

Ground rules for religious engagement of civic life
Written by J. Brent Walker

Election season is upon us. I agree with Holly Hollman's assessment that the relationship between religion and politics will dominate our public discourse over the next several months far more than discussions about constitutional issues concerning church and state.

As I have said before, the institutional separation of church and state does not compel a segregation of religion from politics or strip the public square of religious voices. People of faith may—indeed, I think, must—be involved in public life by speaking out, organizing, voting and running for office.

One of the best pithy statements defining the ground rules for religious engagement of civic life is found in a document called "A Shared Vision: Religious Liberty in the 21st Century." Originally drafted in 1994 and endorsed by more than 80 persons and six religious organizations, including the Baptist Joint Committee, it was revised and redistributed in 2002. It includes a variety of issues on which the endorsers find common ground. The full statement can be read on the BJC's Web site, but I include here the section on "Religion and Politics."

As concerned citizens, religious people can and do seek public office. Article VI of the Constitution wisely provides that no religious test shall be required for public office. As voices of conscience, religious organizations can and do seek to express their prophetic witness by influencing moral values and public policy. Separation of church and state does not mean the separation of religion and politics. Nevertheless, attempts at affecting public policy should be tempered by tolerance for differing views and recognition that a multiplicity of voices is crucial for the success of a democratic society.

While religious groups serve an important role in holding government accountable for its actions, that role can be fulfilled only when a healthy distance is maintained between religion and government.

Neither church nor state may control, dominate or subjugate the other. The idea that America is a "Christian nation" violates the American commitment both to democratic government and religious liberty. In the most religiously pluralistic nation in the world, any government endorsement of religion inevitably will make some people feel like outcasts in their own land.

Accordingly, we must:

- Defend the right of individuals and organizations to speak, debate and advocate with their religious voices in the public square;
- Stand firm by the principle that government action without a secular purpose or with a primary effect that advances or inhibits religion violates the separation of church and state.

Similarly, we should:

- Discourage efforts to make a candidate's religious affiliation or nonaffiliation a campaign issue;
- Discourage the invoking of divine authority on behalf of candidates, policies and platforms and the characterizing of opponents as sinful or ungodly.

May this widely embraced statement guide our words and deeds as we discharge this rite and right of democracy while whole-heartedly affirming the relevance of religious convictions to that sacred exercise.

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