

## Church, state and politics

Church and state in the USA are supposedly separate. The First Amendment of the Bill of Rights (1791) states that 'Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof'. This forbids the creation of a national church, state-supported religion and the promoting of religion. It also protects individuals' right to practice their own faiths. The First Amendment applies only to the federal government, not to the states. However, the Fourteenth Amendment (1868) has been interpreted to mean that the states must also protect and guarantee the rights of religion.

Religion, or the lack of it, is a private matter. A CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in 2003 found that 54 percent of respondents thought that the promoting of a religion by the government or in schools always harms the rights of those people who do not belong to that religion. However, a Newsweek poll in 2002 had reported that 54 percent of respondents felt that, in terms of the separation of church and state, the government should not avoid promoting religion in any way. An Anti-Defamation League (ADL) poll in 2005 found that many Americans now supported a more direct role for religion in public life, such as organized school prayers, the teaching of creationism, allowing religious symbols such as the Ten Commandments to be displayed in public buildings and continuing the use of 'One Nation, Under God' in the pledge of allegiance.

These findings might suggest that Americans are divided on the question of religion in public life and that the principle of church-state separation is threatened. Many people think that religion is under attack and some believe that the church-state barrier should be abolished. Others would like to Christianize America and turn the nation away from its pluralistic, inclusive and tolerant image. However, an AP/IPSOS survey in May 2005 reported that 61 percent of Americans were against attempts by religious leaders to influence government decisions and public policy.

There were established churches before the War for Independence and Massachusetts had an official church into the 1830s, but eventually all churches were separated from the state. There are no church taxes; the churches are not supposed to receive any direct state or federal support; there are no legal or official religious holidays; and no political party is affiliated to a particular denomination. Any attempt to introduce legislation in these areas would, strictly speaking, be regarded as violating the Constitution.

Religious groups are therefore independent organizations and self-supporting. They depend upon their members' financial contributions for their existence and payment of expenses. Americans' donations to their churches are very generous, with 45 percent of all charitable donations going to religion. Fundamentalist and

evangelical churches attract the greatest amounts. Local religious buildings and their congregations are the strengths and centers of US religion. They also provide social, cultural and community activities, supply relief aid for the poor and needy and engage in missionary work domestically and overseas.

But, as society has become more complex and government more pervasive, church and state have interfered with each other. States have historically restricted freedom of religion by prohibiting Catholics and Jews from voting or holding public office. The law has also interfered with minority religions which require special working practices, such as Mormons and Seventh-Day Adventists. In such cases, the Supreme Court and Congress have often invalidated limitations by permitting exceptions to the general rule. The Supreme Court has also restricted adherents' free practice of religion if their behavior is against the public interest. The George W. Bush administration arguably blurred the distinction by its espousal of faith-based social services and federal funding of religious groups. The division between church and state is not absolute, and both Congress and the Supreme Court have sometimes reached decisions which appear to contradict the First Amendment. Some critics argue that the inconsistencies between civic duty and individual conscience are incapable of resolution and result from the tensions within the First Amendment itself.

Although religion is supposed to be a private matter, public and private lives are not inseparable. Given the prevalence and diversity of denominations in American life, it is inevitable that religion and its moral concerns should influence public and political debates on issues such as abortion, the death penalty, same-sex marriage and armed conflicts. For example, Pew research polls in 2003 found that although 53 percent of respondents were against gay marriage (38 percent in favor), this marked a decreased opposition from 65 percent in 1996. A Gallup poll in 2006 reported that most Americans had become more moderate on abortion. Fifty-five percent supported abortion under certain circumstances, 24 percent felt that it is legal in any circumstance and 20 percent believed that it was illegal in all cases.

A religious sensibility is also reflected in national symbols and emblems such as the US seal, the currency and the pledge of allegiance to the American flag. US Presidents often belong to a religious group and politicians frequently refer to God and the Bible in their speeches. US Presidents swear the inaugural oath of office on the Bible, sessions of Congress commence with prayers and both Houses of Congress have official chaplains.

However, formal religion generally has little real influence in national political matters or institutions. Politicians are conscious of the constitutional position and its restrictions upon government action, as well as the restraints of religious tolerance. Nevertheless, personal beliefs and values may affect the way in which individuals react to political issues, how they vote in elections and which parties

and candidates they support.

A source of national debate about religion and politics has revolved around the role of evangelical groups and their leaders. Many of them are very visible, actively propagate their beliefs and attempt to influence public opinion, social institutions and political processes. They do not restrict themselves to moral and religious matters, but campaign on political issues such as anti-abortion legislation and prayers in public schools. The evangelical right, sometimes known as 'the moral majority' or the 'Christian coalition/right' because of its absolutism and stress upon alleged American values, has supported conservative politicians in election campaigns, and some of its leaders have also attempted to gain political office.

The role of religion in politics and social issues is a divisive matter. A Pew Research Center poll in 2004 found that 51 percent of respondents thought that churches should be able to express political and social views, while 44 percent did not. Sixty-five percent considered that churches should not favor anyone candidate in a political election over another, while 25 percent thought they should. Yet a CNN/USA Today/Gallup poll in 2003 showed that 90 percent of respondents approved of the words 'In God We Trust' on US coins. The Supreme Court has not ruled that these words and 'One Nation, Under God' are unconstitutional.