Christianity in the United States: An Overview

Among industrialized nations, the United States is one of the most religious. Christianity, the predominant **religion**, has been present since the country's founding, and has intersected with public life to varying degrees over the course of its history. But in these early years of the 21st century, it is exerting unprecedented **influence** in the political sphere.

Freedom of religious belief and practice is constitutionally protected in the US, and the degree of protection afforded it is one of the country's ideals. At the same time, however, the Constitution maintains a separation between **religion**and government, including public school education. Many of the controversies surrounding the exercising of religious freedoms in the US stem from this divide, and are often characterized by conflict between the rights of the individual and teachings derived from various interpretations of the Bible, Christianity's primary text. Issues which cause steep spikes along this divide include abortion, evolution, the rights of homosexuals, stem cells, prayer in public schools, and sex education.

There is a question whether American values actually coincide with Christian values and at least one example suggests that they do not. Americans value personal freedom above all else, and if you ask an American, he or she will tell you that the country's primary ideal is having the freedom to do with our lives what we please. But according to the Christian Bible, our lives are not our own. In the First Corinthians section of the Bible, we are told that we are not our own, but were bought at a price, which was the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Christians, then may not do as they please, but are admonished to live as Christ would have them live, which could be very different from what direction the individual believes for himself or herself.

Yet Americans and, more specifically American Christians, range across a broad philosophical spectrum. They hold a variety of beliefs regarding the role of Christianity in private and public life, and the degree to which Christian principles should serve as moral guidelines for not only themselves individually, but also the nation's government and legal system. While the Constitution remains the primary guide for protecting **religion** and determining its infringement into government, it has undergone numerous challenges that underscore questions about the direction that the US as a whole is taking, both domestically and internationally.

[**Understanding the Discussion**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/pov/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=9df8c057-4401-45e7-8bf9-afc502710bb7%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4101&bdata=JnNpdGU9cG92LWxpdmU%3d#toc)

**Article 6:**An article in the US Constitution which commits government officials to uphold the Constitution and states that a religious test is not a requirement for political office.

**The Enlightenment:**An eighteenth-century European movement whose ideals included the primacy of reason and universal human rights based on liberty and justice.

**Faith-Based Initiatives:**Coordinated plans carried out by organizations which support issues and efforts deemed vital by a population or a community, with a religious foundation, generally Christian. Since 2000, the federal government has encouraged and supported faith-based initiatives in an unprecedented fashion.

**First Amendment:**The First Amendment of the US Constitution states that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of **religion**, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances." It has been used as the major guideline for protecting religious freedoms and upholding the separation of church and state.

**Liberation Theology:**the use of Christian principles to encourage the economically and socially disadvantaged in their opposition of tyranny and repression.

**Proselytize:**To spread one's beliefs in the hope of converting others to them.

**Separation of Church and State:**A phrase derived from the First Amendment which denotes that organized religions and government should remain independent of one another.

[**History**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/pov/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=9df8c057-4401-45e7-8bf9-afc502710bb7%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4101&bdata=JnNpdGU9cG92LWxpdmU%3d#toc)

The territory that in time became the United States was first settled by Europeans in the seventeenth century. Religious persecution of different Christian sects in their native countries prompted the first colonists to resettle on another continent, which was widely considered to be a new Eden - the garden, according to Christian belief, where Adam and Eve lived until their exile. From the beginning, then, the pre-history of the United States was for many, underpinned with biblical ideas; these same ideas were also used to justify the persecution of the Native Americans, the conquest of the continent and, later, the institution of slavery as well, conversely, as its abolition. The earliest examples of colonial and American literature are permeated with a Christian explication of the settlers' experiences.

The founders of the US were mindful of European religious intolerance and divisive religious wars, which many of the settlers had fled; yet they also borrowed ideas from the European Enlightenment that would determine many of the most respected freedoms of the developing nation. When the first Constitution of 1787 was deemed unacceptable, in part because it did not grant adequate religious freedom, it was revised with the Bill of Rights, or the first ten amendments, which among other things provided for the separation of **religion** and government and the right of worship. Nonetheless, a Christian point of view was still maintained in such documents as the Declaration of Independence, and in traditions, such as swearing oaths on the Bible.

Religious freedoms led to the formation of new, particularly American Christian sects over the course of the next two centuries, including the Church of the Latter Day Saints and the Episcopal Church. Many of these changes took place during the Great Awakenings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a period of heightened interest in Christianity. Scholars date the beginning of the fundamentalist Protestant movement and the formation of the "Bible belt," a conservative swath of territory in the southern-eastern United States, to these periods of religious revitalization. These sects stressed literal interpretations of the Bible, lack of fallacy in its scriptures, spiritual rebirth through Baptism, and the necessity of proselytizing.

In the twentieth century, the strict religious nature of a significant portion of the US population inspired several legal cases and conflicts. For example, Darwinian theory, because it removed God from the world and posited the idea of evolution, was proscribed in some schools for a time. Prohibition (1919-1933), a national ban on producing, transporting, and drinking alcohol, was another landmark. Other actions such as the banning of books in public schools, prayer in schools, and the addition and maintenance of the expression "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance have all been defended on the basis of Christian principles.

During the Cold War, the Christian character of the US was often stressed in order to distinguish it from the country's main enemy, the atheistic Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, further intertwining notions of patriotism with adherence to Christian principles and practices.

Beginning in the 1960s, Christianity was also used to oppose actions of the US government in foreign countries and to rally for social change within the US. Causes taken up by some Christians included the civil rights movement, and American military actions in Vietnam and, later, in Central **America**. Some American Christians also supported liberation theology in foreign countries, particularly in Latin **America**. Liberation theology is the use of Christian principles to encourage the economically and socially disadvantaged in their opposition of tyranny and repression.

Christian fundamentalism began to earnestly **influence** US politics in the 1980s, leading to the growth of the Republican-aligned religious right. Televangelists became increasingly popular and movements such as the Moral Majority were founded. Typical issues which fundamentalist groups rallied against included government welfare programs, abortion, contraceptives, and social and sexual mores that were considered a threat to the fabric of American life.

Those Christians who support a more active role for **religion** in the US argue that Christianity offers sound moral guidance both for individuals and for the nation. Believing that much of American culture exhibits signs of decadence and decay, they argue that only Christian principles can save family life and diminish societal ills. Not all Christians, however, are politically active or politically conservative.

Those Americans who advocate a strict separation of **religion** and government and complete freedom of choice in religious matters argue that it is the only way to guarantee that one sect or one **religion** does not become privileged over others. They also point out that any **religion** taken to an extreme generally leads to intolerance and the denigration of other belief systems. In contradiction to many Christians, they also argue that a system of ethics can be evolved without recourse to **religion**. A commitment to reason, tolerance, and individual rights, typical principles of Enlightenment thinking, are common to this perspective. Liberal and moderate Christians, as well as atheists and other non-Christians, can be found on this side of the divide.

[**Christianity in the United States Today**](http://web.a.ebscohost.com/pov/detail/detail?vid=2&sid=9df8c057-4401-45e7-8bf9-afc502710bb7%40sessionmgr4002&hid=4101&bdata=JnNpdGU9cG92LWxpdmU%3d#toc)

According to a survey conducted by the Baylor Institute for Studies of **Religion**, over 80 percent of modern Americans affiliate themselves with Christianity. Fundamentalist Protestants, mainline Protestants, and Catholics are the three largest Christian groups.

In 2000, the Christian right began to exert unparalleled **influence** on American politics. President George W. Bush spoke openly and often about his religious convictions, and his administration funded numerous faith-based initiatives. Despite Article 6 of the Constitution, political commentators noted during Bush's tenure as president, it became increasingly common for politicians to make public mention of their religious convictions.

The Christian right also became an important voter base in the first two presidential elections of the 21st century. Political analysts considered the support of the Christian right essential to the Republicans having won eight years in power at the presidential level, and for conservative efforts to reverse some trends which arose in the so-called "culture wars." For example, many within the religious right supported the teaching of intelligent design in public schools and opposed stem cell research and gay marriage. Christian ideology informs the support or opposition of these issues, regardless of who is the American head of state.

Since the attacks of September 11, 2001, the discourse surrounding the topic of terrorism has been termed by some as a clash of civilizations, one Christian, one Muslim. As they did during the Cold War, some Americans rallied to Christianity with renewed force in the face of international terrorism and political Islam. The effect of Christian philosophy on American foreign policy is less clear cut, but not to be discounted. While President Jimmy Carter, a Christian, devoted his presidency to peace-making activities and opted not to be aggressive toward an antagonistic Middle Eastern country holding American hostages, President George W. Bush, a self-proclaimed Evangelical Christian, was strongly influenced by his religious beliefs when determining foreign policy, particularly in the defense of humanitarian rights and the status of Israel. President Bush launched a preemptive war against Iraq using humanitarianism as his reason for the war.

In a December 2009 Gallup poll, 78 percent of Americans identified themselves as adhering to some form of Christianity.

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