

Thanksgiving, 2002 Stan Stahl, Ph.D.

*“The time has come,” the Walrus said,
 “To talk of many things:
Of shoes--and ships--and sealing-wax--
 Of cabbages--and kings--
And why the sea is boiling hot--
And whether pigs have wings.”*

Lewis Carroll
Through the Looking-Glass and What Alice Found There

Three hundred eighty two years ago, the Pilgrims, refugees from religious persecution, arrived in the ‘new world’ seeking religious freedom. They gave us our first Thanksgiving.

Three hundred thirty years later, at the age of 6 ½, I said to my Grandfather, an Orthodox Jew from Lithuania, that I had learned in Hebrew School that God has been here forever and that he created the Universe. I proceeded to ask him if it wouldn’t make more sense to say that the Universe has been here forever, as this would allow us to drop the unnecessary hypothesis that there is a God.

That’s freedom of religion!

Don’t get me wrong. I’m not an atheist. I’m simply neutral on questions of ultimate reality, much preferring to leave these questions to God. My own point-of-view was expressed 2500 years ago by Xenophanes, a pre-Socratic Greek philosopher:

*But as for certain truth, no man has known it.
Nor will he know it;
neither of the gods nor yet of all the things of which I speak.
And even if by chance he were to utter the final truth, he would himself not know it;
for all is but a woven web of guesses.*

While I may be an agnostic when it comes to questions of ultimate reality, I am not without faith. On the contrary ... I abound in faith.

My faith is unabashedly optimistic, echoing Winston Churchill who, in the darkest days of World War II, said “it does not seem to be much use being anything else.”

But faith, it seems to me, is just that: faith. Faith is what lies beyond certainty. That’s why it’s called ‘faith.’ If it didn’t lie outside certainty, it would be called ‘knowledge.’

Our faith isn’t what we know. It’s what we believe.

And if faith lies beyond certainty, if faith is only what we believe, then what right have we to impose our faith on another?

The rich diversity of faiths is, to me, one of the miracles of the human experience. Whether Jewish or Christian, Islamic or Hindu, Buddhist or Sikh, atheist or agnostic, our faith is what connects us to the mystery of existence. Deeply, deeply personal, our faith is the wellspring of all that is noble in humankind. Our faith is the source of our motivation and energy to improve the human condition: to feed the poor, to cure the sick, and to provide opportunity for all.

Let us take this Thanksgiving, then, as an opportunity to celebrate faith in all its manifestations.

As we sit down to enjoy our Thanksgiving dinners, let us rejoice in the richness of religious diversity, in the seemingly infinite variety of human religious experience, celebrating not just our own faith, but the faiths of all humankind. For it is our faith that has brought us all that we have and it is through our faith that we give shape to the world that our children's children will inherit.

Let us celebrate in particular the faith of the giants of the American experience. Washington. Jefferson. Adams. Hamilton. Madison. These towering geniuses with an over-abundant faith in the ability of free people to govern themselves. Geniuses whose first act after enacting the Constitution was to ensure religious diversity by prohibiting the Congress from "establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Let us also take this Thanksgiving as an opportunity to speak out against those who would try to impose their faith on others. Faith is a matter for contemplation, not coercion. In matters of religion, might does not make right.

So as we celebrate faith in all its great manifestations, on this, the 382nd anniversary of the Pilgrim's quest for religious freedom, let us also reaffirm our unalterable opposition to those who would seek to deny us our right to freely exercise our religion.

Let Freedom Ring.