

Church and State: The Debate at Tate
Event Summary
November 30, 2006

G. K. Chesterton once remarked that “Religious liberty might be supposed to mean that everybody is free to discuss religion. In practice it means that hardly anybody is allowed to mention it.” In this “nation with the soul of a church,” just what does religious liberty entail? On Thursday, November 30, 2006, Edward Tabash (Americans United for the Separation of Church and State) and Charles Shreffler (Mohrman and Kaardal, P.A.) met at the University of Minnesota to debate this question, in “Church and State: The Debate at Tate,” cosponsored by the Mars Hill Students and the Campus Atheists and Secular Humanists.

Mr. Tabash opened the debate by claiming that the government must be neutral with respect to believer and non-believer, arguing that “belief or lack thereof should make no difference in terms of governance.” He supported his contention by arguing that both Thomas Jefferson and James Madison supported what he termed “strict separation,” defined as a prohibition against the government transforming “purely religious concepts” into prohibitory law.

In his opening remarks, Mr. Shreffler stated his agreement with Mr. Tabash’s position that the government should treat believer and non-believer exactly alike before the law, but qualified this statement by arguing that there is as much room for religious belief in public life as for non-belief. Mr. Shreffler argued that to deny this position is to automatically disenfranchise an entire class of citizens and privilege all non-believers. Government should not support religion, said Mr. Shreffler, nor should it be hostile to it. In arguing for government accommodation of religion and no religion alike, Mr. Shreffler sought out a reasonable middle ground between strict separation and theocracy.

An extended question and answer period followed, with questions initially focusing on Intelligent Design (ID) theory in the public schools. Mr. Shreffler argued that equal time for evolution and ID was a fair solution, whereas Mr. Tabash believed that to offer ID equal time would necessitate offering equal time to whatever other theories might be postulated. Other questions focused on which morality, if any, should be legislated, and whether denying religious believers the opportunity to impact public policy was not, in fact, an explicit denial of their freedom of expression.

In their closing statements, Mr. Tabash stated that allowing religion to impact legislation could lead to the outlawing of homosexuality, contraceptives, and vasectomies, among other things. Mr. Shreffler stated that although Mr. Tabash started out arguing for the reasonable position of equality before law, his final position denied freedom of expression to believers. Mr. Shreffler concluded by reiterating his support for government accommodation of belief and non-belief alike.

This event was the second annual debate the MacLaurin Institute has cosponsored with the Mars Hill Students and the Campus Atheists and Secular Humanists.