The bookends defining literary periods are negotiable. Many believe that the colonial period in American literature begins with the founding of Jamestown in 1607 and extends beyond Thomas Jefferson's (1743–1826) explosive Declaration of Independence in 1776, when American political identity shifted outside the purview of British control, even though that identity remained in flux.

Colonial writings are multihued and include the oral traditions of native peoples, sermons and theological treatises, secular memoirs and spiritual autobiographies, lyric poems and captivity narratives, political pamphlets and chronicles of the struggles and successes of the colonies. Many pieces are deeply introspective. Early colonial literature reveals hearts infused with the Puritan Calvinist vigilance for determining evidence of God's election to salvation, the ambiguous realities of being “in the world, but not of it,” and the desire to identify America with ancient Israel, as God's chosen nation. These themes pulsate in American literature in some form well into the nineteenth century, but later colonial literature, influenced by the intellectual surges of the European Enlightenment, emphasized the rationalist and deist impulses reflected in the philosophy of John Locke and the mechanistic universe of Sir Isaac Newton.

Conformity and Community

William Bradford (1590–1657) begins his chronicle *Of Plymouth Plantation, 1620–1647* by reflecting on Satan's desire throughout history to persecute the faithful saints of the Christian church. Bradford's Calvinism emerges as a crisis theology, as the faithful persevere against a tide of enemies, both within the community and outside of it.

Just as biblical prophets document the struggles of ancient Israel, so Bradford chronicles the pattern of apostasy and belief in the new community. *Of Plymouth Plantation* moves steadily from an account of hope to one of despair and admonition. Where Jeremiah and Isaiah write about the captivity of Israel following the Babylonian invasion, Bradford writes about a captive Plymouth that has turned away from its first love. The elegiac tone culminates in the 1642 chapter “Wickedness Breaks Forth.” Bradford struggles to comprehend how the godly community, now well into its second generation since coming to America, has degenerated into scandal, drunkenness, sodomy, and buggery. Bradford names one offender, Thomas Granger, who after being discovered in a compromising situation, confessed to buggery with “a mare, a cow, two goats, five sheep, two calves, and a turkey.” In compliance with the law against bestiality in Leviticus 20, Granger was executed. Bradford begins to rationalize the presence of such horrific actions within the godly community: where God sows good seed, there will also be tares; while the godly are busy with industry, their servants are engaged in wickedness; while Moses dealt with a “mixed multitude” who fled from Egypt, so must Bradford. To trump this spiritual failure, the following chapter celebrates the first generation's Reverend Elder William Brewster, who exemplified devotion and service to God. The obituary culminates in Bradford's reflecting on the shared tribulations of the first generation that drove them to rely on God. *Of Plymouth Plantation* ends abruptly in 1647; there are no entries for 1648, but in the manuscript two blank leaves are inserted, followed by a listing of the original members of the *Mayflower* who founded Plymouth Plantation. These names perhaps serve in
Governor John Winthrop (1588–1649) of Massachusetts Bay Colony also sought to find signs of God's favor upon the colony's endeavors, struggled to enforce conformity, and worked to stamp out heterodoxy. An early entry in his Journal (July 5, 1632) relates an incident in which several colonists witnessed a battle for survival between a mouse and a snake, in which the mouse killed the snake. One Boston pastor interpreted it as an allegory of the victory of God's meek saints over the great serpent himself. For the years 1636–1638, his Journal records the community's increasingly troubling confrontations with Anne Hutchinson (1591–1643), whom many viewed as a serpent in the mouse's nest. When Hutchinson was brought before the General Court in Boston in 1637, a split in the Bay Colony was already evident. On one side were those who advocated Puritan covenant theology in which one's spiritual works served as the fruits and signs of election. On the other were a growing number of New Englanders such as Anne Hutchinson who subscribed to the notion of “free grace” and the authority of the spirit. These “antinomians” held that personal revelation and the inner workings of the spirit, not works performed under the law, signaled one's salvation. Hutchinson's friend and ally, the contentious Roger Williams (1603–1683), often credited with founding the first Baptist church in America, wrote several minor poems that questioned the ease with which the “visible” saint could be discerned. In one poem Williams admonishes his fellow puritans, “Boast not proud English, of thy birth and blood, / Thy brother Indian is by birth as Good," which is to argue a shared natural condition deserving wrath “Till Grace his soule and thine in Christ restore” (1–2, 6). Williams then asserts a possibility that would have scandalized many Bay Puritans: “Make sure thy second birth, else thou shalt see, / Heaven ope to Indians wild, but shut to thee” (7–8). Banished from Massachusetts Bay in 1635, Williams secured a charter for the colony of Rhode Island in 1644. His crackling Bloudy Tenent of Persecution (1644) is an imaginary dialogue between Truth and Peace that argues for toleration and the liberty of conscience. Like the obstinate Williams, Hutchinson was excommunicated and banished in March 1638, and Winthrop comments that it only renewed her energies.

**Encounters with Natives and Witches**

Hutchinson and Williams presented a threat to doctrinal unity, but Indians threatened communal survival. Mary White Rowlandson (c. 1635–c. 1678) records her eleven-week captivity among the Narragansett Indians that dramatically confirms the workings of divine grace in a blend between spiritual autobiography, travelogue, and narrative of cultural assimilation. She begins her account with the sudden attack in February 1676; within hours, her house had been set on fire, and several neighbors and members of her extended family had been killed: “Thus, were we butchered by those merciless heathen, standing amazed, with the blood running down to our heels.” In the narrative's Third Remove, Rowlandson comments that several days of travel to the Indian camp reminded her of how derelict she had been “of God's holy time, how many Sabbaths I had lost and misspent and how evilly I had walked in God's sight.” God had every right to punish her, cast her from his presence, or kill her, she admits, but though he “wounded me with one hand, so He healed me with the other.” Her ordeal provided time for the introspective self-examination fueling seventeenth-century Puritan culture. Even though she witnesses the dire straits of the Indians themselves, she notes how God's strange Providence preserves and provides for them, and ultimately strengthens them “to be a scourge to His people.”
Throughout, Rowlandson interweaves verses from the Bible as a way of maintaining identity and making sense of her various trials. Like many Puritans, she read the Bible experientially, as readers identify with characters or situations. In her own exile, she echoes the lament of Israel in Babylon in Psalm 137; she is the aged Israel of Genesis 42:36 wailing for Benjamin; she is the prodigal of Luke 15 returning to her father in repentance; she is Job who has lost everything and does not understand the cause; she is the Hebrew slave fleeing the captivity of Pharaoh in Exodus 14:13; and, finally, she is the one whom God loves, for her affliction is evidence of God's favor, as the writer of Hebrews 12:6 confirms.

Rowlandson graphically articulates the widespread fear of Native Americans that colonists felt. There are moments of identification with her captors, but these are fleeting, and the reader is left with her overall impression of their savagery and the lingering external threat posed to the community. The Puritan minister Cotton Mather (1663–1728) collected miscellaneous captivity narratives and anecdotes in his massive Magnalia Christi Americana; or, the Ecclesiastical History of New England (1702) to demonstrate God's preservation of his people in the new wilderness. Other narratives, such as Quentin Stockwell's more secular Relation of his Captivity (1677), were preserved, edited, and heavily annotated with a Puritan focus by the elder Increase Mather (1639–1723) in An Essay for the Recording of Illustrious Providences (1684).

By the end of the century another insidious enemy arose just as the communal pressures of conformity, orthodoxy, and stability reached critical mass. Increase and Cotton Mather grappled with what was then perceived as the most sinister internal threat at Massachusetts Bay: witchcraft. The hysteria in Salem in 1691–1693 is not easily accounted for, but the witch trials made clear that even if there were no de facto witches at Salem, there was a rhetorical need for them as a catalyst for reanimating spiritual devotion and strengthening communal ties. The paranoia in Massachusetts began as several young women fell into unexplainable "fits"; when physical causes could not be ascertained, metaphysical causes were suspected. Several young girls from the colony and a West Indian slave named Tituba confessed to midnight dealings in the forest with the devil, whom many described as resembling a "black man" or an "Indian." By 1693 some 150 citizens had been jailed; 29 of these were convicted on capital charges; 19 persons were hanged, and 1 was pressed to death. George Burroughs, once a minister in Salem, was charged as the ringleader and was executed; no one, it seems, could be trusted.

Cotton Mather's Wonders of the Invisible World (1692), his chronicle of five of the trials, reasons that the presence of witches bears testimony that the devil grew "exceedingly disturbed" by the righteous workings of the colony. Despite his confidence in the colony's providential favor, the younger Mather fears that because an "army of devils is horribly broke in upon the place which is the center ... the first-born of our English settlements," their sinister designs would spread uncontrollably to neighboring communities, and eventually would amount to "no less than a sort of dissolution upon the world." Mather's heightened language to describe the affliction of the colony also resonates with anticipation of Christ's imminent return as a new century approaches, a millenarianism that his father, Increase, had preached to an earlier generation in The Mystery of Israel's Salvation (1667). Such an
apocalyptic vision is also described in Michael Wigglesworth's (1631–1705) long poem *The Day of Doom* (1662), which sold 1,800 copies in the first year and became standard fare for New England school children learning their catechism and the doctrinal lessons of the *Bay Psalm Book* (1640) and the *New-England Primer* (1685).

Evidence for charging someone with practicing witchcraft was sketchy. At Salem that evidence included strange behavior or apparent healing powers, the unexplained appearance of “spectral” forms of the accused in odd or multiple places, the presence of a witch's “teat” on the accused that was believed to be used to suckle a familiar or personal demon, and, remarkably, outright confessions of guilt. Of the latter, Mather states that twenty confessed to signing their names in the devil's book. But outright confession was the quickest way to be exonerated and perhaps the strongest evidence of true conversion. No doubt a few villagers took opportunity to bring up old quarrels with their neighbors as evidence against the accused. Increase Mather and several other Boston ministers were vocal in their caution and opposition to the witch trials.

**Conversion and Spiritual Autobiography**

The colonies’ financial, communal, and spiritual successes and failures are reflected more minutely in personal conversion narratives, or spiritual autobiographies. The genre emerges in connection with church membership. If the church minister and elders determined an individual's grace experience to be genuine, they then extended full church membership. Many scholars have identified a pattern of linear “movements” in the genre of spiritual autobiography: knowledge of sinfulness, a time of preparation (often including physical illness), spiritual conviction and faith, doubt and despair, and, finally, true assurance. Gradually, the spiritual vicissitudes of autobiography in the seventeenth century gave way to more secular concerns in the eighteenth century, as in the *Diary* of Samuel Sewall (1652–1730) and the *Autobiography* of Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790).

Winthrop’s own *Christian Experience* (1637) fits the linear mold of spiritual autobiography. Spiritual autobiographies such as Winthrop's consistently speak of the old/new life of the individual, typologically identified with Paul's distinction between Adam as the “old man” and Christ as the “new man” (Romans 5–6; Colossians 3). A season of physical sickness functions for Winthrop as an external signifier of internal spiritual sickness; the crucible of pain awakens the possibility of death, and with it, the anxieties of separation from God. The conviction of his sin leads Winthrop to a new life of devotion, but one characterized by outward legalism that subsequently leads him back to despair. On the verge of publically proclaiming himself a hypocrite, he experiences the spiritual epiphany of complete wretchedness, a primary tenet of Calvinism. After suffering doubt and defeat, Winthrop bloomed into the assurance of God's mercy and love.

Similar patterns emerge in the spiritual autobiography of Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), the dominant figure of New England's “Great Awakening.” This cultural movement was a Calvinist spiritual revival in the middle decades of the eighteenth century. Edwards relates its varieties and imaginative trajectories in a lengthy letter to the Reverend Benjamin Colman of Boston,
titled “A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God” (1735). Although Edwards was determined to show the ways in which “the light breaks through the cloud, and doubting and darkness soon vanish away,” he did not always possess such confidence, as he acknowledges in his Personal Narrative of conversion, written in 1739 and published posthumously in 1765. Edwards narrates that as a boy he was deeply struck with religious affections and duties, but, as the years passed, he became increasingly infused with doubt as those passions faded. At Yale he fell sick, and the experience caused him to make seeking for salvation “the main business of my life.” In January 1722 Edwards formalized his conversion by committing to paper his vows to God. Some of these vows emerge in his list of seventy holy Resolutions (composed 1723–1724) for daily living. The rest of Edwards’s Narrative relates his discovery of God’s holiness and the depths of his own wickedness. The character that emerges from its pages is of a mind restlessly turning over profound questions, of a life desperate in its love for God, and of a heart suffused with great movements of passion in a century given to the rationalist program.

Edwards was no enthusiast, however, and one need only read his works on philosophical theology, such as his Treatise Concerning Religious Affections (1746), or his painstaking Careful and Strict Enquiry into the Modern Prevailing Notions of that Freedom of Will (1754), to see that he is firmly rooted in the Enlightenment. But his extant sermons demonstrate his keen ability to tap into the dynamic emotional lives of his parishioners to guide them to conversion. His most famous sermon, Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God (July 8, 1741), is an attempt to shock congregants out of their spiritual complacency. One must not view this sermon as wholly representative of Edwards’s preaching or writing, but as the rhetorical instrument that hammers into his congregants’ hearts the assertion that God’s will and pleasure defy human attempts at understanding his plans for salvation. Influenced by the natural discoveries made by the Royal Society, Edwards infuses the sermon with vivid images drawn from nature: sinners are compared to chaff spinning in the whirlwind of God’s wrath, spiders dangling over a fire, prey that are about to be devoured by the serpent, and reeds or branches breaking by the flood—all with a view to impressing a sense of spiritual urgency.

For Elizabeth Ashbridge (1713–1755), conversion from the Church of England to Quakerism unleashed the mockery and wrath of her husband. Ashbridge’s Some Account of the Fore-Part of the Life of Elizabeth Ashbridge … Wrote by Herself (published in 1774) is a fascinating glimpse into the multivalent social attitudes toward religion and its various communities in colonial New England. Ashbridge recounts coming into Pennsylvania to visit relatives, all of whom were Quakers. Many, both dissenters and Anglicans, saw the Quakers as a dangerous fringe group—antinomians run amok, who disregarded civil and ecclesial authorities, extended preaching privileges to women, and exalted the whimsical moving of the spirit (called the Inner Light) more than the scriptures. Ashbridge confesses her prejudice against the sect, preferring the hated “papists” to the Quakers, and expresses her “mortification” on learning that her relations followed the sect’s teachings.

But throughout the Account, Ashbridge describes herself as having the heart of a spiritual seeker. After one service when she falls asleep and nearly falls down, she vows never to reenter the meetinghouse. Later, however, she hears the preaching of William Hammans. He convinces her that the sacraments and rituals of the Church of England are empty now that Christ is come in full righteousness to live in the believer. She converts and sends for her
husband without telling him of her news; before he arrives, however, he learns about her new faith. Thereafter, she suffers ridicule, beatings, and separation from her husband, and patiently endures censure from her former Anglican minister. Even after her husband's death, she does not retaliate in the Account, declaring that although “he was so bad, I never thought him the worst of men,” and blesses God for giving her the strength to persevere as a wife and a widow. Ashbridge’s quiet submission to her cruel husband can be understood within the patriarchal social structures that were oppressive to many eighteenth-century women. Alternately, however, one might read her narrative against the grain and say that her converting to Quakerism and submitting to the mysterious Inner Light gave her an authority that these power structures feared. Because she was exalted by God, Ashbridge found her debasement by humans paradoxically empowered her, rendering her radically available to be used by the Holy Spirit.

The Journal of another Quaker, John Woolman (1720–1772), also demonstrates an awareness of larger social concerns while still remaining a narrative about conversion. As a young man, Woolman earned his living as a tailor and later became an itinerant preacher for abolition. Unlike many Puritan accounts, Woolman's Journal is less occupied with determining evidence of salvation and more concerned with documenting his eventual giving over to the radical authority of the Inner Light. Key to understanding this submission is Woolman's emerging awareness of the moral and social evils multiplied through the institution of slavery. Initially, Woolman makes small changes in his tailoring business. Even though the expensively dyed garments were the principle sources of his profits, he became convinced that selling them committed a violence against the free man and the slave alike, who must burden themselves on behalf of someone else's vanity. Woolman's skill in drawing up legal documents also contributed to the cause of abolition, as he refused to draft the wills of fellow Friends who desired their slaves to be transferred as property.

A prominent African voice opposing the slave trade was that of Olaudah Equiano (1745–1797). The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano (1789) provides the template for many later slave narratives and autobiographies and chronicles his terrifying experiences during the Middle Passage and his life as a slave. During the transatlantic voyage, he marvels at the “magic” of the operations of the sailing ship, as well as the cruelty of his white captors, whom he thought were evil spirits set on devouring him. When he arrives in Virginia, he describes his debilitating sense of alienation. Without a common culture or language among them, slaves were more easily controlled, were more focused workers, and were more dependent subjects. Without common language, genuine community was nearly impossible. Equiano narrates his desire to wash off his blackness in order to be like a young white playmate. In another episode, he relates his growing paranoia when the eyes in a portrait appear to follow him whenever he enters the room.

The thrust of his narrative, as he describes in a prefatory letter to the British Parliament, was to make state dignitaries aware of the horrors of the slave trade. One of the ways that Equiano establishes his credentials, and his humanity in the eyes of white culture, is through the rhetoric of conversion and the guidance of Providence throughout his life. Providence protects him from death after he plunges from the upper deck of a ship; Providence guides him when he is educated by a kind master; Providence provides money and circumstance in his securing his freedom; Providence heals him during a prolonged illness and saves him from a
shipwreck. White slave culture consistently denied that Africans had souls or asserted that they were too brutish to understand Christianity's doctrines. Not only does Equiano present himself as an African with a soul, but he is an African with a soul predestined for salvation, and an African with a divinely inspired mission to ban the slave trade. Equiano's autobiography becomes more than a conversion narrative; like Woolman's account, Equiano's narrative blurs into the literature of social protest and political reform.

Spiritual Struggle and Devotional Verse

Like spiritual autobiography, colonial American devotional verse contained all the dramatic elements of temptation and doubt, introspection, spiritual failure, and grace assurance. America's first great poet, Anne Bradstreet (1612–1672), travelled with Winthrop's party aboard the flagship Arbella to Massachusetts Bay. Before disembarking, she heard Winthrop preach A Model of Christian Charity (1630), wherein America is envisioned as the "city upon a hill." Bradstreet was self-conscious about her writing, as she confesses in the Prologue to her book of poems The Tenth Muse Lately Sprung Up in America (1650). In "The Author to Her Book," she meekly calls her book the "ill-form'd offspring of my feeble brain" and the "rambling brat" that is "unfit for light" (1, 8–9). The revised but posthumous second edition of The Tenth Muse, retitled Several Poems (1678), contains the poems that form the core of her poetic reputation. "As Weary Pilgrim, Now at Rest" dwells on natural images that are emblematic of human suffering; storms, stony paths, a blazing sun, and briars and thorns no longer afflict the pilgrim who has gone to his death. As a fellow traveler who is vexed by sorrow, pain, and a "Clay house mouldring away" (19–22), Bradstreet looks toward her own resurrection when Christ returns. In "The Flesh and the Spirit," flesh and spirit are described as two sisters who contend for prominence. Spirit winningly trumps, "My garments are not silk nor gold, / Nor such like trash which Earth doth hold, / But Royal Robes I shall have on, / More glorious than the glist'ring Sun" (79–82). These poems seem straightforward declarations of the poet's resolve toward the life to come.

A similar resignation exists in the poems commemorating the deaths of her grandchildren, Elizabeth (d. 1665) and Simon (d. 1669). "In memory of my dear grand-childe Elizabeth" questions why the poet should "bewail thy fate" because Elizabeth is now "settled in an Everlasting state" (5, 7). Death is part of the natural order, and God possesses the solitary hand "that guides nature and fate" (14). Yet the reader confronts the repeated "Farewel" in the first three lines that address the "dear babe," "sweet babe," and "fair flower" who has departed. Elizabeth was "my hearts too much content" and the "pleasure of mine eye" (1–2), and a tone of grief pervades for the earthly pleasures of a presence no longer to be enjoyed. In her poem commemorating the death of Simon, Bradstreet writes that even though Elizabeth, Simon, and their sister Anne have all been "Cropt by the Almighty's hand; yet is he good," for when Christ returns he will "make up all our losses" (4, 9). But the poem continues, "Let's say he's merciful as well as just" (8), an ambiguous statement that belies the poet's struggle to come to terms with God's goodness. Furthermore, both of these poems are emblems of Bradstreet's conviction that this world is worth remembering and preserving. Bradstreet's poems demonstrate an investment in the world even as she eschews it. Similar spiritual ambiguity can be found in "To My Dear and Loving Husband," "A Letter to Her Husband, Absent upon Publick Employment," and "Upon the burning of our House, July 10th, 1666."
America's other major poet of the seventeenth century was Edward Taylor (1642–1729). His sizable personal library contained a single volume of poetry: Bradstreet's 1678 _Several Poems_. Despite his prodigious body of work, the only poetry published in his lifetime were a few stanzas from "Upon Wedlock, & Death of Children," a moving elegy written to memorialize the infant deaths of five of his eight children by his first wife, Elizabeth Fitch. Taylor's other occasional verses include love poems, paraphrases of the Psalms, and meditations on the natural world. "Upon a Spider Catching a Fly" is an allegorical poem that likens a spider's web to hell's "stratagems" (37), which are woven as "Cords" and "nets" to "tangle Adams race" (33–34, 36). Taylor pleads that God's grace would be the instrument to "breake the Cord" (43). In "Huswifery" Taylor prays that he would be made into God's "Spinning Wheele compleate" (1), with the wheel's various mechanic components and the thread likened to Taylor's emotions, soul, understanding, and will transformed by the spirit and the Word. "The Ebb and Flow" is a meditation on his lackcluster devotion, wherein he expresses his anxiety that his devotional fire is nothing more than "a mocking Ignis Fatuus" (14), a false fire. Yet this doubt is transformed into a favorable sign of election, for when his "ashes" are blown away, "thy fire doth glow" (18). _God's Determinations Touching His Elect …_ (c. 1680) contains thirty-five sequential poems that follow the arc of creation, fall, and redemption in the epic struggle for a person's soul. In "The Souls Groan to Christ for Succor," Taylor confesses the justice of his condemnation, only to be answered in the next poem, "Christs Reply," with addresses of "my Hony," "My Little Darling," "my Dove," and "my Love" (1–4). This conversational structure governs this entire series of poems. These are public poems, but Taylor's poetic reputation firmly resides in his private _Preparatory Meditations_, poems on the Lord's Supper written over the course of forty-three years, which suggests that Taylor approached the composition of these poems as a spiritual exercise. In _Meditation 1.1_, which sets the tone for all the poems that follow, Taylor marvels at the Incarnation—the event wherein God demonstrates his "Matchless Love! Filling Heaven to the brim!" and "Overflowing Hell" (7, 9). Yet in the last six lines, God's abundant love is unrequited by Taylor's "Lifeless Sparke," "Fireless Flame," and "Chilly Love, and Cold" (15–16). Like so many of the _Meditations_, this poem ends with Taylor's desire for God's complete mastery over an unfaithful desire through grace.

Deity and Enlightened Revolution

Devotional literature faded by the mid-eighteenth century as colonial authors consistently invoke the God of deism: not the personal God of the Puritans, but a God who is the great clockmaker of the universe. This distant God creates by design, governs justly and benevolently through universal moral laws and observable natural laws, and is most discernible through rationality rather than through private revelation or the rites of the church.

Note this deist impulse in Jefferson's phrasing in the _Declaration of Independence_: "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights; that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Truth is not privately "revealed," but is communal and discoverable through observation. By "equal" Jefferson means that the Creator has endowed all humanity with their highest capacity: to behold moral truth and to exercise virtue. These two ideals are upheld late in Jefferson's life when he compiled his _Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth_ (c. 1817), a gospel that Jefferson wove together from Jesus' teachings. All that survives of this document
is his listing of the biblical texts to be included. True to the Enlightenment, he avoids the miracles, including the Virgin Birth and the Resurrection; moreover, he elides nearly all the gospel of John, which portrays the most theologically confrontational Jesus of the four gospels. Instead, Jefferson's gospel records the life and parabolic teachings of a historical—though mortal—man.

Deist sympathies are more explicit in the *Letters to an American Farmer* of James Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur (1735–1813), written during the 1770s and published in 1782. In these twelve letters, Crèvecoeur speculates on what it means to be “American,” praises self-interest, reflects on political and moral dilemmas, and confesses divided loyalties between Britain and the colonies. Unlike the pressures to conform and the compulsory tithes in the Church of England, organized religion in America demands only a heart full of gratitude to the Creator, as he describes in Letter III. In Letter XII, he fantasizes about fleeing the contradictions of the Revolution to live with the Indians. Unlike the earlier savage portraits of the Native Americans, Crèvecoeur's farmer is generous and emphasizes his holding the values that deism celebrates: Indians seemingly have no laws, but understand justice; they have no temples or priests, nor religious doctrine, but display reverence for the Creation and the Supreme Being. Should he retreat to their community, the farmer would continue to instruct his family in religion, but would only teach the Decalogue—God's commandments given to Moses that have universal application. While the Puritans of the previous century had consistently looked to the biblical past, Crèvecoeur's farmer persona looks to the future.

Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790) shared Crèvecoeur's optimism. Unlike the Puritans, Franklin comprehended his life according to the operations of reason, the industriousness of the self, and the personal “errata” that interfere, as he describes it in the *Autobiography*. Franklin wrote the *Autobiography* as letters to his son at different times in his life (1771, 1784, and 1788), and he implicitly offers himself up for imitation—a self-made American man, the youngest son of a youngest son. As a young man Franklin read the skeptical works of the third Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713) and Anthony Collins (1676–1729), which led him to become a "real Doubter in many Points of our Religious Doctrine" (18). He subsequently published several treatises on deism: *A Dissertation on Liberty and Necessity, Pleasure and Pain* (1725), *Articles of Belief and Acts of Religion* (1728), and *On the Providence of God in the Government of the World* (1730). His *Articles of Belief* is an alternate liturgy that Franklin states he practiced alone instead of attending religious services. While agreeing that Sunday services were important, he found that preachers were engaged in polemics or the explication of dogma, rather than encouraging human beings to be better human beings.

Like Jonathan Edwards, Franklin also wrote a list of resolutions, from which he derived a "bold and arduous Project of arriving at moral Perfection." Edwards would have been scandalized at such a goal, and Franklin sought to practice thirteen secular virtues. While Edwards's resolutions were for "Christ's sake," as he states in his preface, Franklin's resolutions were for their own sake, as Franklin sought to become master of himself and shaper of his public persona. While Edwards confesses he is unable “to do anything without God's help," Franklin reasons that success is measured by the rational replacement of one habit with another. Throughout, Franklin makes himself the butt of jokes, and his attempt at moral perfection is no exception. Discouraged by his frequent failures, he relates a parable: A man came to the blacksmith wanting the whole of his axe to gleam as brightly as the edge. The smith tells the
man to turn the wheels of the grinder. The man soon becomes fatigued and concludes (like Franklin), “I think I like a speckled Ax best.” Franklin reasons that a man of moral perfection would be the object of scorn and envy. A man who conducts business with the world ought to be benevolent but not perfect, so as to “keep his Friends in Countenance.” In Franklin's world, the secular virtues celebrated by deism were second to utility.

The tenets of deism had rhetorical utility as well. As the Revolution unfolded, Thomas Paine (1737–1809) appealed to the deist God, the universal moral law, and the optimism in human rationality to justify the colonial break from Britain. In Part III of Common Sense (1776), he argues that America has long “made large sacrifices to superstition,” principal among them that Great Britain is a benevolent protector. For Paine, Britain's insistence on being the “mother country” amounts to a “low papistical design” to enslave thinking minds. Reconciliation with Britain is not plausible, argues Paine, who quotes John Milton's Satan in Paradise Lost: “For never can true reconcilement grow/ Where wounds of deadly hate have pierc'd so deep” (IV, 98–99). Britain's repeated violations of justice strike a chord against the “unextinguishable feelings for good and wise purposes” that the “Almighty hath implanted in us.” America's cause is therefore a universal human cause: the fight against tyranny. In “The Crisis, No. 1” (December 23,1776), Paine argues that God will not subject his people to destruction and tyranny if they have exhausted every means of avoiding war, nor has God “relinquished the government of the world, and given us up to the care of devils.” As Paine describes it, the colonies' struggle is universal; the resulting order accompanying the final break will reflect the larger divine government of the universe.

One of the clearest articulations of deist philosophy is Paine's treatise The Age of Reason (the first part published in 1794). The aim of the document is to separate rationally the superstitions and false theologies that have corrupted religion from the pure belief in one God, the duties owed to one's neighbor, and the moral principles that lead to a liberated mind. Paine ardently asserts that “[m]y own mind is my own church.” The state too often wields religion as an “engine of power” that “serves the purpose of despotism.” If something is to be believed, argues Paine, it must be universally acceptable through rational “proof and evidence.” Like Jefferson, Paine agrees that Jesus was an extraordinary man whose teachings are surpassed by none, but to believe in his divinity, the Virgin birth, or his Resurrection transgresses that empiricist rule. What can be universally trusted, however, is the theology to be found in the “scripture called the Creation,” which no person can alter or deny. The book of nature transcends culture and language and is independent of the whims of a single mind. In nature a person can discern the attributes of the Creator: intelligence, generosity, wisdom, immutability, and goodness. Christianity distorts this vision of the Creator and offers a God who acts “like a passionate man, that killed his son, when he could not revenge himself any other way.” For Paine, this is not a God worthy of praise. His rejection of Christian doctrine is offered upon the altar of universal reason and moral truth, and he ends the treatise hopeful that the free exchange of ideas in matters of religion and government will “powerfully prevail.”

Had they met, William Bradford and Thomas Paine may have viewed one another with contempt. They did, however, share the same convictions that America is destined to be the guarantor of the liberty of conscience and that it is chosen by God as a nation of exceptional people. Bradford's Puritan imagination and Paine's myth of American exceptionalism are
deeply ingrained, as the subsequent generations in American literature grapple with their legacy.

See also *African American Religion: Colonial Period through the Civil War; America: Religious Interpretations of; Anglicans in Colonial and Revolutionary America; Antinomian Controversy; Common Sense Realism; Deism; Enlightenment; Evangelicals: Colonial America; Great Awakening(s); Music: Christian; Popular Religion and Popular Culture: From the Colonial Period through the Civil War; Politics: Colonial Era; Presbyterians: Colonial; Puritans; Religious Thought: Reformed; Systematic Theology.*

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http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781608712427.n204
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