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A statue honoring Quaker religious martyr Mary Dyer as a "witness for religious freedom" stands outside the Massachusetts State House in Boston. (Wikimedia Commons/Daderot)



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Vice President JD Vance spoke at the [International Religious Freedom Summit](#) last week. There was much in his speech with which any of us would agree. But, Lord, did he get his history upside down!

Vance said he intended to reflect not only on the Founding Fathers' words about religious liberty "but especially on those [words] of their own intellectual forbears, the Church Fathers of classical Christianity, to which we owe the very notion of religious liberty."

"It is, I think, a conceit of modern society that religious liberty is a liberal concept but we know that religious freedom flows from concepts central to the Christian faith in particular, the free will of human beings and the essential dignity of all peoples."

Vance mentioned Jesus' teaching that we should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's" and invoked a beautiful letter Tertullian wrote to the Roman consul in the third century. Vance quoted an unnamed Christian apologist (it was Lactantius) [who wrote](#) to the Emperor Constantine: "Religion cannot be imposed by force; the matter must be carried on by words rather than blows."

Vance added, "Of course, this line of thought runs from the early Church Fathers to now, the modern era."

Of course.

It is true, as Vance noted, that some of the founders such as Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were familiar with the writings of the fathers. And it is true that Constantine was relatively tolerant for his day, except for the Jews whom he hated and persecuted.

But a lot happened between Constantine's reign and the Constitutional Convention of 1787. Passing over 14 centuries of religious intolerance and persecution by saying "this line of thought runs" from one to the other in order to deny that religious liberty has a liberal pedigree is intellectually dishonest.

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Does the name Mary Dyer mean anything to Vance? She was executed on Boston Common in 1660 because she was a Quaker. Bonus question for the veep: When was the Congregational Church disestablished in Massachusetts? 1833, after Jefferson and Adams had died.

Has Vance ever heard of a place called Tyburn? It is the spot in London where Catholics were executed in Tudor England. Marble Arch marks the spot today. In the brief reign of Queen Mary, a Catholic, Oxford witnessed the burning of Thomas Cranmer and other Protestants. Is that part of "this line" running from Constantine to now?

Perhaps our vice president is unfamiliar with the workings of the Spanish Inquisition, an arm of the state run by the church, and used to hunt and persecute Jews and other heretics.

Ever run into an Albigensian, Mr. Vance? No, they were murdered in the Cathar Crusade in 13th-century France because they, too, were deemed heretics. And there were the Crusades to the Holy Land which were not about spreading tolerance.

Vance might be pleased to know that there were other books in Jefferson's library than those penned by Tertullian. I think it is safe to say that our nation's third president was more influenced by the writings of John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau than he was by any early Christian writers.

He did have a Bible, of course, but he mutilated it, cutting out those passages which involved Jesus performing miracles, including the Resurrection. Jefferson considered Jesus a great teacher, but not the Son of God, making Jefferson a Deist. He was not sent to Tyburn. And there were more proximate thinkers than Tertullian who brought about the religious tolerance that allowed the sage of Monticello to die in his own bed.

The emergence of religious tolerance and, later, religious liberty in the second millennium is not only a story about ideas. It is the story of societies wanting an end to religious strife. Average people who couldn't tell a Church Father from a potato patch were horrified by the carnage of religious wars. Politicians, who are never fixated only on getting their ideas right, recognized the need for the gifts of people

whose religious beliefs were unorthodox.

The growth of secularism is not only a story of intellectual and moral decline. The removal of ultimate issues from public life has often been experienced as a civic blessing.



Pope Pius IX, who reigned 1846-78 (CNS file photo)

One of the last opponents of religious liberty was the Roman Catholic Church, in which our vice president now worships. He would do well to study the [Syllabus of Errors](#). Pope Pius IX decreed that it was heretical to assert: "In the present day it is

no longer expedient that the Catholic religion should be held as the only religion of the State, to the exclusion of all other forms of worship."

Also condemned was this proposition: "The Roman Pontiff can, and ought to, reconcile himself, and come to terms with progress, liberalism and modern civilization."

These were the magisterial teachings that led to the silencing of Jesuit Fr. John Courtney Murray in the 1950s.

It is worth noting, too, that the church's current teaching on religious liberty is not situated exclusively in "the free will of human beings" but in their obligation to search for the truth. "It is in accordance with their dignity as persons — that is, beings endowed with reason and free will and therefore privileged to bear personal responsibility — that all men should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth," states [*Dignitatis Humanae*](#), the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Religious Liberty. "They are also bound to adhere to the truth, once it is known, and to order their whole lives in accord with the demands of truth."

Vance's lousy attempt at historiography was not the only jarring part of his speech. "We know in America faith nurtures our communities," the vice president said. "At home and abroad it fosters a love for one's neighbor, it inspires generosity and service, it calls us to treat one another with dignity, to lift up those in need, to build nations grounded in moral principle."

I could not have penned a finer indictment of the Trump administration's early executive actions than these words of Vance's.

As Catholics, we can welcome the fact that our vice president is interested in theology and that he makes public theology a central feature of his public utterances. Vance's handling of this subject matter, however, is so haphazard, he betrays the fact he is an ingenu or a demagogue. Or both.