

Separation of Church and State in Public Schools in the USA

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Abstract

Separation of church and state has been the source of many arguments in the USA in the last decades. The concept teaches and ascertains that all that is spiritual must be separated from all that is materialistic. Since religion is related to God and the latter is a spirit, religion must be kept away from real worldly affairs and issues, mostly government. However, the notion is being misused in the USA by many atheists, agnostics, and seculars who try hard to eliminate Christianity and every biblical concept from public forum and educational arena, planting the seeds of secular humanism to grow and spread.

Keywords

Separation of church and state; secular humanism; US constitution; public schools; Christianity

1. Introduction

This notion of separating church and state, framed by the world political system and erroneously reinforced by the worldly religious philosophers has caused much controversy in USA in recent years. It was based on the argument that God is spirit and unconcerned with the real world of political, economic, and social issues. This Eastern mystical concept was designed to keep Christians away from earthly matters. Therefore, many God loving Christians were persuaded to think that God wants only souls and not bodies in which those souls live.

2. Genesis

The separation of church and state has its roots in the old religious heresy 'Gnostic Dualism' during the fourth and fifth centuries. Because it reinforced the argument that religion was a personal spiritual matter, and must be detached from real worldly affairs, especially the government, this philosophy of dualism

⁽¹⁾ fastened the erroneous concept of separation between church and state. It teaches the illusionary if not the uselessness of the world and all its matters. It stresses that the only Christian valuable work is preparing people's spirits for paradise. Accordingly, if religion is not separated from all earthly issues, it will be corrupted. This pushed many Christians to neglect their duties for earthly matters.

Today, the words separation of church and state are directly associated with the Founding Father, Thomas Jefferson, even though they do not appear in any official documents of the government. The statement was mentioned in a letter written by Jefferson as a reply to the Danbury Baptist Association of Connecticut on January 1, 1802. In their letter, the Danbury Baptists, minority denomination, complained that their religious liberties were threatened and not secured. They were frightened of a widespread rumor of a national religion established by the Congregationalists, another denomination. They were afraid to re-experience the state controlled Church of England, where people were kept under strict dictates and forced to go to the state designated church and worship a chosen dictated god. In his reply, Jefferson tried to assure that the government would not establish a national religion or meddle between men and God. He wrote:

"Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with solemn reverence that act of the

whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof, thus building a wall of separation between church and state.”⁽²⁾

Indeed, Jefferson borrowed the term ‘wall of separation’ from Roger Williams, a famous Baptist minister and prominent preacher to establish and realize a common ground with the Baptists. By using the phrase, he intended to remove all threats and fears of a state established church through erecting an imaginary wall to separate both the state and the church. He meant and perceived the wall in one direction, to protect the church from the state and not the reverse. Thus, the church would remain free to teach people biblical principles and influence both the court and the government with virtue.

3. Misconception of Separation of Church and State in USA

Unfortunately, the phrase ‘separation of church and state’ was misconceived and used as a destructive weapon by atheists, agnostics and seculars to remove religion and every word that mention God or biblical principles from public forum. The phrase was used for the first time by the United States Supreme Court in *Reynolds V. United States*, 98 US 145(1879). However, it was until the court case: *Everson V. Board of Education* 330 US 1 (1947) imposed by the Liberal Court on the nation by 5 to 4 votes, that the phrase became a definitive part in the Establishment Clause, Jurisprudence. It started being used by the American Civil Liberties Union ‘ACLU’⁽³⁾, and other anti-Christian organizations to harass Christians everywhere convincing them of the importance of separating God from civil government and the courts.

The separation between church and state was put into action in the court through ruling on different cases. On June 25, 1962, the court forbade any prayer in schools through the court case of *Engle Versus Vital*. In *Murray Versus Curlett*, the Bible reading was completely removed from schools. Only graduates from high school could study the Holy Scriptures. On June 17, 1965, religious instructions were totally banned from all American schools after *Abington Versus Schempp*. The court argued “if portions of the New Testament were read without explanation, they could be and have been psychologically harmful to the child.”⁽⁴⁾ By enacting these laws, the separation between church and state went farther to be a separation between school and religion. In 1965, it became unconstitutional for a student to pray aloud in schools after *Reid Versus Vanhovan*. Every word that mentions God or may cause one to think of God was forbidden. After *Stone Versus Graham* in 1980, it became unconstitutional to post the Ten Commandments on the hall bulletin boards. The court explained that they may have effects on children and push them to read, meditate upon them, and perhaps obey them.

In fact, this was not the real intention of the Founding Fathers. Masons of USA meant and constructed the first American colleges like Harvard, William and Mary, Yale, and Princeton on Christian values. Contrary to the present, children’s education was largely biblical and Christian principles. During their four first years of education, children’s text book was the Bible to be replaced later on by another text book composed of at least 87 percent of selections from it. The Bible was to be read everyday in schools to strengthen the link between the coming generation and ethics. The attachment to the Bible was meant to rear the American children in virtue, morality, discipline and patriotism. Hence, many states encouraged prayer and Bible reading in Schools. Benjamin Weiss⁽⁵⁾ ascertained, in his book: *God in American History*, the total dependence of all fifty states of the United States of America on Almighty God to build and strengthen the bounds to Christianity and rear the coming generation in the bosom of the Bible and the Ten Commandments. For example, in Massachusetts it was stated:

“The school committee shall require the daily reading of some portions of the Bible in the common English version, but shall never direct any school books calculated to favor the tenets of any particular sects of Christians to be purchased or used in any of the town schools.”(General Statutes 1859, Ch. 38, Sec.27, Acts 1855. Ch. 410.)

In Michigan the constitution mentioned: *"Religion, morality and knowledge being necessary to good government and the happiness of mankind, schools and the means of education shall forever be encouraged."* (Constitution 1909, Art. XI, Sec.1). The Founding Fathers were sure that schools were the effective instrument and way through which ethics could be transmitted to children and society.

However, the deist nature of the founding fathers pushed them to break away from traditional Christian thinking. Instead of using faith, they resorted to reason as their guide. A short glance at the US legal documents, The Treaty of Tripoli, The Declaration of Independence, and the US Constitution, explicitly reveal the secular nature of the United States. A deep research and analysis of these documents, helps to find the secular intention of the Masons of America from the very beginning of the foundation.

Three hundred years before the treaty of Tripoli, the Mediterranean Sea was controlled by the Barbary Coast States (Tripoli- Algiers- Morocco- Tunisia) through piracy. Hostages had to pay tribute to the Barbary Sultans in order to be ransomed; otherwise they would be sold as slaves. Because it had its commerce crippled after the American Revolution and mainly in the Mediterranean Sea, USA decided to sign tribute treaty with the Barbary States. It signed the Treaty of Tripoli, which is officially called Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and his subjects at Tripoli on November 4, 1796 and in Algiers on January 3, 1797. It stated:

"As the Government of the United States of America is not, in any sense, founded on the Christian religion; as it has in itself no character of enmity against the laws, religion, or tranquility, of Mussulmen; and, as the said States never entered into any war, or act of hostility against any Mahometan nation, it is declared by the parties, that no pretext arising from religious opinions, shall ever produce an interruption of the harmony existing between the two countries." ⁽⁶⁾

The treaty's original version was in Arabic. It was the American Consul- General to the Barbary States of Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunisia, Joel Barlow who translated it into English, to be ratified and signed by John Adams with the Senate on June 10, 1797. The words of the treaty show clearly that the American government was completely detached from religion. Therefore, the founding fathers' mission to establish a government of religion was a myth as they stated with clear words that their regime was not founded upon Christianity.

In addition, The Declaration of Independence is another instance of the secular nature of America. Because it mentioned God, the document had been taken as evidence that America was founded upon Christianity. However, indeed, God mentioned in the Declaration described the laws of nature and not Christianity's God. All the references to God were consistent with Deism. *"The separate and equal station to which the laws of nature and of Nature's God entitle them...a firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence..."* ⁽⁷⁾ The document aimed at building a government separated from Great Britain and far from religious monarchy. It was meant to secure people's rights of life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness. It insisted that securing these rights may be fulfilled only via instituting governments among people and not through Christianity. This is evidence that America was founded with an intention of being more secular than religious.

The U.S. Constitution also shows that the American government was not grounded upon Christianity. No reference to God was mentioned in the supreme law of the land. Religion was mentioned only to establish a government far from its teachings. A direct proof is stated in the first Amendment of the U.S. Constitution:

"Congress shall make no law respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the

freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances”⁽⁸⁾

In Article VI, Section 3 it is mentioned that “...no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States.” Furthermore the author of the constitution, Madison, insisted that the government should remain neutral from any spiritual matters.

4. Conclusion

To sum up, removing church influence on government and educational system was meant to oppose and prevent any intention of creating and building a nation based on the Bible and the Ten Commandments. Separating religion from schools meant planting the seeds of secularism in the new coming generation hearts. It closed all doors of virtue, righteousness, and justice and opened corruption, wickedness and injustice ones, paving the ground for secular humanism, one of the major causes that triggered Christian fundamentalists to revolt, strengthen, and propagate in the American society.

5. Works Cited

¹ -Dualism, in philosophy, the theory that the universe is explicable only as a whole composed of two distinct and mutually irreducible elements. In Platonic philosophy the ultimate dualism is between “being” and “nonbeing”—that is, between ideas and matter. In the 17th century, dualism took the form of belief in two fundamental substances: mind and matter. Dualism in ethics describes the recognition of the independent and opposing principles of good and evil. Frank Jackson, *Epiphenomenal Qualia, In Mind and Cognition*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990.

² -Thomas Jefferson, *Personal Letter to Danbury Baptist Association*, Danbury, C T, January 1, 1802, <http://www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html>, Retrieved 2010.

³ -American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), organization devoted to defending the individual rights and freedoms of all people in the United States. The ACLU works to protect the civil liberties granted by the Constitution of the United States and the Bill of Rights through litigation, legislation, and public education. Samuel Walker, *In Defense of American Liberties: A History of the ACLU*, Oxford University Press, 1990.

⁴ -David Barton, *America’s Godly Heritage*, Wall Builder Press, Aledo, Texas, 1993.

⁵ -Benjamin Weiss, “*God in American History: A Documentation of America’s Religious Heritage*,” Grand Rapids Pub. House, 1966.

⁶ -John Fea, *Was America Founded as a Christian Nation? An Historical Introduction*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.

⁷ -US Declaration of Independence, <http://www.archives.gov.html>, Retrieved July 20, 2011.

⁸ -US Federal Constitution, Amendment 1, ‘Freedom of Religion, Speech, and the Press; Rights of Assembly and Petition. 2000, <http://www.archives.gov.html>, Retrieved in July 2011.