

Why Freedom of Religion and Belief Should Matter and How We Can Achieve it Everywhere

The news today is ripe with reports of religious intolerance and the attendant extremism that often results. Those circumstances, in both Western Republics and Islamic Republics, can be remedied and must be remedied, for religious freedom and democracy go hand in hand; each strengthening and reinforcing the other. Let me explain how they do so.

First, many believe the free exercise of religion can promote a more humanitarian, tolerant society. For example, most religions teach the importance of a power greater than one's self. The very nature of this vertical belief puts an adherent in a position where he or she comes to believe that the beginning and end of all creation, and the importance of life, transcend individual needs and wants. As one comes to understand that others are equally subordinated, there is a greater likelihood of horizontal involvement with other members of society. One can become more attuned to the horizontal equality that knits a community together, as well as the vertical belief in a higher power which instills a sense of humility. This "turning out" phenomenon increases the possibility of genuine concern for others and is important to a society which cares for those in need.

Second, most religions – but not all – promote civic virtue and influence believers to be law abiding. Democratic societies generally function because the vast majority of people are willing to obey the law without enforcement action by the state. Allowing, without impediment, people to exercise religious beliefs that tend to encourage acceptance of legal norms can therefore further a law-abiding culture, which is essential to democracy.

Third, religious freedom preserves an important opportunity for choice, which is a key component of liberty. When each religious community is free to proclaim its tenets and teach others, there will be a wider landscape of varying religious views and a broader spectrum of choices. As a result, each individual has a greater opportunity to make a choice that best fits his or her personal needs. Religious freedom is therefore both an important end in itself as well as one of the

cornerstones of self-determination, individual choice and pluralism. There is a profound liberty interest in being able to choose something as fundamental and personal as religion. Thus, with freedom to thrive, religions can help elevate the political process in society to a higher plane of democracy and individual freedom. It can also lead to a more stable society because freedom to choose a religion which best fits individual needs will result in a more satisfied society.

Finally, just as our collective viewpoint is enriched by ethnic and racial diversity, so too can diversity in religious cultures contribute to our political and social discourse. It is important to consider diverse perspectives in dealing with new challenges facing our society.

The challenges facing religious freedom will vary among countries and regions based on differences in culture, history, structure of government, and other factors. But its protection is fundamental, in my judgment, in assisting in the development of a democratic society.