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Pondering a 'rising tide' of threats to religious freedom

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

Beyond any doubt, religious freedom has emerged as the premier social and political concern of the Catholic church in the early 21st century. Pope Benedict XVI offered confirmation as recently as last Saturday, during his trip to Lebanon.

Speaking to politicians, diplomats and religious leaders (including representatives of all four major branches of Islam in Lebanon -- Sunni, Shi'ite, Druze and Alawite), the pope insisted that "religious freedom is the basic right on which many others depend."

A new report released Thursday by the Pew Forum illustrates why, at least in this case, it's impossible to argue that the concern is misplaced.

Based on analysis of 197 countries and territories, here's the sobering conclusion: "A rising tide of restrictions on religion spread around the world between mid-2009 and mid-2010." Key findings include:

- Restrictions on religion rose in each of the five major regions of the world, including in the United States. (America was one of 16 nations whose scores for restrictions, both government-imposed and social, jumped by more than a point. That conclusion, by the way, has nothing to do with the controversy between the U.S. bishops and the White House over insurance mandates, which wasn't on the radar screen during the period covered in the report. Instead, it cites new restrictions in prison systems on religious practice, zoning hassles faced by churches, legislative attempts to ban *sharia* law, and an effort in a Tennessee community to ban construction of a mosque on the grounds that Islam is an ideology rather than a religion.)
- 37 percent of nations in the world have high or very high restrictions on religion, up from 31 percent a year ago -- a six-point spike in just 12 months.

- Three-quarters of the world's population of 7 billion, meaning 5.25 billion people, live in countries with high or very high restrictions on religion. That's up from 70 percent a year ago.
- Restrictions rose not just in countries that already had a tough climate for religious freedom, but even in places that began with a fairly good track record, such as Switzerland.
- In the period ending mid-2010, Christians faced harassment in a larger number of countries, a total of 111, than any other religious group. They also led the pack for the highest number of countries in which they had faced harassment any time between 2006 and 2010, a total of 139.

The Pew report assesses both government restrictions and "social hostility," meaning acts of harassment against religion by private individuals, organizations and social groups, or what one might think of as the difference between restrictions *de jure* and *de facto*.

Bottom line: This isn't just a case of overheated ecclesiastical rhetoric. Threats to religious freedom around the world are real, and getting worse.

Three reflections seem in order.

First, the report does not distinguish between restrictions on religiously based institutions, such as where a religious charity can operate or what services it can deliver, and limits on the freedom of individual believers, such as the right to convert from one religion to another without harassment or legal penalties, such as the "blasphemy laws" in some majority Muslim states.

In broad strokes, the institutional issues tend to loom largest in the West, with the recent American dust-up over insurance mandates as a good example. Or consider the fallout from the 2007 "Equality Law" in the U.K., which made it illegal for Catholic adoption agencies to refuse to serve same-sex couples, driving some of them out of business, others to cut ties with the church, and still others into court.

In other parts of the world, violation of individual liberties is far more overt. Although this goes beyond the scope of the Pew study, it's hard to avoid the suspicion that the two are connected, and that a climate in which the freedom of religious institutions is curtailed is one in which, sooner or later, individual freedoms also may be attenuated.

Of course, there is a balance to be struck between permitting an institution to be true to its creed while also insisting it obey the law of the land in the public arena, especially if it receives public support. Reasonable people can differ about where the boundaries ought to be drawn.

Nonetheless, it's worth thinking about where hemming in the autonomy of faith-based institutions might be headed -- and if it's someplace we really want to go.

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Second, we should recall that behind the statistics cited in the Pew report are real flesh-and-blood people. I met some of them last weekend, including a group of Christian refugees from Syria now in a camp in Lebanon because they're terrified about their prospects in a post-Bashar Assad society. (The fact that elements of the rebel forces have adopted the motto "Christians to Lebanon, Alawites to the grave!" obviously hasn't helped calm those anxieties.)

The refugees were at the papal Mass on Beirut's waterfront Sunday morning, and while they were thrilled to be in proximity to the pope, frankly, they weren't convinced Benedict's words on religious freedom

would have much short-term impact in terms of making it safe to go home.

Surely everyone can agree, whatever their political persuasion, that being driven out of your country because you practice the wrong faith is unacceptable -- and that forgetting these people would be an acute moral failure.

Third, the Pew report is more concerned with documenting this "rising tide" of restrictions on religion than with explaining what's driving it. However, societies often lash out at something when they're either afraid of it or mad at it, and so religions might profitably ask to what extent they're giving people good reason to be either scared or angry.

For instance, however half-baked current proposals to ban *sharia* may be in some American states (after all, it's not as if Oklahoma is on the brink of Muslim conquest), they are nevertheless a response to something real -- the global threat of Islamic radicalism.

In a different way, if the insurance mandates controversy suggests some sectors of American society are less deferential to the Catholic church these days, it's probably not unrelated to the sex abuse scandals over the last decade. Quite frankly, the church has made itself an easier target.

This isn't to suggest, of course, that two wrongs make a right. Radical currents in Islam don't excuse hollow legislative gestures directed against Muslims generally, nor should the sex abuse crisis make it open season on Catholic institutions. Yet religious leaders need to acknowledge that if there are steps they can take to improve their faith's profile without betraying their beliefs and without catering to popular fashions, doing so might help generate a more sympathetic environment for a principled defense of religious liberty.

If nothing else, Thursday's Pew report is a wake-up call. The threat to religious freedom isn't phony, and it isn't just politics. Instead, it's the human drama of the early 21st century.

For our purposes, the burning question becomes: What would a thoughtful, unified, constructive Catholic response look like? Whoever offers a convincing answer will have a great deal to say about the Catholic future.

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I've already posted a wrap-up story on the Lebanon trip, but here's a final thought.

I'm not one of those pious types who sees divine providence behind every hiccup of history, but it's hard not to be struck by parallels between Benedict's Sept. 14-16 voyage to Lebanon and John Paul II's September 2001 trip to Kazakhstan, principally because both came at the exact right moment to project a badly needed bit of symbolism.

Kazakhstan is one of the former Soviet Republics, and, like Lebanon, it's a country with both a Muslim majority and a sizeable Christian minority. John Paul's trip came just 11 days after the Twin Towers terrorist attacks of 9/11, and Kazakhstan is not far from the northern border of Afghanistan, where everyone knew the United States would shortly launch military operations. Just as with Benedict's outing to Lebanon, which came amid civil war in Syria and the killings of American personnel in Libya, there was wide speculation that John Paul's trip to Kazakhstan would be canceled or postponed because of the security situation, but the pontiff forged ahead.

In neither instance was the timing a matter of crafty planning, because, let's face it, the Vatican isn't

exactly designed for rapid response. Yet as it turns out, this makes twice that the pope has been the first Western leader to visit a Muslim nation in the wake of an incident that's aroused deep tensions between Islam and the West.

In both cases, the global situation lent significance that the trip would otherwise have lacked. In the abstract, papal outings to Kazakhstan or Lebanon may not seem like banner news, but against the backdrop of deep anxieties about a "clash of civilizations," both trips offered a counter-narrative that said to the world, "It doesn't have to be this way."

Both in Kazakhstan and Lebanon, images of Christian/Muslim solidarity were remarkable. When John Paul II celebrated an open-air Mass in Astana, the Kazakh capital, on Sept. 23, 2001, a substantial portion of the crowd was made up of reverent and respectful young Muslims. I remember walking among them and asking what in the world they were doing at a Catholic Mass, celebrated by the pope no less, and their response was clear: "The pope reached out to us by coming here, and we want to reach out to him."

In a similar spirit, Muslim clerics and ordinary believers alike turned out for almost every event on Benedict's itinerary in Lebanon (even Hezbollah put up banners welcoming Benedict XVI), and he returned the favor. During a prayer service with Eastern Catholic patriarchs Saturday night, he urged the prelates to love their Muslim neighbors and to pray for them, because, he said, "we are all brothers."

Granted, both Kazakhstan and Lebanon reflect unique historical and social situations that can't be easily replicated. Among other things, the Christian minority in Kazakhstan didn't arrive as imperial conquerors. They came in chains under Stalin, and were sheltered by the Muslim population -- a memory no one has lost.

Granted, too, the goodwill generated by John Paul's 2001 trip was hardly enough to stop two wars triggered by 9/11 or the spread of terrorist violence. Similarly, Benedict's Lebanon trip doesn't seem likely to stop the fighting in Syria, or to put the genie back in the bottle of anti-Western frustrations sweeping across the Middle East.

That said, both trips nevertheless lifted up compelling examples of tolerance and respect in a moment when the world, and especially those regions of it, needed them. In Lebanon, Msgr. John Kozar of the Catholic Near East Welfare Association told me this was "the church at its best," and I recall thinking the same thing after the Kazakhstan trip, too.

Whether it's providence or just dumb luck, sometimes popes hit the road at exactly the right time.

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