

# [Religion and the state in the us](https://assignbuster.com/religion-and-the-state-in-the-us/)

### The separation of church and state in the United States

Religion in the United States

Religious belief among Americans today is as vigorous, dynamic and widespread as it ever has been.

Immigration constantly brings new and different religious traditions and practices to the United States, even as the Christian traditions to which most Americans adhere continue to adapt to the needs of an ever-changing population.

Approximately ninety percent of Americans profess a belief in God, and religion remains a pervasive influence on American culture, politics and public policy.

No Established “ State” Religion: The separation of “ church” and “ state”

Yet the United States is among the few nations in the world that eschew an established state religion-indeed it was the first to do so, in 1791.

As a result, the government is prohibited from supporting or endorsing any religion, or promoting one at the expense of another.

Among other things, this means it cannot appoint religious leaders, compel worship or prayer, provide official interpretations of sacred scriptures, or define creedal statements of faith.

Although this arrangement is widely known in the United States as the “ separation of church and state,” owing to the predominance of Christian churches, it also applies to mosques, synagogues, and indeed all religious institutions of any sort.

Scholars often use the term “ disestablishment” to specify the legal aspect of the concept, but by whatever name it is a core principle and defining feature of American political life.

The Declaration of Independence

July 4, 1776: Representatives of 13 British colonies in North America published the Declaration of Independence, an open letter to the world stating their reasons for breaking the American ties of allegiance to King George V, written primarily by Thomas Jefferson:

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed. That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

What does this mean?

The Declaration argued that human rights were given by God, but that they must be protected by a government whose powers are derived from the consent of the governed, not from royal lineage or divine sanction.

In its entirety, the declaration did not offer a detailed theory of church and state, much less codify it into law, but these passages do imply a certain view of the relationship between religion and government.

According to this document:

God is to be acknowledged as the creator of humankind and source of “ inalienable” rights.

Government is properly understood as a human, not divine, institution whose authority and power is derived from citizens themselves, not from God.

This concept is known as “ popular sovereignty,” which President Abraham Lincoln would famously describe nearly a hundred years later as “ Government of the people, by the people and for the people.”

The Declaration of Independence is highly esteemed in American culture not merely as the document that marked the United States’ independence as a nation, but also as a succinct statement of the founding values of this country.

Bill of Rights

December 15, 1791: This became part of the United States Constitution. It gave American citizens the most extensive guarantees of liberty the world had ever seen. If the Declaration of Independence signaled the founding of the new nation upon grand ideals of freedom, the Bill of Rights gave power to that promise.

It guaranteed the rights to religious freedom, free speech and free association; protections against self-incrimination and unlawful search and seizure; guarantees of public trial, legal counsel and the “ due process of law”; and the extraordinary recognition that citizens have many other powers and rights not enumerated in the Constitution.

First right in the bill: “ Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, nor prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

Challenges to the freedom of religion

The right to the free exercise of religion is not absolute, at least as it applies to religious practices.

While American citizens enjoy the absolute liberty of conscience (meaning that they are legally entitled to believe or reject any idea, religious or otherwise, that they encounter), it would be impossible for them to have equal rights to act upon those ideas without being subject to some sort of regulation.

Some of these actions would conflict with the goals or actions of others, and the freedom of one or the other person would therefore be restricted.

Thus in principle the laws and regulations protecting the free exercise of religion are intended to grant an individual the most expansive set of liberties compatible with the same liberties granted to all others.

Conclusion

The separation of church and state, and the freedom of conscience it is intended to protect, are widely embraced core principles of the American form of liberal democracy. Church-state separation is at once simple in concept and irredeemably complex in practice.

In a sense the aspiration for legal neutrality vis-à-vis religion is doomed to failure because the concept of disestablishment itself rests upon a distinctively Protestant Christian understanding of religion as something that can be equated with faith, then privatized and separated from other parts of life.

But in another sense, the “ lively experiment” of religious liberty in the United States has been an extraordinary success, and not just for Protestants: thousands of different religious groups now make up the American religious landscape.

Religion in the United States

The religious landscape in the United States is shifting rapidly. We used to be a nation where most people identified themselves as Christian; today there are not only more Christian sects, but also growing numbers of people who belong to other faith traditions, and growing numbers who are not affiliated with any religion or are not believers.

According to the national surveys, religious affiliation in the United States is both very diverse and extremely fluid.

United States public is becoming less religion

A study by the Pew Research Center made in 2014 compared data to 2007:

The share of U. S. adults who say they believe in God declined from approximately 92% to 89%.

The share of Americans who say they are “ absolutely certain” God exists has dropped more sharply, from 71% in 2007 to 63% in 2014.

The falloff in traditional religious beliefs and practices coincides with changes in the religious composition of the U. S. public. A growing share of Americans are religiously unaffiliated, including some who self-identify as atheists or agnostics as well as many who describe their religion as “ nothing in particular.” Altogether, the religiously unaffiliated (also called the “ nones”) now account for 23% of the adult population, up from 16% in 2007.

Mixed religious backgrounds on the rise

About one-in-five U. S. adults were raised with a mixed religious background, according to a new Pew Research Center study.

This includes about one-in-ten who say they were raised by two people, both of whom were religiously affiliated but with different religions, such as a Protestant mother and a Catholic father, or a Jewish mother and a Protestant stepfather.

An additional 12% say they were raised by one person who was religiously affiliated (e. g., with Protestantism, Catholicism, Judaism or another religion) and another person who was religiously unaffiliated (atheist, agnostic or “ nothing in particular”).

Still the exception

To be sure, religiously mixed backgrounds remain the exception in America. Eight-in-ten U. S. adults say they were raised within a single religion, including two-thirds who say they were raised by two people who shared the same religion (or both of whom were religiously unaffiliated). An additional 14% who say they were raised by a single parent.

But the number of Americans raised in interfaith homes appears to be growing. Fully one-quarter of young adults in the Millennial generation (27%) say they were raised in a religiously mixed family. Fewer Generation Xers (20%), Baby Boomers (19%) and adults from the Silent and Greatest generations (13%) say they were raised in such a household.

Religious “ nones”

Americans are most likely to identify in adulthood as religiously unaffiliated if they were raised exclusively by a parent or parents who were unaffiliated themselves. Indeed, among adults who say they were raised either by a single parent who had no religion or by two people who were both religious “ nones,” a solid majority (62%) identify as “ nones” today.

But there also are many “ nones” who come from religiously mixed backgrounds. Nearly four-in-ten of those who say they had one parent who identified with a religion and another parent who was religiously unaffiliated describe themselves as “ nones” today (38%). And one-quarter of those raised by a Protestant and a Catholic are now religiously unaffiliated (26%). One-in-five people who were raised exclusively by Catholics are religious “ nones” today, as are 14% of those who say they were raised solely by Protestants.

Catholics

Most people raised solely by Catholics (62%) continue to identify as Catholics in adulthood, which is on par with the share of those raised solely by “ nones” who remain religiously unaffiliated today. But those raised by one Catholic parent and one non-Catholic parent have less than a 50-50 chance of identifying with Catholicism as adults. Among U. S. adults from a mixed Protestant/Catholic background, for example, just 29% identify as Catholics today, while 38% are Protestants and 26% are “ nones.”

Protestants

Eight-in-ten people raised exclusively within Protestantism continue to identify as Protestants today. And 56% of those raised by a Protestant parent and a religiously unaffiliated parent now identify as Protestants.

Mother knows best

Most Americans who were raised by a biological or adoptive mother and father say their parents played an equal role in their religious upbringing. But among the roughly four-in-ten adults who say one of their parents (either biological or adoptive) was “ more” responsible for their religious upbringing, far more name their mother than their father.

Moms seem to have been especially influential in the religious upbringing of people from interfaith families. Nearly half (46%) of those raised by parents affiliated with two different religions say their mother was primarily responsible for their religious upbringing, while just 7% say their father took primary responsibility; the rest say both parents played equally important roles in their religious upbringing (41%) or give some other answer, such as that they were not raised in any religion (3%).