The UMW Department of Classics, Philosophy, & Religion

and the Fredericksburg Coalition of Reason

announce

*The 2017 Religious Freedom Essay Contest.*

Topic:

**Is religious freedom essential to achieving social justice?**

An original opinion essay based on experience, evidence, and recent events.

This is open to all UMW and Germanna Community College students.

The writer of the winning essay will receive a check of **$750**, the runner-up a check of **$500**, from the Fredericksburg Coalition of Reason. Both will be asked to read their essays on January 15, 2017 at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library at the meeting commemorating the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom.

Submit your essay no later than 11 PM December 9, 2016 as a Word document or pdf to [cvasey@umw.edu](mailto:cvasey@umw.edu)

Length: maximum of 3 pages, double-spaced, Times New Roman 12 pt. Use endnotes for documentation (if sources need to be cited).

Essays will be judged by the faculty of the UMW Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion.

The following must be copied and pasted on the title page of your entry:

“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.”



\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_Kristin Frye (name)  12-09-16 (date)



“With liberty and justice for all.” I remember reciting this phrase every morning growing up, but only recently did I begin to understand the meaning and reason for it. The pledge of allegiance was intended as a way to educate young people on the foundational principles on which our nation was built: liberty and justice. The definition of social justice is the intersection of these principles, requiring both the equality of individual liberty and the fair and just distribution of opportunities between individuals in a society.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Since our founding as a nation we have supported the idea that every man and woman should have the opportunity to live free from oppression, make their own decisions and serve their community and nation as free patrons. That, as we seek to attain a more perfect union, we must “establish Justice... and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity.”[[2]](#footnote-2) In effect, that social justice as an inalienable right. When our founding fathers revised the constitution, the first amendment ratified stated that Congress “shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion,”[[3]](#footnote-3) or prohibiting the free exercise of religion. By including this passage first, the founders identified the most essential part of ensuring social justice: religious freedom. Without this stipulation, the other factors of the first amendment - freedom of speech, the press, and the right to peacefully assemble would not be fully protected. Freedom of religion is specific. It typifies freedom as the encouragement of diversification and legitimizes the sentiments of others as valuable. It is a compromise between individual freedom and group welfare, and guarantees a nation of free and diverse opinions within the constraints of a singular system.

When Thomas Jefferson wrote the Virginia statute of religious freedom, he attempted to address this compromise. He noted that the laws that benefit the group are the same that benefit the individual. That freedom for the individual is achieved when all people are free of imposition, and their thoughts exist as their own without infringement from the ideas of others. That diversity of thought and opinion is what makes this country successful and that our political system has a responsibility to foster this diversity.

Jefferson also purported that an inherent part of faith is founded in the fact that religious truth is shaped by personal conscience and belief rather than fact or proof. Contrarily, political reason *requires* fact and logic that encourage political critique and negotiation. The mixing of one with the other – faith with governance – inevitably corrupts both institutions. Thus, religious freedom that separates religious ideas from political rule, is instrumental to ensuring the vitality and authenticity of our diverse union.

Right now, we are living in a politically divided nation, separated on two sides by opposing political ideologies. On one side, Republicans fight to ensure the principle of liberty. On the other, Democrats commit to promoting justice. And the compromise between the two seems to get lost as both sides refuse to concede. We forget that we need each other – that we need to bridge the gap between different opinions with compromise. Our union is defined by this compromise, the very definition of social justice, and the reciprocal relationship it creates between society and the individual, whereby members of society share the burdens and benefits of cooperation. We share the burden of limiting personal beliefs within the political system in order to ensure freedom and opportunity for all religious thought. However, we also share the benefit of preventing the systematized imposition from others religious beliefs on our own.

A successful society offers all individuals equality of opportunity and the freedom to make choices. Implementing legislation based on a specific religious sentiment instead of fact and reason limits the equality of the opportunity that legislation should strive to keep. When we incorporate religion institutionally, we are choosing one religious interpretation over others in a way that does not foster equality or freedom but creates division that limits the effectiveness of reason in negotiation, encouraging one group to be reticent to listen to the diverse opinions of others. We see the negative effects of incorporating religion with law when politicians implement legislation based on a single religious interpretation. The problem with such laws is that they do not encourage a reciprocal relationship between society and the individual, disproportionally distributing benefits and burdens between members of a society. Instead of strengthening social justice, such legislation strengthens certain individual’s freedoms at the expense of the just distribution of opportunity. Negotiation is based on opinion instead of reason, producing an outcome that does not favor the optimal situation for society as a whole.

Religious liberty is freedom from the imposition of one faith on the thoughts and actions of others. It encourages diversity and ensures that we as a nation continue to debate and adjust our practices to better fit the needs of the group without sacrificing the liberties of the individual. Religious freedom is essential to social justice because it creates a society where all have equality of opportunity to express diversity – a diversity founded in the multiplicity of religious opinion. It ensures that no one interpretation is more valued than others, or that convictions are reduced to a singularity. It prevents government intervention in personal expression – something that is critical to securing other first amendment freedoms. It is the foundation of the values that we hold as a country. Social justice is a bipartisan goal that requires freedom of religion as a quintessential stipulation. Without this, we cannot hope to achieve a more perfect union, based on liberty and justice for all, in which our founding fathers believed.

1. Rawls, J. (1971). *A Theory of Justice.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. U.S. Const. pmbl., 1788. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. U.S. Const. amend. I., ratified 1791. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)