



# Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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## “Faith and Freedom”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

### Centering Thoughts:

*Each person [should] maintain whatever religious faith he wishes, with old or new rituals, while we at the same time leave it to their judgment to do as they please in the matter of faith, just so long as they bring no harm to bear on anyone at all. Queen Isabella Jagiellon, 1557*

*Forced worship stinks in God's nostrils. Roger Williams, 1670*

*Believing with you that religion is a matter which lies solely between man and his God, that he owes account to none other for his faith or his worship, that the legislative powers of government reach actions only, and not opinions, I contemplate with sovereign reverence that act of the whole American people which declared that their legislature should ‘make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof,’ thus building a wall of separation between church and State.*

Thomas Jefferson, in a letter to the Danbury Baptist Association (Connecticut), 1802

### Sermon:

About The symbolic wall that separates religion from government and government from religion feels, to me, under attack. As a member of a minority religion, I’m concerned. I suspect you may be, too.

The case of the newest candidate for Senate, former Judge Roy Moore, proves my point. Twice Moore has been removed from public office by Alabama’s nine-member Court of the Judiciary for his failure to comply with federal law., Moore was removed from the bench first for refusing to remove a granite monument of the Biblical Ten Commandments in the lobby of the state courthouse and for inviting only Christian clergy to give opening prayers for court sessions. When he called the Supreme Court’s decision in support of same-sex marriage ‘contrary to reason and divine law’ and therefore refused to follow it, he was removed again. Moore believes his personal religious understanding holds greater authority than either Alabama’s or the Supreme Court’s. ([www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/politics/roy-moore-judicial-fight/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2017/09/27/politics/roy-moore-judicial-fight/index.html))

Moore’s defiance indicates he wants no separation between church and state. He seems ready to make America a theocracy under his interpretation of Christianity. Moore regularly preaches of his hope to return the country to its roots as a Christian nation, despite our founders clearly stating they had no interest in favoring Christianity or any other religion.

You might think that since Moore was removed from office that the wall of separation firmly stands. And yet, Alabama voters endorsed his bid for the Senate last week. And, a recent Supreme Court decision allowed taxpayer money to be granted to a Missouri church to improve its playground, striking down earlier lower court decisions against it. And now, there will likely be more challenges demanding institutions not be penalized because of their religious status. Already, the Supreme Court has agreed to review the case of a baker whom the lower courts had ruled against. The baker refused to make a wedding cake for a same-sex couple because homosexual conduct violates his religious beliefs.

And lastly, proposed ‘freedom for religion’ acts at both federal and state levels will give permission to bigotry or religious liberty, depending on your viewpoint. People on both sides of these freedom acts argue that their rights are being trampled. One side claims the government shouldn’t support religious groups because it goes against the establishment clause in the First Amendment. And the other side claims the government shouldn’t discriminate against religious groups because that goes against the free exercise clause in the First Amendment. *Oi vey!*

How do we balance the rights of people with conflicting religious ideas? How do we keep the wall from crumbling? And, how did that wall of separation between government and religion get built in the first place?

You heard earlier about our Unitarian ancestors in Transylvania who made the first contemporary laws giving people the freedom to practice the religion of their choice. They hoped to end the religious wars and persecutions they saw throughout Europe. As Queen Isabella’s son, King John, said in the 1568 Edict of Toleration issued at Torda, “faith is the gift of God”, meaning no one should be coerced into a particular belief by government or religious authority. Truth should be determined by debate and discussion, not war and persecution.

Even so, because King John became Unitarian, the nobles followed suit. By sharing his religion they hoped to win favor and position with the king – the norm at the time. Additionally, the clergy of a monarch’s religion also expected to enjoy favor and position. Neither nobles nor clerics had a model for religious diversity or freedom. Equality gave no one the upper hand and removed those from power who once had privilege. (You can guess how well that went over.)

Sadly, King John died a few years later from wounds received during a horse or carriage accident. Despite the expansion of Unitarianism in Transylvania, Roman Catholics ascended to power and the experiment with toleration ended. King John’s Unitarian court minister, Francis Dávid, was thrown into prison where he remained for seven years until his death, making him one of many Unitarian martyrs.

Beyond the tiny principality of Transylvania, Western Europe continued to engage in religious warfare and it prompted Puritan settlers to come to America. Although they came to freely practice their religion, they did not allow others to freely practice theirs. Church and state were one in early Massachusetts. As more colonists settled up and down the Atlantic coast, they established their own state-sponsored religions. In Virginia, for example, it was the Church of England and in Massachusetts it was the Calvinistic Congregational Church.

After the American Revolution, the founding fathers wanted nothing to do with established religion and the conflict it created. As Enlightenment-influenced Thomas Jefferson wrote, they wanted a wall of separation between church and state. Fortunately, the many and varied religious leaders wanted the same thing. They all saw first-hand the threat state-supported religious groups had over individuals and minority religions. Methodist, Baptist, Catholic, Seventh-Day Adventist, Quaker, and Unitarian followers in most locales at the time were all minority religionists who knew and feared the power of the majority. Freedom from government interference in religion and freedom for unfettered religious practice became their constitutionally protected dream. The First Amendment states, ‘Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.’ The Constitution prevented federal establishment, but arguments continued within states long after. The last holdout was Maryland, which finally disestablished its church in 1961.

It is no error that the Constitution includes no word of God or Jesus Christ. What’s more, when Rev. Charles Pinckney of South Carolina offered an amendment that no religious test ‘shall ever be required as a qualification to any office or public trust under the authority of the United States’, what became Article 6, Clause 3 of the Constitution, it received unanimous approval without any debate at the Constitutional Convention of 1787. The majority of the nation may have been Christian, but the founders agreed, religion should have no part in their new government.

Many years later, to shore up the wall, in 1954, President Lyndon Johnson signed an Amendment stating that tax-exempt organizations “are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of [or in opposition to] any candidate for elective public office.” If I endorse a particular candidate I risk the Fellowship’s tax-exempt status. From the pulpit you and I are allowed to advocate for or against issues, but not political parties or particular candidates.

With the intent of repealing the Johnson Amendment, one Georgia Representative to Congress, Jodi Hice, has co-sponsored the Free Speech Fairness Act. But there is little religious support for repealing the Amendment. A 2016 Pew Research survey shows 71% of citizens do not want their places of worship to become politically divisive. The UUA, along with many mainline religious groups, signed a letter to Congress opposing this new Act. It might sound reasonable to allow us the right to endorse candidates from the pulpit as I nearly did last year, but I believe the down-sides far outweigh any good.

For one thing, it would allow political money into churches. Preachers could be bought and sold by candidates. Because of our liberal social stances, it’s difficult enough for us to welcome people of both major political parties without my telling you who to vote for. If I accepted money from a candidate, does the candidate own my voice or my conscience? Wouldn’t I lose whatever moral authority I might have if my vote was for sale? And, just as my actions are imperfect, our government has been known to use religion less than honorably. Just ask displaced Native Americans and once-enslaved Africans for whom religion was used to justify genocidal and racist treatment against them.

That said, I personally can’t separate my values and beliefs from how I believe government should act. Because I believe same-sex marriage should be legal I personally want the baker in

Missouri to bake a cake and I want a clerk of the court in Kentucky to issue a marriage license. Because I believe minority religions shouldn't be disfavored by government, I want none of my tax money to go to another religious community. I want my religious rights protected.

But if I can't separate church and state, how can I expect that of others? If protecting my religious rights violates someone else's, how do we decide who wins? Can both sides win, or will there always be winners and losers engaged in constant war?

Although life would be so much easier if there were, I think there are no easy answers. I think we will win some battles and lose others. I think we must simply be vigilant, voice our truth whatever it may be, and vote our conscience.

Preserving the freedom to practice religion in accord with our conscience, or not to practice any religion at all, must be a part of Unitarian Universalist activism. As minority religionists, we must be ready to rise in body, in spirit, and in voice, to preserve the promise of our Constitution. To take our eyes off the wall would profane the martyrs who gave their lives for it.

May we remain ever vigilant.

### **Questions for Reflection or Discussion:**

1. Do you feel free to believe and practice your faith as you wish, or to not hold any beliefs or practice any faith if you wish? What encourages or limits your sense of freedom?
2. Are you concerned with the status of the wall that separates religion and government? Explain.
3. 75% of the U.S. identifies as Christian. Do minority religions have enough protection from the majority's influence? Does the U.S. have a 'tyranny of the majority'? Share.