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“Let Freedom Ring . . . !”
John Carroll Society Event
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On August 3, 1944, in the middle of the neuralgic Philadelphia transit workers’ strike, a black protester, passionately concerned about racial equality and labor rights, walked into *Independence Hall* and hurled a quartz paperweight at the *Liberty Bell*, ringing it with a deep thud that sent guards after him as he shouted, “Liberty Bell, Liberty Bell . . . liberty! That’s a lot of *bunk*.” (Bystanders reported that he used a noun other than “bunk.”)

That incident comes to mind as we gather this evening to consider the theme, “Let Freedom Ring,” as thoughtful citizens of all political stripes are tempted to hurl something at our cherished *Liberty Bell* so concerned are they about threats to the “first and most cherished liberty, *freedom of religion*.”

Cardinal Wuerl, Monsignor Vaghi, brother priests, deacons; religious women and men; board and officers of the prestigious *John Carroll Society*, civic officials, our gracious hosts this evening at this inviting location dedicated to yet another right guaranteed by the first amendment: I sure appreciate your gracious invitation and warm welcome.

I feel at home, not just because of my fond memories of eight extraordinarily happy years here in Washington, three as a graduate student at The Catholic University of America, and five as a secretary at the Apostolic Nunciature, (the Vatican Embassy) - - and it’s a tonic to see friends from those days here tonight - - but, because, I happen to be a proud member of the *John Carroll Society*, our conveners this evening, and, by the way, a recipient of the *John Carroll Award*. Monsignor Vaghi reminded me of my membership earlier this evening, prodding me as well that I’m seven years behind in my dues.

As happy as I am to be with you, I must confess a bit of apprehension. As I look out in admiration at this distinguished assembly, I realize that there are far more qualified experts on this topic of *Religious Freedom* than I'll ever be. I hope I don't get lost!

I'm reminded of Archbishop Fulton Sheen's story - - speaking of the *Liberty Bell* - - about his engagement to deliver a lecture at *Independence Hall* in Philadelphia. He had been told that the *Hall* was only eight blocks from his hotel, so he decided to walk. But, he got lost, and found himself in a rather ominous section of town. He took a deep breath and asked a threatening group of toughs sitting on the curb smoking and drinking,

“Pardon me, gentlemen, I am lost. Can you help me get to *Independence Hall* where I must give a talk?”

The leader eyed – him up suspiciously, then softened, “Sure,” and helpfully gave him directions.

As Archbishop Sheen thanked him and started to leave, the street-kid asked,

“Say, Father, what are you gonna talk about?”

Ever the evangelist, Sheen replied, “How to get to heaven.”

To which the tough replied, “Good luck! Hell, you can't even get to *Independence Hall*.”

Let's hope I can this evening.

A final personal comment: I dedicate this talk to a great patriot, husband, father, leader, and Catholic gentleman: Naval Lt. Commander Joseph Vaghi, who heroically got the “boys of *Pointe der Hoc* ” to the beach at Normandy on D-Day, who passed away just sixteen-days ago.

May his soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in peace! Amen!

Here's what I thought I'd do for half-an-hour-or-so: I want to "restore the luster" on this "first and most cherished freedom." See, I'm afraid that the promotion and protection of *religious liberty* is becoming caricatured as some narrow, hyper-defensive, far-right, self-serving cause. Nothing can be more inaccurate. Rather, *freedom of religion* has been the driving force of almost every enlightened, un-shackling, noble cause in American history.

Thus, the defense of *religious freedom* is not some evangelical Christian polemic, or wily strategy of discredited Catholic bishops, but the quintessential American cause, the first line in the defense of and protection of human rights.

See, *religious freedom* has always been understood in this land as one of a cluster of fundamental freedoms; that is, spheres of free thought and action essential to individual liberty and a civil society. The normative idea of a constitutionally, democratically restrained government - - a government that makes no theological judgments (*religious freedom*), that does not handcuff the media (*freedom of the press*), that does not dictate thought or culture (*free speech*), and that does not dominate all the room a humane society needs (*freedom of assembly*) - - is predicated on the belief in human equality and dignity.

So, my proposition is that, in "letting freedom ring," we citizens of any and all faiths, or none at all, are not just paranoid and self-serving in defending what we hoard as "ours," but we are, in fact, protecting America. We act not as sectarians, but as responsible citizens. We act on behalf of the truth about the human person.

In fact, a case can be made that the founders were characteristically wise in placing *freedom of religion* as the first of the famous quartet, since the others are in jeopardy if that lead-off liberty is diluted. As Pope Benedict XVI observed at the United Nations:

“Refusal to recognize the contribution to society rooted in the religious dimension and in the quest for the absolute . . . would effectively privilege an individualistic approach, and would fragment the unity of the person.”

Francis Beckwith agrees, worrying that a chipping away at *religious freedom* means that “the very question of what is essential to a civil society is itself in dispute.”

No wonder Thomas Jefferson asked, “Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God?”

No wonder de Tocqueville concluded that, “Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot. Religion . . . is more needed in democratic republics than in any others.”

Let’s roll-out some “exhibits” to make my case that *religious freedom* in American history has hardly been the cause of chilling, repressive, retrograde movements, but of the most liberating, ennobling ones, a point made well by Dan McKanan in his recent *Prophetic Encounters: Religion and the American Radical Tradition*.

Shall we start with the *American Revolution* itself? As I’m sure you are aware, the conjectures of towering-American historians such as Sydney Ahlstrom and Winthrop Hudson are almost a “given” in our country’s self-understanding: namely, that the *Great Awakening* in the middle decades of the 18th century - - a religious movement usually associated with Jonathan Edwards - - was one of the major causes of the *Revolution* and our independence.

Professor Joseph Loconte recalls one particularly vivid scene: On Sunday morning, January 21, 1776, at a church in Woodstock, Virginia, Reverend Peter Gabriel Muhlenberg brought his sermon to a dramatic and unexpected crescendo. His text was taken from the book of *Ecclesiastes*. “The Bible tells us ‘there is a time for all things,’ and there is a time to preach

and a time to pray,” said Muhlenberg. “But the time for me to preach has passed away; and there is a time to fight, and that time has now come.”

Stepping down from the pulpit, the minister took off his clerical robes to reveal the uniform of colonel in the 8th Virginia Regiment of the Continental Army. He had been personally recruited by George Washington. Outside the church door, drums sounded as men kissed their wives goodbye and strode down the aisle to enlist. In less than an hour, 162 men from Muhlenberg’s congregation joined the patriot cause.

As historian James Hutson explains in his *Religion and the Founding of the American Republic*, “By combining Whig political theory with religion, the early preachers forged an especially powerful weapon to mobilize opposition to Britain.” “Fighting Parsons” such as Elisha Williams and John Witherspoon injected the revolutionary cause with biblical and doctrinal encouragement, with the “minute man” and the minister side-by-side.

With religion and the churches such an essential partner in the revolution, is it any wonder that *Freedom of Religion* was enshrined in our national charters?

That *Freedom of Religion*, protecting a spot in the public square for the voices of those speaking from a faith-formed conscience, was a blessing to our Republic is vividly evident in my exhibit B, the essential role of religion in the *abolition* of slavery.

While it is soberly undeniable that every denomination in America, except the Quakers, should shout a *mea culpa* when it comes to our failure to take a prophetic stance against slavery, it is equally undeniable that the leaders of the abolitionists were mostly inspired by religious conviction.

The litany of abolitionists - - William Lloyd Garrison, Benjamin Lundy, John Greenleaf Whittier, William Collier, Theodore Dwight Weld - - and even the less fire-breathing ones like Ralph Waldo Emerson, Lyman Beecher, and William Ellery Channing - - are a diverse collection, but have one thing in common: their devotion to the cause to end slavery flowed

from a conscience formed by faith. Jacob Needleman, author of *American Soul*, is right in contending that abolitionism was, at its core, a *religious* crusade. In a land where loyalty to conscience and *freedom of religion* were not guaranteed, emancipation would have come at a much tragically later date.

By the way, Dan McKanan, whom I referred to earlier, conjectures that, because women often had leading roles in the abolitionist movement, the slow-but-steady advancement of *women's equality*, was also a religiously animated reform movement. This is good reminder, since, today, those who criticize the churches' mobilization in defense of *religious freedom* often slyly muddy it with "war on women" slogans.

Let's, then couple the *advancement of women* with that cause's most colorful project, *temperance*, as "exhibit C" in my case that *freedom of religion* is the battery in all our noble causes.

Now, we Catholics might quibble with designating the temperance movement as a religious cause, and, to be sure, one would not find many Catholic names on the rolls. But, the fact remains that the women of the temperance movement saw their cause as biblical, inspired by conscience, a conscience protected by *religious liberty*.

How about the crusade that is actually called, *the Reform Movement*, led in the latter years of the 19th century and opening ones of the 20th by the "Great Commoner" himself, William Jennings Bryan, as "exhibit D" in my case? Michael Kazin entitles his masterful biography of Bryan *A Godly Hero*, and demonstrates that Bryan viewed the prairie populism of the Age of Reform, which he led, as nothing less than another "Great Awakening." The introduction to Kazin's work is even called "The Romance of Jefferson and Jesus." According to Richard Lingeman's review of a *Godly Hero* in the *New York Times*, Teddy Roosevelt's "Fair Deal," Woodrow Wilson's progressivism, and FDR's "New Deal," are all direct descendants of this religious crusade called the *Reform Movement*.

“Exhibit E” - - boy, I sure hope I’m swaying you ladies and gentlemen of the jury! - - would be the *Civil Rights Movement*. Without the unfettered preaching of the Gospel, without the leadership of Black southern preachers, led heroically by the Reverend Martin Luther King - - whose brilliant *Letters from a Birmingham Jail* is perhaps one of the most cogent proof texts for religious freedom, the primacy of conscience, the proper posture of religion in the national conversation, and the normative role of Natural Law in our nation’s founding - - the *Civil Rights Movement* would never have flourished.

“Exhibit F” would be the *Peace Movement* of the 1960’s and ‘70’s and ‘80’s, and “Exhibit G” the premier civil rights movement of today, the *Pro-Life Movement*, both religiously driven.

Now, patient listeners, I haven’t even listed the *labor movement*, the *urban reform movement*, or other noble causes, hardly because they are of lesser importance, but because I’m already at the seventh-inning stretch.

And, besides, here in Maryland and our nation’s capital, I’m “preaching to the choir.” Maryland, acres of this Archdiocese of Washington, was, of course, a laboratory of the *religious freedom* which I argue is at the heart of what is most noble in the American project. Maryland gave us a Catholic community which provided religious Catholic leaders, who then helped fashion the guiding documents of our country, including the patron of our host this evening, John Carroll, his brother Daniel, and his cousin, Charles.

As you know, the first English-speaking Catholics to come to these shores were led on by Cecil Calvert, Lord Baltimore, who landed on St. Clement’s Island on the Feast of the Annunciation, March 25, 1634.

Maryland was not a “Catholic colony,” but a colony which rightly, especially after the enactment of the *Act of Religious Toleration* 15 years after settlement, boasted about its claim of religious diversity and freedom, and the only colony with a notable Catholic population.

(Some even inaccurately think the colony was named after the Mother of Jesus. Monsignor John Tracy Ellis told the story of Bishop John Spence, an auxiliary bishop here, who, preparing a talk on the history of Catholicism in Maryland, telephoned to ask him, “I just wanted to verify the name of the person who named this colony after the Blessed Mother.” Monsignor Ellis, ever precise, replied, “Actually, Your Excellency, the colony was named after Queen Henrietta Maria, wife of Charles I.” After a long pause, the obviously disappointed bishop replied, “Sorry I asked. Don’t tell anyone, please, that I inquired, and that you corrected me.”)

Yet Maryland provided the laboratory. Your ancestors here were shrewd: they did not want any favored status for either their beloved Catholic faith or any other religion. Nor did they want their faith, however normative in their own life, to have any institutional input in the colonial government. Mainly, *they just wanted to be left alone! Left alone . . .* to practice their faith, and follow their properly formed consciences in the public square.

See, they had fled an England where religion did have political privilege, such as tax-support and mandatory membership for Anglican bishops in parliament. The Church of England was established by law in England, which meant every other religion was second-class. Ask Lord Baltimore; ask Roger Williams, the founder of Rhode Island, whose assembly would declare in 1658, “Freedom of conscience, to be protected from enforcements, was the principal ground of our charter . . . which freedom we still prize as the greatest happiness that men can possess in this world.”

They did not want privileges from the state; they just wanted to be *left alone*.

And that desire spread, and prevailed, and became constitutionally enshrined in the historical provision that “Congress shall make no law to establish religion,” in our “first and most cherished freedom.”

For our foundational generations, this was *freedom for religion*, to let it flourish unfettered from government intrusion, not freedom *from* religion, as today’s established creed, secularism, would have us believe. As Charles Chaput, the Archbishop of Philadelphia, remarks,

“*Religious freedom* is never just *freedom from* repression, but also *freedom for* active discipleship. It includes the right of religious believers, leaders and communities to engage society and to work actively in the public square.”

Simply put, government has no business interfering in the internal life of the soul, conscience, or church.

An interesting story shows how early our Republic understood this. As Rome became more and more aware of the situation of this strange new country which had declared its independence from England in 1776, the Holy See became, naturally, very concerned about the tiny Catholic flock there. Understandably, Rome approached France to help get information about the nascent Church in America, since France had been allied with the colonists in the Revolutionary War. Thus did the nuncio at the court of Versailles approach the American minister there, one Benjamin Franklin, to inquire if the American government would permit the appointment of a Catholic superior in America. The answer from America to Rome through Franklin was clear: “How nice of you to ask, but, it’s really none of our business,” to paraphrase just a bit.

You realize how dramatic this was for Rome to hear! At a time of presumed unity between throne and altar all throughout Europe, when governments claimed the right to manage and define the Church, this young whippersnapper of a nation called America says that interference in the internal life of a church is none of its business!

Leave religion alone . . . the guiding principle of religious freedom.

A man who understood this wish was a successor to our first bishop, John Carroll. His name was James Gibbons. Here’s how he bragged about *freedom of religion*, in a 1887 sermon preached in Rome:

“ . . . as a citizen of the United States, without closing my eyes to our defects as a nation, I proclaim, with a deep sense of pride and gratitude, in this great capitol of Christendom, that I

belong to a country where the government holds over us the aegis of its protection, without interfering in the legitimate exercise of our sublime mission . . .”

Well said: protect our free exercise, then *leave us alone*.

President Lyndon Johnson comprehended this in a characteristically homey way. An advisor close to him related to me that, as the first Medicare Bill was being formulated, advisors and drafters suggested including coverage for things some religions considered contrary to their conscience.

“Stay away from that!” LBJ thundered. “Religion is like a beehive: look at it and protect it from a distance, and you’ll get good honey! Stick your hand inside of it, and you’ll get stung bad!”

Which brings us to now. For the threats to our “first and most cherished freedom” are abundant, but let me list just two.

One comes from those called *secularists*, who will tolerate religion as long as it’s just considered some eccentric private hobby for superstitious, unenlightened folks, limited to an hour on the Sabbath, with no claim to any voice in the public square. Such, of course, is hardly “free exercise,” as Michelle Obama recently pointed out: “Our faith . . . just isn’t about showing up on Sunday . . . it’s about what we do on Monday through Saturday.”

The second omen comes from direct intrusion of the government into the very definition of a church’s minister, ministries, message, and meaning. Thus, to say it again, the wide ecumenical and inter-religious outrage over the HHS mandate is *not* about its coverage of chemical contraceptives and abortion-inducing drugs, - - in spite of the well-oiled mantra from our opponents - - but upon the raw presumption of a bureau of the federal government to define a church’s minister, ministry, message, and meaning.

As Cardinal Wuerl noted,

“The mandates’ definition of a religious organization contradicts decades of precedent and practice. Republicans and Democrats alike have long agreed that the First Amendment’s guarantee of *religious liberty* includes not only what goes on within the four walls of a church, but also the religiously motivated acts of service that fulfill the mission of that church. Only now . . . has the government said that we must leave our conscience behind when we step into the public square.”

Recently, sadly, a prominent Catholic political leader down the street stated that “The Church needs to get over their conscience thing.”

No, we don’t; no, we can’t; as believers, as Americans.

All we want to do, along with Cecil Calvert, Roger Williams, William Penn, and John Carroll, is to be left alone. All we want, along with the “Parson Patriots,” Jonathan Edwards, the abolitionists, William Jennings Bryan, Cesar Chavez, Dorothy Day, and the Reverend Martin Luther King, is the freedom to carry the convictions of a faith-formed conscience into our public lives.

That’s the freedom Charles Carroll of Carrollton, the only Catholic to sign the *Declaration of Independence*, the wealthiest man in the thirteen colonies, who risked his life, family, and property in the revolutionary cause to, and I quote “obtain religious as well as civil liberty.”

That’s the freedom Navy Lt. Commander Joseph Vaghi fought to defend.

We don’t want to curse the Freedom Bell as a sham; we want to *Let*

Freedom ring!