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February 16, 2013: No One Believes in Separation of Church and State

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Title: No One Believes in Separation of Church and State

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2/16/2013—In April I will be speaking in Philadelphia to a regional meeting of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State. This group is unusually open given our political hyper-partisanship. They are willing to listen to me speak in a way that challenges some, not all, of what they believe in. I am working on the talk now. It will be about the common ground that exists between what we call religion and what we call nonbelief. But I will begin with the observation that no one really is committed to separation of church and state beyond certain narrow practices—like giving public money to churches, which everyone opposes. Obviously the religious right does not believe in separation. They want God plastered on every public occasion. They want public piety to be ostentatious, despite Jesus' injunction to pray in secret. Yet the right is not consistent. When it comes to the Obamacare contraception mandate, they plead that religion is a separate realm and that the institutions of religion should be exempt from the demands of law. But if religion is in the public square, why should churches and all believers get any special treatment? That should only happen if religion is separate. In similar inconsistent fashion, the left, including Americans United, want to banish religion from the public square. Religion is separate. But, when churches and their related institutions want separate protection from general law, suddenly religion is no longer a separate realm. Suddenly, religion is to be treated just like everything else. Now, I also do not believe generally in separation. But my reason is different. I don't believe there really are two realms at all. Most of us are believers. Most of us believe in a real but invisible realm of values, such as the true and the beautiful and the good. When we say slavery is wrong, most of us mean wrong inherently and forever, not wrong because humans finally agreed it is wrong. Wrong from the point of view of the universe. And that is a religious view.