

The Choice Is Ours

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Every society rests upon a moral base. That base is essentially spiritual -- it consists of a theology. Even atheistic societies have a theological premise. They have a conclusion about God and have built a social structure on that conclusion.

Or theology determines our worldview. What and how we think about God molds our thinking about everything else -- especially ourselves and our behavior. The divergent cultures produced by the world's religions demonstrate this. People become like their gods.

It is equally true that what people desire to do affects the development of their religion. For thousands of years people have created gods in their own likeness. These likenesses often represent the fears, hopes, and desires of the people. Then the actual religions developed follow the passions and actions ascribed to the deities. The debased antics of the gods of Greek and Roman mythology are a classic example.

In America we talk of separation of church and state and cherish the twin no-establishment and free-exercise clauses of the First Amendment to the Constitution. The fact still remains: The United States of America is built upon a theological foundation -- the Judeo-Christian faith. From colonial times until the mid-20th century, biblical principles were recognized as valid and authoritative. They defined right and wrong and become embodied in our laws and institutions.

The doctrine of church-state separation has been fundamental to American law since the adoption of the Bill of Rights. A major problem exists, however, when doctrine is misconstrued to mean separation of religion and morality on the one hand from government and public life on the other. Religion and morality are essentially one. Whenever they are divorced, both are ruined. Religion without morality is a farce; morality cut off from vital religion is relativistic and without ultimate authority. Separating religion and morality from government and public life creates an ethical vacuum in which no free society can survive.

Yet this is the definition of church-state separation many want us to adopt. It is equivalent to actually establishing atheism in the public sector. It holds the state unaccountable to any moral authority higher than itself, or at most than the current public consensus. Either way the seeds of totalitarianism are sown, and the individuals' rights are ultimately lost.

By contrast one of our founding documents, the Declaration of Independence, affirms: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights...." There it is -- the theological foundation of our human rights. These rights are not conferred on us by human rights. These rights are not conferred on us by human authority. If they were, they could be taken away from us by human authority. We are endowed with them by our Creator. On that basis alone they are inalienable.

Although we keep church and state separate, we are nevertheless a "nation under God." Recognition of the divine source of our being and therefore of our human rights is essential to the security of our being and the protection of those rights. And recognizing that both government and the people are accountable to a moral authority higher than themselves is essential to the survival of only democracy but also of society itself.

This dispels the notion that government must not prefer religion over nonreligion. Although it is neutral among religions, when it comes to religion versus nonreligion, our form of government is not neutral. Our Constitution affirms the fundamental importance of religious faith and the stake democracy has in that faith.