



Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Church & State

Policy Positions

We live pluralistic society, especially with respect to religious beliefs and practice. We are not only multi-denominational from a Christian standpoint; we are also multi-faith, with the number and variety of traditions continuing to grow. Because of the broad diversity of religious beliefs that exists in our country today, the Council supports the principle of separation of church and state. Support of this principle leads the Council to the following positions:

- All persons have the right to practice religion according to individual conscience.
- Government should not impose particular religious views upon any persons or groups.
- No government should establish or authorize school-sponsored prayer or any specific devotional practices in public schools.
- No government should require the teaching of courses or specific principles or theories that are based on religious beliefs, traditions, or practices in public schools.

Background

William Penn, father of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, was a member of the Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) who experienced persecution for his beliefs in his native England. He was jailed several times for his public witness that did not conform to the Church of England (the Anglican Church). Penn was an ardent supporter of religious freedom, campaigning for it in the court of King Charles II.

Penn saw the possibility of a society based on religious tolerance in the New World. According to a brief biography:

Seeing no prospects for religious tolerance or political reform in England, Penn looked to America, which he had visited briefly in 1677. In a 1682 document, Penn guaranteed absolute freedom of worship in Pennsylvania. Rich in fertile lands as well as religious freedom, the colony attracted settlers and grew rapidly.¹

Thus, William Penn founded the then colony of Pennsylvania (“Penn’s Woods”) on the basis of religious freedom. It appears that Penn, in the 1682 document, ***Pennsylvania Charter of Liberty, Laws Agreed Upon in England***, may have been the first to explicitly express disestablishment (that is, maintaining church and state as separate entities):

That all persons living in this province, who confess and acknowledge the one Almighty and eternal God, to be the Creator, Upholder and Ruler of the world; and that hold themselves obliged in conscience to live peaceably and justly in civil society, shall, in no ways, be molested or prejudiced for their religious persuasion, or practice, in matters of faith and worship, nor shall they be compelled, at any time, to frequent or maintain any religious worship, place or ministry whatever.²

But Penn was not alone. In his actions, Penn joined Roger Williams, a Puritan and founder of the colony of Rhode Island:

Williams’ Nonconformist leanings lured him across the Atlantic to Plymouth in 1631...His views on religion and government quickly embroiled him in disputes with the Massachusetts authorities in Salem and Boston...In 1635, he was expelled from the church and placed under an order of expulsion from the colony...In 1636, he and a number of followers established the settlement of

¹ www.americanrevolution.com/WilliamPenn.htm.

² The Founder’s Constitution, Amendment 1, Art. 35, http://press-pubs.uchicago.edu/founders/documents/amendI_religions9.html

Providence on Narragansett Bay...Williams founded the first Baptist Church in America, but soon withdrew and thereafter referred to himself as a "seeker," meaning basically a nondenominational Christian in search of spiritual truth.

One of Williams' beliefs had caused particular grief among the authorities. He argued that an individual Christian would know when he was saved, but could not know about the salvation of others. Therefore, it was senseless to require a religious qualification for voting. In essence, Williams was calling for the complete separation of church and state, a position that undercut the authority of the church and civic leaders.

Williams obtained a royal charter for Rhode Island in 1644...Under Williams' influence, Rhode Island became a haven for those who suffered from religious persecution, including Jews and Quakers.³

The efforts of people like Penn and Williams during the earliest stages of our country's formation appear contrary to claims that the United States was founded as a Christian nation. In fact, the constitutional principle of religious liberty is embodied in these words in the First Amendment to our Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." Simply stated, this "Establishment Clause" is meant to prevent government from promoting religion or interfering with its practice.

Then Peter began to speak to them: "I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.

Acts 10:34-35 (NRSV)

While the words "separation of church and state" do not appear in the Constitution, there is little question that the framers of this document believed that such separation is implied in the words of the Establishment Clause:

Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802 to answer a letter from them written in October 1801...The Danbury Baptists were a religious minority in Connecticut, and they complained that in their state, the religious liberties they enjoyed were not seen as immutable rights, but as privileges granted by the legislature—as "favors granted." Jefferson's reply did not address their concerns about problems with state establishment of religion—only that on the national level. The letter contains the phrase "wall of separation between church and state," which led to the short-hand for the Establishment Clause that we use today: "Separation of church and state."⁴

First Amendment Center senior scholar Charles Haynes writes, "The philosophical ideas and religious convictions of Roger Williams, William Penn, John Leland, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison and other leaders were decisive in the struggle for freedom of conscience." He further notes:

The guiding principles that the framers intended to govern the relationship between religion and politics are set forth in Article VI of the Constitution and in the opening 16 words of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Now that America has expanded from the largely Protestant pluralism of the 17th century to a nation of some 3,000 religious groups, it is more vital than ever that every citizen understand the appropriate role of religion in public life and affirm the constitutional guarantees of religious liberty, or freedom of conscience, for people of all faiths and none.⁵

Haynes provides a "Frame of Reference"⁶ for today based on and affirming the ideals and convictions that these leaders embraced.

In the more recent past, both "liberals" and "conservatives" have continued to embrace the principle of separation of church and state. Critics of Roman Catholic presidential hopeful John F. Kennedy feared that as president, he would take orders from the Vatican. Kennedy sought to ease these fears, expressing his support for religious liberty in a 1960 speech:

³ www.u-s-history.com/pages/h584.html.

⁴ The U.S. Constitution Online, "Jefferson's Wall of Separation Letter," www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html.

⁵ Charles Haynes, "History of Religious Liberty in America" (written for Civitas: A Framework for Civic Education. Copyright 1991, Council for the Advancement of Citizenship and the Center for Civic Education), reprinted by permission at www.firstamendmentcenter.org/rel_liberty/history/overview.aspx.

⁶ *Ibid.*

*I believe in an America that is officially neither Catholic, Protestant or Jewish—where no public official either requests or accepts instructions on public policy from the pope, the National Council of Churches or any other ecclesiastical source, where no religious body seeks to impose its will directly or indirectly upon the general populace or the public acts of its officials and where religious liberty is so indivisible that an act against one church is treated as an act against all.*⁷

Likewise, the late conservative Republican Barry Goldwater, who ran for president in 1964, is on the record in support of separation of church and state with these words from a 1994 essay written for the *Washington Post*:

*I am a conservative Republican, but I believe in democracy and the separation of church and state. The conservative movement is founded on the simple tenet that people have the right to live life as they please as long as they don't hurt anyone else in the process.*⁸

Goldwater appears to have held these views for a long time, as evidenced by these words from a 1981 speech to the U.S. Senate:

*By maintaining the separation of church and state, the United States has avoided the intolerance which has so divided the rest of the world with religious wars... Can any of us refute the wisdom of Madison and the other framers? Can anyone look at the carnage in Iran, the bloodshed in Northern Ireland or the bombs bursting in Lebanon and yet question the dangers of injecting religious issues into the affairs of state?*⁹

In her book, *A New Religious America*, religious scholar Dr. Diana L. Eck, Professor of Comparative Religion and Indian Studies at Harvard University and Director of the Pluralism Project, says, “The United States is the most religiously diverse nation in the world.”¹⁰ She suggests that many people are unaware of the radical change in religious landscape that came with Immigration Act of 1965, which eliminated the quotas linking immigration to national origins and thus brought “Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Sikhs, Jams, Zoroastrians, and new varieties of Jews and Catholics... from every part of the globe.” Among the startling facts and statistics:

- The 1990s saw the U.S. Navy commission its first Muslim chaplain and open its first mosque.
- There are presently more than three hundred temples in Los Angeles, home to the greatest variety of Buddhists in the world.
- There are more American Muslims than there are American Episcopalians, Jews, or Presbyterians.¹¹

Currently there is a growing concern over government actions and proposals that threaten the separation of church and state. Many are familiar with the ongoing legal battles over the display of religious materials on government property and in other public places, most recently around the display of the Ten Commandments.

Theological Perspective and the View of the Pennsylvania Council of Churches

Scripture does not speak specifically to the issue of separation of church and state, though Matthew does suggest that Jesus draws a distinction between one's allegiance to God and to government in these words: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.”¹² We do know, however, the fate of many early Christians who continued to practice their faith under the reigns of a hostile Roman government:

Meanwhile, in the case of those who were denounced to me as Christians, I have observed the following procedure: I interrogated these as to whether they were Christians; those who confessed I interrogated a second and a third time, threatening them with punishment;

⁷ John F. Kennedy, Address to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, September 12, 1960, www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/PDFFiles/jkennedy_houstonministerial.pdf.

⁸ Found in numerous locations, including www.zeppcommentaries.com/Other_Voices/goldwater.htm under “On the Religious Right.”

⁹ Found in numerous locations, including www.famous-quote.net/barry-goldwater-quotes.shtml.

¹⁰ The Pluralism Project, www.pluralism.org/publications/new_religious_america/index.php.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² From Matthew 20:17-21 (NRSV).

*those who persevered I ordered executed. For I had no doubt that, whatever the nature of their creed, stubbornness and inflexible obstinacy surely deserve to be punished.*¹³

We also know the fate suffered by some early settlers in our own country for practicing their faith:

*Puritan Congregationalism had been established in New England with freedom of worship for Congregationalists but dissenters did not enjoy the same freedom because Congregationalism resorted to fines, whips, jails, and gallows to enforce its religious monopoly.*¹⁴

Even today we have witnessed the violence and death that can result when radical religious traditions become enmeshed with governments around the world. Given the growing diversity of religious traditions in the United States, it is important to maintain the “wall of separation” that was intended by our nation’s founders so that a majority in one faith tradition cannot threaten or interfere with the ability of others to practice freely within their own traditions, and no one feels threatened because of government policies concerning their religious practices.

In 2002, The American Jewish Committee, the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, The Interfaith Alliance Foundation, the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A. and the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism issued a joint publication entitled “A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century.” The document asserts that the separation of church and state remains the “best means of assuring robust religious liberty and to creating a climate of mutual respect in a religiously diverse culture.”¹⁵ Their vision:

*As organizations committed to religious liberty as well as a dynamic role for religion in public life, we share a different vision about the future: a vision that avoids both the theocratic tendencies on one side and the hostility about religion associated with the other. Now more than ever, the United States must maintain its commitment to freedom for persons of all faiths and persons of no faith. We are beset by religious and ethnic conflict abroad. Exploding pluralism challenges us at home. At such a time, we must reaffirm our dedication to providing what Roger Williams called a “haven for the cause of conscience.” We agree with Williams that conscience is best guarded by maintaining a healthy distance between the institutions of religion and government.*¹⁶

I do affirm it to be against the testimony of Christ Jesus...for the civil state to impose upon the people a religion, a worship, a ministry. The state should give free and absolute permission of conscience to all men in what is spiritual alone. Ye have lost yourselves! Your breath blows out the candle of liberty in this land.

Roger Williams, on trial in 1635 for condemning the Puritan vision of a Biblical commonwealth

Contributors to the statement agree, however, that faith should not be considered in or be a barrier to one’s participation in the democratic process. According to their statement:

*This view denies our country the powerful moral guidance of our religious heritage and discourages many of our brightest and most committed citizens from participating in our public life.*¹⁷

The Council’s **Principles for Public Advocacy** (draft, 5/05) says:

We affirm the principle of separation of church and state; this principle assures an appropriate role of government, guaranteeing that in a just and religiously diverse society, each person has the right to practice his or her religion according to individual conscience. We also maintain, however, that government also has a responsibility to ensure that particular religious views or positions are not involuntarily imposed on persons in public settings such as schools or in public meetings.

¹³ Pliny the Younger (governor of Pontus/Bithynia from A.D. 111-113), in a letter to the Emperor Trajan (written A.D. 111 or 112), www.bible-researcher.com/persecution.html.

¹⁴ Carl L. Becker, “Religious Freedom: The Other Revolution,” http://earlyamerica.com/review/2003_summer_fall/religious_freedom.htm.

¹⁵ The Interfaith Alliance, www.interfaithalliance.org/site/apps/nl/content2.asp?c=8dJIIWMCE&b=829121&ct=147361.

¹⁶ “A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century,” www.interfaithalliance.org/atf/cf/{05044A38-9516-4831-9AA2-E10AFAB8886A}/vision.pdf.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*; see also “Civic Engagement,” a position statement by the Pennsylvania Council of Churches, concerning rights and responsibilities for Christian involvement in the political process, www.pachurches.org/html/Position_Paper-Good_Government.pdf.