

Baptist Joint Committee
Supporting Bodies

- Alliance of Baptists
- American Baptist Churches USA
- Baptist General Association of Virginia
- Baptist General Conference
- Baptist General Convention of Texas
- Baptist General Convention of Missouri
- Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
- Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
- National Baptist Convention of America
- National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.
- National Missionary Baptist Convention
- North American Baptist Conference
- Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc.
- Religious Liberty Council
- Seventh Day Baptist General Conference

REPORT from the Capital

J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

Jeff Huett
Editor

Phallan Davis
Associate Editor

Report from the Capital (ISSN-0346-0661) is published 10 times each year by the Baptist Joint Committee. For subscription information, please contact the Baptist Joint Committee.

The gift of religious liberty? Priceless.

This year the BJC is offering an opportunity that will help ensure religious liberty for generations. For your donation received by **Monday, December 17**, the BJC will send a friend or loved one a special Christmas card acknowledging your donation in his or her honor. And there's no minimum gift. Gifts can be made via the BJC's Web site, phone, e-mail or mail.

Send Christmas card to:

Name of recipient _____
Address _____
City _____ State ____ ZIP _____
E-mail _____

Your name _____
Address _____
City _____ State ____ ZIP _____
E-mail _____

Payment method

Circle one: Check or credit card

Credit card # _____

Expiration date _____

Signature _____



To make donation requests via phone or e-mail, contact **Kristin Clifton** at **202-544-4226** or **kclifton@bjconline.org**.

Checks should be made payable to the **Baptist Joint Committee** with "Christmas gift" in the memo line. If submitting payment online at **www.bjconline.org**, include "Christmas gift" and contact information for the recipient(s) in the comments blank.



200 Maryland Ave., N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-5797

Phone: 202.544.4226
Fax: 202.544.2094
E-mail: bjc@BJConline.org
Website: www.BJConline.org

Non-profit
Organization
U.S. Postage
PAID
Riverdale, MD
Permit No. 5061



REPORT

from the Capital

BJC lauds defeat of Utah school voucher referendum

Voters in Utah have defeated a voucher plan that would have made available vouchers ranging from \$500 to \$3,000 for students to attend private schools, including religious institutions, regardless of family income or school district.

In the November 7 referendum, 62 percent of the voters in Utah marked ballots against the Parents Choice in Education Act, which was adopted by the state legislature in February. The law passed by a single vote, but opponents collected 124,000 signatures to send the issue to a voter referendum.

The Salt Lake Tribune reported that the voucher programs, which would have been phased in over 13 years, would have cost taxpayers \$430 million.

According to *The Associated Press*, “voucher critics argued the state should not spend money on private schools when Utah has the nation’s largest class sizes and spends less per students than any other state. Voucher proponents contended the program would reduce class sizes in public schools, give parents a choice which school their child goes to that’s not dictated by where they can afford to live and improve public schools through competition.”

The Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty has long decried using school vouchers for students to attend religious institutions.

“The fundamental principle influencing the BJC’s opposition to school vouchers is that tax dollars should not be used to finance the teaching of religion.

Government does so no less by passing vouchers through the pockets of parents,” said BJC Executive Director J. Brent Walker. “This is particularly problematic

when nearly all the participants wind up in religious schools.”

The AP cited research by the National School Boards Association that reported 10 state referendums on various voucher programs since 1972.

Each time, the survey found, vouchers or tuition tax credits were voted down by an average of 68.6 percent. Voters in California, Michigan and Colorado have defeated voucher proposals twice.

Major opposition to vouchers in Utah has come from teacher unions such as the National Education Association, who, according to media reports, spent millions in its campaigns. After learning of the outcome of the referendum, Kim Campbell, president of the Utah Education Association, said “With the eyes of the nation upon us, Utah has rejected this flawed voucher law. We believe this sends a clear message. It sends a message that Utahns believe in, and support, public schools.”

Leading support of the voucher initiative was Overstock.com founder and CEO Patrick Byrne. After the vote, Byrne, who contributed millions to the pro-voucher group Parents for Choice in Education, told *The Salt Lake Tribune* that vouchers were the only way for students in the United States to compete with other industrialized nations.

“What’s got to happen and it might take Utah five to 10 years to understand [is that] they are at the bottom of the heap [educationally] and the heap is at the bottom of the international heap,” Byrne said.

After the vote, Utah House Speaker Greg Curtis told the *Deseret Morning News* that he didn’t expect the issue to be addressed in the 2008 legislative session.

— Phallan Davis



Newsletter of the Baptist Joint Committee

Vol. 62 No. 10

November -
December 2007

INSIDE:

- ☐ Reflections 3
- ☐ Religious liberty. . . . 4
- ☐ Soul freedom 7
- ☐ Blogging the BJC . . . 8
- ☐ Hollman Report . . . 10
- ☐ News 11

Senate probing finances of evangelical TV ministries

WASHINGTON — A prominent U.S. senator is seeking financial information from some of the biggest names among evangelical TV ministries following “complaints from the public” and news reports of possible money mismanagement.

Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, the top-ranking Republican on the Senate Finance Committee, gave the six ministries 30 days to turn over the records, according to letters sent Nov. 5.

“I’m following up on complaints from the public and news coverage regarding certain practices at six ministries,” Grassley said in a statement. “The allegations involve governing boards that aren’t independent and allow generous salaries and housing allowances and amenities such as private jets and Rolls Royces.”

The letters were sent to Randy and Paula White of Tampa, Fla.; Benny Hinn Ministries in Grapevine, Texas; Joyce Meyer Ministries in Fenton, Mo.; Bishop Eddie Long of New Birth Missionary Baptist Church in Lithonia, Ga.; Creflo Dollar Ministries in College Park, Ga.; and Kenneth Copeland Ministries of Newark, Texas.

“I don’t want to conclude that there’s a problem, but I have an obligation to donors and the taxpayers to find out more,” Grassley said. “People who donated should have their money spent as intended and in adherence with the tax code.”

Ken Behr, president of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, called the request “quite unusual” and “almost unprecedented.” He said none of the six ministries targeted are members of his Winchester, Va., organization, but he expects it will prompt others to get their houses in order.

“I think it’s a wake-up call for everybody that financial accountability, transparency, proper accounting processes are important,” said Behr.

The letters follow investigations of the Whites by *The*

Tampa Tribune and a 2003 *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* series that questioned Meyer’s financial practices.

The Whites, who recently divorced, acknowledged in a statement that they had received the letter.

“We find it unusual, since the IRS has separate powers to investigate religious organizations if they think it’s necessary,” they said. “So we find it odd that the IRS did not initiate this investigation.”

Meyer’s ministry posted a statement on its Web site, saying that “Joyce Meyer Ministries is committed to financial transparency. We are diligently working on the presented requests and will continue to take the necessary steps to maintain our financial integrity.”

Long’s ministry also issued a statement saying he intends to “fully comply” with the request. “New Birth has several safeguards put in place to insure all transactions are in compliance with laws applicable to churches.”

Responses from other ministries could not be immediately obtained.

Information requested by Grassley included:

- audited financial statements from 2004-2006
- names and addresses of board members
- detailed explanations of compensation paid to ministry leaders
- payments to ministry leaders not reported as income to the Internal Revenue Service on Forms W-2 and 1099
- statements for credit cards used by ministry leaders for expenses paid by their ministries
- lists of vehicles owned or leased by ministries for the benefit of their leaders.

At this point, Grassley is not seeking Senate hearings, said Jill Gerber, his committee press secretary. The six ministries were asked to respond by Dec. 6.

— RNS



Bush names Glendon as Vatican ambassador

WASHINGTON — President Bush has nominated Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard Law School professor and prominent conservative commentator, as U.S. ambassador to the Vatican.

Glendon, 69, is a longtime opponent of abortion and gay marriage and has written widely on culture and ethics in books and scholarly journals.

Her appointment must be confirmed by the Senate.

In 1994, Pope John Paul II named Glendon to the then-new Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, a Vatican advisory panel. She headed a Vatican delegation to the United Nations’ Women’s Conference in Beijing the next year.

The Massachusetts native has also served on the

President’s Council on Bioethics and, until her nomination Nov. 5, was an adviser to the presidential campaign of former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney.

“While I may have lost her trusted counsel to our campaign, our country has gained an extremely gifted ambassador,” Romney said in a statement.

Kishore Jayabalan, director of the Rome office for the Grand Rapids, Mich.-based Acton Institute, said Glendon’s Vatican experience makes her appointment “unprecedented.”

“She knows the strengths and weaknesses of the Roman Curia,” he said. “She has no learning curve when it comes to Vatican City.”

— RNS

REFLECTIONS

This year give the gift of religious liberty

As we approach the Advent season, surely once again we'll hear cries of a "War on Christmas." Of course, these invectives are bogus. No one is deprived of the right to enjoy the Christmas season or wish others "Merry Christmas." On the other hand, many folks, out of common courtesy and good manners, will wish someone whose religious affiliation is unknown, "Happy Holidays" instead.

No, if there is a war on Christmas, it comes through excessive, rampant and pervasive commercialism, cranking up nowadays right after Halloween. We all spend far too much time, energy and money on things. And then we worry a lot about whether the stuff we buy is suitable and will be appreciated by the recipient. In fact, most of the presents we give and receive are things we do not need and in some cases do not really want.

This year, why not give the gift of religious liberty!

Why not give a gift to the Baptist Joint Committee in honor or memory of a loved one or friend? For every such gift received, we will gladly send a beautiful Christmas card informing the honoree or surviving spouse of your gift. (They will need to know why there is not a present under the tree from you.) They will also be provided a subscription to *Report from the Capital*, if they don't already receive that publication.

This works the other way around, too. Why not ask friends and loved ones, instead of giving you a gift of another tie, sweater or perfume, to make a donation to the Baptist Joint Committee instead. Our good friends and supporters, Buddy and Kay Shurden, did this last year. They asked their children to calculate what they planned to spend on gifts for the Shurdens and to give that amount to the Baptist Joint Committee instead. They gladly did so. By the way, I'm not going to ask you to do something that I'm not willing to do. So, I'll make the same request of my children this year.

For those of you who have already enjoyed more than 70 Christmases, there's a special bonus. You are able to help ensure religious liberty for your children and grandchildren by giving a gift from your retirement fund of up to \$100,000, tax free.

Under federal law, slated to expire at the end of the year, qualified donors who are older than

70 ½ can give up to \$100,000 from their retirement fund without having to ante up to Uncle Sam one penny.

Two years ago, under a similar law passed by Congress in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, Dick Ice — a longtime board member representing the American Baptist Churches, USA — gave \$100,000 to the BJC. Why not do the same this year? You can split your \$100,000 into thirds — for the capital campaign, for endowment and for current budget needs — if you wish!

(A quick word of caution: it is always prudent to consult with your accountant, tax adviser or other financial professional to ensure the gift qualifies for this favorable tax treatment and is made in a way that maximizes the benefit to you. While most states with income taxes follow the federal provisions, you should check to make sure that your state law allows this special provision to avoid surprises.)

I hope that you will take advantage of these ways to rail against the commercialism of Christmas, help ensure religious liberty for the next generation, and honor the birth of the one in whom we find true freedom.

See page 12 for more information about the BJC's Christmas card project.



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

"No, if there is a war on Christmas, it comes through excessive, rampant and pervasive commercialism, cranking up nowadays right after Halloween."

Supporters honor, memorialize others with donations to the BJC

In honor of Lynn C. Heflin's 90th birthday
Boo and Mary Heflin

In memory of Florence Langford
Henry Langford

In memory of the Honorable Fred Schwengel
Victor Tupitza

In honor of Walter B. Shurden
Sandy D. and Danita D. Martin

Religious liberty:

[Victor] has issued a clarion call to all Baptists; “As we journey there, [heaven], we need to raise awareness of religious persecution, pray for our suffering brothers and sisters and act to help those who endure persecution today. Who knows – tomorrow we may need their help.

Virginia Baptist pastor Victor Visotsky knows about religious persecution. Visotsky, now pastor of New Life Russian Baptist Church in Falls Church, grew up in Soviet Estonia. He remembers how members of his Baptist church were arrested and imprisoned for printing and distributing Christian literature. Others were fined for holding illegal prayer meetings in their homes, or for teaching their children to follow the Bible. Periodically, the KGB and local police would raid and ransack his house as they searched for religious materials. Like countless others before and since, Visotsky came to America seeking a place to practice his faith without fear or reprisals. And still they come.

To remind us all not to take our religious freedom for granted, a Sunday each year is placed on our denominational calendar – usually the first Sunday in July. But the Virginia Baptist religious liberty committee believes that one Sunday is not enough. In a prepared statement for the *Religious Herald*, the committee stated, “This observance can be easily lost in all the emphases about summer camps and Bible schools, family vacations, mission trips and a host of other exciting and meaningful events filling the schedules of church going Baptists this summer.

“Ironically, it can also be lost within a myriad of celebratory events in the church and community as the independence of the nation is celebrated. What is especially poignant is the

reality that of all the freedoms we celebrate as Americans, and as Baptists in America, the freedom of religion is one of our first freedoms. Yet if we fail to act responsibly, it may be one of our first freedoms to be lost.”

In varying degrees, since the founding of our nation, the freedom of religion has been under attack. One might easily contend that the most trying times for religious freedom were during the early colonial period when Baptists were routinely jailed for proclaiming their faith. For Baptists, that these were dark days are beyond dispute.

But the persecutions Baptists and other religious minorities endured, and the state church’s blatant over-extension of its powers, actually crystallized opposition and provided the catalyst for establishing our constitutional freedom of religion.

The days of persecution were trying, but there is a much more sinister, though well-intentioned, threat to religious freedom working its way through the fabric of our republic. When it comes to protecting religious freedom for all Americans, the conditions are mirrored in the words of a ‘70s balladeer, “... the times they are a changing.”

In some cases, attitudes are changing because people have not understood or have never been exposed to the deep level of commitment to religious freedom the nation’s early founders brought to the constitutional debate.



Why celebrate it ?



Sometimes school administrators and others are confused about how to interpret and apply laws covering religious expression. Changes in legislative and judicial applications of religious freedom laws, and the fear of lawsuits or public outcry keep them overly cautious in separating church and state.

But religious liberty violations cut both ways.

When students are denied the right to express their faith through art or clothing, or when they are prevented by school officials from participating in a "See You At the Pole" gathering their freedoms are being limited.

Baptists and other Christians must be vigilant in protecting their freedoms. But they must be equally determined to protect the religious freedoms of non-Christians.

We Baptists, who were persecuted early on, must be fearless in rising to protect others when their religious freedoms are threatened.

First Baptist Church of Dalton, Ga., — a congregation affiliated with the Baptist General Association of Virginia — is a good example. This congregation rose to defend the rights of a group of Muslims to build a mosque when other Christian groups rose in opposition. What many do not seem to understand is that an attack on any American's freedom is an attack on all Americans' freedoms.

People who are truly intent on preserving their own religious liberties will find creative ways to bridge gaps of misunderstanding and prejudice and support the religious freedoms of all faith groups in our land.

Religious persecution is wrong. Whether it is a blatant attempt to deny individuals or groups the right to practice their faith without interference or governmental support, or is subtly cloaked in nationalist pride, it is wrong.

We Baptist Christians, who on the one hand champion soul competency and liberty of faith in Christ, cannot on the other hand deny any person the liberty to discover his or her

own faith position, even if that position is different than our own.

Thomas Jefferson said it best in the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom:

"We the General Assembly of Virginia do enact that no man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry whatsoever, nor shall be enforced restrained, molested, or burthened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief; but that all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities."

Victor is not so far removed from his own persecutions that he has forgotten the importance of standing together in liberty. "We are one body in Christ and the day will come when we will stand before the throne of God together with 'a great multitude, of all nations, and kindreds, and people, and tongues.'" (Revelation 7:9). He has issued a clarion call to all Baptists; "As we journey there, [heaven], we need to raise awareness of religious persecution, pray for our suffering brothers and sisters and act to help those who endure persecution today. Who knows — tomorrow we may need their help."

The religious liberty committee asks for your church's active participation in celebrating and preserving religious liberty. Education, prayer, and community bridge-building is needed. In doing this, we will make our nation stronger, and, in the process, demonstrate the magnanimity of Christ's kingdom.

This article originally appeared in the September 6 issue of the *Religious Herald* and is reprinted with the author's permission. David Robinson of West Hampton Baptist Church in Hampton, Va., is a member of the BGAV religious liberty committee. Fellow committee members Paula Batts and Victor Visotsky contributed to this article.



Separation of church and state misunderstood by many, says Yale panel

NEW HAVEN, Conn. — The separation of church and state is part of what makes America great — and America is plagued by “total ignorance” about what it means, according to panelists at a Yale Divinity School event.

However, not even all the expert panelists agree on how the pesky details of church-state separation work themselves out in real life.

David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, joined a megachurch pastor, a political editor, policy experts and theologians Oct. 12 to discuss the role of politics and faith in the public sphere.

Called “Voices & Votes II: Shaping a New Moral Agenda,” the event was co-sponsored by three Christian magazines: *Sojourners*, *Christianity Today* and *The Christian Century*.

“The founders began the [enumeration] of our most fundamental rights with the statement that ‘Congress shall make no law’ even ‘respecting’ the establishment of religion,” Saperstein said. “We, the religious community, get enormous benefits out of the fact that this exists.”

Unfortunately, Saperstein said, some people have deluded Americans into thinking that upholding the separation concept amounts to being anti-religion.

On the contrary, separation of church of state does not mean Americans do not have religious principles that influence public policy, said Norman Ornstein, a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. The key is to find the middle ground between an official public religion and no mention of the role of religion in public life.

Seamus Hasson, founder of The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, said differences of religion and its practice should be treated like race: acknowledge and celebrate the differences instead of pretending they are not there. The Becket Fund is a group that works to promote its understanding of religious freedom, which sometimes includes defending officials or government agencies accused of unconstitutionally promoting religion.

For instance, Americans usually celebrate secular but cultural events like St. Patrick’s Day and Black History Month without problems, Hasson said, but he “always gets calls” from people upset about the religious holidays of Christmas or Hanukkah.

“Why should we pretend we’re all agnostic?” he asked. As pastor of the Vineyard Church of Columbus, Ohio,

Richard Nathan said the church has a big role in supporting a healthy understanding of religious freedom.

His concern is not about using public institutions to assert Christian views, he said. He cares more about forming healthy contacts between community leaders and church leaders — partnerships that foster confidence between the two and that neither corrupt religion nor destroy the neutrality of the state.

It’s not about “how can we gain more rights vis-à-vis the community by aggressively promoting our posture” but rather by “approaching the community by way of service,” Nathan said.

Amy Sullivan, the political editor for *Time* magazine, said people in both the Democratic and Republican parties could use some “basic education” about what the separation of church and state means.

“I’m always chagrined when I hear ... ‘I want somebody in office who is of my faith,’” she said. That’s “getting

far far away from our Baptist forefathers.”

Sullivan, who was raised Baptist, said the Christian community is getting wiser when it comes to forming alliances with partisan groups. For instance, she noted, many left-leaning evangelicals want to make sure that Democrats do not take them for granted during this election like Republicans have, in recent years, taken their conservative brethren for granted.

Eric Sapp, who works to build relationships between the Democratic Party and religious communities, agreed. It’s a very good time to be a Democrat — everything is going in their favor, said the senior partner at Common Good Strategies.

“The party has learned a great deal and part of that they’ve learned from some of the mistakes made by the religious right,” Sapp said.

But Ralph Reed, the founder of the Christian Coalition, a conservative advocacy group, did not let the conjecture about the failed policies of the GOP go on for long.

“All I can say is enjoy it while you can because eventually there are going to be two nominees,” Reed said. “Don’t make the mistake of watching the intramural within the party and think that that ... they won’t be united in the fall.”

— ABP



Readers will recall that J. Brent Walker spoke at “Voices and Votes: Religious Convictions in the Public Square,” earlier this year.

Soul freedom and the New Baptist Covenant

This article is the second in a three-part series in the run up to the New Baptist Covenant Celebration in 2008.

BY AARON WEAVER

uine prophetic Baptist voice in North America.

Just 100 years ago, Baptist minister Walter Rauschenbusch, the father of the Social Gospel Movement, penned a series of five brief articles titled "Why I Am A Baptist." Rauschenbusch wrote: "We may be Baptists by birth, but we must become Baptists by conviction. ...I began by being a Baptist because my father was, but today I am a Baptist, because, with my convictions I could not well be anything else."

Like Rauschenbusch, I too am the son of a Baptist minister. And like Rauschenbusch, I was also "born" a Baptist. But even after experiencing the coercion and forced conformity of fundamentalism firsthand, I remain a Baptist because of my convictions. At the heart of those convictions is what prominent early 20th century Baptists, E.Y. Mullins and G.W. Truett, referred to as "soul competency," and James Dunn dubbed "soul freedom." Walter Shurden has stated that soul freedom is the "stackpole around which Baptist convictions develop." In the words of Rauschenbusch himself, "The Christian faith, as Baptists hold it, sets spiritual experience boldly to the front as the one great thing in religion." Indeed, if there is one tie that binds us Baptists together, it is our belief that each person has the freedom, ability, and responsibility to respond to God directly without a human mediator. No priest. No bishop. No magisterium. And definitely no spiritual masters.

United around this bedrock principle of soul freedom, a diverse group of Baptist leaders representing more than 20 million Baptists were brought together by President Jimmy Carter on April 16, 2006, to reaffirm voluntarily their commitment to historic Baptist values like "sharing the gospel, promoting peace with justice, feeding the hungry, caring for the sick and poor and promoting liberty and respect for religious diversity." With not a small bit of courage, these Baptist heroes vowed to work together to create an authentic and gen-

promise was kept. And because of that promise made good, more than 20,000 Baptists from across North America will converge in January at the World Congress Center in Atlanta, Ga., for the Celebration of a

New Baptist Covenant.

This historic three-day display of Baptist unity will hopefully usher in an era of unprecedented cooperation between Baptists. Lord knows we need it!

For nearing 400 years, Baptists have engaged in endless battles among

themselves. Recent decades of fighting fundamentalism has left the Baptist witness severely fractured and needing to be fixed. By uniting thousands of racially and ethnically diverse Baptists together in fellowship and worship, the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant is a first step toward healing. The Celebration will provide a much needed opportunity for Baptists in North America to follow Christ's command in Matthew 5:24 to "... first, be reconciled to your brother or sister" With the world watching closely, we will show that evangelism and social justice are but merely different sides of the same missional coin. We Baptists whom have found freedom in Christ can not neglect one for another.

As a young Fellowship Baptist, I hope that the Celebration of a New Baptist Covenant will rekindle pride in our legacy as a Christ-centered people, committed to soul freedom, who can cooperate and unite amidst our diversity. Our commitment to an unfettered conscience means we support religious freedom for all. And when we see that all must be free to respond to God, we cannot neglect the conspicuous social implications of the Gospel.

NEW BAPTIST
COVENANT



Aaron Weaver, a graduate student at Baylor University and former intern at the Baptist Joint Committee, writes for his blog at www.thebigdaddyweave.com.

GOP presidential candidate John McCain said recently that he “admired” Islam but would prefer a president with “a solid grounding” in the Christian faith. Would you consider a candidate’s religious background in deciding for whom to vote? If so, under what circumstances?



By J. Brent Walker

Sen. McCain’s unfortunate comments reflect a common but wrong belief (shared with about 55 percent of the American public) that the U.S. Constitution establishes a Christian nation.

The Constitution is a decidedly secular document. Yes, many of the Founders were men of faith and mostly Christian, but they opted to ensure religious liberty for all, not ensconce their own religious views in the nation’s founding document. When it comes to religion, our Constitution is not a *religious* document but a *religious freedom* document. The U.S. may be a Christian nation sociologically, but not constitutionally. That fact is easy to demonstrate. Living up to the religious freedom values embodied in the Constitution and not giving preference to the Christian majority is more difficult.

Article VI of the Constitution bans any religious test for public office. True, the provision outlaws only legal disabilities based on religion. Citizens can and do vote for whom they wish and take religion into account in making that decision. The fact is, many people are comfortable with people who wear labels like their own. But the spirit of Article VI reflects an important American value — rights of citizenship are not dependent on “right” religious affiliations. Moreover, assumptions about how someone will lead, based on their religious affiliation are risky at best.

The fundamental inquiry for our leaders should be who can best lead and uphold our Constitution — not who is the most devout Christian or devotee of any other religion for that matter. The best candidate may be a person of no faith but of strong commitment to our nation’s principles, including religious freedom for all. Wasn’t it Martin Luther who said, better to be ruled by a smart Turk than a dumb Christian?

Religion may be relevant to evaluating a candidate. To the extent a candidate’s religion bears on his or her commitment to constitutional principles or affects positions on policy issues, a candidate’s religion may be a valid consideration. A candidate’s religious commitments or practices may also tell us something about the person’s character. How and to what extent one’s religion influences or dictates one’s value system, leadership style, policy outcomes is useful information.

For example, Candidate A’s extreme pacifism and Candidate B’s militant fundamentalism could result in drastically different policy outcomes on issues of peace and war. Candidate C, whose religion says that abortion

Bloggging

The BJC’s Don Byrd reports and comments on the latest
• Executive Director J. Brent Walker gives his take on pr
at ‘On Faith,’ a joint project of *The Washington Post* and N

Blog from the Capital : www.BJConline.org/blog

Nova Biology 101

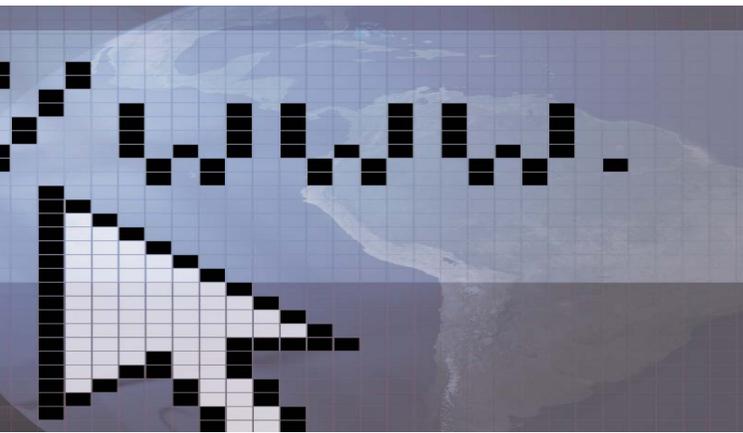
By Don Byrd (posted on November 9)

Hey, who watched last night’s Nova documentary on the Pennsylvania “Intelligent Design” case? I found it to be utterly fascinating — even riveting, maybe because my own education in biology is, shall we say, lacking. The primer on evolution and the description of recent findings was sensational and interesting. The show demonstrated with clarity, and on far more levels than I anticipated, just how improper ID is for a science curriculum for high school students, and how clearly religion remains the motivation and substance of the argument on its behalf.

On the other side, maybe this was just me, but I was very saddened to see the poor display of religious advocates arguing for ID’s inclusion in the curriculum. From the city officials misleading the court in depositions, to the anonymous destruction of a student’s artwork and awful threats to those — including the judge — with whom they disagree, to the general mistrust

amounts to murder, and Candidate D, whose religion requires an abortion to save a life of the mother, may come out at different places on *Roe v. Wade*. Candidate E, whose premillennial eschatology says that God is going to end it all on God’s timetable, and Candidate F, whose understanding of stewardship demands meticulous care of God’s creation, probably are going to come out differently on environmental issues.

In sum, religion may be relevant to evaluating a candidate’s fitness for office, but only to the extent it is tied tightly to how the candidate will perform the job he or she is being elected to do. At the same time, we should use great care to honor our country’s tradition of religious freedom for all by guarding against any assumption that one’s religion determines one’s right or fitness to be involved, to step forward and to lead.



the BJC

church-state news at www.BJConline.org/blog.
pressing questions at the intersection of faith and life
newsweek, www.washingtonpost.newsweek.com.

of science — the assumption that those of us who believe in the well-tested theory of evolution could not possibly claim belief in God, I found the “intelligent design” advocates to be something of an embarrassment to religion.

Supporting science is not a religious disqualifier, and pushing religion on captive public school students is as wrong and troubling as it is — thankfully — unconstitutional. Religious beliefs about the origin of species — whether those beliefs do or don’t contradict the theory of evolution — should be taught in synagogues and churches and homes, not in science class.

Blog from the Capital : www.BJConline.org/blog

Should Judges Determine Who Qualifies as a Minister?

By Don Byrd (posted on October 25)

A recent ruling by a Pennsylvania judge has created havoc around hundreds of couples across the state who thought they were married. York County Common Pleas Judge Maria Musti Cook determined that Dorie Heyer’s wedding was invalid because the minister who performed the ceremony received his ordination in five minutes online, and had neither a church nor a congregation. According to yesterday’s *USA Today*, Pennsylvania is home to 6,000 ministers ordained through the “Universal Life Church Monastery,” which offers such an online service. The decision sent officials scrambling.

“Things have reached a point where we’re approaching some chaos,” said David Cleaver, the solicitor for Pennsylvania’s state association of registers of wills and clerks of orphans’ court.

The American Civil Liberties Union says Pennsylvania officials have trampled the boundary between church and state and is mulling legal action.

After the ruling, Cleaver sent an e-mail to all county clerks and registers, telling them not to accept marriage licenses from couples married by online ministers. Five days later, he sent a second e-mail, telling them to accept the licenses.

“I said to myself: Wait a minute, we’re not cops. We’re not entrusted to check out these licenses,” he said, explaining his change of mind.

Washington Post/ Newsweek Blog: On Faith

The Dalai Lama says ‘All major religious traditions carry basically the same message: That is love, compassion and forgiveness.’ Do you agree?

By J. Brent Walker

First, an important disclaimer: I am not a scholar of world religions. Though I work daily to help ensure religious liberty for all faiths, I am most familiar with the Christian tradition. But, yes, I believe the major world religions — at their best — embody the principles of love, compassion and forgiveness.

To this general acquiescence in the Dali Lama’s observation, I offer several caveats.

Acknowledging that the major world religions incorporate these basic values — love, compassion and forgiveness — is not to say that all religions are the same or to gloss over significant differences among them. A watered-down, lowest-common denominator view of religion to support the idea that one religion is about as good as the next is a mistake. To concede similarities and commonalities among religions should not lead us to obscure the differences.

It is also important to realize that love, compassion and forgiveness are virtues that are inherently related to and in tension with counterparts. For example, many Christians are taught that love for God and one another must not dissuade us from actively hating sin itself. Our compassion for the downtrodden and those who suffer often requires us to engage in confrontation. Forgiveness (even seventy times seven) does not mean that we never make judgments — condemning injustices or seeking to hold one another accountable in churches, synagogues, mosques and other holy places. Hence, in recognizing that many religions share similar virtues, it is crucial also to understand how disparate faiths relate to these companion values.

Finally, these observations are complicated further by the reality that a sinful humanity never measures up to the ideal. The maxim of “loving the sinner but hating the sin” gets turned around and confused. Compassion — particularly in American Christianity — is compromised by competition. We often are short on forgiveness and hasten to judge others with a different religion. Religious practice never measures up to religion’s best teachings. Indeed, religion is one of the few things for which people are willing to kill.

Yes, religions — at their best — are loving, compassionate and forgiving. Religionists quite often are not.





K. Hollyn Hollman
General Counsel

Looking for leadership in presidential politics

One year from now we will have elected a new president, a new leader to serve our country and be the face of America to the world. While many factors and proposed policies will influence voters, wouldn't it be terrific if our next president, regardless of party or religious affiliation, had a strong commitment to America's tradition of religious freedom and church-state separation?

The media is covering thoroughly the role of religion in the campaigns. Most focus on the frequency with which candidates talk about religion and attend worship services or endorsements from high-profile preachers and spokesmen for religious groups. While interesting, these stories often fail to enlighten on the candidate's view of our First Freedom. I am not issuing a scorecard, but I do propose a framework to measure the candidates' commitment to religious freedom.

First, how does the candidate view religious pluralism? Voters want to know what makes a candidate tick; a

candidate's explanation of his or her religion may help. Offering one's religious or spiritual biography, provides opportunities and risks. The opportunity is to place the candidate's story as part of the larger American story that embraces people of many faiths and of no faith. The risk is that speaking of one's faith may appear as using religion to pander for votes, something that a candidate should avoid out of respect for religion and our Constitution, which bans any religious test for office. As we hear the candidates' stories, we should listen for recognition of (or better yet, appreciation for) our religious diversity.

It is helpful when a candidate acknowledges religious differences and the responsibility to serve all the people, such as when John Edwards said: "I think there is a difference between my belief system and what responsibilities of the President of the United States are." Likewise, Rudy Giuliani, got it right years ago when he said, "As the Mayor of New York City, I will work as hard to protect someone's right to believe in God as he or she sees fit — or not to believe in God — because I realize that my right to practice my religion depends completely on my commitment to defend someone else's right to practice theirs, or to practice no religion at all." America is one of the most religious and most religiously diverse nations on earth. That strength should not be taken for granted.

Second, how does the candidate treat church-state issues? It is worrisome when a candidate fails to note the important lines that have to be drawn in recurring church-state debates, such as those about the role of religion in the public schools, government funding, and government-sponsored religious displays. Fair treatment of these issues requires careful attention to the values of both no establishment and free exercise. It demeans religious freedom when a candidate takes a swipe at these issues without recognizing distinctions required by our Constitution. Fred Thompson provided an example when he said that many federal judges "seem intent on eliminating God from the public schools and the public square in ways that would astound our founding fathers." No candidate should confuse the importance of avoiding government-sponsored religion. Mike Huckabee got it right on school prayer when he said he never understood why so many people railed against the absence of prayer in schools when they didn't even pray at home. Our president must do more than promote slogans. He or she must be willing to acknowledge the delicate balance our Constitution mandates.

Third, does the candidate blur distinctions between duties to God and country? We are a religious freedom nation, not a "Christian nation" in any legal sense. Some candidates inevitably will rely on the promotion of civil religion, replacing respect for robust religious expression in all our diversity for a lowest-common denominator religion that appears to give Christianity a legal privilege. It is dangerous to promote the idea that we are a Christian nation, as John McCain asserted. He revised his comment, saying that he meant to say that the America "was founded on the values of Judeo-Christian values." Indeed, we have a rich religious heritage, but we should be careful not to misrepresent our founding document, the Constitution. As Barack Obama has said, we need "to understand the critical role that the separation of church and state has played in preserving not only our democracy, but the robustness of our religious practice." He was correct to say that respect for our increasing religious diversity (including among Christians) requires that our laws are based on principles that are accessible to all, without regard to faith.

It may be too much to expect any one candidate to get it all right, but I am hopeful. I look forward to the candidates continuing to rise to the occasion to represent our country well, giving religious freedom the respect it deserves.

"As we hear the candidates' stories, we should listen for recognition of (or better yet, appreciation for) our religious diversity."

Clifton joins BJC staff as development officer

Kristin Clifton, a Maryland native, has joined the staff of the Baptist Joint Committee as its development officer.

She comes to the BJC from Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., where she held several positions, the most recent being communications manager. Before joining Columbia, Clifton worked as a project manager for IBM, Global Services.

She earned a degree in Liberal Arts and Sciences, with concentrations in communications, political science, women studies, and black studies from Virginia Tech. Clifton currently resides in Falls Church, Va.



Clifton

BJC announces 2008 religious liberty high school essay contest

WASHINGTON — To engage high school students in church-state issues and to generate interest from a wide range of Baptists, the BJC has launched the 2008 Religious Liberty High School Essay Contest.

Open to all Baptist high school students in the classes of 2008 and 2009, the contest offers a grand prize of \$1,000 and a trip to Washington, D.C. Second prize is \$500, and third prize is \$100.

Winners will be announced in the summer of 2008 and will be featured in the BJC's flagship publication, *Report from the Capital*. The grand prize winner will also be recognized at the BJC board meeting in Washington, D.C., on October 6, 2008. Judges reserve the right to present no awards or to reduce the number of awards if an insufficient number of deserving entries is received.

The 2008 topic asks students to discuss the relevance of religious faith to politics, including whether and to what extent faith should be an election issue in 2008. Essays must be between 700 and 1,000 words. All essays must be post-marked by March 3, 2008.

Essays that do not meet the minimum qualifications will not be judged. To download a registration form and a promotional flier, visit www.bjconline.org/contest. For more information, contact Phallan Davis at 202-544-4226 or e-mail her at pdavis@bjconline.org.

Court rules against taxpayer challenge to lawmaker prayers

A federal appeals court ruled Oct. 30 that taxpayers who complained about Christian prayers before the Indiana legislature do not have standing to sue.

The 2-1 ruling by a panel of the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals hinged on a recent Supreme Court ruling that said taxpayers did not have standing to challenge the constitutionality of the White House's faith-based initiative.

"The plaintiffs have not tied their status as taxpayers to the House's allegedly unconstitutional practice of regularly offering a sectarian prayer," wrote Circuit Judge Kenneth F.

Ripple. "They have not shown that the legislature has extracted from them tax dollars for the establishment and implementation of a program that violates the Establishment Clause."

In 2005, a lower court ruled that the prayers before the legislature violated the constitutional prohibition on governmental establishment of religion.

But the appeals court, factoring in the Supreme Court's June decision in *Hein v. Freedom from Religion Foundation*, overruled the lower court, saying the funds used to pay for clergy and the prayers came from a general budget and not a specific appropriation.

Indiana House Republican Leader Brian Bosma said he was "elated" by the appellate ruling.

"There is no more fundamental freedom than the right of individuals to offer thoughtful speech, uncensored by the federal government, before our elected bodies, and the Court of Appeals ruling guarantees this right for future generations," he said.

Circuit Judge Diane P. Wood dissented in the decision, calling the majority's requirement about tracing money to state accounts "an excessive requirement" to determine standing. — RNS

Louisiana senator cuts \$100,000 from religious group

WASHINGTON — Bowing to pressure, Sen. David Vitter, R-La., has backed off an attempt to steer \$100,000 to a Christian group that supports teaching religious and alternative theories of creation alongside evolution in science classrooms.

Vitter has taken heat from educational, religious and civil rights groups for earmarking money in a fiscal 2008 spending bill for the Louisiana Family Forum, "to develop a plan to promote better science education."

The group has long challenged Darwinian theories explaining the origins of life, and the earmark was seen by some as an attempt to inject Christian religious doctrine into the classroom.

Vitter went to the Senate floor Oct. 17 and announced that "to avoid more hysterics," he wanted to shift the money to science and computer labs in schools in Ouachita Parish. He said the earmark had been misconstrued.

"The project, which would develop a plan to promote better science-based education in Ouachita Parish by Louisiana Family Forum, has raised concerns among some that its intention was to mandate and push creationism within the public schools," Vitter said.

"That is clearly not and never was the intent of the project, nor would it have been its effect."

The Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said in a prepared statement. "The federal courts have repeatedly held that teaching creationism in public schools is unconstitutional."

Americans United was among more than 30 groups that banded together to call for the earmark to be stripped. The coalition also included the Anti-Defamation League, the American Association of School Administrators and the National Center for Science Education. — RNS