

The Relationship Between Religion and Government, the Founders' Intent

“Congress shall make no law respecting an 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.”¹

The first amendment protects the freedom of religion by prohibiting the government from meddling in religious affairs. However, many Americans believe that the founding fathers wanted there to be a separation between the church and the state. Many People have been using the first amendment in an attempt to eradicate religion from the American culture. People today believe that the first clause of the first amendment justifies the government's actions. However, the actions of the government are violating the second clause: our right to freely exercise religion. This was not the true intent of the founding fathers. For us to know the true intent of the founding fathers, we must first understand where they were coming from, because in this situation, context is king.

On July 4, 1776, America declared itself free from the tyrannical reign of the British king. Eventually, the first amendment was created to prevent the government from establishing an official church, as was done by the king of England. The founders saw religion as a natural right. However, today people incorrectly believe that the first amendment was put in place to keep the church out of the government, when in reality, it was put in place to restrict the power that the state has on the church.

Although the founding fathers were deeply influenced by Christian principles, this nation was not founded to be a theocracy. The Danbury Baptists wrote a letter to Thomas Jefferson in 1801, asking for the government to make Baptist laws into federal laws. Thomas Jefferson responded to their request by stating, “I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the

¹ (2017, July 23). First Amendment Activities. Retrieved from <http://www.uscourts.gov/about-federal-courts/educational-resources/educational-activities/first-amendment-activities>

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."² When Thomas Jefferson used the term "a wall of separation between the church and the state" he was asserting that the state should not be able to create a religion or interfere with the free practice of any religion. If Thomas Jefferson would have complied with the Danbury Baptists request, he would have broken the first clause of the first amendment, by establishing laws that favor one religion. Unfortunately, people have misinterpreted Thomas Jefferson's comment as meaning that the church should have no place or influence in the government.

The founding fathers did not want the state to control the church, but that did not mean that religion could not influence the state. For example, the founding fathers wrote in The Declaration of Independence that, "all men are created equal and they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights."³ This means that all men were born with rights that were given to them by their creator. The founding fathers also believed in natural law, which states that there is a distinct right and wrong that applies to everyone. Jeremiah 31:33 states, "Declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts." The Bible states that God wrote his laws on our heart giving us morals and the ability to know that there is a distinct right and wrong.

Benjamin Franklin said, "Only a virtuous people are capable of freedom. As nations become corrupt and vicious, they have more need of masters."⁴ In other words, our founding fathers intended for us to use religious principles to keep us moral. The founding fathers intended for the church to be free of government regulations, but for the state to be deeply influenced by the religious mortality of the people. In order for our country to continue to thrive we must follow the founders' intent and read the first clause of the first amendment as "Congress shall

² (2017, July 23). Thomas Jefferson's Letter to the Danbury Baptists. Retrieved from https://www.au.org/files/images/page_photos/jeffersons-letter-to-the.pdf

³ (2017, July 23). The Declaration of Independence. Retrieved from <http://www.ushistory.org/Declaration/document/>

⁴ (2017, July 23). Benjamin Franklin Quotes. Retrieved from <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/438662-only-a-virtuous-people-are-capable-of-freedom-as-nations>

make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” not just “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”