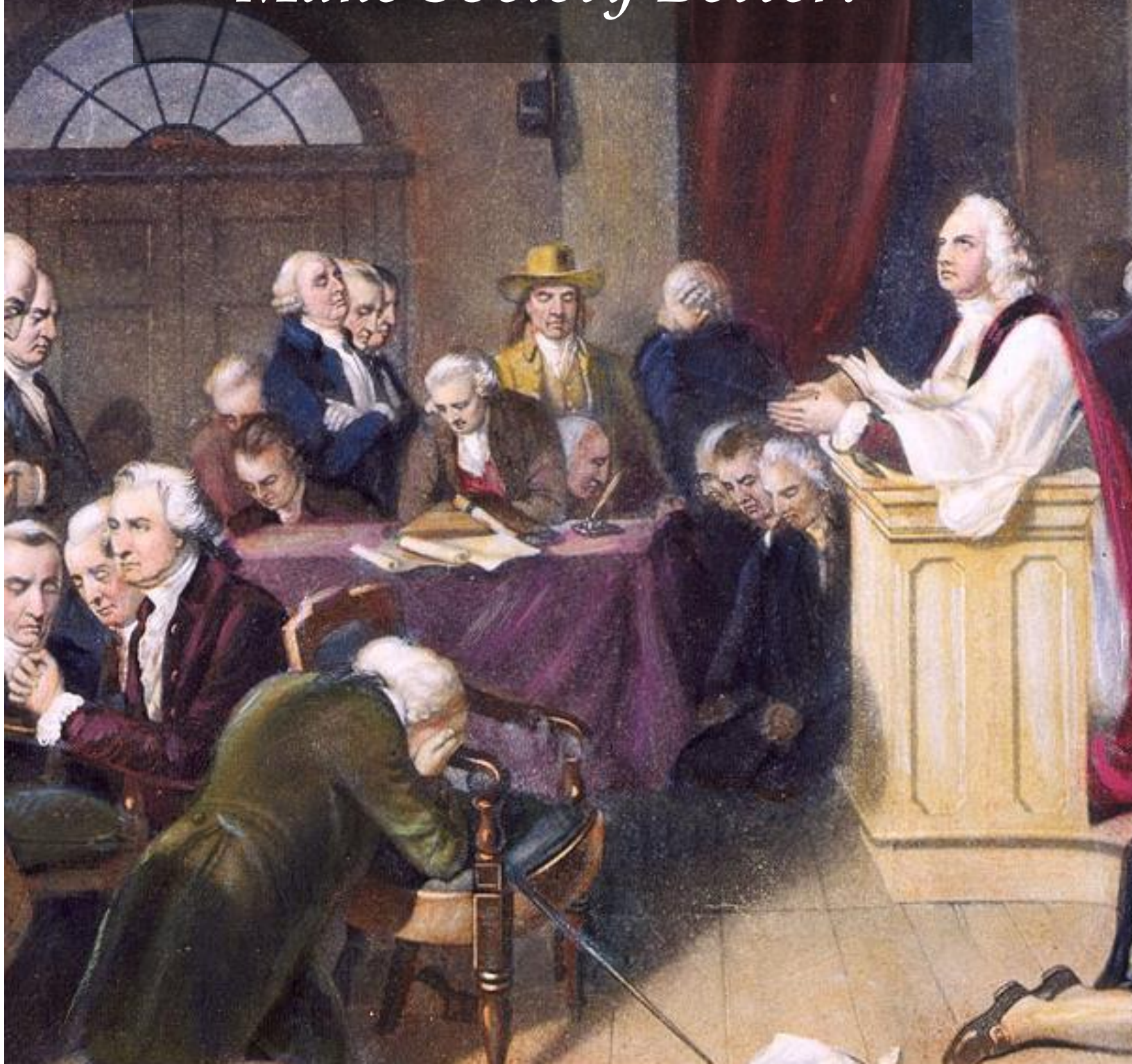


## LESSON 4

# *Does Religious Freedom Make Society Better?*



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ARTIST T.H. Matteson  
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# LESSON 4

## Does Religious Freedom Make Society Better?

### *Introduction*

Were the U.S. Founders right? Are people safer, healthier, and happier when religious freedom is protected in law and embraced by society? If not, are communities better off when public law and funds promote just one religion? If so, who gets to decide which religion is favored? How does the government punish someone whose conscience tells them to follow a banned religious tradition? Perhaps as some modern groups suggest, society is better off when all religion is silenced and religious people are forced to keep their ideas private. This lesson illustrates the disastrous consequences of these threats to religion and religious freedom, and presents evidence to show how religious freedom is a human right that protects other civil liberties and leads to safe, productive communities.

### *Key Terms and Concepts*

As you read through the lesson, make sure you understand the following key terms and concepts.

Civil liberties	Free exercise equality	Public
Common good	Happiness	Private
Explore, Embrace, Express	Politics	Tyranny

### *Key Questions*

Once you complete the lesson, you should be able to 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 minimized?
4. What kind of governance works without religious freedom and what kind of governance depends on religious freedom?
5. How does Free Exercise Equality protect every member of society?
6. What are the 3 dimensions of religious freedom and why is each one important?
7. How does religious freedom protect other civil liberties?
8. What is the benefit to everyone when religious freedom is protected by law and embraced in society?

## ***What is Politics?***

It may surprise some people to learn that our English word for **politics** can be traced all the way back to ancient Greece. For many centuries, ancient Greece was made up of dozens of independent cities. Each city was known as a *polis*. Each polis was made up of homes, markets, schools, fields, and businesses that were almost always organized around a religious center that was built on an acropolis or fortified harbor.

The modern word ‘political’ comes from the Greek word *politikos* which means “relating to the activities of the polis.” In other words, politics is much more than just elected officials debating ideas and passing laws. Instead, politics describes all the activities that allow people to make good decisions and conduct life together in community.

### **CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

**Question:** What is the origin of the modern word *politics* and what does it mean in its broadest sense?

## **❖ Politics and Happiness**

There was an ancient Greek philosopher in one of these Greek city states that wrote a lot about politics. His name was Aristotle. Along with his famous teacher Plato, he became one of the world’s most influential thinkers. One of his famous books is called *Politics*. In this book, Aristotle wrote that “human beings are by nature political animals, who naturally want to live together” in community. In other words, humans are social creatures. However, history also suggests that people can be petty, selfish, and difficult to live with. Aristotle believed that good politics would help communities live together and enjoy what he called “the good life” and allow every individual to find **happiness**. You may recognize that word from the Declaration of Independence where the US Founders declared the “pursuit of happiness” to be an inalienable right of all people.

What did thinkers like Aristotle and the American Founders mean by “happiness” and how does good politics increase the chance of being happy? Many modern people equate happiness with financial security that comes with owning material wealth. However, to Aristotle and the Founders, happiness was closely linked to freedom. It meant that every individual was allowed to freely choose how to use his or her own interests, talents, and skills rather than being told by the government or a powerful private group how to live. Thus, the pursuit of happiness was basically the ability to live free and decide how to live one’s life. That may sound great, but what would happen if every individual freely decided to pursue only their own interests, even if it meant harming others to get what they want?

### **CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

**Question:** What did thinkers like Aristotle and many of the Founders mean by happiness?

### ❖ Politics and Virtue

The Founders had read enough history to know that this was a real possibility. It may have been tempting for them to use the power of government to force all citizens to treat others with respect and threaten them if they acted selfishly. However, they also understood that using the power of the state to bully its citizens and coerce them to act a certain way would abolish the personal freedoms the Founding generation had fought so hard to secure.

Remember back to James Madison’s dilemma in *Federalist 51* when he thought about what to do with factions—groups of people acting in their own self-interest. He knew that a society couldn’t abolish factions without destroying liberty. He also knew that a society would be destroyed if it allowed factions to grow unchecked.

The same dilemma exists for ensuring good politics. You can’t force people to act charitably without abolishing individual freedom. Yet, a free society can’t survive and live together in harmony without people having a general commitment to the good of others. The solution was the same in both cases—virtuous people who would work for the common good.

### ❖ Politics and the Common Good

When we speak of the **common good**, we are referring to a set of conditions that benefit all society, not just certain groups or individuals. A widespread commitment to the common good is key to any type of stable democracy.

### ❖ Applying our Definition of Politics

As we just learned, the modern word “politics” comes from an ancient Greek word that involved all the affairs of the entire community. In other words, politics is the sum of activities that allows communities of very different 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.



### ❖ Why is a Commitment to the Common Good Important?

Without a commitment to the common good, democratic political systems can't work. History strongly suggests that they will break down into chaos with individuals selfishly pursuing only their own interests. Alexis de Tocqueville was a Frenchman who traveled to the United States in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. During his visit, he made an important observation when he famously said that “despotism [absolute power] may govern without faith, but liberty cannot.” His point was that a government that protects personal freedom must turn to something other than coercion to ensure the common good and he, like the Founders, believed that faith rooted in organized religion was that thing.

*Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot.*

Alexis de Tocqueville

### ❖ Application to Modern Politics

So, what does all this mean for our understanding of modern politics? What does this suggest about our own commitment to the common good, the survival of democracy and personal freedoms in America?

**First**, we understand from its origin as a word that politics involves many different activities that help communities organize themselves to pursue happiness. Therefore, it includes the work of both elected officials and ordinary citizens. It is the work of legislators and judges. It is also the work of community groups, local school boards, and hospitals. Everyone must be committed to practicing good politics.

**Second**, we understand that it will be difficult to maintain a commitment to good if citizens lack personal virtue and a commitment to the common good.

### CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**Question:** Who must be involved in practicing good politics if democratic systems are to survive?

### ❖ The “Free Exercise” of Religion

One of the American Founders' central ways of encouraging the virtue on which good politics depends 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. They believed that the private exercise of religion is an important source of the virtue necessary for healthy democracies. They also believed that the public exercise of religion is not only a natural expression of private devotion (see Lesson 1), but an important source, perhaps the most important source, of ensuring the common good.

It appears that the American Founders were right. Almost 250 years after the founding of America, an overwhelming amount of evidence demonstrates that the ability of all citizens to freely exercise their faith contributes to good politics and promotes the common good.

### ❖ **What is Free Exercise Equality?**

This brings us to an important concept. **Free exercise equality** means that all individuals and communities must be treated equally under the law. It means that all individuals and communities, religious or not, are provided an equal right to conduct private and public activities. We know the Founders encouraged religion in public life. They just did not want any one religion to be established in law and forced upon all people through coercion. So, what are examples of voluntary private and public religious activities?

Examples of the **private** exercise of religion include the right to:

- Believe what one's own conscience says is true
- Attend houses of faith to worship with like-minded people
- Follow religious leaders that reflect one's own beliefs
- Conduct family activities and raise children consistent with one's faith
- Conduct one's business in ways consistent with one's faith
- Establish standards for membership in the religious community
- Leave a religious community

Examples of the **public** exercise of religion include the right to:







- Form political parties and run for office in ways that reflect religious teachings
- Purchase property to conduct religious activities
- Create and run charitable organizations
- Create and run institutions such as schools and hospitals in ways that reflect religious teachings
- Express religious ideas in places such as classrooms, courtrooms, and public media

In summary, religious freedom grants equality under the law to people of all faiths and no faith to act out their most deeply held beliefs in both private and public settings. Religious freedom gives all people, religious or non-religious, the right to speak openly and appeal to their fellow Americans for support of their ideas. The unwillingness to permit religion in the public square is itself a violation of human equality and religious freedom.

### **CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING**

**Question:** What is Free Exercise Equality? How is it violated?

Thus, true religious freedom requires that every individual must be free to do 3 things:

The Three Dimensions of Religious Freedom		
	 <b>EXPLORE</b>	Every individual must be free to <b>explore</b> life's great questions regarding ultimate things.
	 <b>EMBRACE</b>	Every individual must be free to <b>embrace</b> what his or her conscience suggests is true.
	 <b>EXPRESS</b>	Every individual must be free to <b>express</b> those truths in private and public life, alone or in community.

❖ **Free Exercise, Civil Liberties, and the Common Good**

What happens when religious freedom is both protected by law and embraced in society? What happens when people of faith are allowed to faithfully live out their beliefs for the benefit of society? The answer is—good things. Consider the following evidence:

- According to the Journal of Primary Care and Community Health, nearly 20% of hospital beds in community settings in the U.S. are provided by a religiously affiliated organization.
- In at least 10 U.S. states, more than 30% of hospital beds are in religious facilities.
- The US Department of Health and Human Services states that there are more than 8,000 faith-based child placing agencies serving children and families across the country.
- The Baylor University Institute for Studies of Religion surveyed 11 cities around the country and found that faith-based organizations provide 58% of emergency shelter beds in those cities.
- Those same organizations provided education, healthcare, job training, and addiction recovery to individuals for an estimated \$119 million in tax savings to the public in those same 11 cities.
- In 2016, a study by the Religious Freedom & Business Foundation estimated that religion contributes about \$1.2 trillion of socioeconomic value each year to the U.S. economy.

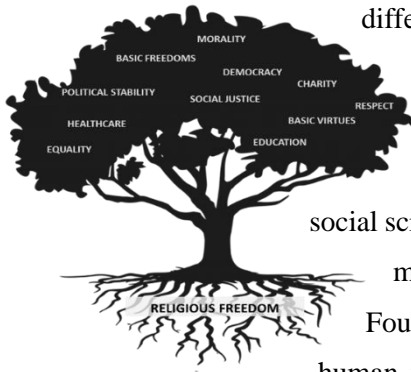
Of course, there are also public institutions, staffed by religious and non-religious people, that deliver these type of services. But as the above data suggest, religious institutions are vital to advancing the common good. When allowed to exercise religion freely, religious communities establish programs and institutions that benefit everyone. They help the sick and dying. They offer help to the poor and destitute. They empower the weak and marginalized. They feed the hungry. Religious freedom is good for everyone. Now imagine if the government or an aggressive private group was to force religious institutions to either abandon their religious principles or close their doors and end their services. The potential cost to taxpayers and harm to individuals would be immense.



## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

**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?

The benefits of religious freedom aren't confined to one area. As the illustration to the left suggests, many different positive outcomes can be traced to a commitment to religious freedom.



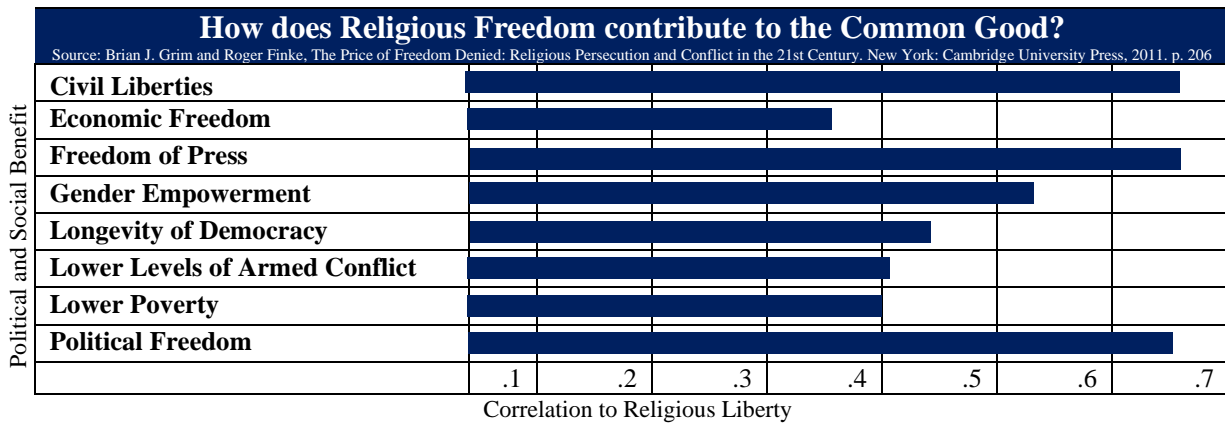
It is also true that religious freedom actually protects other **civil liberties**.

It provides a check on government **tyranny** and hostile private groups that might seek to deprive people of their basic freedoms. 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 is one such study that conclusively shows how religious liberty positively correlates with other civil liberties and benefits to society (see the chart below).



Based on the evidence presented by contemporary research and armed with an understanding of history, we can confidently say 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.

## CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING





**Questions:** What other civil liberties does religious freedom help protect?

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## The Benefits of Religious Freedom Summarized

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In summary, when properly understood and practiced, religious freedom is a foundational political freedom that benefits everyone in society in at least four distinct ways:

	<b>Equality</b>	Religious freedom promotes equality by maintaining everyone's right to follow their conscience and live out their most closely held beliefs.
	<b>Dignity</b>	Religious freedom insists on universal human dignity that reinforces democratic ideals where all individuals are valued and respected.
	<b>Protection</b>	Religious freedom combats government tyranny and social hostility by acknowledging a higher power to which all are accountable.
	<b>Flourishing</b>	Religious Freedom allows religious groups and individuals to provide public services that benefit everyone in society.

