

Reply to a reader on US Attorney General Ashcroft and the separation of church and state

Shannon Jones
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The following is a letter from a reader concerning the WSWs article “US attorney general invokes God in ‘war on terrorism,’” posted last May 15, and a reply by the author of the article, Shannon Jones.

I really appreciated your well-researched and referenced article on idiot Ashcroft and the separation of church and state. However, I think you give our “founding fathers” a little too much credit. As an atheist, it seems to me that the policy has always been freedom of religion, not freedom from religion. The distinction is that you can believe in whatever god you want, as long as you believe in god. God is in our constitution, on our money, in our national anthem and our pledge of allegiance. Although your idealism is commendable, America has never practiced a true separation of church and state. Keep up the thought provoking work!

AS

Shannon Jones responds:

Thank you for your email. I am glad that my article on the attempt by Ashcroft and the religious right to stoke religious intolerance stirred your interest.

However, your assertion that the intent of the constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion does not include freedom *from* religion is simply not true. An objective study of the historical context and the actual wording of the relevant passages in the Constitution both argue the opposite—that the framers were intent on establishing what Jefferson called a “wall” between the state and all forms of religion.

An important component of the First Amendment guarantee of freedom of religion is the right to be left alone, that is, to be free from intrusive meddling by the government into private affairs, including personal

beliefs about the existence or nonexistence of God.

The American Revolution, with all its contradictions, was a massive and progressive advance in mankind’s social and political development. The revolution had both historical and ideological roots. As Marxists we give first place, in the final analysis, to the objective economic and social contradictions. However, as dialectical and historical materialists, we recognize that these objective contradictions can manifest themselves only in and through the conscious activities and thoughts of people. The relationship between material base and ideological superstructure is complex, and genuine Marxists pay the utmost attention to questions of social consciousness and ideology.

In the struggle to establish their independence, the colonists were forced to challenge all the bulwarks of the old order, including the substantial power of the Anglican Church, the established church of the British ruling classes. Under the British, American colonists were forced to pay tithes and taxes to support the state church, even if they opposed its teachings. Opposition to this requirement was a powerful motivating factor in the struggle against British rule.

The fight against this tyranny involved not simply replacing one established church with another, but of challenging the idea that the state had any role to play in religious affairs. The most important framers of the US Constitution, such as James Madison, strongly believed that, as a fundamental democratic principle, individuals had the right to form their own beliefs, free from state interference of any kind.

In the 1784 Virginia Assessment Bill for the support of religious education, to which I referred in my article on Ashcroft, the issue was precisely freedom *from*

religion. The Virginia legislature proposed to levy a tax to support religious education, but individuals were free to choose which church was to receive the money. Madison opposed this bill in the strongest possible terms. He declared that any government support for religion was a violation of democratic principles and “that equality which ought to be the basis of every law.”

He continued. “If ‘all men are by nature equally free and independent,’ all men are to be considered as entering into Society on equal conditions; as relinquishing no more, and therefore retaining no less, one than another, of their natural rights. Above all are they to be considered as retaining an ‘equal title to the free exercise of Religion according to the dictates of conscience.’ Whilst we assert for ourselves a freedom to embrace, to profess and to observe the Religion which we believe to be of divine origin, we cannot deny an equal freedom to those whose minds have not yet yielded to the evidence which has convinced us.”

Here it is clear that Madison’s concept of freedom of religion includes the rights of non-believers as well as the faithful. As a consequence of Madison’s agitation, the Virginia legislature passed Thomas Jefferson’s Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom. A few years later Madison helped draft the First Amendment to the US Constitution.

A review of Jefferson’s writings can leave no doubt that his struggle for religious freedom was based on his opposition to all forms of intellectual coercion, including government promotion of religion. Thus he wrote, “But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty gods, or no god. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

It is true that there has been an ongoing assault on this basic democratic conception, including such things as the forced recitation of the “pledge of allegiance.” It should be noted that the reference to “one nation under God” in the pledge of allegiance was instituted during the McCarthy period in the 1950s.

Democratic vice-presidential candidate Joseph Lieberman asserted during the 2000 campaign, in an effort to woo votes from religious conservatives, that the Constitution does not guarantee freedom from religion. It is an indication of the advanced state of decay of US bourgeois democracy that this assertion was barely challenged. (See: Lieberman’s support for

government-backed religion: an attack on the letter and spirit of the Constitution)

However, so firmly embedded is the concept of the separation of church and state that the Supreme Court, including the present reactionary gang, has up to now interpreted freedom of religion to include freedom from religion. It has ruled unconstitutional the holding of “moments of silence” at the start of school, or even “voluntary” student led prayers before the start of high school football games. Of course, the right-wing majority on the Court, headed by Chief Justice William Rehnquist, is basically hostile to the principle of the separation of church and state, and is doing its best to undermine it.



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