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Why the vitriol when discussing religious liberty today?

Bill Tammeus | Sep. 19, 2012 A small c catholic

The difference between our public discussion of religious liberty in 1988 and what passes for that discourse today is remarkable and terribly sad.

In June 1988, as part of the ongoing celebration of the U.S. Constitution's 200th anniversary, a broad group of religious, political, business and civic leaders produced the Williamsburg Charter [1].

As an introduction to it says, it "was written and published expressly to address the dilemmas, challenges, and opportunities posed by religious liberty in American public life today."

Many religious leaders signed it, including Archbishop John L. May of St. Louis, then president of what is now called the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. But there also were Jews, Protestants, Orthodox Christians, Buddhists and many others who signed.

Beyond the religious world, everyone from Ted Kennedy to Phyllis Schlafly signed it. (Did they ever agree on anything else?)

Obviously, we could talk about religious liberty then without demonizing one another, without temperatures zipping past boiling before any substantive points were made -- and with respect for the constitutional provisions forbidding establishment of a state religion and protecting religion's free exercise.

Gimme back that old-time religion.

You're wrong if you think the Williamsburg Charter was a two-sentence, bland statement of the obvious. In fact, it carried on in some analytical detail for 19 pages before it got to the seven pages of names of people who agreed with it enough to sign it. (The signers also included the chairs of both the Democratic and Republican national parties.)

Clearly, much of the current debate over religious liberty is not rooted in the kind of civility -- however flawed even then -- that made the Williamsburg Charter possible. The charter even speaks of the importance of civility this way: "Civility obliges citizens in a pluralistic society to take great care in using words and casting issues."

Great care in using words? In casting, or framing, issues? Such delicacies are just for wimps today. Real men don't eat their words.

In fact, civility now is such an endangered species that religion scholar and author Diana Butler Bass recently tweeted [2] this: "I've decided that civility is the new counter-culturalism."

I am perfectly willing to concede that almost everybody engaged in the current debate is right about some things. But what I find so distressing is that so many of the more aggressive religious participants in that debate have lost sight of some foundational principles on which religion obligates them to operate.

First -- and always -- they are obliged not to make religious liberty, however it's defined, an idol. All sin ultimately is idolatry. It's why the first of the Ten Commandments -- "no other gods before me" -- is first.

Pope Benedict XVI was right when he said [3] that "when religious freedom is acknowledged, the dignity of the human person is respected at its root." But part of religious freedom is the freedom to decide what religious freedom means. Its meaning cannot be dictated from above.

Thus, many of those standing tall for religious freedom today seem not to have made room in the discussion for what Catholic social teaching calls the common good. The great Hebrew Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann has it right when he says that "the great crisis among us today is the crisis of 'the common good,' the sense of community solidarity that binds all in a common destiny -- haves and have-nots, the rich and the poor."

I lived through the 1980s, writing political satire for a newspaper in that selfish decade. So I'm well aware that when I point to a 1988 document as a good example of civil discourse about religious liberty, I'm not offering a pristine piece of work from a flawless era.

But by contrast to 1988, today it seems impossible for our religious, political, business and civic leaders to speak with one voice about the importance of religious liberty. People, we can be better than that.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder and former award-winning Faith columnist for *The Kansas City Star*, writes the daily "Faith Matters" blog [4] for *The Star*'s website and a monthly column for *The Presbyterian Outlook*. His latest book, co-authored with Rabbi Jacques Cukierkorn, is *They Were Just People: Stories of Rescue in Poland During the Holocaust* *[5]*. Email him at wtammeus@kc.rr.com.]

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