

The White House Office of Faith and Religious Freedom.

(4 May 2025)

On February 6, the annual National Prayer Breakfast was held in Washington, DC. This event is a time-honored American tradition that, since 1953, has brought together hundreds of political, religious, and business leaders, as well as prominent figures from around the world, every first Thursday of February. The tradition was initiated by President Eisenhower and has since been attended by successive presidents, whose speeches have always been a central part of the gathering. At this year's event, attended by President Trump, the most significant point of his speech was his desire to bring religion back to the center of the country.

Religion is a particularly significant issue in the United States, where it has been deeply intertwined with the nation's history. Trump stated that he wants to protect religious freedom and announced the creation of a Presidential Commission dedicated to safeguarding this fundamental right. Additionally, he revealed that he has tasked Attorney General Pam Bondi with leading a Task Force to investigate and combat anti-Christian bias, as well as to work on establishing a White House Office of Faith, headed by Pastor Paula White. According to the announcement at the National Prayer Breakfast, the Task Force is expected to address all threats to Christianity, not only within the government but also in agencies such as the FBI, IRS, and the Justice Department, as well as in broader society. This speech was followed, as early as the next day, by an Executive Order establishing the White House Office of Faith.

The text of the Executive Order outlines the responsibilities of this Office, which include engaging in dialogue with experts, religious leaders, and federal agencies with significant experience in their respective fields—particularly in areas such as the protection of women and children, the strengthening of marriage and family, the defense of religious freedom, and the fight against anti-Semitism and anti-Christianity. Additionally, the Office will be responsible for making recommendations to the President to enhance support for these organizations, convening meetings, and overseeing the implementation of policies put in place. It will also collaborate with businesses on employee volunteering initiatives and work alongside the Attorney General to address the concerns of religious organizations if the executive branch fails to do so¹.

This was followed by other notable events, such as Secretary of State Rubio wearing a cross on his forehead to mark the beginning of the Lenten season and a photo posted on social media depicting Trump in a pose reminiscent of Christ's Last Supper. All of these events have raised doubts and concerns due to inconsistencies with the principles on which American history is founded, as reflected in the nation's

1 Cf. Executive Order n.14205, February 7, 2025.

foundational documents. More importantly, they have reignited the debate on the separation of church and state in the United States and the issue of religious freedom. The United States is a secular state², although its relationship with religion remains deeply rooted. History presents us with a fundamental fact: nearly all U.S. presidents have held well-defined religious beliefs. However, this has not prevented them from governing in accordance with the long standing principle of separating church and state, in line with American historical tradition. The connection between religion and American history is undeniable consider, for instance, the Pilgrim Fathers, who came to America to escape religious persecution. From that moment on, the ability to freely practice one's faith in this new land enabled many people to settle and build a society based on religious coexistence. The Founding Fathers, as strong advocates of religious liberty, enshrined this principle in the First Amendment, which prohibits Congress from legislating on matters concerning the establishment of religion or restricting its free exercise³.

It is precisely the potential violation of the First Amendment that has been called into question in recent weeks following statements made by President Donald Trump.

A closer analysis of the First Amendment reveals that it consists of two key components: the "Establishment Clause," and the "Free Exercise Clause"⁴.

The first clause, known as the Establishment Clause, essentially enshrines the separation of church and state by prohibiting the government from interfering in religious matters, either through the establishment of an official state religion or by taking actions that favor one religion over others⁵. The second, the Free Exercise Clause, guarantees the right to freely practice one's religion, provided it does not interfere with public safety, health, or welfare. The actual operation of this Office could raise constitutional concerns. Moreover, in the president's statements, there is a noticeable closeness to Christianity. The risk, however, is that a personal preference could translate into an element that undermines the First Amendment, which prohibits government favoritism toward any religion, ensuring state neutrality and upholding the separation of church and state. Doubts also persist regarding the Task Force established to monitor potential bias against Christians, as its mandate would extend to overseeing the work of government agencies.

What implications could this have for the Vatican? Could the Church's recent openness under Pope Francis' pontificate come into conflict with a rigid interpretation of religion and statements that blur the existing boundary between church and state? Furthermore, a pressing question arises: could this initiative

2 Cf. I Amendment to the Constitution of the United States America

3 Cf. I Amendment to the Constitution of the United States America

4 Free Exercise Clause, in West's Encyclopedia of American Law, edition 2, 2008.

5 The Supreme Court defined this clause in *Lemon v. Kurtzman* 403 U.S 602 (1971), in which it established a three level test for whether the provision violates the clause in question

lead to discrimination against other religious denominations? The strong emphasis on protecting Christians might result in preferential treatment for one specific faith, potentially disadvantaging others. If these concerns materialize, the government's alignment with the Church could erode the clear boundaries between them, putting religious freedom—an inviolable and fundamental right—at risk. What will happen in America? Is the separation of church and state under threat? Is religious freedom at risk? Does the Office face compatibility issues with constitutional rights? All that remains is to await the official start of its operations and see whether the measures implemented could endanger a fundamental right—one that lies at the very heart of America itself.

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