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# 1. 2016

# 1.1 March

## Separation of Church and State? (2016-03-15 02:48) - roleofreligioninpolitics

Eventually in an American history course a student will hear the phrase "separation of church and state," but what does it mean? Why did this become the first Amendment to the United States Constitution?

Countless religious people, cultures, and communities have suffered due to the pursuit of religious uniformity and conformity. World history is filled with centuries of religious prosecution by dominating religious churches and inter-religious wars. The founding fathers decided that in order for America to be the safe haven for religious people that it claimed to be, there had to be a separation of church and state and they consequently amended the U.S. Constitution. This meant no church should be endorsed or supported by the government, allowing all religious people to legally and openly express their religions.

Nonetheless, centuries later the presence of religion still shapes the decisions made by our government officials thus severing the solidarity of our First Amendment. This connection between church and state has likely survived due to the presence and power of Christianity that was already established in America and throughout the Globe. Christianity was one of the first religions to establish a connection between moral acts and God's acceptance, this allowed it to weave its way into government policies involving abortions, marriage and gender equality, etc.

America is supposed to be a melting pot of different cultures, people and beliefs but the prevalence of religion in our government, acting through religious politicians and policy makers, has hindered opportunities for people who have may fail to see any moral dilemma.

**Religion in Schools (Part 1) (2016-03-26 19:30) - roleofreligioninpolitics**

In 1802, Thomas Jefferson used the term "separation of church and state" to describe the changes that had been made to the United States Constitution, he states that:

Religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship.

Similar to the mystics he believed that the connection between a man and their deity was personal; this means that people have a right to be passionate about their religion. Mysticism across religions has given the underprivileged the right to build a connection with their God that goes unquestioned. The same approach to religion had a similar effect in America because it (legally) freed oppressed religious people from the constraints of government. One of the applications of the First Amendment that are visible today is religion in public schools. Teachers, principals, guidance counselors, and other local government officials present in schools are not permitted to express opinions of religions during school hours or events. This hasn't always been abided by, and in some cases the unconstitutional acts have been brought to the Supreme Court.

For instance in 1943, *West Virginia Board of Education vs. Barnette* addressed the issue of forcing all students to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, if the student refused to say the pledge they could be expelled from school and removed from their parents' custody. This extreme admiration for material items, also known as idolatry, is not condoned in multiple religions including Judaism, Islam, and unorthodox Christianity. In America, the United States flag is definitely an idol, this is proven by the countless laws that protect its honor by regulating its display. In this court case, a number of Jehovah's Witnesses challenged this notion and stated that it was unconstitutional to force them to commit idolatry. The United States Supreme Court agreed that it was unconstitutional to force faith onto another person.

This was the first of many court cases that were brought forth due to the superiority of some religions over others due to their majority. Although blatant unlawful acts like the one that occurred in West Virginia are not as frequent, there's still a subtle presence of religion in American schools that can go unseen by the untuned eye.



**Religion in Schools (Part 2 of 2) (2016-03-27 13:00) - roleofreligioninpolitics**

The Pledge of Allegiance is something that's heard everyday in public schools. "One Nation under God," why is that allowed to be said in schools? If a Muslim substituted the word God for Allah, a Jew replaced it with Yahweh, or a Hindu said Vishnu would they be ostracized, even more so would they be punished for this action?

The current version of the Pledge of Allegiance is the only one the millennials have ever recited but there are some members of society that may remember the pledge of allegiance before the alterations it experienced in 1954. The term "under God," was added over a century after the First Amendment was made, this blatant introduction of religion doesn't seem representative of the constitution. President Eisenhower stated:

"From this day forward, the millions of our school children will daily proclaim in every city and town, every village and rural school house, the dedication of our nation and our people to the Almighty.... In this way we are reaffirming the transcendence of religious faith in America's heritage and future; in this way we shall constantly strengthen those spiritual weapons which forever will be our country's most powerful resource, in peace or in war."

No assumptions have to be made about why this amendment was made, it is clearly due to the religious preferences of the president and policy makers at the time. This is an example of the lack of separation of church and state in the United States government, Eisenhower was a Presbyterian and that clearly influenced his decision that would then be exerted on the lives of all Americans. Prior to the Supreme Court decision in 1943 that stated that students couldn't be compelled to say the pledge of allegiance, there was another, *Minersville School District vs Gobitis* (1940) that led to the persecution of countless Jehovah's Witnesses that refused to go against their religious beliefs.

There are policies stating what students and teachers can or cannot do while on school grounds, that are enforced by imperfect individuals. For instance, students are allowed to pray as long as it's not interrupting school activities, in Christianity simply bowing your head may suffice but a Muslim student goes through a ritual before prayer, whether or not the prayer is a disruption is subjective. The point is that schools may unintentionally allow the minimization of less prevalent religions.

## 1.2 April

## Religion influencing Health Care and Education (2016-04-13 21:15) - roleofreligioninpolitics

In 1873, the Comstock law illegalized obscenities as a result of the conservative forces working in the government at that time. The first thing that may come to mind when reading this is how the definition of obscene likely varies between people. Obscene behaviors are those that are offensive to moral principles. The United States has many regulations that limit morally unacceptable behaviors like murder, rape, burglary, violence, etc. but even with the elaborate mesh of laws in place there leaves a lot of wiggle room for more personal decisions. Moral principles vary between people and between religions. For instance, Jainism does not agree with any acts of harm, this has allowed them to live peacefully with other religions in similar areas. On the other hand, Christianity does not support murder but history is filled with crusades and conquests that have occurred in the name of the religion. Members of both religions can be deeply devoted and religious people but their beliefs about what is and is not socially acceptable differ.

The Comstock laws specifically said that it was illegal to use the Postal Service to transport erotica, sex toys, abortifacients and contraceptives. The Comstock laws inspired some states to outlaw the possession of any of the listed all together. Over a century later, there is still immense controversy surrounding abortions and contraceptives because of religious people who see the moral flaws surrounding it.

My generation, the millennials, did not receive consistent and regulated sex education because of the controversy surrounding the content that we would be introduced to. The problem with this is that ignorance is not bliss, there are college-level students who have never formerly learned about the difference between contraceptives and how to protect themselves from STIs. I know this firsthand because I've taught a General Biology for Non-Science Majors lab course for over 2 years and there's consistently students who are learning about contraceptives for the first time in our lab. The consequence is a generation of adults that are not educated about their bodies and how to best protect themselves and others.

Lastly, there's a significant amount of controversy surrounding women in health care because of abortions. Due to religious objections, there are people that believe that they should be illegal no matter the circumstances. Doctor's have the right to turn down abortions to some women because of their religious beliefs, even if the pregnancy poses a risk to her life or if the pregnancy was a result of crime against her. This is a central debate between democrats and republicans but if our government was rid of religion, the anti-abortion movement would have lost momentum long ago.

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**Religion in Marriage Equality (2016-04-15 12:00) - roleofreligioninpolitics**

On Friday, June 26th 2015 the Supreme Court ruled that states must allow same-sex marriage, making it illegal to deny gay and lesbian couples the right to marry. Why is this such a recent advancement? The United States was founded in 1776, almost 250 years later the Supreme Court legalizes marriage for everyone in a 5-4 ruling.

Besides being given the opportunity to profess your love for someone and it be recognized, by denying marriage equality there were also denying other rights and privileges given only to married couples. Benefits include filing joint income tax returns, obtaining spouse's insurance benefits, medical benefits like visiting a spouse in the ICU (intensive care unit) or making medical decisions for them, death benefits like making funeral arrangements, applying for joint adoption, and a plethora of others. These rights were denied to gay and lesbian American citizens, including those who served in the armed forces. A civil rights movement has swept across the nation and caused various opinions surrounding homosexuality, consequentially there were inconsistencies in which states recognized same-sex marriage. On that day, the Supreme Court was deciding whether states had the right to ban same-sex marriage and if all states had to acknowledge lawful marriages that occurred outside of state.

If the reason is religious then why not only ban marriage in churches instead of banning it altogether? The reason often given is that God said that marriage is a union between a man and a woman, therefore two men or women do not meet these standards at all. Here again the role religion plays in the government is unashamedly present and controls some of the most intimate decisions in peoples lives, like who they get to legally marry.



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