

Founding Faith

HOW OUR FOUNDING FATHERS FORGED A
RADICAL NEW APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

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SETTLERS TRY TO PLANT PROTESTANTISM AS THE OFFICIAL FAITH—AND FAIL

THE NEW WORLD WAS SETTLED TO PROMOTE CHRISTIANITY. FOR more than 150 years, colonial governments actively supported the dominant faith. Less acknowledged today is a point well understood by the Founding Fathers: Nearly all of these experiments in state encouragement of religion failed.

Christopher Columbus believed the world would soon end. In the year 1652, to be exact, Christ would return and usher in a glorious new Kingdom—if certain prophecies were fulfilled before then. Columbus's arrival in the New World in 1492 was one such event, he wrote later, a clear "fulfillment of what Isaiah had prophesied." He was quite certain that God had guided him. "With a hand that could be felt, the Lord opened my mind to the fact that it would be possible to sail from here to the Indies." Another precondition for Jesus's return was the conquest of Jerusalem, which was held by the Muslims. His voyages to the New World would help with that, too, providing a glorious model to inspire Christian warriors, and the gold to pay their way. Finally, his discovery of the new lands would enable Christians to fulfill another essential requirement, the spreading of the Good News to all corners of the world.

"The Gospel must now be proclaimed to so many lands in such a short time," Columbus explained to Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand.¹

After encountering hospitable natives in the Caribbean, he had become quite optimistic that he would indeed be able to bring these generous but unsaved souls to God, plus get some cheap labor. "If one asks for anything they have they never say no," he wrote.² "They should be good servants . . . and I believe they would easily be made Christians, for they appear to have no religion."³

Though he declared a desire to convert them "by love and friendship rather than by force," the Europeans did not have a light touch with the natives. Those in the Caribbean who rejected or destroyed statues of Christian saints were burned at the stake. Slaughter and European-borne disease killed all but a few thousand Indians.⁴ But the Spaniards persisted and their missions eventually made their way to current-day Florida and Mexico.

While the Spaniards did not ultimately win control of the land that became the thirteen American colonies, fear of Catholic Spain's expansion helped prompt England to get serious about settling America in the early 1600s.⁵

VIRGINIA'S LAWES DIVINE

The twin goals of converting Indians and defeating Catholics provided a strong rallying cry for Virginia's settlers. Prospective settlers were instructed to bring "no traitors, nor Papists that depend on the Great Whore."⁶ An Anglican promotional booklet argued that if the Spanish had so much luck pressing their corrupt religion, imagine how successful the English could be with their noble goals of saving "those wretched people," drawing them from "darkness to light, from falsehood to truth, from dumb idols to the living God, from the deep pit of hell to the highest heaven."⁷ King James's charter for Virginia in 1606 made it official: The mission was to promote Christianity to those living "in darkness and miserable ignorance of the true knowledge and worship of God."⁸

The faiths of the settlers were tested even before they landed in Virginia. One-third of the immigrants on the *Godspeed*, the *Discovery*, and the *Susan Constant* in 1607 died en route. Once in America, their goal of converting Indians soon took a backseat to survival. In 1609 and 1610, the period known as "the starving time," the colony almost perished. Settlers ate dogs, cats, rats, and one another in order to survive. One man was executed for killing his wife for food.⁹

To try to salvage the colony, the Virginia Company in May 1611 sent Lord Thomas de la Warr and Thomas Dale, who swiftly issued a new set of laws to bring order, in part through forced religiosity. The laws declared that the job of the king is "principal care of true Religion and reverence to God"¹⁰ and that the settlers themselves were "especial souldiers in this sacred cause." The new "Lawes Divine, Morall and Martiall" required worship twice each Sunday. Those who failed to do so would lose their daily allowance; a second infraction would draw a whipping, and the third offense would put them in the galleys at sea for six months. Settlers who failed to observe the Sabbath lost provisions for a week (first offense), received a whipping (second offense), or were executed (third offense). Women convicted of sexual misdeeds were required to wear white gowns, hold white wands, and "stand on chairs or stools during public worship."¹¹ Blasphemy—the use of "unlawful oaths" and "taking the name of God in vain"—was a serious crime, sometimes punishable by having a hot iron plunged through the tongue, and sometimes by execution.¹² Eight settlers were put to death in Jamestown for violations of Dale's laws. Though alien to us, the idea behind forced worship was practical: Pervasive worship would secure God's favor and give settlers the strength and moral wherewithal to cope with the crushing burdens of disease, Indian attacks, and internal squabbling.

As in England, clergy were to be supported by taxes and public funds, or, to be more precise, ten pounds of tobacco and a bushel of corn per settler. A special patch of farmland, a glebe, was also set aside for the parson.¹³ Despite these provisions, there was a severe shortage of clergy. By 1662, there were only ten ministers serving forty-five different parishes.¹⁴ Since there was no ecclesiastic church structure to monitor religious matters and manage clergy, the state accepted that role, even disciplining clergy who hadn't preached at least one sermon each Sunday.¹⁵

The settlers did survive, in part because of their strong faith. This alone prompted wonder. John Rolfe, an early Jamestown resident credited with the introduction of tobacco, wrote that the settlers were "chosen by the finger of God."¹⁶

In surviving, they prevented encroachment from French and Spanish Catholics who settled west and south of Virginia. At that moment in history, the Catholic Church was viewed in England not as a competing form of Christianity but as a fraudulent faith. It was called "the Whore" because it had prostituted itself by selling indulgences (the promise that for a fee, the church would make sure that the soul of a loved one wouldn't be stuck in

purgatory). Protestants believed Catholics should be called papists, not Christians, because they had substituted worship of the pope for devotion to Christ. And only the Antichrist, it was thought, would use the trappings of faith to so distort the message of Jesus. Not surprisingly, the Virginia government attempted to squelch Catholicism within the colony. In 1640, it prohibited Catholics from holding public office unless they “had taken the oath of allegiance and supremacy” to the Church of England. It decreed that any “popish priests” who arrived in Virginia “should be deported forthwith.”¹⁷

The settlers’ other religious goal—that of pulling the Indians from the deep pit of hell—proved harder to meet. Pocahontas’s conversion to Christianity was much celebrated and, indeed, is depicted in a painting in the US Capitol to this day. But mostly the settlers just viewed the Indians as untamable savages, and vice versa.¹⁸ Moreover, Virginia certainly didn’t limit itself to punishing just Catholics and Indians. In 1660, it forbade ship captains from importing Quakers;¹⁹ Puritan clergy were banished; and Jews were kept out entirely for two generations.²⁰

As the economy developed and the population grew, the Church of England became more powerful throughout Virginia. By the 1740s, the church had become a place of social and spiritual nourishment for the gentlemen farmers who came to run the colony. Though it became more genteel and less coercive, Anglicanism remained the legally established, official religion of the colony. Taxpayers financed the salaries of the Anglican ministers in their area, as well as the construction of new Anglican churches. During some of this time, other religious bodies were simply not allowed to erect churches at all. Up through the 1740s, it was clear in Virginia that there was one church, one spiritual style, one faith—not just by custom but by law.

THE HOLY COMMONWEALTH OF MASSACHUSETTS

While religion was a factor in Jamestown, it was *the* impetus for Pilgrims who landed in Plymouth and the Puritans who settled in Massachusetts Bay. Again, the motivation was not promotion of Christianity in general but Protestantism specifically. Puritans believed that despite Henry VIII’s split with Rome, the Church of England had retained too many vestiges of the Catholic Church. “Kneeling at the Sacrament, bowing to the Altar and to the name of Jesus, Popish holy days, Holiness of places, Organs and Cathedral Musick, The Books of Common prayer, or church Government by Bishops . . . They are nothing else but reliques of Popery, and remnants of Baal,”

sniffed one prominent Puritan.²¹ They viewed the Anglican ministers as ungodly and incompetent. In a petition to Parliament, one Puritan called the clergy “Dumme Dogs . . . Destroying Drones, or rather Caterpillars of the Word.”²² Worst of all, the Church of England seemed to let in as a congregant any damned sinner who requested entry.

King James found the Puritans annoying. While passing through Lancashire one day in 1618, he noticed that the Puritans had even prohibited sports and recreation. He explicitly prevented them from banning “may-games, Whitsun-ales, Morris-dances, and the setting up of Maypoles”—all activities that Puritans regarded as pagan.²³ Though we tend to think of those who settled in New England as fleeing severe religious persecution, it might be more precise to say most were avoiding the harassment of a government that wanted the Puritans to be more liberal. Frustrated by the relentless protests of the Puritans about the church, King James declared, “I shall make them conform themselves, or I will harry them out of the land, or else do worse.”²⁴

The Pilgrims were Puritans who had become “Separatists” because they believed that the Church of England was so corruptly entangled with Catholicism that nothing short of a clean break would suffice. They had left England and sought religious refuge in Holland. Their sense of mission was biblical: William Bradford, in his journal from Plymouth Plantation, compared these settlers to those cast out of Israel. “Our fathers were Englishmen which came over this great ocean, and were ready to perish in this wilderness; but they cried unto the Lord, and he heard their voice, and looked on their adversity.”²⁵ Sailing aboard the *Mayflower* in 1620, the Pilgrims wrote the Mayflower Compact, committing themselves to “ye glory of God, and advancement of ye Christian faith.”

Though the Pilgrims landed the starring roles in future Thanksgiving celebrations, it was the Puritans who thrived economically, took over Massachusetts, profoundly influenced American religious history. (One historian estimated that in all thirteen colonies, Puritanism “provided the moral and religious background of fully 75% of the people who declared their independence in 1776.”)²⁶ In 1628, the “great migration” of Puritans from England began. They came for “liberty,” said the Massachusetts minister John Cotton—the freedom to practice their religion *precisely*—“not of some ordinances of God, but of all, and in all purity.”²⁷ It was with tongue not in cheek that Richard Mather explained his motives for immigrating: the opportunity “to censure those who ought to be censured.”²⁸

In spring 1630, John Winthrop, an influential Puritan, boarded the *Arbella* and headed toward the New Israel. On board, he gave what would become one of the most famous sermons in American history. They were “God’s chosen people,” required by covenant to lead exemplary Christian lives. “We shall be as a City upon a Hill,” he declared. “The eyes of all people are upon us.” This passage has been used by many a politician since, evoking the idea that America would become a model of freedom for the world. But the rest of the sermon bore a darker message. If they *didn’t* succeed in providing a Christian model, God would show his wrath—“we shall be made a story and a by-word through the world.”²⁹

The Puritans left us many ennobling legacies. They set up Congregational churches that stressed simplicity, local control, and a direct connection to God. Because reading the Bible was so central, they established a remarkable system of schools and pressed for widespread literacy. They outlawed usury and promoted the dignity of work, even to the point of endorsing trade guilds. But this book, by necessity, will focus on how they mixed church and state, and how they used power.

Like the Anglicans who settled in Virginia, the Puritans in Massachusetts viewed church and state as fully entwined—a “Holy Commonwealth.” “Theocracy, or to make the Lord God our governor, is the best form of government in a Christian commonwealth,” wrote John Cotton. If it seems shocking to read one of our forefathers so boldly employ a word today associated with Islamic fundamentalists, we ought to remember that it was a typical approach at the time. Since Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman Empire, Western Christian leaders had believed that, thanks to Adam’s bite of the apple, man was so inherently depraved, a strong one-two punch of church and state working together would be required to tame his evil impulses.

The Puritans believed that civil authorities, bound by the same Bible as they, could be responsible for creating a godly society.³⁰ This wasn’t to be state manipulating church but rather church shaping state. According to Puritan theology, drawn from French theologian John Calvin, they had an obligation to create a kingdom of God on earth—a society and a church of mostly “visible saints” that would make the worldly kingdom resemble heaven as much as possible. This church was to comprise a limited number of Christians selected by God to receive saving grace.³¹

Figuring out who was favored by God was no easy task. It helped if you were well behaved and prosperous, but that was no guarantee. A candidate

for membership in a church would present him- or herself before the elders for examination. He would have to demonstrate facility with scriptures and provide a chronicle of how “God’s saving Grace came to him.” The mission was not to save sinners but to eject them, protecting the saints from corruption. Thomas Shepard, the pastor of the church in Cambridge, Massachusetts, explained that “if we could be so Eagle-eyed, as to discern them now that are hypocrites, we should exclude them now.” Why? Because “one man or woman secretly vile, which the church hath not used all means to discover, may defile a whole church.”³²

The church was composed of the saved, and the state would be governed by members of the church. Only full members of the Congregational churches could vote in civil elections. One Puritan named Robert Child suggested that the limitations on the franchise and church membership be abolished. The Massachusetts General Court rejected his request, and had him arrested for good measure.³³ Of course, Catholics were not allowed. (Since the Puritans tried to embody the compassion of Jesus, they did allow that any “Jesuits” who had ended up in their midst due to a shipwreck need not be killed.)³⁴ In 1644, the Massachusetts General Court banned Baptists, too.³⁵ Increase Mather, a Boston Puritan leader, later declared that “the Toleration of all Religions and Perswasions, is the way to have no Religion at all.”³⁶ Puritans did not hunt the eastern seaboard for deviants, but tried to keep their own communities spiritually pure. “The government of Massachusetts, and of Connecticut as well, was a dictatorship, and never pretended to be anything else,” wrote Perry Miller, the foremost historian of the Puritans. “It was a dictatorship, not of a single tyrant, or of an economic class, or of a political faction, but of the holy and regenerate.”³⁷

Two of the most famous to be purged for faulty theology were Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. Hutchinson was a reputable Boston matron who began holding meetings after church to discuss the day’s sermons or the Bible. It was deemed a direct assault on the official church. Theologically, she believed that the Puritans emphasized good works *too much* and put insufficient emphasis on grace. She was brought before the general court, where her accusers were also her judges. She declared that the local clergy lacked inspiration from God, and asked what laws she’d broken. The fifth commandment, they said, since she was disobeying the church and state and therefore, metaphorically, her father and mother. When she retorted that even children should disobey parents when they are immoral, Governor John Winthrop responded, “We do not mean to discourse with those of your sex.” They became

more enraged when she told them that she had directly heard the voice of God.³⁸ She was banished—first by the church, then by the civil magistrate—and moved to New York, where she died during an Indian massacre.

Roger Williams was, in many ways, just as conservative as those in Massachusetts's ruling order. But he believed that the church had become corrupt in a number of ways. The settlers had been unfair to the Indians, he said, and while he shared the desire to convert them, the New Englanders had simply stolen their lands. Second, he said that church and state needed to be separated or else men of faith would lose their way. Like Hutchinson, he was expelled from Massachusetts for heresy and later became a leader of the Baptists in Rhode Island. And these were just the most famous to be punished. A catalog of judicial rulings in Salem, Massachusetts, in 1644 shows that even small instances of inappropriate speech or thought drew sanctions: A Miss Alice George of Gloucester was to be whipped for calling a fellow a "wicked wretch"; Mr. William Hewes and his son John were fined fifty shillings each for deriding those who sang in the congregation and "for saying that Mr. Whiting preached confusedly."³⁹

"NOT A WOMAN CHILD, BUT A MONSTER"

It was to the Quakers that the Puritans showed their sharpest fangs. Quakers were Christians who believed that each person had to rely for spiritual guidance on the Inner Light more than scripture. The Congregational Church viewed this as blasphemous. In seventeenth-century New England, it was *illegal* to be a Quaker.⁴⁰ For the crime of being a Quaker who refused to leave Massachusetts, the punishment on the first offense was usually whipping; on the second offense, an ear was cut off. For a third offense, the criminal would be executed. In a 1703 book called *New England Judged by the Spirit of the Lord*, George Bishop, an English Quaker, cataloged some of the punishments inflicted on New England Quakers, sometimes for intentionally defying banishment orders and sometimes for just worshipping privately. Behold the sheer viciousness of the Puritan approach:

- William Brend, "a man of years," was locked in irons for sixteen hours and then whipped 117 times with a pitched rope, "so that his flesh was beaten black and as into a jelly, and under his arms the bruised flesh and blood hung down, clotted as it were into bags; and it was so beat into one mass, that the sign of one particular blow could not be seen."

- Josiah Southwick compounded the crime of being a Quaker with refusal to remove his hat in the presence of a magistrate (Quakers kept their heads covered in deference to God). The General Court directed "the executioner" to strip him from the waist up, "tie him to a cart-tail, and whip him ten stripes out of Boston and deliver him to the Constable of Roxbury" who was, in turn, supposed to repeat the procedure and deliver him to the constable of Dedham, who would do it again.⁴¹
- Alice Ambrose, Mary Tomkins, and Ann Coleman had taken to preaching their gospel at the Piscataqua River. They were arrested, "stripped naked, from the middle upward, and tied to a cart, and after a while cruelly whipped . . . , whilst the priest stood and looked on, and laughed at it."⁴²

This makes for depressing reading, but please bear with me for one more case, for the story of Mary Dyer should be known by any American who loves religious freedom.

A young mother living in Boston, Dyer in 1637 had been attending Anne Hutchinson's Sunday meetings. Viewing the group as heretical, the Puritans saw an opportunity to send a message after Dyer gave birth to a deformed still-born baby. Her minister, the Reverend Joseph Wilson, preached from the pulpit: "We have been visited of late by the admonition of the Lord. One Mary Dyer of our midst, who has lately become addicted to heresy, has produced not a woman child but a monster. God himself has intervened and pointed His finger at this woman at the height of her sinful opinions."

She was banished from Boston. In later years, during a trip to England, Dyer met George Fox, the founder of the Quakers, and became one herself. When she returned to Massachusetts Bay in the fall of 1656, she was arrested and taken to the prison yard. As several men watched, she and another Quaker woman were stripped to the waist, tied to a whipping post, and flogged until blood flowed from wounds on their back and breasts. On October 27, 1659, Dyer was convicted of defying an order of banishment and sentenced to death along with two friends. She watched as her friends' necks snapped, and then was given a last-minute reprieve. That had been the court's intention all along: They wanted her to witness her friends' execution before letting her go.

A year later, she defied the law again and was brought before the General Court, with Governor John Endicott presiding.

"Do you consider yourself to be a prophetess?" the governor, who was also the judge, asked.

"I speak only the words that the Lord speaks in me," Dyer replied.

"Away with her!" shouted Governor Endicott. "Away with her."

On June 1, 1660, wearing a plain gray dress, cloak, and bonnet, Dyer walked from prison to the Boston Common. Sixty armed soldiers and drummers lined her route, ready to play—and drown out her words—if she attempted to speak to the crowd. Her old pastor, the Reverend Wilson, came forward to challenge her. "Repent, Mary Dyer . . . Repent! Continue not this wicked delusion. You have indeed been carried away by the deceit of the Devil. Repent!"

"Nay, man, I am not now to repent. I do only what the Lord God requires of me. Do not mourn of my passing, for I am filled with happiness."

A rope had been wrapped around the horizontal branch of a great elm. She climbed a ladder, allowed the noose to be placed around her neck, and was executed by the Holy Commonwealth of Massachusetts—the very government that had been set up by Puritans who had fled England to avoid religious persecution.⁴³

Suffice it to say, the Puritan goal of creating a kingdom of God on earth by purging its church of heretics did not succeed. In the 1630s, 70 to 80 percent of taxpayers belonged to a church; by the 1670s, half that many did. In Salem, only about 30 percent belonged to a congregation in 1690.⁴⁴ The grip of the Congregational leadership was further weakened as European immigration brought the region Baptists, Presbyterians, French Protestants, Scots-Irish, and Welsh. In 1684, King Charles II—deciding that he no longer wanted the holy commonwealth to exclude Anglicans or Catholics—rescinded the charter and decreed that Anglicans should be allowed to worship in the Massachusetts colony.⁴⁵

Historians speculate that these conditions laid the groundwork for the Salem witch trials of 1692. Though the most famous example of Puritan excess, the witch trials bear less on church-state issues than does the persecution of the Quakers but, for several reasons, are still worth a quick review. The episode began when some local girls accused an Indian slave, Tituba, of casting spells. The girls said some of the townspeople were witches whose spirits had come to their homes to entrance and torment them. These visitations by ghosts—known as "spectral evidence"—were considered attacks no less real than if a physical body had struck them. During the trials, accused witches were chained to the walls so their specters couldn't escape. Wardens searched

their bodies for witches' teats. "Much of the searching was in and around the accused's genitals," noted Salem scholar Frances Hill.⁴⁶ Dorcas Goode, the four-and-a-half-year-old daughter of one accused witch, Sarah Goode, was imprisoned for seven or eight months. After refusing to confess, Giles Corey was crushed under a gradually increasing pile of stones.⁴⁷ In all, 150 people were arrested and twenty executed.

Some of what makes the Salem witch trials well studied—the phenomenon of mass hysteria, the absurd standards of legal evidence—does not relate to the topic of this book. But there are two points of relevance. First, it was the Puritan theology that a few sinners (or demons) could pollute and destroy the whole church that made persecution of the witches seem urgent. Some historians have argued that the Puritans viewed themselves as players in an apocalyptic drama. If they succeeded, Christ would come again; if they failed, "allowing heresy to spread," God would "punish them just as he had the Israelites of the Old Testament."⁴⁸

Second, this inquisition wasn't driven merely by a few village zealots; it was supported by the top leaders of Puritan society, Increase Mather and his son, Cotton Mather. One alleged witch, George Burroughs, almost avoided execution by giving an earnest speech and reciting the Lord's Prayer to the crowd that had assembled for his hanging. According to one account, "It seemed as if the spectators would rise to hinder the execution." Then, wrote historian George Bancroft, "Cotton Mather, on horseback among the crowd, addressed the people, caviling at the ordination of Burroughs, as though he had been no true minister; insisting on his guilt, and hinting that the devil could sometimes assume the appearance of an angel of light: and the hanging proceeded."⁴⁹

Mather's involvement in the witch trials came at the beginning of a long career of Puritanical preaching. And although he eventually mellowed, his basic theology remained harsh. In 1708, for instance, he wrote a message to children: "Ah, children; be afraid of going prayerless to bed, lest the devil be your bedfellow. Be afraid of playing on the Lord's Day, lest the devil be your play fellow. Be afraid of telling lies, or speaking wickedly, lest that evil tongue be one day tormented in the flames, where a drop of water to cool the tongue will be roared for."⁵⁰ He lived until 1729, and was therefore a dominant figure in Boston during the childhood and early adulthood of Benjamin Franklin.

REPUGNANT JEWS AND DEMONIC CATHOLICS

Though Virginia and Massachusetts were especially important, every colony experimented with a different relationship between church and state. With the exception of Rhode Island, all colonies had official or semi-official churches that promoted the glory of Jesus Christ. Most defined Christianity as being Protestantism, and most discriminated blatantly against Catholics and Jews. Beyond that, there were important differences. The New England colonies—Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Hampshire—were dominated by Puritans and their Congregational churches. They disliked the Anglicans. Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia were at one point or another dominated by the Church of England. They disliked Puritans.

Four colonies followed more distinctive paths. Rhode Island, led by Roger Williams, established something close to the modern American approach to tolerance (though even there, Jews didn't have full rights). Williams had urged tolerance even for "popish and Jewish consciences" and, in *The Bloody Tenent of Persecution for cause of Conscience*, set out concepts that have hardened into gems over time: that religious wars were not "required nor accepted by Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace"; that non-Christians be battled only with "the Sword of Gods Spirit, the Word of God"; that "inforced uniformity" of religion has caused "hypocrisie and destruction of millions of souls"; and, most important, that the sacred roles of spiritual leadership and the secular missions of civil leadership were different and must be kept separate.⁷¹

Pennsylvania established a "Holie Experiment" that gave protection to Quakers and most other minorities but ran into troubles that will be described in the next chapter. And Maryland and New York offer their own captivating, unique, and disheartening lessons, to which we now turn.

New York, of course, originated under the Dutch, not the English. Neither the propaganda designed to draw settlers nor the official chartering documents emphasized religion as much as the English had. Amsterdam, as a trading center of Europe, embraced religious tolerance earlier than most; those values were partly transmitted to their new settlements.⁷² And New Amsterdam (later called New York) became overwhelmed so quickly by such a wide variety of different sects that efforts to establish the Dutch Reformed Church as the official church were ineffective.

But that didn't mean religious tolerance reigned. In 1654, a group of Jews who had been kicked out of Brazil (when the Portuguese regained control from the Dutch) arrived in New Amsterdam seeking freedom, and were

promptly thrown in jail for not having the money to pay for the ship ride.⁵³ Johannes Megapolensis, a Dutch Reformed minister in New Amsterdam, explained the difficulties that might arise from allowing Jews entry: They were "godless rascals" who "have no other God than the unrighteous Mammon, and no other aim than to get possession of Christian property."⁵⁴ New Amsterdam's administrator, Peter Stuyvesant, asked the Dutch West India Company to rule that the "very repugnant" Jews not be allowed to "infect" the colony. Stuyvesant also warned that tolerating Jews, bad in itself, created worse problems since, by "giving them liberty, we cannot refuse the Lutherans and Papists."⁵⁵

But the company informed Stuyvesant that he *had* to welcome the Jews, since "many of the Jewish nation are principal shareholders in the company."⁵⁶ Stuyvesant grudgingly followed orders but harassed the Jews by restricting their ability to buy homes or cemetery plots,⁵⁷ preventing them from opening retail shops, and banning them from practicing any crafts (except being a butcher) as well as from conducting public synagogue services.⁵⁸ In 1655, authorities barred Jews from military service—then put a special tax on them because they were not serving in the military.⁵⁹ In 1658, the citizens of Flushing on Long Island wrote the Flushing Remonstrance, which declared that religious freedom was a blessing that should be protected. Stuyvesant responded to this inspiring call for liberty by having the man who delivered it, Tobias Feake, arrested and banished.⁶⁰

As with most of the colonies, there were occasional breaks in either the repression or the exclusive control of one faith. For a brief period from 1682 to 1688, New York actually had a Catholic governor.⁶¹ Then, in 1689, a man named Jacob Leisler took over, spread rumors that French Catholics and Indians were conspiring to attack, and called for the arrest of "all reputed papists." Their franchise was suspended, and priests were ordered out within three months.⁶² Eventually, New York moved toward a more pluralistic approach, but only after demonstrating the tyranny of both Dutch and English establishments.

Then there's the sad saga of Maryland, established explicitly as a refuge for Catholics. An English Catholic convert named George Calvert, aka Lord Baltimore, was given the land grant by King Charles I in 1632. He told his brother Leonard, who would be the first governor, to "treat the Protestants with as much mildness and favor as justice will permit."⁶³ But enemies of Lord Baltimore, who resented his medieval way of running the colony, laid claims on Maryland's land. In 1644, an influential Virginian, William Clai-

borne, launched a military attack and captured Kent Island in the name of fighting the “Papist devils.”⁶⁴ Eventually, Baltimore recovered the land and resumed efforts to create a religious safe haven. In part to prove that he was not establishing the Catholic Church as the official religion, he worked with the assembly to pass in 1649 a law allowing tolerance of all (except, of course, for “blasphemers and Jews”).⁶⁵ The Act Concerning Religion declared that no one “professing to believe in Jesus Christ shall from henceforth be in any ways troubled, molested or discountenanced for or in respect of his or her religion. . . .” The lofty spirit of tolerance faded from the document in the penalty section, which prescribed capital punishment for anyone who blasphemed God, denied or criticized the divinity of Christ, or criticized any component of the Trinity.⁶⁶ While the death penalty for non-Christians might strike some of us today as a bit extreme, Baltimore’s more pressing problem was trying to appease Protestants, who had come to outnumber Catholics in Maryland. In one sense, this gesture of tolerance worked—in 1649, several hundred Puritans, oppressed in Virginia by the Anglicans, fled to the freedom of Maryland. But with no good deed going unpunished, the Puritans soon allied with Lord Baltimore’s enemies and claimed that he was “professing an establishment of the Romish Religion only,” “suppressing poor Protestants,” and making citizens swear to “uphold Antichrist.”⁶⁷

By 1681, Protestants outnumbered Catholics thirty to one in Maryland. In 1689, the Glorious Revolution was under way in England, and rumors of Catholic-Indian plots now spread rapidly. In July, a group calling itself the Protestant Association again seized the Maryland government.⁶⁸ After that, the Church of England was established and followed patterns similar to those in Virginia, using taxes to build churches, set up vestries, and compensate the Anglican clergy.⁶⁹ In 1700, the colony prevented Catholics from inheriting or purchasing land and established life imprisonment for priests. Informants who spotted priests saying Mass could get a one-hundred-pound reward. In 1704, it prohibited Catholic worship. In 1715, it required that children of a Protestant father and Catholic mother be forcibly removed from the mother if the father died. The next year, public officeholders were required to swear allegiance to the Church of England; in 1718, Catholics were denied the vote unless they took the same oath.⁷⁰

So ended Maryland’s experiment in religious tolerance.

It must always be remembered that for most people of faith in the colonies, religion was a source not of discord but of strength. Countless settlers created families, grew communities, and survived against great odds in large part because of their faith in Jesus Christ. These stories do not generally make the history books because they deal with the mundane, and awesome, power of God in people’s lives. It’s quite possible none of us would be here today if their religious beliefs and practices hadn’t enabled the Puritans, Pilgrims, and Jamestown settlers to persevere against gruesome odds. They were not for the most part hypocrites or sadists. In most cases, they tried to create a world that would bring them closer to God, following his commandments as best they knew how.

But the colonies struggled mightily to establish the proper relationship between church and state. Instances of repression were persistent and often grounded in law. And let’s be clear: These laws were not intended to promote “Judeo-Christian values,” as is sometimes claimed. Jews were not included, nor were most Catholics. The laws aimed to advance first Protestantism and then, depending on the colony, a particular Protestant denomination. Obviously, none of the colonies resembled the model enshrined in the US Constitution in 1787. Forced worship, taxpayers paying ministers’ salaries, voting rights limited to certain religious denominations, brutal punishments for worshipping in a different manner—these are all behaviors that today’s liberals and conservatives would together abhor. Yet they were common in the colonies, and it’s worth noting that the victims of these practices were not atheists or secularists. The victims of these efforts to promote religion were people of faith.

How did this ancient history affect the Founding Fathers and their views on religious liberty? Of course, to some of them, these events were not of the distant past. For instance, Benjamin Franklin’s father immigrated to Massachusetts nine years *before* the Salem witch trials, and Cotton Mather was still preaching in the small town of Boston until Ben was twenty-two. The world of the founding grandfathers shaped the attitudes of the Founding Fathers. So, let us now turn to our first Founder, who was born an old-fashioned Puritan and evolved into a historically important hybrid—a religious freedom fighter with Puritan DNA.

believe in an afterlife. In a condolence note to a friend, he wrote, "Why then should we grieve that a new child is born among the immortals?"²⁸ And, at least later in life, he felt certain he was the beneficiary of God's love. "And, if he loves me, can I doubt that he will go on to take care of me, not only here but hereafter?"²⁹

His true faith was religious pluralism. He wanted a society that was religiously dynamic and relentlessly accepting of differences. This practical—and some would say relativistic—worldview was captured by Franklin in a parody he wrote called "Remarks Concerning the Savages." As he spun the tale, a Swedish diplomat was attempting to teach some Susquehanna Indians stories from the Bible. It seems the Indians listened politely and expressed their appreciation. They then told the diplomat *their* creation story, prompting the minister to declare it a mere "fable." The Indians, according to Franklin, then accused the Swedish official of lacking "common civility." "You saw that we, who understand and practice those Rules, believed all *your* stories," the Indians said. "Why do you refuse to believe ours?"³⁰

BATTLING THE QUAKER PACIFISTS

Another set of events—involving the rise and fall of the Quakers in Pennsylvania—likely shaped Franklin's views on the role of faith in government in a more practical way. Pennsylvania had been established by William Penn, a Quaker, as a "Holy Experiment" in religious tolerance. But contrary to popular impressions, the colony was not secular; the "Quaker Party" controlled the legislature. Pennsylvania therefore tested an interesting hypothesis: Could one merge church and state if those in power were religious pluralists rather than exclusivists, as they had been in Massachusetts and Virginia?

On many of the issues that tripped up other colonies, the Quakers did well. They did not force people of other faiths to pay taxes to support Quaker meetinghouses. Ministers could criticize politicians without being thrown in jail. Philadelphia had the only Catholic church in all the colonies protected by authorities, and diversity flourished.³¹ As one traveler wrote in 1750, "Sects of every belief are tolerated. You meet here Lutherans, Reformed, Catholics, Quakers, Mennonites, Herrenhuter or Moravian Brethren, Seventh Day Baptists, Dunkers, Presbyterians, the New Born, Free Masons, Separatists, Free Thinkers, Negroes and Indians." Franklin admired the Quakers for their tolerance and lack of clergy (and didn't mind getting their printing contracts

either).³² Compared with other colonies, Pennsylvania managed its diversity well—and the other Founding Fathers repeatedly pointed to Pennsylvania's thriving economic and cultural life as evidence that religious tolerance was smart as well as right.³³

Ironically, the main flaw was the Quaker commitment to pacifism. Throughout the colony's history, Quaker lawmakers had adamantly refused to create militias or arm soldiers, in keeping with the religion's view that one of Jesus's most central teachings was nonviolence. When pressed by the British Crown to pay for colonial defense, the Quakers would concoct indirect ways of doing so, such as when they approved funds for "other grains" and didn't object when the governor interpreted that to mean gunpowder. This don't-ask-don't-tell approach worked fine while times were relatively calm. Quakers had built good relations with Indians on the western frontier of the colony and believed that the resultant peace proved that God was providing His special protection.³⁴

But by the summer of 1747, French and Spanish privateers were raiding towns along the Delaware River,³⁵ and rumors spread that they would attack Philadelphia the following summer. The Quakers who controlled the assembly refused to engage in military action. Non-Quakers accused them of imposing their faith on them, and jeopardizing their physical safety. Franklin, then a member of the assembly, wrote an article, signed "a Tradesman of Philadelphia," warning that "fortunes, wives and daughters shall be subject to the wanton and unbridled rage, rapine and lust" of the enemy.³⁶ His other newspaper articles, while respectful of the Quaker position, argued that self-defense was essential. He raised money privately for weapons in part by establishing a lottery, selling ten thousand tickets for two pounds each.³⁷

On November 15, 1755, a group of 120 Indians near present-day Reading, Pennsylvania, murdered fifteen settlers and scalped three children.³⁸ The Germans began to abandon the frontier. On November 25, 1755, four hundred wagons carrying eighteen hundred angry and weary settlers poured into Philadelphia and headed to the governor's residence. There, on the sidewalk in front of the house, they displayed the scalped, mutilated, blackened bodies of a dozen friends and relatives. A few days later, the assembly approved a defense commission to supervise the war effort, and the Quakers' theological control was effectively ended.

Given the Quakers' historic suffering in Massachusetts, it must have seemed to them a terrible irony that the other faiths in Pennsylvania viewed *them* as oppressors. Though the Pennsylvania experiment failed for different

reasons than those of Massachusetts, Maryland, or Virginia, Franklin could not help but observe that any government dominated by a particular religious faction—even one committed to tolerance—would struggle if it tried to legislate religious views.

He also could not help but notice some of the positive influences that religion was having in the land. For Franklin had a front-row seat for a Christian religious revival that would transform American culture and pave the way for religious freedom. Franklin—the ultimate Enlightenment scientist-philosopher—not only witnessed the Great Awakening but helped push it along as well.

3

the evangelical revolution

A CROSS-EYED PREACHER FUELS THE DRIVE FOR INDEPENDENCE AND RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

IN 1775, GENERAL BENEDICT ARNOLD WAS PREPARING TO LEAD troops up to Quebec to enlist Canadians in the colonial cause—or failing that, simply to conquer them. Before leaving, Arnold's chaplain, Samuel Spring, had a morbid idea for motivating the troops. He marched them to Newburyport, Massachusetts, to the grave of a preacher named George Whitefield. They dug up the casket, broke it open, and removed from the skeleton Whitefield's clerical collar and wristbands. Spring cut them up and distributed them to the troops for inspiration.

Why did Spring choose this particular preacher to disturb? Whitefield was the most important leader in the period known as the Great Awakening, and Spring undoubtedly wanted help from the preacher's divine connections when the men faced combat. Moreover, it was fitting that Whitefield, or bits of him, would be dragged into battle because—to a degree seldom acknowledged in textbooks—the evangelical revival he led helped lay the groundwork for American independence and the triumph of religious liberty.

The dramatic wave of religious activity dubbed the Great Awakening started in New Jersey and western Massachusetts, where ministers such as Gilbert Tennent and Jonathan Edwards were preaching about the importance of personal born-again experiences. They believed that New England was especially sinful but that God would be offering a new wave of dispensa-

tions.¹ These isolated revivals became a mass movement in fall 1739 with the arrival from England of Whitefield, who was a friend of John and Charles Wesley, the founders of Methodism. Whitefield had developed a following in England after writing about his conversion experiences and travels from depravity to salvation. Just twenty-five years old, his voice was powerful and hypnotic. He was described as handsome, even though one of his eyes was crossed inward—which some viewed as a divine mark.² He attacked the Church of England for its lethargy and failure to emphasize the idea that only God's mercy keeps us from damnation. Anglican churches banned him from their pews, so he went into the fields, where he drew worshippers by the thousands.

When he arrived in the colonies, Whitefield declared that they were fortunate enough to be in the midst of a special outpouring of grace from God, a rare moment when He expanded the pool of the saved—and pity the poor fool who was not paying enough attention to accept the gift. He moved crowds to tears or gasps or silence. His arrival in a town was an *event*. “I was in my field at Work,” a farmer in Middletown, Connecticut, wrote in a journal. “I dropt my tool that I had in my hand and ran home to my wife telling her to make ready quickly to go and hear Mr. Whitfield preach.” Breathless, he arrived in time to see the preacher—“young, slim, slender . . . almost angelical,” and looking as if “cloathed with the authority from the Great God.”³

Like modern evangelists, Whitefield used the latest media innovations to spread the gospel far and wide. In his case, that meant tapping into a burgeoning network of newspapers that had sprung up in the colonies—one of the most important being *The Pennsylvania Gazette*, a small publication purchased in 1729 by Benjamin Franklin. For six months before his arrival in the colonies, the *Gazette* printed dispatches about Whitefield's preaching in England—the twenty thousand who showed up at Kensington commons; the time he delivered a sermon on a tombstone; how he used tree limbs as pews. Once Whitefield arrived, Franklin offered saturation coverage of his every move, including the huge crowds in Charleston and Wilmington and the money he was raising for an orphanage in Georgia. Apparently skeptical of some early crowd estimates, Franklin conducted an experiment while Whitefield was preaching from the top of the courthouse steps at the intersection of Market and Second streets in Philadelphia. Franklin walked backward down Market Street and kept going until he could no longer hear the sermon. He then imagined a semicircle with himself as one of the outermost points. From that he calculated that Whitefield was speaking to thirty thousand people.

Keep in mind that the populations of Boston, New York, and Philadelphia were each between ten and fifteen thousand at the time.⁴ Historian Frank Lambert, in *Pedlar in Divinity*, has estimated that 75 percent of the *Gazette's* issues during the fourteen months Whitefield was in America carried pieces about the preacher. On eight occasions, Franklin devoted the entire front page to Whitefield.⁵ The two even collaborated on a popular subscription series based on his talks, and Franklin helped connect Whitefield with the publishers of other colonial newspapers.

In describing one of Whitefield's sermons, Franklin's bemusement over the preacher's message but admiration for his salutary impact both shone through:

The multitudes of all sects and denominations that attended his sermons were enormous, and it was a matter of speculation to me . . . to observe the extraordinary influence of his oratory on his hearers, and how much they admir'd and respected him, notwithstanding his common abuse of them, by assuring them that they were naturally half beasts and half devils.

It was wonderful to see the change soon made in the manners of our inhabitants. From being thoughtless or indifferent about religion, it seem'd as if all the world were growing religious, so that one could not walk thro' the town in an evening without hearing psalms sung in different families of every street.

In some parts of America, Whitefield reported finding a hollow and superficial faith. In his journal during his trip to Boston in October 1740, Whitefield wrote that “it has the form of religion kept up, but has lost much of its power.” Mark Noll, one of the preeminent historians of this period, has noted that Whitefield's efforts did result in a dramatic increase in the number of people “making personal profession of faith in order to join a church.” From 1730 to 1740, before the Great Awakening, Congregational churches in Connecticut had recorded an average of eight new members per year. In 1741 and 1742, during the height of the revival, the average was four times that.⁶ More broadly, the Great Awakening divided many American churches into “New Lights,” who embraced the new evangelical spirit, and “Old Lights,” who were more traditional. Certain new denominations—especially the Baptists—grew rapidly. New universities sprouted up to promote the ap-

proach, including Princeton, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth. In colony after colony, these proto-evangelicals turned against the dominant religious hierarchies.

Why was Whitefield embraced by someone like Franklin, an Enlightenment thinker, who strongly disagreed with Whitefield's view that salvation was based on faith rather than good behavior? Franklin clearly thought Whitefield was good for business; he charged more for a collection of Whitefield's sermons than for his own *Poor Richard's Almanack*. But there was more to his admiration. For one thing, Whitefield was a small-*d* democrat whose style and tone challenged traditional forms of social organization and authority. He denounced the mistreatment of slaves, endorsed education for Negroes, and established several charities.⁷ He believed that each person, no matter how well educated or wealthy, could make a choice for Jesus. And Franklin must have loved the way Whitefield mocked denominational differences. In the first sermon he preached in Philadelphia, Whitefield offered an imaginary conversation in Heaven:

Father Abraham, who have you in heaven? Any Episcopalians?

No!

Any Presbyterians?

No!

Any Baptists?

No!

Have you any Methodists, Seceders or Independents there?

No, no, no!

Why, who have you there?

We don't know those names here. All who are here are Christians, believers in Christ—men who have overcome by the blood of the Lamb, and the word of his testimony.⁸

When local clergy stopped giving Whitefield a place to speak, Franklin helped build a new hall for him, and clergy of any other religion. Franklin boasted that it was "expressly for the use of any preacher of any religious persuasion who might desire to say something to the people at Philadelphia; the design in building not being to accommodate any particular sect, but the inhabitants in general; so that even if the Mufti of Constantinople were to send a missionary to preach Mahometanism to us, he would find a pulpit at his ser-

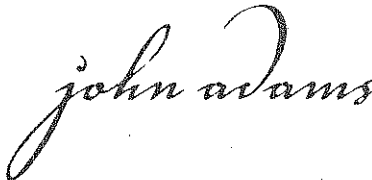
vice."⁹ A church for the leading evangelical—and the Mufti of Constantinople? Franklin viewed Whitefield's cause and that of religious pluralism as tightly joined.

Most important, Whitefield was brutal in his criticism of the Church of England and its colonial outposts. He challenged their pettiness, stodginess, and lethargy about moral evils. "The reason why congregations have been so dead," he declared, "is because they have dead men preach them."¹⁰ So as the New Lights multiplied, the colonies began to fill with men and women hostile to one of the most visible institutions of England. And what started as enmity toward the connection between a particular church and a particular state led naturally to a reassessment of the traditional assumption that church and state must be connected. As noted earlier, most of the colonies had imported the idea that an official "established" church was an absolute necessity for promoting religion. In the South, it was the Anglican Church, while in the North, the Puritan-influenced Congregational Church was dominant. In both cases, colonial elites mostly accepted that established churches were traditional and sensible. But evangelicals of the Great Awakening viewed these official and semi-official churches as the ones keeping them from worshipping as they saw fit.

Many historians have argued that it was through the revivals that colonists gained practice in challenging authority in general. Whitefield believed that "God's grace made it possible for even the humblest individual to take a place alongside the greatest of saints," wrote Mark Noll, Nathan Hatch, and George Marsden. "This spirit—a frank expression of popular democracy and the sharpest attack yet on inherited privilege in colonial America—probably had much to do with the rise of a similar spirit in politics later on." New Light Baptists in Massachusetts refused to pay religious taxes. Throughout the colonies, evangelicals flouted church and legislative laws requiring preachers to have special licenses and limit their work to predetermined boundaries. Theologically, average colonists were taught that they needn't rely on experts to translate their conversations with God; they had the insight, and right, to connect directly and interpret God's will. The dominant institutions of community life need not be heeded; if people in authority were limiting your freedom, you had the right to ignore them. "Defiance of authority was infectious," wrote William G. McLoughlin.¹¹

In other words, it was in part from the evangelicals that many colonists learned how to be revolutionaries.

Of course, not all Americans needed the New Light spirit to fuel antagonism to Great Britain. It was, after all, in the traditional Puritan strongholds of New England that rebellion's fire burned first. So to understand the drive toward independence—and religious freedom—we must now turn to Boston, and to the religiously complex John Adams.

4


THE ANGRY UNITARIAN

THE MEETINGHOUSE IN BRAINTREE, MASSACHUSETTS, WAS SO cold in the winters that the communion bread would sometimes freeze solid. But the Adams family rarely missed services each Sunday, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. Because John Adams's father was a deacon, young John marched straight to the front, sitting just to the left of the pulpit, a place of honor.¹

Though Puritanism's hold on Massachusetts had weakened by the time of John Adams's birth in 1735—twenty-nine years after Franklin's—it still powerfully shaped him. By law, the local schools were required to teach the Westminster Catechism, the core of the Congregational Faith, which declared with precision the correct doctrines about the Trinity, original sin, the Ten Commandments, and 104 other points.² Religion jumped from every page of textbooks such as *The New England Primer*, showing the tenderness of Puritanism (“HUSH my dear, lie still and slumber, holy angels guard thy bed”) as well as the harsher side (“There is a dreadful fiery hell / Where wicked ones must always dwell”). Through school, church, and family, Adams came to revere God and his ancestors. To be sure, he acknowledged, the Puritan fathers might have occasionally exhibited excessive “enthusiasm”—a Quaker hanging here, a witch stoning there—but they were just reflecting the behavioral norms of their day. On balance, the Puritans had founded the colonies on