

## Interfaith Voices GT Column: Vital Role of Religious Freedom

By Alice Henderson Rampton

March 14, 2017

Religious Freedom is vital in the world today. Thousands of individuals are fleeing from their homes because their religious beliefs are not tolerated. Christians and others are persecuted for their beliefs. Muslim mosques and Jewish synagogues have been recent victims of vandalism and hate crimes.

In the U.S., we are blessed with a constitution which strives to protect government from religion and vice versa. But that almost didn't happen. When representatives of 13 colonies met in 1774 for the 1<sup>st</sup> Continental Congress they brought with them many religious persuasions. Thomas Jefferson, raised an Anglican-Episcopalian, had developed a "Deist" philosophy. John Adams was raised in a Congregationalist home, but later became a Unitarian. James Madison, educated in Presbyterianism, leaned toward a world view of Christianity.

The entire Continental Congress was nearly derailed the first day, because no one could decide who should give the opening prayer. Fortunately, Samuel Adams, known for his strong religious beliefs and sometimes intolerance for others, moved that Rev. Jacob Duche, an Episcopalian minister, give the prayer the next day. The congress voted approval because if Samuel Adams could tolerate another person's religion, then any of them should do likewise. And so religious freedom and tolerance paved the way for what led to the formation of the U.S. Constitution. The first amendment of the Constitution in the Bill of Rights begins, **"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..."**

The leaders and members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are strong proponents of Religious Freedom. One reason for this is because they, like many religious groups, have experienced hardships because of their tenets. In 1838, Missouri Governor Lilburn Boggs issued an executive order which directed, "the Mormons must be treated as enemies, and must be exterminated or driven from the State if necessary for the public peace..." Fleeing Missouri, they went to Illinois and founded the city of Nauvoo.

Joseph Smith, the first church president, wrote in 1843, "If it has been demonstrated that I have been willing to die for a 'Mormon,' I am bold to declare before Heaven that I am just as ready to die in defending the rights of a Presbyterian, a Baptist, or a good man of any denomination; for the same principle which would trample upon the rights of the Latter-day Saints would trample upon the rights of the Roman Catholics, or of any other denomination who may be unpopular and too weak to defend themselves. It is a love of liberty which inspires my soul — civil and religious liberty to the whole of the human race." But differences in religious practices and lack of dialogue led to additional persecution in Illinois forcing the Mormons on their arduous 1300 mile trek to the Salt Lake Valley in 1847.

On the LDS Church website, it reads, "Religious freedom is more than just the freedom to believe what you want. It's the freedom to *talk* about and *act* on your core beliefs without interference from government or others, except when necessary to protect health and safety."

Elder Todd D. Christofferson shared this vision at an interfaith gathering in Sao Paulo, Brazil, "A robust [religious] freedom is not merely what political philosophers have referred to as the 'negative' freedom to be left alone. ... Rather, it is a much richer 'positive' freedom—the freedom to live one's religion or belief in a legal, political, and social environment that is tolerant, respectful, and accommodating of diverse beliefs."

How can each of us be an emissary of Religious Freedom in our communities and throughout the world?