Religious Right groups and their allies insist that the United States was designed to be officially Christian and that our laws should enforce the doctrines of (their version of) Christianity. Is this viewpoint accurate? Is there anything in the Constitution that gives special treatment or preference to Christianity? Did the founders of our government believe this or intend to create a government that gave special recognition to Christianity?

The answer to all of these questions is no. The U.S. Constitution is a wholly secular document. It contains no mention of Christianity or Jesus Christ. In fact, the Constitution refers to religion only twice – in the First Amendment, which bars laws “respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,” and in Article VI, which prohibits “religious tests” for public office. Both of these provisions are evidence that the country was not founded as officially Christian.

The Founding Fathers did not create a secular government because they disliked religion. Many were believers themselves. Yet they were well aware of the dangers of church-state union. They had studied and even seen first-hand the difficulties that church-state partnerships spawned in Europe. During the American colonial period, alliances between religion and government produced oppression and tyranny on our own shores.

Many colonies, for example, had provisions limiting public office to “Trinitarian Protestants” and other types of laws designed to prop up the religious sentiments of the politically powerful. Some colonies had officially established churches and taxed all citizens to support them, whether they were members or not. Dissenters faced imprisonment, torture and even death. These arrangements led to bitterness and sectarian division. Many people began agitating for an end to “religious tests” for public office, tax subsidies for churches and other forms of state endorsement of religion. Those who led this charge were not anti-religion. Indeed, many were members of the clergy and people of deep piety. They argued that true faith did not need or want the support of government.

Respect for religious pluralism gradually became the norm. When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Declaration of Independence, for example, he spoke of “unalienable rights endowed by our Creator.” He used generic religious language that all religious groups of the day would respond to, not narrowly Christian language traditionally employed by nations with state churches.

While some of the country’s founders believed that the government should espouse Christianity, that viewpoint soon became a losing proposition. In Virginia, Patrick Henry argued in favor of tax support for Christian churches. But Henry and his cohorts were in the minority and lost that battle. Jefferson, James Madison and their allies among the state’s religious groups ended Virginia’s established church and helped pass the Virginia Statute for Religious Liberty, a 1786 law guaranteeing religious freedom to all.

Jefferson and Madison’s viewpoint also carried the day when the Constitution, and later, the Bill of Rights, were written. Had an officially Christian nation been the goal of the founders, that concept would appear in the Constitution. It does not. Instead, our nation’s governing document ensures religious freedom for everyone.

Maryland representative Luther Martin said that a handful of delegates to the Constitutional Convention argued for formal recognition of Christianity in the Constitution, insisting that such language was neces-
sary in order to "hold out some distinction between the professors of Christianity and downright infidelity or paganism." But that view was not adopted, and the Constitution gave government no authority over reli-
gion. Article VI, which allows persons of all religious viewpoints to hold public office, was adopted by a unanimous vote. "Through ratification of the First Amendment, observed Jefferson, the American people built a "wall of separation between church and state."

Some pastors who favored church-state union were outraged and delivered sermons asserting that the United States would not be a successful nation because its Constitution did not give special treatment to Christianity. But many respected the new dawn of freedom and praised the Constitution and the First Amendment as true protectors of liberty.

Early national leaders understood that separation of church and state would be good for all faiths—including Christianity. Jefferson rejected that Virginia had passed his religious freedom law, noting that it would ensure religious freedom for "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, the infidel of every denomination."

Other early U.S. leaders echoed that view. President George Washington, in a famous 1790 letter to a Jewish congregation in Newport, R.I., celebrated the fact that Jews had full freedom of worship in America. Noted Washington, "All possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship."

Washington's administration even negotiated a treaty with the Muslim rulers of north Africa that stated explicitly that the United States was not founded on the law of the land, in order to constitute a Christian government. Ten years later, the House Judiciary Committee voted against its adoption. The committee noted "the dan-
gers which the union between church and state had imposed upon so many nations of the Old World" and said in light of that it was felt "inexpedient to put anything into the Constitution which might be construed to be a refer-
ce to any religious creed or doctrine."

The American people of the 18th and 19th centuries had a firm faith in the principle that the separation of church and state would be good for all faiths—Christianity no less than Judaism or Islam. In the words of Justice John Paul Stevens in his 1985 Wallace v. Jaffree ruling:

"The Constitution which might be construed to be a reference to any religious creed or doctrine."

When the underlying principle has been examined in the crucible of litigation, the Court has unambiguously concluded that the individual freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment embraces the right to select any religious faith or none at all.

—Justice John Paul Stevens