

Religion Today
March 27-April 2, 2005
The First Commandment vs. the First Amendment
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The Supreme Court is now considering whether displays of the Ten Commandments should remain in our nation's courthouses and on government property. The reason for removing them comes from our country's legal restriction against the government promotion of religion. The main argument for allowing them is that they form part of the history of America's legal foundation and hence that dependence should be recognized.

This is an interesting claim, but one that is only true in part.

Certainly the Ten Commandments were important to the Pilgrims and the Puritans, who came to America for religious freedom. But the commandments played no significant role for the men who composed key documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Many of them were Deists, and believed that God had created the universe to run itself, without His involvement. This god certainly did not communicate with individuals nor act to "save" the human race.

The Puritans were perhaps the pivotal religious group in America's founding. They championed religious freedom, by which they meant that they themselves should be a community that was free to worship according to their beliefs. They believed that they were a new "Israel" and that therefore Scripture and the Ten Commandments applied to them. As a community, they enforced its legal requirements.

The First Commandment took on special meaning. "You shall have no other gods before me" meant: You shall not follow beliefs or practices about God different from those of the community. Freedom of worship was thus freedom to do as the community of believers determined, with scriptural and divine guidance, but not as individuals believed, whatever scriptural or divine guidance they received. The Puritans thus created a restrictive society, like the one they had fled.

People who went against the dictates of the Puritan community were expelled, as were fervent Christians such as Anne Hutchinson and Roger Williams. Both fled to Rhode Island, where Williams

founded America's first Baptist congregation. Rhode Island became a center for religious difference. Not only did several different types of Christianity flourish there, but so did the Touro Synagogue, one of America's first Jewish congregations.

Williams' ideas later became fixed in the Bill of Rights' First Amendment, which provides the foundation for the exclusion of government from involvement in religious matters. This so-called "disestablishment" requires all religious beliefs and organizations to be treated equally by the government, and has developed the United States of America into a haven of religious tolerance and freedom. Indeed, the U.S. probably is home to a greater variety of Christian denominations and a greater variety of religions and religious beliefs than any other nation in the world.

This religious freedom comes from the First Amendment's denial of the First Commandment. To be more specific, the First Amendment denies the government the ability to enforce or even influence adherence of American citizens to the First Commandment. Each person's ability to worship as they choose, whether to adhere to one church (or synagogue or mosque) all their lives, or to switch among them (and even convert) comes from the Bill of Rights' restrictions on the First Commandment.

Given this legacy, how can the proponents of displaying the Ten Commandments in courthouses win their case? Simple, by having the Supreme Court deny the Commandments' religious validity.

This is exactly what the historical argument aims to accomplish, for it implies that although the Commandments may once have been religiously important, they no longer are. But the proponents of these displays do not actually believe this. They gather regularly to pray for the court victory.

They believe that these displays will encourage good moral and religious behavior among people, especially America's youth. Given this, it would be sad that the Ten Commandments will remain on display only through a court ruling stating that they have no God-given character. This sounds like a deal of which the devil would be proud.