

Atheism and Freedom of Religion: Thoughts On Independence Day

By Holly Lisle

John Carlton, whose work has done me immeasurable good, and whose blog—The Rant—I read with considerable enthusiasm, has a post up on “Why We Blow Stuff Up On The Fourth Of July.”

Which is, actually, about the right of freedom of speech in America.

Generally I read without replying. This time, though, I noted that while he was giving deserved attention to the second clause of the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights, he had skipped right over that much touchier subject, the first clause, with its guarantee that Congress would make no law regarding the establishment of religion, or restraining the exercise thereof.

So I did post. And because this is not an issue I've taken up here before, I'm copying my reply to his thread, and explaining why I, an atheist, am both an atheist and a fervent supporter of freedom of religion. Read his whole post. It is, as always, well-thought-out and delightfully phrased.

But my response stands alone below.

To answer the first part of your question, I deal with cynics by walking away—cynicism is the art of remaining blind to opportunity and potential by artfully denying their existence. I don't choose to be blind, but neither do I choose to fight with some idiot over his wish to remain so rather than remove the bag over his head.

As for freedom of speech, it is essential.

But as an atheist, I want to point out that the framers of the Bill of Rights got the order of the provisions of the First Amendment correct when they noted first that:

“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof;”

...and made freedom of speech second.

Which might seem to be a damned odd thing for an atheist to say. But. Religion (or philosophy) is what people think...and in the better class of discussion, debate, reasoning, argument, and policy-making, people think before they speak.

The first item of the First Amendment does nothing less amazing than guarantee freedom of thought—that you can choose to believe, or disbelieve, any damn-fool thing you desire, and the government has no right to forbid you, or to make any laws regarding or restraining the contents of your brain.

Before you can speak freely, you must be able to think freely, to be able to study all options and pursue those you believe to have value.

I was raised the child of lay missionaries, I had an on-the-ground education in comparative religion and watched religion, like sausage, being made, and I discovered by the time I was sixteen that I have a congenital inability to believe that which I know to be untrue.

I came to my own thoughts by hard work and hard study—read the whole Bible end to end several times, read the Koran, read the Book of Mormon, went through the tenets and beliefs of multiple other religions looking for something that did not demand the sacrifice of reason for faith. I am no fan of religions—ANY religions—and vocally so.

But the presence of the first clause of the First Amendment protects our rights to our own minds, and it is no small

point that those who argue vehemently for “freedom FROM religion” are arguing for the right to eliminate freedom of thought, of belief, of the right of the individual to choose and own the contents of his own mind.

*So, **because I am an atheist, and not in spite of it**, I’ll make my stand on that portion of Bill of Rights that mandates Freedom of Religion.*

I judge it to be in even greater danger now than freedom of speech.

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