

IGNORANCE OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS IS WIDESPREAD

The Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania has released a new survey on the public's knowledge of basic constitutional rights; it is disturbing on many levels.

More than a third of Americans, 37 percent, can't name any of the rights guaranteed by the First Amendment. Nearly half, 48 percent, list freedom of speech as a guaranteed right, but only 15 percent can name freedom of religion. The results of other survey houses indicate that matters have gotten worse.

The First Amendment Center at Vanderbilt University has been tracking this issue for decades. In 2014, it found that 68 percent were able to identify freedom of speech as a guaranteed right, but only 29 percent could name freedom of religion. Twenty years ago, the respective figures were 49 percent and 21 percent.

Why is it that knowledge of our First Amendment right to freedom of religion always trails our awareness of freedom of speech? Is it because the rights crusade that began in the 1960s is more often associated with free speech rights? Yet the efforts by Rev. Martin Luther King were anchored more in religious rights than free speech rights.

Why is it that we are apparently going backwards on both measures, especially on religious rights? To be exact, between 1997 and 2017, our knowledge of free speech as a First Amendment right slipped by 2 percent, but our knowledge of freedom of religion dropped by 29 percent. Is it because the public schools harbor a phobia, or worse, about religious expression?

Freedom depends, in part, on our vigilance in protecting

fundamental human rights. If the first freedom to go is freedom of religion—history shows that it is—then these survey findings are not encouraging. We are not likely to defend rights we barely know exist.