

Authoritarianism, Censorship and Civil Liberties

By Norm R. Allen Jr.

Freedom is always dangerous, but it is the safest thing we have. - Alexis de Tocqueville

Many people that believe in true democracy hold two competing ideas in their minds. On the one hand, they believe that consenting adults ought to be able to do as they please, as long as they are not hurting anyone else. On the other hand, many advocates of democracy want to protect adults from what they consider to be dangerous ideas and actions. Such freedom loving people give lip service to the virtues of free inquiry and liberty, but they do not truly believe in them - at least not where certain topics and actions are concerned.

A great example is a Black person that, in theory, believes in the importance of objectively examining all issues, but believes that the issue of affirmative action has already been settled. It must be embraced if true equality is to be achieved, and any Black person that disagrees must be a dangerous sellout, and any White person that disagrees must be a racist. Those in opposition to affirmative action must be censored, shouted down, or worse.

Similarly, many feminists believe that there should be no objective discussion of pornography or prostitution. These practices are simply evil, they maintain, and any sex-positive feminist must be a sellout and not worth listening to.

Then there are those that simply want to use an appeal to free inquiry to promote ideas that are intellectually bankrupt. The best example are those promoting creationism or Intelligent Design (ID). They talk about the supposed importance of “teaching the controversy” when there is no controversy about whether evolution occurs or has occurred, as far as most serious scientists are concerned.

In any case, any debate between evolutionists and ID proponents should not take place in the science classrooms of public schools, or in textbooks used in public schools. Rather, they could take place in religion classes, comparative religion classes, houses of worship, formal debates at colleges and universities, etc.

Many proponents of democracy want to protect adults from themselves. They want to pass laws legislating personal morality in areas such as sexual behavior, gambling, smoking tobacco products, drinking alcoholic beverages, drug use, etc. After all, such behavior can have devastating effects upon individuals and society.

The problem is that we all engage in behavior and embrace ideas that others consider to be morally objectionable or harmful. For example, much of the food many of us eat leads to obesity, hypertension, diabetes, hardened arteries, cancer, etc. (And it certainly does no good to the animals we kill for consumption.) Moreover, many of us eat and drink products that are high in sugar, leading to tooth decay. (The recent well-intentioned but ill-conceived attempt by New York City’s Mayor Michael Bloomberg to regulate the sale of soda demonstrated how difficult it is to pass laws regulating what consenting adults may eat or drink.)

In these latter cases, such behavior touches us all in the way of exorbitant health costs. However, this is the price of freedom. Democracy, like authoritarianism, has trade-offs. The answer is not to treat grown women and men as though they are children. The answer is to use gentle persuasion through *education*. Sadly, however, many people will resort to authoritarian measures to prevent behavior to which they are opposed, if education does not work. Conversely, they would *never* stand for anyone trying to tell them how to live *their* lives.

In many authoritarian nations there are relatively low levels of gambling, heavy drinking, promiscuity, etc. But at what cost? As someone once proudly joked, “In Afghanistan, they commit adultery and get stoned. In Australia, we get stoned and commit adultery.” The point is that many people throughout the world prefer liberty - even licentiousness - to social order resulting from misery-inducing, life-sapping and mind-numbing authoritarianism.

There are reasonable limits to liberty, such as the well-known prohibition against screaming “fire!” in a crowded theater when there is no fire. However, generally speaking, people should have the right to discuss any subject they please. Telling people they cannot have an objective discussion of sexuality is no different than telling them they have no right to criticize religion, to blaspheme, etc.

Many people advocate authoritarian measures such as censorship because they lack the confidence to defend their positions. Others do not have much confidence in the positions themselves, and find it much easier to simply stifle debate. They are more interested in advocacy than free inquiry.

Among many conservative religionists, there is the notion of collective suffering. The belief is that God punishes entire nations for the transgressions of sinners. Thus, religious conservatives such as Pat Robertson and the late Jerry Falwell blamed the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on such alleged sinners as feminists, homosexuals, the ACLU and others. These religionists believe that it is their sacred duty to legally forbid allegedly sinful behavior to prevent the wrath of God from raining down upon their nation.

However, no one is in any way obligated to share their beliefs, and true democracy must take precedence over anyone’s firmly held and deeply cherished beliefs. Religious conservatives that take seriously the idea of collective suffering would be better off forming their own communities or nations and leaving the rest of us free to pursue happiness as we see fit.

What the world needs is more people that are sincerely and consistently dedicated to free inquiry in all areas of human endeavor. Moreover, everyone needs to understand that adults do not have to be saved from themselves. No one should feel morally obligated to try to live up to everyone else’s expectations. After all, the idea that consenting adults should be able to do as they please as long as they are not hurting anyone else is one of the most important ideas in the history of democracy. Indeed, it is hard to even imagine true democracy without it.