



Living with Our Deepest Differences

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We are talking about the ideas of religious freedoms. One of the most important ideas that we need to focus on as a global society, regardless of our backgrounds, regardless of the political systems we come to. This is something we need to wrestle with so stridently.

Secularizations, or a secular government, is meant to be the kind of government that Civil-Public-Square-fostering kind of a government, that says that we are neutral towards any one religion so it doesn't become the dominant force. But we are also promoting of all religious ideas and expressions so that they can come and discuss their deep differences.

But there are those who want to sort of remove this idea. That we have to oust all things religious from the public life, or even in some cases from private life. I think of the famous words of Victor Stinger, the famous atheist philosopher of the United States, he said, "Science flies you to the moon, but religion flies you into buildings."

Now that is a stark statement. I think it is an unfair statement. But it's a stark statement where he is trying to say that religion is inherently bad. And if we have laws that don't allow for religious freedom, in some ways we are implicitly agreeing with that kind of a view. In some ways about certain people and we are devaluing those people.

But thankfully not all secular thinkers think this way. There are those among us who are secular thinkers, atheists as well, who say, "No, religion has done some wonderful things - different religions in general, and one in particular."

Secularism's Ongoing Debt to Religion

Because I come from a Christian background let me espouse what one secular thinker thinks about the religious benefits that have come from Christianity. It's from John Steinrucken, who is himself an atheist. He wrote an article that was called, *Secularism's Ongoing Debt to Religion*, because that secularism has a debt to religion. This is what he says,

"Although I am a secularist, I accept that the great majority of people will be morally and spiritually lost without religion, can anyone seriously argue that crime

and debauchery are not held in check by religion? Is it not comforting to live in a community where the rule of law and fairness are respected? Would such be likely if Christianity were not to provide a moral compass to the great majority? Do we secularists not benefit out of all proportion from a morally responsible society? An orderly society is dependent on a generally accepted morality. There can be no such morality without religion. Has there ever been a more perfect and concise moral code than the one Moses brought down from the mountain?"

That is a statement by a secular person - by an atheist who does not ascribe to that moral code specifically as transcendent, but he says it has its value. It has done something in society and that can only come about through the freedom of religion that is born out of the freedom of conscience, that our states - our governments - can help to foster.

The very fact that we can have this kind of a lunch, with this diverse of an audience, with this august of an audience, is a ray of hope in an otherwise very disagreeable world. No one here has to be reminded of how disagreeable things are today, where it seems that having a contrary opinion is considered a personal offense to someone else. And we have to sort of fight about these things and immediately come to blows.

But this kind of a lunch is a ray of hope. It gives me a tremendous kind of hope that we have come together to discuss these things and see how we can discuss our deepest differences, and disagree maybe, without being disagreeable. It's a wonderful thing.

The Golden Rule

It reminds me of one of the most famous phrases that anyone has ever heard of and has been spoken. The *Golden Rule* - most of us know the Golden Rule: "Do unto others as you would have done unto you."

Now what is interesting is, if you go to the United Nations - as many of you probably have - and seen the plaque, and even the picture of the Golden Rule versions in different religious systems and different cultures.

Many of them say, "Don't do unto others what you wouldn't want done to you." Or, "Refrain from harming others because you don't want to be harmed yourself." [...]

We have a shared common value. There is this undercurrent of respecting the inherent and intrinsic worth of human beings. We share that value.

But let me focus on, because of my background as a Christian and as a follower of Jesus, the way Jesus uniquely, and I think particularly movingly, expresses the same value of the Golden Rule. He doesn't say, "Don't do unto others what you don't want done unto you," because he is

not trying to be self protective. He is saying, “*DO* unto others what you would want done unto you.”

That requires an element of something that is sorely lacking in our world. It requires an element of trust, because we are to do for others, before they do for us. We are to do for them, what we would hope they would do for us. Because we recognize something - that whether they are friend or foe, whatever it might be - in the Christian faith, regardless of their background, regardless of their ideology, regardless of their agenda against or for us, they have an intrinsic and inherent worth. They have a value in and of themselves and Jesus’ statement makes that clear. That is why we are to *do unto others as we would have them do unto us*.

As a specifically Christian thing, I think we all have that same value within our own systems of belief. It is embodied in the various charters that we all have either signed onto, or our governments have signed onto. The United States Constitution recognizes the inherent value of human beings. The UN Charter does. The *Declaration of Human Rights* specifically says, that all people have equal dignity and the right to be free. We recognize this as a universal right. In order for us to foster that, that requires that we trust each other, and I think that is very tough to do in this day and age.

Inherent Dignity, Intrinsic Worth

But I think, and I have hope, that if we recognize that first principle - that all human beings have an inherent dignity, an intrinsic worth - then we will see them not as *those people* who have done such wrong to us but as people who, like us, are not perfect. People like us, who need that redemption, who need that work on our own spirits and their spirits as well. We can come together, look at our deepest differences and say, how can we discuss this in a way that is civil, in a way that says, “I value you so much, that I’m willing to respect the fact that you disagree with what I believe in, but I’m willing to respect that you have the right to disagree.”

But here is the reality, not all ideas are equal. They are just not. They are certainly not equal. The Civil Public Square is where we can come and have disagreement on these things and see that maybe they are not all equal, but they do have equal right to be heard.

But if all ideas are not equal, that’s one thing. But the fact is that all people are equal. The ideas they have are not equal, but the people who have them are all equal and they deserve the right to be heard. That means they have the right to express their religion publically, no matter what that religion is. That means they have the right to express no religion, to reject religion and live publically that way. That also means they have the right to choose a religion other than the one they were born into and live that way publically, without fear of reprisal.

If our worldview, or if our religious system, or whatever it might be - whether it is religious or non religious - is afraid of competition, is afraid of meeting with others in the public square, because

it might be toppled over too easily, then we have to reassess whether or not our worldview is made of steel that we think it is, or whether it is made of straw that we fear it might be.

But the Global Public Square, the Civil Public Square, will allow us to find out what the truth is. And in the words of a famous Middle Easterner where I come from, if we do engage in that public square, then “we will know the truth and the truth will set us free.”

Thank you so much.