



# INTERPRETING THE DOCUMENTS: Separation of Church and State

“As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of all government to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith.”

—Thomas Paine

“Nothing is more dreaded than the national government meddling with religion.”

—John Adams

The concept of the **separation of church and state** is probably a more controversial issue today than when the constitution was written. Despite the fact that the separation of church and state is not addressed directly in the Constitution, the First Amendment implies this separation briefly and somewhat vaguely.

The first paragraph of the **First Amendment** to the Constitution states:

**“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;”**

The Founding Fathers did not want government to get in the way of religion, nor did they want to deny the role of religion in society. In the Constitution, they tried to:

**Establish a government whose sole function was to administer secular matters.**

**Protect the practice of any religion to avoid persecution or censorship.**



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The connection between religious beliefs and state affairs remains controversial after more than two hundred years of legislation and discussion on the matter. The constitutional validity of **prayer in publicly funded schools** is one aspect of the controversy often discussed in popular culture.

Some public school staff adopted the practice of prayer before the beginning of classes, meals, meetings, and special events. The general public has both criticized and commended school prayer. Before the 1950s, it was legal for public schools to have religious education teachers, who would instruct the students in the Christian faith and moral values. In 1949, the Supreme Court stated that public schools could no longer do this because it “breached the historical separation of church and state.”



*A girl prays before eating her school lunch in 1936.*

In the decades since the 1949 ruling, several lawsuits against educational institutions have attempted to abolish the practice of prayer in schools. Even though court rulings have banned this practice from several states, there are still many that contend that freedom of expression and free exercise of religion allow for prayer in schools. In 1984, **President Reagan proposed an amendment** to the Constitution which would allow for group prayer in public schools. The final vote in the Senate was 56 to 44 in favor. Even though most Senators voted in favor, a two-thirds majority was needed to pass the amendment.

Whatever side one chooses to follow, the ambiguity of the Constitution on this subject will continue to raise questions regarding the right of publicly funded educational institutions to encourage these practices.