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Our Government Engages in the Culture War

The month since the Inauguration of President Trump, has been a governmental tempest the likes of which I have never seen before. This storm has impacted all three branches of our government. The lengthy drama around the confirmation of Betsy DeVos as Secretary of Education is just one of the story lines in the cultural conflict that is playing out before us and it appears the conflict will continue beyond confirmations. Two days after her confirmation Secretary DeVos attempted to visit a public school in Washington DC and was blocked by protestors who, according to some reports, violently blocked her access to the school. The furor around Secretary DeVos is largely because she has a new vision for schools in our nation, wanting to lend support to charter and private schools where people of faith could choose to send their children as an alternative to public schools that have become ardently secular.

Some would say that the current cultural division is the deepest since the civil war. However, the civil war focused on one important concept, resolving the grievous sin of slavery that festered for almost 100 years before boiling over into the deadliest war of our history. The current cultural conflict includes a panoply of issues that have emerged only over the past few years:

- Should parents be given alternatives to public schools, including faith based schools, for the education of their children?
- Can we find ways for people of faith to live out and share their faith freely in schools, the workplace and other public venues without people of different or no faith feeling threatened?
- How can we combat the growing disease of drugs and the associated crime and gang violence that has long plagued our inner cities?
- Should our nation have more restrictive policies regarding immigration into the country in order to protect citizens from terrorism?
- Have the federal government and the courts gone too far in regulating private enterprise both in areas of social values and health, safety and environmental regulations?
- Should free speech be reined in to protect the sensibilities of those it may offend?
- Is our country to continue as a federation of states, each having significant influence in the direction of the nation, or are we to become a pure democracy in which majority votes of the entire nation could overrule the desires of a majority of states, effectively drowning out rural interests and voices?

Each of these are hot button issues that we or others consider very important to our way of life. They have caused some to go to the streets in protests that at times have also crossed the line to become violent illegal activity. Many of them are rooted in our conception of freedom of religion and freedom of speech.

On a recent visit to the National Museum of American Jewish History I was struck by two quotes which served as a reminder that the freedom to argue publicly for the tenants of our faith, and our obligation to protect the religious voice of those who disagree with us, have always been at the core of what has made America great.

The first quote was from Thomas Jefferson, who wrote in the [Bill for Establishing Religious Freedom in Virginia in 1786](#),

all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities.

Clearly Jefferson felt that our culture should be one in which argument about religion should occur frequently and would not have imagined that those of us who pursue the “civil capacity,” of teaching would have our freedom to speak about our religious beliefs hampered.

The second quote was from President Washington in his [Letter to the Hebrew Congregation in Newport, Rhode Island in August 1790](#),

Happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support...”

“May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants— while everyone shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

May the father of all mercies scatter light, and not darkness, upon our paths, and make us all in our several vocations useful here, and in His own due time and way everlastingly happy.

Washington felt that discouraging bigotry and allowing everyone, regardless of their religious beliefs, to pursue happiness was fundamental to the American concept of freedom.

Christians teachers also have a burden to pursue freedom of speech and religion because scripture tells us that the reconciliation of our students to God through Christ is their only real hope for peace:

All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.

2Corinthians 5:18-20

Many Christian teachers would appreciate more civil protections to profess their faith without persecution. However, we know that regardless of civil protections at times even a gentle Christian witness will stir people to violence as it did when Jesus was crucified for merely assenting to Pilate’s assessment that he is a King, but his kingdom is, “not of this world.” (John 18:36). Jesus told us to expect similar treatment, “Indeed, the hour is coming when whoever kills you will think he is offering service to God.” (John 16:2) We need to be in prayer for each other that regardless of persecution that may come we will all be faithful to the ministry of reconciliation given to us as ambassadors for Christ.

On a slightly different but related topic, I was greatly encouraged when at the swearing in of Jeff Sessions as Attorney General President Trump said of Sessions, “He has devoted his life to in the cause of justice and believes deeply that all people are equals in the eyes of the law, and very importantly for Jeff and so many of us, also in the eyes of God.” He then went on to say to Sessions, “I wish you God’s

wisdom and blessings in your journey.” It was troubling that some media outlets in their on-line videos of the swearing in cut these references to God, but nevertheless it was good to hear President Trump acknowledging a need for God.

CEAI is interested in your thoughts on the ideas expressed here. Members can express their thoughts on education and faith by entering comments below. Personal comments may be addressed to the author at JMitchell@ceai.org. John Mitchell is the Washington, DC Area Director for the Christian Educators Association.