

God & Country

Perhaps the most commonly used metaphor for the relationship between religion and government in the United States is the “wall of separation,” an expression coined by Thomas Jefferson in 1802. For centuries, the controversy concerning that relationship has seemed always to come back to the same question: how high should the wall be?

But a review of public opinion suggests that this is perhaps not the most apt symbol we could be employing in this ongoing debate. The more fitting figurative partition between God and country might not be a wall, but a line, and the more pertinent question not that of how high to build it, but of where to draw it.

Large majorities of Americans see the strength of our nation as residing in religious faith. More than three-quarters of those who think religion is increasing its influence on American life see this as a good thing, while a nearly identical proportion who believe it is losing influence see this as a bad thing. Nearly 60% think it's appropriate for presidential candidates to discuss their religious beliefs in public, while half say they would be more likely to vote for someone who draws emotional strength from religion. We see many reasons to support public funding for religious organizations to provide social services, and far more good than harm in allowing prayer in public schools.

Yet a considerable amount of discomfort underlies these seemingly strong endorsements of religion in the public sphere. Many people say they would be bothered by elected officials who relied on church leaders for advice on how to vote

on specific legislation, or who always voted for legislation according to their religious beliefs. And while survey respondents might not mind candidates talking about their beliefs in public, most would prefer to have a president who didn't.

By and large, Americans think it is wrong for clergy to discuss political issues or come out in favor of candidates. Although generally supportive of government agencies and religious organizations collaborating in “faith-based initiatives,” majorities do harbor important concerns about how the involvement of each might affect the other.

Things become more uncomfortable still when we begin to talk about just whose religion it is that is the rock of our foundation. Americans are far less likely to support public funding for social service organizations run by Muslims or Buddhists than by Catholics or Protestants; over two-thirds consider the United States a Christian nation. And if you happen to be a political candidate who doesn't believe in God—well, then, may heaven help you.

Our sense of where the boundary lies between church and state tends to blur as we vacillate between the comforting idea of a generic sort of faith that binds us all together, and the disquiet we feel when more specific and divisive questions of government and religion arise. When all is said and done, the line between the two is not nearly as immovable as Jefferson's wall metaphor would seem to imply.

—Lisa Ferraro Parmelee, Editor

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