

Free to believe, free to think, free to live



Highland Views

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Guest columnist

The annual “Freedom of Thought Report” is out and it doesn’t paint a pretty picture. Published by Humanists International (HI), the report presents the worldwide state of affairs concerning religious persecution of freethinkers, agnostics, atheists and humanists. As stated on the HI website: there are “many humanist human rights defenders facing persecution for their defense of democratic values and promotion of secularism.” It’s disappointing so many in the religious community don’t stand up and speak out for secularism since the alternative is religious dominance in government or, at worst, theocracy. Freethinkers and sensible people of faith can protect the free expression of faith and conscience in a free society. When one religion or ideology seizes power to grant special preference and privilege to their own tribe, thinking, believing and living are restricted. To disagree or dissent is not allowed. In America, this might mean harassment or job loss due to accusations of “wokeness” or being too liberal. In some other countries, this can mean imprisonment or death.

Here’s a summary of findings from the report:

—In 11 countries, state agencies marginalize, harass or sow hatred toward the non-religious.

—In 15 countries, it is illegal to identify as non-religious.

—In 23 countries, non-religious citizens are not allowed to hold public office.

—In 34 countries, state legislation is influenced by religious law.

—In 87 countries, offending religious feelings (“blasphemy”) is punishable under the law.

—In 48 countries, morality and family issues are decided by religious courts.

—In 32 countries, humanist organizations are either illegal or restricted.

—In 33 countries, the teaching of religious doctrines is mandatory in schools, with no option for secular instruction.

As the Freedom of Thought Report shows, some nonbelievers face major discrimination in their countries simply for choosing to leave the faith of their families. The number of those making that difficult choice is growing. A survey from 2012 found that about 60% of the world’s population identifies as religious, while over 30% identify as atheist or “not religious.” In a democratic society, numbers shouldn’t matter. Equal rights and true religious freedom — freedom of opinion and conscience — should be respected and protected, for the majority and the minority, especially in a nation with a secular Constitution. Contrast this protection for true religious liberty to some other national

practices and policies: “Religious privilege is also seen in many countries’ public services and public education. The most common and substantial of these privileges is religious control of state-funded schools.

For example, in Northern Ireland, 94% of state-funded schools are religious in character. This not only reinforces sectarianism beyond the school gate but also excludes the non-religious.” The National Secular Society in the UK has been challenging religious representation in local districts and Parliament. Unfortunately, Britain doesn’t have a clear separation of religion and state, something we’ve had since our founding but is increasingly under major threat.

We often hear criticisms of Islamic governments, but what happens in a country with a parliamentary democracy? In Australia, for instance: “According to the 2021 Census, 44% of those who responded were Christian, 39% were non-religious. Other religious groups included Hindus, Buddhists, Jews and Muslims, who represented a further 10%.” With such diversity, we might think Australia is sensitive to secular values, yet: “Although the government is officially secular, it continues to favor Christianity for many public ceremonies. For example, each session of parliament begins with a joint recitation of the Lord’s Prayer.” Consider how many sessions of legislative bodies in the U.S., from town councils and school boards, to State houses and Congress,

begin with — predominantly Christian — prayers. Another interesting fact about Australia: “The majority of religious conservatives support abortion, assisted dying and LGBTI+ rights.” Religious beliefs present quite a mixed bag in various countries.

I may believe something, you may believe something different. I might think about an issue and come to one conclusion, you think about it and come to a different conclusion. The important thing is that we are thinking. Our opinions may differ, but we are free to hold to those differences. In my view, we ought to be willing to change our views if that seems reasonable, as we accept new evidence. Yet, as we’ve seen, freely choosing to change beliefs can be dangerous.

A healthy society thrives on secular guidelines permitting and protecting freethought and free expression of beliefs. Freedom of thought doesn’t mean freedom to take any action we choose. If we think, believe and act in a way that harms others, more thinking is called for. The Freedom of Thought Report is a good reminder how much work — and serious thought — lie ahead. If we enjoy our own liberty, we ought to be working hard to protect the liberty of others, here and abroad.

Chris Highland was a minister and interfaith chaplain for nearly 30 years. He is a teacher, writer and humanist celebrant. Chris and his wife, the Rev. Carol Hovis, live in Asheville. His books and blogs are presented on “Friendly Freethinker” (www.chighland.com).