



Written by [Bob Adelman](#) on November 27, 2023

House Speaker Mike Johnson Calls “Separation of Church and State” a “Misnomer”

House Speaker Mike Johnson (R-La.), under fire for holding strong religious convictions and defending his faith in Jesus Christ, said [in an interview last week](#) at CNBC’s “Squawk Box” that the understanding of the “separation of church and state” that presently exists in the culture is a “misnomer.”

Dictionaries define “misnomer” as something that is “wrongly or inaccurately applied or used” to describe a concept. Here, the concept is the proper role of government in a society that is based on religious freedom.



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At the time it was written, Thomas Jefferson’s response to a letter from the Danbury Baptists was straightforward:

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 legitimate 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.

For generations this made perfect sense. In a constitutional republic it is assumed that the sovereign citizens will have little need for or interest in governmental interference in their personal affairs, especially their religion. They will hold themselves to be personally responsible for their actions without the need for an overseer. And their actions spring from an understanding and acceptance of the Holy Scriptures. Calvin Coolidge, our 30th president, said:

The foundations of our society and our government rest so much on the teaching of the Bible that it would be difficult to support them if faith in these teachings would cease to be practically universal in our country.

The country’s 33rd president, Harry Truman, said much the same thing:

The fundamental basis of this nation’s laws was given to Moses on the Mount. The fundamental basis of our Bill of Rights comes from the teachings we get from Exodus and [the apostle] Matthew, from Isaiah and from [the apostle] Paul....

If we don’t have a proper fundamental moral background, we will finally end up with a



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totalitarian government which does not believe in rights for anybody except the State!

In other words, the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was a “one way street” — the national government was to stay out of the citizens’ private, personal worship and beliefs. It was not to be used by the government to erase all religious expression from the culture.

Johnson continued the history lesson at “Squawk Box”:

The separation of church and state is a misnomer.

People misunderstand it. Of course, it comes from a phrase that was in a letter that Jefferson wrote. It’s not in the Constitution. And what he was explaining is they [the Founders] did not want the government to encroach upon the church — not that they didn’t want principles of faith to have influence on our public life.

It’s exactly the opposite....

They knew that it would be important to maintain our system. And that’s why I think we need more of that — not an establishment of any national religion — but we need everybody’s vibrant expression of faith because it’s such an important part of who we are as a nation.

Our first president, George Washington, affirmed the absolute necessity of a people — in order to rule themselves — having a firm religious conviction and foundation:

Of all the dispositions and habits which lead to political prosperity, Religion and morality are indispensable supports....

Let us with caution indulge the supposition that morality can be maintained without religion.

Whatever may be conceded to the influence of refined education on minds of peculiar structure, reason and experience both forbid us to expect that National morality can prevail in exclusion of religious principle.

The far-left *Guardian*, in covering the interview for its readers, [called the myth](#) “conventional wisdom” and inadvertently made Johnson’s point:

The second-in-line to the presidency informed Americans on Tuesday that their time-honored conception of one of the founding principles of the country was a “misunderstanding”.

Speaking to CNBC’s Squawk Box, he [Mike Johnson] tried to turn the conventional wisdom about the founders’ intentions on its head and claimed what they really wanted was to stop government interfering with religion, not the other way around.

That’s precisely what the Founders wanted. And it’s exactly what the Supreme Court ruled in its momentous decision in [Coach Joseph] *Kennedy v. Bremerton School District* in June 2022:



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The Free Exercise and Free Speech Clauses of the First Amendment protect an individual engaging in a personal religious observance from government reprisal; the Constitution neither mandates nor permits the government to suppress such religious expression.

Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch, writing for the majority in that decision, concluded that the school district's sanctions of Kennedy's prayers following a football game "rested on a mistaken view that it [the district] had a duty to ferret out and suppress all religious observances ... that [is something] the Constitution neither mandates nor tolerates...."

To be clear: The Maker of the universe rules over governments. During his false trial of Christ, the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, asked Jesus: "Do you refuse to speak to me? Don't you realize that I have power either to free you or to crucify you?" Jesus answered: "You would have no power over me if it were not given to you from above."

That is the "one way street" the Founders of the American Republic intended to build into the First Amendment: keep government out of religion while allowing religion to influence the culture and the government.

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