

The Reality Check

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The Real Meaning of State/Church Separation

By Carl Ledendecker

The historical reality and practical basis for the very important principle of separation are seldom addressed in debates on the issue.

First, it is important to correct some common misconceptions. A common claim is that the principle of separation is not included in the US Constitution. Actually it is so integral that specifically stating it would be redundant. The Constitution was the first document of its kind to intentionally exclude any reference to a religious/supernatural basis or justification. It is an entirely secular document dealing with secular government. The intent was to establish a government that was based on human rights and representative government, not on the divine right of kings or any other supernatural claims to power. The power was to be of the people. It was not to be based on any conflicting claims of supernatural superiority by those who wished to govern.

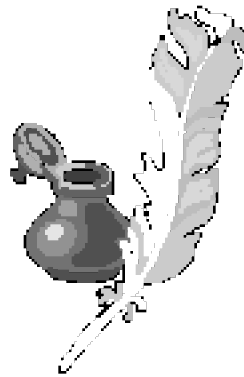
A second misconception is that the First Amendment's purpose was to prevent the government from favoring any particular religion. This is not historically correct in that it is only part of the purpose. As stated in an adaptation of an article by Edd Doerr published by the Jan/Feb 2002 issue of the Humanist magazine:

"Those not fully aware of the complete history of Jefferson's position sometimes contend that the First Amendment's establishment clause intended to prevent preferential treatment of one religion over another while allowing nonpreferential aid to all religions. James Madison and Jefferson defeated that position in the Virginia legislature the year before the Constitutional Convention was held in Philadelphia. The nonpreferential position was later considered by the First Congress and again rejected."

James Madison has been rightly called "The Father of the Constitution." He made many compromises and concessions to the forces that wanted to mix religion and government, but his constant goal was to separate religion and government. He even tried to prevent the Congress and military from having chaplains because he thought that the practice violated the Constitution. The idea was to keep government out of religion and to keep religion out of government. This key intent was to exclude religious intervention in the operation of the government. There was to be no law above the laws of the people. No

one or group was to be able to claim divine exemption or veto power. This is a very important provision. If the law of the land does not apply to those who think they are special, superior and exempt because they feel like it, then there is no law of the land.

Two years ago an Indianapolis church decided that it was above the law of the land and did not have to withhold federal income tax and Social Security taxes from its employees' pay in 1984. The claim was that they were exempt because they were a church and it didn't matter what the courts and Congress established. For this group supernatural claims superseded civil law. Those who opposed them were considered anti-Christ by the minister, Rev. Greg A. Dixon. He even claimed that "the Bush administration, that claims to be Christian, has just trampled a church." He also said that they are "not a friend of Christ." The problem here is that any person or group that claims to be divinely sanctioned can essentially write their own rules which is basically anarchy unless one group gains enough power to dominate. Then it becomes something much different than a free society.



There was to be no law above the laws of the people.

The history of Europe prior to the American Revolution was fraught with the horrors of religious conflict. Whoever was the monarch at any particular time, tried to impose his or her religious system on the entire population and/or other populations, a major reason why there were so many leaving Europe to come to America. For example, the Thirty Years War resulted in (among other deaths) the killing of ten percent of Germany's population over mainly religious doctrine. These problems continued in America with each state establishing a religion resulting in persecution and arrests. Baptists were arrested in Virginia and Quakers in Massachusetts and so on. Many present day Baptists seem to forget that they were originally some of the strongest supporters of state/church separation and for good reason. Freedom requires the protection of minority rights.

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My Atheist History

By Chuck Janack

"Yeah, yeah, you'll think differently when you're older." Or, "You'll be praying for God's forgiveness on your deathbed." I've heard them all, once someone religious uncovers my beliefs, or alleged lack of. The implied reasoning is that I will come to recognize my stupidity and see the "light." How arrogant. I don't imagine for a second that I possess all the answers, all the truth in the universe. I do seek answers, but I do so freely, without encumbering authoritarian dogmas that demand blind obedience.

Interesting and interested civil people sometime ask, "How did this come to be?" I answer as best I can.

My mother converted to her husband's religion when commanded to and she signed the demanded oath to press this religion upon her children. Consequently, I attended Christian church every Sunday until my late teens. I attended a religious school through the fourth grade when moving forced a transfer to public school in fifth. Then I was bussed to religious education classes once every week until I graduated from high school (earning a full class credit for my diligence). I have dream-like early memories of kneeling next to my bed, elbows on the mattress, hands together and head bent down in supplication, praying. I never remember believing.

Please allow me to repeat myself because this is the statement that astonishes Theists: I never remember believing in god. Not ever.

For the record, I must have tried believing when I was a child. I imagine I would have prayed to god to make Mommie and Daddie stop beating me everyday because I could not walk like normal people because of an undiagnosed birth defect that doctors and clergy claimed was a "bad habit" and should be beaten out of me. No god answered. Still, that is too simplistic. I don't remember expecting salvation. I knew what was real. I was not fooled, even as a child. I drew on my own inner strength.

A precocious child, I questioned the lessons taught me. I also learned quickly to keep my observations to myself (a hard slap on the side of the head does that). Yet the question remained: Why are there such obvious contradictions and fallacies in his teachings if god is perfect, omnipotent, omnipresent?

Adolescence overcame fear and bold pointed questions that the instructor could not dismiss burst forth: So is it okay to masturbate or not? One Apostle says never, it's always a sin, but the other says you should if you're

lusting for a whore. Why is Easter celebrated on a vastly different day every year if it was a specific day Jesus rose from the dead? Why is it all right, even sanctioned by the church, to kill other humans over an insignificant difference in dogma when one of god's laws specifically forbids killing? Having read and studied the Bible I should remember more, but once released from the purgatory that was religious education I did not, could not, go back. I consciously chose to forget.

Much to the dismay of my god-fearing friends who know me as a good person (but pray for me anyway) more evidence presents itself as each year passes supporting my position. I am more convinced than ever in my life that there is no god, never was but in the imagination of the superstitious, and never will be. Consider this, a favorite quote, an excerpt from a famous speech given by the Mohawk leader, Red Jacket, in 1828, to Mr. Cram, a Boston Missionary Society representative:

*"I never remember
believing in god.
Not ever."*

"Brother!... You say that you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind; and if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right and we are lost. How do you know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book. If it was intended for us as well as for you, why has not the Great Spirit given it to us; and not only to us, but why did he not give it to our forefathers the knowledge of that book, with the means of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe being so often deceived by the white people?"

"Brother! You say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit. If there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why do you not all agree, as you can all read the book?" — from *Native American Testimony*, 1978, 1991, edited by Peter Nabokov, pg. 57,

Few words convince me more that there is no god than those last two sentences in the quote above. After all, if the aforementioned Christian god is one of love, compassion, and forgiveness than why have Christians proselytized with sword and torture? The Inquisition lasted nearly 600 years! There is no hell but the one the religious create in this world with their incessant attempts to dominate every single human being. Truth persuades, Christians preach. Then why burn books? Seek to silence free thought? Demand unquestioning obedience? Refuse even to converse or listen? Why the current effort to obtain control of our Federal, State, and Local governments for the stated purpose of "returning our country to its Christian beginnings?" A fallacious fabrication as evidenced by these 1831 quotes:

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"The founders of our nation were nearly all Infidels, and that of the presidents who had thus far been elected [Washington; Adams; Jefferson; Madison; Monroe; Adams; Jackson] not a one had professed a belief in Christianity... "Among all our presidents from Washington downward, not one was a professor of religion, at least not more than Unitarianism." — The Reverend Doctor Bird Wilson, an Episcopal minister in Albany, New York, in a sermon preached in October, 1831; first sentence quoted in John E. Remsburg, "Six Historic Americans," second sentence quoted in Paul F. Boller, *George Washington & Religion*, pp. 14-15.

I agree with John Adams, the Second President of the United States of America, and a signer of the Declaration of Independence: "I shall have liberty to think for myself without molesting others or being molested myself." — John Adams, letter to his brother-in-law, Richard Cranch, August 29, 1756.

Since I do not demand servitude and obedience from my fellow humans using violence or coercion, I will not need to ask for forgiveness on my deathbed.



Upcoming events:

Visit www.rationalists.org or call 982-8687 for more information.

Sunday, January 5, 10:30 AM, Roundtable on "Is memetics science or pseudo science?" at the Candy Factory

Sunday, January 12, 5:00 PM, Book Club on Daniel Dennett's Elbow Room, Border's

Sunday, January 19, 10:30, Annual membership meeting and election of officers, at the Candy Factory

Sunday, January 19, 10:30 AM, Philosophy Sunday on "How do we know if a belief is true?" at the Candy Factory

Sunday, February 2, 10:30 AM Guest Speaker from ACLU of Tennessee on "Separation of State and Church Issues in Tennessee" at the Candy Factory

Saturday, February 8, Rotating Dinner Club

Sunday, February 16, 5:00 PM, Skeptic Book Club on Eric Schlosser's Fast Food Nation, at Border's

Sunday, February 23, 10:30 AM, Philosophy Sunday on "Philosophizing about the mind" at the Candy Factory.

Sunday, March 2, 10:30 AM, Roundtable with special guest Rosalind Hackett, at the Candy Factory.

The real meaning of State/Church Separation

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Now this does not mean that an individual's beliefs may not or should not influence his or her political positions. One's values and concepts of right and wrong stem from individual world views, and that is part of the reason not to have a government based on a particular religion. Freedom of conscience was very important to the Founding Fathers. In a society that dictates how to believe or not believe there is no freedom. There is also no debate and therefore no chance to find new and better solutions.

Now, how do these ideas work in practice? History, for those who look at the broad perspective rather than just mining for specific incidents or quotes to justify a pre-establish dogma, has provided much evidence to support the value of state/church separation. As mentioned above Europe was continuously embroiled in religious conflict between nations and between the rulers and the people. In addition rulers and explorers used religious justifications to decimate and/or enslave populations in newly discovered parts of the world. To most of the supernatural/religious world, freedom was not of importance. The alleged saving of souls was the rationale. (It should be noted that the accumulation of wealth and power typically seem to be connected to the saving of souls.)

Therein lies the rub. Without the preeminence of human rights and a government defined and limited in such a way to protect everyone's rights equally there can be not such thing as freedom. If a government is allowed to claim divine authority it can override any civil rule and usually feels compelled to do so.

The current US administration is demonstrating this very problem. All science advisory boards are being filled only by those who hold the political and religious positions held by the fundamentalist Christian wing of the Bush administration. So instead of good, reasoned and thoughtful input from the overall scientific community representing the welfare and best interests of all, the nation is being scammed by those who claim to possess a "higher power" as the guide.

Other examples include the used of intimidation, force and murder by antiabortionists justified by God's law which to them overrides secular law.

The "Wall of Separation" is not some "Liberal" trick, but is actually historically rooted in the very essence of the Constitution and Freedom itself.



Camp Quest of the Smoky Mountains

by Aleta Ledendecker

The summer of 2002 marked the first Camp Quest of the Smoky Mountains. For a week in June eleven campers and a host of adults spent a week in the mountains enjoying peacefulness and camaraderie. Normal camp activities such as hiking, swimming and crafts were part of the week-long camp.

Members of RET offered a variety of activities for the campers. There were workshops on magic, photography, code breaking, communication, critical thinking and an ongoing piece on philosophers and philosophy. Campers were divided into two teams for presenting their work on the challenges they received the first evening. These revolved around a mythical kingdom ruled by superstition. Campers were charged with developing a new government and strategies for bringing the population to a less superstitious world view.

Over several evenings, at the Socrates Cafe campers discussed some of the deep questions of philosophy, much like adult members of RET do during philosophy Sundays.

For the adults involved with the camp experience, it was a chance to share personal interests with an appreciative



audience. One of the lessons learned by the adults was that children respond positively to virtually any topic provided the adult sharing it is enthusiastic about it.

With that in mind, we are looking for enthusiastic adults to share their skills, hobbies or interests with campers during the 2003 session. Camp Quest will take place June 1 - 8, 2003. Participating adults receive a highly sought after CQ t-shirt in addition to the pleasure of lighting up the eyes of eager campers. These shirts are collectors' items and can only be acquired through CQ participation. Interested adults may share an hour or two one day or evening, or even spend the entire week enriching their own lives and the lives of young people.

So, what's your interest? Woodworking? Painting? Theater? Biology? Ecology? Poetry? History? Music? Science? Don't think that you have nothing to offer. If you are interested in spending some time at Camp Quest but don't think you could possibly hold the interest of a group of campers, we are here to help out. Let us know. You can help build a better future by supporting the inquiring minds of young Humanists.

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Material published in The Reality Check represents the views of the individual authors. Publication does not constitute an endorsement by the Rationalist of East Tennessee or its members. Articles, letters, review or other material intended for publication should be submitted to Carl Ledendecker or Chuck Janack via e-mail (ledendecker@earthlink.net or c_janack@yahoo.com) in text or RTF format. Final decision on publication will be made by the editors. Authors will be notified of acceptance for publication before publication. Phone contact (evenings) 982-8687 (Carl) or 531-8577 (Chuck).

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