

# America risks squandering religious liberty, Os Guinness says

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DALLAS—An unprecedented “sea change” in how America views religious freedom places the nation’s greatest gift to the world at risk, social critic and author Os Guinness told a gathering at Dallas Baptist University.

“America is in danger of squandering what is at the heart of its great heritage,” Guinness told the Speak Freedom Dallas Summit Nov. 4 at DBU, sponsored by the 21st Century Wilberforce Initiative.

Religious liberty is endangered by those who reduce freedom of conscience and the free exercise of religion to freedom of worship, who seek to remove religion from the public square, and who rebrand disagreement as discrimination and religious conviction as bigotry, he said.

**Guinness asserted:**

- **“Reducers” want to replace soul liberty and freedom of conscience with freedom of worship.**

“Every dictator will allow freedom of worship, in the sense of allowing you to hold any belief in your head, between your two ears, as long as you keep your mouth shut,” he said. “That is not free exercise.”

“Shame on President Obama and shame on Secretary of State Clinton for reducing it to that,” he said.

In a later interview, Guinness explained he was referring to [public speeches](#) by Obama and Clinton in which they consistently referred to

“freedom of worship” instead of “religious liberty.”

- **“Removers” want to eliminate religious discussion from public discourse and religious influence from society.**

The “new atheists” such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris seized upon the 9/11 attacks by radical Muslims as examples of the harm religion inflicts on society at large, and cited the terrorist attacks as evidence pointing to the need to remove religious influence from public life, he said.

However, Guinness asserted, the “removers” began to influence American life more than 50 years earlier. In particular, he blamed the “strict separation” of church and state view articulated by Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black.

In *Everson v. Board of Education*, Black—a Baptist Sunday school teacher—cited Thomas Jefferson’s letter to Danbury Baptist Association as evidence the Founders intended the First Amendment’s no establishment of religion clause to “erect a wall of separation between church and state.”

The strict separation of church and state that was advanced in the latter half of the 20th century went far beyond the institutional separation the Founders intended, Guinness insisted.

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, affirmed Guinness’ first point but took issue with his second to some degree.

“I’ll go with Hugo Black, Thomas Jefferson and, yes, Roger Williams any day,” he said, while traveling in Providence, R.I., to speak at Baptist Heritage Weekend. “I like to talk about institutional and functional separation. That does not divorce religion from public life or stifle religious speech in the public square. Yes, freedom of worship is a truncated concept—too privatized. Free exercise is better. Separation of

church and state, properly understood, is good for both.”

Walker cited a recent *Report from the Capital* article in which he [wrote](#): “The separation principle is simply another way of saying government should not try to help or hurt religion, but it should leave religion alone. Under the First Amendment, there should be both no establishment and free exercise of religion. These clauses, taken together, command an institutional and functional separation as a constitutional means to the end of ensuring religious liberty for all.”

• **“Rebranders” apply the anti-discrimination language of the Civil Rights movement to religious convictions.**

Guinness pointed specifically to a report by the U.S. Civil Rights Commission and comments by Chairman Martin Castro.

“The phrases ‘religious liberty’ and ‘religious freedom’ will stand for nothing except hypocrisy as long as they remain code words for discrimination, intolerance, racism, sexism, homophobia, Islamophobia, Christian supremacy or any form of intolerance,” [Castro said](#).

“Branding disagreement as discrimination is intellectually muddled and politically dangerous,” Guinness said.

Human rights find their grounding not in Enlightenment theory but in Reformation doctrine that recognizes humanity as created in the image of God and in the Exodus experience recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures, Guinness said.

“A free God called his people to worship him freely,” he said.

## **Civility in crisis**

In an interview later, Guinness said he is concerned the United States is moving away from the civil public square imagined by its Founders, where

a variety of religious opinions can be voiced and exercised, to a naked public square closer to the secularism and anti-clericalism of the French Revolution.

“Civility is in crisis today,” he said, noting the 2016 presidential campaign surpassed the election of 1800 as the historic low point of incivility. Even worse, he said, the presidential candidates of both major parties seemed to display “an incredible ignorance of history” that reflects the larger American culture.

“There seems to be no doubt that neither the First Amendment to the Constitution nor Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights would pass muster today,” he said.

Article 18 of the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#), passed in 1948, states: “Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”

### **Need for civic education**

Prior to about the 1960s, civic education nurtured responsible citizenship and helped integrate and assimilate people from other cultures into the American way of life, he said, noting, “Civic education is the missing ingredient” today.

Donald Trump, the GOP presidential nominee, was “fumbling in the right direction” when he called for a ban on Muslim immigration, Guinness said.

Rather than requiring a religious test, he insisted, the candidate was seizing upon a desire for “extreme vetting” of immigrants to eliminate those who would want to replace a constitutional republic with religious

law.

“You can’t let people replace the Constitution with a caliphate,” Guinness said.

Baptists of varied stripes are [on record](#) opposing any call for a ban on Muslim immigration.

Walker of the Baptist Joint Committee called it “un-American, unworkable, counterproductive and embarrassing.”

Russell Moore, president of the Southern Baptist Convention’s Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, likewise condemned Trump’s proposal.

“Anyone who cares an iota about religious liberty should denounce this reckless, demagogic rhetoric,” Moore said.