Separation of Church and State is essential for the evolution of our country and the preservation of our society

*By Benjamin J. Rutter*

The relationship between Church and State must be defined and separate for the United States to survive and thrive. I can say this with confidence because I have explored the role of organized religion in my own spiritual journey. No matter how I look at the relationship between Church and State, it benefits both sides to keep a sharp boundary.

I was raised in a household that encourages the exploration of one’s own spirituality. I’ve been to services in all kinds of churches, tried T’ai Chi with Taoists, and struggled at a confession. I come from a long line of religious dissenters and atheists.

My grandfather’s grandfather was a freethinker in the early 1900s. If a religion was organized, it was suspect by virtue of its structure. My grandfather, less a rebel and more a deep thinker and debater, would say, “You can believe anything you like, and I can prove you wrong.” He knew the Bible forward and backward so he could bring opponents to their knees with his superior memory and application of logic.

Through conversations with my grandfather, I came to understand that organized religion is a natural byproduct of developing societies. Humans long to make sense of the universe and find comfort in a protective savior. Yet religions often organize and become powerful to keep people under control mentally, economically, socially and behaviorally.

In my lifetime, I’ve seen the tug of war between the Church and the U.S. educational system. Whether it’s prayer in school or how we salute the U.S. flag, many religious groups try to exert influence into our public schools. It’s critical that our public education system not become a channel for religious control. If school systems are controlled by religion, how can individuals learn to test dissenting opinion? Protecting our public education system from undue influence of organized religions will preserve that delicate balance.

It’s human nature to find others like ourselves and interact based on our commonalities. However, I believe what is familiar and safe is also “easy.” By separating Church and State, we inject “hardship” into society. We force people to think for themselves instead of drifting into sameness. Just like a body that doesn’t pump blood unless it’s moving, our differences keep our government vigorous. Even when our government was in its infancy, our founders saw strength in our differences. Variety in religious groups, climate, geography and cultural backgrounds are evidence of our “Great American Melting Pot.”

If we test the opposing argument – that the Church and State should be mingled – the argument fails in four ways:

First, including the Church in the affairs of the State muddies what we know of the law and precedents in this country. Such intertwining undermines the careful thought our founding fathers applied to our new country.

Second, if the Church exerts its power over the State through the election process, then an ecclesiocracy begins to form, where those elected have control through pathways that are not transparent to the people.

Third, intermingling Church and State can lead to a power struggle between religions. As such, a ruler – elected or otherwise – will tend to empower their church of choice. Both Church and State in this situation want the political expedience of being sole provider.

Fourth, once an entire country becomes loyal to (or is forced to become loyal to) a single belief system, the people lose their natural inclination to explore other viewpoints. They become susceptible to, and accepting of, the suppression of any dissenting opinions and beliefs.

Look to history for proof. Let’s go back to the Spanish Inquisition or any similar theocracy. The masses need a central belief system in a time of strife and uncertainty. The Church and State become one to “save the country.” Swept up in an emotional process, the people hunger to have their fears allayed. They want to trust just one power source for religion, governance and information. The church-state assumes the role. After all, it is argued, who wants to go through that whole revolt again? The people agree, and on those grounds, what was meant to be a reinvented church-state falls into the same trap as its predecessor. Sooner or later, imbalance causes the people to rise up yet again, and the walls of repression and rebellion are torn down and rebuilt in an endless cycle.

Some would say that modern countries don’t suffer those fluctuations because they can’t decide which religion to agree on or they have a “working” centralized religion. However, look at the most prosperous of countries worldwide: While they may have major belief systems that are commonplace throughout the population, they do not have State religions. Take China, for example. In spite of the central belief of atheism, the government encourages and recognizes Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism, and Catholicism. The General Secretary of China, Xi Jinping, encourages traditional religions (depending on region) and supports the idea of a harmonious and Confucian society. While religion is integrated, the role of the Church in China is not to control the State.

To me, separation of Church and State means the freedom to find my own spirituality and voice it without judgment. That freedom, recognized by our founders and built into the fabric of this country, means I can safely congregate with like-minded people and share my opinions. Separation allows me to take comfort, without judgment or harassment, in my own concept of a higher power, whether it’s a supreme being or merely a spark of energy that can never perish.

To continue our freedom of thought in the U.S., the line between Church and State must be sharp and clean instead of blurred and braided. It is only through diligent protection of the separation of Church and State that our nation can continue to be a free and civilized society.