

Revisiting The First Amendment: The Meaning of Separation of Church and State

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"Politics is an earthly reflection
of a spiritual battle."
--- Caleb Couchman

My experiences

It was during my freshman year at Modesto Junior College, in Psychology 101, when I realized I was different. Psychology 101 was one of those classes everyone has to take, so they herded us into a huge lecture hall and the teacher gave lectures she had probably been reciting for years. But this time it wasn't just a regular lecture. The teacher had invited a gay man to discuss his homosexuality with the class, and she herself was lecturing on this topic as well: "INAH-3 hypothalamus cells in homosexual male cadavers were significantly larger than those of heterosexual counterparts," the teacher said, or words to that effect. Then the kicker: "That's something you might not have learned in Sunday school." Ouch. I suppose this may have been the first time I felt blatantly attacked for my religion. It was quite an eye opener. I don't think I said anything in class; it is easy to not get called on in those big lecture halls. I left it to the other students to ask questions of the man invited to class to discuss his homosexuality.

This event initiated an interesting development for me. I wondered if it would mark my school years. I had grown up in a world where Christianity was accepted, I had gone to Christian schools all my life. Now I was in a place where my ideas seemed foreign and out of place. I was told this would happen though, and so I accepted it and moved on. I am glad to say that for the most part this sort of experience has not repeated itself. There are subtle comments that I pick up on, "the myth of Adam and Eve," and certainly the acceptance of evolution as the explanation of Earth's beginning. But I think that most teachers probably don't even realize they are doing it.

"But is that size difference a cause or an effect of homosexual activity?" Andree Seu asks.¹ Andree is

even willing to concede that homosexuality is genetically linked. She writes a concise article on how Christians should view things that may seem natural to us. This same question that came up at the beginning of my college career came up again a few days ago as I approach the end of that career. In a survey given out by sociology students to test methodology, I was asked the question, "Do you know a gay person?" The question threw me because of the things it implied about homosexuality and how they were different from my worldview. See, I now know a person who was gay and living in a homosexual lifestyle. Now he has been born again and is in his words, "looking forward to the wife God has planned for him." So I didn't know how to answer the question because it seemed to imply that you are born gay and cannot get out of it. Is my new friend gay or not? No, I guess he is not. However, the very worldview I come from says something about this simple yes or no question that is different from the question's implications. I don't mean to attack homosexuality specifically. I don't see it as different from any other sex outside of marriage, or worse than other sins. It is simply that my view on the subject is different from many people in this world, and that it has been pointed out specifically on this issue.

"Providence has given to our people the choice of their rulers, and it is the duty, as well as the privilege and interest of our Christian nation to select and prefer Christians for their rulers."
--John Jay, first Supreme Court Justice

Who am I?

I wonder what I am sometimes. In politics, it is often easier to label yourself (or the other side) as one thing and say that this is who or what you are. I have noticed this phenomenon and it seems that we pick whatever group we are in and label ourselves with it and then hang around with those types of people. Latinos hang with Latinos, blacks with blacks. It doesn't have to be race though, Christians hang with Christians, liberals with liberals, teachers with fellow

¹ Andree Seu, "Born that way", World Magazine,

teachers, gays with gays, etc. Maybe it is not that you hang out with the same sort of people but I think in a way we tend to identify with people who are from the same group as us. Labels, in politics, are meant to clarify. It helps us to find voting trends or how the socio-economic status of our country is divided. The labels we put on ourselves can be race, religion, occupation, or even a hobby we have or something we enjoy (think NASCAR dads). In the end we are all human, but these labels help to add something, to make us a little bit different. Maybe they are not a bad thing.

I am a Christian. I "self-identify" as one at least. However, 85% of Americans would say that they are Christian as well. Why is it that it seems to me that Christianity and its beliefs are in the minority? When trying to define Christianity I went to see how it could be officially classified in polls. I found that 31% of the adult population identify as born-again but not evangelical. That is still near a third, which is a lot. However, evangelical Christians (a subset of born-again that believe in some basic Biblical truths) are only 7% of the adult population.² This is less than some estimates of the percentage of homosexuals in America (often cited at 10%). This would be the minority that I identify with and perhaps explains why I feel that my views are hardly the norm. Even in this group I may be considered conservative. For a fair look at what evangelicals believe, I would recommend a recent National Journal report called "The Faithful."

Some liberals would define evangelical Christians in a different way. We are seen as bigoted, intolerant, people driven by exclusionary ideology. It is hard to talk to people who see us this way, in the end I can only control myself and try to show them love. Still, in stereotypes we often find some truth. I could be considered bigoted because I cling to the Bible as the source of morality and truth. Indeed, I believe that some of the political battles we face today are supremely about where we derive our morality. I could be considered intolerant because I am willing to call some things wrong. Whenever you are willing to call something wrong there will always be someone in this world who will stand up and say it is right. That is how the world currently operates.

And when you declare something to be wrong, you are labeled intolerant. Tolerance used to mean that you accepted that a person has the right to live the way they pleased even if you did not approve of it. It has been usurped to mean that you must accept the way they live as wholly good and as completely acceptable as any other way of living. In fact, you cannot be critical of something today without the possibility of being labeled as intolerant towards it. This is a scary thought when all critical thought about what is good for society as a whole is shut out in order to please the individual's personal feelings on the subject. Finally, Christianity in its fundamental form is seen as exclusionary. The Bible says, "let it be known to all of you and to all the people of Israel, that by the name of Jesus Christ the Nazarene, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead--by this name this man stands here before you in good health. And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven that has been given among men by which we must be saved." (NAS, Acts 4:10,12) Jesus himself said, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to God but through me." (John 14:6) Christ also said, "For the gate is small and the way is narrow that leads to life, and there are few who find it." (Matthew 7:14) This is hard to hear in America where we believe that all paths lead to Heaven (if you believe in it at all). So in a way it is exclusionary, but please don't take this the wrong way. After saying these things, I must still emphasize that the good news of Jesus Christ is available to all people, everywhere, no matter what you have done. However, the gospel just doesn't fit sometimes in a world where all religions and lifestyles are said to be equally valid.

Evangelicals are sometimes called fundamentalists. When I was playing basketball, we were taught the fundamentals. These fundamentals are the core beliefs, the very essence of what makes a thing what it is. In basketball, you must excel in the fundamentals first and other skills will follow. If you lose the fundamentals, you have lost the sport entirely. Now fundamentalism has become a bad word. It is seen as being backwards. Islamic fundamentalists attacked the United States on September 11th. This may or may not be fundamental to what Islam is about (that is up for debate). However, fundamentals are not in and of

² <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=Topics>

themselves bad, and sticking to them is sometimes very important. It is disturbing then when I hear comparisons in fundamentals slip from one religion to another so easily as was done in a recent New York Times Magazine article.³ Islam and Christianity are being lumped together as one, and the trend is quite disturbing. There will always be some that believe that religion, in general, is the opiate of the masses. However, recently, there has been a push to associate two distinct religions as very much alike in regards to their fundamentalism.

The reason I try to make this distinction about fundamentals is that its application is directly relevant to how you view the separation of church and state. One of the objections that has been laid before me is that we should look at what happens when religion controls the government. For instance, the Taliban and Iran, as well as Saudi Arabia, were/are under Shariah law and see themselves as theocracies. The problem with this thinking is that it completely ignores the differences between Islam and Christianity. These governments are built upon a belief system that is entirely different from Christianity.

Another point I have noticed is that I don't think of myself as religious. Religion now has negative connotations. I think this stems from the rules that accompany religion, as well as religion being seen as limiting freedom. As I walk in the Christian faith, I believe that the rules are quite excellent and are not there to harm me but to help me. Also I perceive myself as freed by, not limited by this religion. In short, my faith is about trying to do my best to walk with God, not about following rules.

"Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion is more needed in democratic societies than in any other."

--Alexis de Tocqueville,
from Democracy in America

My Rationale

I have mentioned all of these experiences and thoughts not to complain. Persecution of Christians

is happening around the world and for me to count any of my experiences as such would be foolish. Christ said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." Rejoice at persecution! Surely these aren't the words of a mere man. Persecution of Christians has, historically, caused the church to grow. No, stopping persecution is not necessarily a goal and I actually expect it as this world is a diverse place full of many contradicting ideas. But I want people on the outside to know that coming to college can be a trying experience for a Christian, especially one who is not grounded in the word of God. I want to provide examples of the kinds of biases against Christianity that permeate our thinking, perhaps without even knowing it.

In America, we have the ability to transform our government and we should use this ability to put religious freedom at the forefront of what makes America different from other nations. Other countries are heading towards the path of secularism. Secularism is the belief that morality should be based on the well-being of mankind without any consideration of religious systems and forms of worship. Secularism is also the point of view that religion should not be introduced into public education or civil affairs. Although morality should be based on the well-being of mankind, we differ in what this means and how it should be accomplished. Secularism says that religious systems have no place in determining these things. That religion, though it clearly addresses moral issues, should be kept away and should not have a place at the table in policy making. We see examples of the slow degradation of the right of religion to exist and influence policy in countries other than America. France has recently outlawed the displaying of religious symbols in public, including crosses, yarmulkes, and especially disturbing for Muslims, headscarves.⁴ A British political party leader is under arrest for calling Islam evil. Perhaps this falls under freedom of speech, but freedom of speech and religion are very similar.⁵ In

⁴<http://worldmag.com/displayarticle.cfm?id=8493>

⁵<http://www.cnsnews.com/ViewForeignBureaus.asp?Page=%5CForeignBureaus%5Carchive%5C200412%5CFOR20041215d.html>

³ *The New York Times Magazine*, Oct. 17, 2004, p. 46

Canada, they are attempting to make it “hate speech” if you say that homosexuality is morally wrong.

Even in America, we see these types of issues coming up. The Plano school district recently outlawed green and red from Christmas parties because they are seen as religious.⁶ A principal wouldn't allow Morgan Nyman, a second-grader, to pass out cards with religious messages on them, saying they violated the separation of church and state.⁷ This basic misunderstanding of the role that religion should play in public is becoming more prevalent throughout the world.

I want to stop the mindset that this separation of church and state causes. Those of faith are being frightened to speak out for fear of reprisal and their rights to freedom of religion and speech are being taken away. I want to get away from the idea that religion and politics shouldn't mix because not only is it impossible but it is not a good idea. A recent poll by USA today said that 48% of Americans thought that the church or organized religion currently has too much political influence in America, while 40% said it had too little. However, 64% said the church had too little moral influence, while only 27% said the church had too much influence. What I don't understand is why there is a willingness to give morals to the church but not politics. Americans do not understand two things. One, that the laws we make shape our morality. But also, importantly, that while the laws shape our morality, the laws are an actual reflection of our morality. Therefore, a call to increase moral influence while not calling for an increase in political influence is not only ineffective, it doesn't make sense. We have created a dichotomy in our society in which morals can't interact with politics, and then wonder why our politics are so immoral.⁸

As a Christian, in writing this paper, I am forced to confront myself in how much I am willing to put my beliefs on others. I believe that you both can and cannot legislate morality. Morality is first and foremost personal and laws themselves do not make a person moral. However, all laws legislate someone's morality, and the laws that we make set the moral

climate from which the culture as a whole stems. As a result, fighting to create laws that are moral is a necessary thing to do.

I was asked, "Do you want America to be a theocracy?" My immediate thought was, no, of course, I wouldn't, thinking of examples of Saudi Arabia and Iran. But the more I thought about it the more the answer 'no' was just too simple. I believe God has shown us how to live, and that as our Creator He knows that this is not only a good way to live, but it is the best way for us to live. If a theocracy is a state that follows the laws of God then that is the best state and the best government. However, this sort of theocracy is the idyllic one that can not come to pass here on Earth (until the end).

In the meantime, even if we can gather a "Christian" majority to vote in laws, we still must be careful to not trample on the rights of minorities that are outlined in the Constitution. This, of course, is the whole idea of Constitutional law and there is a continuing fight between forces on both sides that tends to balance the issue out in the long run. There is this idea that you will be forcing someone to do something if you make it into law. This is hardly the case as people disobey laws all the time. Indeed, some laws in this world ought not to be followed. The fear seems to be that people will lose rights or freedoms if fundamentalist Christians get their way. I suppose that this could be true, but only because we have taken as “rights” things that are wrong. In other words, only certain rights should be considered fundamental. We should not work to make everything a “right,” we should keep a few broad rights as fundamental and vigorously defend these for everyone. This includes freedom of speech and religion. Thus, in America, people must be allowed to believe what they want to believe. Even as an evangelical Christian, I would not wish to have this changed, even if I had the power to “make” everyone believe the same thing through public policies. In the end, I believe that living in a land with Christian laws is conducive to freedom, not harmful to freedom.

If you want to see a country that has its government founded on Christian principles then you should look no further than the United States of America. It has not lost its religious freedom. It allows people to operate their lives in the way that they wish. It is a great country. I started off to

⁶ www.alliancedefensefund.org

⁷ “Truth with triumph”, World Magazine, Nov. 20, 2004

⁸ www.usatoday.com/news/polls/tables/live/2004-11-22-poll.htm

criticize America but through study realized that this country was founded on ideals that have allowed the religious freedom I have. I am blessed to be living in America. Still there is room for improvement and I will look into how we can continue to expand religious freedom. I will look into the founding father's original intent and see if we are upholding that intent today. I will critique certain Supreme Court decisions and see how the Supreme Court has negatively impacted the way we perceive separation of church and state.

