

[!\[\]\(c8d96c8885d3000a912c2582004aed63_img.jpg\)](http://commons.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:ReligiousFreedomStamp.jpg)It is the beauty and privilege of living in a country like the

United States of America the freedom of the people to speak freely and maintain their own religious faith and convictions. I fully support an individual's choice of faith and belief systems, even as they differ from my own or anyone else's beliefs. I think that as intelligent human beings we can have our faith, and agree to disagree on what it means to the individual in the meantime. Frankly, I enjoy discussions of religion because it gives me a greater insight into the world (and its people) and provides me with varying and unique perspective of life on the planet.

The issue of religion and religious freedom once again came to the forefront recently in the media. There was a seemingly inexplicable hue and cry from many people in this country regarding President Obama's religious convictions. Is he a Muslim? Isn't he? Better yet, do we really care? Last I looked, the Constitution gives people the freedom to participate in their own religious beliefs, and that freedom would also extend to the President. So if the President of the United States is Catholic or Hindu or a Scientologist, for that matter does he not have the right to do so? Worse yet, why would anyone use that as some form of reasoning that he shouldn't be in the office? And even beyond that, somehow the debate over his religious beliefs provoked fear in many.

This could have all simply been a blip on the media airwaves. But in my humble opinion, the level of religious intolerance appears to have magnified since that time. Perhaps I am getting more sensitive to it, and perhaps I am more offended by it. Or both.

I have personally been exposed to this type of diatribe in recent months. I have been told (by a number of people in all walks of life) in no uncertain terms that the country is now less safe than it was before Obama took office. I have also heard talk of pastors relating the Muslim birth rate in this country (as compared to the Christian birth rate) to our general decrease in national safety. Frankly, I am a little dumbfounded by what I perceive to be such inflammatory statements. But they are becoming more frequent, and from people that I wouldn't dare think would espouse such vitriol.

I have had to remind more people than I care to count that prior to 9/11, the worst terrorist attack on US soil was the Oklahoma City bombing on April 19, 1995. This was committed by none other than Timothy McVeigh, a US citizen born into an Irish Catholic family who was a US Army veteran. Extremists know no bounds, religious or otherwise.

Lest I remind you, all of this is taking place in a country that embraces diversity and religious freedom.

Let me stop for a moment and thank one of my high school teachers John Ballachey. For those of you who have seen Back To School with Rodney Dangerfield, you may remember the scene with Sam Kinison playing the history teacher. He was very animated, descriptive, and passionate about history. Yes, that was John Ballachey and his grade 11 Asian history class (and, I might add, I say that with all the deepest respect and admiration). This was actually the reason that you wanted to take his class it was his passion about history, and about getting students to think.

In our time studying Asian history, we were presented information on all the world religions as they impacted the region. We discussed Buddhism. And Taoism. And Hinduism. And Islam. I was given a pretty broad paint stroke on world religions before I ever left high school.

And there was one underlying theme that there is NO world religion that advocates the killing of others. As in most other realms, it is the extremists and fanatics that are the problem. And yes, Dorothy, we have extremists amongst us. And you know what? They have always been amongst us. Case in point the aforementioned McVeigh.

What I find more disturbing is that organized religion is actively promoting fear. Love thy neighbor, but be afraid of thy neighbor whose faith is different than that of the congregation. All in the name of salvation, of course.

It saddens me to watch this happen in this country. Worse yet, it scares me. Religious intolerance is a trend that I hope goes the way of bell bottoms and parachute pants. In the name of the Constitution. In the name of our freedoms. Let the voices of reason prevail.

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