



# RELIGIOUS TOLERANCE: MADE IN AMERICA

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Each year the President of the United States lights a national Christmas tree, hosts a Hanukkah party at the White House and issues a proclamation honoring Ramadan. Only in America.

Indeed, America is known for religious tolerance. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that America, where people of all faiths are free to worship (or not worship) as they please, invented modern religious tolerance. This tolerance, which Americans take for granted, didn't exist anywhere in the world before America invented it. How did this happen?

To answer that we have to look to America's origins which were overwhelmingly religious and, to be precise, overwhelmingly Christian. To put it another way, America became the religiously open nation that we know today because it was first a Christian nation, specifically a Protestant one.

Let me explain.

Until the beginning of the 16th Century religious life in Europe was dominated by the Catholic Church. All religious power was concentrated in the Pope and the Catholic clergy. They determined religious doctrine. The power structure was top down. All that changed in 1517 when Martin Luther, a German priest, led a revolt that came to be known as the Protestant Reformation. The theme of the Reformation was that people should be free to interpret the Bible and manage their houses of worship as they saw fit – a bottom up power structure.

The most zealous of England's Reformers were known as the Puritans, so called because they wanted to purify the Church of England. Some of these Puritans became so disenchanted they decided they had no choice but to leave England. Only in the New World of America, untainted by European prejudices, could they practice their Protestant Christianity in its purest form. We know these hardy souls as Pilgrims. The strength of their conviction can easily be measured by the incredible risks they took in crossing the North Atlantic on small wooden sailing ships, of which The Mayflower was only one.

True to their religious background these early settlers, and those that followed, were fiercely independent. Given that the Puritans believed that people should read and interpret scripture for themselves, how could it be otherwise? Not surprisingly, it didn't take long before disputes broke out among the settlers regarding doctrine. In fact, the colony of Rhode Island was established in 1638 as a haven for some of these dissidents.

Throughout the 17th century more colonists arrived, including Catholics and Jews but their numbers remained small relative to the Protestant majority. All the way through American

Independence in 1776 and the Revolutionary War that followed Protestants remained dominant. But with more settlers came more religious discord. The only thing that everyone could agree on was that religion, specifically Christianity – firmly rooted, it is important to note, in the Hebrew Scriptures – was central to the new nation’s life.

When the colonies became states and wrote their state constitutions, they were noticeably Christian in their language and tone. But beyond that there was little uniformity. Some states granted privileges to specific religions while others expressed religious freedom for everyone; Delaware required an oath of office that professed faith in God and Jesus Christ; North Carolina prohibited any atheist or one who denied “the truth of the Protestant religion” to hold office; a handful of states required office holders to be Christians, some others required public officials to simply state they believed in God. On the other hand, five states prohibited clergy from holding office.

This crazy quilt, anyone can interpret scripture on their own, state-by-state, church-by-church character of early American religious practice, which was both distinctly Protestant and uniquely American, led to the atmosphere of tolerance that was present at the founding of the nation. Indeed, it’s enshrined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution:

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...

Given America’s English and European roots, places where governments officially sanctioned one religion, this was a singular advance in human freedom. So, when the President of the United States lights a national Christmas tree, hosts a Hanukkah party at the White House and issues a proclamation honoring Ramadan, we should thank those headstrong Puritans.

I’m Larry Schweikart of the University of Dayton for Prager University.