

# Adams, Discussing Faith, Dismisses Idea of Separating Church and State

Mayor Eric Adams also suggested that banning organized public school prayer was a mistake, saying, “When we took prayers out of schools, guns came into schools.”



By Dana Rubinstein

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The annual interfaith breakfast hosted on Tuesday by Mayor Eric Adams began normally enough. A choir sang a rousing rendition of “My Country ’Tis of Thee.” A rabbi spoke. So did Buddhist and Muslim leaders.

And then things started to get surreal.

The mayor’s closest aide, Ingrid Lewis-Martin, took the stage to declare that the Adams administration “doesn’t believe” in the separation of church and state, characterizing the mayor of New York City as “definitely one of the chosen” as she introduced him.

Mr. Adams clearly had no issue with how Ms. Lewis-Martin, a chaplain, described his views.

“Ingrid was so right,” Mr. Adams said, to the astonishment of some of the religious leaders who filled the New York Public Library’s glass-domed reception hall on Fifth Avenue. “Don’t tell me about no separation of church and state. State is the body. Church is the heart. You take the heart out of the body, the body dies.”

“I can’t separate my belief because I’m an elected official,” he continued, over scattered applause.

He went on to suggest that his path to the mayoralty was divinely ordained, saying that when he implements policies, he does so in a “godlike approach.”

At another point, Mr. Adams seemed to suggest that it was a mistake for the Supreme Court to ban mandated prayer in public schools, as it did in 1962. “When we took prayers out of schools, guns came into schools,” he said.

The phrase “separation of church and state” is not in the Constitution, but the First Amendment’s statement that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” has been widely interpreted to dictate such a separation.

Mr. Adams’s suggestion that he did not endorse the divide alarmed some New Yorkers in the audience, including Rabbi Abby Stein. She said that she and several people sharing her table had the same, immediate reaction upon hearing the mayor’s remarks on that topic: “No, no, no, no.”

Rabbi Stein said it was “unhinged and dangerous” of Mr. Adams to speak so dismissively about what she called such a critical tenet of American society.

“I respect people talking about using their faith to help people,” said the rabbi, who met Mr. Adams in June 2018 when, as Brooklyn borough president, he honored her and other L.G.B.T.Q. activists during Pride Week. “This wasn’t that.”

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Rabbi Stein noted that such rhetoric was especially harmful amid numerous instances of people citing their religious faith while targeting, for instance, drag queen story hours, including in New York City.

“I don’t think that this helps,” she said.

Donna Lieberman, executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union, described herself on Tuesday afternoon as “speechless” upon hearing the mayor’s remarks.

“The mayor is entitled to his own religious beliefs or nonbeliefs, and, the N.Y.C.L.U. would defend his right to hold those beliefs,” Ms. Lieberman said. “But, as mayor, he’s bound to uphold the Constitution, which provides for separation of church and state. And the separation of church and state is essential for the mayor and everyone else in the country to be able to freely exercise their own religious or nonreligious values.”

Fabien Levy, a spokesman for Mr. Adams, suggested that too much fuss was being made of the mayor’s remarks. The mayor was merely saying, Mr. Levy argued, that faith guides his actions.

“As the mayor said before an interfaith group comprising hundreds of representatives from a multitude of religions, you can’t remove the heart from the body,” Mr. Levy said. “The policies we make as an administration are rooted in the mayor’s belief in the creator.”

It has been a long time since New York City had an overtly religious mayor. Mr. Adams’s immediate predecessor, Bill de Blasio, considered himself an unaffiliated “spiritual” person. Mr. de Blasio’s predecessor, Michael R. Bloomberg, was a secular Jew. He belonged to Temple Emanu-El, a Reform synagogue on Fifth Avenue, but rarely attended services, his spokesman said.

Mr. Adams, who grew up attending a storefront church in Queens, identifies as Christian, but of no particular denomination. He was elected to office with strong bases of support in churchgoing portions of Brooklyn and Queens.

But he also has a lowercase catholic approach to spirituality and mysticism. He has at least one Buddha statue. He has spoken in earnest about the energy emitted from stones. And he seems to view his own rise from police officer to mayor of the financial and media capital of the United States as divinely ordained.

“I strongly believe in all of my heart, God said, ‘I’m going to take the most broken person and I’m going to elevate him to the place of being the mayor of the most powerful city on the globe,’” Mr. Adams said on Tuesday. “He could have made me the mayor of Topeka, Kan.”

The mayor of Topeka could not be reached for immediate comment.

Ed Shanahan contributed reporting.