

Persecution?

In the US, Canada and the rest of the Western World, Christians are facing an organized resistance that wants to shut them up, and shut them out of the public square

by Johan D. Tangelder

The six foot tall cross is perched high on a rock thirty feet above the Mojave National Preserve in California. Built by a group of World War I veterans as a memorial in 1934, it is seen by all who use the two-lane highway twenty feet away. But only twenty cars a day use the road. In March 2001, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed suit against the National Park Service, claiming the cross violated the American Constitution's First Amendment. The federal district judge concurred and ordered that the cross be covered with a brown canvass, to the dismay of local veterans who consider the cross a historic monument to honor the American war dead.

In San Francisco, Superior Court judges and commissioners adopted a policy prohibiting judges within their jurisdiction from being Scoutmasters, troop leaders, or members of a governing board that is affiliated with the Boy Scouts or any other organization that excludes homosexuals.

A zoning authority in Portland, Oregon, told the Sunnyside Centenary United Methodist Church that it would have to curtail its meal programs for low-income families and the homeless. It also ordered that its attendance at events, including Sunday worship, should be limited to seventy people and, even further, restricted Wednesday night Bible classes and other uses of the church facility.

These are a few examples of the scores of cases of discrimination against Christians in the United States, which David Limbaugh, a lawyer and syndicated columnist (brother of conservative broadcaster Rush Limbaugh) brings together in his instant best seller *Persecution: How Liberals are waging war against Christianity*. Limbaugh decided to write about this subject when he continued to see stories in the newspapers almost every day reporting incidents of discrimination and mistreatment of Christians. He concluded that the pervasiveness of the assault was evidence of a systematic attack on Christianity in the United States. The hundreds of cases Limbaugh cites convincingly show how various groups are working hard to remove Christianity from the public square and reduce religious liberty for Christians. Unfortunately, many Christians do not seem to be fully aware that they are under attack. They even believe that the very mention of "discrimination" and "culture wars" is alarmist.

Limbaugh hopes that his book will jolt Christians out of their complacency, alerting them that they are the primary targets in the current culture war. Why is Christianity targeted? Why do non-Christian religions get a sympathetic hearing? The

most likely reason is that Christianity is perceived as a majority religion and its absolute standards of right and wrong interfere with the advancement of the radical secularist agenda, the homosexual lobby, the feminist movement, and other politically correct pet ideologies.

The First Amendment

Historically, the United States has offered great latitude to citizens to worship and express their religious beliefs. Religious freedom is enshrined in its Constitution. The First Amendment to the Constitution states:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Nothing in the Constitution limits the First Amendment freedoms of speech, religion, and associations to only private property like homes and churches. When American citizens walk onto government property, or enter public schools or enter the public square, they weren't supposed to suddenly lose these freedoms. The authors of the constitution had no such intent.

Recently, however, concerns have arisen. Though neither the First Amendment, nor the rest of the Constitution refers to a "separation of church and state," the US Supreme Court used the metaphor, saying there should be a "wall of separation" between the two. Thus Christianity was marginalized to the private sphere, and told to stay out of public life.

The American court system is becoming increasingly controversial. Some critics accuse judges of being overly "activist" by usurping the legislative process and furthering a trend towards social regulation through the courts rather than legislation. A disturbing development is the court's interference with religious freedom. The ACLU and fellow secular ideologues constantly go to court and refer to the "wall of separation" metaphor in their efforts to confine the Christian faith to the private sphere.

Public Schools

The majority of examples Limbaugh cites can be found in the public schools, though the public square is a close second. Voluntary Christian student religious expression is suppressed. References to Christianity and to America's Christian heritage have been deliberately excised from most public school textbooks. In the name of promoting freedom of religion through a strict enforcement of "separation of church and state" the public schools are suppressing the "free exercise of religion" right of students. The public schools' policies further the anti-religious stigma they often portray. Based on the free speech clause of the First Amendment, public facilities must be made available for rental use to religious organizations on the same term as to nonreligious organizations. Nevertheless, problems continue in some states over the use of public

school facilities. The metaphor of "strict separation" has led overzealous officials to discriminate against religious organizations.

And there are other examples of discrimination. School administration officials at a Kentucky public school told a student he was not permitted to pray or even mention God in school. Bibles seem to draw the anger of public school officials. At one school, the principal, school administrators, and police confronted students gathered around the flagpole before the school day had begun and threatened to arrest them if they didn't quite handing out Bibles. A teacher in a Denver elementary school had to remove his Bible from the library. He also had to remove his personal Bible from his desk, where he kept it to read during silent time. School officials didn't want the Bible in the students' sight. The 1985 case *Wallace vs. Jaffree* held that public schools may not set aside a period of silence at the commencement of a school day if there is the mere suggestion that students might use the time for prayer. School administrators of Walker County School District in Birmingham, Alabama, told eleven-year old Kandice Smith that she couldn't wear a cross necklace to the Curry Middle School under the school dress code.

Christmas is specially targeted for discrimination. Christmas carols are heard in shopping malls but not in the public schools. The chancellor of the New York Department of Education prohibited the display of Nativity scenes in New York City schools during Christmas, but allowed displays of the Jewish menorah and the Islamic star and crescent. Another principal, in accordance with this New York policy, sent out a memo urging teachers to bring Jewish, Islamic, and Kwanza symbols to school, but references to Christianity were conspicuously absent. All this in the name of tolerance, diversity, and multiculturalism!

The National Council of Social Studies' *Curriculum Guidelines for Multicultural Education* is rife with admonitions to promote multiculturalism and de-emphasize a distinct American culture. These guidelines are now used in many schools. The *Washington Times Weekly* reported that an examination of seven widely used world history textbooks revealed that public school classrooms, "sanitize the problems of Islam" in comparison to their treatment of Western civilization. The speculation is that the special treatment of Islam might be the result of lobbying by the Council of Islamic Education. In California the state legislature even mandated three weeks of Islam studies for seventh grade students as part of a statewide curriculum. The textbook presents a biased view in favor of Islam and against Christianity.

But, as Limbaugh points out, one of the problems of public education is that it inevitably teaches values; and all too often those values are not those of the parents but of education bureaucrats whose values and ideas can be very different from what the parents want for their children. Limbaugh says that although cases of outright discrimination against religious students do occur, the most common problem in public schools is the value-laden-secular-humanist viewpoint in the curriculum that masquerades as "neutrality." Consequently, religion is intellectually and culturally marginalized and discriminated against.

Homosexual Agenda

Homosexual activists have made great strides in public schools. They are busy trying to muzzle Christians. Sex education is now a tool being used by social engineers to remold American society through the education system.

For example, the California legislature enacted the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, which requires the state education curriculum to be modified to enable students to acknowledge homosexual, lesbian "transgender," and bisexual historical figures and events. In August 2002, California's legislators approved a measure that would have allowed a teenage boy to report his foster parents for a civil-right violation if they refused to dress him like a girl. In May 2003 a new bill went even further. It requires foster parents to support homosexual, bisexual, and transsexual behavior and expression among foster children. It also requires mandatory training for foster parents to indoctrinate them to support homosexual behavior of foster children. No wonder openly Christian foster parents in California are complaining about being blacklisted for their support of spanking and their moral opposition to homosexuality.

Colleges and Universities

Academic freedom and tolerance seem only applicable for the politically correct. For example, Mississippi University for Women asked Professor Nancy Bryson - the head of the school's Division of Science and Mathematics - to resign her position for exposing a group of honor students to scientific flaws in Darwinian thought in a presentation called "Critical Thinking on Evolution." A biology professor, who had not attended the talk, told Bryson that her talk was "religion masquerading as science." At Washington University in St. Louis, the Student Bar Association denied official status and funding to a group of anti-abortion law students based on the content of the group's beliefs. University of Houston officials squashed an anti-abortion rally but embraced a pro-gay rights event.

Many other examples of double standards are recorded by Limbaugh. Furthermore, those who clamor for a strict separation of church and state never raise a hand of objection to the government's endorsement of this non-Christian, values-laden instruction.

Canada

Limbaugh does not mention the threat against the free exercise of religion in Canada. I believe that the freedoms of expression, assembly, and conscience are even at greater risk in Canada than in the United States. The outlook for free press and free speech in Canada has grown dim. For example, as punishment for his views on Islamist extremism and the Canadian Gay Revolution, columnist David Warren, who writes as a committed Roman Catholic Christian, was suddenly and shabbily dismissed from his television show.

As in the United States, there is a frightening spirit of totalitarianism evident in Canada's pro-homosexuality movement. This spirit will lead them to force upon the children of objecting parents a program of propaganda that presents homosexual behavior as just an alternative lifestyle - even an attractive lifestyle. Tolerance is not enough. The homosexual activists call for total acceptance and approval.

For example, the Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) in a Vancouver school has been given a free hand to propagandize the students of the school as a whole. It distributed a six-colored, gay pride rainbow sticker to every teacher, counselor, administrator and other staff members to display in their classroom or office. By displaying this sticker, the latter were supposed to show their acceptance and support of the gay, lesbian, transgendered and questioning students and staff in their school. The response so far has been largely positive. But what right does a public school have to turn over its resources of publicity to a group such as the GSA ? Homosexual activists lobby for same-sex marriage and insist that schools be compelled to portray such homosexual unions as marriages, equal in every way to traditional marriages. Public opponents of same sex may well face jail. Svend Robinson's gag bill (C-250) will make any criticism of homosexuality in Canada a potential offence, under the "genocide" provision of the criminal code.

The Centre for Cultural Renewal's report *The Inconsistency of Canadian Laws Regarding Rights in Relation to Expression and Religion when they relate to Abortion Protests* states that there are signs that the post-Charter era judiciary is losing sight of its jurisdiction. The report shows that decisions by the courts are being driven by political rather than legal considerations in some areas where matters ought to be left to the legislature. This ability by judges to interpret without constraint leads Canada away from democracy to something else - a jurocracy: that is to say a system in which judges can read in, read out, strike down, or simply re-write legislation. The report comments that without the restraints long understood to be essential to society, law itself can become dangerous.

An example of how the judiciary can be a threat to religious freedom is British Columbia's *Access to Abortion Services Act* (AASA). It created protective "bubble zones", within which no one is allowed to "protest" or demonstrate, attempt to advise or dissuade anyone from obtaining an abortion ("sidewalk interference"), film or videotape anyone, watch persons repeatedly, or approach or follow anyone with the intent to dissuade them from providing abortion services. Violators face a fine not exceeding \$5,000 and the possibility of 6 months in jail. The most obvious aspect of the AASA is that it completely precludes peaceful, even silent, expression. In fact, it is not only illegal, within a "bubble-zone, " to attempt to inform a person concerning any issues related to abortion, but is also illegal to actually persuade someone from having an abortion if an encounter initially takes place within the zone. This overbreadth of the definitions of "protest" and "sidewalk interference" rivals Stalinist-era limitations on expression or those of any totalitarian regime. An example of a striking case point is that of Mary Wagner, a B.C. woman who was imprisoned for having violated the AASA. Her transgression? Handing out roses in front of an abortion clinic.

A Clarion Call for Vigilance

Christian should warmly welcome Limbaugh's well-documented chronicle of creeping anti-Christian bias in American society. The assault is primarily going on in the public sector. If Christians don't stop it at this point, it will certainly continue and they will lose their liberties. But they are not there yet. Limbaugh observes that they still have the liberty to worship as they choose in their churches and in private. He calls upon

Christians to be vigilant and courageous. He urges them to stand up against the intimidating nature of political correctness and the secular humanist forces in American culture. He says, "Let's get in the fight now, while there is still time."

Limbaugh is right. Evangelicals should call for a cease fire in their worship wars, focus on what is essential to the Gospel, and spend time and energy on protecting and advancing religious freedom before it is too late and all will be lost. And Limbaugh's clarion to action should also be heeded by Canadian Christians. The erosion of freedom in Canada for Christians is even more noticeable than in the United States.

We are living in perilous times. But are we being persecuted? A pastor of a small Baptist church in Arkansas said in a letter to Limbaugh, "Persecution of the Christian church is alive and well even within smaller communities in our great nation." However, I don't believe that we may use the word "persecution" to describe the anti-Christian spirit of our times. That's why the title of Limbaugh's book is a misnomer. We may call it discrimination or unjust treatment or politically correctness running wild, but not persecution. This word is used for the early Christians who were thrown to the lions for their refusal to offer incense to Caesar. In North America Christians are not burnt at the stake, stoned, or crucified for their faith. We cannot compare ourselves to the horrible treatment so many of our fellow Christians suffer from the hands of persecutors. At this very moment Christians are being imprisoned, raped, sold into slavery, and tortured to death. They suffer the same fate as the early Christians. According to the World Evangelical Alliance's Religious Liberty Commission, 200 million Christians today live with serious persecution. They are threatened with prison, violence, and other actions. There are forced conversions and executions of those who leave Islam for the sake of the Gospel. In Sudan slavery is intimately tied to the treatment of Christians. Sudanese pastors have been crucified. As long as North American Christians can go to court with their grievances and highlight their grievances in the press, their struggles cannot be compared to those of the millions who risk their life for their Lord. Nevertheless, we should pay careful attention to Limbaugh's message while we still have the freedom to do so.