

As another presidential contest begins a-brewing, the now stock campaign cry erupts: “Religion is under attack!” Really? What does religion under attack look like?

Recall that, in 1620, some pious dissidents left Old England seeking religious freedom in New England. So, how’d that turn out? As migrations continued, what was actually practiced in the New World was not freedom of the individual to worship as he chose, but rather freedom of the majority religious group in each community to dominate, persecute, and exclude minorities. Religion under attack was the norm on both sides of the Atlantic, pitting ruling sects against anyone who challenged their authority: Anabaptists against Quakers, Congregationalists against Baptists, Protestants against Catholics, and so on.

Religious freedom didn’t appear until later, when, banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony for his beliefs, Roger Williams joined other outcasts to found Rhode Island Colony. In that small refuge of freedom in a wilderness of religious intolerance, a person’s belief was at last considered his own affair, not a political issue, let alone a crime.

Elsewhere, though, religious differences remained grounds for discrimination, persecution, and even witch-trials, until a new Constitution and Bill of Rights were ratified in 1788. The very first of these rights forbids government to favor any religion above any other. No, the words “separation of church and state” aren’t in the Constitution; but they and other words to that effect appear in the writings of the nation’s most prominent founders, Adams, Franklin, Jefferson, and Madison among them. Being diversely religious themselves, most of them favored ending European-style political-religious alliances against individual conscience in the new United States of America.

Every government official is free to conduct his personal life by the faith or philosophy of his choice. But his official duty is to people of all beliefs (including disbelief). By the

Constitution, he may not use government power or resources to promote or prohibit any religious sect or belief. This isn't restricting religious freedom; it's preventing religious tyranny.

So today, every American is free to believe and profess any creed he sees fit, join any sect he chooses, and worship (or not) in his home or in any non-government facility open for the purpose, presumably free from discrimination by any arm of government, or by any person, group, or business acting under civil law in the public sphere.

An employer whose faith forbids blood transfusions is free to refuse transfusions for herself, but may not deny her employees medical insurance to pay for them; medical decisions concern patients and their doctors, not their bosses. The owner of a private business open to the public is free to observe his own religious taboos, but may not discriminate against customers who don't share them. Mosaic law forbids a man to lie with other men; it doesn't forbid him to sell flowers or cakes to anyone.

Your beliefs are your personal treasures. They're your concern, no one else's. Americans are right to complain when anyone, with or without government's unconstitutional collusion, attempts to control others by imposing his or her beliefs on them. It's hardly that Americans don't like religion; far from it! It's only that [1] they don't like anyone's taxes being used to promote anyone else's creed, and [2] they mostly agree that forcing any religious preference upon anyone is tyranny, not freedom, and not the American way.

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Responses:

"Speak up" (2015-05-16):

**Steven Joyce deserves a Pulitzer** for his brilliant article, "Forcing religious preference not American," May 8. This eloquently expressed essay is long overdue.