

Religious Ideas in the Declaration of Independence:  
Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, and the American Mind

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### Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the religious statements of the Declaration of Independence. It examines contemporary uses of Locke's ideas on natural rights and created equality in newspapers, town meetings, colonial governments, speeches, and sermons. It also identifies uses of Locke's works in religious sources in the decades before the Revolution. Locke's ideas became especially important to arguments in favor of religious liberty for dissenters during and after the First Great Awakening. These analyses connect to both his *Two Treatises of Government* and his *A Letter Concerning Toleration*. These works parallel to the writings and protests of colonial religious leaders like Elisha Williams and Isaac Backus. This thesis also evaluates the relevance of these religious ideas to the arguments for civil liberty, showing how Americans connected civil and religious liberty in the Revolution. Finally, it outlines Thomas Jefferson's connection to efforts for religious liberty and examines the correlation of his religious beliefs to the civil-religious theory of the Declaration.

### Religious Ideas in the Declaration of Independence:

#### Thomas Jefferson, John Locke, and the American Mind

The Declaration of Independence, as the charter document of the United States, provides both the practical, contemporary concerns of separation from Great Britain and the basic theory for the new government. At the center of this theory is the idea that equality and rights come from God. The basic rights of the people could not be violated, because their source was an authority higher than government itself. Thomas Jefferson's contemporaries claimed that he borrowed this main idea directly from the writings of John Locke, yet Jefferson himself recognized it as coming more from the popular sentiment and conversation leading to the American Revolution. It is clear, however, from examination of speeches, letters, and other writings of the time, that Locke held a central position in that American revolutionary conversation, while other sources had similar significance. Though the religious content of the Declaration of Independence may appear to be an elite and deistic Enlightenment theory, the documents and experiences surrounding the American Revolution reveal a deeper and more widespread religious connection.

#### **Drafting and Discussing the Document**

The religious language of the Declaration appears in its explicit basic assumptions, truths which colonists used, as Thomas Jefferson later described, in "an appeal to the tribunal of the world."<sup>1</sup> Towards the end of his life, Jefferson explained the

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<sup>1</sup> Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson, Political Writings*, Ed. Joyce Appleby and Terrence Ball (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 147-48.

purpose of the Declaration in response to debates about its content.<sup>2</sup> He clarified that Americans continued to cherish and celebrate the document not for its list of grievances but for its principles. The majority of the Declaration does not use explicitly religious language, but this can be explained by the need for simple enumeration of the failures of the British government to fulfill its theoretical role. The introductory lines, however, describe the theory itself and invoke religious ideas as a foundation. The first few lines address the idea of one people separating from another, explaining that their equality is established in the laws of Nature and Nature's God. The next lines, being at least a partial explanation of these laws, make the most well-known claims "that all men are created equal" and are "endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." The following arguments, which assert that the people have a right to separate from a government that does not uphold this higher standard, claim their authority from this ultimate source of law and rights.

Interpreting the religious meaning behind the statements of the Declaration requires examining the author and his sources. The first and most obvious source is Thomas Jefferson's draft of the Declaration before it was submitted to legislative revision.<sup>3</sup> Though the subcommittee selected by the Continental Congress to draft a declaration, consisting of Jefferson and four others, met to discuss and revise the document, all accounts of the process claim Jefferson as the author.<sup>4</sup> The Congress then

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<sup>2</sup> Jefferson to James Madison, Monticello, August 30, 1823, in *Thomas Jefferson, Political Writings*, 147.

<sup>3</sup> Jefferson explains in his letter to Madison that the changes made to his original draft included his own editions, as well as the few suggestions of both John Adams and Benjamin Franklin, before he submitted the document to legislative scrutiny.

<sup>4</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1997), 99-105. The committee, consisting of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Benjamin

discussed and edited this draft, working as a Committee of the Whole.<sup>5</sup> The truths outlined in the document had originally been “sacred and undeniable” rather than simply “self-evident.”<sup>6</sup> Also, Jefferson’s original wording laid extra stress on the most central idea: the origin of rights in equal creation by God. That phrase originally said, “all men are created equal & independent, that from that equal creation they derive rights inherent & inalienable.”<sup>7</sup> One of Jefferson’s most recent encounters with the idea of natural rights at the time was the Virginia Declaration of Rights, written by George Mason. In his adaptation of the Virginia declaration, Jefferson revealed a purposeful addition of religious origin. Where Mason said “all men are born equally free and independent,” Jefferson said that “all men are created equal & independent.”<sup>8</sup>

Jefferson left more than his original draft to indicate the source of his writings. He also explained his sources in the debate on the contents of the Declaration. His fellow founders insisted that his writing was not original. Jefferson replied that the point was irrelevant, since he had never claimed originality or intended to invent his own ideas. The Declaration was, to him, the most straightforward defense of rights as he could compose,

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Franklin, Roger Sherman, and Robert R. Livingston, left no official notes of its meetings. Also, it is difficult to discern who contributed each change, since Jefferson noted his own changes as well as others’. See Maier for a detailed description of evidence, an account of the committee and Congressional process, and the changes made.

<sup>5</sup> Pauline Maier, *American Scripture*, 143-44. Again, no official records of the process of editing the Declaration in Congress exist. See Maier for a detailed account of the events of the Congress.

<sup>6</sup> Jefferson’s “original Rough draught” of the Declaration of Independence, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, ed. Julian P. Boyd (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1950), III: 423. Boyd explains that this change was in Jefferson’s hand, but there is no final conclusion who decided to change it.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas S. Kidd, *God of Liberty: A Religious History of the American Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2010), 142. Pauline Maier, *American Scripture: Making the Declaration of Independence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1997), 134.

simply containing an “expression of the American mind.”<sup>9</sup> He explained that “[a]ll its authority rests then on the harmonizing sentiments of the day.”<sup>10</sup> The Declaration was a true representation of the ideas already valued by Americans. He clarified that these sentiments were common in conversation, letters, essays, and books on public right, the basics including Aristotle, Cicero, Locke, Sidney, and others.<sup>11</sup>

The most obvious, direct influence on the text of the Declaration among these philosophers was John Locke. Richard Henry Lee apparently dismissed Jefferson’s celebrated writing as simply a copy from Locke’s *Second Treatise on Government*, though Jefferson remembered that he referenced no specific source while writing the Declaration.<sup>12</sup> However, the parallel in the two works is hard to miss. Locke’s *Treatise* argues for natural, God-given rights, explaining that man’s common origin in God’s workmanship gives each one equal rights.<sup>13</sup> Locke argues that to preserve life given by God, a man must have the liberty to do as he wills where the law of society allows.<sup>14</sup> Likewise, he has ownership first of his own person and, through this liberty, his own labor by which he gains property to support his life.<sup>15</sup> This group of rights, listed in

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<sup>9</sup> Jefferson to Henry Lee, May 8, 1825, in *Thomas Jefferson, Political Writings*, 147-48.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* This was a list of sources given in Jefferson’s letter to Henry Lee.

<sup>12</sup> Jefferson to Madison, May 1825, *Thomas Jefferson, Political Writings*, 146. Locke’s *Second Treatise* is also *The True Original, Extent, and End of Government*.

<sup>13</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, Ed. Peter Laslett (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 271. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 138-39.

<sup>14</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises*, 284.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 286-88.

various forms, appears over and over again in Locke's work.<sup>16</sup> And it appears also in Jefferson's writing of the Declaration as "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." As a student of the Enlightenment, Jefferson studied Locke, among many others, and he naturally expressed it in his writing.<sup>17</sup>

### Contemporary Uses of Locke

Locke's writings also influenced a wider, American audience. Due to his literary connection to the Glorious Revolution, the revolutionary generation of Americans celebrated Locke as one of the most authoritative sources on natural rights and the role of government.<sup>18</sup> In 1775, one contemporary observer declared that "the venerable name of LOCKE carries so much weight and authority that on every subject relative to politics or government, his arguments seem irresistibly persuasive."<sup>19</sup> Even those who opposed the resistance, and still looked to Locke as an authority on the dispute, recognized his influence. Peter Van Schaack, a New York loyalist who resisted the new state government in 1777, noted the importance of "the sentiments of Mr. Locke and those other advocates for the rights of mankind whose principles have been avowed and in some instances carried into practice by the congress."<sup>20</sup> Probably among these other

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<sup>16</sup> John Locke, *Two Treatises*, 350. Locke says the "end," or purpose, of government is the "mutual *Preservation* of their Lives, Liberties and Estates, which I call by the general Name, *Property*."

<sup>17</sup> Edwin S. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God: A Religious Biography of Thomas Jefferson* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1996), 20.

<sup>18</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 138. Bernard Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967). Gordon S. Wood suggests in *Radicalism of the American Revolution* that even Locke's *Some Thoughts on Education* impacted ideas of liberty in America through softening the patriarchal structure of society. Gordon S. Wood, *The Radicalism of the American Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 149.

<sup>19</sup> The *Pennsylvania Packet*, April 19, 1775, quoted in T. H. Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots: the Revolution of the People* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2010), 248.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted in Bailyn, *The Ideological Origins of the American Revolution*, 29.

advocates were John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, writers of *The Independent Whig* and *Cato's Letters*, whose ideas held an American audience since the 1720s. Trenchard and Gordon took much of their theory on natural rights from Locke.<sup>21</sup> In a study of the authors cited in political writings from 1760 to 1805, Locke ranked third in frequency, following Montesquieu and Blackstone. During the years of the Revolution itself, Locke equaled or exceeded these two authors.<sup>22</sup> For Americans striving to explain their resistance to British government, Locke provided a well-established argument based on the ultimate authority of God's creation. Though many Americans may not have known Locke's works themselves, his ideas had worked into their understanding of government and rights.<sup>23</sup>

Jefferson was right about his sources for the Declaration. The natural, God-given rights that Locke described were expressed in all types of writings of the day. Perhaps the writings which best represented colonists were documents from all levels of colonial governments. For small communities of ordinary people, like those of Gorham, Massachusetts, theory was consistent with practical objections to oppressive measures. The Gorham town meeting declared that no power under heaven held claim to their meager possessions, according to the law of God and the British Constitution.<sup>24</sup> In the same fashion, a town meeting in Newport, Rhode Island in 1774 took action against the tax on tea with the supporting argument that "the disposal of their own property is the

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<sup>21</sup> Samuel C. Smith, *A Cautious Enthusiasm: Mystical Piety and Evangelicalism in Colonial South Carolina* (Columbia, SC: The University of South Carolina Press, 2013.), 70, 73-74.

<sup>22</sup> Study conducted by Donald S. Lutz and Charles S. Hyneman cited in John Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution: the Faith of Our Founding Fathers* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1987), 51-53.

<sup>23</sup> Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 242-43.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 250-51.

inherent right of freemen; that there can be no property in that which another can, of right, take from us....”<sup>25</sup> Other colonial governments expressed more explicit theories. In 1776, the Massachusetts government declared that the ultimate sovereignty of the people could not be held by a single or a few rulers, since God never gave men the right to put themselves under unlimited authority.<sup>26</sup> God-given rights and theories of representative government were not new topics in Massachusetts. In rhetorical battles with Lieutenant Governor Thomas Hutchinson, the colony’s House of Representatives had argued directly from the works of John Locke.<sup>27</sup>

Other writings of the time carried the same message. Newspapers, speeches, and essays all proclaimed the God-given nature of rights. For example, the *Connecticut Courant* of May, 1775 asserted that “The rights of mankind, viz. to personal security, liberty, and private property, are derived from the great first cause—are holden by a divine tenure, the great Charter of him that made us, and are natural to our very existence.”<sup>28</sup> Similarly, in May of the next year a “Farmer of Philadelphia County” argued in a speech that since God gave him his life and property, only God had the power to demand it from him.<sup>29</sup> The *Connecticut Gazette* on May 27, 1774 also insisted on these rights under God’s authority, saying that “the man who refuses to assert his right to liberty—property—and life—is guilty of the worst kind of rebellion. He commits high

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<sup>25</sup> *Colony of Rhode-Island, &c. At a town-meeting held at Newport, the 12th day of January, 1774, Henry Ward, Esq; moderator*, In Evans Collection (Newport: Solomon Southwick, 1774).

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 251.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>28</sup> Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 250.

<sup>29</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 140.

treason against God.”<sup>30</sup> Even earlier works, like James Otis’s *A Vindication of the Conduct of the House of Representatives* of 1762, used this argument. Otis, in defense of the Massachusetts legislature, stated as a foundation to his argument that God created all men equal and that no societal ideas of superiority were actually innate.<sup>31</sup> Otis quoted Locke extensively on this point. He included Locke’s explanation that natural liberty should be free from any higher, earthly power and that this liberty is so connected to self-preservation that it cannot be totally surrendered.

The central idea in these arguments for colonial protest was an appeal to a higher standard rather than a rejection of authority in general. In 1774, the *Norwich Packet* proclaimed, “Blessed be God we do not hold our liberties by the precarious tenor of any man’s will. They are defended by the impregnable bulwarks of law and guaranteed by the most awful sanctions.”<sup>32</sup> To a people who could not find redress in the agents of their cherished English law, an appeal to heaven made perfect sense. Popular works that aimed to inspire resistance used these ideas. For example, *Common Sense* argued that Americans should turn from monarchy and return to God and his law as their king.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the *Crisis*, which Americans repeatedly reprinted, urged English subjects to stand with the colonists and fight for “those rights and liberties which heaven gave” and secure their safety “by an appeal to heaven, by a glorious resistance.”<sup>34</sup> If they did not, it

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<sup>30</sup> Quoted in Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 256.

<sup>31</sup> James Otis, *A Vindication of the Conduct of the House of Representatives*, in the Evans Collection (Boston: Printed by Edes and Gill, in Queen-Street, 1762), 17-18.

<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 256.

<sup>33</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> *The Crisis, Number XXII*, in the Evans Collection (New York: Reprinted by John Anderson, 1775), [181], 182.

said, and “America can be reduced to slavery, all the boasted privileges of Englishmen must fall with her.” Understanding this commonly accepted idea may explain the enthusiasm the soldiers under General Israel Putnam expressed when they revealed their banner at Boston in 1775, displaying the motto “AN APPEAL TO HEAVEN.”<sup>35</sup> A prayer offered for the soldiers in the ceremony that day again directly reflected the ideas of Locke. Reverend Abiel Leonard recognized that their choice was “submitting to arbitrary laws and despotic government; or taking up arms in defense of those rights and privileges, which thou, in thy goodness, hast conferred upon them.”<sup>36</sup> Locke had argued in his *Second Treatise* that if a ruler violated the trust of the people and would not act according to their consent, a people’s final appeal was to heaven.<sup>37</sup>

Though Locke’s ideas are within the scope of the Enlightenment, his writings in the American colonies often merged with a more traditional, religious viewpoint. Sermons acted as another means of spreading political messages, including theories of natural, God-given rights. Reverend Dan Foster, in a series of sermons collected in his *A Short Essay on Civil Government*, argued for resistance through the Old Testament example of God’s reluctance to give Israel a king. In the midst of this Biblical argument, Foster used Locke’s outline of men with natural rights entering into society under the direction of the God of nature.<sup>38</sup> Samuel Lockwood made similar points in a sermon

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<sup>35</sup> Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 244.

<sup>36</sup> Abiel Leonard, *A prayer, composed for the benefit of the soldiery, in the American army*, in the Evans Collection (Cambridge: Printed and sold by S. & E Hall., 1775), [3].

<sup>37</sup> Breen, *American Insurgents, American Patriots*, 246. John Locke, *Two Treatises of Government*, 282.

<sup>38</sup> Dan Foster, *A short essay on civil government, the substance of six sermons, preached in Windsor, Second Society, October 1774*, in the Evans Collection (Hartford: Printed by Ebenezer Watson, near the great-bridge, 1775), 7-8.

preached before the Connecticut General Assembly in 1774. Lockwood examined the purpose of entering into society, explaining that “men are born free” and “give up certain native rights” to enter into society and “secure and perpetuate their personal liberties and properties.”<sup>39</sup> Other sermons emphasized the God-given nature of these rights. John Allen, a former English pastor, mixed his evangelicalism with the cause of liberty in his 1773 essay *The American Alarm, or The Bostonian Plea*. He explained that life is not truly life without liberty and declared that “Freedom is that very breath of life that God breathed into man when he became a living soul.”<sup>40</sup> Allen reasoned from this idea that each man equally possesses natural rights and supported it by claiming that Scripture condemns as murderers those who violate these rights.

### **Locke’s Religious Connections from the First Great Awakening**

The use of Locke and natural rights was not new to religious works by the time of the Revolution. In fact, colonial ministers had discussed the relevance of Enlightenment ideas to the right of private judgment in religion for nearly half of a century.<sup>41</sup> Religious liberty in general had an even deeper history. Roger Williams, one of the earliest proponents of religious liberty, published his own works on the topic, which some suggest show striking parallels to Locke’s later work *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Samuel Lockwood, *Civil Rulers an Ordinance of God, for Good to Mankind*, in the Evans Collection (New London, CT: Timothy Green, 1774), 17-18.

<sup>40</sup> John Allen, *The American alarm, or The Bostonian plea, for the rights, and liberties, of the people*, in the Evans Collection (Boston: Printed and sold by D. Kneeland and N. Davis, in Queen-Street, 1773), 6.

<sup>41</sup> Nicholas P. Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment: Dissenting Protestants and the Separation of Church and State* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), Published to Oxford Scholarship Online, September 2012, 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199858361.001.0001. (accessed September 7, 2013), 91-93.

<sup>42</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 71-72. Kidd’s description of Roger Williams’s arguments for a separation of church and civil government, a limiting of government to protection of members of

Other ministers over time began to couple natural rights with scriptural arguments, believing them compatible, despite some opposition. The right of private judgment, which began in the colonies as a Protestant idea to more traditional leaders like Cotton Mather in 1718, incorporated natural rights by leaders like Josiah Smith in the 1730s and Jonathan Mayhew in the 1740s.<sup>43</sup> The coming of the Great Awakening intensified debates over religious liberty, and prominent clergy used Locke's ideas on toleration to fight for the rights of dissenting sects.

Elisha Williams was a descendent of a distinguished and devout New England family, and established himself as a leading figure in Connecticut through positions in ministry, government, military, and education. He studied theology and law, worked as a teacher and a minister, and became the rector of Yale with the understanding that he would restore the traditional character of its theology.<sup>44</sup> He was also a member of the Connecticut Assembly, held a position on the Connecticut Supreme Court, served as chaplain in the campaign to take Louisbourg in 1745, and attended as a delegate to the Albany Congress in 1754.<sup>45</sup> In his later years in public office, however, Williams's beliefs put him in the middle of Great Awakening controversies. He took a conciliatory position between the old and new lights, continuing to adhere to traditional views of his Puritan predecessors while giving moderate acceptance to the enthusiasms of others.<sup>46</sup> In

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society, and the danger of the corruption of the church through civil authority appeared later in striking similarity in Locke's *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 43-44.

<sup>43</sup> Miller, *The Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 91-93.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ellis Sandoz, ed., *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805*, 2nd Ed. Libertyfund.org (accessed April 14, 2013) (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

<sup>46</sup> Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 96.

1742, while Williams served for the second time in the Connecticut Assembly, he opposed new restrictions on itinerant preaching, restrictions which came with the punishment of removal from authority to preach.<sup>47</sup> After speaking against the law before the Assembly, Williams lost his positions as judge and justice of the peace, though his loss of public position was only temporary.<sup>48</sup> Despite criticisms from both old and new lights, Williams continued to assert his views. In 1744, he published his essay, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, responding to the controversy with Scripture and the ideas of natural rights.<sup>49</sup>

Williams used *The Essential Rights and Liberties* to combine Scripture with Lockean ideas to support liberty. He opens his essay with an argument based on the authority of Scripture and on freedom given by Christ. Then he pauses from this argument to consider what he calls “the Origin and End of Civil Government,” a clear reflection of Locke’s *Second Treatise*.<sup>50</sup> He asserts that, “as reason tells us, all are born thus naturally equal, i.e. with an equal right to their persons; so also with an equal right to their preservation; and therefore to such things as nature affords for their subsistence.”<sup>51</sup> He speculates on the reasons for man’s entry into a state of society, concluding, “as the

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<sup>47</sup> Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 96. Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

<sup>50</sup> Elisha Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, in *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era, 1730-1805* (Libertyfund.org).

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

celebrated Locke observes,” that these institutions are meant for “the preservation of their persons, their liberties and estates, or their property”<sup>52</sup>

Elisha Williams begins with an argument for the role of government and rights within society, but his broader topic is freedom of religion. Religious liberty is not the topic of Locke’s *Second Treatise* but of his *Letter Concerning Toleration*. Locke’s *Letter*, which American printers published at least two times before the Revolution and once after, made its mark in the work of Williams.<sup>53</sup> Where Williams declared that “no action is a religious action without understanding and choice in the agent,” Locke had said “All the life and power of true religion consist in the inward and full persuasion of the mind; and faith is not faith without believing.”<sup>54</sup> Similarly, where Williams said “so no laws may be made for, or any doctrines be taught and enjoined upon the church of Christ besides those he has made and taught and enjoined,” Locke had questioned “[H]ow can [that] be called the Church of Christ which is established upon laws that are not His?”<sup>55</sup> Both authors argued from reason and Scripture and concluded that, as Williams put it, “the rights of conscience are sacred and equal in all, and strictly speaking unalienable.”<sup>56</sup> Though Williams died over a decade before the colonies began to resist imperial policies, his work had a lasting impact.

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<sup>52</sup> Elisha Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*.

<sup>53</sup> Locke’s *Letter* was published in Boston in 1743, in Wilmington, DE in 1764 (a copy of which was given as a gift in 1772 according to handwriting on the title page), and in Windsor, VT in 1788, according to the Evans Collection.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, translated by William Popple, in *Great Books of the Western World*, Vol. 35, Edited by Robert Maynard Hutchins (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), 3.

<sup>55</sup> Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*. Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 5.

<sup>56</sup> Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 3, 5.

Isaac Backus was a fellow Connecticut minister in the later years of Williams's life, but in many ways his experience was very different. Backus did not receive formal training or adhere to traditional Congregational beliefs. Instead, after experiencing conversion in the Great Awakening, he joined a group of dissenters who had raised objections to the Congregational halfway covenant and separated from the established church.<sup>57</sup> Under the direction of England's Toleration Act of 1688, Connecticut made carefully-ruled allowances for recognized dissenting churches, but new groups breaking away during the Great Awakening found themselves facing fines and sometimes imprisonment.<sup>58</sup> Backus continued in separate groups and by 1751 became a Baptist minister.<sup>59</sup> This position gave him the opportunity to lead in outspoken opposition to the established church for the next couple of decades and into the Revolution. Backus's first writing on religious liberty, provoked by the 1770 excommunication of a family who objected to infant baptism, adopted part of the name of Williams's work and cited Locke's *Letter* directly.<sup>60</sup> In 1773, Backus, as a representative of a Baptist association to obtain exemption from taxes to support the church, published his *Appeal to the Public for Religious Liberty*.<sup>61</sup> Though Backus rejected Locke's theory on man's first state in nature, he cited Locke's ideas of created rights, drawing specifically on the separate spheres of jurisdiction for the church and the state in *A Letter Concerning Toleration*.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Sandoz, *Political Sermons of the American Founding Era*, (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1998).

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 102.

<sup>59</sup> Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 102.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 104.

### Religious Liberty in the American Revolution

Religious liberty was the common thread before the Great Awakening, through the American Revolution, and into the new nation. Some of what Williams expressed was continued ideas of the Protestant Reformation argued under new circumstances, a parallel not surprising for a people who connected their sense of national identity and freedom to Protestantism.<sup>63</sup> The Great Awakening, which had already affected the colonies with a social leveling, inspired resistance to established churches that lasted into the beginnings of imperial crisis.<sup>64</sup> In 1748, when Separates in Connecticut petitioned their legislature for the “unalienable right” of conscience, they echoed Elisha Williams *Essential Rights* and anticipated Jefferson’s Declaration.<sup>65</sup> Pastor Israel Holly, another Connecticut Separate, argued in his 1765 *A Word on Zion’s Behalf* that civil authority has no power beyond preserving the rights of life, liberty, property, and conscience.<sup>66</sup> Holly quotes Elisha Williams’s *Essential Rights and Liberties*, and reflects both him and Locke in saying that “God in his word nowhere commands us, nay, nowhere allows us to give up ourselves to the Guidance of fallible Men in Matters of Religion.”<sup>67</sup>

The cause of religious liberty also contributed directly to the pre-Revolution resistance to new imperial policies. Built on the colonists’ value of Protestantism as a freedom, religious liberty became a defensive struggle. Colonists, who had grown to

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<sup>63</sup> Williams: “Every one is under an indispensable obligation to search the scripture for himself... for his own information in the will of God, the nature and duties of Christianity.” Miller, *Religious Roots of the First Amendment*, 104. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 16-18.

<sup>64</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 21, 45, 51.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>66</sup> Israel Holly, *A Word in Zion's Behalf*, in the Evans Collection (Hartford: Printed by Thomas Green at the Heart and Crown, 1765), 5-7.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 7, 5.

resent the Anglican Church hierarchy, felt revived fears of Catholic-like control in Anglican plans to reestablish influence through an American bishop.<sup>68</sup> John Adams attested to the colonial connection of civil and religious liberty by explaining that “the apprehension of episcopacy...contributed as much as any cause” to the Revolution.<sup>69</sup> Colonists also attached special religious significance to otherwise civil grievances. The Stamp Act was reported to cause anger especially among non-Anglicans, some of which who, even at this early date, responded with the cry, “No King but King Jesus.”<sup>70</sup> In 1774, the Quebec Act, which allowed the Catholic religion in newly British and formerly French territory, quickened religious fears.<sup>71</sup> To the colonists, this seemed a concession to the enemies at their doorstep, a betrayal by the Crown.<sup>72</sup> Many speculated that Catholic enemies would make a ready force to subdue them, and Alexander Hamilton confirmed that this seemed the most sure sign of imperial plots against the colonists’ liberties. These concerns help to explain why, as one colonial minister said, “We could not long expect to enjoy our religious liberties, when once our civil liberties were gone.”<sup>73</sup>

Colonists connected civil and religious liberties through more than just fear. Reason, too, informed them of their interdependence, and leaders both before, as shown by Elisha Williams, and after the Revolution argued for them simultaneously. Thomas

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<sup>68</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 63-66.

<sup>69</sup> John Adams to Dr. J. Morse, December 2, 1815, in *Letters 1811-1825, Indexes*, vol. 10 of *The Works of John Adams*, ed. Charles Francis Adams (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1856), Libertyfund.org (accessed November 4, 2013).

<sup>70</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 33.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 66-67.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 69-70.

<sup>73</sup> Benjamin Throop, *A Thanksgiving Sermon, Upon the Occasion of the glorious News of the repeal of the Stamp Act*, In the Evans Collection (New London: Printed by Timothy Green, 1766), 12.

Jefferson, who had so well expressed the “American mind,” also fervently fought for religious liberty. Virginia encountered some of the fiercest political battles over religious liberty as a result of the Great Awakening. Presbyterian minister Samuel Davies led colonial dissenters in the 1740s, pressing for toleration and the freedom to preach.<sup>74</sup> Patrick Henry adapted evangelical-style preaching into his famous, revolutionary oratory and named Davies as the most influential evangelical leader in Virginia.<sup>75</sup> Dissenting groups, especially Baptists and Presbyterians, resisted the established Anglican Church, a struggle that often brought violence and imprisonment on itinerant preachers.<sup>76</sup> Tax-supported Anglican clergy had powerful allies in the Virginia Assembly, and the Anglican Church system, though at times weak or at odds with colonial leadership throughout its Virginian past, had been a part of local governance and social life for well over a century.<sup>77</sup> The coming of resistance to British government brought the possibility of questioning the establishment of England’s Church. Jefferson and James Madison, with the inspiration of persecuted evangelicals and the influence of Locke’s ideas on toleration led the effort for official religious liberty.

Jefferson and Madison joined the struggle for freedom of religion in Virginia, which evangelical dissenters had already been fighting, in an effort that lasted for more than a decade. Both leaders expressed opposition to establishment and persecution in the years before independence. In 1776, Jefferson began to attempt to change Virginia’s

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<sup>74</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 50-51.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 76.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>77</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 38-39. Ronald L. Heinemann et al, *Old Dominion, New Commonwealth: A History of Virginia, 1607-2007* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2007), 33, 72.

establishment of religion as part of a larger effort to reform state laws in accordance with reason and liberty.<sup>78</sup> Though he succeeded in removing punishments for not attending church and for not holding certain Christian beliefs, he considered these small steps toward the goal. In the next year, he drafted a bill for establishing full religious liberty, an attempt that ended in legislative approval of George Mason's milder requirement for Christian charity toward dissenters.<sup>79</sup> Jefferson continued to press for approval of religious liberty as a legislator, but it was in his service as Governor that he submitted his next bill. He had no support from many members of the Assembly, the established Anglicans, or even from some Presbyterian ministers who had backed away from full disestablishment.<sup>80</sup> The Assembly tabled the bill, but many dissenters still exerted pressure along with Jefferson. The influence of the Great Awakening in Virginia had multiplied Baptists, Presbyterians, German Lutherans, Quakers, and Methodists, who all continued to insist on freedom.<sup>81</sup> After the American Revolution, their collective appeal brought force to the arguments of Jefferson and Madison.

The turning point came with the fierce political battle surrounding the attempt to establish a general assessment, or tax, to support religion. The legislature's focus on the practical matters of war and state reorganization during the final years of the Revolution meant that the issue of religion had received less attention.<sup>82</sup> In 1784, the Episcopal Church, renamed since its break with the Anglican hierarchy, appealed successfully for

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<sup>78</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 49-51.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-52.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-53.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

state incorporation, fueling such opposition from dissenters that the Assembly repealed it two years later.<sup>83</sup> By this time, Madison led in the legislature for religious liberty, informing and working with Jefferson. When the opposition to complete disestablishment submitted the bill for a religious assessment, it included support from leading figures like Patrick Henry, Richard Henry Lee, Edmund Randolph, and John Marshall.<sup>84</sup> By encouraging a flood of new petitions from dissenters and using argument in the Assembly, Madison defeated the assessment.<sup>85</sup> In his speech, he cited Locke and followed arguments similar to those in Locke's *Letter*.<sup>86</sup> After this victory, Jefferson, through Madison, submitted his bill again, in another legislative battle over its language.<sup>87</sup> Finally, in 1786, the Virginia General Assembly accepted his act on religious freedom.

The struggle for religious liberty was the link between widely different beliefs in the revolutionary era. Both the works of Enlightenment thinkers like Locke and the persistence under persecution by evangelical dissenters inspired Jefferson and Madison.<sup>88</sup> And these dissenters also turned to arguments on rights and reason. Presbyterians called on Virginia's Declaration of Rights as the rule against the attempt to support clergy through state taxes, and Baptists opposed the law with a well-used argument often attributed to Locke, by claiming that the gospel did not need government sanction for its

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<sup>83</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 53-54.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 58, 62-63.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-61.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-67.

<sup>88</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 38-39.

support.<sup>89</sup> To some evangelicals, this struggle made Jefferson a hero in behalf of religion. The Baptist itinerant preacher John Leland worked in Virginia as well as his native New England, claiming thousands of sermons and over 1,200 converts and publishing arguments against restrictions on religious liberty.<sup>90</sup> When Jefferson won the Presidential election of 1800, which included heated debate on religion, Leland celebrated it as the victory of religious freedom.<sup>91</sup> Jefferson, in his own description of the struggles for religious freedom in Virginia, revealed how important the issue was to him and others. He explained that that the “unrighteous compulsion to maintain teachers of what [dissenters] deemed religious errors was grievously felt” before the Revolution. For Jefferson, these were “the severest contests in which I have ever been engaged.”<sup>92</sup>

### **The Religious Beliefs of Thomas Jefferson**

Jefferson and his evangelical co-laborers in the effort against religious restrictions were, in many ways, opposite in the spectrum of religious beliefs of eighteenth century America. Where Baptists saw a violation to the truth of the Gospel, Jefferson observed an equal offense but against God’s gift of reason to man instead.<sup>93</sup> Jefferson rejected Scripture as the special revelation of God, and in fact did not believe in special revelation

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<sup>89</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 62. Locke: “For the truth certainly would do well enough if she were once left to shift for herself.” *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 15.

<sup>90</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 157, 176.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 4-5, 177.

<sup>92</sup> Thomas Jefferson, *Autobiography of Thomas Jefferson* (Raleigh, NC: Alex Catalogue, n.d) EBSCOhost  
[http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1085921&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp\\_1](http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1085921&site=ehost-live&scope=site&ebv=EB&ppid=pp_1) (accessed November 4, 2013), 26-27.

<sup>93</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 62, 70-71.

at all.<sup>94</sup> Elisha Williams, like other religious sources on equality, argued from the authority of Scripture as well as the guidance of reason. Williams said, “if we submit ourselves truly and impartially to the authority of Christ, and search for the truths we are to believe... in his written word; then only do we make him our director and guide, and the scriptures the rule of our faith and practice.”<sup>95</sup> Jefferson also rejected miracles, given the experience gained through observing nature, a belief that challenged much of the content of the Bible.<sup>96</sup> This meant that, for Jefferson, Jesus Christ was not deity, and men could not, and needed not, rely on him for salvation. Though Separates and Congregationalists, and Baptists and Anglicans, fought over religious liberty, their differences remained within traditional doctrines of Christianity, such as the requirements of salvation.<sup>97</sup> Even Locke, though giving strong emphasis to reason, argued throughout his *Letter* from Scripture and from the assumption that one religion is true. To defend generosity to those with varying beliefs, Locke insisted that “this the Gospel enjoins, this reason directs.”<sup>98</sup>

The greatest difference at the root of Jefferson’s departure from other American arguments was his elevation of reason to the ultimate and only source of truth, and with it came probably the weakest emphasis among the founders on the corrupting influence in humanity. His letter to his nephew, Peter Carr, offers one of his most well-known

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<sup>94</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 28.

<sup>95</sup> Williams, *The Essential Rights and Liberties of Protestants*, libertyfund.org.

<sup>96</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 33.

<sup>97</sup> Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 47.

<sup>98</sup> Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 6. Locke also uses basic Christian beliefs to convince his audience, who were, of course, Christians. He argued that men must answer to God above rulers, because “Every man has an immortal soul, capable of eternal happiness or misery; whose happiness depending upon his believing and doing those things in this life which are necessary to the obtaining of God’s favor, and are prescribed by God to that end.” Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 15.

descriptions for religion of reason. He urged his nephew to examine the text of the Bible with a critical eye to its conformity to reasoned experience. "Question with boldness even the existence of a god," he instructed, "because, if there be one, he must more approve of the homage of reason, than that of blindfolded fear."<sup>99</sup> Jefferson coupled this faith in accuracy of human reason with the guidance of an innate moral sense, assuming that the free use of these God-given, human powers would lead to peace, prosperity, and a stable state.<sup>100</sup> Traditional views of the sinfulness of mankind often included the total corruption of human reason, a concept Jefferson could not accept.<sup>101</sup> He was one of the most radical of the founders in these beliefs, since most of the founders centered their policy ideas on the conviction that men were naturally corruptible.<sup>102</sup> Jefferson did admit the tendency toward corruption in an elite government, but his optimism about the future rested on an unswerving faith in the social moral sense of the people.<sup>103</sup> The results of his faith in reason and social morality, however, appeared to have results that Jefferson did not expect. Later in life, he became what some historians have described as dogmatic and pessimistic about the increase of commercialistic capitalism, democracy, and evangelical

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<sup>99</sup> Thomas Jefferson to Peter Carr, August 10, 1787. "The Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826." American History from Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond. <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl61.php> (accessed December 29, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 32. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 109.

<sup>101</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 30.

<sup>102</sup> Eidsmoe, *Christianity and the Constitution*, 21. Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 114, 116. Kidd's chapter "If Men Were Angels" outlines the concerns on the corrupting influence of concentrated power in the Constitution. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 209.

<sup>103</sup> Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 107, 114. Jefferson also used the fallibility of men in government to argue against state support of the church in his Act for Establishing Religious Freedom.

Christianity.<sup>104</sup> The liberty for which he had struggled did not produce the reasoned, peaceful, and simple virtue that he anticipated. Instead, he seemed to be increasingly alarmed by the revelation of his mistaken faith in the natural goodness of mankind.<sup>105</sup>

Despite all these differences, Jefferson shared important, basic beliefs with the American mind, ideas which shaped the foundational argument of the Declaration of Independence. Though he rejected much of what many considered essential to true religion, what he accepted constituted genuine religious belief. In some ways, Jefferson believed in the public value of religion. He continued in his participation and financial support of the Anglican Church throughout his life and celebrated community worship of God.<sup>106</sup> In 1822, he explained that “the court house is our common temple” where believers of various denominations “join in hymning their Maker.”<sup>107</sup> Jefferson did break with precedent in refusing to proclaim national days of prayer during his Presidency, but he also prayed for guidance in his inaugural address from “that Infinite Power which rules the destinies of the universe.”<sup>108</sup> He also revealed this utilitarian belief in the societal value of religion in his decisions on Indian relations. Despite warnings that it may be seen as violating church and state separation, Jefferson authorized continued federal support of missionaries to western tribes, in a policy intended to educate and civilize Native Americans.<sup>109</sup> Though he was known to oppose clergy later in life, he

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<sup>104</sup> Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 113-14, 111.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 13-14.

<sup>107</sup> Quoted in Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 14.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 101.

expressed his opposition in the context of their attempts to establish religion and compared their behavior to the standard of the true teachings of Jesus. He declared that, throughout history, priests had always been in alliance with despotic rulers against freedom and true Christianity.<sup>110</sup>

Jefferson's private life, however, represented even greater religious reflection. His reduced version of the Bible has become famous as evidence against his religious belief, but historians have suggested that Jefferson made this revision in his own attempt to reconcile religion with reason and in answer to accusations that he had rejected religion entirely.<sup>111</sup> His correspondence reveals the true nature of the revision. Jefferson maintained a continual dialogue with Joseph Priestly, an English theologian, and Benjamin Rush on his thoughts on Christianity.<sup>112</sup> He gave much of his spare time to condensing the moral and philosophical elements of the teachings of Jesus, selecting specific verses to outline what he believed to be the heart of Jesus' message.<sup>113</sup> He guarded this work as a private matter with his closest friends, never intending it to become a public refutation of the Bible. Among his nightly readings on religion and morality and in his times of loss, he often turned to this edited version of the Bible for instruction and comfort.<sup>114</sup> Also, similar to the God in the Declaration, the God Jefferson

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<sup>110</sup> Frank Donovan, *The Thomas Jefferson Papers* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963), 212.

<sup>111</sup> Wood, *Revolutionary Characters*, 107.

<sup>112</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 114-15.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, 114-15, 118-19.

<sup>114</sup> Charles B. Sanford, *The Religious Life of Thomas Jefferson* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1984), 3.

revered was both the Creator and sustainer of the world, evidenced by the design in Nature.<sup>115</sup> In writing to John Adams, Jefferson concluded:

I hold (without revelation) that when we take a view of the universe...it is impossible for the human mind not to perceive and feel a conviction of design...it is impossible, I say, for the human mind not to believe that there is in all this design, cause and effect up to an ultimate cause, a Fabricator of all things from matter and motion, their Preserver and Regulator.<sup>116</sup>

Jefferson's claim described a God who not only designed but continued to sustain that design. This Creator provided reason as the only guidance which man could trust and the rule by which men would be judged.<sup>117</sup> Jefferson also believed that an inner moral sense, found not just in the elite, came from God and proved man's created equality.<sup>118</sup>

Jefferson revealed his belief in the Creator as the source of rights in his key writings on religion and liberty, again reflecting authors before him. Like other writers, he repeated Locke's ideas, drawing many of the same conclusions in his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson anticipated his own famous idea of a wall of separation between church and state by asserting that, in reference to submission to rulers, "the rights of conscience we never submitted, we could not submit."<sup>119</sup> Just like the Declaration, Jefferson did not originate this idea. Locke had claimed, "I esteem it above all things necessary to distinguish exactly the business of civil government from that of

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<sup>115</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 36-37.

<sup>116</sup> Thomas Jefferson to John Adams, April 11, 1823. "The Letters of Thomas Jefferson, 1743-1826." American History from Revolution to Reconstruction and Beyond. <http://www.let.rug.nl/usa/presidents/thomas-jefferson/letters-of-thomas-jefferson/jefl271.php> (accessed December 29, 2013).

<sup>117</sup> Jefferson to his nephew, Peter Carr, *ibid*.

<sup>118</sup> Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 32.

<sup>119</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 152.

religion and to settle the just bounds that lie between the one and the other.”<sup>120</sup> Both argued that men were answerable only to God for their conscience, and both limited the role of government in religion to its intersection with the protective laws of society.<sup>121</sup> Like Locke, Jefferson reminded his readers that “Truth can stand by herself.”<sup>122</sup> Likewise, Jefferson’s Act for Establishing Religious Freedom paralleled Locke’s *Letter*.<sup>123</sup> Jefferson, showing again his belief in created equality, begins by stating that “Almighty God hath created the mind free.”<sup>124</sup> He, like Locke, argued that even God, who alone should have such power, did not turn to coercion to save souls.<sup>125</sup> And both authors asserted that religious tyranny corrupted the church with hypocrisy and the state with injustice.<sup>126</sup> Jefferson certainly departed from authors of the past in his writings, but he also borrowed from them in an on-going emphasis on religious liberty. Finally, if Jefferson’s agreement with the American mind on created equality still needed proof, he offered it clearly when he stated his fears for government under the influence of slavery:

And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of

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<sup>120</sup> Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 2. Locke also asserts that man is incapable of surrendering his right of conscience. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 3. Locke possibly used this idea from Roger Williams’s original claim that a wall separated the church from temporal government. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 43.

<sup>121</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 152. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 10-11.

<sup>122</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 153. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 15. Jefferson also reflected Locke’s *Letter* in arguing that the world held many religions, all enforced by the state, showing that force could not lead to true religion. Jefferson, *Notes*, 153 & Locke, *Letter*, 4.

<sup>123</sup> Kidd connects Jefferson and Madison to Locke specifically on ideas of religious liberty, and Gaustad suggested the connection between Jefferson’s writings and Locke’s *Letter*. Kidd, *God of Liberty*, 39. Gaustad, *Sworn on the Altar of God*, 70.

<sup>124</sup> Jefferson, Act for Establishing Religious Freedom, in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 206.

<sup>125</sup> Jefferson, Act for Religious Freedom, 206. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 8.

<sup>126</sup> Jefferson, Act for Religious Freedom, 206-07. Locke, *Letter Concerning Toleration*, 1, 7.

the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just; that his justice cannot sleep forever.<sup>127</sup>

In Jefferson's view, religion provided the foundation to liberty, and God's judgment would respond to the choices of a nation.

The ideas and sources of the American Revolution are many and difficult to trace. Turning to the words of the people and of the Declaration that their representatives made for them, it is clear that religious belief was one of their important and unifying ideas. Sermons, town meetings, newspapers, speeches and personal accounts all shared the Declaration's parallel to Locke's argument for created equality. Though Locke was most popularly used in reference to any debate on civil authority, his ideas on liberty had been introduced prominently through arguments for religious liberty in the decades before the Revolution. Rather than being a sudden inspiration from elite, Enlightenment thinking, Locke's relevance came through long use in religious circles. The connection between religious and civil liberty continued to be a central principle, even for their leading spokesman and radical founder, Thomas Jefferson.

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<sup>127</sup> Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, 156. Additionally, Jefferson explains in this context of slavery that God may turn punishment on a slaveholding nation by "supernatural interference" through slave rebellion. This, clearly, suggests something beyond simple deism.

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