

behind him most passionately in support of church-state separation. The 18th-century evangelicals were Madison's and Jefferson's foot soldiers in the drive for religious liberty. Of course, some of this evangelical support was practical—they aimed to stop the persecutions and break up the authority of the established churches which were preventing them from praying the way they wanted. But there was also a theology to their advocacy of church-state separation. They believed in a personal relationship with God that didn't have to always go through intermediary institutions, namely clergy or church. And this kind of individual liberty or democratic—with a small “d”—approach to religion meshed perfectly with the revolutionary spirit of Jefferson, Madison, and other founders who were insistent in their protestations to the British Crown that the individual also has the right to liberty.

**You also point out that the founding fathers didn't see the languages of reason and faith as contradictory.**

Yes. Take a look at Jefferson, who elevated reason above all other functions. We tend to think of that as meaning he was a secularist, but in fact Jefferson elevated reason because he believed that reason would lead a person to believe in God. “The mind,” he said, “was the only oracle that heaven gave us.”

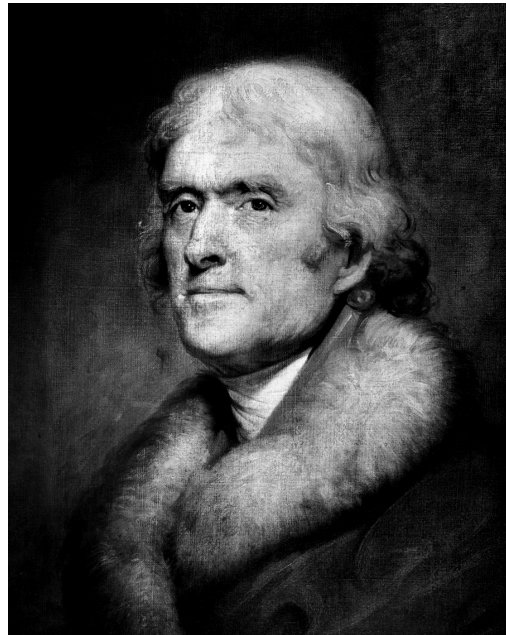
George Washington also invoked God's favor and Providence repeatedly. He did it as commander of the Continental Army, and he did it as president.

There is one significant difference, though, in the way the founding fathers talked about Divine Providence and the way it is often talked about today. Now, when the words “God bless America” are voiced, there is this sense that we are inherently worthy of God's support just by virtue of being Americans. The founders certainly believed that the American experiment was noble and worthy of God's support, but they felt the constant need to prove themselves as worthy of God's grace. Washington, for example, grew concerned that

his soldiers were so profane in their cursing and drinking that God would abandon them on the battlefield. So the early proclamations for prayer that the Continental Congress and President Washington offered always included two parts: one asking and praising God for His support, and the other confessing and pledging to purge themselves of their sins.

**What else do we know of Washington's take on religion and politics?**

The clearest understanding of George Washington's approach can be found in a letter he penned on Christmas 1795, just four years before his death. “In politics as in religion,” he wrote, “my tenets are few and simple. The leading one of which, and indeed that which embraces most others, is to be honest and just ourselves and to exact it from others, meddling as little as possible in their affairs where our own are not involved. If this



*“To an extent rarely acknowledged, Thomas Jefferson despised Jews, [saying that] the ‘vicious ethics’ of the Jews were ‘irreconcilable with the sound dictates of reason & morality’ and were ‘repulsive and antisocial as respecting other nations.’ Though his negative attitude about Judaism seemed mostly confined to antiquity, he occasionally revealed an up-to-date bias.... Referring to New England Federalists, Jefferson declared that ‘They are marked like the Jews, with... a perversity of character.’”—Steven Waldman*

**“In 17th-century New England it was a crime to be a Quaker. In Virginia it was a crime to be a Baptist—and Jews were kept out entirely for generations.”**

maxim was generally adopted, wars would cease and our swords would soon be converted into reap hooks and our harvests be more peaceful, abundant, and happy.”

Five years earlier, Washington made history by extending the definition of American religious legitimacy beyond Christians. For much of the previous decades, political discussion about religious toleration for all practical purposes referred solely to freedom for a variety of Protestants and, occasionally, Catholics. There was little mention—or tolerance—of non-Christians. So it was of great conse-

quence when Washington visited the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island and then, in a follow-up letter, declared full religious equality for Jews: “It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.... May the Children of the