



U.S. religious freedom is being eroded, advocates say

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U.S. religious freedom is being eroded, advocates say
Misconceptions and ignorance are weakening the Constitution's 'first freedom.'

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They are heroes in a battle most Americans think has already been won. On Wednesday evening, they are to be honored for their contributions to strengthening religious freedom at home and abroad.

Although the US is home to the greatest experiment in religious freedom ever, and the great majority of Americans support that principle, surprising gaps in knowledge and understanding remain when it comes to practicing that freedom. And support for it seems to rise and fall.

Only a slim majority (56 percent) of Americans said in a 2007 survey that freedom of worship should extend to people of all religious groups, no matter what their beliefs (down 16 points, from 72 percent in 2000).

"A great many Americans don't define religious liberty as a universal right for everyone," says Charles Haynes, one of the honorees. He is senior scholar at Freedom Forum's First Amendment Center, which conducted the survey.

At the same time, others see a weakening in federal courts in recent years of the First Amendment provisions relating to religion, a development that could endanger the rights of minority faiths.

Freedom weaker, now

"It's a disquieting fact that the First Amendment clauses are now very weak provisions, not giving the robust protection ... that historically and for much of the 20th century they did provide," says John Witte, professor of law and religion at Emory University in Atlanta and another of the honorees.

In an era when the US is promoting democracy and freedom of conscience around the world, such knowledgeable people say, it's crucial to get the experiment right here at home.

One organization seeking to boost understanding and respect for this fundamental freedom is the Council for America's First Freedom, based in Richmond, Va. The council sponsors a variety of public education programs, including a nationwide high-school essay competition.

And each year on Jan. 16 - the date in 1786 when Virginia passed the nation's first law guaranteeing religious liberty - the council hands out First Freedom Awards to individuals whose actions have made a significant difference. The three 2008 recipients have advanced religious freedom domestically and internationally:

* For two decades, Dr. Haynes of the First Amendment Center has helped local school districts and communities across the US find common ground to resolve conflicts over religion and values. He recently helped the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe draft guidelines for the study of religions in European classrooms.

* Mr. Witte, director of Emory University's Center for the Study of Law and Religion, has led major global projects related to religion and human rights among scholars from the major faiths; the projects have broken new ground on key issues.

* Since the tragic war and ethnic cleansing of the 1990s in the former Yugoslavia, Jakob Finci, president of the Jewish Community of Bosnia and Herzegovina, has encouraged reconciliation among the Catholic, Orthodox, Muslim, and Jewish communities.

With these awards and programs, "we are trying to raise the decibel level" of conversation about the "first freedom," says Robert Seiple, council president. Dr. Seiple formerly served as the US State Department's Ambassador for International Religious Freedom.

"People don't yet feel comfortable talking about religion," Seiple says, but "we need to talk about it more. Ninety-five percent of the problems in the world take place at the nexus of religion and politics."

Calling America's concept of religious freedom the country's best gift to the world, Seiple says it's incumbent on every generation of Americans to learn why it is essential and to recognize that it has to be nurtured in order to be sustained.

"We need to get to a more sophisticated level as a nation as to why this is so important," he adds.

Obstacle: privileging one faith

One obstacle is a growing tendency on the part of some people to feel that Christianity, the majority faith, should be privileged, and minority faiths only tolerated, if that. This belief is a product of the popular notion that the United States Constitution established a Christian nation. It did not. It created a secular republic committed to freedom of religion and conscience for all.

Both Seiple and Haynes express concern over the continued lack of knowledge in the US about Islam. "To think [Islam] is a monolithic faith is as silly as thinking that all Baptists think alike - it's crazy," he says.

With a syndicated column that appears bimonthly in newspapers across the US, Haynes receives "hundreds of e-mails" each time he writes about Islam; they have led him to conclude that "Islamophobia is a big and growing problem in America. Some people want to recast the 'war on terrorism' as a 'war on Islam,'" he says. This is dangerous not only for Muslims but for the country as a whole, he adds.

More encouraging, however, is the progress that's been made on religious issues in US public schools. While fights continue over such questions as the teaching of evolution and creationism, great strides have been made in ensuring students' constitutional rights to religious expression as well as in bringing religion appropriately into the curriculum.

Back in the mid-1980s, when religion was virtually ignored in public school textbooks, as though it played no role in history or society, Haynes left his college teaching career to pioneer a new field.

With support from Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, he and Oliver Thomas of the Baptist Joint Committee brought together representatives from the country's principal religious and education groups to seek agreement on what a proper curriculum on religion would look like. A year and a half of discussion among groups that had been fighting for many decades resulted in a national breakthrough: "Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers," published in 1988.

They followed that agreement with another on religious holidays, and a third on equal access for religious expression. Those national agreements provided local districts with safe guidelines for bringing religion constitutionally into the schools.

'We need respect'

"Those were the formative agreements, but more significant are the local communities that have found common ground and created their own policies" as a result, Haynes says. "That's the most satisfying - seeing Americans from all different backgrounds sitting together and coming up with a plan for how to deal with these issues in their schools."

Good textbooks and resource materials are now widely available. "Fairfax County, Va., near where I live, has 11 world religion electives!" Haynes says.

Why teach about a variety of faiths? Religious freedom is like apple pie and motherhood - everyone says they're in favor of it. But, as the survey showed, many aren't so sure it should protect groups they may see as offensive.

"Of course in the 18th century, that would have been the Baptists; in the 19th century, that would have been the Catholics and Mormons; and today, it could be Muslims for some people, Wiccans for others," he explains.

Education about religious liberty and about various faiths is necessary in a diverse culture because there is a direct link between knowledge and respect, these experts say.

"Tolerance is too wimpy a word," Seiple says. "It's respect that we need." Respect doesn't mean agreeing theologically, he hastens to add, but on the right of others to follow their conscience.

Witte - who 10 times has been chosen "most outstanding professor" by Emory's law students - has carried that same conviction into the international arena.

In the 1990s, he directed a five-year global project on the religious foundations of human rights, which involved 1,000 scholars of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Together they created a framework for the field, thought through the problems of religious freedom across the globe, and identified challenges to be faced in the next millennium.

Three major issues identified

Three major issues came to the fore: the problem of proselytism, women's rights and how they are accommodated in various traditions, and jurisdiction over marriage - and to what extent autonomy in this area can be given to religious traditions.

"In the ensuing 15 years, these have become the big questions," Witte says. Indeed, with globalization, religions are elbowing each other all over the planet, and Witte ended up leading another project on the problems of proselytizing.

That project helped spawn a major dialogue currently under way among the world's religious communities, which aims to hammer out a code of ethics on issues related to conversion. Many flashpoints exist, whether it's a question of apostasy in Islam or how some Christians go about their evangelizing.

These advocates of religious freedom view the US experiment as clearly the world's most successful, but also far from secured. One danger sign for 2008? What looks to them like a superficial and divisive use of religion in the presidential campaign.

"It's fair for candidates to talk about their faith," Haynes says. "But when they suggest being religious or of a certain religion is what qualifies them ... then it undermines religious freedom. That's a dangerous message to send at a time we really do need to learn to live with our differences."

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