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The crusade for religious liberty

Pat Perriello | Dec. 20, 2012 NCR Today

The Catholic bishops in the United States seem determined to hitch their wagon to the star of religious liberty. This is quite ironic in that the 2000-year history of the church is in no way a demonstration of acceptance or support for this democratic concept. The inquisitions, the burning of heretics, and the establishment of the church as the absolute authority throughout the Middle Ages were not events particularly evocative of the notion of religious liberty. Even today, we see the church determined to impose its will on governments in countries like Ireland and the Philippines.

Nonetheless, it appears from an article [1] from the *National Catholic Register* that religious liberty has become a major project of time, energy, and the expenditure of financial resources for the U.S. church. The effort also embraces an attempt to bring in the Catholic lay community to advocate for this distorted notion of religious freedom. It appears they believe they can use this dubious pathway to achieve greater power and influence over the government of the United States.

Their understanding of this concept appears to apply only to the Catholic church but does not really consider freedom for any other individual or group. I find their crusade so at odds with my understanding of the American tradition of religious liberty that I feel there should be a counter project espoused by Catholics to challenge the position of the bishops on this issue. A group needs to come forth to represent the views of Catholics who disagree with the direction of this project and who have a more accurate understanding of what religious liberty actually means in these United States.

For the present, let us just look at a few of the specifics that are mentioned in the article. Let's start with the overall rhetoric. The implication is that the United States is some third-world country or dictatorship that is out to crush religious freedom. They speak of the need to be a watchdog against the denial of religious liberty. They want to establish groups whose job it is to ferret out every incident of the denial of religious freedom. They speak of the erosion of religious liberty.

There are some legitimate policy differences, but to couch them in terms of the erosion of religious liberty is an attempt to sensationalize a minor controversy at best. Catholic institutions are in fact in possession of the free exercise of their religion. Unfortunately, they continue to operate with a narrow understanding of what freedom means. They might want to first exercise a bit of humility and understand that they are not in possession of the only worldview, and that in fact they may actually be able to learn something from listening to others.

The bishops are correct in some cases. The criminalization of immigration outreach is not in keeping with religious liberty. If there are cases of public employees being forced to perform same-sex marriages against their will, they should be challenged. But these incidents are about individuals making erroneous judgments. They should be addressed in the courts. That is what the court system is for and is part of what is right about our system of religious liberty, not what is wrong with it.

The overblown rhetoric continues on the issue of the church's role in the public debate. They speak of the church and its ideas being expelled from the public square. This language is almost laughable. Church leaders

are obviously busy about making their views known using every conceivable form of media. I don't see religious officials reluctant to speak their mind, and I don't see anyone trying to prevent them from doing so. Maybe, however, people would be more responsive to the bishop's ideas if they exhibited some level of respect for the ideas of others.

In the article, it is stated that freedom of religion is the first line of defense of the dignity of the human person. This is beautiful rhetoric. At its core, freedom of religion *is* about freedom for the individual. The problem is there is no indication that the church is interested in freedom for the individual, but only for the institution. They want to be able to operate and provide or deny services as they see fit. This is indeed freedom for them, but what about individuals to whom they deny legal services? What about their freedom? The church wants this freedom, but yet continues to seek and expect exemptions, waivers, tax breaks, etc. Can you really have it both ways?

The bottom line is that the institutional church has come to understand and embrace modern media and its often-deceptive methods of persuasion. They are willing to manipulate their own arguments and distort the arguments of others to further their own ends. Unfortunately, I see little evidence that they are willing to acknowledge that people other than themselves also have rights.

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