

2nd Opinion: Press freedom a Baptist trophy

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Religious freedom has long been considered the “trophy” of Baptists—even if some Baptists of yesteryear weren’t as radical as heroes like Roger Williams, John Clarke, Obadiah Holmes and John Leland—and accounts of Baptists fighting for the separation of church and state fill the history books.

Contemporary observers often are shocked when they find Baptists—of all people—compromising religious liberty issues and church-state separation for government favoritism. Given the Baptist reputation for their advocacy of religious freedom, it is assumed that Baptists have swiftly announced their support for other First Amendment freedoms found in the Bill of Rights of the U.S. Constitution.

Baptist giants of the early 20th century—notably E.Y. Mullins and George W. Truett—voiced support for freedom of speech and freedom of the press.

Mullins, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said these freedoms were “implied” in the fundamental freedom of religious liberty. Because Baptists believe in these freedoms for themselves, Mullins reasoned, they must affirm them equally for all people.

Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas, argued for a free press that would not be “censured by the sultan, nor sizzled by some czar.” Truett anticipated later squeamishness about abuses in the print media, however. He implored newspaper editors to have integrity and take the moral high road of integrity when deciding what to publish.

Truett lamented that newspapers sifted “through the sewers and cesspools

for matter with which to fill its columns It plunges its accursed beak into the putrescent carcasses of crime and virtue, and it parades it all before a waiting world.”

Baptist contributions to the freedoms of speech and the press have especially come through the work of Supreme Court Justice Charles Evans Hughes. A lifelong Baptist and the first president of the Northern Baptist Convention upon its formation in 1907, Hughes was chief justice of the court for 11 years, from 1930 to 1941.

The Hughes Court advanced freedom of the press and freedom of speech. In particular, Hughes helped incorporate both freedoms into the 14th Amendment, so that First Amendment freedoms are protected from state interference.

The first significant press case to reach the Supreme Court was *Near v. Minnesota* (1931). It involved Jay Near, who criticized government officials for doing nothing to stop corruption of the “bootlegging and racketeering” of “Jewish gangsters.”

Minnesota legal authorities halted the publication of Near’s *Saturday Press*, accusing him of violating the “Public Nuisance Law” that banned publication of material that was “malicious, scandalous and defamatory.” But the Hughes Court prohibited censorship and found “prior restraint”—a concept that referred to governmental activity that halted publications—to be “presumptively unconstitutional” except for “exceptional cases.”

Hughes’ contemporaries observed his Baptist commitment to individual conscience contributed to his legal insights.

Southern Baptists confronted the issues of a free press during their “controversy” that raged through the 1980s. Was the denominational press a public relations agency for the Southern Baptist Convention, or were the journalists free to report all the news in the spirit of a free press?

Most journalists argued for a free press—and were accused of siding with the moderate faction of the convention fight for doing so. In particular, Paul Pressler, one of the architects of the SBC’s fundamentalist takeover, vehemently complained about reporting by the SBC news agency Baptist Press and accused journalists of initiating interviews that criticized the “conservative resurgence.” In 1990, with the fundamentalist victory complete, Al Shackelford and Dan Martin of Baptist Press were fired.

The concept of a free press also was tested severely at the Sunday School Board when agency trustees stopped the publication of their history—in their minds skewed with liberal bias—by Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Leon McBeth.

During the 400th anniversary of the origins of the Baptist tradition, we will applaud our commitment to freedom. Let’s be proud of the trophies but not forget the reality of squeamishness and censorship. If freedom of the press is implied in religious freedom, as E.Y. Mullins suggested, then we must be free to search and report the truth, as we understand it, and we must allow others to do the same.

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