

# America's Legacy of Religious Liberty

## Pass It On

Unlike many countries around the world, the United States mandates full religious freedom in its Constitution. No government official or politician can tell you which faith to follow. That very personal decision is made by each individual. Without this right to worship as we see fit, Americans would not be truly a free people.

The constitutional principle that ensures religious liberty is the separation of church and state. The First Amendment says, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." That means simply that government cannot promote religion or interfere with its practice.

Although we sometimes take this vital right for granted today, visionary thinkers fought long and hard to win this freedom. Early American colonies made some denominations their official state religions, and those who dissented were jailed, exiled or even executed. We've come a long way since then.

After the American Revolution, our Founders created a government where true freedom of conscience was protected. It was Thomas Jefferson, our nation's third president and author of the Declaration of Independence, who said that the American people through the First Amendment have built a "wall of separation between church and state." James Madison, the fourth president and Father of the Constitution and Bill of Rights, joined Jefferson in fighting for religious liberty.

Nevertheless, Jefferson's wall – and the very concept of church-state separation – have become the subject of many misunderstandings over the years. Here are the facts: Separation of church and state is good for religion.

The United States is one of the most religious nations on earth. The overwhelming majority of Americans say they believe in God, and many attend worship services regularly. In contrast, in some European nations where religion still gets government support, interest in faith is falling, and many people no longer go to services.

**Who should decide when and how you pray?**

**Who should decide how much money you donate to religion?**

**Who should decide how often you attend worship services?**

Surveys of residents of Europe find declining belief in religion. In England, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and the Netherlands, fewer than 1 in 10 people attend religious services. Fifty-five percent of people in Sweden say God is not important to them. Yet many of these countries have government-established churches or had them until recently.

Compare those figures to the U.S. equivalents: Here, nearly 50 percent attend religious services regularly. Eighty-three percent say they have prayed within the past week; 95 percent believe in God.

It seems that the failure to separate church and state hurts religion. Why is that? Here's the answer: Freedom and competition are good for religion. When houses of worship are dependent on government for support, religion loses its vitality. In America, religious groups rely on voluntary contributions. This policy makes them more robust.

Church-state separation also guarantees the right of religious groups to speak out on issues of justice, ethics and morality. In countries where religion receives tax support, clergy usually are wary of criticizing the government. After all, they don't want to bite the hand that feeds them! Because religious groups in America are truly independent, they feel no such constraints. They are free to try to persuade other Americans toward their perspective.

Madison was well aware of this. In his home state of Virginia, Madison noted that severing the ties between religion and government increased interest in religion and made the citizenry more virtuous. In 1819, he wrote, "The number, the industry, and the morality of the priesthood and the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the church from the state."

Alexis de Tocqueville made a similar observation in his well-known book *Democracy in America*. Tocqueville, who traveled extensively in the United States in the early part of the 19th Century, noted that religion was much stronger in America than in Europe.

After talking with both ministers and church members of different faiths, Tocqueville reported, "[T]hey all attributed the peaceful dominion of religion in their country mainly to the separation of church and state. I do not hesitate to affirm that during my stay in America I did not meet a single individual, of the clergy or the laity, who was not of the same opinion on this point."

Tocqueville's view is not surprising. By guaranteeing the free exercise of faith and barring the establishment of religion, the First Amendment protects houses of worship

from government interference and places a premium on their independence.

In addition, because church-state separation prevents the government from taking sides in religious disputes, it creates a type of “religious free market” whereby various faiths are free to spread their views and win new converts.

Most American religious leaders appreciate the protections guaranteed by our Constitution. They have no desire to see any religion, including their own, favored by the government. Only a small – but vocal and well-organized – minority questions our heritage of religious liberty and campaigns to see their faith enshrined in law.

Separation of church and state is good for families.

Students may pray or read scripture at any time during the school day that the academic schedule permits, but the decision must be theirs. Schools may not sponsor devotional activities, but they are allowed to offer instruction about religion from an academic perspective. They may teach but not preach or usurp the rightful role of parents. The high court’s decisions about our schools have struck the right balance.

Thanks to the separation of church and state, you are in complete control of the religious upbringing of your children. Government institutions, including the public school system, are not permitted to coerce your children to adopt new and different religions.

Religious traditions differ on matters of doctrine and practice. Even among the different branches of Christianity, there are wide variations of belief. These are not meaningless distinctions. People take them very seriously. Due to the separation of church and state, the government remains neutral on these disputes. This gives you the right to decide which religious views you will adopt and which you will choose for your children.

Protecting youngsters from government coercion is one of the most important things the First Amendment does. In 1962 and ’63, the Supreme Court struck down mandatory worship in public schools. The court did not ban voluntary prayer and Bible reading or “kick God out of the schools,” as some mistakenly claim. Rather, it ruled that parents – not politicians, bureaucrats or school officials – have the right to make decisions about their children’s religious training. Why would we want to have it any other way?

Religion is alive and well in America’s public schools. The difference today is that it is voluntary religion. Student-run religious clubs meet on high school campuses outside class hours all over the country, but no youngster is compelled or pressured to attend. In fact, Charisma, a Christian magazine, reports that 10,000 Bible clubs meet in America’s schools. Public schools are not “religion-free” zones.

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Separation of church and state is good for taxpayers.

Many colonial-era Americans were strongly opposed to taxation to support government-favored churches. They vehemently resented being forced to turn over their hard-earned money to support religions whose doctrines they considered wrong or even dangerous.

Separation of church and state ended that unfair arrangement. Once the institutions of religion and government were separated, all houses of worship were set free to raise financial support through private donations, not coercion.

Today, this system means you get to decide how much money you contribute to religious groups. Unlike some countries, the United States no longer levies church taxes on anyone or compels financial support for religion. Our religious institutions have thrived under this arrangement, receiving an estimated \$81 billion in contributions annually.

Despite the generosity of the American people in supporting religion voluntarily, there have been occasional calls to require the taxpayer to fund religious endeavors. The American people have resisted this. Over the years, several states have held referenda on proposals to fund church-run schools and other religious institutions with public money. All have been voted down, usually by wide margins.

Separation of church and state is good for America.

Few countries have as much religious diversity as ours. One scholar of religion has estimated that 2,000 faith groups and denominations are active in America.

All of these traditions exist side by side and get along extraordinarily well. The United States has been spared the worst excesses of inter-religious conflict. The Balkans, Northern Ireland, the Middle East and other regions have been torn apart by religious violence that sometimes has gone on for centuries. Americans have been spared most of this tension, thanks to our wise policy of church-state separation.

Separation of church and state works so well that the principle has been celebrated by scholars and political leaders across the spectrum. Liberals and conservatives, Democrats, Republicans and Independents have hailed this vital concept.

One of the most powerful endorsements came from President John F. Kennedy, who in a 1960 speech remarked, “I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant or Jewish – where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source, where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.”

Sen. Barry Goldwater, a noted conservative Republican, also strongly backed church-state separation. In a 1994 essay, Goldwater wrote, “I am a conservative Republican, but I believe in democracy and the separation of church and state. The conservative movement is founded on the simple tenet that people have the right to live life as they please as long as they don’t hurt anyone else in the process.”

In a famous 1981 speech, Goldwater said, “By maintaining the separation of church and state, the United States has avoided the intolerance which has so divided the rest of the world with religious wars.... Can any of us refute the wisdom of Madison and the other framers? Can anyone look at the carnage in Iran, the bloodshed in Northern Ireland or the bombs bursting in Lebanon and yet question the dangers of injecting religious issues into the affairs of state?”

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The United States has a well-deserved reputation as a beacon for religious liberty around the world. Throughout our history, immigrants have come to our shores seeking the right to worship as they saw fit. Our nation’s policy of separation of church and state has ensured religious freedom and made our country a model for others to follow.

People of goodwill may disagree about some of the more contentious issues surrounding church-state separation. But there should be no argument about the value of the underlying principle. Jefferson’s wall of separation between religion and government should be celebrated; it is a bulwark of liberty. Religious freedom is one of America’s greatest legacies. We must ensure that our children and grandchildren enjoy it as well.