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Five myths about church and state in America

By David Sehat, Friday, April 22, 2:42 PM

Liberals claim that the founding fathers separated church and state, while conservatives argue that the founders made faith a foundation of our government. Both sides argue that America once enjoyed a freedom to worship that they seek to preserve. Yet neither side gets it right. As we mark Passover and Easter, let's end some misconceptions about religion and politics in America.

1. The Constitution has always protected religious freedom.

Many Americans believe that the First Amendment's separation of church and state safeguards religious liberty. But when the First Amendment was ratified in 1791, it did not apply to the states and would not until well into the 20th century. As a result, the First Amendment did not prevent states from paying churches out of the public treasury, as Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Vermont, Connecticut and South Carolina did when that amendment was written. And those states that did not fund churches still favored Christianity. Blasphemy was forbidden in Delaware in 1826, and officeholders in Pennsylvania had to swear that they believed in "the being of a God and a future state of rewards and punishments."

American federalism gave states enormous power to regulate the health, welfare and morals of their citizens. Because many thought religion was the foundation of American society, they used their power to imprint their moral ideals on state constitutions and judicial opinions for much of American history. Even today, these laws linger on the books. I still can't buy beer on Sundays in Atlanta.

2. The founders' faith matters.

Christians who consider the founders saintly won't have much luck backing that up. Thomas Jefferson wrote a version of the New Testament that removed references to Jesus's divinity. Ben Franklin was a deist. And George Washington may not have taken Communion.

But whatever the founders' religious beliefs were, the First Amendment merely preserved the church-and-state status quo. There had never been an official religion in the 13 colonies, and the new states favored different faiths. The South was traditionally Anglican but had a growing Methodist and Baptist population. New England was traditionally Congregationalist, but evangelicals moved there nonetheless. The middle colonies mixed Lutherans, Catholics (in Maryland), Presbyterians and Quakers. A small number of Jews lived in early America, as well.

So the framers punted the issue of religion to the states, promising only that the power of the federal government would not be used to advance, say, Congregationalist beliefs over Presbyterian ones. This was a pluralistic vision of sorts but one that still allowed states to declare official religions and grant privileges to specific denominations.

3. Christian conservatives have only recently taken over politics.

Christian partisans mobilized early in U.S. history, seeking to impose an interdenominational — but still Christian and, more specifically, Protestant — moral order on the new nation.

Initially, Christians were more successful in exercising political and legal control at the state level. They passed blasphemy laws. They required Sabbath rest on Sundays. In Massachusetts, they mandated devotional exercises in public schools, a practice that spread to every state with public education.

In time, however, the faithful found a federal audience for moral reform with the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919, a national experiment in prohibition. These moral campaigns anticipated many of the political disputes over religion that have emerged in recent decades, and they weren't any less divisive than debates about the death penalty, abortion or gay marriage.

4. America is more secular than it used to be.

The American Revolution was actually a low point in American religious adherence. Sociologists have shown that no more than 20 percent of the population in 1776 belonged to a church. Then, under the influence of evangelical expansion during the Second Great Awakening in the early 19th century, church membership grew rapidly until, by 1850, more than one-third of Americans belonged to a church. In 1890, after another round of Protestant evangelization and Catholic immigration from Ireland, Italy and elsewhere, the proportion rose to 45 percent. And in 1906, church members became a majority — 51 percent of the population.

The trend continues. In 2000, 62 percent of the populace belonged to religious institutions, if not specifically Christian churches. Evangelical Christians still lead this expansion, and their influence has become more pronounced, not less, over the past two centuries. The presidency of George W. Bush — the most evangelical commander in chief — testifies that Americans are becoming more religious, not less.

5. Liberals are anti-religious.

In 1947's *Everson v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court demanded a more thorough separation of church and state. States could no longer endorse specific religions, and prayer and Bible reading in schools and blasphemy laws went on the chopping block. This led religious conservatives to accuse the high court — as well as liberals in general — of, well, irreligion.

But liberals such as Justices Robert H. Jackson and William Brennan argued that they sought to honor the multiple religious traditions that had been repressed in the United States. They pointed out that Catholics had been made to recite the Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in public schools; that observant Jews labored at an economic disadvantage because they had to close their shop on the Sabbath; that Buddhists, who could not swear that they believed in God, were banned from office in several states; that Jehovah's Witnesses were made to say the pledge of allegiance in violation of their religious beliefs; and that secular humanists could be drafted without regard to their conscientious objection.

Liberals on the court sought to do away with this heritage of official discrimination, but they did not seek to do away with religion. As Jackson wrote in 1952: "My evangelistic brethren confuse an objection to compulsion with an objection to religion. It is possible to hold a faith with enough confidence to believe that what should be rendered to God does not need to be decided and collected by Caesar."

Amen to that.

dsehat@gsu.edu

David Sehat is an assistant professor of history at Georgia State University and the author of “The Myth of American Religious Freedom.” He will be online on Monday, April 25, at 11 a.m. ET to chat. [Submit your questions and comments](#) before or during the discussion.

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