

Protecting Religious Identity and Human Dignity
Against Ascendant Irreligion
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I am grateful to be with you. Our united interest in promoting and preserving religious freedom for everyone everywhere brings us together with not only a vital purpose, but I believe with a sacred one as well. Thank you for joining the broadcast and thank you for your interest in and efforts to support religious freedom. Your time and personal influence matter.

We share a fundamental belief in human dignity and the importance of individual religious identity. Human dignity is not earned. It is innate. It is the spark of the divine in all humankind. The compelling religious feelings that animate us are not easy to describe to those who have not experienced them, but they are real. They are the center of our lives and personal identity.

The profound power of religious belief among the ancients is recounted frequently in the scriptures. The New Testament book of Acts describes an occasion not long after the resurrection of Jesus Christ when the Apostles Peter and John were arrested following their prominent healing at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem of a man who had been lame since birth. The sensational event led to Peter and John being arrested and jailed overnight. The next day they were hauled before the “rulers, and elders, and scribes,” along with the man who was healed. They were asked, “by what power, or by what name” they had performed the healing.

Peter and John stood before the very men who had condemned Christ before Pilate and vehemently urged that He be crucified. Peter boldly replied, that “by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom ye crucified, whom God raised from the dead, even by him, doth this man stand here before you whole.”

Annas, the high priest, and Caiaphas, and the other rulers threatened Peter and John and “commanded them not to speak at all nor teach in the name of Jesus.” Peter replied, “Whether it be right in the sight of God to hearken unto you more than unto God, judge ye.”

From Mexico in 1915, comes another account of the power of belief and faith. Rafael Monroy and Vicente Morales, both members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints who lived in San Marcos, state of Hidalgo, were accused of following a foreign religion and of secretly harboring a cache of arms to be used against the revolutionary Zapatista army. Monroy’s store and home were repeatedly ransacked in the search for weapons. Nothing was found. Monroy affirmed to the Zapatistas that the only weapons they had in their homes and store were their copies of scriptures. The Zapatistas told them that if they would renounce their foreign faith, they would be spared. They refused, and so were lined up one evening before a firing squad and executed.

The history of the Latter-day Saints in this country tells a similar story. Between 1830-1847, early Church members moved from New York, where their faith was founded, to Ohio, to Missouri, to Illinois, to Iowa, and eventually to Utah in search only of the opportunity to escape persecution and the freedom to live their religion. The First Amendment promised them that freedom but hard experience on the ground wherever they went denied them that right. Their 1,200-mile march from Illinois to Utah was among the greatest religious migrations in history, with about 60,000 Latter-day Saints crossing the plains on foot or horseback, in handcarts or wagons, between 1847 and 1868. The journey came at incalculable cost, with Church members leaving homes and farms, friends and family, and in too many cases their dead spouses, children, and parents, buried alongside the trail west.

Why would anyone, anywhere, be willing to expose themselves to these risks of death, execution, imprisonment, physical and emotional suffering, economic losses, and trauma?

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Because religion is more than a hobby. For us believers, religion is the center, the core of our souls, identities, and lives. It's the why and the purpose of our lives. It most clearly isn't a shirt or blouse that we put on and take off according to whim or fashion.

A few weeks ago, Kathy and I walked along the Mall in Washington, DC, visiting the Lincoln Memorial, the Washington Monument, and the Jefferson Memorial. On one of the walls of his memorial, Jefferson's words are inscribed as follows:

Almighty God hath created the mind free. All attempts to influence it by temporal punishments or burthens . . . are a departure from the plan of the Holy Author of our religion . . . No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship or ministry or shall otherwise suffer on account of his religious opinions or belief, but all men shall be free to profess and by argument to maintain their opinions in matters of religion. I know but one code of morality for men whether acting singly or collectively.

We live in a day when Jefferson's words have been forgotten, and when the reality of religious identity is ignored. Recent government action and inaction, and the strong currents of culture, have placed "temporal punishments [and] burthens" on religious "opinions [and] beliefs." The Pandemic opened an era of unconcealed discrimination against religion and believers in the USA. Notwithstanding the protections of the First Amendment, some government leaders imposed broad limitations on religious gatherings, labeled by government leaders as "non-essential," while bars and other non-religious activities were characterized as "essential" and allowed to continue as normal or were accorded less-intrusive restrictions. All too often infringements of religious freedom were undertaken without any concern for the harm done to the religious rights of believers and with little public outcry in favor of protecting the religious freedom of churches and their members.

Exigent circumstances like the Pandemic may justify reasonable restrictions, but only if these are designed to tread as lightly as possible on the right of believers to practice their religion, including to gather and worship according to the dictates of their faith. No limitation on such

religious actions should be imposed without first fully taking into account the preeminence of the protections in the First Amendment.

When government action or inaction, cultural currents, or community sentiments threaten our religious rights, those influences compel us to action. Overcoming the dangerous assumption that restricting religious rights harms no one is a core issue *for all of us*. Public religious expression and assembly are fundamental to our human dignity and identity as believers, just as other points of view and actions are essential to other people's deepest senses of themselves. Religious freedom, a human right, rests on the foundation of human dignity. Human dignity is a recognition that there is a divine, inextinguishable spark in everyone everywhere.

What does human dignity mean? Let me share, as I have on another occasion, an experience I believe shows what human dignity looks like on the ground. A few years ago, Kathy and I were assigned to visit with leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in Kinshasa, Democratic Republic of the Congo. Our meetings were held in side-by-side meetinghouses located on a large, gently sloping lot. The street alongside the entry to the property was partially paved.

Inside the lot, there was no pavement, only concrete pathways immediately outside the buildings. It had been raining off and on (after all it was the Congo), so the driveway from the street to the buildings was muddy.

We arrived a few minutes early and stood some distance down the slope from the gate for a few moments, watching and greeting hundreds of Latter-day Saints as they arrived for the meetings. They were let off their buses near the entrance and walked downhill to the buildings, except one sister. She had no legs. She moved herself forward by pushing her fists into the mud, raising her torso off the ground, and then thrusting it forward until she rested it again in the mud and repeated the process.

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One of the people who accompanied us was a white South African employee of the Church who oversaw security for southern Africa. A former high-ranking police officer who had been involved in the controversies and civil unrest of apartheid, he observed this sister making her way down the hill and then quietly said, “I can’t watch this any longer.” He rushed up toward the gate in his dark suit, white shirt, and tie, gently lifted the sister up, and carried her the rest of the way down the slope and into the building. When the meetings ended, he carried her back to the top of the hill and helped her board the bus for her return trip home.

Here was a collision of cultures. They shared no language. They were from vastly different educational backgrounds. He was white, she was black. He was raised in a country riven by apartheid. She had likely seen few whites ever before. But they were both aware of their own and each other’s identity as children of God. With all their differences, that critically important defining characteristic, they shared. Their identity as children of God and neighbors, even as brother and sister, binds them together, then, now, and forever. His action validated their shared human dignity and their identity as brothers and sisters, equal before God.

The Will Rogers Follies, a Broadway musical, includes a song titled, “I Never Met a Man I Didn’t Like.” In one scene Will Rogers, who was part-Cherokee, stops singing the song for a few moments and says to the audience in an aside:

I guess I met a whole lot of people in my lifetime, and I always tried to approach them the same way my Indian ancestors would. Y’ see, an Indian always looks back after he passes something so he can get a view of it from both sides. A white man don’t do that—he just figures that all sides of a thing are automatically the same. That’s why you must never judge a man while you’re facing him. You’ve got to go around behind him like an Indian and look at what he’s looking at. Then go back and face him and you’ll have a totally different idea of who he is. You’ll be surprised how much easier it is to get along with everybody.ⁱ

A fundamental step in protecting religious freedom, promoting human dignity, and honoring religious identity, is to help believers and nonbelievers listen to each other with a

modest respect for and deference to others' views. We needn't and often won't agree with each other. But if we can genuinely listen, if we can "go around behind" the other person to see what he or she sees, the possibility of finding a mutually satisfactory path forward increases.

Failure to *really listen* to each other characterizes the controversies about religious rights to an astonishing measure. Some very specific identity-based rights today are culturally popular and ascendant. They get prime-time attention. Religious identity, by comparison, is given little attention and poor treatment. Believers are increasingly mocked by mainstream media, academia, and government. When religion is dismissed as passe, bigoted, uneducated, or insignificant, irreligious attitudes and decisions soon diminish the rights, dignity, and identity of believers.

For irreligionists, opposition to religion from any quarter is welcome and seen as advancing their secular cause. The question increasingly seems to be not *which* religious rights, but *whether* religious rights. This is a showdown between the forces of religion and irreligion, and it is a zero-sum game. If we lose, it ends with irreligion enthroned as the new state religion.

In 1978 here at Brigham Young University, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, then a member of the Presidency of the Seventy and later of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, spoke these words with remarkable foresight: "Irreligion as the state religion would be the worst of all combinations. Its orthodoxy would be insistent and its inquisitors inevitable. Its paid ministry would be numerous beyond belief." Quoting M. J. Sobran, he further noted, "A religious conviction is now a second-class conviction, expected to step to the back of the secular bus, and not to get uppity about it."ⁱⁱ

None of us can win this war alone. We need to stand together to ensure that human dignity is recognized for everyone everywhere, and to protect religious identity and religious freedom. If we wish to succeed in protecting our rights, we will work with each other collegially

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notwithstanding differences in doctrine and practice.

I join with you in applauding the work of the International Center for Law and Religion Studies. Its contributions become more prominent and powerful with each passing year. May we all join with the Center to bring to the battle the very best of scholarship, persuasion, financial support, and personal effort as we strive to protect human dignity, religious identity, and religious freedom.

Thank you very much.

ⁱ Peter Stone, Cy Coleman, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, *The Will Rogers Follies*, 1993, Charade Productions, Inc., Notable Music Company, Inc., and Betdolph Music Inc., Act, 2, Scene 5, pgs. 25-26

ⁱⁱ Neal A. Maxwell, *BYU Speeches*, “Meeting the Challenges of Today, October 10, 1978