
The Separation of Church and State: A Great Religious Revolution!

**A sermon by the Very Rev. Sam Candler
Celebrating Independence Day in the United States of America**

I love it, and I laugh, when am I am asked to speak at any kind of Thanksgiving service in the United States, when our country remembers such occasions as the early Pilgrims landing at Plymouth Rock. I am an Episcopal priest, part of the beautiful and broad Anglican tradition of Christianity. Those early pilgrims were fleeing the Anglican Church, the Church of England! They were trying to be rid of the Episcopalians!

But, when asked, I speak anyway; because, two hundred and fifty years ago, this country, the United States of America, started a religious revolution that might be more important than the actual War of Independence. The religious revolution our country started is what we now call the principle of the separation of church and state. A state without an established religion was unprecedented in the Western World at the time. The separation of church and state was a new thing two hundred and fifty years ago, and it has benefitted both church and state. The principle has allowed the state to flourish, and the principle has allowed the church to flourish! I thank God for the separation of church and state!

Let me quickly rehearse the facts, the history, which I have preaching for over forty years now. I am not making this up, just to chime in on the present situation of our country. When European settlers gathered in this new world four and five centuries ago, their religious sentiments became the drivers of their division. It was unthinkable that any state, or colony, could exist without some accompanying established religion. Thus, every new state or colony in the New World, perpetuated the same religious divisions and clashes that they brought with them from the Old World.

Roman Catholicism was the first western religion to reach the New World. Recall, however, the antagonism between Roman Catholics and Protestants, since the Reformation of the 16th century! The religious establishment in countries was that of the king. Whatever religion the king was, was the religion of the realm. ("Cuius regio, eius religio").

The Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay colonies were founded by groups expressly hostile to the Church of England, the established religion. The genius of Queen Elizabeth's reign in England had been to foster an Anglican Church that was certainly Protestant but which also retained much of the tradition of Roman Catholicism. But the extreme Puritans continued to claim that she, and her successors, were not Protestant enough.

Thus, the Puritans of Massachusetts fled the Anglican Church. They stressed conversion; and a credible testimony was required before one could join the church – and society. Church and state were meant to be a unified whole. Further, the Plymouth and Massachusetts Bay Colonies prohibited the presence of the Church of England.

Down in Jamestown, of course, established in 1607, the Church of England was the established religion! Virginia's earliest legal code made attendance at Sunday services compulsory. Taxes supported the local Anglican Church and paid the local ministers. In Virginia, one could vote only if one were an Anglican. The Church of England would be the major church in Virginia, the Carolinas, and Georgia.

South Carolina would actually become a bit more progressive. There, the Church of England would be the

established church in the colony, but religious freedom would be given to anyone who believed in God, like the Quakers and the Huguenots. But, here is a shock: Jews would be welcome, since all that was required was belief in God, but Roman Catholics would not be recognized!

That is too bad about the Roman Catholics, because a rather tolerant Roman Catholicism had found a healthy foothold in Maryland. George Calvert, Lord Baltimore, named the land for the Roman Catholic queen of the Protestant king. The queen's name was Maria Henrietta of France. Remember, then, that Maryland is not named for the Virgin Mary, but for Queen Maria Henrietta! Maryland, however, had lots of Protestants.

Roger Williams, the Baptist, began his ministry in the Puritan colonies, but the Puritans did not like Roger Williams. He was preaching a strict separation of church and state; thus, he was banished from Plymouth and from Salem. In 1639, Roger Williams helped form the first Baptist Church in the new world, in Rhode Island.

Meanwhile, other denominations were settling in the new world. Presbyterians were coming over from Scotland and Ireland. New York was strictly a Dutch Reformed colony. But they resented the Quakers, who therefore, went to Southern New Jersey, Delaware, and, of course, to Pennsylvania. George Washington could tolerate the Roman Catholics, but not the Quakers – who professed pacifism (Washington feared that they were Tory). Later, of course, the Methodists would split off from Episcopalians.

In 1776, two-thirds of the signers of the Declaration of Independence were Anglican, at least nominally, like George Washington. Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, the rationalists, claimed, that “we are teaching the world the great truth that Governments do better without Kings and Nobles, than with them. The merit will be doubled by the other lesson that Religion flourishes in greater purity, without the aid of Government.”

Yes, there were certainly grievous sins. Native Americans were being forced off their homeland and into reservations. And, yes, the entire new country's economy benefitted from the slave trade (slavery was not just a “southern thing”). Many of the new world's citizens came here voluntarily, but the ancestors of American blacks came involuntarily. The slave trade, too, was often justified in the name of religion. It is one of the great miracles of religion that African-Americans actually found a source of salvation within the white man's religion; they took the story of slavery in Egypt, the Exodus, the flight to freedom and into the promised land -- and they made it theirs. Such is the way of God. God tends not to let salvation be confined to only the powerful few.

The United States, then, has had its share of violent and oppressive history, often justified by religion. But something new happened in this country, for which I give gracious thanks. The founders of our country figured out a way to separate church and state in a way that gave enormous freedom to each.

Martin Marty, the church historian, calls the principle of the separation of church and state as large a revolution as was the War of Independence: “The statesmen founders of the United States... set out to convince churchly citizens that religion was larger than their own sects. ...They sundered what both tribal and church-minded people had kept bound together of thousands of years. No shots were fired, but in their own ways these achievements amounted to an American revolution as much as did the War of Independence.” (Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, p. 155).

By the time of the American Revolution and the Declaration of Independence, Americans knew first-hand what religious *intolerance* was like. They knew what happened when a colony or state or a country tried to impose its own particular brand of Christianity on its people. Such behavior did not lead to liberty, freedom, and independence. It led to dissension, oppression, and even death.

Part of the great American experiment, promulgated with the Declaration of Independence and in the United States Constitution, was the *dis*-establishment of religion. No one religion, or one group's form of religion, would be the standard of government in this new land. Religious tolerance would be the rule and basis for this country's freedom and independence.

In fact, this decision was a beautiful one, for it allowed the brilliant diversity of American religion to flourish. As a Christian in this country, as an Episcopalian in this country, I give thanks today for the separation of church and state, a separation which allows religion to be truly free. This spirit of religious toleration is the same spirit which allows Americans from all sorts of other countries to celebrate their cultural heritages *without ceasing to be American*. I even believe that some cultures who have had their lives damaged in this nation, cultures such as the Native American or the African American help heal that damage by their ability to celebrate heritage. This is our country's genius. It is a religious revolution in world history, the separation of church and state. Thanks be to God!

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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