

## Room at the Inn? On Religious “Freedom” to Discriminate against LGBT People

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*[She] laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn (Luke 2:7)*

Each of us, at our moral best, lives a life dedicated to flourishing –our own, and that of other people. Similarly, society, at its moral best, enables all people to lead full, rich lives of joy and gratitude, blessing and service. If, as church father Irenaeus said, the glory of God is people fully alive, our work as individuals and as a society is to maximize flourishing and eliminate unnecessary suffering so that we can all be fully alive.

Luke’s nativity story invites us to ask a difficult question: why was there no place for Joseph and Mary at the inn? Was the inn full? Or were they simply not welcome there?

We don’t know the answer. But the innkeepers of our society have made it very clear that lots of people are not welcome at the inn today. Racial minorities? Undocumented immigrants? Women? Poor people? Muslims? LGBT people? Not welcome.

Any religion worth its salt values welcome, radical hospitality and unwavering inclusive love and compassion. The open table of Jesus shows us religion at its best. When someone uses religion to justify death and violence, they are causing suffering and limiting flourishing. We unite against violence in the name of religion, because violence is morally bad and because religion must be better than that.

Religion, however, can do a lot of harm without starting an actual holy war. Religion can devalue people based on their social groups, and can lead people to treat others badly based on “sincerely held religious beliefs.”

Let’s be clear: the moral question is not how sincere someone’s religious beliefs are. There is a long, ugly history of terrible things done based on sincerely held religious beliefs. The moral question is whether actions based on religious beliefs support flourishing or cause suffering. Religiously based actions that lead to flourishing are morally good. Religiously based actions that cause suffering are morally wrong, not least because they imply that the Holy loves some people more than others and that only certain people are welcome at the inn. Such messages cause spiritual, emotional, and sometimes even physical harm. Any form of religion-based discrimination is, therefore, morally wrong, even if based on sincerely held beliefs. This includes treating LGBT people badly by discriminating against them.

Some people justify such poor treatment by arguing that religious freedom ought to trump other kinds of freedoms, rights, and values. But just as we can determine whether religion is morally good or problematic based on how it is used to treat people, we can ask a similar question of freedom: is it a means to an end or an end in and of itself?

If freedom is an end, we ought to value it whatever outcomes result. People who oppose gun control sometimes say that shooting deaths are the price we pay for freedom, meaning the

freedom to own as many guns as one wants and do whatever one wants with them. By this logic, freedom trumps even life itself, let alone the ability to live free from fear.

If we really care about the flourishing of all people, however, we should not see freedom as an end in itself but rather as a means to an end: the end of flourishing. We have life and liberty specifically so that we may pursue happiness. When freedom interferes with flourishing, we should be clear that flourishing must come first. We are not free to kill people. We are not free to yell “fire” in a crowded theater when there is no fire, precisely because such an action can lead to unnecessary harm. Yet we have mostly not chosen to restrict freedoms that support discrimination against some people.

Like the “freedom” to commit murder, the freedom to discriminate against someone is problematic since it leads to suffering rather than flourishing. If any form of religious discrimination is morally wrong, justifying it with claims of freedom does not make it morally right. If anything, we should respond that just as the Sabbath was made for humanity, freedom was made to support human well-being.

We can structure freedom to support well-being in two ways: with laws and with regard to how we teach ourselves and encourage others to live morally. We can enact laws that limit freedoms used to harm people. We can invite all people to live virtuously by sacrificing some freedom in order to love our neighbors as ourselves, supporting those neighbors in their flourishing.

May our lives and our politics welcome all to the inn and lift up the flourishing of all people. May we reject freedom when it leads to harm and embrace freedom when it enables us to be fully alive, to the glory of all that is good and right and wondrous. And may we be models for the rest of our country to live likewise.