

Confusion over ‘separation of church and state’ persists

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=5420>

The problem between “church and state” just seems to be getting worse, and from all indications it’s not going to get any better any time soon. The recent boondoggle created by Mayor Bloomberg’s decision to prohibit any clergy from participating in the 9/11 ceremonies underscores the lack of understanding of what the “separation of church and state” actually means.

Bloomberg’s reasoning for the exclusion was that he wanted the ceremonies to focus on the families of the 9/11 victims, notwithstanding the likelihood that most of the families are Christian or Jewish. Some pundits are speculating that the only way to prevent Muslim clerics from participating is to prohibit all clergy from doing so. Perhaps he is trying to be impartial to all religions by excluding them all, or perhaps he thinks he might break the law by allowing any of them to participate. Regardless of the mayor’s reasons, he has a real dilemma on his hands. However, there might be no dilemma at all if the public at large actually understood what the concept of “separation of church and state” actually meant. Secularists and progressives have intentionally blurred its origin and original meaning for so long that now most Americans believe that it is illegal to promote religion, or more specifically, Christianity, in public.

If you don’t already know the works of the author David Barton, you need to do so. Among the many books Barton has written, there are two in particular worth noting.

The first is *Separation of Church & State - What the Founders Meant*, is a short book that gives a brief overview of the issue, and the other is *Original Intent - The Courts, the Constitution, & Religion*, which is much longer and more detailed.

In the first book, Barton relates a conversation he had with a U.S. congressman who was also an accomplished attorney. The congressman was lamenting the fact that we could not teach the “importance of basic religious values and teachings to public behavior and society in general,” insisting that the concept of separation of church and state in the Constitution would not permit it.

Handing him a copy of the Constitution, Barton asked him to show him where the phrase “separation of church and state” appeared. The Congressman quickly turned to the First Amendment, only to discover that the phrase was not there. The embarrassed Congressman admitted that he had been taught in law school that the First Amendment contained the requirement for separation of church and state and that he had never been required to read the Constitution in law school.

Pointing out that in the Founder’s time, the words “religion” and “denomination” were used interchangeably, Barton said of the congressional records kept during the framing of the First Amendment, “In those lengthy discussions that spanned months, the Founders repeatedly

explained that they were seeking to prevent what they had experienced under Great Britain - the legal establishment by the national government of a single religious denomination in exclusion of all others...”

And that in the words proposed by James Adams, “nor shall any national religion be established,” there was deep concern that the government should not have any power over religious freedom.

In the foreword of the second book, Barton explains that not only do current books about our Founders cite contemporary sources about the Founders (instead of citing the Founders in their own words), but that the courts have ignored much of what the original Founders actually said. For example, there were 55 Founders who wrote the Constitution and 90 who wrote the Bill of Rights, but the courts have only invoked the writings of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison, and then only a few sentences from Jefferson’s over 60 volumes of writings and from over 20 volumes written by Madison.

This is evident in many of the issues regarding churches that I have written about, especially in terms of the growing hostility that local governments have demonstrated towards the churches in their own communities. Americans, including Christians, but especially those who hold powerful positions in government, simply don’t understand what our Constitution says or why the wisdom of our Founders is so important to the survival of our nation’s churches.

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