

What is religious liberty?



Faith . Freedom . For All.

“Religious liberty” is the freedom to believe and exercise or act upon religious conscience without unnecessary interference by the government. Just as religious liberty involves the freedom to practice religion, it also means freedom not to practice religion. If you can’t say “no,” your “yes” is meaningless.

Just like any freedom, religious liberty is not without limits. As the old saying goes, “My right to swing my fist ends where your nose begins.” Some religions involve beliefs or practices that conflict with other laws, such as compulsory education laws, animal protection laws and anti-drug laws. In those cases, legislatures and courts must step in to determine how to accommodate sincere religious beliefs while protecting other government interests, including protecting those who may not share the same beliefs. So, when government makes exceptions for religious exercise, it must look out for the rights and well-being of others who may be detrimentally affected.

BJC advocates a “golden rule” of religious liberty: Do not ask government to promote your religion if you don’t want government to promote somebody else’s religion; and do not permit government to hinder somebody else’s religion if you don’t want government to hinder your own religion.

How is religious liberty legally protected in the United States?

The U.S. Constitution protects the freedom of religion in a distinct way, allowing people with vastly different beliefs to live peaceably together.

The first 16 words of the First Amendment have two protections for religion. The prohibition on an establishment of religion keeps the government from advancing or privileging religion. The protection of free exercise keeps the government from unnecessarily interfering with religious practice.

The First Amendment keeps government neutral – neither helping nor hurting religion, but allowing people to practice their religion (or practice no religion). Additional protections exist in various federal, state and local laws.

First 16 words of the
First Amendment:

Congress shall make
no law respecting an
establishment of religion,
or prohibiting the
free exercise thereof

What about the separation of church and state?

The phrase “separation of church and state” is not in the Constitution. It is shorthand for the protections in the First Amendment and for a deeper truth: religious liberty is best protected when the institutions of church and state remain separated and neither tries to perform or interfere with the essential mission and work of the other.

People of faith generally agree that government should not unduly restrict religion. But, government promotion of religion is problematic. When government tries to aid religion – financially or otherwise – it also tends to regulate religion and often waters it down, robbing religion of its vitality. Decisions on religious matters are best left to individuals and houses of worship. As soon as government starts to meddle in religion or take sides in religious disputes – favoring one religion over another – someone’s religious liberty is denied and everyone’s is threatened. The separation of church and state ensures religious liberty in the United States.

Why do Baptists care about religious liberty?

Baptists believe that we are inherently free to choose whether to worship God and follow Christ without efforts by the government to advance or restrain religion. This historic commitment to religious liberty for all people can be traced back to 17th century England and Colonial America, where Baptist leaders called for complete religious freedom. Baptists declared that the government was powerless to control conscience and was incompetent to dictate spiritual matters.

The fight for religious liberty is an effort to prevent the government from doing what even God will not do: coerce faith.