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In Support of Religious Liberty

What is the value of religious liberty? This is a liberty over which wars have been fought and lives have been lost. Over the course of history, groups and individuals have risked everything in order to worship freely according to belief. The immense growth as well as the deterioration of many societies has been closely tied to the state of that society's religious liberty. Understanding religious liberty and examining its effect on societies makes clear that religious liberty is essential to the health of civilization.

In order to fully comprehend the role that religious liberty plays in any society – but specifically healthy societies – it becomes imperative to define both of these concepts. What is religious liberty? What does a healthy society look like? The best and brightest philosophical minds have addressed these questions. In identifying the meaning of religious liberty, it is necessary to understand the distinction between liberty and freedom. John Locke, as he expressed in his *Second Treatise on Government*, believed that freedom is being able to act and do as one sees fit (Ch 2: Sect 4). In only slight contrast, John Stuart Mill's *On Liberty* refers to liberty as being the use of one man's freedom without hindering the freedom of anyone else (Ch 1). Thus the distinction between the terms freedom and liberty is the action against others that each allows: freedom focusing on the rights of individuals and liberty encompassing those rights as well as the preservation of those rights for all. Religious liberty, as opposed to religious

freedom, sets limitations on destructive actions that are taken against others in the name of religion, as well as actions taken against others in an attempt to destroy religion or erase its natural influences. While the principle of religious liberty strictly limits the enforcement of religion, it also protects, supports and encourages the expression of religion. It is this right to expression in addition to a freedom from oppression that has been shown to be a key component of healthy, thriving societies.

The Constitution of The United States of America clearly outlines this principle as it states in the first amendment that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof” (U.S. Constitution amend.1). In the words of American lawyer and politician Joseph Kennedy III, “There is a difference between exercising religious beliefs and imposing them on others. Our Constitution fiercely protects the former and expressly prohibits the latter” (par. 14).

Confucius believed that in order to thrive a society had to be built on values that could be sustained through education and philosophical thought (*Stanford*, “Confucius”). Nietzsche believed that societies should center around and strive for unified higher goals, saying that “Society must not exist for society's sake but only as the foundation and scaffolding on which a choice type of being is able to raise itself to its higher task and to a higher state of being” (*Stanford*, “Nietzsche” 258). These values and “choice” ways of being undeniably stem from belief. Whether perpetuated by organized religion or not, faith, moral codes, ethical perspectives and answers to existential questions that affect how one chooses to live one’s life, all stem from a place of personal belief, often supported by groups that share that belief. Though these beliefs do not have to directly correlate to any form of organized religion, organized religion as *well* as these valuable

elements of belief that motivate and build healthy societies, are protected by religious liberty.

Voltaire suggested that social progress should be brought on without the dominance of authority getting in its way and “that no authority—religious or political or otherwise—should be immune to challenge by reason” (*Stanford*, “Voltaire”). This idea of challenging religious authority may seemingly contrast the idea that belief and solidified values are what drive a society to thrive as a unified whole. However, this idea actually benefits the preservation of religious liberty by ensuring that all parts of a society have the freedom to believe and act *without* the perpetuation of these beliefs by authority infringing upon the freedom of any others (therefore inhibiting a progressing and healthy society according to Voltaire). Similarly, Kant’s philosophy concerning religion directly addresses this principle in stating that

a head of state who favors religious enlightenment, goes even further, for he realizes there is no danger (to his legislation) in allowing his subjects to (use reason publicly and) set before the world their thoughts concerning better formulations (of his laws), even if this involves frank criticism (of legislation currently in effect). (Kant, 9)

Kant suggests that allowing for the existence of challenging and contrasting thought does more to support religious enlightenment, thought, and expression than prohibiting that contrast. In other words, the freedom to challenge simultaneously promotes the freedom to believe, and the freedom to accept or deny different values allows those values to serve as genuine motivators and inspirations for individuals in a society.

How do differing values and beliefs contribute to the higher state of society that Nietzsche and Confucius allude to? Plato answers this question in believing that “conflicting interests of different parts of society can be harmonized” (IEP, par 1). He

proposes that “the best, rational and righteous, political order, leads to a harmonious unity of society and allows each of its parts to flourish, but not at the expense of others” (IEP, par 1). These parts, when flourishing, are what help make up a healthy society. A healthy society propagates art, education, peaceful coexistence in diversity, stable government with ensured justice, and economic prosperity.

An analysis of functional and dysfunctional societies makes clear the necessity of religious liberty to a healthy society. One can compare societies with religious liberty to those without it, as well as compare a single society which over time has experienced religious liberty and its absence. Either study demonstrates essential benefits of religious freedom’s existence in societies, and the breakdown of civilization that comes as a result of a lack thereof.

As one of the most explosive and influential societal movements throughout history, The European Renaissance of the 14th-17th century serves as a peak example of both cultural progress and societal health. The Renaissance was born primarily out of the reformation of the Catholic Church as it then stood. Rome’s fight for religious liberty was not initiated by any other nation or group antagonizing or limiting Rome’s religious freedom; in reality, Rome’s lack of religious liberty was a result of the Catholic church’s power constraining individuals and groups to worship and believe in one way only, which stunted the cultural expression and social progress of Rome. The church was the only source of religious output or expression. The church as an organization had been mass producing and quickly manufacturing every aspect of religious art or cultural practice as an attempt to easily educate the people and organize worship. As an example, art was utilized as a means by which low grade picture books could be

created to illustrate bible stories to the masses (whom the leadership of the church viewed as being incapable of thinking or even believing anything for themselves). This became limiting to culture and society and in the eyes of the people had gone beyond the just rights of religious leadership. This civil dominion by one religious entity became extremely limiting to art and expression. In revolt, a semi-conscious cultural movement stemmed from the arts and the religious expression of artists. As the Reformation grew, it opened up space and freedom in religious beliefs, only adding to the cultural growth that followed.

This cultural growth has been reviewed throughout history as being a pinnacle of creativity, knowledge and societal thriving/progress. What is remarkable is that while this progress depended on being free from stifling religious leadership, the majority of the art that this free space provided centered around theology and glorified divinity. What is even more fascinating is that almost any cultural growth that has occurred in societies throughout history has similarly testified to belief in divine beings and furthered the glorification of theological ideologies, religious symbols, and words of scripture.

Expansion in humanities is a key factor in healthy societies because it evidences a strong basis of education, as well as the appreciation of and the capacity to create beautiful, poetic and expanding works. Not only does the existence of cultural growth in a society show stability, it also increases and produces that stability. The Renaissance showed that through artistic, mathematical, and scientific development, society was elevated to deeper levels of thought and efficiency. With greater mathematical and scientific understanding, came invention and education. With more emphasis on developing and discussing new ideas, political thought was elevated and analyzed. With

art came honor, and with faith came hope. From theology grew expression, independence, peace. Free belief, occurring within the bounds of liberty, inspired a thriving society that set a new standard for cultural development.

While cultural growth born out of religious liberty has been shown to create health and prosperity, it can be seen just as easily that societies which force and manufacture cultural growth against free will of the people crumble into ruin. The most interesting thing is that both of these forms of cultural growth are strongest when backed by fervent spiritual or religious belief, showing that the focus and glorification of the divine is what prompts the most drastic movements of humankind. People trying to control other people with religion is destructive. People and governments limiting religious liberty is destructive. Religious liberty (versus religious constriction) is the leaven that makes the difference between growth and implosion.

An example of this is the way in which the forced involvement of religion in societal culture contributed to the fall of ancient Greece. Religious liberty was almost completely nonexistent in ancient Greece. It was a society built on intellectual growth and the perpetuation of cultural progress, but all development had a forced connection to belief in Greek pantheology. While there was immense growth in Greek art, science and politics, everything had to reference, honor, or glorify an aspect of the mythology. Homage to the gods was enforced by government officials in each of the ancient Greek city states. Additionally, city-wide organized worship was also enforced by the government; a failure to do so would result in fines or the loss of property, at the very least. Because of the government's involvement in Greek religion, when the city states began warring for political control, they were also fighting to gain control of religious

belief and worship. In turn, the fall of the ancient Greek government also meant the fall of that cultural progress. Control of belief stifled even the famed Greek seedbed of intellect and creativity. No such extermination or fall resulted during the Renaissance, because choice and liberty, freedom from control by one entity to limit the religious expression of others or all, enabled development.

There are countless examples of the downfall of societies when religious liberty is removed. An entire body of people united as Jews by religion and heritage were persecuted, stripped of all rites, abused in the cruelest manner, and exterminated through Naziism. Mao Ze Tung's communist rule spurred anti-religion and limitations on belief that led to the atrocities of the cultural revolution and limitations on freedom of expression and religious liberty that continue to the present day. ISIS also requires strict adherence to the teachings of Muhammad and in the name of this religion, atrocities have been committed and people's opportunity to worship as they choose has been obliterated through violence and terror. "In their efforts to impose universal worship, men have unsheathed their swords and killed one another. They have invented gods and challenged each other: 'Discard your gods and worship mine or I will destroy both your gods and you!'"(Dostoyevsky)

Religious liberty has played a major role in the history of nations. This can be seen by studying and examining one nation and its experience with religious liberty over time, however the importance of religious liberty is even more transparent in societies where religious freedoms have come and gone at various points on a timeline.

The United States of America as a country was founded by people seeking religious freedom. Not only was the importance the colonists placed on religious

freedom illustrated by their willingness to leave their familiar homes and families and risk death, disease and even wage war in order to worship according to their beliefs, it was of such importance that when *The Constitution* was written, the first amendment established was for the purpose of preserving and protecting their new religious freedoms. Early American society was built on independence fueled by oppression by tyranny. The importance of religion and self-determination in practice of belief seeped into literally every aspect of the nation's functionality. This influence and inspiration strengthened the foundation of the nation by uniting its inhabitants on belief and a shared distaste for inhibited freedom, specifically in regards to religion.

Unfortunately, this united belief and newfound freedom that so clearly benefited society didn't honor the ideal of religious liberty for all. One of the first and most horrific attacks on belief at the hands of the newly free, was the forced assimilation of Native Americans into Christianity. Not only were natives forced out of sacred land that was central to their various belief systems, their children were taken from their homes and placed in government boarding schools, to be taught Christian beliefs. Many indigenous religious practices including dance and musical expression as forms of worship were criminalized by the government.

The colonists had just escaped oppression in England in search of religious freedom for themselves, and yet, enforced action and laws that would take away the religious freedoms from groups with beliefs different from their own. This was also prevalent in the culture produced by American puritanism. For example, witch trials where those who did not live in accordance with expected religious practice were punished and even killed. These examples reveal the danger of religious freedom for

some, as opposed to religious liberty for all. This lack of religious liberty has clearly shown to have a hand in creating tragedies in American history. Forceful eradication of differing beliefs harmed a society built with freedom as central to its creation and survival.

Although the principle of religious liberty wasn't applied as set forth, the principle was reintroduced in this new nation. This was done through eighteenth century legislation, such as The Rhode Island Charter, a document that supported Rhode Island in being the first colony to allow for religious liberty, and The Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom, which allowed all faiths the freedom to worship. Later, some limitations on the freedoms of others were even corrected in laws like the American Indian Religious Freedom Act, which restored the right of practicing religion to the Native Americans. Documents like this partially acted as inspiration for the first amendment to *The Constitution*.

The creation of *The Constitution* and specifically the First Amendment, held the promise of religious liberty being upheld. This concept of a government having a limited place in religious affairs while still protecting religious rights was introduced during the American Revolution. Thomas Paine, who was extremely influential in this process, outlined this principle in stating that "As to religion, I hold it to be the indispensable duty of government to protect all conscientious professors thereof, and I know of no other business which government hath to do therewith"(Paine).

True religious liberty is more than the freedom to worship and believe according to individual will. It is the freedom to do so for all. Throughout the history of civilization individuals and governments have attempted to force religion, eradicate religion, or

force one religion. This has always limited individuals and societies. When religious liberty is preserved, individuals and societies flourish, connection to the divine is expressed in humanities and sciences, and civilizations thrive. America is in a unique position to support founding documents that define and require religious liberty which can keep the people of the nation truly free to choose and free to believe and worship. The preservation of this right is fundamental because belief fuels action and provides motivation for every individual. James Madison supports this in stating that “Conscience is the most sacred of all property.” This principle of conscience and belief is inherent to all humanity. Even if an individual wants nothing to do with religion, the right to that belief is protected under religious liberty. Belief and the freedom to act and worship according to conscience is preserved through religious liberty which benefits societies. The most beneficial act to protect and encourage societal health is promoting freedom of belief in our attitude and dialogue towards others, and supporting the protection of that dialogue and these rights by defending religious liberty.

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