

One Nation Under God or One Nation Without God



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Question with boldness even the existence of God; because if there be one, He must approve the homage of Reason rather than that of blindfolded Fear.

—Thomas Jefferson

Is the United States a nation under God, or a nation without God? Debate continues to this day over the influence of religion in government. With the appropriate historical context in mind, the fact that the separation of church and state provides everyone with freedom and equality and that the “founding fathers” of our nation had this in mind becomes undeniably evident. The American “founding fathers” could refer to anyone who had a key place in establishing the country for what it is today but that would have to include “every signer of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States—indeed, every governor and every member of every ratifying state legislature.”¹ Here the term is used to address the key figures whose great minds shaped the fundamental ideas from which this country was founded upon. Specifically, the term is used throughout this paper to refer to Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, James Madison, and Thomas Paine. From the beginning, the “founding fathers” intended not to keep religion strictly out of government, nor to establish the United States as a Christian nation, but to preserve equality and protect the individual liberties of all people regardless of their religious beliefs, ethnic background, or political persuasion.

The concept of separation between church and state is officially established in the founding documents of the United States. Article IV section 3 of the U.S. Constitution reads, “No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.”² This is meant to keep people from being put into office, or not put into office, based on their religion. The First Amendment in the Bill of Rights begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”³ This explicitly marks what has come to be known through the courts as the “wall of separation” between church and state. These two documents upon which the country was directly

1 Norman Cousins, *In God We Trust* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 2

2 Constitution of the United States, http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/constitution_transcript.html

3 Bill of Rights, http://www.archives.gov/national-archives-experience/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html

founded give no mention of any God. Surely, there must be some danger in allowing government and religion to mix, and the authors of these documents were conscious of it.

Advocates and opponents of the separation between church and state have become intensely polarized in their conflicting views. One side says the other is hostile to religion, while the opposite says that the other is intractable to it.⁴ Each side feels that they are losing and the issue becomes even more polarized. Both sides try to pin the “founding fathers” and documents of the nation as supporting their own views, when the issue is not for or against any particular religion, but rather about religious freedom. Religiously motivated revisionists attempt to reinterpret the constitutional history of our nation, recast our collective history, and produce a myth of an Evangelical Christian foundation by putting a lot of time, energy, and money into pursuing their agenda.⁵ Those who want religion entirely removed from government, and those who want religion tightly woven into government, both fail to understand how separation of church and state exists to protect their own freedom of, as well as from, religion. Devoutly religious and adamantly nonreligious people alike have the First Amendment to thank for their freedom to practice and hold to their own beliefs. It is essential to consider the historical context of the issue to genuinely understand the “founding fathers” true intentions and to see the importance of keeping church and state separate.

Dispute continues between these two polar groups often without the necessary historical context behind the separation. To be able to better analyze and understand the founding documents, it is important to view the issue with the appropriate context from the time of the “founding fathers.” At the time of the nation's founding, church and state indeed were not separate. States did sponsor their own churches, but it was realized by the founders of the country, that religion in the colonies, nonuniform as

4 A conversation with Jon Meacham, *One Nation Under God? In Good Faith and Good Will*, American History Vol. 42, No. 1 (April 2007), 32-39

5 Gregory W. Hamilton, *Religious Pluralism and America's Christian Nation Debate*, Liberty: Magazine of Religious Freedom (Sept./Oct. 2007), 8

it was, “was becoming so pluralized that an establishment of religion could mean little more than public financial support and preference for one 'denomination' of Christians.”⁶ Not only were there the major differences in religion regionally, but there were also the differences within those regions. Everyone was from different groups with different religious backgrounds, experiences, and outlooks. They all belonged to different divisions and subdivisions, branches and subbranches of religions. There was no way to unite everyone under one church, so it was decided that churches would no longer be government funded.⁷ This religious plurality actually provided strength, not weakness. It was pointed out by various individuals like Jefferson that “what was true for America politically was true in the reverse spiritually. In politics it was: United we stand, divided we fall. In religion: Divided we stand, united we fall.”⁸

The “founding fathers” did not want the country to operate under the control or direct influence of a religion. They understood the problems associated with a theocracy. The country was founded with the intention of securing freedom for all individuals in their beliefs, practices, thoughts, and words. They knew that religious freedom was necessary to protect people from church legislation against dissenters and an inevitable contest for power between different denominations. The freedom not to worship is necessary because if government controlled this, then it could soon control how and where worship would be. This would be unacceptable even to many religious people. The “founding fathers” simply could not approve of a federal church.

American settlers made their journey under the impression that they were leaving behind the tyrannies in Europe, but Colonial America had almost all of the very same forms of persecution. The Bill of Rights was put in place specifically for the purpose of putting an end to that. One example is in

6 John E. Wilson & Donald L. Drakeman, *Church and State in American History* (Colorado: Westview Press, 2003), 37

7 Jacoby, 31

8 Cousins, 6

Puritan Massachusetts, Quakers were banished and those who stayed or returned were killed.⁹ Our constitutional freedoms are just as much a result of the religious monopolies and oppression here, as that in Europe.

Leading up to, and some time after the founding of the nation was a period marked by propagating nonreligious freethought and religious dissent.¹⁰ The church reacted to the dissemination of secular ideas just like it did the Enlightenment. Consequently, there was a huge religious push to regain ground. From 1850-1906, spending for the construction of churches tripled.¹¹ The colonies had a dynamic culture and only 5% of Americans had formal ties to a church or synagogue in 1790 compared to 43% in 1910.¹² The “founding fathers” were products of this time of spreading freethought. They were the Enlightenment thinkers of their time.

On the polar opposites of this debate are those who believe that the “founding fathers” were evangelicals and those who believe that they were atheists. Neither are correct. None of the “founding fathers” were evangelicals or atheists. They were deists and freethinkers. Most of them may have considered themselves Christian, as most people of the time did, but that only meant that they valued some aspects of Christianity and believed in the importance of Jesus Christ just as those who were only considered deists at the time did. It was understood in a literal sense, and did not mean that they were very religious people in the dogmatic sense.

The forefathers varied on how religious they were. Thomas Paine was very anti-religious and had very much to say about it, although he was a deist. Benjamin Franklin valued virtue above all else, but did believe that religion had a lot to do with virtue. John Adams was religious, but he was a Unitarian Universalist. Thomas Jefferson was truly a freethinker. He did not blindly follow religion and

9 Cousins, 11

10 Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: a history of American secularism* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004), 14

11 Jacoby, 151

12 Jacoby, 151

was actually skeptical of it. As a whole, they all opposed creed-based dogmatic religion.

In response to Britain's repeal of an old law that made it a crime to deny the existence of the Holy Trinity, John Adams wrote the following in a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1813.

We can never be so certain of any Prophecy, or the fulfillment of any Prophecy; or of any miracle, or the design of any miracle as We are, from the revelation of nature i.e. nature's God that two and two are equal to four. Miracles or Prophecies might frighten us to say that We believe that 2 and 2 make 5. But We should not believe it. We should know the contrary.¹³

Here he says that religion can lie and therefore we should not put religion above reason. This is why government and religion cannot operate together. It would be too dangerous. The potential for the government to become corrupt and take advantage of people's faith is too great.

Both James Madison and Thomas Jefferson opposed a proposal by Reverend Jasper Adams for the government to sponsor Christianity.¹⁴ The United States was intended to be free for all people, regardless of culture, ethnicity, language, or religion. An exceptional quote by Thomas Jefferson to the Virginia baptists in 1808 gives a good idea of how he saw the issue.

Because religious belief, or non-belief, is such an important part of every person's life, freedom of religion affects every individual. State churches that use government power to support themselves and force their views on persons of other faiths undermine all our civil rights. Moreover, state support of the church tends to make the clergy unresponsive to the people and leads to corruption within religion. Erecting the "wall of separation between church and state," therefore, is absolutely essential in a free society. We have solved ... the great and interesting question whether freedom of religion is compatible with order in government and obedience to the laws. And we have experienced the quiet as well as the comfort which results from leaving every one to profess freely and openly those principles of religion which are the inductions of his own reason and the serious convictions of his own inquiries.¹⁵

This raises excellent points about church and state. Churches should not need government power to support themselves and could easily take advantage of that power, were it given to them, to force their views on people. History holds much proof of that. The separation of church and state is a necessary protection of an individual's freedom to believe in and practice their own religious or non-religious

13 Jacoby, 13

14 Hamilton, 8

15 Freethoughtpedia, *Was the United States founded on Christianity?* (January 2008)

beliefs. Notable people throughout American history, including very religious persons, have explained this.

Roger Williams was an English theologian who believed strongly in his religious views as well as the separation of church and state. His belief was that each person should have the freedom to chose their own beliefs and that people should be individual believers, not followers of those who hold the power in society.¹⁶ As religious as he was, he knew that religion was not something to be forced upon people and that true religion was embraced by people of their own free will.

President Abraham Lincoln was presented with a petition for a Christian government and he, as well as Congress, denied taking any action to Christianize the Constitution, and Congress would continue to essentially waive the proposal year after year.¹⁷ It was simply much too controversial and was bound to lead to dividing the people. He was trying to restore peace and order after the Civil War and the last thing he needed was more divisive fighting over the passionate feelings held about religion.

President John F. Kennedy, the only practicing Roman Catholic to ever be elected president, said the following in one of his remarks on church and state.

I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute—where no Catholic prelate would tell the President (should he be a Catholic) how to act and no Protestant minister would tell his parishioners for whom to vote—where no church or church school is granted any public funds or political preference—and where no man is denied public office merely because his religion differs from the President who might appoint him or the people who might elect him.¹⁸

The underlying message in his words is that religion should not be a concern of government and people should not be put into office based on their beliefs. The United States government is a secular institution that serves to maintain order in society, not to impose morals, through legislation. Laws are

16 Glenn W. LaFantasie, *One Nation Under God? Liberty for the Soul*, American History, Vol. 42, No. 1 (April 2007), 22-29

17 Jacoby, 106

18 Wilson et al, 189

passed for the purpose of governing people in a changing society and officials are put into office for making the best decisions for their role. Religious beliefs are not relevant to one's ability to do that job.

Much of the argument today is based on the Christian majority, but a Christian majority does not make a Christian nation. The United States is a free nation and a nation of equality. What would a Christian nation mean for all those Americans who are not Christian? Are they really any less American because of their religious beliefs? Reverend John Leland, a “hell-fire preaching colonial Baptist from Virginia” wrote that “the notion of a Christian commonwealth should be exploded forever.”¹⁹ He argued that,

*Government should protect every man in thinking and speaking freely, and see that one does not abuse another. The liberty I contend for is more than toleration. The very idea of toleration is despicable; it supposes that some have a preeminence above the rest to grant indulgence, whereas all should be equally free, Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians.*²⁰

His point was that people of all religion should be more than just “tolerated.” Toleration only means that they are accepted, in the weakest meaning of the word, but they should all be equals. This, alongside freedom, is what the separation of church and state provides-- equality.

Without the separation of church and state, the state could corrupt the church, as feared by Roger Williams, or the church could corrupt the state, as feared by Thomas Jefferson.²¹ Separation between church and state, as outlined in “*Patterns of Church-State Relations*” by John Coleman Bennett, gives three important protections: freedom of the church from state, freedom of the state from church control, and church independence.²²

19 Hamilton, 8+

20 Hamilton, 8+

21 Wilson et al, 172

22 Wilson et al, 180

“Equal and exact justice to all men, of whatever state or persuasion, religious or political; peace, commerce, and honest friendship with all nations, entangling alliances with none; ... freedom of religion,” are all principals of the United States outlined by Thomas Jefferson in his first inaugural address in March of 1801.²³ Separation of church and state exists to protect those principals for the benefit of everyone and that was the intention of the “founding fathers.” The United States is neither a nation under God, nor a nation without one, but a nation of liberty and equality.

²³ Thomas Jefferson, *First Inaugural Address*, (March, 1801)

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