

Right or Wrong?: Religious liberty tied to ethical decision-making

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I agree, because religious liberty is rooted in liberty of conscience, and some understanding of “conscience” lies at the heart of most ethical decision-making. Conscience is the ability to put oneself in the place of others and to look at self through the eyes of others. The most important eyes for this reflexive look are those of God. In those eyes, at first glance, we all look guilty.

Whether our initial perception of God’s perspective is conveyed to us by Scripture or is mediated to us by others, the faith that makes a guilty conscience clean must be appropriated individually. God’s offer of forgiveness and a clean heart is personal, and it always is accompanied by the freedom to accept or reject life lived in loving relationship with God. The choices we make regarding how we relate to God are personal. They are the most important and enduring decisions of our lives. No one else can properly make those choices for us. Neither can we presume to make those choices for others. That is why religious liberty and liberty of conscience are the most basic and essential of all human rights.

Ethical decision-making involves learning how to make choices and exercise our freedom conscientiously. Conscientious decisions most often are made by exercising the human capacity to assume a standpoint outside ourselves and view the situation from different perspectives. We can look at the situation from the perspective of the law, from the perspectives of the various parties involved, from the perspective of an interested observer, and from the perspective of an impartial spectator. Generally, we weigh the

value of the various perspectives in relation to one another until we arrive at a decision we believe to be fair, equitable and conscientious.

The most basic guideline for measuring the conscientiousness of an ethical decision is the Golden Rule, “do unto others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). It presupposes two things—the capacity to view things from the perspective of another and the ability to act in a manner that gives equal weight to the concerns of the other. The Golden Rule sums up not only the Hebrew law and prophets, but also most of the basic requirements for harmonious life in a pluralistic society and for peaceful co-existence in a world of religiously diverse and ideologically competitive civilizations.

Distinctive to the Christian understanding of the Golden Rule is an additional admonition concerning the spirit in which we are to exercise our power to assume a standpoint outside ourselves. Christians should exercise this power with humility—looking back at ourselves with a contrite and meek attitude—and not with arrogance—looking down on others with a judgmental attitude (Matthew 7:1-5).

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