

DAILY NEWS

The Catholic Church and the Global Crisis of Religious Liberty

Address to the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops at their June meeting.

BY THOMAS FARR

| Posted 6/13/12 at 4:01 PM

Cardinal Dolan, Bishop Pates, eminences, excellencies and assembled guests: It is an honor to be invited to appear before this convocation. I am grateful for the opportunity to address you on the subject of religious freedom — a matter of increasing importance to the Church and to the world.

I have been privileged to spend the last 13 years of my life reflecting, writing and acting on the subject of religious liberty, both here and abroad. Those years have convinced me of three propositions that will frame my remarks today:

First, both history and modern scholarship demonstrate that a robust system of religious liberty in both law and culture is indispensable to individual human dignity and to the social, economic, intellectual, political and religious flourishing of civil societies and of nations.

Second, religious liberty is in global crisis, with enormous consequences for the Church, the United States, the success of democracy, the defeat of religion-based terrorism, and the cause of international justice and peace.

Third, propositions one and two are highly contested. Outside the West, where religious belief and practice are widespread and growing, the idea of religious freedom in full — i.e., full equality under the law, in private and in public, for all religious ideas and actors — is highly suspect.

Although most nations have signed international covenants and enacted constitutional provisions that purport to guarantee religious liberty, in truth, almost no nation outside the West has protected that right in practice. Even in Europe, where the origins of religious freedom are buried deep in history, the decline of religion itself has dramatically reduced respect for any public expression of religion.



Empirical Evidence of a Global Crisis

Let me give you the evidence for labeling this phenomenon "a global crisis." In 2009 and 2011, the Pew Research Center presented two comprehensive reports that measured in every country of the world government restrictions on religion and social hostilities toward religion. The two reports covered the years 2006 to mid-2009.

The first report revealed a profoundly disturbing statistic: *70% of the world's population* lives in countries in which religious freedom is either highly or very highly restricted, either by governments or private actors. That is almost three out of four human beings on the planet.

Most of those people live in 66 countries. Of those, most are either Muslim-majority nations, communist regimes such as China, North Korea, Cuba and Vietnam, or large non-Muslim states such as India, Burma and Russia.

The second report demonstrated that the problem is getting worse. Between the first and second reports, restrictions on religious freedom increased in twice as many countries as those in which restrictions decreased. And because the problem countries tend to be populous, the increasing restrictions affected some 2.2 billion people, or about a third of the world's population, whereas the small numbers of improvements affected only about 1% of the world's population.

The religious minorities most subject to harassment in these and other countries were Christians, who were harassed in 130 nations, and Muslims, who were a close second at 117.

Many of the nations with the highest restrictions on religious freedom are Muslim nations, including the theocratic autocracies of Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also the nascent and struggling democracies such as Pakistan, Indonesia, Afghanistan and Iraq.

Note those last two. They are places where America has spent its blood and treasure for more than a decade. After the overthrow of the Taliban and Saddam [Hussein], respectively, religious persecution subsided temporarily. Now, like an infection that was never quite eliminated, persecution is returning in both countries with a vengeance.

But there were also a few surprises in the second report. Strikingly, Europe, compared with all other regions, has the largest proportion of nations in which social hostilities toward religion are rising. Hostilities in the United Kingdom, for example, increased so much that the U.K. now stands in the company of Iran and Saudi Arabia in the category of "high" social hostilities. That is quite extraordinary. French government restrictions increased enough to move France ahead of Cuba in that category.

On balance, it is fair to say that religious freedom is not faring well in the continent where its theological and intellectual origins lie, and that should be a cautionary tale for us. Of course, what is happening in Europe does not approach the levels of violent persecution we see elsewhere: torture, rape, murder, unjust

imprisonment or unjust execution resulting from the religious beliefs and practices of the victims or those of their tormentors.

The Underlying Cause of the Global Crisis

And yet, the root cause is quite similar: a belief that religious freedom is not only *unnecessary* for human flourishing or social development, but that it poses a *threat* to these and other goods. Of course, those views are not new. Modern tyrants, from Stalin, Hitler and Mao to Mexico's Plutarco Calles, Iraq's Saddam Hussein and Syria's Bashar Assad, have sought either to eliminate religious ideas and actors altogether or to control and suppress them in order to keep their regimes in power.

What is new, and profoundly troubling, is that we are seeing today the rejection of religious freedom not simply by authoritarian regimes in places like China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, but by democratic majorities in places like Egypt, Pakistan, Iraq, Afghanistan and even Western Europe. These majorities seem unwilling to embrace the core of religious freedom, which is full equality under the law in private and in public matters for all religious individuals and institutions.

To be sure, religious freedom is rejected by democracies for different reasons — in Egypt, for example, the Muslim majority is loath to permit Christian Copts full equality because it means much more than the right not to be persecuted or the right merely to be tolerated. It means the right of Copts to run for president or to make Christian arguments in political life or to criticize Islam publicly without fear of recrimination or even to invite Muslims to become Christian. In Russia, the Orthodox Church allies with anti-democratic forces in order to maintain its monopoly.

Religious freedom is also increasingly being rejected in Western Europe, but for very different reasons. Here, the problem is not a religious majority, but an aggressive secularist majority that refuses to permit religiously informed moral arguments into public life. Recently, our Religious Freedom Project [at Georgetown University] held a major conference in Oxford on the rising tensions between religious liberty and assertions of equality for homosexuals.

In his keynote address, Philip Tartaglia, the Catholic bishop of Paisley, Scotland, noted that one of his priests had expressed fear after having watched a popular television program with audience participation. The audience was of one mind — once same-sex “marriage” becomes law in the U.K., they said, any dissenters should be “pursued by the law.”

I could not help recalling the anti-Catholic penal laws enacted by the English in Scotland in the late 18th century — laws that criminalized the very existence of priests and the Mass, let alone the public expression of Catholic teachings. I am not suggesting that Scotland is returning to the practices of the 18th century, but it would be foolish to assume that the growing intolerance of Catholicism in Europe cannot devolve into persecutory laws and practices. Bishop Tartaglia said that he expected one day to be standing before a judge because of his public defense of Catholic teachings.

Others at the conference made it clear that they simply could not and would not brook any “special” consideration to religious ideas, which, they argued, had no more relevance to human beings or societies than any other idea under the sun.

In short, religion in Europe is no longer seen as intrinsic to human dignity and social flourishing. It is generally understood as merely an opinion and, as a species, a dangerous opinion at that: While it is fine to practice your religion in churches, synagogues, mosques and temples, democracy requires that you keep it there. To bring it into politics endangers democracy.

This malevolent idea, which was most famously championed by the American political philosopher John Rawls, is gaining considerable purchase in our own country. It gives reason for profound concern, not only for religious individuals, but for the whole concept of democracy grounded in ordered liberty — both here and abroad.

The Individual and Social Value of Religious Freedom: Cause for Hope

It is a great irony, but also a cause for hope, that at the very moment when religious liberty is under sustained pressure around the world, contemporary scholarship is demonstrating that societies desperately need it. The work of sociologists Brian Grim and Roger Finke, for example, shows that religious freedom is highly correlated with the consolidation and longevity of democracy and with other goods such as economic development, the equality of women or the absence of violent religious extremism.

A recent study by Paul Marshall and Nina Shea, entitled “Silenced,” shows how the absence of religious freedom — in the form of laws or norms criminalizing blasphemy — silences the voices of reform throughout the Muslim world, thereby almost ensuring that struggling democracies cannot and will not take root.

Looking to the Future: Church’s Role

What, then, is to be done? In particular, what can the Church do to address this crisis? Let me focus my answer in two areas: first, the role of the Church internationally; and, second, the question of America’s own policy of advancing international religious freedom.

The Church has always been the repository of the most powerful argument for religious liberty, namely, the fundamental dignity and equality of every person in the eyes of God. While that understanding did not take modern form until the promulgation of *Dignitatis Humanae* in 1965 [the Church’s Declaration on Religious Freedom], the historic struggle among Catholic nations to advance that norm can provide a model for others.

Samuel Huntington, in *The Third Wave of Democratization*, wrote that the lessons of *Dignitatis* played a substantive role in triggering the democracies that emerged from the 1970s into the 1990s, 80% of which were Catholic. Many of those nations came to embrace religious liberty, not only in the traditional sense

of *libertas ecclesiae*, but on the basis of the equality of all religious institutions in civil society: Catholic and non-Catholic, Christian and non-Christian.

This very point, it seems to me, is vital for the Muslim world. It suggests two key lessons: first, that democracy cannot consolidate without full equality among all religious groups; and, second, that democracy need not place religion at the margins of political life. As *Dignitatis* puts it, "Government ought ... to take account of the religious life of the people and show it favor" (*Dignitatis Humanae*, 3).

Most in the Muslim world, when they hear the phrase "religious freedom," do not think of such a "religion-friendly" understanding of the role of government. Unfortunately, they are far more familiar with the French model of privatization — moving religion to the margins of public life. It is one of the greatest ironies of all that the United States, which has traditionally invited religion into public life, has utterly failed to overcome that perception in its foreign policy. Our policy is viewed by Muslims, with some justification, as offering the French model, rather than the American model.

Let me now turn briefly to U.S. foreign policy. As many of you know, Congress passed in 1998 the International Religious Freedom Act, which was signed into law by President [Bill] Clinton. It mandated that the United States advance religious freedom in its foreign policy, and it created an office in the State Department, headed by an ambassador-at-large, to achieve that goal. It also created a separate IRF Commission, on which several of you have served.

In the 14 years since the passage of that law, much has been achieved. U.S. diplomats, for example, have become adept at producing an annual report on the status of religious freedom in every country in the world. All U.S. presidents have given major speeches abroad that included this subject — for example, President [George W.] Bush in 2002 in Beijing and President [Barack] Obama in 2009 in Cairo. The commission has over the years made some very important policy recommendations.

Unfortunately, it is difficult to argue that U.S. policy has had much impact on the status of religious freedom anywhere in the world. Having served under both Presidents Clinton and Bush, and having written critically of both, I can say that all three administrations are responsible. But U.S. policy has continued to weaken. For example, it took this administration *two and one-half years* to get its IRF ambassador into the job; and when she arrived, she had little status or resources. Meanwhile, favored human-rights initiatives were quickly under way and well resourced, including the promotion of "international LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender] rights," which has garnered far more energy in the State Department than has the promotion of international religious freedom.

The explanation for our anemic policy abroad is, in my view, not difficult to discern. In part, it is that the State Department under any administration is a highly secular organization. But the deeper reason is that, for many of our elites — including some in this administration — religious freedom is a threat to the modern project of sexual liberation. This is why many wish to define freedom of religion as a private right, i.e., the "freedom to worship," but not as the right of citizens to employ religiously informed moral arguments in the political life of the nation and to win.

This thin, impoverished concept of religious freedom also has implications for our strategy, such as it is, to advance religious freedom in the Muslim world. To the extent Muslims in Egypt or Pakistan or anywhere else believe that the American goal is to move Islam to the private margins of their lives, then to that extent they will not buy what we are selling.

In short, our international religious-freedom policy is weak because the intellectual roots of religious liberty in America are weak. Too many of our elites no longer believe that religious freedom is the first freedom. Those intellectual roots need to be strengthened, which is, I might note, one goal of our Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown.

It is here — in strengthening our understanding of the value of religious freedom — that I believe the bishops of the Roman Catholic Church in America can make their greatest contribution.

The Church is uniquely positioned to help reclaim a sense of the importance of religious liberty. Its theology as well as its natural law and personalist philosophies teach that each person possesses inherent dignity and worth, a dignity and worth at the root of any argument for religious freedom. Its historical demand for *libertas ecclesiae* helped develop the idea and practice of limited government and created the very possibility of social pluralism. Its successful struggle to embrace democracy that is grounded in the equality of all religious institutions in civil society and law provides hope that others can learn similar lessons from history and experience — especially Muslim-majority nations.

Of course, religious freedom for the Church brings with it enormous responsibilities, for its leaders and its members, precisely because of the Church's understanding of freedom as ordered to truth. Our freedom beckons us to witness the great culture-forming truths taught by the Catholic tradition, truths such as those concerning human life, marriage and caring for the poor. It means opposing — in civil society and in law — the increasingly vocal arguments now arrayed against those truths, arguments in favor of abortion, contraception, "no-fault" divorce, same-sex "marriage," pornography and unbridled materialism.

What we convey in exercising our religious liberty, in other words, is vitally important. It is important to American democracy and to the protection of religious liberty itself.

The stakes are very high. They implicate our country, our Church and the world.

God bless you all in your work.

Thomas Farr, a Catholic convert, presented this address June 13.

He teaches at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service and is senior fellow and director of the Religious Freedom Project at Georgetown's Berkley Center.