

## I. Introduction

A. One of the most liberating ideas that I've encountered in the last few years is the idea of "the common good."

B. It's an ancient concept discussed by Aristotle and the Apostle Paul. It was revived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century by Pope Leo the 13<sup>th</sup>, who became Pope at a time when the Catholic church had no direct political power in Europe. Rather than becoming withdrawn or defensive in response to this change, Pope Leo wrote letter after letter re-articulating the Christian faith and its social teaching. At the heart of his teaching was the idea of the common Good.

C. The Common Good is about:

1. The flourishing of persons in community. We become who we were created to become in relationships with one another.

2. The infinite dignity of every human being created in the image of God. And the common good is about community because persons created in the image of a triune God do not flourish unless they are in community.

3. The care of the weak. The best test of the common good is the flourishing of the vulnerable. Indeed, as far as biblical people are concerned, human societies are graded on a curve and the fate of the most vulnerable in those societies are given the most weight. There are all kinds of conditions in which the affluent, privileged, majority can flourish. But the far more demanding test of any society is the fate of the most vulnerable: the youngest, oldest, most frail, most marginalized.

## II. If you care about the flourishing of persons - especially the vulnerable - you will care about the freedom of religion.

A. Religion is one of the deepest forms of human flourishing. Human beings have the extraordinary unique capacity among creatures to bind themselves to deep commitments about the ultimate meaning of the world.

B. It's one of the burdens and glory of human life. To not just act based on our immediate interests, preferences or needs, but on some deep conviction about the ultimate truth of reality. What it is to be a flourishing human being is to bind yourself to something bigger than yourself regardless of the cost.

C. Religion is not just about beliefs or worship, it's about committed action based on what you believe and what or whom you worship. The Apostle James puts it this way: religion that is pure and undefiled before God the father is this: to care for orphans and widows in their distress and to keep yourself unstained by the world.

D. There are 2 elements to James understanding of pure undefiled true religion:

1. Public action caring for orphans and widows, the vulnerable of society.

2. Keeping oneself unstained by the world that is by being distinctly different in some way from society around us.

E. Religious freedom needs to make room not just for private beliefs or for secluded worship, but for distinctive public action based on countercultural commitments.

## III. The test of religious freedom is how it protects minority religious communities.

A. Does it protect you if you're a Jew in Saudi Arabia, a Palestinian Arab in Israel, a Christian in Malaysia or a Muslim in Nashville?

B. Being denied religious freedom in public is one of the deepest denials of human flourishing.

C. There is something else in James' definition that's significant: his attention to orphans and widows, the most vulnerable in biblical frame.

D. The empirical reality is the kinds of communities that very often provide the deepest and most transformative services for the most vulnerable are religious communities.

1. We experience this in a small but telling way at Q itself, this is a context of tremendous power, privilege, affluence and majority culture here at Q, but when you compare Q to similar secular events, it's amazing how much of this conference touches upon the deepest issues of human vulnerability.

2. You can go to TED and hear great talks on innovation and design and some of those may touch on how those affect the bottom billion. You can go to the World Economic Forum in Davos and hear earnest panels on global economic development and some of it will mention how it affects the poorest and most vulnerable but there's no way you hear as much at TED or Davos about the most vulnerable in the world as you will over the next couple days.

3. This is a deeply Christian thing. But it's not just a Christian thing, it seems strikingly often that religious commitments of many kinds create the kinds of communities that attend to the needs of the most vulnerable in the deepest and most transformative ways.

IV. If you care about the flourishing of persons especially the most vulnerable in communities, you will care about religious freedom. But, here is the difficult truth: religious freedom is more at risk globally and in the US than I think it has been in any of our lifetimes in this room.

A. PEW has been rigorously tracking and studying religious freedom globally over the last 7 years. They measure 2 dimensions that threat religious freedom around the world:

1. Government restriction
2. Social hostility

B. Both of these dimensions matter, Americans tend to think of it as primarily a legal or governmental matter, but social hostility non- governmental resistance to religious expression is just as important.

C. In Murfreesboro, TN in 2009, a significant public outcry arose over the plans to build a Mosque and Islamic center. Now the county planning commission voted unanimously to permit the construction - this is not primarily a case of government restriction. But that decision was met with vandalism and threats of violence, it was met with social hostility. And social hostility is every bit as effective as legal restrictions in preventing communities from living out their faith in public.

D. The most recent PEW study of religious freedom covers data through the year 2012\*.

1. In 2012 they found social hostility was at an all time high across all major countries in the world.
2. And one especially troubling finding for us in the US, is that in the US, government restrictions on religion have gone up more over the past 6 years, more than in any other large nation.
3. The PEW scale study ranks countries as low restriction, medium restriction and high restriction. In 2007, the US ranked as low restriction, 3 years ago the US moved from the low category to moderate.
4. And what this means is that more than half of the countries in the world have less government restriction on religion than the US. By the methodology of the PEW researchers. The US obviously has far more religious freedom than countries that rank high like Saudi Arabia or China.
5. The increase on government restrictions is not primarily a federal matter, it tends to be state and local government decisions. For example, many substantial burdens on religious freedom come from zoning decisions like the situation in Murfreesboro could've been. Mosques, churches, religious schools, often face more burdensome regulatory requirements from their local governments than secular non-profit organizations or businesses.
6. So, it turns out, one of the ways you can advance religious freedom and the common good is to attend zoning hearings. Radical sacrificial activism, I would say, Wow. Why?

V. Why is this happening globally and in our country? Why are protections for religious freedoms eroding? Why is social hostility increasing?

A. Religious pluralism is happening around the world. We live next door more and more to people who are religiously different than us.

B. Religious freedom is hard. No matter what you are for, there is something you are against that you are going to have to tolerate if you want religious freedom.

1. You may support the owners of Hobby Lobby, the craft store whose case was argued before the Supreme Court a few weeks ago, who do not feel they can in good conscious pay for forms of contraception they feel lead to abortion in some cases. Fine. You may support them on religious freedom grounds.

2. But, do you support the local mosque that wants to guide its members in raising their children and handling family disputes in accordance with Sharia law.

3. Do you support Native Americans who feel religiously bound to use peyote, a drug like Marijuana, in their religious ceremonies?

4. Do you support Christian photographers who on the basis of human flourishing decline to take photos of same sex marriages?

C. No matter how conservative or progressive your religious views, some expression of religious freedom is going to be troubling to you and that is the point of religious freedom.

D. If prevailing cultural commitments can trump binding religious commitments, you don't have religious freedom, it is not easy, it is not intuitive, it is not natural for human societies and that is why it never flourishes unless it is actively protected.

VI. So, how are we going to protect it? Not just by avoiding government restrictions, but by actually trying to lower and limit social hostility. There is one word that has emerged from the jurisprudence around this topic, that I find incredibly helpful even though it's not the most inspiring word that has ever been uttered from the Q stage. But it sure does help how we're supposed to approach these issues.

A. The word is: accommodation. Boy, that'll preach.

B. Our task as the creators of a culture of pervasive and durable religious freedom is to find creative ways to accommodate the binding commitment of our neighbors even and especially when we find them difficult. Let me illustrate what this does not mean and what this does mean:

C. Accommodation does not override societies compelling interest in protecting the most vulnerable. If you are a Jehovah's Witness adherent, you are bound by your faith to believe that the bible forbids the transfusion of blood. Our society accommodates that belief for adults, but we do not accommodate it in the case of children who are the children of Jehovah's Witness parents, we override that because society has a compelling interest in the welfare of its most vulnerable and if transfusion is the best medical practice, we do enforce that.

D. Accommodation also does not give a blank check to the religious, in fact it should ensure that they gain no extrinsic benefits from exercising their religious convictions. If Hobby Lobby does not feel free to provide certain forms of contraception, the accommodation of that belief should ensure that it doesn't gain any financial benefit from doing so, partly because this will prevent individuals or communities from claiming or faking religious commitments just to get out of hard work or high cost. Religious freedom does not ask that we give a free pass when people ask for it.

E. But what accommodation does mean is creative problem solving ideally and especially at the local level. Here's an example: Philip Hall is a Baptist deacon, he is a pharmacist who works at a Walgreens, and he believes along with Hobby Lobby that Plan B contraceptives can sometimes cause abortions and does not feel in good conscious he can dispense this. Walgreens and Mr. Hall came to an accommodation of his beliefs. Walgreens did not stop selling Plan B but instead they arranged that there would always be another pharmacist on duty who dispense it if someone came in with a prescription, so that Mr. Hall could not violate his conscience by prescribing it. Walgreens did not change its views about which drug it should sell, it did not change its national policy, but it made room for an employee to honor his deepest commitments.

F. If we don't learn to do this kind of accommodation, we will end up with a false pluralism that loudly trumpets its commitment to diversity but marginalizes and minimizes the communities that would add real diversity to our society.

G. And unfortunately, this year Philip Hall was fired from his position after 5 years of successfully accommodating his belief even as Walgreens issued a press release saying the honor the freedom of conscience of their employees.

VII. We can do better than a false pluralism and we can start here at Q. All of us have been bound by some very deep commitments, all of us can learn to honor others who have been bound by deep commitments and to a great degree the future of religious freedom and the common good depends on us.