

# VERDICT

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## Toxic Religious Liberty: President Trump Takes the Conservative Religious Agenda to the International Stage

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President Trump gave short shrift to the United Nations Climate Action Summit, instead choosing to invest his time and energy in his administration's brand of religious liberty with [this speech](#).

Trump is calling for an international movement to end religious *persecution*, which is laudable, of course. But there is so much more in these speeches than meets the eye of the casual observer. They contained troubling messages for the many religious believers and nonbelieving Americans who don't share the twin policy agendas of conservative evangelicals like Vice President Mike Pence: anti-abortion and anti-LGBTQ.

It often seems as though Trump is reading from a sermon rather than a presidential script when he wanders into what he calls religious liberty. Take this passage, for example, in which he turns the United States into a theocracy:

The United States is founded on the principle that our rights do not come from government; they come from God. This immortal truth is proclaimed in our Declaration of Independence and enshrined in the First Amendment to our Constitution's Bill of Rights. Our Founders understood that no right is more fundamental to a peaceful, prosperous, and virtuous society than the right to follow one's religious convictions.

Actually, contrary to Trump's assertions, neither the First Amendment nor the Constitution name God as the author of our government, or as the source of all rights. The Constitution was drafted by men, who thankfully had a healthy distrust of humans holding power. It was designed to avoid the tyranny that results from accumulations of power by dividing power centers, including the branches of government, the states and federal government, and the union of power between church and state. That generation understood the tyranny of state-sponsored religion; many of their forebears had escaped oppression in England, Scotland, and Europe generally.

James Madison drafted the First Amendment and, before that, his *Memorial and Remonstrance*, where he warned against a government that favors any one religion:

Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects? that the same authority which can force a citizen to contribute three pence only of his property for the support of any one establishment, may force him to conform to any other establishment in all cases whatsoever?

No scholar of constitutional history, Trump has utterly ignored Madison's wise warning. He typically means by "religious belief" the conservative Christian beliefs that would outright ban abortion and LGBTQ rights. He and his administration endorse the elimination of abortion and pretend that *Roe v. Wade* has already been overturned by the United States Supreme Court. He treats the "born and unborn" as equivalent in their rights. His administration has even gone so far as to **join other countries** like Saudi Arabia in opposing abortion as a right.

The Trump administration has gone out of its way to be cruel to LGBTQ individuals as it attempts to implement the worldview of those like the Rev. Franklin Graham, who Trump copiously praised in his religious liberty speech. Graham was the one who told presidential candidate Mayor Pete Buttigieg he needed to repent for being gay. Buttigieg's line that his quarrel is not with him "but his Creator," was a brilliant reminder that plenty of good Christians support rights for LGBTQ.

The Trump administration seeks to legitimate discrimination against LGBTQ individuals in employment, including for-profit companies, to support states that financially support organizations that refuse to allow same-sex couples to adopt, and to traumatize and single out for negative treatment the trans community, in schools and the military. Those are the religious liberty "rights" this administration has fought for.

What I found particularly troubling in Trump's statements was that he announced a coalition of businesses for religious liberty. Let me guess: are these the businesses that endorse for-profit Hobby Lobby's use of its owners' religious beliefs about contraception to shape their female employees' health care benefits, without regard to the employees' own personal beliefs? Or others that are lobbying to ensure they don't have to let LGBTQ employees through their doors, or if they do make it through, that they can fire them with impunity for their sexual orientation or marriage partners? These aren't the religious or policy views of a majority of Americans, but they are those of one religious cohort.

Trump is casting himself as a fighter against persecution as cover to evangelize the world with very specific beliefs. And he wants to export this approach to the world. That is not the religious liberty of the constitutional framers. It's toxic religious liberty and Madison warned us about it.

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