

Dr. Albert Mohler (Southern Seminary, Louisville, KY)

Edited by the Centennial Review from remarks made at the 2019  
Western Conservative Summit in Denver, Colorado.

Our concern at this gathering is the assault on religious liberty now experienced within the United States and throughout Western civilization. The very civilization that paid an incalculable price through the centuries to defend and preserve human rights and human liberty now grows hostile to the most basic liberty of all. History's most courageous experiment in self-government predicated upon unalienable rights now seeks to alienate the unalienable.

The cultural left now dares to use the term religious liberty only in scare quotes. How did this happen? Most conservatives in the United States have vastly underestimated the reality and comprehensiveness of the challenge we face. We see religious liberty denied when a cake baker in Colorado experiences sustained efforts to put him out of business or worse. That is accompanied nationwide by florists, photographers, and a host of others. We see the fire chief of Atlanta, Georgia lose his job because he dared to uphold a biblical standard of sexual morality, to teach it in his church, and to put it in print. That is now impossible for someone who would be the fire chief of Atlanta, Georgia.

We see Christian schools and ministries confront unprecedented challenges across several fronts, and we see a continual effort to court Christians to surrender to the new regime of sexual rules, gender identity, intersectionality, and identity politics. The enemies of religious liberty are playing hardball and we were warned. Chai Feldblum, formerly of Georgetown University Law Center and later appointed by President Barack Obama to the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission over a decade ago, admitted in a public statement that religious liberty would have to give way to the new sexual or erotic liberty. This new sexual liberty was invented by moral revolutionaries, enshrined by the United States Supreme Court, and is now used as a weapon of cultural and legal warfare. Then, looking to the day when same-sex marriage would be legalized and religious liberty would be inevitably denied or redefined, Chai Feldblum said, "I'm having a hard time coming up with any case in which religious liberty should win. Sexual liberty should win in most cases. There can be a conflict between religious liberty and sexual liberty, but in almost all cases, sexual liberty should win because that's the only way that the dignity of gay people can be affirmed in any realistic manner." We can't say we weren't told because she told us a decade before it happened.

In oral arguments before the Supreme Court of the United States, President Obama's Solicitor General Donald Verrilli, when asked if the legalization of same-sex marriage might require a Christian college to be coerced into compliance on the question, for

example, of married student housing, the Solicitor General responded candidly, "It will be an issue." Indeed, it will. It will be an issue for every Christian school, college, or university. It will be an issue for every Christian in the professions, business, public service, and in uniform. It will be an issue for all of us and particularly for our children and their children and their children's children.

Denis Diderot, the philosopher of radical enlightenment, once infamously stated, "Man will never be free until the last king is strangled with the entrails of the last priest." The agents, of course, of secularism evidently believed that the American public will not be safe until the last religious symbol is pried off of the last square inch of public property. They lost their challenge to the Peace Cross in Bladensburg, Maryland a few weeks ago, but they will be back, rest assured of that. Every vestige of Christianity, every single symbol of theism is something that haunts and infuriates a culture, especially the elites of the culture, who deny God. They are determined to erase His memory.

How did this happen? I want to make a simple, essential argument. We cannot understand our stewardship of religious liberty without **three essential words: God, truth, and liberty, and in that order.** There can be no lasting defense of religious liberty without understanding how these three words hold together and in what order. **First, God.** Professor Robert George tonight mentioned Alexander Solzhenitsyn and his speech [at Harvard] in 1983. Solzhenitsyn said he could remember old people in Russia explaining the disasters that befell Russia and later the Soviet Union in the 20th century, men have forgotten God, that is why all this has happened. I was a young man when I first heard that, and I remember thinking, yes, that is true in Russia. But the problem is that is now true in the United States of America. Men have forgotten God, and that is why all this has happened. We are living in an age of accelerating secularization.

The causes and courses of this secular motion are debatable, but the essential truth is beyond question. Belief in God, any belief in God, is an eclipse. This is especially true among the intellectual elites and the cultural creatives. Decades ago, Yale law professor Steven Carter argued that the intellectual elites had reduced God to a symbol and religion to a hobby. Now those same elites see God as a dangerous symbol and religion as a scandalous hobby. Consider the statement made by Frank Bruni, columnist for The New York Times. He said we are going to have to tolerate religious liberty, so long as religious people keep their religious beliefs to their hearts, homes, and pews, so long as it has no public significance. That is not religious liberty. That is the denial of religious liberty. If you can only believe, teach, advocate, preach, and live out what you believe in your heart, home, or house of worship, that is not religious liberty, but that is exactly how it's being redefined. Notice how successive administrations, especially the Obama administration, redefined "religious liberty" as "freedom of worship". In other words, keep it in your church, that is okay, just don't bring it out.

The Declaration of Independence, our most foundational national charter, spoke of the laws of nature and nature's God. When belief in God recedes, the only secure ground of human rights and human dignity recedes as well. Solzhenitsyn had it right. You ask how this happened? Men have forgotten God, that is how all this has happened. Natural rights cannot survive without understanding that natural rights have a supernatural origin. God has revealed such rights in nature accessible to all, but men who will not acknowledge God eventually will not acknowledge those rights, the rights that God has revealed. Human nature is the explanation for how human beings can look to nature and understand, but human nature is defined by the fact that we are, every single one of us, made in God's image. We are not merely natural.

**The second word is truth.** This word might actually be the most neglected of the essential vocabulary of the Declaration of Independence. "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Every one of these words demands our rapt attention, but do not move too quickly over the word truth. They did not say merely values or opinions.

Truth. A defense of religious liberty and all other self-evident liberties is predicated upon an assertion of truth, not mere opinion. The worldview that will alone sustain liberty is a worldview that is established upon a defense of truth. The objective existence of reality and the necessary correspondence of statement and objective truth. Why will we now expect an academic and elite culture pervasively shaped by postmodern notions of truth to defend religious liberty? If objective reality does not exist or if it cannot be known, then politics is reduced to what Harvard professor Mary Ann Glendon calls "rights talk". Politics collapses into nothing more than an endless succession of battles over contested rights.

I remember as a teenager when I first read Francis Schaeffer. That great Christian thinker and apologist said that eventually Christians would have to be very clear that we do not just believe in truth, we believe in "true truth." It should be ridiculous to have to say "true truth," but most people in our society think the truth is a compliment you have paid to an idea. We believe that it is true because it is true. If you do not believe that truth exists, you will not believe that inalienable rights exist. If there is no truth, then there is certainly no self-evident truth, and the foundation of the American experiment in liberty, including religious liberty, disappears.

**The third word is liberty.** The founders not only asserted truth claims, they defended liberties. They did not use that word by accident. They argued that the proper function of government is to secure these rights, not to invent them, grant them, create them, or even to discover them. Instead, the function of government is to secure rights and liberties that pre-exist the government and the state.

Religious freedom is truly the first freedom, for without this prior freedom, all others become fragile and contingent. As a Christian theologian, I will insist that the only true grounding of our first liberty is in the very first chapter of the very first book of the Bible. The book of Genesis tells us that God created human beings in his own image, each a living soul. Human dignity is grounded in the loving and glorious creation of the self-existent omnipotent all-glorious God who revealed himself perfectly incarnationally in Jesus Christ, verbally in the Holy Scriptures, and clearly even in the structures of creation. We owe every human being created in God's image the full recognition of human dignity and the sacredness of every human life, including life in the womb.

Make no mistake, these issues are not unrelated. The right to life and the right to exercise liberty, including religious freedom, are deeply related. It is no accident that a society that devalues life in the womb will also devalue religious liberty. If we are just cosmic accidents, and there is no inherent meaning to our lives, then there is no sacredness to human life, any human life, and liberty is just another word for my preference over yours. The eclipse of the biblical worldview makes every arena of life deadly and dangerous.

From the womb to the classroom to the courtroom, God, truth, and liberty. We need to discipline ourselves to say these words together. We must teach them to our children and our neighbors. We must cherish them in our schools and homes and teach them in our churches. The great challenge to religious liberty in our times? It is not any threat to liberal religion. Those churches and denominations long ago surrendered to the moral revolutionaries, and they simply do not believe anything sufficiently biblical or theological to get any of them into trouble. They can afford to put quotation marks around religious liberty because they already put quotation marks around God. We must defend the right to believe in enough theology to get us into trouble with anyone, anywhere in a secular age. We must defend the right of Christians along with all other believers to be faithful in the public square. We must defend the right to teach our children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. We must defend the rights of Christian schools to be Christian. We cannot understand our stewardship of religious liberty without three essential words: God, truth, and liberty, and in that order.