

Religion in a Free Society -1992

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Recently a group of religious and political leaders and scholars from all around the world met in Budapest, Hungary, to discuss the practical challenges faced by the former communist nations that are moving toward some form of religious liberty. The concept of religious freedom is revolutionary for many countries, and they are struggling with many potentially divisive issues: To what extent should public schools recognize and teach religion? To what degree should church and state be separated? Should there be an official state church?

Do those issues sound familiar? They should. The Founding Fathers of the United States wrestled with them more than two hundred years ago, and they continue to be serious topics of discussion and debate to this very day.

The principles and philosophies upon which the U.S. Constitutional law is based are not simply the result of the best efforts of a remarkable group of men. They were inspired by God, and the rights and privileges guaranteed in the Constitution are God-given, not man-derived. The freedom and independence afforded by the Constitution and Bill of Rights are divine rights - sacred, essential, and inalienable. In the 98th section of the D&C, the Lord indicates that the "law of the land which is constitutional, supporting that principle of freedom in maintaining rights and privileges, belongs to all mankind, and is justifiable before me."

I focus my comments on sixteen significant words found in the First Amendment to the Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

These words are simple and direct. Their message and meaning appear to be clear. But through the years presidents, congress, and the courts have interpreted them in so many different ways that many people today have no sense of the perspective upon which they were based.

Believe it or not, at one time the very notion of government had less to do with politics than with virtue. According to James Madison, often referred to as the father of the Constitution: "We have staked the whole future of the American civilization not upon the power of the government - far from it. We have staked the future of all our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.

Madison, Washington and Lincoln all understood that democracy cannot possibly flourish in a moral vacuum and that organized religion plays an important role in preserving and maintaining public morality. Indeed, John Adams, another of America's founding Fathers, insisted: "We have no government armed with power capable of contending with human passions unbridled by morality and religion."

Yet that is precisely the position we find ourselves in today. Our government is succumbing to pressure to distance itself from God and religion. Consequently, the government is discovering that it is incapable of contending with people who are increasingly "unbridled by morality and religion." A simple constitutional prohibition of state-sponsored church has evolved into court ordered bans against representations of the Ten Commandments on government buildings, Christmas manger scenes on public property, and prayer at public meetings. Instead of seeking the "national morality"

based on “religious principle” that Washington spoke of, many are actively seeking a blind standard of legislative amorality, with a total exclusion of the mention of God in the public square.

Such a standard of religious exclusion is absolutely and unequivocally counter to the intention of those who designed our government. Do you think that mere chance placed the freedom to worship according to individual conscience among the first freedoms specified in the Bill of rights – freedoms that are destined to flourish together or perish separately? The Founding Fathers understood this country’s spiritual heritage. They frequently declared that God’s hand was upon this nation, and that He was working through them to create what Chesterton once called “a nation with soul of a church.” While they were influenced by history and their accumulated knowledge, the single most influential reference source for their work on the Constitution was the Holy Bible.

The Founding Fathers very likely were aware of the experiences of Roger Williams and others when they wrote in the First Amendment that the government cannot impede the free exercise of religion. They wrote that the church and the state were to be separate, independent entities, not to eliminate morality and God’s law but to make sure that the power of government could never be used to silence religious expression or to persecute religious practice. Once again quoting George Washington: “If I could have entertained the slightest apprehension that the Constitution, framed in the convention where I had the honor to preside, might possibly endanger the religious rights of any ecclesiastical society, certainly I would never have placed my signature to it.”

The constitutional provisions relation to government and religion were not intended to control the religious rights of people. Rather, they were intended to expand them, eliminate the fear of government intrusion. These provisions were meant to separate religion and government so that religion would be independent. The experiences of Roger Williams and other reformers provided the Founding Fathers of the U.S. with important facts to help them deal with the potential risks of a state religion corrupted by politics. Consequently, they drafted an article in the Bill of Rights to guarantee religious freedom from government as opposed to government religion.

In fact, the framers of the Constitution probably assumed that religious freedom would establish religion as a watchdog over government, and believed that free churches would inevitably stand and speak against immoral and corrupt legislation. All churches not only have the right to speak out on public moral issues, but they have the solemn obligation to do so. Religion represents society’s conscience, and churches must speak out when government chooses a course that is contrary to the laws of God. To remove the influence of religion from public policy simply because some are uncomfortable with any degree of moral restraint is like the passenger on a sinking ship who removes his life jacket because it is restrictive and uncomfortable.

Said Lincoln: “We have grown in numbers, wealth and power as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us; and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of their own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us!”