

Freedom of religion vs. Obama's 'freedom of worship'

by Randy Bright <http://www.tulsabeacon.com/?p=4558>

A building is a powerful communication tool. If that weren't true, no one would object to the mosque at Ground Zero.

As such, a church building is a powerful expression of freedom of religion and because most people are familiar with the symbol of the cross, they get the message that Jesus died for us, even if they don't totally understand why. We are free, at least for now, to place crosses on our churches.

Churches and cathedrals built in medieval days were elaborately decorated with statues and artworks that were used to teach the Bible to parishioners. In those days, few people were literate and they depended on the spoken word and visual images to learn. In our times, the American public is learning less about the Gospel than ever before, so there is a great need for its expression through church architecture. The question is, how long will that be allowed?

Randy Sly, the author of an article in Catholic Online, has noticed a shift in the paradigm from "freedom of religion" to "freedom of worship" which could lead to something that I have been concerned about for a number of years, and that is that churches will eventually have to become invisible in our communities.

Sly says that "this shift happened between the president's speech in Cairo where he showcased America's freedom of religion and his appearance in November at a memorial for the victims of Fort Hood, where he specifically used the term 'freedom of worship.' From that point on, it has become the term of choice for the president and (Hillary) Clinton."

Ashley Samelson (Becket Fund for Religious Liberty) put it this way: "To anyone who closely follows prominent discussion of religious freedom in the diplomatic and political arena, this linguistic shift is troubling. The reason is simple. Any person of faith knows that religious exercise is about a lot more than freedom of worship. It's about the right to dress according to one's religious dictates, to preach openly, to evangelize, to engage in the public square. Everyone knows that religious Jews keep kosher, religious Quakers don't go to war and religious Muslim women wear headscarves - yet 'freedom of worship' would protect none of these acts of faith.... The effort to squash religion into the private sphere is on the rise around the world."

Sly says in his article, "A shift of freedom of religion to freedom of worship moves the dialog from the world stage into the physical confines of the church, temple, synagogue or mosque. Such limitations can unleash an unbridled initiative that we have only experienced in a mild way through actions determined to remove roadside crosses, wearing of religious t-shirts and pro-life pins as well as any initiatives of evangelism. It also could exclude our right to raise our children in our faith, the right to religious education, literature or media, the right to raise funds or

organize charitable activities and the right to express religious beliefs in the normal discourse of life.”

If this paradigm shift does occur, and it becomes codified into law by legislature or by a liberal judge, how will this affect church architecture?

Perhaps the first thing that will occur is that we will have to remove anything of a religious nature from our church buildings, which will mean the removal of crosses. The impetus behind this will be that the new concept of community is that the exterior of our buildings belong to the public domain, simply because they can be seen by the public.

If liberals succeed in shifting the paradigm from freedom of religion to freedom of worship, it will likely mean that Christians and Jews will be required to limit their activities to the interior confines of the church building where they are not visible to those who aren't among their ranks.

It is critical that churches, as well as synagogues, recognize the importance of maintaining a place in their communities, and that includes preserving their right of free expression through their architecture; but it is also important to remember that the Obama administration is intent upon gaining control over churches who are willing to participate in his “Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships” initiative.

There has never been a time in American history where our nation's churches were in such peril, not just from our own government, but also from an increasingly secular society. Perhaps if we are willing to admit that the peril does indeed exist, Christians will become bold enough to fight for the freedom of religion that our Founders intended we should have.

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