Few would doubt that the United States, from its founding to the present, has been unusually fertile ground for religion. The fervent rhetoric of U.S. leaders and the passionate evangelicalism of ordinary citizens have encouraged observers to locate faith at the heart of American national identity. And yet the Revolutionary era—spanning the outbreak of war with Britain in 1775 and the passage of the Bill of Rights in 1790—witnessed not only the consolidation of American independence and the ratification of the Constitution, but also the effective separation of religion and politics in the new federal government. Somehow, a community steeped in faith rejected an established church and religious tests for officeholders, while insisting that freedom to worship any god (or none) was a fundamental right of citizenship.

The fact that these progressive-seeming measures emerged from a crucible of piety and religious fervour has always taken some explaining. The thirteen essays collected in *Faith and the Founders of the American Republic* offer answers to three basic questions: How religious were the Founders? Did religion play a role in fomenting the American Revolution? And why did the Founders ultimately endorse the separation of church and state? Several of the essays sketch the place of religious minorities in Revolutionary America, and others consider the role of religion in the lives of specific political actors in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century.

The answer to the first question depends to a great extent on the individuals you choose to examine. Several contributors capture the matrix of religious conviction and Enlightenment scepticism that animated the most celebrated Founders: George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, James Madison, Alexander Hamilton, and John Adams. Darren Staloff does a fine job of persuading us that the ‘Deism’ of several of these men has been either overstated or misconstrued; a belief in ‘rational’ religion would unite rather than divide a Deist and an orthodox Reformed Protestant, in any case. In the second section of the book, meanwhile, a procession of less familiar Founders (John Hancock, Gouverneur Morris, Isaac Backus, and others) convinces us that the unorthodox religious beliefs of Thomas Jefferson or Thomas Paine were the exception rather than the rule amongst American revolutionaries. Though the precise extent and shape of personal belief remains an open question even for the most famous Founders, this collection puts to bed any notion that radical secularism was the handmaiden of the United States.
The precise relationship between religious conviction and the American Revolution is harder to establish. Mark David Hall offers a useful introduction to the European Reformed tradition and the religious roots of resistance theory. Daniel Dreisbach, Gary Scott Smith, and Jane Calvert identify specific religious beliefs and practices which nudged particular Founders towards an embrace of the Revolution. Given the hostility that accompanied its publication in 1966, Alan Heimert’s *Religion and the American Mind* receives a surprisingly sympathetic nod from several of the contributors, and it would be hard to dispute the broad claim that religious dissent offered a proving ground for political protest. I am not sure, however, that *Faith and the Founders* offers a convincing case for religion as a central driver of the colonial crisis, even if the proponents of the Revolution (Thomas Paine among them) were keen to use religious concepts and language to win support for independence.

The contributors are on surer ground with the issues of establishment and religious freedom. At its most basic level, the case against an established church in an independent America rested on denominational diversity. As Robert Calhoon and Ruma Chopra point out in their essay on American colonists who remained loyal to Britain, while only ten percent of English churchgoers in 1776 remained outside the Anglican tradition, the corresponding figure in the new United States was over 75 percent. The American Revolution could hardly fail to displace the Church of England, and the diversity of competing denominations—from Congregationalist and Presbyterians to Methodists, Baptists, and Quakers—worked against the identification of a single national church that could unite Americans behind establishment.

Donald Drakeman’s essay on the Antifederalists—the opponents of the new Federal Constitution of 1787—suggests another important reason for the rejection of a national church: many Americans in the 1780s and 1790s were opposed to almost anything with a national reach, believing that the United States was a confederation of independent states rather than a unitary nation. Not all Antifederalists (or other opponents of federal involvement in religion) believed that state governments should support religion; but the fact that some of them did is significant. Drakeman is right to connect scholarship on what became known as the ‘establishment clause’ of the Constitution with the growing body of scholarship on state building and federal/state tensions in the late eighteenth century. Meanwhile, the essays by Jane Calvert and Joe Coker engage the fascinating battle over establishment and religious freedom that took place within individual states like Massachusetts after 1776. Although the U.S. Supreme Court decided in 1947 to extend Thomas Jefferson’s ‘wall of separation’ to the states, debates over government involvement in religion in the founding era looked rather different at the local and state level from the