

# Commentary: Religious liberty for all

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WASHINGTON (RNS) — A recent survey found only 2 percent of evangelical Christians indicated that the Bill of Rights made America great, although more than half said they highly value the freedom of religion and less than half said they appreciate America's Christian roots.



Curtis Freeman This lack of enthusiasm stands in sharp contrast to earlier generations. The overwhelming number of evangelical Christians during the formative period of our constitutional democracy regarded the freedoms enshrined in the Bill of Rights to be essential for making America great. The Constitution and the Bill of Rights created the environment for the United States to become a Beulah Land where religious dissenters of all sorts flourished because it ensured that liberty was for all.

Evangelical Christians have not lost their mind, but they have clearly lost their memory. If our fragile democracy is to survive this social amnesia, it is important for all Americans to recover our collective memory by learning anew the important stories of the forgotten tradition of religious dissent and the ways it shaped American democracy, and more importantly how

dissent ensures democracy's vitality.

When the U.S. Constitution was proposed in 1787, Article VI declared in the strongest possible language that "no religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust." This was the only reference to religion in the entire text, but an important one. It reflected the fact that the conviction of religious liberty in England was forged in the fires of one religious test after another.

Religious dissenters, who included anyone not in good standing with the Church of England, were excluded by law from holding public office, attending university or serving in the military. In the event that a dissenter was elected to public office, there was a provision for an exception, as long as dissenting Christians received Communion in the Church of England within a year. Daniel Defoe sharply criticized the "occasional conformity" of dissenters who engaged in this dubious practice to qualify for the privilege of employment or public office, saying they were mortgaging their consciences and playing a game of Bo-peep with the Almighty.

The application of religious tests to exclude dissenters was something the Framers wanted to explicitly prohibit. But even the constitutional provision against religious tests was not sufficient for John Leland and the Baptists of Virginia. For Leland, true liberty was more than toleration, which presupposes preeminence of one and indulgence of others. Genuine liberty, he argued, must apply equally to "Jews, Turks, Pagans and Christians." Liberty must be for all or it is not liberty at all.

To secure this liberty, Leland met with James Madison, who was preparing to run for the Constitutional Congress of 1788. Leland protested that the Constitution had no provision for religious liberty. Madison agreed, but he stated that if elected he would work to secure religious liberty as he had done in Virginia. Leland and the Baptists agreed to support Madison, who was elected by a large margin. Virginia passed the Constitution in June

1789, and Madison went on to write the Bill of Rights, which was approved in 1791. The First Amendment made good on his promise to religious dissenters, declaring that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Evangelical Christians in the founding of our republic understood something worth remembering. The flourishing of their communities depended on the extension of religious freedom, not only to minority Protestant dissenters like themselves, but to all — Protestants, Catholics, Jews, Muslims, and people of all faiths or none at all.

Evangelical Christians are not alone in suffering from a severe case of historical amnesia. It is a condition afflicting many Americans who have no memory of the inclusive vision in the Bill of Rights.

Even more importantly we are in danger of losing the recognition of, and capacity for, living with fundamental religious differences, which is a foundational condition to the basic political tolerance on which American democracy depends. Religious pluralism is a legacy of religious liberty. Both were crucial in the formation of American democracy, and both remain essential for its flourishing today.

We must not allow a misremembering of history to change religious liberty into a presumed privilege of a religious majority (real or assumed) or to become a tool of exclusion used against religious minorities (no matter how different from us they may be). To do so turns our founding principles on their heads. It was just such a bad idea that called for the creation of the lively experiment that became America. Let’s celebrate and defend religious liberty for all, and make America great again.

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