

**SEPARATING CHURCH AND STATE;  
WHO DONE IT AND WHY?**

**John G. Heyburn II  
Salmagundi  
November 20, 2003**

At the time of the Declaration of Independence, over half the colonies supported an established church in some form or another. Religion and government were considered the interdependent foundations of a stable society. Two hundred fifty years later we interpret our traditions to require a wall between church and state, which many view as leading to the virtual constitutional secularization of American public life. Tonight I will tell a story of how such a momentous change in constitutional policy might have come to pass.

I will not attempt to describe the many constitutional arguments about the precise placement and height of the wall which now separates religion and our government. I am not on a historical quest for the First Amendment holy grail. What history is and what it means are two distinct inquiries. To simply describe the past, with all its mysterious interweavings and unknowable twists and turns, is enough of a challenge for one evening.

As we pursue this story, I'd like you focus on a few recurring themes which impact the discussions about separation of church and state: the changing demographics of our country; the diversification of religions; tension between the desire to infuse civil society with religious values and desire to protect the rights of individual conscience; the tensions between the anti-religion and pro-religion sides of the separation alliance; and the efforts of various groups to enact their own particular moral codes as the laws of our nation.

This is a story of how America itself changed over the past two and half centuries; how