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# Religion & Government

Religion and government are like a couple who sometimes have a hard time living together but who find they simply cannot live apart. Religion and government both need their independence in order to flourish, but history has shown that a complete divorce is healthy for neither. They travel different but parallel tracks. They are most successful and most effective when they protect and encourage one another.

Governments play an essential role in protecting and maintaining religious freedom and in fostering the role of churches in society. Fortunately, most governments in the world today recognize at least some degree of religious freedom and ensure to their citizens the right to worship and to practice their religion according to the dictates of their own conscience. That has not always been the case.

Many generations have seen the stifling loss of freedom that results when government imposes a state religion. Others have experienced the moral collapse that accompanies governmental prohibition of religion altogether. We are thankful that a growing majority of the constitutions of countries in today's world envision a society where religious belief and observance, though separate from government, should be protected and safeguarded against persecution.<sup>1</sup>

The heaven-inspired government described in the Book of Mormon afforded this freedom of religious belief and practice to its people:

“Now if a man desired to serve God, it was his privilege; or rather, if he believed in God it was his privilege to serve him; but if he did not believe in him there was no law to punish him. . . .

“For there was a law that men should be judged according to their crimes. Nevertheless, there was no law against a man’s belief” (Alma 30:9, 11).

As people of faith we should be thankful for governmental protections that allow us to embrace and practice our religious beliefs as we desire.

### The Essential Role of Religion

It is perhaps less obvious to some that religion and morality play an essential role in maintaining and promoting good and effective government. The only real solutions to many of the serious problems facing our world today are spiritual, not political or economic. Racism, violence, and hate crimes, for example, are spiritual problems, and their only real solution is spiritual. Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles has taught:

“Many of the most significant moral advances in Western society have been motivated by religious principles and persuaded to official adoption by pulpit preaching. Examples include the abolition of the slave trade in England and the Emancipation Proclamation in [the United States]. The same is true of the Civil Rights movement of the last half-century.”<sup>2</sup>



#### THE VITAL INFLUENCE OF RELIGIOUS BELIEF

“Our society is not held together primarily by law and its enforcement, but most importantly by those who voluntarily obey the unenforceable because of their internalized norms

of righteous or correct behavior. Religious belief in right and wrong is a vital influence to produce such voluntary compliance by a large number of our citizens.”

Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, “Strengthening the Free Exercise of Religion,” address given at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty Canterbury Medal Dinner, New York City, May 16, 2013, 1; available at [mormonnewsroom.org](http://mormonnewsroom.org).

Societies depend in large part upon religion and churches to establish moral order. Government can never build enough jails to house the criminals produced by a society lacking in morality, character, and faith. These attributes are better encouraged by religious observance than by legislative decree or police force. It is impossible for government to control the attitudes, desires, and hopes that spring from the human heart. And yet these are the seeds that grow into the conduct government must regulate.

French historian and statesman Alexis de Tocqueville wrote, “Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot.”<sup>3</sup> And even despotism cannot govern indefinitely without faith. For as Boris Yeltsin, first president of the Russian Federation, observed, “You can build a throne with bayonets, but it’s difficult to sit on it.”<sup>4</sup>

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus contrasted the law written on the books with the law written in the heart.

“Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment:

“But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment” (Matthew 5:21–22).

While governments enforce the law written on the books, religion teaches and encourages adherence to the law written in the heart. Those who abide the latter will seldom if ever violate the former. As we read in the Doctrine and Covenants, “He that keepeth the laws of God hath no need to break the laws of the land” (58:21).

But where matters of the heart are ignored, the black letter law and the legal machinery of government will eventually bog down. Civility in society is achieved when the majority of people do what is moral because they believe they should, not because they are compelled by law or by police force.

Government oversees the conduct of its citizens. It tries to get them to behave in a decent and moral way. Religion, on the other hand, tries to get them to *desire* to behave in a decent and moral way. President Ezra



Taft Benson (1899–1994), a cabinet member under U.S. President Dwight D. Eisenhower, taught this most important distinction:

“The Lord works from the inside out. The world works from the outside in. The world would take people out of the slums. Christ takes the slums out of people, and then they take themselves out of the slums. The world would mold men by changing their environment. Christ changes men, who then change their environment. The world would shape human behavior, but Christ can change human nature.”<sup>5</sup>

Over time all free governments must ultimately depend on the voluntary goodness and support of their citizens. As legendary statesman and political philosopher Edmund Burke said, “It is ordained in the eternal constitution of things, that men of intemperate minds cannot be free. Their passions forge their fetters.”<sup>6</sup>

To that end, good government protects religion and fosters religious freedom. And good religion encourages good citizenship and adherence to the law of the land.

Good government need not take sides. It should not foster or favor one religion over another. Its representatives must be free to believe and practice according to

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the dictates of their own conscience. By the same token, good religion should neither endorse nor oppose any political party or candidate. And its believers must be free and even encouraged to participate in the political process and to support whichever party or candidate they think best.

### **Make Your Voice Heard**

While the Church, as an institution, has repeatedly affirmed its political neutrality, Latter-day Saints are encouraged to engage in the political process and to add their voices to the public debate. It is part of our religion to be good citizens wherever we live.

*Handbook 2: Administering the Church* states, “In accordance with the laws of their respective governments, members are encouraged to register to vote, to study issues and candidates carefully, and to vote for individuals who they believe will act with integrity and sound judgment. Latter-day Saints have a special obligation to seek out, vote for, and uphold leaders who are honest, good, and wise (see D&C 98:10).”<sup>7</sup>

One day the Savior will come again. It is His right to rule and to reign as the King of kings *and* as our great High Priest. Then the scepter of government and the power of the priesthood will be combined into one.

Until that great day, religion and government must walk down the path of human history hand in hand—each respecting the other’s independence, each appreciating the other’s essential contribution. ■

#### **NOTES**

1. See W. Cole Durham Jr., Silvio Ferrari, Cristiana Cianitto, Donlu Thayer, eds., *Law, Religion, Constitution: Freedom of Religion, Equal Treatment, and the Law* (2013), 3–5.
2. Dallin H. Oaks, “Strengthening the Free Exercise of Religion,” address given at The Becket Fund for Religious Liberty Canterbury Medal Dinner, New York City, May 16, 2013, 1; available at [mormonnewsroom.org](http://mormonnewsroom.org).
3. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2 vols. (1835–40), 1:306.
4. Boris Yeltsin, in Donald Murray, *A Democracy of Despots* (1995), 8.
5. Ezra Taft Benson, “Born of God,” *Ensign*, Nov. 1985, 6.
6. Edmund Burke, *A Letter from Mr. Burke, to a Member of the National Assembly; in Answer to Some Objections to His Book on French Affairs*, 2nd ed. (1791), 69.
7. *Handbook 2: Administering the Church* (2010), 21.1.29.