

What holds up Jefferson's wall of separation?

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*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. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties.*

So wrote then-President Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1802. Next to the First Amendment, this letter has perhaps come to represent the most popular understanding of religious freedom in the collective mind of America. Because of Jefferson's "wall of separation" metaphor, some would like the letter to pass back into the shadow of obscurity under which it rested prior to the 1947 *Everson v. Board of Education* decision. Others rejoice that the letter provides the lens through which religion itself is defined and applied in contemporary America.

Jefferson's famous metaphor is important, but it is a star drawing into its orbit the comet of our short attention span. In our fascination with the wall metaphor, we often miss how Jefferson understood the basis for religious freedom. Jefferson saw religious freedom as being built on a nonsectarian theological foundation. Jefferson thought that, like all natural rights, religious freedom is predicated on God's sovereignty and benevolence. It is also justified by the fact of people's responsibility to God for what they believe.

Notice how Jefferson articulated the meaning of religion—it is "a matter which lies solely between Man & his God." Further, Jefferson acknowledged that humanity

“owes account to none other [than God] for his faith or his worship.” Just as religion would have no meaning apart from God’s existence, God’s relation to humanity, and humanity’s accountability to God, the freedom to relate to God according to one’s conscience would also have no meaning.

Notice also that Jefferson’s letter indirectly includes religious freedom as one natural right among others. (In the Declaration of Independence Jefferson argued that God as Creator bestowed natural rights upon humanity.) Natural rights *per se* complement social responsibility. Thus, religious freedom, situated upon a broad theological basis, helps to ensure human flourishing. It does this by not only securing the person’s relationship to God, but also the person’s relationship to his community.

Church and state maintain their distinctive roles in such a society. It is not necessarily inappropriate to envision Jefferson’s wall of separation existing between church and state. But the metaphor must be understood in the context of how Jefferson articulated the meaning of religious freedom. Put another way, the wall of separation rests on a solid foundation—the acknowledgement of God and human responsibility to God. Read in context, it is really impossible to interpret Jefferson’s letter as an argument for the expulsion of religion from the public square. As a natural right bestowed by God to creatures accountable to God, religious freedom contributes to the flourishing of the society as a whole, because the church and the state restrict themselves to their proper *public* roles. If religion is privatized, and thus relegated to the interior of a church building, or the individual heart, then it can make no meaningful contribution to the common good.

Jefferson's wall is not hanging in the air. It is not based on nothing. It is based on something solid. The basis of religious freedom is an acknowledgement of the reality of God. The reality of God is what gives meaning to our right to worship and practice our faith. The idea that we are individually accountable to God for the content of our faith and the way we live our lives is at the heart of Jefferson’s contention that governments have no jurisdiction over matters of conscience. If it is true that temporal authorities have no right to compel obedience, then what powers have that right? There can only be one alternative: spiritual authority. Thereupon rests the basis of religious freedom.

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