

Scott Douglass  
Professor Lambert  
History 302

## **The Founding Fathers and the Debate Over Religion and State**

Today many groups want the United States government to return to the principles of the country's founding fathers. What many groups are advocating is for the national government to include God's law and to govern America the way God wants it to be. But this is not what the founding fathers had in mind when establishing a new federal government in 1787. They wanted to establish a federal government that would not take a religious position and would not infringe on individuals' religious rights. James Madison, the father of the Constitution, believed that the only way for a "liberty-loving" society to function correctly was to ensure that the government would not infringe on citizen's religious freedoms, thus allowing society to get along.<sup>1</sup> We will examine the works of Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, Benjamin Franklin, and George Washington, and how they viewed religion and government. Also we will take a look at the Virginia State Constitution, Massachusetts' Constitution, and how these two documents were significant in the creation of the United States Constitution. But to understand why the founders believed in this separation we must go back to the 1600's in England.

In the 1600's the King of England established the Church of England, and the government ran the church. English monarchs were able to exert enormous control over the

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<sup>1</sup> Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (New York: Facts on File, 1996), vol. II 375-377.

church's teachings, polity, and practices. This upset many Protestants in England, and prompted many to leave England and begin establishing their own churches in the New World.<sup>2</sup> Roger Williams and William Penn were two individuals who wanted to protect religion from the government, so that the government could not corrupt religion.<sup>3</sup> Because of the events that had taken place in England the founders wanted to create a government that would allow the people to practice religion freely, without government interference.

Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence, believed that human rights such as; "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" was gifts from God. Jefferson, though still a Christian, would become anticlerical later in his life.<sup>4</sup> Jefferson thought for true religious liberty would require disestablishment and the free exercise of all religions. "The state", he insisted, "should give no special aid, support, privilege, or protection to any religion."<sup>5</sup> Later when Jefferson becomes president, he writes in a to the Danbury Baptists, who feared that their religious liberty could be violated by the nation government, Jefferson assured that their rights would not be infringed upon and that there is a "wall of separation" between the church and state.<sup>6</sup> But Jefferson would prove early that keeping religion separate from government works when he drafted a bill for Virginia's Constitution.

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<sup>2</sup> Professor Frank Lambert, "Religion in Europe" (lecture, History 302: Religion and American Society and Politics, August, 26, 2010).

<sup>3</sup> Bryan F. LeBeau, *Religion in America to 1865* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 79-103.

<sup>4</sup> Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History* (New York: Facts on File, 1996), vol. I 324-325.

<sup>5</sup> John Witte Jr., "Two Models of Religious Liberty." in *Religion and The New Republic: Faith in the Founding America*, ed. James H. Hutson (Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2000), 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Hutson, "A Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Nehemiah Dodge, Ephraim Robbins and Stephen S. Nelson" *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, last modified July 23, 2010. <http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/religion/religion.html>.

The debate over religion and state began in the 1750s when many Virginians severed their ties from the religious uniformity that the planters had cherished.<sup>7</sup> The two sides clashed over the state's proposed constitution. The planters proposed that a religious establishment should be in the constitution arguing that a "religious establishment in a State is conducive to its peace and happiness." Thomas Jefferson replied that "establishment was not necessary for religion to flourish." Pennsylvania, where there are multiple sects, exists through the voluntary financial support of its members.<sup>8</sup> This debate would last throughout the War of Independence, but soon after Virginians were ready to take up the issue again.

Jefferson believed that Virginia should adopt religious competition, because it would allow other religions to check other religions. He believed that since the war Americans are aware of tyrants, and goes on to say "It is true...we are as yet secured against them by the spirit of times. I doubt whether the people of this country would suffer an execution for heresy, or a three years imprisonment for not comprehending the mysteries of the Trinity." He argued that "the time for fixing every essential right on a legal basis is while our rules are honest, and ourselves united."<sup>9</sup> Soon Thomas Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom took center stage in Virginia's House. "Almighty God hath created the mind free," Jefferson wrote, "and manifested his supreme will that free it shall remain by making it altogether insusceptible of restraint; that all attempts to influence it by temporal punishments, or burdens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy

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<sup>7</sup> Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 226.

<sup>8</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 226-227.

<sup>9</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 230.

author of our religion.”<sup>10</sup> Jefferson discusses that history has shown that church and state leaders have tried to impose their religious practices onto the people. This in turn has not allowed the people to think freely, the way God intended for us to think. The bill itself states that “no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.” On December 17, 1785 Jefferson’s bill was passed by the House (Lambert, 2003).<sup>11</sup> Now we turn to John Adams, who had a different view than Jefferson on religion, and his influence on Massachusetts’ Constitution.

John Adams, a self-confessed “church going animal”, endorsed the belief that religion was fundamental in society. Adams thought religion played an important role in the live of American’s and without religion; society would not be able to function properly. In a letter on June 28, 1813 Adams wrote to Jefferson:

*“The general Principles, on which the Fathers Atchieved Independence, were the only Principles in which that beautiful Assembly of young Gentlemen could Unite . . . . And what were these general Principles? I answer, the general Principles of Christianity, in*

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<sup>10</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 233-234.

<sup>11</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 234-235.

*which all those Sects were United... that those general Principles of Christianity... are as unalterable as human Nature and our terrestrial, mundane System.”<sup>12</sup>*

Adams believed that religion had played a vital role in the development of the country and that religion has played a role in the development of the country’s government. Though Adams was a strong believer in religion playing a role in society, he embraced, however, “free exercise of religion as long as it did not disturb someone else’s free expression” (Lambert). Adams beliefs would end up being debated when he puts them to policy when he writes out part of Massachusetts’ Constitution.

It took two years for the people of Massachusetts to ratify the constitution, because of the debate over the religion clauses. The court adopted the first draft in 1778, but was rejected by the people. A revised version was ratified in 1780, but Separate Baptists protested against the bill. John Adams Composed Article 2 of the Declaration of Rights, which states:

“It is the right as well as the duty of all men in society, publicly, and stated season, to worship the Supreme Being, the great Creator and Preserver of the universe. And no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience, or for his religious profession or sentiments, provided he doth not disturb the public peace or obstruct other in their religious worship.”<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> James H. Hutson, “John Adams to Thomas Jefferson, April 19, 1817” *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*.

<sup>13</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 222.

This provision allowed people to express their religion freely, and would have satisfied the citizens of Massachusetts, but Article 3 gave the government the power to establish churches within the cities. Article 3 states:

As the happiness of a people and the good order and preservation of civil government essentially depend upon piety, religion, and morality, and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community but by the institution of the public worship of God and of public instructions in piety, religion, and morality: Therefore, To promote their happiness and to secure the good order and preservation of their government, the people of this commonwealth have a right to invest their legislature with power to authorize and require, and the legislature, shall, from time to time, authorize and require, the several town, parishes, precincts, and other bodies-politic or religious societies to make suitable provision, at their own expense, for the institution of public worship and for the support and maintenance of public Protestant teaches of piety, religion, and morality in all cases where such provisions shall not be made voluntarily.<sup>14</sup>

Articles 2 and 3 represent the two sides of the debate over religion and state relations. As you can see Article 2 is similar to Jefferson's bill in Virginia, and shows that the practice of religion should be up to the individual and not the state. But Article 3 was receiving the attention of those who wanted religious freedom. People like Isaac Backus, a Baptist and believer in religious freedom, fought hard against this provision, believing that government could "impose unacceptable demands" on to the people of Massachusetts. Regardless of the amount of people

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<sup>14</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 223.

who were against Article 3 the constitution was passed. Massachusetts Constitution would stand until ratified in 1833.<sup>15</sup>

James Madison, also known as the “Father of the Constitution”, believed that with the diversity of interest within the thirteen colonies that the country would be weak, and could fail.<sup>16</sup> But was later inspired by works of David Hume, Madison came to the conclusion that “a large area could actually promote republican government by preventing from dominating the whole.” In *Federalist* No. 10 Madison wrote “Extend the sphere and you take in a greater variety of parties and interests; you make it less probable that a majority of the whole will have a common motive to invade the rights of other citizens.”<sup>17</sup> This meant that instead of one religion domination over other religions, each religion will be no greater than another, allowing the country to unite under something other than religion, in this case freedom. What Madison mentioned in *Federalist* No. 10 would be the key factor into how the fathers drafted the United States Constitution.

The Founding Father struggled with the question of whether the United States should be organized around a single religion. Madison sought to prevent the nation government from supporting any particular religion.<sup>18</sup> The first question was the definition of church and state. The Founders did not want a strict interpretation of the phrase fearing that too narrow would make the document negative. They settled with the model used in Virginia, which refused to

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<sup>15</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 224-225.

<sup>16</sup> Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History*, vol. II 375-377.

<sup>17</sup> Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and Place of Religion in America*, 242.

<sup>18</sup> LeBeau, *Religion in America to 1865*, 79-103.

grant power to the government concerning religion. Though many feared with the absence of religion in the constitution, the federal government later would establish a nation religion, but Madison argues that the Constitution “delegated specific powers to the federal government, prohibition all others, including that of religious establishment.”<sup>19</sup> The Founders also tackled the issue of religious tests, which became a problem because some states have religious tests while others do not, this lead to debates on whether to include in the Constitution an article prohibiting religious tests. The Constitutional Convention would incorporate this provision into Article 6 of the Constitution, which prohibits religious tests as a qualification for federal office holders. When the Constitution was ratified and given to the states to ratify, many Americans were disappointed that a bill of rights was not included to guarantee rights to the citizens and that the government would not infringe upon. James Madison drafted and presented the Bill of Rights to the First Federal Congress. Congress voted to send the bill to the states to be ratified, and overall twelve amendments were passed, but only ten was ratified by the states.<sup>20</sup> In regards to religion the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." The Constitution allows citizens to practice their own religion freely without government interference. The Constitution also ends the debate on whether or not the government could establish a nation religion, because the First Amendment prohibits that kind of action.

During the Constitution Convention delegates from both the large and small states argued over representation in the new government. Benjamin Franklin gave a speech asking the

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<sup>19</sup> LeBeau, *Religion in America to 1865*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> James H. Hutson, “Religion and The Bill of Rights” *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*.

convention to allow prayer before every meeting. In his speech Franklin believes that “God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without his notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without his aid?” Franklin thought that if they asked God for guidance then God would help the convention draft a constitution to start a new government. But Franklin’s motion failed because the Convention had no funds to pay local clergymen to act as chaplains.<sup>21</sup> The Convention believe as well that if word is to get out on that they are praying to God for help, then the people would find it hard to trust the delegates at getting things accomplished.

George Washington, the nation’s first president, was a firm believer in religion and its importance in American society. On October 3, 1789 Washington asked for the 26<sup>th</sup> day of November to do be a day to give thanks to God.<sup>22</sup> “Whereas it is the duty of all nations to acknowledge the providence of Almighty God, to obey His will, to be grateful for His benefits, and humbly to implore His protection and favor...” In Washington’s Farewell Address, Washington address the importance of religion in society, “Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports...It is substantially true that virtue or morality is a necessary spring of popular government.” Washington believed that religion and morality is the foundation of American society. But while in office, Washington believed that church and state should and ought to be separate. In a letter from Washington to the Jews of Newport, Rode Island, Washington affirms that the federal

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<sup>21</sup> James H. Hutson, “Religion And The Constitution” *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*.

<sup>22</sup> “George Washington, Proclamation: A National Thanksgiving, 3 October 1789” *The Founders’ Constitution*, The University of Chicago Press, Volume 5, Amendment I (Religion), Document 54, [http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI\\_religions54.html](http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions54.html).

government would not infringe on the rights of citizens to express their view on religion freely and that the government would not establish a nation church.<sup>23</sup>

After looking at works from men such as; Jefferson, Adams, Madison, Franklin, and Washington, we can see that though these men were religious, when it came to the issue of religion and government relations the founders believed that both should be separate. To reiterate what Madison stated, he believed that the only way for a “liberty-loving” society to function correctly was to ensure that the government would not infringe on citizen’s religious freedoms, thus allowing society to get along.<sup>24</sup> The founders kept the government from establishing a national religion, because history has shown, the Church of England, that when church and state leaders have tried to impose their religious practices onto the people, it has negative effects on its people. We can say that the debate over the countries Founding Fathers and their view on religion and state relations disproves those who argue that the fathers wanted God to be considered in government.

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<sup>23</sup> James H. Hutson, “The Rhetorical Support of Religion: Washington and Adams” *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*.

<sup>24</sup> Edward L. Queen II, Stephen R. Prothero, and Gardiner H. Shattuck Jr., *The Encyclopedia of American Religious History*, vol. II 375-377.

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