

An executive order churches didn't need

Trump says pastors are bullied and silenced. That comes as a surprise to me.

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [June 7, 2017](#) issue



President Trump at Liberty University on May 13, 2017. Photo courtesy REUTERS/Yuri Gripas.

When an interviewer once asked Abraham Joshua Heschel what he believed his greatest gift was, the rabbi replied, “My ability to be surprised.” Heschel was referring to the human sense of wonder. Without awe, wonder, and amazement, he reasoned, no reverence is possible.

It turns out that our brains gravitate to surprise as much as our best religious yearnings do. Neuroscientists have discovered that we derive more pleasure from surprises than from other sensations. When human subjects in a Baylor College of Medicine study received computer-generated squirts of either tropical fruit juice or tap water in their mouths, scientists viewing the MRIs noted that it was the element of surprise—not the pleasurable effect of one taste over the other—that elicited the

greatest surges of dopamine. More dopamine reached the anterior cingulate cortex of the brain when unexpected stimuli triggered a reflexive neural response.

The power of surprise is one of the reasons live sporting events keep attracting people. There is a dopamine rush every time a baseball goes flying out of the park. It's also why we can't tickle ourselves. Unpredictability is the key to tickling, and our brain cancels out the element of surprise when we attempt to tickle ourselves.

By intent or impulse, Donald Trump has made surprise a regular feature of his style of governance. The unpredictable nature of many of his utterances continues to yield national surges of dopamine. People across the political spectrum twitch enthusiastically or nervously with every tweet and proclamation.

When Trump spoke last month after signing his executive order on religious liberty, his words caught many believers by surprise. "For too long the federal government has used the power of the state as a weapon against people of faith," said Trump. "We will not allow people of faith to be targeted, bullied, or silenced anymore. Under my administration . . . we are giving our churches their voices back."

I quickly did a mental inventory of my own congregation—a politically diverse menagerie—wondering if anyone in the mix even remotely felt that we Christians are facing state-sponsored oppression in America. I couldn't think of a soul. I asked some friends in ministry if any of them could relate to the notion that the government had somehow stolen the voice of the church and bullied its adherents. All of them seemed alarmed by the suggestion.

This dismay shouldn't surprise. Despite the president's threat to "totally destroy" the 1954 Johnson Amendment, with its prohibition against tax-exempt religious organizations endorsing political candidates, the executive order was empty of all such language. It lacked the punch of Trump's Rose Garden rhetoric—just as it will prove irrelevant to most congregations. This may reflect the fact that nearly 80 percent of all Americans, and nearly 90 percent of evangelical leaders, oppose the idea of clergy endorsing political candidates. Turning the church into a political organization is apparently of little interest to most believers.

Novelist Raymond Chandler once wrote of passionate love becoming routine: "The first kiss is magic. The second is intimate. The third is routine." It may be that our president's surprise utterances will eventually become so routine that the dopamine rush inside our nation's anterior cingulate cortex will all but disappear.

FOLLOWING UP (Updated April 6): A \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill passed by Congress March 22 and signed by President Trump the next day did not make changes to the Johnson Amendment, a tax law provision that prohibits tax-exempt organizations from endorsing candidates in electoral politics. “Those who depend on houses of worship and community nonprofits can breathe a sigh of relief, as concerted efforts to weaken the long-standing law that keeps the 501(c)(3) sector free from partisan campaigning were rebuked yet again,” said Amanda Tyler, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, in a statement. The BJC counted more than 4,500 faith leaders from all 50 states and more than 5,500 nonprofits who petitioned Congress to keep the Johnson Amendment in place.

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