



Trump needs to learn some American history

By Jay Parini

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President Trump said faith leaders should be able speak freely and without fear of retribution.

Story highlights

Jay Parini: Government neutrality on religious questions is something that makes us Americans

It's not in the interest of any Christian to see the separation of church and state eroded, Parini says

Jay Parini teaches at Middlebury College. He wrote "Promised Land: Thirteen Books that Changed America."

(CNN) President Donald Trump sends shock waves through the nation, around the world, every day of the week, and sometimes this is bluster that doesn't actually threaten America's deepest values.

On Thursday, however, he went a large step too far by suggesting to a group of religious leaders that he would "destroy" the [Johnson Amendment](#), which in 1954 prohibited churches and other tax-exempt organizations from supporting one party or candidate over another.



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By violating this law, they could lose their [tax exemptions](#), and that loss would be crushing for most churches and charities.

Do we really want to live in a country where religious organizations can benefit from special tax status and use the donations they receive for partisan purposes, especially in support of religious programs that we find repugnant or against our own faith values?

In the [mid-1950s](#), the Johnson Amendment aroused little concern. It was, after all, signed into law by President Dwight Eisenhower, a much-admired Republican, although it was named for senator (later President) Lyndon B. Johnson, a feisty Democrat.

That [churches get tax emptions](#) is a questionable idea in itself, and many good reasons for taxing churches (especially church property) and not exempting contributions to them exist. "It's a sensitive topic," says Robert W. Wood in Forbes, "inviting questions about the separation of church and state."

Let's dig into American history for a moment. One hears a lot about the "[separation of church and state](#)," and that's a critical divide, one that was implicit in the US Constitution. The phrase itself was used by Thomas Jefferson, and it's not explicitly written into the First Amendment, although it's implied.

Indeed, the phrase itself was [employed by the Supreme Court in 1878](#) and often used in subsequent years. No self-respecting constitutional scholar doubts that one of the hugely important matters for our Founding Fathers was to maintain this border, as many of our forebears had fled Europe because of religious oppression.

One thinks back to [Roger Williams](#), who founded the Colony of Rhode Island and Providence Plantations. In his correspondence with John Cotton, a Puritan preacher, Williams famously wrote in praise of a "[hedge or wall of Separation between the Garden of the Church and the Wilderness of the world.](#)" He worried that allowing this hedge to fade would imperil religion itself, and the practice of faith, which is always an individual thing and should never be imposed or curtailed.



Trump: I will destroy Johnson amendment 00:45

One sees this separation discussed again and again, as in [Everson v. Board of Education in 1947](#), which applied the Establishment Clause from the Bill of Rights to local and state governments. The First Amendment clearly states that "Congress shall make no laws respecting an establishment of religion.

This means that religions -- all religions -- stay on their side of the fence, while the local, state, and federal government must remain

secular.

Government neutrality on religious questions is something that makes us Americans.

It's important for the government never to side with one religion over another. In 2004, [Justice Sandra Day O'Connor \(appointed by Ronald Reagan\)](#) sent a strong message to the legal community on this point, saying that governmental endorsements of religion suggest that some groups of religious persons are "favored members of the political community" while those who don't follow this faith are "outsiders, [or] not full members of the political community."

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This is such a powerful statement, and -- as a Christian myself who wants full freedom to practice my faith exactly as I believe I have

the duty and right to do so -- I

certainly don't want to see the Johnson Amendment in any way challenged.

In my view, it's not in the interest of any Christian -- even the evangelicals who support Trump -- to see the Johnson Amendment or the [separation of church and state eroded](#), and it's certainly not in the majority interest. Trump naturally wants to stand behind the evangelicals who supported him in his recent election

But he doesn't understand that there is a long and intricate history about the practice of religion in the United States, and that religious freedom actually depends on keeping the lines of separation bold and clear.