
Independence and Dependence

**A sermon by the Very Reverend Sam G. Candler
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Observing Independence Day in the United States of America**

This is the week that the United States of America celebrates our country. And, today, in the Christian Church, we rightly give thanks for this country's liberty and freedom. I join all those who salute Independence Day in this land!

We call the Fourth of July "Independence Day," but I do not want to speak today about independence at all. Instead, I want to speak about dependence. Over two hundred years after our war of independence from Great Britain, I propose that it is not independence that holds this country together, but, rather, dependence. (In fact, it may be our various ideas of "independence" that threaten to pull our country apart.)

In particular, I give thanks today for two realities upon which we are rightly dependent, not independent. First, we are rightly dependent upon God. The character of this country has always included various sorts of religious faith; indeed, G.K. Chesterton said that "America is a nation with the soul of a church."

Jon Meacham, the managing editor of *Newsweek* magazine (and a faithful Episcopalian), has just written a careful and hopeful book describing our country's religion, titled *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*. Read it on the Fourth of July! He mentions Chesterton and faith in some truly Anglican ways!

Toward the end of his book, Meacham writes one short sentence which is worth memorizing. "Democracy is easy; republicanism is hard." (page 247) What he means is that electing people and deciding legislative issues simply by majority vote is rather easy. But electing people and deciding legislative issues according to a constitution is quite difficult. Our country is not just a democracy. We are a constitutional republic. We are dependent, if you will, upon a constitution.

I am thankful for these two dependencies of our country. First, a healthy United States realizes its dependence upon God. That dependence should always lead to humility, not arrogance. It should always lead to charity and care, not haughtiness and provincial isolation.

Likewise, secondly, a healthy United States realizes our dependence upon the Constitution, a constitution whose first amendment provides the guiding religious genius of this land: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The separation of church and state has come to mean much more than that, but the principle is worth remembering and giving thanks for, year after year.

Let me quickly review our country's early days of religion and politics.

When European settlers gathered in this new world three centuries ago, their firm religious sentiments also were solidly embedded in their political structures. It was unthinkable that a state-or a country-could exist without some accompanying

established religion.

To this new land, these folks also brought their religious faith. They were Anglican, German Lutheran, Swiss and Dutch Reformed, Anabaptist, Quaker, Jewish, and Puritan. Let us never forget when we celebrate the Fourth of July in our churches, the startling and sometimes conflicting diversity of religious expression in the early American colonies. When charters were granted to various individuals and companies in the New World, those charters usually stipulated what sort of religious belief and expression were to be allowed. This was true in Western Europe, and it was to be true in the new colonies.

Thus, religious beliefs often became the drivers of their political division. We would do well in these days of religious political partisanship to heed what our ancestors learned.

Consider the old Roman Catholic-Protestant antagonisms. Think of the Anglicans in Virginia and South Carolina who made church-going compulsory and who used state tax money for the upkeep of the Anglican Church (on second thought, maybe we in the Episcopal Church wouldn't mind this!). In Virginia, one could vote only if he were Anglican. Maryland, on the other hand, was established as a Roman Catholic colony

The Massachusetts and Plymouth Bay colonies were founded by groups expressly hostile to the established religion; those Puritans prohibited the presence of the Church of England.

The Baptists, too, were separating from the Church of England; but they were distrusted, in turn, by the Puritans. Roger Williams, banished from both Plymouth and Salem, ended up in Rhode Island with all sorts of other free thinkers, some so free and so strange that it was said, "If a man had lost his religion, he would be sure to find it in some Rhode Island village."

Meanwhile, Presbyterians were emigrating from Scotland and Ireland. New York was strictly a Dutch Reformed colony. They resented the Quakers, who therefore, went to Southern New Jersey and, of course, to Pennsylvania. George Washington could tolerate the Roman Catholics, but not the Quakers - who professed pacifism (Washington feared that they were Tories).

The new country's entire economy benefited from the slave trade (it wasn't just a "southern" thing). That slave trade, too, was often justified in the name of religion. It is one of the great miracles of religion that African-Americans actually found a source of salvation within the white man's religion; they took the slavery story of the Exodus-the flight to freedom and into the Promised Land-and they made it theirs. (Such is the way of God. God will not let salvation be confined to only the powerful few.)

The United States, then, has had its share of divisive and oppressive history, often justified by religion. But something new happened in this country, something which I give gracious thanks for this week. The founders of our country figured out a way to separate church and state in a way that gave enormous freedom to each.

Martin Marty, the great church historian, calls the principle of the separation of church and state as large a revolution as was the War of Independence: "The statesmen founders of the United States... set out to convince churchly citizens that religion was larger than their own sects. ... They [separated] what both tribal and church-minded people had kept bound together of thousands of years. No shots were fired, but in their own ways these achievements amounted to an American revolution as much as did the War of Independence." (Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land*, p. 155).

We do have a long way to go. Today, the plurality of various religions presents us with another challenge. But the genius of American separation of church and state gives us a noble platform from which to meet that challenge. We can do it. If our early American religious communities found a way to live above their differences, perhaps we can teach the world to live peaceably above those differences, too. It is no longer just the Protestants and the Roman Catholics who must learn to trust one another, but now it is the Christians and the Jews and the Moslems and the Hindus, too. We can do it.

In the United States today, we enjoy a tremendous gift: the principle of the separation of church and state. By the time of the Declaration of Independence, which we remember this weekend, Americans knew first-hand what religious intolerance was like. They knew what happened when a party or a state or a country tried to impose its own particular

brand of Christianity on its people. Such behavior did not lead to liberty, freedom, and independence. It led to dissension, oppression, and even death.

Part of the great American experiment, then, promulgated in the United States Constitution, was the *dis*-establishment of religion. No one religion, or one group's form of religion, would be the standard of government in this new land.

This decision was a beautiful one, for it allowed the brilliant diversity of American religion to flourish. The process was influenced, I might add, by some specifically *non*-religious principles, principles of liberty and freedom which emerged from Enlightenment thinkers such as John Locke and even Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and others hearkened back to the classics of Greece and Rome for guidance. That is why our dollar bill, even though it says "In God we trust," also includes the Great Seal of the United States with these two sayings: *Novus Ordo Seclorum* "A New Order of the Ages," and *Annuit Coeptis*, "He has favored our undertakings." Both these sayings come from the Roman poet Virgil, who lived before the time of Christ.

As a Christian in this relatively new world of the United States of America, I give thanks today for the separation of church and state, a separation which allows both religion and government to be truly free.

And I give thanks that we are, indeed, under God (whether folks acknowledge it or not!). I don't mind that phrase "under God," was added to the pledge of allegiance in 1954.

As Christians, of course, our primary allegiance is always to God; and, as Americans, our allegiance is to the Constitution. I give thanks for both this day.

AMEN.

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