

## SHOULD THERE BE LIMITS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM?

Richard S. Gilbert – Albany, NY – June 23, 2019

The Rev. Franklin Graham, son of the great evangelist, called for Christians to pray for President Trump on June 2 of this year – a prayer to “strengthen” and “embolden” the president against his “enemies.” He has a perfect right to do so. We are a nation that cherishes religious freedom.

The Rev. David Platt, minister of the McLean Bible Church in Vienna, Virginia, did pray for – AND WITH - President Donald Trump during an unexpected presidential visit to his church service that day. The good Rev. Platt, however, was not flustered as he delivered a non-partisan prayer with a very pious President beside him. He later admitted that “In my church, some of us voted for President Trump. All of us pray for him.”<sup>i</sup>

(I can only imagine if Trump were to make a surprise visit to this congregation today. Let your imaginations go wild.)

The co-leader of the Poor People’s Campaign, the Rev. William Barber, had a very different response to Graham’s invitation: “These evangelicals are praying (PRAYING) for a man preying (PREYING) on many.” Harsh and prophetic words. He calls upon us to be “conspicuous in the public square.” He surely is. He is a giant of a man, physically and spiritually. I heard him in 2015 on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Selma March.

Had I access to a pulpit June 2 I might have done as Graham suggested, though my prayer would have been quite different. It would have been intercessory prayer – one which urges God to intercede in human affairs – not that my theology accepts the idea that we have any influence over deity. I am a mystical religious humanist who believes we are the ones in charge of our destiny. However, we definitely do need some intervention on this earthly plain.

On heavenly matters I have no opinion, though our current hyper-partisanship does remind me of the story of the Republican who on his death bed changed his political registration to Democrat. When he reached heaven, he was asked why: “Better to lose one of them than one of us.” Evidently, political strife is rife in Heaven too.

This action by Graham, however, does raise the question of religious freedom, and more broadly, the separation of church and state. “Congress shall make no law regarding an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. . . .” You will recognize those words as the beginning of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. It is in two parts – one forbidding the promotion by government of any particular religion – government neutrality; and the other prohibiting government from infringing upon the practice of any faith, or no faith – religious liberty.

Sounds simple enough, but we know better. The Supreme Court has rendered judgment on what all this means - from citing Thomas Jefferson’s metaphor, “the wall of separation between church and state,” to the Masterpiece Baker’s case. You will remember the bakery owner’s religious opposition to same-sex marriage was used as grounds for refusing service to two men who wished to marry.

What are the limits of religious freedom? It is no abstract question, but emerges in contemporary public life: from religious exemption for measles anti-vaccinators - to the refusal of anti-abortion doctors to provide legal abortions; from the federal Johnson Amendment’s provision denying

religious communities the right to endorse or support specific candidates - to the evangelical effort in Project Blitz to codify America as an official Christian nation.

Take the issue of vaccination against measles. New York State, as you know, recently ended the religious exemption for measles vaccination – though medical exemptions are still permitted. The Governor argues that public health wins the argument here. We proudly independent Unitarian Universalists have long struggled as a minority faith seeking freedom in places dominated by other religious groups. We are known for fiercely defending our independence as well as that of others. So, it might seem we would lean toward those claiming religious freedom.

However, we are more than individuals; we are members, members of a wider community of which we are a part. You will remember our 7<sup>th</sup> principle which affirms the “interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.” I find the web principle trumps the individualist principle (if you will excuse the expression).

Or take that Masterpiece Baker incident, which actually is still being litigated. It seems that the Court decided in favor of the baker because they thought the Colorado Human Rights Commission was biased against him. They did not determine if religious freedom allowed him to refuse service.

Should individual religious freedom be used to deny basic freedoms to others? The baker refused service on religious grounds; he said that the Bible required him to reject homosexuality.

That logic could well have been used when society discriminated against African Americans who sought justice in the public square.

I well remember the 1963 March on Washington. And I well remember my embarrassment and anger in Suffolk, Virginia, where my wife Joyce and I led a Head Start and recreation program for the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee in the black community. It was the summer of 1965, just after public accommodations were legally integrated. We had a celebratory end-of-program dinner in the best restaurant in town. Naïve as I was, I wondered at the slow and sullen service our interracial party received in the private dining room we had reserved. I was stunned when the owner, accepting my payment, angrily called me out for having integrated his restaurant. He claimed the private dining area was not covered by federal legislation. His religious freedom would deny the freedom of others to eat a meal.

I vividly remember the fear I felt in Selma in 1965 where we celebrated the life and mourned the death of James Reeb as we witnessed for voting rights.

And I vividly remember the Biblical citations and the religious rhetoric that defended such discrimination. There were those who believed their faith enabled them to deny certain persons their basic human rights. They dug out some Biblical verses to document their claim – and the Bible does have material we would find repugnant. However, religious freedom must not be used as a weapon in the culture wars; must not be used to harm another person under the guise of religious liberty.

Now, in 2019, we have a similar argument, as supposedly religious folks rely on the same arguments to deny others their basic rights.

For example, take the efforts of the Trump administration to utilize religious freedom to promote a “denial of care” principle on the basis of religious freedom. That policy would defend doctors

and others who refuse to treat women seeking abortions or members of the LGBTQ community who seek medical care. There are already balanced protections for them.

But what if a woman with serious pregnancy complications approaches an anti-abortion doctor who refuses to treat her? What if there are few, if any, alternatives, and the doctor refuses to even refer her to a sympathetic doctor? Is this doctor, who has sworn to “do no harm,” privileged to deny that service when it might well be dangerous or lethal for her to seek it elsewhere? Is this a proper use of religious freedom? Yet, given recent legislation and rhetoric, there is no argument I have read that suggests there must be exceptions to what I would call religious bigotry. There is, by the way, legislation introduced in the U. S. House of Representatives to reverse that. It is called the “do no harm” bill.

While evangelical Christians argue against abortion and homosexuality by invoking Jesus, it is fascinating to note that Jesus said nothing about either. There is nothing in the Gospels on either issue. On the other hand, consider this hypothetical: if I had a book shop and wanted to exercise my religious freedom with potential customers, I might ask if they were adulterers. Adultery, you see, is against my religion. I don’t want to serve adulterers. The big difference between my religious liberty and that of evangelicals is that my rationale is in the Gospels. Theirs is not. Go figure.

Mark 10: 11-12: “Whoever divorces his wife and marries another commits adultery against her. And if she divorces her husband and marries another, she commits adultery.” I could refuse service to the President of the United States because of my religious freedom. Not that he would be in a bookstore.

Am I not justified in banning book buyers if they violate my religious freedom? I rest my case, not that the Supreme Court would listen.

On the other hand, consider this large and complex problem: global climate change. Here we see an even greater danger in religious liberty: There are Christian politicians, some office holders, who believe in the Apocalypse – that God will end the world in our time. Franklin Graham believes that Jesus will come in the Rapture to judge all those who do not adhere to his (Graham’s) biblical interpretation. So why bother dealing with climate change when God will take care of it? After all, God is not only omniscient, but also omnipotent. While President Trump employs a secular denial of global climate change, an evangelical may argue that the Apocalypse is coming. He has a right to his opinion, but what if his opinion determines his vote against measures to address climate change – and prevails? We might be looking at a human Apocalypse!

How much respect must be given that view when there is a virtual scientific consensus that climate change is real and threatening, and that, furthermore, we humans are largely to blame? Is this a proper use of religious liberty? They are surely free to make this argument, but what do we do when it harms others? When does the classic prohibition of “you can’t shout ‘fire’ in a crowded theater when there is no fire” apply?

In my view the fundamental human right to live and breathe on this planet must have priority over the kind of religious freedom that would interfere with this basic human right.

Religious freedom helps us frame our ethical and social perspective. I employ it to develop what I call a “God’s eye view of the world.” Like Abraham Lincoln, I do not presume to know the will

of God, but I do seek a perspective that transcends self-interest – what I imagine God’s will would be if only I could know it. In my case “God’s eye view” is theological rhetoric for my highest values.

What I am suggesting is that fundamental human rights transcend particular expressions of religious freedom. Some values transcend right and left, liberal and conservative – they are right and wrong. Racism is wrong; xenophobia is wrong; Islamophobia is wrong, homophobia is wrong, and an America First chauvinism is wrong.

Poet Arthur Guiterman wrote satirically: “Providence, that watches over children, drunkards and fools, with silent miracles and other esoterica, continue to suspend the ordinary rules and take care of the United States of America.” If we do not cherish and defend fundamental human rights against those who would use narrow sectarianism to quash them, we are in deep trouble.

The unknown author of “The Lesson” has important insights for us. While the Bible is not holy writ for me, it does have important lessons. As Judas asked in this reading: “What does this have to do with real life?” Despite the cherry picking of dehumanizing verses, I agree with the Roman Catholic bishops who say the fundamental biblical ethic is a “preferential option for the poor.” And I agree with evangelical preacher Jim Wallis who reminds us that while there are a handful of verses about homosexuality, there are hundreds reminding us of our obligation to the oppressed. If you cut out all those passages on justice, he said, you would have a bible “full of holes.”

A true faith perspective drives us deeper than our particular denomination. It drives us beyond our often-narrow self-interest to consideration of the Greater Good, the public interest, the Beloved Community. It is when our faith perspective drives us to support of fundamental human rights – when it aligns with them – then religious liberty works as it should.

Our own affirmation of the inherent worth of every person, compassion, equity and justice, and our active engagement with the interdependent web of existence of which we are all a part – these religious values are far more than a parochial pursuit of religious liberty. These words represent our aspiration to be activists for universal human rights.

An excellent summary of the role of the religious community in the political realm is in the words of Martin Luther King, Jr. “The church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state, but rather the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.”

Your minister, my friend and colleague, Sam Trumbore sent me a cartoon that speaks to our condition. It depicts a man looking intently at a large shopping mall directory trying to figure out his location. Over his head is the sign, “Institute of Philosophy,” which could well be changed to “Unitarian Universalist Church.” In any event, the man sees the characteristic dot indicating his position with the more intriguing words: “Why are you here?”

Indeed, why are you here? Why am I here? We are here to exercise our religious freedom in the interest, not only of ourselves and our loved ones, but in the interest of those we do not and never will know. That is why we are here. End of the “lesson” for today.

Blurb: Religious freedom has been invoked in many problematic moral situations: parents who refuse to have their children vaccinated; merchants who won't serve same sex couples; congregations which want to endorse political candidates. What is the meaning of church-state separation in this context?

## NOTES

Biblical verses on adultery: 1 Cor. 6: 9-10 and 6:18; Ex. 20:14; Heb. 13:4; James 4:17; Jer. 13:27; Mark 10:11-12; Luke 16:18; Matt. 19:9; Matt. 5:27-28; Matt. 5:31-32; 1 John 1:9

## CALL TO CELEBRATION

Welcome to this assembly,  
A congregation, not of saints or sinners,  
But of seekers.

We gladly greet those who are on a journey -  
Even if they know not where they go, or wish to go.  
We would walk with you as we explore the way together.

This church is a place  
where the lonely can find community,  
where the friendless can befriend and be befriended,  
where the hopeless can find a future,  
where the happy can share their joy,  
where the despondent can share their pain and woe,  
And where people can find, and be a neighbor,  
one to the other.

- Richard S. Gilbert, 3/8/98

READING: THE LESSON (ESPECIALLY FOR TEACHERS) - Author unknown

Then Jesus took his disciples up the mountain and gathered them around him.  
He taught them, saying:  
Blessed are the poor in spirit,  
for theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven;  
Blessed are the meek;  
Blessed are they that mourn;  
Blessed are the merciful;  
Blessed are they who thirst for justice;  
Blessed are you when persecuted;  
Blessed are you when you suffer;  
Be glad and rejoice, for your reward is great in heaven,  
And remember what I am telling you.

Then Simon Peter said: "Do we have to write this down?"  
And Andrew said: "Are we supposed to know this?"

And James said: "Will we have a test on this?"  
And Phillip said: "What if we don't know it?"  
And Bartholomew said: "Do we have to turn this in?"  
And John said: "The other disciples didn't have to learn this."  
And Matthew said: "When do we get out of here?"  
And Judas said: "What does this have to do with real life?"  
And the other disciples likewise.

Then one of the Pharisees who was present asked to see Jesus' lesson plan, and inquired of Jesus of his terminal objectives in the cognitive domain -

And Jesus wept.

## THE SHIRK ETHIC

O God of Work and Leisure,  
Teach me to shirk upon occasion,  
Not only that I may work more effectively,  
But also that I may enjoy life  
more abundantly.  
Enable me to understand that the earth  
Magically continues spinning on its axis  
Even when I am not tending thy vineyards.  
Permit me to breathe more easily  
Knowing the destiny of the race  
Rests not on my shoulders alone.  
Deliver me from false prophets who urge me  
To "Repent and shirk no more."  
I pray for thy grace on me,  
Thy faithful shirker. Amen.  
ORDER OF SERVICE 10am

## RINGING OF THE CHIME

### WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION OF GUEST

CALL TO CELEBRATION "A Congregation of Seekers"

Richard S. Gilbert

### PRELUDE

### CHALICE LIGHTING

HYMN *Singing the Living Tradition* # 40 "The Morning Hangs a Signal"

### WELCOMING GUESTS AND VISITORS

### COMMUNITY GREETING

### SECOND RINGING OF THE CHIME

### ANNOUNCEMENTS

### PERSONAL JOYS AND SORROWS

SPOKEN MEDITATION “The Ambivalent Blessings” Richard S. Gilbert

SILENT MEDITATION

HYMN *Singing the Living Tradition* # 391 “Voice Still and Small”

READING “The Lesson” Author Unknown

OFFERTORY

SERMON “Should There Be Limits on Religious Freedom?” Richard S. Gilbert

HYMN *Singing the Journey* # 1035 “Freedom Is Coming”

UNISON EXTINGUISHING OF THE CHALICE rsg

CLOSING WORDS “The Shirk Ethic” Richard S. Gilbert

POSTLUDE

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<sup>i</sup> *DIY Faith – Opinion*. June 11, 2019.