

Separation of Church and State: A Value Worth Preserving

August 25, 2010

Following is the winning essay in the [2010 Religious Liberty Essay Contest](#), sponsored by the Religious Liberty Council of the [Baptist Joint Committee](#). The author, Nathan Webb, is a senior at Lumberton High School. He is the son of Bob and Dianne Webb and attends [First Baptist Church of Loeb](#).

The relationship of government and religion in America has long been a controversial topic. Early colonists came to America with the hope of creating a nation in which their religion was not controlled or restricted by the government. The church should be free from the intrusion of the state, and the government should be free from being controlled by the church.

As our society constantly changes, it is difficult to determine where the line between church and state should be drawn. In John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech to the Greater Houston Ministerial Association, he strongly advocated the absolute separation of church and state. A complete separation is good for both government and religion. Both are better served when they are free to pursue their different, but complementary roles in society. The challenge of implementing this principle is as great today as it was in 1960.

Then-U.S. Senator Kennedy's speech was precipitated by criticism he received because of his religious affiliation. There had never before been a Catholic President, and there were those who implied that his religion would affect his judgment as commander in chief, or that other religions might somehow be diminished.

This pattern repeated itself in the 2008 Presidential election, when then-senator Barack Obama was criticized by his adversaries with the false

claim that he was a Muslim. They asserted that this might compromise his loyalty to America as a “Christian nation.” While President Obama clearly stated his Christian beliefs, his religion should not have been a factor in voters’ judgment of his ability to govern. As President Kennedy stated, the Presidency is “a great office that must be neither humbled by making it the instrument of any religious group nor tarnished by arbitrarily withholding its occupancy from the members of any one religious group.” (Kennedy)

The Chief Executive must represent and uphold the ideals set forth by the Constitution for all American citizens, regardless of their beliefs.

A contemporary challenge to church-state separation is in dealing with a call for government aid to religious organizations in providing community assistance. In 2001, President George W. Bush launched an initiative to expand opportunities for government funding to faith-based groups that provide social services. While this sounds good on the surface, it inevitably results in one of two unacceptable outcomes.

By definition, the goal of most religious organizations is to promote the acceptance of their beliefs. Since proselytizing would preclude their receiving government funding, they must either renounce or dilute their mission as a church in order to ethically accept money from the government. “The state-imposed regulations and conditions inevitably dilute the faith in faith-based programs. As they say in Washington, with shekels come shackles.” (Haynes)

The other, equally unacceptable alternative would be that the church accept state funding, and continue to promote its religious beliefs in the government-sponsored program. This practice would be in direct violation of the law regarding church-state separation. In the first outcome, the church gains financially, but loses its stated purpose; in the second, the church fulfills its purpose, but the state is put in the unlawful position of advancing religion.

Both the church and the government would be better served by simply cooperating, while keeping their efforts independent and autonomous.

An instance where we have clearly departed from a separation of church and state is by the existence of an ambassador to the Vatican. Even as a practicing Catholic, President Kennedy opposed this arrangement. He recognized that this relationship was contradictory to a healthy understanding of church-state separation. This system has continued, although it is an obvious violation of the spirit of the First Amendment.

To be consistent, the government should also appoint an ambassador to the National Council of Churches, the United Methodist Church, and the Two-Seed-in-the-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists. More troubling than this favoritism shown to the Catholic Church is the apparent attempt of the government to become entangled in religious affairs to gain a political advantage.

We can be proud of the many ways in which America has upheld religious liberty throughout our history. Each week, millions of Americans worship in the church of their choice without fear of government interference or reprisal. Churches are able to speak truth to power because they are not compromised by dependence on government support. Parents can send their children to public schools without fear that students will be proselytized by any religious group.

Because of our commitment to religious liberty, diverse groups of people in our country can live and work together without being torn apart by religious strife. It is difficult to imagine the America we know and love without this basic understanding of church-state separation.

While the First Amendment of the Constitution provides that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof," (US Const., Amendment 1) it is left to the courts

to decide how these provisions are to be applied today. This is important to all Americans because when any group attains a majority, there is a temptation to blur the line of separation when it is favorable to them. However, in order to protect the free exercise of religion for all, the rights of the minority must be preserved.

President Kennedy pointed this out in his speech when he said, "For while this year it may be a Catholic against whom the finger of suspicion is pointed, in other years it has been - and may someday be again - a Jew, or a Quaker, or a Unitarian, or a Baptist." (Kennedy)

President Kennedy's assertion that church and state should be absolutely separate is as essential as it is difficult to maintain. However, this separation serves as a crucial safeguard for religious liberty, a right that should be fiercely protected as a value that remains rare among the nations of the world.

Justice Sandra Day O'Connor stated, "Those who would renegotiate the boundaries between church and state must answer a difficult question: Why would we trade a system that has served us so well for one that has served others so poorly." (McCreary County v. A.C.L.U.)

{!jomcomment}