
10 ways to defend religious freedom in 2017

by Jeff Swift | Jan 23, 2017 | Featured, Judgement, Mormonism, Politics | 0 comments



As you might have heard, Mormons—like many of our other religious brothers and sisters—are fairly anxious about religious freedom these days. In light of President Obama’s proclamation that January 16th is Religious Freedom day, this post suggests a number of concrete ways that we can all do a little better at honoring religious freedom.

Spoiler: "don't bake cakes for LGBTQ weddings" didn't make the cut.

1) Respect people of all faiths

"We ought to be aware of those prejudices which sometimes so strangely present themselves, and are so congenial to human nature, against our friends, neighbors and brethren of the world, who choose to differ from us in opinion and in matters of faith. Our religion is between us and our God. Their religion is between them and their God."
—Joseph Smith

Sometimes the faithful can be the most passionately dismissive of others' religious beliefs. America has a long history of dominant religions oppressing minority religions. Just ask Mormons in Missouri in 1838 or the survivors of Haun's Mill.

If we are to defend religious freedom, we must remember that when any religious group is targeted, we all have a responsibility to speak up.—President Obama

2) Respect people of no faith

We acknowledge that the same freedom of conscience must apply to men and women everywhere to follow the religious faith of their choice, **or none at all if they so choose.**
—Dallin H. Oaks



Religious freedom covers all variations of religious belief —from the most believing to the religious “nones.” Defending religious freedom requires that every point on that spectrum is equally defended.

Religious freedom protects the rights of all groups and individuals, including the most vulnerable, whether religious or not. —Mormon Newsroom

3) Stand with minority religions

Unpopular minority religions are especially dependent upon a constitutional guarantee of free exercise of religion. —Dallin H. Oaks

Donald Trump’s threatened Muslim registry and the crisis at Standing Rock in 2016 were an opportunity for members of the Christian majority in America to stand with their fellow people of faith. Many did. Too many of us didn’t, or did so halfheartedly. In 2017, let’s be sure to try a little harder to be a little better at this.



[T]he same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves. —Joseph Smith

4) Err on the side of compassion

Part of being American means guarding against bigotry and speaking out on behalf of others, no matter their background or belief—whether they are wearing a hijab or a baseball cap, a yarmulke or a cowboy hat.—President Obama

Christians worship Jesus, a dark-skinned Jew who routinely offended the religious leaders of his day by doing exactly the opposite of what they said. If they decided someone was dirty and untouchable, Jesus went out of his way to touch them. If they decided you couldn't shuck corn on Sunday, Jesus waited until they walked by on a Sunday, and shucked corn right in front of them.

Churches are political even when they refuse to act politically, because silence is a form of complicity and thus an endorsement of the status quo.—Robin R. Meyers

Religion is supposed to help us love each other more, not beat each other over the heads with the weight of our interpretations of scripture.



This becomes easier when we remember that Elder Oaks has taught us just because we religious folk don't get our way legally doesn't mean that we're somehow oppressed:

Religious belief is obviously protected against government action. The practice of that belief must have some limits.—Dallin H. Oaks

5) Use religious freedom to bring people together, not drive people apart

We have a responsibility to be active in the communities where we live ... and to work cooperatively with other churches. ... It's important that we eliminate the weakness of one standing alone and substitute for it the strength of people working together.

—President Monson

We have a great opportunity in religious diversity. All religions of the world have truth and goodness to share. And all religions call for more love, more compassion, and more service.

[T]hroughout our history, faith communities have helped uphold these values by joining in efforts to help those in need—rallying in the face of tragedy and providing care or shelter in times of disaster.—President Obama

If we prioritize being right over love and service—if we use faith as an excuse to be mean to others—we are doing far worse than hiding our light under a bushel.



image credit: mormonnewsroom.org

As Christians, our most “deeply held religious belief” is that Jesus Christ died on the cross for sinful people, and that in imitation of that, we are called to love God, to love our neighbors, and to love even our enemies to the point of death. So I think we can handle making pastries for gay people.—Rachel Held Evans

6) Listen



Nobody likes talking with someone who knows they're 100% right about something. This is especially true when it comes to matters of faith. When our number one goal is to prove we're right or defend our turn, we'll miss out on opportunities to learn and grow.

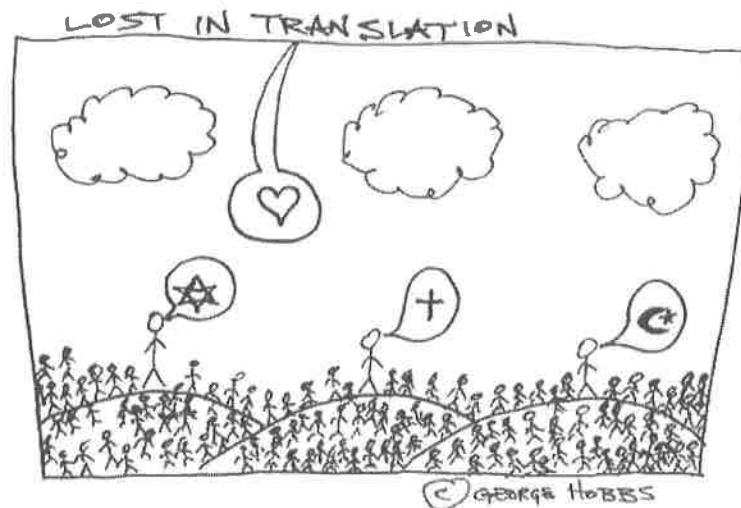
As a Nation, our strength comes from our diversity, and we must be unified in our commitment to protecting the freedoms of conscience and religious belief and the freedom to live our lives according to them. —President Obama

7) Let others worship how, where, and what they may

A church can claim access to higher authority on moral questions, but its opinions on the application of those moral questions to specific legislation will inevitably be challenged by and measured against secular-based legislative or political judgments. —Elder Dallin H. Oaks

It's easy to forget that some people worship differently than we do, but should still be allowed their religious preference.

Yet while I do this work because of my faith, I also recognize of course that in a pluralistic society there are many different perspectives. It is both unrealistic and wrong to insist that everyone hold my views, my faith. The place we meet, in our differences, is in the founding documents of our democratic republic.—Sister Simone Campbell



8) Disagree without being disagreeable

"Hooray for differences! Without them, there would be no harmony. In principles, great clarity. In practices, great charity." —Sister Chieko N. Okazaki

Religious freedom means freedom *for* religion, but also freedom *from* religion. Freedom from hatred and judgment. Freedom from oppression because of religious beliefs.

[I]n a nation with citizens of many different religious beliefs, the right of some to act upon their religious principles must be qualified by the government's responsibility to protect the health and safety of all.—Dallin H. Oaks

9) Be bold in defense of *both sides* of religious freedom

As L. Tom Perry wisely taught "Besides protecting our own rights, we must protect the rights of others, including the most vulnerable and the least popular. We must show

mutual respect for others and treat all civilly. No one should be belittled for following his or her moral conscience.”

The religious beliefs of people like Sister Simone Campbell and Rev. William Barber (and many others) drive them to defend LGBT rights just as sincerely and religiously as others’ religious beliefs drive people to restrict them. It’s not religious freedom if it just defends me and my perspective.

In other words, there’s a “religious right” and there’s a “religious left.” There’s all shades of a religious middle. Our nation is healthiest when we allow all sides to come to the table rather than pretending our side is the only legitimate one.

We are at our best as fellow citizens when the push-pull of different viewpoints, freely and thoroughly aired in national debate, leads ultimately to compromise and resolution and we move on as a nation, stronger than before.—Sister Neill F. Marriott

10) Don’t turn religious freedom into a competition

While it might be easy to attempt to compare persecution complexes, religious freedom isn’t about who gets picked on the most. Persecution is all too rampant across the world—both *of* religious people and *by* religious people.

When we are so caught up in how oppressed are, we’re not able to actually live the part of our religion that asks us to love *other* people, to watch *their* backs in a dangerous world.

Indeed, a quick glance around this broken world makes it painfully obvious that we don’t need more arguments on behalf of God; we need more people who live as if they are in covenant with Unconditional Love, which is our best definition of God.—Robin R. Meyers

A version of this post was also published at MormonPress.

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Jeff Swift

Jeff Swift is married to a registered nurse, and is a fan of playing duplos with her and their two boys. He has lived in Provo, New York City, Bulgaria, North Carolina, and California. He’s into politics, the interwebs, good debates, and soccer. He also blogs at mormonpress.com.