First Place
CORNELL

Lois M. Collins
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Second in a series

Utah teachers and education administrators tiptoe cautiously along the edge of a razor as they try to figure out religion's place in public schools.

Move too far one way and the result can be religious indoctrination. Too far another way indicates hostility to religion.

Questions pop up in seemingly innocent places: At a school concert, during the Pledge of Allegiance (no longer a daily practice in many schools), in a story on Pilgrims coming to this continent, or among the festive decorations on a classroom door at Christmas.

At issue is religious liberty - both freedom to believe and freedom from belief. The question is, when does one person's freedom to believe stomp on another's freedom not to believe and vice versa? And where does religion fit into the education system?

"A painful first step might be for all sides to acknowledge the failure of public education throughout our history to find a constitutionally permissible and educationally sound role for religion in the schools," writes Charles C. Haynes, editor of "Finding Common Ground: A First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education," produced by the Freedom Forum of the First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University. The book is used by Utah school districts as they try to draft policy concerning religion.

But it doesn't need to be so complicated, according to Douglas F. Bates, coordinator of school law and legislation for the Utah State Office of Education.

"The reason it's complicated is people still want to use government as a tool to push their own biases," said Bates. "We find that in efforts to control the curriculum."

He cites evolution versus creation as an example. "We have people on both sides of that question. In a sense, atheism is a religion, same as theism is. It's improper for school to push either side of that question."

"It comes up a lot in people forgetting who they are when they are in their official capacities," he said. "When I'm in my official capacity, I'm the state. Government isn't real; it exists only in our minds. So when we say that government did wrong,

that means a person has done something wrong. If I'm wearing my government hat, then I can't pray, I can't endorse religion, I can't take action against religion or restrict it. Religious freedom is a right of people, not government."

If people remember that, he said, there's little conflict - or litigation.

Hot issues in Utah

In Utah, "the hot issues tend to be ones dealing with school prayer, both in school and at graduation," said Dave Doty, who serves as assistant to the superintendent for policy and school law in the Davis School District. "In Utah, it tends to be more a graduation issue than a classroom one."

Administrators and teachers also grapple with the rights of students to express personal religious conviction during school time, he said. That includes the right to wear religious clothing or to include religious content in assignments. Sometimes it's the right to hand out religious literature on school property or "witness" to others.

Every year, the same questions seem to recycle through, Doty said.
Davis School District last month became the first in the state to come up with what it calls a comprehensive policy on religion in schools.

"We're trying to foster statewide discussion," admits Doty, who drafted much of the policy. "I hope this will prompt other institutions to take a look at these things."

'Common sense' is needed

Bates believes common sense goes a long way toward explaining religion's place in school. A teacher acts as an agent of government, so he or she can't express belief or disbelief in God. A student doesn't represent government and is free to say, "I don't believe in the chance theory of evolution; I believe God had an active hand in creation," Bates said.

A student who wants to write about Jesus Christ or Buddha as a person who had great influence on his or her life can. "It fits an assignment and is the expression of private belief and faith," Bates said. "It's not disruptive."

If a student draws a picture of Jesus Christ or Buddha and the school exhibit it, it's not a problem. The school is exhibiting student art. But it can't assign a picture of Christ or Buddha.

During the past two years, Utah media have raced around the story of a high school student, Rachel Bauchman, who sued the school district because her choir at West High School sang religious songs. The question of whether religious songs at graduation ceremonies is legal arose.

Even that's not complicated, Bates said. "The primary reason it keeps coming up is school choirs are large groups. If you're looking for music written for large groups with orchestra accompaniment, you're pretty much restricted to religious music. . . . You're not presenting a religious experience, you're presenting a musical experience.

"You can be advised it should be sung with respect, but not with reverence. Reverence is taught at church and home. Respect should belong to all of society."

In the rush to be inoffensive or to avoid lawsuits, many teachers have shied away from teaching religion in any context, even as pure history.

A complete education

But education is incomplete without the study of religion, according to the First Amendment Guide to Religion and Public Education. Various religious influences have formed history, art, music, literature and life in general. "Even teaching religious liberty, the civic foundation that sustains the United States as one nation of many faiths, requires teaching about the role of religion in history and culture."

Says Doty, "What can you teach if you can't teach about the principles that informed and formed our government?"

Such a version of history would "turn pilgrims into people who made long trips" (Doty said a circuit judge speaking at a convention claimed to have seen a text with that description). And the story of Martin Luther King Jr. and the civil rights movement of the '60s is very different when churches and their influence on the birth of the movement are removed.

"If you do that, you're not teaching anything at all," Doty said.

Diversity fosters respect

In her eight years as principal of Lincoln Elementary School in downtown Salt Lake City, Sheri-anne Cotterell said she never encountered religious problems. "I think the diversity at Lincoln made it so there seemed to be a respect for other perspectives," she said. "The only time it came up was when students who were Jehovah's Witnesses had to be excluded from some party activities. That was hard, but we made sure they never felt they were punished and we tried to do fun things with them."

The teachers and administrators at the school decided how to handle holidays: They had winter programs and incorporated Christmas, Kwanzaa and Hanukkah. In the spring program they had Easter and other holidays. One year, they focused on "peace" instead of Christmas.

The Williamsburg Charter, presented to Americans in 1988, was drafted by leaders of many faiths, civic leaders and former presidents Carter and Ford. Its goal was to reaffirm the importance of First Amendment religious liberty principles and help define the acceptable role of religion in public life.

The diverse group of religious and educational groups who signed it agreed that there are constitutionally permissible
and educationally sound ways to include religion in the curriculum. They, too, affirmed the need for religious instruction without indoctrination or hostility.

Short-changes children

"Religion as history should not be a question at all," Bates said. "It's perfectly permissible. If we attempt to educate without teaching about the role religion has played, we shortchange children... To say that the Mormons came out here looking for better economic prospects, as some have recommended, is a distortion of history."

That type of distortion is precisely what some formerly Communist nations are grappling with. In April 1990, Elder Russell M. Nelson of the LDS Church's Quorum of the Twelve met with the deputy prime minister of what at that time was Czechoslovakia. Speaking during Provo's annual Freedom Festival fireside that year, Elder Nelson recounted the meeting.

When asked what type of aid could be rendered to the newly formed government, the minister said, "We don't need material goods or technology. We need a new spirit. We need moral values. We need the Judeo-Christian ethic back in our curriculum."

Bates believes that "in order to educate properly, to bring in reasons why things are the way they are... always involves religion. I don't know what it is, but I would bet the base-10 math system has a religious origin... The days of the week and the number of days all have religious underpinnings," Bates said.

But it's not so simple for individual students sometimes. On one hand, people talk about being tolerant of other views. On the other, youths can be made to feel excluded in many situations.

Lawsuits abound

As a result, lawsuits carving out religious policy are nothing new. Court challenges to seminary programs go back several decades. The current U.S. Supreme Court ruling holds that religious classes can be held during school hours on private property and students can have release time to attend. But school money, staff and property can't be used to promote or operate religious-education classes.

Other issues are much less clear. Last year, when an LDS seminary building in West Jordan burned down, the American Civil Liberties Union wasn't happy that a local school allowed classes on school property for several days.

Then again, when the Richfield High auditorium burned down and the LDS Church offered its tabernacle for graduation, everyone agreed it was the only venue large enough.

Whatever stripe the current debate takes, Bates believes America pays dearly for not knowing more about other cultures. And he says he's guilty of it, as well. He never learned the religious holidays surrounding Buddhists or Muslims, for example. "I don't know what those are in other cultures; it's one of the weaknesses of Americans. We attempt to impose our ideas of what's appropriate. We really do need to teach children what's going on in other cultures and what foundations there are."

Next week, the will examine how the criminal justice system allows for religious practice.

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The physical wreckage of the accident that killed him was cleared away months ago.

The spiritual and emotional wreckage still shows in the lives of his wife and two children. They are real people, not composites, three-fourths of a once-happy family whose hearts have been shredded by a loss so unexpected and devastating it has crippled them.

She thinks her job as a mom is to muster on, taking care of the scheduling, the bills and the meals - day-to-day tasks that won't wait. She goes to work daily, smiles sometimes, laughs occasionally and often wonders why he died. Her anger and grief are hidden, acknowledged seldom and only in private, as if they are a disease that, loosened, will burn through the home with fiery destruction.

The boy, now 11, struggles to be the "little man." He tries to take care of his mom and his sister. In school, he's detached, sometimes sullen, often just "somewhere else."

The baby, now 6, thinks she killed her daddy. She was supposed to clean her room and didn't. She cleans it over and over, hoping the act of being good will restore balance to their lives. Psychologists call it magical thinking - a child's belief that she caused calamity and can make it right again.

The mother knows they are a family in trouble. She hopes professional counselors like Ruth Foulger, the Rev. Kenny Wiggens, Kasey Travelstead and Deanna Rosen can help them.

They must learn to embrace their grief, set it free, deal with it and move on. They will never forget. But they can survive and reclaim joy.

Each will grieve differently.

"There are stages to grief," said Rosen, a licensed clinical social worker, "but they are not for the same length of time for everyone, not in the same order, and some people bounce back and forth between them. It's the expression of the sadness and despair and sense of loss that helps in the healing process. When one holds it in, it festers and does not go away."

The others deal with grieving as part of a broader practice that includes marriage and family counseling. But grief surrounds Travelstead, aftercare specialist for Valley View Memorial Park and Funeral Home. She runs a group called My Circle of Friends for children 4 to 11 who are learning to deal with the death of someone they loved. Every other weekend, the mortuary sponsors counseling sessions. Twice a year, they bring in bereavement specialists for five or six intensive sessions. People don't have to be Valley View clients to attend.

The therapists all know the stages: Denial. This didn't happen. Anger. It isn't fair. Bargaining. If I had only done this... . Depression. Life feels hopeless. Acceptance. It's real and I must find a way to go on.

Finding that way, however, depends on gender, age, religious background, relationships, regrets and individual variables.

With a devastating personal loss, grief is necessary. Grief postponed eventually erupts, said Rosen. The aftershocks can include psychosomatic illness, inability to eat or sleep, headaches, depression, inappropriate anger, even violence. "If it's not resolved, it can spill out toward others."

There's no right way to grieve, the counselors say. Finding what works takes time and creativity. But some things are generally true.

Men grieve, at least outwardly, for a shorter period of time than women. That, in turn, can lead to guilt and new grief.
Children's grief is very complex. The younger they are, the more egocentric their grief. Very young children worry about the effects of loss on their own lives. Who will take care of me? What's to become of me? They yearn and pine and their sense of security can smash like an egg dropped from a plane.

Faith in a higher power, whether the name God is applied or not, seems to help. People who believe in an afterlife find comfort in faith they will meet their loved one again.

That belief, however, is not something that counselors usually deal with unless the person who is grieving brings it up.

The Rev. Wiggins of the Baptist Counseling Center is sure that God is real and caring and that families will be reunited in heaven. What a client believes, however, "is not for me to say if it's right or wrong for them. Every belief system has a purpose. But I believe there is a difference. For the people who have some of what I would call eternal hope, well - even though that loss hurts, they have more to look forward to. There's comfort. If one doesn't believe in God, he doesn't know what's going to take place . . . . Death is terminal."

Faith in God, he says, "is hope that extends beyond death."

Foulger finds that many people are "caught off guard and haven't really made decisions - especially young people - about what they believe in and what they don't."

One reason children and grief are so complex is that most haven't yet developed belief systems. Initially, they inherit their religious views from adults around them. They have not experienced or studied or probed enough to make decisions about faith.

Children need reality checks, said Foulger. Almost all children engage in some form of magical thinking. It's like the belief that if a child waits by the window long enough, Santa Claus will pass by.

A magical thinker can be told repeatedly what happened and still feel responsible for the death by reason of an action or omission.

"Children are more involved in their own power and what they can control. They think they made it happen," said Foulger.

Still, they often bounce back faster than adults, with help, said Rosen. "For one thing, they will sob and grieve openly and hard. For an adult man to cry in my office in depth - well, there're just too many social inhibitions."

Counseling children takes many forms. Travelstead sometimes uses a workbook that tackles issues like self-esteem and memories. Children combat fear that they will forget: What color were daddy's eyes? What pet name did mommy call me? Fear of forgetting plagues people of all ages.

She helps develop "rituals of grieving" to let people "remember loved ones with a sense of peace." In one family, children light a candle on Father's Day and talk about the times they shared with their father. A family that lost a little boy invites a needy child over and gives him gifts. Remembering someone by helping someone else is therapeutic. Others plant a tree in memory of a loved one or celebrate a birthday or anniversary by performing a kindness for others.

All of the counselors encourage children and adults to take care of unfinished business. Travelstead likes them to write a note, tie it to a balloon and let it go. All four use letter therapy: The bereaved writes a letter to the person who died, then pens a reply the way he or she thinks that loved one would. It helps let go of unresolved issues.

Sometimes words are not enough. "Getting physical" may help teenagers, who can find relief by taking rubber bats to pound on chairs to vent anger, said Foulger.

Younger children get the same results with play therapy. They make sense of their feelings by drawing pictures of their lost loved ones. They play with dolls, where one is the child expressing feelings and the other is the person who died. That way, the child talks through the grief.

At a center that specializes in grief counseling for children, youngsters pound the walls of a padded room if they want, or shout and scream to get feelings out.

That a child who lost a loved one can still play shocks some adults. The Rev. Wiggins believes it's natural - and healthy.

"That's how they do it. That's their world, the world of play. One of the best things to do is join them and play with them. Join them wherever they are."
Friends and relatives may not know what to do to help someone who is grieving. The answer is both simple and difficult: Listen.

For children, Foulger said, "It's real important to help them identify what they feel and let them express it and acknowledge that you heard it without trying to change it or correct it or teach them anything."

Too often, people don't listen. They talk - and say the wrong things.

"It's important not to say God wanted them or took them home because they were so good. It makes the children feel they're not good enough," said Travelstead. She's also seen children choose not to be good because they fear death and think God takes good people.

Don't tell a child that "Daddy is asleep." Some children become terrified to go to sleep because they associate it with death.

Instead, find teaching moments. When you pass a dead squirrel in the park, Travelstead says, talk about it. Let children know death is a natural consequence of life. Introduce the concept so it's not shocking when someone dies.

Don't say you know what someone's going through; it's different for each person. Don't "comfort" someone whose child was stillborn with the statement, "You can have another one." People are irreplaceable. And babies are literally the stuff dreams are made of. What parent hasn't pinned a helping of hopes on a child's future?

Most of all, don't think helping someone overcome the after-effects of loss will be easy. Everything has potential consequences, both good and bad. Even belief in God can compound grief, Foulger said. Someone who believes the last rites are needed to get to heaven may be devastated when a loved one is lost unexpectedly, without those rites. That daddy's in heaven won't mean a future reunion for someone who believes she's not good enough to get there, too.

Grief takes longer than people think. "Work gives you three days off," said Travelstead. "Sometimes it takes five years to get through a thing like that. Almost always the grief takes more energy than they can imagine. And in our lives, we are not taught to lose. We are taught to gain. It shows in the psychological, social and physical."
When Joe Donato became a Christian, a voice told him, "You're reborn. Go tell your friends."

He obeyed, but it wasn't easy. Donato was a hit man and a con man. His friends were in or were linked to the Mafia.

Donato is in Salt Lake City this week for meetings hosted by the International Fellowship of Christian Businessmen. He spoke Friday at a luncheon and will address the group at the Ramada Inn, 600 South and 200 West, at 7 p.m. Saturday night.

His life changed in 1972, when Donato started looking for what he calls his "missing piece of the puzzle." He had money and the things it could buy, only to discover "you can buy the nicest bed in the world, but you can't buy a good night's sleep." He had attained status among his gangster friends because he had been charged with murder twice - and both times been acquitted. "In the sick world of the underworld, that's a feather in your cap."

He also had years of looking over his shoulder and horrendous nightmares. He'd seen friends and colleagues blown up and mowed down.

Donato was raised in a poor family, one of 10 children. He went to work shoveling coal at age 6. At 10, he was shining shoes to make money. The nicest shoes he saw belonged to the gangsters in his neighborhood.

Gifted as an entertainer and a natural impersonator of public figures and movie stars, he had opportunities galore. He got national awards and twice won the Ted Mack Amateur Hour. He appeared with the Three Stooges and had job offers. But he'd seen the high-rolling gangster lifestyle depicted in movies. He craved it.

"What I forgot," he told the Deseret News Thursday, "is that the gangster always got killed at the end of the movie."

Now, when he visits juvenile halls around the country, he tells young miscreants that crime does, indeed, pay. "It pays with heartache. It pays with prison. It pays with hate and divorce." A prosecutor told him, "Show me your friends and I'll show you who you are." He modifies it for the youths: "Show me your friends and I'll show you your future."

Donato cashed crime's paycheck. He only spent two months in prison, in the late 1940s. But his marriage dissolved and he has spent the past two decades apologizing to his three children for the kind of father he was. His own father never said, "I love you." That's a mistake Donato no longer makes.

In 1952 he moved to California and worked for a bookie. Soon, he owned the business. Not long after, he met guys who were "connected." He was "impressionable," and when they offered him jobs, he took them up on it. But he's proud of the fact that he always steered clear of the drug trade.

Donato knew he needed a new life but said no one walks away from the one he already had. Religion, he was sure, wasn't the answer. Most of the Mafia are "religious." "If religion could have changed me as a kid, I would have been one changed kid."

God, he believed, was a "crutch for weak people."

What he wanted was an indefinable essence he saw in the woman who worked part time as his maid. "She had a glow and peace and joy and kindness I've never seen before." He later learned that she and the members of her tiny church had been praying for him.

On March 7, 1972, he looked up at the stars and said, "God, if you're for real and you can change my life, I want that. I asked Jesus to come into my heart."
There were no flashes of lightning, no bells or choirs. He went to bed a "successful mess." But he slept that night, he said. And he cannot even describe what he saw when he awoke. It's a private vision that makes him cry unabashedly.

"My room was filled with the glory of God. And I thought that God is real and he's come to kill me for the way I have lived."

God didn't kill him. He realized God had been sparing him for a long time.

The miracles continue to this day, said Donato, who has told his story around the world, on CBS and NBC, in religious programs and on quiet streets - wherever someone will listen.

He didn't turn from crime immediately, although he would not hurt anyone. He tried to do other parts of his old business. He couldn't. He learned the unhappiest person on earth isn't the sinner, "but the saved one who is straddling the fence." He gave away his money. He told the mob he was through.

They let him go.

Since then, he's traveled 2 million miles telling his story. He's given away countless copies of his book, "Tell It to the Mafia." (He doesn't sell his book or other merchandise, which he calls "pentacostal panhandling.") He's seen some of his former colleagues turn their own lives around. He just returned from 31/2 years helping run an orphanage in Africa.

His message is always the same, he said. "For a child of God, failure is never fatal and never final."

"When you stumble, run to Him."
Saturday, December 13, 1997

Graciela Garcia shakes with anger when she talks about Salt Lake City's decision to remove the stairs and platform it built to the "Virgin of Guadalupe" tree in Taufer Park.

The city believes the stairs and platform it built in the tiny park at 700 South and 300 East are a safety hazard now that the weather has turned snowy. Someone could fall while climbing up or down to view what many believe is an image of Our Lady of Guadalupe in a sawed-off branch of the elm tree.

"It's a safety hazard in winter," said Ken Connaughton, executive assistant to Mayor Deedee Corradini. "We need to take (the stairs) down. It's going to happen soon."

The city first erected the stairs and platform because people were attempting to climb up to see the branch stump using ladders and other means that didn't seem safe. But city officials say the stairs were to be temporary; they didn't expect the crowds to keep coming for months.

They also didn't expect all the rumors floating in the crowd around the tree. Some believe the city is tearing down the platform "to clean up the park." Others believe it's race or religious discrimination. There are tales that the tree itself will be chopped down, which Connaughton flatly denied.

"They will still be able to go there to worship," he said of the devoted group that makes minipilgrimages to the tree.

While city officials worry about safety and liability and speak of a "fiduciary responsibility to taxpayers not to get sued" if someone is injured, the faithful who gathered at the tree in freezing cold temperatures Friday evening spoke of "holy ground" and a "place of devotion."

Friday was the feast day for Our Lady of Guadalupe, Garcia said. Saturday, crowds will celebrate that occasion around noon or 1 p.m. with singing, praying, lit candles and mariachi music.

They will climb the stairs, stand on the tiny platform and perhaps trace the image they see with reverent fingertips. Some will place roses or hang photographs of loved ones; others will light candles.

The city also plans to remove the candles and other ornamentations that have been decorating the tree and the area surrounding it. That puzzles even those who understand the city's worry that someone will slip should the wooden steps become slick.

"Even if that's true," Garcia asked, "why remove the rest?"

She and Pat Dell, who visits often from her home in West Jordan, jokingly tell some of those standing nearby not to climb the outside of the tree. "You might slip on the rosaries," they say, with a trace of sarcasm.

Adolfo Gutierrez, who visits the makeshift shrine periodically, believes the city should be cautious about lawsuits. But it would make much more sense, he said, to make new, better steps than to tear down access to something that is very dear to hundreds, even thousands of Utahns.

"All the people who come here, they don't try to bother the city. We want the city to understand we have a religion; we respect other religions and we want respect of our religion."

"The city could make it safe," echoes Marcelino Ponce. "This is a place where we come to pray for the vision."

The vision he seeks is that of Mary, who reportedly appeared to Juan Diego as Our Lady of Guadalupe in 1531 near Mexico City. Now many pictures of Our Lady of Guadalupe have been hung on or near the tree.

Ponce doesn't believe the fear of a lawsuit is valid; the people who visit the tree, he said, are "people who come with"
faith, not complain-ers."

Nearly 300 people signed a petition near the tree. The petition says that "We draw great solace and comfort from prayer and devotion at the wayside shrine in Taufer Park." And it adds that "These practices are essential to our devotion."

Since people first began to visit the spot last spring, crime in the area has dropped. That's another argument for leaving the steps.

"People have made this park sacred, rather than a sanctuary for drug dealers," Dell said.
Saturday, February 22, 1997

First in a series

Utah Gov. Mike Leavitt announces commitment to faith in God, asking that it be "emblazoned in our hearts" and says, "Heaven save the society that's too polite to speak about God."

Congressional leaders say churches should take up social programs as government cuts back.

A Catholic archbishop threatens to sue San Francisco for violating the religious freedom of Catholic Charities by demanding the agency offer domestic partner benefits like health insurance to gay and lesbian couples, of which the church does not approve.

In Utah, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints comes out strongly against parimutuel betting, which is later defeated by voters.

Where religion intersects with government - and how it can legally be expressed - has become a continuing conundrum for citizens and public officials alike. Among the questions:

Is it OK to put a Nativity scene on public property? And will adding a couple of reindeer to the scene make it "inoffensive"?

Should public funding be used for vouchers so students can attend parochial schools if their parents desire it?

Should the state be able to require civil marriages for couples who were wed by American Indian spiritual leaders? Can it decide who's a "valid" spiritual leader?

And exactly how thick is that "wall" that separates church and state?

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments this week on the constitutionality of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which will impact many of these issues. The case centers on a U.S. district judge's ruling that a Roman Catholic church near San Antonio could not invoke the act to challenge being designated a historic landmark - which would prevent it from demolishing part of its structure to build a larger sanctuary.

As courts and politicians puzzle over the place of religion in public life, members of the clergy strive to help define it.

What is legal vs. appropriate?

Rabbi Frederick Wenger of Congregation Kol Ami believes much of the confusion lies in differences between "what is legal and what is appropriate and good."

It is legal, he said, for people in public positions to offer prayers that are "particularistic" or secular. Whether one does so depends on whether one wishes to be completely inclusive - the listener, it can be the difference between feeling as if one is included or feeling as if one is tolerated."

He cites the difference between worship and theater. In theater, "the actor on stage is performer, the audience is itself and in the background there's a prompter whose job is to talk about the script. In worship, the person on stage is the prompter, the audience is the performer - and God is the audience."
'That's why people will feel comfortable in listening to a speech with which they disagree, even religious speech, but when someone says 'let us pray' and ends on a sectarian note, it may not be a prayer to which I can say 'amen.'

"All of this has nothing to do with what is legal," Rabbi Wenger said. "It has to do with what is sensitive or appropriate in a speaker who wishes to be inclusive."

'Wall' of separation not mandated

People who cry "foul" at public religious expression often believe the so-called "wall of separation" between church and state is mandated by the U.S. Constitution. It's not, according to constitutional law professor Ed Firmage of the University of Utah College of Law. That phrase was coined by President Thomas Jefferson as his view of the ideal. He had seen Europe torn apart by a 100-year religious war. He feared religion meddling in politics as "corrosive and divisive."

Then, religion was the only real threat to the sovereignty of government. Secular states had emerged. He "feared the arrival of a second Episcopal bishop" - hardly worrisome to modern politicians, Firmage said. "Now we might lament the influence is as limited as it is today. If you put down threats to national sovereignty, far down the list would be religious influence."

America, in fact, has moved well beyond any possibility of an established, official church, he said. That's why President Clinton can talk about God and faith without stirring the same controversy that greeted Leavitt's remarks during his recent inaugural address.

The state, Firmage said, is another story. Utah was founded as a theocracy, based on one specific denomination: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Early society and government were built around church doctrine, and a majority of the state's population today is LDS.

Early in its history, however, Firmage said, Utahns chose to become secular. "None of that, however, means that religiously motivated people and churches as such couldn't participate in politics and public life."

Free expression encouraged

In Utah or across the nation, ministers are free to run for office. People of faith - or people with no faith - are equally free to express their views, whether as officeholders or those who elect them.

U.S. Catholic bishops, in fact, have called on voters to do just that. In a report issued by the U.S. Catholic Conference in November, they asked Catholics to use the upcoming election to advance Pope John Paul II's goal of standing up for unborn children, families and immigrants.

In pursuit of that, the bishops said, the church's goal is to be "political but not partisan . . . engaged but not used."

"We hope," they said, "American Catholics, as both believers and citizens, will use the resources of our faith and the opportunities of this democracy to help shape a society more respectful of the life, dignity and rights of the human person, especially the poor and vulnerable."

Clearly, people with strong religious convictions are involved politically. But defining what's appropriate and what crosses the line of religious activity in government isn't easy. Those who interpret and enforce state and federal law grapple with how to allow religious expression, which is as protected as any other form of speech, without allowing government to place what may seem to be a seal of approval on a particular church or on religion itself.

Often, Firmage said, people refer to a "violation of church and state" but actually mean "you're going against a substantive issue that I like."

Degrees of separation

The Rev. Tom Goldsmith, First Unitarian Church, believes people "want separation to be minimal when it's a cause that really matters to you."

But it's "tricky," he said, "when anything smacking of particular ideologies or doctrine gets mixed up in the public realm."

He hopes that government will always err on the side of protecting the diversity of American citizens. "There's a part of me that says the Nativity scene is innocent; it didn't do me any harm even though I don't subscribe to Christianity with a capital C. But I would certainly be in favor of not having any secular display of one belief system or holiday. We are just
too diverse. We have different nationalities, religions, outlooks and we need to honor that.

"We can’t just hide behind the generosity of Christianity that is loving and tolerant. We need to respect the traditions of growing, diverse populations."

The Rev. Jerry Lewis, Southeast Christian Church, said it’s important that public policy not be made based on private religious beliefs. "But when religion or a person’s faith is lived out, it’s going to have room for other people to freely express themselves. I believe no man should be restricted from expressing why he values people in a certain way or why he perceives the well-being of mankind in the light of his own values."

More than that, he said, you can’t take the value system out of the man. So when a politician seeks office, faith - or lack of it - should be considered by voters. "Whatever his concept of God, he will operate in accordance with that. He’ll either be a liar or be faithful."

In Utah, the Rev. Lewis is part of a minority faith, as he was when he lived in a predominantly Catholic area. "If the predominate of a legislative body has a particular leaning, it is always going to color their decisionmaking. You will be compelled to live according to that, but it is not necessarily a negative thing as far as the society is concerned."

When inclusion is 'Ludicrous'

At times, he said, "inclusion of all that call themselves religious becomes ludicrous and ineffective. I’ve seen circumstances when people are asked to open a government meeting with no belief at all. They simply express a humanistic credo and it is ludicrous. Rather than pretending to be open to everyone, we would be just as well off forgetting it."

In terms of the Constitution, though, he has no doubts: "If we’re going to make room for one religion, we’ve got to make room for all. If I had to choose, I’d say let everyone express their belief systems and not try to stifle expression of faith and values."

To him, that means the Nativity scene stays. And so does the Menorah and symbols of other faiths during their holy seasons. In that way, tolerance of others leads to education about and understanding of values held dear by very different people.

The quest for religious tolerance has a long history in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, whose early members were forced to leave the Midwest by those who were intolerant or fearful of their beliefs and practices. The church’s 11th Article of Faith states that members "claim the privilege of worshiping Almighty God according to the dictates of our own conscience, and allow all men the same privilege; let them worship how, where or what they may."

Freedom from religion?

Yet in recent times, LDS leaders have questioned publicly whether freedom of religion has been twisted to become freedom from religion when it comes to religious observance or exercise in public.

Elder Dallin H. Oaks, a former Utah State Supreme Court Justice and a member of the church’s Quorum of the Twelve, has argued that in the past 30 years, many legal decisions regarding freedom of religion have been interpreted in a way that constitutes religious censorship. In an article published in the Wall Street Journal in May 1990, Elder Oaks observed that "In the past, religion had been an accepted part of public life in America. It has become something that had to prove its right to remain in the public square. By the 1970s, earlier principles had hardened into mechanical formulas that can be interpreted in ways hostile to religion."

And President Boyd K. Packer, acting president of the church’s Quorum of the Twelve, has observed that the legal trend to place "the collective rights of the majority in subjugation to the individual rights of any single citizen" is a step toward tyranny. Speaking during Provo’s Freedom Festival celebration in June 1989, he said, "Individual rights as an ideal cannot endure except there be respect for the agency of others.

Responsibility a must

"There is no true freedom without responsibility. Freedom without restraint becomes tyranny of a new and fatal kind. . . . Neither can freedom long survive in a society where the rights of the individual are fanatically promoted regardless of what happens to society . . . . Without some balance, activists, lawyers, legislators, judges and courts who think they are protecting individuals are in fact fabricating a new and subtle and sinister kind of dictatorship," he said.

While the debates rage, "There are areas in which everybody believes religion and expression belongs," said Rabbi Wenger. "The role of advocacy - the idea that meaningful faith has something to say in role of policy. And not only people of faith but faith communities, who advocate what they believe is just policy."
So in debates on abortion, capital punishment, even welfare reform, "Let the games begin," he said. "A teaching function for all of society comes into play. And religious expression is also government by the right to free speech. But beyond that, you get into more complex areas of concern, like whether or not there is indeed a public philosophy that's religiously based."

"That's where people of good will agree to disagree."