

COLUMNISTS

Church and state separation evolves

This week I'm struck by the perversity of teenagers. My education involved eight years of public school followed by four years at an all-girls Catholic high school. We were very cynical as high school students and liked to ridicule the rules imposed by the administration and to reject the opinions of our parents, teachers and elders. Because we went to a school where every class, every meeting, every assembly began with prayer, I can remember times when an atmosphere developed in which we took the opportunity for granted, or even disdained the prayer we were "forced" into.

Today we witness our nation having come through several decades of extreme separation of church and state, especially on the legal and official level. Part of the current fabric is apparently reacting against all that, as we hear about requests from schools and students to pray in public schools and at school events. The response to such requests from the courts has seemed to be a firm and consistent "no." Lately, groups of fervent teens have found ways to move around these sorts of rulings by staging prayer at moments preceding official events or at places minimally off campus in order to avoid sanctions.

What we make of this current climate is quite interesting. For some, court decisions rejecting such requests provoke a sense of outrage, charging that our nation is abandoning religion and saying no to God. For others, the prospect of prayer in government-sponsored facili-



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BY PATRICIA SCHOELLES, SSJ

ties and at public events is repulsive, somehow a denial of the sacred separation of church and state that is part of the heritage of American democracy.

Joseph Lieberman is running for public office, and created a bit of a fracas by speaking quite openly about his faith and its relation to his public service. Earlier in the campaign both Bush and Gore had introduced their faith perspectives. Bush declared that his favorite political philosopher was "Christ, because he changed my heart." Gore told us that he decides important questions by using the slogan "W.W.J.D." Beyond this, some activists urge that the Ten Commandments be posted in schools and other public venues as an antidote to violence and other forms of cultural mayhem.

The separation of church and state in this country has a history, of course. Part of it descends back to the colonization process, when many groups were themselves escaping forms of religious persecution in Europe. Part of it relates to anti-Catholic sentiment that prevailed in

this country and eventually took aim at the prospect of Catholic schools usurping public funds. As Catholics have become more mainstreamed in the nation, anti-Catholic sentiment has declined. The problem of Catholic schools being the only form of sectarian education has also diminished as other denominationally based schools have emerged.

Today we know that the absolute wall between church and state that held so firmly during much of the 20th century has eroded somewhat. Today many religious schools do receive some state aid, often in the form of technology grants and transportation. We know that religious social service organizations receive and dispense large quantities of public monies because of the "secular purposes" which their activities serve.

Much of the discourse around this matter seeks to protect values that we have consistently held dear throughout our nation's history. As a people, we reject practices and forms of uniformity that are imposed on us, especially when they are imposed by the state. Above all, our national ethos is informed by our commitment to freedom and the unencumbered autonomy of the individual.

I think many of us have grown suspicious of some court decisions that ostensibly aim at trying to limit religious expression by the state. Today there is concern that such strict separation of church and state works instead to forbid religious expression by citizens on public property. This looks more like discrimi-

nation than it does protection. And today it is discrimination above all that we think we must avoid. In some ways we have come to view religion as one more preference of individuals and groups. No longer do we fear religion as a public category, potentially limiting public options through imposition by the state. Today we seem more to welcome religion as a positive public force as long as it is initiated, practiced and controlled by individuals and not the state.

I am unclear about whether the current impulse to allow less stringent separation between church and state will eventually make us better or worse. Sometimes I think we are far more astute at protecting the state from incursion by the church than we are at protecting the church from intrusion by the state. I'm not sure, for example, what effects there are on religious social service providers when they become multimillion-dollar agencies with armies of lawyers and accountants financed by large government grants. I'm no longer afraid that the government will force a state-sponsored religion on me. I am afraid sometimes that we have privatized our faith and have allowed our agencies and institutions to exhibit enormous secular success while risking their Catholic identity through watering down their original missions so extensively that they have jeopardized their very reason for existing.

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