Loving Thy Neighbor: Social Justice and Religion

By Rachel Finston

December 2, 2016

“I hereby commit to attending the January 15 2017 ceremony hosted by the Fredericksburg Coalition of Reason at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library Headquarters (Caroline Street) and reading my essay if it is selected as the winner or runner up.”

Rachel Finston, December 2, 2016

Religious freedom is essential to achieving social justice. In fact, the two causes are inseparable. Social justice promotes the idea that equal opportunities are essential to a just society, while religious freedom is the guarantee that each individual has the right to practice their faith and live their life in accordance with its values. Both ideas are congruent with the principal of equity for all people. According to the Pew Research Center, 70.6% of Americans identify within a denomination of Christianity[[1]](#endnote-1). Western society is simply built for Christians, from school dances on Friday nights to the federal government closing for Christmas. Members of minority religions have to deal with the social consequences of being religious differently than everyone else. Christians have the profound privilege of not having to explain being late to work on Ash Wednesday, and being able to go to a restaurant without looking at the menu for kosher or hallal options. Living in America as a Christian is just easier than living as a Muslim, Buddhist, Hindu or Jew. One has to worry about work environment when seeking employment. Is this job a place where I can be openly Jewish? Can I get time off for Eid? Can I wear my hijab? Christians do not have to worry about being pressured to work Sundays, or being the target of a slur. They have no need for “safe spaces.” While Christians come in all colors and races, they have the same kind of unconscious privilege as all white Americans, in that they belong to a majority that rarely has to experience religious oppression or ignorance.

Recently, we have been experiencing turbulence in our democracy. On November 21st, CNN ran a line of text that said, “Alt-Right Founder Questions if Jews are People.”[[2]](#endnote-2) The segment went on to analyze the risks president elect Trump may face if he chooses to disavow Alt-Right leaders. This was on television, and seriously discussed, by actual journalists. Muslims have been vilified in the press innumerable times, even by political leaders, for failing to stop terrorists in their midst, while the white neighbors of school shooters are interviewed on TV as innocent bystanders. There is a different standard in America for minorities; you have to be a “cool Muslim” or “not one of those crazy Jews.” People ask me at parties what I think of Jesus. They ask me explicit sexual questions, and they tell me “You’re the first Jew I’ve ever met!” As if I am there to answer their questions, rather than just existing for my own sake. This is not necessarily their fault. They spent nine months learning about US history in eleventh grade, without learning about the contributions minorities made to its growth. Some of the first people to settle in what would become New York were Jews. Coffee, clocks, algebra and cameras have one think in common: they were all Muslim discoveries or inventions. And yet, when a fourteen-year-old kid brought a project in to school to show his teachers he was arrested for being brown and having a clock. In his post-9/11 congressional address, former president George W. Bush praised the teachings of Islam and reasserted the respect Americans have for freedom of religion, for American Muslims and those around the globe.[[3]](#endnote-3) It is hard to believe that these words of acceptance came from the same political party that now endangers Muslims with hateful and incendiary rhetoric.

It is universally acknowledged that anyone can make it in America; you just have to work hard enough. However, over 60% of the Forbes 400 are classified as having been born rich.[[4]](#endnote-4) Even if you did not receive a small loan from your father, the average Christian still has an advantage over everyone else. Most American Muslims and Jews are second or third generation American, and their parents and grandparents came to the United States for opportunity. The options for these immigrants were severely limited, while their Christian counterparts had no such troubles. My grandfather was the one of the first in his family to go to college, and he became an insurance salesman. Being blond and blue eyed, he could pass as non-Jewish, and so he could ingratiate himself into communities to sell insurance. He was a member of the board of the local Serbian Orthodox Church until he retired. You might say that it was a different time, but just last month I was fired by an anti-Semite. I go to a school where I do not see a lot of faces that look like mine. The food they serve in the dining hall is not kosher, and half of the time, they only serve pork. I have a hundred stories of slurs used behind my back and jokes told to my face. It is safe to say, post-prejudice America only exists in our dreams.

Social justice and religious freedom are two intimately connected causes, both of which strive to make Americans equal, in the eyes of the law and society. There has never been a time when everyone in our country has received equal opportunities, never been a time when racial and religious tension hasn’t existed. Our country was founded on the principals of religious freedom, but land-owning, white male Christians ran it. The democracy that we hold dear is unbalanced, when the first Muslim representative was elected in 2007, and Muslims have been here since the beginning. Social justice is about how we see each other, and religion defines many of us, but we cannot allow it to divide us. Equity is not about uniformity, it is about acceptance, and with that acceptance, we will be all able to move forward into a more just and peaceful world.

1. Religious Landscape Study. N.d. Raw data. Pew Research Center, n.p. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Nickalls, Sammy. "'Are Jews People' Was an Actual, Real Discussion Topic on CNN." Esquire. Hearst Digital Media, 21 Nov. 2016. Web. 27 Nov. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Bush, George W. “President Bush Addresses the Nation.” Joint Session of Congress. Capitol Building. Washington, D.C. 20 Sept. 2001. Address. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Pizzigati, Sam. The ‘Self-Made’ Myth: Our Hallucinating Rich. Inequality.org. Institute for Policy Studies, 23 Sept. 2010. Web. 26 Nov. 2016. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)