
The Right to Freedom of Religion in the First Amendment of the Constitution

The First Amendment, added to the Constitution in 1791, contains guarantees of freedom of religion. Why did the Founders think freedom of religion was so important?

The establishment clause of the first amendment prohibits the government from making any law "respecting an establishment of religion." It also forbids the government from favoring one religion over another and prohibits them from preferring religion over non-religion or vice versa. "The government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." - John Adams. Adams believed that the government should not be founded on any religion and stated explicitly that the United States Government is not established on one. The free exercise clause says that American citizens have the right to accept any religious belief and engage in religious rituals. It does not only protect the religious beliefs but also actions made on behalf of those beliefs. The difference between these two clauses is the fact that the Establishment Clause prevents the government from enforcing a specific type of religion while the Free Exercise clause gives American's permission to be proactive in any religion they chose. The Establishment clause protects the rights of the citizens so that they are not forced to believe one specific religion, and the Free Exercise just backs up the establishment clause to ensure that any holes are filled and furthers American's right to their religion(s).

I believe that limitations should not be imposed on the free exercise of one's religious beliefs, but in some cases, restrictions are necessary. For example, if a person had a religion that stated that it was okay to kill people, there should be a limitation on the amount of that religion that the person can exercise. Although the free exercise clause states that citizens have the right to practice their religion, if killing someone is a part of that religion, it takes away from another person's right to live which is stated in the Declaration of Independence as an unalienable right. Limitations should be placed on religion when the religion in question is a concern to the public.

Church and state should be kept separate. The church should have no significant impact on the state, and the state should have no significant effect on the church. The dividing line should be drawn when the church or state start to overstep their limits regarding each other. For example, in the case *Lemon v. Kurtzman*, 91 S. Ct. 2105 (1971), the Supreme Court established a three-part test for determining if an action of government violates the First Amendment's separation of church and state. The three rules are that first, the government's action must have a secular purpose. Two, the primary goal must not be to inhibit or to advance religion, and three, there

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must be no excessive entanglement between government and religion. If these rules are not followed, then the government has violated the First Amendment, and its actions are unconstitutional. Another case involving the separation of church and state was *Engel v. Vitale*, 82 S. Ct. 1261 (1962). The result of this case was the Supreme Court ruling that any prayer, composed by public school districts, even nondenominational prayer, is unconstitutional government sponsorship of religion. This is because public schools are owned and operated by the government and prayer in a public school violates the establishment clause.

Freedom of religion is especially important in the United States, which is often referred to as a "Melting Pot" due to people of all different backgrounds and cultures immigrating to the country. Forcing an entire country to follow one religion would never go well, and it was important that the Establishment clause and the Free exercise clause were thought up by our founding fathers. The separation of Church and State, also mentioned in the First Amendment, also provides a protective layer in every citizen's life. Without this protection, the state could hold control over churches and churches could maintain control over the state. The founding fathers thought freedom of religion was essential because religion and morality were essential elements of political prosperity. Without this freedom, politics in America would crumble.

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