

James Madison on the Separation of Church and State

It's not unusual to witness discussions on the topic of whether or not the United States was founded "[as a Christian nation](#)." (Or, worded slightly differently, whether or not America [had a Christian founding](#).)

The answer to this question depends largely on semantics. On one hand, the Founding Fathers were overwhelmingly Christian and built a constitutional framework that would allow states (whose powers were "[numerous and indefinite](#)") to determine to what degree religion and government might intermingle. On the other hand, they were highly influenced by Enlightenment thinkers and explicitly prohibited the federal government from establishing a religion.

It's also worth noting that James Madison, the father of the Constitution, was a staunch and vociferous advocate of keeping government and religion separate. In fact, Madison once went to war with fellow Virginian Patrick Henry on the issue.

In 1784 Henry, perceiving what he regarded as a decline in moral virtue, was pushing a bill he had sponsored in the state's House of Delegates that would require Virginians to pay for a Christian congregation of their own choosing. Similar religious taxes (or "general assessment schemes") [had been implemented](#) in Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New Hampshire.

Madison, who as a 25-year-old lawmaker had seen his "free exercise" formula added to [Virginia's Declaration of Rights](#) (see Section 16), wasted no time in attacking Henry's bill (both directly and indirectly).

When Madison's initial efforts to derail Henry's bill failed, he maneuvered to have Henry kicked upstairs to the seat of governor. With Henry out of the legislature, Madison went to work.

What followed, writes historian Kevin R.C. Gutzman, author of [James Madison and the Making of America](#), was "the first truly popular statewide political campaign in Virginia history."

This included Madison's (anonymous) publication of [Memorial Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments](#), a document Gutzman calls "perhaps the finest arguments for religious freedom ever penned in America."

In the text, Madison methodically presents the case as to why Virginians should not be compelled to finance Christianity. It includes barrages such as this:

During almost fifteen centuries has the legal establishment of Christianity been on trial. What have been its fruits? More or less in all places, pride and indolence in the Clergy, ignorance and servility in the laity, in both, superstition, bigotry and persecution. Enquire of the Teachers of Christianity for the ages in which it appeared in its greatest lustre; those of every sect, point to the ages prior to its incorporation with Civil policy.

Henry, a learned man and arguably Virginia's most popular statesman, proved no match for Madison, arguably the most effective politician of his day. Henry's bill was defeated, and the General Assembly eventually adopted Thomas Jefferson's Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom, which was [signed into law in 1786](#).

Madison would go on to see language similar to his "free exercise" formula adopted in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, which was ratified by the states in 1791. (His proposal to preclude states from infringing upon the religious

liberties of the people was defeated, however.)

Twenty years later, as president of the United States, Madison would veto a bill designed to incorporate an Episcopal parish in the nation's capital on grounds that it violated the establishment clause of the First Amendment. A bill that would have given land to Baptists in Mississippi was vetoed on similar grounds.

[Thomas Paine](#) may have been the most strident and outspoken of the Founding Fathers when it came to religious freedom, but it was Madison who was the most effective.

As Gutzman writes: "Madison is more responsible than anyone else for the fact that in America, no one is taxed to pay for a church building, no one is forced by the government to wear a yarmulke to school, and no one is executed for apostasy."

Interestingly, Madison came to believe his positions on religious freedom had not gone far enough. [He later](#) suggested his call for a day of prayer during the War of 1812 was a mistake and called the inclusion of chaplains in the U.S. military "[in]consistent with the Constitution."

Do his views surprise you?