

Ten Myths of Religious Freedom

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This past month we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's landmark document on religious liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*. This pithy, 5,700-word declaration emerged from the kiln of heated, sometimes acerbic discussion regarding the nature of religious faith and the relationship between truth and conscience.

Despite the clarity of the Council's teaching, many old misperceptions persist while other new errors have sprung up. Some see the document (if not the entire Council) as an unfortunate capitulation to the pressures of modernity, and even an abandonment of traditional Catholic teaching on salvation. Others see the idea of religious freedom as validating a creedal free-for-all.

In the following paragraphs I will highlight ten myths that can obscure the Church's understanding of authentic religious freedom.

1. The myth of religious indifference: "It doesn't matter who's right."

The notion that religious truth really doesn't matter is a child of the Enlightenment. Committed to overcoming the strife and bloodshed caused by the wars of religion, the French *philosophes* and their counterparts in other countries believed that the way to peace necessarily entailed discarding religious conviction.

Dignitatis Humanae, on the other hand, taught that religious freedom "leaves untouched traditional Catholic doctrine on the moral duty of men and societies toward the true religion and toward the one Church of Christ" (no. 1). Catholics believe that it matters tremendously who is right, and have historically been willing to shed their blood in bearing witness to the truth of the Christian faith. Yet Catholics also recognize that faith in Christ, along with being a gift of God, also requires the free assent of the person and cannot be coerced.

2. The myth of religious relativism: "Everybody's right."

A kissing cousin of religious indifference is the relativism that sees all religions as having the same value. All would be paths to salvation. No single religion has a universal or absolute value, since all are valid expressions of man's open-ended search for spirituality and transcendence.

The commonsense philosophical principle of non-contradiction, however, states that two contrary propositions cannot both be true. If you and I hold contrary ideas as regards the existence of God or the nature of the Church, we simply can't both be right. Religious relativism is a self-contradictory cop-out. Christians continue to espouse the words of Saint Peter: "There is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (Acts 4: 12).

3. The myth of false humility: "We don't know who's right."

Many today, thinking they are practicing intellectual humility, refuse to take a firm position on religious questions that are empirically unverifiable and prefer the comfortable stance of "open-mindedness." A clear faith would leave them in the awkward position of saying, or at least tacitly implying, that other people are... wrong. We think it judgmental and discourteous to proclaim our religious beliefs as *absolutely* true, as if such religious conviction could only be the fruit of arrogance.

Yet humility doesn't mean intellectual ambivalence. We can be convinced without thinking that we are therefore better than others. Our Catholic faith came to us as a free

gift that we did nothing to merit, and has nothing to do with any supposed tribal superiority. With gratitude and confidence we make the words of *Dignitatis Humanae* our own: “We believe that this one true religion subsists in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus committed the duty of spreading it abroad among all men” (no. 1).

4. The myth of epistemological skepticism. “It’s impossible to know who’s right.”

A famous story from the Buddhist Sutra speaks of four blind men trying to describe an elephant. Since one touches the side, another the tail, another a leg and another the elephant’s ear, their descriptions vary considerably and each captures only a part of the overall reality. Many nowadays use this analogy to describe how different religions approach God. Each would have a part of the truth and no one the whole truth.

The problem with this, of course, is that the narrator of the story (who is not blind) *does* claim to have the whole picture, which explains how he knows that the others only have a partial knowledge. Even agnostics and atheists claim to know something about religious truth, even if only to criticize it.

5. The myth of religious cynicism: “Nobody’s right.”

According to the cynical mindset nobody’s right because there is no “right” and “wrong” in questions of religion. Religion would be strictly a question of piety and worship, not of true or false propositions. What matters is the consistency with which you follow your own personal values, not the content of those values. To “believe” is not to “know,” but simply to opt for a possible explanation in the absence of knowledge.

Catholics, on the other hand, understand faith to be a way of knowing, every bit as valid as reason and empirical observation. Pope John Paul II referred to faith and reason as the two “wings” by which we rise to the truth. Every Sunday we publicly profess our faith in a number of propositions that we understand to be true. We make very specific truth claims about God and his relationship with us, which cannot be reduced to mere sentiments or “values.”

6. The myth of the infallible conscience: “If my conscience says so, it must be right.”

Conscience is our best gauge and *Dignitatis Humanae* affirms that in all his activity a person “is bound to follow his conscience” and that “he is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience” (no. 3).

Nonetheless, we all make mistakes, and a vague appeal to conscience cannot justify wrongdoing. Sometimes we do wrong because we don’t listen to our conscience; other times our conscience itself is mistaken in its judgments. Therefore, along with our duty to *follow* conscience comes a duty to *form* our conscience, so that its judgments will guide us according to moral truth rather than subjective whim.

7. The myth of religious tolerance: “We put up with religion.”

Another invention of the Enlightenment, “tolerance” was recruited to replace support or worst still, enthusiasm for religion. We tolerate evils, bothersome things, not good things. No one tolerates chocolate cake or pleasant conversation. By speaking of religious tolerance we understand religion to be an unfortunate fact to be borne with, not a blessing to be embraced.

For Enlightenment leaders “progress” meant leaving behind the “ignorance” of religion to usher in an age of science and reason. This in turn led them to downplay or even ridicule religion in the hopes that it would soon disappear altogether. Thus, separation of Church and State becomes separation of public life and religious belief.

Religion should be banned from public conversation and relegated to the intimacy of home and chapel.

Dignitatis Humanae, on the other hand, taught that religion is a human good to be promoted, not an evil to be tolerated. While government should not presume to command religious acts, it should “take account of the religious life of the citizenry and show it favor” (no. 3). Religious practice forms part of the common good of society, and should be encouraged.

8. The myth of moral license: “I have a right to be wrong.”

The Church’s embrace of religious freedom doesn’t excuse the lazy and superficial from seeking the deeper truths about God, the afterlife, and the meaning of human existence. Religious truth plays such a central role in man’s life that no one can rightly say, “Religion isn’t my thing, and I prefer to dedicate myself to other pursuits.” The declaration teaches that all “should be at once impelled by nature and also bound by a moral obligation to seek the truth, especially religious truth” (no. 2).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that the right to religious liberty “is neither a moral license to adhere to error, nor a supposed right to error, but rather a natural right of the human person to civil liberty, i.e., immunity, within just limits, from external constraint in religious matters by political authorities” (CCC 2108).

9. The myth of religious pluralism: “Religious diversity is a good to be pursued.”

In many things diversity is a good to be pursued; in others, it is not. In art, literature, and music, the loss of specific cultural traditions would constitute a loss for humanity. But no one calls the loss of belief in a flat world an assault on scientific “diversity.” Education surely reduces the diversity of beliefs as people come to know the truth, but who would consider this a setback?

The *fact* of a plurality of religions doesn’t imply the *ideology* of religious pluralism. Saint Paul undauntedly preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to King Agrippa, who declared: “A little more and you would make a Christian of me,” to which Paul replied, “I wish that not only you, but all those that hear me might become as I am” (Acts 26: 28-29). Though other religions may contain elements of truth, it is to be hoped that all come to the fullness of truth.

10. The myth of evangelical renunciation: “I have no right to proselytize.”

Some think that embracing religious freedom entails adopting a “live and let live” mentality, at odds with the missionary zeal that characterized our forebears. Why, after all, disturb people if they are happy in their ignorance?

Dignitatis Humanae recalls Jesus’ last words to his followers: “Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 28: 19-20). This “missionary mandate” carries the same weight today as it did 2000 years ago. The treasure we have received cannot be “hidden under a bushel basket,” but must be “placed on a lampstand for all to see” (Matt 5:15). Yet the announcement of the Good News must be done in a way respectful of the dignity of each person. In the words of John Paul II, “The Church proposes; she imposes nothing” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 39).

The 40th anniversary of *Dignitatis Humanae* furnishes an ideal occasion to celebrate the Church’s teaching on religious liberty. “The truth,” we read, “cannot impose itself except by virtue of its own truth” (no. 1). At the same time we are renewed in our

wholehearted embrace of the truth we have found, and in our commitment to share this truth with others, so they will have the opportunity to know the joy of faith in Christ.

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