



Talking to the press

When Reporters Come to You

Once you have established yourself, or your group, as a credible source of information, reporters will begin calling you for quotes and comments about church-state issues. Here are some basic pointers for dealing with those situations.

- Remember that reporters work on deadlines. If you receive a message from a reporter, call back promptly. Reporters do not always work on deadline, but if that's not the case, they need to hear from you as soon as possible.
- All conversations with reporters are considered on the record unless you say otherwise. This means that anything you say can be written down by the reporter and published in the newspaper or broadcast over the air. Don't say anything you do not want to be made public. If, for some reason, you want to tell a reporter something that you don't want him or her to publicize, preface it by saying, "This comment is off the record."
- If a reporter calls you about an issue you are not sure about, or with a question you can't answer, feel free to decline the interview or refer the reporter to someone else you may be able to help. A referral is good because it helps build the relationship.

If a reporter does approach you, here are some Fundamental Tips for Interviews

(Reprinted with permission from the Rainforest Action Network's "Activist Toolbox.")

- Discipline your message! Use your slogan or message as much as possible.
- Familiarize yourself with three soundbites (with backup information). Soundbites are short, pithy messages that clearly and fully communicate your message. They are the ideal one or two sentence quote you want to see in tomorrow's newspaper article. Write them down.
- Always turn the question at hand back to your message. Use "bridging" to bridge the gap between the question and the more important issue at hand.
- Anticipate questions – have well thought-out answers ready to respond with.
- Know the opposition's arguments and how to respond to them.
- Practice—even people who speak to reporters all the time practice.
- An interview is never over even if the tape stops rolling. Everything you say to a journalist is on the record.
- Don't get frustrated by difficult questions—just stick to your messages.
- If you slip up, don't worry. Just ask the reporter to start again (unless it's live).
- If you need more time to think, ask the reporter to repeat the question or ask a clarifying question—or simply pause and think before answering.
- If you don't know an answer to a question, don't force it. Try to return to your message. If it's an interview for print media, tell the reporter you'll track down the answer later and call them back.
- Tell the reporter you have more to add if he or she overlooks something you think is important.

Hypothetical Questions from the Media

When reporters come to you... Don't be caught off guard

Q: *Isn't it true that the U.S. Constitution never even mentions church-state separation?*

A: The First Amendment includes the concept of church-state separation. That principle is the practical effect of the religion clauses, which say, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Our founders believed the First Amendment separated church and state. In 1819, it was James Madison, the father of the Constitution, who wrote, "Strongly guarded...is the separation between religion and government in the Constitution of the United States." Other founders, such as Thomas Jefferson, also used the phrase "separation of church and state." This term is simply a shorthand way of expressing what the First Amendment's religion clauses require.

Q: *Wasn't America founded as a Christian nation?*

A: To begin with, our indigenous population was certainly not Christian. Later, when European settlers arrived, many came to escape religious persecution and sought to find freedom to worship. Some of them established repressive theocratic colonies. Years later, as our Founding Fathers wrote the U.S. Constitution, they purposely created a secular republic, as they did not want the new federal government to have any authority over religion. As it stands today, our U.S. Constitution firmly promotes religious liberty.

Q: *Hasn't the Supreme Court deemed America to be a Christian nation?*

A: In an old case from 1892, *Holy Trinity Church v. United States*, Justice David Brewer wrote in *dicta* (a non-official, personal statement from a judge) to express his opinion that the United States is a Christian nation. Brewer seemed to be saying that most Americans are Christians, not that the nation is officially Christian. In any case, *Holy Trinity* is now considered an antiquated and obscure decision that has rarely been cited by modern courts.

Q. *Doesn't the First Amendment protect freedom of religion, not freedom from religion?*

A: The First Amendment protects both. It guarantees the right of every American to worship where he or she chooses or not to worship at all. The First Amendment also protects Americans from compulsive, state-sponsored religious worship. In that sense, it protects freedom from religion.

Q: *How do school vouchers affect church-state separation?*

A: The voucher program affects only private schools, 85 percent of which implement a sectarian religious curriculum. Vouchers do not and cannot help all families equally and are in fact a form of government subsidy of religion. All Americans pay taxes that help to fund the public education system, as well as other public services such libraries, hospitals and police departments. Those who desire privately run services that inculcate religion should be prepared to pay for them without government support.

Q: *Haven't prayer and Bible reading been removed from our schools?*

A: No. Religion has never been banned from our school system, and students retain the right to pray voluntarily or read religious books during their free time. However, school-sponsored worship such as mandatory prayer and Bible reading have been declared unconstitutional. These practices, the courts have ruled, interfere with the rights of parents to shape their children's religious upbringing. The First Amendment does not allow state-sponsored religious coercion. We cannot have religious freedom if children are forced to participate in activities that conflict with beliefs they are taught in the home.

Q: *What's the big deal with "under god" in the Pledge of Allegiance? It has been in there for a long time and has never been a problem until now.*

A: The Pledge of Allegiance, as originally written by Francis Bellamy in 1892, did not contain the phrase "under God." In 1954, during the Red-scare era, Congress added the phrase "under god." Many non-believers oppose the inclusion of "under God" in the Pledge, pointing out that they are forced to affirm belief in God as a condition of expressing love of country. No American should be compelled to take a religious oath against his or her will.

Q: *Why do you oppose the Federal Marriage Amendment?*

A: This amendment would take the view of marriage held by some (but not all) religious groups and write it into law. Some religious groups recognize same-sex marriages; others do not. Some legal scholars believe the FMA would ban even private, extra-legal same-sex ceremonies by religious groups. In addition, proponents of the amendment have not been able to articulate a secular rationale for changing the Constitution in this manner. When pressed, their arguments always revert to religion. U.S. laws should not be based on religious rationales.

Q: *Why do church-state separationists oppose the "faith-based" initiative?*

A: The term "faith-based" initiative is a euphemism for government-supported religion. Americans United lauds the good social service work done by religious groups but believes these efforts must be funded with voluntary contributions, not tax dollars. Many of these programs include religious proselytism. Such activities must not be subsidized with tax money.

In addition, some religious groups want the right to take government money yet still discriminate on the grounds of religion, marital status and sexual orientation when hiring staff for their programs. Allowing tax money to support such rank discrimination would be a sharp break from traditional practices in America and would represent a retreat on civil rights.