632–1704), writing in 1689, stated in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, that “the care of souls cannot belong to the civil magistrate, because his power consists only in outward force; but true and saving religion consists in the inward persuasion of the mind, without which nothing can be acceptable to God.”⁵ While this statement affirming individual religious freedom—without any state compulsion—may be universally agreed upon in contemporary times, it was a revolutionary idea by the eighteenth century. Western society, since at least the empire of Constantine in the fourth century, had agreed that religion and the state were partners in bringing order and providing identity to a nation. The argument for the unity of religion and the state, modeled by the Puritans in particular was taken for granted by Westerners for centuries. To draw a stark contrast between that time and our own, Edwin Gaustad stated, “We of today ask where the state left off and the church began; they of yesterday can only shake their heads in wonderment at so meaningless a question.”⁶ Locke’s statement in the *Letter* is passed over today as a given, but it was radical to Locke’s readership in 1689, and was still innovative at the time of the founding of the United States.

The question being asked in this paper is: what caused this shift in the American conception of the role of religion in the state between the Puritan model of 1630 and the enactment of the American Constitution in 1789? Or, as Frank Lambert put it, “How did the Puritan Fathers erecting their ‘City upon a Hill’ transform into the Founding Fathers drawing a distinct line between church and state”⁷ and guaranteeing religious liberty? Three dynamics of change occurring in the eighteenth century caused the American conception of religion’s role in the state to evolve from the Puritan model of a Christian state in the 1600s to the Constitutional model which disestablished religion from the state and guaranteed

⁴ The terms “religious freedom” and “religious liberty” will be used synonymously throughout the work. The term “freedom of conscience” will also refer to religious freedom unless otherwise specified.

⁵ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, trans. William Popple, *The Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 35 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 3.

⁶ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faith of our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 12.

⁷ Frank Lambert, *Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 3.

uninhibited religious liberty: the Great Awakening, the Enlightenment, and radical Whig ideology. The paper will first explain the Puritan model, one that did not exhibit a significant departure from the traditional Western conception of the place of religion in the state, but was designed to be Christian in every respect. Next, the paper will turn attention to the Great Awakening of the mid-eighteenth century, to demonstrate how this religious movement in the colonies would contribute to the shift. The relevant aspects of the Enlightenment to the shift will also be discussed, as will those of radical Whig ideology, that dynamic in which the ideas fueling the American Revolution can be most clearly seen. After these three dynamics are shown to have played defining roles in the shift, the last part of the paper will give a brief description of selected Founders'⁸ conception of religion's role in the state, the conception that ultimately would define the American society, and set it apart as a standard that much of the world would later follow.

The Puritan Conception of Religion's Role in the State in the Seventeenth Century

What was the goal of the Puritans in establishing overseas colonies? Simply put, the goal was to form a pure society, one that integrated biblical theology into a synthesis of all areas of life. According to Stephen Keillor, "they came to advocate two ideas in precarious, paradoxical combination: a state church of all the English people, yet a pure one led by the pious alone."⁹ Further, Keillor wrote, "They sought to have a purified church that controlled family, economy, and government. Not a church hierarchy but church members who were truly converted would truly integrate this society."¹⁰ This society would then be fully Christian and would be an example for others, particularly England. The goal was to create, as Winthrop called it in his *Model of Christian Charity*, a "city upon a hill," a beacon that would be a source of inspiration to the world. Conrad Cherry described the Puritan goal as "their purpose . . . to build a holy

⁸ The term "Founder" and "Founders" will be used to identify major figures who contributed to the establishment of the United States through the processes of developing the first American state papers that remain in force under the constitutional system: the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights.

⁹ Stephen J. Keillor, *This Rebellious House: American History & the Truth of Christianity*. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 64.

¹⁰ Ibid.

commonwealth in which the people were covenanted together by their public profession of religious faith and were covenanted with God by their pledge to erect a Christian society.”¹¹

As a result of this view of the need for biblical synthesis in society the Puritans’ understanding of religious liberty was radically different than the modern view. Their understanding was, to use Mark Noll’s term, positive liberty, rather than negative liberty. Just as they were free to leave England’s shores to set up a colony to worship God as they saw fit, dissenters in New England were also free to leave. If they stayed, they were giving assent to the Puritan way. This was not negative liberty, the freedom to worship God according to the dictates of one’s conscience. This freedom did not exist in Puritan New England. Thus, the New England Puritans were quite intolerant, in that they did not offer religious sanctuary to those who would disagree with them. They saw themselves as God’s new chosen people, bound to Him by covenant agreement. As Sacvan Bercovitch asserted, “The New World, like Canaan of old, belonged wholly to God. The remnant that fled Babylon [England] in 1630 set sail for the new promised land, especially reserved by God for them.”¹² Thus, they were after doctrinal purity in their colony. Yet they were not hypocrites, in that they were unwilling to grant what they demanded for themselves. They were not denying freedom of religion to persons within their own realms, having previously demanded such in their former home of England. Their desire was to transform England, to rid it of the last vestiges of Catholicism and restore pure worship there. When it became obvious that this would not come to pass, they came to America. Miller expressed this with crystal clarity: “To allow no dissent from the truth was exactly the reason they had come to America. They maintained here precisely what they had maintained in England, and if they exiled, fined, jailed, whipped, or hanged those who disagreed with them in New England, they would have done the same thing in England could they have secured the power. . . .”¹³ Perry Miller quoted Samuel Willard, minister of the Third Church in Boston, who said in 1681, “I perceive they are mistaken in the design of our first Planters, whose business was not

¹¹ Conrad Cherry, ed., *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny*, revised ed. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 26.

¹² Sacvan Bercovitch, *The Puritan Origins of the American Self* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1975), 100.

¹³ Perry Miller, *Errand Into The Wilderness* (Cambridge: Belknap, 1956), 145.

Toleration; but were professed Enemies of it, and could leave the World professing they died no Libertines. Their business was to settle, and (as much as in them lay) secure Religion to Posterity, according to that way which they believed was of God.”¹⁴ Lambert quoted Nathanael Ward to say “all Familists, Antinomians, Anabaptists, and other Enthusiasts shall have free Liberty to keepe away from us, and such as will come to be gone as fast as they can, the sooner the better.”¹⁵

The Great Awakening (ca. 1730–ca. 1750) and its Role in the Shift

The Great Awakening of the eighteenth century was a religious movement that swept North America and Great Britain as a result of influential preaching that stressed the individual’s relationship to God. It represented a move away from formal, state-sponsored religion to evangelicalism, which stressed the importance of an individual’s relationship to God through the new birth, described by Christ in John 3. Noll described the Great Awakening as being the impetus for “Western Protestantism . . . moving from establishment forms of religion, embedded in traditional, organic, premodern political economies, to individualized and affectional forms, adapted to modernizing, rational, and market-oriented societies.”¹⁶ This focus on the individual was part of the larger cultural dynamic of the Enlightenment, which sought to demonstrate that a person can think for himself using his own reason and he need not rely upon traditional external authorities. It also entailed a much greater emphasis on the emotional aspect of religion, known as personal piety. Old structures of religion, such as the parish system, were dismantled by the itinerant preachers of the Awakening, so people could listen to the word of God preached outside the boundaries of the parish and even the four walls of the church. Also, and very significantly, the Puritan synthesis which sought to join all of society together under God’s sovereignty and revealed word would be no more, and church would take on a new meaning. Thus, Noll pointed out that “the Awakening marked a transition from clerical to lay religion, from the minister as an inherited authority figure to self-empowered mobilizer, from the definition of Christianity by doctrine to its definition by piety, and from a state church

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lambert, *Place of Religion*, 76.

¹⁶ Mark Noll, *America’s God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 4.

encompassing all of society to a gathered church made up only of the converted.”¹⁷ Edwin Gaustad wrote, “Just as civil and ecclesiastical tyranny had marched side by side through the centuries, each reinforcing the other and thereby swelling the flow of blood, so the battle for liberty could not cease until completed on both political and religious fronts.”¹⁸

One of the most significant changes laying the groundwork for the impact of the Awakening was the unique reality of cultural and religious pluralism in the colonies. The pluralism of the eighteenth century American colonies did not include the truly global elements of twenty-first century times: there was not a wide plurality of different religions or worldviews, nor was there much diversity in racial or ethnic backgrounds. Free colonists were made up of Europeans holding to set of basic Christian commitments. Still, the religious and cultural pluralism that existed in the colonies was not familiar to Europeans who were accustomed to one church for one place for one people group. The result of this growing pluralism in colonial society was to break down the traditional religious paradigm of the parish system under the established state church and present a number of religious choices to people.

How did this breakdown of the parish system occur in the colonies? Instead of waiting for people to fill a pew on the assigned day at the assigned hour to hear a carefully scripted sermon written along the lines of a strict Anglican perspective, itinerant preachers of the Awakening would enter a town on any given day and preach a message directed to the individual, often outside the four walls of a church. Like the merchants who were discovering new ways to profit from sales by going to the consumers rather than waiting for the consumers to come to them, evangelicals were adopting those methods to carry the gospel to the people. George Whitefield (1715–1770), an incomparable figure of the Awakening, used advertising masterfully in order to gather enormous crowds for his sermons. According to Lambert, “[a]dvance publicity begun months before he arrived in a particular location served to build anticipation to a fever pitch.”¹⁹ Additionally, “evangelicals penetrated parish lines by sending itinerant preachers all

¹⁷ Ibid., 44.

¹⁸ Edwin S. Gaustad, *Faiths of our Fathers: Religion and the New Nation* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 6.

¹⁹ Lambert, *Place of Religion*, 139.

over the Anglo-American world. Where they found a sympathetic parish minister, they preached from his pulpit. Where parish ministers opposed them, they preached wherever they found space within the parish: in market squares, from courthouse steps, at racecourses, in public parks, and even in taverns.”²⁰

In this new environment of an open religious market, religion began to truly flourish as it never had previously in the colonies. This open market forced religious leaders to compete for new congregants for the first time. Prior to the Awakening, the union of religion and state set up a culture wherein the people went to the church to receive spiritual guidance. The open market dynamic introduced during the first half of the eighteenth century along with religious pluralism reversed this traditional reality.

The key to understanding the impact of the Awakening on the religious culture of colonial America, especially when referring to the role of religion in the state, can be summarized in one word: choice. For centuries, Western culture offered very little in terms of religious choice, indeed discouraged it. For the first time during the Awakening, religious choice was thrust upon ordinary people. This was a key development of religious liberty and also a very significant factor in changing American conceptions of the role of religion in the state from the premodern view of the Puritans to the modern view of the Founding Fathers.

The impact of the Awakening was felt in at least one more way. The Puritan synthesis that had been constructed in New England was dismantled for all time. The Awakening split the New England Puritans into four groups,²¹ each one defined by its response to the phenomenon of the revivals sweeping the colonies, revivals fueled in part by one of their own, Edwards himself. Mark Noll, George Marsden, and Nathan Hatch wrote, “Those who opposed the revival took over the Puritan conception of unified society, but greatly deemphasized the need for personal faith to ground the society. On the other hand, those who promoted the revival retained the Puritan conviction about the need for personal salvation, but

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ The Old Calvinists sought to maintain the theologically integrated society which had been from the beginning; the moderate New Lights sought to purify New England churches from within; the radical New Lights (Separates) formed their own churches in reaction against the dry religiosity of the New England churches; the Old Lights were against the revivals, seeing them through the lenses of the Enlightenment and deism and condemning their doctrines as childish relics.

largely abandoned the Puritan concern for a united commonwealth. The Great Awakening forced a choice. The result was the end of Puritan ideas about society, state, and politics.”²²

Thus, the Awakening’s impact was felt most pointedly in the presence of real religious choices for ordinary people in an open market of ideas. The Awakening created a new environment where religious liberty was being felt by the populace for the first time. By the time of the signing of the Declaration of Independence only forty or so years after the beginning of the Awakening, Lambert wrote, “the fast-growing population of dissenters lobbied legislators to bring laws into conformity with the new religious economy, by disestablishing state churches and guaranteeing complete religious freedom.”²³

The Enlightenment and its Role in the Shift

The Enlightenment represented a dramatic shift in the overall pattern of Western thought. Simply put, it marked the division between premodernity and modernity in the Western world. The mindset of the premodern West was marked by humility before authority, submission to and acceptance of the supernatural, recognition of limits to the human capacity for understanding God and His creation (mystery), and acquiescence to the notion of the fallen state of man in sin. In contrast, the modern mind rejected external authorities, such as royal majesty or priestly command, it threw off old trepidation before mystery and the supernatural, and it rejected the idea of limits to human understanding of the world as well as that of the universal sinfulness of humankind. It was the Enlightenment that brought about this intellectual sea change in the West.

The role and function of reason in the human encounter with the world was one of the primary concerns of Enlightenment thought. Prior to the Enlightenment, reason was widely accepted as a useful supplement to revelation, a means of gaining further insight into matters of faith, what Martin Luther referred to as ministerial reason. Absolute certainty could be found through revelation and priestly authority. Reason did not challenge these sources, but supported them, according to the premodern mind. After the Enlightenment, according to Eugene Bewkes, et. al., “Reason now was not satisfied to deny the

²² Mark A. Noll, Nathan O. Hatch, and George M. Marsden, *The Search for Christian America* (Colorado Springs: Helmers and Howard, 1989), 60.

²³ Lambert, *Place of Religion*, 208.

authority of the church or the pope; it attacked the fundamental concepts of Christianity, like the Trinity, incarnation, and the sinfulness of man. Reason, in short, became critical, standing apart from faith in certainty of its own powers and criticizing even those beliefs once most dear to men but now out of harmony with the dominant interests of the new age.”²⁴ Thus, the Enlightenment emphasized the present over the past, reason over revelation, and nature over God.

The Enlightenment in England influenced the British colonies more than the Continental Enlightenment for obvious reasons, and the work of Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and John Locke were especially prominent. Thomas Jefferson held these three thinkers in such high regard that he had artist John Trumbull paint them and he placed the painting in his home at Monticello. Lambert quoted Jefferson as having called them, “the three greatest men that have ever lived, without any exception, and as having laid the foundation of those superstructures which have been raised in the Physical and Moral Sciences.”²⁵

Locke’s philosophical, social, and political contributions to the West cannot be understated. Next to the Founders themselves, it is possible that no other thinker contributed more to the establishment of the United States than Locke. At the heart of Locke’s political philosophy was his belief that humankind, in its natural state, was free to dispose of its life and property as it deemed proper. Humans also naturally existed in a state of absolute equality. Because nature dispersed its gifts of reason and freedom to all equally, no one person could lord over another as a result of being endowed more generously with others. Locke described this natural state of equality among all in this way: “wherein all the power in jurisdiction is reciprocal, no one having more than another, there being nothing more evident than that creatures of the same species and rank, promiscuously born to all the same advantages of Nature, and the use of the same faculties, should also be equal one amongst another, without subordination or subjection. . . .”²⁶

Based on these assertions, Locke proposed his idea of the social contract. Since each individual human being was free and independent, any form of government would have to be consented to by every

²⁴Eugene Bewkes, and others, *The Western Heritage of Faith and Reason* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 554.

²⁵Lambert, *Place of Religion*, 161.

²⁶John Locke, *Concerning Civil Government, Second Essay*, *The Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 35 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), II, 4.

free and independent person. Thus, government must always be by consent of the governed for common security and protection of property. Once the government is installed by the governed, the government is ruled by the will of the majority of its citizens.

Locke's positions on political theory are inextricably connected to his theory on religious practice and the role of religion in the state. Simply put, he was an exponent of full religious freedom. He defined the church in terms that are similar to his social contract theory. His view of the church was that it is a voluntary organization. For Locke, a person's faith is just that, a personal decision that involves no one else except that person and God. He said of the church in his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, "I say it is a free and voluntary society. Nobody is born a member of any church; otherwise the religion of parents would descend unto children by the same right of inheritance as their temporal estates, and everyone would hold his faith by the same tenure he does his lands, than which nothing can be imagined more absurd."²⁷ The role of the state is to secure the liberty of its citizens to worship how they choose, not to compel them to worship how it chooses. The state cannot compel faith because the role of the state is to implement law by force and faith does not arise out of force but out of persuasion. Thus, the state must protect an environment where religious reasoning and persuasion may flourish.

For Locke, personal liberty was the natural state of every human being. It was the basis for the social contract, and it was also the basis for the church. Both the church and the state were organizations set up by the free and voluntary choice of individuals. This is in stark contrast to the Puritan conception of the state and the church. Recall that for the Puritans, the basis for both state and church was the covenant which humans entered into with God. The authority of God's word revealed and obedience to it were at the very center of the notion of the covenant for the Puritans. Not so for Locke, a child of the Enlightenment. Locke's social contract was not centered on God, but on humankind in the natural state.

Radical Whig Ideology and its Role in the Shift

When one considers the sum of American revolutionary thought, his mind is really being drawn toward what scholars have called radical, or real, Whig ideology. Radical Whig ideology was developed

²⁷ Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 4.

by the English Dissenters of the early eighteenth century. Its roots lie in the English Civil War which culminated in the execution of Charles I in 1649, the Commonwealth period under Oliver Cromwell during the 1650s, and the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Simply put, the controversies of the 1600s in England were based on the power struggle between Parliament and the crown. After the installation of William and Mary in 1688, it was clear that Parliament was to have the upper hand in the mixed monarchy of England. But by the 1720s, weaknesses in the system were showing themselves as the king (to whom the Church of England was closely aligned) was using bribery to control the Parliament. Thus, to “Commonwealth men” of the early eighteenth century, the tide of power was shifting away from rule of the people through the Parliament and toward the arbitrary rule of the dually aligned monarchy and Church. The Dissenters were those who opposed this perceived shift in power. Marsden effectively described the fundamental belief system of radical Whig ideology when he wrote, “[Dissenters] shared with the Puritans the belief that high-handed monarchical power is always supported by ecclesiastical privilege. Therefore, the Commonwealth men championed both the inalienable rights of humanity to life, liberty, and property, in the tradition of John Locke, and the inalienable rights of conscience in the traditions of English religious dissent.”²⁸ The Commonwealth men viewed the Church of England with great suspicion because to them it closely resembled Catholicism, a system which represented superstition, arbitrary privilege, and authoritarianism. These undesirable features were also marks of the monarchy, in contrast to dissenting Protestantism which championed common-sense reason as well as individual liberty under God. Thus, as Noll wrote, the notion that “unchecked power led to corruption and corruption to unchecked power, and that the arbitrary exercise of unchecked power must by its very nature result in the demise of liberty, law, and natural rights”²⁹ were at the center of radical Whig ideology.

²⁸George M. Marsden, *Religion and the American Culture* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 45. Religious dissenters in England were those not aligned with the Church of England: Baptists, Quakers, Puritans, etc. Many came to America, but many also stayed in England.

²⁹Noll, *Christians in the American Revolution*, 23.

There were several radical Whig writers in England during the course of the eighteenth century: Richard Cumberland, Robert Molesworth, Joseph Addison, Algernon Sidney and Walter Moyle to name a few. Of all the radical English Whig writers, none had a greater following than John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon because their journal, *The Independent Whig*, was the only major publication that was printed in American editions before the Revolution.³⁰ This journal appeared in London from 1720–23 and was republished over the next twenty-five years.³¹ It was dedicated to, among other things, complete religious liberty. Its subtitle was “a Defense of Primitive Christianity, and of Our Ecclesiastical Establishment, Against the Exorbitant Claims and Encroachments of Fanatical and Disaffected Clergymen.” Trenchard and Gordon published another set of writings together entitled *Cato’s Letters*, subtitled “Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, And other important Subjects.” *Cato’s Letters* had a more secular focus, but still addressed issues related to religious liberty.

Trenchard and Gordon sought to prevent destruction of liberty from happening in their own country as they believed had happened in the ancient republics such as Rome. A great deal of optimism was expressed in the efficacy of liberty in securing progress. There was therefore a consistent attack upon the Church of England, which Trenchard and Gordon viewed as a twin of Catholicism. Robbins wrote, “The anticlericalism of the *Independent Whig* is its most striking characteristic. . . . First of all, so long as the exiled Stuarts continued to exist in to profess Catholicism, there persisted a strong and vigorous prejudice against the Protestant but High-church group that were suspected of Jacobitism and of a belief in divine right.”³²

Trenchard and Gordon’s writings on liberty are reminiscent of Locke’s writings on the subject. Indeed, the influence of the Enlightenment upon radical Whig ideology is detected most unmistakably at

³⁰ Patricia U. Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven: Religion, Society, and Politics in Colonial America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 195. A pamphlet by John Milton was printed in America, but this was not as influential as the writings of Trenchard and Gordon.

³¹ Caroline Robbins, *The Eighteenth Century Commonwealthman: Studies in the Transmission, Development and Circumstance of English Liberal Thought from the Restoration of Charles II until the War with the Thirteen Colonies* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), 115.

³² *Ibid.*, 116.

this point. This quote from a passage in *Cato's Letters*, provided by Robbins, demonstrates the debt radical Whig ideology owed to Locke:

[*Cato's Letters* asserted] without the right of resistance men cannot defend liberty, the chief topic of his letters. All Men are born free. Liberty is a Gift which they receive from God himself, nor can they alienate the same by Consent, though possibly they may forfeit it by Crimes. No man has Power over his own Life, or to dispose of his own Religion, and cannot consequently transfer the Power of either to anybody else; much less can he give away the Lives and Liberties, Religion or acquired Property of his posterity, who will be born free as himself was born, and can never be bound by his wicked and ridiculous Bargain.³³

In this passage we find Locke's assertions that 1) humans are free in their natural state, 2) liberty is not surrendered when a government is consented to, and 3) the equality of all on the basis of an equal bestowal of gifts upon all by nature.

The emphasis placed on religious liberty by radical Whig ideology distinctly shows how this dynamic contributed to the shift in American conceptions of the role of religion in the state. The Anglican bishop controversy of 1767–70 further illustrates how radical Whig ideology influenced the shift in conceptions of religion and the state. The New York assembly election of 1769 was dominated by rumors that the Church of England was about to assign a bishop over the colonies, something which had no precedent. Historians debate whether or not the rumor of an Anglican bishop over the colonies had any basis in reality. But William Livingston of New York wrote a series of sixty-four weekly essays under the pseudonym "The American Whig" from March 1768 to July 1769 in which he condemned Anglican authorities for disregarding religious liberty. Bonomi wrote, "Against the background of the Stamp Act, the visible presence of British troops, and rumors about the creation of an American peerage, the provincials had little reason to doubt that the Church of England was about to be strengthened at the expense of dissenting denominations."³⁴ The controversy would prepare the ground for the writing of state constitutions after independence was declared in 1776. As Lambert observed, "In 1776, as delegates met in the thirteen states to draft new constitutions that would safeguard their liberties, dissenters led the fight for complete religious freedom. . . . Advocates of establishment tried to mollify dissenters by

³³ Ibid., 124.

³⁴ Bonomi, *Under the Cope of Heaven*, 206.

promising liberal religious toleration for nonconformists. But dissenters wanted more, something as radical as the political revolution; they wanted religious freedom, not mere toleration.”³⁵ The controversy would also lay the groundwork for popular acceptance of Jefferson and Madison’s work in disestablishing the church in the state and guaranteeing religious liberty first in Virginia, and later in the United States.

The Conception of Religion’s Role in the State by 1789

We can see at this point that great distance was traversed in American conceptions of religion’s role in the state between the founding of Massachusetts Bay Colony in 1630 and the enacting of the Constitution in 1789. The Puritans established a Christian state, one that united civil and ecclesiastical life into a synthesis. After the Awakening, the Enlightenment, and radical Whig ideology had made their impacts upon religious, political, economic, and intellectual life of the colonists during the late seventeenth and early to mid-eighteenth centuries, the shift in the American conception of the place of religion in the state had occurred. Thus, the model the Founders sought to preserve as a fundamental part of American political and social life was that of disestablishment and of religious freedom. Clearly then, in contrast to the Puritans, the Founders did not seek to create a Christian state, but a state marked by a plurality of faiths. They sought to establish a nation in which the individual conscience could be free to choose from an open market of religious ideas, and the flourishing of faith would be encouraged not by the volubility of the state in religious affairs, but by its silence.

If the Founders as a whole valued the disestablishment of religion and freedom of conscience, what did they value as individuals? It is not within the scope of this study to analyze and explain the views of each person involved in the founding of the United States related to the issue of religion and the state. It is appropriate, however, to give special attention to some of the aspects of the positions held by Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) and James Madison (1751–1836). Because of their early work in ensuring religious liberty in Virginia, and seeing Virginia’s model of religious liberty adopted into the Constitution, these two Founders are particularly relevant.

³⁵ Lambert, *Place of Religion*, 207.

If anyone can be said to have followed the Enlightenment values of reason, nature, and optimism, it would be Jefferson. One can almost hear John Locke speaking through Jefferson in the Declaration of Independence. The statement “. . . they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. That, to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed; that, whenever any form of government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the right of the people to alter or abolish it” reads much like Locke’s *Second Essay Concerning Civil Government*. Just as Locke assisted in justifying the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688 with his political writings, Jefferson would justify the American Revolution through his own writings, most plainly in the Declaration.

Jefferson, as is widely known, was not an orthodox Christian but a deist. Deism, that “single banner”³⁶ of the Enlightenment as Montgomery asserted, was a powerful basis for Jefferson’s desire to see religion disestablished and freedom of religion guaranteed. As a deist, Jefferson believed that freedom of conscience was a natural right that the state could not touch. In 1779, he proposed a “Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom” in Virginia, and it was seven years later, with a great deal of help from his fellow Virginian and friend Madison, before it would become law. When it did become law in 1786, Jefferson had the privilege as governor of signing it and it became known as the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Most of the language Jefferson used in the bill was preserved in the Statute. Gaustad and Schmidt quote an important passage from the Statute that reflects Jefferson’s sentiments on disestablishment and freedom of conscience: “Be it enacted . . . that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened [*sic*] in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or beliefs.”³⁷ Thus, the year before the Constitutional Convention was assembled to craft a stronger government over the old system under the Articles of Confederation, Jefferson’s bill overturned Anglican establishment in Virginia that started with the inception of the colony in 1607.

³⁶ John Warwick Montgomery, *The Shaping of America* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1975), 48.

³⁷ Edwin S. Gaustad and Leigh E. Schmidt, *The Religious History of America*, revised ed. (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), 125.

Jefferson's role in helping define the role that religion would have in the United States in the Constitution was, at best, indirect. He was not present at the Convention assembling in Philadelphia in May, 1787. He was representing the United States as the American ambassador to France in Paris. Still, through his correspondence with Madison, Jefferson was able to keep abreast of the debates and issues the delegates to the Convention were discussing. In October of 1787, Madison sent Jefferson a copy of the newly signed Constitution to Jefferson in Paris for his perusal. Jefferson replied in a letter dated December 20, 1787 that there was much to admire about the document, but there were still some problems. Jefferson, after listing some of the aspects of the document he liked, wrote, "There are other good things of less moment. I will now add what I do not like. First the omission of a bill of rights providing clearly and without the aid of sophisms for freedom of religion, freedom of the press" ³⁸ He explained the seriousness of the need for such a statement of basic rights: "Let me add that a bill of rights is what the people are entitled to against every government on earth, general or particular, and what no just government should refuse, or rest on inference." ³⁹ Jefferson was referring to the commonly held notion among the delegates that the Constitution's silence on overtly religious issues would signal its affirmation of religious freedom. This silence was not nearly enough for Jefferson. The Bill of Rights was drafted in 1788 and satisfied Jefferson's desire. It was also a key element in winning over states reluctant to ratify the Constitution without such a clear statement of basic liberties.

Madison and Jefferson were in fundamental agreement on the role of religion in the state, as evidenced by their work together on the Virginia Statute and the Constitution. Madison's role in the development of the Constitution is virtually unmatched by any of his contemporaries and his views on preserving natural liberties through a republican style of government are outlined in many of his writings. In *Federalist* no. 10, he expressed his belief that a representative government, as opposed to a pure democracy, would better protect the people from the tyranny of the majority. A pure democracy, by

³⁸ Thomas Jefferson to James Madison, 20 December 1787, in Michael Kammen, ed., *The Origins of the American Constitution: A Documentary History* (New York: Penguin, 1986), 90.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 91.

definition, must be small. The majority produced by a democracy would be monolithic in its position, and would then be in a position to lord over the minority. He wrote that in a democracy, “a common passion or interest will, in almost every case, be felt by a majority of the whole; a communication and concert result from the form of government itself; and there is nothing to check the inducements to sacrifice the weaker party or an obnoxious individual. Hence it is that such democracies . . . have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property.”⁴⁰ By contrast, a representative government, such as a republic, can grow in population and territory without the limits that a democracy has. With growth in size, a republic’s free marketplace of ideas also grows. Even a majority will have a range of opinions that will keep it from exercising tyrannical lordship over a minority. Madison said, “Extend the sphere, and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens; or if such a common motive exists, it will be more difficult for all who feel it to discover their own strength, and to act in unison with each other.”⁴¹ Thus, no one religious sect will be able to impose its will upon the whole. Religious groups must compete for adherents in a free marketplace ruled by individual choice, just as other religious groups do.

Jefferson and Madison, because of their work in Virginia disestablishing religion from the state, were very influential in guiding the Constitutional debates toward disestablishment and religious freedom in all the states. And this is one of the great achievements of the American Constitution. For the first time, a Western nation divided religion and the state, based on the conviction that freedom of conscience was not the concern of the state and had no jurisdiction over it. It was a revolutionary idea whose time had indeed come. The Great Awakening demonstrated to the colonists living in British America that they could choose what religion they would follow from a variety of competing sects. The Enlightenment thought of Newton and Locke showed Americans that their world was not one shrouded in divine mystery

⁴⁰ James Madison, *Federalist*, no. 10, *The Great Books of the Western World*, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins, no. 43 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1952), 51.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 52.

and that God had bestowed reason upon the whole human race that they might understand His universe. Along with reason, God had given to humans basic rights, one of which was freedom of conscience which transcended all forms of outside human compulsion. Finally, radical Whig ideology took the Enlightenment notion of liberty and introduced it to ordinary people, seeking to throw off all royal and ecclesiastical authorities, which were seen as inherently tyrannical. The Puritan model of a synthesis of religion and state, no matter how logically formulated or well-intentioned, could never survive against such powerful ideas that had decades to mature and develop around the ever-changing circumstances of colonial America in the eighteenth century. The difference between the Puritan and the Constitutional models of religion's role in the state is the difference between two distinct modes of thought: one is premodern, the other, modern.

The Founders were not attempting to do the same thing as the Puritans. They were not seeking to create a Christian state. They realized that to do such a thing would be to step backward into the premodern world, when they knew they were introducing a form of society that was different than any which had preceded them. When Patrick Henry attempted to have Christianity recognized as the state religion of Virginia in 1785, he was met with the furious resistance of Madison who rebutted him in his famous Memorial and Remonstrance, which championed religious freedom. The Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom was the final outcome of that debate in Virginia, paving the road to the Bill of Rights. While the Puritans may have seen themselves as a new Israel establishing a theologically pure society, the Founders had no such notion in mind. As Montgomery said, "In certain circles at the far right of the religious spectrum it is customary to wax eloquent on the 'Bible religion of our Founding Fathers.' We are implored to 'return to the simple Gospel that made our Founding Fathers great,' etc. Unhappily, though we might fervently wish that these sentiments were accurate, the fact is that they express a pure mythology. The idea of believing Christian Founding Fathers is very largely a pious myth, and if we want to arrive at a balanced and mature understanding of the relation between scriptural religion and our

national heritage, we must rigorously carry out a process of demythologization at this point.”⁴² Instead of contending for the idea of a Christian America as an apologetic for evangelical Christianity, evangelicals can and ought to demonstrate that religious liberty is at the heart of American heritage. This is an argument that is easily won, and an argument that lays the ground work for a much more effective apologetic based on the reliable authority of Scripture.

⁴² Montgomery, *Shaping of America*, 50–51.

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