



In an Era of Surveillance, Privacy Matters

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I've spent a good portion of my life waiting in lines at the airport, and about six months ago, I noticed a change. When I approached the TSA agent for screening, they asked me to take off my hat and mask and look directly into a camera. As I turned, I noticed a sign with small lettering behind their desk. But I couldn't read it well, so I obeyed. Once past the agent, I read the sign and learned that the camera had captured my biometric data using "AI facial recognition technology." This new, routine collection of my data has prompted me to consider how our right to privacy and our faith are intertwined.

Faith and surveillance came to the forefront of the American imagination after 9/11, when the FBI implemented the PATRIOT Act by spying on American Muslim community leaders under the guise of "national security." While this Act ultimately expired, its implementation sent a potent message: the federal government has the tools to surveil us and our faith communities.

Unfortunately, the government continues to spy on its citizens. Section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act was also enacted after 9/11 and is still in effect. This provision authorizes the government to collect the communications of non-Americans located abroad without a warrant. This surveillance inevitably sweeps up Americans' private phone calls, emails, and text messages. Once collected, federal agents can review the communications of American citizens without a warrant, in violation of our constitutional rights. Intelligence agencies conduct more than 200,000 of these warrantless "backdoor" searches for Americans' private communications every year.

The new AI facial recognition devices used by TSA at airports also pose serious privacy concerns. TSA has refused to provide any information on how our data is collected, who has access to it, and what happens if our data is hacked. There's also concern surrounding bias in the facial recognition algorithm. And, as I personally experienced, TSA has failed to make it abundantly clear to passengers that we can opt out of using this technology.

Privacy is a prominent value upheld in the Bible. In many instances, Jesus enacts miracles, then asks the witnesses to not tell anyone what he just did. In the Gospel of Mark, for example, Jesus heals a man with leprosy and commands him, "See that you say nothing to anyone" (Mark 1:44). Jesus seems to require privacy to work miracles and act out his faith.

Losing our freedom to practice religion begins with losing our right to privacy. In almost every historical case of religious persecution by a government, privacy is the first right that is violated. It is critical that as a faith community we oppose all efforts to violate our privacy rights. As our Muslim brothers and sisters in the United States continue to disproportionately suffer from the unregulated surveillance state, it is our duty to fight alongside them and prevent governmental overreach.

Luckily, we have allies.

Fourteen Senators from both sides of the aisle sent a letter to Senate leadership in May urging restrictions on the use of facial recognition technology by TSA until rigorous Congressional oversight occurs. The House of Representatives recently voted to reform section 702 of the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to require a warrant before intelligence officers could read communications by American citizens. While the reform was ultimately rejected in a tiebreaking vote by Speaker Johnson, 212 Democrats and Republicans united to fight for our right to privacy.

As we move into the summer, I urge you to notice surveillance, and speak up when you feel your privacy is violated. And in the fall, vote for governmental leadership who takes your right to privacy seriously. We have work to do. Let's do it together.

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