

# Religious Liberty's Greatest Threat

By Jeff Wehr

WHAT danger threatens our religious freedoms in America more than any other? Will the dismantled former Soviet Union arise and crush us? Never! All the armies of Europe, Asia, the former Soviet Union, and the Middle East combined, with a Hitler at the helm, could not pluck one kernel of wheat from the heartland of America.

History identifies religious institutions that control the power of the state as the greatest enemy to religious freedom. Most of those who are persecuted when the church controls the state are Christians, not secular humanists nor the immoral. There is a heightened intolerance of those who believe, but believe differently. The greatest persecution of Christianity comes from within Christianity, as history shows.

## Persecution in America

Anti-Catholicism came to America on the Mayflower in 1620, as well as hatred towards Anabaptists, Mennonites, Quakers, and anyone else whose beliefs did not square with those of the Pilgrims. Tolerance was not one of those things in great supply when the Pilgrims first stepped on Plymouth Rock. In America many were imprisoned, had their tongues cut out, and some were even put to death because of their religious beliefs. However, tolerance was something that Americans would progressively develop.

In 1791, 170 years later, there would be a legal break in this dark side of American history with the ratification of the First Amendment, which reads: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." However, persecution still continued for some time in the New World. In Philadelphia, the city of brotherly love, two Catholic churches and one seminary were burned down, thirteen people killed, and fifty wounded. Why? Because Catholic children refused to participate in the Protestant service of classroom prayer and reading from the King James Version of the Bible. In fact, riots also raged against Catholics in the 1830s in New York City and Boston.

## The Vatican Persecutes

The most tragic and widespread intolerance and persecution was expressed by the Church of Rome. Around the world over one hundred million people were martyred for believing differently.

"That the church of Rome has shed more innocent blood than any other institution that has ever existed among mankind, will be questioned by no Protestant who has a competent knowledge of history." W.E.H. Lecky, *History of the Rise and Influence of the Spirit of Rationalism in Europe*, vol. 2, 32, 1910 edition.

## The Injustice of Intolerance

However, the question must be asked, If God judges the morals of man, why do churches seek the civil law to legislate against or to incriminate those who believe differently? Scholar Leonard Levy observed, "The theory of the church was that a society forfeits the protection of heaven by offending the divine powers that protect against disasters. A wrathful God could inflict droughts, famines, plagues, poverty, and military defeat. Rulers, said Augustine, used the sword well as 'ministers of God, avengers unto wrath against those who do evil.' Having established the church by law, rulers recognized it as possessing the only true faith and the sole jurisdiction over the state, thus ensuring the possibility of future rewards." Levy, *Blasphemy*, 47-48.

Catholic theologian, Thomas Aquinas, taught that heretics must be delivered to "the secular tribunal to be exterminated." Otherwise, they would corrupt the faith of others. "Eternal salvation takes precedence over temporal good, and . . . the good of the many is to be preferred to the good of one." Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, volume 9, 154-155.

Catholic scholar Desiderius Erasmus declared, "How could anyone infer . . . that I do not approve of killing heretics? . . . To kill blasphemous and seditious heretics is necessary for the maintainance of the state." Sebastian Castellio, *Concerning Heretics: Whether They Are To Be Persecuted and How They Are To Be Treated*, translation with introduction by Roland H. Bainton, New York, 1935, 38-41.

It is understandable that actions of incivility are punishable, but to punish someone because of his religious beliefs is uncivil. To punish a man because his faith does not agree with yours is to show a lack of faith in what you believe and in the triumph of truth itself.

Perhaps the greatest danger in punishing "heretics," is that the "heretic" might be right. After all, Jesus was considered a "heretic" and consequently they crucified the world's Redeemer. Every word that Jesus spoke was redemptive. Every moment of every day, Jesus was about His Father's business in saving man. Yet, the religious leaders took advantage of the opportunity to destroy Jesus through the arm of the state.

Did the words Jesus spoke make Him worthy of death? When He went about doing good and healing all manner of sickness, was He guilty of some crime worthy of being crucified? When men are persecuted for holding different religious beliefs, the punishment always exceeds the crime.

What punishment should be inflicted upon the man who observes another day for worship? Should he pay a fifty dollar fine? Should he pay a \$500 fine? Should he be imprisoned for three days? Should he be imprisoned until he recants and observes the day enforced by the state? Should he be deprived of the right to buy and sell? Is he worthy of death?

Even if the "heretic" were doctrinally incorrect, the greatest heretic is the one that professes to be a Christian but denies Jesus with his life. Is not the persecution of others a denial of the Spirit of Christ? Christ taught us to love our enemies, not hate them and slay them.

The satanic remedy of persecuting "heretics" is far worse than the "heresy." Force does not protect truth. Truth makes men good, not evil. Truth makes men loving, not hateful. Truth is not afraid to be placed under the closest scrutiny. Why? Because truth will shine all the brighter.

Did Jesus ever teach His disciples to fine or imprison those who failed to accept the gospel? No! Did Jesus ever carry a sword? No! Did He rebuke Peter for taking up the sword? Yes! Therefore, the true successors of Peter are not the persecutors, but the persecuted. Would God's true church ever possess prisons, guillotines, the rack, or any other form of torture? No! Any church in possession of these things is none of Christ's.

Was there ever any persecutor who had to act out of necessity? No! All persecutors have acted out of choice. All persecutors are without excuse for their diabolical behavior. An account of their actions will come before them in the judgment. God will avenge His own.

Intolerant powers fail to realize that religion is a private matter between the individual and God. We are not saved corporately; we are saved individually. The free exercise of religion in the First Amendment of the American Constitution recognizes personal accountability. While religious groups have religious liberty, the individual has religious liberty, first and foremost. If an individual is disfellowshipped from the group, he retains no less of his natural right to worship God according to the dictates of his own conscience.

Inspiration identifies more than one singular power that will trample upon our religious freedoms in these last days. Concerning these powers, the Church of Rome is clearly the most vocal worldwide enemy of religious freedom. The Vatican has ever condemned liberty of conscience.

"The absurd and erroneous doctrines or ravings in defense of liberty of conscience are a most pestilential error--a pest, of all others, most to be dreaded in a state." Pope Pius IX, Encyclical Letter of August 15, 1854.

"That neither the Church nor the State, whensoever they are united on the true basis of divine right, have any cognizance of tolerance. . . . The Church has the right, in virtue of her divine commission, to require of every one to accept her doctrine. Whoever obstinately refuses, or obstinately insists upon the election out of it of what is pleasing to himself is against her. But were the Church to tolerate such an opponent, she must tolerate another. If she tolerate one sect, she must tolerate another sect, and thereby give herself up." Cardinal Manning, *Essays on Religion and Literature*, 403.

"We maintain that the Church of Rome is intolerant, that is, she uses every means in her power to root out heresy; but her intolerance is the result of her infallibility. She alone has the right to be intolerant because she alone has the truth. The Church tolerates heretics where she is obliged to do so, but she hates them with a deadly hatred, and uses all her power to annihilate them. If ever Roman Catholics in this land should become a considerable majority--which in time will surely be the case--then would religious freedom in the Republic of the United States come to an end. Our enemies know how the Roman Church treated heretics in the Middle Ages and how she treats them today wherever she has the power. We no more think of denying these historical facts than we do of blaming the Holy God and the princes of the Church for what they have thought is

good to do." Bishop Ryan (later Archbishop of Philadelphia), in the "Shepherd of the Valley," Catholic paper of St. Louis--quoted in *Church Guardian*, Montreal, October 28, 1885.

Pope John Paul II has carried on this dogma of Rome's infallibility and rightful rule over others. He said that the "church's doctrine of papal infallibility was a 'gift from Christ,' and that Swiss theologian Hans Kung was correctly penalized for questioning it. . . . The church's 110 year-old doctrine of papal infallibility . . . was indispensable to the church." West Salem, NC, newspaper, May 23, 1980.

"John Paul replies that true freedom must be united with moral truth, truth as reflected in a natural law that is evident to everyone and defined by the Bible and *church tradition*. Otherwise, he says, each individual conscience becomes supreme--he even uses the word infallible. And in the clash of infallibilities, moral confusion reigns. Only absolute morality, argues the Pope, provides the basis for the democratic equality of all citizens, with common rights and duties and without 'privileges or exceptions.' In short, only when people hold to the same standards of good and evil can they be free and equal." *TIME*, October 4, 1993.

In his encyclical, John Paul II declares, "Opposition to the teaching of the Church's Pastors cannot be seen as a legitimate expression either of Christian freedom or of the diversity of the Spirit's gifts." Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, Encyclical Letter, 169, August 6, 1993.

When John Paul was visiting Baltimore in 1995 he stated that freedom is not the right to do what you want, but freedom is the right to do what you ought. It is unfortunate that Rome's concept of freedom attempts to supersede personal conscience.

Alan Keyes, devout Catholic and presidential candidate, shouted, "You cannot have the right to do wrong." Rome has not changed. She is still intolerant of liberty of conscience. For her, there is only freedom and equality when one thinks the same as the Church of Rome.

Perhaps the most regrettable remark made by Pope John Paul II was that expressed when he dismissed the "widespread idea that one can obtain forgiveness directly from God," and exhorted Catholics to confess more often to their priests. See Don A. Schanche, "No Forgiveness 'Directly From God,' Pope says," *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1984, 11.

The pope could not be more wrong. Forgiveness of sin does come directly from God, and it comes only from God. It is one thing to mislead people on the issue of religious liberty, but it is still worse to mislead them on the essentials of the gospel.

It is not wrong for the Vatican to express moral views. However, her religious views are not to be imposed on society. When she has had the opportunity to impose those views through religious legislation, she has painted the darkest hues on the pages of human history.

However, the Vatican is not capable of changing, mending, or blotting out our present Constitution without help from the inside. She seeks the hand of Protestants that believe in religious legislation. Do such Protestants exist? Are Protestants reaching across the gulf to clasp hands with the Church of Rome?

The Christian Coalition is perhaps the most influential political group in America. It is principally made up of Evangelicals, Pentecostals, and conservative Catholics. To accomplish their political agenda of passing religious legislation, they recognize the need to form an alliance with the Vatican. Televangelist Pat Robertson said, "I believe frankly that the Evangelicals and the Catholics in America, if they work together, can see many pro-family initiatives in our society, and we can be an effective counterbalance to some of the radical, leftist initiatives." *Church & State*, March 1989, 17.

Charles Colson said, "It's high time that all of us who are Christians come together regardless of the differences of our confessions and our traditions and make common cause to bring Christian values to bear in our society." Keith Fournier, *Evangelical Catholics*.

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, said, "The future of American politics lies in the growing strength of Evangelicals and their Roman Catholic allies. If these two core constituencies--Evangelicals comprising the swing vote in the South, Catholics holding sway in the North--can cooperate on issues and support like-minded candidates, they can determine the outcome of almost any election in the nation." Ralph Reed, *Politically Incorrect*, 16.

An agreement was signed March 30, 1994, between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, whereby, they promised to stop proselytizing one another's members. This twenty-five page document, signed by thirty-nine leading Evangelical Protestants and Catholics, urges the country's 13 million Evangelicals and 52 million Catholics to work together toward world evangelism and societal concerns. However, this document represents the merging of two major religious groups that form the country's largest voting bloc. "This is the wave of the future," commented Reed. He described the new unity expressed in the agreement as evidence of a potential political coalition that will significantly influence American politics in the years to come. See *Hope Liberty News*, Volume No. 8, June 1994.

Evangelical Protestants are not the only ones clasping hands with the Vatican for political gain. Dave Hunt says, "Why do world leaders want to get into bed with the Vatican? The heads of state in today's world all recognize that the Pope wields a power which in many ways is even greater than their own. It is not only Catholicism's 900 million subjects and enormous wealth that causes the world's most powerful governments to cultivate friendly relations with the Roman Catholic Church, it is because Vatican City's citizens are found in great numbers in nearly every country. They constitute an international network that reaches into the inside circles of the world's power centers." *Global Peace and the Rise of Antichrist*, 116.

The purpose of this alliance between many Protestants and the Vatican is to tear down the wall of separation of church and state in order to enact religious legislation. Evangelical preacher Jerry Falwell declared, "In recent months God has been calling me to do more than just preach--He has called me to take action. I have a divine mandate to go right into the halls of Congress and fight for laws that will save America." *The Saginaw News*, September 11, 1980.

Jerry Falwell's Moral Majority carried the following editorial: "Separation of church and state is a dangerous concept. This is because the phrase 'separation of church and state' is not found in the Constitution and the misuse of the phrase leads to all sorts of trouble--such as trying to keep

godly principles out of legislation. . . . It [the First Amendment] does not mean that our beliefs cannot be legislated or church attending people elected to office." Editorial, *Moral Majority's Washington State Newspaper*, August 1980. All emphasis added unless otherwise noted.

Keith Fournier, a Catholic, is the executive director of the American Center for Law and Justice, which is the "religious liberty" arm and legal aid of the Christian Coalition. He said, "The wall of separation between church and state that was erected by secular humanists and other enemies of religious freedom has to come down. That wall is more of a threat to society than the Berlin wall ever was." Keith Fournier, Esq., "Tear Down This Wall!" *Law and Justice*, Winter 1992, 1.

Leaders in the Christian Coalition believe that victory is at hand and that the "wall" separating church and state will soon come down. Pat Robertson said, "God showed me . . . that He was going to bless the Christian Coalition beyond our wildest expectations. Before the year 2000, the Christian Coalition will be the most powerful organization in America. We'll be back in 1994, we'll be back in 1995. . . . We'll be back until we win it all." *Hope Liberty News*, Number 4, December 1993.

It is unfortunate that our Supreme Court is also moving toward a communitarian and majoritarian mindset, in which laws will be passed which favor the opinion of the majority at the expense of the rights of the minority. "In what was called a 'radical departure' from previous rulings protecting religion, the Supreme Court Tuesday forcefully declared that it would no longer shield believers whose practices violate *general law*. . . .

"But in a sweeping opinion, Justice Antonin Scalia went far beyond the case and declared that when religious rights clash with the government's need for *uniform rules*, the court will side with the government.

"As a nation, 'we cannot afford the *luxury*' of striking down laws simply because they limit someone's religious practices, Scalia said. He advised religious adherents to look to the political system, not the courts, for protection.

"Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, normally on the conservative side, voted with the majority on the peyote case. But she objected strongly to Scalia's opinion, which will be binding on lower courts.

"His opinion 'is incompatible with our nation's fundamental commitment to *individual religious liberty*,' she wrote. 'In my view, the First Amendment was enacted precisely to protect the rights of those whose religious practices are not shared by the majority and may be *viewed with hostility*.' " *Los Angeles Times*, April 18, 1990.

Justice Antonin Scalia believes that general law supersedes individual rights, that general law has to do with uniform rules, and that one's religious practices are a luxury. He could not be more wrong. Religious liberty is not a luxury; it is a necessity and a natural right. It is religious intolerance that is a cancer on the society of men. General law is to protect the life, liberty, and happiness of each individual. Consequently, general law cannot supersede individual rights. The protection of individual rights makes for good general laws. Laws of uniformity make nonconformity a crime.

We do not question the sincerity of the many Christians who are determined to bring in religious legislation. However, it is quite evident that they do not understand where their efforts are tending. All laws are meant to be enforced. If we have religious laws then we will have religious persecution. History attests to that fact.

The founders of this great nation, the framers of the American Constitution, were well aware of the fruits of the union of church and state. After all, the union of church and state had been on trial for over twelve centuries. Therefore, the establishment clause in the First Amendment to the American Constitution reads, "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."