

The Contemporary Relevance of a Religious Idea

I was raised in the denomination once known as Northern Baptist, not to be confused with other varieties of Baptist. Northern (now American) Baptists trace their origins to the English Reformation. Some of their spiritual ancestors sought early refuge in Holland to escape persecution, which also occurred in America. They claim Roger Williams as one of their guiding lights, and they hold freedom of conscience, aka soul liberty, to be one of their highest principles. They are also explicitly non-creedal, although most American Baptists today hold to a fairly conventional Christian theology. But they have usually found room for the theological dissenter, the unorthodox, the religious non-conformist.

Although there is little that is unconventional or non-conformist in my daily life, I vigorously resist the imposition of unfounded ideas, dogmas, or conventional notions that cannot bear the scrutiny of evidence, logic, and real world experience. If I must choose between traditional teaching, or doctrine, and the best evidence and knowledge currently available to reason and experience, I'll always go with the latter.

Being raised in a non-conformist religious tradition has probably had something to do with my commitment not only to intellectual freedom but also to civil liberties and human rights. Some folks think that religious values and ideas should be confined to our private lives, but that's not possible. Indeed, any religious idea worth its salt ought to inform and shape the rest of our existence.

It is essential to our humanity that we possess a significant measure of privacy and freedom in our personal lives. A proper and meaningful sense of self requires as much. We must also have freedom and opportunity in our public lives to express ourselves, advocate our ideas, act upon our convictions, and embody our values to the fullest measure possible – the chief constraint being that we do not thereby limit or deny the same to others.

All this may help explain why I regard the NSA's massive surveillance activities to be among the gravest of threats to our humanity, a usurpation that threatens our God-given rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of a life worth living. The surveillance society strikes at the heart of religious and political as well as personal freedom. Allow this surveillance to persist and we stand to become pawns conformed to the demands of the imperial State rather than creative individual persons bestowed with the image of our Creator.

Copyright 2014 by Byron C. Bangert