

The Saga of Religious Freedom: Introduction; Martin Luther and the Protestant Reformation; the Great Awakening: George Whitfield, et al.; Elisha Williams Defends the Priesthood of the Believer

## THE SAGA OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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No person can be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs.

—Justice Hugo L. Black  
*Everson v. Board of Education*

### INTRODUCTION:

Since World War II ended, the United States armed forces have been deployed into numerous conflicts, none of which have resulted in a clear victory over the opposition forces.

During this time, the influence of God's Word within the thinking of the nation's citizens has steadily declined. This gradual loss of thought has been reflected in those who have acquired power over others.

In our day, many mistakenly assume that this loss of thought is concentrated only in those who are in positions of authority. But such does not occur in a vacuum. The decline of integrity and honor among the people facilitates the rise of poor leaders. It is rare indeed that people of sound judgment would willingly place themselves under the heel of a tyrant.

Yet when a collective loss of thought proceeds from generation to generation, ultimately the desire for leadership is not the selection of a benevolent servant but rather that of Pied Piper who plays the tune the masses want to hear as he slowly leads them into servitude.

It has become customary to greet those in uniform by expressing gratitude for their service to the country. This is a proper and hopefully a well-received statement. Our armed services are made up strictly of volunteers, so their task is to go where civilian authority sends them. No one in the military can therefore be held responsible for strategies and tactics that are conjured by the head of the Department of Defence or in times of declared war the president who takes on the additional title of commander-in-chief.

Our military is the greatest martial organization ever assembled in world history. Its present civilian leadership is among the worst in our nation's history. Rules of engagement have so restricted our men at arms that the phrase "in harm's way" has taken on a new and ominous meaning.

Political correctness has redefined the attacks that caused the death of three-thousand Americans as "man caused disasters" rather than terrorism. Because the perpetrators were not in a nation's uniform, those held at Guantanamo Bay may not be called "enemy combatants," the official term for uniformed POWs, but detainees.

Those that subscribe to progressive ideology assert that they are opposed to war. But they are not shy to engage our military in combat by another name, the current designations being Operation Whatever.

Through it all we salute our uniformed heroes with appreciation for protecting our freedoms. But as valiantly as our servicemen ply their trade, there is nothing they can do about the loss of freedom that is taking place within the walls of Fortress America.

So today we will travel back in time and review the writings and reports of those whose words and deeds inspired the establishment and preservation of our great nation. And we begin with the attitude toward human authority expressed by Martin Luther when he faced off against the theology of the Catholic Church.

### MARTIN LUTHER AND THE PROTESTANT REFORMATION:

In order to justify standing fast for doctrine in opposition to the wishes of civilian authority, Luther wrote about the believer's obligation to submit to its requirements:



If your prince or temporal ruler commands you to side with the pope, to believe thus and so, or to get rid of certain books, you should say, "It is not fitting that Lucifer should sit at the side of God. Gracious sir, I owe you obedience in body and property; command me within the limits of your authority on earth, and I will obey. But if you command me to believe or to get rid of certain books, I will not obey; for then you are a tyrant and overreach yourself, commanding where you have neither the right nor the authority." Should he seize your property on account of this and punish such disobedience, then blessed are you; thank God that you are worthy to suffer for the sake of the divine word. Let him rage, fool that he is; he will meet his judge. For I tell you, if you fail to withstand him, if you give in to him and let him take away your faith and your books, you have truly denied God.

Let me illustrate. In Meissen, Bavaria, the Mark, and other places, the tyrants have issued an order that all copies of the New Testament are everywhere to be turned in to the officials. This should be the response of their subjects: They should not turn in a single page, not even a letter ... Whoever does so is delivering Christ up into the hands of Herod, for these tyrants act as murderers of Christ just like Herod.

If their homes are ordered searched and books or property taken by force, they should suffer it to be done. Outrage is not to be resisted but endured; yet we should not sanction it, or lift a finger to conform, or obey. For such tyrants are acting as worldly princes are supposed to act, and worldly princes they surely are. But the world is God's enemy; hence they too have to do what is antagonistic to God and agreeable to the world, that they may not be bereft of honor, but remain worldly princes. Do not wonder, therefore, that they rage and mock at the gospel; they have to live up to their name and title. (p. 20)

You must know that since the beginning of the world a wise prince is a mighty rare bird, and an upright prince even rarer. They are generally the biggest fools or the worst scoundrels on earth; therefore, one must constantly expect the worst from them and look for little good, especially in divine matters which concern the salvation of souls. They are God's executioners and hangmen; his divine wrath uses them to punish the wicked and to maintain outward peace. Our God is a great lord and ruler; this is why he must also have such noble, highborn, and rich hangmen and constables. He desires that everyone shall copiously accord them riches, honor, and fear in abundance. It pleases his divine will that we call his hangmen gracious lords, fall at their feet, and be subjective to them in all humility, so long as they do not ply their trade too far and try to become shepherds instead of hangmen. If a prince should happen to be wise, upright, or a Christian, that is one of the great miracles, the most precious token of divine grace upon that land. Ordinarily the course of events is in accordance with the passage from Isaiah 3:4, "I will make boys their princes, and gaping fools shall rule over them"; and in Hosea 13:11, I will give you a king in my anger, and take him away in my wrath." The world is too wicked, and does not deserve to have many wise and upright princes. (pp. 20–21)

Again you say, "The temporal power is not forcing men to believe; it is simply seeing to it externally that no one deceives the people by false doctrine; how could heretics otherwise be restrained?" Answer: This the bishops should do; it is a function entrusted to them and not to the princes. Heresy can never be restrained by force. One will have to tackle the problem in some other way, for heresy must be opposed and dealt with otherwise than with the sword.

Here God's word must do the fighting. If it does not succeed, certainly the temporal power will not succeed either, even if it were to drench the world in blood. Heresy is a spiritual matter which you cannot hack to pieces with iron, consume with fire, or drown in water. God's word alone avails here, as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 10:4-5, "Our weapons are not carnal, but mighty in God to destroy every argument and proud obstacle that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, and to take every thought captive in the service of Christ."

Moreover, faith and heresy are never so strong as when men oppose them by sheer force, without God's word. For men count it certain that such force is for a wrong cause and is directed against the right, since it proceeds without God's word and knows not how to further its cause except by naked force, as brute beasts do. Even in temporal affairs force can be used only after the wrong has been legally condemned. How much less possible it is to act with force, without justice and God's word, in these lofty spiritual matters! See, therefore, what fine, clever nobles they are! They would drive out heresy, but set about it in such a way that they only strengthen the opposition, rousing suspicion against themselves and justifying the heretics. My friend, if you wish to drive out heresy, you must find some way to tear it first of all from the heart and completely turn men's wills away from it. With force you will not stop it, but only strengthen it. What do you gain by strengthening heresy in the heart, while weakening only its outward expression and forcing the tongue to lie? God's word, however, enlightens the heart, and so all heresies and errors vanish from the heart of their own accord. (p. 21)<sup>1</sup>

### THE GREAT AWAKENING:

The influence evangelists had on development of religious freedom among the colonies carried over to the inclusion of the free exercise clause of the First Amendment to the Constitution. Some background is necessary to appreciate the example that will follow:

**The Great Awakening:** A series of revivals in the American colonies between 1725 and 1760. The earliest stirrings occurred among the Dutch Reformed in the Raritan Valley of New Jersey, through the fervent preaching of T.J. Frelinghuysen. This early revival reached a peak in 1726 when Gilbert Tennent, a Presbyterian pastor in New Brunswick, began to preach for "conviction." Simultaneously in New England in 1734-35 a recovery of heartfelt religion appeared in Northampton, Massachusetts, through the preaching of the able theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards.

The one man more than any other, however, who linked these regional awakenings into a "Great Awakening" was the English evangelist George Whitefield. By traveling throughout the colonies and calling men to repentance and faith in Christ, Whitefield after 1740 helped to plant evangelical Christianity on American shores and to prepare the colonies religiously for the trials of the revolutionary age.

Through the "Reading houses" of Samuel Morris, and the preaching of William Robinson and Samuel Davies, Presbyterians experienced revival in the South. Methodism with the preaching of Devereux Jarratt and the Baptist movement through the work of Daniel Marshall and Shubal Stearns grew rapidly in the era of the Great Awakening. (p. 428)

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<sup>1</sup> *The Sacred Rights of Conscience: Selected Readings on Religious Liberty and Church-State Relations in the American Founding*, eds. Daniel L. Dreisbach and Mark David Hall (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2009), 20-21.

The revivalists soon met resistance. The established clergy, led by Charles Chauncy in New England, criticized the revivalists' preaching and practices. The encouraging of lay preaching or "exhorting," the criticisms of revivalists who charged the established clergymen with "spiritual darkness," the uninhibited "enthusiasm," and the divisions within churches after the revivalists had swept through them—these taken together erected a sizable barrier to the spread of the revival. (pp. 428–29)

The Great Awakening made its impact upon the American colonies. Dissenting groups growing from the revival in Virginia helped to overthrow the established Anglican Church in that colony.

The movement made also a great contribution to education. Princeton University, the University of Pennsylvania, Rutgers, Brown, and Dartmouth were some of the more significant schools created as a result of the awakening. Of equal importance was the mood of tolerance that cut across denominational lines. This attitude not only contributed to a national spirit of religious tolerance that helped to make the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution a workable arrangement; it also provided for an evangelical consensus that is traceable to the present.<sup>2</sup> (p. 429)

Throughout human history, people in political authority, those Martin Luther referred to a "princes," have sought to silence truth. Our duty as a nation is to stand for truth, defend it, and honor it. We, as a free people, must be willing to give no quarter to countries, ideologies, or religions that would do harm to any of our citizens. Believers must remain loyal to the essential doctrines of our faith while remaining flexible in the nonessentials presented by the devil's world.

For example, this paper by Elisha Williams (1694–1755), a Congregationalist pastor and judge on the Connecticut Supreme Court, addresses a Connecticut statute drawn to restrain itinerant revivalists of the Great Awakening. Williams argues for an extensive liberty of conscience in religious matters.

In order to answer your main enquiry concerning the extent of the civil magistrate's power respecting religion; I suppose it needful to look back to the end, and therefore to the original of it: By which means I suppose a just notion may be formed of what is properly their business or the object of their power, and so without any insuperable difficulty we may thence learn what is out of that compass. (pp. 173, 174)

That the sacred scriptures are the alone rule of faith and practice to a Christian, all Protestants are agreed in; and must therefore inviolably maintain, that every Christian has a right of judging for himself what he is to believe and practice in religion according to that rule: Which I think on a full examination you will find perfectly inconsistent with any power in the civil magistrate to make any penal laws in matters of religion. The more firmly this is established in our minds; the more firm shall we be against all attempts upon our Christian liberty. (p. 175)

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<sup>2</sup> Bruce L. Shelley, "Great Awakening," in *The New International Dictionary of the Christian Church*, rev. ed., gen. ed. J. D. Douglas (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, 1978), 428–29.

The members of a civil state or society do retain their natural liberty in all such cases as have no relation to the ends of such a society. In a state of nature men had a right to read Milton or Lock for their instruction or amusement: and why they do not retain this liberty under a government that is instituted for the preservation of their persons and properties, is inconceivable. From whence can such a society derive any right to hinder them from doing that which does not affect the ends of that society? Should a government therefore restrain the free use of the scriptures, prohibit men the reading of them, and make it penal to examine and search them, it would be a manifest usurpation upon the common rights of mankind, as much a violation of natural liberty as the attack of a highwayman upon the road can be upon our civil rights. And indeed with respect to the sacred writings, men might not only read them if the government did prohibit the same, but they would be bound by a higher authority to read them, notwithstanding any human prohibition. The pretence of any authority to restrain men from reading the same, is wicked as well as vain.

The members of a civil state do retain their natural liberty or right of judging for themselves in matters of religion. Every man has an equal right to follow the dictates of his own conscience in the affairs of religion. Every one is under an indispensable obligation to search the scripture for himself and to make the best use of it he can for his own information in the will of GOD, the nature and duties of Christianity.

And as every Christian is so bound; so he has an unalienable right to judge of the sense and meaning of it, and to follow his judgment wherever it leads him, even an equal right with any rulers be they civil or ecclesiastical. (p. 178)

No action is a religious action without understanding and choice in the agent. Whence it follows, the rights of conscience are sacred and equal in all, and strictly speaking unalienable. This right of judging every one for himself in matters of religion results from the nature of man, and is so inseparably connected wherewith, that a man can no more part with it than he can with his power of thinking. A man may alienate some branches of his property and give up his right in them to others; but he cannot transfer the rights in them to others; but he cannot transfer the rights of conscience, unless he could destroy his rational and moral powers, or substitute some other to be judged for him at the tribunal of GOD. (p. 178–79)

What may further clear this point and at the same time shew the extent of this right of private judgment in matters of religion, is this truth, That the sacred scriptures are the alone rule of faith and practice to every individual Christian. It is sufficient for all such as acknowledge the divine authority of the scriptures, briefly to observe, that GOD the author has therein declared he has given and designed them to be our only rule of faith and practice.

The apostle Paul, 2 Timothy 3:15, the apostle John in his gospel, Chapter 20, verse 31, and in his first epistle, chapter 5, verse 13, show that what was written was to be the standing rule of faith and practice, compleat and most sufficient for such an end, designed by infinite wisdom in the giving them, containing every thing needful to be known and done by Christians, or such as believe on the same of the Son of GOD. Now inasmuch as the scriptures are the only rule of faith and practice to a Christian, hence every one has an unalienable right to read, enquire into, and impartially judge of the sense and meaning of it for himself. For if he is to be governed and determined therein by the opinions and determinations of any others, the scriptures cease to be a rule to him, and those opinions or determinations of others are substituted in the room thereof.

The officers of Christ has commissioned in his church, as pastors, are to teach his laws, to explain as they are able the mind & will of CHRIST laid down in the scriptures; but they have no warrant to make any laws for them, nor are their sentiments the rule to any Christian, who are all commanded to prove all things, to try the spirits whether they be of GOD. 1 Thessalonians 5:21. (p. 179)<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *The Sacred Rights of Conscience*, 173, 174–75, 178–79.