

AUSTRALIAN COUNCIL FOR THE DEFENCE OF GOVERNMENT SCHOOLS

Press Release 1048

The Plight of Religious Liberty in America:

Reflections on the first 'Religious Liberty' Commission meeting

[Rachel Laser](#)

The following article by the President of Americans United and CEO Rachel Laser originally appeared in the [July-August issue](#) of AU's Church & State magazine.

Poet and civil rights activist Maya Angelou famously said: “When someone shows you who they are, believe them the first time.” I was reminded of those words when, on June 16, I was reeling with all sorts of emotions from attending the first meeting of President Donald Trump’s Religious Liberty Commission.

President Trump had established the commission, which he housed at the Department of Justice, through an executive order he signed on the National Day of Prayer on May 1, 2025. Notably, in his somewhat incoherent remarks at the signing ceremony, Trump was dismissive of the separation of church and state: “They say separation between church and state ... I said, ‘All right, let’s forget about that for one time... .’” While attacks like this on church-state separation are all too common these days, let’s commit to pause and feel outrage every single time the president of the United States degrades this foundational principle.

Though Trump’s executive order didn’t mention Christianity, the fact sheet explaining the commission rooted its existence in the “previous administration’s ... target[ing of] peaceful Christians while ignoring violent, anti-Christian offenses.”

Infiltrating the Commission

Though these meetings by law are required to be announced and open to the public, I was still surprised when I signed up — indicating AU as my organizational affiliation — and got in. While leading Americans United for 7.5 years, I have not prioritized attending meetings hostile to our issue. My schedule is already extremely full of actions to build our movement. But I have always wanted to witness such a meeting

to see the body language and hear the words live, rather than just reading about them or watching them on my computer.

So, dressed in a blue suit with the Americans United logo and the American flag pinned to my lapel, I headed to the Museum of the Bible (the location of the meeting). There, with multiple American and Department of Justice flags waving in the background, I observed the commission members shamelessly advance three Christian Nationalist myths.

A trio of Christian Nationalist myths

The first was the idea that America is a Christian country. This government meeting opened with – you guessed it – a prayer “in Jesus’ Holy name.” I wondered how Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, the one non-Christian on the commission, felt at that moment. Soon, Carrie Prejean Boller, former Miss California USA (until she was stripped of her crown for alleged breaches of contract), who was sitting directly next to the rabbi, was pronouncing (quoting America’s first Supreme Court chief justice): “It is the duty to prefer Christians” as “rulers.” It was impossible to take the next commission member seriously when he spoke about a “robust scope for religious liberty.”

The second Christian Nationalist myth I heard repeatedly was the idea, as articulated by commission member Kelly Shackelford, president and CEO of the Christian Nationalist group First Liberty, that “our freedoms, our rights, come from God and no government can take that away.” This mentality, when applied to Trump, whom many Christian Nationalists believe is God’s vessel for their agenda, means that Trump can do no wrong, even when he is violating the Constitution. Under this reasoning, religious extremists can justify violence, upending our democracy, and discriminating against and harming people “in the name of God.”

The third myth that arose again and again was the notion echoing the commission fact sheet that, as commission member and longtime TV host Dr. Phil McGraw put it, “today religious liberty [for Christians] is under assault.” Some commission members spoke of “unjust laws” where even religious exemptions would be a “not sufficient” remedy. Others spoke of the problem of the “naked public square” where religion is not welcome. The irony is that Christians do fine when it comes to religion in the public square — from “In God We Trust” on money to every session of Congress opening with a primarily Christian prayer. It’s religious minorities and the nonreligious who are generally trampled on or excluded.

I must confess that I only managed to stay for a few hours, leaving before Attorney General Pam Bondi addressed the commission. I had heard enough. It’s critically important to keep fighting for church-state separation right now. Perhaps you, too,

can take inspiration from these powerful additional words of Maya Angelou: “You may write me down in history / With your bitter, twisted lies, / You may trod me in the very dirt / But still, like dust, I’ll rise.”

Rachel Laser

Is the President and CEO of Americans United for Separation of Church and State. And she is coming to Australia between 17 and 31 October 2025 at the invitation of the National Secular Lobby.

Rachel believes that the work of Americans United for Separation of Church and State (AU) has never been more important than it is today.

She argues that Christian Nationalism in the US is a serious threat to religious freedom and the separation of church and state. She has written op-eds for the New York Times, MSNBC, CNN, Fox News, PBS New House, CNBC, and ABC News along these lines.

Americans United brings together people of all faiths and of no religious faith to fight in the courts, legislatures and the public square for freedom without favour and equality without exception.

She was raised as a Reform Jew and understands why US laws should treat everyone fairly and equally. She is a graduate of Harvard University and the University of Chicago Law School. She and her husband have three children.

During her career Rachel has built bridges between disparate groups on a host of issues related to church-state separation. As the deputy director for the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, Rachel ran interfaith campaigns on LGBTI+equality, immigration reform, gun violence prevention, and paid sick, family and medical leave.

She directed the Culture Program at Third Way, a Washington D.C. progressive think tank specialising in understanding and reaching political moderates.

DOGS are looking forward to meeting her when she arrives in Australia in October.

LISTEN TO THE DOGS PROGRAM

855 ON THE AM DIAL: 12.00 NOON SATURDAYS <http://www.3cr.org.au/dogs>

