Amanda Tyler, Holly Hollman, Melissa Rogers, and Rabbi David Saperstein discuss the complexity in church-state law, the role of religion in public life, the dangers of government promotion of religion, the protections provided by the separation of church and state, and more.

1. The panel begins the discussion by talking about misperceptions people hold about religious liberty, including the idea that government sponsorship of one religion is not a problem for religious liberty. Melissa Rogers states that in addition to being harmful for minority faiths, government-sponsored religion is actually not good for the religion it endorses because the state tends to only magnify the elements of the religion it agrees with while suppressing the voices and perspectives of the faith that criticize the state. Rogers reflects that this leads to a "funhouse version of faith" versus an authentic version that holds our government accountable. Prior to listening to this podcast, what were some of the misperceptions or narratives that you heard about religious liberty today? How do Rogers' points counteract those assumptions? What are some examples of a "funhouse version" of Christianity that you see in our society?

2. Rabbi David Saperstein attests that some of the greatest abuses throughout history came from places where church and state were not separated. In fact, he argues that our wall of separation in the United States leads to far more people going to worship, believing in God, and holding religious values. At 15:47, he says, "One of the greatnesses of America was precisely separating church and state, and that protection of religion has allowed religion to flourish in America with a diversity and strength unmatched anywhere in the democratic world today." Due to Article VI in the original Constitution (which prohibits any religious test for office) and the First Amendment, the United States is a model for religious freedom and has influenced important global documents, such as the United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Why do you think the separation of church and state has allowed religion to flourish in the United States?

3. The first proclamation in the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement is, “People of all faiths and none have the right and responsibility to engage constructively in the public square” (20:41). While unpacking this statement, Rogers discusses the important role that religious communities can play in public life by offering a conscience for the country. Holly Hollman adds that the power of their moral voice cannot happen if there is not separation between church and state that allows the church to both have the right to organize a protest like any other group and the right to criticize the state openly without being beholden to the state. What role do you think the church should play in the public square? Do religious groups have a responsibility to be a moral voice? Do you see that happening in your community?
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With more than 2,000 different religions, denominations, or sects in America alone, a key principle of the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement is that “Government should not prefer one religion over another or religion over non-religion.” Melissa Rogers clarifies what that statement means. At 29:15, she says, “For a person to say that the government should not favor one religion — my religion — over another religion does not mean that a person has to say that all religions are the same ... [or] there is no exclusive truth in my tradition.” This principle is about human dignity and giving everyone the same opportunity to follow the judgment of their own hearts and minds. What misperceptions do you think others may have about what this statement means? How do you interpret the statement, and why do you think it’s important for the United States, considering our religious diversity? Why would Christian nationalists push back against this statement? Should government ever favor a religion?

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As a result of Project Blitz and other Christian nationalist efforts, Bible literacy bills have become increasingly popular the past few years. However, the Christians Against Christian Nationalism statement says that “Religious instruction is best left to our houses of worship, other religious institutions and families” (32:30). Hollman argues that through the statement, “We’re not saying that there is no role for public schools to teach about religion or religious diversity or respect” (33:55). In fact, the panel argues that teaching about religious understanding, religious liberty, and religious diversity is needed both in the public schools and in places like the State Department. However, teaching about the role of religion is not the same as teaching religious tenets and practices. What responsibility do you think people of faith have to stand up to resist such Bible bills? How do you think a public school teaching about the role of religion differs from how religion is taught in your church?

IN THIS PODCAST

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Former U.S. Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom and director emeritus of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

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