

Religion Today
April 6 - 12, 2014

Unfettered Capitalism and the United States' Marketplace of Religion

Paul V.M. Flesher

Our pilgrim forebears came to America in 1620 for freedom of religion. They sought the ability to worship and believe according to their conscience. They were Separatists who fled the England of King James I, who had restricted religious freedom for those who did not follow his religious ideals, whether Separatists, Puritans or Catholics.

At first, the Pilgrims and others of similar Calvinist leanings emphasized their own ability to worship as they saw fit and did not accord others the same right. But Roger Williams' focus on each individual's right to their own "Soul Liberty" took a different view. His perspective was that the problem was not that the government (e.g., King James) favored the wrong theological view, but that government favored any theological view at all.

In the end, Williams' idea became the foundation of the United States' approach to the relationship between government and religious organizations. The main point is that there should not be a relationship; according to the First Amendment, government should pass no laws "respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

The former phrase means that laws cannot give some religious group more rights than other groups, while the latter phrase indicates that laws cannot give some religious groups or individuals fewer rights than other religious groups. To the extent possible, government should pass no laws concerning religions.

While this principle has not been followed 100 percent, the United States probably has fewer laws about religion and less government involvement in regulating religious organizations than any other country.

This hands-off government approach has placed America's religions in a free-for-all marketplace. Varieties of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Paganism and many other religions jostle each other to find a niche or establish their place in the religious scene.

This religious marketplace is quite capitalist in character. Some religious organizations compete at the top of the marketplace. Like a company seeking higher sales, they work to attract more members. Like advertisers, they loudly broadcast their views for all to see. Whether they are a large organization, like the Catholic Church, or a small group, like the followers of the anti-gay Fred Phelps, they compete for media attention to get their word out.

Other religious organizations participate in the market by finding a quiet niche. They do not want a big public presence, but simply wish to practice their faith and be left alone. And, of course, there are many approaches in between.

Competition in this religious marketplace occurs in many forms, from blatant advertising on the sides of buses to announcing meeting times on the Saturday newspaper "church page." There are parades, social outreach through missions and soup kitchens, sponsorship of Boy Scouts and, especially, the erection of prominent buildings. Churches and their steeples have dominated the skylines and central squares of towns and villages for centuries.

The capitalistic nature of this competition does not prevent different religious groups from using non-capitalistic means to gain an edge. Recently, the quest has been to allow religious groups or individuals to deprive others of their rights. In particular, the present social debate over freedom of religion is the claim that one person's right to believe as they wish includes the right to deprive others of their rights.

This is the claim of the Hobby Lobby case presently before the Supreme Court and the goal of laws recently passed in Arizona (where it was vetoed) and in Mississippi that allow businesses to discriminate on the basis of belief.

The capitalist character of America's religious marketplace, then, is so free and open that nothing prevents religious groups from using non-capitalist means to try to make it less free and less equal for some. Success in this quest will eventually make religious belief and practice less free for everyone.