

Windows and Mirrors for All

A Delicate Balance

By Florence Sprague

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

The drafters of the United States Constitution packed a lot of punch into the First Amendment. Many of the rights that could be most widely named by the person on the street are tucked into that list. However, they are also often widely only superficially understood, and asserted to justify many personal expressions of faith, which makes them worth pondering.

Free exercise of religion was, and continues to be, a significant factor behind immigration to the U.S., both as a push factor and a pull factor. While many early colonizers were seeking economic gain, most school children could tell you that the Pilgrims and the Puritans came to North America for free practice of their version of the Christian religion. (We tend to conflate these groups, but they actually had different attitudes about whether to separate from or reform the Anglican Church, among other things)

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What we tend to forget, is that once here, they were not very tolerant of divergent viewpoints, shunning, punishing or banishing those who refused to follow the new orthodoxy. So we are fortunate that the Founders did not stop there.

Perhaps less often recalled is that as early as 1654 there was a Jewish congregation in New York City and that very early on the era of colonization synagogues were built in Rhode Island and Charleston, South Carolina. This was long before the large influx of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe and Russia, were pushed to emigrate from their shtetls by pogroms and bigotry.

Founding Father Thomas Jefferson, was not a traditional Christian. His beliefs have been described as Deism, rational religion or Unitarianism.

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The Native Americans have their own spiritual beliefs or religions. While some have converted to or adopted European sourced religions, most still deeply value their traditional beliefs which are foundational to their worldview and fundamental to their spiritual health.

There have been mosques in the US for a hundred years with early Muslim immigrants from the region of Syria arriving as early as the 1870s and from south Asia to the west coast in the early

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1900s. Some of the earliest mosques were built in Maine in 1915, and North Dakota in 1920. (<http://pluralism.org/religions/islam/islam-in-america/early-american-mosques/>)

Today there are millions of Americans who follow Buddhism, Hinduism, animism and a wide variety of other religions, or follow a spiritual path that does not fit into an organized religion. Millions more are agnostics or atheists.

Despite this broad and longtime diversity of faith as practiced in North America, it is often heard that “America is a Christian country,” and this may be spoken with anger and resentment at any limitations on public practice and support. This leads me to ponder what kind of Christianity the speakers mean. Anyone living in the United States cannot miss that Christianity is not monolithic. Those who claim that same affiliation can differ radically in their beliefs on social issues, worship practices and politics. So what kind of “Christian country” are we supposed to be?

Where I grew up, religious diversity was whether you were Catholic or Protestant, with the Catholic kids walking one direction down the block to the parochial school and the Protestants walking the other way to the public school. It doesn't take a deep knowledge of history to know that as ethnicities that were largely Catholic came to the US, like the Irish and the Italians, they were not easily accepted, so do people mean we are a protestant country? (Remember the claims that if John Kennedy were elected the Pope would be calling the shots? And before that, Al Smith?)

Of course, today, many of the strongest Christian churches are evangelical, not the old mainline Protestant sects tied to the early immigrants.

I go to church most weeks. I would identify myself as Christian in many contexts, though I cannot express belief in a literal resurrection, or any literal miracles. I find the moral construct helpful and the focus on helping others and thinking beyond myself important, but I am deeply uncomfortable with many styles of Christian worship and with the beliefs of many sects within it. The diversity of belief and acceptance under that umbrella term is huge.

When we talk about Muslims, they are all lumped together. While the terms, Sunni and Shia are used, I doubt that many understand and if we get to Sufi, Wahhabi and others, the mystification of the general public is clear. We need to acknowledge that just as we can see that not all Christians are alike, so not all Muslims are the same. Many things done in the name of either religion may have little connection to the fundamental truths or tenets of the faith.

What would establishment of religion look like? It could be a requirement that all citizens participate in the state religion. It could be a preference for a state religion, giving benefits to that one and placing burdens on others. It could be actually banning all but a state religion. Most often here this law has been used to challenge a favoring of one religion—read Christianity—in such a way that could make others feel burdened, or even fearful. It does not apply to personal expressions, in personal space, of faith, but to public entities and public spaces and public power. Majority adherence to a particular faith neither constitutes, nor justifies, governmental support for that faith. For many years, a majority was large enough in many communities to support the expression of faith on public property (*e.g.*, crèches, the 10 Commandments). Then when the 1st Amendment is enforced and they are removed there is a strong feeling of grievance. Today that feeling of grievance is aimed at Muslims, but I can remember when the people most often seeking such change were atheists. (Remember Madalyn Murray O'Hair?)

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Have faith. Personal faith. Study it, practice it, and honor it. May it bring you guidance, comfort, and peace. The strength of your belief, whichever it is, needs to be within you. Maybe I'll agree with you, maybe I won't. If you want the freedom of your beliefs, well, so do I and all others. (And don't forget the millions of atheists and agnostics!)

Free exercise of religion is highly compatible with religious diversity when we trust in ourselves and we don't let fear interfere.

