**LAW CLASS**

**The First Amendment**

**FREEDOM OF RELIGION**

Freedom of religion means that you can practice the religion of your choice or you can choose not to practice any religion at all. The key point to remember is the government cannot dictate to you what religion you can or cannot practice. But centuries ago, this was not true. For example, the pilgrims back in England were called Separatists because they wanted to be independent from the established Church of England. So, they came to what is now known as the United States in search of religious freedom.

There are two clauses in the First Amendment that protect your religious freedom. The first clause is the Establishment Clause and the second is the Free Exercise Clause.

The Establishment Clause (Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion) is understood to mean that government

1. must remain neutral when it comes to religion,

(2) cannot give the impression that it endorses religious belief over non-belief or any particular belief over another belief and

1. cannot coerce religious participation.

The Free Exercise Clause (Congress shall make no law…prohibiting the free exercise thereof) is understood to mean that government cannot prevent someone from practicing his/her own religion. This means that the government cannot regulate how to practice your religion or punish the expression of religious doctrine.

There is, however, an exception to this free exercise clause. If a law or policy is passed that applies to everyone but interferes with the practices of a particular religion, an individual may not be able to challenge the law or policy based on this clause.

While many countries have included in their Constitution the freedom of religion, with governments generally respecting this right in practice, there are still countries that do not have these same freedoms.