

## Religious Freedom – Not So Free After All

Throughout America's history as a nation, there has been conflict between groups determining who is entitled to religious freedom. A well-known example is the persecution of Native Americans, at the hands of settlers and sometimes as a result of spreading the gospel, forcing them to reject their own religion and accept the Catholic faith - a dark time for both our nation and religion. Correspondingly, Irish Catholics faced much discrimination in a country that was founded by primarily Protestant men. And it was not until 1960 that the first Catholic president was elected after almost two centuries of Protestant leaders. These instances share the common theme that religious freedom is present in America for those in control; similarly, freedom of religion today is allowed as long as it is not in opposition to what is currently in vogue as society's ideals.

It is important to consider these historic events when we contemplate current interpretations of "freedom of religion"; namely, that religion is meant to be in the private, and not the public, sphere. Society and government pressure us to keep religion to ourselves, harboring the assumption that one can worship in their own home as long as they do not bring their faith to school, the workplace, or anywhere in the public sector. This leads to the question: How can we have crucial, in depth discussions without bringing up our faith, morals, or views?

The First Amendment in our Constitution states, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof..." The United States was founded on the chief principle of religious freedom, an ideal that separates church and state, resulting in the protection of religious practices across the broad spectrum of faiths we see today. In theory, this "right" to religious freedom was novel and progressive; in practice, religious exercises were in fact prohibited and continue to be today.

American society has begun embodying the concept of Relativism, where one cannot “push” their views onto others. This poses a challenge to our concept of Absolutism, which holds that there are certain beliefs that are always true, no matter the circumstance. Key truths held by Catholics are under attack; principally, the beliefs that all human beings have a right to life and that marriage is between one man and one woman. In a country that claims to have “no law...prohibiting the free exercise [of religion],” we are constantly battling societal standards that directly contradict our faith.

We believe that all human beings have a right to life because we are created in the image and likeness of God. Jeremiah 1:5 tells us, “Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you.” Abortion, euthanasia, and in some cases, contraceptives, take an individual’s life; we know that humans are not called to decide another’s outcome, no matter the circumstance. This value is central to our faith, and the United States’ government challenges it every day when we are required to pay taxes that will provide health insurance that cover abortion, as well as contraceptives for women. Putting our faith into practice means that we will not support an organization or individual which allows these acts that are intrinsically wrong.

Another current conflict is found in the recent legalization of same-sex marriage. As Catholics, we know that traditional marriage was designed by God and is essential to the prosperity of family and society. A similar issue currently at the forefront is different gender identifications, such as transgender, fluid, and non-binary. This interpretation conflicts with our beliefs, yet we are expected to comply with paying for health insurance that covers transgender surgeries and the issuing of marriage license for same-sex couples.

People belonging to numerous religions in America deserve the protected freedom to practice and exercise their faith in order to allow true discussions of current issues. Our nation was founded on this principle, and while it may not have played out perfectly, there is no reason we cannot start exercising our faith in public: at school, work, and in the community. For this to happen, our nation must recognize that religious freedom allows us to contest prevailing societal norms that we find morally wrong, not simply to attend Church once a week without persecution.