

3: Religion in American Public Life: The Founding to the Pre-Civil War

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In the more than two-and-a-quarter centuries since America declared its independence from England, the nation's philosophy of governance and its views toward religion have changed significantly. As a result, while the basic premises set forth in the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights are still espoused, they are interpreted today in ways that are vastly different from how they were when first adopted.

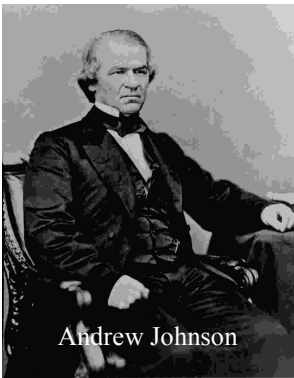
In 1776, the Declaration of Independence was signed by men who believed in God, His Divine Providence, and the Creator's authority over men and nations. They publicly placed their reliance on God and felt He would intervene in their struggle for freedom if their cause was just. Christianity and a deep knowledge of the Bible shaped the political and social philosophies of these early Americans, and gave them a common set of moral principles. All of the Christian sects in America, with the exception of Catholics, were products of the Reformation and had roots in the teachings of John Calvin. As these men were of many religious denominations and were familiar with the problems inherent in a national church, they left the role and support of religion in public life to the individual States.

Under the Articles of Confederation, the States retained their sovereignty and independence, and entered into a "league of friendship with each other, for their common defense, the security of their liberties, and their mutual and general welfare." While freedom to worship existed, there still was discrimination in some States, particularly against Catholics, even though there probably were not more than 20,000 Catholics at the time of Independence in the overall population of 5,000,000. Maryland, which was founded by the Catholics George and Cecil Calvert for religious toleration, prohibited Catholics from holding public office as early as 1691 and did not remove a religious test until after the Civil War.

In 1789, "We the People of the United States" adopted the Constitution, and two years later ten Amendments known as the Bill of Rights, as a means for organizing a government under which the people could operate. Again, Calvinistic beliefs came into play. As the nation's leaders distrusted the concept of long-term office holders because of the weakness of human nature, they created a federal government with limited and clearly delineated powers. They established checks and balances at the federal level, and left any powers not delegated to the central government to the States and to the people. Freedom of assembly, speech and religion were important issues. Since these basic liberties were not mentioned in the Constitution, they were reserved for the States to guarantee. But there was a concern that, since they were unmentioned, the power of the federal government could in time infringe upon them. Therefore, these freedoms were addressed in the Bill of Rights, the first Amendment of which specifies that the "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the

free exercise thereof.” This was the beginning of federalism, in which power was shared among the federal government, the States and the people.

Religion was very much a part of public life, as people believed that only a virtuous citizenry could sustain a democratic form of government. Thomas Jefferson allowed the use of government buildings for religious services on Sundays. Jefferson, and Madison who succeeded him, regularly attended church services in the House of Representatives. This practice continued until after the Civil War. Jefferson considered this acceptable as the services were voluntary and nondiscriminatory – preachers of every Protestant denomination participated, and even Catholic priests began officiating in 1826.



There was no wall of separation between state and church, as the First Amendment was viewed as pertaining to the federal government, not the states. Decades after that Amendment was adopted, states continued to promote established churches. It was not until 1818 that Connecticut disestablished the Congregational Church and guaranteed religious freedom, and as late as 1832 Massachusetts still supported churches through taxes. The profession of Christianity was dominant, even though it took the form of many Protestant sects. It was so accepted that President Andrew Johnson could say: “Let us look forward to the time when we can take the flag of our country and nail it below the Cross, and there let it wave as it waved in the olden times, and let us gather around it and inscribed for our motto: ‘Liberty and Union, one and inseparable, now and forever,’ and exclaim, Christ first, our country next!”

Immigration began to increase significantly in the 1840s and 1850s, expanding the population eight-fold from the founding until the Civil War. Large numbers of Catholics emigrated primarily from Ireland because of a severe famine in the late 1840s, as well as from France, and Germany. With them came their priests. The large influx of immigrants resulted in an intense backlash of anti-Catholic feeling. American nativists, steeped in the residue of the Protestant Reformation, viewed Catholic Europe as undemocratic and the Pope as a tyrannical despot. Although religious freedom was guaranteed, Protestants developed political strategies designed to stiffen immigration laws and exclude Catholics and foreigners from public office. As a result, Catholics settled in enclaves within a militant Protestant society, which strengthened their devotion and loyalty to their Church. The First Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1852 laid the foundations for a strong parish life. Catholicism began to grow, and by sheer numbers, Catholics began to have an influence on the country.