

COLUMNISTS

Give thanks for religious freedom

The Thanksgiving holiday affords Americans (and, last month, Canadians) an annual opportunity — as individuals, as families, and as a nation — to step back from their daily routine and to reflect on those aspects of their lives for which they are, or should be, grateful.

There is a list of "usual suspects": our families, our health, the roof over our heads, a nation at peace and in relative prosperity, and a host of constitutional freedoms — of religion, of free speech, of association, and so on.

We may nod in assent when politicians warn of ever-present threats to our liberty, but most of us don't really believe that our freedoms are under attack or actually threatened.

We get up in the morning, go to work or school, return home in the evening, eat, relax, go to bed, and start all over the next day. Monday to Friday — without any real interference in the normal course of our lives.

Somewhere between these two views — threats to freedom lurking everywhere versus "no threats, no sweat" — lies the truth.

It is a matter of some curiosity that the first, more pessimistic view has enjoyed a fairly wide appeal among religious people, who seem ready to accept at face value the dire warning that there is a secularist conspiracy to expel religious faith from "the public square." Speaking as a religious person who



essays in
theology

By FATHER RICHARD P. MCBRIEN

is more than minimally active in "the public square," I wonder what the complainers have in mind. The United States is one of the most religious nations in the world. The majority of Americans seem to wear their religious faith on their sleeves.

Nowhere is that more obvious than in the realm of competitive sports. After the final game of the World Series, for example, at least two New York Yankee players attributed their personal success to Jesus Christ when interviewed on national television. Such overt religious references are made all the time by sports figures, and not just by Christians but by an increasing number of black Muslim athletes as well.

In the recently concluded presidential campaign a major-party candidate thundered his support for a school-prayer amendment, and the inauguration ceremony this January will undoubtedly begin and end with formal

prayers.

If anyone has reason to complain about the status of religion in our society, I should think it would be the non-religious citizen who is bombarded with religion and religiosity in the public and private sectors alike, as well as members of religious groups that are numerically marginal and for whom "Jesus-talk" is alienating.

As a matter of fact, segments of the dominant Christian community leave even many of their fellow Christians out of the loop. The truth is that their style can be just as alienating for a mainstream Catholic and a mainstream Protestant as it is for a Jew.

What aggressive religious majorities too often forget is that majorities come and go. Back in the 1950s Will Herberg's extraordinarily popular book on religion in America took for granted that the nation was divided religiously into three discrete parts: Protestant, Catholic and Jewish. That assumption is totally outdated now. America is a nation of many religions — hundreds, even thousands, in fact. And it is a nation of no religion as well.

We are not so much a melting pot as a mosaic. But it is only through mutual respect and tolerance that such a nation can be enriched, rather than torn apart, by its diversity.

And yet there are persistent voices along the sidelines complaining that religion has been excluded from "the

public square" — even as they strive to impose upon the nation a detailed moral agenda that would limit freedom in private human relationships, in what books and magazines we read, in what films and television programs we see.

As we reflect with gratitude on the personal and social freedoms we enjoy in our constitutional democracy, we would do well to remember that the slope from freedom to repression, particularly in the religious realm, is a slippery one.

My thoughts this Thanksgiving turn toward Kabul, Afghanistan, where the culturally and theologically primitive Taliban Islamic militia, currently in control of the capital, forbids girls and women from going to school, working outside the home, or appearing unaccompanied and unshrouded in public. They cut off the hands of petty thieves and force grown men, under threat of punishment, to pray in mosques.

And they do it all in the name of a religious faith. The civil law, they insist, must be an instrument of God's law — that is, of God's law as they understand it.

This Thanksgiving we should gratefully remember our Founding Fathers not only for guaranteeing freedom of religion, but also for insuring freedom from religion.

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