

Vermont

Church and State – Separate or Inseparable?

Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, Baptist, Quaker, Methodist, and Presbyterian: these were the increasingly diverse religions of Vermont in its early years. Article III of the Vermont Constitution outlines the framework for religious freedom guaranteed to everyone regardless of their beliefs. It makes clear the importance of separation of church and state and declares that no person should be “abridged of any civil rights as a citizen on account of religious sentiments.” What does this mean and why was it included in the Vermont constitution? How closely do we follow this article today?

No matter what our religious beliefs are, if any, we are all entitled to equal rights as guaranteed by the Constitution of Vermont and of the United States. These civil rights include voting, exemption from involuntary servitude, and equal treatment with respect to the enjoyment of life, liberty, and property under the protection of our laws. This means that if I am Catholic I have the same rights as my Lutheran neighbor. Although the state is 25% Catholic, according to the Glenmary Research Institute, Vermont has a more diverse religious population today than at the time of Thomas Chittenden.

In spite of the fact that Vermont had fought hard to earn its statehood, the most likely reason Article III was included in the Vermont Constitution was simply that it was modeled after the U.S. Constitution. Our founding fathers went to great lengths to ensure that our country was not subject to the theocracy of the British. They also established a separation of powers in our three branches of government to ensure a

system of checks and balances. Perhaps this notion had a part in conceiving the separation of church and state concept.

In thinking about whether or not Article III is relevant today, there are the extremists who argue that perhaps our founding fathers never actually intended for there to be a true separation of church and state.

They point out that these words themselves do not appear in the articles of the U.S. Constitution. The notion itself was first made by Thomas Jefferson in his letter of 1802 to the Baptists of Danbury, Connecticut. A rumor had been spreading that the U.S. would declare Christianity as the required religion for the nation. This was the case as in the early theocracy of the Puritans of Massachusetts who established a system of government in which religious leaders claimed divine guidance and did not grant equal religious liberties to all religious sects. It is difficult to buy into the extremist ideology because of the strength and endurance of the separation of church and state and Article III and its absolute relevance today.

Look at Vermont. In December of 1999 the Vermont Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples are entitled to the same benefits and protections afforded by Vermont law to married opposite-sex couples. After very contentious debate, the legislature followed the Court's suggestion and passed H.B. 847 which was signed by Gov. [Howard Dean](#). The law went into effect on [July 1](#), 2000. [Vermont](#) thus became the second U.S. state (after [California](#)) to offer legal status to same-sex couples, and the first to offer a [civil union](#) status encompassing the same legal rights and responsibilities of [marriage](#). Our governmental leaders separated their religious beliefs from legislative duty when they passed this law.

More and more, separation of church and state is insisted upon. Some of the many recent Supreme Court debates have included banning prayer from school, banning the words "under God" from the Pledge of Allegiance, trying to remove the

words “in God we trust” from our currency, and removing the Ten Commandments from our courthouses.

“In God We Trust”, “Under God”, “So Help Me God” - how much longer will these words live on? How long will they go unnoticed? Will they come under more scrutiny? We must fight for what we believe in. We must keep our church and state separate, but neither one can be neglected. If we do not uphold our religions and our government, life as we know it will change dramatically. Yes, Article III is relevant today, thank God!