

REFLECTIONS

Lawrence P. Grayson

The Great Divide

Opposition to Obamacare is growing as a result of its onerous mandates which force individuals and institutions to violate their religious beliefs. The ministry of the Little Sisters of the Poor to the aged is threatened; Christian schools, such as Wheaton College and Franciscan University, are being coerced to breach the religious principles they teach; for-profit companies, such as Hobby Lobby and Domino's Farms, are being required to contravene their founding values or pay crippling fines.

Currently, 73 suits have been filed in federal courts seeking relief from the requirement to provide employee health insurance that covers contraception, sterilization and abortion-inducing drugs. These represent over 200 plaintiffs, including seven states, EWTN, Priests for Life, numerous Catholic dioceses, hospitals, health associations, schools, private businesses and others.

The effects of the Obamacare directives will be grievous. But they also are indicative of an even greater concern -- the existence of sharp philosophical differences on the role of religion in the state, divisions that deeply divide the public. On one side are religiously-committed people who support life at all its stages, maintain the traditional view of marriage and family, are supportive of religious pluralism in public life, and conduct their social responsibilities through individuals and private organizations. On the other side are the religiously-indifferent, a cohort within which those who profess to follow no religion are a significant and growing component. They overwhelmingly support abortion, gay marriage, total separation of church and state, and look to the government as the agent of social responsibility.

The opposing views of the two groups are not simply opinions that are debatable. Rather, they are convictions that are fundamentally different, intransigent and intrinsically conflicting. The religiously-committed and the religiously-indifferent differ not only theologically, but clash culturally and politically, as well.

America was founded on a belief in God, who endowed all men with certain unalienable rights. The existence of many religious denominations at the nation's founding led to a civic pluralism in which churches and the state are separate, but with each having a role in public life. The churches were allowed to shape the moral character of the people according to transcendental norms, which provided citizens with the traits needed for a government of and by the people. The state, in turn, guaranteed the public order and secured the rights which allowed churches to carry out their mission and people to practice their faith in public life. The state was secular, that is, non-theistic, but did not prohibit the free exercise of religion.

As the religious beliefs of the populous have diminished, the view of separation of church and state has changed. The complementary relationship that existed is being replaced by an anti-religious secularism. Society is being operated as if God does not exist, or if he does, his existence does not matter. The result is a state-enforced practical atheism.

This nation has grounded its social order on laws. Treating everyone equally before the law has provided a major safeguard against the capriciousness of an unconstrained power. Laws, however, if not based upon fixed principles outside of the society, that is, upon immutable moral precepts, are subject to changing societal preferences. People obey laws to avoid penalties, not necessarily because they believe it is the right thing to do. When opportunities arise, people drive at excessive speeds, cheat on their income taxes, or loot homes and businesses when disaster disrupts the social order.

A government of the people requires individuals to voluntarily act for the good of society. It is morality, not laws, which forms such people. Moral views reflect the purpose of human life, the reason why we were created. The religiously-committed and the religiously-indifferent have very different perspective on this point. A person who believes that life on earth is transitory and that one will spend an eternity in heaven or hell depending upon how that life is lived will make vastly different choices than one who believes that the here and now is all there is.

Today, legal opinion is beginning to follow the growing influence of the religiously-indifferent. In striking down a Texas sodomy law, in 2003, Supreme Court Justice Anthony Kennedy noted that moral censure of homosexuality has been “shaped by religious beliefs, conceptions of right and acceptable behavior, and respect for the traditional family,” implying that religiously-influenced moral views are legally suspect.

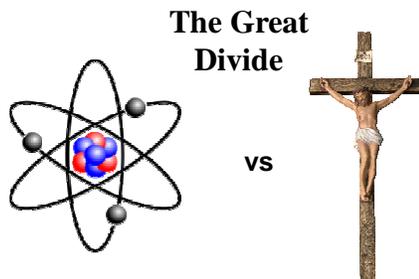
In 2010, Federal District Court Judge Vaughn Walker went further when he overturned Proposition 8, an electorate-adopted amendment to California’s state constitution limiting marriage to opposite-sex couples. He observed that many supporters of the initiative were motivated by their religious convictions which should not be allowed to govern public law.

If this trend continues -- and Obamacare is part of it -- there will be a severe limiting of religious freedom. Individuals may be allowed to worship God in private, but they increasingly will be prohibited from exercising their beliefs in ways that affect public life.

Freedom of religion is more than freedom to worship or of personal conscience. It includes the freedom to bring one’s religious views into the public square and pattern one’s actions based on those beliefs. It is the freedom for religious institutions to engage in public discourse and to carry out their missions in accord with their religious convictions. When the state can determine what constitutes a religious institution, coerce companies to violate the religiously-shaped principles upon which they were founded, prohibit military chaplains from presenting their denomination’s teachings on homosexuality, redefine a relationship such as marriage, decide when human life begins, and deny a child in the womb the fundamental right to life, religious freedom does not exist.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, in his 1978 address at Harvard University, viewed the United States to be in a “state of spiritual exhaustion,” in which it has achieved great technological progress, but at a cost of its moral heritage. Freedom, he continued, is conditioned on the fulfillment of our responsibilities to God, but Western man has proclaimed and practiced his autonomy from any higher power above him.

The future of religious freedom in the United States may well rest on the outcome of the struggle between aggressive secularism, spurred by the growth of the religiously-indifferent, and a freedom grounded in spiritual values reflected by the religiously-committed. This struggle will end only when the supporters of one of these immutable views have no further means to resist the supporters of the other. In the meantime, a solution to rekindle the nation's spiritual development, as Solzhenitsyn implied, may entail a period of deep suffering.



* * * * *

November 2013, Maryland State Bulletin