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To: [Board of Education](#)
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There was a bit of an outcry in response to Trustee Tiede's opening comments at the February 22, 2023 School Board meeting where she loosely paraphrased a statement from the Bible. Ditto for comments by an individual from the gallery who also quoted from the Bible. As is usual in these sorts of situations, the phrase "separation of church and state" was flung out there to oppose the idea of someone daring to express religious sentiment in the public square, especially in a public school setting.

When people use the phrase "separation of church and state" to defend opposition to religious expression or practice in the public square, it is kind of like a hockey player shooting into their own net if you consider it in its original context.

The expression "separation of church and state" originated in a private letter from Thomas Jefferson to the Dansbury Baptist Association (DBA) in 1802. The DBA had expressed concerns that their state constitution was insufficient for protecting religious freedom. Jefferson responded by referencing portions of the First Amendment, stating, *"legislature should 'make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,' thus building a wall of separation between Church & State."* It is generally believed that by his use of this phrase, Jefferson did not mean that religious exercise or expression should never occur on government property. On the contrary, he regularly infused his government work with his confessions of faith in God. He clearly believed his government allowed its citizens to freely express their personal religious convictions even in a government setting. It is generally believed that his use of the phrase "separation of church and state" meant, in his perspective that religious debate or expression should not be shut down but that people should be guaranteed the freedom to partake in it respectfully.

In 1947, the U.S. Supreme Court supported its decision to forbid religious instruction in public schools with the claim *"in the words of Jefferson, the clause against establishment of religion by law was intended to erect 'a wall of separation between church and state'."* This decision made it seem as though Jefferson's phrase supported completely severing public and religious life. Was that a stretch? When considering Jefferson's own life, one would think so given the inconsistency of their interpretation of his words and Jefferson's own life and actions while serving in government. Nevertheless, since that time, that phrase has been used to suppress all religious expression in public education in both the United States and Canada, not just the formal instruction of religion in public schools.

Sadly, in many countries today, religious freedom is still revolutionary. In this country, we still have the ability to freely exercise our freedom of religion and right of belief in our personal and professional lives, even when we work in a government setting. This freedom is, however, being quickly eroded. Rather than punishing those who have the courage to publicly model this freedom for us, thereby helping preserve those freedoms for all, as members of this local public school community we should be recognizing that they are helping keep these freedoms alive, and use the opportunity to respectfully consider and debate the concepts raised - religious or otherwise - rather than just shutting down forums for public discourse. How else will we model this kind of public discourse and exchange of ideas for students in our public education system? As adults responsible for encouraging critical thinking in the students we serve, why not set parameters for respectful dialogue rather than shutting down the dialogue altogether.

Respectfully,
Laurie Bowen
Resident of West Kelowna