

Americans divided on church-state separation: Religious liberty prized

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About half of Americans consider freedom of religion to be a top legal and guaranteed right, but a similar percentage think separation of church and state has become too severe or is not necessary in this country, a new survey indicates.

Asked which legal guarantee other than freedom of speech is most important, 52 percent of Americans cited freedom of religion, reported the Council for America's First Freedom. The Richmond, Virginia-based nonprofit organization, which is dedicated to promoting religious liberty, released results of its first commissioned survey September 14.

Nineteen percent of respondents chose freedom of the press, 16 percent picked the right to bear arms and 10 percent said freedom of assembly.

As to how they regard the separation of church and state, the respondents were evenly divided: 49 percent said it was important to keep religion and government separated. Another 29 percent said church-state separation has become "too severe and needs to be less strictly interpreted," while 20 percent said "there is really no need to separate church and state" in the country today.

Eighty-three percent of respondents said they would not support legislation creating an "official religion" in the U.S., and 37 percent said religious differences are the primary root cause of armed conflict around the globe.

Stephen Elliott, executive director of the council, said in a statement that the survey prompted mixed feelings on his part. "The results are at the same time heartening and disquieting," he said.

"They show a public that holds religious liberty as among our most prized freedoms, yet, in an apparent contradiction, is ambivalent about the constitutional tenet that keeps church and state separate."

The telephone survey was conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, which polled 500 men and 500 women during the week of August 9. It has a margin of error of plus or minus 5 percentage points. -*Religion News Service*