

Separation of Church and State: Myths, Realities, and Results

Glossary of Terms

Wall of Separation – popular metaphor used to describe the “separation between church and state.” It was used by Thomas Jefferson in his letter to the Danbury, Connecticut association of Baptists to calm their fears about government encroachment upon their religious freedoms.

Jurisprudence - the science or philosophy of law; a system or body of law; the course of court decisions.

Dissidents – those who disagree especially with an established religious or political system, organization, or belief.

State Church – Church officially sanctioned by the monarchy and supported through taxation.

Original Intent - a method of constitutional interpretation that seeks to discern the original meaning of the words being interpreted through the lens of the intentions of the framers who created the constitutional provision under consideration.

Establishment Clause - refers to the first part of the First Amendment’s statement on religion, stating: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion.”

Free Exercise Clause - refers to the second part of the First Amendment’s statement on religion, stating: “or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Sect/Society – as used by the framers refers to a religious group or Christian denomination.

Federalists – those who favored a strong centralized national government as opposed to the weak and sometimes chaotic governance provided by the Articles of Confederation. The collection of essays known as the Federalist Papers outlined the rationale behind this approach, advocating ratification of the Federal Constitution.

Anti-Federalist – those who favored states having equal or greater authority than the centralized national government. The Anti-Federalist Papers are a collection of essays written in opposition to the ratification of the Federal Constitution.

Unitarian – belief in the single personality of God as opposed to a Trinity of Father, Son, and Spirit. Consequently, Unitarians see Jesus as a great teacher and example, but not as God.

Alienable – a legal term meaning transferable to the ownership of another. This term is linked to legal rights, which are conveyed by government, and as such are contingent upon laws. Alienable rights are culturally and politically relative.

Inalienable – a legal term meaning incapable of being transferred. Inalienable rights are inherent, natural or God-given, and are therefore not contingent upon the laws, customs, or beliefs of a particular society or government. Inalienable rights are universal.