

BOOKS

# Puzzling out that church-state split

Baltimore law professor Michael Meyerson seeks to reconcile America's secular, spiritual sides

BY MARY CAROLE MCCAULEY  
The Baltimore Sun

For Michael Meyerson, the Great Seal of the United States encapsulates the struggle over the relationship between religion and government that has become a defining characteristic of our nation.

The front of the seal, with its famous eagle, olive branch and arrows of war, is entirely secular. But the reverse, in which the eye and the inscription both refer to a divine providence, is "undeniably religious," Meyerson writes.

Americans are constantly reminded of that duality, since the seal has been reproduced on \$1 bills since 1935. Meyerson's third book, "Endowed by Our Creator: The Birth of Religious Freedom in America," represents the author's attempt to understand how those two very different points of view can coexist simultaneously in our body politic.

"Our nation's framers knew that religion could be a source of incredible good in our society, but also of unspeakable evil," Meyerson says. "That continues to this day."

The author is a professor at the University of Baltimore School of Law who specializes in constitutional issues. He'll expand on his observations Wednesday during a reading at the central Enoch Pratt Free Library.

**Your book has been praised in glowing terms by both the magazine Christianity Today and by the radio show the American Freethought Podcast. Both evangelicals and atheists have been impressed by the book's fair-mindedness and by your exhaustive research. Were you surprised?**

It gave me a lot of hope. It really did. It takes intellectual courage to treat your opponents' views with respect and to consider that the story that you're telling might be wrong.

**What inspired you to write "Endowed By Our Creator"?**

In 2005, the Supreme Court handed down a decision ruling that the Ten Commandments couldn't be posted in a Kentucky courthouse. Justice [David] Souter wrote the majority opinion, and he made a very cogent, well-reasoned argument for the separation of church and state, and I thought, "He's absolutely right."

Then I read Justice [Antonin] Scalia's dissenting opinion. He made a very cogent, well-reasoned argument that all references to religion couldn't be completely banned from public discourse, and I thought, "He's absolutely right."

That troubled me, because I figured they can't both be right. So I started doing research.

**About that research: Your 275-page book contains an additional 77 pages of footnotes.**

First, I read everything contemporary I could find on the subject and realized that everybody doing political history was cherry-picking their quotes, cutting off half of the quote or sometimes making up quotes altogether.



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Michael Meyerson

LLOYD FOX/BALTIMORE SUN

"It all comes down to respect," says Michael Meyerson. "If people want their own beliefs to be respected, being understanding of their opponents is part of the deal."

## If you go

Michael Meyerson will read and sign copies from his new book at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday at the central Enoch Pratt Free Library, 400 Cathedral St. Admission is free. Information: 410-396-5430 or prattlibrary.org.

So I read their sources. Eventually, my reading took me back to the framing fathers and the records of the Constitutional Convention. I went as far back as I could, with as many original sources as I could, to see if I could figure out whose story was correct. It took me two years.

The thing about the Internet is that the library's always open. It's so seductive.

## Whose story was correct?

They [Justices Souter and Scalia] were both half-right. There's truth on both sides.

The framing generation believed that religion tends to make people well-behaved

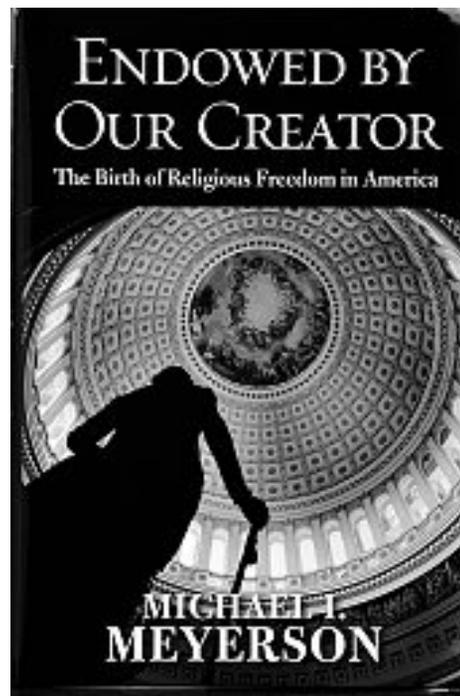
and could help unify a diverse nation. But they also realized that we are a religiously pluralistic society, and that the government shouldn't favor any particular creed. They thought everyone should feel welcome.

## How did America first become so obsessed with religious differences?

There's a myth that people left England for America to practice religious tolerance. They left to practice their own religion, not to extend the same freedom to everyone else. Most of the colonies had one or two dominant faiths: New England became Congregationalist, while the South became Anglican, and so on. And they did what dominant religions tend to do, which is to dominate.

There was incredible hostility toward the Catholics, for example. Starting in 1774, there were annual "Pope's Day" celebrations in which effigies of the pope were burned in public bonfires.

**Your book mentions that it took Maryland longer than most states to end**



## The book

"Endowed by Our Creator: The Birth of Religious Freedom in America" Yale University Press. 384 pages, \$32.50.

## religious discrimination.

It wasn't until 1826, when the "Jew Bill" was passed, that Jewish politicians were allowed to serve in the Maryland legislature. And until 1961 — during my lifetime — state officials were still required to declare that they believed in God.

## Is there a middle ground between those who think that the U.S. should favor Christianity and those demanding the building of an impenetrable wall between church and state?

I think we should realize that religion can't be completely cleansed from public discourse. To try is unnecessarily divisive.

At the same time, we must realize that religion can also be used to divide and disrespect and hurt people. We need to make sure that people of all faiths are valued.

It all comes down to respect. If people want their own beliefs to be respected, being understanding of their opponents is part of the deal.

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