A history of religious freedom

What one group calls freedom may result in repression for others.

BY LAURA GIFFORD

My heart hath naturally detested foure things: The standing of the Apocrypha in the Bible; Forrainers dwelling in my Country, to crowd out native Subjects into the corners of the Earth; Alchymized coines; Tolerations of divers Religions, or of one Religion in segregant shapes: He that willingly assents to the last, if he examines his heart by daylight, his conscience will tell him, he is either an Atheist, or an Heretique, or an Hypocrite, or at best a captive to some Lust: Poly-piety is the greatest impiety in the world.

—PURITAN MINISTER NATHANIEL WARD, "THE SIMPLE COBBLER OF AGGAWAM" (1645), A PAMPHLET AGAINST RELIGIOUS TOLERATION

POPULAR HISTORY HAS TAUGHT US that the Pilgrims came to the United States in search of religious freedom. They did … for themselves. They believed that the Church of England (established in the 1530s when King Henry VIII sought independence from papal authority) had not traveled far enough down the path of reform. After a burst of reforming zeal during the short reign of the young Edward VI and a brief reversion to Roman Catholicism under Mary I, Queen Elizabeth I's England sought a happy—and, most importantly, stable—medium. Elizabeth's policies, however, left Puritans feeling threatened and marginalized. Some were persecuted for the fervor of their reforming faith; others departed for voluntary exile on the European continent. Finally, the Puritans determined that the "New World" could provide safe harbor for their community to practice their faith as they felt called.

That did *not*, however, mean that they wanted others to be free to practice different kinds of faith.

Take the case of Anne Hutchinson, for example. Anne was born in England to a Puritan family. When the family's minister, John Cotton, immigrated to the Massachusetts Bay Colony, Anne's family soon followed. Anne was deeply committed to her faith. She knew her Bible well, and she began to host meetings in which she interpreted sermons for other women. Initially, local leaders

supported her activities, but soon they realized Anne was sharing her *own* opinions. Governor John Winthrop forced Anne to appear before the General Court, where she was charged with usurping the power of local ministers and behaving in a manner "uncomely" for a woman. While Anne vigorously defended herself—using the Bible as her defense!—she was convicted and placed under house arrest. Placed on trial again a year later, Anne still refused to back down. Consequently, she was banished from Massachusetts Bay Colony. Puritan "freedom of religion" did not include freedom for women to lead in ministry.

As the American colonies continued to grow, new questions emerged surrounding religious liberty. In southern colonies like Virginia, the Church of England—which became the Episcopal Church post-independence—held sway. Ministers had to apply to the local government for a preaching license, and most officials refused to license ministers who professed a Baptist faith. Baptists were part of the Anabaptist tradition, a more radical reform movement that had encountered considerable persecution in Europe. After the Constitutional Convention in 1787, Baptists lobbied James Madison: Simply proclaiming that the new United States would have no established church was not enough protection. Baptist leaders advocated for positive protection of the right to worship as they chose. Madison heeded their calls, and the First Amendment specifically provides for freedom of worship.

Some 60 years later, Baptists had become rooted members of American society, but growing tensions between North and South brought conflict about just how far religious freedom might extend. Like many denominations, including Lutherans, Baptists would divide themselves into separate, regional camps. In the case of Baptist Christians, the breaking point came in 1845, following a conflict over whether slaveholders could serve as missionaries. Many Baptists answered "no"—a slaveholder could not proclaim God's freedom as a missionary. Those who answered "yes" formed the Southern Baptist Convention.

Historian and Methodist elder John Fanestil has written about the deep roots of White Christian Nationalism in the United States, exploring how many of the doctrines early Americans held dear have produced both sweet and bitter fruits. While the "high-minded ideals" of our founding documents are one true reflection of early American sentiments, "a distinctively American brand of passionate Protestant nationalism helped rally patriots to the revolutionary cause"—and has echoed down through the generations, Fanestil writes

(*American Heresy*, Fortress, 2023, p. 15). Order, purpose, progress, innovation, liberty and patriotism are products of our religious roots, Fanestil observes, but so, too, are violence, nostalgia, racism, propaganda, conspiratorial thinking and nationalism (pp. 162-3).

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TODAY

In our contemporary landscape, where might we see the language of religious freedom being used in ways that harm our neighbors? In the state of Oklahoma, for example, recently-enacted legislation instructs all public school teachers to use the Bible in their lessons. Further, the state superintendent called for a specific version of the Bible to be adopted. The stated intention of this legislation is to allow for free expression of Christian belief. However, we know that not all students are Christian. Even for those who do profess faith in the Bible, "Bible" can mean many different things. Roman Catholic students use a version of the Scriptures that includes the books of the Apocrypha. Students of different denominations may favor different Bible translations. Suddenly, it becomes clear that what one group calls "freedom" may result in repression for others.

In other cases, privately held corporations have argued that "religious freedom" allows them to refrain from offering health insurance coverage for things like contraception or gender-affirming care. ELCA social-teaching documents profess that these forms of health care may help the humans who need them to flourish—and human flourishing is God's plan for all of us. Consequently, supporting the freedom to discriminate among forms of health care will curtail the freedom of those who need these services.

When considering the principle of religious freedom, we must think carefully about whether and how those religious freedoms extend to all. When our freedom limits another's, are we following Jesus's declaration that he came to provide life and abundance for everyone? True religious freedom will protect both those who seek to worship, and those who worship quite differently or not at all. As Lutherans, we proclaim that God's grace extends to everyone. A gift is something that must be accepted freely. Coercion will never be a part of God's plan.

Further reading

On Christian nationalism:

- John Fanestil, *American Heresy*: The Roots and Reach of White Christian Nationalism (Fortress, 2023)
- Amanda Tyler, *How to End Christian Nationalism* (Broadleaf, 2024)

On interfaith dialogue and speaking across differences:

- Jacqueline A. Bussie, *Love Without Limits: Jesus' Radical Vision for Love Without Exceptions* (Broadleaf, 2022)
- Hans Gustafson, *Everyday Encounters: Humanizing Dialogue in Theory and Practice* (Fortress, 2025)
- Amir Hussein, *One God and Two Religions: Christians and Muslims as Neighbors* (Fortress, 2025)