

Religious Freedom and the Democratic Limits of Toleration

A recent editorial in *The Christian Century* magazine took Bernie Sanders to task for voting against the confirmation of one Russell Vought, a self-professed Christian, to be Deputy Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Vought is on record as stating that Muslims “do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ his Son, and they stand condemned.”

Sanders characterized Vought’s view of Islam as “indefensible,” “hateful,” “Islamophobic,” and “an insult to over a billion Muslims throughout the world.”

The anonymous editorialist argued that Sanders came “close to imposing a religion test for public office” and that he “was mistaken to think that Vought had to abandon his fundamental beliefs in order to serve in government.” Other commentators also seemed to think Sanders overreacted and went too far in passing judgment against Vought.

I wrote the editor to raise some questions about the editorial. I asked, first, “Did Vought include Jews, Buddhists, and Hindus among those who ‘do not know God because they have rejected Jesus Christ?’” Vought’s focus on Muslims for their non-Christian beliefs made him suspect of having some special animus toward them. Ironically, Jesus is held in higher esteem within Islam than in all other major religions.

The editorialist maintained that Vought should not have to abandon his fundamental beliefs to gain appointment to public office. But what if those fundamental beliefs are incompatible with democratic comity and values? Can a public servant impartially serve those of his fellow citizens whom he believes “stand condemned” because they “do not know God”? Perhaps Vought is able to transcend his personal theological views and treat all persons with equal positive regard, even if he believes they are headed for eternal damnation, but one must wonder. I certainly find Vought’s views to be objectionable. The nettlesome question arises: Are views that are considered objectionable ever to be judged unacceptable, even intolerable?

According to some interpretations of American history, we have religious freedom enshrined in our democracy only because no religious group has ever been sufficiently dominant to impose its brand of religion on all the others. Not every religious group or denomination adheres to core values that translate into mutual respect for fundamental differences regarding deeply held religious beliefs. There are varieties of Christianity and Judaism, as well as Islam, that would diminish or destroy religious freedom if and when they ever had the political power to do so. There are also varieties of Christianity, Judaism, and Islam that cherish respect and honor differences among the peoples of the world enough to oppose any imposition of conformity in religious belief or practice. I fear that many religiously unaffiliated people fail to recognize how important it is that these latter varieties continue to flourish.

If there is any major exception to a posture of respect and toleration among those varieties of religion that are compatible with democracy, it must be a steadfast unwillingness to countenance intolerance. The inherently difficult and messy logic of democracy requires that intolerance not be tolerated – at least not to the degree that it poses a threat to basic religious freedoms and

respect for all citizens, irrespective of their religious or other beliefs.

Democracy seems able to accommodate diverse pockets of intolerance – religious or otherwise – of which there are a great many,. But it must resist giving such intolerance a major voice in the public square or the sanction of high position in the halls of government. Appointment to high public office is not a right but a privilege, which can reasonably be denied to someone espousing views judged antithetical to democracy.

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