What Your Friends May Not Know About Separation Of Church And State

By Rachel K. Laser

A reporter recently asked me a great question. What is there about separation of church and state, he asked, that might surprise some people?

I had three answers for him, which I'd like to share with you:

Effective public education would be impossible without separation of church and state. Of course, we think of church-state separation when it comes to issues like school prayer. But that's just the beginning. The connection goes much deeper, and while you may be aware of it, many people are not.

There's a reason AU's founders cited protection of public education as part of the organization's chief goals during our founding in 1947: no separation, no public education. They wanted to avoid siphoning tax money away from public schools into the coffers of (unaccountable) private religious schools – something we are battling more than ever right now with this Supreme Court's support for private school vouchers.

But they also knew that a public education system that would bring together children from all backgrounds – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, atheist, etc. – and provide them with a secular education was crucial to America's survival. When our children learn together, we sculpt a generation of successful Americans who can live side by side despite deep differences, including in belief systems.

Many of our most fundamental rights rely on the separation of church and state. If you see a towering cross on public land, you know that's a church-state violation. It's visible and visceral. But consider your right to control your own reproductive freedom. Your right to marry the person you love. The right of your transgender niece to be herself in public school and take part in all the programs. The right of your children and grandchildren to read, to explore, to question.

What do they all have in common? All those rights are threatened by oppressive, fundamentalist religious groups that seek to use the power of the state to enforce their theology. Only separation can stop them.

On top of the wall of separation rest reproductive freedom, LGBTQ equality, public schools, modern science education, women's equality and the freedom to learn. If the wall fully collapses, everything resting on top falls with it.

Religious people and leaders cherish separation of religion and government. Many people associate separation of church and state with the government telling religious groups what they *can't* do. Let's consider something they *can* do under separation: Flourish! We are the vibrant, pluralistic nation our founders intended.

Thomas Jefferson spoke with great pride of the fact that his Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom protected "the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and Mahometan, the Hindoo, and Infidel of every denomination." James Madison celebrated the "multiplicity of sects, which pervades America, and which is the best and only security for religious liberty in any society."

At Americans United, we reflect this diversity in our membership, our staff and our governing board. The current chair of AU's Board of Trustees is the two-term past president of the National Council of Churches, and the Board recently added members from the Seventh-day Adventist, Baptist and Orthodox Jewish communities. AU has a thriving national Faith Advisory Council of committed religious leaders who advise AU and broaden our reach. Our Legal, Public Policy and Outreach departments rely on working with faith communities and leaders in order to advocate most effectively for our issue. These faith leaders stand shoulder to shoulder with our nonreligious members in support of this vital principle.

Imagine our lives without church-state separation. Imagine a country that does not honor it. That country would not be America because without church-state separation, we are no longer the nation we were intended to be. Without church-state separation, American democracy, which is premised on freedom without favor and equality without exception, fails.

In the end, perhaps the best answer for the journalist would have been that the most surprising part of church-state separation is how much we rely on it every day, and yet how many of us take it for granted.

P.S. You might have noticed that I got a promotion! My column is now the first thing you'll see when you open *Church & State* instead of the last. It's part of a redesign. We felt it was time for a fresher, newer look – but not too crazy. The great content is still here. I hope you enjoy our new look!



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