

## Religious and Free

Contributed by Wes Riddle  
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Faith and freedom coexist in Western Civilization, not as adversaries as some would have it but in a symbiosis. Faith begets freedom and freedom, faith. When Thomas Jefferson declared the self-evident truth that all men are created equal, he presumed to speak to a people steeped in a certain kind of learning. Self-evidence requires thinking after all. People aren't all the same height, weight, color, strength, skill, wealth, IQ or anything. The proposition he makes is accepted as truth only in terms of moral equality. The moral worth of every single individual under heaven is such that rights inhere in them—from a street sweeper to the bank president, from unemployed to self-employed or retired, from blue collar to white collar, from penniless to rich. The proposition is only accepted as truth by Western societies and cultures that emerged through hundreds of years of historic experience with Christianity. Ultimately individuals have rights—rights bound to be respected, because they are children of God and made in his image and likeness. It may come as surprise to some people today to learn that the most basic and common standards of conduct are all directly linked to systematic codes of behavior based on the morality stemming from religion. "Ye shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free" in one sense alludes to an enlarged physical realm for action, opportunity and a realized potential when (and only when) a majority of people aren't stealing your stuff; ripping off your limbs; accosting wives, husbands, sons and daughters; tearing down fences; and burning down your house and barn. If Western societies continue to secularize without regard for religion, then they do so benefiting from a residual good will and habits instilled by millions of people over centuries, who lived their religion and fought to live it; and fought again to keep the freedoms won, in order to follow their faith according to conscience so long as they did no harm to others. It is interesting that so many years removed from the factual dependence of freedom and legitimacy of civil authority on religion, that we have come to view religion and its expression as being dependent somehow on secular authority for legitimacy. Many see freedom as somehow threatened by religious exercise, whether in the public square or on private compounds, instead of seeing religious life as an outgrowth of freedom and the most concrete emanation of freedom possible. Metaphysically, one has to ask whether life has a purpose external to materiality. If so then it is first and foremost the province of religion and spirituality. If not, then life is all a matter of the state belonging to the state. Fortunately a few states like Texas have court jurisprudence friendly towards parental rights and religious liberties, and the Texas Supreme Court has upheld again and again that religious institutions possess autonomy free from significant oversight by state agencies and courts. The recognition is vital to promoting liberty as understood by Thomas Jefferson and the other Founders. Its presumption is deference by the state to God's own purpose for every human being and the individual's prerogative-imperative to seek and find, and to pursue life's spiritual journey. Any other ordering in terms of respect or priority vis-à-vis the secular state and religion descends into fascism, communism or an autocracy where freedom dies. Fortunately faith is substantial and hardly powerless, and the greatest achievements in American secular freedom were accomplished on the heels as it were, after a season of revival. The Great Awakening fueled support for ideas animating the American Revolution. The Second Great Awakening served as ideational basis for changes leading to women's suffrage and an end to slavery. Revivalism led to labor reform and the amelioration of urban problems after the period of rapid industrialization. Now is time for hope and fervent prayer for yet another great Revival to reclaim the legacy of freedom and to meet the unprecedented challenges facing us in the twenty-first century: May future generations be free enough to be religious; and may enough of them also be religious, so that all may keep their freedom.

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