News



People gather near Capitol Hill in Washington (CNS /Tyler Orsburn)



Dennis Sadowski

View Author Profile

Catholic News Service

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Washington, D.C. — September 14, 2017
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

Religious freedom requires tolerance of differing viewpoints -- including the voices of nonreligious people -- in addition to the free practice of faith to assure civility in American society, speakers said during a Brookings Institution program.

Furthermore, they said at the Sept. 13 event, intolerant comments by people of faith when it comes to key issues facing the country has fed an increasingly angry discourse that threatens to keep people divided at a time in American history when unity is more important than ever.

It wasn't always this way, said John Dilulio, professor of politics, religion and civil society at the University of Pennsylvania and the first director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives under President George W. Bush.

In his keynote address, Dilulio recalled that 24 years ago, President Bill Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act during a White House ceremony attended by Republican and Democratic members of Congress and numerous religious leaders in a sign of unity.

But within a decade, such unity began to fragment as people coalesced around divergent views with little tolerance for opposing opinions on religion or politics, he said.

Dilulio, who is Catholic, called it a "puzzle" how the country got to where it is today with its lack of acceptance of others and widespread public expression of hatred, especially among people claiming deep faith.

He cited the words of James Madison, who, writing in the Federalist Papers before he became president, argued that the free practice of religion in all its forms was important to the future of the young American democracy. The same holds true today, he said.

"What we need is to entertain, as sympathetically as possible, ideas and values related to different religious traditions, including various nonreligious traditions. And most particularly to entertain ideas and values on issues of religious freedom and church-state relations that one is, for whatever reasons, strongly inclined to reject outright as wrong-headed, wrong-hearted, not mine," he said.

Dilulio offered three suggestions for the audience to consider.

First, he said, most political leaders in the late 20th and early 21st centuries have been "reasonable, well-informed and well-balanced on their view on religion in the public square."

He also called on the wider society to root their stances in facts and to be open to "hearing each other out on religious freedom and church-state issues."

"We don't know how to produce empathy," he said. "We know how to change behavior ... but we don't know how to produce empathy. Empathy is a precious thing. Once gone from society, it's lost."

Finally, he called on people to celebrate how in a diverse and dynamic representative democracy, "the civic intersections of religion and politics, the civic lanes that merge into church-state debates, are bound to be, and ought to be, busy and boisterous, not calmly quiet."

"(There will be) honking horns, traffic jams, indelicate disputes about who has the right of way, occasional confusion about the rules of the road and accidental fender benders. But let's also insist emphatically, unambiguously, non-negotiably, that one and all always fall far short of the civic equivalent of road rage. There are lines that cannot be crossed and should not be crossed."

After the presentation, four panelists offered their views of the importance of protecting religious freedom.

Joshua Dubois, CEO of Values Partnerships and former director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships under President Barack Obama, urged the country to explore the gaps that exist between people with differing views rather than overlooking them.

Confronting the tensions between people of different beliefs will build a more peaceful society, he said. Not addressing tensions can lead to confrontations such as the action of an alleged white supremacist accused of driving his car into counterprotesters in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August, and that of an avowed racist who shot and killed several African-Americans participating in prayer and Bible study at a Charleston, South Carolina, church in 2015.

"I'm not sure that we fully explored this tension, this gap," Dubois said. "What are the cultural voices that would allow that young man to grow up with such antipathy of other human beings, the extent that he did not see them as human and to work out those feelings in such horrific ways?"

"Their freedoms could not protect them from the culture and history that killed them," he said.

Journalist David Gregory, a political analyst for CNN, said the root of religious faith is love. He admitted that he offers his take on American politics through the lens of his Jewish faith and the promises of peace and justice God has for all people.

"All of our religious traditions require us to interrogate ourselves and what is the basis of our humanity and ask ourselves what is it that God demands of us as human beings and how we treat one another," he said.

He called on the country to "recognize that we spend way too much time in the public square walking around with this chip on our shoulder, with a sense of certainty that we know and you don't know. What we don't do is very comfortably hold on to our vulnerability and show it to each other and say, 'You know what? I'm confused. I'm angry. I'm frustrated and I just don't know what the answer is, that I somehow feel isolated.'"

The media, he added, could serve the country better by exploring faith as it intersects with civic life rather than isolating faith on the sidelines of society.

Russell Moore, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, the public policy arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, said the state cannot and should not impose religious values on anyone and attempts by any religious leaders to use the government to do so are inappropriate.

"Even Americans who have no religious commitment at all should be very concerned about protecting religious freedom," Moore said. "We should want the American people to have priorities that transcend the state. It would be best for us if we are a people who are not Americans first in order that we can be Americans best.

"If all that we have is a commitment to a government or to a state or to a culture, we end up with a divisive and often very violent situation. I believe in a limit of the state or a limit of the culture to allow people to have genuine and often spirited conversations with one another," he continued.

Advertisement

Katrina Lantos Swett, president of the Lantos Foundation for Human Rights and Justice, suggested that hearing stories from others would cement strong relationships that lead to respect and greater civility.

She described how her father, former Rep. Tom Lantos of California, as a young Jewish prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp in his native Hungary, was beaten because he refused to convert to Christianity. Lantos survived, immigrated to the United States and eventually became the first Holocaust survivor to be elected to Congress and serves as a reminder to the strength of adhering to religious beliefs, Swett said.

Religious freedom is "a fight worth waging," she said, "because if we in any measure abandon a passionate defense of freedom of religion, conscience and belief for all people on an equal basis, we will have given up something as precious as what my father faced in that moment of truth."