Government was instituted for the general good, but officers entrusted with its powers. have most commonly perverted them to the selfish views of avarice and ambition.

—Charles Carroll, 1773

The boisterous patrons of the small Maryland tavern fell suddenly silent as the small, well-dressed man appeared in the entrance. Charles Carroll of Carrollton paused as the gazes of so many fell upon him. Suddenly, one man called out, “There is the First Citizen!” The crowd rose as one to its feet and burst into applause. Carroll politely doffed his hat and bowed slightly in return. Carroll had been using the pen name “First Citizen” in a series of newspaper essays defending the liberties of Marylanders against the colonial government. By this spring of 1773, the prosperous plantation owner had indeed become the first among equals in the eyes of his fellow Marylanders.

Background

Charles Carroll was born on September 19, 1737, to a Catholic family in Annapolis, Maryland. His grandfather had moved there from Great Britain to escape religious persecution. Charles’ father owned hundreds of slaves and prospered as a tobacco planter. He expected young Charles to take over the family business once he had proved himself “a worthy heir.” Charles was sent to London and Paris, where he received an extensive Catholic education. When he returned to Maryland in 1765, he helped his father manage a forty-thousand-acre estate on which two hundred eighty-five slaves toiled.

As a Catholic, Carroll knew that he was at a disadvantage in America. When his grandfather came to Maryland, the governing family, the Baltimores, practiced religious tolerance. However, Maryland became a royal colony in 1691 and, therefore, subject to English law. The Church of England became the official church, and Catholics felt the consequences. They could not practice law or vote. They were prohibited from serving in government. They were also forced to pay taxes to the Anglican Church. Despite these severe restrictions, Carroll remained in his homeland.

The Revolutionary

The year 1772 marked the beginning of Carroll’s twenty-eight-year role as revolutionary spokesman and civil servant. He became involved in politics when the governor of Maryland fixed government officials’ public service fees at a high rate. At the time, citizens had to pay officials directly for certain public services. The proceeds from these fees were used to pay the officials’ salaries. Daniel Dulany, a high-ranking Maryland official, defended the governor’s act in a series of articles published in the Maryland Gazette. Carroll quickly responded.

Writing under the name “First Citizen,” Carroll argued that the fees were taxes. He contended that only the Maryland Assembly, not the governor, had the right to levy taxes. “In a land of freedom,” Carroll argued, “this arbitrary [unpredictable] exertion of prerogative [power] will not, must not, be endured.” The identity of the First Citizen soon became known to all. Dulany responded with both argument and personal attack. He questioned Carroll’s right as a Catholic to become involved in public affairs. Carroll defended the right of Catholics to speak out on political issues.
Carroll believed that the restrictions placed on Catholics in Maryland were motivated by a desire for power on the part of the Protestant majority. Religious belief was merely an excuse to deny political influence to men like Carroll. “Designing and selfish men,” Carroll complained in the year following his First Citizen letters, “invented religious tests to exclude from posts of profit and trust their weaker or more conscientious fellow subjects, thus to secure to themselves all the emoluments [benefits] of Government.”

The battle on paper between a powerful government official and a Catholic landowner captivated the reading public. As First Citizen, Carroll earned a reputation for intelligence and character. Soon he was elected to serve on local committees that supported revolutionary ideals.

In October 1774, Carroll was again in the spotlight. The local merchant ship Peggy Stewart had arrived in Annapolis with a shipment of goods, including tea leaves. With Lexington and Concord only six months away, times were tense. The English monopoly on tea and oppressive British trade policies had driven most merchants to sign a nonimportation agreement in protest. When the colonists learned of the shipment, they were outraged. They threatened the lives of the owner and crew.

The vessel’s owner called upon the influential Carroll for advice. It was immediately clear to Carroll that an apology or exportation of the tea would not satisfy the crowd. He offered a drastic solution: burn the tea along with the entire ship. Doubtful but desperate, the owner agreed. Crisis was averted.

**Diplomacy and the Declaration**

As the colonies plunged deeper into conflict with the British, Carroll worked tirelessly for independence. The citizens of Maryland elected him to serve on the first Committee of Safety in Annapolis. He also served in the Provincial Congress in 1775. The following year, he was chosen to represent Maryland in the Continental Congress.

The Congress chose Carroll, along with Benjamin Franklin and Samuel Chase, to serve on a mission to gain Canada’s support for the Revolution. Carroll was picked because he spoke French and was Catholic, like many Canadians. Though the delegation returned home empty-handed, Carroll became recognized as an important player in the national political arena.

In the spring of 1776, Carroll returned home and learned that Congress would soon vote on a resolution to separate from Great Britain. He also found out that the Maryland delegates in Congress had been instructed by the colonial assembly to oppose independence.

Carroll immediately returned to Annapolis to argue the merits of independence. He reminded the delegates of England’s tyranny. After much debate, the Maryland legislature joined in support of separation. In July, Carroll returned to the Continental Congress. Though he missed the vote for independence on July 4, he “most willingly” signed the Declaration of Independence on August 2. Carroll was the only Catholic to put his name to that document.

It was reported that after Carroll signed his name, a spectator commented, “There go a few millions.” If Britain won the war, Carroll would certainly lose his family estate and perhaps even his life. Victory, however, could bring both political and religious liberty. Like all who supported the Revolution, Carroll was willing to sacrifice everything he had for independence and liberty.
In Service to State and Nation

During the American Revolution, Carroll immersed himself in public duties. In 1776, he was elected to the Maryland Convention, the body that governed the state during the war. The convention appointed Carroll to the committee responsible for creating a state constitution. Carroll succeeded in enshrining religious liberty in the Declaration of Rights attached to the document. The final version of the Declaration asserted that “all persons professing the Christian religion are equally entitled to protection in their religious liberty.” Catholics thereby became equal citizens under Maryland law, having earned the right to vote and hold office.

After independence, Carroll continued to serve in the Maryland legislature. Following the adoption of the new Constitution in 1789, Carroll also served as a United States senator. In 1792, however, Maryland disallowed simultaneous service in both the national and state legislatures. Carroll therefore resigned from the national legislature in order to continue serving his state. He retired from the Maryland Senate in 1800.

Retirement

Even in retirement, Carroll continued to make public appearances. On July 4, 1826, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence, Carroll composed a short address to honor the occasion. “I do hereby recommend,” he announced, “to the present and future generations the principles of that important document as the best earthly inheritance their ancestors could bequeath to them.”

Carroll’s stature grew in his later years; he became famous among his countrymen as the last surviving signer of the Declaration of Independence. On November 14, 1832, at the age of ninety-five, Carroll died, quietly closing a chapter on the Founding generation.

Reading Comprehension Questions

1. What two topics did Carroll address in his First Citizen letters?
2. What did Carroll think was the reason that Catholics were denied rights in Maryland?
3. Why did Carroll become even more famous during the last few years of his life?

Critical Thinking Questions

4. What did Charles Carroll stand to lose by supporting the American Revolution? What did he stand to gain?
5. Imagine that you are Charles Carroll in 1832. Compose a one-paragraph newspaper article in which you reflect on the changes in Maryland between 1765 and 1832.
VOCABULARY AND CONTEXT QUESTIONS

Excerpts from the Antilon-First Citizen Letters

1. **Vocabulary:** Use context clues to determine the meaning or significance of each of these words and write their definitions:
   a. disabled/disabilities
   b. resolve
   c. speculative
   d. approbation
   e. papist
   f. knaves
   g. sects/denominations
   h. malice
   i. basest

2. **Context:** Answer the following questions.
   a. When were these documents written?
   b. Where were these documents written?
   c. Who wrote these documents?
   d. What type of document are these?
   e. What were the purposes of these documents?
   f. Who was the audience for these documents?
In His Own Words: Charles Carroll of Carrollton on Religious Liberty

Excerpts from the Antilon-First Citizen Letters

Between January 7 and July 1, 1773, Charles Carroll and Daniel Dulany, a Maryland government official, conducted a debate in the form of a series of letters published in Maryland newspapers. At issue was the governor’s proclamation setting government officials’ public service fees at a high rate. Dulany defended the governor’s act in a series of articles published in the Maryland Gazette. Dulany called himself “Antilon,” which combines “anti” (“against”) and an old English word meaning “unfair taxes.”

Charles Carroll quickly responded. Writing under the name “First Citizen,” Carroll argued that the fees were taxes. He contended that only the Maryland Assembly, not the governor, had the right to levy taxes. Dulany replied with both argument and personal attack. He questioned Carroll’s right as a Catholic to become involved in public affairs.

Below are excerpts from the third and fourth letters written by Dulany and Carroll.

Antilon’s Third Letter
Who is he [Carroll]? He has no share in the legislature, as a member of any branch; he is incapable of being a member; he is disabled from giving a vote in the choice of representatives, by the laws and constitution of the country, on account of his principles, which are distrusted by those laws. He is disabled by an express resolve from interfering in the election of members, on the same account. He is not a protestant.

First Citizen’s Third Letter
What my speculative notions of religion may be, this is neither the place, nor time to declare; my political principles ought only to be questioned on the present occasion; surely they are constitutional, and have met, I hope, with the approbation of my countrymen.

Antilon’s Fourth Letter
We are...put upon our guard by our laws, and constitution, which have laid him under disabilities, because he is a papist, and his religious principles are suspected to have so great influence, as to make it unsafe to permit his interference, in any degree, when the interests of the established religion, or the civil government, may be concerned.

First Citizen’s Fourth Letter
I am as averse to having a religion crammed down people’s throats, as proclamation. There are my political principles, in which I glory...Knaves, and bigots of all sects and denominations I hate, and I despise...[Catholics] cannot...enjoy any place of profit, or trust, while they continue papists; but do these disabilities extend so far, as to preclude them from thinking and writing on matters merely of a political nature?...

He will not allow me freedom of thought or speech...That you have talents admirably well adapted to the works of darkness, malice to attempt the blackest, and meanness to stoop to the basest, is too true.


Charles Carroll of Carrollton
A sound understanding of the United States requires an appreciation of the historical commitment of the American people to certain fundamental liberties. High on the list of these liberties is freedom of religion. The image of brave seventeenth-century English Puritans making the difficult journey across the Atlantic to American shores in pursuit of the freedom to live according to their faith is a powerful part of the American myth. Less remembered, however, is the fact that the commonwealth established by the Puritans was as intolerant as Anglican England, from which they had fled. Indeed, the road to achieving full religious liberty in the United States was long and arduous. By the time of the writing of the United States Constitution in 1787, Americans were committed to the principle of religious tolerance (or, to use the term of the time, “toleration”) and the idea of separation of church and state, but only to a limited degree. It would be another five decades before all states granted broad religious liberty to their citizens and provided for the complete separation of church and state.

Modern ideas about freedom of religion were developed in the wake of the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century, which shattered the unity of Christendom and plunged Europe into political and religious conflict. Though some European states remained religiously homogeneous, either retaining the traditional faith of Roman Catholicism or adopting some brand of Protestantism, religious division within many countries led to discord and bloodshed. In England, the church established in the mid-sixteenth century by King Henry VIII (who reigned from 1509 to 1547) faced stiff resistance, first from the many Catholics who refused to abandon the faith of their ancestors, and then from the Puritans who opposed the rule of bishops and wanted to purify the church so that it included only the elect.

Henry VIII’s successors, Elizabeth I (1558–1603) and James I (1603–1625), successfully quelled opposition to the Church of England (the Anglican Church), largely through harsh persecution of dissenters. In 1642, however, England was engulfed by religious civil war, from which the Puritans emerged victorious. The Puritan Commonwealth established by Oliver Cromwell ruthlessly persecuted Anglicans and Catholics. But Puritan rule was short-lived. An Anglican monarch, Charles II, was restored to the throne in 1660. This “settlement” of the religious crisis, however, was threatened by the accession of a Catholic, James II, to the throne in 1685. Anxious Protestants conspired and invited a foreigner, William of Orange, to assume the kingship of England. William invaded England, drove James into exile, assumed the throne, and reestablished the Church of England as the national church.

In this contentious atmosphere some English political thinkers, such as John Locke, began to advocate a policy of religious toleration. Locke’s ideas reflected a key assumption of Enlightenment thought—that religious belief, like political theory, is a matter of opinion, not absolute truth. “The business of laws,” Locke wrote in his Letter on Toleration (1689), “is not to provide for the truth of opinions, but for the safety and security of the commonwealth and of every particular man’s goods and person.” Public security was in no way dependent on a uniformity of religious belief among the citizenry. “If a Jew do not believe the New Testament to be the Word of God,” Locke stated, “he does not thereby alter anything in men’s civil rights.” Rather, intolerance led to “discord and war,” and Locke warned that “no peace and security” could be “preserved amongst men so long as this opinion prevails . . . that religion is to be propagated by force of arms.” Religious belief, in Locke’s view, was a matter of individual choice, a matter for society, not for government.

Locke’s views on religious liberty had a profound influence on American thinking in the next century. Other writings, however, particularly the Bible, had at least as great an impact on American political theory. Indeed, the American experiment in religious toleration began years before the publication of
Locke’s treatise, though the early history of Puritan Massachusetts Bay was hardly indicative of the course that toleration would take in America. Established by John Winthrop in 1630, Massachusetts was a repressive place where church and state were one and where religious dissent was ruthlessly stamped out. Dissenters had few options: they could be silent, suffer persecution, or leave the colony. Roger Williams, a freethinking preacher, was forced to choose this last option, leaving Massachusetts in 1636 to establish the colony of Rhode Island.

In Rhode Island, Williams instituted toleration for all people, and his new colony quickly became a refuge for persecuted groups like Quakers and Baptists. Williams’s case for toleration was at least as radical as Locke’s. Basing his arguments on the Bible, Williams insisted that the Jews, Muslims, and atheists were also deserving of religious liberty. The only “sword” to be used in fighting their opinions was scripture itself. Intolerance was an offense to God. “An enforced uniformity of religion throughout a nation or civil state,” Williams wrote in *The Bloody Tenet of Persecution* (1644), “denies the principles of Christianity.” Williams argued that forced belief was not only a violation of God’s law but also an unwise policy. “Enforced uniformity (sooner or later) is the greatest occasion of civil war, ravishing of conscience, persecution of Christ Jesus in his servants, and of the hypocrisy and destruction of millions of souls.”

Two years before the founding of Rhode Island, Cecil Calvert founded the colony of Maryland and proclaimed toleration for all Christians. Calvert himself was a Catholic, but he knew that the viability of his colony depended on luring enough Protestant settlers to make it an economic success. A policy of toleration, he hoped, would serve this purpose. In setting up Pennsylvania in the 1680s, William Penn, a Quaker, followed a similar course, making his colony a haven not only for his fellow coreligionists, but, like Rhode Island, a refuge for people of all religious sects.

Pennsylvania and Rhode Island would preserve uninterrupted their traditions of religious liberty, but in Maryland, freedom of religion would be curtailed for Catholics once Protestants came to power in the last decade of the seventeenth century. Still, the idea that some degree of religious liberty was a healthful policy for government became firmly rooted in America by the eighteenth century. Americans learned from the example of seventeenth-century England that religious persecution was ultimately detrimental to the political, social, and economic welfare of the nation. In America, where the Christian sects were more numerous than in England, the repercussions of religious intolerance would be especially adverse to the nation’s prospects. Americans’ devotion to religious freedom, then, was a product of necessity and experience as well as reason.

The crisis of empire during the 1760s and 1770s served to strengthen the American commitment to religious liberty. It was not only the intrusive economic measures passed by Parliament during these years that alarmed Americans. Patriot leaders also warned of the danger of the Anglican Church’s interference in American religious affairs. There was much talk that the British government would install a bishop in America who would become the instrument of tyranny. This idea that political and religious liberty went hand in hand was reflected in the New York Constitution of 1776, which explicitly connected “civil tyranny” with “spiritual oppression and intolerance.”

Nearly all the state constitutions written during the American independence movement reflected a commitment to some degree of religious liberty. The Massachusetts Constitution of 1780 promised that “no subject shall be hurt, molested, or restrained, in his person, liberty, or estate, for worshipping God in the manner and season most agreeable to the dictates of his own conscience.” The Virginia Declaration of Rights of 1776, authored by George Mason, proclaimed “That Religion or the duty which we owe to our Creator and the manner of discharging it, can be directed only by reason and conviction, not by force or violence.” Mason’s ideas mirrored Locke’s belief that government should not intrude upon the concerns of society.

But many states limited religious liberty to Christians in general, or to Protestants in particular. The North Carolina Constitution of 1776 decreed “That no person, who shall deny the being of God or the truth of the Protestant religion . . . shall be capable of holding any office or place of trust or profit in the civil department within this State.” Similarly, the New Jersey Constitution of the same year declared that “there
shall be no establishment of any one religious sect in this Province, in preference to another," but promised Protestants alone full civil rights. Thanks largely to the efforts of Charles Carroll of Carrollton, a Roman Catholic, Maryland’s Revolutionary Constitution was more liberal in its guarantee of religious liberty to “all persons, professing the Christian religion.”

The Protestant majority in America was indeed particularly concerned about the Catholic minority in its midst. Catholics constituted the largest non-Protestant creed in the country, and it was believed that Catholicism demanded loyalty to the pope above devotion to country. The connection between Catholicism and absolutism was deeply ingrained in the American Protestant mind and was a legacy of the Reformation, which Protestants saw as a period of liberation from the ignorance, superstition, and tyranny of the Roman Catholic Church. During the crisis with England, a wave of religious hysteria swept over American Protestants, who worried that the pope would personally lead the Catholics of Canada in a military assault on American forces. “Much more is to be dreaded from the growth of Popery in America,” patriot leader Samuel Adams asserted in 1768, “than from Stamp-Acts or any other acts destructive of men’s civil rights.” This bigotry caused Roman Catholics to become outspoken proponents of religious toleration and the separation of church and state. In a country dominated by Protestants, this was the only realistic course for them.

All thirteen states at the time of American independence, then, acknowledged to some degree in their constitutions the principle of religious liberty. Most also provided for some degree of separation of church and state. Several states went so far as to prohibit clergymen from holding state office, a restriction in the Georgia Constitution of 1777 that the Reverend John Witherspoon of New Jersey would famously protest. But few states provided for a complete separation of church and state, for it was believed that the government should give some support to religion in general. Though a substantial number of American elites in the late eighteenth century were not church-going Christians, nearly all believed in the God of the Old Testament, and all recognized the practical value of Christianity as a check on antisocial behavior. Many of the state constitutions written in the era of independence, therefore, required that government give some support to Christianity. Though the Massachusetts Constitution guaranteed that “no subordination of any one sect or denomination to another shall ever be established by law,” it also permitted the legislature to levy taxes “for the support and maintenance of public protestant teachers of piety, religion and morality.” Similarly, the Maryland Constitution of 1776 permitted the legislature to “lay a general and equal tax for the support of the Christian religion.”

There were, however, calls for complete religious disestablishment at the state level. In Virginia, James Madison and Thomas Jefferson were two of the most prominent advocates of a strict separation of church and state. Their ideas about religious liberty were clearly influenced by John Locke and fellow Virginian George Mason. In 1785, the Virginia legislature considered a bill that would provide for public funding of Christian instruction. The measure was backed by several prominent statesmen, including Patrick Henry. But James Madison, then a member of the legislature, took the lead in opposing the bill, reminding Virginians that “torrents of blood have been spilt in the old world, by vain attempts of the secular arm, to extinguish Religious discord, by proscribing all difference in Religious opinion.” The bill was defeated, and the following year, Jefferson introduced “A Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom,” which attempted to enshrine in law the idea “that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious Worship place or Ministry whatsoever.” The bill passed with minor changes.

By the time of the Constitutional Convention of 1787, there was a broad consensus regarding the proper relationship between the national government and religion: first, that the government ought not to give support to any religious sect; second, that the government ought not to require a religious test for office; third, that the government ought not to interfere with private religious practice; and fourth, that the government ought not to interfere with the right of the states to do as they wished in regard to religious establishment and religious liberty. These points of consensus were reflected in both the body of the United States Constitution and in the First Amendment, which was ratified in 1791 as part of the Bill of Rights. Article VI of the Constitution explicitly stated that
“no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” The First Amendment declared that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

The right of the states to set their own policy in regard to religion was implicitly acknowledged in Article I of the Constitution, which stipulated that to be eligible to vote in elections for the United States House of Representatives, “the elector in each State shall have the qualifications requisite for electors of the most numerous branch of the State Legislature.” Several states at the time mandated a religious test as a requirement for the franchise, and the Constitution therefore tacitly approved such tests. In addition, the First Amendment’s prohibition against religious establishment applied explicitly to the national Congress alone. Indeed, it was not until after the American Civil War, in the incorporation cases, that the United States Supreme Court ruled that some of the restrictions placed on the federal government by the amendments also applied to the state governments.

By 1800, then, there was a broad consensus among Americans that religious freedom was essential to political liberty and the well-being of the nation. During the next two centuries, the definition of freedom of religion would be broadened, as states abandoned religious tests and achieved complete disestablishment and as state and federal courts ruled that various subtle forms of government encouragement of religion were unconstitutional. Shortly after the dawn of the nineteenth century, in a letter to a Baptist congregation in Danbury, Connecticut, Thomas Jefferson asserted that the First Amendment created “a wall of separation between church and state.” What Jefferson meant by this term is a subject of great debate. But there is no doubt that his words have become part of the American political creed and a rallying cry for those who seek to expand the definition of religious liberty, even to mean that religion should be removed from public life altogether.

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Suggestions for Further Reading