

# ARE BANS ON CHURCH GATHERINGS KOSHER?

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on the religious liberty issues involved in coronavirus restrictions:

In Michigan, New York, and Ohio, churches are exempt from bans on large gatherings at this time due to the coronavirus. Indiana, Louisiana, and Virginia have decided to extend the ban to churches. This is definitely a state issue: the Trump administration has wisely stayed out of it.

At the state level, this is a difficult issue. Our first impulse is to defend religious liberty, but like any freedom, it is not absolute. For example, in New York, it was reasonably decided, after much discussion, not to exempt religious bodies from mandated vaccinations.

Whenever religious liberty collides with public health, the government is obliged to put the least restrictive measures on religion. If that is done, and the motive is purely to protect the public, then in a crisis situation, temporary bans may be legitimate.

Motive counts. Why? Because we must always consider the source of an objection to religious exemptions. If the source is the medical community, and reasonable temporary restrictions are called for in a crisis situation, that is one thing; if the source is a hostile force, that is another. Unfortunately, there are plenty of examples of the latter.

Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), Americans United for Separation of Church and State, and the Center for Inquiry have all issued statements against allowing religious exemptions for bans on large gatherings at this time. Their motives are not benign.

For example, FFRF opposes the decision by the West Virginia Governor to designate a "day for prayer" at this time of crisis. Americans United opposes a similar measure in Pennsylvania. The Center for Inquiry, an atheist organization, has not weighed in on this issue, but it is so extreme that it forced its founder, Paul Kurtz, off its board of directors because he was deemed too moderate.

We also have the likes of the religion haters at American Atheists blasting Senator Marco Rubio for seeking to allow financial assistance to churches so they can meet payroll and rent bills. But why not? If the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts is considered worthy of stimulus funds, why should monies be denied churches to pay their bills (the funds are not for proselytizing campaigns)? American Atheists surely had no problem supporting efforts to provide funding to Planned Parenthood.

The best way to proceed with this issue is for religious leaders to work with state officials in coming up with a compromise during these difficult times. What we don't need is the advice of those who are anything but religion-friendly.