Jun-2004

Editor's Notebook: Knocking Those Old Walls Down

Michael Kryzanek

Bridgewater State College, mkryzanek@bridgew.edu

Recommended Citation


This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.
In 1802 Thomas Jefferson wrote a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in response to the Association’s inquiry as to why as President he had not named national days of fasting and thanksgiving as had been the case with his two predecessors, Washington and Adams. In his response Jefferson talked about the importance of a “wall of separation” between church and state. Jefferson was very conscious that he was creating the basis for antagonism and political opposition by taking his position in support of the walls of separation, but he was also convinced that the framers of the Constitution were correct not to see Congress or the President as taking any action that might be seen as favoring the establishment of religion in this country.

It is now over two hundred years since Jefferson’s “walls of separation” letter and it is obvious that segments of American society are working feverishly to bring those walls down and establish religious principles as the guiding foundation of government policy and national life. While there is no effort to foster a national religion, as in the case of some Middle Eastern countries, there are, however, numerous religious denominations, interest groups and faith-based movements that have organized campaigns to pressure the Congress and the Executive to embrace religious values, principles and doctrines in ways that would transform this country into one that is less secular and more God-centered.

The list of public policy issues that have been touched by these campaigns to establish a religious foundation within the government and within the country is now quite familiar. Legislation to limit or end abortion and partial birth abortion has begun to chip away at women’s reproductive rights. Judicial permission to allow vouchers for religious schools has created pockets of support for church-directed education. Government initiatives to ensure that faith-based organizations receive financial support to conduct charitable work remain in the forefront of the policy agenda. National efforts to stop same-sex marriages have been elevated to a constitutional amendment process. And seasonal challenges to court ordered removal of religious displays or pre-game prayers continue to galvanize the religious faithful.

We as a nation have come to a critical crossroads as we grapple with the issue of how much influence religion and religious beliefs should be granted in the formation of public policy. Conservative commentators lament the secularization of American society and call for a rebirth of religion in American life. They see America slowly slipping into a void without any values or belief system. Liberals fear that by breaking down Jefferson’s wall America will slide into a kind of religious conformity that will limit personal freedom. Such conformity will lead to laws that contradict the values and the beliefs of those who are not religious or whose religion is not in the current “mainstream.”

If there is an answer to this quandary over what place religion should play in national life and national governance, it is in the wisdom of Thomas Jefferson. Jefferson and the framers of the Constitution were very careful about linking religion and the government. If you notice, nowhere in the Constitution does the word “God” appear, and the First Amendment cannot express any more clearly the founding fathers’ concerns about religion dominating national life. Yes, religion is important to the Founders, and yes religion was viewed as a vital part of American life. But no, religion was never intended to be the primary guidepost used to make public policy decisions or define public values.

Americans, of course, should be free to follow their religious belief in whatever manner they so choose, but the advice of Jefferson on the wall of separation between government and religion still remains worthy of respect and allegiance. Religion has always been a private matter, a matter of the heart and the soul and the spirit. As the Founders saw religion it should be practiced privately and lived privately. America is a nation that prides itself on its diversity; its respect for differences and its protections of minorities and minority opinions. When government begins to form its laws, regulations, values and priorities on the basis of one religious view or one religious denomination, then this country no longer can lay claim to be a beacon of freedom and democracy.

—Michael Kryzanek is Editor of the Bridgewater Review