Teaching Religious Liberty to a New Generation

Museum slated for Philadelphia’s Independence Mall

By Alexi Sargeant

On a sidewalk near Philadelphia’s historic district, waves of light spill out from a modern brick building. On closer inspection you can see the light is spelling out words. A line of text rippling through the window reads, “Let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven.”

This is a vision from the future, hinting at the American Bible Society’s ambitious plan to build something called the Faith and Liberty Discovery Center—a new museum on Philadelphia’s Independence Mall projected to open in 2020. It will chronicle how the Bible has shaped American history by inspiring individuals from founding fathers to civil-rights leaders. And it hopes to help Americans see afresh the continuing importance of protecting what our founders called “the first freedom”—the freedom of conscience, worship, and faith.

The new facility will open its doors to an American public that is increasingly divided about what role religious faith should play in our nation. A growing share of Americans, especially young Americans, are religiously unaffiliated. Significant numbers of these so-called “nones” are more than non-religious; they are anti-religious, citing their dislike of the social positions churches take as a reason for their lack of religious affiliation. University of Pennsylvania chaplain Chaz Howard, a member of the FLDC board of scholar advisers, says many of today’s Ivy League students display “an air of suspicion to Christianity. There are always people who will bring up the Crusades or the Inquisition.” Liberal students in particular look askance at evangelicals, at Christians generally, and at the Scriptures themselves.

These trends create anxiety among defenders of religious freedom. Religious liberty was one of the original impulses that drove the creation of America. But journalist Terry Mattingly (who has covered religion for three decades) notes that many publications now put “religious liberty” in quotes—as if it were “something created by a vast right-wing fundamentalist conspiracy. People don’t realize the extent to which the defense of religious minorities is a liberal value,” he says.

Thus, when Senator Bernie Sanders attacks the orthodox Christian views of federal office nominee Russell Vought, many news stories present it as an unmasking of intolerance—rather than an instance of intolerance itself. Journalists confuse matters, Mattingly suggests, by covering headline-grabbing cases like Masterpiece Cakeshop v. Colorado Civil Right Commission as if believers are asking for sweeping exemptions, instead of narrow accommodations. And the many instances that contradict the narrative of religious liberty as a smokescreen for bigotry are just ignored. “Traditional religious believers of all stripes are being hit by this truck,” warns Mattingly, pointing to the way France has cracked down on Muslim swimwear.

Princeton scholar and religious-liberty advocate Robert George agrees that America’s conversation about religious liberty has gone off the rails. “Religious liberty is the freedom to ask the most fundamental questions about human meaning and existence: Where did we come from? What is our destiny? Is there a more-than-merely-human source of existence?” Once we’ve answered those questions as best we can, the framers of our nation insisted, citizens should be able to “enter the public square and advocate on behalf of their religiously informed judgments concerning justice and the common good” without danger or disparagement.

The privatized conception of faith that forbids any public expression of one’s spiritual convictions is much too “cramped and crabbed,” George warns. Yet this severely limited view of religious liberty is taking deep root. Among American elites in academe, the media, and progressive politics there are aggressive efforts “to force religion out of American public life,” and confine it merely to a “freedom to say prayers at the dinner table or on your knees at bedtime.” That is not acceptable to most believers, and not what our founders had in mind.

Americans of faith see their religious convictions not as private tastes but as guideposts that must inform all of their actions, including political decisions. All of the great American reform movements, from the abolition of slavery, to various crusades against want, to—in some ways—our Revolution itself, were “led by religious people and prosecuted precisely as religious causes,” George reminds.

For nearly all of our history “we’ve understood religious freedom to be the freedom to express oneself and to act on one’s convictions, bringing religiously informed judgments of justice and the common good” into public activities. Chaz Howard, meanwhile, thinks Americans by and large don’t appreciate how much religious belief informs current social activism on questions of racial justice and immigration. Can we really understand America, he asks, if we ignore, for example, the story of Exodus and the way Americans have applied it to their own journeys out of slavery?

Historic messenger

The American Bible Society hopes its Faith and Liberty Discovery Center can renew appreciation for these under-remembered aspects of our origin pact. “This is an
opportunity to raise a national conversation about the Bible in the American story, and its relevance and importance to the American future,” says Alan Crippen, the ABS official most focused today on the new museum.

His organization, he explains, was founded in 1816 by Elias Boudinot, Washington’s commissary general for prisoners during the Revolutionary War, who then served in both the Continental Congress and the first U.S. House of Representatives. In his retirement, Boudinot became concerned about shortages of Bibles, and epidemics of moral disorder, in the American West (a pathfinding missionary had called the region “the valley of the shadow of death”). Boudinot and other donors founded the American Bible Society to meet hungers for religious wisdom and instruction.

Many of the first members of the ABS were statesmen, and they believed the society’s work filled a civic as well as religious mission. In a self-ruling republic, active measures to inculcate virtue are necessary. Faith was both a path to individual understanding and happiness, and an important contributor to social goodness and cohesion.

But the founders of the ABS were not simply canny politicians using faith as a tool to promote social wellbeing. Elias Boudinot held strong Presbyterian convictions and responded to Thomas Paine’s deist tract *The Age of Reason* with a book-length rebuttal titled *The Age of Revelation*. Today, the ABS displays that same mix of public-spiritedness and religious fervor. Its headquarters in Philadelphia features a missional verse: “For the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the LORD, as the waters cover the sea.”

The top goal of the American Bible Society at present is to raise the number of “Bible-engaged” Americans from 40 million to 100 million by 2026. It is tracking progress through an annual “State of the Bible” survey it conducts in partnership with Barna Group, a polling firm with deep experience in measuring religious practice. The Faith and Liberty Discovery Center is one of the ABS’s efforts to advance this goal of Bible engagement—both by illuminating the Bible’s influence on America in the past, and by showing visitors how their own values intersect with that story. The center will have a low admission fee and be open longer than other attractions on Independence Mall (“the most historic square mile in America”).

When the ABS sold its New York City headquarters and moved to Philadelphia a few years ago, it put aside $30 million of the real-estate proceeds to help fund creation of the Faith and Liberty center, then challenged outside donors to match its investment. That has so far attracted $20 million in grant commitments. Major donors include Mark and Nancy Hanson, their Sea Foam Sales Company as a corporate supporter, the James Herr Foundation, Kelly Integral Solutions, and Linda Bean of the L. L. Bean Co.

Donor Michael Cardone Jr. is a born-and-raised Philly resident and longtime member of the city’s business community. He hopes the center will provide a new opportunity for visitors to “understand the role the Bible has played in the founding of our country and our whole history.” Charlie Shaver, another local businessman and donor, says “what was attractive to me was that it was right there on Independence Mall, where a lot of our liberty as a country came from. You have this diverse audience that comes through there every year. What a shame that there’s no reference to the Bible, which was such a guiding force throughout our history.” He looks to the museum to remind people that faith is not only compatible with but thoroughly intertwined into American values.

“If you can educate people, it changes the conversation. Whether they’re believers or not, you can shift that conversation slightly.”

It’s an eventful time for Bible philanthropy, and for new museums of American history. The new Museum of the Bible in Washington, D.C. (no direct connection to the FLDC) has welcomed
a million visitors since its opening last year. The new Museum of the American Revolution, largely supported by Philadelphia philanthropy, explores the story of our country’s birth just two blocks away from the forthcoming center. The FLDC plans to offer something complementary to and unique from these popular tourist destinations.

The museum’s galleries will be organized around moral principles: faith, liberty, justice, hope, unity, and love. The faith gallery will dive into the history of Pennsylvania as a radical experiment in religious freedom. The liberty gallery will feature profiles of American “changemakers”—a diverse crowd ranging from John Jay to Sojourner Truth, from Dorothy Day to Joni Tada. The gallery of hope will reflect on recent crises and their consequences in the Bible. The justice gallery, for example, will show how both sides in the debate over slavery tried to marshal Scripture to support their cause. It will cover controversies over suffrage and immigration.

Yet the museum experience is designed to end on a note of unity. Visitors will carry “lamps” that digitally capture bits of Bible text, American history, and storytelling that they particularly resonate with. In the unity section, museum-goers will see the resulting “values fingerprint” displayed on a wall, with overlaps between their values and those of others in the room highlighted.

The center is not meant to be a “didactic experience but rather a Socratic one,” says Crippen. It should start conversations by highlighting things visitors might not have known about their country or themselves. “People will be surprised to see themselves in the museum,” says Chaz Howard, highlighting the racial diversity of the Americans featured in the FLDC. And by being in Philadelphia, he points out, the center will engage a different audience than if it was located in the Bible Belt. “Whether they see themselves as Christians or not,” he states, “my hope is people walk out moved by the role the Bible has played in the life of the country.”

After I leave ABS headquarters, I walk along Independence Mall and randomly stop tourists for street interviews, asking what religious liberty means to them. A Southeast Asian family tell me they think of it as “being able to choose whatever religion you want to pray.” Richard, sporting a Phillies cap, tells me he thinks religious liberty is an essential part of our political heritage. Then he defines it entirely in terms of freedom from religion. “It’s why the government can’t establish a religious state.”

A group of Jewish tourists from England say they’ll answer my questions so long as I point them afterward toward the Liberty Bell. Deal. Then they define religious liberty as the right to practice your own faith, with two caveats. One, “you don’t encroach on other people,” and, two “you can’t just make it up!” We chat briefly about how religion is not personal philosophy or moral whim. Its origin is outside the individual, in what the prophets or Thomas Aquinas or Martin Luther King Jr. would identify as eternal law.

Then I keep up my end of the bargain and direct the group toward the pavilion that houses the Liberty Bell. Before they walk away, one of them wants to make sure I am aware of something: Did I know that the inscription on the Liberty Bell is from the Torah? “Leviticus 25:10,” proudly notes a bearded man in a yarmulke named Bernard.

“The whole world,” the Bay Area couple tells me. They are there with a Southeast Asian family who say they think of religious liberty as “being able to choose whatever religion you want to pray.” Richard, sporting a Phillies cap, tells me he thinks religious liberty is an essential part of our political heritage. Then he defines it entirely in terms of freedom from religion. “It’s why the government can’t establish a religious state.”

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“Proclaim liberty throughout all the land unto all the inhabitants thereof.”

What could be more American than that?