

## ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus  
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska

11 August 2012

### *Religious and Political Liberty in 2012*

The United States was founded on the principles of both religious and political liberty. These precious principles were enshrined in the Bill of Rights, especially the First Amendment. As a nation that has championed these rights throughout its history and indeed the world, in terms of protecting these rights, our nation is changing. Rights and personal liberties are now defined as personal autonomy, something never envisioned by our Founders. Further, those on the leftwing of the political spectrum are threatening religious liberty on a scale unimaginable only a few years ago. Permit me to offer several thoughts.

- First, consider the Dan Cathy, President of Chick-fil-A. Cathy personally shared his views on marriage in a recent radio interview. He declared that “I think we are inviting God’s judgment on our nation when we shake our fist at Him and say, ‘We know better than you as to what constitutes a marriage.’ I pray God’s mercy on our generation that has such a prideful, arrogant attitude to think that we have the audacity to redefine what marriage is all about.” Predictably, many criticized Chick-fil-A as “anti-gay” and began intimidating others to boycott the Atlanta-based restaurant chain and its nationwide stores, thereby seeking to establish a pattern of fear for any other business leaders who would ever dare to share something similar. Cathy’s restaurants are quite popular and are growing across the nation. The restaurants are closed on Sundays and Cathy declares that he runs his company based on biblical principles. In another interview with the Baptist Press, Cathy stated that “We are very much supportive of the family—the biblical definition of the family unit. We are a family-owned business, a family-led business, and we are married to our first wives. We give God thanks for that.” As with my own personal ethic of marriage, Cathy roots his beliefs in the Creation Ordinance of God. His views reflect as well the historic view of marriage, anchored in thousands of years of history. This was also the view of President Obama, until a few months ago when he endorsed same-sex marriage. Furthermore, there are no policies within Chick-fil-A that discriminate against gays as employees or as customers. Cathy has expressed no animosity towards gays and has not even used the phrase same-sex marriage in his interviews. The attack on Cathy is an attack on his freedom of speech, even his freedom of religious speech. This freedom is protected by the First Amendment and even those who do not agree with Cathy’s personal views have defended his right to articulate those personal views. Most famously has been the ACLU. For that reason, I can only say shame on the politicians who have criticized Cathy and even gone so far as to deny Cathy the right to open his restaurants in their legislative districts or cities. Among those are Chicago Mayor Rahm Emmanuel, Chicago Alderman Joe Moreno, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino, San Francisco Mayor Edwin Lee and New York City Council Speaker Christine Quinn. There is nothing as un-American as the actions of these political leaders. Indeed, ACLU attorney Adam Schwartz correctly observed that “the government can

regulate discrimination in employment or against customers, but what the government cannot do is to punish someone for their words.”

- Second, the First Amendment guarantees the “free exercise of religion.” In one sense, this is a curious phrase, for it goes beyond freedom of worship and freedom of belief. It guarantees a broad practice and expression of religion far beyond what we do on a Sunday morning or a Saturday evening. Our Founders guaranteed an expression of religious belief and freedom that encompasses an entire lifestyle. Indeed, the First Lady, Michelle Obama, stated recently at a conference of the African Methodist Episcopal Church: “Our faith journey isn’t just about showing up on Sunday. It’s about what we do Monday through Saturday . . .” For that reason, it is dumbfounding to see her husband, through his Department of Health and Human Services, create, in the words of columnist Ross Douthat, “a religious exemption from the mandate requiring employers to pay for contraception, sterilization and the days-after pill that covers only churches, and treats religious hospitals, schools and charities as purely secular operations.” His decision protects the freedom of worship but it does not protect the free exercise of religion, stipulated by the First Amendment. Also, consider something absolutely bizarre recently handed down by a judge in Germany. In Cologne, Germany, a judge recently banned circumcision as a violation of a newborn’s human rights. Those who agreed said this decision did not harm a Jewish or Muslim’s freedom of belief. But this misses the whole point of the exercise of religion. It is a lifestyle, an exercise of religious devotion and belief that goes beyond worship. Such a ban strikes at the heart of what it means to be a Jew or a Muslim.

No one is being repressed by religious practices in the West. What is occurring is that Western monotheism and its beliefs about human sexuality, marriage, chastity before marriage and its overall ethical framework are running head on into the postmodern penchant for autonomy and absolute personal freedom. And, anyone who does not agree with that autonomy is a “bigot, hate-monger and an enemy of my personal freedom.” But, as Douthat so brilliantly comments, “It may seem strange that anyone could look around the pornography-saturated, fertility-challenged, family-breakdown-plagued West and see a society menaced by a repressive puritanism. But it’s clear that this perspective is widely and sincerely held. It would be refreshing, though, if it were expressed honestly, without the ‘of course we respect religious freedom’ façade. If you want to fine Catholic hospitals for following Catholic teaching, or prevent Jewish parents from circumcising their sons, or ban Chic-fil-A in Boston, then don’t tell religious people that you respect our freedoms. Say what you really think: that the exercise of our religion threatens all that’s good and decent, and that you’re going to use the levers of power to bend us to your will.”

- Finally, the press and the Obama administration mocked Mitt Romney’s speeches, both in Israel and Poland, such that most Americans missed the real message he sent to the people of Israel and Poland. In Poland, Romney pounded his free market message and the Polish peoples’ heroic struggle for freedom against an oppressive government. As columnist Kathleen Parker demonstrated, “He made clear the point that individual freedom, rather than government largesse, had created one of the strongest economies in Europe.” Romney said of Poland that “your nation has moved from a state monopoly over the economy, price controls and severe trade restrictions to a culture of entrepreneurship, greater fiscal

responsibility and international trade.” He also stressed important Catholic Church principles (so important in Poland) about the dignity of the human individual and emphasized the importance of small institutions from the family to the church to labor unions. His message was missed by the media and certainly by Obama and his administration, which coincidentally on the same day Romney spoke (1 August 2012), implemented the rule about employers paying for abortion-inducing drugs, sterilization and birth control products!! As he addressed a nation that models all of these virtues, Romney wove the themes of solidarity, free enterprise, hope and religious freedom together. The nation (i.e., America) that should have heard that message was under the impression that Romney’s speeches were filled with gaffes!!!!

My prayer is that the American people will take very seriously the growing threat that their government poses to the exercise of their religious freedom. These are dangerous days for American citizens, indeed for citizens of all western civilization, who want their respective governments to protect the exercise of their religious beliefs. This is not the kind of civilization our Founders envisioned.

See Kathleen Parker in the *Washington Post* (1 August 2012); Ross Douthat in the *New York Times* (29 July 2012); and Jay Richards and James Robison in the *Wall Street Journal* (3 August 2012).