

[The Making of the U.S. Constitution](#)

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Honoring James Madison, Whose Efforts 200 Years Ago Guaranteed Religious Freedom for all Americans

Nalluran, Muni America might have been a Christian country, as many modern-day evangelicals like to think that it is. The fortunate fact is, however, that the United States of America, largely as a result of one man's genius, heralds a secular government designed to ensure equality for all religions. That man was James Madison, and today because of his clear thinking and logically forceful arguments, Hindus throughout the United States are as free to build temples and worship in them as anyone of any religion is to worship in their own way. True, Christians had their influence in the formation of this great nation. Yet most of the founding fathers and constitutional framers were not Christians. They were Deists. (Some Deists were hostile toward Christianity; others were not.) Because of their strong intellects and profound insights which prevailed over urges to make America a Christian nation, it is their ideas that we live by today. Moreover, many mystics insist that the founding fathers were divinely guided by inner plane masters, and that many belonged to the secret societies of the Freemasons or the Rosicrucians - orders with beliefs closely akin to Hinduism. Note the dollar bill, which prominently displays the pyramid and the mystic third eye.

Hindus can be thankful, as are all immigrants to this country, that the founding fathers did create a genuine separation of church and state. They could have created a nation in which the Christian majority would now "tolerate" the existence of other faiths. But that is not the case.

The document which ensures this profound acceptance of the plurality of man's religious expression (and upon which all legal arguments in this country are ultimately based) is the Constitution of the United States of America, forged in a 4-month period by 55 statesmen in Philadelphia in 1787, 11 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. This September 17th, America will burst its seams proudly celebrating the 200th anniversary of that great accomplishment.

Today, the original Constitution is kept under glass at the national archives, entombed in a helium chamber to stave off its inevitable physical deterioration as long as possible, hydraulically lowered into a concrete A one-page parchment chamber each night. A one-page parchment document, its value is beyond measure. It is a noble inscription of timeless, lofty and long-lasting ideals which so far have endured and kept America a singular nation inspite of Promethean challenges. It is the oldest surviving national constitution. And freedom of religion is the first of all the rights it guarantees.

To learn of the Constitution's birth, we must go back 200 years to May 25th, when James Madison, a 35-year old intellectual, walked into the Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia as a delegate from Virginia with a draft of a new constitution in his pocket. He had spent the previous several years reading and thinking about the best way to found a government which would guarantee and protect the basic human liberties. Religious freedom - the freedom to worship God in any way, or not to worship God at all - was at the top of his list.

Madison was a shy man and a poor public speaker. (When he became the nation's fourth President in 1809, he spoke his inaugural address so softly that no one could hear it.) But he was an astute politician. He placed his delegation's proposed constitution as the first item on the agenda. That was crucial, for from the opening gavel that historic document, rather than attempts to amend the existing, problem-ridden "Articles of Confederation," became the issue of the convention. (The Articles were little more than an a mutual defense pact among the 13 states.) The 5' 6" Virginian guided the Convention through four months of debate. His role was vital, his understanding profound. He had combed through documents of ancient republics and gleaned the best from the state constitutions. His views were clear and he was consulted frequently. Among the ten original amendments, which formed the Bill of Rights, Madison wrote the first, outlining the right to freedom of worship; his proposals are embodied in eight of the others.

Madison was born into a wealthy tidewater Virginia family in 1751. Like his mother, he was frail and bright. In his childhood, he was tutored by two clergymen, was well-schooled in Greek and Latin and well-read in the classics. Then he went away to the College of New Jersey, now known as Princeton, which was under the leadership of Scottish Presbyterian John Witherspoon, who soon became one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Witherspoon's ideals for the college, stated in 1768, influenced the young Madison: "In the instruction of the youth, care is to be taken to cherish the spirit of liberty and free enquiry; and not only to permit, but even to encourage their right of private judgment, without presuming

to dictate with an air of infallibility, or demanding an implicit assent to the decisions of the preceptor."

The intellectual climate of the New World was decidedly anti-tyranny, anti-Tory and rationalistic. Unitarian groups with names like "New Lights of Awakening" were seen on the campuses and in the cities of the colonies. In fact, as far as religious seeking is concerned, it was a time not unlike our own. Many immigrants came to the colonies not only for financial reasons, but for freedom of thought and freedom of religion.

Europe had been through centuries of witch hunting and hysterical movements in which the general public was subject to the dominion of a few who claimed to be performing the will of God. The rationalistic movement was born out of that chaos. This movement's central belief was that God had installed in man the faculty of reason to use in developing judgment in his life, and that reason would guide him back to God. The religious philosophy which came out of this way of thinking is called Deism. Deists believed that God exists, created the world and imbued it with basic principles, many of them evident in the natural order. These divine principles were further evident in the axioms of mathematics and logic. The Deists ruled out the concepts of grace and divine intervention, arguing that God would not put aside the basic laws of the universe to come to the aid of one of his children because this would destroy his plan and send the universe on a helter-skelter course.

George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, James Madison and Alexander Hamilton, the primary architects of the Constitution, were all Deists or near-Deists. Some of the beliefs of the framers are reflected in a statement by Benjamin Franklin: "1) Virtuous men ought to join together to strengthen the interest of virtue in the world and so to strengthen themselves in virtue; 2) knowledge and learning are to be cultivated and ignorance dissipated; 3) none but the virtuous are wise; and 4) the perfection of humanity is a virtue."

Madison valued liberty above all, and formed his idea of government to ensure that tyranny could not take hold in this new republic. The power of government was divided among three branches. Just as a stool with three legs stands solidly, so a government with three branches - the executive, the legislative, and the judicial - would stand strong and would check and balance one another.

Madison also believed in and fought for the complete separation of church and state. In framing the Virginia Declaration of Rights, Madison had written, "Before any man can be considered as a member of Civil Society, he must be considered as a subject of the Governor of the Universe: And if a member of Civil Society enters into any subordinate Association, [he] must always do it with a reservation of his duty to the General Authority; much more must every man who becomes a member of any particular Civil Society, do it with a saving of his allegiance to the Universal Sovereign. We maintain, therefore, that in matters of Religion, no man's right is abridged by the institution of Civil Society, and that Religion is wholly exempt from its cognizance."

In regard to the nation's position on religion, the framers of the Constitution had two choices. They could have instituted a state religion and given other religious organizations freedom to exist. England has that kind of freedom of religion. The Founding Fathers could not have done anything less than that because there were so many religious organizations already active in the States - Baptists, Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists and Quakers, to mention only the largest.

Their other choice, adopted because of the insistence of Madison, was the complete separation of church and state, with no one religion more prominent than another. By writing, "We the People...do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States," the Founding Fathers clearly meant to found a state on the power of the people. The word for God does not even appear in the Constitution, and the very last stricture of the Constitution is that, "No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

Yet, neither Washington nor Madison nor any of the Founding Fathers was anti-religious. In fact in their own way all were deeply religious men. They wanted to protect against tyranny and they believed deeply in the role of individual conscience, that chamber in everyone's mind where reason lives and the individual faces God himself. Because of this deep concern, Hindus are free to worship in America.