

It is exciting to be here. I have always admired the ACLU, as I do every organization that has so consistently annoyed the Reverend Pat Robertson. I remember the first time I learned of the ACLU, back in the 1970's when you were accused of communism by tirelessly laboring to uphold America's Constitution. But then there have always been those in our country who believe the best way to safeguard our freedoms is to punish those who exercise them.

When I was a teenager, I saw the movie *Inherent the Wind*, on late night television, starring Spencer Tracy as the eastern liberal elite lawyer Henry Drummond. You'll remember in that movie he defended the Tennessee science teacher accused of teaching evolution. I loved Spencer Tracy. Whenever I saw a Spencer Tracy movie, I wanted to pursue the vocation he played in the movie. After watching *Boy's Town*, I wanted to become a Catholic priest like Father Flanagan. Then I saw *The Old Man and the Sea* and wanted to be a Cuban fisherman. But I liked Spencer Tracy best of all in *Inherit the Wind*, and told my parents I wanted to be an attorney.

They said, "Don't be silly. It doesn't pay that well and you work long hours."

So I became a Quaker minister instead.

Then I began writing books of essays and quirky, funny novels about a small-town Quaker meeting. The books were warmly received by the Christian community and I won several awards and people would take me out to dinner and wouldn't let me pay for it. It is a curious thing that when you hit a lucky patch and achieve even a modest bit of success, people want to take you out and buy your dinner. Where were they when my wife and I were broke and eating on a fold down ironing board in the kitchen like the Romney's?

So we were clicking along and then, growing weary of nostalgia and satire, I decided to write a book of theology, in which my co-author, Jim Mulholland, and I speculated that people other than Christians were loved and accepted by God. It was welcomed by Buddhists, Muslims, Hindus, and Jewish people, though many Christians did not care for it, including a significant number of evangelical Quakers who tried for eight years to rescind my credentials as a Quaker pastor.

When it appeared I wouldn't lose my pastoral credentials, some of the fundamentalists grew desperate, so did what religious bullies often do and armed themselves with a Bible verse. In this instance, Matthew 18:6. *"But whoever shall offend one of these little ones who believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea."*

If I heard that verse once, I heard it a million times. People quoted it to my face, wrote it out and mailed it to me. Sent it in e-mails. “God is going to hang a millstone around your neck and throw you in the sea.” It never worried me because I’m a good swimmer. But as a pacifist I’ve never appreciated the God-as-hit-man theology, and am always alarmed when someone else’s religious argument includes predictions of my demise. I am a lover of history and the whole affair had an Inquisitional feel to it, which I found simultaneously alarming and thrilling. Those of us who love the First Amendment, dream, in our Walter Mitty moments, of one day staring down the pitchforked mob, and winning them over with our vigorous and eloquent defense of liberty. I had actually written a speech defending myself and had even committed the speech to memory, only to have the matter resolved by wiser, cooler heads, which should have made me happy, but instead left me vaguely disappointed. There is no greater feeling than the anticipation of valor, and no worse feeling than having the opportunity taken away. Our best speeches are the ones we never have the chance to give.

Ah, the First Amendment. *Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.*

Has there ever been, in the long history of humanity, a more perfect, more imaginative, more powerful sentence written? We writers live for sentences like that. If I wrote a sentence as flawless and lovely as that one, I would retire, knowing its quality could never be matched. That lovely amendment, granting us the freedom to say whatever we wish. It is, ironically, an amendment usually tested by those people who have nothing of substance to say. The First Amendment was written by people who had no idea such forbearance would lead to Rush Limbaugh accusing women on birth control of being sluts. Nevertheless, we guard our first amendment, because we are familiar with the principle of incrementalism, of the camel whose nose first appears under the tent and next its head and then its body. The effort to silence the foolish ends eventually in the silencing of the wise. Those who give the First Amendment a thorough workout, though often irritating, and occasionally ignorant, are the canaries in the mine of freedom.

At the end of World War II, when we witnessed the destructive power of the atom bomb, the writer, E.B. White, wrote an essay entitled, *The Morning of the Day They Did It*. In that essay he described the apocalyptic end of the world. Several years later, in the midst of the Korean War, White was asked if it could be reprinted. He declined to give permission, saying, "I'm not sure it's a public service to describe the end of the world, even in a spirit of satire. People are jumpy right now, and I see no reason to explode paper bags."

As much as I admire E.B. White, he was mistaken. It isn't the exploding of paper bags that should be feared. What should be feared are those who would corral our speech for the sake of some imagined and elusive harmony, who would limit our speech in deference to a god or gods or prophet.

A paper bag was popped last week in the Middle East when a shoddy, ham-handed video clip dubbed *The Innocence of Muslims* became public knowledge, leading to rioting, protests, and even deaths in that region. It doesn't surprise me at all that people who have been ruled by tyrants would resort to that same familiar tyranny. Indeed, when one is immersed in a culture of brutal repression and religious intolerance, the pattern of repression and intolerance will almost always be repeated.

The solution, however, is not to tiptoe around sensitivities, fearful any comment might incite religious and political violence. The solution is the unfettered exchange of ideas, the flowering of diversity that accompanies true freedom, and a line, clearly drawn, between government and religion, in order to avoid the inevitable contamination of both.

Robert Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic, spoke to more Americans in the 19th century than any other individual. Ingersoll said. “To Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Benjamin Franklin, we are indebted more than to all others, for a human government, and for a Constitution in which no God is recognized superior to the legally expressed will of the people. They knew that to put God in the Constitution was to put man out. They knew that the recognition of a Deity would be seized upon by fanatics and zealots as a pretext for destroying liberty and thought.”

We must be ever-vigilant. There is no guarantee the liberties we treasure will continue unabated. If our economy crumbled to dust, as it came perilously close to doing several years ago, and there were widespread hunger and fear, would free speech and free association be seen as too great a luxury?

I was born when the stale odors of McCarthyism were still wafting across our land. You’ll remember that what finally stopped McCarthy weren’t the government officials who had sworn to uphold the Constitution and safeguard our rights of speech and association. They were thick in the middle of it—the House Un-American Activities Committee, the FBI, and J. Edgar Hoover.

No, what cut the ground from underneath McCarthy was a North Carolina Quaker farm boy, born in a log cabin, who grew up, went to college, moved to New York City and eventually found his way to CBS. His name was Edward R. Murrow. When no one else would confront McCarthy, it was Murrow who said to America and McCarthy what should have been said by the President and the Supreme Court and the members of Congress and every newspaper editor in America. "We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty. We must remember always that accusation is not proof and that conviction depends upon evidence and due process of law. We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason, if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine, and remember that we are not descended from fearful men."

This is all to say that those who lead us, those who speak most fervently about freedom and liberty, are often the poorest safeguards of freedom and liberty. Which is why we need the ACLU, why we need an organization whose sole commitment is not to political popularity, but to the liberties promised us in our Constitution. That is why this Quaker pastor loves the ACLU. For I have seen, too many times, the veil of fear and silence that descends when the proclivities of religion and the power of government intermingle. Today, the chief obstacle to marriage equality is a religious objection, driven by religious people who believe the state should accommodate and expand their prejudices rather than accommodate and expand freedom.

Religion is my life's work. In it, I have found meaning, joy, purpose, and community. But I know its tendency to overreach. I know its habit of thinking everyone should partake of its manna. I know how quickly wanting turns to requiring. So I want to live in a country which has drawn a clear and careful line between the proclivities of religion and the power of government. That is why this Quaker pastor wants an ACLU who will keep religion and government in their proper places, each addressing and fulfilling vital but different needs. So I thank you for your contributions and work that have made, and will continue to make, that vital distinction a reality.