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# **First Freedom: The Fight for Religious Liberty**

By Unknown

Brian Stokes Mitchell:  
In the dawning days  
of the American Republic,  
a band of remarkable characters  
came to  
a revolutionary conclusion.

**Matthew Holland:**

an extraordinary collection  
of ingenious people.  
They truly were  
the best and brightest.  
They were very  
gifted individuals.

**Gordon s. Wood:**

accused of being unchristian.  
Well, he said  
to himself and his friends,  
"what does it matter  
whether my neighbor believes  
"in 20 gods or no God?  
What does it hurt me?"  
George Washington was  
the most cautious man  
that, I think,  
I have ever read about.

**Forrest church:**

Benjamin Franklin,  
he believed  
in the practicality  
of religion,  
that religion was a useful tool  
to organize society  
and keep people loving  
their neighbor as themselves.

**Doug Brinkley:**

well, he liked the idea  
of freedom of conscience,  
that each individual makes up  
their own belief about God.  
The first real life test

for religious freedom took place  
in the election of 1800  
between John Adams  
and Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

These men and others,  
fathers  
of the American revolution,  
saw to it that religion  
and religious thought  
would be removed completely  
from the rule of state  
and that instead  
it was the state itself  
that should be ruled  
by the people.  
[Singing in hebrew]

**Mitchell:**

separation of church and state  
would change  
world history forever.  
Freedom of religion is  
in many ways  
the first freedom.  
This established  
our nation as a nation  
where people could honor their  
own conscientious convictions  
and worship God in the way  
that they believed,  
in conscience,  
God wished to be worshipped.  
friends of nci

**Mitchell:**

early English colonists,  
the very idea of America rested  
on religious freedom.  
The puritans hoped  
to create utopia  
in the new england wilderness,  
a place where they could

follow their faith in peace.  
Their religion would  
create a community.  
Man as John winthrop:  
We must be knit together  
in this work, as one man.  
We must entertain each other  
in brotherly affection.  
We must delight  
in each other,  
make others' conditions  
our own...

**Mitchell:**

in 1630, led a group  
of puritans sailing  
from england to Massachusetts.  
A brilliant man  
and a natural leader,  
winthrop had already been  
elected as governor  
of the new Massachusetts  
bay colony,  
and he would be reelected  
no less than 12 times.  
For we must consider that we  
shall be as a city upon a hill.  
The eyes of all people  
are upon us.

**Mitchell:**

winthrop gave  
a departure sermon,  
telling his fellow puritans  
that their colony would be  
a different kind of society.  
It would be a model  
of righteousness.

**Holland:**

who have called it  
the greatest sermon  
of the last thousand years.  
That's quite a statement,

but it's something  
that stands at the beginning  
of our political  
civic consciousness.  
Winthrop was very purposefully  
self-conscious,  
and he wanted his new colony  
to be self-conscious,  
to be aware that God  
was watching this colony  
and that other peoples  
around the world  
were going to be watching  
it as well.

**Wood:**

were all believers in God.  
They all had a confidence  
that in some sense  
God was looking  
after the Republic.  
A lot of nations,  
probably all of them,  
think that they're  
God's special favorite,  
but America has a special sense  
of responsibility  
regarding itself  
as a model,  
not a nation that seeks  
to conquer so much  
as one that wants to be copied.

**Mitchell:**

often reasonable and charitable,  
but he could also be obstinate,  
domineering, and autocratic.  
"A democracy," he said,  
"is accounted the meanest  
and worst of all forms  
of government."  
Winthrop's colony  
would not abide dissent.

**Patricia bonomi:**

didn't come to establish  
religious liberty.  
They came to practice their own  
form of christianity  
without interference  
from anybody else.

**Mitchell:**

an unlikely opponent emerged  
in Boston--Anne hutchinson,  
a 46-year-old woman  
then in the midst  
of her 15th pregnancy.  
Women in the colony were  
forbidden from preaching,  
but the brave  
and strong-willed hutchinson  
began conducting  
popular Bible groups.

**Man as winthrop:**

that any hath authority  
to set up any other exercises  
besides what authority  
hath already set up.

**Mitchell:**

the puritan powers  
had had enough.  
Anne hutchinson was brought  
to civil trial for sedition  
with John winthrop presiding.  
She defended herself  
skillfully,  
but there would be no escape  
from judgment.  
We are your judges  
and not you ours.  
Mistress hutchinson,  
the sentence of the court  
you hear is that you  
are to be banished  
from out

of our jurisdiction  
as being a woman not fit  
for our society.  
I desire to  
know wherefore  
I am banished?  
Say no more.  
The court knows wherefore  
and is satisfied.

**Mitchell:**

with the role of women,  
but at its core,  
it was about religious liberty,  
and religious liberty lost.

**Richard bushman:**

John winthrop was devoted to  
making the Massachusetts  
bay colony work,  
and he felt religion  
was the heart drive  
of the whole operation,  
but for that very reason,  
he could not let religion  
disrupt the bay colony,  
and Anne hutchinson seemed  
like a very dangerous person,  
and he felt obligated  
to quiet her  
or drive her from the colony.

**Mitchell:**

behind Anne hutchinson's trial  
lasted throughout  
the 17th century  
in Massachusetts.  
More than a half century  
later in 1692,  
over 150 people were arrested  
in the infamous witch trials.  
One woman was accused  
of wearing pieces of lace.  
Another was convicted

after testimony  
from her daughter,  
who was 4 years old.  
It was primitive,  
barbaric, and sad.  
In the end, 20 people  
were put to death.

**Mitchell:**

established stable  
and quite Democratic communities  
in an untamed wilderness.  
The flaw  
in the puritan experiment  
was the inability  
to allow serious dissent,  
but democracy in the 1600s  
seldom extended to faith.  
It would take a revolution.  
Some 8 years after the puritans  
came to Massachusetts,  
the American dream began  
to change shape.  
The new world was now  
a more secular beacon.  
It was the place to look  
for a better life.  
Religion for many new  
arrivals was secondary.  
The church became  
the stepchild of government,  
not the master,  
and clergymen themselves  
came under popular fire.  
Some seemed to be  
in it for the money.  
Many had run dry  
of inspiration.  
The services were not  
all that interesting to people.  
In many cases they were long,  
they were oriented  
towards doctrine,  
often read from manuscript.

Whitefield changed all that.  
He only had about  
8 sermons, I think, you know,  
and he went up and down  
the seaboard,  
but he was charismatic.

**Bonomi:**

He was sort of  
the first great celebrity,  
you might say.

**Mitchell:**

a fevered crowd  
of tens of thousands  
gathered before the steps  
of the Philadelphia courthouse.  
They'd come not in rebellion  
but in ecstasy  
to hear the passionate,  
energetic,  
and theatrical  
George whitefield.  
The son of an innkeeper,  
whitefield had worked  
his way through Oxford  
as a servant.  
By 1740, he was already  
the most famous religious  
figure of the day.  
He toured America,  
preaching nearly every day  
to huge crowds.

**Bonomi:**

out in the open,  
he didn't have to be  
inside a church.  
He preached in the fields.  
He preached  
in Philadelphia  
in the center  
of the street apparently.  
Whitefield was a radical

in certain ways  
in denouncing  
conventional faith.

**Holmes:**

was that God cared  
even for the poor,  
for the Indians,  
for the blacks,  
as well as for the wealthy.  
Narrator at the end  
of his sermons,  
whitefield would boom out his  
universal invitation,  
"come poor, lost,  
undone sinner,  
come just as you are to Christ."  
If religion didn't  
cut deeply,  
if it didn't move  
people powerfully,  
then it was no good,  
and so he would thumb  
his nose at the clergy,  
say they were  
too conventional,  
they were too dry,  
they were dead.

**Mitchell:**

crowd that day  
was Benjamin Franklin,  
already a well-known printer,  
the author  
of the hugely successful  
"poor Richard's almanack."  
Ben Franklin was  
a compendium of American  
intellectual interests,  
an autodidact who would  
go on to chart the Gulf stream  
and invent the lightning rod,  
bifocals,  
and the Franklin stove.

He was a deeply  
unconventional man.  
He believed in God  
but rejected organized religion.  
Man as Benjamin Franklin:  
I never was without some  
religious principles.  
I never doubted,  
for instance,  
the existence of the deity,  
that he made the world  
and governed it  
by his Providence  
and that the most  
acceptable service of God  
was the doing good to man.  
Benjamin Franklin.

**Church:**

in the practicality of religion,  
that religion was a useful tool  
to organize society  
and keep people loving  
their neighbor as themselves.  
Brethren and fathers  
and all ye whom I am  
about to preach  
the kingdom of God,  
I suppose you need not be...

**Mitchell:**

Franklin didn't proselytize.  
He didn't discuss  
his religious beliefs at all  
unless he was pressed.  
He gave donations  
to a wide variety of churches,  
yet he'd decided  
beforehand that he would be  
impervious  
to whitefield's message.

**Man as Franklin:**

I silently resolved he

should get nothing from me.  
I had in my pocket  
a handful of copper money,  
3 or 4 silver dollars,  
and 5 pistoles in gold.  
As he proceeded,  
I began to soften  
and concluded to give  
the coppers.  
Another stroke of his  
oratory made me ashamed of that,  
and determined me  
to give the silver,  
and he finished  
so admirably that I emptied  
my pockets wholly into  
the collection plate,  
gold and all.

**Mitchell:**

Franklin would publish many  
of whitefield's tracts.  
The preacher's eloquence  
kick-started what was known  
as the great awakening,  
a wave of Evangelical fervor  
that lasted a decade.  
The awakening went  
beyond the spiritual.  
It instilled the vital idea  
that these 13 separate  
and very different colonies  
were connected,  
that their people could share  
not only language but beliefs.  
Suddenly, these colonists saw  
themselves as large actors  
upon the biggest stage of all.  
Americans began to realize  
that they were one people.

**Meacham:**

founding a new world,  
there was

a great deal of imagery,  
a great deal of conversation  
about America being  
the new Israel,  
the new promised land.  
There was an intense  
religious feeling shaping  
the generation that became  
the revolutionary generation.

**Mitchell:**

the great awakening ebbed  
in the 1750s,  
it left more churches  
but not more church-goers.  
So somewhat surprisingly  
in America  
in the mid-18th century,  
somewhere around  
20% to 30%, at the most,  
of European American colonists  
had any kind  
of significant relationship  
with a Christian congregation.

**Mitchell:**

It was in this era,  
a time when evangelism had  
ripped through America,  
uniting it but then departing,  
that a very different kind  
of passion began  
to take hold of the colonies.  
This time  
the fervor was political.  
It would lead,  
in the end, to revolution,  
and that revolution,  
in turn, would lead  
to an unprecedented freedom  
of religious faith.

**Mitchell:**

would try to unite

13 colonies into a country,  
yet unity was,  
in a sense, unnatural.  
Religion mattered,  
and in terms of religion,  
America was strikingly diverse.

**Butler:**

of the revolution,  
no single denomination  
held a majority.  
In fact, the numbers  
were very tiny.  
Congregationalists were the  
largest single denomination.  
They comprised only 22%  
of all religiously  
affiliated colonists.  
Next were the presbyterians,  
less than that.  
Next was the church of england.

**Meacham:**

there were quakers,  
there were christians  
of every kind of denomination,  
there were hugely patriotic  
Jewish Americans.  
You also have a number  
of slave religions  
that have disappeared.

**Bonomi:**

German reform, the Dutch reform.  
Robert p. George:  
That makes us really unique.  
It certainly made us unique  
in the 18th century,  
where peoplehood  
was the result of having  
a common ethnic bond  
or tribal bond  
or national bond or something  
along those lines.

No European society looked like this at all. In every European society, there was a dominant group that by law could claim the membership of virtually everyone, and then there were some very small minorities. America turned that topsy-turvy.

**Mitchell:**

not a recipe for tranquility. Religious clashes among the sects were common and occasionally violent. The prosperous and powerful colony of Virginia was in a sense typical. Before the revolution, the preeminent political voice was the radical Patrick Henry. Henry pushed a series of anti-British resolves through the house of burgesses with inflammatory rhetoric, but Henry's own wife was not given a Christian burial because her mental illness was thought to be the work of the devil. True toleration and religious freedom were not even up for debate.

**Butler:**

sought through local authorities to ban the activities of both presbyterians and baptists. [Bang bang bang]

**Mitchell:**

a respected Virginia judge,

was just one  
of the Virginia judges  
who sentenced  
baptists preachers to jail  
for what an observer called  
"the heinous charge  
"of worshiping God according  
to the dictates  
of their own consciences."  
A local sheriff  
brutally horsewhipped  
one baptist clergyman.  
A "gang of well-dressed men"  
nearly drowned  
two other baptists  
by holding their heads  
underwater in a nearby river.  
Persecution was public practice  
in orange, Virginia,  
the hometown of a small, frail,  
and sickly 17 year-old  
named James Madison,  
a shy boy whose father  
was a prosperous  
tobacco planter.  
One day in 1768,  
the two were out walking  
and happened by the local jail.

**Fenster:**

named Elijah Craig  
was arrested in Virginia  
for being a baptist minister.  
He began to preach  
a sermon through the window  
of his cell,  
and a crowd gathered,  
awed by what was happening.

**Mitchell:**

a lasting impression  
on the sensitive  
young Madison.  
His response was a lifelong

pursuit of religious freedom  
by the man who would was perhaps  
the most influential  
founder of all.

"That diabolical,  
hell-conceived principle  
of persecution rages  
here in Virginia,"  
Madison wrote.

"There are 5 or 6  
well-meaning men  
"in close jail for publishing  
their religious sentiments,  
so I must beg you to pray for  
liberty of conscience for all."

Liberty of conscience was  
no fact of life  
in the American colonies  
in the decade  
before the revolution.  
If Virginia persecuted  
its baptists,  
the northern colonies  
had their own heretics,  
Roman catholics.  
In overwhelmingly  
protestant New York City,  
catholics practiced  
their religion in secret.

**Bonomi :**

no catholic churches  
in New York  
or in Massachusetts.  
You couldn't enter  
New York as a catholic.  
It was against the law.  
They weren't even seen  
by some as christians.  
They were called heathens,  
but then, the catholics called  
the protestants heathens.  
This is the way  
they spoke to each other.

Opposition to catholicism  
had actually been  
a uniting force  
within england itself.  
England defined itself  
as a protestant nation  
over against catholic France,  
and America inherited  
that anti-catholicism  
from their English parents.

**Holmes:**

and the French empires  
as far as they stretched  
were on the whole intolerant  
of protestants.  
They put them to death  
as heretics.  
Protestants were afraid that  
if they gave equal treatment  
to Roman catholics and they grew  
and multiplied  
that they would again be  
under Roman catholic authority.

**Mitchell:**

a problem called Canada.  
By winning  
the French and Indian war,  
britain had taken over  
what is now quebec in 1763.  
Its denizens  
were still French  
and still catholic.  
To mollify their new citizens,  
the British parliament passed  
the quebec act in 1774.  
It granted Canadian catholics  
complete freedom of worship.  
Anti-catholic Americans  
were furious.  
Engraver Paul revere drew  
a cartoon showing  
Roman catholic bishops

dancing in glee.  
Some of the loudest protests  
came from an unsuccessful  
businessman and tax collector  
in Boston named Samuel Adams.  
Adams was 51, an established  
and vocal leader  
of popular resistance  
to the crown.  
He was volatile,  
bellicose, God-fearing,  
and deeply prejudiced.  
He came from Massachusetts  
and the puritan background  
that was known  
for its ferocity  
in favor of its own  
particular religious beliefs.  
There were suspicions  
that catholics owed allegiance  
to a foreign prince,  
that being of course the pope.  
Man as Samuel Adams:  
Much more is to be dreaded  
from the growth  
of popery in America  
than from stamp acts  
or any other acts destructive  
of men's civil rights.  
Samuel Adams.

**Children:**

have a right  
to worship their own way

**Mitchell:**

the outrage was put into verse.  
of poor americans  
there were enough  
examples of raw friction  
and even violence to give  
the founding generation  
first-hand knowledge  
of the power of religion

and how it could shatter  
a society or unite it.

**Mitchell:**

One of the greatest members  
of the founding generation  
was born in Quincy  
near Boston in 1735.  
John Adams, cousin of Sam,  
was part of the fifth  
generation of adamses  
in puritan Massachusetts.  
John studied for the ministry  
but gave it up in disgust.  
He found the local clergymen  
were dogmatic and back-biting.  
Man as John Adams:  
The study of theology  
and the pursuit of it as  
a profession would involve me  
in endless altercations  
and make my life miserable.  
John Adams.

**Mitchell:**

to the law but proudly boasted  
that when healthy  
he never once missed  
Sunday services  
during his entire life.  
Man as John Adams:  
Ask me not, then,  
whether I am a catholic  
or a protestant,  
calvinist or Armenian.  
As far as they are  
christians,  
I wish to be a fellow disciple  
with them all.  
John Adams.

**Mitchell:**

would never be loved by all.  
He was a prominent, skillful,

and deeply knowledgeable lawyer.  
His ideas on government  
would help shape the nation,  
but John Adams was simply  
too contentious to be loved.

**Wood:**

on his sleeve,  
a very passionate man,  
full of ideas,  
honest to the core,  
politically incorrect.

**Church:**

Adams is the red queen--  
everything was  
"off with their heads."  
He was a great fulminator,  
tremendously energetic,  
always angry.

**Mitchell:**

Adams was always angry  
about British assaults  
on American liberty.  
He would soon form an alliance  
with another like-minded lawyer,  
Thomas Jefferson of Virginia.  
The young Jefferson  
was brilliant  
in everything  
from archaeology to zoology,  
with architecture, music,  
and paleontology in between,  
but was less good  
at making and handling money.  
He was romantic  
and idealistic.  
Among his ideals were  
an abiding belief  
in individual rights,  
a dislike  
for centralized government,  
and a faith in the need

for religious freedom.

**Wood:**

very doubtful  
about the virtue  
of the people,  
and Jefferson,  
who had a very magnanimous  
view of human nature,  
believed that people  
were essentially virtuous,  
and that's what separates  
one founder from another,  
their view of human nature.

**Mitchell:**

and John Adams became  
close friends.  
"Adams is so amiable,"  
Jefferson told a friend,  
"that I pronounce  
you will love him  
if you ever become  
acquainted with him."  
The two were an odd couple.  
Adams was short,  
stout, northern, blunt,  
and much attached  
to tradition;  
Jefferson, tall,  
elegant, Southern, thoughtful,  
and sweepingly revolutionary.  
Both men were unconventional  
in their faith,  
but here, too,  
they were different.  
Adams was a devout Christian,  
but he was a unitarian  
and flatly rejected  
standard Christian doctrines  
of the trinity  
and predestination.  
Jefferson was  
even more unorthodox.

**Holland:**

was born and raised an anglican  
and sometime  
in his teenage years experienced  
a kind of religious crisis,  
became more rationalist,  
more skeptical.  
He did have great doubts about--  
well, not just doubts.  
He just denied  
the divinity of Jesus,  
and he was accused  
of being un-Christian.  
Well, he said to himself,  
"I am a real Christian  
because I believe  
in Jesus' morality."

**Fenster:**

maintain an attachment  
to the anglican church,  
also known  
as the episcopal church,  
but mainly for the sake  
of his daughters  
and their activities.  
He did make two  
statements publicly,  
one in his "notes of Virginia"  
where he said,  
"what does it matter  
whether my neighbor believes  
"in 20 gods or no God?  
What does it hurt me?"  
Well, that did hurt him,  
that statement,  
and then he said in his preamble  
to the bill  
for religious freedom,  
a very important document,  
"well, religion is  
no more important  
"to our civic rights

than our beliefs  
in geometry and physics."

**Mitchell:**

by myself, as far as I know,"  
Jefferson once wrote.  
He clearly was someone  
who disliked  
ecclesiastical authority.  
He saw it, I think,  
as an unnecessary layer.  
In his own mind,  
he was a deeply  
religious man  
because his faith  
and his knowledge  
were all of a piece.

**Mitchell:**

how controversial  
his own version  
of faith would be  
if revealed in public,  
so he kept it very private.  
Man as Jefferson:  
Our particular principles  
of religion are a subject  
of accountability  
to our God alone.  
I inquire after no man's  
and trouble none with mine.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

deeply believed that  
government and religion  
should be separate.  
He later wrote how pleased  
he was that the United States  
were "founded  
on the natural authority  
yet Adams also believed  
that religion played  
a crucial role

in public life.

Only a religious people  
with God-fearing leaders  
could guide an orderly  
and rational popular government.

He had, he said,

"a veneration for the religion  
of a people who profess  
and call themselves christians."

Man as John Adams:

Without religion,  
this world would be  
something not fit to be  
mentioned in polite company.

I mean hell.

John Adams.

**Mitchell:**

For the next 50 years,  
these two men at the forefront  
of American politics  
would be friends, rivals,  
enemies, and friends again.  
Their agreements  
and differences alike  
would shape the nation.

**Mitchell:**

after the events,  
ex-president John Adams wrote  
about the history he'd seen.  
Man as John Adams: They thought  
themselves bound to pray  
for the king and queen  
and all the royal family  
and all in authority  
under them as ministers ordained  
of God for their good,  
but when they saw  
those powers bent  
upon the destruction  
of all the securities  
of their lives,  
liberties, and properties,

they thought  
it their duty to pray  
for the continental congress.  
John Adams.

**Mitchell:**

British policies like  
the stamp act  
and the coercive acts  
had incensed many Americans.  
Revolution was in the air.  
Every colony except  
Georgia sent a delegation  
to Philadelphia to discuss  
what measures to take,  
how far to go.  
This first continental congress  
was the first time  
that the separate colonies  
had met in a single assembly.  
Could they act together?  
A crowd milling  
around outside the meeting hall  
expected news and wanted action.  
Yet on the first day  
of the first American congress,  
with the overpowering issue  
of rebellion hanging  
in the balance, the first issue  
discussed was faith.  
A delegate  
from Massachusetts proposed  
that they open  
the meeting with a prayer,  
but as delegate John Adams  
wrote his wife Abigail...  
Man as John Adams:  
The motion was opposed  
because we were so divided  
in religious sentiments--  
some were episcopalians,  
some quakers,  
some anabaptists,  
some presbyterians,

and some congregationalists--  
so that we could not join  
in the same act of worship.  
John Adams.

**Brinkley:**

everything almost went  
to a crashing halt  
at the continental congress  
over the issue of a prayer.  
What would be appropriate,  
what Bible to use,  
would you say something  
that would alienate  
an episcopalian  
or a presbyterian?  
And it became just  
a hot button issue.

**Mitchell:**

Suddenly religion stood like  
an immediate roadblock  
to the entire idea of America.  
Among the most prominent  
delegates was  
the uncompromising Samuel Adams.  
The firebrand  
congregationalist was  
well-known for his  
harsh condemnation  
of both Roman catholics  
and other protestant sects.  
Samuel Adams was possibly  
the most devout  
of all the delegates  
to the congress.  
Man as John Adams:  
Mr. Samuel Adams arose and said  
he was no bigot.  
I am no bigot.  
Now I can hear a prayer  
from a gentleman  
of piety and virtue,  
who is at the same time

a friend of my country.  
Man as John Adams:  
He moved that Mr. duche,  
an episcopal clergyman,  
might be desired  
to read prayers  
to the congress  
tomorrow morning.  
The motion was  
seconded and passed  
in the affirmative.  
John Adams.

**Man as duche:**

for thy name's sake,  
lead me and guide me.

**Mitchell:**

An episcopal clergyman.  
It was, as one delegate  
said, "a masterly stroke."  
If a notoriously stubborn  
congregationalist like Adams  
could accept  
an episcopalian,  
the other sects could, too.

Man as John Adams:

We must remember this was  
the next morning after  
we heard the horrible rumor  
of the cannonade of Boston.  
I never saw a greater effect  
upon an audience.

It seemed as if heaven had  
ordained that psalm  
to be read on that morning.

John Adams.

Constrain them to drop  
the weapons of war  
from their unnerved hands  
in the day of battle.

Amen.

[Delegates murmuring]

**George:**

a need for some sort of unity  
in the great project  
of building America.  
There was a need for some  
sort of, one might call it,  
spiritual unity,  
that did not implicate  
the great divisions that  
the founders had theologically.  
I think Samuel Adams  
understood this.

**Mitchell:**

their partitions,  
the 56 delegates of the first  
continental congress  
were all one thing--  
English protestants  
and anti-French.  
An anti-catholic rancor  
was rampant at the congress,  
yet as America prepared  
to separate from Britain,  
the congress hoped  
to make Canada an ally.  
The assembly composed  
an open letter to Canadians.  
Man as John Dickinson:  
What is offered to you  
by the late act of parliament?  
Liberty of conscience  
in your religion?  
No. God gave it to you.  
John Dickinson.

**Mitchell:**

sentence was a watershed.  
Religious freedom,  
America's founders were saying,  
came from God,  
not from government,  
and if the two could be  
separated at all,

they could eventually  
be separated for good.  
The revolution did not begin  
with the founders  
declaring independence.  
Paul revere made  
his celebrated midnight ride,  
preceding the impromptu battles  
of Lexington and Concord,  
on the 18th of April in 1775.  
Though not everyone knew it,  
war had begun.  
A few weeks later,  
a second continental congress  
gathered in Philadelphia.  
This time, they voted to create  
a continental army  
with a 43 year-old  
virginian as commander.  
George Washington was tall,  
athletic, and sickly.  
He'd already suffered  
from diphtheria, dysentery,  
malaria, smallpox  
and tuberculosis  
and hadn't a single tooth  
left in his mouth.  
He was a supremely  
successful planter,  
quite probably the richest man  
in colonial America,  
yet he was known  
for his reserve,  
a public figure's sense  
of eternal caution.

**Roberts:**

the most cautious man that,  
I think, I have  
ever read about.  
He was so aware of how  
everything he did was watched  
and would be followed  
or commented upon,

seem to have  
some significance.

**Mitchell:**

but not unfeeling.  
Washington hoped, as he said,  
to promote  
"the happiness of mankind."  
Man as George Washington:  
I trust the people  
of every denomination  
will be convinced that I shall  
always strive to prove  
a faithful and impartial patron  
of genuine, vital religion.  
No one would be  
more zealous than myself  
to establish effectual barriers  
against the horrors  
of spiritual tyranny  
and every species  
of religious persecution.  
George Washington.

**Mitchell:**

even showed respect  
toward the religious freedom  
of his enemies.  
In 1775, he ordered  
colonel Benedict Arnold  
to invade Canada, hoping  
the French Canadians there  
would jump into the war  
on the American side  
and take up arms against  
their old enemies, the British,  
but Washington gave  
the invaders  
very particular instructions.  
Man as Washington:  
As far as lays in your power,  
you are to protect  
and support  
the free exercise

of the religion of the country  
and the undisturbed  
enjoyment of conscience  
in religious matters  
with your utmost  
influence and authority,  
so forth and so on...

**Mitchell:**

orders to colonel Arnold  
on the army's conduct  
in the Canadian provinces  
were explicit.  
I would ask you to avoid  
all disrespect  
to or contempt  
of the religion of this country  
and its ceremonies.  
That is clear?

**Fenster:**

was a military disaster.  
The American army was  
turned away from Canada,  
which was more than happy  
to turn away  
from the American rebellion.

**Mitchell:**

With the invasion a failure,  
Canada would remain British,  
but a precedent  
had been set.  
George Washington had made  
it clear that the cause  
of American liberty would  
include freedom of religion.

**Mitchell:**

On the face of it,  
the American revolution was  
nothing less than blasphemy.  
The king of england was  
chosen by God

and aligned with God,  
yet virtually every  
founder felt that religion  
was a keystone  
of his very being.  
How could the founders  
rationalize their  
rebellious actions?

**Meacham:**

What I do think religion did  
for the founding generation is  
it gave them a confidence  
and a way of seeing the world  
in which the individual became  
the primary organizing element  
of the society.  
It was no longer  
the king and the aristocracy.  
It was the citizen,  
and the citizen drew  
its authority,  
drew its being  
from being a creature of God.

**Mitchell:**

on individual rights came  
directly from John Locke,  
the 17th century  
English philosopher.  
Everyone, said Locke,  
had a natural right  
to defend his "life, health,  
liberty, or possessions."

**Meacham:**

that helped them see  
that we needed to move  
from the divine right of kings  
to the idea that  
we were all created equal  
and that, in fact, divinity  
resided in every person.  
Rights that came from a king,

or even from a mob,  
were rights that could be taken  
away by a king or by a mob.  
Rights that came  
from God were permanent.

**Mitchell:**

individuals have rights,  
America's founders were  
willing to claim those rights  
in the face of the armed might  
of the English crown.  
In the summer of 1776,  
a committee of 5,  
including Jefferson,  
Adams, and Franklin,  
submitted their work.  
56 members of congress  
then signed  
the declaration of independence.

**Brinkley:**

life on the line for liberty  
by signing that document.

**Mitchell:**

of independence was  
a secular document based  
on implicit faith.  
It mentioned God 4 times,  
twice in the first  
two sentences.

**Fenster:**

a list of reasons  
for the rebellion,  
some of which may seem  
quite petty today,  
it raised the dimension  
of the demand  
for independence and made  
it a spiritual thing.

**Mitchell:**

their right to rebel come from?

From God.

It was not a king, pope,  
preacher, or politician  
who bestowed freedom  
on human beings but God.  
"The laws of nature  
and nature's God,"  
the declaration said,  
entitled the American people  
to be both equal to the British  
and separate from them,  
and all men "are endowed  
by their creator  
with certain  
inalienable rights,"  
including "life, liberty,  
and the pursuit of happiness."

**Mitchell:**

reference to God was  
an appeal to "the supreme judge  
of the world."  
The fourth acknowledged  
"the protection  
of divine Providence."  
God was there 4 times  
in just 1,337 words,  
yet more important  
were things that  
the declaration  
did not talk about.

**Meacham:**

was not mentioned,  
Jesus was not mentioned,  
the trinity was not invoked.  
The founders understood  
that it was going to become  
a country of many  
different faiths,  
of many different tongues,  
and they wanted to preserve  
the right of everyone

to pursue that part  
of their lives in as free  
a context as possible.

**Mitchell:**

different faiths,  
religion could have broken  
the new country apart,  
but diversity could also  
bind Americans together.  
Difference, paradoxically  
enough, was something  
we all had in common.  
We were all part  
of a diverse whole.  
As Madison would later argue,  
the fact that there were  
so many different groups  
could act as the best guarantee  
of religious freedom.  
No single powerful group  
could bully the rest.

**Holland:**

a rich legacy that comes  
to us from the founding  
of America,  
a rich culture of faith  
and morality that teaches us  
that other  
human beings matter,  
that we should  
care for them,  
that there is something like  
transcendent truth out there.  
They've held us accountable  
for justice and equity.  
Alexis de Tocqueville in his  
classic work  
"Democracy in America"  
asked the question,  
"what has been responsible  
for America's  
Democratic greatness?"

He argued, that the difference  
was America's mores,  
its character, its national  
sense of values and ideals.  
To be an American is to believe  
in some things,  
and those things are  
equality, liberty,  
constitutionalism.  
And those founders created  
this basis for nationhood.  
There was no nation in 1776.  
No one has ever come up  
with better principles.  
No one has come up  
with a better principle  
than the equality  
of human beings,  
the basic equality  
of human beings  
as children of God.  
No one's ever come up  
with a better principle  
than the idea that  
we are endowed  
by our creator  
with certain unalienable rights,  
rights that  
the government didn't give us  
and therefore the government has  
no right to take away.  
Those are principles  
that are perennial.  
They'll live forever.

**Mitchell:**

For all the soaring grandeur  
of the declaration  
and the greatness  
of the American character,  
the new country  
had a tragic flaw,  
one that would  
ruin millions of lives.

I see a paradox that is  
so extraordinary  
that it does not submit itself  
to honest reasoning.  
They were fighting  
for their freedom.  
At the same time,  
they held large numbers  
of people in slavery  
with no intention,  
with no intention  
of setting them free,  
and spending their  
time rationalizing  
why they should not be free.

**Mitchell:**

among dozens of founders  
who owned slaves, including  
Washington and Franklin,  
yet he was also the author  
of the immortal words,  
"all men are created equal,"  
and he hated slavery.

Man as Jefferson:

The rights of human nature  
deeply wounded by this  
infamous practice of slavery.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

all 13 colonies agree to unite  
if slavery were outlawed  
in the new nation?  
Jefferson didn't  
think they would.  
Without allowing  
the "infamous practice,"  
there would be no America.  
In his own life, too,  
Jefferson felt trapped.  
His plantations needed  
slave labor to compete,  
and survive.

Man as Jefferson: As it is,  
we have the wolf by the ear,  
and we can neither hold him  
nor safely let him go.  
Justice is in one scale  
and self-preservation  
in the other.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Church:**

that was trying to survive  
was saying, "there's nothing  
we can do about this,"  
or "it's up to  
another generation."  
He turned his eye away  
while recognizing,  
"there is no way that the notion  
all men are created equal  
does not include  
our black brothers and sisters."  
He was divided  
right down the middle.  
You can call that  
hypocrisy if you want.  
This is a manifestation  
of the fact  
that the founders were human,  
just like we're human today.  
They fell short  
of their ideals  
just like we fall short  
of our ideals today.  
What rescues the founders  
for me, though in this,  
is that they put into place  
the principles that  
would over time  
repudiate slavery.

**Mitchell:**

of independence,  
the founders did not mention  
slavery at all.

**Meacham:**

to them not by deifying them  
but by taking them  
all and all and realizing  
that if human beings  
as flawed as Washington  
and Jefferson and Adams  
and Madison were  
can do great things,  
then potentially we can, too.

**Mitchell:**

Washington's army had survived  
a killing winter  
at valley forge,  
but how could the tattered  
remnants of an army win a war?  
The powerful British forces  
took control  
of America's major cities,  
sat back, and waited  
for the rebel army  
to disintegrate.  
The colonials were  
poorly paid, badly fed,  
and sometimes overwhelmed by  
the formidable army they faced.  
What could hold these troops  
from entirely different  
colonies together?  
For Washington,  
the challenge lay  
in establishing unity  
in an army and a country  
with disparate beliefs.

**Church:**

were never clearer  
than on Sunday.  
The sabbath was a day  
of rest in new england,  
and it was day  
of recreation in Virginia,

and so when Washington  
would declare these days  
of Thanksgiving,  
which were to celebrate  
a great victory,  
he made sure everyone went  
to church in the morning,  
and then he invoked play  
and recreation  
as the agenda  
for the afternoon.  
So everyone was  
100% half satisfied.

**Mitchell:**

a kind of religious amalgam.  
By his mid-30s he'd  
served as a vestryman  
in his local  
episcopal church.

**Church:**

he was a vestryman,  
he never joined the church,  
never took communion,  
was very, very mum  
on Christian matters.

**Mitchell:**

authorized the appointment  
of army chaplains,  
something not common  
in European armies.  
It would be a good thing,  
he thought,  
if his men were devout.  
To the distinguished  
character of patriot,  
it should be  
our highest glory  
to add the more  
distinguished character  
of Christian.

**Butler:**

religion among his troops  
during the revolutionary war.  
He encouraged it  
for purposes of troop morale.  
He wasn't cynical in that.  
He knew that many soldiers  
were themselves religious.  
Washington saw  
a military usefulness in that.  
I think he also saw  
a moral usefulness in that.  
The founders, all of them were  
believers in God.  
There's not  
an atheist among them.  
They were not emotionally  
religious people, most of them,  
but faith in that sense  
was important to them,  
but it was important  
as an inculcator  
of virtue, of morality.  
Society needed  
religion to survive.

**Mitchell:**

was more comfortable  
talking about Providence  
rather than God.  
His letters are full  
of statements  
about the hand  
of Providence intervening  
and assertions that  
the revolution  
could not possibly  
have succeeded  
without God's intervention.  
His work overflows  
with references  
about Providence,  
but his exact nature  
of his private religious beliefs

is hard to discern.

**Mitchell:**

Washington gave Benedict Arnold  
command of the vital  
west point stronghold  
on the Hudson river north  
of New York City.

Arnold was a traitor.

He devised a plot to turn  
west point over to the British  
and gave the papers  
detailing his plan

to a spy named John Andre.

Andre disguised himself  
in an American uniform  
and rushed with the plans  
toward British headquarters  
in New York.

The next morning,  
a wandering group  
of American soldiers,  
absent without leave  
from the continental army,  
stopped Andre  
for no reason at all.

They searched him  
and discovered the papers,  
ending Benedict Arnold's  
treasonous plot.

Man as Washington:

In no instance  
since the commencement  
of the war,  
has the interposition  
of Providence appeared  
more remarkably conspicuous than  
in the rescue of the post  
and Garrison of west point from  
Arnold's villainous perfidy.

Your humble servant,  
George Washington.

**Mitchell:**

"Providence" was used often  
by many of the founders.  
It meant the benign  
intervention of God,  
but what God?

**Brinkley:**

a tradition of great Americans  
of invoking God,  
but it's God not  
of a particular sect.  
It's a universal God,  
an American creator.  
Providence meant that he was  
moving forward the good causes.  
So when the revolution occurs,  
it's very important to them  
to know that God is  
on their side  
because he was  
active in history.  
Washington thought  
God was looking after  
the Republic.  
He thought he was looking  
after him personally  
because he survived  
the revolutionary war.  
So I think faith  
in that sense was  
important to them.

**Mitchell:**

John Winthrop had hoped  
that Boston would be  
the city on the hill,  
the perfect model  
for the world.  
Almost 150 years later,  
many of the founders hoped  
and believed that America  
would be the nation on the hill,  
a model for the world.  
In 1776, we were fighting

for independence,  
and even then, it was  
already clear that we were  
fighting for much more,  
a new kind of nation.  
For almost 170 years,  
the government of Virginia  
had been closely intertwined  
with the anglican church,  
but as the war went on,  
Virginia began to take  
the first steps  
toward another kind  
of revolution,  
religious freedom.

George Mason drafted  
the Virginia declaration  
of rights in June, 1776.  
It would deeply influence  
both the declaration  
of independence  
and the bill of rights.

Mason's first  
draft included a clause  
that guaranteed toleration  
of all religious creeds.

Man as George Mason:  
All men should enjoy  
the fullest toleration  
in the exercise of religion,  
unpunished and unrestrained.  
George Mason.

**Mitchell:**

It was a giant step forward,  
but for James Madison  
not enough.  
The small, frail boy who'd been  
moved by a sermon from jail  
was now a small, frail man  
with weak nerves  
and a squeaky voice.  
He was once described as  
a man "no bigger than

a half piece of soap,"  
but Madison was  
an incisive thinker  
who prepared  
with incredible thoroughness  
and a voracious student  
who was passionate  
about religious freedom.

**Brinkley:**

out of his readings was  
a firm belief that he  
carried through life  
that it was  
the individual's pursuit  
of religion,  
that it was not doctrine  
that had to be spoon-fed you,  
that you needed to read  
scripture and come up  
with your own interpretations  
and be a church unto yourself.

**Mitchell:**

he defended baptist preachers  
arrested for preaching  
without a license  
from the anglican church.  
For Madison, the idea that  
the government could tolerate  
various beliefs  
was not sufficient.  
Nor was the idea new.  
In 1689, the English  
parliament had passed  
the act of toleration,  
granting freedom of worship  
to protestants alone,  
and dissenters like  
the puritans  
had to register with the church.  
Toleration presupposed that  
there was a dominant church  
willing to let the others exist.

Toleration was a very different thing from religious liberty. It took a long time for a true understanding of liberty to develop.

**Holmes:**

who said that toleration is an insult because when toleration is granted it can always be withdrawn.

**Mitchell:**

Madison helped Mason rewrite Virginia's declaration of rights.

It was now quite different.

Man as James Madison:

Religion can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence, and therefore, all men are equally entitled to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience.

James Madison.

**George:**

to the American founders-- the great experiment that they undertook-- was to see if it would be possible, as the first federalist papers said, "to create a government based on reflection and choice rather than on accident and force."

**Mitchell:**

had become freedom.  
Yet the amended  
declaration of rights  
also suggested  
that the government depended  
on Christian virtues.

**Man as Madison:**

It is the mutual duty of all  
to practice  
Christian forbearance, love,  
and charity towards each other.  
James Madison.

**Mitchell:**

and fellow virginian  
Thomas Jefferson  
still wasn't satisfied.

**Fenster:**

a legislator in Virginia  
when he authored  
a bill for establishing  
religious freedom.  
Its main point  
was quite simple,  
"all men shall be free  
to profess and by argument  
to maintain their opinions  
in matters of religion."

**Mitchell:**

appointed minister to France,  
he took care  
to pack ample copies  
of his bill  
for religious freedom.  
The great thinkers  
of Europe had created  
the theory of man's  
natural rights of man,  
but it took the new American  
spirit to put those ideas  
into the language of law,

but Jefferson's bill  
was not yet a law.  
In Virginia, the bill stalled  
in the legislature.

**Mitchell:**

the treaty of Paris ended  
the revolutionary war.  
Against all odds,  
the Americans had won.  
Man as Washington:  
I was but the humble agent  
of favoring heaven,  
whose benign interference  
was so often manifested  
in our behalf  
and to whom the praise  
of victory alone is due.

**Meacham:**

at the end of the war  
Washington's view  
of divine intervention  
was heartfelt,  
and I think he was humbled  
by what had happened,  
almost crushed  
in New York, valley forge,  
all the great images  
that we know.  
No rational person would  
have bet on us in 1776,  
and so certainly,  
it seemed like a miracle.  
If anything, I think  
Washington believed  
that it was virtue rewarded  
and that a great sense  
of responsibility  
came with that,  
that this was a covenant.  
This wasn't victory  
without strings.  
The strings were you

have to live up  
to what you've been given--  
fought for but also given.

**Mitchell:**

had always taken  
up the reins of authority.  
Power was the usual reward  
for victory,  
but George Washington  
went home to Virginia.  
His home state was  
in the midst  
of a very different struggle.  
Several states had passed  
what was essentially  
a religious tax,  
government support  
for churches  
in the form  
of a general assessment.  
Thomas Jefferson was outraged.  
Man as Jefferson:  
To compel a man to furnish  
contributions of money  
for the propagation  
of religious opinions  
which he disbelieves  
and deplores  
is sinful and tyrannical.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

opposed the general assessment,  
but the powerful  
anglican church  
strongly supported the tax,  
led by the eminent  
Patrick Henry.  
The revolutionary orator famed  
for "give me liberty,  
or give me death"  
had been raised as  
an anglican,

but as a lawyer,  
he'd defended both  
baptists and quakers.  
He'd even been known to pay  
the fines of imprisoned baptists  
out of his own pocket.  
His bill would  
eliminate the idea  
of a single state-supported,  
church but it would deliver  
tax money to ministers  
of various  
Christian denominations,  
linking government with church.

**Holland:**

that religious morality  
was absolutely critical  
to sustaining liberty  
and therefore government  
had some role to play  
to shore that up.

**Mitchell:**

and Madison opposed  
any state support  
for religion,  
earning themselves  
a formidable political foe.  
The fiery Henry  
was universally  
revered in Virginia  
and had been  
elected governor 4 times.  
To a friend, Jefferson wrote...  
Man as Jefferson:  
What we have to do, I think,  
is pray devoutly  
for his death.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

the scholarly Madison wrote  
a persuasive

if anonymous argument  
against Henry's bill.  
"The state had no  
authority to involve  
itself in religion,"  
Madison said.  
True religious freedom  
did not mean that all churches  
would be linked  
to the government  
but that none of them would.  
An effective argument.  
Some 11,000 virginians signed  
a petition opposing  
the general assessment,  
and the measure soon died.  
Jefferson's act  
for religious freedom,  
instead, became  
Virginia law in 1786.

**Meacham:**

of the Virginia act  
is providing  
the intellectual foundation,  
underpinnings, and argument  
for a culture and nation  
in which religion is a matter  
of choice and not coercion,  
and almost every other country,  
it had been an issue  
of coercion.

**Mitchell:**

a simple but revolutionary step.  
It entirely separated  
the institutions  
of government and religion.  
Jefferson and Madison  
had redefined the modern state.

**Man as Madison:**

We have in this country  
extinguished forever

the ambitious hope  
of making laws  
for the human mind.  
James Madison.

**Mitchell:**

after it had begun,  
the United States was  
on the brink of failure.  
The former colonies  
were united only loosely  
under the articles  
of confederation.  
The federal government could  
neither pay its debts  
nor protect its people.  
Something had to be done.  
In the summer of 1787,  
delegates from 12  
of the 13 states  
gathered in Philadelphia.  
James Madison came  
from Virginia  
11 days before the meeting  
was supposed to begin.  
He needed to be prepared,  
for Madison wanted  
his delegation  
to present an ambitious plan  
to the convention.  
Instead of fixing  
the broken government,  
the assembly would create  
an entirely new system,  
a constitution.  
The United States constitution  
had a long, difficult nativity,  
4 months of wrangling,  
compromise, and distrust.  
So much of Madison's  
original plan  
was discarded that he became  
bitterly disappointed.  
Before long, the assembly was

on the verge of breaking apart.  
Sir, fairness demands  
that each state  
be represented equally  
and not..

**Mitchell:**

not be discouraged  
was 81 year-old  
Benjamin Franklin.  
Not known for his  
public speaking,  
Franklin delivered  
a perfectly timed  
and delicately  
articulate suggestion.  
I have lived, sir,  
a long time,  
and the longer I live,  
the more convincing proofs I see  
of this truth,  
that God governs  
in the affairs of men.

**Bushman:**

was virtually a second father  
of this country.  
George Washington  
had attained his high standing  
in the public mind  
through his generalship.  
Benjamin Franklin attained  
it through diplomacy,  
so though he said very little  
in the constitutional  
convention,  
whenever he spoke,  
everyone listened.  
I therefore beg leave  
to move  
that henceforth prayers  
imploring  
the assistance of heaven  
and blessings

on our deliberations  
be held in this assembly  
each morning  
before we proceed  
to our business.  
For the people's sake  
and for the country's sake,  
they needed to invoke  
God's blessing.  
Your excellency.

**Mitchell:**

the founders did next  
was astounding,  
a kind of American revolution  
all by itself.  
Most of them thought  
that a common religious belief  
was necessary  
for a moral society,  
yet the venerable  
Ben Franklin  
was quickly voted down.  
On the bottom of his speech,  
Franklin scrawled,  
"the convention,  
except 3 or 4 persons,  
thought prayers unnecessary!"  
The impasse  
over the representation  
of states was eventually  
circumvented,  
and the constitution  
was written during  
the course of 1787.

**Butler:**

an amazing document.  
Itt's amazing  
an amazing document  
in a structural fashion.  
It's an amazing document  
as a political fact  
because it was forged

in a sense from nothing.  
It is amazing  
in its inventiveness,  
its creativeness.  
Nothing like this  
had existed before,  
and it's frankly amazing  
in its secularity,  
that is, its power  
isn't derived  
from claims  
about the divine.

**Mitchell:**

of religion  
in the original  
constitution was meant  
to enforce the idea  
of religious liberty.  
It came from Charles pinckney,  
an unlikely source.  
Pinckney was an ambitious,  
unrestrained South carolinian  
from a powerful family.  
He had no apparent interest  
in religious freedom.  
Against the inclinations  
of many delegates,  
pinckney eventually pushed  
through a seminal line  
in article vi.  
And so I propose that  
no religious test  
should be required  
as a qualification to serve  
in public office  
or the other public trusts.

**Mitchell:**

line distinguished  
the United States  
from the old world  
and pointed the way  
toward a secular conception

of the state.  
In the finished constitution,  
God was not mentioned at all.  
Who was in charge?  
"This constitution,"  
the document says,  
"shall be the supreme law  
of the land."

**Butler:**

question wasn't seen  
as proper to a question  
about the structure  
of government.  
It was also seen as dangerous.  
In other words,  
if you put the religion question  
out in the structure  
of government,  
would that undermine  
the chances  
for the ratification  
of a new federal government?

**Mitchell:**

the constitution  
displeased everyone.  
Benjamin Franklin lamented  
that it didn't abolish slavery.  
Several delegates  
lamented that the omission  
of a bill of rights,  
including religious freedom,  
was an appalling mistake.  
Near the end, Ben Franklin  
offered the convention  
his wisdom one more time  
but decided it would be  
more effectively delivered  
by someone else.  
He asked his friend  
James Wilson to read it.  
"Mr. president,  
I doubt whether

"any other convention  
we can obtain  
"may be able to make  
a better constitution,  
"for when you assemble  
a number of men to have  
"the advantage  
of their joint wisdom,  
"you inevitably assemble  
with those men  
"all their prejudices,  
"their passions,  
their errors of opinion,  
"their local interests,  
and their selfish views.  
"It therefore  
astonishes me, sir,  
"to find this system  
approaching so near  
to perfection as it does."  
[Pounding and murmuring]  
Hear, hear!

**Mitchell:**

all but 3 of the delegates  
signed the constitution.  
After its passage,  
even the disappointed  
James Madison began  
to look approvingly  
on the document.  
Many of the ideas  
in the constitution  
had been his work,  
but he now pointed  
toward a different author.

**Man as Madison:**

for the man of pious reflection  
not to perceive  
in the constitution a finger  
of that almighty hand  
which had been extended  
to our relief

in the revolution.

James Madison.

**Mitchell:**

was finished and signed.

The question was whether

it would be accepted

by the people.

For it to become law,

9 states would need

to ratify it

in special state conventions.

The debate was long

and contentious.

Finally the supporters

of the constitution,

called the federalists,

agreed to add a bill of rights.

With that concession,

the U.S. constitution

was ratified.

On April 30, 1789,

George Washington became

the first president

of the United States.

His was a job and a role

that was entirely undefined.

**Fenster:**

Americans were acting

on centuries of tradition

in looking

to their leader for guidance

on religious matters,

but George Washington

was extremely careful

in that regard.

He was deeply aware

of his responsibility

to bring people together.

He did not want religion

to be a divisive force

in any way.

To use language of Jesus

and Jesus Christ often  
could be seen as divisive  
and unneeded.

If you appeared to speak in one  
form of religious language,  
you're going to alienate  
people who spoke  
another religious language,  
and Washington knew well  
that he had to rise  
above that fray.

We can credit him  
with laying the groundwork  
for religious freedom  
by leaving his own  
position neutral.

**Mitchell:**

when George Washington  
was in the second year  
of his presidency,  
he received a letter  
from the Jewish congregation  
yeshuat Israel of Newport,  
Rhode Island.

In reply, he wrote  
a memorable response  
about religion in America.

Man as Washington:

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.

**Mitchell:**

together at the synagogue  
in Newport every August,  
the anniversary  
of Washington's letter.

The reading of the letter is  
a very special occasion  
because the words are  
among the most important  
in terms of American history.

"May the children  
of the stock of Abraham,  
who dwell in this land"...

Man as Washington:

Continue to merit  
and enjoy the goodwill  
of the other inhabitants,  
while everyone shall sit  
in safety  
under his own vine and fig tree,  
and there shall be none  
to make him afraid.

**Mitchell:**

none to make him afraid."  
The president's biblical  
reference was a poetic  
and powerful assurance,  
but Washington wasn't  
going to be president forever.  
Everybody knew that religion  
would ultimately come  
to affect politics,  
and the question was  
if the wrong group or groups  
got power  
with the federal government,  
wouldn't they try to  
establish their church  
as the national church?  
Couldn't some group just lop on  
to the federal government  
and say, "ok."  
The presbyterian church  
is going to be  
the national church,"  
or, "the congregational church  
is going to be  
the national church"?

And so there was a fear  
about the religion question  
if it wasn't handled.

**Mitchell:**

small religious groups  
have in a new nation,  
and what about individuals?  
Perhaps a more  
power-hungry president  
than Washington would want  
to tell the people  
what they could say  
or where they could pray?  
Critics of the new constitution  
clamored for changes,  
the changes  
that had been promised  
during the struggle  
for ratification  
two years earlier.  
I beg to differ  
with you, Mr. Madison.  
The people of Virginia  
insist there be a list  
of assured  
individual liberties.

**Holland:**

George Mason,  
these prominent anti-federalists  
are the ones that  
really put the heat  
on James Madison and others  
to say, "if you're  
going to have our support,  
"if we're going  
to move forward,  
"we really need to have  
a bill of rights  
as part of this,"  
and one of the things that  
is preeminent there  
is a commitment

to religious liberty.

**Mitchell:**

were strong supporters  
of religious freedom  
for a very good reason.

**Church:**

experience had been,  
"unless it is made explicit,  
we are going to be burned,  
"government  
will turn against us,  
"the established parties  
will persecute us,  
will tax us for the support of  
other religious institutions,"  
namely their own.

**Bushman:**

a bill of rights on principle.

**Mitchell:**

a list of certain  
individual rights implied  
that there couldn't be  
other rights.  
Whatever you didn't list  
could be denied.  
And changing the constitution  
might be like  
opening up pandora's box--  
all kinds of bad laws  
would follow.

**Church:**

by his baptist constituents  
to deal with what he called,  
"this nauseating business  
of amendments."

**Mitchell:**

it would be better  
if Madison

just did it himself.  
He took the lead in writing  
the bill of rights,  
10 amendments that guaranteed  
what we now see  
as the basic rights  
of Americans.

The very  
first amendment began...  
Congress shall make  
no law respecting  
an establishment of religion  
or prohibiting  
the free exercise thereof.

**George:**

is rightly interpreted  
as meaning that the founders  
wanted to make sure  
that the institution  
of the church  
and the institution of the state  
were separate institutions.

**Meacham:**

amendment has two parts.  
It bans the idea,  
it bans the possibility  
of an established church,  
and it argues that everyone  
should have the free  
exercise of religion.

**Wood:**

applied at the outset  
only to the federal government  
so that we have to keep  
in mind that  
that first amendment was saying  
the federal government  
cannot interfere  
with certain rights,  
but the states were still  
free to put limits

on religious freedom and speech.

**Mitchell:**

was a milestone  
in world history.  
For the first time,  
a national government promised  
to stay out of religion.

**Roberts:**

of independence,  
the constitution,  
the bill of rights,  
our charters of freedom,  
they're our glue.  
They are what make us a country,  
and once we have that  
pulling us together,  
then we have the freedom  
and the ability  
to be diverse  
in all kinds of other ways.

**Meacham:**

simply the freedom  
to choose whether to be  
a mormon or an episcopalian  
or catholic or a Muslim.  
It is the liberty  
of those not to believe.  
"I am going to pursue  
my own destiny, my own code,  
"my own vision  
without being pressured by  
or buffeted by larger forces."  
The first real  
life test for religious freedom  
took place  
in the election of 1800  
between John Adams  
and Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

for a second term

against Jefferson,  
his long-time friend  
and by now  
his political opposite.  
Together they'd done much  
of the work to create  
the declaration  
of independence,  
but Adams had beaten Jefferson  
in the last election.  
Then as president,  
he moved to suppress criticism  
of his government.  
He had made the government  
a force in religious matters  
to great discontent.

**Church:**

a fast day,  
a national day of fasting.  
It was written  
in very Christian language.  
Adams himself believed  
that the support of the church  
was necessary if government  
were going to stand.  
The fast Eve,  
there were riots in the streets.  
That fast day led  
the sectarian christians,  
the baptists, the methodists,  
and also Jews and others  
to be very wary of Adams  
as a religious president  
who would impose  
his religious views upon them.

**Mitchell:**

the vice president,  
was outraged.  
The election campaign  
of 1800 was bitter.

**George:**

of 1800 was a crucial moment  
in our national history.  
People think our politics  
today is polarized--and it is--  
but, boy, if you wanted  
to see polarization,  
you should look  
at the election of 1800--  
bitterness, recriminations,  
nasty campaigning.

**Mitchell:**

James Callender,  
a writer who specialized  
in political slander.  
The Jefferson campaign called  
Adams a fool, a hypocrite,  
a criminal, a tyrant,  
but Adams'  
supporters retaliated.  
Jefferson was branded  
a weakling, a libertine,  
and a coward.  
Perhaps the worst  
accusation of all--  
this politician who said he was  
"in a sect by myself,"  
did he believe in God at all?

**Man:**

be asked by every American,  
"laying his hand  
on his heart, is  
"shall I continue  
in allegiance to God  
"and a religious president  
or impiously declare  
for Jefferson and no God?"

**Wood:**

of being an atheist,  
and he felt he was  
not an atheist.  
He never was.

He learned his lesson,  
which Franklin had voiced  
several years earlier.  
1784 he said, "look.  
Anybody who speaks out  
"against religion,  
it's like spitting in the wind.  
You just don't  
do it in America."

**Mitchell:**

of the campaign severed  
the old friendship.  
It was a tragedy of spirit  
that seemed to endanger  
everything that  
the two great men had worked  
so hard to create--  
the American system itself.

**Brinkley:**

that America was going to be  
destroyed because suddenly  
this two-party system  
had reared its head,  
and the Adams crowd,  
the federalists, were saying  
that he was a pagan--  
Thomas Jefferson--  
a crazy deist,  
and that he was going to  
forever ban christianity  
in the United States,  
and it got very heated.

**Mitchell:**

maelstrom created genuine fear.  
Citizens actually believed  
that Jefferson  
would banish the Bible.

**Bushman:**

one of the questions was,  
"are we going to go

the jeffersonian/baptist route  
"with no established religions  
of any kind  
"and take the risk that  
religion will diminish  
in America and virtue  
will go down with it?"

**Mitchell:**

and confused election.  
In the end, Jefferson won.

**Fenster:**

proved a point that  
reverberates to this day,  
that the implementation  
of religious freedom  
and separation of church  
and state were laws  
laid down by the founders,  
but the protection  
of those ideas was  
in the hands  
of the people.

Man as Jefferson:

If the freedom for religion,  
guaranteed to us  
by law in theory,  
can ever rise in practice under  
the overbearing inquisition  
of public opinion,  
truth will prevail  
over fanaticism.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

and Madison both realized  
that freedom is  
a greater spur than force.  
The absence of federal  
government intervention  
actually helped religion  
to grow.

**Hatch:**

tremendous upsurge.  
I was reading the diary  
of William Bentley,  
who kept talking about  
how the common people  
of the town were holding  
night religious meetings,  
and there would be  
sailors preaching,  
there would be women preaching,  
there would be  
African-Americans preaching.  
I shout, "hallelujah,"  
when I think of his life.

**Butler:**

forbids an establishment  
and also protects the right  
of religious worship,  
and both of them working  
together have encouraged  
religious groups to go out  
and seek members.  
In the old days,  
in the days of an establishment,  
you didn't need  
to seek members  
because the state paid  
for religious services.

**Hatch:**

the yellow pages of any town  
in America, and you can  
find forms of faith  
that the founding fathers  
would have found unimaginable  
but would have given  
free choice  
to any individual to belong  
to a wide variety of groups  
or to no group,  
and I think that  
would have pleased them.

**Butler:**

of the United States  
at the beginning  
of the 21st century suggests  
that they were  
completely correct.  
They couldn't have  
been more correct.  
We now live  
in a society that has  
far more religions,  
far more religious  
participation,  
far more religion involved  
in the nature of society  
than happened to have  
been true at the time  
of the American revolution  
and the creation  
of the first amendment,  
and that in part is  
a testament  
to their conviction  
that religion would  
flourish on its own.

**Meacham:**

about the country  
is that religion has shaped us  
without strangling us.

**Mitchell:**

revolution we all know  
came with drums and guns,  
with battle and bloodshed.  
The quieter revolution  
was less spectacular  
and much slower,  
coming only step by step,  
but it was more  
unique in human history.  
This was the story  
of an idea,

a government devoted  
to maintaining liberty,  
not uniformity.

**Bushman:**

is never a simple story.  
It requires constant attention,  
constant thought.  
It requires argument and debate,  
and only out of that process  
can we achieve  
the goal that we want,  
which is religious freedom  
for all.

**Wood:**

not only created  
the institutions by which  
we still govern ourselves,  
but they infused  
into the culture, our culture,  
all of our highest aspirations,  
our ideals,  
our greatest values,  
including religious liberty  
being one of the most important.  
The struggle  
for religious liberty is  
a perennial struggle.  
There will always be  
the temptation  
to cut back  
on religious freedom.  
There will always be  
some end in view,  
some fear that people have  
that will tempt us as a people  
to dishonor  
the fundamental right  
to religious freedom  
and the right to bring faith  
into the public square.  
It was a world historic  
contribution to say that

"yes, religion matters  
for the health  
"of a society,  
but government  
"must leave people free  
to pursue their beliefs  
as they see fit."  
It is a system that we should  
change with great care,  
if at all.

**Mitchell:**

was the first to go.  
By 1790, he was 84  
and quite ill.  
One day his daughter said,  
"I hope, father,  
that you will yet recover,  
and live many years."  
"I hope not,"  
Ben Franklin said.  
His wish was granted.  
He died that April, 1790.  
It was soon discovered  
that he'd added a note  
onto his will.

**Man as Franklin:**

My fine crab-tree walking stick  
with a gold head  
curiously wrought  
in the form  
of a cap of liberty  
I give to my friend  
and the friend of mankind  
George Washington.

**Mitchell:**

himself still had Miles to go  
before he could rest  
from his 8 years as president.  
It was 1796 before  
he would write  
his farewell address

to the American people.  
An advisor suggested  
that Washington mention  
"a generally received  
and divinely authoritative  
religion" in the address.  
Washington refused,  
but he believed that faith  
needed to be a part  
of the national character.  
He was leaving  
a nation that was,  
as he said, "in command  
of its own fortunes."  
Man as Washington:  
I anticipate with  
pleasing expectation  
that retreat  
in which I promise myself  
the sweet enjoyment  
of good laws  
under a free government.

**Mitchell:**

3 years after leaving office,  
George Washington died  
and was buried at Mount Vernon.  
James Madison was  
the last founding father to die.  
In 1817, he retired  
to Montpelier,  
his tobacco plantation.  
For his final 19 years,  
he never left Virginia again.  
Among his last works  
was a protest  
against the appointment  
of chaplains for congress.  
Even at the end,  
James Madison was a watchdog  
for the revolutionary  
American concept  
of separation  
between church and state.

**Man as Madison:**

I am far from desponding  
of the great  
political experiment  
in the hands  
of the American people.  
Much has already been gained.  
Much may be expected.

**Mitchell:**

The bitter election of 1800  
had severed the friendship  
between Thomas Jefferson  
and John Adams.

In time, the two  
great men reconciled.

Man as John Adams:

Now, my friend Jefferson,  
there is now, ever will be,  
and never was

but one being who can  
understand the universe  
and that it is not  
only vain but wicked  
for insects to pretend  
to comprehend it.

John Adams.

Man as Jefferson:

These are things  
which you and I  
may perhaps know ere long.  
We have so lived  
as to fear near neither horn  
of the dilemma.

We have, willingly,  
done injury to no man  
and have done  
for our country the good  
which has fallen in our way.  
Be our last as cordial  
as were our first affections.  
Thomas Jefferson.

**Mitchell:**

on July 4, 1826,  
exactly a half century  
after the declaration  
of independence.  
Adams' last words were,  
"Jefferson still survives."  
He was wrong.  
Thomas Jefferson  
had died just hours before,  
but what they had created  
with the other founders  
still survived.  
The shocking and very basic  
American principles  
of a separate church  
and state of a nation,  
that guaranteed religious  
liberty in these United States.  
Religious freedom  
has always been  
a fundamental human right,  
but freedom does not always  
come easily.  
America's first freedom  
was freedom of faith.  
As Thomas Jefferson wrote,  
"almighty God hath created  
the mind free."  
"No man shall suffer on account  
of his religious opinions  
or belief,  
"but all men shall be free  
to profess their opinions  
"in matters of religion."  
"Truth is great  
and will prevail  
if left to herself."  
To learn more  
about the founding  
fathers  
and the separation  
of church and state,  
visit

pbs. Org/first freedom.

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