

Freedom of Religion Requires Freedom to Offend

By Dr. Brian Lee, Pastor, Christ Reformed Church, Washington, D.C.

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With a mob at the gates on 9/11, the U.S. Embassy in Cairo issued the following statement:

"The Embassy of the United States in Cairo condemns the continuing efforts by misguided individuals to hurt the religious feelings of Muslims — as we condemn efforts to offend believers of all religions.

"Today, the 11th anniversary of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, Americans are honoring our patriots and those who serve our nation as the fitting response to the enemies of democracy. Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy. We firmly reject the actions by those who abuse the universal right of free speech to hurt the religious beliefs of others."

This statement is now a political orphan. Both Obama and Romney have distanced themselves from it, and it has been expunged from the U.S. Embassy's website. As no one stands by these words, they will be mostly ignored by the next news cycle.

Before these words fade, it is crucial that we consider their significance for religion, as well as politics. Both the left and the right would be remiss if we didn't try to set all politics aside and consider the fundamental question about the nature of religious freedom, and religion itself, that they raise. For these words reflect widespread assumptions about religion, and could just as easily have been drafted during the Bush administration.

There are two obvious rejoinders to the statement. First, it relegates religious freedom to the realm of utter subjectivity by condemning "efforts to hurt religious feelings." On this score, anyone could limit the exercise of opposing religions by claiming that their religious feelings were hurt ("What is a religious feeling?"). The second problem is that this standard of not giving offense has clearly not been equally applied by secular elites (see "Piss Christ," et al.).

By condemning "incitement," the statement's title suggests that the author is mindful of these objections. The freedom of speech doesn't protect yelling "Fire!" in a crowded theater, nor should we protect religious speech that does the same. And since Christians don't typically riot when offended, offending them isn't incitement. Were I a foreign service officer watching my flag

burn, I might be inclined to take a similar approach to distance myself from the Christian bigot who yelled fire halfway around the world.

But the real problem with the statement is its failure to grasp the inherently offensive nature of most religious belief. It belies the widely held belief that “good religion” must be utterly private, banal, and non-offensive. We may limit the exercise of Terry Jones’s religion — even seek his persecution — because our definition of religion doesn’t include that kind of quackery. “Respect for religious beliefs is a cornerstone of American democracy” ... unless those beliefs aren’t respectable, and respectable religion doesn’t make other people feel bad.

Christianity is a religion of love, but it is also a religion of redemption, and therefore offense. The Apostles clearly proclaimed Jesus as a “stone of stumbling and a rock of offense” (1 Peter 2:8), and Paul located this offense centrally in “Christ crucified, a stumbling block [offense] to Jews, and folly to Gentiles” (1 Corinthians 1:23). The cross is foolish and weak; it offends both the reason and religion of us all.

The Apostles did not hijack the message of Jesus, who often gave offense (Matthew 13:57; Mark 6:3). Jesus even asked his followers, “Do you take offense at this [teaching]? Then what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before? It is the Spirit who gives life; the flesh is no help at all” (John 6:61 – 63). Jesus’ claim to be God, to have pre-existed in heaven, was his most offensive claim of all.

Christianity isn’t just offensive to Muslims; it’s offensive to everybody. The Gospel calls us all to account for our sin. It tells us there is no such thing as “self-help,” we have no power, no solution for sin in ourselves. It promises us death and eternal destruction unless we confess, repent, and place all our confidence in a crucified Jew, now raised from the dead — who claimed, by the way, to be the very Son of God.

Of course, God is love, but what is said in love may yet give offense. The law of God requires us to love our neighbor as ourselves. Paul teaches that we should not seek offense (1 Corinthians 10:32), and he can proudly say that “Neither against the law of the Jews, nor against the temple, nor against Caesar have I committed any offense” (Acts 25:8). And yet, throughout his public ministry we see scenes reminiscent of Cairo and Benghazi. Ephesus and Jerusalem erupt in righteous anger at his proclamation of the risen Christ as Lord (Acts 19, 21). God offends Jew and Gentile alike.

Ironically, this offensiveness of Christianity is why the freedom of religion is the only public policy position for which we can claim the direct support of the New Testament. As Paul is driven from synagogue and marketplace across the Mediterranean, he appeals to Roman authorities on the basis of the rights he possesses as a Roman citizen for the freedom to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Acts of the Apostles may be read as an apology for Christianity as a religion of peace and love, while its opponents claim falsely that it “upsets the world,” even as they do. While the church has often fallen short of this ideal, the teaching of the New Testament is the basis for true religious tolerance.

Christianity not only may give offense, it must give offense. The embassy statement was wrong.

“Respect for religious beliefs” is not a cornerstone of our democracy. Respect for our fellow man, and his right to dissent, is. There is a world of difference. A freedom merely to exercise an inoffensive religion is no freedom at all.

The State Department’s Dangerous Version of “Religious Tolerance”

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Ten days ago the U.S. Embassy in Cairo — under siege from riotous mobs — issued a despicable statement vitiating the freedom of religion. It could fairly be chalked up as a loss of nerve under fire, and the statement was quickly abandoned by the Obama administration, condemned by the Romney campaign, and removed from the Embassy website.

Now the U.S. State Department is doubling down on its perfidy, using \$70,000 of taxpayer funds to run television ads in Pakistan purportedly “distancing” the U.S. government from an Internet video. Unfortunately, these ads also enshrine a “religious tolerance” that dare not offend. By rejecting both “all efforts to denigrate” as well as the content of a particular message, we as a nation are now advertising our intolerance toward specific kinds of speech, religious or otherwise.

Crucially, this understanding of tolerance — premised on the widespread belief that true religion must be banal and inoffensive — is substituted for our true constitutional liberty, namely the free exercise of religion, which may in itself disparage others.

Superficially, the advertisement is inoffensive, made up entirely of quotes from public statements made by President Obama and Hillary Clinton:

President Obama: “Since our founding, the United States has been a nation that respects all faiths. We reject all efforts to denigrate the religious beliefs of others. But there is absolutely no justification to this type of senseless violence. None.”

Secretary of State Clinton: “Let me state, very clearly, and I hope it is obvious, that the United States government had absolutely nothing to do with this video. We absolutely reject its content and message. America’s commitment to religious tolerance goes back to the very beginning of our nation.”

I understand the desire to distance oneself and our nation from the crudest forms of anti-Muslim discourse, and this video certainly qualifies. But as Clinton admits, it’s not entirely clear that anyone, even in the Middle East, believed this video was produced or sponsored by the U.S. government. In fact, that denial serves as something of a fig leaf for the advertisement’s central

message, which is a condemnation of the video's content and message, as well as "all efforts to denigrate religious beliefs of others."

Note that Obama and Clinton aren't simply personally rejecting the message. By using the first person plural "we," they are not speaking for themselves, but in the place of their office, and for our country, as the two highest and most recognizable American officials on the international stage.

The advertisement is therefore a condemnation of protected speech by the U.S. government — and religious speech, at that. The danger of these statements for freedom of speech and religion, issued personally by our highest government officials, lies in its subtlety. Cloaked in the platitudes of tolerance is an explicit limitation on protected speech.

The error is fundamental, and particular. Fundamentally, the United States does not respect all faiths. Rather, it isn't the respecter of any faith. The Constitution prohibits Congress from establishing, or respecting, any faith, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof. You may say this is due to an inherent regard for religion; it is more likely a bulwark against the terrors of religious tyranny. Thus the Constitution protects the exercise of faiths which many, even a majority, may find unrespectable.

Furthermore, while I personally reject the denigration of opposing religious beliefs, our government does not. It cannot. The freedom of speech stands alongside the freedom of religion, protecting the right to verbally pour scorn upon, belittle, or degrade opposing religions.

Even if we understand the denigration of religious beliefs to go so far as to entail defamation, the U.S. government does not criminalize this act, but rather allows it as a ground for civil legal actions. Even the United Nations Commission on Human Rights has ruled that the criminalization of libel violates the freedom of expression.

The error is also particular. How can the government "absolutely reject" the "content and message" of the anti-Muslim video? While crudely communicated, many of the ideas expressed have been communicated elsewhere by historians and religious critics of Islam. Does our government reject these messages as well? Or is the State Department passing subjective value on the tone of the message?

A cornerstone of Old Testament prophetic religion was the denigration of idols, and those who worshiped them. The Psalmist mocks the idols who have ears but cannot hear, and feet but cannot walk, and warns that those who worship them are bound to become like them (Psalm 115). The New Testament church, unlike Israel in the Old Testament, is scattered throughout the world, and endeavors to live peacefully alongside the worshipers of false gods. Yet still it proclaims that on the last day "every knee will bow, and every tongue confess, that Jesus Christ is Lord" (Philippians 2:10 – 11), and urges us all to be prepared to give a defense for the hope that we have within us.

To tell idolaters and atheists alike that they will soon bow before Jesus may not seem to be an expression of respect. To explain to an idolater the folly of his way may seem to denigrate. Yet

this speech — and other evangelistic and apologetic language — is essential to the free exercise of my religion, and protected by the Constitution.

I fear the new U.S. policy of tolerance being sold abroad will soon criminalize the Christian faith.

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