

# **Independence Daze**

## **The Ups and Downs of Freedom**

**By**

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**July 4, 2021**

Earlier this week, on the heels of America's Independence Day, China celebrated 100 years of Communist rule in what is the world's most populated nation. "A century ago China was declining and withering away in the eyes of the world," China President Xi Jinping said in his celebratory oration. "Today, the image it presents to the world is one of a thriving nation, that is advancing with unstoppable momentum toward rejuvenation." I have to agree, many of China's successes during recent years have been more than impressive. Bloomberg predicts, at the rate of its tremendous economic growth, it will become the world's largest economy, surpassing the U.S., by 2028.<sup>1</sup>

China is also excelling and may soon dominate today's fourth wave of the technological revolution, which includes advancements in artificial intelligence, big data, biotechnology, nanotech, robotics, the internet of things, telecommunications, and quantum computing.<sup>2</sup> According to the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace:

To help achieve this, China is eclipsing the United States as the world's largest overall (public and private) R&D investor. The Chinese government already outspent the U.S. government on intramural funding in 2017 (\$67.4 billion to \$47.1 billion), and Beijing likely exceeded U.S. gross domestic spending on R&D in 2018 (after sitting at roughly one-third below U.S. spending levels a decade ago).

The Chinese government is also taking Global Warming seriously and believes in the science proving it's caused by human activity, and it is actively working to change its habits to combat the problem and create a greener future. According to the World Economic Forum (a Geneva based NGO), after decades of industrialization China has dramatically improved its air quality with regulations to reduce its carbon emissions and by dismantling its coal-fired power plants. China is also implementing the United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, which is more than we can say for the U.S. According to the WEF, some of these measures include integrating "technologies in sewage treatment, waste utilization, ecological restoration, and artificial intelligence to solve issues from resource management to pollution," as well as for "tackling desertification."<sup>3</sup> Some of China's biggest tech companies have also formed the Green Digital Finance Alliance, which "aims to use digital technology to advance green finance." And, according to the Happy Planet Index, China's ecological footprint is half that of the U.S., despite it having a much larger population. Although income inequality there seems to be growing, it's nowhere near what it is in the U.S., and today, most the country's citizens are better off financially than they were just two decades ago.

Yet, despite all these successes, China still has a miserable human rights record. Just last year, as Amnesty International reminds us, life there "was marked by harsh crackdowns on human rights defenders and people perceived to be dissidents, as well as the systematic repression of ethnic

minorities.”<sup>4</sup> In addition to reprimanding Chinese health officials for issuing warnings about the coronavirus outbreak in Wuhan, where it began, and the disturbing clampdown on freedom of expression in Hong Kong, Amnesty says, “Stringent restrictions on freedom of expression continued unabated. Foreign journalists faced detention and expulsion, as well as systematic delays to and refusals of visa renewals. Chinese and other tech firms operating outside China blocked what the government deemed politically sensitive content, extending its censorship standards internationally.”<sup>5</sup>

I could go on about China’s poor human rights record, but I won’t. My purpose in bringing it up here is to point out what should be an existential concern regarding our nation’s failing democracy and for democracies around the world, that freedom doesn’t seem necessary for a nation or its citizens to prosper. Certainly, many of its successes are the result of the nation’s participation in global Capitalism, but it’s government remains Communist and totalitarian. President Xi abolished term limits in 2018, setting himself up to be President for life. During his speech this week, Xi promised to “ensure social stability,” and to advance toward “peaceful national reunification” with Taiwan, but such stability and unification comes at the expense of individual freedom in totalitarian societies.

But why should a nation that is doing so well without freedom care in the least about our Western culture’s idealistic belief in inalienable human rights? Where has this belief gotten us? With income inequality on the rise, continued racist practices in our streets, a disastrous environmental record, the world’s worst response to COVID-19 (including the most number of cases and deaths), universities that give trigger warnings to frail students and pink slips to tenured professors who don’t, the ascent of an oppressive ideological cult on the far left to match the entrenched and intolerant ideologues on the far right, in a land where most people get their news from short quips on Facebook or 280 characters on Twitter, or from AI-algorithm-driven conspiracy theories on social media that appeal to our worst instincts, we have to ask, where have our freedoms gotten us in the world’s oldest democracy?

No wonder we are witnessing the emergence of the Cult of Wokeness, which has all but overtaken our own liberal religion: its adherents willing to punish and ostracize any minister, or member, or congregation that does not yield to their unforgiving and illiberal demands. In a hastily written public letter of condemnation regarding my book of dissenting opinions about the misdirection Unitarian Universalism is heading, hundreds of ministers debased, what they called, “predictable ‘freedom of speech’ arguments,” on the grounds that they are “weaponized to perpetuate oppression and inflict further harm.” Today, the leaders of our congregations and the leaders of our national Association sound more like China’s totalitarian President than the Enlightenment founders of both our nation and our religion who uplifted reason, freedom, and tolerance above all else. They now describe our traditional commitment to individual freedom, and to individual uniqueness, and our aversion to authoritarians, as our religion’s “trinity of errors,” and are cracking down on dissenters in the name of greater unity, what they call “the Beloved Community,” just like China’s Communist government.

Ours proports to be the freest nation on Earth yet has the largest percentage and number of its citizens in prison than any other country, even though we hold only five percent of the world's population. In recent years, the Republican party has gerrymandered voting districts to their advantage with unprecedented technological sophistication and are currently behind more than twenty bills that will make it more difficult, not easier, for Americans to vote, especially for those who tend to vote Democrat. And one of the great ironies in our own religion is at this year's Unitarian Universalist General Assembly, just last week, Georgia politician and voting rights activist Stacy Abrams gave a keynote address about letting everyone vote, even as the UUA leadership was trying to pass an amendment that would have effectively permitted them to put forward a single candidate as our Associational President, making elections unnecessary. This occurred even as they worked to publicly undermine the candidacy of an individual running for its Board of Trustees against their own chosen candidate. This would have been the first real election of any candidate to the UUA board in a decade, which they publicized as a "contested" election even though it hadn't yet taken place. By the UUA's definition, a contested election, rather than occurring after the votes are tallied, is any election that has more than once choice. Most of us would simply call that an election.

So how has a country like ours, let alone a liberal religion like ours, reached a point in history where there is such blatant disregard for freedom and democracy, the very principles both were founded upon? I will submit to you that it is because people like the idea of freedom more than they like freedom. Like the word sounds, *communities* are defined by what they share in common—common beliefs, common stories, common histories, common religion, common values, common genes, even common enemies. But freedom is for expressing our individuality, our differences, the things we may not share in common with everyone else. A free society tolerates such differences, such freedom, in order to guarantee nobody is oppressed. But most societies are afraid of freedom for the very reason that it is the antithesis of community, of commonality. Freedom leads to exceptions to the rules, and to exceptionalism, and to a distrust of authoritarians, all the things the UUA is now calling our "Trinity of Errors."

As Sigmund Freud said, "A great part of the struggles of mankind centers round the single task of finding some expedient (i.e., satisfying) solution between these individual claims and those of the civilized community."<sup>6</sup> Freud also said, as I have often repeated, "every individual is virtually an enemy of civilization"<sup>7</sup> and "civilization has to be defended against the individual, and its regulations, institutions and commands are directed to that task."<sup>8</sup> To be clear, individual fulfillment and growth is dependent upon having a strong degree of personal freedom, but such freedom often runs counter to the groupthink necessary to maintain a peaceful, if not docile, cooperative and cohesive community. Americans say ours is a free country, and sometimes say we are sending our children to fight and die for our freedoms, but our leaders mostly let the word "freedom" ring like the dinner bell of one of Pavlov's salivating dogs—as a reinforcing control mechanism, not a true ideal they aspire toward.

Philosophers have long defined humans as primarily a social animal, which would mean that when making a choice between freedom and belonging, we are more naturally inclined to choose belonging, even if it means sacrificing our own authenticity, our own freedom of expression, and it certainly makes us more inclined to resent and suppress the individual expression of others. As social psychologist Erich Fromm said, we choose to succumb to authoritarianism with one aim in mind, “to get rid of the individual self, to lose oneself; in other words, to get rid of the burden of freedom.”<sup>9</sup> Fromm says this in his aptly titled book, *Escape from Freedom*, about our innate fear of freedom because we know it can lead to us being ostracized. If we can’t overcome this fear, then our societies are doomed to become totalitarian.

For this same reason, 20<sup>th</sup> century social philosopher, Isaiah Berlin considered liberty and equality to be “irredeemably in conflict.”<sup>10</sup> This tension, this opposition between freedom and equality is something I first noticed and began articulating only recently, after the surprise reaction against my book, *The Gadfly Papers*. It was then I realized that for some the attainment of equality, in which everyone has about the same amount of prosperity and is treated about the same by society, requires that we also think the same and act the same as everyone else, which further requires the suppression of individual expression. This kind of equality, based on the principle that everyone should be mostly the same, is accomplished by suppressing individual freedom, whether it is a free press or internet communications in China, the oppression of dissenters in Hong Kong, or showing freethinking ministers the door in the UUA.

On the other hand, individual freedom left unchecked can lead to the enormous income inequality we’re seeing almost everywhere today, as well as to the rampant irrational delusional thinking on both the right and the left. Berlin offers one explanation for this phenomenon in his book, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, saying that when “Individualism grows to excess,” it “dissolves the ties that unite the mass of the people,”<sup>11</sup> and to “the disintegration of the tightly knit ‘organic’ State,”<sup>12</sup> which ends “either in anarchy” or in “the unchecked liberty of the free peoples, which is the worst of all tyrannies.”<sup>13</sup> That’s quite a statement, that freedom leads to a tyranny of the masses. Yet we see this being played out today, in our society’s widespread belief that people should be free to believe the most baseless claims without being questioned or contradicted. Those who dare disagree with such madness might quickly be destroyed on unregulated social media, without trial or even the presumption of innocent until proven guilty. Today, those who are free in our country are using their freedom to dominate our national discourse.

So we have two competing social values, liberty and equality, and two competing individual needs, freedom and belonging, which means we must either learn to maintain a delicate balance between the two or else sacrifice one for the other. Today, in the United States, those on the extreme left want to sacrifice individual freedom in the hope of establishing greater equality. Meanwhile, those on the extreme right prefer to guarantee certain freedoms, especially economic freedoms that promise unregulated prosperity for a few at the expense of others and the environment.

Yet, to paraphrase an old saying, *we can't live with freedom, and we can't live without it*, at least not if we subscribe to Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs. Societies that focus mostly on the lower part of his pyramid—providing us with our basic physiological needs, safety and security, and our need to belong—tend to emphasize equality and belonging. Societies that focus the upper portion—our need for esteem and self-actualization—tend to emphasize liberty and freedom. But in countries like Russia and China, where totalitarian governments control the distribution of wealth and resources to meet the basic needs of their citizens, human rights go out the window. Many of their citizens may not care, so long as they are taken care of. But if you happen to value freedom and are courageous enough to express your dissenting views, life can become miserable. On the other hand, in countries like ours, where people are free to pursue their own interests and to say and believe whatever they want, more of us are struggling just to make a basic living.

But the point not to be missed in all of this is that even though many of us want to be free—free to express ourselves, free to go where we wish, free to participate in the full benefits of society, and free to fully unfold as human beings—many of us, even some of the most oppressed among us, are afraid of freedom and fear and resent those of us who are or, at least, strive to be free. To be free is to risk being left out of society, potentially even being persecuted and punished, because we dare to authentically express ourselves. So, this 4<sup>th</sup> of July, as we consider what it means to be truly independent, we must not only consider the costs of freedom, but honestly how committed we really are to this principle. We say we want freedom. We say we want to live in a free society where others are free. But do we really? Or do we want to control what others do, what they say, what they think?

It's an important question for our society, which is founded upon the Enlightenment belief in human happiness, that every individual ought to be relatively free to pursue their own purposes and to make up their minds. The pursuit of happiness that our Constitution guarantees means more than just good feelings, it means creating a society in which it is possible to have all our needs met, our basic physiological needs for food, clothing, housing, health, security, and inclusion, as well as our need to fully unfold as individuals. A society that succeeds only in providing some of these needs is a failed society. The humanistic ethic requires us to advance both human welfare and individual unfolding, both the bottom and the top of Maslow's pyramid of needs.

It is also an important question for us today because many on both the Left and the Right in our society have decided that guaranteeing freedom to those they disagree goes too far. This is true of both our religion and our nation, both of which are in an existential crisis. If we are no longer going to be a free society, if Democracy is now considered an evil that gives a voice to our enemies, then what kind of society and religion will we become? If totalitarian countries like China can look at the mess our Democracy has led to and scoff at us, even as their society is prospering in unprecedented ways, with no such commitment to human rights and freedoms, how are we to respond? How are we to justify continuing to defend our way of life to the rest of the world when we are failing to achieve our own greatest aspirations?

I believe, as Unitarian Universalists, and as Americans, we must continue to pursue these values and to demonstrate, the best we can, why our commitment to individual freedom of expression is among the greatest of all human dreams. Without freedom, even if we have all our other needs met—healthy food, security, and belonging—what would we be the point of living? What would be the point of planting a seed in good soil and watering it every day if it is never to flower? China may be doing well right now, but if its citizens cannot flower as individuals, cannot fully unfold, what's the point? On the other hand, American democracy may be in trouble, and authoritarians may have overtaken our liberal religion, but as a great American once said about another existential American Crisis:

THESE are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of their country; but [one] that stands by it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph. What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value. Heaven knows how to put a proper price upon its goods; and it would be strange indeed if so celestial an article as FREEDOM should not be highly rated.

On this 4<sup>th</sup> of July, I still say, let freedom ring.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/2021-china-accelerated-growth/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://carnegieendowment.org/2019/10/10/competing-with-china-on-technology-and-innovation-pub-80010>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2018/04/china-is-going-green-here-s-how/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.amnesty.org/en/countries/asia-and-the-pacific/china/report-china/>

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *Civilization and its Discontents*, Dover Publications, Inc., New York, NY, 1930, 1994, p. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Freud, Sigmund, *The Future of an Illusion*, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, NY, 1961, 1989, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

<sup>9</sup> Fromm, Erich, *Escape from Freedom*, (Avon Books, Heart Corporation, New York, NY, 1941, 1965), p. 173.

<sup>10</sup> Grayling, A.C., *The History of Philosophy*, Penguin Press, New York, NY, 2019, p. 459.

<sup>11</sup> Berlin, Isaiah, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2000, p. 84.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.