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Mark Caleb Smith

*Cedarville University*, [mcsmith@cedarville.edu](mailto:mcsmith@cedarville.edu)

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# RELIGIOUS FREEDOM AND AMERICAN HISTORY: REASONS TO THANK GOD

by Mark Caleb Smith



When the United States Supreme Court begins a new session, the Marshal of the Court solemnly intones:

“All persons having business before the honorable, the Supreme Court of the United States, are admonished to draw near and give their attention, for the Court is now sitting. God save the United States and this Honorable Court!”

The last sentence jars modern ears, but “God” regularly inhabits the trappings of our federal government. Our currency reads, “In God We Trust.” Our presidents, by tradition, take the Oath of Office on a Bible and conclude it with the phrase, “So help me God.” Congress opens its sessions with prayer.

## Competing Visions

We have a long history of “civil religion,” but it would be a mistake to ascribe these instances to mere ceremony. Our founders valued religion for very particular reasons. George Washington, in his Farewell Address, said:

“Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, religion and morality are indispensable supports.”

Like many, but not all, of his generation, Washington believed religion was the foundation of morality and that our government, to be successful, required a moral people. As such, those who wrote and ratified the Constitution wanted to protect religious freedom. For them, there was no conflict between that desire and government’s ability to favor religion, either through ceremony, symbolism, or, in some instances, actual policies. The government could fund military chaplains, for example, and stay within the parameters of the First Amendment as long as it did not choose a particular church or sect to favor.


Thomas Jefferson thought differently. He argued, in his famous letter to Baptists in Danbury, Connecticut, for a “wall of separation between church and state.” While Jefferson’s wall was not absolute, he thought separating the two institutions and, to a degree, religion and politics, would promote political freedom and protect individual conscience.

These somewhat competing visions, which are still with us, have defined how our nation perceives religious freedom, especially within the context of politics. Some, like Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia, see it as a mechanism by which the religious are free to influence government and where government may favor religion in certain circumstances. Others, like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, see religion’s influence on government, and vice versa, as a source of conflict.

## A Christian Response

As America becomes more diverse, questions of religious freedom will only mount. The Supreme Court, as it makes critical decisions about the First Amendment’s precise contours, will continue as the epicenter of strife. As Christians examine this reality, we should keep two things in mind.

First, we must keep a healthy perspective. We enjoy an enormous amount of religious liberty. Americans are free to worship any god or no god. Christians are free to share their beliefs with very few constraints. We can organize, lobby, run for office, and vote for whomever we wish. Christians can buy or run radio and TV stations, newspapers, magazines, websites, and blogs. We are free to have religious schools, like Cedarville University. By any measure, we have significant religious freedom, and we should regularly thank God for it.

Second, we should remember that through debate, disagreement, and discussion, we have an opportunity to reveal Christ to the political and legal worlds. Winning an argument, a case, or an election may provide a respite for our weariness, but we are called to witness even through the manner in which we do these things. To paraphrase Christ, what does it profit a people to assert their rights, but while doing so to lose their souls? We must prove ourselves worthy ambassadors regardless of our successes or failures. This is our greatest challenge. 

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**Mark Caleb Smith** is an Associate Professor of Political Science and Director of the Center for Political Studies at Cedarville. He received a master’s degree from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School and a master’s and Ph.D. from The University of Georgia.