

Youth Culture Lesson
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Freedom and Faith: Are Christians Being Persecuted?

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What Happened:

A Muslim college student alleges the school he attends, George Washington University Law School, is discriminating against him and other Muslims. The catch: George Washington is a Catholic university.

In a complaint filed at the Washington, D.C., Office of Human Rights, John Banzhaf says Muslim students “must perform their prayers surrounded by symbols of Catholicism...which many students find inappropriate.” He alleges that Muslims are required to hold prayer services at the school’s cathedral or one of its many chapels.

A day later, another complaint involving religion was filed hundreds of miles away, this one alleging an Alabama high school was airing prayers via loudspeaker before its home football games.

“It is coercive and inappropriate to ask students to listen while a prayer is delivered at athletic events,” says Stephanie Schmitt of the Freedom From Religion Foundation. “This is especially disturbing given the young age of these students.”

Religious freedom—and exactly what the phrase means—has been a hot-button issue for decades, and the conversation seems to get a bit more heated every year. The First Amendment forbids the government from establishing an official religion or impeding folks from worshipping as they wish. Still, exactly how does religious freedom appear in an increasingly multicultural and secular society?

Some believe the separation between church and state—between the government and religion—should be high and wide: Courts displaying depictions of the Ten Commandments or city parks that allow Christmas displays have been increasingly under fire. Public schools are not allowed to encourage organized prayer, and some advocates believe religious minorities should not be exposed to expressions of Christianity at all.

Others argue freedom of religion was neither intended to strip away religious expression, nor should the country be required to dismiss the impact that faith has had on the nation, these advocates say. As such, much of our coinage still includes the national motto “In God We Trust” (established in 1956), and the Pledge of Allegiance still includes the phrase “Under God” (added in 1954).

Things get even messier when it comes to private institutions or optional events. Should George Washington University be required to set aside a room free of Christian imagery for its Muslim students? While praying in a public Alabama high school may be inappropriate, would prayer before a sporting event—an event no one is required to attend—also be barred?

Talk About It:

Do you have friends who aren't Christian? Do you try to be sensitive to their beliefs? Are they sensitive to yours?

As Christians, we're told to spread the gospel and stand proudly for what we believe. Can that attitude go hand-in-hand with religious sensitivity and diversity? Is it possible to be proud of your own faith while still respecting the religious rights and beliefs of others?

Do you think Christians should be more sensitive to other people's beliefs? Are Christians being picked on unfairly these days? Where should the line be drawn between freedom of religion and freedom from religion?

If you lived in a country where Christians were a minority, what sort of rights would you hope for from the country in question? Say you went to a Muslim university: Would you hope or expect the university to set aside a room for you to pray?

What the Bible Says:

“If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all” (Isa. 7:9).

“And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher. That is why I am suffering as I am. Yet I am not ashamed, because I know whom I have believed...” (2 Tim. 1:11-12).

“Blessed are you when men hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man” (Luke 6:22).

“Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice; mourn with those who mourn. Live in harmony with one another. Do not be proud, but be willing to associate with people of low position. Do not be conceited” (Rom. 12:14-16).