

Happy Birthday, America

The recent July 4 holiday always brings out the patriotism in everyone. We sing patriotic songs as fireworks burst in the air. And, as is our custom, we debate political policies and the future of our country. One issue that invariably arises is the role of religion in our nation's founding. People actually get into fiery debates over this seemingly innocent topic.

For many people, this is a Christian nation, based on Christian principles. Others disagree, pointing out that the U.S. Constitution does not mention God, Christianity or any other religion. Yet, every person who was involved in writing the Constitution was raised in a sect of Christianity. None of them denied belief in Jesus or in the tenants of that faith. Several, such as Thomas Jefferson, were deists – they believed in God, but not necessarily in Jesus. However, when Jefferson edited the New Testament to remove what he considered mythology, he did not excise Jesus.

Still, overall evidence is that the United States is not a Christian nation.

Here are some basic reasons:

- The Constitution itself divorced religion from the political equation: “No religious Test shall ever be required as a qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” (Art. 6, Sec. 3).
- The First Amendment of the Constitution forbids the creation of any laws “respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” The only oath spelled out in the Constitution, the presidential oath of office, contains no reference to God or the Bible.
- In 1797, near the end of George Washington's second term, he approved a treaty with Tripoli that declared "the government of the United States is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion." John Adams shepherded the treaty through Congress without dissent over the wording. Nor did the public object when the treaty was published.
- In a letter to a Baptist group in 1802, President Jefferson described "a wall of separation between church and state." That term has become commonplace in court decisions, reflecting the idea that religion has no place in government action.
- Jefferson emphasized that government had no right to promote any religion or interfere with private belief. He underlined that belief by asking visitors in the White House why he should care what his neighbor believes?
- Even though the vast majority of Americans are Christian – about 75 percent at last count -- the Constitution guarantees that they cannot impose their religious beliefs on others. The 14th Amendment also prevents states and cities from creating restrictions that would deprive minorities of their Constitutional rights.
- The government was not based on the Ten Commandments or any religious teachings. Instead, our Founding Fathers drew on ideas of democracy followed by the Indians, their knowledge of European government and some original ideas.