



Written by [Joe Wolverton, II, J.D.](#) on July 22, 2010

Obama Changes “Freedom of Religion” to “Freedom of Worship”

Well into the 20th century, coal miners in the United Kingdom and the United States carried canaries into coal mines as an early-warning signal for the leakage of toxic gases including methane and carbon monoxide.

The canaries, being more sensitive of the presence of such dangerous elements, would become sick before the miners, thus affording the human workers a chance to escape or put on protective respirators before falling ill themselves.

In our own time, as Americans toil to make ends meet in the “salt mines” of the world, there are various groups of our fellow citizens who act as canaries, sentinels who monitor the presence of threats to our precious freedoms and the sacred liberty by which we are made free.



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One of our most cherished and essential freedoms is protected by First Amendment: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” This is the first of the slate of five freedoms in the First Amendment that are given shelter from assault by the government.

Lately, if the canaries of liberty are to be trusted, key members of the Obama administration and the President himself have begun using a nuance of language when describing our freedom of religion in a such a way that indicates a shift away from the fullness of the right as expressed by our Founders and toward a narrower, more limited definition.

There is much to be feared from such a nearly imperceptible exchange of one phrase for another, especially in light of the subject of that change. From their study of the republics of history that were once paragons of freedom but devolved into dictatorships, our Founding Fathers knew that the descent from self-government to autocracy was gentle and sloping.

As James Madison warned in a speech to the Virginia Ratifying Convention on June 16, 1788: “There are more instances of the abridgment of the freedom of the people by gradual and silent encroachments of those in power than by violent and sudden usurpations.”

Are we experiencing now one of Madison’s “gradual and silent encroachments” with regard to our freedom of religion? The answer seems to be found in the number of coughing canaries flying frantically out of the mineshafts.

According to reports published by a few special-interest groups, beginning with his speech at the



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memorial service for the servicemen killed at Fort Hood, Texas, by Nidal Hasan on November 5, 2009, President Obama has ceased referring to America's "freedom of religion" and begun praising our "freedom of worship." The substitution has been parroted in addresses given by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, as well.

Ashley Samelson, international programs director for the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty, wrote an article in [First Things](#) magazine stating, "To anyone who closely follows prominent discussion of religious freedom in the diplomatic and political arena, this linguistic shift is troubling. The reason is simple. Any person of faith knows that religious exercise is about a lot more than freedom of worship. It's about the right to dress according to one's religious dictates, to preach openly, to evangelize, to engage in the public square. Everyone knows that religious Jews keep kosher, religious Quakers don't go to war, and religious Muslim women wear headscarves-yet 'freedom of worship' would protect none of these acts of faith."

Anyone familiar with President Obama's penchant for soft-pedaling the Judeo-Christian plank in the platform of American society, especially in the presence of Muslims would not be surprised by this turn of phrase. President Obama has taken it as a personal mission to repair relations with the Islamic world, assuring those nations that America will not use 9/11 as a pretext for meddling in their peculiar domestic policy positions.

In matters of our inviolable right to practice our religion free of government abridgement thereof, changes in words and phrases are inexcusable. The right to practice a religion involves so many aspects of daily life that would not be covered by the "right to worship," which is a vague expression without the scope sufficient to keep the faithful safe from persecution or proscription.

As [Catholic Online](#) rightly assessed:

Let's be clear, however; language matters when it comes to defining freedoms and limits. A shift from freedom of religion to freedom of worship moves the dialog from the world stage into the physical confines of a church, temple, synagogue or mosque. Such limitations can unleash an unbridled initiative that we have only experienced in a mild way through actions determined to remove of roadside crosses, wearing of religious t-shirts and pro-life pins as well as any initiatives of evangelization. It also could exclude our right to raise our children in our faith, the right to religious education, literature or media, the right to raise funds or organize charitable activities and the right to express religious beliefs in the normal discourse of life.

In the article mentioned above, Ms. Samuelson notes that across the globe, the natural right to practice the religion of one's own choosing is being alienated. Samuelson writes, "In France, students at public schools cannot wear headscarves, yarmulkes, or large crucifixes. The European Court of Human Rights has banned crucifixes from the walls of Italian schools."

Surprisingly, even the leftist *Washington Post* took note of the potentially catastrophic variation in the language of freedom. An article on religion in the paper stated, "Knox Thames, director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom — a Congress-controlled body tasked with monitoring religious freedom abroad — spoke at a recent briefing about the worry, reportedly saying he sees a change in lingo and that it's not an accident."

Using a similar metaphor to my own "canary in the mineshaft," during testimony given before the House Subcommittee on International Religions, Human Rights and Oversight, Georgetown professor Thomas Farr warned, "Those of us in the business of sniffing out rats know that this is a rhetorical shift



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to watch." Farr once led the State Department's International Religious Freedom Office.

This subtle substitution in phraseology is choking many of the civil rights canaries that pride themselves on their ability to detect even a whiff of the foul odor of the abolition of liberty. In fact, these fumes are interpreted as precursors of impending permanent policy proposals that will soon waft up from down below.

As indicated above, and as lovers of the safeguards of liberty contained in our founding charter, freedom of worship is but one narrow band in the brighter spectrum of religious freedom. A determined and purposeful fudging of the language of liberty could indicate a contraction of those rights that we hold dear and which permit us to approach deity in the manner we believe to be appropriate.

Is it not possible that by replacing the "freedom of religion" with the "freedom of worship" such things as the wearing of religious garments and jewelry, as well as the sending of our children to schools funded and founded by religious orders that teach religion along with other more secular subjects could be forbidden? Furthermore, could not the constriction of the freedom of religion foster "climates of impunity, where private religiously-motivated violence isn't prevented and punished?"

As we stand in the defense of our freedom, let us be cognizant of the canaries.



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