

## Reconsidering Secular Humanism: Separation of Church and State in Public Schools in the USA

### إعادة التفكير في الإنسانية العلمانية: فصل الكنيسة عن الدولة في المدارس العامة بالولايات المتحدة

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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.*

#### ملخص

إنّ مفهوم فصل الكنيسة عن الدولة و المؤطّر من طرف النظام السياسي العالمي قد أفرز نقاشات متعدّدة بأمريكا في السنوات الأخيرة. فقد بُني هذا المفهوم على برهان يقضي أنّ الإله هو روح و أنّه غير مهتمّ بالعالم الواقعي، السياسي منه و الاقتصادي و الاجتماعي. كما أنّ المفهوم صيغ لصدّ المسيحيين بعيدا عن الخوض في القضايا الدنيوية. وفي المقابل فإنّ كثيرا من المسيحيين كانوا مقتنعين بأنّ الإله يريد من روح الإنسان أن تتحرّر و ليس الجسد الذي تحيا الروح داخله. ولذلك فإنّ نزع تأثير الكنيسة عن نظام الحكم و التعليم كان يهدف إلى معارضة و منع أية محاولة لخلق و تأسيس أمة على أساس من الكتاب المقدّس و الوصايا العشر. وبالتالي فإنّ إبعاد الدّين عن المدارس كان يهدف إلى غرس بذور العلمانية لدى أجيال المستقبل.

**الكلمات الدالة :** فصل الكنيسة عن الدولة، الإنسانية العلمانية، الدستور الأمريكي، المدارس العامة، المسيحية.

## 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<sup>(1)</sup> 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.* <sup>(2)</sup>

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’ <sup>(3)</sup>, 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.*”<sup>(4)</sup> 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<sup>(5)</sup> 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 twocountries* <sup>(6)</sup>

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..."* <sup>(7)</sup>

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* <sup>(8)</sup>

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.

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.

#### 4. Secular Humanism Revisited

The concept secularism has had various definitions through time. It is derived from the Latin word *Saeculum* to mean 'an age' or 'era' in the early Christian era. Through the fourth and the fifth century it started to mean 'the world' or the 'spirit of an age'. In Latin Christian liturgy, the term was mostly used to refer to 'the world to come' or 'world without end'. The term secular was also used to denote any priest serving parishes instead of serving God in monasteries. Secularism did not acquire its current meaning till the German sociologist, Max Weber, used the term 'secularization' to highlight the drawbacks of modernity on religion and society.

In effect, the source of secularism was, and without doubt, the Enlightenment's rationalism. Because reason imposed its existence in every divine issue, the process of rationalization infiltrated every human activity. Accordingly, material caused substituted the supernatural in explaining every single aspect of life.

*"For intellectuals, secularism or secularization meant three things: 1) a decline in religious institutional participation and religious piety; 2) the differentiation of social institutions, whereby every function in society could and should be performed by specific institutions serving particular needs; and 3) the privatization of religion, meaning that religion*



*and specifically Christianity no longer shaped public life but was denoted to the private chambers of the heart.* <sup>(9)</sup>

Western European scholars of the modern period have predicted that Christianity would turn down in the current secular world and subsequently lose its impact on lives of individuals. Secularists argue that any decision-making in private or public life of the individual is to be based on individual autonomy, far from any religious constraints. According to most experts in academic study of religion, *“religion lost its throne not only as the queen of science but as the king of the state.”* <sup>(10)</sup>

Separating the church from public arena, especially from schools was the beginning of secular humanism's official practice in the USA. The term, secular humanism, was coined in the 20th century to refer to the branch of philosophy which supports the application of reason and scientific inquiry that upholds the scientific method while rejecting dogmatic wisdom, supernatural religions, and Christian miracles such as the second coming of Jesus Christ. It is one of the outgrowths of the 19th century free thoughts, advocated by many secular groups as the Council for Democratic and Secular Humanism, the American Rationalist Federation, and many unaffiliated academic philosophers and scientists.

However, the very beginning of this philosophy can be traced back to the 19th and 20th century's philosophical movement, existentialism.<sup>(11)</sup> The latter emphasizes individual existence, freedom, and choice. The first existentialist philosopher was the Danish Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), although elements of his philosophy can be found in Socrates' thoughts. Existentialism was carried on by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844-1900), Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), and twentieth century existentialist Jean Paul Sartre. The latter argued and affirmed man's freedom in choosing his existence. According to Sartre man is free in choosing his existence and in being responsible of his choice whether being good or bad i.e. choosing one's being entails commitments and responsibility to whatever the results of one's choice are. This gave humanity excess freedom,

one of the strong motives that led to emergence of secularism. Secular humanists believe that all humans have values and can solve their problems through free speech, rational thinking and democracy. Accordingly, the church meddling in civil matters became without avail since public morality totally depends on rational grounds. The modern secular spirit dethroned religion from society and government aiming at establishing a godless country.

Fundamentalists consider secular humanism as a real danger and threat to all humanity since it encourages non belief. The first victims of this anti-god, anti-Christ philosophy are children especially with the removal of teaching Christian principles and values from schools. Since 1962, when federal judges banned any prayers in classrooms including a minute of silence for private prayer, unwed birth rates of 15- 19 years old girls doubled. The percentage<sup>(12)</sup> of pregnant girls aged between 10- 14 increased 553%. The sexually transmitted diseases went up 228 % among students aged between 15 and 19.

The American crime clock clicks every minute alarming the corruption of the American youth. America has become number one and the most violent nation on the face of the earth. New York, Chicago, Miami, Atlanta, and Philadelphia are so swarming with criminals that it has become dangerous for one to walk in the streets even during the day. Everyday, people are murdered, raped, and robbed mostly by teens. Since 1985, murder arrests of teens jumped 92 percent. So, the American schools, the chief transmitters of American ethics, as regarded by the Founding Fathers and many educators, were transformed into institutions that plant and produce all kinds of sins, crimes, cruelty and immorality in the new generation supposed to build the USA.

Fundamentalists blame secular humanists and bear them the responsibility of destroying the American society with the excessive freedom, non belief, and rational thoughts. The latter have led the American society to deterioration especially with the amazing increase of crimes. America became notorious with the spread of murdering, addiction, homosexuality, and gay bars, not to mention the thousands of innocent

babies who are ‘slaughtered’ everyday at baby killing centers allowed by the government which has made abortion an effective form of birth control. The anthropologist, Marvin Harris, summarized the state of the American society in his book, *America Now: the Anthropology of a Changing Culture* 1982, as follows:

*Violent crime is at an all-time high. Children are disrespectful. Vandalism is rampant. Premarital and extramarital sex for both men and women has become the norm; the birth rate is an all-time low. There are more divorces and broken families than ever before, and there is a sharp rise in the number of homosexuals or at least in the number of people who publicly express and advertise homosexuals preferences.* <sup>(13)</sup>

Secular humanism’s excess of freedom coupled with the deist way of reasoning have led to a break with all that was traditional, firing an enormous zeal of the new and the modern. This gave the birth to theological modernism, the theology of rationalism.

## 5. 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.

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