Competing Liberties: Virginia, New England, and the Battle Over Religion in the Early Republic

By

Lailuma Sayed

Master of Arts in History

Middle Tennessee State University

August, 2025

Thesis Committee:

Andrew Polk

Lisa Pruitt

ABSTRACT

This thesis looks at the disputed development of religious liberty beginning in colonial America and through the early American republic particularly by comparing the regional ideologies of Virginia and New England. While popular history looks at religious freedom as a shared Enlightenment tradition, this study argues that it emerged instead through a deep ideological conflict between the two colonial worlds. New England society understood liberty as an idea rooted in moral governance coming from Puritan values and religion was foundational for the civic order. In contrast, Virginia's model emphasized Enlightenment rationalism, and the break of state religion which were influenced by the colony's Anglican past and elite political culture. This paper looks at sermons, legal texts, state constitutions, political writings, and key thinkers of the period such as Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and John Adams. This study reveals that religious liberty in the United States was not a product of national consensus but of regional competition. Beginning in early colonial America, the disagreements continued to shape American political and religious life into the nineteenth century.

Table of Contents

Introduction

One way Americans uphold the idea of nationalism and patriotism today is through the principle of religious freedom, a constitutional right across all fifty states and to the population of nearly 350 million people. While the United States may not be the most religiously diverse nation, the legal framework that allows for freedom of faith is undeniably granted to people of all religious backgrounds, including those of no faith. From the nation's inception, the United States has been associated with the phrase *land of the free.* Unfortunately, religious freedom was not established as a clean break from British colonial rule.

This thesis will argue how religious liberty in the early republic was not a result of universally accepted enlightenment ideals by New England and Virginia but instead the result of regional tensions. While historians have traditionally isolated each region and studied its influence on the new republic, this thesis will analyze how New England and Virginia approached religious liberty and how opposing ideologies were addressed after the establishment of the United States. While Virginia's model of rationalism, individual consciousness, and disestablishment trumped New England's Puritan agenda for the New Republic, lingering tensions remained causing Massachusetts to undo, rewrite and reinterpret its constitution to fit not only its Puritan ideals but the federal government's goal of religious liberty as well. By tracing the debates, documents, sermons, and constitutional developments from the colonial period through the founding era, this study reveals how conflicting religious visions shaped the legal and ideological framework of the new republic.

While there have been several scholarly works on the political and religious origins of the American Revolution, historians have largely studied the two regions of New England and Virginia as independent actors. The manner which Virginia and New England clashed and debated around the period of the American Revolution remains understudied. This paper addresses the gap by detailing how conversations and conflicts between the two regions shaped around the Revolutionary period on the subject of church and state.

Scholars such as Thomas E. Buckley have offered in-depth studies on specific colonies such as his text *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787.* This scholarly work gives a detailed account of Virginia's disestablishment process, yet it does not connect those developments to overall regional dynamics particularly with New England. As Leonard W. Levy noted in *From Jamestown to Jefferson*, historians are drawn to Virginia's church-state struggle because "the sources are uniquely ample." The dramatic clash of ideas between figures like Madison and Henry was so well documented however, the work remains particularly focused on Virginia's internal story.

Other foundational works by historians such as Bernard Bailyn's *Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (1967) and Richard Beeman's *The Varieties of Political Experience in Eighteenth-Century America* (2004) have been important in shifting revolutionary historiography towards more of an ideological focus. The historians do this by detailing how republican thought developed across the colonies. Beeman argues that political culture did not exist in pre-revolutionary America but despite this argument, his work does not explore or really analyze how ideological differences between colonies were unfolding in real time. Bailyn's text, while significant, treats each colony's ideological formation in isolation and pays little attention to how those ideas clashed or discussed in national debates, like those at the Constitutional Convention.

This pattern can also be seen in religious histories, specifically Thomas Kidd's *The Great Awakening* since it relies heavily on New England's large archive to explain the religious revival movement. Focusing more on that region's influence and less on the interactions with other colonies like Virginia, Kidd acknowledges that, despite the Great Awakening affecting all thirteen colonies, most historians limit their studies to New England simply due to the abundance of sources.

On the legal and philosophical side, John Ragosta's *Religious Freedom: Jefferson's Legacy, America's Creed* is a valuable contribution that centers Jefferson's influence on American religious liberty. Again, this narrative focuses on Virginia's efforts and Jefferson's vision as a one-way influence to the rest of the country and offers little engagement with how other regions reacted to, challenged, or competed with that vision. New England, when discussed, is merely a reactionary to Virginia and not an active player.

While many studies explore Enlightenment ideals as the foundation of the American Revolution, this thesis will also look at how the Founding Fathers were not universally driven by democratic ideals as posed, but by an effort to maintain the original regional structure each region had. The prime example of this would be New England trying to uphold church and state relations as long as possible even after the ratification of the federal constitution. Furthermore, the story of church and state in early America cannot be fully told by looking at individual colonies in isolation but it must account for conflict, competition, and compromise among the colonies themselves. This study intervenes in the discourse by asking: How did New England handle disestablishment after the ratifications of the first amendment despite its Puritan roots? How did Virginia and New England define religious liberty differently, and how did those

definitions influence the new American republic? How did Virginia's economic and political background influence the founding father's goals of disestablishment?

Chapter 1: New England Founding Vision and Cultural Legacy

New England has been recognized as a beacon of knowledge, religion, and communal life in early colonial America. Both private and public life in New England prioritized a clear moral compass rooted in religion. The dense primary source collection is an example of knowledge preservation in the region and enables historians to write detailed histories. To understand the later historical debates with Virginia over church and state, this chapter first establishes the religious and political foundations of New England society. Despite New England not formally establishing itself as a religious state, the colony nevertheless was structured and functioned as a theocracy. This chapter will demonstrate the extent to which New England society and civic life depended on Puritanism to form and function as a religious society throughout the seventeenth century and then will examine how, despite religious fervour disseminating before the revolutionary war, New Englanders still sought to revive and replenish religion in the region through the Awakenings.

Section 1. Establishing Puritan Ideals and Social Order

New England has been historically described as a “city on the hill” to symbolize its role as a region founded on morality, religion and knowledge. Rooted in the Puritan faith, men and women left England in large numbers led by John Winthrop and landed in Massachusetts. Later becoming the governor of the Massachusetts Bay Company, Winthrop made it clear what he envisioned for the newly established religious colony. Winthrop’s renowned speech “A Model of

Christian Charity" echoes in "The Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company" forwarded to King Charles in 1628 where it states, "... Our said people, inhabitants there, may be so religiously, peaceably, and civilly governed… and the Christian faith, which in Our royal intention, and the adventurers free profession, is the principal end of this plantation."[1]

The following year, Reverend Francis Higginson gave a farewell speech to England while on board and stated, "We will not say, as the Separatists were wont to say at their leaving of England, 'Farewell Babylon, farewell Rome,' but we will say, 'Farewell dear England, farewell the church of God in England, and all the Christian friends there I do not go to New England as Separatists from the Church of England, tho we cannot but separate from the corruptions in it; but we go to practise the positive part of church reformation and propagate the gospel in America."[2] While the separation of church and state eventually swept all of the United States over a century later, this is significant to point out to understand the ideology on which New England was built on that later informed regional politics and debates. This is a clear divorce from all the corruption from the church in England and an effort by the colonists to bring only the good.

Leading the Massachusetts Bay colony, John Winthrop wished the colonists not only engaged in the knowledge of religion for their personal lives but attempted to create Puritanism as the foundation of the new home as well. The charter states the settlers wished to "win and incite the natives of the country to the knowledge and obedience of the only true God and Savior of mankind," reinforcing the idea that the English sought to create a settler colony. The objective

---

[1] "The Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company, 1628," *The Winthrop Society*, https://www.winthropsociety.com/charter

[2] Trouble finding the primary source but found in Henry Foote, "The Significance of the Cambridge Platform of 1648," https://www.harvardsquarelibrary.org/congregational-polity/significance-and-influence-cambridge-platform-foote/

was not coexistence or mutual respect, but rather the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity as part of a broader civilizing mission and creating the white race as the superior race in the region.

John Winthrop's vision can also be understood as a godly commonwealth from his renowned 1630 sermon aboard the Arabella with other colonists headed to the New World. In "A Model of Christian Charity" Winthrop announces to the colonists they must "seek out a place of cohabitation and consortship under a due form of Government both civil and ecclesiastical…" He goes on to state, "The end is to improve our lives to do more service to the Lord; the comfort and increase of the body of Christ, whereof we are members…"[3] Membership in the Puritan church was not just a matter of personal salvation but a prerequisite for political power. Only church saints who had undergone a conversion experience could become full church members and only full members could vote in Massachusetts Bay's political elections. The intertwining of religious and civil status reveals the extent that governance in New England was deeply theocratic. The Massachusetts Bay Colony also required that all freemen be members of a Puritan church. Edmund Morgan notes in *The Puritan Dilemma* that citizenship in Massachusetts was tied not to wealth or birth, but to the applicant's standing in the church.[4] This confirmed a religiously homogeneous electorate and kept civil power in the hands of the spiritually "elect."

The Puritans also viewed civil authority as an extension of religious authority so participation in public life required not just being a resident but spiritual legitimacy as well. The Cambridge Platform was written by the Congressionalist synod to establish a religious society that would later be accepted across the New England colony. Chapter one of the Cambridge

---

[3] "A Model of Christian Charity, 1630," https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/a-model-of-christian-charity-2/

[4] Edmund Morgan, *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop*, (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1958).

Platform states, “Church government is considered in a double respect, either in regard of the parts of government themselves, or necessary circumstances thereof.”[5] This language emphasizes that religious governance was not incidental or informal but intentionally structured and worded with attention to both the spiritual principles and the practical needs of a well functioning society. Creating the church government on scripture and community consensus, the Puritans made clear that religion was not only central to the individual and private life but the very foundation of public authority. The Cambridge Platform shows how the New England colonies institutionalized religion within their governing frameworks, toughening the argument that spiritual legitimacy and civic participation cannot divorce in the Puritan worldview.

Winthrop's ideal society of those coming together to uphold God's obligations as a community was played out in various forms, one being, as historian Jon Butler described, through "town covenants.” This was essentially the community coming together in fear of God and "to profess and practice one truth according to that most perfect rule..."[6] While the tight knit community for a new immigrant community might be ideal, it limited its participants on the basis of race, religion and eventually, class. Butler goes on to argue this enabled a society to be closed from others and being a community member essentially meant a membership in the Puritan congregation. The form of religious intimacy established between the community led to various towns being referred to as "communities of saints.”[7] Religious uniformity was so central to the extent that dissenters were punished or exiled. Roger Williams, who advocated for separation of church and state and fair dealings with Native Americans, was expelled in 1635 and founded Rhode Island as a haven for religious liberty. Anne Hutchinson, who questioned clerical

---

[5] “The Cambridge Platform, 1648.” https://pilgrim-platform.org/the-cambridge-platform/
[6] Jon Butler, *New World Faiths: Religion in Colonial America*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 52.
[7] Ibid, Jon Butler, New World Faiths: Religion in Colonial America, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 54.

authority and the way to achieve salvation, was also expelled. These different events demonstrate the limits of religious freedom in early New England and the broader desire to preserve a unified moral order.

Despite efforts to establish a harmonious society as Christian merchants and farmers, as mentioned, Winthrop did not include the natives in this equation. English settlers encroaching on native lands led to the inevitable conflicts with the most consequential one being King Phillips' War beginning in 1675. Thomas Kidd argues that morale in New England declined significantly after King Philip's War, leading many English settlers to turn more towards religion in an effort to avert divine punishment.[8] The product of such widespread despair and anxiety naturally resulted in a new movement or a stronger push towards religion which ultimately fueled the Great Awakening and Revivalist movement of the late 18th century. Perry Miller, when writing on Jonathan Edwards, essentially brought forth the argument of the Great Awakening being "'nothing more than an inevitable culmination' of covenant renewals" due to the widespread desperation of the settlers.[9] The postwar sense of divine judgment created common anxiety that encouraged tighter moral codes and revivalism. While the First Great Awakening would not occur until decades later, the present patterns of self-examination and despair initiated it all. Sermons began drastically preaching moral decline to such an extent, ministers across New England preached Jeremiads more commonly and urged the community to return to religion.[10]

To prove the effectiveness of the sermons, Harry Stout's book on the social history of New England preaching, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial*

---

[8]Thomas Kidd, *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 2.

[9] Perry Miller, "Jonathan Edwards and the Great Awakening," …….

[10] Jeremiads were mournful sermons in colonial America, particularly in Puritan New England, preached by ministers urging the return to religion and warning of a religious and spiritual decline.

New England, is an exemplary text which demonstrates how the preachings functioned as channels of information and served to regularly disseminate knowledge, both educational and religious, along with local news in colonial New England.[11] Strategically integrating all things secular into Puritan sermons would not only serve their purpose of gathering the people but would also require people of different religious backgrounds to come together. The communal gatherings continued to function in favor of the religious, political and social order of New England established by Puritans. The sermons were the most consistent form of information for the colonists since over the span of the colonial period, there were over five million separate messages in the community "whose population never exceeded one-half million and whose principal city never grew beyond seventeen thousand" making it the most consistent source of information and knowledge.[12] As a key component in sharing knowledge, the colonists were dependent on the sermons for information even if it was intertwined with a religious purpose. This would eventually contribute to the normalization of Puritanism as a religion being shared and spread even if the colonists intention was not to receive the faith. This can be summed up in Perry Miller's *The New England Soul* in which he states:

> Puritan life, in the New England theory, was centered upon a corporate and communal ceremony, upon the oral delivery of a lecture, and the effort of the Massachusetts Bay Company to set up a due form of government both civil and ecclesiastical came ultimately to the one purpose of gathering men and women together in orderly congregations that they might sit under a 'powerful' and a literate ministry, that they might hear the Word of

[11] Harry Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) pg 3.
[12] Ibid, *Harry Stout, The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England,* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) pg 4.

> God as well as read it, and hear it not as it was written in revelation, but as it was expounded by that ministry, refashioned into doctrines, reasons, and uses…[13]

Section 2. Religion in New England Economics

The admiral of the colony John Smith viewed New England with much potential and if the newly arrived colonists put effort into the colony, it would be equal to "any of those famous Kingdomes, in all commodities, pleasures and conditions."[14] Described as a moral capitalist society by Stephen Innes, the New England colonists established a market economy and intertwined with it the civics and moral code system to ensure its success.[15] The civic ecology of New England was based firmly in a culture based on discipline, responsibility to the community, and "high ratio of savings and investment relative to income by its limitation on leisure."[16] The society based on little leisure, strict savings and consistently striving to invest would naturally result in an economically successful colony. The consistent description of the New England colony having rocky soil and cold climate causing the colonists to rely heavily on subsistence farming led historians to the conclusion that the colonists merely survived and made good out of the bad when establishing their settlement. However, the success of the commercial and agricultural society allowed the New Englanders to not only survive but also establish consistent and reliable trade routes with England and other colonies, particularly from exporting timber.

Despite the general economic success of the New England colony, the settlers did not indulge with the standard form of capitalism New Englanders have today. A seventeenth century

---

[13] Perry Miller, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England,* (Cambridge: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1983), 298.
[14] John Smith quoted in *Creating the Commonwealth*, 64.
[15] Stephen Innes. *Creating the Commonwealth.* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1998) 7.
[16] Ibid, 9.

example of this would be the import merchant Robert Keayne who was fined £200 for what is known as price gouging today but labeled as oppression then. The merchant sold a bag of nails for more than twopence at mark up price leading to additional investigations which proved he had done this form of, what was deemed by the Puritan society, oppression before with other goods. After the General Court had fined him, Keayne had to face the Boston First Church as well for "selling his wares at excessive Rates, to the Dishonor of God's name, the Offense of the Great Generall Court, and the Publique scandall of the Country." Robert Keayne later stood before the congregation and "with tears, acknowledge and bewail his covetous and corrupt heart."[17] This is one example and demonstration of how New England was not merely a settlement there to strictly grow economically in the seventeenth century but had a moral code that was strictly followed, even at the expense of a few pounds. Despite the religious fervour reducing in the early 18th century, the colony nevertheless still managed to try to keep the religion as the foundation of the colony.

Despite the Puritan context rooted in all aspects of communal life, religious zeal across the colony began to decline. A clear sign of this was the establishment of the Half-way Covenant by the Congressionalist church polity in the 1660s. Used as a device to create partial church membership, the Half-way Covenant was a natural response for the generations following the initial settlers who were unable to furnish proof of their conversion. No longer being a church full of saints with an explicit conversion experience, many Congressionalists argued being of biological descent was sufficient enough to be a part of the church, unless a descendant broke the line intentionally via excommunication. The 1662 synod is a clear example of the colony's effort

[17] Quoted from Stephen Innes. *Creating the Commonwealth.* (New York: WW Norton & Co, 1998) 160-161.

to maintain a religious grounding despite a continuously changing colonial society as time went on.

Section 3. Modernization or Reorganization?

New England began to lose religious fervor and attempted to revive it through various forms such as religious awakenings which would also inform regional politics leading up to the American Revolution. The context of the New England Pre-Revolutionary War was a Puritan one and can be seen through the politics of the Great Awakening. The Great Awakenings were a clear example of an altering colony who nevertheless wishes to maintain an intentionally religious society.[18] For this section, I will strictly review the First Great Awakening movement starting in the 1730s but lasting through the American Revolution.

About four generations into the settlement, the religious zeal which the colonists fled for initially began to die down by the early 1700s. The First Great Awakening Movement is described as an initial battle between the Old and New Lights, where the Old Lights were firmly against the revivals but the New Lights supported them. The New Lights were individuals who revived by allowing people who traditionally were excluded from the church, into the religious space such as women, the poor and nonwhites. Nonwhites and women that were initially discriminated against in the church were holding high positions such as pastors and elders thanks to the revivalists.[19] While the Old Lights viewed these emotional displays and inclusive practices as a threat to social and religious stability, the New Lights saw them as necessary inclusions to a

[18] Historians have agreed that there were three to four Great Awakenings in American history, though the fourth one is debated. Spanning from the 18th century to the mid 20th century, each movement called for a religious revival while the third one focused on social issues and the Social Gospel movement.
[19] Thomas Kidd. *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America,* 2007.

spiritually stagnant society. There could have been a larger movement of secularism, however, these revivals were radical enough by definition for the Old Lights, and a subtle next step for the church towards potential secularization leading up to the New Republic. The revivalists' call for renewed spiritual vigor can be seen as an effort to reassert religion's central role in civil life. From this, the revivals were not an aberration but a continuation of the deeply rooted Puritan effort to preserve moral order through communal religious experience. The New Lights were a group that was both radical and reinforcers in the idea that New England's strength and legitimacy stem from its covenant with God. Language surrounding the Great Awakening would be a strong reflection of what the New Englanders were facing amid the transition from a strictly fundamentalist society to a more inclusive one. Inclusivity was not limited to nonwhites and women but also the common people who have traditionally been expected to defer to the elites of society. This will be highlighted later when discussing the influence of the revivalist sermons on the New England commoners.

Fomenting the first Great Awakening throughout the North American colonies, George Whitefield is a great starting point for those interested in learning more of what the movement was, in addition to how it was received and understood. George Whitefield's journals are a great example of what New Englander's were witnessing and experiencing during the first Great Awakening; however, as Thomas Kidd argues, the writings were also intended for the publishing marketing and to bolster his name and career.[20] Nevertheless, the writings are still a rich source and his sermons were attended by thousands on some occasions. Benjamin Franklin estimated that Whitefield had around twenty five thousand listeners in a single sermon once.[21] While these

[20] Thomas Kidd. *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America,* 2007, 40.
[21] Ibid, 45.

numbers may be exaggerated, it still reflects how prominent figures of the time witnessed swaths of people attend his sermons. The individuals who attended the sermons were not simply elites but also commoners who have been excluded either by being unable to read the sermons in the pamphlets or the publishers using language they were unfamiliar with. The location of these sermons were also influential and different from what it traditionally was prior to the revival. In England the people enjoyed sermons within the church walls, while in Philadelphia six thousand colonists attended Whitefield's sermons from the steps of the court house.[22] To speak on how his sermons were delivered and revered by the colonists, a New York observer told the colonial newspaper what he witnessed after attending Whitefield's sermons:

> I came home astonished. Every scruple vanished; I never saw or heard the like; and I said within myself, Surely God is with this man of a truth! . . . Mr. Whitefield is a man of middle stature, of a slender body, a fair complexion and a comely appearance. He is of sprightly cheerful temper and acts and moves with great agility. The endowments of his mind are very uncommon. . . . He has a most ready memory and, I think, speaks entirely without notes. He has a clear and musical voice, and a wonderful command of it. He uses much gesture, but with great propriety. Every accent of his voice, and every motion of his body, speaks, and both are natural and unaffected. If his delivery be the product of art, 'tis certainly the perfection of it, for it is entirely concealed. He has a great mastery of words, but studies much plainness of speech.[23]

In George Whitefield's sermon "Worldly Business No Plea for the Neglect of Religion" of 1739, he states, "First then, I am to prove, that no temporal business, though ever so important, can justify a neglect of true religion. By the word religion, I do not mean any set of moral virtues, any partial amendment of ourselves, or formal attendance on any outward duties whatsoever: but an application of Christ's whole and personal righteousness, made by faith to our hearts; a thorough real change of nature wrought in us by the invisible, yet powerful operation of

---

[22] Ibid.
[23] Quoted in Thomas Kidd's *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America,* pg 49.

the Holy Ghost, preserved and nourished in our souls by a constant use of all the means of grace, evidenced by a good life, and bringing forth the fruits of the Spirit."[24] As a renowned revivalist in both England and North America, Whitefield's words could be a solid reflection of what these movements meant to the colonists. Due to the waning religious society, these sermons were not merely a call to reflect and reintroduce religion to civil life but instead integrate and hold the religion superior to all secular life. This wave of religious enthusiasm was not just a reaction to spiritual apathy but a reaffirmation of the belief that New England's social order was inseparable from its religious foundations.

The revivalist movement did not dismantle the Puritan legacy but rather adapted it to meet the needs of a society facing social change over time. The inclusive and emotional language used in both sermons and print materials suggested an urgent desire to maintain a sense of divine purpose while amid traditional structures dismantling. By framing the spiritual rebirth as significant to civil and public life, the Great Awakening effectively reaffirms religion's relevance but not through dogma, but through adaptability and a form of mass appeal that can be seen as really attainable by people. From this, revivalism was both a cultural and spiritual effort between early Puritan ideals and the increasingly more diverse colonial world that began to include people of all backgrounds both by using common language in the sermons and holding it in public spaces outside of the church.

The influence of revivalist ideas went beyond the pulpit, and Harry S. Stout's analysis demonstrates how the Great Awakening was shaping colonial public discourse despite in essence being a religious movement. In his essay "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution," Stout argues that the revivalist sermons functioned as the

---

[24] George Whitefield. "Worldly Business No Plea for the Neglect of Religion, 1739." *Whitefield's Sermons*. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/whitefield/sermons.xxii.html

way through which New Englanders engaged with both theological and political ideas. Ministers were not only spiritual leaders but also influential orators who helped frame the ideological vocabulary of liberty, covenant, and resistance all in common language. The Great Awakening was an event that gave start to the emotional preaching style, emphasis on moral urgency, and accessible rhetoric for the common people created a template for future public mobilization.

Stout also emphasized how the knowledge disseminated from the sermons were no longer serving the elite but the common people who were traditionally left out of the discourse which was usually through pamphlets and other print material. He states that the revivalists' sermons "technique of mass address to a voluntary audience forced a dialogue between speaker and hearer that disregarded social position and local setting" to such an extent it was a new form of persuasion that was not traditionally heard before.[25] To drive his point home, Stout argues that what made the sermons different was not merely the fact that it was using revivalist rhetoric but "the revolutionary setting in which the good news was proclaimed."[26] Stout's insights reveal that revivalism did not simply serve spiritual aims but also influenced the public's sense of collective identity and "a rebirth of the localistic impulse" which would lay the foundation for revolutionary language in the next few decades. [27]

The same revivalist fervor that pushed religion back to the center of public life also offered something for colonial society to reimagine its own societal structure and destiny. By broadcasting sermons across large outdoor gatherings and distributing religious words widely, revivalist leaders shaped a shared cultural and political consciousness that transcended local

---

[25]Harry S. Stout, "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution." The William and Mary Quarterly, 34, no. 4 (1977), 519-54, 527.
[26] Ibid, 526.
[27] Kenneth A Lockridge, *Settlement and Unsettlement in Early America* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 43-44.

church governance and into the public. Some historians state that the Great Awakening was the event that made New England Puritans Yankees by driving them to become more politically shaped.[28] The author also argued that this was a problem for the established religious authority in New England because it was challenging the traditional hierarchy, norms of the church sermons and who was included. The Great Awakening was not merely a religious revival but a cultural revival for future ideological campaigns of those leading the American Revolution.

Section 5. Religious to More Secular Authority in Preparation for American Revolution

Harry Stout's argument was critical in understanding how revivalism was able to firmly ground itself in Puritanism but began to explore and loosen up the religious restrictions to not only include more people but later set up for the American Revolution. While Jon Butler has a similar argument in response, the historian argues it was not a direct result of The Great Awakening. Butler argues that while revivalism challenged traditional religious and social authorities by empowering the traditionally excluded groups such as the commoners, its political consequences were uncertain and not a direct line to the revolutionary war. Nevertheless, both still argued there was connection between the two. Revivalist and evangelists discussed a new society free of England's rule leading up to the American Revolution by looking at sermons and constitutions that were intertwined with religion. This will later be in contrast with the manner Virginia led up to the revolution and how their leaders did not refer to scripture to justify their version of the American Revolution.

---

[28] Richard L Bushman, *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

Despite a decline in religious fervor and the later rise of the Great Awakening to revive it, New Englanders maintained a firm conviction to the religious foundations under which the colony had been originally established. Historians have argued that by the third or fourth generation of Puritans of the New England colony, religion was no longer as significant; however, this argument is debatable by analyzing the rhetoric and language of those running for office and established laws leading up to the Revolution and during the period of the early republic.

Gilbert Tennent (1703–1764) was a Presbyterian minister and one of the most influential figures of the First Great Awakening. Born in Ireland and educated at Yale, he settled in New Jersey and became known for his influential revivalist preaching style. He was influenced by the pietist theology of his father, William Tennent, and was a distinguished leader in a movement that emphasized true conversion over traditional and formal education or ecclesiastical status. Through his sermons and leadership, Tennent became a prominent critic of the established clergy and a critical voice in the push toward a more personal and egalitarian form of Protestantism in the American colonies.

Gilbert Tennent's 1740 sermon *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry* is an example of how revivalists used religious rhetoric to challenge traditional authority in the decades leading up to the American Revolution.[29] In this sermon, Tennent criticized unconverted ministers, those he believed lacked genuine spiritual experience, and compared them to the Pharisees who misled the people during Christ's time. He did not hold back, describing these ministers as prideful,

---

[29] Cotton Mather, *The Present State of New-England, Considered in a Discourse on the Necessities and Advantages of a Public Spirit in Every Man* (Boston: Printed by B. Green, 1690), https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N03758.0001.001.

politically motivated, and spiritually dead because they were only focused in on formalities rather than what he considered true spiritualism. What makes Tennent significant is that he called on ordinary people to be discerning of their ministers, encouraging a new level of religious agency and judgment among the laity despite their status. His message also reflects how the revivalist movement broke down traditional hierarchies and gave religious voice to those previously excluded. In doing so, Tennent and others like him contributed to a broader cultural shift in New England which was one that emphasized moral authority over institutional power. This also enabled and helped prepare people to imagine a new kind of society breaking from the traditional colonial structure which was built on inherited positions.

In his famous sermon, Gilbert Tennent draws a connection between the religious leadership of Christ's time and the spiritual condition of the colonists, stating, "But notwithstanding of the great Crowds of these Orthodox, Letter-learned and regular Pharisees, our Lord laments the unhappy Case of that great Number of People… For all them, the People were as Sheep without a Shepherd."[30] The sort of imagery that Tennet highlights here is a critique of established religious authorities who, despite their appearance of orthodoxy, failed to provide genuine spiritual guidance for the people. Tennent's emphasis on the "unconverted ministry" exposes a ministry that was more focused on maintaining power and tradition than on truly guiding the people's souls. Tennent not only challenges the established clergy of his own day but also emphasizes the urgent need for revivalist fervor that could reach and empower the common people. This idea of a neglected and leaderless group became a rallying cry for the Great Awakening's emphasis on personal conversion. Furthermore, this critique also reflects broader

[30] Gilbert Tennent, *The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry, Consider'd in a Sermon* on Mark VI. 34, preached at Nottingham, Pennsylvania, March 8, 1739/40, https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno=N03758.0001.001.

social and political undercurrents in New England, where revivalism's challenge to traditional authority paralleled growing demands for more inclusive and participatory form governance for all colonists. This way Tennent's sermon not only calls for religious renewal but also shows a change toward a society that questions hierarchical structures which ultimately was a shift that helped create the ideological ground for the American Revolution.

New England society during colonial America was undeniably created on Puritanism as a religion that not only penetrated the personal lives of the Puritans but also a community whose sole purpose was to build a civilization to serve God. Faith intermingled with the legal system leading to religion's role as the foundation of the law which can be seen later when discussing the Massachusetts constitution. While Puritanism was the driver of morality and functionality in colonial New England, Virginia did not use the same framework for its colony having it use an utterly contrasting ideological framework leading up the revolution.

Chapter 2: The Role of Faith in Colonial Virginia's Social Order

Despite 18th century Virginian religious culture being heavily Protestant, that was not the case for the colony before the Revolutionary war. Popular religion before the establishment of the new republic in colonial Virginia was Anglican and it has not received adequate scholarship.[31] There has been an abundance of research done on the economic, social and political history of Virginia but very little has been written on its religious history. Historian Brent Tarter states scholars have reviewed surviving documents and connected it generally to individualism rather than an extensive research into the religious beliefs of the colonists.[32] The records do an extensive job at giving historians an abundance of information on colonial plantation life, slavery, and economics often leading to the assumption that early colonists who landed on the east coast were merely there for the sake of riches and devoid of religion. However, that is inaccurate especially considering the significance of the English Reformation and influence on every Englishmen despite where they lived. This chapter argues that colonial Virginia's religious culture was less about communal piety or revival and more about reinforcing elite power, promoting economic gain, and sustaining a hierarchical social order. By analyzing sermons, political charters, personal writings, and key legal texts, this chapter shows how religion in Virginia served primarily as a tool of colonization, social control, and the ideological groundwork for secular individualism in the early republic.

---

[31] Historians have typically referred to and studied the pre revolutionary Anglican identity through the lens of Protestantism which became popular in 19th century Virginia. Refer to Jacob Blosser's "Pursuing Happiness in Colonial Virginia: Sacred Words, Cheap Print, and Popular Religion in the Eighteenth Century," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol 118, No. 2, 2010, 211.

[32] Paul Rasor, Richard E. Bond, *From Jamestown to Jefferson : The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Virginia,* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011).

Despite the religious contrast with New England, the economy and geography also contributed to Virginia's identity. Unlike the north's geography which is generally regarded as a rocky land needing less slave labor, Virginia has rich soil and an abundance of land that needed as much slave labor as possible to suffice the tobacco market. Alongside this, the economic structure and religious identity both contributed to a tool for maintaining social hierarchy and economic control.

Moses I Finley wrote, "private, concentrated landownership, sufficient development of commodity production and markets, and unavailability of an internal labor supply" are all critical to the system however, "as always, the starting point is the land."[33] As indentured servants declined in popularity over the course of eighteenth century Virginia, the landowners began importing African slaves which led to the development of a successful exporting economy. The tobacco economy reigned superior in Virginia for decades.

Section 1. The Political Economy of Faith in Colonial Virginia

The Seventeenth century Virginia Company used religion in the colony to give reasoning and maintain order over the land. Unlike early colonial New England, the sermons in Virginia were rarely on the topic of becoming a strong, god-ordained community for the other colonies to follow. Sermons in the early 17th century Virginia colony, as Haig Smith described, were frequently intertwined with language on wealth and God's wish for the English to colonize the new lands and ultimately spread the faith to the natives. It is difficult to say if the financial profits came first or religion for the early Virginia colonists, but one can argue that both went hand in hand since many preached that in order to be wealthy, the colonists needed religion.

---

[33] Moses I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology,* (Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1980), 132.

Another key factor in early Virginia colony sermons was the use of religion to justify the colonization of the natives, particularly the Powhatan.

John Smith was an explorer who aided in the establishment of Jamestown and one of the masterminds behind its success. The adventurous colonizer documented his experience for those back home in England and took detailed notes of natives to further justify colonial exploitation. His writings also put the purpose of the land grab into perspective as truly a settler colony and drives King James the I's points home. In this 1612 document "A Map of Virginia. With a Description of the Countrey, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion by John Smith", Smith first begins the section on native religion by stating, "There is yet in Virginia no place discovered to bee so Savage in which the Savages have not a religion, Deare, and Bow and Arrowes. All thinges that were able to do them hurt beyond their prevention, they adore with their kinde of divine worship; as the fire, water, lightning, thunder, our ordinance, peeces, horses…"[34] What Smith first does is establish the primal and backward state of the natives by associating deer, bows and arrows with people the colonists have encountered whereas the English come with more advanced technologies such as guns. Smith goes on to state, "By him is commonly the sepulcher of their kings. Their bodies are first bowelled, then dryed upon hurdles till they bee verie dry, and so about the most of their iointes and necke they hang bracelets or chaines of copper, pearle, and such like, as they vse to weare: their inwards they stuffe with copper beads and couer with a skin, hatchets, and such trash."[35] By describing in vivid detail how the Powhatan honored their leaders by using what he deemed primitive objects like copper

[34]"John Smith. "A Map of Virginia. With a Description of the Countrey, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion, 1612." https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/a-map-of-virginia-with-a-description-of-the-countrey-the-commodities-people-government-and-religion-by-john-smith-1612/
[35] Ibid.

beads and "trash," Smith reinforced to his English readers the perception of the natives as uncivilized, thus justifying the need for both religious conversion and colonial domination.

This fusion of religious rhetoric with imperial ambition reveals how colonization in Virginia was framed not as a purely economic endeavor, but as a divine mission sanctioned by God. The colonists were not just settlers, but also the instruments and beneficiaries of a providential plan to civilize and Christianize the land, a schema that quickly combined the ideas of conquest and calling. By doing this, religion became a facade that only sought to seek out material gain, embedding spiritual language into the very foundations of Virginia's settler-colonial logic.

Later, the House of Burgesses was established in 1619 and took much responsibility for the church in the colony. In 1663 The Carolina Charter by King James I would establish a more religiously tolerant society; however, the colonial government was only allowed to support the Church of England.[36] Historian Monica Najar argues, "The religious and ethnic diversity of the settlers—by the 1740s, the colony had significant populations of English Quakers, Scots-Irish Presbyterians, and a number of German sects—ensured that, during the early eighteenth century, no single church could dominate the religious life of the colony."[37] This set up the foundations of the religious toleration which later came out of Virginia by the Founding Fathers a few decades later.

Other than to justify colonization of the native people, religion was also used to call the colonists to seek out wealth in colonial Virginia, setting up one of the foundations for an

[36] Monica Najar, *Evangelizing the South : a social history of church and state in early America,* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[37] Ibid.

individualist society which would later inform the Founding Fathers vision. King James I states in the First Charter of Virginia:

> "We greatly commending, and graciously accepting of, their desires for the furtherance of so noble a work, which may, by the providence of Almighty God, hereafter tend to the glory of his divine Majesty, in propagating of Christian religion to such people, as yet live in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God, and may in time bring the infidels and savages, living in those parts, to human civility, and to a settled and quiet government; Do, by these our letters pattents, graciously accept of, and agree to, their humble and well intended desires…"[38]

Being one of the early texts of colonial Virginia during the time of Englishmen and women immigrating from England to the New World, this text set the tone and showed some of the reasoning behind England's efforts to seek out the new lands similarly to John Winthrop's The Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company. While John Winthrop's vision remained clear and historians have used to justify the reasoning behind Winthrop's influence on the colonization of New England, King James' intention for the New World can be shown here in similar ways. The goal of spreading the religion and fulfilling God's duty by calling the savages to faith was a part of the mission.

However, primary documents such as this one have proven that New England's colonists' hope for the New World was internally facing while colonial Virginia's is externally facing for riches and land. King James goes on to state, "And moreover, we do grant and agree, for us, our heirs and successors; that the said several councils, of and for the said several colonies, shall and lawfully may, by virtue hereof, from time to time, without any interruption of us, our heirs or successors, give and take order, to dig, mine, and search for all manner of mines of gold, silver, and copper, as well within any part of their said several colonies, as of the said main lands on the

[38] "First Charter of Virginia, 1606" https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/first-charter-of-virginia-1606/

backside."[39] King James sets the foundation of what other purpose the colonists will be serving in the name of religion. This text is explicitly stating the colony will be seeking out the raw material for the fulfillment of England.

The sermons in colonial Virginia also prove that financial gain was a driving factor for the colony. The humanistic community, which frequently held sermons in the region during the seventeenth century, typically would preach both the American secular and religious mission, usually arguing that the difficulties the colonists were facing were not merely due to religion but also due to the people's financial state.[40] To emphasize the role of land and riches in Virginia which was intertwined with religion, the Virginia Company would offer English ministers "stipend of up to £200 a year, as well as offering land, sometimes amounting to 100 acres, with a guarantee of six tenants to work the land."[41] While New England leadership would later concern themselves with price gouging, Virginia colonial leaders were occupied with creating financial incentives and bribes to get more ministers in the colony by offering and creating Glebe Lands. Unlike the revivalist in New England, religion in Virginia operated within a framework of patronage. This strategy reveals the extent to which religious institutions in Virginia were tied to material advancement rather than spiritual renewal like that of New England. Clergy were frequently viewed less as moral authorities and more as agents of order, brought in to stabilize society and reinforce economic productivity.

This point can be further argued by Samuel Davies' sermon titled "Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier" of 1755 which, as the name suggests, was to

[39] Ibid.
[40] Haig Z. Smith, *Religion and Governance in England's Emerging Colonial Empire, 1601–1698*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), 48-49.
[41] Ibid, 49.

further the political and religious cause simultaneously in Virginia. In this sermon, Davies' preaches:

> And shall their ravages go unchecked? Shall Virgnia incur the guilt, and the everlasting shame of tamely exchanging her liberty, her religion and her all, for arbitrary Gallic power, and for popish slavery, tyranny and massacre? Alas! Are there none of her children that enjoyed the blessings of her peace, that will espouse her cause, and befriend her now in the time of her danger? Are Britons utterly degenerated by so short a remove from their mother-country? Is the spirit of patriotism entirely extinguished among us? and must I give thee up for lost, O my Country! and all that is included in that important word? Must I look upon thee as a conquered, enslaved province of France and the Range of Indian Savages? My heart breaks at the thought. And must ye, our unhappy brethren in our frontiers, must ye stand the single barriers of a ravaged country, unassisted, and unbefriended, unpitied? Alas! Must I draw these shocking conclusions?[42]

Samuel Davies' sermon exemplifies the relationship between religion and political causes during the 18th century in Virginia. Unlike New England, which was focused on keeping religion internally facing for the most part and calling the people to revive their spiritual relationship with God, in colonial Virginia religion was to further push and support the elites' vision of preserving political authority and maintaining social hierarchy. Davies' does not focus on grassroot revival, spiritual awakening and a Godly community but instead, focusing on the ravages and hopes of colonists protecting liberty as patriots as much as people of God. Religion ultimately did influence the Founding Fathers and this can be seen in Thomas Jefferson's rationale behind his push for disestablishment. Thomas Jefferson has consistently used faith to back his argument of freedom of religion in the New Republic. In the 1779 Statute of Religious Freedom he states:

> All Mighty God hath created the mind free, and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate

[42] Samuel Davies, "Religion and Patriotism The Constituents of a Good Soldier: A Sermon, 1755."

> it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone… that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time.[43]

Jefferson's statute reveals how religion, rather than being dismissed entirely, was a personal and moral compass that should not be enforced by civil authority. His argument relied on a belief that true faith could only emerge through reason and voluntary conviction, not through institutional coercion which was an idea that still drew on Protestant values of individual conscience and divine moral order. By invoking God's will to justify religious liberty, Jefferson demonstrated that even in advocating for disestablishment, religious language and logic were still critical in shaping political thought. This shows that the Founding Fathers, particularly in Virginia, did not seek to erase religion from public life but to reposition it as a matter of personal freedom later aligning both Enlightenment ideals and Anglican influences to support a new secular framework.

Section 2. Individualism and Religious Culture in Colonial Virginia

Unlike New England, religion in colonial Virginia was more about upholding the established social hierarchy and moving in moderation as most colonists focused more on the material than the spiritual. While the House of Burgesses and vestries carried influence in the colony, it is not the same influence as the church authority in New England. Seventeenth and Eighteenth century life in the colonies or back home in England was deeply intertwined with religion. In Virginia, it had more to do with maintaining a social hierarchy. As historian Rhys

[43] Thomas Jefferson, "Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, 1779." https://cas.umw.edu/cprd/files/2011/09/Jefferson-Statute-2-versions.pdf

Isaac explains, churchgoing "had more to do with expressing the dominance of the gentry than with inculcating piety or forming devout personalities."[44] One way Isaac encompasses this is by sharing the words of Reverend Mr. Hugh Jones who states:

> Neither would they have meer scholars and stoicks, or zealots too rigid in outward appearance, as they would be without loose and licentious profligates; . . . And as in words and actions they should be neither too reserved nor too extravagant; so in principles should they be neither too high or too low: The Virginians being neither favourers of popery . . . nor of presbytery. . . . They must be such as can converse and know more than bare philosophy and speculative ethicks, and have studied men and business . . . as well as books; they may . . . be facetious and good-humoured, without too much freedom and licentiousness.[45]

This quote of the reverend demonstrated the sort of balance colonists in the Virginia colony wished to strike between the spiritual and material. Considering the time period and the contrast this expectation holds with colonial New England, this quote also proves how lax the religious authority of the region was. This sort of laxness can be proven by the way some sacred gatherings and ceremonies such as weddings and funerals were held at home rather than traditionally at a church in England. Reverend Mr. Hugh Jones states:

> It is customary to bury in gardens or orchards, where whole families lye interred together, in a spot generally handsomely enclosed, planted with evergreens, and the graves kept decently. Hence . . . arises the occa- sion of preaching funeral sermons in houses, where at funerals are as- sembled a great congregation of neighbours and friends; and if you insist upon having the sermon and ceremony at church, they'll say they will be without it, unless performed after their usual custom. In houses also there is occasion, from humour, custom sometimes, from necessity most frequently, to baptize children and church women. . . . In houses also they most commonly marry, without regard to the time of day or season of the year."[46]

---

[44] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982) 120.
[45] Ibid, 120-121.
[46] Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*, (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982) pg?

The elite Virginian William Byrd II's diary offers insight into the nature of communal and religious life in early 18th-century Virginia. His diary, ranging from 1709 to 1712, despite the timespan, demonstrates how religion functioned as a social routine rather than hinting at any form of deep spiritual engagement. Byrd treats religion as a customary routine which occasionally mentions church attendance and biblical discussions, but offering little insight into its spiritual significance for him. Unlike many eighteenth century New England colonists, whose religious writings emphasized deep spiritual reflection, Byrd's references are light and reflect social habit rather than personal conviction. In his May 18, 1709 diary entry he states, "I rose at 5 o'clock and read two chapters in Hebrew and some Greek in Josephus. I said my prayers and ate milk for breakfast. I danced my dance [did calisthenic exercises]. This was [a] fast day to pray to God to remove the fatal sickness with which this country has been of late afflicted. There was the most people at church I ever saw there."[47] In this excerpt, Byrd demonstrates that when there is a high number of churchgoers in a single period, it is associated with inflictions the nation has been challenged with rather than any form of spiritual revivalism.

In conclusion, religion in colonial Virginia functioned not as something that drove spirituality but instead as a tool to reinforce the colony's economic goals, maintenance of the social hierarchy, and emerging ideology of individualism. Unlike the deeply spiritual and communal religiosity of New England, Virginia's religious culture was shaped by elite interests, colonial governance, and the material conditions of plantation life. Religion helped justify conquest, slavery, and wealth accumulation, often cloaked in divine language to serve political ends. Rather than promoting communal revival, Virginia's religious institutions promoted

[47] "The Diary of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1709-1712: Selections," *National Humanities Center Resource Toolbox, Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies*, 1690-1763.

structure and order. Religion in colonial Virginia assisted in creating a more secular and individualist society which the colony is confronted with later during the Revolutionary period. Founding Fathers such as Thomas Jefferson were responsible for framing religious liberty as a personal right rooted in choice. Thus, Virginia's religious history reveals more of the relationship between faith, power, and profit in shaping both colonial life and the ideological foundations of the early republic. Compared to New England, Virginia accepted enlightenment ideals and religious liberty before the revolution. Hence why when drafting the constitution, Massachusetts would be in the position of continuously reviving their state constitution to fit the federal framework of liberty Post-Revolutionary Era.

Chapter 3: Clashing Religious Ideologies in the Early Republic

While religion did not dictate every civic decision in the American colonies, its influence particularly in New England, was rooted so deeply that Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw would later refer to its structure as a "dual corporation," where church and state coexisted as pillars of public life.[48] Yet despite the ideological differences between New England and Virginia, there was one common denominator for most of their miseries; the British Empire. Across the colonies, Jefferson and other Enlightenment thinkers paid a great deal of attention to Nature, especially in his 1774 *A Summary View of Rights of British Americans*. Free trade within and beyond the colonies was considered a natural right of man but the British Empire made it strictly between the colonies and Britain. Explaining what was unnatural, Jefferson said "An acts passed during the reign of George II forbade an American 'to make a hat for himself of the fur which he has taken perhaps on his soil.'" Iron was mined in the American colonies but would only be shipped out to Britain for manufacturing.[49]

Section 1. The Constitutional Convention and the Bill of Rights

While not formally considered a philosopher, Thomas Jefferson was a prodigious writer whose influence was naturally beyond the American borders. Serving as the third president of the United States and being remembered as the Founding Father who ultimately established religious freedom, Jefferson's ideological background rooted in Enlightenment ideals set in motion at least the idea of American rights, despite not formally granting all people on American

[48] Quote from "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts 1780-1833."
[49] Edwin Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson,* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996) 44.

soil rights. During the time period groups opposing Jefferson, such as the Anti Federalists, discussed his religious background as either an atheist or deist. To such a degree that when Thomas Jefferson was running for president in 1800, the pressing point against the Founding Father was his "heretical" beliefs and being irreligious.[50] However, Thomas Jefferson was raised in a Protestant household and held Christian beliefs. Historian Claude Bowers stated in her book *Jefferson and Hamilton: The Struggle for Democracy in America*:

> He planned at least one church and contributed to the erection of others, gave freely to Bible Societies, and liberally to the support of the clergy. He attended church with normal regularity, taking his prayer book to the services and joining in the responses and prayers of the congregation… During the period of his social ostracism by the intolerant partisans of Philadelphia, he passed many evenings with Dr. Rush in conversation on religion. 'I am Christian,' he once said, 'in the only sense in which Jesus wished any one to be - sincerely attached to his doctrines in preference to all others.' On one occasion when a man of distinction expressed his disbelief in the truths of the Bible, he said, 'Then, sir, you have studied it to little.'[51]

Also, a champion of establishing religious freedom in the United States, James Madison firmly opposed Governor Patrick Henry's legislative bill titled "Establishing a Provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion." This bill would allow tax dollars to be used to fund religious educational programs in Virginia. Madison would then respond to this bill by publishing "The 'Memorial and Remonstrance'" of 1785 which "offers Madison's most comprehensive and philosophical statement on the fundamental political principles excluding religion as such from civil jurisdiction. It stands as the pinnacle of his theoretical reflections on the subject of church and state."[52] In this text, he states,

---

[50] Jacob E. Hicks, *To Contest With All the Powers of Darkness: New England Baptists, Religious Liberty, and New Political Landscapes, 1740-1833,* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2024) 2.
[51] Claude G. Bowers, *Jefferson and Hamilton;: The struggle for democracy in America*, (Boston: Houghton Mifflin company, 1925), 103.
[52] Vincent Phillip Munoz, "James Madison's Principle of Religious Liberty," *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003), p. 21.

> "We… citizens of the said Commonwealth, having taken into serious consideration, a Bill… entitled 'A Bill establishing a provision for Teachers of the Christian Religion,' …will be a dangerous abuse of power, are bound as faithful members of a free State to remonstrate against it… Because we hold it for a fundamental and undeniable truth, "that Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence." The Religion then of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man; and it is the right of every man to exercise it as these may dictate. This right is in its nature an unalienable right. It is unalienable, because the opinions of men, depending only on the evidence contemplated by their own minds cannot follow the dictates of other men: It is unalienable also, because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator."[53]

Madison's *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* makes clear his belief that religion needs to be a private matter, free from government influence or coercion. For Madison, religious belief was not something the state could legislate or encourage without violating the natural rights of individuals, whereas we see the opposite in the Massachusetts Constitution in New England. Madison considered state support for religion a dangerous abuse of power and argued that freedom of conscience was both a civil and sacred right simultaneously unalienable and foundational to a free society. His ideas of course were in line with Jefferson who stated, "that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction…" in his bill for establishing religious freedom in 1779.[54]

Madison had also worked closely with Jefferson on the "Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom" of 1786 which was highlighted in chapter 2. This bill created much opposition in Virginia but ultimately laid the groundwork for the constitution's bill of rights in the following years and ideas that inform American identity. According to Jefferson and Madison, true liberty was not merely to those of a particular faith in accordance with the federal or local government

---

[53] James Madison, "Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, 1785" https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163

[54] Thomas Jefferson, "82. A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779" https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082

but instead a form of liberty that would protect all religious minorities, whether in line with the majority or not. What ignited this bill was the religious discrimination Baptists of Virginia were facing as a minority group in a predominantly Anglican society. Heavily influenced by John Locke's ideas, Jefferson intertwines enlightenment theory such as religious belief being a natural right and a decision of each person. In the bill he states:

> We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact [Be it enacted by the General Assembly] that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, … but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.
> And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act [to be] irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the *natural rights of mankind*, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.[55]

The language of this text goes beyond mere toleration since it affirms that religious liberty is a natural right that the government must protect, whatever that religion or lack of is, not regulate. The historic statute that was eventually passed, Virginia was the first place to pass a bill aligned with religious freedom. This state level success would later set the precedent and inform decisions at the national level in the subsequent years which can be seen in his presidency.

Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists attests to his vision of disestablishment and religious freedom in the United States. Similarly facing religious discrimination in Virginia, Baptists of Connecticut were distraught about the state sponsored religion and wrote to Jefferson expressing their concern and dissatisfaction, which was Calvinist Protestantism. Jefferson into the second year of his presidency responded:

---

[55] Thomas Jefferson, "Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, 1786."

> Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.[56]

His response to the Danbury Baptists shows the same Lockean philosophy that reflects Virginia's earlier fight against religious establishment: that faith was a matter "solely between Man and his God," and not subject to government coercion. By referencing the "supreme will of the nation" in establishing religious liberty, Jefferson connected his own state-level efforts in Virginia with the broader constitutional vision and showed that what began as a regional ideological stance had later become a foundational national principle which would be sought out by religious minorities, not the evangelicals whose religion was mainstream.

Section 2. New England's Scramble in the Early Republic

Despite not taking part in the Constitutional Convention, Thomas Jefferson's ideological influence was nevertheless present and created a challenge for the influential leaders of New England who wished to have religious influence in the new republic. In the years leading up to the Constitutional Convention, legal documents out of New England offer insight into what many regional leaders believed the new nation should look like. These writings reflect not only the political ideals of the time but also the religious and moral frameworks that shaped early American thought. One of the most significant of these documents is the Massachusetts

[56] Thomas Jefferson, "Letter to the Danbury Baptists, 1802," *Library of Congress*, https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html

Constitution, drafted by John Adams in 1780. It was the first state constitution created by a special convention and ratified by a vote of the people, setting an important precedent for democratic governance and the text "reiterated the principles of the Declaration of Independence."[57] Unlike Thomas Jefferson, who leaned more toward Deism and advocated for a clearer separation between church and state, Adams believed that religion was foundational to civil life and a good American society. He envisioned a moral and religious society where belief in God was not just a private matter but a public necessity. His views are embedded in the text of the Massachusetts Constitution, revealing a vision for the republic in which religion, particularly Christianity, served as the basis of civic life and social order.

John Adams begins the first Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 by stating: "It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and at stated seasons to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe…"[58] Although he goes on to affirm that no one should be harmed or restrained for worshiping according to their conscience, as long as the people do not disturb the public peace, Adams still establishes worship as a public duty and not a private liberty which will be in contrast to the U.S. Constitution later on. Such framing is significant in understanding the difference between the two since the federal constitution ensures freedom from religion as much as freedom of religion, giving space for those who wish to not believe in a religion, the Massachusetts Constitution, grounded in New England's religious culture, assumes that belief in a Supreme Being (likely the Christian God) is a civic responsibility. Due to this, New England created a public expectation of religiosity that stood in contrast with the ultimate trend toward secular governance in the subsequent years.

---

[57] Merrill D. Peterson, *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue*, (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1978) 24.
[58] "Massachusetts Constitution, 1780." https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Constitution

When placed alongside John Adams's Massachusetts Constitution, the contrast reveals a deep divide between New England and Virginia after the American Revolution. While Adams saw religion as a public duty and part of civic life, Madison viewed it as a private effort that is way beyond the state's reach. Intertwined in the fabric of each colony, religion was not merely colonial culture differences but something that would inform leader's positions later on during the Constitutional Convention and beyond. These state constitutions and debates over religious support reveal the ideological divisions and tensions that delegates brought to the Constitutional Convention in 1787, especially concerning the role of religion in government and the rights of conscience. These differences reflected deep ideological contrasts creating a potential hiccup for the new nation over religion.

Since the American Revolution, the Virginia Assembly had consistently supported the separation of church and state. As historian Thomas Buckley describes, Virginians were ahead of their time, choosing the "genuinely revolutionary course of action" by disestablishing religion even before independence.[59] When the Constitutional Convention met in 1787, delegates arrived carrying the weight of their region's political and religious traditions. They were forced to confront difficult questions about the structure of the new republic such as slavery, freedom, state rights, Native American relations, and, most divisively, the place of religion in national life. While religion did not receive explicit attention in the final document, its absence was not due to consensus but, as I argue, due to the major divide in ideology.

[59] Thomas E. Buckley, Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787, (University of Virginia Press: 1977), 173.

Section 3. Federalist Papers and the New Republic

Despite the United States being the land of the free and upholding religious freedom of all faiths and those of no faith, it was not a unanimous decision. Leading up to the Constitutional Convention, the Founding Fathers and other leaders had distinct understandings of the role of religion in public life and the founding of the new nation. Religion was largely avoided in the drafting of the original Constitution, except for the no religious test clause in Article VI. However, it became a pressing topic during the debates over ratification later on which ultimately prompted the inclusion of explicit religious protections in the First Amendment, ratified as part of the Bill of Rights in 1791.

After the constitution was signed in 1787, it did not immediately become the law of the land since it had to be ratified by at least nine of the thirteen states, and this process revealed just how divided the nation still was over key issues, especially the absence of a Bill of Rights. Requiring at least nine states to ratify the constitution, many states had problems with the constitution proposing some things like overreach and more limitation on state rights. James Madison would later recall, "The coming fight over ratification would be the greatest democratic event in the history of the world up to that point in time. White male freeholders across the thirteen states would be tasked with electing delegates to special ratifying conventions that would determine whether the Constitution would be adopted."[60] Many issues lied with the constitution for various states before it was verified hence why the Bill of Rights were later introduced. More broadly, Anti-Federalists feared that the newly formed federal government could easily become tyrannical without a formal bill of rights hence why it was later introduced

[60] Cost, *James Madison*, p. 114.

to restrain its power, particularly in this case matters of personal conscience and religious freedom. Their concerns were rooted in a political philosophy that emphasized popular participation and local control, drawing more from Aristotelian ideas of democracy and the importance of the populace in making choices for the people. Federalists, in contrast, believed in a more structured form of government where the wisest would make decisions for the people rooting from thinkers such as Plato.

A prominent Anti-Federalists of New England, Elbridge Gerry took part in the constitutional convention but left without believing the needs of New England would be met in the constitution. Like many others who participated in the Constitutional Convention but opposed the proposed document, essays were being published in the thirteen colonies against the proposal. Many wrote under the pen names of "Brutus," "Agrippa," "Cato," "Centinel," and the "Federal Farmer" taking a firm stance against the content stating there were dangers with the form of federal government and would limit state rights.[61] Both Anti-Federalist Elbridge Gerry and Federalist James Madison believed religion should be addressed in the Constitution, though they emphasized it in fundamentally different ways. Elbridge Gerry stated in his letter to Speaker of the Massachusetts House of Representative James Warren expressing his concern with the proposed document by stating, "the System is without the Security of a Bill of rights, these are objections which are not local, but apply equally to all the States..."[62] Although Elbridge Gerry did not explicitly name religion in his objections, his call for a Bill of Rights reflected a broader Anti-Federalist concern that individual liberties, including religious freedom, were left unprotected in the new Constitution. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 had already

[61] Gary L. Rose, *James Madison, Public Servant: A Biography*, (San Diego: Academica Press, 2024), 61.
[62] Elbridge Gerry, "Elbridge Gerry's Objections to the Constitution, 1787." https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/elbridge-gerrys-objections/.

established religion as a civic value, further pushing Gerry's concern with the absence from the federal document. Ultimately, both Gerry's and Madison's concerns were addressed with the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1791. While the two came from opposing ideologies, the First Amendment accommodated both the New England concern for public morality and the Virginian insistence on individual conscience.

"Agrippa" was another pen name by James Winthrop writing the issues with the proposed Constitution in the *Massachusetts Gazette*, "...especially concerned that personal freedom would be compromised by 18 the Constitution and how a reduction in freedom would compromise economic productivity and the work ethic of the people."[63] Satisfied with the form of government Massachusetts already had as a moral-religious order, "Agrippa" believed the local system already protected liberties of the people and did not require the level of federal government influence as proposed in the Constitution. He states, "... where the government was more particularly interested, mercy has been extended, but in civil causes, and in the case of moral offences, the law has been punctually executed. Damage done to individuals, during the tumults, has been repaired, by judgment of the courts of law, and the award has been carried into effect. This is the present state of affairs, when we are asked to relinquish that freedom which produces such happy effects."[64] Arguing that the current state of affairs is being executed correctly, "Agrippa" sees no benefit of the federal government getting involved. He goes on to state, "After the treatment we have received, we have a right to be jealous, and to guard our present constitution with the strictest care."[65] For "Agrippa" and many in New England,

---

[63] Gary L. Rose, *James Madison, Public Servant: A Biography*, (San Diego: Academica Press, 2024).

[64]

[65] Agrippa 2 https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/agrippa-ii/

protecting local governance also meant preserving a system in which religion served as the foundation of public virtue and civic stability.

While popular histories often emphasize primarily on the breaking of the American and British colonial relationship, historians argue that the real conflict was establishing a government right after. The sole purpose of the creation of the new republic, that could be agreed on by all the ideological factions, was to first break from tyrannical Great Britain but also establish an efficient and effective government. The Constitutional Convention merely gave birth to a proposed document as the foundation of the United States. The real work lied in the hands of the Federalists scrambling to convince the American people to support the proposed document. This is where the *Federalists Papers* were created by Alexander Hamilton to try and convince undecided delegates of New York to support the ratification of the Constitution. The papers being orchestrated by Alexander Hamilton, the New York delegation had originally left the Constitutional Convention out of frustration leaving Hamilton to sign as "Alexander Hamilton of New York, not as Alexander Hamilton on behalf of New York and their delegation."[66] A firm supporter of the federal government, Hamilton asked James Madison to take part in his plan. Both of New York's delegates had withdrawn from the Convention and publicly opposed the Constitution, along with Governor George Clinton, one of the state's most influential political figures, who would later emerge as a vocal opponent of ratification. Despite significant opposition against Hamilton, his team began writing.

Hamilton begins the papers by explaining why they began writing in the first place by stating, "After an unequivocal experience of the inefficiency of the subsisting federal

---

[66] Jude M. Pfister, *Charting an American Republic: The Origins and Writing of the Federalist Papers,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016), 184.

government, you are called upon to deliberate on a new Constitution for the United States of America."[67] He then proceeds to state, "...nothing less than the existence of the UNION, the safety and welfare of the parts of which it is composed..." emphasizing that preserving the Union was the central concern and more urgent than enforcing religious or moral uniformity. He then goes on to write, "...to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend...on accident and force." By stating this, Hamilton encapsulates the Enlightenment-inspired belief that government should be based on reason, deliberation, and consent and not on tradition, religious authority, or coercion which was the subject of the conflict. Although Hamilton believed religion was essential for maintaining public morality and social order, his view was still considered insufficiently religious by New England standards. Unlike the New England model, which upheld traditional religious institutions and civic religious practices, Hamilton treated religion more as a means of guiding moral behavior than as something to be formally embedded in government. Conversely, Jefferson viewed Hamilton's take on religion as fundamentally different from his enlightenment vision for the United States where he wished for disestablishment and no form of entanglement between religion and government.

The *Federalist Papers* encapsulated the vision of the three Founding Fathers who wrote the papers: James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay. *Federalist Papers No. 10 and 51* are especially helpful in establishing their vision for the New Republic. Beginning with *No. 10* by James Madison, he states, "Among the numerous advantages promised by a well-constructed Union, none deserves to be more accurately developed than its tendency to break and control the

[67] *The Federalist Papers,* pg 20.

violence of faction."[68] Later on, to define what a faction is he writes, "By a faction I understand a number of citizens, whether amounting to a majority or minority of the whole, who are united and actuated by some common impulse of passion, or of interest, adverse to the rights of other citizens, or to the permanent and aggregate interests of the community."[69] Historian Jude Pfister states that Madison is attempting to emphasize that human nature cannot be overcome and man will always seek out its own interest at the expense of others, but, as Madison states, it can be controlled.[70] To conclude the argument he states:

> A landed interest, a manufacturing interest, a mercantile interest, a moneyed interest, with many lesser interests, grow up of necessity in civilized nations, and divide them into different classes, actuated by different sentiments and views. The regulation of these various and interfering interests forms the principle task of modern legislation, and involves the spirit of party and faction in the necessary and ordinary operations of the government.[71]

Madison's argument in *Federalist* No. 10 places emphasis on a foundation of the Federalist vision: that a well structured republic must be designed to manage the unavoidable divisions within a pluralistic and developed society. Rather than imposing moral or religious uniformity, Madison proposes a system that controls the dangers of factions through the representative government and a large, diverse union. This directly supports the Virginian model of disestablishment and religious neutrality, where no particular religious or ideological faction can dominate the political process. In contrast to the New England emphasis on religious influence as a foundation for civic life, Madison's logic in *Federalist No. 10* reinforces the Enlightenment ideal that liberty, including religious liberty, is preserved through a structured

---

[68] *The Federalists Papers*, pg 49.
[69] Ibid.
[70] Jude M. Pfister, *Charting an American Republic: The Origins and Writing of the Federalist Papers,* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016), 189.
[71] *The Federalists Papers*, pg 49.

system rather than imposing it on others. For Madison, danger was not in the diversity of belief but in the dominance of any one faction that may trump others despite the faith. His argument assumes that conflict and pluralism are unavoidable in a free society like the New Republic, and that the government should instead be designed to mitigate those conflicts through institutional legislations and not by imposing or favoring a particular religion that should be practiced by all. This approach was in complete contrast from the New England model, which saw religious unity as essential to social order and political stability. Madison viewed liberty as the freedom of conscience, something that must be protected *from* moral uniformity, not achieved *through* it. His vision established the foundation for a new republic where religious pluralism could be celebrated without state interference.

Federalist Paper no. 51 also emphasizes a foundational point for the Founding Fathers idea of the new government which emphasizes the preservation of liberty through check and balances. Madison states,

> To what expedient, then, shall we finally resort, for maintaining in practice the necessary partition of power among the several departments as laid down in the Constitution? The only answer that can be given is that as all these exterior provisions are found to be inadequate the defect must be supplied, by so contriving the interior structure of the government as that its several constituent parts may, by their mutual relations, be the means of keeping each other in their proper places.[72]

What makes this point significant is that it may ease the anxiety of anti Federalists who may think the proposed form of government in the constitution may be a significant overreach in power. Madison's argument offers reassurance that liberty would be maintained not by trusting those in power, but by structuring power in such a way that ambition would check ambition which is a mechanism essential for the long-term stability and legitimacy of the republic. This

[72] *The Federalists Papers*, pg 256.

also included religious liberty and would help almost eliminate the Jeffersonian fear of state religion.

What the Federalists Papers do is inform the New Yorkers that the government proposed through the Constitution is not there to enforce morality or religion but instead to protect the American people's freedom of conscience through structural safeguards. James Madison, Alexander Hamilton and John Jay are attempting to frame religion as safe only in a limited form of government that is respecting the rights of the American people. This marks the point at which Virginia's secular, reason-based model, as articulated by Madison and Hamilton, began to define the future of national governance, opposing New England's religious civic vision.

Although the *Federalist Papers* were primarily focused on securing ratification of the Constitution, the text laid the philosophical groundwork for the structure of the new republic which included the eventual triumph of Virginian ideals regarding religious liberty. While the Papers themselves did not emphasize religion directly, their emphasis on reason, representative government, and structural safeguards aligned more closely with Madison and Jefferson's Enlightenment rooted vision than with New England's more theocratic tendencies. With the ratification of the Constitution in 1788 and the addition of the Bill of Rights in 1791, the Virginian disestablishment model gained a solid legal foundation. However, it was not until the presidencies of Jefferson and Madison that this model was fully implemented at the federal level, marking a cultural and institutional turning point in the role of religion in American public life. As the Virginia Commission on the Bicentennial of the United States Constitution popularly wrote, "The Constitution: It has Virginia written all over it."[73] Not only was Virginia the

[73] Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall, *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Reading on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, (Carmel: Liberty Fund, 2009).

epicenter for the British colonies since it was both financially successful but also the state produced admirable leaders.

After the American Revolution, states were scrambling to redefine local government's relationship with the church. Regarding Virginia, Thomas J Curry said, "no state surpassed Virginia in speed and extent of alterations in Church-State relations."[74] While many associate Jefferson's vision of religious liberty to the Enlightenment, historian Daniel L. Dreisbach argues that an undeniable part of the push was also the level of religious diversity in the American colonies.[75] The idea of disestablishment was backed not merely for the sake of religious liberty in Virginia and at the federal level, but also "there was a growing belief in the founding era that religious establishments led to complacency, corruption, and intolerance, whereas the combination of competition among sects, religious liberty, and disestablishment created an environment in which religions could flourish and beneficently inform public culture."[76] The Virginian model may have won out at the federal level, but New England did not just roll over. Instead, it took a firm stance on its position regarding church and state, one where religion remained tightly woven into the fabric of civic life up until 1833, and arguably after.

After the ratification of the Constitution, a new form of Federalism emerged in New England that was almost in sharp contrast with the ideology of the original Federalists like Madison and Hamilton. While national Federalists had emphasized enlightenment ideals such as disestablishment, limited government interference in religion, and individual conscience, New

---

[74] Thomas J. Curry, *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 134.
[75] Paul B Rasor and Richard E Bond, From Jamestown to Jefferson: The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Virginia, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2011), 174.
[76] Ibid, 176.

England Federalists later believed the state had a duty to uphold public morality through religious institutions. They supported tax funding for the Congregational Church and saw moral unity as necessary for civic order. In this light, the label "Federalist" came to mean something a bit different in New England in the years after the ratification of the constitution. It frequently supported a distinct relationship between church and state, rather than a push for complete disestablishment. New England federalists believed in providing "tax support to the parochial Congregational Church because public religion was vital to creating a citizenry with shared values. Moral conflict, realized in the competition between groups in civil society, threatened the common good by implying that 'the people' need not or did not share the same values. Federalists tried to limit the rights of the voluntary dissenting churches by denying them corporate privileges."[77]

Section 4. Massachusetts Problematic Story of Disestablishment

Massachusetts now found itself in both a civil and political dilemma. Historian Johann N. Neem says that Massachusetts would now have to determine the relationship between civil life and the state to accommodate the growing interest and religious diversity. Unlike in Virginia whereby this time disestablishment was firmly grounded, Massachusetts still attempted to integrate religion into the public sphere at the state level. Neem states, “In essence, civil society, not just the church, had to be disestablished” which was what Gordon Wood would refer to as “American science of politics.”[78]

[77] Neem, Johann N. “The Elusive Common Good: Religion and Civil Society in Massachusetts, 1780-1833.” Journal of the Early Republic 24, no. 3 (2004): 384. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4141439.
[78] Ibid.

The conversation over churches receiving funds from the state government in Massachusetts was a pressing point during the state's Constitutional Convention in 1820. Federalists supported state funding for the church because they believed it would promote the common good by instilling shared moral values, aligning with the original aim of the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention to ground civic life in public virtue.[79] Unitarian minister Leverett Saltonstall's argument for the support of the state church was, as Johann Neem describes, "that without shared institutions and values nothing would hold the civic community together."[80] As mentioned, despite the slow rolling out of disestablishment throughout the American states after the creation of the Union, states such as Massachusetts and Connecticut still had secular leaders and religious leaders attempting to maintain the structure and relationship between the state and church.

Thanks to the rich sources preserved of the debates surrounding the Massachusetts Constitutional Convention of 1820, understanding the sentiment, emotions and thoughts of the lawmakers and New Englanders during this period of disestablishment of New England is not a complex effort. While this convention did not uphold disestablishment, it did begin to explore themes of religious toleration in the state. Disestablishment was later seen in the 1833 Constitutional Convention of Massachusetts. Until then, the convention of 1820 upheld much of the original 1780 constitution with some change to conform to the Union while responding to the political shift caused by Maine's separation. John Adams sought to balance religious liberty with religious establishment primarily considering that the Baptists, Methodists and Catholics wanted the religious freedom that existed in other states. While 1833 is when religious taxes were

[79] Ibid, 401.
[80] Ibid.

repealed, Historians John Witte Jr. and Justin Latterell argue that the logic and arguments of Massachusettsan remained relatively consistent from 1780 to 1833 when discussing the relationship they expected between church and state. The argument was that the citizens believed religion was an essential part of "public and private morality and that the Constitution should safeguard diverse religious beliefs and practices, at least among Protestants."[81] It can be argued that New England's form of religious liberty, as expressed in the early constitutional conventions of Massachusetts, would not be as extreme as Jefferson's idea of any or no religion. Instead, New Englanders believed in practicing any form of Protestantism. This can be seen from township Sandisfield's instruction to secure protections for the Protestant establishment while simultaneously guaranteeing toleration of other Christian faiths. It says: "You will Endeavour in the forming of the Constitution that the Free Exercise of religious principles or Profession, worship and Liberty of Conscience shall be for ever Secures to all Denominations of Protestants - and Protestants Dis(s) enters of all Denominations within the State, without any Compulsion whatever. Always allowing the Legislative Body of this State the Power of Toleration to other Denominations of Christians from time to time as they Shall see Cause, at the same time, Reserving to our Selves, the Right of Instructions to our Representatives Respecting Said Toleration as well as in other Cases."[82]

Other sources such as the *Worcestriensis*, which was a popular pamphlet circulating in late 18th century New England, also promoted a similar idea of delicately establishing Protestant religion but simultaneously celebrating the New England version of religious liberty. In the *Number IV* publication the pamphlet reads, "no part of the community shall be permitted to

---

[81] Carl H. Esbeck and Jonathan J. Den Hartog, *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States*, 1776-1833, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019) 400.
[82] Ibid, 401. From Handlin and Handlin*, Popular Sources*, 419.

perplex and harass the other for any supposed heresy, but that each individual shall be allowed to have and enjoy, profess and maintain his own system of religion, provided it does not issue an overt acts of treason undermining the peace and good order of society. To allow one part of a society to lord it over the faith and consciences of the other, in religious matters, is the ready way to set the whole community together by the ears."[83]

Traditionally such religious liberty in Massachusetts was not prominent or something modern day readers would associate with the region. However, it speaks to the argument that New England was indeed ideologically and religiously free but not necessarily the standard Virginian thinkers were hoping for the new nation. To prove this point, the pamphlet later reads that the state could "give preference to that profession of religion which they take to be true."[84] Potentially having flexibility in New England due to its long history of religion within the region may have been worth exploring for a new state, however, as a Baptist advocate would later say in response, the state would be "assuming power to govern a religion, rather than being governed by it" creating additional problems.[85] Although there were calls for disestablishment and broader democratic reforms, the convention preserved Article III, which allowed tax support for religion, now with more flexibility for individuals to direct that support to their own denominations. Ultimately, the convention resisted full disestablishment and major structural reforms, maintaining Massachusetts' civic-religious framework for another decade until religious establishment was finally abolished in 1833.

---

[83] Ibid in Carl H. Esbeck and Jonathan J. Den Hartog, Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States, 1776-1833, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019) 401.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Ibid.

James Savage, member of the Constitutional Convention of 1820 stated the following when discussing Harvard University, “initiated in arts and sciences qualifying them for usefulness in church and state..." which proves the attempt of convention’s delegate members in attempting to uphold the religious and the secular simultaneously despite the general trend of the nation significantly moving towards the separation of church and state, especially at a local level. Instead of strictly outlawing the interconnection between the religious and the secular, Savage is a key example of local leaders attempting to still connect the two even subtly. This ultimately allows New Englanders to subconsciously associate the moral and civic with religion due to the selective refinement at the state level.

Ultimately, Massachusetts upholding the ideals and making little change to the influence of church in the state in the convention of 1820 proved the New England leaders’ point of how the citizens want to continue the relationship. This can be seen from the manner in which a delegate shared results with the people of Massachusetts. In the address to the people, it is said:

> We have inferred from these facts that you did not desire any important and fundamental changes in your frame of government; and this consideration has had its just influence on our deliberations; in revising every part of the constitution, which we were required to do, by the words of the law, under which we are assembled.
>
> We have kept in view that the will of the majority can alone determine what the powers of government shall be, and also the manner in which these powers shall be exercised; and that it is, consequently, your exclusive right to decide, whether all, or any of the amendments, which we think expedient, shall be adopted or rejected.[86]

The words of the delegate reinforce the idea of a new democratic society at the federal level but simultaneously the religious at the local state level. Claiming the exclusive right to

[86] Journal of debates and proceedings in the Convention of delegates chosen to revise the constitution of Massachusetts: Address to the People, *Hathi Trust*, pg 622. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=rul.39030013313194&seq=636

decide placed New Englanders in the role of determining their governmental preferences. This convention is the moment Massachusetts tried to defend the old church-state model while the nation moved on.

Despite the long convention and attempt to uphold the church-state model in Massachusetts, pressure nevertheless continued from the federal government. Just thirteen years later, Massachusetts would formally disestablish but only after a prolonged defense of the New England religious model. Although the 1833 disestablishment was the formal end of state-supported religion in Massachusetts, it did not eradicate the relationship between civic life and Protestant values that had shaped New England up until this day. The Massachusetts example illustrates how disestablishment was not a single national event but a slow, contested process while facing federal pressure. While Virginia's Enlightenment-based model ultimately won at the federal level, the local resistance in Massachusetts reminds Americans that religious liberty was forged not only through philosophical ideals, but through regional compromise, cultural identity, and negotiation.

Disestablishment was not a smooth, linear process but rather a regional negotiation of values. This can be seen specifically when comparing Massachusetts and Virginia. In Virginia, Jefferson and Madison viewed religion through the lens of Enlightenment ideals and natural rights which pushes for complete separation of church and state to protect individual conscience. For those two, religious liberty meant keeping religion out of civil affairs altogether. Massachusetts, however, held onto a different definition for as long as they could. Even as pressures for disestablishment mounted, many New Englanders believed religion, specifically Protestantism, was essential to public virtue and civic stability. They did not see religious support as an infringement but instead a way to safeguard moral order despite the potential

challenges it would bring other religious minority groups including those of other Protestant sects. This explains why the 1820 Constitutional Convention in Massachusetts upheld Article III and why disestablishment didn't come until 1833.

Ultimately, what we see is not simply a battle between religious freedom and religious control, but a deeper conflict over what kind of society Americans wanted to build after independence. Virginia prioritized individual rights and secular governance, while Massachusetts tried to preserve a moral community built on Protestant values. Both states believed they were protecting liberty, however, their understandings of liberty contrasted. Where one saw government neutrality as the highest protection of conscience, the other saw shared religious values as the glue that held the republic together. This tension would remain in American political culture for decades to come, long after legal disestablishment was achieved.

Conclusion

This thesis has argued that religious liberty in the early American republic did not emerge from a shared Enlightenment consensus, but instead through a complex relationship and ideological understanding between New England and Virginia. While Virginia's commitment to disestablishment, individual conscience, and rational religious thought ultimately won on the federal level, New England's vision of religion as essential to public morality and order in society offered a powerful alternative that continued to be influential well after the Constitution was ratified. By looking at and studying both regions not as isolated case studies but as ideological competitors within the broader struggle for national identity, this study approached the development of religious liberty as the product of negotiation, resistance, and compromise rather than an inevitable philosophical end after the creation of the United States.

In Virginia, religion was intertwined with colonial power and economic expansion. Despite Anglicanism being established as the dominant religion in the region, it operated more as a cultural and political mechanism than a spiritual force, as seen in New England with Puritanism. Over time the shared Enlightenment ideals by the Founding Fathers, economic interests, and the experience of religious pluralism pushed for a shift toward disestablishment in the early republic. Key figures such as Thomas Jefferson and James Madison helped advocate a vision of religious liberty which were

rooted in individual rights and freedom of conscience as seen in the *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* and the First Amendment. With such a model, the state was required to be neutral in matters of religion, however, not because religion was insignificant to the populace's lives, but because true belief was seen as a personal commitment and not one that should be institutionalized.

New England, by contrast, upheld a religious society rooted in Puritan theology, where religion and civic life were ultimately inseparable. Churches were expected to uphold public morality, and the health of the community was understood through the spiritual discipline within the divine law. Even after the Revolution, states like Massachusetts resisted the Virginian model of disestablishment. Revivalist effort from the First and Second Great Awakenings helped to maintain a religious authority which reinforces the idea that morality was rooted in the Puritan religious framework. Though the federal Constitution prohibited religious tests and established religious neutrality, New England continued to defend religious establishments which required a number constitutional amendments and legal reinterpretation to bring the region on par with the established national norms. Massachusetts did not fully disestablish its state church until 1833 which was a full generation after the ratification of the Bill of Rights.

The conflict between these two prominent models of colonial America and the early republic reveals a crucial gap in much of the existing historiography. Scholars such as Thomas Buckley, John Ragosta, and Thomas Kidd have offered rich studies of religion in individual regions, but few have placed Virginia and New England into direct

conversation. This thesis contributes to the field by bridging this heavy divide and demonstrating how deeply regional religious cultures shaped and contrasted the meaning of liberty in the new republic. It simultaneously challenges the assumption which is common in both popular and scholarly narratives that disestablishment and religious freedom were natural outcomes of Enlightenment thought. Instead, the development of American religious liberty was primarily political and contested.

Understanding that American religious liberty was the product of conflict rather than a unanimous ideology also helps the modern populace understand why debates and conversations surrounding religion in the United States remain tense. The Virginian model of ultimate liberty and the New England model of moral governance are not simply historical footnotes but also represent two modern American traditions. One leans toward individual autonomy and pluralism while the later towards civic virtue and public morality rooted in religious tradition. Both influential colonial models can be seen today in debates over religion in schools, church state boundaries, and the role of faith in politics. Ultimately, this thesis has shown that the meaning of religious liberty in America was never settled at the moment of founding as popular history demonstrates. Rather, it was only through the ideological struggle which were seen through the regions, visions of government, and opposing American interpretations of religion's role in public life. From this, we gain an understanding of how American identity was shaped not by a singular founding ideal but by the clash and coexistence of competing religious cultures.

Bibliography

"Agrippa." https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/agrippa-ii/

Blosser, Jacob. "Pursuing Happiness in Colonial Virginia: Sacred Words, Cheap Print, and Popular Religion in the Eighteenth Century," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol 118, No. 2, 2010, 211

Bowers, Claude G. *Jefferson and Hamilton;: The struggle for democracy in America*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1925.

Buckley, Thomas E. *Church and State in Revolutionary Virginia, 1776–1787.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press: 1977.

Bushman, Richard L. *From Puritan to Yankee: Character and the Social Order in Connecticut, 1690–1765.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Butler, Jon Butler. *New World Faiths: Religion in Colonial America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

Curry, Thomas J. *The First Freedoms: Church and State in America to the Passage of the First Amendment.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

Cushing, John D. "Notes on Disestablishment in Massachusetts, 1780–1833." *The William and Mary Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (April 1969): 169–190. https://www.jstor.org/stable/1918674

Davies, Samuel. "Religion and Patriotism the Constituents of a Good Soldier: A Sermon Preached to Captain Overton's Independent Company of Volunteers, 1755."

Dreisbach, Daniel L. and Mark David Hall. *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Reading on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*. Carmel: Liberty Fund, 2009.

Esbeck, Carl H., and Jonathan J. Den Hartog, eds. *Disestablishment and Religious Dissent: Church-State Relations in the New American States, 1776–1833*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2019.

Finley, Moses I. *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology*. Princeton: Markus Weiner Publishers, 1980.

"First Charter of Virginia, 1606." Encyclopedia Virginia. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/first-charter-of-virginia-1606/

Foote, Henry Wilder. "The Significance and Influence of the Cambridge Platform of 1648,"

Gerry, Elbridge. "Elbridge Gerry's Objections to the Constitution, 1787." https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/elbridge-gerrys-objections/.

Guastad, Edwin S. *Sworn on the Alter of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson*. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996.

Hicks, Jacob E. *To Contest With All the Powers of Darkness: New England Baptists, Religious Liberty, and New Political Landscapes, 1740-1833*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2024.

Innes, Stephen. *Creating the Commonwealth*. New York: WW Norton & Co, 1998.

Isaac, Rhy. *The Transformation of Virginia, 1740-1790*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1982.

Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson. "A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, 18 June 1779" https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/01-02-02-0132-0004-0082

Jefferson, Thomas. “Letter to the Danbury Baptists, 1802,” *Library of Congress*. https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html

Jefferson, Thomas. “Virginia Statute of Religious Freedom, 1779.” https://cas.umw.edu/cprd/files/2011/09/Jefferson-Statute-2-versions.pdf

Journal of Debates and Proceedings in the Convention of Delegates Chosen to Revise the Constitution of Massachusetts. "Address to the People." Boston: White and Potter, 1853. https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=rul.39030013313194&seq=636.

Lockridge, Kenneth A. *Settlement and Unsettlement in Early America.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Kidd, Thomas. *The Great Awakening: The Roots of Evangelical Christianity in Colonial America*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Madison, James. “Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments, 1785” https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163

Madison, James. “Cost.”

"Massachusetts Constitution, 1780." https://malegislature.gov/Laws/Constitution

Mather, Cotton. *The Present State of New-England, Considered in a Discourse on the Necessities and Advantages of a Public Spirit in Every Man*. Boston: Printed by B. Green, 1690. https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;idno=N03758.0001.001.

Miller, Perry. *Jonathan Edwards.* Lincoln: Bison Books, 1949.

Miller, Perry. *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. Cambridge: An Imprint of Harvard University Press, 1983.

Morgan, Edmund. *The Puritan Dilemma: The Story of John Winthrop.* Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958.

Munoz, Vincent Phillip. "James Madison's Principle of Religious Liberty" *The American Political Science Review*, Vol. 97, No. 1 (February 2003).

Najar, Monica. *Evangelizing the South: A Social History of Church and State in Early America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.

Neem, Johann N. "The Elusive Common Good: Religion and Civil Society in Massachusetts, 1780–1833." *Journal of the Early Republic* 24, no. 3 (2004): 381–417. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4141439.

Peterson, Merrill D. *Adams and Jefferson: A Revolutionary Dialogue.* Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 1978.

Pfister, Jude M. *Charting an American Republic: The Origins and Writing of the Federalist Papers*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2016.

Rasor, Paul, Richard E. Bond. *From Jamestown to Jefferson : The Evolution of Religious Freedom in Virginia*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia, 2011.

Rose, Gary L. *James Madison, Public Servant: A Biography*. San Diego: Academica Press, 2024.

Smith, Haig Z. *Religion and Governance in England's Emerging Colonial Empire, 1601–1698*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022.

Smith, John. "A Map of Virginia. With a Description of the Country, the Commodities, People, Government and Religion by John Smith, 1612." Encyclopedia Virginia.

https://encyclopediavirginia.org/primary-documents/a-map-of-virginia-with-a-description-of-the-countrey-the-commodities-people-government-and-religion-by-john-smith-1612/

Stout, Harry. "Religion, Communications, and the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution." *The William and Mary Quarterly,* 34, no. 4 (1977).

Stout, Harry. *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Tennent, Gilbert."The Danger of an Unconverted Ministry, Consider'd in a Sermon on Mark VI. 34, preached at Nottingham, Pennsylvania, March 8, 1739/40," https://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/t/text/text-idx?c=evans;cc=evans;rgn=main;view=text;idno=N03758.0001.001.

"The Diary of William Byrd II of Virginia, 1709-1712: Selections," *National Humanities Center*, Becoming American: The British Atlantic Colonies, 1690-1763.

The Federalist Papers.

Winthrop, John. "A Model of Christian Charity, 1630," https://teachingamericanhistory.org/document/a-model-of-christian-charity-2/

Whitefield, George. "Worldly Business No Plea for the Neglect of Religion, 1739." *Whitefield's Sermons*. https://www.ccel.org/ccel/whitefield/sermons.xxii.html

"The Charter of the Massachusetts Bay Company, 1628," The Winthrop Society,

https://www.winthropsociety.com/charter