

SESSION 3: RELIGION IN THE PUBLIC SQUARE: A HISTORY OF FAITH AND A WALL OF SEPARATION IN AMERICA

(SLIDES 1-5)

This session will help us explore the history of religion in the public square of American life. What we have today was not the way it always was.

The American colonies were founded by religious refugees — Puritans in Massachusetts, Catholics in Maryland and Georgia, Quakers and Reform Protestants in Pennsylvania, Baptists in Rhode Island, and Jews in New Amsterdam. What they shared was a commitment to religious freedom that could not be found in Europe. And so, imbedded in the foundations of the United States, is freedom from religious oppression and freedom to be a person of faith. What roles religion has played in America is the theme of this session's exploration.

(Slides 6-7-8)

The history of America — and American politics — is inextricably linked to religion. Think of the great moments in America where religion was a force for good.

Take this opportunity to turn to a colleague and discuss your examples — how did religious leaders engage, inspire and motivate people to do good?

(SLIDES 9)

LET'S TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO look at the often complicated intertwining of American political and religious history.

The First Great Awakening that preceded the Revolutionary War was experienced as an outpouring of the **Holy Spirit. **Revivals** encapsulated those hallmarks and spread the newly created **evangelicalism** into the early republic as Evangelical preachers sought to include every person in conversion, regardless of gender, race, and status.**

In fact, religion played a major role in the American Revolution by offering a moral sanction for opposition to the British — an assurance to the average American that revolution was justified in the sight of God.

America was not able to avoid religious conflict. In spite of the Bill of Rights that enshrined religious freedom, there were anti-Catholic riots outside Boston in 1834 and in Philadelphia in 1844 where churches were burned and people were murdered.

And we know that slavery was often endorsed by faith leaders as a religious imperative. Yet we could not imagine the abolition of slavery, the Civil War, and the constitutional amendments that sought to enshrine civil rights in the 1860s without remembering the powerful religious voices that preached God's endorsement of emancipation as "His Truth goes marching on."

Religious tensions — and religious prejudice — rose again at the end of the 19th century. Blaine Laws were passed to limit the rights of Catholics and anti-Semitic covenants were passed to block Jews from buying homes or staying in hotels.

And no doubt the White Man's Burden and Christian missionaries led to the morally complicated conquest of the West and President McKinley praying on his knees to launch the Spanish–American War and American colonialism.

And World War I — the war to end all wars — was promoted by Woodrow Wilson, the son of a Presbyterian minister, who believed that universal peace was truly possible.

(Slides 11-12 -13)

Perhaps in response, there was a backlash, a concern that religion was intruding too deeply into the political life of America. By mid-20th century, new battles arose as Congress and the courts tried to limit the role of religion in the public arena, raising ever higher the wall separating church and state. For some, it meant religious influence was waning, yet many Americans still believe that religion has a constructive role to play.

(Slide 14)

Let's examine a most recent debate over what some call gay marriage and others call marriage equality. We see how the country is split. Our interest is not what particular views you have but how could you construct a healthy and constructive conversation which, of course, could include a call to action if you so desire. Please create small groups of three or four and together try to imagine a program you could offer in your congregation or in other faith-based settings that would constructively and respectfully address this polarizing issue.

(Slides 15-16-17-18)

This is a difficult time for religion, for speaking the word of God. Strident voices use God to justify violence and terror, murder and even genocide. Yet we do not believe such voices are what God wants of us. We believe and hope that there is in America, and around the world, a more authentic and compelling voice that understands that religious authenticity can be found by engaging others with deep listening and respect — even with those with whom we disagree. We are better agents of divine purpose when we speak truth with humility, and express passion while in true relationship with others. As a religious leader, we ask you to find your own voice to help heal the polarization and violent rhetoric.

You can help replace the hostility with compassion, civility and humility while staying true to your and your community's beliefs and values. That is the model America needs today. And you can help achieve it.