

The Necessity of the Complete Separation between Church and State

Our current president, George W. Bush, is known for being religious. He has been quoted saying that “God told [him] to strike at al Qaeda,” and “God want[ed] [him] to run for President.” He has called the war on terrorism a “crusade.” When he was the governor of Texas, he created a state-wide “Jesus Day.” In 2001, he talked of the “bridge between church and state” (“Big List of George W Bush Quotes”). The problem? He is tampering with our nation’s history. He is destroying what the Founding Fathers outlined in the Constitution, and *he* is the president of the United States—and he’s not the only one who thinks this way. In the last decade, the religious right has gained a foothold in American politics and has been forcing through legislation that, if passed, would slowly destroy the separation of church and state. Despite the First Amendment, the intentions of the Founding Fathers, and the obvious corruption that a merging of government and religion would bring—all of which give very good reasons for a complete separation of church and state—these people still claim that the nation’s government is entwined with religion.

First of all, one thing must be made clear: The United States’ government is in no way based upon Christianity. Such a claim betrays an unbearable ignorance of the nation’s history. Yes, the nation is predominantly Christian in its population and has been ever since its creation, but that does not suddenly translate to “the American government has Christian roots,” especially considering that Article 11 of the Treaty of Tripoli, ratified in 1797, clearly states that “the government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian Religion” (Buckner). But, even without that blatant statement of the true relation between Christianity and the nation’s government, the argument for a Christian nation holds very little

water. For example, the Founding Fathers, while mostly Christian, were comprised of a handful of deists, including Benjamin Franklin, John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and James Madison—some of the most well-known Founders. These men did believe in a god—or “the Supreme Architect,” as they called him—and the immortal soul, but they doubted and rejected the divinity of Jesus, the Trinity, predestination, and original sin (Gaustad). Why would *deists* help write a Constitution paying homage to the Christian God, whom they saw as false? Also, the simple fact that there is absolutely no mention of God in the Constitution says it all: The Founding Fathers did not want a theocracy, and so they did not tie any god to their government (Jacoby). Supporters of the Christian nation theory might then bring up the Pledge’s phrase of “Under God” and the phrase “In God We Trust,” which is found on both American currency and the nation’s motto. However, these two phrases were unknown in the first 76 years of the nation’s history. “In God We Trust” was first stamped on a coin in 1864. It wasn’t until 1938—150 *years* after the formation of the nation—that the phrase was inscribed on all coins, and only in 1956—168 years—was it first used on paper money. This was also when the 84th Congress declared “In God We Trust” to be the national motto of the United States. Until that point, the motto had been “E Pluribus Unum,” or “one of many” (“History of ‘In God We Trust’”). As for the Pledge, it was changed to include “Under God” around the same time: 1954 (Santich). Why so many changes in such a short period of time? The Cold War. Changing the Pledge and the national motto to include God was meant to separate the “‘God-fearing’ Americans from the ‘godless’ communists” (Santich; “History of ‘In God We Trust’”). The suggestion of “In God We Trust” in 1864 has a similar reason behind it: the Civil War (“History of ‘In God We Trust’”). In war it is necessary to rally the nation’s public to support the cause;

otherwise, the war will quickly turn sour and be remembered as such, even if victory is achieved. As is obvious by the passion people have for their religion and the hope it can bring to people, invoking God is extremely effective in propaganda, resulting in support for legislation/war. In the end, this is further evidence of trends found in all major wars: the slow fall of natural, human rights. Just like how the Espionage and Sedition Acts were passed during World War I to keep the nation supporting the war effort despite how much they incriminated on the right of speech, assigning the entire nation a god chips away at the freedom of religion—and, in doing so, the First Amendment. At this point, the opposition might move on to the judicial system, stating that the American legal system is based on the Ten Commandments and/or the Bible. Luckily for time's sake, it is simple to prove the claim incorrect: Just open a Bible and look up the Ten Commandments, and the proof is there. Of the Ten Commandments, only seven (or six) actually provide moral guidelines—the first four (or three, depending on your denomination) merely set religious customs and restrictions (King James Bible Exodus 20:2-21:17). Of the remaining seven/six, only three of these are considered illegal in the United States: lying (but only punishable if lying under oath), stealing, and murder (“LAWRENCE V. TEXAS”). How exactly does a 30% correlation translate into a direct connection? A scientific paper that is only 30% factual is not accepted as the basis of a new law, so why should such a percentage be fine for the Ten Commandments?

With that misconception out of the way, the Constitution and the Founding Fathers can be brought to light. It is well-known that some degree of a separation of church and state exists due to the First Amendment in the Bill of Rights, which states that: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (Interpreting

Primary Documents 106) and the Fourteenth Amendment, which spreads the Bill of Rights to influence each state government (Amar 385). Since there has already been much debate on the interpretation of these statements—much of which is purely speculative—the focus will instead be shifted to the origin of the idea of freedom of religion. The two major characters were Thomas Jefferson and James Madison; the setting was Virginia, 1786 (Opposing Viewpoints 113). The document: the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. Written by Thomas Jefferson and advocated by James Madison, this act was the blue-print of religious freedom for the Founding Fathers (Boston 15). It declared that:

No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced, restrained . . . or otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in nowise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities (Opposing Viewpoints 113).

While this does not seem like a major accomplishment, given that the content is not very different from that of the First Amendment, it does connect Thomas Jefferson to the First Amendment. Although James Madison was the one to suggest that the freedom of religion should be included in the Bill of Rights, the idea originated from Thomas Jefferson, who, at the time of the Constitutional Convention, was in Paris, but was keeping in contact with James Madison (Boston 15). So, in order to understand what the intention of Jefferson and Madison was, it is necessary to look to their works—and what can be found shines a new light onto the whole controversy. Thomas Jefferson was the more outspoken of the two for the separation of

church and state; in fact, he was the one who created the term. In a letter to Danbury Baptists in 1802, Jefferson stated that “[the people’s] legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between Church & State” (Boston 13). This separatist policy is further evident in his others writings, in which he declared such things as “I have ever thought religion a concern purely between our God and our consciences,” and “I never will, by any word or act, bow to the shrine of intolerance or admit a right of inquiry into the religious opinions of others” (“Jefferson on Politics and Government”). He also noted that “the way to silence religious disputes is to take no notice of them” (Jefferson 115). In James Madison’s *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments*, he makes a point of saying that “the religion . . . of every man must be left to the conviction and conscience of every man” (Madison 113), and that the government should “[protect] every citizen . . . with the same equal hand which protects his person and his property” (Madison 116). Later in life, he went on to write that “... religion & Govt [sic] will both exist in greater purity, the less they are mixed together” in 1822 and noticed that “the civil government . . . functions with complete success . . . by the total separation of the Church from the State” (“Positive Atheism’s James Madison Quotes”). The conclusion? Thomas Jefferson and James Madison both considered religion to be a private, personal opinion, and therefore considered such private matters to be kept personal and out of the American government.

The next question is rather simple: Why? Well, if religion is cleaved from government completely, there is no need to discriminate against people for religious reasons. It doesn’t affect person A if person B disagrees with him/her on the topic of religion, for it is simply a matter of opinion. Thomas Jefferson noted the same: “[I]t does me no injury for my neighbour [sic] to say

there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg” (Jefferson 112). Also, religion, by definition, is a personal belief. In fact, it’s even beyond belief: It’s faith. By definition, faith involves a conviction based upon no hard evidence, which makes it impossible to “disprove” or “discount” someone else’s religion. Since all religions are equal in this sense, imposing religious beliefs upon people who disagree with them is a pointless action. The idea of keeping personal, private opinions to yourself emerges yet again. Even if this equality of religion is ignored, the idea of giving the power over religion to the government or the power over government to religion sets off some mental alarms. As the saying goes, “absolute power corrupts absolutely,” and giving so much power to so few people would just result in a corrupt clergy and government, damaging both the nation *and* religion. While some may argue that having religious laws as optional would keep the government neutral and the people happy, the government would still be supporting certain religious beliefs over others, thereby making certain religions “official” and resulting in an unconstitutional law (Black, 148). It is simply impossible to create a law enforcing any religious belief or practice that is neutral; religions contradict each other by nature—which is why we have so many of them to begin with. A complete separation of church and state, already supported by Madison and Jefferson, also saves a lot of confusion and time.

Religion is an opinion based on faith, not provable evidence, making it is impossible to prove any religion completely wrong. This facet of religious opinion means that religion, out of all of the opinions that someone has, should be kept the most private. So, keep it out of politics, education, and science. Keep it personal; the Founding Fathers knew what they were doing.

Works Cited

Amar, Akhil Reed. *America's Constitution*. New York: Random House, Inc., 2005.

"Big Scary List of George W Bush Quotations." *Positive Atheism*. 10 April 2008. 18 April 2008
<<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/bushframe.htm>>.

Black, Hugo. "The First Amendment Clearly Separates Church and State." *Opposing Viewpoints: Bill of Rights*. Eds. John Chalberg, William Dudley, Bruno Leone, Teresa O'Neill. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1994. 130-136.

Black, Hugo. "School Prayers Violate the First Amendment." *Opposing Viewpoints: Bill of Rights*. Eds. John Chalberg, William Dudley, Bruno Leone, Teresa O'Neill. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1994. 143-149.

Boston, Rob. "Priority Mail." *Church & State January 2002* 55 (2002): 11-13. EBSCOhost. St. Mary's County Lib., St. Mary's County, MD. 9 April 2008 <<http://search.ebscohost.com/>>.

"History of 'In God We Trust.'" *US Department of Treasury*. 22 April 2008. 24 April 2008
<<http://www.treas.gov/>>. Path: History & Education; Currency & Coins; History of "In God We Trust."

Buckner, Ed. "Does the 1796-97 Treaty with Tripoli Matter to Church/State Separation?" *The Unofficial Stephen Jay Gould Archive*. 22 June 1997. 16 May 2008
<http://www.stephenjaygould.org/ctrl/buckner_tripoli.html>

Gaustad, Edwin. "Disciples of Reason." *Christian History* (1996): 28-31. SIRS Renaissance. SMCPs Lib., St. Mary's County, MD. 11 April 2008 <<http://www.sks.sirs.com/>>.

Interpreting Primary Documents: The Bill of Rights. Ed. Tom Head. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2004.

Jacoby, Susan. "The Great Debate of Our Season: Original Intent." *Mother Jones* 30 (2005): 26+.

SIRS Researcher. SMCPs Lib., St. Mary's County, MD. 12 April 2008 <<http://www.sks.sirs.com/>>.

Jefferson, Thomas. "The Freedom of Conscience." *Interpreting Primary Documents: The Bill of Rights*. Ed. Tom Head. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 2004. 109-115.

"LAWRENCE V. TEXAS." *Cornell University Law School*. 26 June 2003. 10 May 2008. <<http://www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/02-102.ZD.html>>.

Madison, James. "A General Religious Tax Is Detrimental to Religious Freedom." *Opposing Viewpoints: Bill of Rights*. Eds. John Chalberg, William Dudley, Bruno Leone, Teresa O'Neill. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1994. 112-117

Opposing Viewpoints: Bill of Rights. Eds. John Chalberg, William Dudley, Bruno Leone, Teresa O'Neill. N.p.: Greenhaven Press, Inc., 1994.

"Positive Atheism's Big List of James Madison Quotations." *Positive Atheism*. 10 April 2008. 18 April 2008. <<http://www.positiveatheism.org/hist/quotes/qframe.htm>>.

Santich, Kate. "Author of Pledge Left Out Mention of God, United States." *Orlando Sentinel* (2003): n.p. SIRS Researcher. SMCPs Lib., St. Mary's County, MD. 13 April 2008 <<http://www.sks.sirs.com/>>.

The King James Bible. Thomas Nelson, gen. ed. N.p.: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1989.

“Thomas Jefferson on Politics & Government: Freedom of Religion.” *University of Virginia Library*. 1999. 18 April 2008 < <http://etext.virginia.edu/jefferson/quotations/jeff1650.htm>>.

“U.S. national mottos: History and constitutionality.” *Religious Tolerance*. 13 February 2006. 15 May 2008 <http://www.religioustolerance.org/nat_mott.htm>.