

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM TEN YEARS AFTER 9/11
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Introduction

What is very clear ten years after 9/11 is that the theme of religion must given strong importance since it plays a crucial role in the course of current events. We can never underestimate the power of religion in its great influence on culture and politics. Because bin Laden preached “holy war” against the West, Islam, religion itself, has been on trial. The extremism of a few has too often been attributed to Islam as a whole, while religion itself has too often been dismissed as a source of conflict and division. Nonetheless we can be proud that over the past ten years, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Hindus and others have been united in holding that terrorism and violence in the name of religion profanes religion. From Colombia and the Congo to Sudan and Sri Lanka, numerous religious leaders and believers have shown how faith can be an undeniable force for freedom, justice and peace.

There have been strong efforts, certainly on the part of Catholic leaders and those in academia, to restore faith and religion through the deepening of our understanding for the need of continuing engagement with the Muslim community. This effort is especially necessary in the face of anti-Muslim bigotry that has been so evident since 9/11.

The Teaching of the Church on Religious Freedom

The message of Pope Benedict XVI on the occasion of World Day of Peace, last January 1, addressed specifically the issue of religious freedom as the path to peace. It began with references to recent incidents as examples of egregious violations of religious freedom. The Pope cites the sufferings of the Christian community worldwide and in particular, the reprehensible attack on the Syro-Catholic Cathedral of Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Baghdad where on October 31, 2010, two priests and over fifty faithful were killed as they gathered for Mass. “In the days that followed, other attacks ensued, even on private homes, spreading fear within the Christian community.”¹

¹ Message of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for the celebration of World Day of Peace, January 1, 2011.

Even after he issued his timely message, a bombing at a Coptic church in Alexandria, Egypt, opened the new year, and around the same time, there was a breakdown of the entente between the People's Republic of China and the Vatican on the appointment of bishops.

The Holy Father points out that Christians are the religious group which most suffers from persecution on account of its faith. Many Christians experience daily affronts and often live in constant fear because of their faith in Jesus Christ and their desire for respect of their religious freedom.

The Pope's message is the most extensive official treatment of religious freedom since the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on Religious Liberty" in 1965.

The Pope's starting point is that without religious freedom, women and men cannot develop their own identities in relation to the transcendent horizons that are essential to being human. Freedom of religion "allows us to direct our personal and social life to God, in whose light and identity, meaning and purpose of the person are fully

understood.”² In other words, our very nature presumes that women and men are religious. Our tradition of natural law presumes that we are born with an innate desire for transcendence and truth.

Several times in his message, the Holy Father, relates the freedom of religion with peace in the world. “To deny or arbitrarily restrict this freedom,” he writes, “is to foster a reductive vision of the human person; to eclipse the public role of religion is to create a society which is unjust, inasmuch as it fails to take account of the true nature of the human person; *it is to stifle the growth of the authentic and lasting peace of the whole human family.*”³

He also states that “Religious freedom is an authentic weapon of peace, with an *historical* and *prophetic mission*. Peace brings to full fruition the deepest qualities and potentials of the human person, the qualities which can change ⁱthe world and make it better. It gives hope

² *Ibid*

³ *Ibid*

for a future of justice and peace, even in the face of grave injustice and material and moral poverty.”⁴

The Pope’s message insists that religious freedom embraces respect for the faith of others, the right to change one’s faith, and even the right to profess no religion at all. It welcomes religious pluralism and affirms the need for public authorities to defend religious minorities. Religious freedom encourages inter-religious dialogue and dialogue between religious and cultural institutions.

Religious freedom, according to Pope Benedict XVI, also includes a “positive secularity,” by which governments provide a common life and equal rights for women and men of diverse faiths. The message offers a very helpful distinction between secularity and secularism. Secularity is the independence of political and other institutions from religious domination. Secularism is a west European ideology that is hostile to religion.

⁴ *Ibid*

A very important part of his message underscores that religion requires protection in public as well as in private settings. “Each person must be able to exercise freely the right to profess and manifest, individually or in community, his or her own religion or faith, in public and in private, in teaching, in practice, in publications, in worship and in ritual observances.”⁵ This contradicts a popular notion in some countries held by some governments that freedom of religion simply allows people to worship as they wish.

In his message, the Pope includes the possibility that religious believers should have the freedom to make their distinctive contributions to the common good, of their societies and to the justice and peace of the world. It is good for Americans to be reminded of this since often bishops and other religious leaders are challenged when they teach about social justice and peace. Some in our country would deny religious leaders from speaking about any worldly or societal issues, claiming that we violate the principle of the separation of church and state.

⁵ *Ibid*

It is good at this point to quote Article 18 of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights: “Everyone has a right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief; and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.”ⁱⁱ⁶ One of the persons who worked on that Declaration was Jacques Maritain, noted neo-Thomist scholar of the 20th Century.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom

Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, Bishop William Murphy, Archbishop Charles Chaput and I have served on the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. This independent and bi-partisan commission reports to the U.S. Congress, the White House, and the State Department on religious freedom as it is observed or not

⁶ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Paris, France, December, 1948.

observed in foreign countries. I must say that in my years of serving on the Commission I came to appreciate different religions and the concept of religious freedom. In our country we take for granted that our religious institutions can exist and exercise their way of life as long as they do not interfere with the social order. In many other countries, this is not so.

I will never forget a visit to a Baptist house church community in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. After sharing a meal with them and listening to stories about how their house gatherings are often invaded and their leaders taken off to jail, and as we were leaving, the people wept and implored us to do something through our government so that they could enjoy the freedom to exercise their faith. In that same country, neither the Bible Society nor the Jehovah's Witnesses were allowed to print bibles or religious materials. It is interesting that I had to go all the way to Uzbekistan to have a conversation with Jehovah's Witnesses.

Very sad also was the situation of the Jewish people in Alexandria, Egypt. At one time, we were told there were perhaps as many as ten active synagogues in that city, now there is only one with only a handful

of Jewish adherents who remained in Alexandria. The tiny community has to invite a rabbi from Israel each year to lead the Passover.

Also in Egypt, we encountered Coptic priests who are consistently denied the construction of new churches, and even the repair of their existing churches. Also in Egypt, Muslims are not allowed to convert to any other religion, if they do, they have to flee to another country for fear of losing their lives or being imprisoned.

China does not allow neither Mormons nor Jehovah's Witnesses to enter their country, and all Protestants are grouped into one Christian-Protestant church. We are all aware of the difficulties the Vatican has in appointing its own choice of bishops. At this time it is the Chinese government who decides who is to be a bishop and then only from the official church. Religious freedom conditions for Tibetan Buddhists and Uigher Muslims remain particularly acute as the government often discredits and imprisons religious leaders, controls the selection of their clergy, bans religious gatherings, and controls the distribution of religious literature by members of these groups. Last year the government detained over 500 unregistered Protestants. Dozens of

unregistered Catholic clergy remained in detention or home confinement or have simply disappeared.

Besides China, countries that are most egregious in violating religious freedom are North Korea and Saudi Arabia. There are no Christian or any other churches of any kind allowed in North Korea where a personality cult of Kim Jong Il, the head of state, has been created. The U.S. Commission reports that discrimination and harassment of both authorized and unauthorized religious activity occur in North Korea regularly. It also reports the arrest, torture and possible execution of those conducting clandestine religious activity. In addition to this, asylum seekers repatriated from China, are imprisoned, particularly those suspected of engaging in religious activities or having religious affiliations.

The government of Saudi Arabia persists in banning of all public religious expression other than that of the government's own interpretation of Sunni Islam and prohibits churches, synagogues, temples, and other non-Muslim places of worship. U.S. Catholics living or visiting Saudi Arabia, for example, who want to attend Sunday Mass

can do so only at the U.S. Embassy. There are many thousands of Catholics who migrate to Saudi Arabia for work, and they are denied priests to lead them in church services. Other countries that egregiously violate religious freedom are the following: Burma, Eritrea, Iran, Iraq, Nigeria, Pakistan, Sudan, Turkmenistan, and Vietnam. On the watch list, that is, those who are not considered as egregious violators of religious freedom are Afghanistan, Belarus, Cuba, India, Indonesia, Laos, Russia, Somalia, Tajikistan, Turkey, and Venezuela.⁷

Practical Responses by our Government

I have already described the work of our government through its religious freedom commission, but its work is thwarted by the lack of attention from other government bodies. It is unclear to me how much importance the present administration or Congress give to religious liberty.

I recall specifically our reception by the U.S. diplomatic team in the Sudan. There seemed to be very little, if not any, interest in our mission to that country. As a result of the awareness on the part of the

⁷ United States Commission on International Religious Freedom Annual Report, May 2011

Commission on indifference to religious freedom among our diplomatic corps, we visited the School of Foreign Service and urged them to include greater emphasis on religious freedom issues and concerns in their program of studies.

On-going dialogue should continue between Christian leaders including the Vatican, and such centers of moderate Islamic learning such as the Muslim university Al-Azhar in Cairo.

Practical Responses by the Church

If the vision of Pope Benedict XVI on religious freedom is to bear fruit, it will demand hard work for many years. We understand that the diplomatic efforts of the Holy See have increasingly supported religious liberty for all and not just Catholics, but it can only do so much with its limited resources. In our own country, all our churches must take on the challenge of denouncing intolerance and bigotry. We simply have to do a better job of educating our communities to be more embracing of those who are different. Within a parish, for example, those who always attend Mass in English may want to meet with those who attend Mass in Spanish or some other language. Among parishes, a parish made up

mostly of Euro-Americans could twin with a Latino parish, plan and have evenings or retreats together, to exchange their stories.

One of the most successful projects undertaken by the U.S.C.C.B. was *Encuentro 2000, Many Faces in God's Church*. There we exchanged stories of the various language, racial, ethnic groups that make up the Church. For example, those of us there learned much of the Vietnamese Catholics through the testimony of Cardinal Van Thuan. The stories of Native American and African American Catholics were very moving.

Together, Catholics and Protestants can press government to be more effective in addressing religious liberty and the plight of minority Christian populations in such places as Iraq, Pakistan, and the Israel-Lebanon border. The Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre has the potential, under the leadership Archbishop Edwin O'Brien, to be more pro-active in addressing the Vatican-Israeli issues.

Related Issues

There are strong implications of the Church's teaching on religious freedom and the challenge of peace building beginning with the local

level. Religious liberty calls us to a renewed respect not only for religious differences but also for racial, ethnic, cultural, ideological, and political differences. Benito Juárez, the president of Mexico in the 19th century, is often quoted: “*el respeto al derecho ajeno es la paz*” (“the respect for the rights of others is peace”). Our religious and governmental institutions are challenged to work for peace and harmony in a world of division, intolerance, discrimination, and conflict.

In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, our nation responded in remarkable ways. We turned to God in prayer for our nation, our leaders, for those we lost and their families. Those who had sought to bring us to our knees did so, but not in the way they had planned. We knelt before our God who stands for a kingdom of love and life, justice and peace.

We turned to one another. Those who attacked us wanted to intimidate and divide us. Instead they brought us together. On that day, for example, we New Mexicans became New Yorkers, and we strongly felt ourselves as a *family* of Americans.

The legacy of 9/11 is powerful and positive. It is a legacy of faith and compassion, healing and resolve. However, we have lost much of that unity and common concern that we felt right after 9/11. We are divided by politics, ideology, economics, and ethnicity. Having gone to war in Iraq divides us. The way to address our broken economy divides us. The ways to treat newcomers divides us.

Divisions, marked by bitterness and anger among our public servants and others, are disturbing. It is unhelpful when motives of those who hold outlooks different from our own are challenged, and whose faith and patriotism are questioned. This polarization and the demonization of others is the antithesis of the unity and common purpose we felt and showed ten years ago. These negative attitudes diminish us all and poison our democratic way of life, detracting from the respect for those fundamental values that our attackers were trying to destroy on 9/11.

One of the consequences of 9/11 is that it made us as a nation feel vulnerable and more insecure than ever. In the ten years since, we have been a nation at war: two major wars, one of which is the longest in our

history. As Christians, how are we to think about this decade-long quest for security against terrorism? What of the morality of the means we choose?

Has military force brought the freedom, justice and peace that we expected it would? Has the necessary focus on terrorism diverted our attention and resources from addressing other threats to our security? Do we need to understand security in much broader terms than we sometimes do, remembering the adage of Pope Paul VI that, “if you want peace, work for justice”?

These are hard questions. But if 9/11 calls us to do anything, it challenges us to consider the moral limits on war and the moral imperative to find new ways to fulfill Jesus’ call to be peacemakers.

The sad anniversary of 9/11 calls us to recommit ourselves to the common good. We are challenged to look beyond our political and ideological, racial and ethnic differences to defend and protect the life and dignity of all in our nation and in the world. Our leaders must set aside ideological differences and work together to fix a broken economy, reduce deficits and debt, and do so in ways that protect the poor and the

vulnerable. More and more we recognize the need to fix a broken immigration system in ways that provide security to our nation and recognize the contributions and dignity of immigrants. The present violent and conflictual world in which we live must be replaced by lasting peace with justice; this will happen only with respectful dialogue which needs to take place at every level of society, including parish and local communities.

Immigration

On January 10 of this year, Pope Benedict XVI told diplomats from around the world that religious freedom and diversity are not threats to society and should not be a source of conflict.⁸ The United States has always been a nation whose hallmark is diversity. Presently, the ugly face of racism and intolerance of differences has shown its ugly face once more. Among those who suffer discrimination and intolerance are immigrants to our land. We Americans hold as a national tradition the virtue of hospitality and welcoming the stranger.

⁸ His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, "State of the World Address" January 10, 2011.

As the history of salvation unfolds in Sacred Scripture, when hospitality is offered wonderful things happen. In fact salvation history begins with the hospitality of Abraham. Abraham and Sarah offered a sumptuous banquet to the three mysterious visitors, whom Abraham recognized as a visit from the Lord. As a result of that gesture of hospitality, Abraham and Sarah are promised a child and the rest is history, salvation history that is. Thus the promise of God that Abraham was to be the father of the People of God is fulfilled.

In the Jesus' story as redacted in the Gospels, when hospitality is offered, wonderful things also happen. Jesus either is offered hospitality or he offers hospitality. At the wedding feast at Cana, as a result of the hospitality offered to Jesus and his mother, a stunning miracle happens with water changed into choice wine. When the Samaritan woman is offered living water, she becomes the first evangelizer in the Gospel of John. When Jesus hosts the 5,000 and more on the other side of the Sea of Galilee, the five loaves and two fishes are multiplied in order to feed everyone with abundant leftovers for people to take home. When Jesus invites his apostles to the Last Supper, and they accept his invitation, he

gives to all believers the gift of the Eucharist. Yes, wonderful things happen when hospitality is offered.

And so it is with immigrants: when our Church and our country receive and welcome immigrants and refugees we are blessed. Already we see this in the U.S. Church. New life, excitement and hope are among the treasures new immigrants bring from Latin America, Africa and Asia, many of them Roman Catholic. These are taking the place of the large numbers of those who have left the American Church. A significant number of seminarians, young priests and permanent deacons are immigrants or sons of immigrants.

Ten years after 9/11, it behooves us to recall that we are one people, one nation, one family under a God who loves and cares for every one of us without regard for our nationality, race, economic status, politics or power. As we commemorate this sad anniversary, let us recommit to the best of what came after the attack and to work to overcome the worst that has tarnished this decade.

Father Joseph Bayne, a Franciscan chaplain who ministered to Buffalo firefighters at Ground Zero, says of that time: “I did not see the

devil's face at Ground Zero. I saw the face of God in the people working, caring, seating, crying, rescuing, recovering..." Jesuit Father James Martin, also working at Ground Zero, says that 9/11 was a parable for today: "As I looked around at the rescue workers, I thought, what is God like? God is like the firefighter who rushes into a burning building to save someone. That's how much God loves us." That is the mystery of the cross: that out of Jesus' death comes new life.

That kind of faith should give us hope. Hope assures us that, with God's grace, we will see our way through what, even ten years on, sometimes seemed like an overwhelming challenge. But we must not forget that God does not promise us security, but the grace to live with our insecurity.
