

Religious Liberty “ A Core American Value

Editor's note: This is an edited excerpt from [Bruce Prescott's manuscript](#) prepared for the ninth annual Interfaith Day of Prayer and Reflection last week in Oklahoma City.

Young James Madison graduated in 1771 from the College of New Jersey, now Princeton University.

Raised in the Anglican Church, the established church in Virginia, Madison fell under the influence of the John Witherspoon, president of the college.

Witherspoon was a Presbyterian minister known for his stout opposition to the church establishments in Scotland.

Madison studied Hebrew privately with Witherspoon and gave serious consideration to becoming a Presbyterian minister.

He shifted from ministry to law. That shift changed the course of history and helped to secure legally the fundamental liberty and core American value of religious liberty for all.

We get some idea about what propelled Madison to study law from a letter he wrote to William Bradford, one of his college classmates, on Jan. 24, 1774.

“That diabolical Hell conceived principle of persecution rages among some and to their eternal infamy the Clergy can furnish their quota of Imps for such business. This vexes me the most of anything whatever. There are at this [time?] in the adjacent County not less than 5 or 6 well meaning men in close Goal for publishing their religious Sentiments which in the main are very orthodox. I have neither patience to hear talk or think anything relative to this matter, for I have squabbled and scolded, abused and ridiculed so long about it, [to so lit]tle

purpose that I am without common patience. So I [leave you] to pity me and pray for Liberty of Conscience,” wrote Madison.

The men in “close Goal” were Baptist ministers.

Between 1760 and 1778, at least 78 Baptists in more than 153 different instances faced serious persecution for their faith in the colony of Virginia alone.

Records show that 45 different Baptist preachers were jailed in 56 different instances – and that doesn’t count all the times they were arrested and released without being jailed.

Madison lived in Orange County, where there were 14 instances of jailings.

Baptists were being jailed for disturbing the peace – they were preaching without a license.

They could not get a license to preach because they were Baptists, and Baptists were not approved by the established Anglican Church.

Baptist tradition holds that Madison was an advocate in court for some of these Baptist preachers.

Secular historians often note the decisive support of Baptists in a number of very close elections that Madison won on his way to positions that enabled him to write the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights and shepherd them through the ratification process.

I focus on Madison because I think he represents a conviction that is so firmly implanted in the American soul that we can describe it as a core American value.

That conviction is best described as the value of liberty of conscience, or religious liberty.

The Pilgrims that settled this land came looking for religious liberty. Once they were settled, they refused to grant the same liberty to people who differed from

them.

But within a decade of their arrival, Roger Williams began his long public advocacy for what he called “soul liberty” and “liberty of conscience.”

Williams’ influence on the American psyche is so great that a current best-selling book by John Barry is titled “Roger Williams and the Creation of the American Soul.”

Madison’s activism for religious liberty was prompted by his outrage at the union of church and state that permitted the marginalization and persecution of persons of minority faith by intolerant religious leaders and government officials.

His letter excerpt indicated the passion with which he protested.

Ten years ago, Damien Reinhardt and a small but vocal group associated with Oklahoma Atheists were aroused by the union of church and state on display on the first Thursday of every May when our government endorses a sectarian Christian Nationalist-organized and promoted “National Day of Prayer.”

They felt they were being marginalized in their own society. They were aroused enough to protest by standing across the street from the capitol with signs that said “Democracy not Theocracy” and the “NDOP is Unconstitutional.”

The group knew that I was president of the local chapter of Americans for Separation of Church and State.

They asked me to join them in their protest. I shared their concern, but I declined to participate in their protest that day.

I explained to them that I was also a Baptist minister, and I did not know how to join them without giving the appearance that I was also protesting against prayer.

I asked them to work with me to create an event that would respect the U.S. Constitution and liberty of conscience for all.

The result was an “Interfaith Day of Prayer and Reflection.”

Nine years ago, we held the first “Interfaith Day of Prayer and Reflection.” From the beginning, we wanted to focus on what unites all Americans and not what divides us.

Religious convictions divide us. Religious liberty is a right that unites us. We asked speakers from the broad diversity of faiths in our city to speak about the value of religious liberty.

We asked Jews, Christians and Muslims to speak about the value of religious liberty. We asked Wiccans to speak about the value of religious liberty. We asked atheists to speak about the value of religious liberty.

No group was intentionally excluded or marginalized. We did not engage in vocal prayer.

Instead, we concluded with a moment of silent prayer or reflection. Our desire was to demonstrate that we valued and respected the liberty of conscience of everyone in our community.

It was a worthy ambition. It still is.

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