

The United States was founded just as the European Enlightenment swept through. The Enlightenment occurred after two centuries of religious wars had exhausted not only Europe's population, but also its intellectuals. Ordinary people were not theologians; they simply retreated to the various sects accepted by their families or rulers. Southern Europeans remained Catholic, while the more economically progressive north (England, Scotland, Scandinavia, and northern Germany) and their rulers favored Protestantism.

The 17th-century Pilgrims brought with them a form of Calvinism that was neither tolerant nor compulsion-free. Their zeal flagged over the next two centuries so that by the actual founding of the new country at the end of the 18th century, the Enlightenment shaped it. The Founding fathers, Enlightenment men all, forbade state support for religion. Religion was permitted to flourish, but without compulsion. Religion without official force is a wobbly thing; people may join---or leave, something entirely new in the world. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, new sects flowered, some of them native-born, but some of which eventually burnt out.

American presidents have over the centuries worked to keep religion separate from government, yet they adopting the values that most of the population cherished. The Quakers, for example, a British faith, came to America and were persecuted by the Calvinist Pilgrims. Over time, however, their values spread and they amassed a following that urged abolition of slavery. They succeeded in doing this in England in 1833; but it took thirty more years before slavery was abolished nationwide.

But, back to our beginnings as a country. The Dutch ruled New York (New Amsterdam) in the 17th century. When a shipload of Jews arrived fleeing Catholic persecution in Brazil, they sought refuge. The governor, Peter Stuyvesant, tried to bar them, but because the Dutch government had recently enacted the first legal religious toleration for Jews and Protestant dissidents, Stuyvesant was overruled by the home country. America's first Jews had arrived and lived, for the first time in 2,000 years, in freedom.

The Jews were granted full Dutch citizenship when a group of Jewish pirates brought to Holland the entire Spanish gold fleet they had captured at sea. Read this fascinating story in Edward Kritzler's: Jewish Pirates of the Caribbean, 2008.

During the Revolutionary War, one Jewish friend of General George Washington gave his entire fortune to support the war. This loyalty was not forgotten. Upon the retirement of President Washington, he wrote a letter to the Jewish congregation of Newport, Rhode Island, promising that religious "toleration" would give way to religious liberty, and that the government would not interfere with individuals in matters of conscience and belief.

"Every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and figtree, and there shall be none to make him afraid. For happily, the Government of the United States gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support." [Italics mine.]

Presidents Obama and Bush have been dealing with another bout of bigotry that both have tried to nip in the bud. Because Militant Islam carried out a deadly attack on this country on 9/11/01, President Bush hastened to distinguish between criminal Muslims and ordinary Muslim citizens. He insisted that "Islam is a religion of peace," asking Americans not to brand all Muslims as terrorists.

His intentions were good. We have too many bullies ready to bash heads of the innocent when stirred up. But Islamist lone-wolf attacks continued.

This month, President Obama did the same. He visited a mosque and assured Muslims that they are welcome and do belong in this country. He, too, means well. However, since 9/11, Militant Islam has burrowed among the Muslim population, carrying out (or trying to) murderous attacks. President Obama, aware of this, echoed George Washington that this minority should demean themselves as good citizens, in giving it on all occasions their effectual support. Muslim spokesmen resent that they are being held to a standard that other immigrants have not. Other immigrants did not require it.

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