

# EDITORIAL: A “wall” protects our field of faith

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The intersection of Church Street and State Avenue has been a crash zone. U.S. Senate candidates from Delaware wrangled over whether “separation of church and state” exists in the Constitution. Similarly, a Senate candidate from Colorado argued against the distinct boundary between religion and government. These debates echo at water coolers, around lunch tables and in church pews nationwide.

The heat they generate illustrates why many Americans don’t like to discuss religion or politics—or certainly both of them together. They’re an incendiary mix, precisely because both are vital to life and culture.

Editor Marv Knox

In the Delaware debate, Christine O’Donnell sought to refute Chris Coons’ assertion the Constitution disallows integration of religion and government. “Where in the Constitution is the separation of church and state?” O’Donnell asked. Coons pointed to the First Amendment. She retorted: “You’re telling me that the separation of church and state is found in the First Amendment?”

Religion is the first of five freedoms protected by the [First Amendment](#), which begins, “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof ... .”

Law students in the Delaware debate’s audience laughed when O’Donnell appeared not to know the contents of the First Amendment. Later, her campaign clarified she knows the First Amendment but was pointing out “separation of church and state” does not appear in the Constitution. That’s the same tack taken by Ken Buck in Colorado. In a Senate candidate forum,

he said: "I disagree strongly with the concept of separation of church and state. It was not written into the Constitution."

Buck and O'Donnell share a popular opinion held by millions of Americans. But it is not supported by history, plain English and judicial precedent. Also, it's dangerous.

While many settlers traveled to the New World for religious liberty, they came for their religious liberty. As witnesses to persecution and religious warfare among the state churches of Europe, they wanted to worship according to the dictates of their own consciences. But they did not honor others' consciences. Ironically, most colonies mirrored Europe, with government sponsoring favored religion and persecuting others. Fortunately, leaders of the young United States learned from the past. They sealed religious liberty protection in the First Amendment.

Unlike today's simplistic solutionists, they recognized religious liberty is complicated. Not only must government be prohibited from sponsoring religion—"no law respecting an establishment of religion"—but it also must not interfere with faith—"or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Religion of and for people all faiths and no faith always has occupied vital space in the American public square. But religion is not government's domain, whether Congress, state legislatures or local school boards. (Ironically, the people who trust government the least are the very ones who clamor against church-state separation. Why would they risk government involvement with their faith?)

Thomas Jefferson, father of the Declaration of Independence and a champion of the Bill of Rights, affirmed and amplified this principle. In a letter to Danville Baptist Association, he coined the term "wall of separation" to distinguish the space between church and state. No, the term is not in the Constitution, but an advocate of the Constitution used the term to explain the concept.

All Americans—especially people of faith—should fear a breach in that wall. Most wars and coordinated violence of the last 1,700 years, including many conflicts today, arose from discord between religious groups. By prohibiting state sponsorship of religion while protecting religious exercise, our American experiment has provided 234 years of peaceful coexistence and the world’s most fertile field for faith.

—*Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard. Visit his [FaithWorks Blog](#).*