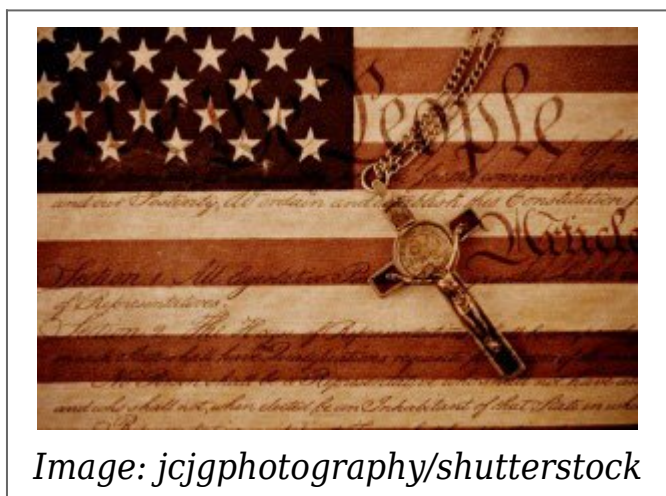


Religious Expression in American Public Life: A Joint Statement

July 3, 2012

In celebration of July 4th, and with the hope that this item will be useful to religious communities and candidates during the election season, the [Center for Religion and Public Affairs](#) at Wake Forest University Divinity School has re-released this joint statement of current law on religious expression in American public life today. It's the perfect resource for kicking off informed and civil discussions of religion's role in public life during this election season.



As candidates and campaigns reach out to people of faith, and religious organizations join the fray over hot topics like the recognition of same-sex marriage in civil law and federal requirements regarding contraception coverage, Americans are once again asking questions about the rules governing religious expression in public life.

To provide Americans with some answers to these questions, a group of national Muslim, Jewish, Sikh and Christian leaders from the evangelical,

mainline and Catholic traditions joined with civil liberties leaders to draft ["Religious Expression in American Public Life: A Joint Statement of Current Law."](#) The [Center for Religion and Public Affairs](#) at Wake Forest University School of Divinity coordinated the project.

"As the campaign cycle moves toward November elections, the statement provides helpful guidance for tax-exempt organizations about the IRS rules that apply to their political activities," said [Melissa Rogers](#), director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs. "It also helps voters understand how the First Amendment applies to the political activities of religious individuals and institutions," Rogers explained. "The role of religion in public life has long been a source of controversy and litigation. We brought together a diverse group of experts on law and religion to clarify what current law has to say about these matters."

Originally released at the Brookings Institution in 2010, the document is being re-released as the presidential election approaches. It remains the most comprehensive joint statement of current law and is the first document of its kind to address such a wide spectrum of issues related to the role of religion in public life, Rogers said. She added: "As the nation debates the meaning of religious liberty, and what the law in this area does or should protect and prohibit, this guide can serve as a tool for civil and informed discussions."

The full text of this [document](#) is available for immediate preview and digital download — including iPad and PDF versions - free of charge from the School of Divinity web site. In addition, bound and full-color print copies are available from [MagCloud.com](#)

"Our purpose in providing this statement is to increase understanding of current law regarding religious expression in American public life," Rogers said. "While the drafters of this document may disagree about how the legal line *should* be drawn between church and state, we have been able to

come together and agree in many cases on what the law is today."

The 32-page document follows a question-and-answer format for easy reference and covers election-relevant topics such as:

Q. May religious groups and people participate in the debate of public issues?

A. Yes. Religious individuals and groups, like nonreligious individuals and groups, have a right to participate in the debate on all issues that are important to political and civic life.

Q. May the government require individuals to pass a religious test in order to hold government office?

A. No. Article VI of the Constitution requires certain government officials to take an oath or affirm that they will support the Constitution, but it specifies that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust."

Q. Are persons elected or nominated to serve as government officials required to place their hands on the Bible when making oaths or affirmations?

A. No. Those who make an affirmation or take an oath promising to fulfill certain duties toward the government may choose to do so while placing a hand on a text that is sacred to him or her (whether the text is the Bible or something else), but this is not in any way required by the Constitution.

Q. Does the Internal Revenue Code place restrictions on the political activities of tax-exempt organizations, including tax-exempt religious organizations?

A. Yes. If groups wish to qualify for and maintain status as tax-exempt organizations under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, they

must not become involved in campaign activity for or against candidates for elective political office and no substantial part of their activities may be spent attempting to influence legislation.

Q. May government officials' religious beliefs inform public policy?

A. Government officials' religious beliefs may inform their policy decisions so long as advancing religion is not the predominant purpose or primary effect of governmental action.

Members of the drafting committee included those associated with faith-based groups as diverse as the Union of Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America, the Islamic Networks Group, the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, the Queens Federation of Churches, the American Jewish Committee, the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and the Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention.

—(*Via Sojo.net*)