

Why Religious Liberty?

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In 1902 religious historian Sanford Cobb called religious liberty “America’s great gift to civilization and the world.” Religious liberty stands as one of our nation’s bedrock principles, yet seemingly it is always under siege--by those, mostly Christians, who fail to appreciate the complex thinking of the American founding fathers that caused them to write into the Constitution the principle that guarantees religious liberty: the separation of church and state.

The separation of church and state is blamed today for many things: the “unprecedented moral decline,” the shootings at Columbine High School and other schools around the country, “rampant secularism,” the spread of “cults and false religions,” greed and materialism, even “God’s judgment” against the United States resulting in the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks.

To remedy the so-called evils of the separation of church and state, many today attempt to re-write history, to tell us that the principle has been widely misunderstood. They suggest that the separation idea was only a political philosophy popular among a few radical founding fathers, or that it was devised for expedience only—the inevitable result of religious pluralism in the new nation. Most often we hear that the principle originally prohibited only the establishment of one religion over others, not the advancement of religion by government if performed without discrimination against any particular religion. These critics suggest, for example, that there is no constitutional prohibition to prayer in public schools, provided we hear everyone’s prayer; that we can help solve the moral decline with a program of nondiscriminatory government funding of churches and other religious groups to administer social programs and religious schools; and that we can post the Ten Commandments and other sacred texts that most Americans agree with in public schools, courtrooms, and other government buildings.

Of course one rarely hears these suggestions from members of religious minorities. They know that a constitutional framework that allows government to actively support religion, even on a nondiscriminatory basis, will result in a virtual Christian establishment. This is because on the basis of virtually every poll, at least 80-85% of Americans still identify themselves as Christians; thus they believe that allowing government to actively support religion will only result in the public sector being bathed in Christian prayer, language, programs, activities, symbols, and messages. They fear being crushed under the weight of Christian majoritarianism—in a country where they are supposed to be “equal” in the eyes of government. And they are right: this is precisely what would happen, to the delight of many Christians who want a privileged place for Christianity in the nation, but who fail to understand the profound theological foundation of the separation of church and state.

The principle of separation of church and state is ultimately founded on a theological basis. When the founders wrote in the Declaration of Independence that “all men are created equal,” they had in mind that people are essentially equal in that they are created in the image of God and are “endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” including the freedom to believe and practice one’s religion. They believed that the *imago Dei* stamped upon every human being is the basis of the dignity and worth of every person. They understood that one’s choices in the realm of religion must be made freely; otherwise one’s dignity and worth before God are not respected. In other words, they believed in voluntarism, the right of every person to believe and practice his or her faith with out coercion or interference from government.

If government has the ability to support and advance religion, even on a nondiscriminatory basis, the inevitable result is a “through the back door” establishment of the majority religion, which treats those of minority faiths and those of no faith with disrespect about the most sacred of human choices. The founders considered the “nondiscriminatory” support principle in at least four drafts of the First Amendment’s religion clauses when they wrote the Constitution. It was rejected in each case. In the end, the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment was the founders’ way of encouraging every person to find his or her own way in religion; the Establishment Clause was their way of ensuring that government would not interfere with that process, even by encouraging or promoting the very idea of faith. The founders agreed with what Roger Williams wrote in the 17th century, that it is wrong for the civil power to encourage a person to “this or that judgment or opinion of faith” or to suggest to someone “this or that practice in religion.” People must believe for themselves, otherwise the divine initiative is compromised and government has violated the sacredness of those whom it is called to serve. The great Baptist John Leland would agree: “Religion is a concern between God and the soul with which no human authority can intermeddle.”

This does not mean that there is no public role for religion. America has a rich tradition of acknowledging the sovereignty of God over the nation by adopting generic language that attempts to respect as many Americans’ faith as possible. For example, the national motto, “In God We Trust,” is a broad term that most, though certainly not all, Americans can support. Such “civil religious” practices are assurances against carrying the separation principle too far, against government-sponsored secularism, but the basic commitment to separating church and state remains—as something that is good for both government and religion.

The separation of church and state guarantees that civil authorities will not, to use Leland’s term, “intermeddle” in sacred concerns. Absent this guarantee, religious liberty is hollow, mere “politically correct” verbiage.

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