

## Guest column

# Roots of religious liberty run deep in U.S.

By Michael Parkinson

In his "Plea for Religious Liberty," Roger Williams, founder of Rhode Island, wrote that "to molest any person, Jew or Gentile, for either professing doctrine, or practicing worship merely religious or spiritual, it is to persecute him, and such a person (whatever his doctrine or practice be, true or false) suffereth persecution for conscience."

A few years later, the Catholic colony of Maryland passed its Act of Toleration, making it illegal to compel "the conscience in matters of Religion." Similar sentiments prevailed in the other American colonies.

By the time of American independence, the right to freedom of conscience in matters of religion had become commonplace in legislative enactments.

The most famous enactment was in the Virginia Bill of Rights of 1776, which declared:

"That Religion, or the Duty which we owe to our Creator, and the Manner of discharging it, can be directed only by Reason and Conviction, not by Force or Violence; and therefore all Men

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are equally entitled to the free exercise of Religion, according to the Dictates of Conscience, and that it is the mutual Duty of all to practice Christian Forbearance, Love and Charity towards each other."

The Virginia Bill of Rights became the model for the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which begins with the phrase:

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

The first clause of the First Amendment, known as the "Establishment Clause," prohibits the federal government from interfering in the affairs of religious organizations.

The second clause, known as the "Free Exercise Clause," prohibits the federal government from interfering in the rights of the in-

dividual in the exercise of religious conscience.

The founders believed that the freedom of religious conscience was antecedent to all civil governments, for such freedoms, they believed, came directly from God.

"All men," George Mason said, "have an equal, natural and unalienable right to the free exercise of religion, according to the dictates of conscience."

The right was derived from the sound moral principle that no man can compel another to sin.

It mattered not, as Roger Williams said, whether the act in itself is or is not sinful, but only that the person being coerced believes it to be an offense against God.

For any government to exercise coercion against an individual in such circumstances was considered tantamount to the government placing itself between God and man, which was thought to be the height of tyranny, in the classical sense of that word.

For this reason, George Washington, in his letter to the Hebrew Congregation of Newport, said that liberty of conscience was the foremost right of all Americans "in the

exercise of their inherent natural rights."

In the 20th century, it became the view of communist, national socialist and other totalitarian regimes that religious freedom should be restricted to the right to "worship" in a religious service of one's choice, as long as the "worship" did not threaten the interests of the state. Such a notion is antithetical to the historical meaning of religious freedom.

As Thomas Jefferson reiterated in his Statute for Religious Freedom: "No man shall be compelled to frequent or support any religious worship, place, or ministry, whatsoever, *nor shall be enforced, restrained, molested, or burdened in his body or goods, nor shall otherwise suffer, on account of his religious opinions or belief ...*" (emphasis added.)

"That to suffer," he said, "the civil magistrate to intrude his powers into the field of opinion and to restrain the profession of principles on supposition of their ill tendency is a dangerous fallacy, which at once destroys religious liberty."

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