

FREEDOM FROM RELIGION *foundation*

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November 19, 2020

SENT VIA U.S. MAIL AND EMAIL

info@madisoncawthorn.com

The Honorable Madison Cawthorn
638 Spartanburg Hwy.
STE 70, #362
Hendersonville, NC 28792

Re: Guidance on State/ Church Separation

Dear Mr. Cawthorn:

I am writing on behalf of the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) to address your recent comment on the separation of state and church. FFRF is a national nonprofit organization with more than 33,000 members across the country, including 750 members and a chapter in North Carolina. FFRF protects the constitutional separation between state and church and educates about nontheism.

We understand that *Jewish Insider* interviewed you on a variety of issues.¹ Much attention has been given to the admission that you attempted to convert Jews to Christianity. We write to offer some guidance on a different issue, one that is widely misunderstood: the separation of state and church. The relevant portion of the interview read as follows:

After *JI* inquired about Cawthorn's thoughts on the separation of church and state, he said that many people have asked him if he will be able to divorce himself from his faith as a congressman. "That is the basis of all of my experience and everything I've learned, everything that I believe in, how I've formed all of my worldview," he said of his religion. "I always think of that question as just so silly." "The Lord and the Bible and the value systems I've gotten through Judeo-Christian values," he added, "it affects every single decision I make."

¹ Matthew Kassel, "Madison Cawthorn arrives in Washington," *Jewish Insider* (Nov. 16, 2020) at <https://jewishinsider.com/2020/11/madison-cawthorn-arrives-washington/>.

“My family is a bunch of true frickin’ believers,” Cawthorn said. “It’s Christians that are, like, fun to be around, too. It’s not like guys who are like, ‘Oh, that’s a sin,’ ‘Oh, you’re awful,’ ‘Oh, X Y and Z.’ It’s people who just meet you where you are. If you want to cuss and drink, that’s your prerogative. I cuss and drink. I probably shouldn’t, but, you know.”

At FFRF we say that the only wall we need is the wall separating state and church. That “wall of separation” is an American original. It is an American invention. The idea was born in the Enlightenment, but it was first implemented in the American Experiment. Until then, no other nation had sought to protect the ability of its citizens to think freely — by separating the government from religion and religion from the government. That separation is one of the truly unique and original aspects of the U.S. Constitution.

America invented the separation of state and church. We should be proud of that fact.

Most of the other original elements of our Constitution were secular. For instance, “We the people.” Those words are so much more than poetic. They declare that power comes from people, not gods. The source of rulers’ authority comes not from above, but from the masses. That was revolutionary.

Not only does our Constitution draw its power from the people, it’s entirely godless—the first governing document not to mention a god or deity. That was no accident, but a choice. Our Constitution was also the first to ban religious tests for public office: “no religious Test shall ever be required as a Qualification to any Office or public Trust under the United States.” Article VI, clause 3.

Why did the founders design a secular government for the American Experiment? For a few reasons, but one that might interest you is that they did so to guarantee religious freedom. The founders understood something that many American Christians seem to have forgotten: There is no freedom *of* religion without a government that is free *from* religion. A secular government is required for true religious freedom to exist.

While you may be a Christian, you represent many non-Christians. Non-religious Americans are the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population by religious identification — 35 percent of Americans are non-Christians, and this includes the more than one in four Americans who now identify as religiously unaffiliated.² Younger Americans are not just

² Pew Research Center, “In U.S., Decline of Christianity Continues at Rapid Pace,” (Oct. 17, 2019) at <https://pewrsr.ch/2VPiES7>.

religiously unaffiliated, they are largely atheist or agnostic. A recent survey found that 21 percent of Americans born after 1999 are atheist or agnostic.³

If you truly value and esteem your religion, you ought to want to keep it out of politics. State/church separation is critical for religious independence, credibility, and purity. James Madison put this nicely: “Religion and government will exist in greater purity the less they are mixed together.”⁴ If religion wants to get involved in the government, to roll around in the mud with politicians, the government and politicians are going to get involved in religion. There is no such thing as a one-way wall.

The separation of state and church is one of the things that truly makes America great. We hope next time you’re asked about this foundational American value and principle, you’ll defend it rather than dismiss it.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Andrew L. Seidel". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Andrew L. Seidel
Constitutional Attorney
Director of Strategic Response
Freedom From Religion Foundation

³ *Atheism Doubles Among Generation Z*, The Barna Group (Jan. 24, 2018), <https://www.barna.com/research/atheism-doubles-among-generation-z/>.

⁴ From James Madison to Edward Livingston, 10 July 1822,” Founders Online, National Archives, <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Madison/04-02-02-0471>.