

On December 15, 1791, the first ten amendments to the Constitution of the United States of America were declared in force. Article I: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

This does not mean that only Christians may practice their religion without harassment or legal impediments. Islam is also a religion. Hindus may believe as they wish and put their beliefs in practice. Native Americans are not prohibited from following their beliefs. Whatever our myths regarding religion may be, we are free to follow them. Or, so we were until a few days ago, when this country’s poor excuse for a leader decided to ignore the Constitution of the United States, the document he swore to uphold less than ten days ago.

So, all of us who care about human rights, who believe in freedom of religion and freedom from religion if we so choose, now have a decision to make. Do we believe in the basic tenets of our country as expressed in the document that is the basis of our governmental system? Or, do we put our faith in demagoguery and leaders who are seemingly driven only by self-interest and egoism?

I know where we stand. Martin Niemöller, a German Protestant pastor expressed the situation well in his famous words spoken after the end of World War II. He said, “First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Trade Unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—Because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak for me.”

So, today and from now on, I am speaking for the Muslims, both native born citizens of this country and immigrants. We must not fall into the trap of condemning a group of people for the action of a few who do not represent the values of the majority. The same can be said of Christians, Jews, Hindus, and other religious groups and of secular groups as well. That said, when a “leader” of a powerful country such as ours shows such poor judgement, disrespect for other people, and foolhardy behavior, it is time for many of us here and many more in other parts of the world to fear for our democracy.