

Religion, Thomas Jefferson and Today

Theme: Religion, Thomas Jefferson and his influence on American Society

Historical Context:

Since the earliest British colonists settled the present day United States, religion has played an important role in their lives. Religion was the basis for many laws passed in the colonies. The nature and role of these early religious laws often led to discord among the colonists. The Puritans who fled England to escaped religious persecution established the Massachusetts Bay Colony where a man had to be a member of the church to hold office. Rhode Island and Connecticut were two such colonies formed after people left Massachusetts because of intolerance. William Penn started the colony of Pennsylvania with the idea of religious tolerance for all people. Virginia one of the first British settlements passed laws where the clergy and the church would be supported by a "forced" tithe or tax on every male citizen. During the American Revolution one of the first acts of Thomas Jefferson, author of the Declaration of Independence was to propose to the Virginia Legislature a Bill for the Establishing Religious Freedom in 1777. This bill became the idea behind the first amendment to the United States Constitution in 1791.

Question: What role did religion play in founding the thirteen British colonies that became the United States? How did Thomas Jefferson's early thoughts and ideas influence America's view of religion today?

Part A: Answer the following questions based on the reading of each of the documents in complete sentences.

Part B: Task: In a well constructed essay discuss what role religion played in founding the early British colonies in North America. How did Thomas Jefferson's early thoughts and ideas influence United States citizens' views on religion in the 20th and 21st century?

Document 1:

Founding the Thirteen Colonies			
Colony	1st Permanent Settlement	Reasons Founded	Nature of Religion
New England Colonies			
Massachusetts	1620	Religious freedom	Pilgrims and Puritans pay church tax and attend church
New Hampshire	1630	Profit from trade and fishing	Puritan, church support by tax
Rhode Island	1636	Religious freedom	Freedom of religion
Connecticut	1635	Religious and political freedom and profit from fur trade, farming;	Puritan and Congregationalist
Middle Colonies			
New York	1624	Expand trade	Weak Anglican establishment
Delaware	1638	Expand trade	mixed churches
New Jersey	1638	Profit from selling land	Weak Anglican establishment
Pennsylvania	1682	Religion and Profit from selling land	Quakers
Southern Colonies			
Virginia	1607	expand trade	Anglican Church- tax to support clergy
Maryland	1634	Catholic religious freedom and to sell land	Catholic Church and Anglican
North Carolina	C. 1660's	Profit from trade and selling land	weak Anglican Church
South Carolina	1670	Profit from trade and selling land	weak Anglican Church
Georgia	1735	Protection against Spanish Florida; safe home for debtors	Weak Anglican Church

*Anglican Church is the Church of England

1. Which colonies were founded for primarily for religious reasons? (1 pt)

2. Which two church groups were dominant in the colonies? (1 pt)

Document 2: Timeline showing important dates related to church's influence on the early colonies

1610-11--In Virginia under Martial Law no man was allowed to speak impiously or maliciously, against the holy and blessed Trinity, or any against any known articles of the Christian faith, upon pain of death

1629 Puritans flee religious persecution in England for Massachusetts Bay Colony

1630's—only church members were allow to hold public office and vote, must pay tax for membership to church in Massachusetts.

1632—absence from church services or criticism of church pay a fine

1636—Roger William banished from Massachusetts for "new and dangerous opinions" of separation of church and state founds Rhode Island

1638—Anne Hutchinson banished from Massachusetts for promoting personal revelation over religion

1662-- church clergy was paid with tax upon citizens (this practice continued until American Revolution in Virginia)

1692—Salem Witch Trials in Massachusetts, where 19 legally lynched for suspected witchcraft, one was pressed to death

3. Discuss one way religion in the early colonies restricted freedom of speech. (1 pt)

4. Discuss two ways using the timeline that religion forced people to support the church. (2 pts)

Document 3 Thomas Jefferson: Proposed Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom (1777 and 1779).

SECTION I. Well aware that the opinions and belief of men depend not on their own will, but follow involuntarily the evidence proposed to their minds; that Almighty God hath created the mind free,

SECT. II. WE the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

5. According to the Jefferson's Religious Freedom Bill, what 2 kinds of laws were the Assembly of Virginia forbidden to pass? (2pts)

6. What shall all men be allowed to practice and why? (1 pt)

Document 4: Letter from Thomas Jefferson *To Messrs. Nehemiah Dodge and Others, a Committee of the Danbury Baptist Association, in the State of Connecticut*, January 1, 1802

Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should "make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," thus building a wall of separation between church and State. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.

I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem.

7. What does Jefferson believe concerning the practice of religion? (1 pt)

8. What is the legislature prohibited from doing and what specific words does Jefferson use to reflect his view? (2 pts)

Document 5: Excerpt from the 1962 *Engel v Vitale*, which outlawed the mandatory school prayer which was said at the beginning of each morning before the start of the school day.

There can be no doubt that New York's state prayer program officially establishes the religious beliefs embodied in the Regents' prayer... (even though it) does not require all pupils to recite the prayer but permits those who wish to do so to remain silent or be excused from the room, ignores the essential nature of the program's constitutional defects. Neither the fact that the prayer may be denominationally neutral nor the fact that its observance on the part of the students is voluntary can serve to free it from the limitations of the Establishment Clause, as it might from the Free Exercise Clause, of the First Amendment, both of which are operative against the States by virtue of the Fourteenth Amendment. Although these two clauses may in certain instances overlap, they forbid two quite different kinds of governmental encroachment upon religious freedom. The Establishment Clause, unlike the Free Exercise Clause, does not depend upon any showing of direct governmental compulsion and is violated by the enactment of laws which establish an official religion whether those laws operate directly to coerce non-observing individuals or not. This is not to say, of course, that [370 U.S. 421, 431] laws officially prescribing a particular form of religious worship do not involve coercion of such individuals. When the power, prestige and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain....

The history of governmentally established religion, both in England and in this country, showed that whenever government had allied itself with one particular form of religion, the inevitable result had been that it had incurred the hatred, disrespect and even contempt of those who held contrary beliefs... It was in large part to get completely away from this sort of systematic religious persecution that the Founders brought into being our Nation, our Constitution, and our Bill of Rights with its prohibition against any governmental establishment of religion. The New York laws officially prescribing the Regents' prayer are inconsistent both with the purposes of the Establishment Clause and with the Establishment Clause itself.

9. Explain what is at issue before the Supreme Court in this case. (1 pt)

10. How does this case explain government coercion can happen even though the prayer was voluntary? (1 pt)

Document 6: No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, major points from US Education Secretary Rod Paige. These are the general rules he outlined.

- Students may bring bibles or other religious scriptures to school and read them on campus;
- Students may pray together during school hours, so long as it does not interrupt learning times;
- Students may say grace at lunchtime, silently or aloud, alone or with other students;
- Students may organize prayer groups, religious clubs, and ad hoc gatherings. These student-led faith groups must be given the same access to school facilities as non-religious groups;
- School officials may not compel students to participate in prayer or other religious activities;
- Students may express their faith within their homework assignments;
- Students are allowed to pray during any school-initiated "minute of silence";
- Public schools must release students for parent-approved, off-campus religious instruction;
- When student speakers are selected (using neutral criteria) and retain control of the content of the message, they may engage in religious speech or pray in student assemblies or graduation ceremonies.

11. State two places or ways students can practice their religious beliefs in school? (2 pts)

12. Describe one place where students are allowed to discuss their religious views freely? (1 pt)

Document 7: Proposed amendment to U.S. Constitution submitted in February of 2005

"Nothing in this Constitution shall be construed to prohibit individual prayer in public schools or to prohibit school officials from including voluntary prayer in official school ceremonies and meetings. Neither the United States nor any State shall prescribe the content of any such prayer."

13. What is the purpose of this proposed amendment? (1 pt)

14. How could school officials violate the beliefs of the Declaration of Religious Freedom (Document 3) under the new proposed amendment? (1 pt)

Part B:

Essay:

Directions: Write a well organized essay that includes an introduction, several paragraphs, and a conclusion. Use evidence from at least five documents in the body of the essay. Support your response with relevant facts, examples, and details. Include additional outside information.

Task: In a well constructed essay discuss:

- what role religion played in founding the early British colonies in North America.
- to what extent Thomas Jefferson's early thoughts and ideas have influenced United States citizens' views on religion in the 20th and 21st century?