An Easy Answer:

An Essay on the Separation of Church and State

By Guthrie Stafford

*“I'm completely in favor of the separation of Church and State. My idea is that these two institutions screw us up enough on their own, so both of them together is certain death." – George Carlin*

Some questions in life can never be answered. “Is separation of Church and State a good idea?” is not one of those questions. The answer is yes, and the evidence for that answer is embedded in our very culture. Every kid knows what a witch is. They’ve seen them being melted or burned alive in their own ovens. What these kids don’t know is that real witches were a lot more relatable than they appear in the movies and picture books. Real witches looked a lot like these kids’ mothers, aunts, older sisters, babysitters, and friends. And they were persecuted, not for their flying monkey armies or taste for human flesh, but for daring to divert from woman’s subservient role under religious doctrine or for practicing other nature based religions. What does it matter though? In the grand scheme, they burned the same. These and other marks of theocracy are splattered thickly across the pages of history, and they represent the inherent problem of mixing power and faith. Religion is so divided and impossible to agree upon that, given a place in policy making, it necessarily helps some at the expense of others. And yet, personal belief is clearly a human right. Freedom *to* practice religion is just as important as freedom *from* the practice of religion. Our country was founded on the principle of separation of Church and State, which allows for both, balancing the freedom of belief with the dangers of its misuse.

The most obvious threat of a religious state is that it would use religion as a mask for political agenda. Historical witches were usually outspoken or independent women whose very existence threatened the patriarchal status quo, hence the burning. The leaders of ancient Rome feared the effect of a Christian pacifist god on their militant empire, hence the lions. Then there’s nineteenth century Europe, using the pretense of bringing Christianity to Africa as an excuse for colonial interests. And let’s not forget modern day Iran, where liberal values are associated with the infidel West, which automatically makes them contrary to Islam. In our own country Manifest Destiny excused the destruction of the Native American way of life and bible passages were quoted to slaves to teach the importance of being loyal to their masters. The list goes on and on, and it would become mind numbingly boring if one forgot that every footnote represents the destruction of human liberty and human life. Time and time again we see examples of religion being twisted into a weapon to strike at reform, or a shield to hold against criticism of the status quo. The weight of blood spilled in the name of God is more than sufficient testament to the danger of religion as an excuse. And even when it’s employed with the most honest intentions, religion in government can still have disastrous consequences.

It is often said that religion brings people together, but in some very key ways it tears them apart. Mark 3: 25, and later, Abraham Lincoln said: “A house divided cannot stand,” and that seems pretty wise to me. When a large percentage of our population operates under the assumption of a fundamentally different reality, we have problems. Take U.S. Senator James Inhofe of Oklahoma, for example. In 2012 he said that climate change was impossible because *“God’s still up there. The arrogance of people to think that we, human beings, would be able to change what He is doing in the climate is, to me, outrageous.”* Oh really, senator? That’s what’s outrageous? Why not take it one step further and decide there’s nothing we can do about poverty, disease, hunger, and crime? Why not forget Government entirely if it’s “arrogant” to try to change God’s world? Senator Inhofe is entitled to his opinion in his own private life. But when it comes to matters that drastically impact others, opinion just doesn’t cut it anymore. We don’t let MD’s bleed people to align their humors like they did in the middle ages because we know now that it’s dangerous. Why should congressmen be any different? If we are to have fair rule of law, then its foot must rest on the universal, undeniable laws of nature, not the spindle that is religion. It is only by the stability of a nation grounded in reason that personal belief may be made the right of the individual.

Our country was founded on the principle that everyone deserves to be free, and religion will always be a part of that. But the greatest freedom of all, the freedom that religion at its best tries to represent, is hope. Our forefathers hoped that we could live in a world that was better than the one they knew, a world where pogroms, crusades, and witch hunts were relegated to the history books. And, for the most part, they got their wish. Today we hope the same thing for our children, that they can live in a world where terrorism, climate change denial, and sexuality and gender discrimination are nothing but memories. And we **are** on our way to that better world. The road of hope has always been paved with questions. And we can check the first one off the list. “Is separation of Church and State a good idea?” Yes, yes it is.