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Is the United States hostile to religion?

Pat Perriello | Aug. 30, 2012 NCR Today

Real Clear Religion* in an article by Jeffrey Weiss [1] discusses a study done by the Family Research Council and the Liberty Institute concerning hostility to religion in the United States. In the study, the two organizations seek to show how hostile our country and its institutions have become toward religion.

It is interesting that according to Weiss, the study, designed to show such hostility, actually shows very little. Six hundred instances are discovered over a 10-year period, which equates to 60 a year in a country of 300 million people. Weiss notes that 400 people are struck by lightning each year. Moreover, if you look at the examples of hostility, he cites they could be considered bad judgment but rarely hostility. In addition, they are by and large addressed through our court system.

One must recognize that religious liberty is not absolute. Just as one cannot cry "Fire!" in a crowded theater unless there is a fire, the rights of others will always impinge on your right to do everything the way you might like. As has often been said, "Your freedom ends where my rights begin." Unfortunately, it seems that church leaders often fail to understand or accept the fact that their position might not always prevail.

In a case in Baltimore, the church went to court because the city wanted Catholic family planning clinics to have signs indicating they did not provide abortion services. The church won its case. The church cheered. The case is being appealed. If the church were to lose on appeal, I wonder if they will still be cheering?

Again, Weiss notes that all institutions are flawed. That includes the church. It is for this reason the courts are such a blessing in our government as a place where all parties have the opportunity to seek redress of grievances. One side does not always win, but every side has an equal right to make its case. One hopes the church does understand how democracy works and does not simply want to have its own positions enshrined into law.

The church used to understand religious liberty. The famous American Catholic theologian John Courtney Murray was so eloquent on this topic that his ideas were the basis for Vatican Council documents on religious liberty. He understood what freedom of conscience meant and what it meant to be free from religious coercion. A rereading of some of these official church documents might be helpful for those in leadership roles in the Church today.

Finally, I think all of us, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, should be grateful for the wisdom of the founding fathers and the First Amendment to our constitution. Consider how religious liberty is indeed being denied to millions of Christians and members of other religions throughout the world in often violent ways. The freedoms we have here are what have enabled our church to grow and thrive in a society that in an earlier age was indeed hostile to the church of Rome. Hopefully, we will choose to continue to be good citizens, staying true to our beliefs but respecting the beliefs of others as well.

**An earlier version of this blog post incorrectly identified the site on which the article originally ran.*

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Links:
[1] http://www.realclearreligion.org/articles/2012/08/28/much_ado_about_religious_liberty.html