



Auckland Unitarian Church
Love beyond belief

Celebrating Freedom

John DiLeo © 7 July 2024

The Thursday just past was US Independence Day – the annual celebration of that country’s declaration, and eventual winning, of independence from English colonial rule.

That occasion got me thinking about freedom, in the patriotic, “land of the free and home of the brave” sense. This eventually brought me to a few questions: What freedoms do I *really* have? Which ones matter most to me? What would I be willing to do to preserve them?

During previous services I’ve led, I spoke from this pulpit about the freedom from fear I realised I’d gained by fleeing the violence and madness of my former homeland, the United States.

I’ve also spoken about the freedom of movement and association I’ve enjoyed my entire life, by virtue of my privileged circumstances – I’m a white, English-speaking, *cis*, straight man of Christian heritage, with multiple graduate degrees, expertise in a niche technical field, and a US passport – and how I eventually realised just how much that privilege had helped me throughout my life.

As you might have guessed from my reading selections, though, my thinking this time around settled on Freedom of Thought, as embodied by our Third and Fourth Principles: Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregation; and A free and responsible search for truth and meaning.

A particular embodiment of this freedom is Freedom of Religion or, arguably more importantly, freedom *from* religion – the right not to profess any religion or belief at all.

As residents of a “free” country, we might consider this right to be self-evident, and might even assume it’s universally recognised – I know I

once did. In many parts of the world, reality is actually quite far from that. In fact, as we heard in the second reading, things aren't exactly perfect here.

In December, Humanists International published their updated *Freedom of Thought Report*.¹

As they tell us on their website:

“The *Freedom of Thought Report*...assesses every country in the world on the basis of human rights and the legal status with regard to humanists, atheists, and the non-religious.

“We believe it is important to document discriminatory national laws and state authorities which violate freedom of religion or belief and freedom of expression. As well as affecting the overtly nonreligious, such as atheists and humanists, such systemic discrimination also often affects religious people, in particular minorities and non-conformists, and the unaffiliated (those who hold no particular worldview or religion).

“Systemic, legal discrimination can include such things as established state churches (resulting in religious privilege), religious instruction provided without secular ethical alternative classes in schools, through to severe punishments such as prison for crimes of ‘insulting’ religion, or death merely for expressing your atheism.”

In their press release announcing the publication of the Report,² Humanists International highlighted several key findings:

- “The report finds that humanists are discriminated against in 186 countries across the globe through a combination of the following:
- Government figures or state agencies openly marginalize, harass, or incite hatred or violence against the non-religious in 11 countries;
 - It is illegal or unrecognized to identify as an atheist or as non-religious in 15 countries;

¹ <https://humanists.international/what-we-do/freedom-of-thought-report/>

² <https://humanists.international/2023/12/humanists-on-the-front-line-of-democracies-globally-new-report-shows/>

- The barring of the non-religious from holding at least some offices in 23 countries;
- The derivation of state legislation in whole or in part from religious law in 34 countries;
- Blasphemy remains a punishable offense in at least 87 countries across the globe;
- The use of religious courts on family or moral matters in 48 countries;
- Discriminatory funding of religion in 85 countries;
- It is difficult or illegal to run an overtly humanist organization in 32 countries;
- The provision of mandatory religious instruction in state-funded schools without a secular or humanist alternative in 33 countries.”

In their entry for New Zealand,³ the organisation acknowledges the country’s attitude toward religious freedom is generally good, but points up a few problem areas:

1. “Preferential treatment is given to a religion, or to religion in general;
2. State-funding of religious institutions or salaries, or discriminatory tax exemptions;
3. Official symbolic deference to religion
4. There is state-funding of at least some religious schools; and
5. State-funded schools offer religious or ideological instruction with no secular or humanist alternative, but it is [technically] optional.”

One item they note, of which I hadn’t been aware: “Until 2019, a ‘blasphemy’ law had been in place in New Zealand, under a section on ‘crimes against morality and decency, sexual crimes and crimes against public welfare’ within the Crimes Act 1961...In theory ‘blasphemy’ offences were punishable with a prison term.” The section criminalizing “blasphemy” was repealed by the Crimes Amendment Act 2019 – I guess we should be proud of our homeland’s (eventual) progress on that front.

One of the reasons I started attending a UU fellowship in the first place is the fact we explicitly *do not* require members to profess any particular

³ <https://fot.humanists.international/countries/oceania-australia-and-new-zealand/new-zealand/>

creed, or in fact to profess *any* creed at all. We are free to believe, or not believe, whatever we like, with the concurrent expectation that we respect the beliefs (or non-beliefs) of others in our midst.

We also see that religious freedoms – especially the freedom from having others’ religious beliefs imposed on us through legislation – continues to be under attack. The right-wing activist takeover of the Supreme Court and many lower federal courts in the US is a particularly egregious example. Many protections from religiously motivated government interference, which we had believed were enshrined as the law of the land in the US, have been successfully stripped away with little hope we’ll see them restored for at least another generation. And the onslaught continues.

Complicating the situation is the fact we lack a freedom I really *wish* we had: freedom from “alternative facts.” We find ourselves living under a constant barrage of misinformation and disinformation, manufactured and spewed by every special interest group under the sun, providing versions of reality that precisely align with their respective agendas and conveniently exclude the *possibility* that their opponents have valid concerns and needs, or are worthy of respect or consideration.

It’s difficult enough to reach an accord among parties seeking conflicting outcomes, when they actually *share* a common reality. The problem is magnified many times over, when the various parties operate from mutually contradictory collections of “truth.”

As a creed-free community of faith, I believe it falls particularly on UUs around the world to speak up for freedom of thought and freedom from religion. As New Zealand’s only active UU congregation, we have an important role to play in those debates here. Make no mistake – it won’t be easy. But it couldn’t be more important.

Meditation / Discussion Questions

What freedom(s) do you cherish most highly?

Are there freedoms you wish you had, but feel you don’t?