

Religious Freedom and the American Experiment

“...our fathers founded a new nation, conceived in liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.”

—Abraham Lincoln

QUESTIONS:

1. By what authority do we enjoy our individual liberties, and are human rights a global, regional, or local social concept?
2. What is religious freedom?
3. Is religious freedom a benefit or a liability to a pluralistic society?
4. What does “separation of church and state” mean in practice?

1. By what authority do we enjoy our individual liberties, and are human rights a global, regional, or local social concept?

A: Our liberties are human rights that we can claim because we are all co-equal children of God and bearers of His image; no earthly power can make a higher claim.

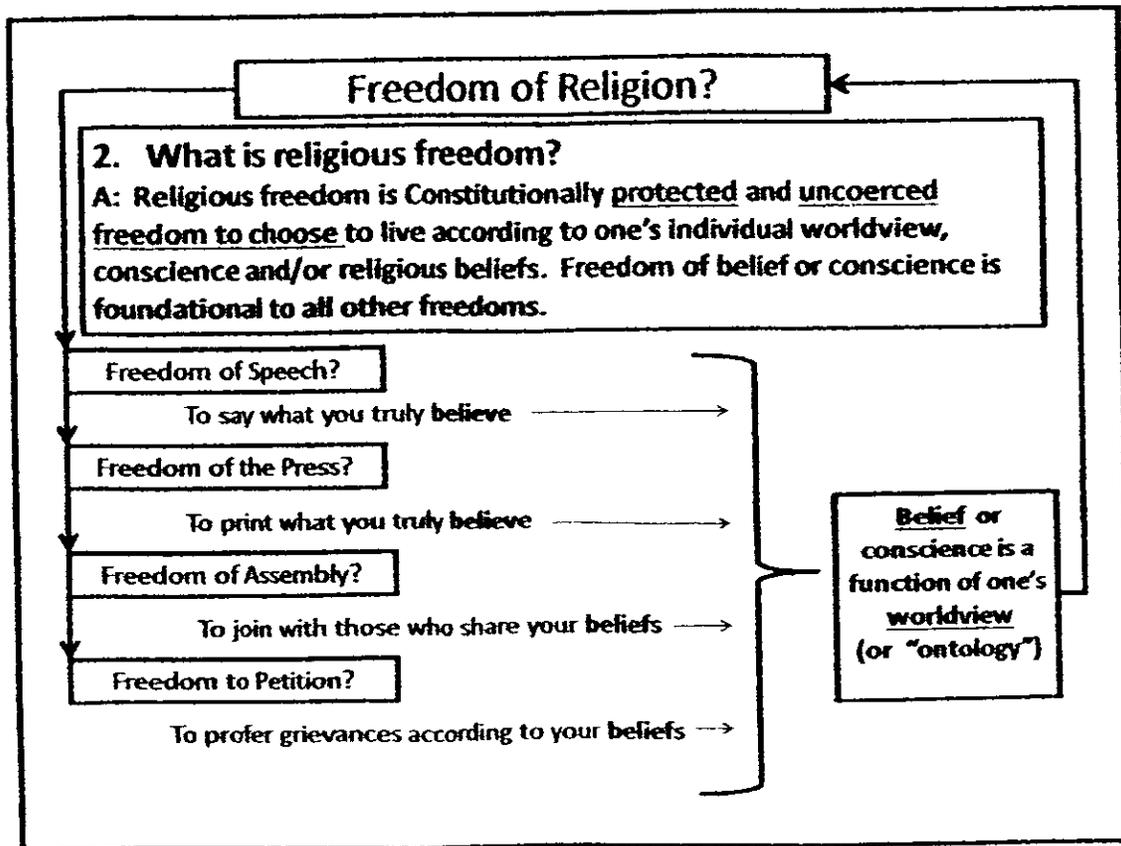
A: God’s claim on His children is universal; there is no differentiation with respect to time or place; human rights exist wherever humans exist.

“O Lord, God of our fathers, are you not God in heaven? You rule over all the kingdoms of the nations. In your hand are power and might, so that none is able to withstand you. —2Chron 20:6

“Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?”

—Malachi 2:10

| Declaration of Independence (excerpts*) | COMMENTS |
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| <p>When in the Course of human events, it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the <u>Laws of Nature and of Nature's God</u> entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel them to the separation.</p> | <p><i>Appeal to the highest Law Giver (Legislative).</i> The Founders' formal appeal was not to any man-made decree or governmental authority, but to basic rights inherently possessed by all men because of our very humanity. These rights are eternally consistent with the "Laws of Nature and of Nature's God."</p> <p>This is therefore a legal appeal, citing a law that is higher than any man-made law...even higher than the so-called divine pronouncements of human royalty.</p> |
| <p>We hold these <u>truths to be self-evident</u>,</p> <p>—that <u>all men are created equal</u>,</p> <p>—that they are <u>endowed by their Creator</u> with certain unalienable <u>Rights</u>,</p> <p>—that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.</p> | <p><i>Self-Evident Truths.</i> The signers declare that America and its government are founded on higher truths that are self-evident in the sense of their being irrefutable, beyond question, and fundamental to the understanding of what ultimately must define what it is to be a human being.</p> <p><i>Endowed by their Creator.</i> Our rights as humans carry the Creator's copyright, and therefore transcend the ability of any mere human government to destroy or ignore them.</p> <p><i>Rights.</i> Such rights are therefore permanently affirmed and irrevocable liberties, possessed by all men by virtue of their status as created beings... all possessing the image of the Creator.</p> |
| <p>That to <u>secure these rights</u>, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed,</p> | <p><i>Secure these rights.</i> The purpose of a truly legitimate government is to secure and protect "certain unalienable rights," including "Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness" on behalf of the governed.</p> |
| <p>That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the <u>Right of the People to alter or to abolish it</u>, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their <u>Safety and Happiness</u>.</p> | <p><i>The Right of Revolution.</i> Politically, the most important right is the right of self-government in liberty. Violation of the consent of the governed calls forth the right, if not the duty, of "the people" to "institute a new government" that will serve to restore "their safety and happiness."</p> |
| <p>We, therefore, the Representatives of the United States of America, in General Congress, Assembled, appealing to the <u>Supreme Judge of the world</u> for the rectitude of our intentions, do, in the Name, and by Authority of the good People of these Colonies, solemnly publish and declare, That these United Colonies are, and of Right ought to be Free and Independent States; ...</p> | <p><i>Appeal to Divine Justice (Judicial):</i> The signers appeal to the highest possible authority to validate their declaration of human rights...the Supreme Judge of the World.</p> |
| <p>And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance on the protection of <u>divine Providence</u>, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes and our <u>sacred Honor</u>.</p> <p>(*Underlining added for emphasis)</p> | <p><i>Appeal to Divine Providence (Executive):</i> The signers appeal to the highest executive authority to support their commitment to this new concept of government.</p> <p><i>Pledge our Sacred Honor:</i> Men can earn respect and honor from other men for noteworthy deeds, but "sacred honor" is a higher concept; it is the divine value inherent in each individual that God has emplaced in association with His own image. The signers are pledging everything they have, all their mortal possessions, and even committing their God-given sacred identities, to make their strongest possible closing statement.</p> |



3. Is religious freedom a benefit or a liability to a pluralistic society?

By allowing religious freedom to flourish...

- **People will have more visibility of the market of religious concepts, find common values, and gain ethical knowledge.**
Make me understand the way of your precepts, and I will meditate on your wondrous works. – Psalm 119:27
- **Moral belief systems will serve to guide individual actions, and promote personal accountability and self-control.**
Through your precepts I get understanding; therefore I hate every false way. – Psalm 119:104
- **Morally informed legal systems discourage rebellious, criminal activity.**
Look, O Lord, for I am in distress; my stomach churns; my heart is wrung within me, because I have been very rebellious. – Lamentations 1:20a
- **A moral society's ethos and behaviors will also work to preserve and enhance true liberty among all its members.**
One who is righteous is a guide to his neighbor, but the way of the wicked leads them astray. – Proverbs 12:26

4. What does “separation of church and state” mean in practice?

| CONCEPT | COMMENT |
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| Keep the Government “Free FROM Religion” ? | No. The non-establishment clause does not require that all public officials adopt a secular humanist worldview in the conduct of their business. Moreover, there is no individual right to be insulated from exposure to religious thought, or free speech, in public places. |
| “Freedom of Worship” ? | No. Worship is only a small subset of the larger freedom, religious freedom of conscience. Limiting religious freedom merely to an hour of worship each week is not consistent with the meaning of religious liberty. |
| “Freedom of Religion”? | Yes. The non-establishment clause precludes official government participation or coercion in religious matters, which then permits individuals and churches to have the freedom to pursue diverse beliefs of their own choosing within a pluralistic market of ideas. Public expressions of religious belief by individuals do not, however, make government complicit in the establishment of religion. Religious freedom requires mutual respect and civilized coexistence among diverse points of view. |

4. What does “separation of church and state” mean in practice?

- **Everyone believes in something, so government needs to permit religious expression as well as non-religious expression.**
- **“Freedom of religion” cannot surrender to demands for “freedom from religion.”**
- **A pluralist democracy does require toleration of opposing worldviews within the marketplace of ideas.**
- **Our citizens need to be informed and supportive of the need for religious freedom in order to preserve all our personal liberties associated with freedom of conscience.**