

Religious Tolerance: What Would Jefferson Do?

The International Institute of the Bengal and Himalayan Basins, a Berkeley nonprofit committed to the mitigation of water toxicity and the equitable distribution of water worldwide is equally dedicated to the principles of secular democracy, particularly in Bangladesh where it seeks to create understandings between Hindus and Moslems. The Institute's founder, hydrologist, Dr. Rash Ghosh, is widely respected and trusted by both communities in the United States and on the Indo-Bangla subcontinent. As a young man, Dr. Ghosh worked with the founders of Bangladesh as a secular democracy established on principles very like those of the American republic. The beauty and greatness of America, especially in this century, is the extent to which the Enlightenment vision of our founding fathers has been realized; we have a secular democracy which permits all beliefs to be pursued without persecution or discrimination.

This matter of secularism is as urgent today as it was for our founders. Throughout the 16th and 17th centuries in Europe, Christian sects bent on political hegemony fought for control of nations. The principle of social and political unity in those days was the religious homogeneity or theological correctness of a people, and this principle was enforced through spiritual warfare: political purges, intolerance, persecution, forced conversion, theological cleansing, murder, and genocide. Thus, in the 17th Century, the British Crown was not alone in its intolerance of unsanctioned beliefs. Our own nation was originally a group of colonies divided according to membership in Christian sects. This solution to political violence in England did nothing to solve the problem of intolerance within the individual colonies where the theologically incorrect could be killed or denounced as witches. In fact, during the English Civil war, Puritans who as religious refugees had fled to Massachusetts, returned to Britain to join their fellow extremists under the religious dictator, Cromwell, in the persecution of Anglicans and the genocide of Catholics in Ireland. This is our history, too.

Out of that benighted age, arose better understandings of tolerance and rationality, and the following century saw the birth of the Enlightenment, or Age of Reason. Thomas Jefferson was our continent's great prophet of that era and its secular and democratic principles including religious tolerance and the separation of church and state. Our founders, Christians and Deists alike, recognized that tolerance and reason do not survive long without such separation, so this principle was enshrined in our constitution as its first amendment.

Yet today, Jefferson's vision of secular democracy is imperiled in America as well as on the Indo-Bangla subcontinent where it is opposed by Moslem and Hindu extremists. In Texas, fundamentalists understand the values of Jefferson, and in their war against our constitution's first amendment, are downplaying him in public school curricula to make room for others including John Calvin, the Swiss theologian, whose intolerance the Puritans practised so lethally in Massachusetts, England, and Ireland. If Calvin is more crucial to American history than Jefferson, will they next push Washington aside for Cromwell? They might admire Cromwell's spiritual warfare and his more "biblical worldview," but this is America—our founders are not theocrats of old Europe.

Today, the Republican presidential hopeful receives preemptive exorcisms against witchcraft, movements such as Dominionism which seek to replace our constitution with "biblical" law grow strong, and we have seen the reemergence of Christian terrorist organizations unparalleled since the Klan's persecution of African-Americans, Jews, and Catholics. This intolerance has advanced from the demonization of a religious minority by Fox News to Glenn Beck's recent denunciation of mainstream Christian churches' commitment to social justice, which he equated with "communism" and "Nazism."

Here as abroad, the prophets of reaction and intolerance use religious differences and misunderstandings to frighten and confuse as well as to obfuscate the causes of and possible solutions to increasing social inequity and environmental emergencies. The IIBHB is to be commended for developing approaches that address difficulties confronting democracies politically and religiously while seeking social and scientific solutions to the problems of economic disadvantage, housing, and clean water, our century's emerging crises.

As Americans, we should always ask ourselves the question, WWJD, "What Would Jefferson Do?" As far as I can tell, pretty much the same as Jesus.

Reason in the defense of liberty is no vice!

\