

You say that at the time of America's founding, the debate over church-state separation was marked by the same kind of intolerance and violence the colonists had come to the New World to escape.

Yes. For the first 150 years of our history, almost all of the colonies had semiofficial or official state-supported religions; in New England it was the Congregational Church of the Puritans and in the Southern states it was the Church of England. The one thing all these established state churches had in common was intolerance for people who did not share their religious convictions.

To what lengths did they go to stifle individual religious freedom?

To great lengths. For instance, the treatment of Quakers in early American history was not just a case of harassment or persecution; in 17th-century New England it was a crime to be a Quaker. A Quaker who was ordered to leave Massachusetts and refused faced whipping for the first offense, an ear cut off for the second, and execution for the third. Every school child ought to know the story of Mary Dyer of Boston. This upstanding, churchgoing woman, along with some other people, started having what we would now call Bible studies at home,

offering up different views than those of the established Congregational Church. At first her minister accused her of heresy. Then, when she became a Quaker, she was banished from Boston a few times, but she kept coming back because she believed in the righteousness of her cause and in the truth of her beliefs. On October 27, 1659 she and two of her Quaker friends were tried and convicted of defying an order of banishment and sentenced to death by hanging. She watched as her friends' necks snapped; she was given a last-minute reprieve, which had been the court's intention all along. A year later she defied the law again and was brought before the General Court, with Massachusetts Governor John Endicott as presiding judge. She was found guilty, and on June 1, 1660 she was executed by the Holy Commonwealth of Massachusetts—the very government established by Puritans who had fled England to avoid religious persecution. Drummers lined the route, ready to drown out her words if she attempted to speak to the crowd.

Was this degree of persecution practiced in other colonies as well?

Baptists were persecuted throughout the colonies, but it was perhaps most intense in the part of northern Virginia that gave us James Madison, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson. In Madison's local courthouse, officials of the Anglican Church unleashed a wave of persecution against area Baptists, throwing them in jail simply for preaching their own gospel. This trampling on "liberty of conscience" had a profound impact on Madison, who later became the nation's most zealous champion of religious freedom. And it should be emphasized that his support for the separation of church and state was to promote, not to discourage, religion. Madison articulated the philosophy of religious freedom that I call the "founding faith" of America—promoting religion by leaving it alone, resulting in religious liberty for all.

Was Madison's intent to protect religion from government interference?

Yes, and interestingly, it was the Evangelical Christians of his day that rallied



"George Washington made history by extending the definition of American religious legitimacy beyond Christians. . . . [Previously], the discussion about toleration. . . referred to freedom for a variety of Protestants and, occasionally, Catholics [with] little mention (or tolerance) of non-Christians. So it was of great consequence when Washington visited the Touro Synagogue in Newport, Rhode Island, and then wrote [a] follow-up letter declaring full religious equality for Jews: 'The government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance. . . . May the Children of the Stock of Abraham, who dwell in this land, continue to merit and enjoy the good will of other inhabitants. . . and there shall be none to make him afraid.'"—Steven Waldman, from Founding Faith.