

# **The Role of Religion in the Formation of American Identity**

## **Introduction**

Historians and scholars have long discussed the role of religion in American identity, but it is a complicated and varied subject because of the changes in the American landscape. American identity refers to the cultural, social, and political ideals that characterize the American people. Since the earliest days of American history, religion has substantially influenced the development of these values and beliefs. Understanding the role of religion in the construction of American identity is essential because it identifies the forces that have molded the cultural and political landscape of the nation. It enables interested parties to know why and how religion impacted the colonial period and continues to influence today greatly. Studies show that its role in American identity has evolved, with different religious groups significantly shaping the country's values. Through an exploration of the historical, cultural, and political aspects of religion in America, this essay aims to illustrate how religion has shaped American identity, the tensions that have arisen as a result, and the implications for the future of American society. This paper will show that religion has been and will continue to be an essential factor in shaping American identity, influencing individual beliefs, political decisions, and social movements.

## **Historical Overview of Religion in America**

The methodology of this research is primarily centered on analyzing textual sources, such as historical documents, religious texts, and scholarly materials. This section will explore the historical overview of religion in America, the early religious groups, and their influence on the construction of American identity. The analysis will also focus on the Great Awakening and its influence in the colonial period.

## **The Arrival of Religion in America**

Religion initially appeared in America in the early 16th century, when the first European colonists, mostly Spanish and French, founded colonies in Florida and Louisiana. However, British settlers who had real influence in introducing religion founded Jamestown, Virginia, the first definitive settlement in North America, in 1607 (Vaca, 2019). The Anglican Church served as the main place of worship during the early stages of colonization, and religion was important to that process.

### **Early Religious Groups**

Puritans, Quakers, and Catholics were among the early religious organizations to come to America, and they all greatly influenced how the US came to define itself. First, the Puritans, who immigrated to America in the early 17th century, strongly valued individualism and believed that hard labor and education were important (Sigmund, 2019). This Puritan work ethic influenced the development of the American identity as a nation of self-made, hard-working people who value education and personal growth. The Quakers, who immigrated to America in the late 17th century, had a different influence on American identity development. They supported social justice and equality for all people, including women and Native Americans. The religious tolerance expressed by the Quakers influenced the development of the American identity as a nation that upholds diversity.

The Catholic Church, which arrived in America in the early 18th century, also shaped American identity through its education system. Catholic schools provided an alternative to public schools, emphasizing discipline, hard work, and a strong moral code. This Catholic education system influenced American identity as a nation of individuals with a strong work ethic, moral values, and discipline.

### **The Great Awakenings and Their Impact**

In the mid-18th century, religious waves swept through American colonies and lasted until the 19th century. The first Great Awakening occurred around the 1730s and 40s and was

characterized by a resurgence of interest in Christianity (Balmer, 2021). This created excitement among believers and gave rise to new religious movements. Evangelists such as George Whitefield and Jonathan Edwards worked to foster an intimate, spiritual relationship with God. They emphasized the value of the individual religious experience over the established hierarchies of organized religion. This emphasis on individualism and personal piety influenced American identity since it was consistent with the larger cultural norms of self-governance and self-reliance spreading throughout the colonies. Balmer (2021) add that the movement promoted a sense of shared identity among Americans by breaking down the barriers between the individual colonies. The enthusiasm for religion also left a long-lasting impression on American literature and the arts. It spawned a wave of hymns, religious poetry, and other cultural expressions that contributed to the formation of American culture.

The Second Great Awakening began in the early 1800s when the US rapidly expanded in people and territory (Ward, 2020). The religious resurgence at this time responded to the uncertainty and anxiety many Americans felt about the country's future. The Awakening strongly emphasized individual salvation and encouraged followers to seek a close relationship with God. Thus, this religious movement had an even greater impact on American identity formation, aligning with the emerging social and economic change. As the country transitioned from an agricultural to an industrial society, many people were disconnected from traditional communities and meaning sources.

The Second Awakening created a sense of community and belonging through participation in religious revivals and social reform movements. According to Nash (2019), many evangelical Christians actively addressed social issues, such as abolitionism, because they felt it was their duty to change society per their religious principles. This reinforced the belief that people can make a positive change in the world through an individual agency. The Awakening significantly contributed to the growth of American democracy as evangelical

Christians became more involved in politics (Ward, 2020). The public became actively involved in challenging power structures and advancing an inclusive vision of American society. The Second Great Awakening made the United States a distinctly religious nation. It established a cultural and moral framework that still influences American identity today.

### **Impact of Religion on Colonial America**

Religion played a huge role in colonial Americans' social and political lives. Churches were the center of social activity, and religious authorities frequently impacted the community. Religious beliefs also influenced the political views and behaviors held by most groups. For example, the Puritans clung to the idea of the "covenant," which was based on the agreement entered by God and the community (Gorski, 2019). People were responsible for building a "city upon a hill," a society that would serve as an example to the rest of the world. The Puritans had the conviction that their religious norms were exceptional and issued penalties for anybody who disobeyed them.

Religion also influenced colonial America's economy. Many religious communities, including the Quakers, promoted a simple way of life and avoided trading or entering into business deals. On the other hand, the Puritans considered a success in business and hard work a sign of God's favor. They also exercised the idea of predestination, which maintained that God had already chosen who would be saved and who would be damned. This idea gave rise to the Protestant work ethic that strongly emphasized diligence to affirm one's salvation.

These religious differences led to political and social conflicts. As mentioned, the Puritans believed their religious beliefs were superior. They deliberately worked to repress the behaviors of other religious organizations like the Quakers and Catholics because of their great intolerance to them. The prejudice resulted in many people being convicted of witchcraft and imprisoned through the Salem witch trials (Gorski, 2019). Contrarily, the Quakers, who presented as pacifists, opposed the hierarchies and activities, such as serving in

the military, resulting in disagreements with the government. Additionally, many settlers believed they had a divine calling to "civilize" Native Americans whose practices were unchristian and conventional. As a result, most of them were forcibly converted by being forced to learn Christianity in mission schools, which made them reject their native culture and adopt European habits.

### **Religion and the Founding of the United States**

Religion was important in the development of American identity, particularly during the founding of the US government. Key figures, widely known as the Founding Fathers, held a variety of religions, and their perspectives on religion shaped the country's founding policies and laws.

#### **Influence of the Founding Fathers**

The term "Founding Father" refers to a group of American statesmen instrumental in forming the US. They had diverse religious beliefs, ranging from Protestantism to Deism, but they had an immense influence on shaping the nation. Although most of them were Christians, their opinions on God's nature, the place of religion in society, and the connection between religion and politics varied. For example, Thomas Jefferson, James Madison, and Benjamin Franklin held a Deist belief that God was uninvolved and far-off (Sigmund, 2019). They believed the divine is not involved in human matters, suggesting that religion should be a personal practice that does not influence politics or the administration. On the other hand, prominent figures such as John Adams and George Washington were devout Christians who held a personal God who interjected himself into human affairs (Holdzkom, 2023). They saw themselves as vessels supposed to execute God's plan. The opposing sides led to forming of a nation that did not favor religious affiliation.

#### **The Role of Religion in the American Revolution**

Religion was essential to the American Revolution as a driver and a unifier. Many colonists viewed the war with Great Britain as a spiritual battle for liberty and independence. According to Holdzkom (2023), they saw it as their responsibility to struggle for their rights predestined by God. The priests were crucial in generating support for the cause by conducting patriotic sermons, influencing public opinion, and raising funds for resistance movements. For example, the "Black Regiment" significantly contributed to the war. They donned black cassocks, carried muskets, and used their churches to encourage the congregation to join the movement (Nash, 2019). Thus, while the Revolution was waged due to political oppression, it created a course for more religious practices. Many states that developed during the time were based on religion and the protection of these affiliations.

### **The Declaration of Independence and the Constitution**

Religious ideals and ideas had an impact on both the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In the latter, the phrase, "all men are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights," reflects the role played by religion in its creation (Sellers, 2022). This inclusion means that human rights are a gift from God that can never be revoked by an authority on earth, indicating the nation's emphasis on equality. Similarly, the Constitution has multiple allusions to God, including the phrase "Year of our Lord" to show a belief in God as the ultimate source of authority (Garvey, 2021). This meant that human rules should be per divine laws. It protected citizens against the government and its agencies' limitations on expressing their chosen faith.

### **The Separation of Church and State**

The principle of the separation of church and state is upheld in the US Constitution. The phrase "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof" reflects the Founding Fathers' belief that religion was personal (Robbins, 2020). As such, the government should not regulate or interfere with it.

The principle was crucial in forming the American identity that tolerated religion and advocated freedom. It allowed Americans to freely follow their faith without worrying about retaliation or prejudice. Additionally, the clause allowed different religious communities to coexist peacefully and contribute to the country's cultural and social fabric.

Additionally, the doctrine aided and continues to influence the creation of a secular political culture. Most American political discourse primarily focuses on individual rights, democracy, and equality (Campbell et al., 2020). In contrast, some nations, such as Iran and Saudi Arabia, mix religion and politics, limiting religious expression. The separation of church and state was influential in addressing the needs of society members with different convictions.

### **Religion and American values**

Religion has shaped the moral framework of the US through social and political movements and views toward controversial issues alike justice, equality, and human rights, which are major factors in American society. It is important to explore this relationship to establish its impact on American society

#### **Individualism**

The promotion of individuality in America has been greatly influenced by religion. The fundamental tenets of numerous religions practiced in America include the concept of personal accountability, the value of independence, and the conviction that each person can make a positive change (King, 2019). This inclination is based on the idea of salvation, which emphasizes the individual's duty for their redemption. This sense of personal accountability has contributed to forming the American identity and created a society that values success and personal achievement. Additionally, the heritage of religious tolerance and diversity in America has been significant in the growth of individualism as it empowers people to follow their religious practices. This has created a society free to follow multiple spiritual paths.

Although religion encourages individualism, there may be conflict within the religious group. According to King (2019), individualism may be unwelcome in some religious communities in favor of shared values and beliefs. Besides, the individualistic norms of American culture might conflict with the notion of community and shared responsibility that some religious institutions emphasize. As a result, American history has experienced long-standing tensions and religious conflicts between individual autonomy and authority.

### **Equality**

Religious convictions have greatly influenced the campaign for civil rights in America. Most of the leaders in the movement used religious justifications to promote equality. For example, Martin Luther King Jr. seldom failed to cite Scripture in his speeches to highlight Christian values of justice. This inference was common as religious traditions insisted that human beings possess inherent worth and dignity. For instance, Christianity declares that everyone is equal in God's eyes because they were all made in his image. As a result, many critics, such as abolitionists, suffragists, and civil rights activists, were motivated to struggle for greater social and political equality. It is worth mentioning the concept of Judaism's "tikkun olam," which translates to "repairing the world" (Grzeda, 2019). It is one illustration of how religion may spur civic engagement. It introduced the idea of learning to better understand the challenges and issues experienced by society members. This enlightenment made most leaders stress the value of kindness, fairness, and the common good.

### **Community**

Religion has long been essential to establishing and maintaining communities in the US. Religious groups offer a sense of community, emotional support, and a model for moral and ethical conduct. Organizations like churches, synagogues, and mosques are often the



focal point of their neighborhoods, offering a place of worship and a location for community gatherings and activities (Reddy & van Dam, 2020). Additionally, religious diversity has had a tremendous impact on American communities. There is also a rich tapestry of cultural expression and interaction because of the diversity of religious practices in America. However, religious diversity can also contribute to conflicts and divisions by fostering tensions between various religious groups.

### **Freedom**

Since the country's founding, religious freedom has been one of the main tenets of American culture. The Constitution's First Amendment provides freedom of religion, allowing one to express one's religious convictions and practices without restriction. As a result, many different religious traditions are thriving in America, creating a diversified and vibrant religious landscape. Additionally, religious organizations have been at the fore of social and political movements, fighting for causes like social justice and civil rights. Furthermore, religious institutions have significantly delivered social services to individuals from various backgrounds, such as healthcare, education, and disaster relief.

However, there have been difficulties with religious freedom. The conflict between religious freedom and other liberties is one of the most important tensions that result from that freedom. For example, there may be occasions when the right to exercise one's faith and the right to free speech are incompatible (Scribner, 2005). This conflict occurs when secular principles like the freedom of expression or the right to marry whoever one chooses conflict with religious views. There have been cases where religious company owners have refused service to minorities such as LGBTQ and Muslim clients, citing their religious convictions as the cause.

The conflict between religious freedom and public policy is another issue that results from religious freedom. Religious convictions are often in opposition to the law. Scribner

(2005) state that certain religious organizations reject immunization, and their opposition endangers the general public's health. Similarly, certain religious beliefs forbid people from accessing reproductive healthcare, including birth control and abortion. This means the state must compromise the public interest and religious freedom in such situations. This balance might be difficult due to conflicting interests, prompting calls for a thorough assessment of the values at risk.

## **Religion and Politics**

### **The Influence of Religion on Political Ideology**

US political philosophy is greatly influenced by religion. Politics and policymaking are significantly impacted by the way that many Americans merge their religious and political convictions. For instance, the political movement known as the Christian Right, which first gained traction in the 1970s and 1980s, has been essential in advancing socially conservative ideas, including resistance to abortion and same-sex marriage (Derichs, 2022). The movement's emphasis on traditional principles like the value of the family and the sanctity of life has greatly impacted the Republican Party's platform and political goals.

Further, religious organizations have influenced political thought by supporting social justice and human rights. Kawangung (2019) highlights that numerous religious organizations have led actions such as the struggles for civil rights, immigrant rights, and safeguarding the environment. In particular, the African American church served as an ethical and religious anchor for the movement's leaders and members during the 1950s and 1960s, when the fight for civil rights was popular (Kawangung, 2019). The literature further shows that other faith-based groups have initiated initiatives to combat income disparity and advance economic justice.

### **The Impact of Religion on Political Campaigns and Elections**

In the US, elections and political campaigns are significantly influenced by religion. Candidates employ religious rhetoric and symbols to win over voters, particularly those who hold or share religious views. For example, several Republican politicians win over Christian voters by campaigning using religious terms. On the other hand, Democratic candidates emphasize the value of religious tolerance and pluralism to appeal to their audiences. Religion has also influenced voter registration and participation. Churches and other religious institutions actively encourage their members to cast ballots and foster civic participation. This has especially been the case in communities of color, where the church has traditionally played a crucial role in political mobilization. While approaching political issues using religious components has worked for most politicians, there has also been debate regarding its inclusion in the field. Most critics believe using religious language to advance policies discriminates against minority communities and can be divisive.

### **The Proper Relationship Between Religion and Government**

Since the country's establishment, there has been discussion about how religion and government should interact. Establishing a state religion is forbidden by the First Amendment of the Constitution, which also protects the right to freedom of religion. However, there has been disagreement regarding how these laws should be interpreted.

On the one hand, critics contend that the government should have a more active role in advancing morality and religious values. They express that religious values help foster a more compassionate and just society by serving as a moral guide for political choices (Topidi, 2019). Others, on the other hand, contend that the government must refrain from endorsing any specific religion or set of religious beliefs and practices. They consider that this independence is required to safeguard individual rights and stop discrimination.

The argument that the government has grown too involved in promoting religious values has caused the separation of church and state to weaken has been intense in recent

years. As a result, the US is witnessing intensified disputes over the correct relationship between religion and government. Those who disagree with the separation contend that religious views serve as a useful source of direction for politicians and that the government has a significant role in promoting moral principles. Ultimately, the interaction of religion and government US will likely remain contentious as religious preferences change.

### **Contemporary issues in religion and American identity**

#### **Religion and Science**

History has seen a long-standing conflict between science and religion, with scientific breakthroughs regularly questioning religious ideas. There have been many confrontations in the US between religious beliefs and scientific views. For example, certain religious organizations that adhere to a literal interpretation of creation accounts oppose the idea of evolution. Furthermore, discussions surrounding stem cell research and genetic engineering have raised moral and ethical issues that touch on religious views.

Despite the conflict between religion and science, many religious societies have integrated scientific theories and discoveries into their practices. According to Neurath (2021), such groups interpret religious literature metaphorically rather than literally, which permits a more open-ended interpretation of scientific theories. Others who are open to the idea of mixing science and religion see science as a means of learning more about God's creation and figuring out the fundamental structure and meaning of the cosmos. Further, some religious academics and authorities actively engage in scientific research and attempt to incorporate it into their religious teachings. This shift is due to the emphasis on diversity and the need for creativity.

#### **Religion and Secularism**

American culture has been secularizing over the past few decades, with more and more people identifying as non-religious or having no religious affiliation. Particularly,

Morrison (2021) reports that the younger generations are less likely than previous generations to identify with organized religion. For example, the number of persons in the country who identify as Christians has decreased from 78% in 2007 to 65% in 2019, while the proportion of adults who do not identify with a religion has climbed from 16% to 26% over the same time period (Smith & Mitchell, 2022). Along with rising global awareness of gender equality, secular principles have also had an impact on the women's rights movement. In many nations, for instance, the proportion of women in the labor has increased, and women's presence in politics has also increased (World Bank, 2022). This trend is due to several factors, such as easier access to information, shifting cultural norms, and a loss in the power of religious institutions.

The advent of secularism has significantly impacted religion and religious values in the US. Religious institutions have a harder time attracting and keeping members as fewer people self-identify as religious. Some religious groups have responded to this by broadening their membership and adapting to the times. Besides, a higher emphasis is placed on individualism and personal opinions than devotion to religious teaching due to the loss of religious influence.

### **Religion and Globalization**

Religious communities and the practice of religion in the US have been significantly impacted by globalization. There has been increased cultural interaction and the spread of religious beliefs and practices due to people being more linked through technology and travel. This has increased religious variety in many regions of the nation and sparked the growth of new religious movements and hybrid spiritual practices. Additionally, the rise of international religious networks has been facilitated by chances for religious organizations to go beyond national boundaries. As a result, sentiments regarding globalization have been significantly shaped by religion. Some religious movements have embraced globalization to reach out to a

worldwide audience of believers. Additionally, some religious communities have led the way in solving global issues like poverty and environmental degradation, highlighting how connected everyone is and the necessity of taking action as a group. On the other hand, some religious institutions reject the influence of globalization because they regard it as a danger to cultural identity and traditional values.

### **Conclusion**

The significance of religion to American identity is expected to remain the same for the foreseeable future. Instead, it will continue to catalyze unity and division as society becomes more varied. It is difficult to predict how the role of religion as a reaction to these shifting cultural and political trends makes the implications for the future of American identity complicated. On the one hand, religion will have a significant role in defining American identity by giving citizens a sense of direction, community, and morality. This might be especially true for religious communities like Muslims, Sikhs, and other non-Christian faiths that have traditionally experienced exclusion or discrimination. Additionally, religion may continue to motivate social movements and activity, advancing critical concerns like poverty, climate change, and human rights.

On the other hand, as various religious organizations and their respective values clash, the place of religion in American identity may grow more tense and polarized. Some people may believe that religion is being pushed to the periphery of society as a nation due to the increase in secular and pluralistic views. Others may feel that secular forces are endangering their religious convictions.

A complex interaction of cultural, social, and political elements is likely to influence the future of American identity and the place of religion within it. It is crucial to acknowledge the various viewpoints and ideas that go into creating this complex and changing identity, even while religion will continue to define American identity. Eventually, it will be up to

each person to choose how they want to include religion in their sense of American identity and how they address religious diversity to create a more accepting and tolerant society.

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