

4-2016

Adam Smith and Religious Plurality in America

Drew Liquerman

College of William and Mary

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Liquerman, Drew (2016) "Adam Smith and Religious Plurality in America," *Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History*. Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 3.

DOI: 10.20429/aujh.2016.060103

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/aujh/vol6/iss1/3>

This article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Georgia Southern Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Armstrong Undergraduate Journal of History by an authorized administrator of Georgia Southern Commons. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Adam Smith and Religious Plurality in America

Drew Liquerman

College of William and Mary

(Williamsburg, Virginia)

To the layman, many thoughts come to mind when discussing Adam Smith: Father of modern-day economics, author of *Wealth of Nations*, formulator of the invisible hand theory, supporter of laissez-faire economics, and strong believer of government nonintervention are just a few. However, Adam Smith was much more than an economic theorist. His writings, most importantly *An Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations (WON)*, greatly influenced James Madison in his thoughts on disestablishment of religion as written in “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” in Federalist Nos. 10 and 51, and in the First Amendment’s Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses that constitute the foundation for the free society we live in today.¹

Although *WON* is widely-known for Smith’s ideas on economic liberty, Book V of *WON* focuses on religion and the role government should, or should not play, in an individual’s

¹ Adam Smith, *An Enquiry into the Wealth of Nations*, (1776; Project Gutenberg 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/3300> (accessed September 28, 2015). James Madison, “Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments,” (1785; Founders Online National Archives 2015), <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/01-08-02-0163> (accessed September 30, 2015); Madison, “Federalist No. 51. The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments,” (1788; Project Gutenberg, 2013), <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm> (accessed October 1, 2015). Madison, “The Federalist No. 10. The Utility of the Union as a Safeguard Against Domestic Faction and Insurrection.” (1787; Project Gutenberg 2013). <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/1404/1404-h/1404-h.htm> (accessed October 1, 2015).

religious practices. In Book V, Smith studies the historical detriments that have occurred when government plays a role in religion, concluding that a government's establishment and support of a religion is detrimental to religion, government, and society.² While Smith's motive for disestablishment was based primarily upon his protection of the purity of religion, his thoughts on religion and government that influenced the foundational principles in the First Amendment have fortuitously led to a greatly pluralistic America, where an individual is free to believe, or not believe, as they wish. Due in part to Smith's influence on Madison, our country was founded on the principles of separation of church and state and religious liberty, which has led to the flourishing and acceptance of a multitude of religious beliefs and ideals in our country today. Adam Smith was not only the father of modern-day economics, but a prominent contributor to the religious diversity still flourishing in this country over two hundred years later.

Constitutional scholars have made the strong argument for Smith's influence on Madison's opinion on the subject of separation of church and state both in his prior writings and his drafting of the Establishment and Religious Liberty Clauses.³ In "Remonstrance," Madison espoused for religious freedom and separation of church and state in the years prior to writing the Constitution. Madison wrote "Remonstrance" to oppose a bill in Virginia that would have established a salary for Christian teachers, stating "for it is known this Religion both existed and flourished, not only without the support of human laws, but in spite of every opposition from them."⁴

Madison, similar to Smith, believed that state intervention could adversely affect the sanctity of religion, writing, "ecclesiastical establishments instead of maintaining the purity and

² Ibid., 730–731.

³ Samuel Fleischacher, "Adam Smith's Reception among the American Founders, 1776–1790," *The William and Mary Quarterly* 59, no.4 (2002): 905.

⁴ Madison, "Remonstrance."

efficacy of Religion, have had a contrary operation.”⁵ Madison believed that religion would be corrupted by a state established church “because the subsidized churches would become unresponsive to the needs of congregants, secure in the knowledge that their funding would be guaranteed by government’s strong hand.”⁶ Based on his knowledge of the historical corruption of established churches, most likely including his knowledge of the Scottish Kirk, Madison viewed the historical experience of these established churches to be “pride and indolence in the Clergy; ignorance and servility in the laity; in both, superstition, bigotry, and persecution.”⁷

Prior to Madison addressing state corruption of religion in “Remonstrance,” in very similar sentiment, Smith espoused in *WON* that a state established religion would lead to government corruption of religion. Smith believed that “state regulation of religion would produce corruption as rulers sought to tax and prohibit churches that failed to support them.”⁸ Smith, as a Scot living in 18th century Scotland, had first-hand and historical knowledge of the oppressive and corruptive Kirk and the Established Church of England. During his studies at University of Glasgow, his mentor Frances Hutcheson was the target of religious zealots. Likely impacted by the historically corruptive Kirk and the attacks on his mentor, Smith believed where “an established religion exists, the clergy becomes corrupted and the sovereign disempowered.”⁹ Smith writes in *WON* of the corruptive established religion, “The clergy of an established and well-endowed religion frequently become men of learning and elegance, who possess all the virtues of gentlemen, or which can recommend them to the esteem of gentlemen; but they are apt

⁵ Madison, “Remonstrance.”

⁶ K. Hylton, Y. Rodionova, and F. Deng, “Church and State: An Economic Analysis.” Working Paper No. 08–24 (Boston University School of Law, 2008), <http://www.bu.edu/law/faculty/scholarship/sorkingpapers/2008html> (accessed September 30, 2015), 3.

⁷ Saul K. Padover, *The Complete Madison: His Basic Writings* (New York: Harper 1953), 302, quoted in Hylton, “Church and State,” 3.

⁸ Hylton, “Church and State,” 2.

⁹ Blake, “Framers,” *Campbell Law Review*, 730.

gradually to lose the qualities, both good and bad, which gave them authority and influence with the inferior ranks of people, and which had perhaps been the original causes of the success and establishment of their religion.”¹⁰

Given that Smith wrote these words in *WON* in 1776, that *WON* was not only widely-read among the framers but was housed in 28% of American libraries in the years 1777–1790, which exceeded works by Locke and Rousseau, and given the great similarity in his thought to Madison’s words in “Remonstrance,” it is likely that Smith had significant impact on Madison’s thought and writing on the corruptive dangers of state support and establishment of a religion.¹¹ In fact, Madison placed *WON* on his listing of volumes to be included in the Congressional library in 1783.¹²

Madison’s writings in Federalist Nos. 51 and 10 also exhibit great similarity to Smith’s writings on religion in *WON*. In Federalist No. 51, Madison stresses that similar to government nonintervention in religion enabling religions to grow and prosper, government nonintervention in the political sphere enables political groups to grow and prosper, thereby protecting civil rights. Madison writes, “In a free government the security for civil rights must be the same as that for religious rights. It consists in the one case in the multiplicity of interests, and in the other in the multiplicity of sects.”¹³ In Federalist No. 10, Madison makes his seminal argument that in a large republic a greater diversity of parties produces fewer opportunities for a majority to coalesce around a common cause, “rendering each faction less dangerous.”¹⁴ Both of these propositions stated in Federalist Nos. 51 and 10 have their genesis in Smith’s *WON*.

¹⁰ Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, Book V, Chapter 1, Part 3, Article 3.

¹¹ Fleischacher, “Adam Smith’s Reception,” *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 901. See also David Prindle, “The Invisible Hand of James Madison,” *Constitutional Political Economy* 15 (2004): 231.

¹² Blake, “Framers,” *Campbell Law Review*, 733; Prindle, “Invisible Hand,” *Constitutional Political Economy*, 231.

¹³ Madison, “Federalist No. 51.”

¹⁴ Fleischacher, “Adam Smith’s Reception,” *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 909.

Years earlier, Smith opined that without government establishment, “religion would flourish numerically” and that “an increased number of sects would result in more competition-which would in turn create better teachers, better religious leaders, and more overall enthusiasm.”¹⁵ Smith was concerned that if one religion was state established, it could become involved in “violent religious controversy” and “violent faction.”¹⁶ In *WON*, Smith argues that disestablishment of religion promotes both equality and multiplicity of sects, as well as peace among them, noting, “[t]he interested and active zeal of religious teachers can be dangerous and troublesome only where there is either but one sect tolerated in the society, or where the whole of a large society is divided into two or three great sects...But that zeal must be altogether innocent where the society is divided into two or three hundred, or perhaps into as many thousand small sects....”¹⁷ Smith was no stranger to religious zealotry and the oppressive impact a state established religion could have on free thought. In his view, religious competition reduces the zealotry of religion and enables no one sect to “be considerable enough to disturb the publick tranquility.”¹⁸ Through competition in religion, new churches would arise to meet parishioner’s needs, and the potential for new churches entering the market would be an impetus for churches to listen to the wants and needs of their congregants. Smith believed that this increased competition would lead to reduced fanaticism and increased tolerance due to the prospect of losing customers to other doctrines.¹⁹ In Federalist No. 51, Madison echoes Smith’s “many thousand small sects” with his “multiplicity of sects,” stressing that “a protection of freedom, known to follow from the multiplicity of religious sects, could be brought to bear on the

¹⁵ Blake, “Framers,” *Campbell Law Review*, 731.

¹⁶ Smith, “Wealth of Nations,” Book V, Chapter 1, Part 3, Article 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Hylton, “Church and State,” 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

comparable political case in which political ‘sects’ compete with one another.”²⁰ Madison, like Smith, “refers to the beneficial political benefits of creating competition among social groups,” stressing that in a free society civil rights and religious rights will be secured and prosper.²¹

Further support for Smith’s influence on Madison is found in Federalist No. 10. Iain McLean notes the strong similarity between Smith in *WON* and Madison in Federalist No. 10 where each writer extols that “[a]n extended republic offers the best solution to the tyranny of the majority, because no one religious or political faction is likely to be dominant.”²² In Federalist No. 10, Madison’s pivotal argument is that in a large republic there would be a greater diversity of parties, which prevents any one faction from becoming a majority. This precise argument “is an extension of the argument” that Smith first lays out in *WON* regarding the benefits of a multitude of religious sects.²³

Scholars recognize that Madison’s “Remonstrance” served as the impetus for the Virginia religious freedom statute and that statute served as precedent for drafting of the Establishment and Religious Liberty Clauses in the First Amendment.²⁴ When the state conventions requested Madison draft the First Amendment provisions, the only disestablishment statute to refer to was the Virginia statute.²⁵ Given that Madison was deeply involved in the promulgation of the Virginia statute, it is only natural that he would look to that statute for guidance in drafting the clauses. Given the great similarity between Adam Smith’s *WON* and Madison’s “Remonstrance” and Federalist Nos. 10 and 51, the dispositive influence of “Remonstrance” on the Virginia

²⁰ Fleischacher, “Adam Smith’s Reception,” *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 910.

²¹ Prindle, “Invisible Hand,” *Constitutional Political Economy*, 232.

²² Iain McLean, “Adam Smith at the Constitutional Convention” (paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, Hyatt Regency Chicago and the Sheraton Chicago Hotel and Towers, Chicago, August 30–September 2, 2007). <http://citation.allacademic.com> (accessed 28 September 2015), 15.

²³ Fleischacher, “Adam Smith’s Reception,” *The William & Mary Quarterly*, 909.

²⁴ Philip B. Kurland, “The Origins of the Religion Clause of the Constitution.” *William and Mary Law Review* 27 (1986): 839.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 853.

statute, and the drafting of the First Amendment by Madison, there is a strong argument that Smith's thoughts on religion ultimately made it into the First Amendment.

Questions of religious liberty abound as much today as they did over two hundred years ago. Whether it was church protection from the state or state protection from the church, the prominent author of the First Amendment, James Madison, likely looked, in part, to Adam Smith for his thoughts on religious liberty. The questions of religious liberty today are just as controversial as were the issues over two centuries ago. Whether the issue is mandated payment for birth control under Obamacare, ordering state clerks to perform same-sex marriage, or forcing pharmacists to sell abortion pills, the debate over the meaning and extent of the First Amendment's Religious Liberty and Establishment Clauses is always at the forefront of judicial activity. However, these same clauses, carrying the imprint of Adam Smith, have led to a greatly diverse and religiously pluralistic society.

About the author

Drew Liquerman is an undergraduate student pursuing a degree (Bachelor of Arts/International Honors) in International Relations in the College of William and Mary/University of St. Andrews Joint Degree Programme. At William and Mary, he is a member of the Political Psychology and International Relations research lab, and he is currently researching and writing papers on internet diplomacy and Former Soviet Central Asian States.