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Be Careful What You Ask For: The High Price of Secularism

The rise of strict separationism in church-state relations came at the urging of American Protestants afraid of Catholic power. Now, many evangelicals are unaware of how we contributed to this crisis of secularism.

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“By the middle of the twentieth century, the idea of separation between church and state had become an almost irresistible American dogma,” explains constitutional scholar Philip Hamburger. A law professor at the University of Chicago, Hamburger had traced the victory of church-state separationism over the founder’s intentions in the First Amendment.

His book, *Separation of Church and State*, published by Harvard University Press, is a massive study of American history and constitutional interpretation. His book should change the terms of the debate on questions of church and state—but don’t count on it.

Why are so many Americans afraid of this issue? Americans are rightly outraged at the action of a Federal District Court judge in ordering that Alabama’s Ten Commandments monument be removed from its state Judicial Building. But that outrage will be wasted unless concerned citizens look at the root of the problem.

The problem is not just this isolated order from a federal court. Rather, the problem is the fact that a doctrine of strict separation between church and state has now become so imbedded in the nation’s courts, that this decision is just one of many outrages that twist and reverse the intention of the Constitution’s framers. The simple elegance of the First Amendment’s actual language has been replaced with a secular vision that finds a violation of the Constitution whenever religious symbolism or religious language enter the public square. The shorthand for this vision is Thomas Jefferson’s image of “a wall of separation between church and state.”

Most evangelicals, frustrated and distressed by this trend, are unaware of how American Protestants fueled the fire of the separationist vision. Hamburger forces us to look at our own history—even the history of the Southern Baptist Convention—and face the reality.

Having suffered persecution, Baptists cherish the ideal of religious liberty. E. Y. Mullins, perhaps the most influential Baptist theologian of the twentieth century, described the Baptist ideal as “a free church in a free state.” But the central ideal of religious liberty has sometimes conflicted with other concerns.

Hamburger points to the 1947 U. S. Supreme Court decision in the case *Everson v. Board of Education* as the turning point in church-state relations. In that case, Justice Hugo Black’s majority opinion cited Jefferson’s “wall of separation” as its rationale and standard in interpreting the First Amendment. Thereafter, the Court handed down decisions outlawing, for example, organized school prayer and religious displays on government property. The expanding logic of those cases led to the showdown in Montgomery.

But Hamburger also recounts how American Protestants fueled this fire. A powerful anti-Catholic tendency drove many Protestants—including leading Southern Baptists—to call for state and federal courts to guard Jefferson’s “wall.” These non-Catholics feared the power of the Roman Catholic Church, opposed their parochial schools, and accused American Catholics of having divided loyalties between the nation and their Church. They promoted a doctrine of strict separationism as a way of ensuring that Roman Catholic power would not grow or spread.

With the support of major non-Catholic denominations, leading American churchmen established groups such as

“Protestants and Others United for the Separation of Church and State,” to oppose the Catholic threat. That organization, now known as Americans United for Separation of Church and State, was one of the groups that sued for the removal of Alabama’s Ten Commandments monument.

Baptist pastors in Alabama are rightly outraged now, but in 1947 the Birmingham [Baptist] Pastors Conference resolved, “to approach the Federal Council of Churches in America and all Protestant denominations, the Jews, the Masons, and other groups, looking for the formation of a national organization to combat every attempt to invalidate the American Bill of Rights and its corollary, the separation of church and state.”

Look carefully: The Baptist pastors of Birmingham, Alabama called for a united front to include the liberal Federal Council of Churches and Masons in order to demand a doctrine of strict separation. The “others” in Protestants and Others United for Separation of Church and State would shock most Southern Baptists today.

Southern Baptists also established a Committee on Public Relations [later the Committee on Public Affairs] to cooperate with the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs in Washington in defense of strict separation. Joseph M. Dawson, former pastor of First Baptist Church, Waco, Texas, served as the committee’s first executive director, and then later served as the founding director of Protestants United. Hamburger comments that Dawson’s move to the Protestants United position in 1947 was because “Dawson and his theologically liberal allies had a more secular vision of separation than many of their fellow Southern Baptists, and they increasingly had reason to fear that a future majority in the Southern Baptist Convention might try to prevent [what became the Baptist Joint Committee] from litigating for some of the broader implications of separation.”

That majority coalesced in the 1970’s, of course, and the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention led to a decisive break with the Baptist Joint Committee and its agenda. In fact, issues related to the church-state divide framed many of the debates between convention conservatives and the liberal faction.

By then, however, evangelical Christians no longer operated at the center of a church culture. Even in the “Bible Belt,” signs of a secular shift were undeniable. By the last quarter of the twentieth century, evangelical Christians were far more concerned with the threat of secularism than of Catholicism. Evangelicals observed Catholic parochial schools and founded their own Christian schools as an alternative to the increasingly secularized public schools. Evangelicals, along with Catholics, now felt the effect of laws and court decisions hostile to religious expression. As our grandmothers would have reminded us, the sauce good for the goose is good for the gander.

With federal courts now outlawing school prayer, Bible reading, and nativity scenes in the town square, Hamburger notes, “Many relatively traditional Protestants felt stunned, leading them slowly to reconsider separation.” Hamburger continues: “They had sought their familiar Protestant separation and now suddenly found themselves confronted with a secular version, which threatened the nonsectarian religiosity of America’s public institutions. It was an experience they would feel even more profoundly in the wake of later Supreme Court cases and that would gradually bring many Protestants to recognize that they faced a greater threat from secularism and separation than from Catholicism.”

Contested issues at the intersection of church and state are rarely easy to resolve, even under the best of circumstances. But the courts’ increasing aggression to free expression on grounds of strict separation will, if left unchecked, lead to a virtually secular America. The empty space in Alabama’s Judicial Building is a powerful symbol of secularism’s ambition to oppose all public support for religious expression—especially Christian expression.

Under the present doctrine of strict separation, the government is not *neutral* toward religious expression and religious speech, but increasingly *hostile*. The debacle in Montgomery offers convincing proof. Even a monument to the Ten Commandments is just too much for the federal courts—too much of a threat to the secular vision.

America’s Christians must learn to resist this vision by every means available. We must work and pray that the federal courts will regain constitutional sanity. We must educate the American people to the reality of our situation and crisis.

Of course, as Philip Hamburger reminds us, we had also better start educating ourselves about how we arrived at this impasse, and not repeat the mistakes of the past. Those who once demanded an absolute “wall” of separation got more than they asked for.

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