Religious Freedom in Early America

Have you ever looked closely at the words on the back of a one-dollar bill? You may have noticed the phrase "In God we Trust" printed in the center!

What about the words in the U.S. Pledge of Allegiance? Have you thought to yourself what it means when we say we are "One Nation Under God?"

Faith and religious freedom are at the heart of our American identity and our shared American history. These two terms – faith and religious freedom – are distinct from one another but are closely connected. Faith is what you believe. Religious freedom is your right – that comes from God – to express what you believe, such as through prayer, worship, or sermon.

People need religious freedom to fully participate in their faith. Imagine being a Christian and not being allowed to read the Bible or attend church. You would still have your faith, but it would be much harder to practice it – and doing so may even be dangerous. Sadly, there are many countries in the world with governments that prohibit religious believers from worshiping freely.

The United States of America was founded on the fact that all of our rights as human beings come from God and cannot be taken away by any other human. One of our nation's founders, Alexander Hamilton, described these rights as being "written as with a sun beam, in the whole volume of human nature, by the hand of divinity itself; and can never be erased or obscured by mortal power."[1]

The Declaration of Independence said that the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God" gave the colonists the authority to declare independence from England. This is because God is the ultimate ruler – higher than any person and any government. For America's founders, faith and religious freedom were the foundation, the cornerstone, and the basis of all of our other individual freedoms. This is why religious freedom is often called "America's first freedom."

Part of what makes America unique is the importance of faith and religious freedom in our nation's founding. But the centrality of faith and religious freedom to life in America started before 1776. In this lesson, we'll learn about the role of religion in the American colonies.

Many of America's earliest settlers fled England and came to the New World in search of religious freedom. Consider that in 1620, more than 100 Pilgrims boarded the Mayflower and

made the difficult, more than two-month-long journey across the Atlantic Ocean. At this time, British citizens were required to support the Church of England or else face punishment and persecution.

The Pilgrims wanted to break off and start their own church, but because they weren't allowed to worship freely in England, they had to go somewhere else. So, they came to the New World and settled in New England.

Beginning in 1630, as many as 20,000 Puritans followed in the Pilgrims' footsteps and fled England for the ability to worship freely in a new home. The majority settled in New England. Unlike the Pilgrims, the Puritans didn't want to break off from the Church of England – they wanted to reform and purify the church.

One of the Puritans who came to New England was named John Winthrop. In 1630, just before departing for the New World or while aboard his ship, Winthrop gave a sermon called "A Model of Christian Charity."

Speaking to the colonists he was leading to embark on their new lives in the New World, Winthrop said, "For we must consider that we shall be as a city upon a hill. The eyes of all people are upon us."[2]

This was inspired by Matthew 5:14-15, which reads, "Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick, and it giveth light unto all that are in the house."[3]

Winthrop's sermon was a call to be an example to the world of what a community founded on faith and moral values could be. This idea would form the foundation of what we now know as "American exceptionalism," the notion that the United States is an example to all the world of how a nation founded upon freedom and God-given rights for all can prosper and thrive.

Pilgrims and Puritans were just two of the religious groups that made up the early American colonies. (Note: when Puritans came to the colonies, they were also known as Congregationalists.) The vast majority of settlers in the New World were various Christian denominations, creating a diverse fabric of religious beliefs.

Pilgrims and Puritans (Congregationalists) were Protestants, a type of Christianity. These two faiths had branched or broken off from Anglicanism, the Church of England. [Editor's note: Pilgrims were more radical and broke off from the Church of England, while Puritans thought they could reform the Church from within.[4]] The Church of England had broken off from the Catholic Church. The Church of England was created in the 1530s by King Henry VIII because

he refused to follow the rules of the Catholic Church and the Pope. He installed himself as the new ruler of the Church.

Here's a simple diagram to sum it up:

Catholics ⟶ Angelicans ⟶ Puritans (Congregationalists)/Pilgrims

Throughout the 17th century, Anglicans and Congregationalists were the primary denominations.

In Virginia, the oldest of America's 13 colonies, the Church of England was the established church.[5] It was officially made the colony's religion by the House of Burgesses in 1619. Church attendance was mandatory for Virginians, and those who weren't church members had to pay taxes to support the Church.[6][7]

As mentioned, Puritans established the New England colonies, most notably the Massachusetts Bay Colony, where John Winthrop served as governor. There were strict rules, regulations, and punishments in the Puritan colonies. Church members were also the only ones allowed to hold political office. The church and the government in the New England Puritan colonies were closely intertwined.[8]

Religion was an important part of the culture by the 18th century, and many thought that there would be peace and order if everyone were of the same religious denomination.

[Editor's note: Alan Taylor, professor of history at the University of Virginia, said the colonies were dominated by the "conviction that there will be more social peace and a better moral order if everyone goes to the same church."[9]]

But as the colonists and America's founders came to find out, religious freedom — rather than uniformity — was the surest path to peace and prosperity.

Throughout history, people haven't always had the freedom to speak, worship, or profess their religious beliefs as they wanted. In fact, if you were to take the time to study the thousands of years of human history, you would find that almost never have men been left free when it comes to how they choose to worship or express their religious ideas. We Americans are unique.

The First Amendment states: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."[10] This means the government can't say that a particular religion, faith, or church is the official church of our nation. So, people are free to

worship in any way they see fit, in accordance with their conscience. They can share their religious beliefs with anyone they want, go to the church of their choice, and pray openly.

[Editor's note: Unfortunately, many people mistakenly believe this means public officials cannot express their religious beliefs, nor can religious organizations have political opinions. In reality, the First Amendment is a negative right, a right that limits government action. In each case, it is the government's role to defend us from those who would interfere with our exercise of these rights and deprive us of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.]

The right to worship freely was so important to America's Founding Fathers that religious freedom is the first freedom listed in the First Amendment! It is named before the freedom of speech, freedom of the press, the freedom to assemble, and the freedom to petition the government. Religious freedom is often called America's first freedom. This isn't just because it was listed first, but also because it is the foundation of all other freedoms. A person's faith determines what they say, how they think, what they do, and how they act. Without the ability to worship freely, none of the other freedoms are complete!

But how did the founders come to view the importance of religious freedom in this way?

If you remember, John Winthrop, a key Puritan leader, gave a famous sermon in 1630 called *A Model of Christian Charity*. In this sermon, he told the people of the Massachusetts Bay Colony that they would be "a city upon a hill," meaning that their colony would be watched by the rest of the world as a shining example of Christian values. He based this idea on a verse from the Bible, Matthew 5:14-15, which says that followers of Christ should be "a light unto the world." Winthrop believed that their community would serve as a model of righteousness and morality, guiding others by their example.

However, Winthrop's vision for a united and harmonious Puritan colony was not realized. While the Puritans started out with a shared sense of purpose, they soon faced problems due to differences in religious beliefs. The Puritans valued strict religious unity, but not everyone agreed with their way of practicing Christianity, and these disagreements led to divisions. One of the biggest challenges to the Puritan vision came from people who disagreed with the colony's religious rules. For example, Anne Hutchinson, a woman who questioned the teachings of Puritan ministers, was banished from Massachusetts for heresy. Roger Williams, another Puritan minister, disagreed with the way the colony mixed religion with government. Williams was also exiled and went on to found Rhode Island, a colony that became known for its tolerance of different religious beliefs.

Consider Connecticut, which was settled by Puritans from both Massachusetts and England. Puritan settlers in Connecticut sought to create religiously "pure" communities with a close

connection between church and state, especially under the leadership of Thomas Hooker in Hartford. While more tolerant than Massachusetts, Connecticut still persecuted Baptists. They faced fines, imprisonment, and harassment for holding unauthorized meetings or preaching outside Puritan norms, though the severity was less than in Massachusetts.

At the same time, other colonies formed with their own religious identities. Maryland was established as a safe haven for Catholics when it was founded by Cecil Calvert in 1632. Pennsylvania, founded by William Penn in 1681, became a home for Quakers, a Christian group that believed in pacifism, equality, and a personal connection with God. Penn's colony was founded on the idea of religious freedom, allowing people of different faiths to live together peacefully.

In the southern colonies, religious tensions also affected the development of the colonies. In Georgia, for example, the Anglican Church was dominant, and Catholics were banned for many years. Other religions, including Judaism, faced discrimination in the colonies because some political offices required a declaration of Christian faith. This reflected the distrust between denominations, with each group wanting to keep its own beliefs separate from others. In this way, religion in colonial America was often a source of conflict, even though all the groups were still part of the broader Christian tradition.

So, for our nation's founders, such as James Madison, who wrote the Bill of Rights to the Constitution, and Thomas Jefferson, who wrote the Declaration of Independence, religious freedom wasn't just an abstract idea—it was a very real, ongoing issue.

Jefferson and Madison were deeply influenced by the ideas of religious toleration supported by the British philosopher John Locke. As fellow Virginians, they worked together to champion this cause. Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom became a foundational document that laid the groundwork for Madison's later creation of the First Amendment, which enshrined religious freedom at the national level.

Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom became a key model for protecting religious freedom. Written in 1777 and passed by the Virginia government in 1786, it boldly stated that the "General Assembly," also called the Legislative body, recognized "that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinion in matters of religion."[11] Jefferson knew that for many people—of all faiths—being able to freely practice their religion is a key part of their pursuit of happiness.

Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which protected personal religious choices from government interference, was revolutionary. It established the principle that individuals—not the state—are the primary holders of certain rights, particularly when it comes to matters of

conscience and faith. So much so, that the United States Supreme Court claimed Jefferson's Statute for Religious Freedom "defined" religious liberty and "the true distinction between what properly belongs to the church and what to the State." [12]

James Madison, a fellow Virginian, also championed religious freedom. He fought very hard to get Jefferson's Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom passed while Jefferson was an ambassador to France. After Madison got Jefferson's law passed, he wrote a letter to Jefferson, saying, "I flatter myself have in this Country extinguished for ever the ambitious hope of making laws for the human mind." [13]

The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom laid the foundation for both religious liberty and the freedom of conscience, fundamental pillars of a free society, and cornerstones of the United States.

[Editor's Note: Jefferson's demand for strict separation and religious freedom does not mean that he was irreligious. In fact, this accusation irritated Jefferson. He explains this in his letter to Margaret Bayard Smith, August 6, 1816.[14]]

Footnotes

1. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Hamilton/01-01-02-0057
2. https://minio.la.utexas.edu/webeditor-files/coretexts/pdf/163020model20of20christian20charity.pdf
3. https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Matthew%205%3A13-15&version=KJ21
4. https://www.history.com/news/pilgrims-puritans-differences
5. https://encyclopediavirginia.org/entries/church-of-england-in-virginia/
6. https://www.history.com/news/religion-13-colonies-america
7. https://education.nationalgeographic.org/resource/gods-mosaic/
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9. https://www.history.com/news/religion-13-colonies-america
10. Ibid.
11. https://www.monticello.org/research-education/thomas-jefferson-encyclopedia/virginia-statute-religious-freedom/
12. https://tile.loc.gov/storage-services/service/ll/usrep/usrep098/usrep098145/usrep098145.pdf
13. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0249
14. https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/03-10-02-0186