

Defending Separation of Religion and State

by Rabbi Alan Silverstein

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The results of the Iowa caucuses revealed the prominent role religion is playing in the 2008 presidential campaign. Many caucus participants were reported as saying it was "important" that a presidential candidate "share their faith." Their feelings notwithstanding, the Sixth Amendment prohibits a "religious test" for holding public office.

It should be a source of concern to Jews and members of other religious minorities that campaign ads promoted Mike Huckabee, a former Baptist minister, as "the Christian candidate"; this evidently was catering to potential evangelical supporters in order primarily to contrast Huckabee with Mitt Romney, a Mormon. On the stump, candidate Huckabee has cited verses from Christian scripture to illustrate his civic policies and has delivered unabashedly theological sermons at churches. He also presented a holiday television message not simply extending wishes for a "Merry Christmas," but encouraging viewers to celebrate "the birth of Christ."

On the Dec. 30 edition of Meet the Press, the former Arkansas governor defended his 1998 charge to the Southern Baptist Convention: "I hope we...can take this nation back for Jesus."

Widespread acceptance of this assumption - that our country was founded as a "Christian" country and must be restored to an alleged "original intent" - is harmful. It is untrue and needs to be addressed. The Founding Fathers shaped an American polity in which advocacy of policies in the name of a specific faith was to be avoided. In the words of Thomas Jefferson, "Religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God..."

What led these masters of statecraft to pursue religious pluralism and tolerance?

First, they were acutely aware that, according to the American Jewish Committee, "this country had been settled, in large measure, by Christians - Puritans, Quakers, Mennonites, Baptists, Catholics, Lutherans, Huguenots, and many others - feeling persecution at the hands of other Christians who controlled the machinery of state, and were absolutely certain that they were doing the Lord's will in oppressing minority sects..." They structured a nation to protect all faith groups from tyranny by the majority. In James Madison's words, the goal was to create a society "with the mantle of its protection [extended to]...the Jew and the Gentile, the Christian and the Mahometan, the Hindu and the infidel [secularist] in every denomination."

Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, and other key founders were Deists, or adherents of the Enlightenment's so-called "rational religion." Having tired of doctrinal differences separating faith groups, they suggested that only affirmations that can be derived from a person's rational faculties are essential: God exists, God is to be worshiped, the true worship of God is virtue/morality, man must resist and repent wrongdoing, there are rewards and punishments in the hereafter. Deists also asserted

that while elites could arrive at necessary elements of religion via reason alone, society should provide a spectrum of organized religion to assist the religious tutelage of the masses.

In 1790, only 7 percent of American citizens were affiliated with any religious institution. The founders realized that no single church body was strong enough to prevail as an official American faith. Similarly impractical in the view of these visionaries was the option of "multiple establishment," official support of several faiths. The only viable remaining choice in their eyes was to totally sever the government's legal and financial support for any and all churches.

In addition, the Founding Fathers intuited that religion would thrive best amid a "free marketplace of souls," a public square in which diverse faith adherents could persuade others to affiliate. By keeping faith groups apart from government, they would be spared the taint of political inefficiency, corruption, and bickering.

In the process, America emerged as the world's most God-intoxicated democracy. As noted in a 1976 "Williamsburg charter" issued in honor of America's bicentennial and signed by hundreds of dignitaries including Presidents Ford and Carter, Supreme Court Justices Rehnquist and Burger, and religious leaders Coretta Scott King and the Rev. James Dobson: "Far from denigrating religion...the separation of Church and State is...the saving of religion from the temptation of political power... Far from weakening religion, disestablishment has, as an historical fact, enabled it to flourish."

Thus motivated, America's founders carefully crafted a separation between church and state. The Declaration of Independence makes no mention of God, Jesus, or Christianity. Similarly, the Constitution avoids any mention of Jesus and Christianity. The First Amendment to the Constitution further clarifies that "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The Sixth Amendment adds that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust in the United States."

As we approach the selection of an American president, let us reaffirm the words of John F. Kennedy as a candidate in 1960: "I believe in an America where the separation of church and state is absolute...where no man is denied public office because his religion differs from the president who might appoint him or the people who might elect him."