

Secretary Kerry's 'Stupid' Defense of Religious Liberty

Secretary of State John Kerry was barely off the plane in Germany before he embarrassed himself—and all of us—with what is perhaps the worst defense of **religious freedom** ever offered. Kerry, the unsuccessful Democratic candidate for president in 2004, said the United States protects religious freedom because: “In America, you have a right to be stupid.”

Sec. Kerry's audience of German students laughed when he said that. He missed, of course, the perfect opportunity to share our deepest values with the rising generation that will have Europe's future in their hands.

Instead of talking of “tolerance” and how we “tolerate” ideas we think are stupid, Kerry might have told the young Germans about George Washington's eloquent Letter to the Hebrew Congregation at Newport. In 1790, President Washington told those Jewish Americans—who had so loyally supported our country's bid for independence and freedom:

It is now no more that toleration is spoken of as if it were the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed the exercise of their inherent natural rights, for, happily, the Government of the United States, which gives to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance, requires only that they who live under its protection should demean themselves as good citizens in giving it on all occasions their effectual support.

This was a world historical event. It was the first time in history that any national leader addressed the Jews as equal fellow citizens. Wouldn't Germany—with its tragic history—have been an excellent place to reiterate President Washington's deep beliefs?

Let us note well: President Washington says we do not speak of toleration. That's because he understood that **religious freedom** is not the gift of the government, of the governing elites, or even of the majority of voters. Religious freedom is the gift of God. It is the foundation of our inalienable right to liberty.

Kerry could have quoted this eloquent Washington passage:

May the children of the stock of Abraham who dwell in this land continue to merit and enjoy the good will of the other inhabitants—while every one shall sit in safety under his own vine and fig tree and there shall be none to make him afraid.

Or, Kerry could have cited Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Their work on the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom (1786) was also epochal. That Statute was not passed by “stupid people” for a stupid people. Jefferson was in Paris as our ambassador when he learned of his friend Madison's success in Virginia. Mr. Jefferson was so happy about Madison's achievement securing passage of this Magna Carta of religious freedom that he had it translated into French and other European languages. Jefferson considered this event so important he listed his authorship of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom as part of his own epitaph.

Jefferson was our first Sec. of State, and a most successful one. He understood, as John Kerry does not, how important **religious freedom** is. “For I have sworn upon the altar of God eternal hostility to every form of tyranny over the mind of man.”

Religious oppression is that form of tyranny which makes all other forms possible. The reason we don't have democracy in any of those countries going through an “Arab Spring” is because they do not place religious freedom first among the chartered rights of their own people. We build houses on sand when we try to export democracy to countries where people

believe their neighbors who worship differently should be killed.

Germany since 1945 has had an exemplary record on civil liberties, but it has failed in one important respect: The democratic Federal Republic still persecutes home schoolers. We have had to give asylum to a young German couple who were threatened with imprisonment for home schooling their children. This Christian family, the Romeikes, settled in Tennessee.

Germans are likely to respond that they have to control education because of their unhappy history with the Third Reich. We should respond with sympathy, with a proper appreciation of their tortured history and their sincere efforts to avoid any repetition of that tragic period. But the first thing to say is that it was because the German state viewed children as subjects of the regime that they suffered the rise of Nazism.

In America, as early as 1925, our Supreme Court struck down an attempt to outlaw private and Christian education. When Oregon tried to force all children into state schools, the Court said: "The child is not the mere creature of the state." And the Court recognized the rights of parents who love their children:

"those who nurture him and direct his destiny have the right, coupled with the high duty, to recognize and prepare him for additional obligations." (Pierce v. Society of Sisters, 1925)

No one wants our Sec. of State to insult his hosts. We don't expect him to go out of his way to criticize countries with whom we must deal. Still, John Kerry's "stupid" remarks reflect badly on this nation, our people, and our historical record. James Madison believed that establishing religious freedom would add to "the lustre of our country." It would be nice if John Kerry believed that and said so.

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