

Liberty, equality and the meaning of religious freedom

By Paul V.M. Flesher

The Declaration of Independence placed the Enlightenment ideal of “liberty” at the heart of the American soul. It cites liberty among the reasons for creating our new country. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.”

The basic meaning of liberty is the ability to do what one wants. Of course even school children know that unbridled liberty is impossible. If one person decides they want to kill another, an extreme example, the second person’s liberty is violated, to say nothing of their life.

Liberty as a political or governing policy thus consists of balancing of each individual’s ability to behave as they wish against others’ freedom to do the same. The goal is to achieve an equality of liberty for everyone, with everyone attaining as much freedom as possible.

Another widely used definition of liberty is one of freedom from oppression; as the Merriam-Webster dictionary puts it, “freedom from arbitrary or despotic control.” This notion of liberty inspired the Puritans to leave England and come to the New World. They wanted the freedom to believe and worship as they were convinced that God wanted them to.

If America’s notion of liberty began with this bid for religious liberty, the result was initially disappointing. True, in 1620 the Puritans established a colony at Plymouth where they followed their faith freely.

But the Puritan notion of religious freedom was limited to themselves and their own beliefs and practices. It did not extend to anyone who believed different from them. In that, they were no different from the Church of England, which had developed its discriminatory policies under King James (who died in 1625).

When Roger Williams and then Anne Hutchinson developed theological positions that differed from those of the Puritans, they were banished. Roger Williams fled to Rhode Island where in 1636 he founded Providence as the first community run on the basis of religious freedom (and founded the First Baptist Church in America). Anne and her followers later settled there.

Although we often call Roger Williams the founder of religious liberty, what he really created was religious equality. The practical effect of bringing together several groups with different religious beliefs in Rhode Island set up an ironic conundrum: religious freedom had to be restricted to achieve



the highest level of religious liberty.

Each group in Rhode Island was free under the second definition of liberty, that of freedom from oppression and control. But they were not free under the first one, that of the unlimited ability to do as they wished. Where one group’s free expression of belief and practice impinged upon another’s, they had to work out a compromise to prevent that. These compromises usually limited both sides’ freedom, although ideally with as little limitation as possible.

America’s great reputation for religious freedom is therefore the reputation for religious equality. Every religion and every version of a religion is free to worship and believe as each one chooses, as long as it does not impinge upon the rights of others. The clarion call we still sound for religious liberty is a call for equal rights of all religions.

That is what makes America the standard bearer for religious freedom. Religious refugees from around the world flock to our country because they know they can worship without persecution here.

What is opposite of equal rights for all religions? Despotism.

If a country allows one religion to worship and act in accordance with its beliefs at the expense of other religions, then that country no longer has freedom of religion but the religious equivalent of political dictatorship.

This is the situation for many countries around the world. They have a political system that favors one religion or even one version of a religion. That preference permits the members of the favored religion rights and privileges others do not have.

This is true whether the religion is Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Judaism and even Christianity. The difference in rights between the religion in favor and those out of favor range from mild to extreme, from England’s support of Anglicanism with public taxes, to Israel’s allowing Judaism’s Orthodox wing of Judaism to control marriage law, to frequent persecution of Christians for blasphemy in Islamic countries.

Only equal rights for all religions and all religious people, as well as non-religious beliefs and people, ensures the most religious freedom possible. Any other position penalizes those who do not follow the privileged faith.

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