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*Baptist Arguments for the Separation of Church and State*

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When accusations about government interference in religious practice and belief are flying fast and furious in the news, it is easy to lose sight of the issue. The action being attacked is often not "interference," but an attempt to balance the religious interests of all peoples and faiths and to treat them with neither favor nor prejudice. Whatever the particulars of a specific incident that principle is one of which most religious groups, in particular conservative Christian denominations, are strong proponents. This idea, often referred to in shorthand as the separation of church and state, is what gives the United States its famed freedom of religion.

The Southern Baptist Convention, both the largest Protestant denomination in America and one of the most conservative, explicitly argues for the absolute separation of church and state in its June 2000 revision of its summary of faith, called, *The Baptist Faith and Message*. In the section on "Religious Liberty," the document specifically states: "Church and state should be separate. The state owes to every church protection and full freedom in the pursuit of its spiritual ends. In providing for such freedom no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others." This means that the government, whether federal, state or local, should allow all religious groups to pursue their beliefs and practices and should not provide support to one of them not available to the others. The government certainly "has no right to impose taxes for the support of any form of religion."

The opposite should also hold true, states the official Southern Baptist document. That is, the government should not denigrate religion in general or any particular religion. "The state has no right to impose penalties for religious

opinions of any kind." Such "penalties" may be monetary, such as taxes, but could also be holding those of a particular belief at a disadvantage with regard to others. Thus the Southern Baptist Church endorses America's religious free-for-all, and comes out against the notion that particular religions can be disqualified, as Germany has recently determined Scientology not to be a religion.

This of course does not mean that Southern Baptists think that all religions are of equal value. Baptist and similar Christian beliefs are seen as the only truth, and it is Baptist faith's goal to bring all people to what they consider to be the truth. However, Baptists, like other religions, should not use the power of the state to accomplish this. "The church should not resort to the civil power to carry on its work. The gospel of Christ contemplates spiritual means alone for the pursuit of its ends."

This strong Baptist stance in favor of keeping government and religion separate should come as no surprise to those familiar with Baptist history. Roger Williams of Rhode Island, who founded the first Baptist church in America, made its central tenet that of "Soul liberty." This principle was in opposition to the notion that churches could use governmental authority to enforce religious belief, as was being practiced in Massachusetts at that time. Williams recently had been banned from Massachusetts for daring to go against Puritan religious beliefs.