

The Surprising Reason America Is Not a Theocracy

The beginning of American law, the concepts of independence and freedom, is rooted in the belief that moral absolutes exist within a universal standard of justice independent from political rulers. The Judeo-Christian faith is not separate from but foundational to just and fair public policies that encourage human flourishing.

More than 2,000 Bible verses teach civics, providing examples of good and evil rulers, judges and political authorities. These instructions on civics are informed by approximately 500 verses on salvation, 400 on hell and 250 on heaven—with the overall foundation that right living best leads to a peaceful, thriving society.

Six of the Ten Commandments specifically define civil law. The Western concept and definition of murder, manslaughter, theft, assault, marriage, birth, and other civil and criminal matters are defined and ascribed judicial punishment under Mosaic law. Religious freedom and self-governance are defined in the first commandment, family governance in the second, private property rights in the fifth and a fair trial with witnesses in the sixth.

The Founding Fathers knew this, recalling Exodus 18 and 21, Leviticus 18, Ezekiel 3 and Isaiah 33:22, among others, understanding the Judeo-Christian God, the Lord, as lawgiver, judge and king. Following this model, they devised three branches of government. Congress, the legislative branch—represents the lawgiver; the judicial branch—the judge and the executive branch—the king, primary ruler, head of government.

But the Founding Fathers also knew the danger of authoritarian

rule that some Puritans had tried to implement in 17th-century American colonies.

For example, a non-Puritan and someone who didn't agree with Puritan laws would not have been able to live in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. John Winthrop, a Puritan attorney and its governor, sought to instill a magisterial government that prohibited anyone from voting unless the magistrate approved the specific Christian men who fit its criteria. Winthrop opposed codifying laws, believing that democracy was "the meanest and worst of all forms of government."

The "City on a Hill" to which Winthrop referred in an oft-quoted sermon, ended up being a place that excluded anyone who disagreed with magisterial rule. His colony effectively illustrated the very nonbiblical values that restrain freedom and liberty—and the opposite of meaning of the teaching he referenced.

Upon arrival to the Massachusetts Bay Colony in the 1630s, English clergyman and lawyer Roger Williams opposed Winthrop's form of government. But the Colony's rulers didn't allow for free thought or speech. They rejected his notion of "freedom of conscience." First the magistrates placed Williams under house arrest. He was forbidden from discussing his ideas. But when he continued to speak his mind—in his own home—the magistrates banished him from the colony. Next, they changed their mind and sought to kill him.

Winthrop warned Williams, who fled, leaving his family behind. His suffering was so great, he barely survived. Because of this, he wrote one of the most influential treatises in history, *The Bloudy Tenent of Persecution*. Thomas Jefferson not only read Williams' treatise, but also John Locke's *Two Treatises of Government*, in which Locke referenced more than 1,500 Bible verses.

Were it not for Roger Williams' influence, it's unlikely

Thomas Jefferson would have written what he did in the Declaration of Independence. In it, Jefferson references God four times:

- “The laws of nature and nature’s God,”
- All men are “endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights,”
- “The Supreme Judge of the world for the rectitude of our intentions,” and
- “The protection of Divine Providence.”

Jefferson intentionally declared that a deity exists and is knowable by human reason. He identified this deity as a *creator* and *judge*. He asked in *Notes on the State of Virginia*:

“And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are a gift of God?”

Foundational to the Declaration of Independence was creationism and morality. As John Adams remarked,

“Our Constitution was made only for a moral and religious people. It is wholly inadequate to the government of any other.”

The Founders ensured the validity of freedom originating from God, not man. Their assurance rested in “In God We Trust,” printed on American money, and in “One Nation Under God,” in the Pledge of Allegiance.

The Bible is most often used when courts require oaths of office for U.S. Presidents and elected officials. The Judeo-Christian God is mentioned in all 50 state constitutions. The Supreme Court opens each session verbally declaring, “God save the United States of America.”

The Founders did not seek to create a theocracy understanding biblical Christianity to be non-coercive. They understood that only through biblical principles freedom and liberty exist (Gal. 5:1). As Dostoevsky and others from atheist countries assert, "If there is no God, everything is permitted."

The Founders knew that in every human spirit lies an innate desire to be free. That spirit of freedom became the personification of American character.

As Ronald Reagan said in 1952, "America is less of a place than an idea, and if it is an idea, and I believe that to be true, it is an idea that has been deep in the souls of man." As the soul informs the mind, heart and body, it also informs every area of life in which people live—including politics.