

A stained glass window featuring a religious scene. At the top, a figure in a blue and green robe is seated, possibly a saint or a religious leader, with hands clasped. Below this, a large banner reads "FOR THE POOR". At the bottom, another banner reads "IMMACOLATA AND CARMINE NUCCIARONE". The window is decorated with various geometric and floral patterns in gold, blue, and green.

## LESSON 3

*How does Religious  
Freedom promote Good  
Politics and Civic Virtue?*

FOR THE POOR

IMMACOLATA AND  
CARMINE NUCCIARONE



# LESSON 3

## How does Religious Freedom promote Good Politics and Civic Virtue?

### INTRODUCTION

This lesson begins by considering the fundamental relationship between religious freedom and politics. The word “politics” is used here as the Greek philosopher Aristotle did – *the way we organize our lives together*. Unfortunately, politics today often suggests partisan, self-serving, unproductive bickering. But good politics is absolutely necessary for democracy. When properly understood and practiced, politics protects freedom and equality. It provides order, and it promotes the good of all (the common good). Religious freedom is a key to good politics because it is an inalienable human right that supports a host of other civil liberties that are necessary for stable and democratic societies. In this lesson, we will explore a framework for understanding the relationship between religious freedom, politics, and the common good. We will examine the practical benefits of that relationship and discuss why some governments suppress religious liberty, thereby harming the common good.

### LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- 3.1 Explain the classical meaning of the term politics
- 3.2 Describe the connection the US Founders made between religious freedom and good politics
- 3.3 Describe the ways religious freedom contributes to the common good
- 3.4 Use the three dimensions of religious freedom to comment on contemporary issues and debates
- 3.5 Explain the reasons authoritarian governments are motivated to restrict religious freedom

### KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

*Authoritarianism*

*Democracy*

*Public square*

*Civic virtue*

*Free exercise equality*

*Transcendent*

*Civil society*

*Human flourishing*

*Tyranny*

*Common good*

*Politics*

## Lesson 3: How does Religious Freedom promote Good Politics and Civic Virtue?

### ENGAGE

**Directions:** Read the following list of pairs. For each pair, determine which one seems, in your mind, to be a more important motivation for supporting religious freedom. Put a check in the appropriate box and then add up your total score by giving yourself 1 point for every check in column A and 2 points for every check in column B. Your teacher will explain your score to you.

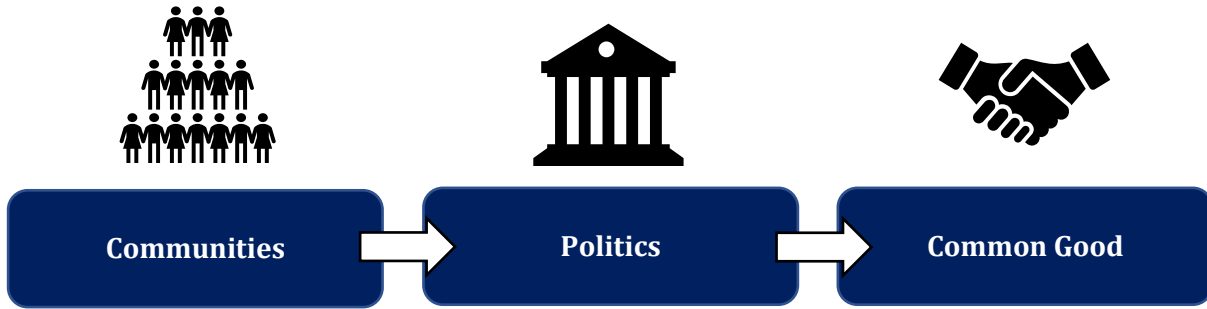
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	A		B	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Provide for family	or	Assemble with others	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Follow my conscience	or	Human equality	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Free speech	or	Peaceful pluralism	<input type="checkbox"/>
<input type="checkbox"/>	Personal and family safety	or	Charitable work	<input type="checkbox"/>
Give yourself 1 point for every check in column A			Give yourself 2 points for every check in column B	
	Column A point total	+	Column B point total	
<b>TOTAL SCORE</b>				

### Politics and the Common Good

When we speak of the “common good” we are generally referring to goods and services that benefit society and our democratic political system, not just certain groups or individuals. A quick survey of history confirms that stable democracies depend on two things—a strong support for the rights of the individual and a collective commitment to the common good. While these ideas may seem contradictory, they are in fact complementary. We’ll say more in this lesson about individual rights. For now, let’s explore the “common good” and see why it is so important.

Let’s start with the role of “politics” which is the way people establish laws, regulations, and public policies, and also empower civil society (private groups) to make their own distinct contributions. The modern word “politics” comes from an ancient Greek word that implies “the affairs of the entire community.” In other words, politics is the sum of activities that allows very different communities of individuals to live together in freedom and harmony. This is what we mean when we refer to the “common good,” a goal that is achieved through good politics.

## Securing the Common Good



Thus, good politics involves far more than government and political parties. It also includes:

- ❖ Our participation as citizens in elections at the local, state, and national levels.
  - ❖ Our attempts, as individuals or members of civil society groups, to influence and form laws, regulations, and public policies (for example, regulations issued by a government agency such as the Department of Health and Human Services).
  - ❖ The actions of *elected* government officials (such as presidents, governors, or legislators at the federal, state, and local levels).
- ❖ The actions of our *unelected* state and federal judges and Supreme Court Justices.
  - ❖ The actions of our *unelected* executive branch officials (for example, agencies such as the Department of Education or the Environmental Protection Agency).
  - ❖ The actions of *private, non-governmental* groups and businesses (civil society) whose activities are regulated by government. A civil society actor might contribute to the common good when it:
    - Provides products, services, and jobs.
    - Runs primary and secondary schools, colleges and universities, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the aged and dying, or immigration services.
    - Influences laws, regulations, and public policies.

### Good Politics and Stable Democracy

Of course, politics certainly cannot solve all our problems. But doing politics well is necessary for our success as a community of people who have deep differences over important things. If we do politics poorly, the nation is likely to do poorly. But if we do politics well, the nation is more likely to flourish. We are more likely to develop the

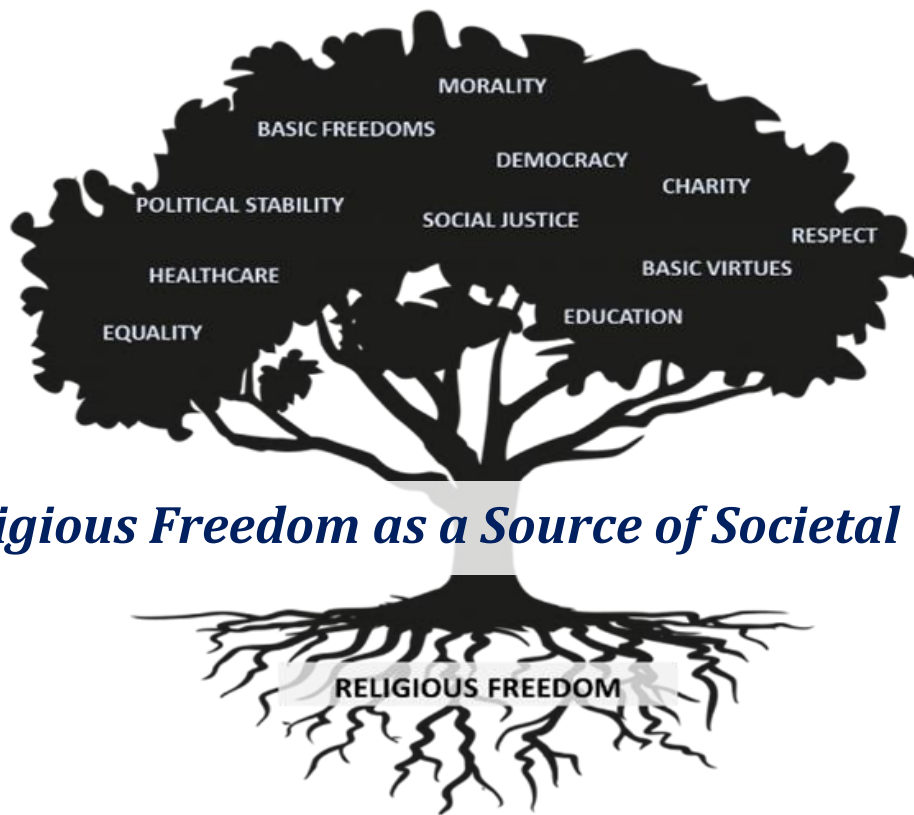
good things typically associated with a healthy democracy—for example, freedom and equality under the law, a widespread commitment to justice for all, the habit of charitable giving, economic prosperity, and civil debate—when the fundamental rights of every individual are valued and defended.

## ***Doing politics well is necessary for success as a community of people who often have deep differences over important things.***

One of the American Founders' central ways of encouraging good politics was the First Amendment's guarantee of the right of every person and every religious community in America to "exercise" religion in both public and private life. *Public* exercise of religion by individuals and groups contributes to the common good. But so too does *private* religious exercise. Personal religious devotion, such as prayer and worship, confession of sins, or study and growth in spiritual wisdom, can make a citizen more moral and virtuous, and, therefore, a better contributor to the common good. This is one reason that America's Founders protected religious freedom in the First Amendment.

In their view, *both* private and public religious exercise contribute to good politics and the common good. The key point is that they believed that the exercise of religion by Americans was necessary if their revolutionary experiment in democracy was to succeed.

It appears that the American Founders were right. Almost 250 years after the founding of America, an overwhelming amount of evidence demonstrates that free exercise for all can contribute to good politics and the common good. Religious freedom is actually a source of many important human virtues and good social and political outcomes, including those you see in the image below:



### ***Religious Freedom as a Source of Societal Goods***

## Free Exercise Equality

This brings us to an important idea. *Free exercise equality* means that all individuals and communities, religious or not, must be treated equally under the law. This means that all religious individuals and communities (religious actors) are provided an equal right to conduct private, or semi-private activities, and public activities as well. Examples of private conduct include the right to:







- Believe or not to believe
- Build houses of worship
- Train clergy
- Raise children in the faith
- Build religious schools
- Establish standards for membership in the religious community
- Invite others to join the religious community
- Leave a religious community

As for public activities, many religious actors believe they have a *duty* to bring into American *public* life their understanding of virtue, morality, justice and the common good. The Founders agreed with this understanding, which is why they guaranteed the right of religious exercise in public as well as private

matters. As a result, all American religious individuals and communities have equal access to the legal, political, and economic institutions and processes of the state. Examples include the right to:

- Form democratic political parties on the basis of religious teachings
- Purchase property
- Receive charitable donations
- Create and run charitable organizations
- Create and run religious institutions such as schools and hospitals
- Run for and hold political office based on religious beliefs
- Express religious ideas in public debates over the common good

In summary, religious freedom is a set of institutions, laws, and habits that yield equality under the law for all religious actors and ideas. It requires the presence of a mutually reinforcing web of government protections, established freedoms, and social practices. Further, the exercise of religion is not merely a private matter. The unwillingness to permit religion in the public square is itself a violation of free exercise equality. True religious freedom requires that the individual be free to do at least 3 things:

The Three Dimensions of Religious Freedom		
	 <b>EXPLORE</b>	Every individual must be free to explore the truths about a greater-than-human source of being and ultimate meaning.
	 <b>EMBRACE</b>	Every individual must be free to embrace those truths when found.
	 <b>EXPRESS</b>	Every individual must be free to express those truths in public and private life including political life.

### REFLECT

Which of the three dimensions of religious freedom is the most controversial in modern America?

The historical benefit of free exercise equality to the common good is well established. When allowed to exercise religion freely, people and their religious communities typically establish programs and institutions that benefit everyone. They develop hospitals and homeless shelters. They offer help to the poor and destitute. They create educational institutions and addiction recovery services. In other words, religious freedom encourages people to exercise their religious beliefs in private and in public, and thereby advance the common good through good politics.



### CHALLENGE YOURSELF CIVIC VIRTUE AND HUMAN FLOURISHING

Civic virtue is an important concept in political philosophy. It is understood to be a set of qualities, and resulting actions, that allow individuals to positively contribute to society. The belief is that when civic virtue wanes, political order and social cohesion are threatened. The concept has been much discussed throughout history. Ancient Greeks such as Socrates and Plato, Roman philosophers such as Cicero and Marcus Aurelius, and European philosophers and theologians including Augustine of Hippo, Thomas Aquinas, and Dante Alighieri typically identified 4 virtues. Others identified seven. Benjamin Franklin eventually settled on 13 in his pursuit of “moral perfection.”

Read [Civic Virtue, and Why It Matters](#) from the National Constitution Center and complete the following:

1. Identify your own list of 4-5 virtues that allow individuals to be good citizens and positively contribute to democracy, political stability, and community life.
2. Identify ways that organized religion can serve to promote each virtue in modern society.

### Authoritarian Regimes and Religious Freedom

Authoritarian regimes certainly understand the power of religious freedom. A core feature of a successful democracy is the limit placed on the power of the government. The power of government is automatically limited when citizens are free to believe in, and be faithful to, an authority greater than government. When they are free to create institutions such as privately-run faith-based schools and hospitals, they are limiting the power of government. Anything less than true religious freedom tends to establish government as the primary source of truth, goodness, and ultimate meaning in human lives.

Predictably, tyranny often begins when government claims the authority to define what is true and regulates how people relate to truth. If government is the source of truth,

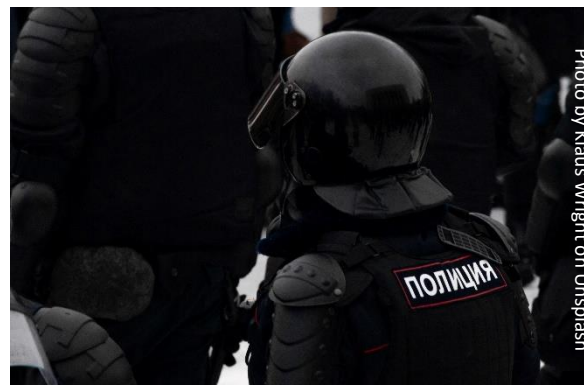


Photo by Klaus Wrigt on Unsplash

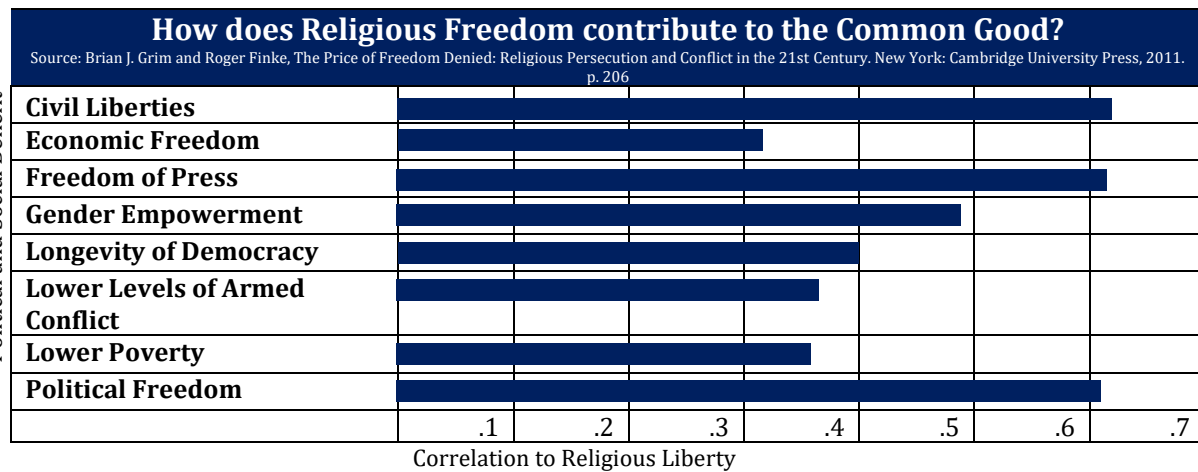
and there are no natural rights given by God or by a transcendent source that exists prior to government, the result is inevitably tyranny and oppression. This pattern is easy to recognize in authoritarian nations like China or North Korea, where the government makes itself the source of truth and attempts to control, or even destroy, any religion challenging its authority. The fear of religion by authoritarian states shows the true value of religious freedom in democratic nations, which rests on the idea that the state is accountable to something greater than itself.

Another form of authoritarianism occurs when a government coerces its citizens to accept only one religion and oppresses all others. Some current examples include Iran or Saudi Arabia. Because the natural religious impulse to discover, believe in, and order one's life according to religious belief is so powerful in most people, government or societal attempts to impose a single religion inevitably leads to intolerance, violence, social unrest, and oppression of minorities.

### Religious Freedom and Civil Liberties

In addition to providing a check on tyranny, free exercise equality benefits the common good in other ways. Evidence from social science confirms that the deeper religious liberty is embedded in a society, the more that society is opened to a wide range of other liberties and benefits. The Founders knew that religious freedom for all *prevents* tyranny and

*promotes* human flourishing, which is one of the many reasons they understood it to be America's "first freedom." The research of sociologist Brian Grim conclusively shows how religious liberty positively correlates with other civil liberties and benefits to society (see the chart below).






Of course, the fact that religious liberty "correlates" with other good things doesn't necessarily mean that religious liberty "causes" those other good things. But the evidence presented by social science and history strongly suggests that religious liberty

is foundational to the bundled group of fundamental freedoms that enable democracy to take root and thrive. Without religious freedom in the bundle, the evidence suggests, the other freedoms and their benefits are unlikely to be sustained over time.



## The Benefits of Religious Freedom Summarized

Properly understood and practiced, religious freedom is a foundational political freedom and promotes the common good in at least three distinct ways as summarized in the chart below:

	<b>PRINCIPLE</b>	Prioritizing religious freedom is fundamental to building a flourishing, stable democratic society where individuals are valued and respected.
	<b>LIMIT</b>	Religious freedom limits government by acknowledging an authority higher than government, and allowing religious groups to provide services the government would otherwise have to provide.
	<b>BENEFIT</b>	Religious freedom allows all individuals and groups to contribute to the common good.

### REFLECT

According to a [2016 study](#) by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation, religion contributes about \$1.2 trillion of socioeconomic value each year to the U.S. economy. That would make it the world's 15th-largest national economy and larger than the global annual revenues of the world's top 10 tech companies (e.g. Amazon, Apple, Google, etc.). In addition to this economic impact, religion has a profound social impact. When people of faith are allowed to publicly contribute their time, efforts, and resources, they make significant contributions to the common good in areas such as health care, education, foster care and adoption, care for the poor, and disaster relief. Recently, Dr. Byron Johnson of the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion has shared research that illustrates how faith-motivated individuals and organizations make significant contributions in less obvious ways including crime and delinquency, substance abuse treatment, and offender rehabilitation. In light of these facts, answer the following questions: (1) *What if religious people were not allowed to express their faith in the public sphere and contribute to the common good according to the dictates of their faith?* (2) *How would the country be disadvantaged and who would have to make up for the lack of goods and services?*

### KEY QUESTIONS

Now that you completed the lesson, can you answer the following key questions?

1. What is a good definition for politics?
2. Why did the Founders think good politics was impossible without religious freedom?
3. How do societies suffer if religion and religious freedom are stifled?
4. Why is it important that all dimensions of religious freedom be respected and allowed in society?
5. Why is religious freedom and authoritarian rule incompatible?

## ADDITIONAL READING

George W. Bush Presidential Center: An Interview with Tony Blair. "[Why-and How-Democracies Must Promote Religious Freedom.](#)" (2021)

Chalk, Casey. "[Would America Be Better Off Without Religion?](#)" (2020)

Farr, Tom. "[Religious Freedom and the Common Good.](#)" (2017).

Johnson, Byron. "[How Religion Contributes to the Common Good, Positive Criminology, and Justice Reform.](#)" (2021)

Grim, Brian. "[The unseen economic and social impacts of American faith: Religious freedom sets religion free to help communities across the country to thrive.](#)" (2021)

Hays, Joshua and Byron Johnson. "[Voices: Are Houses of Worship Essential? A Look at Science.](#)" (2020)

Graham, Andrew. "[Why Religious Pluralism and Religious Literacy Matter for the Future of Religious Freedom in America.](#)" (2020)

