

James L. Holly, M.D.

Celebration of Religious Freedom

By James L. Holly, MD

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No freedom is more fundamental to the liberty of the mind, soul and body than religious freedom. And, whether addressing mental health or physical well being, few issues in human experience have been so fraught with health consequences as the right to believe, or not to believe, and the right to express that belief. As we celebrate the founding of the United States of America and as we interface with other nations struggling with the issues resolved by this nation 232 years ago, it is worthwhile to think about the foundations of our independence.

Arguments fly back and forth concerning the rightful place of religion in public affairs. One side argues that religion and even dogmatic religion should be a part of public dialogue. Another side desires to eliminate religion completely from public affairs. To this dialogue, Jon Meacham's book, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, brings reason to bear by exploring the history of "faith and freedom" in the United States of America.

The truth is that there are two propositions which define the boundaries of this debate. The first is that every man, woman and child has the liberty to practice his/her faith in public worship and has the liberty to express that faith in teaching others. The second is that no man, woman or child can propagate their faith with coercion, intimidation, violence, or manipulation. Within these two boundaries, the practice and expression of religion are the foundation for a stable and healthy society.

Meacham argues, and rightly so, that while the foundation of this nation is religious, it is non-sectarian religion. This means that while reverence toward God and respect of the faith of others are at the foundation of our nation's liberty, public adherence to or political support of any particular faith, or particular expression of a faith, is not only non-essential to the success of our democratic republic, it is lethal to it. Any attempt to impose the tenets of a particular faith upon the laws, or people of a land, is antithetical to the very freedom which allows the promotion of that faith.

The complexity of a multicultural society is that religious freedom is the way to success. Any attempt or desire on the part of one group to impose their beliefs upon another or any desire on the part of one group to discredit, as an act of public policy, the faith of another group or faith in general, will stifle democracy. This complexity is compounded when some come to the United States of America, and while enjoying our liberties, support, advocate or approve either the elimination of religious freedom, or the imposing of religious hegemony in their countries of origin.

Meacham makes the following statements which are worthy of our attention.

“The Founders...found a way to honor religion’s place in the life of the nation while giving people the freedom to believe as they wish, and not merely to tolerate someone else’s faith, but to respect it.” (page 6)

“Tolerance” is a condescending attitude, particularly toward faith. The only public disposition which sustains true religious freedom is the “respecting” of the faiths of others. This does not require ecumenism whereby the common faith is diluted to the point that it is objectionable to no one and acceptable to everyone, but it does suggest that an act of worship, freely practiced in peace, is celebrated even when it is different from your own.

“If totalitarianism was the great problem of the twentieth century, then extremism is, so far, the great problem of the twenty-first...Extremism is a powerful alliance of fear and certitude; complexity and humility are its natural foes.” (p. 17)

Here is one of the greatest problems in practical politics. It has often been said, “While I can’t define pornography; I recognize it when I see it.” In the context of religious freedom, the roots of extremism begin with the thought, “I can recognize extremism when I see others practice it.” While we often ascribe extremist religious views to others, we seldom recognize it in ourselves. Nevertheless, it is easy to see the extremism of those who are willing to attack, maim, and kill others because their faith has been offended, or because they wish to have their faith established as “The faith” in the land.

“Jefferson said, ‘Truth can stand by itself.’ Franklin agreed: ‘When a religion is good, I conceive that it will support itself; and, when it cannot support itself, and God does not take care to support [it], so that its professors are obliged to call for help of the civil power, it is a sign, I apprehend, of its being a bad one.’” (page 60)

Whether passing laws to under gird a tenet of dogma, or establishing one faith as “the faith of the land,” both are anathema to true faith. While the latter is offensive to our civil liberty sensibilities, we are not so quick to appreciate the strangeness of our desire for a constitutional amendment to define the nature of marriage, when people and politicians of faith discard the obligations of marriage as quickly and as easily as those who profess no faith.

“...America was not a ‘Christian nation’ except in the sense that it was a nation populated by people who identified themselves as Christians. Words have consequences, and there is a distinction – an essential one – between being a ‘Christian nation’ and being one who public religion allows religious values, Christian or otherwise, to shape its manners and morals.” (p. 144)

This is not unlike my answer when I am asked if I am a “Christian doctor.” My answer is, “No. I treat Muslims, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, atheists and others. I am however personally a committed Christian.” There is a profound difference in respecting the person of others which allows for the sharing of principles and precepts of faith when desired but preserving the rights of others not to hear about my faith.

“In securing freedom of religion – which is really freedom of thought—and freedom of speech, the Founding Fathers created a national milieu in which those who saw the right

when others did not had the liberty to bear witness to the truth as they understood I, in the hope that the rest of us might come to glimpse it, too.” (p. 158)

The advancement of liberty does not result from condescension on the part of one group who recognizes truth toward another who does not. Liberty marches to the cadence of each person esteeming another valuable regardless and in spite of their beliefs. The Establishment Clause of the Constitution never envisioned public discourse without religious content, but simply that public decrees would never demand compliance with religious precepts.

“...’the content of official religion is bound to be thin; the commitment to it also apt, now and then, to be hollow...’...it is a price the country was willing to pay in order to enjoy the benefits of public religion...rather than go down the darker path of Puritan excesses of the seventeenth century in New England, which may be more orthodox but which belongs in the private, not the public, sphere. Serious believers will always find public religion wanting – lighter on substance, perhaps, than they would like or vague to the point of meaninglessness. But part of the American gospel is that such lamentations should take place in churches or home, not in the public arena....’freedom is like oxygen to religion. Without liberty for all, some one sect or creed might crush all the others, and history tells us that no earthly victory is ever final – so he who crushes may one day be crushed. Religious liberty frees a society from the treat of such strife.” (pp.178-179)

If we are to avoid forms of extremism which are objectionable to us, those of us who hold religious ideals and beliefs which are considered extreme by others must be willing and able to dialogue with those who disagree without “shouting” and without acrimony. It is also important not to attribute evil motives to others until or unless their actions reveal such. Public discourse over religion and politics ought to be held with civility and respect.

Earlier, the word “stifle” was used to describe the effects upon religious freedom of publicly imposed religious views – even, and especially, my (be sure and read your name here) religious views. “Stifle” means “to kill by depriving of oxygen.” As Meacham reminds us “freedom is the oxygen of religion,” thus the elimination of religious freedom with its effort to establish religion, kills any chance of true freedom of religion.

The effect of strongly held private convictions voiced through the language and principles of public faith ought to be the forming of a body politic which is unified by freedom of religion and caring for one another. Thus, Meacham states,

““...we are the strongest nation in human history – and the most religiously, ethnically, and racially diverse. And so the Founders were, as usual, right when they chose the nation’s first motto in the summer of 1776: E. *Pluribus Unum* – ‘out of many, one.’” (p. 246)

The forming of “*one*” out of “*many*” requires no compromise; it does require patience, politeness and esteem of another’s person. The river of liberty is fed by the streams which form it and which pour their waters into it:

- Where there is no freedom of speech, even speech that would offend me,

- Where there is no freedom of the press, even where materials are published which would offend me,
- Where there is no freedom of assembly, even when others congregate for purposes anathema to me,
- Where there is no freedom of worship and religion, even to practice a religion, which is strange and foreign to me,

there is no freedom, only the appearance of liberty. For your life and your health, liberty is required, for it is the oxygen of our public life.