Justice Blackmun, with whom Justice Stevens and Justice O'Connor join, concurring.

Nearly half a century of review and refinement of Establishment Clause jurisprudence has distilled one clear understanding: Government may neither promote nor affiliate itself with any religious doctrine or organization, nor may it obtrude itself in the internal affairs of any religious institution. The application of these principles to the present case mandates the decision reached today by the Court.

I

This Court first reviewed a challenge to state law under the Establishment Clause in Everson v. Board of Education, 330 U. S. 1 (1947). Relying on the history of the Clause, and the Court's prior analysis, Justice Black outlined the considerations that have become the touchstone of Establishment Clause jurisprudence: Neither a State nor the Federal Government can pass laws which aid one religion, aid all religions, or prefer one religion over another. Neither a State nor the Federal Government, openly or secretly, can participate in the affairs of any religious organization and vice versa. "In the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect `a wall of separation between church and State.'" Everson, 330 U. S., at 16, quoting Reynolds v. United States, 98 U. S. 145, 164 (1879). The dissenters agreed: "The Amendment's purpose . . . was to create a complete and permanent separation of the spheres of religious activity and civil authority by comprehensively forbidding every form of public aid or support for religion." 330 U.S., at 31-32 (Rutledge, J., dissenting, joined by Frankfurter, Jackson, and Burton, JJ.).

In Engel v. Vitale, 370 U. S. 421 (1962), the Court considered for the first time the constitutionality of prayer in a public school. Students said aloud a short prayer selected by the State Board of Regents: "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon Thee, and we beg Thy blessings upon us, our parents, our teachers and our Country." Id., at 422. Justice Black, writing for the Court, again made clear that the First Amendment forbids the use of the power or prestige of the government to control, support, or influence the religious beliefs and practices of the American people. Although the prayer was -denominationally neutral- and -its observance on the part of the students [was] voluntary,- id., at 430, the Court found that it violated this essential precept of the Establishment Clause.

A year later, the Court again invalidated government-sponsored prayer in public schools in Abington School District v. Schempp, 374 U. S. 203 (1963). In Schempp, the school day for Baltimore, Maryland, and Abington Township, Pennsylvania, students began with a reading from the Bible, or a recitation of the Lord's Prayer, or both. After a thorough review of the Court's prior Establishment Clause cases, the Court concluded:

> [T]he Establishment Clause has been directly considered by this Court eight times in the past score of years and, with only one Justice dissenting on the point, it has consistently held that the clause withdrew all legislative power respecting religious belief or the expression thereof. The test may be stated as follows: what are the purpose and the primary effect of the enactment? If either is the advancement or inhibition of religion, then the enactment exceeds the scope of legislative power as circumscribed by the Constitution. Id., at 222.

Because the schools' opening exercises were government- sponsored religious ceremonies, the Court found that the primary effect was the advancement of religion and held, therefore, that the activity violated the Establishment Clause. Id., at 223-224.

Five years later, the next time the Court considered whether religious activity in public schools violated the Establishment Clause, it reiterated the principle that government "may not aid, foster, or promote one religion or religious theory against another or even against the militant opposite." Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U. S. 97, 104 (1968). "`If [the purpose or primary effect] is the advancement or inhibition of religion then the enactment exceeds the scope of legislative power as circumscribed by the Constitution.'" Id., at 107 (quoting Schempp, 374 U. S., at 222). Finding that the Arkansas law aided religion by preventing the teaching of evolution, the Court invalidated it.

In 1971, Chief Justice Burger reviewed the Court's past decisions and found: -Three . . . tests may be gleaned from our cases.- Lemon v. Kurtzman, 403 U. S. 602, 612. In order for a statute to survive an Establishment Clause challenge, "[f]irst, the statute must have a secular legislative purpose; second, its principal or primary effect must be one that neither advances nor inhibits religion; finally the statute must not foster an excessive government entanglement with religion." Id., at 612-613 (internal quotation marks and citations omitted). After Lemon, the Court continued to rely on these basic principles in resolving Establishment Clause disputes.

Application of these principles to the facts of this case is straightforward. There can be -no doubt- that the "invocation of God's blessings" delivered at Nathan Bishop Middle School "is a religious activity." Engel, 370 U. S., at 424. In the words of Engel, the Rabbi's prayer "is a solemn avowal of divine faith and supplication for the blessings of the Almighty. The nature of such a prayer has always been religious." Ibid. The question then is whether the government has plac[ed] its official stamp of approval- on the prayer. Id., at 429. As the Court ably demonstrates, when the government -compose[s] official prayers,- id., at 425, selects the member of the clergy to deliver the prayer, has the prayer delivered at a public school event that is planned, supervised and given by school officials, and pressures

students to attend and participate in the prayer, there can be no doubt that the government is advancing and promoting religion. As our prior decisions teach us, it is this that the Constitution prohibits.

II

I join the Court's opinion today because I find nothing in it inconsistent with the essential precepts of the Establishment Clause developed in our precedents. The Court holds that the graduation prayer is unconstitutional because the State "in effect required participation in a religious exercise."Ante, at 14. Although our precedents make clear that proof of government coercion is not necessary to prove an Establishment Clause violation, it is sufficient. Government pressure to participate in a religious activity is an obvious indication that the government is endorsing or promoting religion.

But it is not enough that the government restrain from compelling religious practices: it must not engage in them either. See Schempp, 374 U. S., at 305 (Goldberg, J., concurring). The Court repeatedly has recognized that a violation of the Establishment Clause is not predicated on coercion. See, e.g., id., at 223; id., at 229 (Douglas, J., concurring); Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U. S. 38, 72 (1985) (O'Connor, J., concurring in judgment) ("The decisions [in Engel and Schempp] acknowledged the coercion implicit under the statutory schemes, but they expressly turned only on the fact that the government was sponsoring a manifestly religious exercise" (citation omitted)); Comm. for Public Ed. v. Nyquist, 413 U. S. 756, 786 (1973) ("[P]roof of coercion . . . [is] not a necessary element of any claim under the Establishment Clause"). The Establishment Clause proscribes public schools from "conveying or attempting to convey a message that religion or a particular religious belief is favored or preferred," County of Allegheny v. ACLU, 492 U. S. 573, 593 (1989) (internal quotations omitted) (emphasis in original), even if the schools do not actually "impos[e] pressure upon a student to participate in a religious activity." Westside Community Bd. of Ed. v. Mergens, 496 U. S. 226, 261 (1990) (Kennedy, J., concurring).

The scope of the Establishment Clause's prohibitions developed in our case law derives from the Clause's purposes. The First Amendment encompasses two distinct guarantees- the government shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof- both with the common purpose of securing religious liberty. Through vigorous enforcement of both clauses, we -promote and assure the fullest possible scope of religious liberty and tolerance for all and . . . nurture the conditions which secure the best hope of attainment of that end.- Schempp, 374 U. S., at 305 (Goldberg, J., concurring).

There is no doubt that attempts to aid religion through government coercion jeopardize freedom of conscience. Even subtle

pressure diminishes the right of each individual to choose voluntarily what to believe. Representative Carroll explained during congressional debate over the Establishment Clause: "[T] he rights of conscience are, in their nature, of peculiar delicacy, and will little bear the gentlest touch of governmental hand." I Annals of Cong. 757 (August 15, 1789).

Our decisions have gone beyond prohibiting coercion, however, because the Court has recognized that -the fullest possible scope of religious liberty,- Schempp, 374 U. S., at 305 (Goldberg, J., concurring), entails more than freedom from coercion. The Establishment Clause protects religious liberty on a grand scale; it is a social compact that guarantees for generations a democracy and a strong religious community-both essential to safeguarding religious liberty. "Our fathers seem to have been perfectly sincere in their belief that the members of the Church would be more patriotic, and the citizens of the State more religious, by keeping their respective functions entirely separate." Religious Liberty, in Essays and Speeches of Jeremiah S. Black 53 (C. Black ed. 1885) (Chief Justice of the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania).

The mixing of government and religion can be a threat to free government, even if no one is forced to participate. When the government puts its imprimatur on a particular religion, it conveys a message of exclusion to all those who do not adhere to the favored beliefs. A government cannot be premised on the belief that all persons are created equal when it asserts that God prefers some. Only -[a]nguish, hardship and bitter strife- result -when zealous religious groups struggl[e] with one another to obtain the Government's stamp of approval.- Engel, 370 U. S., at 429; see also Lemon, 403 U. S., at 622-623; Aguilar v. Felton, 473 U.S. 402, 416 (1985) (Powell, J., concurring). Such a struggle can -strain a political system to the breaking point.- Walz v. Tax Commission, 397 U. S. 664, 694 (1970) (opinion of Harlan, J.).

When the government arrogates to itself a role in religious affairs, it abandons its obligation as guarantor of democracy. Democracy requires the nourishment of dialogue and dissent, while religious faith puts its trust in an ultimate divine authority above all human deliberation. When the government appropriates religious truth, it "transforms rational debate into theological decree." Nuechterlein, Note, The Free Exercise Boundaries of Permissible Accommodation Under the Establishment Clause, 99 Yale L.J. 1127, 1131 (1990). Those who disagree no longer are questioning the policy judgment of the elected but the rules of a higher authority who is beyond reproach.

Madison warned that government officials who would use religious authority to pursue secular ends "exceed the commission from which they derive their authority and are Tyrants. The People who submit to it are governed by laws made neither by themselves, nor by an authority derived from them, and are

slaves." Memorial and Remonstrance against Religious Assessments (1785) in The Complete Madison 300 (S. Padover, ed. 1953). Democratic govern- ment will not last long when proclamation replaces persua- sion as the medium of political exchange.

Likewise, we have recognized that "[r]eligion flourishes in greater purity, without than with the aid of Gov[ernment]." Id., at 309. To "make room for as wide a variety of beliefs and creeds as the spiritual needs of man deem necessary," Zorach v. Clauson, 343 U. S. 306, 313 (1952), the government must not align itself with any one of them. When the government favors a particular religion or sect, the disadvantage to all others is obvious, but even the favored religion may fear being -taint[ed] . . . with a corrosive secularism.- Grand Rapids School Dist. v. Ball, 473 U. S. 373, 385 (1985). The favored religion may be compromised as political figures reshape the religion's beliefs for their own purposes; it may be reformed as government largesse brings government regulation. Keeping religion in the hands of private groups minimizes state intrusion on religious choice and best enables each religion to -flourish according to the zeal of its adherents and the appeal of its dogma.- Zorach, 343 U. S., at 313.

It is these understandings and fears that underlie our Establishment Clause jurisprudence. We have believed that religious freedom cannot exist in the absence of a free democratic government, and that such a government cannot endure when there is fusion between religion and the political regime. We have believed that religious freedom cannot thrive in the absence of a vibrant religious community and that such a community cannot prosper when it is bound to the secular. And we have believed that these were the animating principles behind the adoption of the Establishment Clause. To that end, our cases have prohibited government endorsement of religion, its sponsorship, and active involvement in religion, whether or not citizens were coerced to conform.

I remain convinced that our jurisprudence is not misguided, and that it requires the decision reached by the Court today. Accordingly, I join the Court in affirming the judgment of the Court of Appeals.

Justice Souter, with whom Justice Stevens and Justice O'Connor join, concurring.

I join the whole of the Court's opinion, and fully agree that prayers at public school graduation ceremonies indirectly coerce religious observance. I write separately nonetheless on two issues of Establishment Clause analysis that underlie my independent resolution of this case: whether the Clause applies to governmental practices that do not favor one religion or denomination over others, and whether state coercion of religious conformity, over and above state endorsement of religious exercise or belief, is a necessary element of an Establishment Clause violation.

I

Forty-five years ago, this Court announced a basic principle of constitutional law from which it has not strayed: the Establishment Clause forbids not only state practices that "aid one religion . . . or prefer one religion over another," but also those that "aid all religions." Everson v. Board of Education of Ewing, 330 U. S. 1, 15 (1947). Today we reaffirm that principle, holding that the Establishment Clause forbids state-sponsored prayers in public school settings no matter how nondenominational the prayers may be. In barring the State from sponsoring generically Theistic prayers where it could not sponsor sectarian ones, we hold true to a line of precedent from which there is no adequate historical case to depart.

A

Since Everson, we have consistently held the Clause applicable no less to governmental acts favoring religion generally than to acts favoring one religion over others. Thus, in Engel v. Vitale, 370 U. S. 421 (1962), we held that the public schools may not subject their students to readings of any prayer, however -denominationally neutral.- Id., at 430. More recently, in Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U. S. 38 (1985), we held that an Alabama moment-of-silence statute passed for the sole purpose of "returning voluntary prayer to public schools," id., at 57, violated the Establishment Clause even though it did not encourage students to pray to any particular deity. We said that "when the underlying principle has been examined in the crucible of litigation, the Court has unambiguously concluded that the individual freedom of conscience protected by the First Amendment embraces the right to select any religious faith or none at all. " Id., at 52-53. This conclusion, we held, "derives support not only from the interest in respecting the individual's freedom of conscience, but also from the conviction that religious beliefs worthy of respect are the product of free and voluntary choice by the faithful, and from recognition of the fact that the political interest in forestalling intolerance extends beyond intolerance among Christian sects- or even intolerance among `religions'-to encompass intolerance of the disbeliever and the uncertain." Id. , at 53-54 (footnotes omitted).

Likewise, in Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock, 489 U. S. 1 (1989), we struck down a state tax exemption benefiting only religious periodicals; even though the statute in question worked no discrimination among sects, a majority of the Court found that its preference for religious publications over all other kinds - effectively endorses religious belief.- Id., at 17 (plurality opinion); see id., at 28 (Blackmun, J., concurring in judgment) (-A statutory preference for the dissemination of religious ideas offends our most basic understanding of what the Establishment Clause is all about and hence is constitutionally intolerable-). And in Torcaso v. Watkins, 367 U. S. 488 (1961), we struck down a provision of the Maryland Constitution requiring public officials

to declare a -`belief in the existence of God,'- id., at 489, reasoning that, under the Religion Clauses of the First Amendment, "neither a State nor the Federal Government . . . can constitutionally pass laws or impose requirements which aid all religions as against non-believers . . . ", id., at 495. See also Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U. S. 97, 104 (1968) (The First Amendment mandates governmental neutrality between religion and religion, and between religion and nonreligion); School Dist. of Abington v. Schempp, 374 U. S. 203, 216 (1963) ("this Court has rejected unequivocally the contention that the Establishment Clause forbids only governmental preference of one religion over another"); id., at 319-320 (Stewart, J., dissenting) (the Clause applies "to each of us, be he Jew or Agnostic, Christian or Atheist, Buddhist or Freethinker").

Such is the settled law. Here, as elsewhere, we should stick to it absent some compelling reason to discard it. See Arizona v. Rumsey, 467 U. S. 203, 212 (1984); Payne v. Tennessee, 501 U. S. --, -- (1991) (slip op., at 8) (Souter, J., concurring).

B

Some have challenged this precedent by reading the Establishment Clause to permit -nonpreferential- state promotion of religion. The challengers argue that, as originally understood by the Framers, "[t]he Establishment Clause did not require government neutrality between religion and irreligion nor did it prohibit the Federal Government from providing nondiscriminatory aid to religion." Wallace, supra, at 106 (Rehnquist, J., dissenting); see also R. Cord, Separation of Church and State: Historical Fact and Current Fiction (1988). While a case has been made for this position, it is not so convincing as to warrant reconsideration of our settled law; indeed, I find in the history of the Clause's textual development a more powerful argument supporting the Court's jurisprudence following Everson.

When James Madison arrived at the First Congress with a series of proposals to amend the National Constitution, one of the provisions read that -[t]he civil rights of none shall be abridged on account of religious belief or worship, nor shall any national religion be established, nor shall the full and equal rights of conscience be in any manner, or on any pretext, infringed.- 1 Annals of Cong. 434 (1789). Madison's language did not last long. It was sent to a Select Committee of the House, which, without explanation, changed it to read that "no religion shall be established by law, nor shall the equal rights of conscience be infringed." Id., at 729. Thence the proposal went to the Committee of the Whole, which was in turn dissatisfied with the Select Committee's language and adopted an alternative proposed by Samuel Livermore of New Hampshire: -Congress shall make no laws touching religion, or infringing the rights of conscience.- See id., at 731. Livermore's proposal would have forbidden laws having anything to do with religion and was thus

not only far broader than Madison's version, but broader even than the scope of the Establishment Clause as we now understand it. See, e.g., Corporation of Presiding Bishop of Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints v. Amos, 483 U. S. 327 (1987) (upholding legislative exemption of religious groups from certain obligations under civil rights laws).

The House rewrote the amendment once more before sending it to the Senate, this time adopting, without recorded debate, language derived from a proposal by Fisher Ames of Massachusetts: -Congress shall make no law establishing Religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed.- 1 Documentary History of the First Federal Congress of the United States of America 136 (Senate Journal) (L. de Pauw ed. 1972); see 1 Annals of Cong. 765 (1789). Perhaps, on further reflection, the Representatives had thought Liver- more's proposal too expansive, or perhaps, as one historian has suggested, they had simply worried that his language would not - satisfy the demands of those who wanted something said specifically against establishments of religion.- L. Levy, The Establishment Clause 81 (1986) (hereinafter Levy). We do not know; what we do know is that the House rejected the Select Committee's version, which arguably ensured only that -no religion- enjoyed an official preference over others, and deliberately chose instead a prohibition extending to laws establishing -religion- in general.

The sequence of the Senate's treatment of this House proposal, and the House's response to the Senate, confirm that the Framers meant the Establishment Clause's prohibition to encompass nonpreferential aid to religion. In September 1789, the Senate considered a number of provisions that would have permitted such aid, and ultimately it adopted one of them. First, it briefly entertained this language: -Congress shall make no law establishing One Religious Sect or Society in preference to others, nor shall the rights of conscience be infringed.- 1 Documentary History, supra, at 151 (Senate Journal). After rejecting two minor amendments to that proposal, see ibid., the Senate dropped it altogether and chose a provision identical to the House's proposal, but without the clause protecting the - rights of conscience,- ibid. With no record of the Senate debates, we cannot know what prompted these changes, but the record does tell us that, six days later, the Senate went half circle and adopted its narrowest language yet: -Congress shall make no law establishing articles of faith or a mode of worship, or prohibiting the free exercise of religion.- Id., at 166. The Senate sent this proposal to the House along with its versions of the other constitutional amendments proposed.

Though it accepted much of the Senate's work on the Bill of Rights, the House rejected the Senate's version of the Establishment Clause and called for a joint conference committee, to which the Senate agreed. The House conferees ultimately won out, persuading the Senate to accept this as the final text of the Religion Clauses: -Congress shall make no law respecting an

establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.- What is remarkable is that, unlike the earliest House drafts or the final Senate proposal, the prevailing language is not limited to laws respecting an establishment of -a religion,- -a national religion,- -one religious sect,- or specific - articles of faith.- The Framers repeatedly considered and deliberately rejected such narrow language and instead extended their prohibition to state support for -religion- in general.

Implicit in their choice is the distinction between preferential and nonpreferential establishments, which the weight of evidence suggests the Framers appreciated. See, e.g., Laycock, -Nonpreferential- Aid 902-906; Levy 91-119. But cf. T. Curry, The First Freedoms 208-222 (1986). Of particular note, the Framers were vividly familiar with efforts in the colonies and, later, the States to impose general, nondenominational assessments and other incidents of ostensibly ecumenical establishments. See generally Levy 1-62. The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, written by Jefferson and sponsored by Madison, captured the separationist response to such measures. Condemning all establishments, however nonpreferentialist, the Statute broadly guaranteed that "no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever," including his own. Act for Establishing Religious Freedom (1785), in 5 The Founders' Constitution 84, 85 (P. Kurland & R. Lerner eds. 1987). Forcing a citizen to support even his own church would, among other things, deny "the ministry those temporary rewards, which proceeding from an approbation of their personal conduct, are an additional incitement to earnest and unremitting labours for the instruction of mankind." Id, at 84. In general, Madison later added, "religion & Govt. will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together." Letter from J. Madison to E. Livingston, 10 July 1822, in 5 The Founders' Constitution, at 105, 106.

What we thus know of the Framers' experience underscores the observation of one prominent commentator, that confining the Establishment Clause to a prohibition on preferential aid - requires a premise that the Framers were extraordinarily bad drafters-that they believed one thing but adopted language that said something substantially different, and that they did so after repeatedly attending to the choice of language.- Laycock, "Nonpreferential" Aid 882-883; see also Allegheny County v. American Civil Liberties Union, Greater Pittsburgh Chapter, 492 U. S. 573, 647-648 (1989) (opinion of Stevens, J.). We must presume, since there is no conclusive evidence to the contrary, that the Framers embraced the significance of their textual judgment. Thus, on balance, history neither contradicts nor warrants reconsideration of the settled principle that the Establishment Clause forbids support for religion in general no less than support for one religion or some.

While these considerations are, for me, sufficient to reject the nonpreferentialist position, one further concern animates my judgment. In many contexts, including this one, nonpreferentialism requires some distinction between -sectarian- religious practices and those that would be, by some measure, ecumenical enough to pass Establishment Clause muster. Simply by requiring the enquiry, nonpreferentialists invite the courts to engage in comparative theology. I can hardly imagine a subject less amenable to the competence of the federal judiciary, or more deliberately to be avoided where possible.

This case is nicely in point. Since the nonpreferentiality of a prayer must be judged by its text, Justice Blackmun pertinently observes, ante, at 6, n. 5, that Rabbi Gutterman drew his exhortation "[t]o do justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly" straight from the King James version of Micah, ch. 6, v. 8. At some undefinable point, the similarities between a state-sponsored prayer and the sacred text of a specific religion would so closely identify the former with the latter that even a nonpreferentialist would have to concede a breach of the Establishment Clause. And even if Micah's thought is sufficiently generic for most believers, it still embodies a straightforwardly Theistic premise, and so does the Rabbi's prayer. Many Americans who consider themselves religious are not Theistic; some, like several of the Framers, are Deists who would question Rabbi Gutterman's plea for divine advancement of the country's political and moral good. Thus, a nonpreferentialist who would condemn subjecting public school graduates to, say, the Anglican liturgy would still need to explain why the government's preference for Theistic over non-Theistic religion is constitutional.

Nor does it solve the problem to say that the State should promote a -diversity- of religious views; that position would necessarily compel the government and, inevitably, the courts to make wholly inappropriate judgments about the number of religions the State should sponsor and the relative frequency with which it should sponsor each. In fact, the prospect would be even worse than that. As Madison observed in criticizing religious presidential proclamations, the practice of sponsoring religious messages tends, over time, -to narrow the recommendation to the standard of the predominant sect.- Madison's -Detached Memoranda, - 3 Wm. & Mary Q. 534, 561 (E. Fleet ed. 1946) (hereinafter Madison's "Detached Memoranda"). We have not changed much since the days of Madison, and the judiciary should not willingly enter the political arena to battle the centripetal force leading from religious pluralism to official preference for the faith with the most votes.

II

Petitioners rest most of their argument on a theory that, whether or not the Establishment Clause permits extensive nonsectarian support for religion, it does not forbid the state to sponsor affirmations of religious belief that coerce neither

support for religion nor participation in religious observance. I appreciate the force of some of the arguments supporting a -coercion- analysis of the Clause. See generally Allegheny County, supra, at 655-679 (opinion of Kennedy, J.); McConnell, Coercion: The Lost Element of Establishment, 27 Wm. & Mary L. Rev. 933 (1986). But we could not adopt that reading without abandoning our settled law, a course that, in my view, the text of the Clause would not readily permit. Nor does the extratextual evidence of original meaning stand so unequivocally at odds with the textual premise inherent in existing precedent that we should fundamentally reconsider our course.

A

Over the years, this Court has declared the invalidity of many noncoercive state laws and practices conveying a message of religious endorsement. For example, in Allegheny County, supra, we forbade the prominent display of a nativity scene on public property; without contesting the dissent's observation that the display coerced no one into accepting or supporting whatever message it proclaimed, five Members of the Court found its display unconstitutional as a state endorsement of Christianity. Id., at 589-594, 598-602. Likewise, in Wallace v. Jaffree, 472 U.S. 38 (1985), we struck down a state law requiring a moment of silence in public classrooms not because the statute coerced students to participate in prayer (for it did not), but because the manner of its enactment "convey[ed] a message of state approval of prayer activities in the public schools." Id., at 61; see also id., at 67-84 (O'Connor, J., concurring in judgment). Cf. Engel v. Vitale, 370 U. S., at 431 ("When the power, prestige and financial support of government is placed behind a particular religious belief, the indirect coercive pressure upon religious minorities to conform to the prevailing officially approved religion is plain. But the purposes underlying the Establishment Clause go much further than that").

In Epperson v. Arkansas, 393 U. S. 97 (1968), we invalidated a state law that barred the teaching of Darwin's theory of evolution because, even though the statute obviously did not coerce anyone to support religion or participate in any religious practice, it was enacted for a singularly religious purpose. See also Edwards v. Aguillard, 482 U. S. 578, 593 (1987) (statute requiring instruction in -creation science- -endorses religion in violation of the First Amendment-). And in School Dist. of Grand Rapids v. Ball, 473 U. S. 373 (1985), we invalidated a program whereby the State sent public school teachers to parochial schools to instruct students on ostensibly nonreligious matters; while the scheme clearly did not coerce anyone to receive or subsidize religious instruction, we held it invalid because, among other things, "[t]he symbolic union of church and state inherent in the [program] threatens to convey a message of state support for religion to students and to the general public." Id., at 397; see also Texas Monthly, Inc. v. Bullock, 489 U. S., at 17 (plurality opinion) (tax exemption benefiting only religious publications -effectively endorses religious belief-); id., at 28

(Blackmun, J., concurring in judgment) (exemption unconstitutional because State -engaged in preferential support for the communication of religious messages-).

Our precedents may not always have drawn perfectly straight lines. They simply cannot, however, support the position that a showing of coercion is necessary to a successful Establishment Clause claim.

B

Like the provisions about -due- process and -unreasonable- searches and seizures, the constitutional language forbidding laws -respecting an establishment of religion- is not pellucid. But virtually everyone acknowledges that the Clause bans more than formal establishments of religion in the traditional sense, that is, massive state support for religion through, among other means, comprehensive schemes of taxation. See generally Levy 1-62 (discussing such establishments in the colonies and early States). This much follows from the Framers' explicit rejection of simpler provisions prohibiting either the establishment of a religion or laws -establishing religion- in favor of the broader ban on laws -respecting an establishment of religion.- See supra, at 4-6.

While some argue that the Framers added the word -respecting- simply to foreclose federal interference with State establishments of religion, see, e.g., Amar, The Bill of Rights as a Constitution, 100 Yale L. J. 1131, 1157 (1991), the language sweeps more broadly than that. In Madison's words, the Clause in its final form forbids -everything like- a national religious establishment, see Madison's -Detached Memoranda- 558, and, after incorporation, it forbids -everything like- a State religious establishment. Cf. Allegheny County, 492 U. S., at 649 (opinion of Stevens, J.). The sweep is broad enough that Madison himself characterized congressional provisions for legislative and military chaplains as unconstitutional -establishments.- Madison's -Detached Memoranda- 558-559; see infra, at 16-17, and n. 6.

While petitioners insist that the prohibition extends only to the -coercive- features and incidents of establishment, they cannot easily square that claim with the constitutional text. The First Amendment forbids not just laws -respecting an establishment of religion,- but also those -prohibiting the free exercise thereof.- Yet laws that coerce nonadher- ents to -support or participate in any religion or its exercise,- Allegheny County, supra, at 659-660 (opinion of Kennedy, J.), would virtually by definition violate their right to religious free exercise. See Employment Div., Dept. of Human Resources of Ore. v. Smith, 494 U. S. 872, 877 (1990) (under Free Exercise Clause, -government may not compel affirmation of religious belief-), citing Torcaso v. Watkins, 367 U. S. 488 (1961); see also J. Madison, Memori- al and Remonstrance Against Religious

Assessments (1785) (compelling support for religious establishments violates -free exercise of Religion-), quoted in 5 The Founders' Constitution, at 82, 84. Thus, a literal application of the coercion test would render the Establishment Clause a vir- tual nullity, as petitioners' counsel essentially conceded at oral argument. Tr. of Oral Arg. 18.

Our cases presuppose as much; as we said in School Dist. of Abington, supra, -[t]he distinction between the two clauses is apparent-a violation of the Free Exercise Clause is predicated on coercion while the Establishment Clause violation need not be so attended.- 374 U. S., at 223; see also Laycock, "Nonpreferential" Aid 922 (-If coercion is . . . an element of the establishment clause, establishment adds nothing to free exercise-). While one may argue that the Framers meant the Establishment Clause simply to ornament the First Amendment, cf. T. Curry, The First Freedoms 216-217 (1986), that must be a reading of last resort. Without compelling evidence to the contrary, we should presume that the Framers meant the Clause to stand for something more than petitioners attribute to it.

C

Petitioners argue from the political setting in which the Establishment Clause was framed, and from the Framers' own political practices following ratification, that government may constitutionally endorse religion so long as it does not coerce religious conformity. The setting and the practices warrant canvassing, but while they yield some evidence for petitioners' argument, they do not reveal the degree of consensus in early constitutional thought that would raise a threat to stare decisis by challenging the presumption that the Establishment Clause adds something to the Free Exercise Clause that follows it.

The Framers adopted the Religion Clauses in response to a long tradition of coercive state support for religion, particularly in the form of tax assessments, but their special antipathy to religious coercion did not exhaust their hostility to the features and incidents of establishment. Indeed, Jefferson and Madison opposed any political appropriation of religion, see infra, at 15-18 and, even when challenging the hated assessments, they did not always temper their rhetoric with distinctions between coercive and noncoercive state action. When, for example, Madison criticized Virginia's general assessment bill, he invoked principles antithetical to all state efforts to promote religion. An assessment, he wrote, is improper not simply because it forces people to donate -three pence- to religion, but, more broadly, because -it is itself a signal of persecution. It degrades from the equal rank of Citizens all those whose opinions in Religion do not bend to those of the Legislative authority.- J. Madison, Memorial and Remon- strance Against Religious Assessments (1785), in 5 The Founders' Constitution, at 83. Madison saw that, even

without the tax collector's participation, an official endorsement of religion can impair religious liberty.

Petitioners contend that because the early Presidents included religious messages in their inaugural and Thanksgiving Day addresses, the Framers could not have meant the Establishment Clause to forbid noncoercive state endorsement of religion. The argument ignores the fact, however, that Americans today find such proclamations less controversial than did the founding generation, whose published thoughts on the matter belie petitioners' claim. President Jefferson, for example, steadfastly refused to issue Thanksgiving proclamations of any kind, in part because he thought they violated the Religion Clauses. Letter from Thomas Jefferson to Rev. S. Miller (Jan. 23, 1808), in 5 The Founders' Constitution, at 98. In explaining his views to the Reverend Samuel Miller, Jefferson effectively anticipated, and rejected, petitioners' position: "[I]t is only proposed that I should recommend, not prescribe a day of fasting & prayer. That is, that I should indirectly assume to the U. S. an authority over religious exercises which the Constitution has directly precluded from them. It must be meant too that this recommendation is to carry some authority, and to be sanctioned by some penalty on those who disregard it; not indeed of fine and imprisonment, but of some degree of proscription perhaps in public opinion." Id., at 98-99 (emphasis in original). By condemning such noncoercive state practices that, in -recommending- the majority faith, demean religious dissenters -in public opinion,- Jefferson necessarily condemned what, in modern terms, we call official endorsement of religion. He accordingly construed the Establishment Clause to forbid not simply state coercion, but also state endorsement, of religious belief and observance. And if he opposed impersonal presidential addresses for in- flicting -proscription in public opinion,- all the more would he have condemned less diffuse expressions of official endorsement.

During his first three years in office, James Madison also refused to call for days of thanksgiving and prayer, though later, amid the political turmoil of the War of 1812, he did so on four separate occasions. See Madison's -Detached Memoranda,- 562, and n. 54. Upon retirement, in an essay condemning as an unconstitutional -establishment- the use of public money to support congressional and military chaplains, id., at 558-560, he concluded that "[r]eligious proclamations by the Executive recommending thanksgivings & fasts are shoots from the same root with the legislative acts reviewed. Altho' recommendations only, they imply a religious agency, making no part of the trust delegated to political rulers." Id., at 560. Explaining that -[t]he members of a Govt . . . can in no sense, be regarded as possessing an advisory trust from their Constituents in their religious capacities,- ibid., he further observed that the state necessarily freights all of its religious messages with political ones: "the idea of policy [is] associated with religion, whatever be the mode or the occasion, when a function of the latter is assumed by those in power." Id., at 562 (footnote omitted).