

Oppressive Religious Liberty

By Greg L. Bahnsen

The more that thoughtful students read about the revered notion of “religious liberty” and analyze the issues involved, the more they realize that most people have nothing like a clear, well grounded, and consistently applied conception of it. There are some choice ironies to note.

Advocating religious toleration has been a hallmark of Reformed Christianity – from the French Huguenots to the English Puritans who fled to America. But the toleration or liberty which they championed was not completely open-ended. It did not countenance just any kind of behavior or conduct – like the Satanic human sacrifices of the Santeria cult – in the name of “religion.” The traditional concept of religious liberty granted freedom of religious worship and ritual *within* the circle of *Biblical* conviction. For instance, our Puritan forefather John Owen argued that God has not authorized the civil magistrate to punish any man for pursuing his religious practices, *provided* they “no way interfere with the fundamental articles of Christian religion.” John Whitehead has correctly described the liberty intended in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution as “denominational pluralism – a healthy coexistence between the various Christian denominations.” As an earlier Supreme Court Justice, Joseph Story, wrote: the freedom of religion guaranteed in the Bill of Rights was meant to exclude rivalry “among Christian sects,” not to countenance other religious or infidelity.

But now, as any reader will recognize, the concept of religious liberty which has just been described (toleration within the circle of Christian denominations) is not at all the popular concept of today. Indeed, the notion of religious pluralism which we hear circulated in the present culture of America would deem the above notion of religious liberty to be a violation of (true) religious liberty – because it is too restrictive. Toleration must be extended to any and all religious convictions or faith communities. Christianity cannot be the governing worldview for a civil government which is (truly) religiously free; if it were, that would mean religious oppression. Even many Christians are tempted by this new, open-ended notion of religious liberty. Believers have sometimes argued that open-ended religious freedom is more fair and loving than placing Biblically-defined restrictions upon it. The “wider” concept of religious liberty certainly prevails in our day.

But has the modern, wider version of religious liberty expanded or better guaranteed the freedom to practice and pursue one’s religious convictions in America? We might expect that it would, but the facts are against it. Consider three recent illustrations from southern California.

Robert Vernon, an assistant police chief in the Los Angeles Police Department, happens to be an evangelical Christian. In connection with his church, Vernon has been known to teach corporeal discipline for children and a wife’s obligation to be in submission to her husband. When faced with the prospect of needing to arrest fellow believers involved in Operation Rescue, Vernon requested insight and counsel from the elders

of his church. Because of these things, advocates of the “wider” concept of religious freedom are up in arms and demanding an investigation of the assistant police chief – to make sure that his own religious views have not influenced his work as a policeman, thereby infringing upon the work of the police department or the religious freedom of others.

The Cub Scouts is a voluntary organization which requires, among other things, those who join to say the Scout oath. The oath includes a commitment to God (without further definition or detail).

When twin brothers, William and Michael Randall, were turned away from an Anaheim Cub Scout troop because they refused to affirm the Cub Scout commitment to God, their (lawyer) father spotted what he considered a glaring violation of their religious liberty (to be atheists, if they wish). He is in the process of bringing a civil-rights lawsuit against the organization – and generating media exposure and sympathy for compelling the Scouts to give up its own religious practice in deference to the wider religious liberty of the boys who challenged the organization.

John Pelozo is a science teacher in a public high school in the Orange County city of Mission Viejo. Pelozo is a Christian who believes the Biblical doctrine of creation. He is also a student of biology who believes that the scientific evidence does not support evolutionary theory, but rather the thesis of “abrupt appearance” of life-forms. When he teaches biology in the public classroom, he feels honesty requires him to point out the problems in the theory of evolution and the virtue of the competing hypothesis. Because of this the high school paper printed an Opinion piece which was critical of the teacher, entitled “Religion Dominates Science in Pelozo’s Classroom.” He has come under the criticism of his principal and a number of school district officials, and the matter has led to a lawsuit.

The irony in these three stories is painful. In the name of the modern notion of “religious liberty,” there are those who would vociferously challenge the right of people to practice their own religious convictions (or speak contrary to prevailing dogma)! It turns out that the modern concept of religious liberty is simply an avenue for insuring that police chiefs, den leaders, and teachers (as well as others) keep whatever religious commitments they have restricted to their private thoughts and completely out of all public life. Here “religious liberty” becomes interchangeable with “imposed secularism.” In the interest of escaping the oppressive religious liberty of our Reformed forefathers, the modern world has simply *substituted its own oppressive religious liberty* – so that now it will be *Christians* who are prevented from living out their faith.

This should not surprise us. Christ clearly declared that “he who is not with me is against me” (Matthew 12:30).

There is no neutrality regarding religion, even in public affairs. Thus the concept and application of “religious liberty” *will either be used to protect Christian commitment or to hamper it* – by preventing open obedience to Christ in every aspect of life.