

Real threats to religious liberty

In recent weeks, there has been much talk and much writing about religious liberty and the protection of the rights of conscience — and justly so. To be honest, I have been surprised and troubled by the fact that many people, including some Catholics, have asked, in so many words, “What’s all the fuss?”

Much is at stake here, both for our country and for people of all religious faiths who desire to live their faith in freedom.

Threats against religious freedom are current, real and concrete, on both the federal and state level. (See my statement on page 1.)

Taken alone, any of these measures strikes at our religious liberty. Taken together, they represent a multi-pronged attack on the First Amendment right to the practice of religion.

Many of us fear that such measures are only the current stretch of a long-term erosion of our country’s basic pledge to the freedom of religion. This is not simply a Catholic concern — it is a concern of all religious traditions across the world. Moreover, it is not simply a concern of organized religion — it should be the concern of every individual.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution reads as follows: “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

The First Amendment both ensures that there will never be an established religion in this country and protects the



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God-given right of every citizen to live his or her religion freely, fully and with respect. This basic human right has many implications.

A civil right

The Declaration on Religious Freedom of the Second Vatican Council, “Dignitatis Humanae” (“Of Human Dignity”), includes this key passage:

“[T]he human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that all men and women are to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups or of any human power, in such wise that no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs, whether privately or publicly, whether alone or in association with others . . .

“This right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.”

Multi-pronged attack

As the Founders of this country would put it, religious freedom is an “inalienable” right. It is a right that exists even before the state itself.

Made in God’s image and likeness, every human person possesses a God-given dignity which the state must respect and, I would add, cherish. On the one hand, the state cannot

compel one to believe; on the other hand, it cannot coerce one to act against his or her belief, against his or her conscience.

Even God does not force our belief or our love. He has bestowed freedom upon every human person and respects the freedom he has given us. So, too, government and society at large must respect religious freedom.

A right and responsibility

I will be asking our Catholic people to make our federal and state legislators aware of our alarm and our firm objection to threats to religious freedom in this country. However, I also want to highlight several important, related, and sometimes subtle attacks on religious liberty:

Listen to the rhetoric: There is a subtle drumbeat which wants us to think that religious liberty simply means that I can worship where I choose, without restriction, on the weekend. Yes, it includes my worship, but it includes much more. The current threat is that we will be forced to act in a way that is contrary to our religious beliefs, contrary to our conscience.

Beware of the suggestion that the bishops’ concern is “much ado about nothing,” that we are concerned merely because the issues are contraception and abortion. Yes, we are deeply concerned about those issues; but we also are concerned about the foundational right to religious liberty, everything that poses a threat to it, and what such threats will entail in the future.



Examine the assumptions: The truth is that gradually, religious faith and religious points of view are being pushed out of discussions in the public square, as if the sacred truths by which we live are irrelevant and outdated.

Beware of secular “religion”: A profoundly secularist approach rejects religion and religious people as out-of-sync with modern times. It portrays itself as “all grown up” and not in need of God or the gifts and moral guidance he offers.

Remember that our faith is a vital contribution to society: Catholics do not intend to force our faith on the world or civil society. However, we do hold firm that what God has given us is for our good and the good of all. Thus, we have both a right and a responsibility to live by it ourselves and to proclaim it. And the state has a responsibility to respect and protect that right and that responsibility.

I will write more about these matters as the months go by. I am heartened by the recent Supreme Court decision upholding religious freedom, and I am happily surprised at the large number of columnists of different political leanings around the country who have written that recent decisions by the department of Health and Human Services are deeply flawed.

But we must not be naive. This is a critical time in American history, and people of all faiths must guard our liberty — and expect our government to do the same.

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