



One Nation Under God:

The Political Influence of Religion in a Secular United States

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Center for
Faith
Identity &
Globalization

June 2025

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Abstract

This study examines the role of religion in shaping political discourse in the United States, with a particular focus on the intersection of religious beliefs and political actions. It explores how specific religious groups, including Catholic and Jewish communities, and Indigenous traditions, influence American politics on key issues such as immigration, abortion, and environmental policy. By analyzing the historical development of religious freedom and the constitutional framework provided by the First Amendment, the study highlights how religious liberty is both protected and challenged within a pluralistic democracy. The research demonstrates that religion in the United States is not a singular or uniform force but a diverse set of traditions that contribute distinct moral and ethical perspectives to public life. Catholic social teaching emphasizes compassion and the dignity of immigrants, often standing in opposition to restrictive immigration policies. Jewish ethical frameworks bring nuanced interpretations to the debate over abortion, grounded in religious law and historical experience. Indigenous spiritual traditions advocate for environmental justice through a sacred relationship with the land, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all living beings. These perspectives not only inform community values but also shape broader political debates. The study concludes that religious freedom in the United States should be understood as a dynamic and ongoing negotiation among individual rights, collective identities, and constitutional principles, contributing to a more inclusive and ethically grounded democratic society.

Keywords: *First Amendment, Religious Freedom, Religion and Politics, Catholic Social Teaching, Jewish Ethics, Indigenous Spirituality*

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1. Introduction

Religious freedom, immigration, abortion, and environmental stewardship stand as some of the most complex and morally charged issues in contemporary American society. These topics are deeply intertwined with the diverse faith traditions that have shaped the nation, from Indigenous peoples to Catholic and Jewish communities.

The United States' unique history as a land of immigrants, combined with its constitutional commitment to religious freedom, creates ongoing tensions and debates around how faith intersects with law, politics, and national identity.

Religious communities do not merely provide private moral guidance; they actively engage public discourse, influencing debates on how to welcome immigrants, care for the environment, uphold bodily autonomy, and balance individual liberties with communal values. These values are not ever-present in American lives and often fundamentally shape the social and political discourse surrounding issues. These topics highlight the moral complexities at the intersection of faith, law, and the evolving American ideal.

To fully grasp the significance of religious freedom and the seemingly contradictory ideal of the separation of church and state, it is essential to analyze the historical development of religion in the United States, the political implications of the *First Amendment*, and the diverse religious perspectives of *Catholic* and *Jewish Americans*, and *Indigenous peoples* on key contemporary issues such as abortion, environmental stewardship, and immigration. This essay seeks to explore these interwoven themes, tracing how religious belief shapes responses to pressing moral questions and challenges within American public life, revealing the ongoing pursuit of freedom, responsibility, and inclusion in the modern American democracy.

“...it is essential to analyze the historical development of religion in the United States, the political implications of the *First Amendment*, and the diverse religious perspectives of *Catholic* and *Jewish Americans*, and *Indigenous peoples* on key contemporary issues...”

1.1 Background

1.1.1 Origins of Religious Freedom

Religious freedom has deep roots, but its history is complex, emerging from a Christian thinker in 197 CE and evolving into a key debate in U.S. politics. History is rarely simple, and the story of religious freedom is no exception. Religious freedom has no official credited author, and its origin is contested. Tertullian, a Christian from Carthage in 197 CE, first articulated the concept of “freedom of religion.”¹ He addressed this concept to the Roman governor, writing:

“Let one man worship God, another Jove; let this man raise suppliant hands to heaven, that man to the altar of Fides; let one (if you so suppose) count the clouds as he prays, another the panels of the ceiling; let one dedicate his own soul to his god, another a goat’s. Look to it, whether this also may form part of the accusation of irreligion – to do away with freedom of religion, to forbid a man choice of deity, so that I may not worship whom I would, but am forced to worship whom I would not. No one, not even a man, will wish to receive reluctant worship.”²

Tertullian is responsible for the first documented expression of religious freedom. However, the concept is not well explained, and thus it ought to be assumed that his audience was already familiar with the idea of religious liberty.³ Assuming this fact, the concept of religious liberty or religious freedom was understood and debated by philosophers, theologians, and politicians alike long before the United States Constitution ratified the First Amendment which states, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof”⁴ thereby enshrining religious freedom as an inalienable right. While the United States was not the first nation to guarantee religious freedom, it did set a powerful example of what a modern state with religious liberty could look like.

¹ Leppin, Hartmut. “Christianity and the Discovery of Religious Freedom.” *Rechtsgeschichte - Legal History*, Max Planck Institut für europäische Rechtsgeschichte, 2014, no. 22, 62-78.

² Tertullian, Marcus Minucius Felix, T. R. Glover, Gerald Henry Rendall, and Walter Charles Alan Kerr. *Tertullian, Apology, De Spectaculis*. [Rev.]. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1953.

³ Leppin, “Christianity and the Discovery of Religious Freedom,” 62-78.

⁴ U.S. Const. amend. 1.

1.1.1 Separation of Church and State

The separation of church and state varies significantly from the concept of religious freedom, however. The United States recognises the freedom of religion as an inalienable human right, but this does not include separating the church and state. The expression of one's religion is viewed as fundamental, and creating a "wall"⁵ between church and state would result in never-ending hypocrisy and conflict between the two entities. The first mention of religious freedoms and the separation of church and state in the colonies came from a Massachusetts Puritan (turned Baptist), Roger Williams.⁶ Williams spoke about creating a "wall of separation between the Garden of the church and the wilderness of the world."⁷ The Enlightenment thinker and founding father, Thomas Jefferson, further advanced this idea. Williams stands as the first recorded advocate for religious freedom and the separation of church and state in the colonies, sparking a century-long debate on the importance of religious freedom and advocacy.

Complete separation of church and state would risk establishing an authority that would be contrary to the religious freedom guaranteed in the Constitution. The United States is a country full of diverse religious practices. If, for instance, the government were to completely sever the ties between religion and politics and opt for a completely separate church and state, then one could expect unresolvable conflict to arise immediately. Religions often exist in direct opposition to one another, and therefore cannot coexist fully without some allowance for religious freedom. Allowing for religious freedom does not automatically guarantee the right to the separation of church and state. Instead, it advocates for complete private religious practice while still allowing religious practices to exist in the public sphere.

"If, ..., the government were to completely sever the ties between *religion* and *politics* and opt for a completely separate *church* and *state*, then one could expect unresolvable conflict to arise immediately."

⁵ Thomas Jefferson, Letter to the Danbury Baptists, January 1, 1802, in *The Papers of Thomas Jefferson*, vol. 36, ed. Barbara B. Oberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 258–259.

⁶ Williams, Roger. *On Religious Liberty: Selections from the Works of Roger Williams*, Harvard University Press, 2008.

⁷ Ibid.

This paper recognizes the middle ground between the two, finding that separation is mutually beneficial to both the state and the religion. Recognizing the role that the church and state play in the United States is vital to understanding how modern-day political issues are addressed through religion.

1.2 Tensions in Religious Freedom and Church–State Relations

The balancing act between the powers of a state and the freedoms it allows its people is inevitably going to be questioned and opposed. Both sides will never be equally powerful due to the belief that each concept serves in opposition to the other. This paper will then work on the above belief and the acknowledgment that religious freedom is not, by definition, a complete separation of church and state. The concept of religious freedom ought to be viewed in conjunction with the separation of church and state, not as a supplement. Religious freedom also ought to be viewed as a spectrum, where allowances can range depending on the issue and the diversity of opinion. There is no consensus on the limits to religious freedom, and the issue has been contested since the country's inception, and continues to arise from the application and origin of modern laws.

2. Religion on Immigration

Immigration has long been a fundamentally moral and religiously charged issue in the United States. Since its inception, the United States has been a land of immigrants and foreigners who call North America home. Across faith traditions, welcoming the stranger is not simply a political stance but a sacred obligation. This is true for religious traditions that originated in North America prior to the United States as well. Indigenous groups have been forthcoming with their support for immigrants in the United States. Religious communities, including *Catholic*, *Jewish*, and Indigenous peoples, draw on ancient teachings to frame immigration as a matter of justice, compassion, and human dignity. These perspectives often challenge restrictive national policies, highlighting the moral complexities at the intersection of faith, law, and national identity.

...religious freedom ought to be viewed in conjunction with the separation of church and state, not as a supplement.

2.1 Catholic Perspectives on Immigration

Among these religious voices, the Catholic Church has played an influential role in the United States, specifically in shaping both theological and public responses to immigration. For the Catholic Church, immigration is not merely a policy issue but a test of moral conscience rooted in scripture, tradition, and social teaching. This can be seen in scripture, *Catholic Social Teaching*, and church tradition. The dignity of the human person is one such *Catholic Social Teaching* theme that represents care for all human beings. The Bible also repeatedly calls believers to welcome the “stranger” and care for the vulnerable, echoing themes of solidarity found throughout both the *Old* and *New Testaments*. These teachings position the Catholic Church as a strong supporter of immigration, even when those views conflict with national trends in a given nation.

The concept of welcoming the “stranger” is established in scripture in the *Gospel of Matthew*, where Jesus speaks on the concept, saying, “For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, a stranger and you welcomed me.”⁸ This is a clear biblical mandate for hospitality and compassion toward the outsider, and is interpreted as acceptance of immigrants. It reflects a core scriptural foundation for the Church’s advocacy, reinforcing concepts of *Catholic Social Teaching* on the dignity of every human person and the call to solidarity.

The 2020 encyclical *Fratelli Tutti* by the late Pope Francis highlights the call for dignity and solidarity outlined in *Catholic Social Teaching*. “We are obliged to respect the rights of all people, even those born elsewhere, and to value the richness of their cultures rather than fear them.”⁹ The encyclical explains the importance of migrants and their rights as human beings with dignity. There is also a call to community and solidarity with the poorest migrants and those who are underprivileged. Pope Francis consistently argues that our treatment of migrants is a reflection of our shared humanity. In another passage he explains, “Solidarity means much more than engaging in sporadic acts of generosity. It means thinking and acting in terms of community.”¹⁰ These statements reflect the broader Catholic view that immigration is about human dignity, not just border security or economic policy.

⁸ *Matthew* 25:35, USCCB.

⁹ Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020), §39.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §116.

“[*The Gospel of Matthew*] reflects a *core scriptural foundation* for the Church’s *advocacy*, reinforcing concepts of *Catholic Social Teaching* on the *dignity* of every human person and the call to *solidarity*.”

2.1.1 Catholic Charities and Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.

This focus on the human aspect of immigration enables action in the Catholic community, resulting in organizations such as *Catholic Charities* and the *Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.* (CLINIC). These organizations work on the front lines of immigration aid by offering legal assistance, resettlement support, and advocacy for humane immigration laws. *Catholic Charities* is one of the largest faith-based social service providers in the United States. The organization was founded in 1910 and has provided resources for immigrant and refugee communities since its inception. These services include housing assistance, food security programs, job training, and legal aid.

Similarly, *CLINIC* was established by the *U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops* in 1988 to provide legal support specifically for low-income immigrants and refugees. *CLINIC* trains diocesan legal workers to help advocate for and defend the rights of vulnerable immigrant populations. Whether they be asylum seekers, unaccompanied minors, or refugees. The work by *CLINIC* highlights the Catholic teaching that welcoming the immigrant is a moral obligation, not simply a just act.¹¹

The Catholic Church’s approach to immigration reflects an ideology rooted deeply in moral and social commitment to upholding the dignity of every human being, particularly the vulnerable and marginalized. This belief is grounded in scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and lived practice. The Church not only preaches solidarity but enacts it through active institutional support like *Catholic Charities* and *CLINIC*. These efforts represent the action towards solidarity that the Catholic Church aims to embody. While the Catholic tradition offers a clear and compassionate response to immigration rooted in centuries of doctrine, it is not the only faith tradition that approaches immigration through scripture and lived action. Jewish communities in the United States also bring a profound scriptural and historical consciousness to the issue.

¹¹ Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC), “About Us,” accessed July 13, 2025.

“While the *Catholic tradition* offers a *clear* and *compassionate response* to immigration rooted in centuries of doctrine, it is not the only faith tradition that approaches *immigration* through *scripture* and *lived action*.”

2.2 Jewish Perspectives on Immigration

Jewish thought offers a deeply rooted and historically resonant perspective on immigration, grounded in both scripture and lived experience. The command to “welcome the stranger” is not only a recurring biblical theme but a foundational moral imperative within Jewish tradition. For Jewish communities, immigration is intimately tied to the collective memory of exile, displacement, and diaspora.

2.2.1 Torah on Immigration

These beliefs, similar to those held by Catholics, are rooted in the scripture. As interpreted in *Leviticus* 19:33-34, “When strangers reside with you in your land, you shall not wrong them. The strangers who reside with you shall be to you as your citizens; you shall love each one as yourself, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I the Lord am your God.”¹² This love for strangers is a reflection of the experience of the Jews in Egypt. The call to empathy is not optional but is elevated to a religious duty, rooted in historical awareness and divine command from God. The directive ending, “I the Lord am your God,”¹³ clearly reflects the divine authority and the seriousness of the obligation. This is not a suggestion, but rather a religious imperative.

A similar call is seen in *Deuteronomy* 10:17-19, “God is great, powerful, and awe-inspiring, he who lifts up no face [in favor] and takes no bribe, provides justice [for] orphan and widow, and loves the sojourner, by giving him food and clothing. So you are to love the sojourner, for sojourners were you in the land of Egypt!”¹⁴

¹² *Leviticus* 19:33-34, MAM.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Deuteronomy* 10:17-19, MAM.

“The *directive ending*, “I the Lord am your God,” clearly reflects the *divine authority* and the *seriousness of the obligation*. This is *not a suggestion*, but rather a *religious imperative*.”

These instances are continued throughout the *Torah*, as care for the stranger or immigrant, *ger*, is mentioned 36 times.¹⁵ These texts set a theological precedent for equal dignity and inclusion, which continues to inform Jewish ethics today. The phrase “provides justice for the orphan and the widow, and loves the sojourner”¹⁶ groups the stranger with the most vulnerable members of society.

2.2.2 Historical and Modern Experiences

Jewish historical experience adds further weight to these teachings. These experiences of immigration and resettlement are in the heart of the diaspora in the United States and reflect the scars of relocation. Jews have been significant in the U.S. immigration debate since its beginning around 1881, and have been described as “the single most persistent pressure group favoring a liberal immigration policy.”¹⁷ From the late 19th century through the passage of the *Immigration and Nationality Act* of 1965, Jewish individuals and organizations were prominent in advocating for more humane and inclusive policies. Influential Jewish lawmakers such as Emanuel Celler and Jacob Javits were instrumental in dismantling discriminatory immigration quotas that had long targeted non-European and Jewish immigrants.¹⁸ This blend of scriptural mandate and historical experience has translated into sustained advocacy and action by Jewish communities in modern times.

“Influential Jewish lawmakers...were instrumental in dismantling discriminatory immigration quotas...”

¹⁵ Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, "Supporting Immigrants and Refugees in a Challenging Moment," Religious Action Center, July 20, 2023,

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ S. M. Neuringer, *American Jewry and United States Immigration Policy, 1881–1953* (PhD diss., University of Wisconsin–Madison, 1969; Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms, 1971; repr., New York: Arno Press, 1980).

¹⁸ U.S. Senate, “Jacob K. Javits: Featured Biography,” U.S. Senate, accessed July 17, 2025.

2.2.3 Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society

One of the most enduring and influential expressions of a commitment to advocacy and continued collaboration is the work of *Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society* (HIAS). This organization was founded over 120 years ago to assist Jews fleeing Russia and Eastern Europe in the United States.¹⁹ Since then, HIAS has evolved into a global humanitarian organization, embodying the Jewish imperative to protect and welcome the stranger. The expansion of HIAS in the 20th century has allowed the organization to aid displaced people of all backgrounds.

Today, HIAS provides legal assistance, resettlement services, and advocacy for asylum seekers and refugees worldwide, regardless of religion or ethnicity. The organization touts, “We used to help refugees because they were Jewish; now we help refugees because we are Jewish.”²⁰ HIAS’s commitment to refugee protection is not merely charitable; it is an expression of Jewish religious and moral identity. While Jewish and Catholic traditions bring centuries-old teachings and historical memory to bear on immigration, Indigenous religious perspectives offer a distinct and vital voice, one rooted not in migration, but in ancestral connection to the land itself.

“While Jewish and Catholic traditions bring centuries-old teachings and historical memory to bear on immigration, Indigenous religious perspectives offer a distinct and vital voice...”

2.3 Native American Perspectives on Immigration

Indigenous perspectives on immigration are significantly different from those of other religious and cultural traditions examined in this paper in the United States. Rather than being shaped by the memory of migration or exile, similar to the Jewish community, or a general call to the ‘stranger’ as with Catholics, Indigenous worldviews are grounded in deep ancestral ties to the land.

¹⁹ HIAS, “Our History,” accessed July 22, 2025.

²⁰ HIAS, “How HIAS Still Helps Jews in Need,” accessed July 22, 2025.

The concepts of borders and nation-states are not familiar to the native American identity and have been imposed through colonization and Western influence.²¹ This view often conflicts with traditional beliefs about land, mobility, and belonging in historical indigenous communities. From this view, immigration is not merely a legal or political issue; it is bound up with the history of colonialism that has shaped both Indigenous and migrant experiences in the United States.

Although native peoples are not immigrants in the United States, they have historically shared many of the same hardships, through forced removal, relocation, and border creation. These traumas echo those of the modern-day immigrant and bridge the connection between the two groups. For this reason, many Native communities express firm solidarity with immigrants, especially those of Indigenous descent from Latin America who face similar challenges of marginalization and cultural erasure.

“..., many Native communities express *firm solidarity with immigrants, especially those of Indigenous descent from Latin America* who face similar challenges of *marginalization and cultural erasure.*”

2.3.1 Modern Native Experiences

A February 2025 executive order signed by President Trump gained attention across Native American advocacy groups after its concerning use of birthright citizenship claims.²² The order, although deemed unlikely by legal experts to withstand scrutiny, caused concern among Native communities. Native leaders were alarmed by the administration's citation of *Elk v. Wilkins* (1884), a Supreme Court case that once held Native Americans were not automatically U.S. citizens.²³

²¹ Matthew Salafia, "Borders and Boundaries and Barriers, Oh My!," *Reviews in American History* 38, no. 4 (2010): 651.

²² "How Trump citizenship orders could affect Native Americans," *Axios Phoenix*, February 10, 2025.

²³ *Elk v. Wilkins*, 112 U.S. 94 (1884).

While that decision was overturned by the *Indian Citizenship Act* of 1924, the fact that it was resurrected in a modern policy context signaled to many tribes a continued vulnerability in their legal status.²⁴ Tribal governments across the United States, including the *Navajo Nation* (Southwest U.S.), *Shoshone-Paiute* (Western U.S.), and *Coeur d'Alene* (Idaho-based), warned their citizens to carry federally recognized identification, noting that tribal documents such as *Certificates of Indian Blood* (CDIBs) are often not recognized by immigration enforcement officers.²⁵ Indigenous individuals across the United States have reported being detained or interrogated by ICE despite being U.S. citizens, reflecting a dangerous gap in the recognition of tribal sovereignty and legal rights.

This lived reality reinforces long-standing Native critiques of U.S. immigration policy, especially as it applies to the U.S.-Mexico border. Specifically, the *Tohono O'odham Nation* (Arizona-based) has been outspoken about the effects a border wall would have on their community. The historical land of the *Tohono O'odham* spans both modern countries. Further, tribal leaders have argued that the wall would desecrate sacred sites, including *Baboquivari Peak* (located in Arizona), where they believe their creator resides.²⁶ Vice Chairman Verlon Jose emphasizes the tribe's desire for collaboration rather than confrontation, stating, “We’re not your enemy. We’re your ally. We want to work with you in protecting America.”²⁷ The *American Immigration Lawyers Association* (AILA) has documented how immigration enforcement disproportionately affects Indigenous communities, citing instances where sacred sites were damaged by wall construction and where federal agents blocked traditional cross-border travel for ceremonies or family visits. These incursions violate not only environmental protections but also treaty obligations and tribal sovereignty, making immigration enforcement a fundamentally spiritual and legal issue for many Indigenous nations.²⁸

²⁴ Indian Citizenship Act of 1924, Pub. L. No. 68-175, 43 Stat. 253 (June 2, 1924), *U.S. National Archives*, accessed July 15, 2025.

²⁵ Ximena Bustillo, “Fearing Encounters with ICE, Tribal Leaders Offer Guidance to Their Members,” *NPR*, January 29, 2025.

²⁶ Laurel Morales, “Border Wall Would Cut Across Land Sacred To Native Tribe,” *NPR*, February 23, 2017.

²⁷ Verlon Jose, vice chairman of the Tohono O’odham Nation, quoted in Laurel Morales, “Border Wall Would Cut Across Land Sacred To Native Tribe,” *NPR*, February 23, 2017.

²⁸ Alejandro Alvarado, “Impact of U.S. Immigration Policy on Indigenous Peoples and Tribes,” *AILA Blog*, May 3, 2023.

“Indigenous individuals across the United States have reported being detained or interrogated by ICE despite being U.S. citizens, reflecting a dangerous gap in the recognition of tribal sovereignty and legal rights.”

Beyond these legal and territorial concerns, Native scholars and activists have emphasized the need for solidarity between Native and immigrant communities. In an essay published by the Hemispheric Institute, Indigenous authors argue that colonial borders “crossed us too,” disrupting Native nations and criminalizing movement across ancestral homelands.²⁹ By framing immigration enforcement as a continuation of colonial conquest, this perspective pushes back against dominant narratives that portray borders as natural or legitimate. Native American perspectives on immigration challenge the very foundation of U.S. border and citizenship policy. These perspectives are not shaped by migration or exile, but by ancestral ties to the land and a long history of colonial displacement.

3. Religion on Abortion

Conversations surrounding abortion, bodily autonomy, and religious liberty are more prevalent now than ever after the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022. The nation responded in contrasting ways, simultaneously grieving and celebrating what some saw as a triumph, while others viewed it as a significant step backward. These reactions were not tied to a specific religious group or organization, but rather to individual opinions and interpretations. For this essay, the terms ‘pro-choice’ and ‘anti-abortion’ will be used, as they are more representative of the leading positions, and given the often convoluted relationship typically associated with other terms.

“...the terms ‘pro-choice’ and ‘anti-abortion’...are more representative of the leading positions, and given the often convoluted relationship typically associated with other terms.

²⁹ Elizabeth Ellis, “The Border(s) Crossed Us Too: The Intersections of Native American and Immigrant Fights for Justice,” *EMISFERICA* 14, no. 1 (2017).

Abortion is the termination of a pregnancy before the fetus can survive outside the womb, occurring either spontaneously as a miscarriage or intentionally through medical or surgical procedures.³⁰ This includes both spontaneous (miscarriage) and induced abortions. Currently, abortion is banned in 13 states and heavily restricted in 6 others, with legal challenges emerging in some of these states, often citing violations of religious freedom.³¹

Legal challenges in several of these states have emerged, citing violations of religious freedom. While some religious groups celebrated the overturning of *Roe v. Wade* as a victory, others saw it as a significant setback for women's rights and religious freedom. This divide is especially evident within the Catholic community, where official Church doctrine opposes abortion, yet many Catholics hold nuanced or opposing views on the issue.

3.1 Catholicism and Abortion

The Catholic Church has long maintained a firm stance against abortion, shaping both theological discourse and political engagement among its followers. These beliefs are rooted in ancient texts like the *Didache* and the *Epistle of Barnabas*. Over the centuries, the Catholic stance on abortion has been reaffirmed in the *Catechism* and modern teachings on the sanctity of life.

While official Church doctrine remains unwavering, the beliefs of individual Catholics often diverge. Despite the institutional condemnation of abortion, several American Catholics support legal access to the procedure. This complex interplay between doctrine and personal belief highlights the evolving relationship between faith, morality, and politics within the American Catholic community.

“Over the centuries, the Catholic stance on *abortion* has been reaffirmed in the *Catechism* and modern teachings on the *sanctity of life*.”

³⁰ Yale Medicine. "Abortion." *Yale Medicine*. Accessed May 21, 2025.

³¹ KFF. *Exceptions in State Abortion Bans and Early Gestational Limits*. Accessed February 28, 2025.

3.1.1 Doctrinal and Apocryphal Perspectives on Abortion

Didache is derived from the Greek word translated literally as “teaching,” and the document is an anonymous instruction manual for Jewish-Christian followers of Jesus.³² The *Didache* includes a teaching on abortion and infanticide: “You shall not murder a child by abortion, nor kill a child at birth.”³³ This teaching forms the basis for anti-abortion beliefs and ideals in the Catholic Church. The *Epistle of Barnabas* 19:5 expands upon these ideals: “Thou shalt not murder a child by abortion, nor again shalt thou kill it when it is born.”³⁴ Although both works exist outside the Catholic canon, the Catholic Church uses them as vital resources for its anti-abortion argument.

Outside of apocryphal literature condemning abortion lies the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church. The *Catechism* of the Catholic Church is a vital lifeline, a document that highlights the complex and rich beliefs of the Church. A catechism is a document containing “fundamental Christian truths,” and is categorized into two (partially three) categories.³⁵ These categories are major and minor, with the extra classification of universal.

The teachings on abortion come from the *Catechism* of the Catholic Church and serve as a primary universal source for the church as a whole. “Since the first century, the Church has affirmed the moral evil of every procured abortion. This teaching has not changed and remains unchangeable. Direct abortion, that is to say, abortion willed either as an end or a means, is gravely contrary to the moral law.”³⁶ This belief influences the way Catholics view abortion, and thus the way Catholics associate politically. These teachings of the church are fundamental to a catholic mindset; however, church doctrine may not be the only influential factor.

³² Tony Jones. *The Teaching of the Twelve: Believing & Practicing the Primitive Christianity of the Ancient Didache Community*. Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 2009.

³³ *The Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Southampton: Saint Ignatius Orthodox Press, 2013).

³⁴ Epistle of Barnabas 19:5, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, trans. Bart D. Ehrman, 2nd ed. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 145.

³⁵ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Catechism Overview,” *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, accessed January 31, 2025.

³⁶ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997), no. 2271.

“The *Catechism* of the Catholic Church is a vital lifeline, a document that highlights the *complex* and *rich beliefs* of the Church.”

3.1.2 Belief of the Faithful

The belief of the faithful, for this paper, ought to be viewed as alternative opinions, which may be in direct contrast to the teaching of the church. In 2023, of the approximately 52 million Catholics in the United States, 61% believe that abortion should be legal in all or most cases.³⁷ These results are in direct contrast to the teaching of the Catholic Church.³⁸ The Catholic Church has upheld its anti-abortion stance for centuries, referencing the *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas*, both of which condemn infanticide and abortion. The actions of the congregation, however, speak in contrast to the teaching.

3.2 Judaism and Abortion

The Christian viewpoint often dominates religious perspectives on the political aspect of abortion in the United States; however, the Jewish beliefs on abortion vary significantly from those of the other Abrahamic religions and are worth examining when considering the religious side of abortion. Under Jewish law, it is required to get an abortion if the life of the mother is threatened.³⁹ This raises an interesting religious freedom question: if a woman is required to have an abortion in cases of life or death, what happens if abortion is not available? These questions do not have a complete political answer yet.

“The Catholic Church has upheld its anti-abortion stance for centuries, referencing the *Didache* and *Epistle of Barnabas*, both of which condemn infanticide and abortion.”

³⁷ Pew Research Center, 10 facts about U.S. Catholics, March 4, 2025.

³⁸ United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, "Respect for Unborn Human Life," accessed January 31, 2025.

³⁹ Mishnah Ohalot 7:6. In *Sefaria*. Accessed February 7, 2025.

Since *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization* overturned the federal constitutional right to abortion formerly protected by *Roe v. Wade*, these questions have been raised by various Jewish organizations. This is furthered due to the diversity of opinion within the Jewish faith, especially regarding abortion. The act is viewed distinctly across the Jewish faith, namely among Orthodox and Reform Jews. Despite differences in opinion, however, it is important to note that overall, in 2015, 83 percent of American Jews in the United States believed that abortion “should be legal in all/most cases,” which was more than any other religious group in the U.S.⁴⁰

3.2.1 The Tanakh and Talmud Perspectives

A textual interpretation can be drawn from multiple sources, whether it be the *Tanakh* or the *Talmud*. To begin in the *Tanakh* with *Exodus*, there is an example outlined where, “Men have a fight and hurt a pregnant woman, so that she suffers a miscarriage, but no further injury, the guilty one shall be fined as much as the woman’s husband demands of him, and he shall pay in the presence of the judges. But if injury ensues, you shall give life for life,”⁴¹ In this situation the life of the mother takes precedence over the life of the unborn fetus, up until the very moment the head has emerged.

The above concept relates to the concept of *kavod habriyot*, or the belief in intrinsic human dignity, which also affects the way that Jewish people ought to interpret abortion. This distinct recognition of respect for human beings originates in the *Talmud* as scholarly interpretations outline, “Great is human dignity, as it overrides a prohibition in the Torah.” This translation provides a clear hierarchy that outlines abortion as fundamental to the dignity and respect of women.

“Despite differences in opinion, ..., overall, in 2015, 83 percent of American Jews in the United States believed that abortion “should be legal in all/most cases,” which was more than any other religious group in the U.S.”

⁴⁰ Pew Research Center, “Views About Abortion,” *Pew Research Religious Landscape Study*, accessed February 14, 2025.

⁴¹ Exodus 21:22-23.

The above interpretation is then furthered later on in the *Talmud*, where it states, “If a woman is having trouble giving birth, they cut up the child in her womb and bring it forth limb by limb, because her life comes before the life of [the child]. But suppose the greater part has come out. In that case, one may not touch it, for one may not set aside one person’s life for that of another.”⁴² This understanding of the text not only permits abortion, but encourages it if the mother’s life is at risk. Abortion is not just a means to protect the mother; the *Talmud* also states, “the embryo is considered to be mere water (*maya b’alma*) until the fortieth day.”⁴³ This belief, although not scientifically accurate, would permit on-demand abortion until around 6 weeks. The recognition of these texts shapes the way Jews ought to view the act of abortion.

3.2.2 Rabbinic Interpretations

The role of the Rabbi in the Jewish faith is essential, and throughout time, the interpretations of abortion using the *Tanakh* have shaped the way Jews view abortion today. Rabbi Solomon ben Isaac (*Rashi*) and Rabbi Meir Abulafia (*Yad Ramah*) set an important view on the life of a fetus using an interpretation of Sanhedrin 72b.⁴⁴ *Rashi* and *Yad Ramah* established that a fetus contains a soul, the fetus is not a person (*lav nefesh hu*)⁴⁵ until after birth, with *Yad Ramah* saying, “But as long as the fetus is inside, it is not a life [*nefesh*].”⁴⁶ This interpretation ought to impact the way a modern Jew should view the life of the fetus, especially in consideration of abortion.

“[*Yad Ramah*] interpretation ought to impact the way a modern Jew should view the *life of the fetus*, especially in consideration of *abortion*.”

⁴² Mishnah Ohalot 7:6. In Sefaria. Accessed February 7, 2025.

⁴³ The Babylonian Talmud. Yevamot 69b. Accessed February 7, 2025.

⁴⁴ Grossman, Susan, and Avram Reisner. "Understanding Jewish Views of Abortion: An Overview." *Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement*, December 2023.

⁴⁵ Rashi, Commentary on Sanhedrin 72b, accessed March 4, 2025.

⁴⁶ Sefaria, Sanhedrin 72b sheet, accessed March 4, 2025.

Another interpretation comes from the example of an assault on a pregnant woman in Exodus. “When men have a fight and hurt a pregnant woman, so that she suffers a miscarriage, but no further injury, the guilty one shall be fined as much as the woman’s husband demands of him, and he shall pay in the presence of the judges. But if injury ensues, you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot, burn for burn, wound for wound, stripe for stripe.”⁴⁷ Countless Rabbis and their interpretations have analyzed this situation to clarify the role of the fetus in this story. Other Rabbis such as *Maimonides*, *Gur Aryeh*, and *Ralbag* have all spoken on the issue as well, each agreeing that the fetus has no independent legal identity.⁴⁸

Perhaps most appealing is the Rabbinical Assembly statement following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*. The statement reads, “For American Jews and those of other faiths, this decision is a restriction on our religious freedom.”⁴⁹ This statement, released in 2023, advocates for unrestricted abortion access and highlights the disproportionate impact that abortion bans have on minorities and low-income individuals.

3.2.3 Reform Judaism

Traditionally, Reform Judaism is categorized as a liberal and progressive sect of Judaism, both politically and religiously. The movement began in Europe, and the sentiments of the beliefs have been traced back to the 1780s.⁵⁰ The movement began as a way to build a dialogue between scripture, faith, and modern sensibilities.⁵¹ Reform Judaism holds progressive views on women in religious leadership roles, Jewish lifestyle, as well as political and social issues like gay marriage and abortion access.

“...Reform Judaism is categorized as a liberal and progressive sect of Judaism, both politically and religiously.”

⁴⁷ Exodus 21:22-25, *New American Bible*, Revised Edition, accessed March 4, 2025.

⁴⁸ Susan Grossman and Avram Reisner, *Understanding Jewish Views of Abortion: An Overview*, Committee on Jewish Law and Standards of the Conservative Movement, 2023.

⁴⁹ Rabbinical Assembly, *Conservative Rabbis Strongly Condemn U.S. Supreme Court Decision to Overturn Abortion Rights*, May 2, 2022.

⁵⁰ Meyer, Michael A. *Response to Modernity: A History of the Reform Movement in Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1988, 12.

⁵¹ Union for Reform Judaism, “Who We Are: History,” urj.org, accessed July 18, 2025.

In America, Reform groups have been at the forefront of social and political change. Reform Judaism advocates for abortion access as a human right and stresses that the individual (who is receiving the abortion) ought to retain complete bodily autonomy.⁵² This commitment to social justice is deeply rooted in the movement's broader emphasis on adapting religious practice to contemporary values, specifically through modern Rabbinical interpretations of scripture and modern perspectives.

Reform Jewish groups have spearheaded the legal battle against abortion restriction laws across the United States. These groups have been advocating for women's rights for decades, long before the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. In 1935, the *Women of Reform Judaism* (WRJ) endorsed efforts to make birth control education more widespread.⁵³ Furthermore, in 1965, the WRJ passed a resolution in favor of *taharat hamishpachah* ("the purity of the family") and the positive role of abortion and birth control in this deeply personal and social value.⁵⁴ The WRJ group is just one example of an influential group that has previously advocated for religious access to abortion.

Individually and collectively, Reform Jews have been leading the legal battles to protect their religious freedom, especially in opposition to abortion bans. A notable example is the ongoing lawsuit filed by Rabbi Barry Silver in late 2022. Based in Florida, Rabbi Silver challenged the state's 15-week abortion ban after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*. The lawsuit argued that the ban was unconstitutional under the First Amendment and Florida's *Religious Freedom Restoration Act* (RFRA).⁵⁵ Rabbi Silver represented *Congregation L'Dor Va-Dor* until his passing in 2024, but the case is still active. Other religious leaders have joined the cause, including Maya Malay, a Buddhist leader from Florida. Rabbi Barry Silver and *Congregation L'Dor Va-Dor* are just one example of Reform Jewish communities taking action against restrictive abortion bans.

"...in 1965, the WRJ [*Women of Reform Judaism*] passed a resolution in favor of 'the purity of the family'..."

⁵² Julie Zupan, "What Is the Reform Jewish Perspective on Abortion?," [ReformJudaism.org](https://www.reformjudaism.org/), accessed July 17, 2025.

⁵³ Women's Rabbinic Network, "Birth Control Literature: Most Important Resolution of Our First 100 Years," *Women's Rabbinic Network*, 1935.

⁵⁴ Women's Rabbinic Network, "Judaism and the Family," *Women's Rabbinic Network*, 1965.

⁵⁵ Jewish For a Just America, "The Rabbi Suing Florida Over Religious Freedom," *Jewish For a Just America*, March 2023.

Reform Judaism has been at the forefront of the legal battles, arguing for complete bodily autonomy and safe access to abortion for all. Known for its progressive roots, this sect of Judaism seamlessly combines social justice with its religious beliefs. Reform Jews' involvement in legal battles to protect abortion highlights a direct difference between their Orthodox counterparts. To say all Jews support abortion is not factual due to the significant differences between the beliefs of the Reform Jews and the Orthodox Jews. The two sects' opinions on abortion differ vastly, and thus it is paramount to view the groups separately as opposed to generalizing the two distinct groups into one belief system.

“*Reform Jews*’ involvement in legal battles to *protect abortion* highlights a direct difference between their *Orthodox* counterparts.”

3.2.4 Orthodox Judaism

Orthodox Judaism's views on abortion are deeply complex, shaped by religious texts, evolving interpretations, and notably a growing divide within the community. Rooted in the *Talmud* and the *Tanakh*, the Orthodox community has recognized the intrinsic value of life, stressing the importance of preserving maternal health and prioritizing the mother's well-being in cases where her life is at risk. For Orthodox Jews, the life of the fetus is also of great importance. Amongst the Orthodox faith, a clear divide has occurred, with some taking a stance on protecting the life of the mother no matter the cost, and another ultra-Orthodox group that has begun to lean right politically.

One group representing the latter is the *Agudath Israel of America*, which released a statement following the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*, celebrating the decision.⁵⁶ The statement condemned the practice of 'abortion on demand' and further cited the belief, "Jewish law [holds] that fetal life is entitled to significant protection, with termination of pregnancy authorized only under certain extraordinary circumstances."⁵⁷ The group has not commented on the current abortion climate in America and the near-total bans in various states, many of which have no religious exemption.

⁵⁶ Agudath Israel of America Welcomes Supreme Court Overruling *Roe v. Wade*, *Agudath Israel of America*, accessed February 28, 2025.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

“[Agudath Israel of America] statement condemned the practice of ‘abortion on demand’ and further cited the belief, ‘Jewish law [holds] that fetal life is entitled to significant protection, with termination of pregnancy authorized only under certain extraordinary circumstances.’ ”

Agudath Israel of America and the *Rabbinical Council of America* both hold similar views on abortion and have released statements condemning “on-demand abortions.” They argue that these abortions violate Jewish law, and the current system setup does not violate their religious freedom because abortion can be permitted under medically necessary circumstances.⁵⁸ Orthodox groups advocate for guaranteed abortion access if the mother’s life is at risk, even if it is considered “late-term.”⁵⁹ The stance of Orthodox Jewish groups on abortion highlights the ongoing legal and ethical tensions between religious doctrine, reproductive rights, and the evolving landscape of American law after the overturn of *Roe v. Wade*.

3.3 Native American Religions and Abortion

Most discussions on abortion are shaped by a Western-centric perspective, often prioritizing the viewpoints of Christianity and Judaism. However, overlooking the perspectives of Native American religions diminishes the broader religious discourse on abortion, excluding valuable and distinct spiritual understandings. For many Native tribes across the U.S., the concept of bodily autonomy was present long before Christopher Columbus ever set sail.⁶⁰ Native communities across the United States have continued to maintain a strong belief in bodily autonomy and, thus, the right to abortion.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Ibid.; Rabbinical Council of America, "RCA Opposes New York State's Reproductive Health Act," *Rabbinical Council of America*.

⁵⁹ Jewish Telegraphic Agency, "What Jewish Law Really Says About Abortion," *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, May 22, 2019.

⁶⁰ Lauren Van Schilfgaarde et al., *Tribal Nations and Abortion Access: A Path Forward* (2023), 8.

⁶¹ James D. Adams and Cecilia Garcia, "Women’s Health Among the Chumash," *Evidence-Based Complementary and Alternative Medicine* 3 (2006): 125–31.

“...overlooking the perspectives of *Native American religions* diminishes the broader religious discourse on abortion, excluding *valuable* and *distinct spiritual understandings*.”

Abortion was a common act for Native peoples from the 17th to the century onward, initially through natural means.⁶² Black root and cedar root were used as natural abortifacient agents amongst many Native communities during the period from 1600 to 1900.⁶³ Throughout the centuries of U.S. legislation and enforcement, access to abortion and reproductive healthcare for Native peoples has been severely restricted, primarily as a result of previous colonization and systemic white supremacy.⁶⁴ The United States government has largely stripped reproductive decision-making for Native communities through systematic injustice, such as boarding schools and general control over land.⁶⁵ These boarding schools were used to strip Native parents of their children and sever relationships between parent and kin. The government’s goal of assimilation came at the expense of the parents as well as the children.

3.3.1 Adoption and the Indian Child Welfare Act

The end of boarding schools did not mark the end of paternalism for the native peoples, however. The government continued the act of removing native children from their parents under the guise of adoption. In 1967, the *Bureau of Indian Affairs* (BIA) released a statement that, “Sixty-seven Indian children found adoptive homes in 1966 through the *Indian Adoption Project* of the *Bureau of Indian Affairs* and the *Child Welfare League of America*.”⁶⁶ The statement was followed up by saying 1966 was a “record year for the project,”⁶⁷ and the document continued to speak on some details of the adoptions.

⁶² Z. Acevedo, “Abortion in Early America,” *Journal of Family and Consumer Sciences* 4, no. 2 (1979): 159–67.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Jael Silliman et al., “Undivided Rights: Women of Color Organize for Reproductive Justice,” 2nd ed. (2016), 111–28.

⁶⁵ Van Schilfgaarde et al., *Tribal Nations and Abortion Access*, 8.

⁶⁶ U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, “Indian Adoption Project Increases Momentum,” *Office of Public Affairs*, accessed March 27, 2025.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The act of removing native children from their homes was a part of a larger effort to strip native peoples of their cultures. One such effort to prevent this separation is the *Indian Child Welfare Act* (ICWA) of 1978. The act acknowledged the troubling history between the Native peoples and the government and the importance of keeping the community together.⁶⁸ The act remains in effect to this day, following its upholding in the 2023 Supreme Court case *Haaland v. Brackeen*.⁶⁹ Although positive measures have taken place since the grim days of forced removal and boarding schools, the parental scars in the Native community run deep.

Abortion has also been highly regulated for Native peoples. Under the 1921 *Snyder Act*, Native Americans are eligible to receive federally funded medical services.⁷⁰ However, since the medical funds are federal, they are subject to congressional regulation of abortion services under the *Hyde Amendment*.⁷¹ Passed in 1977, the Hyde Amendment prohibits federal funds from being used for abortion services except in “cases of pregnancies resulting from rape or incest or those that pose a threat to the mother’s life.”⁷² This law affects any Native person who wants to receive an abortion through the *Indian Health Service* (IHS).

Abortion has also been highly regulated for Native peoples.

The IHS serves 37 states and around 2.6 million Native people, making it one of the most used health services for Native peoples.⁷³ As a result, around 2.6 million Native people do not have access to abortion across the United States unless in extreme cases of rape, incest, or the mother’s imminent death.

⁶⁸ National Indian Child Welfare Association, “What Is ICWA?,” *National Indian Child Welfare Association*, accessed March 28, 2025.

⁶⁹ Bailey Ruhm, “The Best Interests of the Child Beyond *Haaland v. Brackeen*,” *Law & Psychology Review* 48 (2024): 215.

⁷⁰ American Bar Association, “Native Americans and the Crisis in Health Equity,” *American Bar Association*, accessed March 28, 2025.

⁷¹ Donald K. Warne and Linda Bane Frizzell, “American Indian Health Policy: Historical Trends and Contemporary Issues,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. S3 (2014): S263.

⁷² D. M. Green, L. B. Masi, and M. M. P. O'Rourke, “Health Care Access, Health Insurance, and Health Care Utilization Among American Indians and Alaska Natives,” *American Journal of Public Health* 104, no. 3 (2014): 477.

⁷³ Indian Health Service Funding Overview,” *EBSCO Research Starters*, accessed April 4, 2025.

This creates a situation where a majority of Native women do not have reliable access to abortion. Due to the unreliable access to abortion and gestational healthcare, “Native women in the U.S. were two to three times⁷⁴ more likely to die as a result of pregnancy than white women.”⁷⁵

3.3.2 Indigenous Women Rising

Due to the systemic lack of healthcare for Native people, various organizations have been created to help alleviate the strain on Native communities. *Indigenous Women Rising* (IWR) is one example of an organization supporting Native peoples’ family planning. The organization was founded in 2014 and has expanded significantly since the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022.⁷⁶ The IWR is known mainly for its *Rain Fund*, a donation-based service that gives money to individuals needing an abortion in areas that may not have adequate access.⁷⁷ The *Rain Fund* was created in response to the ongoing lack of access to reproductive healthcare that many Native peoples experience. This abortion fund is specifically for Indigenous individuals, aiming to support those who are impacted by financial barriers, remote locations, and restrictions within *Indian Health Services*. IWR also engages in advocacy and education efforts, highlighting the importance of bodily autonomy within Native communities and addressing the colonial history that continues to affect access to care. Their work is part of a larger movement to ensure that Native people can make informed and independent decisions about their reproductive health, free from the systemic limitations imposed by federal policy. This group is a prime example of Native peoples speaking up and retaking control of their bodily autonomy amidst an unsure political climate.

“Due to the *systemic lack of healthcare* for Native people, various organizations have been created to *help alleviate the strain* on Native communities.”

⁷⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Racial and Ethnic Disparities Continue in Pregnancy-Related Deaths," *CDC Newsroom*, last modified September 5, 2019, accessed April 4, 2025.

⁷⁵ Keri Grey, "Abortion Is Sacred: Native Perspectives on the Overturning of *Roe vs. Wade*," *El Tecolote*, August 4, 2022, accessed April 4, 2025.

⁷⁶ Indigenous Women Rising, Indigenous Women Rising, accessed April 14, 2025.

⁷⁷ Indigenous Women Rising, "Indigenous Women Rising Launches the Rain Fund, a Reimagined Approach to Culture and Healthcare," October 28, 2024.

4. Religion on the Environment

The environment has become one of the most pressing moral issues of our time, and religious traditions around the world have begun to address it not just as a scientific or political concern, but as an inherently spiritual one. For many faiths, care for the Earth is rooted in long-standing teachings about responsibility, justice, and the sacredness of creation. This section explores how religious perspectives, particularly within Catholicism, Judaism, and Indigenous belief systems, frame environmental stewardship as a core part of faith, ethics, and identity.

4.1 Catholics on the Environment

Care for the environment is inherently a Catholic value. Spearheaded by the late Pope Francis, according to *Catholic Social Teaching*, a key component of Church doctrine, care for the poor is integral to the Church's mission and inherently tied to the care of the environment.⁷⁸ This is reflected most notably in the 2015 encyclical document *Laudato Si'*, which outlines the cultivator role that Catholics should take.⁷⁹ *Laudato Si'* views the environment through the lens of people experiencing poverty, a concept that has rarely been used before. Pope Francis continues to note:

The intimate relationship between the poor and the fragility of the planet, the conviction that everything in the world is connected, the critique of new paradigms and forms of power derived from technology, the call to seek other ways of understanding the economy and progress, the value proper to each creature, the human meaning of ecology, the need for forthright and honest debate, the serious responsibility of international and local policy, the throwaway culture and the proposal of a new lifestyle.

This innate care for the environment is highlighted especially by the care for the poor. Pope Francis takes on an extremely anthropocentric view on climate change, focusing on the human impact rather than a global ecological impact.

⁷⁸ J.J. Mueller, SJ, et al., *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*, Revised Edition (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 261–264.

⁷⁹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'*, Encyclical Letter on Care for Our Common Home, *Vatican Press*, 2015, #8.

In this groundbreaking call for action, the Pope stressed the climate crisis as not only an ecological problem but also a humanitarian problem. We as humans ought to have a “preferential option for the poor” as outlined by Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*,⁸⁰ and Pope Francis expanded this teaching further in *Laudato Si’* to include care for the poor through environmental stewardship.⁸¹

4.1.1 Vatican City State Progress

The Vatican, as a city-state, is also seen as an ecological sanctuary. Located inside the city of Rome, inside the country of Italy, the Vatican city-state is the smallest country in the world.⁸² Due to the small size of the country, the Vatican can act as a guinea pig for testing the feasibility of climate change measures. For example, as a country, the Vatican city-state has begun transitioning all of its lights to LED, most notably inside the Sistine Chapel.⁸³ Further, the Vatican researched its water consumption and developed a new gardening system that reduced water waste by 60%.⁸⁴ These are a few examples of tangible and achievable goals the Vatican has set that discuss the element of climate change.

By establishing stewardship as a core principle of *Catholic Social Teaching*,⁸⁵ Pope Francis reframed care for the environment not as a political issue, but as a moral and spiritual responsibility. In doing so, he emphasized that environmental action is not optional for Catholics—it is an essential expression of faith. “Living our vocation to be protectors of God’s handiwork is essential to a life of virtue; it is not an optional or a secondary aspect of our Christian experience.”⁸⁶ Note, it is the Christian experience, rather than solely Catholic.

⁸⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis: On Social Concerns* (Vatican City: Vatican Press, 1987).

⁸¹ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*.

⁸² BBC News. "Vatican Country Profile." Last updated November 17, 2023.

⁸³ PBS NewsHour. "Vatican Sheds New Light on Sistine Chapel's Masterpieces." *PBS*, December 6, 2024.

⁸⁴ Carol Glatz, "Vatican City State is pesticide-free, imports green energy," *Crux*, Dec. 14, 2020.


⁸⁵ J.J. Mueller, SJ, et al., *Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith*, Revised Edition (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2011), 261–264.

⁸⁶ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’*. #217.

“Due to the small size of the country, the *Vatican* can act as a guinea pig for testing the *feasibility* of climate change measures.”

These values are present in the Bible, and Christians can observe the principle of stewardship in scripture. “The LORD God then took the man and settled him in the garden of Eden, to cultivate and care for it.”⁸⁷ This cultivation ought to be seen today as caring for the environment and all of creation.

Further, it can be seen in a 2023 Pew Research study that found that 57% of Catholics view climate change as an extremely/severe problem.⁸⁸ This exactly matches the national average for opinions on climate change. It is higher, however, than all but one other sect of Christianity that was interviewed (historically black protestants).⁸⁹ This indicates that some form of Catholic belief on the environment separates other Christians from Catholics. One such explanation for this would be the above concept of stewardship and the work by Pope Francis in *Laudato Si'*. Pope Leo XIV also shares a similar connection to the environment and has cemented this moral imperative into his papacy. During the first 100 days of his papacy, Pope Leo XIV stated, “We must pray for the conversion of so many people, inside and out of the church, who still don’t recognize the urgency of caring for our common home.”⁹⁰ Further, Pope Leo XIV has committed to continuing the work of Pope Francis in attempting to convert the Vatican into a carbon-neutral country. This would be the first instance of any carbon-neutral state around the world. This moral imperative to care for the Earth is not unique to Christianity. In Judaism, a parallel sense of responsibility is deeply embedded in the concept of “Tikkun Olam.”

 **...a 2023 Pew Research study found that 57% of Catholics view climate change as an extremely/severe problem.**

⁸⁷ *Genesis* 2:15, USCCB.

⁸⁸ Jeff Diamant, "The Pope Is Concerned About Climate Change. How Do U.S. Catholics Feel About It?" *Pew Research Center*, September 28, 2023.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁹⁰ Pope Prays for World to Recognize Urgency of Climate Crisis as He Celebrates Mass Using New Rite," *Associated Press*, July 9, 2025.

4.2 Jews on the Environment

The Jewish faith expands on the ideas presented in *Genesis* 1 and 2, the beliefs over whether God gave the earth to humans and made them as stewards,⁹¹ or if God is the owner outright.⁹² Traditionally, Jewish life was centered around animals and agriculture. This is evident in various instances throughout the Hebrew scriptures and in historical records.⁹³ Jewish communities also held animals in very high regard, though this respect may have stemmed from their economic value rather than from explicit animal rights beliefs.⁹⁴

The *Jewish faith* expands on the ideas presented in *Genesis 1 and 2*, the beliefs over whether God *gave* the earth to humans and made them as *stewards*, or if God is the *owner* outright.”

4.2.1 Domination vs. Cultivation

Current beliefs show two contrasting perspectives on environmentalism: stewardship versus the domination of nature. A Pew survey conducted between 2023 and 2024 found that 65% of Jewish-identifying individuals agreed with the statement, “God gave humans a duty to protect the Earth,” while 34% agreed more with “God gave humans a right to use the Earth.”⁹⁵ This goes back to the contrasting ideals portrayed in *Genesis* 1 and 2. One source for the belief in domination comes from *Genesis* 1. “And God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and they shall rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the heaven and over the animals and over all the earth and over all the creeping things that creep upon the earth.’”⁹⁶

⁹¹ *Genesis* 1:26-28.

⁹² Zemer, Moshe. “Ecology as a Mitzvah.” In *The Environment in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, ed. Moshe Zemer and Walter Jacob, 1st ed., vol. 12 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 24–33.

⁹³ Oded Borowski, *Agriculture in Iron Age Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1985), 162.

⁹⁴ John D. Rayner, “Judaism and Animal Welfare: Overview and Some Questions,” in *The Environment in Jewish Law: Essays and Responsa*, ed. Walter Jacob and Moshe Zemer, 1st ed., vol. 12 (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003), 56–72

⁹⁵ Pew Research Center, *Religion and Views on the Environment*, February 26, 2025.

⁹⁶ *Genesis* 1:26.

The concept of “rule” evokes the belief in domination, the belief that humans have a right to use the Earth to serve humanity’s needs. This idea is furthered in *Genesis* 1 when, “God said to them, ‘Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it, and rule over the fish of the sea and over the fowl of the sky and over all the beasts that tread upon the earth.’”⁹⁷ The use of words like ‘subdue’ and ‘rule’ in these verses has shaped the interpretation that the Earth exists primarily to serve human needs—a perspective reflected in the 34% who align with the belief that God gave humans the right to use the Earth.

“The concept of ‘rule’ evokes the belief in *domination*, the belief that humans have a *right* to use the Earth to serve *humanity’s needs*.”

Not all Jews hold the idea of domination; in fact, around 65% believe that God gave the Earth to humans to cultivate and care for. This concept, similar to the one above, can also be found biblically. *Genesis* 2:5 explains, “Now no tree of the field was yet on the earth, neither did any herb of the field yet grow, because the Lord God had not brought rain upon the earth, and there was no man to work the soil.”⁹⁸ This illustrates the need for a worker or a caretaker. The plants on Earth needed someone to take care of them, not to dominate them.

Genesis 2:15 elucidates, “the Lord God took the man, and He placed him in the Garden of Eden to work it and to guard it.”⁹⁹ Guarding is a much different portrayal than dominating. The words ‘guard’ and ‘work’ do not lend themselves to the idea of domination over the Earth. These verses likely inform the belief held by many Jews that humanity’s role is to protect and maintain the Earth, not to exploit it. This idea of stewardship is closely aligned with the Jewish concept of Tikkun Olam, or “repairing the world.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ *Genesis* 1:28.

⁹⁸ *Genesis* 2:5.

⁹⁹ *Genesis* 2:15.

¹⁰⁰ Muhammad Shafiq and Thomas Donlin-Smith, eds., *Nature and the Environment in Contemporary Religious Contexts* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 64, accessed May 22, 2025.

“[Genesis 2:5 and 2:15] likely inform the belief held by many Jews that *humanity’s role is to protect and maintain the Earth, not to exploit it.*”

4.2.2 Tikkun Olam

The concept of Tikkun Olam, or “repairing the world,” has been used for centuries, and the idea has evolved considerably. Its origins can be traced to the *Mishnah*, a foundational text of Rabbinic Judaism compiled around 200 CE. In this early context, Tikkun Olam referred to legal enactments made by the rabbis to maintain social order. However, the idea has since evolved and expanded far beyond jurisprudence.¹⁰¹ It was not until the 16th century that Rabbi Isaac Luria, a mystic in Safed, expanded on the idea of Tikkun Olam as general care for the environment and our planet.¹⁰²

Luria, a mystic of the Kabbalistic school in Safed, introduced a cosmological narrative in which God scattered divine light throughout creation in shards or “sparks.”¹⁰³ The concept continued that human beings, through good deeds and moral living, can help gather these “sparks” and restore wholeness to creation. Though Luria’s version was mystical, the concept has since been embraced in ethical, social, and environmental contexts in the modern era.

Today, Tikkun Olam reflects a merger between a religious ethos and a social concept.¹⁰⁴ Although the concept may have changed meaning considerably over time, it does not affect the immense social value the concept has now.¹⁰⁵ The Jewish diaspora uses this concept of Tikkun Olam as a means of environmental care.

¹⁰¹ Brandeis University, “The Origins and Evolution of Tikkun Olam,” *Jewish Experience*, May 2023.


¹⁰² Rabbi Jennifer Gorman, “Tikkun Olam Sheet,” *Sefaria*, June 28, 2018, accessed May 22, 2025.

¹⁰³ Bethel Temple Center, “The Origins of Tikkun Olam,” accessed June 9, 2025.

¹⁰⁴ Bernard Kahane, “‘Tikkun Olam’: How a Jewish Ethos Drives Innovation,” *The Journal of Management Development* 31, no. 9 (2012): 938–47.

¹⁰⁵ Joel West, “Practical Esotericism and Tikkun Olam: Two Modern Renditions of a Medieval Mystical Idea,” *Semiotica* 2021, no. 242 (2021): 208–10.

While interpretations vary across Jewish denominations — *Reform, Conservative, Orthodox, and Reconstructionist* — Tikkun Olam consistently serves as a powerful call to improve the world through both spiritual and practical means. It connects religious obligations with tangible efforts to address contemporary challenges such as poverty, inequality, and ecological degradation.¹⁰⁶ Tikkun Olam embodies a profound and evolving Jewish commitment to healing and sustaining the world.

 **...Tikkun
Olam
reflects a
merger between a
religious ethos
and a *social
concept*.**

This concept illustrates how spiritual beliefs can inspire concrete action to protect and repair the Earth, highlighting the vital connection between faith and ecological responsibility. Similarly, Indigenous religions across the United States share deeply intertwined relationships with the natural environment, where the landscapes of their historical homelands are viewed not as resources to be dominated, but as sacred, living communities to be respected and preserved.

4.3 Native Americans on the Environment

Native American religious traditions hold a profoundly sacred and reciprocal relationship with the natural world. For much of American history, Native religions and the relationship between indigenous peoples and the environment have been largely misunderstood. The concept of *Animism* has been used to describe the relationship, but this ideal offers an incomplete picture.¹⁰⁷ E.B. Tylor, the anthropologist and historian who originally coined the term, described *Animism* as the religious worldview, common among many Indigenous cultures, in which both living and nonliving elements of nature are believed to have consciousness and spiritual power.¹⁰⁸ This belief was held for many years, despite its deeply colonial mindset and misguided interpretation.

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert S. Rosenthal, "Tikkun ha-Olam: The Metamorphosis of a Concept," *The Journal of Religion* 85, no. 2 (2005): 214–40.

¹⁰⁷ Harvey, Graham, ed. *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*. Durham, UK: Acumen, 2013.

¹⁰⁸ E.B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom* (London: John Murray, 1871), 260.

“Native American religious traditions hold a profoundly sacred and reciprocal relationship with the natural world.”

New Animism, as theorized by scholars such as Graham Harvey, reimagines the world as a community of beings each possessing spirit, agency, and the capacity for meaningful relationships.¹⁰⁹ *New Animism*, as theorized by scholars such as Graham Harvey, reimagines the world as a community of beings each possessing spirit, agency, and the capacity for meaningful relationships. In this view, animals, plants, landscapes, stones, and even the spirits of the deceased are not merely symbolic or passive elements of nature, but active participants in a shared spiritual world. This *New Animism* expands on the simplistic black and white concept initially proposed by Tylor. It is evident in both concepts, however, that indigenous people have and have historically had a deep and personal connection to the natural environment around them.

The relationship between many indigenous or native peoples and the environment is immediate and unmistakable. This is both in the physical and spiritual sense, as many native communities saw the two worlds as unified, with oral traditions and cosmologies linking them to all living and nonliving beings.¹¹⁰ This connection has fueled many political protests and fueled resistance against anti-ecological legislation and action. A spiritual obligation to protect the land is not only embedded in traditional practices but also manifests today through protests like the Dakota Access Pipeline resistance at Standing Rock and the Bears Ears National Monument protection effort.

4.3.1 Dakota Access Pipeline

The construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) sparked national and international controversy. According to the DAPL website, the DAPL is a “1,172-mile underground 30” pipeline transporting crude oil from the Bakken/Three Forks production area in North Dakota to Patoka, Illinois.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁹ Robin M. Wright, review of *Animism: Respecting the Living World*, by Graham Harvey, *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature and Culture* 4, no. 1 (2010): 95.

¹¹⁰ David Rich Lewis, "Native Americans and the Environment: A Survey of Twentieth-Century Issues," *American Indian Quarterly* 19, no. 3 (Summer 1995): 423.

¹¹¹ Dakota Access Pipeline, “Home,” *Dakota Access Pipeline Facts*, accessed June 16, 2025.

The pipeline is located under the *Standing Rock Sioux* peoples' land as well as situated in the Mississippi River, which supplies water relied upon by millions of Americans for drinking and agricultural purposes.¹¹² Protests against the construction of the pipeline began in April 2016 and were widely known by the hashtag #NoDAPL. In 2015, the tribe officially stated that the pipeline endangered their survival and cultural heritage. The *Standing Rock Sioux Tribe* argued that the pipeline violated the *Fort Laramie Treaty* by threatening their land and water resources, which serve as drinking water and irrigation sources for millions of Americans.¹¹³

“The *Standing Rock Sioux Tribe* argued that the [*Dakota Access*] pipeline violated the *Fort Laramie Treaty* by threatening their *land and water resources*...”

The protests gained national media attention, and strong protest efforts continued for seven months, despite the ongoing progress of the construction and the eventual use of the pipeline. Even today, there have been numerous legal cases brought against the pipeline by the tribe and other activist groups. People from the *Standing Rock*, *Cheyenne River Lakota*, and *Rosebud Sioux Tribes* first began protesting. They created protest camps where thousands of visitors and other organizations flocked to protest the construction. Over 300 members of various tribes were present at the protest in 2016 and 2017, according to NBC News coverage of the protests.¹¹⁴ *Mni Wiconi*, a new slogan for the DAPL protests, emerged in 2017. This phrase, *Mni Wiconi*, translates to “Water is Life” and reflects the traditional beliefs and relationship that many Lakota, Sioux, and Dakota tribes have with their natural waterways and environments.¹¹⁵ For these people, *Mni Wiconi* is the basis of life and is essential to the environment both physically and spiritually. This is just one clear example of the concept of *New Animism* and native peoples' relationship with the environment, specifically regarding political protests like the Dakota Access Pipeline.

¹¹² Sarah Kostecky, *The Dakota Access Pipeline: Native American Perspectives*, University of New Mexico, last modified October 19, 2022.

¹¹³ Treaty with the Sioux—Brulé, Oglala, Miniconjou, Yanktonai, Hunkpapa, Blackfeet, Cuthead, Two Kettle, San Arcs, and Santee—and Arapaho, April 29, 1868, *General Records of the United States Government*, Record Group 11, National Archives.

¹¹⁴ Kevin Liptak, “Dakota Pipeline Protests: President Obama Tells Tribes ‘You’re Making Your Voices Heard,’” *NBC News*, November 2, 2016, accessed July 16, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Jennifer Weston, “Water is Life: The Rise of the Mní Wíćóni Movement,” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* 41, no. 1, March 3, 2017.

Just as the resistance at *Standing Rock* highlighted the inseparable bond between land, water, and spiritual identity, the struggle to protect Bears Ears National Monument offers another powerful example of how Indigenous communities continue to assert their sacred relationship with the environment through both spiritual and political action.

4.3.2 Bears Ears National Monument

Bears Ears, located in southeastern Utah, is a region of immense cultural, historical, and spiritual significance to many Native American tribes, including the *Navajo Nation*, *Hopi Nation*, *Zuni Tribe*, *Ute Indian Tribe* of the Uintah and Ouray, and *Ute Mountain Ute Tribe*.¹¹⁶ The monument has been federally protected since late 2016, when then-President Barack Obama issued a presidential proclamation designating 1,351,849 acres of public land protected.¹¹⁷ One year later, then-President Donald Trump reduced the protected area to 201,397 acres despite backlash.¹¹⁸ The reduction prompted three federal lawsuits filed by five Native American tribes, non-profits, advocacy groups, and an outdoor equipment retailer. This was the first time in modern history that five federally recognized Native American tribes united to oppose a specific issue collaboratively.¹¹⁹ In 2021, then-President Joe Biden reversed Donald Trump's proclamation that reduced the Bears Ears National Monument's size.¹²⁰ The land is significant to the tribes involved in the *Bears Ears Inter-Tribal Coalition* because the land holds spiritual and archaeological value. Hundreds of artifacts have been discovered in the land, including various works of art such as pottery, cave painting, one of the oldest tattoo needles ever discovered, and around 100,000 other archeological sites.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Native American Rights Fund, *Bears Ears Case*, accessed June 24, 2025.

¹¹⁷ Barack Obama, Proclamation—Establishment of the Bears Ears National Monument, *The White House*, December 28, 2016.

¹¹⁸ Donald J. Trump, Proclamation 9681—Modifying the Bears Ears National Monument, *The White House*, December 4, 2017.

¹¹⁹ Native American Rights Fund, *Bears Ears Case*.

¹²⁰ Joseph R. Biden Jr., A Proclamation on Bears Ears National Monument, *The White House*, October 8, 2021.

¹²¹ Andrew Gillreath-Brown et al., "Redefining the Age of Tattooing in Western North America: A 2000-Year-Old Artifact from Utah," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 24 (2019): 1064–1075.

These artifacts are extremely valuable to the unique tribes. Additionally, the land itself is sacred and has been used for communal and ceremonial practices for thousands of years.¹²² The effort to protect Bears Ears National Monument is not only about preserving land, but about honoring the deep spiritual, historical, and cultural ties Native communities maintain with it.

Native American religious traditions demonstrate a profound and enduring relationship with the environment, one rooted in mutual respect, spiritual ties, and cultural responsibility. While Western frameworks like *Early Animism* struggled to capture this depth fully, newer interpretations such as *New Animism* offer a more accurate lens through which to understand Indigenous worldviews. Whether through resistance to the Dakota Access Pipeline or the collaborative protection of Bears Ears, Native communities continue to uphold their sacred obligation to the land. These modern actions are not just political; they are expressions of long-held spiritual and religious beliefs.

5. Conclusion

The exploration of religious freedom, along with the principle of separation of church and state, shows how complex and sometimes contested this space is in American society, where faith, law, and politics intersect. Looking at the history of religion in the United States and the political impact of the First Amendment helps us understand how religious liberty is both protected and challenged. The diverse views of Catholics, Jewish Americans, and Indigenous peoples show that religion is not one thing, but a range of values and beliefs that influence public debates on a variety of topics, including immigration, environmental care, and abortion.

Each of these communities, rooted in their traditions and experiences, emphasizes justice, compassion, and respect for human dignity. These principles often challenge strict policies and invite us to think more deeply about what it means to live in a diverse society. Catholic teachings strongly support welcoming immigrants, rooted in scripture and social justice principles that call for compassion and dignity for all people. This tradition consistently challenges restrictive immigration policies, emphasizing that caring for the stranger is a moral obligation.

¹²² Bears Ears Partnership, “Visit with Respect,” accessed June 24, 2025.

Jewish perspectives bring deep ethical reflections on abortion, grounded in nuanced religious interpretations and historical experiences that emphasize the complexity of bodily autonomy. Native communities and nations demonstrate a distinct and vital voice on environmental stewardship, viewing care for the Earth as a sacred responsibility rooted in ancestral teachings and spiritual connection to the land. Their perspectives emphasize the interdependence of all living things and call for justice and respect for creation, challenging dominant environmental policies and inspiring a deeper ethical relationship with nature.

Ultimately, religious freedom in America is not an absolute or isolated right but a balance between individual liberties, diverse beliefs, and constitutional values. The ongoing dialogue among these faith traditions and public life invites us to rethink the boundaries between church and state, not as strict separations but as a spectrum where rights, responsibilities, and convictions come together. This understanding encourages us to embrace the complexity of American identity, promote inclusion, and uphold the dignity of all people.

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The Center for Faith, Identity, and Globalization (CFGI) is the interdisciplinary research and publication unit of Rumi Forum. CFGI contributes to the knowledge and research at the intersection of faith, identity, and globalization by generating academically-informed analyses and facilitating scholarly exchanges. CFGI's spectrum of themes will cover contemporary subjects that are relevant to our understanding of the connection between faith, identity, and globalization, such as interfaith engagement, religious nationalism, conflict resolution, globalization, religious freedom, and spirituality.

About the Author

Mia Clevano is a senior at *Marymount University* double majoring in Theology and Religion in Culture and Communications. A first generation college student from Durango, Colorado, Mia serves as the President of the Honors Program, a Resident Assistant, and a Supplemental Instructor in Theology at *Marymount University*. In Summer 2024, she attended a six-week study program on Catholic Theology and Mariology at the *University of Oxford*. In Fall 2024, Mia was selected for the first cohort of Emmaus participants at *Boston College*'s Clough School of Theology and Ministry. In addition, she has completed community outreach internship at the *Catholic Charities Diocese of Arlington*, VA and legal internship at *Pace & Little, LLC* in Durango, CO, as she aspires to pursue a dual JD and Master's in Religious Studies after completing her undergraduate studies. Mia plans to become a defense attorney and a professor of religious studies. She recently received the *Capital Speakers Club Foundation*'s 2025 Scholarship Award. Mia plays at Marymount's *Women's College Flag Football* team.

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