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Believe Only What I Say
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Before the release of the movie "The Da Vinci Code," a young Powell, Wyo., high school student decided that the film promoted ideas about Christianity that he found false and insulting. He started a petition asking the theater owner not to show the film. Dozens of Powell residents signed it and the young man presented the petition to the owner, who politely refused it and showed the film anyway.

While I applaud the young man's involvement in his community -- indeed I would like to see more young people get involved in their community -- I think in the end that his goal of preventing free speech about religion was wrong-headed. It is the freedom for people to express their religious views, whatever those views are, and in whatever form they wish to do so, that makes America great, making it different from so many other world countries.

There are two parts to the notion of freedom of religion. The first, nearly everyone agrees with, namely, that "I" as an individual should be free to believe and worship (or not) however I choose. The second part is necessary for the first part to work but lacks its near universal agreement. It is the idea that everyone else has the freedom to believe and worship as they choose, even when those beliefs and practices differ radically from mine. Even if I consider others' religious acts sinful, as long as the acts are not crimes (like murder) it is okay for other people to do them. Both parts are necessary for freedom of religion to exist.

The Puritans who left England so that they could worship as they wished in the American wilderness got the first part right. They worshiped as they chose when they arrived. But they got the second part wrong -- they permitted people to worship only as the Puritan religion saw fit. If someone did not conform, they got kicked out of the community into the wilderness. It took Roger Williams to realize that the Puritans were just like the English they had left behind. He insisted that all

people should be able to follow their own conscience and believe as they saw fit. Thankfully, it was Williams' view that found its way into the United States Bill of Rights.

What would the alternative have been? The alternative would be to set up someone -- or some group -- to judge what is acceptable and what is not. That person would have to be a religious expert of some sort, which 200 years ago would have meant that they would have belonged to one Christian denomination or another.

This would have resulted in the de facto elevation of that denomination to an official status. The dominant denominations of the time were Episcopal, Quaker, Presbyterian, Congregational and some Baptists. Methodists and Lutherans did not become important until later, and Catholics did not arrive in large numbers until the early 20th century. If a judge of "allowed religious beliefs" had been appointed, then the beliefs and practices of others would have been excluded. For example, those who believed that baptism should only take place by dunking would have outlawed those baptized by sprinkling.

Perhaps there would not have been a nationally approved church, but instead the matter would have been left to the states. The southern states would probably have made the Baptists the official church, while Massachusetts would have gone Congregational and Pennsylvania might have chosen Quakerism. Think of it: If you moved from one state to another, you might suddenly have found that your religious beliefs were no longer approved.

In the end, I think that the religious freedom of American citizens is best ensured by its open marketplace approach. Anybody can believe and practice as they choose. As long as they commit no crimes, no one can outlaw them. Yes, that allows for the expression and practice of religions with which we do not agree. But it also ensures that no one has the authority to ban our own religion.