

5—Religion in America

Issues:

1. Most religious settlers of colonial America protected the practice of their own faith, without extending similar protections to other faiths. Tolerance was limited and liberty was constrained in most of the colonies through a tax-supported established church and limits on religious dissent. New faiths and the Revolutionary War weakened religious establishment, but some states maintained established churches well after the Constitution was ratified.
2. Article VI of the constitution forbade any religious test for office. The First Amendment strongly endorsed religious liberty by its “free exercise” clause, subject to the limits of judicial interpretation. (For example, late 19th century Supreme Court rulings on Mormon polygamy outlined the limits of “free exercise” in America.) The First Amendment’s “establishment of religion” clause ruled out a national religion but sent a more ambiguous signal about churches in the states. After 1947, the Supreme Court interpreted this clause to require “a wall of separation” between church and state at all levels of government.
3. Religion’s place in American culture and politics is distinctive in the modern world.

Student Outcomes:

1. Students will understand the limits of religious freedom in America before the Revolution and Constitution. They will be able to describe and evaluate various arguments for religious liberty (such as Williams, Madison, Jefferson).
2. Students will understand the difference between “toleration” and “religious liberty” and how the latter has been implemented in an increasingly diverse American society.
3. Students will understand the meaning of the last clause of Article VI (“no religious Test”) and the two religion clauses in the First Amendment—the “establishment” and “free exercise” clauses.
4. Students will understand how religious practice in America compares to that of other developed democracies.
5. Students will understand the persistent role of religious symbolism in an increasingly secular and pluralistic American society.

Note: First day’s readings: pages 1-9; second day’s readings: pages 10-11.

Students should come to class prepared to teach the other students in the class what they have learned through preparing for the class and be able to provide evidence to support their ideas.

Religious Foundations

Some definitions that may help with your understanding of colonial religious terminology:

Protestants—basically any group or person that had protested against Catholic Church doctrine or practice and had then broken away from the Catholic Church. **The Church of England**—the official, established, church in England. It was protestant in that the church itself had broken away from the Catholic Church, but some saw it as a political rather than a religious protest. The king of England became in a sense the new pope of the Church of England replacing the old pope of the Catholic Church. **Puritans**—members of the Church of England who sought to purify the Church of England from the remnants of Catholic doctrine. Puritans were generally persecuted in England for their beliefs but since their goals were to purify and not to destroy, the sect was legally recognized. Thousands of Puritans came to America seeking the religious freedom to purify the Church of England from without by example. **Pilgrims**—a group of separatists or protestants from the Church of England. This group was persecuted and illegal in England because it sought to be separate from the Church of England. William Bradford of Plymouth Colony was probably the most famous Pilgrim. Only a few hundred of these immigrated to America but their religious influence far exceeded their numbers. **Quakers**—a Protestant sect that was persecuted and illegal in England. William Penn, the founder of Pennsylvania was probably the most famous Quaker in America. His Pennsylvania colony allowed more religious freedom than many of the other colonies. **Catholics**—illegal and persecuted in England but Lord Baltimore, because of service to the King, was given a land grant in America that became Maryland.

In colonial America, religion was a major motivating factor in peoples' lives and significantly influenced the development of political ideas. It would be impossible to understand the development of American politics and culture without understanding the role religion played in the lives of the early colonists and how religion influenced the principles and political theories which became the basis of the American Revolution.

British colonization in the Americas corresponded in time with the great religious debate in England between Catholicism and Protestantism. Although there were some Catholic and Jewish colonists in British North America, the colonists were, for the most part, Protestants who in one way or another had "protested" the doctrines and practices of the Catholic Church. Because of the role their religious ideas had played in bringing them to North America they were naturally "most adverse to all implicit submission of mind and opinion." Although all Protestantism harbored a spirit of dissent, some have argued that those Protestants who came to North America may have been more protestant than those who remained behind. Religious "oppression" formed the second greatest motivating force (second only to economic oppression) in encouraging British colonists to migrate to North America.

Because of the important role religion played in the migration process, most of the colonists saw themselves as **deeply committed Christians**. There was piety (spirituality) and church-going in abundance. Pilgrims and Puritans in New England prayed, read scriptures, and attended religious services on a daily basis. In those Puritan communities it was difficult to tell where religious life ended and social and economic life began. Religion was tied up in what being a community meant. And the most religious tended to be the civic leaders of the community. William Bradford was governor of Plymouth Colony for over thirty years.

Throughout the colonies there was tremendous **diversity of Protestant sects and churches**. Despite the diversity, however, in many of the colonies there was an official, **established church**. In Massachusetts and other New England colonies the Congregational (Puritan) Church was the established church. In Virginia the Church of England (Anglican) was the established church. Where these established churches existed, they had the ability to compel worship through civil law and financial support through taxation. Church membership in the "established church" was necessary for voting and holding public office. Men like Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, and John Adams had to be members of the established church in order to participate in the political process in their respective colonies.

There were a few colonies where religious ideology was less restrictive. Pennsylvania, originally set up as a haven for Quakers, and Maryland, originally established by a prominent Catholic family, allowed for more religious freedom; as did Rhode Island when it was eventually settled by dissenters from what they

saw as restrictive Puritan ideology. Roger Williams and Anne Hutchinson were two of the most famous of these dissenters from Puritanism.

As time went on, even in those colonies with established religions, there were those considered to be “dissenters.” By the mid-1700s even dissenters were seen as a normal and accepted part of the community and enjoyed significant freedom of worship and expression. By the 1770s, while it might not have been legal to build a Baptist church in Williamsburg, Virginia, Baptists could legally preach from the street corners. For many Americans, the obvious contradiction between establishments of religion and true Christian liberty strengthened their commitment to the idea of freedom of religion. And freedom of religious conscience came to be seen as a natural right.

This movement toward religious freedom developed throughout the revolutionary period. In 1776 the principle of established churches was attacked in **Virginia** where a long struggle led by Thomas Jefferson and James Madison culminated in the adoption of a **Statute of Religious Liberty** granting complete religious freedom to all people in the state. Virginia’s example was imitated by other southern states whose ties with the Church of England ended after the Revolutionary War and the **American Episcopal Church** was organized in the states between 1784 and 1789.

The **Congregational Church** (what the Puritans became after independence) in New England lost some of its privileges over time as well. But the Congregational Church was not disestablished in Connecticut until 1818, and in Massachusetts it retained its established status until 1830.

Other denominations reorganized themselves and assumed independent status from the English/European churches after Independence. The Methodist Episcopal Church of America (formerly Church of England) was organized independently in 1784 and the Presbyterian Church of the United States in 1785-1788. Even the Catholic Church granted American clergy the right to choose their own bishops (1788).

Freedom of Worship was expanded for Catholics and Jews, although anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism remained serious problems. There is no question that the move toward religious freedom in the colonies both inspired and was inspired by the move toward political freedom from England.

1. What were the general religious characteristics of the American colonies?

**Why is it that those who came to North America for religious freedom for themselves seemed so willing to create “established” churches in the colonies where they settled?
In what significant ways did “establishments of religion” affect the development of revolutionary thought in the colonies?**

As mentioned above, Puritanism was initially very dedicated to “purifying” the Church of England from its residual “catholic” doctrines. Therefore purification became the Puritan sense of mission to create a “city set upon a hill,” as John Winthrop called it, which could act as a “light upon the hill,” or beacon, to others in the Church of England seeking pure religion.

They were so committed to this sense of religious mission that as each new group of Puritan settlers arrived in North America, they came together on board their ships and wrote up a covenant with each other to create the perfect religious community. This covenant theology formed the basis of what would become established churches, it also contributed to the religious inflexibility that resulted in the famous “witch trial” experience and several hangings of dissenters, but their covenant theology also created a strong spirit of self-determination that helped them to be successful as a colony religiously, economically, and politically. In fact, some have argued that it was in their success that the seeds of greater religious freedom were eventually sown. As settlements grew, through immigration and natural increase, they spread out geographically, thus requiring more churches to be built and ministers to be chosen. This led to a certain amount of declining spirituality and increasing religious diversity within the Puritan ideology.

During the revolutionary period Puritan ministers and their congregations became overwhelming supporters of independence. Because of their quest for independence they became less interested in purifying the Church of England religiously, but Puritans became just as committed to creating a perfect community in terms of economic and political liberty. Economically this dedication came to be referred to as the Puritan work ethic and politically American liberty became another way of purifying the world from the evils of tyranny, or a new sense of mission

“Something like the city upon a hill seems to have been in the back of patriots’ minds in the 1770s, when they resisted the Stamp Act, cast the tea into Boston Harbor, and opened fire on Lexington Green. It was reflected again in the determination of the Philadelphia delegates to push ahead with their task of writing a constitution in spite of daunting difficulties. It may have been on Henry David Thoreau’s mind a generation later when he wrote about living deliberately, and was remembered by Ralph Waldo Emerson when he wrote about self-reliance. It explains the willingness of Grant’s Federal troops to charge the Confederate fortifications at Cold Harbor, knowing in advance that most of them would be killed. It helps us to understand America’s participation in the war against Hitler and National Socialist tyranny, and our nation’s determination to stop Soviet communism at all costs.”¹

2. How does Puritanism (the Congregational Church), as the established church in many of the New England colonies, exemplify how religious ideas influenced the development of political ideas.

In the first half of the 18th Century, because of the increasing number of dissenters, geographic expansion, growing economic interests, and/or the passing the older generation of settlers, colonial clergy worried about declining religious piety among the colonists. The result was a religious revival movement known as the **First Great Awakening** in the 1720s-1740s. The First Great Awakening was a general Protestant movement and a general spirit of religious renewal and revival. Though there was little spirit of competition between religious sects, there was a sharing and mixing of religious sentiments among all Protestant faiths. The movement did rekindle and strengthen religious values, commitments and sentiments among many of the colonists. It also strengthened the colonists’ sense of unity as Protestants.

At the same time the movement created a greater religious diversity and religious toleration. It strengthened and multiplied protestant religious sects like the Baptists, it gave lay people more control over the churches, and it inspired the creation of new religious colleges like Princeton, Brown, Rutgers, and Dartmouth. It also **strengthened the protestant spirit of liberty** and helped to create a revolutionary atmosphere that was ripe for political and social dissent. It fostered an analysis and discussion of religious principles, it encouraged public debate, and it made political dissent even more acceptable.

3. What was the nature of the First Great Awakening in the American colonies? What were some significant religious and political results of the First Great Awakening?

Case 1: Limits on Religious Freedom in Colonial America

If I were unorthodox in my beliefs, where would I want to settle in 1750? Religious freedom was fragile in most of the American colonies. In 9 of the 13 colonies, laws established one church as the official church, using tax dollars to support its buildings and clerics. How would you expect those laws to affect religious life in the colony?

Even when there wasn’t an official established church, various laws might restrict religious freedom, either by limiting religious competition (“dissent”) or by linking civil rights (such as office-holding) to religious faith. As you look at the chart on the next pages, answer the following questions:

1. Which colonies had the most and the least religious freedom?
2. What would be more troubling—an established church, or limits on civil rights or religious expression?
3. How is “toleration” different from “free exercise” as a way of protecting religious freedom? What difference would it make how tough the laws were against “untolerated” churches?
4. Which belief systems were most disadvantaged by the laws?
5. If the laws were on the books but rarely enforced, would it matter that they existed in writing?
6. Think of the best arguments you can make (a) in favor of such laws; and (b) against such laws.

¹ Frank W. Fox and Clayne L. Pope, *City Upon and Hill: The Legacy of America’s Founding* (Provo: BYU Academic Publishing, 2007), 25-26.

Religious Establishment and Other Limits in the American Colonies

Colony	Established church? (date ended)	Religious test to vote or hold public office?	Room for free exercise (toleration of dissent)?
Rhode Island	No	Protestants (till 1789)	Tolerate all
Massachusetts	Congregational (1833)	Congregationalists (till 1665); anti-Catholic oaths (1691-1820)	Limits on Baptists (till 1682) and Quakers (till 1665); tolerate all Christians except Catholics (1691-1778)
Connecticut	Congregational (1818)	Congregationalist Governor (17 th c.); anti-Catholic oaths (1662-1818)	Limits on Quakers (1656-1675 & 1702-1705) and Catholics (1668-1687); tolerate all except Catholics (1689-1818)
New Hampshire	Congregational (1819)	Anti-Catholic oaths (1682-1777); only Christians (1777-1784)	Tolerate all except Catholics (1680-1784)
Delaware	No	Christians (1701-1792); Catholics excluded as representatives (1734-1776)	Tolerate all who profess one almighty God (1701-1706); all Christians (1706-1776)
Pennsylvania	No	No Catholic officers (1689-1776); only professing Christians (1701-1776); Christian legislators (1776-1786)	Tolerate all who profess one almighty God (1682-1706); not Catholics (1692-1700); tolerate Trinitarian Christians (1706-1776)
New Jersey	No	Christian officers (1693-1702); anti-Catholic oaths (1702-1776)	Tolerate all except Catholics (1702-1776)
New York	Dutch Reformed (local, 1664); Anglican (local, 1777)	Anti-Catholic oaths (1689-1777); no Catholic votes (1701-1777); no Jewish votes (1737-1777)	Tolerate all Christians (1665-1686); all except Catholics (1689-1777)
Maryland	Anglican (1776)	No Catholic officers (1689-1776); no Catholic votes (1718-1776)	Tolerate all Christians except those denying Trinity or divine Sonship of Christ (1658-1687); tolerate all except Catholics (1703-1776)
Virginia	Anglican (1776)	No Catholic officers (1641-1776); no Catholic votes (1699-1776); no non-Christian, atheist, non-trinitarian officers (1699-1776)	Limits on Catholics (1609-1679); nonconformists (1642-1679); Quakers (1658-1679); tolerate all except Catholics (1690-1776)
North Carolina	Anglican (1776)	Anti-Catholic oaths (1715-1776)	Tolerate all Christians except Catholics (1715-1776)
South Carolina	Anglican (1778)	Professing Christians (1721-1759); Protestants (1759-1778)	Tolerate all theists (1669-1697); tolerate all except Catholics (1697-1778)
Georgia	Anglican (1776)	No Catholic officers (1689-1776) or votes (1718-1776)	Tolerate all except Catholics (1732-1777)

Adapted from Ralph E. Pyle and James D. Davidson, "Legal Status of Religions in Colonial America," Table 1 in "The Origins of Religious Stratification in Colonial America," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 42 (2003), 66-68.

Religion, Politics, and the Meaning of Religious Freedom

Given the prominent role religion played in the lives of colonists in British North America there is little wonder that religious ideas both mirrored and influenced their political thinking.

“I must not forget to mention religion, both in rulers and people, as of the highest importance to the public. This is the most sacred principle that can dwell in the human breast. It is of the highest importance to men, —the most perfective of the human soul. The truths of the gospel are the most pure, its motives the most noble and animating, and its comforts the most supporting to the mind. The importance of religion to civil society and government is great indeed, as it keeps alive the best sense of moral obligation. . . . The fear and reverence of God and the terrors of eternity are the most powerful restraints upon the minds of men; and hence it is of special importance in a free government, the spirit of which being always friendly to the sacred rights of conscience, it will hold up the gospel as the great rule of faith and practice. . . . Let the restraints of religion once be broken down, . . . and we might well defy all human wisdom and power to support and preserve order and government in the state. Human conduct and character can never be better formed than upon the principles of our holy religion; they give the justest sense, the most adequate views, of the duties between rulers and people, and are the best principles in the world to carry the ruler through the duties of his station. . . . (Phillips Payson, “A Sermon,” Boston, 1778.)

“As religion has a manifest tendency to promote the temporal as well as eternal interests of mankind, it is the duty of rulers to give . . . support to religion that is consistent with liberty of conscience. . . .

“In [tyrannies], where the power is lodged in the hands of one, or a few, the [government] may be maintained, tho’ the people are grossly ignorant and corrupt, because they have no concern in the affairs of government. They are governed by brutal force, and are mere machines which move only as they are moved by an exterior power; but in free governments, where all supplies originate with the people, and the authority delegated by them to their rulers is revocable at their pleasure, it is essential to existence and to the public welfare that people should be virtuous, and entertain just ideas of the relation and mutual obligations between them and their rulers, and the common interest they have in the good of their country. . . .”(Samuel McClintock, “A Sermon on Occasion of the Commencement of the New-Hampshire Constitution,” Portsmouth, 1784.

“Let it simply be asked, ‘Where is the security for property, for reputation, for life, if the sense of religious obligation desert the oaths, which are the instruments of investigation in Courts of Justice?’ And let us with caution indulge the supposition, that morality can be maintained without religion.—Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on the minds of particular structure—reason and experience both forbid us to expect, that national morality can prevail in the exclusion of religious principles.” George Washington, Farwell Address, 1796.

“All persons possessing any portion of power ought to be strongly and awfully impressed with an idea that they act in trust: and that they are to account for their conduct in that trust to the one great Master, Author, and Founder of society. . . . Power to be legitimate must be according to that eternal, immutable law, in which will and reason are the same.” Edmund Burke.

“We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion. Avarice, ambition, revenge or gallantry would break the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net. Our Constitution is designed only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate for any other.” John Adams.

4. How did Americans understand the relationship of religion to government? How did the colonists’ religious experience influence their developing political attitudes?

Despite the prominent role that religion played in the colonies, and maybe because of it, in the years before, during, and after the Revolutionary period America was heading toward greater religious freedom. As mentioned earlier some states began to eliminate established churches and freedom of religious conscience had risen to the level of a natural right. It is not surprising, therefore, that Thomas Jefferson’s writings on religious freedom should come out of this atmosphere. Of all of Thomas Jefferson’s

accomplishments his writing of the “Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom” was one of the three, along with the “Declaration of Independence” and the architectural design for the University of Virginia, of what he considered to be his greatest accomplishments. The date for this document is 1779, which is after the Declaration of Independence but before the end of the Revolutionary War and certainly before the writing of the Constitution. Carefully consider the role such a document would have on developing religious thought in America.

“Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom”

Section I

Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free, 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 burthens, or by civil incapacitations, tend only to beget habits of hypocrisy and meanness, and are a departure from the plan of the holy author of our religion, who being lord both of body and mind, yet chose not to propagate it by coercions on either, as was in his Almighty power to do, but to extend it by its influence on reason alone; that the impious presumption of legislators and rulers, civil as well as ecclesiastical, who, being themselves but fallible and uninspired men, have assumed dominion over the faith of others, setting up their own opinions and modes of thinking as the only true and infallible, and as such endeavoring to impose them on others, hath established and maintained false religions over the greatest part of the world and through all time: That to compel a man to furnish contributions of money for the propagation of opinions which he disbelieves and abhors, is sinful and tyrannical; that even the forcing him to support this or that teacher of his own religious persuasion, is depriving him of the comfortable liberty of giving his contributions to the particular pastor whose morals he would make his pattern, and whose powers he feels most persuasive to righteousness; and is withdrawing from the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind; that our civil rights have no dependance on our religious opinions, any more than our opinions in physics or geometry; that therefore the proscribing any citizen as unworthy the public confidence by laying upon him an incapacity of being called to offices of trust and emolument, unless he profess or renounce this or that religious opinion, is depriving him injuriously of those privileges and advantages to which, in common with his fellow citizens, he has a natural right; that it tends also to corrupt the principles of that very religion it is meant to encourage, by bribing, with a monopoly of worldly honours and emoluments, those who will externally profess and conform to it; that though indeed these are criminal who do not withstand such temptation, yet neither are those innocent who lay the bait in their way; that the opinions of men are not the object of civil government, nor under its jurisdiction; that to suffer the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession or propagation of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous falacy, which at once destroys all religious liberty, because he being of course judge of that tendency will make his opinions the rule of judgment, and approve or condemn the sentiments of others only as they shall square with or differ from his own; that it is time enough for the rightful purposes of civil government for its officers to interfere when principles break out into overt acts against peace and good order; and finally, that truth is great and will prevail if left to herself; that she is the proper and sufficient antagonist to error, and has nothing to fear from the conflict unless by human interposition disarmed of her natural weapons, free argument and debate; errors ceasing to be dangerous when it is permitted freely to contradict them.

Section II.

We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact 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 the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

Section III.

And though we well know that this Assembly, elected by the people for the ordinary purposes of legislation only, have no power to restrain the acts of succeeding Assemblies, constituted with powers equal to our own, and that therefore to declare this act irrevocable would be of no effect in law; yet we are free to declare, and do declare, that the rights hereby asserted are of the natural rights of mankind, and that if any act shall be hereafter passed to repeal the present or to narrow its operation, such act will be an infringement of natural right.

5. Given what you now know about the religious conditions in colonial America, why do you think Jefferson would have felt compelled to write such a document? What have been and are the legacies of Jefferson’s “Statute” on religious thinking in America?

Composing the First Amendment

Religion goes virtually unmentioned in the Constitution. The last clause of Article 6 does prohibit any religious test for office, and some reformers read significance into the clause in Article 1 section 7 that Sunday is not counted as a business day for the president’s return of a bill to Congress.² Otherwise, it is essentially a “godless” constitution. But the states insisted on amendments to secure rights—including religious freedom—and the very first lines of the very first amendment deal with this freedom.

The First Amendment is one of the most influential statements about the rights of Americans, and the meaning of its opening lines--the religion clauses--has long been debated. These two clauses emerged out of a complicated set of discussions and negotiations in 1789. Then, as now, not everyone agreed with the meaning of words, and your own religious principles may influence your outlook in some degree. One scholar has described the challenge of figuring out the intent of the framers of the First Amendment this way: “It is immensely complicated; the records are skimpy; disputants with entrenched polemical positions from later centuries swarm over every inch of the territory; and the provisions that came out of the legislative meatgrinder . . . included an unusually opaque phrase: ‘respecting an establishment of religion’” (Miller, *The First Liberty* [2003], 119).

The First Amendment emerged from proposals discussed in a committee of eleven in the House, a committee in the Senate, and then a conference committee of the House and Senate.

As ratified, the First Amendment reads as follows:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

6. As you look at that language, consider how it would appear to a state with and without an established church (e.g. Connecticut had an established church, Pennsylvania did not). What reaction would you expect from a representative of each state? If you had an established church in your state, would you endorse the language?

Current judicial interpretation of these religious phrases in the First Amendment focuses on the idea that the government needs to be protected from the undue influence of religion. Therefore

² “The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.”

there should be a “wall of separation” between religion and government. For this reason the U.S. Supreme Court in “Engle v Vitale (1962)” stopped the New York Board of Education from mandating the use of a non-denominational prayer in state classrooms, and in “Murray v Curlett (1963)” abolished prayer and bible reading in public classrooms completely. Others disagree with this interpretation and argue that the First Amendment was really designed to do two things: first to protect individuals from the influence of government in their exercise of freedom of conscience; and second, to protect individuals and church from the persecution of an “established” church. As you are probably aware this is a hotly debated issue, and one in which a middle-ground is difficult to find.³

7. What do you think is the meaning of the two phrases, “establishment of religion” and “prohibiting the free exercise thereof”?

[End of first day’s readings.]

³ Other possible sources to consult: John Quincy Adams, “Trinity Decision,” U.S. Supreme Court, 1892; Thomas Jefferson, Letter to Danbury, CT, on Religious Freedom. There is a plethora of information on this topic available on the internet but be advised that it is highly polemical and passionate.

Religion in Modern America

Religion is an issue that has, and continues to, played a major role in the American experience. The following three excerpts give examples of that role. Can you identify where the excerpts come from? How are the phrases used and why do you think they were included?

“When, in the course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume, among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal; that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; that among these, are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

We, therefore, . . . appealing to the Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions And, for the support of this declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our lives, our fortunes, and our sacred honor.”

“One day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight; "and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together.

This is our hope, and this is the faith that I go back to the South with.

With this faith, we will be able to hew out of the mountain of despair a stone of hope.”

“The Almighty has his own purposes. “Woe unto the world because of offences! for it must needs be that offences come; but woe to that man by whom the offence cometh.” If we shall suppose that American slavery is one of those offences which, in the providence of God, must needs come, but which, having continued through His appointed time, He now wills to remove, and that He gives to both North and South this terrible war, as the woe due to those by whom the offence came, shall we discern therein any departure from those divine attributes which the believers in a Living God always ascribe to Him? Fondly do we hope--fervently do we pray--that this mighty scourge of war may speedily pass away. Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

With malice toward none; with charity for all; with firmness in the right, as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in; to bind up the nation's wounds; to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan--to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace, among ourselves, and with all nations.”

8. How to these quotes demonstrate the important role of Religion in American society today?

In 1810, Congress required postmasters to sort and deliver any mail that arrived at their post office on Sundays. At the time there were 2,300 post offices across the young republic. Over the next several years, many Americans (most of them evangelical Protestants by faith) protested the federal government’s intrusion on local Sunday laws—the Federal Postal Service was the only public institution operating on the Sabbath. Americans needed a sacred day to preserve family ties and community restraint, they argued, which connected to other reform causes, such as temperance. Despite their protests, the law stood. To suspend mail traffic on Sunday would drive up costs, and national security and national commerce required that information flow across the whole country as quickly as possible; suspending Sunday delivery would put producers and merchants further from ports at a disadvantage.

In the late 1820s, evangelical reform groups renewed their call for Sunday to be restored as a day of rest, free from government or commercial intrusion. By 1828, America had 7,651 post offices, and the mileage of postal roads had tripled from 1810—Sunday transportation and delivery of mail was routine.

Using America's rapidly expanding transportation and communication network, reformers launched a nationwide effort to promote better Sabbath observance. In New York, ministers and others formed a national, multi-denominational reform association, the "General Union for the Promotion of the Christian Sabbath." Through this organization and others, activists continued to lobby Congress to repeal Sunday mail delivery, sending hundreds of petitions to the Capitol, and arguing that Sunday mail violated postmasters' right to free exercise of religious belief. In effect, Congress had imposed a religious test that disqualified some men of conscience from public service. Reformers also called on private citizens to honor the Sabbath, and lobbied local governments to enforce regulations on Sabbath activity. In response, some people organized "anti-Sabbatarian" societies and denounced religious "combinations" against liberties.

In 1829, Congressman Samuel McKean of Pennsylvania stated that Sunday transportation of mail was vital to the open flow of information needed for free government and free enterprise. He believed, however, that Sunday delivery was not so vital, and he recommended that Congress change that part of the law. But Senator Richard Johnson of Kentucky, chair of the Committee on the Post Office and the Post Roads, issued two reports (actually ghost-written by a Baptist minister) that rejected any changes to Sunday mail delivery. Besides the economic case for transportation and delivery, he said that if Congress yielded to the reformers, it would step beyond civil authority, settling a religious question about which day is the Sabbath or what a day of rest should mean. He also wrote of the danger of religious organizations in politics, suggesting that their efforts had led to "religious despotism" in other countries. He then used Congress' franking privileges to distribute his views nationwide. Although reformers disputed his argument, Sunday mail delivery remained in place.

From 1841-1921, some 71 bills were introduced in Congress in regards to life and commerce on Sunday, only 4 of which passed. Yet in 1912, a coalition of postal clerks and religious clerics successfully persuaded Congress to end Sunday mail delivery. Telegraphic communication provided nearly instant transmission of information across markets and jurisdictions, and machine power had changed transportation networks. Religious reformers and organized labor both sought to protect workers' weekends. Today, local laws that regulated transport, commerce, or recreation on Sunday are all but forgotten, and business goes forward unimpeded seven days a week. Yet the US Postal Service delivers no mail on Sunday today.

In 2005, a coalition of residents in Cedar Hills, Utah called for a special election to decide some local matters, including Sunday closure of stores within the city limits. After a heated campaign, the measure was defeated by 63% to 37% of voters. An opponent of the Sunday closing measure said that the vote showed that "Cedar Hills values diversity and choice," while another opponent and city council member said that local initiative failed because it "felt like they are legislating and enforcing LDS religious practices on everyone in the community." What do you think of the local initiative and the response of its critics? What is your position? Why? How would you respond to the other side? See, Marin Decker, "Cedar Hills votes for diversity," *Deseret Morning News*, 29 June 2005

9. How do these two examples demonstrate the continuing debate over religion in America? What do you think are the positives and negatives of these positions? What are the implications for America?

For further insights into religion in American today, check out the following website for current information on religion in America. <http://religions.pewforum.org>

10. What are the religious tensions in modern America? What are the popular religious images that are familiar in America? What role does religion play in modern America? Why would Americans rate themselves as "religious" more than people in any other country? What would it mean to say that America is both religious and "profane."

[NB: Some of the material herein may be the work of Gary Marshall and Eric Walz. Marshall's content may appear in a forthcoming publication.]