

"Writing the truth  
as I see it;  
trying not to  
offend  
those who will  
disagree."

# The truth as I see it™

Idaho Common Sense™



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## Religion, politics, and the First Amendment

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How do we reconcile religion, politics and the First Amendment to the United States Constitution which says in part, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...?" Did they only mean that government cannot get involved in religion or did they also mean that religion cannot get involved in government? Did they intend we remove our faith and its values from political discussions, from political opinions? Would this be a reasonable expectation?

The First Amendment to the Constitution prevents the government from mandating a specific faith. Millard Fillmore, 13th U.S. President, believed "religion and politics should not be mingled." Was he right? Did the Founding Fathers want to not only protect their faith from government interference but also abandon their faith in political debate, in the voting booth? Or, does the First Amendment's guarantee of freedom of speech also protect our right to mix religion and politics?

The freedom of worship was one of the ideologies that brought the Founding Fathers to this country. This ideology and others led them to commit treason, risking execution to create a new nation, facing down the most powerful empire in the world, the British Empire. Where in the Declaration of Independence, the United States Constitution, or the Bill of Rights did they suggest that freedom to

express our beliefs was limited? Was the First Amendment only limiting the government from endorsing a specific faith or did it go beyond that to also limit the individual's expression of their faith? Did not our Founding Fathers demand, fight and die for the right to express their faith openly, without fear of reprisal?

Why then is it wrong to mention faith in a political discussion? Legislating morality, right wing agenda, intolerant, morally superior — just a few of the adjectives attached to those who mention faith in the political arena. The animosity is such that years ago Warren B. Martin of Cornell College said a presidential candidate's faith "becomes a relevant and divisive issue whenever the candidate shows himself to be devout in his faith." He concluded, "A determined Christian would be a weak President and a strong President must be a weak Christian." Was this an accurate observation or a biased allegation?

Contradicting Martin, Mahatma Gandhi suggested that "those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is." Isn't politics supposed to be society working together, developing shared values for the betterment of the country? Political values are an expression of our personal values which, for people of faith, are an expression of their religious values.

Perhaps our Founding Fathers better understood freedom of religion and freedom of speech than we do today. Perhaps they intentionally worded the First Amendment considerate of the fact the people would freely express the values of their faith in the voting booth. Moreover, might they even have expected us to do so?

Are the ongoing demands for more separation of church and state pushing beyond the boundary of the First Amendment and trying to remove any mention of religion in political discourse? The politician mentioning his or her faith risks substantial criticism, let alone if they dare admit voting their religious values in the Halls of Congress. Are the people demanding separation of religion and politics reasonable or are their demands excessive, demanding a state sanctioned religion — godlessness?

A double standard surfaces when faith enters politics. For instance, a person who is pro-abortion and votes for candidates with like values is considered to be exercising their rights. But a person who is anti-abortion and votes for candidates with like values is, more often than not, accused of trying to legislate religion and morality. Should not all voters be encouraged, even expected, to vote their values, their beliefs, their faith or their lack of faith? Isn't that what the Founding Fathers fought and died for?

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