

Religion in the United States: Key Documents

Directions:

Go through each excerpt and **underline/highlight the phrases or sentences that you think might have something to do with religion**. Then answer the question that you find in the right-hand column for each document.

EXCERPTS

Declaration of Independence (July 4, 1776)

When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness. ...

Does the portion you've marked reflect a religious attitude or perspective? Or is it a statement of policy about the role of religion in society? Explain.

United States Constitution

The Constitution was ratified by the required number of states by June 21, 1788, and went into effect on March 4, 1789.

Preamble

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

Article 6: Debts, Supremacy, Oaths

...The Senators and Representatives before mentioned, and the Members of the several State Legislatures, and all executive and judicial Officers, both of the United States and of the several States, shall be bound by Oath or Affirmation, to support this Constitution; but no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States...

The Bill of Rights

Amendment I: FREEDOM OF RELIGION, SPEECH, PRESS, ASSEMBLY, AND PETITION. Passed by Congress September 25, 1789. Ratified December 15, 1791.

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.

Pledge of Allegiance of the United States

The pledge was written in the late 19th century. It was adopted by the U.S. Congress in 1942 and the words "under God" were adopted in 1954.

I pledge allegiance to the Flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

The Supreme Court

Associate Justice Tom Clark wrote in Abington Sch. Dist. v. Shempp, 374 U.S. 203 (1963):

[I]t might well be said that one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization. It certainly may be said that the Bible is worthy of study for its literary and historic qualities. Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment.

Does the portion you've marked reflect a religious attitude or perspective? Or is it a statement of policy about the role of religion in society? Explain.

Questions:

1. When you consider these documents together, what do you notice about the role of religion in the United States?
2. Based on what you see here, is the study religion in public schools permitted? Why or why not?
3. When it comes to the role of religion in American society, are there some things that are prohibited? Explain your answer.