NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Toleration & Respect

Michael Sean Winters | Sep. 14, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I had intended to write about the need for Americans ? our government, our diplomats and the rest of us ? to be quite unequivocal in both championing our right to free speech and in condemning the abuse of that right by those who denigrate the religion of others. I had intended to specifically frame this as an American issue, not just a Catholic issue. But, then I grabbed the morning paper and Melinda Henneberger beat me to the punch [1]. She makes the case I wanted to make and made it better than I could have done.

So, instead, I would like to focus a bit about our specifically Catholic views on such matters. Wednesday, Catholic University?s Institute for Policy Research & Catholic Studies joined with the USCCB and CRS to host a conference on the issues of international religious liberty. You can find the major texts delivered at the conference here [2]. I employ the plural ?issues? for a reason. As that conference made clear, the challenges to religious liberty are very different in different cultures. For example, as Henneberger noted, should we be surprised that Libyans who have lived under a totalitarian regime all their lives would not understand that a video could be made without government approval? The threats to religious liberty, and the correlative demand for religious tolerance, are different depending on the culture and context in which they arise.

Catholics can take pride in the fact that the leaders of our Church opposed the Iraq War which did so much to advance anti-Western feeling throughout the Arabic world. But, sadly, George W. Bush did not listen to the entreaties made to him by the U.S. bishops nor by the Holy Father. We know the sad consequences of that failure to listen in Iraq, the hundreds of thousands of Christians who have fled that country, but the spillover throughout the Mideast is just as real. Every time one of our soldiers did something disrespectful of Islam, another bundle of kindling was added to the fire of religious intolerance throughout the region.

Catholics must also be more forceful in their defense of Muslims here in the U.S., and then make sure the news of our support for their religious freedom get spread abroad. I have commented before that I applaud the efforts of people with whom I often disagree, such as Professor Robbie George, in these matters. Professor George has called out other groups who claim to be committed to religious freedom but who have betrayed that commitment by trafficking in anti-Islamic stereotypes. He and the Becket Fund [3]went after the Thomas More Law Center when the head of the latter organization sent out a tweet that suggested Islam was destroying America. I hope George will also use his influence with the Bradley Foundation, where he is a board member, to get them to stop funding other anti-Islamic groups.

There is a power in common witness. When you look back at the news reels and the photos from the Civil Rights marches, you almost always see a white Catholic cleric or sister walking arm-in-arm with black leaders. The monuments to the Righteous Gentiles found at Holocaust memorials also speak powerfully to the idea that religion can, and must, point us towards a greater humanism, or we betray our religion. The opening sentences of the Bible point to the common heritage of all persons and all Creation. The Second Vatican Council and all Popes since have gone out of their way to demonstrate that our commitment to Christ must, repeat must, issue in a commitment to the human person and to all human persons, without condition and without reserve. No one can demean, or worse, another in the name of the Church.

I am as firmly committed as anyone to the Christian creeds. I have no problem with Dominus Jesus, the 2000 decree from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith that reiterated the centrality and universality of the salvific mission of Christ and His Church. But, when our confidence in our own right belief leads us to denigrate, or to wink at the denigration, of the beliefs of others, we have grossly abused our faith. Of course, there is something intellectually scandalous about the idea that God Himself entered human history in this one person and moment, a scandal that was obvious to the first Christians. We should not be surprised that non-Christians still find our beliefs scandalous. Nor should we be surprised that many non-Christians look to the history of the Christian Church and perceive scandal too. I would suggest that the Inquisition and the Crusades look different to Jewish and Muslim memories than they do to Christian memories, and we would do well to reflect on that fact. Do we Catholics recognize, really, down in our hearts, the shame Christians brought on the Church in these sorry episodes?

?As Catholics, it is our faith in Jesus Christ and the truth of the human person that drives us to defend the religious rights of all peoples, communities and traditions,? said Cardinal Dolan in his address to the conference at CUA on Wednesday [4]. ?This is our belief in the imago Dei, central to Judeo-Christian revelation, cherished by other creeds as well, that every human person is created in God?s image and likeness, thus deserving dignity and respect.? Here we see clearly that as Catholics we have an additional and doctrinal basis for our commitment to religious tolerance and respect. We must go further than Locke. Or else, we betray not just our country and its finest traditions, but our faith.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/she-the-people/post/hillary-clinton-speaks-out-for-the-same-american-values-upheld-in-retracted-embassy-statement/2012/09/13/ccbf05f2-fdd6-11e1-b153-218509a954e1_blog.html
[2] http://iprcua.com/2012/09/12/international-religious-liberty/
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