

Separation of Church and State

The separation of church and state seems to be a hot topic in this paper as of late. Two weeks ago there was a front page article and two letters to the editor about Marc Mero's talk at Camden Middle School. Mr. Mero's presentations during the day were non-religious in tone but his evening presentation was profoundly religious in its content. This compelled some parents and others to question whether public schools, funded by tax-payers' money, can legally promote a religion. The front page article pointed out that though the use of public school facilities for religious-based exercises is not a violation of the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment to the US Constitution, such exercises cannot legally be promoted or supported by the school district.

Jennifer Armstrong's column, *Opposing Viewpoints*, in last week's paper, further explored the concept of the separation of church and state in America. She pointed out that the Establishment Clause simply states "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion." Its sister clause (Free Exercise Clause) follows it and states "or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Given historical context, it is quite certain our founders did not wish for the US to have a national religion like England and other countries did at the time. What is less clear is whether the clause was meant to prevent our federal government from supporting Christianity in general (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/estabinto.htm>).

Ms. Armstrong mentioned how Thomas Jefferson's letter to the Danbury Baptists in 1802 coined the phrase "a wall of separation between Church and State." She stated that the purpose of the letter was to "assuage the fears of the Danbury, Connecticut Baptists and reassure them that the State would have no authority to interfere in church affairs." I am not sure that was all that Jefferson implied in his letter. A larger quote from this letter is: 'Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between Man & his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legitimate powers of government reach actions only, & not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the 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 & State.' (<http://www.usconstitution.net/jeffwall.html>).

This letter has been cited in various Supreme Court cases to support the idea of a two-way separation between church and state. These cases include: [Everson v Board of Education \(1947\)](#); [McCullum v Board of Education \(1948\)](#); and [Engel v Vitale \(1962\)](#). Though the first case divided the court 5-4, the court unanimously agreed that the Establishment Clause "was intended to do far more than merely prohibit the establishment of a state religion." (<http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/conlaw/estabinto.htm>). I suppose one can argue that the court was being "activist" in these rulings, but our body of federal law to date does support a two-way separation interpretation. Incidentally, I found that one must be careful when referencing quotes by Jefferson and other historic figures found on the Internet. There are several misquotations to be

found, so it behooves one to cross reference them where possible. University and historical sites appear to be more reliable than those promoting religious views (including atheism).

I think in our society of ever growing diversity, it is especially important that our institutions of government not present a bias to one religion over others. This principle is not simply a matter of "political correctness" but traces back to the principles of an individual's Natural Rights to life, liberty and property that this country was founded upon. Following this principle does not lessen our resolve to protect religion from government interference; it does just the opposite, it preserves religious liberty for all. Another famous quote from Jefferson is "But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god."

George Washburn, Florence, NY