

A Global Secular Bill of Rights

James Downard – 5 August 2014

When the *Freedom from Religion Foundation* held their 2012 convention in Portland, Oregon, a young fellow doing a documentary on atheism asked me what would be the most important thing to be said to others around the world about atheism or secularism. My reply was not a plea for universal atheism. Instead I stressed the troubling relationship the state has regarding individual conscience. A comprehensive manifesto, if you like:

No state must ever be allowed to enforce religious orthodoxy, nor may religious groups rightly appeal to the state for that purpose.

No one should ever be persecuted on account of their faith (or lack of it). Apostasy in any form must never be deemed a crime.

The right of individual conscience regarding belief must always be respected. No one has the right to coerce others to your own or any other belief.

And zealotry (whether by state or group or individual) should never be allowed to engage in cultural vandalism, the wilful destruction of the products of our human heritage.

As a secularist, I expressed how offended I was at the Taliban blowing up the giant Buddha statue in Afghanistan. This was not because I am a Buddhist (or ever likely to follow Sam Harris in that direction) but because the Taliban had violated a fundamental issue of human integrity: they had destroyed a work of human thought, obliterating it from the stream of history.

This may be contrasted to the comparatively enlightened Ottoman Turks, who after their conquest of Constantinople in the 16th century converted the Byzantine cathedral of Hagia Sophia into a mosque, but without removing any of the Christian icon mosaic decorations. They at least had a respect for the art of it, and visitors to Istanbul today can still see them. That at least is humility in the face of the creative history of our species.

Now if you need a selling point for the benefit of the secular **Bill of Rights** to people beyond the purely freethinker cohort, then consider a few facts of human demography one may glean from the 2013 *Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life* surveying “The Global Religious Landscape” as of 2010.

Of all the many billions of people living on earth, every one of them is a nonbeliever in certain gods (full atheists just have a slightly longer list of deities they don't believe in, slipped in somewhere after Zeus and Marduk). But even if the sample is restricted to the currently fashionable set of supernatural entities, the fact remains that whatever god you do believe in, most of your fellow humans *don't believe in the one you do*.

The playlist for nearly 7 billion people:

2200 million (32%) Christians (the most dispersed of the world's religions)

1600 million (23%) Muslims

1100 million (16%) *no religious affiliation* (lumping atheists & agnostics with many spiritually uncomfortable with denominational identification)

1000 million (15%) Hindus

500 million (7%) Buddhists

458 million (7%) folk or other religions

14 million (0.2%) Jews (with as many living in the United States as in Israel)

Everyone is a religious minority, and that's true whether or not you ignore those pesky atheists (as Justice Scalia was wont to do during the oral pleadings over the recent *Greece v. Galloway* Supreme Court governmental prayer case). But most believers don't realize their global minority status because they live in cultures where their particular religion happens to be that of the local majority.

Out of sight, out of mind—until a flare up occurs somewhere as religious faction A turns into a nuisance by hacking at religious faction B. And if you happen to be an ideologically primed follower of faction B, such as Tony Perkins of the *Family Research Council*, you selectively draw on the U. S. State Department's latest survey of "International Religious Freedom" to raise alarms about "Christian Genocide" in Iraq, without paying the slightest attention to all the other acts of oppression they mentioned (such as anti-Muslim activities in Burma or harassment of Hindus in Bangladesh).

Consistency, thy name is *not* "Family Research Council."

Secularists can do better. Much better. It is our moral obligation to show the way by objecting most strenuously to *all* oppression of human conscience, not just the examples that mesh with certain parochial ideologies.

Follow us to the high ground.

For some years the *International Humanist and Ethical Union* has compiled an annual "Freedom of Thought Report." Their 2013 edition surveyed 194 countries, ranking them by how tolerant they are of nonbelievers. Connecting that information with the *Pew Research* survey on how many people live in each country (with nations highlighted in **bold** where the "nonaffiliated" are the technical majority) puts the scale of the problem in sharp relief.

Only 262 million people (4% of the world's population) live in the 15 countries that achieved the *IHEU's* rare "Free and Equal" category, where "Freedom of religion or belief is upheld and there are no known cases of discrimination against non-religious individuals." These are Belgium, Benin, Fiji, Jamaica, **Japan**, Kiribati, Kosovo, Nauru, **Netherlands**, Niger, Sao Tome & Principe, Sierra Leone, **South Korea**, Taiwan and Uruguay.

Another 711 million people (10%) lived in 18 countries deemed “Mostly Satisfactory.” Here there may be local or regional discrimination (rather than state driven), and some state support for religious schools or an official (but still limited) state church, use of independent religious courts, and restrictions on media or political freedom (which may involve more than just the non-religious) requiring public deference to the dominant religion. The United States shows up here, along with Albania, Burkino Faso, Brazil, France, Ivory Coast, Macedonia, Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Mongolia, Mozambique, Norway, Palau, Saint Kitts & Nevis, San Marino, Senegal, Slovenia and Ukraine.

Over 1.1 billion people (17%) live in the 85 countries where “Systematic Discrimination” privileges practitioners of the state religion, churches or religious instruction are supported by taxation of nonbelievers, restrictions on “core Humanist principles on democracy, freedom and human rights” occur regarding protests or public expression of dissenting belief, and religious courts may be actively involved as the state enforces blasphemy laws.

These criteria net a disconcertingly broad range of countries, including Canada and Britain, along with Andorra, Antigua & Barbuda, Argentina, Australia, Austria, Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bhutan, Bolivia, Botswana, Bulgaria, Burundi, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Chile, Columbia, Costa Rica, Croatia, Cuba, **Czech Republic**, Dominica, Ecuador, **Estonia**, Finland, Georgia, Ghana, Guatemala, Haiti, Ireland, Italy, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan, Latvia, Lesotho, Liechtenstein, Liberia, Luxembourg, Madagascar, Malawi, Mali, Mauritius, Mexico, Moldova & Transnistria, Monaco, Montenegro, Namibia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Panama, Papua New Guinea, Paraguay, Peru, Portugal, Republic of the Congo, Romania, Rwanda, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent & the Grenadines, Serbia, Seychelles, Singapore, Slovakia, Solomon Islands, South Africa, South Sudan, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, Tanzania, Timor Leste, Togo, Tonga, Trinidad & Tobago, Tuvalu, Uganda, Venezuela and Zambia.

Another 2.2 billion people (32%) live in the 46 countries where “Severe Discrimination” occurs. Non-religious people are banned from some public offices, religious control over family law is upheld by law, apostasy or blasphemy are prohibited, and “it is made difficult to register or operate an explicitly Humanist, atheist, secularist or other non-religious NGO or other human rights organization.”

Here we snag some surprising places (Denmark, Germany and New Zealand) along with Algeria, Angola, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Burma (Myanmar), Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, El Salvador, Equatorial Guinea, Ethiopia, Gabon, Greece, Grenada, Guinea, Guyana, Honduras, Hungary, Iceland, India, Israel, Kazakhstan, Laos, Lebanon, Malta, Oman, Palestine, Poland, Russia, Sri Lanka, Suriname, Tajikistan, Thailand, Tunisia, Turkey, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Viet Nam and basket case Zimbabwe.

Finally (and for too many people living in these countries, “final” can be more than just rhetorical) almost 2.5 billion people (37%) live in the 30 nations accused of “Grave Violations,” where ruling elites or religious authorities have complete power, nonbelievers are banned from public office and violence against opponents can occur

with impunity. Being atheist or nonreligious is illegal or not recognized as a legal condition, and religious or political indoctrination is ubiquitous in schools.

The paranoid Stalinist theme park of **North Korea** naturally shows up here (where expressing a religious faith or any view conflicting with the official “truth” can be very dangerous indeed), along with Afghanistan, Bahrain, Brunei, Bangladesh, **China** (where the state pokes its nose into everything, such as grappling with the Catholic Church over bishops and priests not approved by the Communist Party), Comoros, Egypt, Eritrea, Gambia, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Libya, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritania, Morocco, Nigeria, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Swaziland, Syria, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

This means that *two thirds* of the world live under jurisdictions where atheists and believers in the “wrong” faith can face quite real threats to life and liberty for bucking the majority belief. 55 of these countries treat “blasphemy” as a crime, punishable with prison sentences in 39 of those and by death in 6 nations. Apostasy can get you killed in a dozen countries, and for some blasphemy can be taken as proof of apostasy.

It should be the commonly accepted goal of a secular **Bill of Rights** to render such outrages obsolete. Here secularists can (and should) find common cause with people of faith—though whether ideologues like Tony Perkins or Jay Sekulow’s *American Center for Law and Justice* (the legal arm of Pat Robertson’s *Regent University*) can look past the end of their sectarian noses to defend *full* human freedom remains to be seen.

But that’s no reason for us to keep silent. The suppression of individual conscience is one human tradition we can (and definitely *must*) do without.

Sources noted:

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