

# **House Committee on Foreign Affairs**

## ***Anti-Semitism: A Growing Threat to All Faiths***

### **Testimony of John Garvey**

#### **President of The Catholic University of America**

#### **February 27, 2013**

---

Mr. Chairman, members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today on this important subject. It is a matter of appropriate concern for the Congress and the House Committee on Foreign Affairs. Anti-Semitism is so obviously wrong that I feel almost sheepish making arguments against it. But here we are. So I want to elaborate on three points, which I hope you will not find unnecessarily self-evident. First, anti-Semitism is intrinsically wrong. Second, anti-Semitism is not just wrong for Jews. It is, as the title of today's hearing suggests, a threat to all faiths. Third, anti-Semitism is not just a threat to religion. It undermines the fundamental premises of a liberal democracy.

I. Anti-Semitism is intrinsically wrong. It violates human dignity because it denies the right to religious freedom. The Catholic Church calls this “our first, most cherished liberty.”<sup>1</sup> It allows us to fulfill our most fundamental duty – to live in accordance with God’s commandments. James Madison argued that the right is unalienable “because what is here a right towards men, is a duty towards the Creator.”<sup>2</sup> The Catholic Church actively seeks its protection regardless of the faith in question. That is why the American bishops lent their strong support to the International Religious Freedom Act<sup>3</sup> in 1998. The Act states that “[f]rom its birth to this day, the United States has prized this legacy of religious freedom and honored this heritage by standing for religious freedom and offering refuge to those suffering religious persecution.”

Anti-Semitism also violates human dignity by denying the right of equality. Here is what the Second Vatican Council said: “the Church reproves, as foreign to the mind of Christ, any discrimination against men or harassment of them because of their race, color, condition of life, or religion[.]”<sup>4</sup> The Council went on to say:<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> *Our First, Most Cherished Liberty: A Statement of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops on Religious Liberty* (April, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> James Madison, *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* ¶ 1 (1785).

<sup>3</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development, *Background on Religious Freedom* (February, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> *Nostra Aetate : Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions* (October, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

We cannot truly call on God, the Father of all, if we refuse to treat in a brotherly way any man, created as he is in the image of God. Man's relation to God the Father and his relation to men his brothers are so linked together that Scripture says: 'He who does not love does not know God' (1 John 4:8).

Allow me to add a further refinement. The Catholic Church is especially concerned about anti-Semitism because we are one family in the Abrahamic tradition. Catholics call fellow Christians their brothers and sisters in faith. Pope Benedict XVI describes the Jews as "our fathers in faith."<sup>6</sup> We share with them the Hebrew scriptures, and our traditions of prayer are rooted in that book. Together we worship the God of Abraham. Anti-Semitism is an attack on our family.

The Second Vatican Council expresses this relationship as one of mindfulness of the shared elements of our tradition: "the Church, mindful of the patrimony she shares with the Jews and moved not by political reasons but by the Gospel's spiritual love, decries hatred, persecutions, displays of anti-Semitism, directed against Jews at any time and by anyone."<sup>7</sup> It is a familial outlook that has led our last two popes to make profound gestures of solidarity with the Jewish people. Pope John Paul II used a powerful image to condemn the legacy of anti-Semitism when he said during his historic homily at Brzezinka that the concentration camp is the "Golgotha of the modern world."<sup>8</sup>

II. Anti-Semitism is not just wrong for Jews. A society that tolerates anti-Semitism puts other faiths at risk.

This is so, first of all, because the rhetoric and arguments that support anti-Semitism may be deployed with equal force against other faiths. The descriptions used to disparage Jewish communities a hundred years ago – that they were clannish, insular, didn't fit in, brought their outsider status on themselves – may be used against Muslims in France today. Their offense, it will be said, is not that they are Muslims. It is that they speak a foreign tongue, dress in inappropriate ways, dispute the principle of *laïcité*, favor the prospering of foreign states over France. The principles that justify treating one religion with suspicion or derision can be used against others when the tide turns against them.

We detect a similar pattern in the arguments for suppressing certain religious practices. The Jewish ritual of circumcision was criticized in Germany (and San Francisco) as a violation of individual rights and an outmoded and harmful religious practice. The debate has something in common with the arguments for requiring Catholic institutions to cover prescription contraceptives, early stage abortifacients, and sterilizations in their health care plans. To do otherwise, it is said, discriminates against women, violates reproductive rights, and rests on old-fashioned notions of sexual orthodoxy.

---

<sup>6</sup> Lisa Palmieri-Billig, *New Book Shows Pope's Commitment to Jews and Israel*, The Jerusalem Post (Nov. 28, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, supra note 4.

<sup>8</sup> Pope John Paul II *Homily of His Holiness John Paul II at Brzezinka Concentration Camp* (June, 1979).

The patterns of violence that have historically characterized virulent anti-Semitism are unfortunately familiar today to Catholics as well. Anti-Christian sentiment in some parts of the world, like anti-Semitism, is rooted in a dislike of religious belief. It manifests itself in similar, often violent, ways. Pope Benedict XVI described it in an address to the Diplomatic Corps last year:<sup>9</sup>

In many countries, Christians are deprived of fundamental rights . . . ; in other countries they endure violent attacks against their churches and their homes. At times they are forced to leave the countries they have helped to build because of persistent tensions and policies which frequently relegate them to being second-class spectators of national life.

These attacks are a reminder that violence against one religion often prefigures attacks on another. Religious persecutions mimic one another.

Here is a second cause of harm to other faiths: anti-Semitism can make the world a more hostile place for other religions through a strategy of divide and conquer. Anti-Semitism does not attack belief itself. It focuses its attention on a particular group of believers. When they are intimidated into silence, the strength of the cohort of believers is reduced to that degree. Next might come Jehovah's Witnesses or Mormons, Zoroastrians or Sikhs. Here again is how James Madison saw the danger:<sup>10</sup>

[I]t is proper to take alarm at the first experiment on our liberties. . . . Who does not see that the same authority which can establish Christianity, in exclusion of all other Religions, may establish with the same ease any particular sect of Christians, in exclusion of all other Sects?

The Catholic Church has both a duty and a powerful incentive to defend our Jewish friends against the forces of anti-Semitism in our world. Their troubles are ours, and we are both righteous and prudent to do our utmost to help them.

III. Like other cancers, Anti-Semitism spreads its poison to all parts of the body politic. A society that tolerates anti-Semitism cannot maintain a healthy democracy. This is so for three reasons.

First, as a matter of historical fact, the western commitment to political liberty grew out of our acceptance of religious toleration. John Neville Figgis, the British political philosopher and student of Lord Acton, famously said that “[p]olitical liberty is the residuary legatee of ecclesiastical animosities.”<sup>11</sup> Our success in living with religious differences gave us a lesson in tolerating political differences, and hope that we could surmount them.

If we are passive in the face of anti-Semitism we risk running our constitutional evolution in reverse. Persecution of religious minorities whets the appetite for persecuting political opponents. And it inures us to claims of injustice.

Second, as the late Ronald Dworkin was fond of arguing, democracy rests on a commitment to equality, and democratic equality means that every citizen is entitled

---

<sup>9</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Address to the Diplomatic Corps* (January 9, 2012).

<sup>10</sup> *Memorial and Remonstrance Against Religious Assessments* ¶ 3.

<sup>11</sup> *Studies of Political Thought from Gerson to Grotius* 135 (1907).

to equal concern and respect.<sup>12</sup> Anti-Semitism, like racism, denies the most fundamental commitment of a democratic society – the right to treatment as an equal. Americans have seen this phenomenon play out in our own treatment of African Americans. The original Constitution (in the three-fifths compromise) treated slaves as less than fully human.<sup>13</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sanford*<sup>14</sup> held that slaves were not citizens. It took a Civil War and an amendment to the Constitution to resolve that “all persons born . . . in the United States . . . are citizens,” and that “[n]o State shall . . . deny to any person . . . the equal protection of the laws.”<sup>15</sup> A society that tolerates anti-Semitism denies these principles, and is not worthy to be recognized as a democracy.

Third, a society that tolerates anti-Semitism can make no claim to be a liberal democracy. The defining characteristic of a liberal democracy is its commitment to liberty – a right often guaranteed by constitutional assurances, the separation of powers, competitive elections, and the rule of law. It is hard to imagine a regime of ordered liberty that does not protect the free exercise of religion. Our own Supreme Court has held that “[t]he fundamental concept of liberty” comprises an absolute “freedom to adhere to such religious organization or form of worship as the individual may choose.”<sup>16</sup> To persecute a people for their religious belief and form of worship is to deny the most fundamental commitment of a liberal democracy.

Thank you very much for giving me the opportunity to offer a few thoughts on an issue that is of such concern to so many of us.

---

<sup>12</sup> Taking Rights Seriously 180 (1977).

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Const. art. I, § 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Dred Scott v. Sandford*, 60 U.S. 393 (1857).

<sup>15</sup> U.S. Const. amend. XIV, § 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Cantwell v. Connecticut*, 310 U.S. 296, 303 (1940).