Religion in a Free Society
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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? How much should the state regulate a church’s charitable activities? Should churches be exempted [page 65] from general laws? 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 brilliant 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 Doctrine and Covenants, 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.” (D&C 98:5.)

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 American civilization not upon the power of the government—far from it. We have staked the future of all of our political institutions upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves according to the Ten Commandments of God.” (Russ Walton, Biblical Principles of Importance to Godly Christians, New Hampshire: Plymouth Foundation, 1984, p. 361.)


Nearly one hundred years later, Abraham Lincoln responded to a question about which side God was on during the Civil War with this profound insight: “I am not at all concerned about that, for I know that the Lord is always on the side of the right. But it is my constant anxiety and prayer that I and this nation should be on the Lord’s side.” (Abraham Lincoln’s Stories and Speeches, ed. J. B. McClure, Chicago: Rhodes and McClure Publishing Co., 1896, pp. 185–86.)

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.” (John Adams, The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States, Charles F.
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 the soul of a church.” (Richard John Neuhaus, “A New Order for the Ages,” speech delivered at the Philadelphia Conference on Religious Freedom, 30 May 1991.) 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. Doubtless they were familiar with the Lord’s counsel to the children of Israel as they struggled to become a great nation:

“And it shall come to pass, if thou shalt hearken diligently unto the voice of the Lord thy God, to observe and to do all his commandments which I command thee this day, that the Lord thy God will set thee on high above all nations of the earth:

And all these blessings shall come on thee, and overtake thee, if thou shalt hearken unto the voice of the Lord thy God.

Blessed shalt thou be in the city, and blessed shalt thou be in the field.

Blessed shall be the fruit of thy body, and the fruit of thy ground, and the fruit of thy cattle, the increase of thy kine, and the flocks of thy sheep.

Blessed shall be thy basket and thy store.

Blessed shalt thou be when thou comest in, and blessed shalt thou be when thou goest out.

The Lord shall cause thine enemies that rise up against thee to be smitten before thy face: they shall come out against thee one way, and flee before thee seven ways.

The Lord shall command the blessing upon thee in thy storehouses, and in all that thou settest thine hand unto; and he shall bless thee in the land which the Lord thy God giveth thee.

The Lord shall establish thee an holy people until himself, as he hath sworn unto thee, if thou shalt keep the commandments of the Lord thy God, and walk in his ways.” (Deut. 28:1–9.)

In other words, that nation that keeps God’s commandments and walks in His ways will prosper. The framers of our Constitution knew that, and they tried to lay a solid moral foundation for a society that could be so blessed. As they did so, perhaps they thought of Roger Williams and others like him who made a heroic fight for religious freedom.

Roger Williams began his ministry in England, where his zealous work to free the church from the influence of the king brought the wrath of the government upon him. Eventually he and his young wife were forced to flee to the New World. But instead of finding himself among like-minded reformers in America, he encountered much of the same resistance and persecution until he established a new colony called Providence in Rhode Island. Here America had its first taste of true religious freedom, and the success of the Providence colony convinced many that the concept tasted good.

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.” (Maxims of Washington, New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1894, pp. 370–71.)

What would Washington have thought if he could have foreseen our day? Would he have signed the document?

I believe he would have been troubled to see a time when citizens are forbidden to pray in public meetings; when people claim that “you can’t legislate morality,” as if any law ever passed did not have at its heart some notion of right and wrong; when churches are called intruders when they speak out against public policy that is contrary to the commandments of God; when many people reject the correcting influence of churches if it infringes on daily living; when religion is accepted as a social organization but not as an integral part of national culture; when people bristle if representatives of churches speak in any forum except from the pulpit.

Indeed, some people now claim that the Founding Fathers’ worst fear in connection with religion has been realized; that we have, in fact, a state-sponsored religion in America today. This new religion, adopted by many, does not have an identifiable name, but it operates just like a church. It exists in the form of doctrines and beliefs, where morality is whatever a person wants it to be, and where freedom is derived from the ideas of man and not the laws of God. Many people adhere to this concept of morality with religious zeal and fervor, and courts and legislatures tend to support it.

While you may think I am stretching the point a bit to say that amorality could be a new state-sponsored religion, I believe you would agree that we do not have to look far to find horrifying evidence of rampant immorality that is permitted if not encouraged by our laws. From the plague of pornography to the devastation caused by addiction to drugs, illicit sex, and gambling, wickedness rears its ugly head everywhere, often gaining its foothold in society by invoking the powers of constitutional privilege.

We see a sad reality of contemporary life when many of the same people who defend the right of a pornographer to distribute exploitive films and photos would deny freedom of expression to people of faith because of an alleged fear of what might happen from religious influence on government or public meetings. While much of society has allowed gambling to wash over its communities, leaving broken families and individuals in its soul-destroying wake, it reserves its harshest ridicule for those who advocate obedience to God’s commandments and uniform, inspired standards of right and wrong.

As M. J. Sobran recently wrote: “A religious conviction is now a second-class conviction, expected to step deferentially to the back of the secular bus, and not to get uppity about it.” (Human Life Review, Summer 1978, pp. 58–59.)

There are probably many reasons for the change in public attitudes toward religion. Certainly we’ve had too many wolves posing as shepherds, prompting a national skepticism toward any who profess to represent God. The news media, which rarely report on the good things churches are doing in the world, almost never miss an opportunity to tell people when active church members do wrong. We read about crimes that are committed by former Sunday School teachers, ministers, or missionaries. But when was the last time you read that a crime was committed by someone who hasn’t stepped inside a church in forty years?

For that matter, when was the last time you saw religion or people of faith portrayed positively in any film or television program? For the most part, Hollywood’s attitude toward religion is typified by the expression of cartoon character Bart Simpson, whose mealtime grace consisted of these words: “Dear God, we pay for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing.” Can you imagine how embarrassed and disappointed our Founding Fathers would be to know of the blasphemous disregard many of those of the media have for God our Eternal Father. In fact, noted film critic Michael Medved
accuses Hollywood of a deliberate attempt to undermine organized religion: “A war against standards leads logically and inevitably to hostility to religion, because it is religious faith that provides the ultimate basis for all standards.” (“Popular Culture and the War against Standards,” speech delivered at Hillsdale College, 18 Nov. 1990.)

Organized religion finds itself increasingly on the defensive. Not only are people questioning the right of the church—any church—to be involved in matters of public policy, but some are even beginning to wonder whether the church is entitled to exert any kind of meaningful influence on people’s lives. As one churchgoer recently said on a radio talk show, “I think the world of my minister—as long as he doesn’t try to tell me how to live my life.”

Is it any wonder, then, that religion now finds itself under attack in legislative assemblies and in the courts? In fact, the United States Supreme Court recently discontinued the time-honored judicial standard that gave considerable legal latitude to the free exercise of religion. Allowing people of faith to practice their religion free from the burdening effects of public policy is, according to the court, “a luxury that can no longer be afforded.” While the justices acknowledged that the ruling would “place at a relative disadvantage those religious practices that are not widely engaged in,” they said it was “an unavoidable consequence of a democratic government.” (Oregon Employment Division v. Smith, 1990.)

I do not promote the religious practice that was in question in that case but I am concerned with the long-term implications of the decision. Wherever religious groups are in the minority and are not considered part of the mainline religious community, the potential for state intrusion upon their religious practices is real. With legislative bodies responding most often to the will of the majority, the free exercise of religion by minority faith groups is in peril.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act (HR 2797) is presently before Congress. This important piece of legislation is designed to restore the protections for religious freedom that existed before this recent Supreme Court decision placed those protections in jeopardy. Because the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is necessary for the preservation of the free exercise of religion, it demands our support.

The constitutional provisions relating to government and religion were not intended to control the religious rights of people. Rather, they were intended to expand them and 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 freedom from 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.

Today, the buzz words family values are being incorporated in almost every politician’s thirty-second sound bite. But what does that phrase really mean? Whose values are we going to embrace: the values of politicians? The values the media tell us we should cherish? The values of special interest groups and organizations? The values of rank-and-file Americans, as determined by scientific survey? Obviously, it would not be politically expedient to say that the values that the Founding Fathers drew upon are eternal, unchanging values. But that is a fact. The values that made America great are, in reality, the commandments of God. They provide the foundation upon which the American republic was built. And if American democracy seems shaky today, it’s only because that foundation has been eroded and weakened under the guise of separation of church and state.
Maybe Washington really was speaking of our day when he said, “If I could conceive that the general government might ever be so administered as to render the liberty of conscience insecure, no one would be more zealous than myself to establish effectual barriers against the horrors of spiritual tyranny and every species of religious persecution.” (Maxims of Washington, p. 371.)

Samuel Adams, who is sometimes called the father of the American Revolution, wrote: “I thank God that I have lived to see my country independent and free. She may long enjoy her independence and freedom if she will. It depends upon her virtue.” (Wells, The Life of Samuel Adams, 3:175.)

That means it depends on us. If we would maintain the independence and freedom the Founding Fathers intended, we must work to preserve and protect the moral foundation upon which they built the U. S. government. We must stand boldly for righteousness and truth, and must defend the cause of honor, decency, and personal freedom espoused by Washington, Madison, Adams, Lincoln, and [page 69] other leaders who acknowledged and loved God. Otherwise, we will find ourselves in the same predicament President Lincoln observed in 1863.

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!” (A Proclamation “to designate and set apart a day for national prayer and humiliation.”)

Let us resolve to make our own families truly free by teaching them that God holds us all accountable. His laws are absolutes; breaking them brings misery and unhappiness; keeping them brings joy, happiness, and the blessings of heaven. Let us teach our families and others the importance of moral responsibility based on the laws of God.

The freedom we give thanks for is at stake—for ourselves and for our posterity. No nation or people that rejects God or His commandments can prosper or find happiness. History and the scriptures are filled with examples of nations that rejected God. Let us be wise and remember the source of our blessings and not be timid or apologetic in sharing this knowledge with others.