

My Father's House

P.O. Box 22 Moodus, CT 06469 860/873-1581 f-860/873-2357 www.myfathershouse.com

Separation of Church and State NOT SEPARATION OF GOD FROM STATE

Fr. Bill McCarthy, MSA

Our Founding Fathers

Our Founding Fathers set this great nation of ours upon the *twin towers* of religion and morality. Our first president, George Washington, said that anyone who would attack these twin towers could not possibly consider themselves to be a loyal American. Not only did they set us up as a nation under God, but a nation founded upon the Judaic-Christian principles summarized in the words, “The laws of nature and the laws of nature’s God,” words that we find in the Declaration of Independence.

Never Intended to Separate State from God or from Religion or from Prayer

The First Amendment never intended to separate Christian principles from government. yet today we so often hear the First Amendment couples with the phrase “separation of church and state.” The First Amendment simply states:

“Congress shall make no law respecting and establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Obviously, the words “separation,” “church,” or “state” are not found in the First Amendment; furthermore, that phrase appears in no founding document.

While most recognize the phrase “separation of church and state,” few know its source; but it is important to understand the origins of that phrase. What is the history of the First Amendment?

The process of drafting the First Amendment made the intent of the Founders abundantly clear; for before they approved the final wording, the First Amendment went through nearly a dozen different iterations and extensive discussions.

Those discussions—recorded in the Congressional Records from June 7 through September 25 of 1789—make clear their intent for the First Amendment. By it, the Founders were saying: “We do not want in America what we had in Great Britain: we don’t want one denomination running the nation. We will not all be Catholics, or Anglicans, or any other single denomination. We do want God’s principles, but we don’t want one denomination running the nation.”

This intent was well understood, as evidenced by court rulings after the First Amendment. For example, a 1799 court declared:

“By our form of government, the Christian religion is the established religion; and all sects and denominations of Christians are placed on the same equal footing.”

Again, note the emphasis: “We do want Christian principles—we do want God’s principles—but we don’t want one denomination to run the nation.”

In 1801, the Danbury Baptist Association of Danbury, Connecticut, heard a rumor that the Congregationalist denomination was about to be made the national denomination. That rumor distressed the Danbury Baptists, as it should have. Consequently, they fired off a letter to President Thomas Jefferson voicing their concern. On January 1, 1802, Jefferson wrote the Danbury Baptists, assuring them that “the First Amendment has erected a wall of separation between church and state.”

His letter explained that they need not fear the establishment of a national denomination—and that while the wall of the First Amendment would protect the church from government control—there always would be open and free religious expression of all orthodox religious practices, for true religious expression of all orthodox religious practices, for true religious duties would never threaten the purpose of government. The government would interfere with a religious activity was a direct menace to the government or to the overall peace and good order of society. (Later Supreme Court identified potential “religious” activities in which the government might interfere: things like human sacrifice, bigamy or polygamy, the advocacy of immorality or licentiousness, etc. If any of these activities were to occur in the name of “religion,” then the government would interfere, for these were activities which threaten public peace and safety; but with orthodox religious practices, the government would not interfere).

Today, all that is heard of Jefferson’s letter is the phrase, “a wall of separation between church and state,” without either the context, or the explanation given in the letter, or its application by earlier courts. The clear understanding of the First Amendment for a century-and-a-half was that it prohibited the establishment of a single national denomination. National policies and rulings in that century-and-a-half always reflected that interpretation.

For example, in 1853, a group petitioned Congress to separate Christian principles from government. They desired a so-called “separation of church and state” with chaplains being turned out of the congress, the military, etc. Their petition was referred to the House and the Senate Judiciary Committees, which investigated for almost a year to see if it would be possible to separate Christian principles from government.

Both the House and the Senate Judiciary Committees returned with their reports. The following are excerpts from the House report delivered on May 27, 1854 (the Senate report was very similar):

“Had the people [the Founding Fathers], during the Revolution, had a suspicion of any

attempt to war against Christianity, that Revolution would have been strangled in its cradle. At the time of the adoption of the Constitution and the amendments, the universal sentiment was that Christianity should be encouraged, but not any one sect [denomination].... In this age, there is no substitute for Christianity.... That was the religion of the founders of the republic, and they expected it to remain the religion of their descendants.”

Two months later, the Judiciary Committee made this strong declaration:

“The great, vital, and conservative element in our system [the thing that holds our system together] is the believe of our people in the pure doctrines and divine truths of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.”

The Committees explained that they would not separate these principles, for it was these principles and activities which had made us so successful—they had been our foundation, our basis.

During the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s, yet another group which challenged specific Christian principles in government arrived before the Supreme Court. Jefferson’s letter had remained unused for years, for as time had progressed after its use in 1802—and after no national denomination had been established—his letter had fallen into obscurity. But now—75 years later—in the case *Reynolds v. United States*, the plaintiffs resurrected Jefferson’s letter, hope to use it to their advantage.

In that case, the Court printed an lengthy segment of Jefferson’s letter and then used his letter on “separation of church and state” to again prove that it was permissible to maintain Christian values, principles, and practices in official policy. For the next 15 years during that legal controversy, the Supreme Court utilized Jefferson’s letter to ensure that Christian principles remained a part of government.

Following this controversy, Jefferson’s letter again fell into disuse. It then remained silent for the next 70 years until 1947, when, in *Everson v. Board of Education*, the Court, for the first time, did not cite Jefferson’s entire letter, but selected only eight words from it. The Court now announced:

“The First Amendment has erected ‘a wall of separation between church and state.’ That wall must be kept high and impregnable.”

This was a new philosophy for the Court. Why would the Court take Jefferson’s letter completely out of context and cite only eight of its words? Dr. William James, the Father of modern Psychology—and a strong opponent of religious principles in government and education—perhaps explained the Court’s new strategy when he stated:

“There is nothing so absurd but if you repeat it often enough people will believe it.”

This statement precisely describes the tact utilized by the Court in the years following its 1947 announcement. The Court began regularly to speak of a “separation of church and state,”

broadly explaining that, “This is what the Founders wanted—separation of church and state. This is their great intent.” The Court failed to quote the Founders; it just generically asserted that this is what the Founders wanted.

The courts continued on this track so steadily that, in 1958, in a case called *Baer v. Kolmorgen*, one of the judges was tired of hearing the phrase and wrote a dissent warning that if the court did not stop talking about the “separation of church and state,” people were going to start thinking it was part of the Constitution. That warning was in 1958!

Nevertheless, the Court continued to talk about separation until June 25th, 1962, when, in the case *Engle v. Vitale*, the Court delivered the first ever ruling which completely separated Christian principles from education.

Secular Humanism

With that case, a whole new trend was established and secular humanism became the religion of America. In 1992 the Supreme Court stated the unthinkable. “At the heart of liberty is the right to define one’s own concept of existence, of meaning, of the universe, and of the mystery of human life. In 1997, 40 prominent Catholic and Protestant scholars wrote a position paper entitled, “We Hold These Truths,” in which they stated, “This is the very antithesis of the ordered liberty affirmed by the Founders. Liberty in this debased sense is utterly disengaged from the concept of responsibility and community and is pitted against the ‘laws of nature and the laws of nature’s God. Such liberty degenerates into license and throws into question the very possibility of the rule of law itself.