

Separation of Church and State

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The phrase *separation of church and state* is one familiar to all that live in America. It is a value our country has claimed to uphold since the earliest years of this nation, when it was first used to describe the Establishment Clause of the Constitution's First Amendment by President Thomas Jefferson. The clause ruled that the U.S. government cannot enact any laws that favor one religion over another, nor can it make laws related to the establishment and practice of a religion. It was a crucial piece of our country's foundation and is fundamental to protecting the diversity, free speech, and democracy of our nation. As a young high school student who identifies as part of the LGBT community, as a woman, and as a religious minority, it is amazing how many of my own rights have been protected by this clause. And that is why it worries me so much, looking at historical and present day governmental practices, when I see that this piece of legislation, this ideal that sets our country apart, is often not abided by. Though the concept was originally introduced to protect the church from state intrusion, today it is important for a different reason: preserving the rights of marginalized communities and the democracy our country depends on.

From the issue of abortion to the legalization of same-sex marriage, a large number of social controversies have pitted the church against the state. Across the country religious beliefs are cited as a reason to deny women access to critical health and reproductive care. The current US administration and Supreme Court, influenced by the Catholic Church and pro-life advocates,

have threatened the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which determined abortion as a fundamental right under the Constitution, despite this threat contravening the Establishment Clause. Christian-based organizations are also influential on local governments, where they work to limit LGBTQ people's rights. The group Alliance Defending Freedom, which often cites religious liberty as its motivation, has worked on the state level to prevent transgender people from using the bathroom of their gender identity. In the renowned case of Colorado baker Jack Phillips, who refused to design a cake for a gay couple, Alliance Defending Freedom represented Phillips. These are just a few of many examples of religious organizations influencing legislation regarding civil issues. As a member of the communities being threatened, it is especially important to me and my rights that the separation of church and state be a respected part of the constitution this country is governed by.

'One nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all'

So ends the Pledge of Allegiance, which millions of students, including myself, recite everyday in school, hands on our hearts, facing the flag. Its religious content was added in 1954 in response to the era's Communist threats, despite being in clear violation of the Establishment Clause. And so, though our constitution states that public schools should be secular in practice, that is not the case and Christian ideologies are woven into America's education system. This both disregards students of minority religions and can prevent students from being taught the science behind evolution and the earth's history. Americans, lacking in knowledge of many scientific discoveries concerning the origins of species and our planet, are limited in their ability to

think critically about many of the issues facing our world today. This influences our country's democracy in the long run when knowledge about what science has found, in contrast to Biblical beliefs, is important in making an informed vote. It is important to me, as high school student, that every generation is given the opportunity to understand all that science has discovered, especially when it comes to making governmental decisions that should be based on these discoveries, not on faith.

Historically, the U.S. was not founded to be a Christian country. Thomas Jefferson is quoted as saying:

“In every country and in every age, the priest has been hostile to liberty”

Historical documents show Jefferson felt allowing religion to govern the nation would be detrimental to its democracy and the freedom of its citizens. The U.S., rather, was founded to be a nation in which its citizens were free to worship however they wished, and that right is protected by the First Amendment's Establishment Clause. And so, when conservative christian groups use the First Amendment to argue against the separation of church and state, saying that others' civil rights are an intrusion upon their religious freedom, they are also challenging a piece of the constitution that protects their right to their faith. Were this country theocratic, no U.S. citizens would have the life and liberties we have today. The democracy our founding fathers built is in great part preserved by the clause that separates religion from government and government from religion.

However, religion does hold a powerful influence over this country. Today its citizens are faced with questions concerning how the U.S. should balance religious and civil freedoms in the

way that best serves our democracy. The separation of church and state is crucial in protecting my right to have control over my own body, my right to love whomever I love, and my ability to make an informed vote. It is important to every U.S. citizen who wants our government to make evidence-based, representative decisions. However it is undeniable that the phrase, *the separation of church and state*, is an ideal, not a reality. Many laws that govern us are determined by Christian beliefs, and while that is so we cannot claim the Establishment Clause on its own ensures secular decisions on the rights of women and minorities. Yet, I am very grateful for the rights it has had the legacy of securing me. I am grateful to the foresight of Thomas Jefferson. And I am grateful of the role the separation of church and state has had in protecting our democracy.