

Written by **Matt Dodrill**, Senior
Pastor, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church

FAITH *Matters*

Thomas Jefferson once said that religion can neither pick our pockets nor break our legs.

It goes without saying that religion shouldn't be in the business of pilfering or causing bodily harm, but Jefferson wasn't really talking about religious malice *per se*. He was making a more fundamental claim about religion's place in society.

Around the fifteenth century, the concept of "religion" was conceived as an interior impulse of the soul, and in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, it was reduced to an abstract set of propositional beliefs. Concurrent with these developments was the creation of nation-states, which were thought to be domains of the human body, whereas religion was thought to be a domain of the human soul. In other words, the state is "public," and religion is "private."



PULASKI HEIGHTS
BAPTIST CHURCH



Save the date:
June 19, 2022
Margaret Kolb Lecture Series

Guest Speaker:
Dr. Angela Gorrell, Assistant Professor
of Practical Theology at Baylor's
George W. Truett Theological Seminary

2200 Kavanaugh Blvd., Little Rock, AR
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So when Jefferson quips about religion's inability to pick pockets and break legs, he's saying that private beliefs are not dangerous.

Indeed, once religion was purged from the public realm, it was domesticated and confined to the private realm of the individual soul. This had devastating consequences for ecclesiastical bodies, which were heretofore conceived as polities (from Greek *polis*, meaning "city-state") in their own right. The church, for instance, was seen as a body politic that offered an exemplary form of life together — a *polis* that bore witness to the state regarding public life. But now that religion was privatized, its public witness was diminished — neither able to pick pockets nor break legs.

Thank God Jefferson's view didn't prevail during the Civil Rights Movement. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s campaign for desegregation, demilitarization, and economic democracy was born out of the black church's *public* witness. During that same period, Margaret L. Kolb, a member of Pulaski Heights Baptist Church, became a leader and organizer of the Women's Emergency Committee (WEC), launched in response to Orval Faubus' obstruction of desegregation in Little Rock public schools.

When describing the WEC, Kolb said in an interview: "We were church women who had a strong sense of right and wrong and a strong sense of responsibility for equal rights ... We were building a future for what we considered New Testament thinking ... It was challenging ... to be disciples that followed Jesus' example."

Indeed, Kolb understood what it meant to follow a Messiah who was crucified for his public actions rather than his private beliefs. For her, New Testament thinking involved the recovery of public faith — not the kind that would break legs, but the kind that would break the chains of oppression in her beloved city.

In her honor, Pulaski Heights Baptist Church is launching the Margaret L. Kolb Lecture Series on Faith and Public Life. You can find more information on this page's advertisement. I hope you'll join us for this inaugural event, and I hope you'll be inspired by Margaret Kolb's public witness.