

# The First Amendment & Religious Freedom: Statements by Founding Fathers and U.S. Presidents

## Founding Fathers

The following are notable quotations and statements from key Founding Fathers expressing that our government is not based on any religion, and the founders intended a separation of church and state to ensure religious freedom:

### **Thomas Jefferson – Third U.S. President**

- *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. (Letter to the Danbury Baptists, January 1, 1802).*

### **James Madison – Fourth U.S. President ("Father of the of the Constitution")**

- *[T]he number, the industry, and the morality of the Priesthood, & the devotion of the people have been manifestly increased by the total separation of the Church from the State. (Letter to Robert Walsh, March 2, 1819).*
- *The settled opinion here is that religion is essentially distinct from Civil Government, and exempt from its cognizance; that a connexion between them is injurious to both; that there are causes in the human breast, which ensure the perpetuity of religion without the aid of the law; that rival sects, with equal rights, exercise mutual censorships in favor of good morals; that if new sects arise with absurd opinions or over-heated maginations, the proper remedies lie in time, forbearance and example; that a legal establishment of religion without a toleration could not be thought of, and with toleration, is no security for public quiet and harmony, but rather a source itself of discord and animosity; and, finally, that these opinions are supported by experience, which has shewn that every relaxation of the alliance between*

*law and religion, from the partial example of Holland, to its consummation in Pennsylvania Delaware, New Jersey &c., has been found as safe in practice as it is sounds in theory. Prior to the Revolution, the Episcopal Church was established by law in this State. On the Declaration of Independence it was left, with all other sects, to a self-support. And no doubt exists that there is much more of religion among us now than there ever was before the change; and particularly in the sect which enjoyed the legal patronage. This proves rather more than, that the law is not necessary to the support of religion. (Letter to Edward Everett, March 19, 1823).*

- *The experience of the United States is a happy disproof of the error so long rooted in the unenlightened minds of well-meaning Christians, as well as in the corrupt hearts of persecuting usurpers, that without a legal incorporation of religious and civil polity, neither could be supported. A mutual independence is found most friendly to practical Religion, to social harmony, and to political prosperity. (Letter to F.L. Schaeffer, Dec. 3, 1821).*

### **U.S. Treaty No. 122, "The Treaty of Tripoli," Clause 11**

- *As the government of the United States of America is not in any sense founded on the Christian religion,- as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion or tranquility of Musselmen...it is declared by the parties that no pretext arising from religious opinions shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries. (This treaty was negotiated under George Washington's Administration; President John Adams, Second U.S. President, submitted it to the U.S. Senate; the 5<sup>th</sup> U.S. Congress unanimously ratified the treaty; and President Adams signed it on June 5, 1797).*

### **George Washington – First U.S. President**

- *The Citizens of the United States of America have a right to applaud themselves for having given to mankind examples of an enlarged and liberal policy: a policy worthy of imitation. All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship. It is now no more that toleration is spoken of, as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people, that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights. For happily the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. (Letter to Touro Synagogue, 1790).*

### **Benjamin Franklin**

- *I am fully of your Opinion respecting religious Tests; but, tho' the People of Massachusetts have not in their new Constitution kept quite clear of them, yet, if we consider what that People were 100 Years ago, we must allow they have gone great Lengths in Liberality of Sentiment on religious Subjects; and we may hope for greater Degrees of Perfection, when their Constitution, some years hence, shall be revised. If Christian Preachers had continued to*

*teach as Christ and his Apostles did, without Salaries, and as the Quakers now do, I imagine Tests would never have existed; for I think they were invented, not so much to secure Religion itself, as the Emoluments of it. When a Religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and when, it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support, so that its Professors are oblig'd to call for help of the Civil Power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one. (Letter to Richard Price, October 9, 1780).*

### **Thomas Paine**

- *Persecution is not an original feature in any religion; but it is always the strongly-marked feature of all law-religions, or religions established by law. Take away the law-establishment, and every religion re-assumes its original benignity. (The Rights of Man, 1791-1792).*

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