Eager to gain credibility for their church-state positions, the politicians, preachers, and activists who participate in present-day debates frequently enlist the Founders as allies of their cause. Convinced that the Founders intended the “wall of separation” to divide religion from politics, secularists often characterize the Founders as men whose private spirituality had no effect upon their public duties. Conversely, vast numbers of Christian fundamentalists and evangelicals who are concerned about the supposed moral collapse and spiritual drift of America frequently call for the restoration of the godly heritage that they believe the Founders left for posterity. While the advocates of these antithetical positions may be passionate, the historical narratives that undergird their causes ignore the complexity that defined the religio-political beliefs and practices of the Founders. Concerned about the distortion of the historical record, historians Matthew Harris and Thomas Kidd and constitutional scholars Daniel Dreisbach and Mark David Hall call upon the readers of their respective document collections to step back from present-day perspectives so that they can understand church-state debates in light of the context of the revolutionary generation.

In the brief but insightful introduction of *The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion in Revolutionary America*, Harris and Kidd describe the Founders’ journey to define church-state rela-
tions as arduous. Explaining the essence of the conflict, Harris and Kidd aver: “The Founders struggled to find a balance between ensuring religious freedom and honoring the important place of religion in American society” (6). Adding to the complexity of these issues, the editors contend, was the fact that the Founders often acted in unexpected ways. Thomas Jefferson, for example, may be known as the chief promoter of the “wall of separation” metaphor, but he also routinely invited pastors to preach in Sabbath services held in the halls of Congress.

Harris and Kidd divided the fifty-three documents included in their book into six topics—namely, Religion and the Continental Congress, Religion and State Governments, Constitution and Ratification, Religion and the Federal Government, Disestablishment and the Separation of Church and State, and The Founding Fathers’ Own Views on Religion. Present within these sections are documents such as James Madison’s Memorial and Remonstrance, the First Amendment to the Constitution, and the Virginia Declaration of Rights that are standard components of edited works on religious liberty. Harris and Kidd also included letters and public documents that, though they typically receive scant attention from historians, illustrate how difficult it was for the Founders to define the parameters of religious liberty. Among these documents are proclamations on religion from state constitutions, letters from ministers lamenting the “godless” Constitution, debates about the religion clauses of the First Amendment, and excerpts from the writings of nine different Founders regarding their personal religious views. To be sure, the decision to focus primarily upon public documents and the writings of high-profile Founders means that Harris and Kidd did not include a number of perspectives from the revolutionary era in their work. In fact, the book contains only one entry from a woman and no documents from African American or Native American representatives. While the absence of these perspectives is regrettable, there is a benefit to the select nature of this document collection—namely, Harris and Kidd have crafted a work that is at once readable and informative. Indeed, even non-specialists who read their book will be able to comprehend the key
questions about the place of religion in American life without feeling overwhelmed by copious amounts of data.

In contrast to the conciseness of Harris and Kidd’s work, the massive collection of documents compiled by Dreisbach and Hall will not appeal to those who have only a casual interest in the subject of religious liberty. But Dreisbach and Hall make up for the lack of brevity in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience* with an impressive aggregation of public writings that covers the subject of church-state relations from a number of different angles. Thus, while it takes a great deal of time and energy to read through all of the documents contained in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience*, persistent readers will find that the book provides them with a solid foundation of knowledge about the political debates and legal precedents that shaped America’s religio-political practices.

Dreisbach and Hall set the tone for their work in their thought-provoking introduction when they argue that the Founders only arrived at solutions to the various church-state dilemmas through extensive dialogue. They support this assertion by providing documents that delve deep into the specific details of the Founders’ ideas and practices. In dealing with Thomas Jefferson’s “Wall of Separation” metaphor, for example, Dreisbach and Hall set the context for Jefferson’s famous letter to the Danbury Baptists by beginning this section of their book with writings from Richard Hooker and Roger Williams, theologians who used the “wall” metaphor at least 150 years before Jefferson incorporated the phrase into his writings. Employing their own Constitutional expertise, Dreisbach and Hall also include Supreme Court rulings from cases that confirmed “the prominence of Jefferson’s figurative language in church-state jurisprudence” (532). As is the case with the section on Jefferson, the massive number of documents published in *The Sacred Rights of Conscience* provides serious students of religious liberty—whether they are examining these debates in an undergraduate or graduate classroom or conducting private research—with essential resources for discovery.

While the topics addressed in *The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion in Revolutionary America* and *The Sacred Rights
of Conscience have obvious contemporary relevance, these volumes have tremendous value because the editors insist that their readers interpret these debates within the context of the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries. Moreover, by selecting documents that present a variety of views about church-state relations, the editors make it unmistakably clear that the Founders’ religio-political debates were filled with nuance and complexity. In all, these works are valuable contributions to ongoing discussions about religious liberty, especially because they strive to correct the flawed and incomplete historical narratives frequently embraced by present-day church-state activists.

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