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## THE IMPORTANCE OF RELIGION IN AMERICA TODAY

*-Abstract-*

The following text represents the content of a lecture delivered at “Dunărea de Jos” University of Galați, on April 22, 2013, by professor Bruce A. Little, Southeastern Baptist Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, United States of America. In a clear and concise manner, he emphasises the key concepts which define the American model of the relation between religion and state, as well as the extremely important social role the churches play in the American society. The author emphasises the importance of the so-called “faith based organizations” and the support they enjoyed from some presidents, such as George W. Bush.

*Keywords:* religion, United States of America, faith based organizations, religious freedom, separation wall

## IMPORTANȚA RELIGIEI ÎN AMERICA, ASTĂZI

*-Rezumat-*

Textul de mai jos reprezintă cuprinsul conferinței susținute la Universitatea „Dunărea de Jos” din Galați, în 22 aprilie 2013, de profesorul Bruce A. Little, Southeastern Baptist Seminary, Wake Forest, NC, Statele Unite ale Americii. Într-o manieră limpede și concisă, sunt evidențiate conceptele-cheie care definesc modelul american al raporturilor dintre religie și stat, precum și rolul social extrem de important pe care îl joacă bisericile în societatea americană. În mod special, autorul evidențiază importanța așa-numitelor „faith based organizations” și sprijinul de care acestea s-au bucurat din partea unor președinți, precum George W. Bush.

*Cuvinte cheie:* religie, Statele Unite ale Americii, faith based organizations, libertate religioasă, zid de separație

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I have been asked to speak on the Importance of Religion in America today. People from other countries know that subject of religion in America today is often controversial. Most often it is associated with what has been termed the culture wars. Political candidates are questioned on their religious beliefs or orientation.

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For example in our last presidential election there was discussion regarding Mitt Romney being a Mormon. In the 1960 there was much discussion when John F. Kennedy ran for president as he was a Roman Catholic. Often our Supreme Court address legal questions regarding laws or statutes that have some direct or indirect religious concern. So, it is obvious that religion continues to play an important part in the civil life of America today and maybe not always a positive role. However, what is often misunderstood by outsiders and even those in America is how our Constitution views the role of religion in America. Much has been made of the phrase “the wall of separation between church and state”.

Therefore, it is not possible to speak of the importance of religion in America without a rudimentary understanding of America as it was established as a political entity. One must have a context for understanding this most unique experiment and it was unique. Those who visited America in the early days were most amazed at what had been accomplished in a place where religion and individual liberty were so much a part of what was going on. The French historian Alexis de Tocqueville came to the U.S. in 1831 when he was only 25 years old. Four years later he wrote *Democracy in America*, a two-volume study of the American people and their political institutions. De Tocqueville was impressed with democracy in America and noted that: “Religious nations are therefore naturally strong on the very point on which democratic nations are weak; this shows of what importance it is for men to preserve their religion as their conditions become more equal”<sup>1</sup>.

My point of beginning is not with the founding of America as at that point it was not a nation. I will begin with the first movements of its establishment as a nation. This begins officially on July 4, 1776 when the Declaration of Independence was signed signaling the Colonies’ independence from England It begins: “When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation”<sup>2</sup>. All the Colonies wanted was to be have the freedoms their initial charters from King George afforded them. When after numerous attempts to persuade the King failed, the Declaration of Independence was drafted and signed. In this document, the signers of the document appealed to the Laws of Nature and of Nature's God for the grounds of being treated equal among nations.

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Volume II, Section I, Chapter V, [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch1\\_05.htm](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~Hyper/DETOC/ch1_05.htm), Internet.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/declaration_transcript.html), Internet.

In light of that it states: “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 that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”<sup>3</sup>. Later, (1787) when drafting the Constitution of the United States the framers set forth in the Preamble that: “We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America”<sup>4</sup>. The Constitution was ratified by all 13 colonies on March 4, 1789 with the assurance that the Bill of Rights would become part of the Constitution.

Initially there were 12 articles in the Bill of Rights although only 10 were ratified. Of the two that were not, one became the 21st amendment dealing with Congressional salaries the other remains before the legislative body today. The amendments were introduced by James Madison to the First United States Congress as a series of legislative articles. They were adopted by the House of Representatives on August 21, 1789, formally proposed by joint resolution of Congress on September 25, 1789, and came into effect as Constitutional Amendments on December 15, 1791, through the process of ratification by three-fourths of the States. It is a wonderful legal document even though it has not always been applied properly or consistently. Nonetheless, the nature of the document is such that is most adaptable to changing needs of the people or in some cases changed to amend injustices. It has been amended 17 times in addition to the 10 Bill of Rights.

It is the Bill of Rights that most directly affects the role of religion in America. The purpose of the Bill of Rights was to preserve natural rights of liberty and property. It is the first Amendment that is foundational to answer the question before us. It states: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances”<sup>5</sup>. There are two clauses in the First Amendment that guarantee freedom of religion. The first is the establishment clause which prohibits the government from passing legislation to establish an official religion or preferring one religion over another. The second is the free exercise clause which prohibits the federal government, in most instances, from interfering with a person's practice of their religion. What must be understood is

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/constitution_transcript.html), Internet.

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill\\_of\\_rights\\_transcript.html](http://www.archives.gov/exhibits/charters/bill_of_rights_transcript.html), Internet.

that the first amendment only applies to the Federal Government, not state governments.

What is not found in the constitution is the language of “wall of separation”. This language is found in a letter (January 1, 1802) from Thomas Jefferson to the Danbury Connecticut Baptists: “Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof *thus building a wall of separation between church and State*. Adhering to this expression of the supreme will of the nation in behalf of the rights of conscience, I shall see with sincere satisfaction the progress of those sentiments which tend to restore to man all his natural rights, convinced he has no natural right in opposition to his social duties”<sup>6</sup>. In this letter Jefferson comments: “I reciprocate your kind prayers for the protection and blessing of the common Father and Creator of man, and tender you for yourselves and your religious association, assurances of my high respect and esteem”<sup>7</sup>.

It is a fact that the Baptist supported the idea that there should be no state established religion which is what the first amendment said. It is the freedom of religion that was the genius of the framers of the US Constitution. It was that which has made all the difference in the world; however, it has also of the last 50 years or so been the source of much controversy. Just what did the framers of the constitution mean by the establishment clause? In other words, when does an act of the Government draw too close to the establishment of a religion?

For a long time the general meaning of the establishment clause was to mean that the Government should never establish a state religion. It should be pointed out that the first amendment is sometimes referred to as the Baptist Amendment because Baptists have historically argued for religion to be based on conscience not force and therefore against state sponsored religion.

The documents produced as well as the first Constitutional Convention itself, reveals that there was the foundational thought that there was a God who ruled over His creation. For the farmers this meant that human law was grounded in Natural Law or God’s Law. God was repeatedly referred to as the Judge of all men and prayer opened each session of the Congress. It was on this understanding of things that laws were constructed roughly around the Ten Commandments. There was an

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.constitution.org/tj/sep\\_church\\_state.htm](http://www.constitution.org/tj/sep_church_state.htm), Internet.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibidem*.

assumed connection between Natural Law reveal to all men and the Ten Commandments mediated through the Jewish Law-giver Moses. To reinforce this notion, when the Supreme Court Building was built in 1935, the Ten Commandments were featured on the four walls near the ceiling of the interior of the building. Furthermore, Moses the law-giver sits as the prominent figure atop the building's exterior east side, holding two tablets representing the Ten Commandments. Whether one thinks this is a good idea or not, it is the historical fact of law in the United States.

All of this was not thought of as religious or establishing a religion, but merely a statement as to the nature of reality. Natural Law was the basis of procedural laws in the Constitution that civil government was responsible to enforce. In this way this would provide social order so that the individual citizen could live in a social environment of liberty. In this environment each could pursue his dreams, but always within the general welfare of the nation. All of this was considered part of the natural order of things and was not considered as religion or establishing a religion. Religion was about how one worshipped this God or if they worshipped Him at all. Religion, one's personal relationship to God was a matter of conscience, not compulsion.

Furthermore, the idea of Natural Law was understood best in the context of the Christian God. This can be seen in the phrase: "In God we Trust". This was adopted as the official motto of the United States in 1956 as an alternative or replacement to the unofficial motto of *E pluribus unum*, adopted when the Great Seal of the United States was created and adopted in 1782. "In God we trust" has appeared on most U.S. coins since 1864 and on paper currency since 1957. The Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag contains the phrase: "one nation under God". This was originally composed by Francis Bellamy in 1892 and formally adopted by Congress as the pledge in 1942. The Pledge has been modified four times since its composition and this phrase has remained.

The point to be made is that the idea of God as revealed in our public documents was never intended to support any religion, but only serve as a statement about reality. God is creator and we are His creatures and in this sense we are all created equal which is absolutely foundational to the success of the American republic. When it comes to religion, that is how a man worships God or chooses not to worship God, that is up to the individual to be convinced in his own mind and no one should be forced by the state to worship God. When you read the early public political documents one realizes that initially it was the Christian religion that was always in view, however, broadly understood, it opened the door for any religion to be practiced in the United States as long as it did not disorder public peace and the general welfare of the citizens.

In light of this, religion in general has been free to have a significant role in the American Republic. Churches in America are often involved with social issues. They operate orphanages, shelter and food for the homeless, adoption agencies, mental health clinics, and counseling centers. They work to stop human trafficking and discrimination. You will find churches supporting environmental sustainable measures such as recycling or alternative energy. When I served as director of the Center for Faith and Culture we started several creation stewardship initiatives, held seminars on human trafficking, and other social issues. This was both to inform the Christian community and also encourage involvement. All of these initiatives are supported by charitable gifts from individuals and Foundations.

It is also true that many in the Christian community get involved in politics. Some run for public office while others operate watchdog agencies holding public officials accountable for decisions made in public affairs. This does not mean that every church is involved in this way but many in the Protestant and Catholic tradition are.

According to a Pew survey in 2007, in the United States the Christian tradition in its varied forms make up about 75% of those admitting to some religious affiliation. Other religions such as Islam make up about 5 % with roughly 16 % identifying as atheists or agnostics<sup>8</sup>. That does not mean that atheists or agnostics are not involved in social matters, but the major religion involved as such falls under the broad category of Christian.

It's been about a decade since the White House started inviting faith-based groups to bid for government social services contracts (first under Clinton, then in a much more expansive way under Bush, and now continuing under Obama). U.S. President George W. Bush proposed to grant religious charitable social-service groups federal money via the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives. This raised some questions, but most saw it as a positive move as churches and private religious organizations had demonstrated effectiveness in addressing social issues. The *Science and Theology News* equates the term faith-based group with "civic associations loosely connected with faith groups"<sup>9</sup>, pointing out that such groups have existed in the United States since the Second Great Awakening in the late 18th century.

According to Michelle Boorstein, who reviewed faith based initiatives over a ten year period, noted some of the more prominent achievements of such initiatives. In this report Boorstein lists: the Compassion Capital fund, an initiative designed to strengthen the role faith-based organizations play in human services;

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.pewforum.org/2008/06/01/u-s-religious-landscape-survey-religious-beliefs-and-practices/>, Internet.

<sup>9</sup> <http://shelf3d.com/i/faith-based> Internet.

Mentoring Children of Prisoners, an initiative focused on supporting the children of incarcerated adults; Access to Recovery, which focuses in increasing the availability of drug and alcohol treatment programs; the Prisoner Re-Entry Initiative which focuses on helping individuals returning from prison to successfully re-integrate themselves back into society. In addition, the Federal Government has also set up a comprehensive set of supports for groups who are interested in applying for these resources<sup>10</sup>.

Since Bush launched the faith-based initiative, saying it was necessary in part to empower an army of churchgoers to do more social service work, there has been no change whatsoever in the behavior of congregations. That's what the current research shows, according to Mark Chaves, Duke University sociologist and director of the National Congregations Study, which has been done since 1998. Chaves says the Bush office boosted congregations' interest in social service work, but that hasn't translated into more congregations doing social service work, hiring staff to do social service work, etc<sup>11</sup>. Keep in mind congregations are not the primary faith-based body doing such work, faith-based social service groups are often connected with churches, but separate from them. Stephen Monsma, a research fellow at the Paul Henry Institute for the Study of Christianity and Politics, said there is evidence that people who come out of faith-based programs have somewhat better outcomes, but that current research concludes that it's difficult or impossible to answer this question of which is better<sup>12</sup>.

Family Promise is a non-profit and faith based connected organization that has operated in the U.S. for over 20 years and assists homeless families return to sustainable lives with employment and housing. According to their website they claim they have been an affiliate for 14 years and that the faith program works and achieve incredible goals. They partner with Catholic, Jewish, Muslim, Protestant congregations in an organized and well directed program<sup>13</sup>. Family Promise should definitely be on the short list of faith based non-profits that serve as a best practice model for our nation.

What we learn from all of this is that religion in America is an important part of the social and religious make-up of what it means to be America. When controversy arises it arises mostly over the issue of separation of church and state. Mostly this involves challenges to those in the Protestant tradition. In fact, there are a number of groups who regularly challenge are in court challenging things like prayer at athletic games, religious groups meeting on university campuses and the

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<sup>10</sup> Michelle Boorstein, Status report: 10 years of faith-based initiatives, in „*The Washington Post*”, February 18, 2010 ([http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/02/one\\_year\\_into\\_the\\_obama\\_faith-based\\_office\\_let\\_the\\_opining\\_begin.html](http://onfaith.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/undergod/2010/02/one_year_into_the_obama_faith-based_office_let_the_opining_begin.html), Internet).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.familypromise.org/>, Internet.

like. There is, in addition, political debate when Christians run for office but this is because there is the fear that laws will be passed to support a Christian view of morality. This is a relatively new concern, roughly since the 1980s. Still, religion is considered to be a good thing by most in America even if they are not religious themselves.

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