

EDITORIAL: Reasons we treasure religious liberty

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This is the time of year when our thoughts turn to hamburgers and hot dogs, ice cream, fireworks, heat waves and all things American. Especially freedom. Smack in the middle of summer, we celebrate liberty and independence.

Americans treasure liberty for theological, historical, political and practical reasons. All are valid and valuable. And none is secure if they are not protected as a whole.

Two years before he penned the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson wrote, “The God who gave us life gave us liberty at the same time.” He grasped a truth as old as Adam and Eve. The first two chapters of the Bible recount the story of creation. The formation of people marked creation’s crowning achievement. Scripture clearly indicates God made people to reciprocate divine love. And for reciprocity to be true, it must be free. So, freedom always has been intrinsic to what it means to be human.

Editor Marv Knox

Ironically, religious freedom hasn’t always been an American ideal. Sure, early colonists came here for religious freedom, but it was their freedom, not others’, they cherished. That’s why Massachusetts Congregationalists persecuted the first American Baptist, Roger Williams, and why Virginia Anglicans imprisoned Baptist preachers. It’s why another Virginia Baptist, John Leland, influenced James Madison to ensure religious freedom by listing it first among the freedoms guaranteed by the First Amendment.

Madison and the other Founding Fathers also relied upon history as inspiration for weaving religious liberty into the American fabric. Their

Enlightenment notion of individual liberty didn't materialize in a vacuum. They understood lessons written in blood from decades of European religious wars. They realized ensuring religious liberty for all people was the only way to prevent similar calamity in America. More than 200 years of U.S. history have proven their hypothesis. While religion wars continued to plague the planet, this nation peacefully absorbed people of every conceivable faith, as well as no faith. Religious expression has flourished like never, and nowhere, before.

Like everything else that matters deeply, religious liberty has been absorbed into American politics. This is where the issue gets tangled and tricky. Americans tend to want their politicians to act and sound like they do, an understandable and easily exploited trait. So, political extremists appeal to this base instinct. From the left, they contend arguments from faith are out of bounds in public discourse. They claim guarantees of religious liberty remove faith from the public square. From the right, they act as if the extreme left's position were normative for both government and society, and they claim to be persecuted because others disagree with them and say so. The extreme right often sounds alarmingly like the early colonists who protected their religious liberty by punishing all other expressions of faith.

Today, the five-point intersection of faith, politics, demographics, media and economics is busier and more treacherous than ever. Strident voices seem to dominate discussions of religious liberty and human freedom.

Thank God, millions of Americans also embrace religious liberty for practical reasons. Even though our culture seems faith-averse, religious expression is more robust in the United States than anywhere else in the West. Even though religious expression is enormously diverse, the practice of faith still is safer here than anywhere in the world. Most Americans instinctively realize their religious liberty cannot be separated from the religious liberty they protect for people of other faiths.

We can pray that our American pragmatism will prevail throughout these tumultuous times. It must remain strong enough to preserve religious liberty until Americans once again protect all expressions of faith from the tyranny of zealots at both ends of the theo-political spectrum.

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