

Defining 'separation of church, state'

BY JEANNE HUNTER
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From warfare in the Middle East, the constitutionality of "under God" argued before the U.S. Supreme Court, presidential candidates' pronouncements about their faiths to the popularity of Mel Gibson's "Passion" movie and the best-selling novel "The Da Vinci Code," people are all abuzz about how one defines religion and their place in it.

The following is a compilation of thoughts expressed by East Tennesseans on the "separation church and state."

"The First Amendment is very specific," said Bishop Joseph Kurtz of the Diocese of Knoxville.

"It talks about the non-establishment of a particular religion and the free exercise of religious expression. The state is to avoid establishing a religion, and the state is not to bar religious expression. The language 'wall of separation' is not used in the amendment."

"To me, what that means, the founding principles of truth, upon which our Constitution was built, the inalienable rights of people, respecting people's rights," he said. "We each have a responsibility to promote what I call 'natural law,' a law able to be discovered by every person who seeks the truth. As a deeply religious person, I exercise my right and responsibility to work for the good of society."

When he thinks of how some interpret "separation of church and state," he said, "People suggest you should not apply religion to your life. They say there is a wall of separation. Kurtz does not feel comfortable with the term because he cannot differentiate between "the part of me that is religious and the part of me that is civic."

"Entering into a dialogue doesn't mean setting aside my principles," he said.

"Being an American has nothing to do with where I go to church or if I go to church or what language I speak or my gender. It's all about the principles set forth in our founding documents," said Oliver "Buzz" Thomas, a lawyer, minister and an author who has written and lectured extensively on the subject of religion and public life.

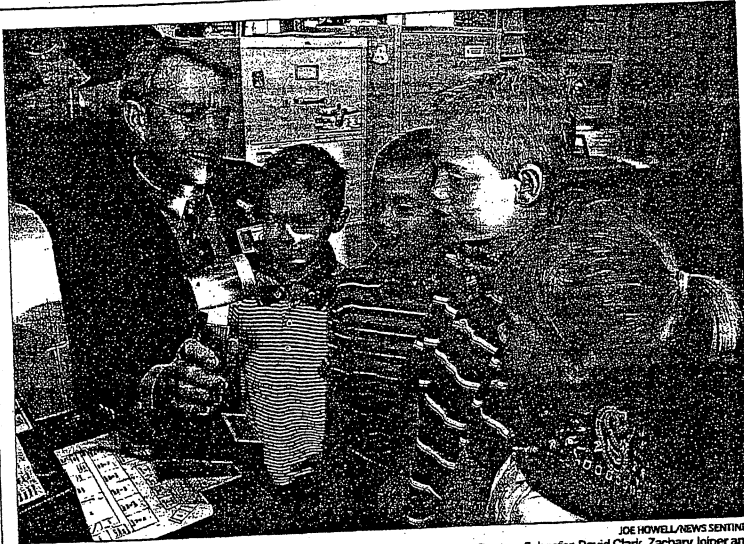
He has been involved in litigation at every level of state and federal courts including the United States Supreme Court and has served as an attorney for a number of different Protestant denominations and organizations such as the Baptist Joint Committee and the National Council of Churches. He directs an educational foundation committed to improving opportunities for rural communities in upper East Tennessee.

"The basis for our republic was not on a belief in God but a commitment to religious liberty."

He referred to Article VI of the Constitution, and read its final clause, "... but no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the United States."

"The framers deliberately established this as a 'secular,' not anti-religious, or civic nation," he said. "Most of these men were Christian but wise enough to know they were not establishing a theocracy."

When asked about the direction of the nation's moral compass, he said, "I think there is a high level of confusion among our people about what constitutes an American. I think a lot of our folk who have never dug into these founding documents to reacquire themselves with these principles identify being American with your religion, speaking English and for some



Center Bluff Primary School Principal Richard Ward holds a microphone for, left to right, Duncan Schaefer, David Clark, Zachary Joiner and Courtney Bryant to lead the school in the Pledge of Allegiance. The phrase "one nation under God" is being debated by the Supreme Court.

In politically charged year, religion takes on a more central role

BY JEANNE HUNTER
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The role of religion in public life will figure more prominently in this year's election cycle than in previous election years, experts say.

Moral issues are the nexus of religion and culture. They include the partial-birth abortion ban, the constitutionality of the "under God" phrase in the Pledge of Allegiance, the state of resolutions statewide acknowledging God as the foundation of government and a proposed constitutional marriage amendment.

"Religion is big news these days — news every bit as big as this year's national elections," Weisen Gaddy, president of the Interfaith Alliance and the Interfaith Alliance Foundation, said during a March forum in Washington, D.C., on religion in the 2004 election. "But religion in the elections is even bigger news. ... From its inception, our nation has exhibited a profound interest in and appreciation for the importance of religion. But the relationship between religion, and politics, and even more importantly, between the institutions of faith and the institutions of government, is changing."

Addressing the Southern Baptist Convention's executive committee in February, the Rev. Dr. Richard Land, president and CEO of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the church's moral concerns and public policy entity, said, "I believe this election will be one of the most critical elections, not just in my lifetime, but in the lifetime of our republic."

"Baptist Press," Southern Baptists' daily

national news service, quoted Land as saying this election may be the "most critical election since 1960," when slavery divided the nation and Abraham Lincoln defeated Stephen Douglas for the White House. The church launched a Web site (VoteValues.com) for voter registration and education to help voters compare candidates' positions and to register at least 2 million new voters by this fall.

According to "Religion and Politics: Contention and Consensus," a 2003 survey from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, "relatively few Americans express concern about the use of religious rhetoric by political leaders."

The forum, a Washington, D.C.-based nonpartisan organization, develops and releases polls and reports on topics related to religion and public policy. Telephone interviews surveyed a nationwide sample of 2,002 adults in late June through early July. Sixty-two percent said President Bush's references to his religious faith were satisfactory, while 44 percent said it was too much and 11 percent said it was too little.

"Overall, six-in-ten (60 percent) of Americans say the president relies a great deal or a fair amount (40 percent) on his own religious beliefs in making policy decisions," according to the survey. "Roughly three-quarters of those who believe this say the influence of religion on the president's policy decisions is appropriate. Just 22 percent of those who see Bush influenced a great deal by his religion say it is inappropriate."

Regarding the influence of Bush's personal faith on his policymaking, 58

percent said he relies upon his faith at "the right amount," while 21 percent would like to see a more prominent role and 10 percent said it's excessive.

"This view is particularly strong among those who think the president's decisions are currently not affected by his faith," according to the survey. "Of the 31 percent who say the president does not rely on his own religious beliefs when making policy decisions, most (51 percent) would like to see him do so more."

White evangelical Protestants were less critical of his reliance upon his faith. Sixty-three percent of whites and 73 percent of white evangelicals said his faith exhibits the right amount of influence on his policymaking, while 16 percent said it didn't have enough influence. About 30 percent of blacks and 56 percent of black Protestants said his personal faith bore little influence on his decisions, while about a quarter said it did.

Regarding public views on the role religion should play in politics, 33 percent said they would like to see more religious advisers for elected officials; 28 percent said they wouldn't. And 30 percent said they would like to see more religious leaders as political candidates, as opposed to 29 percent who were less likely to support that change.

"There is notably less enthusiasm for religious leaders forming political movements — just 22 percent would like to see more of this, while nearly twice as many (42 percent) would like to see less," according to the survey.

Jeanne F. Hunter may be reached at 865-342-6324.

"We are under the heel of these lawless judges," said Griffin, who also served as a leader of the private Bill of Rights Committee for Tennessee, which tried to reclaim an original copy of the Bill of Rights and share the honor with North Carolina. "We're not going to put up with the ACLU stealing our Bill of Rights. This country was created as a nation under God and remains a nation under God."

Regarding current social issues, Father Michael Platanius, pastor of St. George Greek Orthodox Church, said, "I think people are wondering how people have changed from the time when this country was founded, when people assumed 'under God' was a given and normal, natural, and even God-given ways of living would not go away or would be misinterpreted. ... Now there is a backlash from people who fear that things are going too far."

When asked whether a moral society can exist without it being a religious one, he said, "There are secular states that exist without being necessarily a religious state, but the people who live there have a religious identity that cannot be crushed or gotten rid of. The greatest example of that is Russia. ... The faith of the people, which is Orthodox, is stronger than ever. Can one be moral without being religious? Man must somehow associate himself with God in order to be man. Man is not complete without God."

"What is a good American? A good American is one who respects other people, who defends what is right and appreciates the greatness of a document like the Constitution that is meant to secure personal freedom to worship and to live the lives as we wish to live. ... We have responsibilities to each other and to God."

The Rev. Dr. Mike Boyd, senior pastor of Wallace Memorial Baptist Church and Tennessee Baptist Convention president, said separation of church and state "does not mandate separation of God and government."

"It removes mandates, but it does not and cannot remove influence."

It prevents a requirement for all people in the Southern Baptist but it also does not allow for an environment that denies God's existence, he said.

"Never was there an intent to remove Him but at issue is how we are to worship Him," he said, adding that there needs to be some similarity that God is.

Though there are different faith traditions and philosophical perspectives coexisting in the nation, "somewhere you have a benchmark."

He said there are four sources of authority for a human's approach to life that include experience, intellect and reason. For him, Scripture predominates.

"It has served historically as America's benchmark," he said. "And when you remove the benchmark, you lead to anarchy. ... I believe I see a weakening of the moral fiber of America and when the Bible has weaknesses, it will eventually fail."

"The literal definition of Islam is to submit fully and completely to the will of Allah (God). We are taught the moral values of God and how to implement them in our daily actions and practices through the Holy Book of Quran and the practices of the messenger," said Haman Ayeesh, an active member of the Muslim Community of Knoxville who helped

Rationalists of East Tennessee President Dale Haste, who has been a

June Griffin of Dayton, Tenn., says she believes trends in society indicate an agenda

See SEPARATE on A5

SEPARATE

from A4

establish the mosque's school known as Anmor Academy. "We are to struggle through our life to implement these values to attain the good in this life and most of all to please God. He the creator of heaven and earth is perfect. His values and places are for all times and places. Human values are subject to change and are open to corruption. "The Muslims of America, although a small minority, are an important part of this community and are affected in every way by the good and the ill of the society.

"We acknowledge different ways of life and practices. Although we may not agree with some of these practices and values, we must have tolerance, patience and mercy towards everyone.

"Islam, as well as the Judeo-Christian faith, believes that marriage is a sacred union between a man and a woman, with obligations, responsibilities and favors to make life easy for both.

"Human equality is another important concept in Islam. It firmly rejects discrimination of race, color and social status, which creates cultural prejudice and the spreading of fear and hate. We can hope for a great America by increasing our knowledge and understanding of our differences and promote peace and justice for all. America is a superpower that can be a great power, too."

"When I hear 'church and state' I think of the Constitution and the First Amendment and keeping our government small and keeping it out of the business of the church," said Dave Duck, 34, vice president and director of learning for Visum LLC, an e-learning firm. "The government should be neutral. It makes me feel good when I hear those words. It

makes me feel protected."

The trend toward accepting people from different philosophical perspectives is moving in the right direction, even if it's slowly, said Buck.

"We saw it with racism, acceptance of different religions, and we're slowly seeing that with gays and lesbians. But, will strife among different groups be eliminated? I can't imagine that it will be gone. I have faith that it will improve. It would be better if we understand that the middle ground is where most people are and take a look at what do that is right and not be divisive or what drives further wedges and walls."

Separation of church and state is not in the Constitution, but it is constitutional, said the Rev. Gary Beeler, pastor of the Fairview Missionary Baptist Church in Luttrell, Tenn.

"Government is what is restrictive rather than religion," he said. "The Constitution is very plain on that. It restricts government. It doesn't restrict religion."

Beeler started a voluntary released time outreach for schoolchildren in Union County 14 years ago. Last week, hundreds of Union County students attended the five-day event sponsored by Beeler's Crusade Ministries that featured preaching and music for an hour and a half each day.

It started with one school and grew to include different schools, different communities in the county and now ties in neighboring counties. Beeler, founder of Crusade Ministries with his wife, has advised others in other states how to complete their own programs and envisions having these events nationwide.

Religious pluralism has been advantageous in the United States, he said.

"Once people are presented the truth, they can choose it with freedom and without

persecution," he said. "I would not want to impose a state-run Christian church. State-run religion is not a preference of mine even though I'm a Christian and preach Christianity. I preach choices."

"The word of God is the foundation for the laws of America," he said. "That is what will sustain our morality. ... Before the Constitution, we had the word of God. The freedoms and rights we have were not given by the Constitution but by the Word of God."

Among issues related to church and state that concern Dr. Albert Wiberley are the school release religious programs like Beeler's, where students leave their campuses, with their parent's permission, to attend a religious program during the school day.

"Why do they target school time? Instruction comes to a screaming halt when there's a mass exodus from school," said Wiberley, former psychologist who taught at the University of Tennessee and a member of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State.

"If you have 25 percent of kids leaving how does that affect instruction? What happens to the kids who don't go? It is not uncommon for kids to get hassled for not bringing in school permission slips."

Ensuring effective checks and balances are employed when distributing federal funds for faith-based initiatives and federal judge selection are other church/state issues warranting closer scrutiny, said Wiberley.

"I see a shift in this country that is very discouraging," he said, "from public policies that were humane and genuinely concerned about people to policies that are imperialistic and don't have a soul, don't have any soul even though they profess to."

RELIGION

from A1

endorse or promote an area-wide revival sponsored by Crusade Ministries Inc., which runs the Youth Crusades, Prayer in Schools and Prayer in Government. The Rev. Gary Beeler, pastor of Luttrell's Fairview Missionary Baptist Church, established the ministry that assists communities in organizing school-release crusades in which students submit parental permission slips before leaving their campuses during the school day. Also, school officials acted reasonably to protect her, and she was not "subjected to harassment which deprived her of access to educational opportunities," wrote Knoxville attorney John Duffy, who is representing the school board, in the answer filed in 2003.

"It's like, global," she said, pausing to nibble on a sandwich minutes before she was to return to face lawyers and depositions that question views of her faith and family in late March.

Log onto a search engine, query her name and several hits related to the case are the results. When she travels, if she visits a pagan shop out of state, clerics recognize her name. She's a poster child, a cause celebre, for a movement for seculars or secularists, people who identify themselves as nonbelievers, those concerned about the intersection of religion and public life, that seems larger than life to the Tracys.

Correspondence from around the nation and the world strengthen her, she said.

"There is pressure, but I wanted to help others," she said, her voice become softer. "Kids being picked on, instead of going into schools killing people, they hurt themselves." Then she said the name "Tempest Smith."

The 12-year-old Lincoln

"We shouldn't have to fight for what we believe. The issue wasn't what we believe but what we didn't believe. ... We believe in a different faith. Our way of living is like everybody else, but we follow a different path."

Sarajane Tracy, India's mother.

Park, Mich., resident killed herself in 2001, citing harassment, taunting or excessive teasing she experienced at school. According to an article in The Detroit News, her journal revealed she faced teasing daily about "her shy demeanor, choice of clothing and religious beliefs that made each day of school — then eventually life itself — unbearable."

India, who attends a private Knoxvill school, said, "she was in the same situation as me."

India communicates with Tempest's mother who filed a \$10 million dollar lawsuit against the local school district claiming school officials were indifferent to a pattern of harassment, asserting she told teachers and counselors, but no one did anything. The lawsuit also accuses the district of religious discrimination.

The Tracys said Denness Smith first learned about their family after news reported about their eldest daughter's made headlines for not attending the revival as a middle school student. India was in elementary school at the time. The Tracys said they did not learn about Tempest

until after they filed their lawsuit. "We pulled her out of school about the same time as her daughter died," said Sarajane Tracy, adding that it took her awhile to contact Denness Smith because of concern about the woman's loss, how her approach may be received and how she herself felt about the private pain. Tempest must have felt India has some of Tempest's ashes in an amulet she wears daily.

Looking at the jewelry, her mother said, "She has it so we don't forget what that type of pain can cause."

"I fight for Tempest. I fight for others," India said. "This keeps me going."

The Tracys will meet Denness Smith for the first time at a fund-raising event held near the summer solstice in Kentucky. India's parents, Greg and Sarajane Tracy, have been married 20 years. India's the youngest of three children. Her older sister, Tyla, is graduating from Union County High School this spring and is enrolling in the University of San Diego. Her older brother, Garrett, is in the Navy.

"We shouldn't have to fight for what we believe," Sarajane Tracy said of their earth-based spirituality. "The issue wasn't what we believe but what we didn't believe. ... We believe in a different faith. Our way of living is like everybody else, but we follow a different path."

"They're ordinary people," said Tracy attorney Margaret Held of the Held law firm. "When we meet, we usually start off talking about the bills, how the kids are performing in school, their health. ... They are the people next door. Yet this could happen to any of us. They have handled this; I am so privileged to know them. They're real people."

Jeanine F. Hunter may be reached at 865-342-6324.

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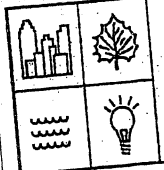
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Public Input Meeting to be Held for Deed Modification Request

A public input meeting will be held on May 25 from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m., at the City County Building, small assembly room, to receive comments on a proposed deed modification.

Knox County has requested a deed modification from TVA to allow transfer of 7.1 acres, with 600 feet of shoreline, to the University of Tennessee (UT) for a collegiate golf practice facility. In exchange, UT would provide Knox County 8.3-acres, with approximately 18,200 feet of public access shoreline, for future construction of a greenway for public use.

TVA is interested in receiving comments on the potential of the proposed action to affect the environment, historic properties, and to identify any other issues associated with this proposal. These comments will be used in reaching a decision concerning the proposed action. Knox County and TVA staff will be available to answer questions and discuss any resource related issues associated with the proposal.

For more information, contact Janet Duffey at (865) 988-2460.

Public Input Meeting
May 25, 2004, 5:30 - 7:30 p.m.
City County Building
Small Assembly Room
400 Main Avenue
Knoxville, Tennessee

