

## Burbank Leader

### Is secularism a threat to religious freedom?

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Q. A Mormon leader recently made a speech, in which he claimed religious freedom in America is under assault from secularization and a growing gay rights movement.

In his speech, Elder Dallin H. Oaks warned of “an alarming trajectory of events pointing toward constraining the freedom of religious speech by forcing it to give way to the ‘rights’ of those offended by such speech.” Oaks said he believes that freedom of faith is under attack not by legal means, but cultural changes and the “ascendency of moral relativism.” He stressed that these infringements affect all religions, not just Mormonism: “Christians, Jews and Muslims ... should unite more effectively to preserve and strengthen the freedom to advocate and practice our religious beliefs, whatever they are.”

One critic responded to Oaks’ speech by saying, “What a certain stripe of religious adherents are asking for is actually an exemption ... from laws that apply generally to everyone else — for example, nondiscrimination protections.” The critic also asked whether Elder Oaks’ words were merely “sour grapes” over criticism of the Mormon Church’s involvement in getting Proposition 8 approved in California.

Do you believe Elder Oaks is correct in saying that the faithful are “under assault?” And is secularization a real danger in a country where about 85% of the population regards itself as religious?

Answer:

Reacting to Elder Dallin Oaks’ contention that religion in our country is under attack by secularists who do not know right from wrong and are dedicated to removing freedom of speech from people of faith, I must protest. I believe that he is incorrect on a number of different fronts.

The idea that those who do not believe in God, in the traditional sense, cannot be moral is simply not supported by evidence. Just because a person does not believe in the values held by Oaks does not mean that he or she is a moral relativist or an immoral person. Moral relativism in Oaks’ view seems to be equated with anything that he and those who agree with him do not believe to be true.

And the charge that someone is trying to keep people from practicing their religions or speaking freely about them is patently false. People in our country are guaranteed freedom to practice religion as they choose. However, when advertisements from particular religious denominations enter the political arena, subsidized by large financial contributions, the issue is quite different. Then, intimidation is being used; and it is often the people who oppose the perspectives about morality, such as those held by Oaks, who are being silenced.

An example of this kind of coercive power can be seen in the opposition those of some religious persuasions have to the rights of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens of our county to equal treatment under the law. As a Unitarian Universalist and a moral person of faith, my views about the inherent worth and dignity of every person, my religious beliefs about the nature of God and the support of free speech must be given equal respect. That is the kind of equality that is the basis for freedom of religion in our democracy.

The Rev. Dr. Betty Stapleford  
Unitarian Universalist Church Of the Verdugo Hills, La Crescenta

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There are undoubtedly some Americans who truly dislike religion and are engaged in activities that could be viewed as an “assault” against people of faith. However, their numbers are so few and insignificant that they can hardly be considered a serious threat to basic religious freedom. In the same vein, while a strong trend toward secularism could theoretically endanger this country’s religious foundations, this is simply not the case in reality. Most Americans either consider themselves religious or respect religion and understand the importance of spirituality in both personal and communal life.

Frankly, I feel that the real threat to religion in this country today is apathy. So many of our youth simply don’t know enough about their respective religious traditions to care about participating. When asked about their beliefs, young people may indicate that they are religious, but that is usually where it ends. Many lack any real knowledge regarding the historical, ethical or moral teachings of their religious affiliations. This lack of engagement is not only sad, but can be seriously detrimental to our country’s core foundations.

Of course there will be disagreements between religious and non-religious groups regarding various issues. But as Americans, there is certainly more that we agree upon than we disagree about; there is a lot of common ground that we share. For the well-being of the next generation, and as a bulwark against indifference, it behooves us to stand strong and be vocal regarding the basic principles we all believe in. We need to ensure that our dialogue on all public issues remains respectful, even when we hold very different viewpoints. In a land that proudly embraces diversity and tolerance, there should be no room for denigration of any kind when we engage in discussion.

Rabbi Simcha Backman

Chabad Jewish Center

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I have never understood why there is freedom of speech, and yet we cannot pray in schools or talk about God. I can’t be the only one wrestling with this. Yes, religious freedom in America is under assault from secularization and even such groups as the gay rights movement.

As Elder Dallin H. Oaks stated, “an alarming trajectory of events pointing toward constraining the freedom of religious speech by forcing it to give way to the ‘rights’ of those offended by such speech” certainly does not seem to be including the freedom of our faith. I do agree that those of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths should come together for the common purpose of successfully protecting the freedom to advocate and practice our religious beliefs, whatever they are. And I say this even though my particular faith is Christian.

What has happened in America that others have the right to push their beliefs on mainstream society, yet faith is discriminated against to the point where we cannot speak out while others can? These thoughts have been present with me — representing an issue I have struggled with for a very long time.

Kimberlie Zakarian, LMFT

La Vie Counseling Center

Pasadena

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The First Amendment to the United States Constitution begins by stating: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.”

Elder Oaks' recent speech at Chapman University Law School was on the subtle, but definite, erosion of rights under the "Free Exercise of Religion" clause. Elder Oaks has spoken on this subject numerous times, starting with a speech given at DePaul University 25 years ago.

Before becoming a member of the LDS Church Quorum of Twelve Apostles, Elder Oaks was a judicial clerk to Chief Justice Earl Warren of the U.S. Supreme Court, a professor of law at the University of Chicago, president of BYU, chairman of PBS and a Utah Supreme Court justice. His legal, broadcasting and theological backgrounds provide him with a unique perspective on this clause.

In 350 words or less, I cannot adequately summarize Elder Oaks speech (which included 64 footnotes), let alone adequately comment on it. In that regard, as I have read news articles commenting on his speech, both on the pros and the cons, it is readily apparent that summary commentary cannot treat this subject adequately, given the complexity and sensitivity of the subject.

I encourage readers to go to the LDS website, [www.lds.org](http://www.lds.org), and search "oaks religious freedom." There one will find the full text of his speech and his arguments as to why religious freedom is being eroded.

Undoubtedly, after reading his speech, some will view his remarks as unpersuasive, old-fashioned and out of step with today's society, while others will agree with his position. Some may cast Elder Oaks remarks solely as a Mormon point of view, but as he said in the speech: "I believe you will find no unique Mormon doctrine in what I say. My sources are law and secular history."

Cardinal Francis George, archbishop of Chicago and president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently spoke at BYU. The title of his speech was "Catholics and Latter-day Saints: Partners in the Defense of Religious Freedom." He proposed "...that Catholics and Mormons stand with one another and with other defenders of conscience, and that we can and should stand as one in the defense of religious liberty."

Is religious liberty a liberty that needs to be defended? That is the question, and Elder Oaks' answer is yes.

Rick Callister

Church of Jesus-Christ of Latter-day Saints

La Cañada

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I'm pretty sure that anyone who puts the word rights in quotes or uses the phrase "so-called rights" (as Oaks did elsewhere in his speech) should not be put in charge of defending America's principles.

The Rev. Amy Pringle

St. George's Episcopal Church

La Cañada

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Let's review: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Note that the First Amendment to the Constitution says nothing about the right to be agreed with in our religious views, only to express them.

Elder Oaks, of course, has every right to express his opinion that the U.S. faithful are “under assault.” I’ll exercise my right to free expression and wonder whether he will be joining us back on planet Earth anytime soon. Has he missed, for instance, the Supreme Court’s recent ruling supporting the right of the Westboro Baptist Church to spew ignorant hatefulness in the name of their religion?

And bringing up the possible “danger” of secularization raises questions to me. Just a few weeks ago we were asked for this column whether non-secular governments in the Middle East are to be feared.

So secularism may be desirable there, but worrisome here? Can we have it both ways?

The “cultural changes” that Elder Oaks so fears may, indeed, rock his world. Change isn’t always easy, even good change. But what is an adjustment in attitude to someone of his faith is, to others—in this case the GLBT community—a better life of physical safety and full civil rights. To me it seems a fair trade.

Roberta Medford

Atheist

Montrose

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No, I do not agree with Elder Oaks. True, there is much secularization in the country — but I don’t think that’s a bad thing. I’m a firm believer in the separation of church and state, and the result is that Christians and Christianity no longer dominate the debate.

Remember the commercial line, “This is no longer your father’s Oldsmobile?” Well, it’s also no longer your father’s (or your grandfather’s) country, and, again, I don’t think that’s a bad thing.

As we all know, we are a nation of immigrants, and proudly so. What do you want to do, take down the sign on the Statue of Liberty? It stands to reason that as more and more immigrants seek to make America their home there will be more and more diversity, both of skin color and religion.

Those of us who call ourselves Christians must get used to the idea that our faith is one among many. So, how about behaving in a truly Christlike fashion and welcoming those who are different? Think “Good Samaritan.” Think “Take the lower seat at the dinner party.” Think “Whoever would be first must be last.”

The Rev. Skip Lindeman

La Cañada Congregational Church

United Church of Christ

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Elder Oaks and I share some common ground here, though it feels like a pretty small plot. We both value the voice of religious communities in the conversations that shape our local and national character. We both think that our traditions bring an age-old wisdom to such conversations – one that grounds them in what we understand to be true about our Creator’s intention toward humanity. We share the view that a reduced concern for moral and ethical living erodes character at every level.

But the boundaries of our common ground end in disagreement on what constitutes moral living, as well as in a

place more central to this week's question, which is the nature of "freedom of religious speech." Elder Oaks employs what I consider to be immoral rhetorical devices. "Doublespeak" comes to mind — the fine art of deliberately reversing the meanings of words. We all learn about doublespeak by reading George Orwell's "1984" in high school, but we keep falling for it anyway. In the Mormon-funded Proposition 8 debate, we saw voters' confusion when a "yes" meant "no" and a "no" meant "yes." Similarly, Oaks is defining "religious freedom" as "everyone must believe as we believe." Moreover, the LGBT community should be particularly offended to find that its work to end assaults on its civil and human rights has been doublespoken as an "assault" on the "faithful."

It is exactly this sort of disingenuous religious rhetoric that engenders distrust for all religious leaders who speak with courage and conviction on the issues of the day. If we are to "unite effectively" as faith communities, we will need to agree first that our communications should promote dialogue that speaks truthfully, seeks reconciliation and promotes respect and love for all of God's people.

The Rev. Paige Eaves

Crescenta Valley United Methodist Church

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If we wish to retain America's freedoms of religion and speech then we had better think twice before banning aspects of either one, lest we whittle both into non-existence.

Recently, the Westboro Baptist Church, the infamous group that pickets soldier funerals while carrying vengeance-of-God signs, won a case against them, thus protecting their rights to do the aforesaid. While most see the group as having poor taste, or a lack of empathy and sensitivity, and selectively ignoring Bible verses that command them to "mourn with those who mourn," (Rom 12:15) I think many of us sighed in relief with the court decision.

Our religious speech privilege provides a rare means of conveying divine wisdom within what is obviously a growing secular American disposition, and if legally curtailed, how may anyone speak for morality? There won't be right and wrong, just barbarism.

The Bible is the only inspired record of God's communications in writing, and within its pages are his authoritative instructions for mankind. We observe there that most of the things of our God-given life are good and should be thankfully received in their proper context, but those same may be abused, and so God instructs.

We all must eat, but excessive consumption, gluttony, is condemned by God. Most people drink, but flagrant drunkenness is immoral. Everyone enjoys sex, but Scripture forbids any deviation from the context of heterosexual marriage. Such teachings are integral to Christian belief and cannot be muzzled lest the religion itself be destroyed. And a religion without divine principles ceases to be all but a social club.

One job of Christianity is to champion the higher ideal. As one adage explains, "we must comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable," and so we will forever be contentious with fickle society. Should Christians be silenced for objecting if something like murder were to gain acceptance, or more realistically perhaps, pedophilia (as in ancient Greece)? Pedophile groups are currently seeking sexual orientation status like homosexual groups have already done. Sound good to you? America needs religious speech, not its silence.

The Rev. Bryan Griem

Montrose Community Church