

IGNORANCE OF RELIGIOUS RIGHTS IS WIDESPREAD

Catholic League president Bill Donohue comments on a new survey of First Amendment rights:

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.

Every totalitarian movement in history, beginning with the French Revolution, has sought to crush conscience rights. That is because conscience rights are inextricably linked to religious rights, making freedom of religion the one right that totalitarian rulers fear most. This alone justifies a well-crafted civics program in the public schools. It is also cause for despair after reading the Annenberg survey.

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?

We are currently witnessing an assault on our First Amendment rights to freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and in both instances it is emanating largely from the schools: colleges and universities are doing a pitiful job defending freedom of speech on campus, and religious rights are increasingly imperiled at the elementary and secondary levels.

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.