

Benjamin Franklin Still Speaks To the Disenfranchised

Will writing this essay result in the government punishing me?

Probably not, thanks to our basic human rights outlined in the First Amendment.

Any history class will teach how the First Amendment revolutionized our society's toleration of freedom of expression by providing for freedom of press, religion, and speech. Benjamin Franklin was an influential advocate of such rights because, as his quote implies, an intellectual society is one that embraces different perspectives and viewpoints while maximizing integrity and honesty, and gives everyone equal access to freedom of expression. Those values are eternal and are applicable in any intellectual, scientific and political environment.

Benjamin Franklin's quote seeks to create a just and equitable government, which guarantees equal freedom to everyone, and demands self-regulation and self-restraint in the pursuance of liberty and free thought. This concept is especially important to both women and minorities, who have oftentimes been "stripped" of these rights and relegated to "separate and equal rights" often fraught with violence and abuse.

In present day America, women and minorities are achieving these rights by the abolition of "Jim Crow" laws, the enactment of "Brown vs. Board of Education," and laws forbidding gender and racial inequality. Unfortunately, women in other countries are still considered "unequal", and minority populations are robbed of their freedom of expression, as well as their right to defend their ideas that veer from the societal or religious norms.

On September 28, 2009, 157 people were killed in Guinea when police slaughtered opposition protestors. Women were further degraded, by stripping and raping them, merely for the “crime” of exercising freedom of speech, and for venturing away from their “subordinate second-class” status.

In the Middle East, Africa, Asia and South America, “honor killings,” which target women who deviate from their religious and family traditions and commit the sin of “self-expression,” freedom of action, and “self-determination,” go virtually unpunished. Many countries allow men to kill female relatives if the speech, behavior or gestures of the females “dishonor” the family. The “punishments” require no court of law; the women are murdered by their relatives and honor is ostensibly restored to the families. This violation of free speech terrorizes women to the extent that they are virtually “emotional and intellectual prisoners,” petrified to think or act independently.

“On September 7, 2009, a pants-wearing Sudanese journalist was convicted of “sensational dressing” and jailed.”¹ In societies where women are subjugated to the demands of reactionary governments, women’s freedoms of expression, including that of opinion and dress, are frequently compromised and punished.

Equally disappointing is the rise of hate groups, reactionary and neo-Nazi movements in America, whose aim is to “turn back the clock” and return to a more repressive, gender and racially biased society. However, the right to assemble and the right of free speech are nonetheless afforded these individuals, because justice must be inclusive and non-repressive in our legal framework. Franklin’s quote exemplifies freedom of thought; however, these hate groups negate the “spirit” of the words which indicate that no man may impinge on the rights of another.

Societies based on totalitarian and racial, religious, minority or gender biased human rights violations will eventually implode, and leave an intellectual and spiritual vacuum similar to a solar tsunami. Subjugation of human dignity and freedom of speech will result in a backlash of civil war, unrest and repression. Every day we see the results of the subjugation and human rights violations in our newspapers and electronic media. Basic inherent rights invoked by Benjamin Franklin in the aforementioned quote are principles, which would create a more just society while encouraging individual restraint and the equality of the human race.

Americans are fortunate to live in a country that attempts to provide women and minorities equal access to freedom of speech. However, these rights have resulted from the “evolution” of our society, judicial reinterpretation of the First Amendment, and adherence to the basic precepts of great thinkers like Benjamin Franklin. His writings helped create the framework to “right” basic human injustices and create a more inclusive society of free men and women. We can only hope that repressive governments can invoke the precepts of Benjamin Franklin, embrace social equality, self-regulation and social justice.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 "Journalist Released From Detention After Being Fined For Wearing Pants." September 7, 2009. Arabic Network For Human Rights Information. www.anbri.net