MERCER DELIVERS SPEECH AT BAYLOR

By Andrew Phillips

Mercer University President Bill Underwood said Monday night that the First Amendment guarantees a freedom of religion that protects American citizens from state-sponsored religion.

Underwood defended the right to freely practice religion on the Baylor campus as part of the annual Baptist Joint Committee lecture series. He said citizens deserve the right to practice religion freely because it allows them freedom to achieve the American dream, a dream that he defines as economic and social development.

“This is the land of opportunity. The freedom to pursue our dreams is a part of who we are,” Underwood said. “By guaranteeing a free religious and intellectual market, the First Amendment has created here, in the United States, the most robust religious environment of any nation in the world.”

Baylor President Ken Starr introduced Underwood at the lecture. “No subject is more rooted in historical Baptist values than the separation of church and state,” Starr said. Underwood was a law professor and the interim Baylor president before going to Mercer.

Underwood told the audience that Christian Nationalism is one of the biggest challenges to overcome in dealing with the right to freely practice religion. “[Christian Nationalism] is the result of a relentless campaign by Christian Nationalists to rewrite our nation’s history,” Underwood said.

Underwood said Christian Nationalists believe America was established as a Christian nation and that the state has a duty and right to support a state-sponsored Christianity.

There was a consensus in America from the beginning to keep the church and state separated, Underwood said. “The First Amendment erected a wall of separation between the church and state,” he said.

But Underwood told the audience that the Supreme Court’s 1962 decision on prayer in schools changed the consensus that church and state should remain separate. Justice Hugo Black wrote in the majority opinion of the Supreme Court on the case *Engel v. Vitale* (1962) that the government had no right to sponsor a prayer in school.

Underwood explained that the Bill of Rights exists to protect the minority, those who practice a religion with little representation. But Underwood said that people often don’t support government neutrality, which is the idea that the government should not support one religion at the expense of the minority religion.

In 2009 Supreme Court Justice Antonin Scalia told an Orthodox Jewish newspaper Hamodia that he doesn’t believe in neutrality.

“According to Justice Scalia, the government is permitted to pick and choose among religions,” Underwood said. “The question then becomes, which religion is the government permitted to favor?”

Underwood said that if the government chooses one religion to sponsor it will always excludes some religions and supports others. He told the audience that Christian Nationalists support a state-sponsored religion by thinking that America was founded as a Christian nation.

Junior business major Elizabeth Randall, who attended the lecture, said that she was surprised by what Underwood said in the lecture. “Everyone kind of assumes that America was founded on Christianity. I was surprised when he said it wasn’t,” she said. “School and society has taught us that America was founded on Christianity.”

But Underwood said the idea that America was founded as a Christian Nation is a misunderstanding. “Nor is it true that our legal system is founded on the Ten Commandments. It’s just not true. To the contrary, our laws don’t prohibit blasphemy, coveting, adultery or failing to honor our parents,” he said.

Underwood said that it would be incorrect to assume that just because murder and theft are prohibited in the Ten Commandments that are nation was founded on Christianity. “Every nation in the world [prohibits murder and theft],” Underwood said.

 Underwood questioned the idea of a state-sponsored religion when he told the audience what could happen if America sponsored one religion. “Think about a country where we fight elections over which prayer we are going to impose on our children,” Underwood said. “We could also impose mandatory Bible study.”

Underwood said that if the government came to this, it would not only violate the First Amendment, but would destroy the foundations of American society.