

Muslims & Religious Liberty

Michael Sean Winters | May. 30, 2012 Distinctly Catholic

I mentioned yesterday the very disturbing fact that the Catholic Governor of Kansas, Sam Brownback, signed an anti-sharia bill into law last week. I can scarcely make the case too strongly: The credibility of the USCCB on the issue of religious liberty is contingent on many things, but none more important than their willingness to loudly and repeatedly speak up on behalf of the religious liberty of our Muslim fellow citizens.

Sadly, the Kansas Catholic Conference has been AWOL, at least publicly, in the effort to beat back these outrageous laws. If you go to their website, there are lots of items pertaining to the HHS mandate. There is a rally planned at the state capitol. There is praise for religious liberty and conscience protection laws the state legislature passed which, strangely, only look at the issue through the lens of the HHS mandates which seems to put the lens behind the camera rather than the other way round. The USCCB has also neglected to mention the anti-sharia laws in its otherwise ample comments, suggestions and prayers for the Fortnight for Freedom.

The bishops have said repeatedly that they do not perceive the fight for religious liberty as a partisan issue, and that if some perceive it as such, there is nothing the bishops can do about it. After all, partisans will always try and put the statements of religious leaders to political advantage and the bishops are not responsible for such ill use of their statements. But, here is an obvious example of something the bishops can do to make their point more clearly. As in the case of focusing on the religious liberty difficulties with the anti-immigration laws, speaking plainly and clearly against these anti-sharia laws will help ensure that the bishops' campaign is truly seen as a religious liberty campaign and not an appendage to the Romney 2012 campaign.

[Commonweal has a fine post up](#) [1] by Greg Metzger that makes this case. (He also links to [another fine article on this topic by Rob Vischer](#) [2] that appeared at First Things.) He especially calls attention to a pernicious little organization named the Thomas More Law Center. The group, among other crazy things, filed a lawsuit charging that President Obama was violating the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment because the government bailed out insurance giant AIG, and AIG has a subsidiary in Bahrain, and in Bahrain, companies and everyone have to abide by sharia law, so President Obama was obviously using the bailout of AIG to promote Islamic jihad, or something like that. It is hard to know precisely what people are saying when they are frothing at the mouth.

The TMLC also recently made news when its director of mission advancement, Tom Lynch, sent out a tweet that read: "Believe Islam a religion, then support Becket Fund. Believe it will destroy US, then supt thomasmore.org." This tweet reveals more than the fact that bigotry is just as ugly when it is confined to 140 characters. It reveals the extent to which kooky, bigoted, and un-American ideas can get funding and erect themselves into a media-savvy organization spewing forth hate. I would also note that TMLC is located in Michigan and have to ask if there is something in the water up there because this kind of bigoted hatred seems more than a little akin to the rantings of Father Coughlin, no?

(In a curious historical footnote, the Church has not always thought it prudent to defend First Amendment rights in the face of an immediate, practical need. In 1942, after years of effort on the part of the USCCB's predecessor, the National Catholic Welfare Conference, and the apostolic delegate, to silence Coughlin, then-

Archbishop Edward Mooney connived with the Postmaster General, Frank Walker, and other officials in FDR's administration to revoke Coughlin's mailing privileges as an impediment to the war effort, and thus shut down his operation.)

In response to the TMLC tweet, [officials at the Becket Fund -Bill Mumma, Mary Ann Glendon and Robert George - wrote to TMLC officials](#) [3]calling attention to the offensive tweet, calling for a public apology, and pointing TMLC to the relevant passages of Nostra Aetate about treating Muslims with respect. I do not know Mr. Mumma, but I know that Ambassador Glendon and Professor George have some juice with the USCCB. Surely they can impress upon the bishops the need to combat anti-Muslim bigotry whether it comes from a group named for St. Thomas More or from the Catholic governor of Kansas, and to place opposition to these anti-sharia laws at the center of the "Fortnight for Freedom." As someone who is not shy about calling out those on "my side of the aisle," I applaud Mumma, Glendon and George for publicly chastising TMLC. Now, let them demonstrate to all that they harbor no nefarious partisan ambitions for the fight for religious freedom, and publicly call on the bishops and all Catholics to make concern for the religious liberty of Muslims a central part of our Catholic campaign.

There is very little comparison between the threats the Catholic Church faces in terms of religious liberty and the threats faced by our Muslim fellow citizens. It is true that these anti-sharia laws are unenforceable. But, it is also true that at some point in the future, say after a terrorist attack, these anti-Muslim bigots will find a larger audience for their venom. And, for the foreseeable future, Muslims will be a small minority of our population and if history teaches anything it teaches that the rights of minorities are the first things to be trampled upon when fear grips the majority. Certainly, these anti-sharia laws are as much of an "urgent" threat to religious liberty as the now thoroughly discredited DOJ brief in Hosanna-Tabor.

Supporting the rights of our Muslim fellow citizens is not only the right thing to do on the merits. It will show as nothing else that we really mean it when we say that our concern for religious liberty is a transcendent concern, that it is something we will pursue no matter how or where it cuts across the partisan grains of our polity. And, not unimportantly, insofar as the "Fortnight for Freedom" is about education on this issue, I am sure that we have some fellow Catholics who harbor anti-Muslim prejudices that need instruction so that they will understand that if religious freedom is not for everybody, it is not for anybody.

Source URL (retrieved on 12/11/2013 - 03:45): <http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/muslims-religious-liberty>

Links:

[1] <http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/not-muslim-issue>

[2] <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2012/02/the-dangers-of-anti-sharia-laws>

[3] <http://mirrorofjustice.blogs.com/mirrorofjustice/2012/05/liberty-and-justice-must-be-for-all.html>