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# THE PERSECUTION COMPLEX

The Religious Right's Deceptive Rallying Cry



The tales of horror keep pouring in: Two middle school girls are **forced into a lesbian kiss** as part of an anti-bullying program; an Air Force sergeant is **fired because he opposes same-sex marriage**; a high school track team is **disqualified from a meet after an athlete thanks God** for the team's victory; a Veterans Affairs hospital **bans Christmas cards** with religious messages; a man fixing the light in a Christmas tree **falls victim to a wave of War-on-Christmas violence**; an elementary school student is **punished for praying** over his school lunch; a little boy is **forced to take a psychological evaluation** after drawing a picture of Jesus.

**None of these stories is true.** But each has become a stock tale for Religious Right broadcasters, activists, and

in some cases elected officials. These myths – which are becoming ever more pervasive in the right-wing media – serve to bolster a larger story, that of a majority religious group in American society becoming a persecuted minority, driven underground in its own country.

This narrative has become an important rallying cry for a movement that has found itself on the losing side of many of the so-called “culture wars.” By reframing political losses as religious oppression, the Right has attempted to build a justification for turning back advances in gay rights, reproductive rights and religious liberty for minority faiths.

The religious persecution narrative is nothing new – it has long been at the core of the Right's reaction to secular government and religious pluralism – but it has taken off in recent years in reaction to advances in gay rights and

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reproductive freedom, and to an increasingly secular and pluralistic society.

The frantic warnings, fueled by individual persecution myths, range from the insistence that conservative Christians are losing their right to free speech to the claim that the U.S. is on the verge of instituting unconstitutional hate speech laws to dire predictions that religious faith itself might soon be criminalized.

In recent months, Eagle Forum founder Phyllis Schlafly warned that “we are in a war for religious liberty” and claimed that President Obama, who speaks frequently and publicly about his Christian faith, “doesn't want any expression of religious faith in any public place.” Activist Janet Porter declared that a reality TV

star's suspension from his program represented an effort to “shut down Christians” and, even more chillingly, predicted that religious faith itself would soon be “declared unlawful.” Pastor Jim Garlow declared that Christians are “experiencing full-blown persecution like we have not seen in America.” Family Research Council President Tony Perkins warned that President Obama was colluding with “anti-Christian” extremists to “neuter the Church” and “silenc[e] Christians.” South Carolina Sen. Tim Scott insisted, “The greatest minority under assault today are Christians.”

One activist after another warns that gay rights will lead to the literal criminalization of Christianity. In April 2014, the American Family Association claimed that there were “seven common careers Christians may no longer hold in America” – including photography, broadcasting and teaching.

In 2012, the Family Research Council and Liberty Institute started releasing an annual “Survey of Religious Hostility in America.”

These surveys of supposed “religious hostility” include prominent court cases in which the Religious Right and civil liberties groups have legitimate, long-held differences of opinion on where the line between church and state should lie – for instance, the case of a large cross displayed on public land in the Mojave Desert.

They also chronicle supposed episodes of individual “persecution,” including many originally promoted by Fox News' Todd Starnes and many that have been long debunked. For instance, the group's 2012 report told the story of Raymond Raines, a boy who was allegedly punished by a teacher for praying in his school

cafeteria. The Raymond Raines story has been around for 20 years and has been repeatedly debunked; Raines was actually disciplined for fighting.

The claim that efforts to draw a line between church and state represent a suppression of individual exercise of religion is key to the Right's persecution narrative. In order to convincingly argue that being on the losing side of a policy debate or a legal argument amounts to religious persecution, you must first establish that the media, government and the culture at large are actively hostile to people of faith.

This requires a constant supply of stories of supposed religious persecution. And for that, the Right has Todd Starnes.

## Todd Starnes: A Look into the Right-Wing Myth Machine

The most prolific manufacturer and promoter of apocryphal stories of American Christian persecution working today is Fox News reporter Todd Starnes. If a story emerges about a service member punished for his or her Christian beliefs or a schoolchild banned from talking about Christmas, it most likely originated with or was promoted by Starnes. And there's a good chance the facts have been either severely distorted or completely fabricated.

For an example of how the Starnes myth machine works, take the story of Air Force Sgt. Phillip Monk, “relieved of his duties,” according to Starnes, “after he disagreed with his openly gay commander when she wanted to severely punish an instructor who had expressed religious objections to homosexuality.”

“Christians have to go into the closet,” Monk told Starnes. “We are being robbed of our dignity and respect. We can't be who we are.” Starnes added: “[I]n essence, Christians are trading places with homosexuals.”

It appears that Monk's story was being shopped around by his attorneys at Liberty Institute, one of several Christian Right legal groups that devote themselves to digging up and publicizing alleged cases of persecution. The Alliance Defending Freedom and the American Center for Law and Justice have played a similar role, cheered on by allies in groups such as the Family Research Council and the American Family Association (AFA).

The Monk story hit a nerve in a movement still reeling from the 2010 repeal of the military's “don't ask, don't tell” policy banning openly gay service members.







After Starnes reported Monk's tale in August 2013, the story spread like wildfire in the Religious Right. Liberty University official Shawn Akers cited the story to claim that Christians were now the victims of a new "don't ask, don't tell" policy. The AFA's Bryan Fischer pointed to Monk's commander to claim that "homosexuals that are in the

military" could now "get away with absolutely anything." Monk was invited to share his tale at a Values Voter Summit panel on the alleged trend of anti-Christian persecution. The Family Research Council produced a tearful video in which Monk told of how he was "reassigned by his commander because of his belief that marriage is the union of a man and a woman."

But Monk's story just wasn't true. In Starnes' very first report on Monk, he quoted an Air Force spokesman who explained that Monk hadn't been punished but had simply come to the end of his assignment. A subsequent Air Force investigation found, according to the *Military Times*, that "Monk was not removed from his position, but rather moved, as scheduled, to another Lackland unit, an assignment he was notified of in April."

This story repeats itself over and over again in Starnes' work. When Starnes accused a Georgia school of "confiscating" a display of teachers' Christmas cards, it turned out that the display had merely been moved from a hallway to an office to accommodate the privacy concerns

of a teacher who had wanted to participate but didn't want her personal card displayed in a public space. School administrators, caught off-guard by Starnes' fabricated story, accused him of "an intentional and vicious dissemination of untrue information that disrupted the good work going on inside" the school.

When Starnes reported in January that a six-year-old girl in California had been stopped in the middle of a class presentation about her family's Christmas traditions, the story of how the girl was told "she can't talk about religion in school" spread rapidly through right-wing media. But this story was also not true. After Starnes' report took off, the girl's baffled teacher explained that she had shortened her student's presentation because of time constraints and had in no way prevented her from talking about her religious faith.

Starnes' reports about the middle school students forced into a lesbian kiss, the athlete disqualified for thanking God, and the Pentagon blocking a Southern Baptist website unraveled in similar ways. The middle school girls were never required to kiss. The track athlete admitted he was disqualified for taunting and disrespecting a referee. Defense Department employees were briefly unable to access the Southern Baptist website because the denomination's website was infected with malware.

No matter how quickly they are debunked, however, these stories are used to build a narrative that bolsters the Religious Right's political goals...and benefits Starnes himself.

In April 2014, Starnes reported that an elementary school student in Florida was told by a teacher "that she was not allowed to pray before eating her lunch time meal" and that "it's not good" to pray. School officials conducted a thorough investigation of the incident, even staging a lineup for the girl to identify the teacher who had supposedly banned her from praying. In the end, they found absolutely no basis for the claims, and even found that the teacher that the girl identified wasn't even in the cafeteria when the incident supposedly took place.

Then it came out that an amazing coincidence had occurred: The girl's father just happened to be head of sales at the company publishing Starnes' new book, *God Less America: Real Stories from the Front Lines of the Attack on Traditional Values*.

Starnes' book chronicles the very sort of story that he repeats in his columns. And the very

first page reveals where he thinks America went wrong: "I grew up in a much simpler time...It was a time when father still knew best - when the girls were girls and the men were men. I grew up when the rainbow was a sign of God's promise, not gay rights."

"I feel like a *Duck Dynasty* guy living in a Miley Cyrus world," he laments.

## Duck Dynasty and Redefining the First Amendment

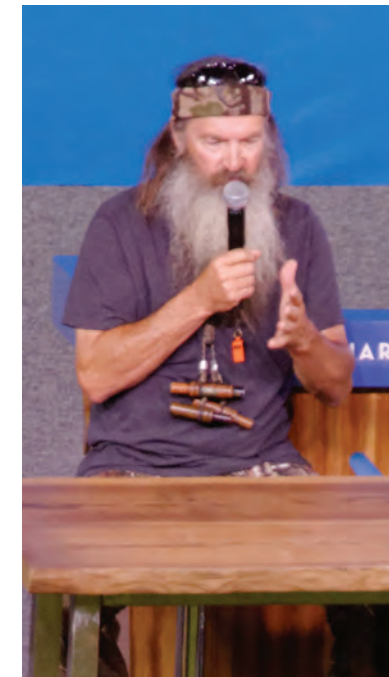
It's no coincidence that the very first sentence of Todd Starnes' book mentions *Duck Dynasty*, the hit A&E reality show about a family of impressively bearded duck-call manufacturers in Louisiana.

*Duck Dynasty* - despite its wide popularity - has become a polarizing culture-war code ever since one of the show's stars was briefly suspended by the network after letting loose with homophobic and racist comments in a magazine interview.

"Start with homosexual behavior and just morph out from there. Bestiality, sleeping around with this woman and that woman and those men," family patriarch Phil Robertson told GQ. "Don't be deceived. Neither the adulterers, the idolaters, the male prostitutes, the homosexual offenders, the greedy, the drunkards, the slanderers, the swindlers - they won't inherit the kingdom of God. Don't deceive yourself. It's not right."

Robertson also painted a rosy picture of life for African Americans in Jim Crow-era Louisiana, saying, "I never, with my eyes, saw the mistreatment of any black person.... Pre-entitlement, pre-welfare, you say: Were they happy? They were godly; they were happy; no one was singing the blues."

Whatever you think of the substance of Robertson's comments, they weren't phrased in a way that you would expect would make him a hero to a major social movement. But when A&E



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The American Family Association launched a petition thanking Robertson for “declaring the truth of God’s word.” The National Organization for Marriage started its own petition insisting that “nothing that Phil Robertson said is hateful.” David Barton praised Robertson for making homosexuality seem “repugnant, which is what it should be.” One Republican congressional candidate called Robertson “the Rosa Parks of our generation.”

The Religious Right turned its anger on gay rights advocates. AFA President Tim Wildmon asked the group’s members, “Will we capture the energy Phil Robertson has generated and draw on that energy to confront the entrenched fortresses of error and sexual anarchy that now dominate our social landscape?” Americans for Truth About Homosexuality head Peter LaBarbera and the anti-gay group Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays (PFOX) both lamented that Robertson had fallen victim to “homofacism.” The Family Research Council blasted the

“totalitarian tactics of the Left.” Anti-choice activist Janet Porter said that Robertson’s suspension meant that religious faith itself was at risk of “being declared unlawful.” Sarah Palin took to Facebook to defend Robertson against the “hatin” of “intolerants,” before admitting that she hadn’t actually read what Robertson said.

One fringe activist, Theodore Shoebat, even suggested responding to the controversy by imposing the death penalty on homosexuality.

The *Duck Dynasty* story fit into a broader right-wing narrative that paints progressive boycotts and pressure campaigns as immoral “economic terrorism” while promoting similar campaigns that target companies they perceive as promoting liberal values such as gay rights. In fact, just three months after right-wing groups were expressing righteous indignation about progressives’ “totalitarian” response to Robertson’s remarks, they cheered Christian

radio stations who pulled Christian rocker Dan Haseltine’s music off the air after he announced his support for marriage equality. When some Christian radio stations responded by pulling Haseltine’s group’s music from the air. The Family Research Council and the American Family Association applauded. “Don’t complain when there are consequences for making a foolish declaration like that,” said the AFA’s Bryan Fischer, apparently oblivious to the irony.

## A Changing Strategy on Gay Rights

Warnings about the persecution of conservative Christians have gone hand in hand with the rapid success of the gay rights movement in politics, courts and public opinion. This is not a coincidence. Todd Starnes’ myth machine, the perennial “War on Christmas” and the hero status of the *Duck Dynasty* clan are useful tools in the effort to reframe every losing policy battle and every shift in public opinion as “persecution” of the Religious Right.

In a 2013 report for Political Research Associates, scholar Jay Michaelson documents how the persecution narrative was at the core of religious

Of course, no court has ever found a constitutional right to appear on a reality TV show. And A&E may well have had legitimate business considerations for its move; when *Duck Dynasty* returned for its next season, its viewership had plummeted. But the story of Phil Robertson fit so well into the Religious Right’s narrative that conservative Christians had become the scrappy underdogs in the “culture war” that it stuck.

conservatives’ response to desegregation, the end of school-sponsored school prayer and the victory for abortion rights in *Roe v. Wade*.

But nowhere has the Religious Right lost more ground in recent years than on the issue of gay rights.

The movement’s leaders have portrayed gay rights as the moral test for our time, warning that every advance in the rights of LGBT people detracts from the rights of people who have religious objections to homosexuality.

As recently as the past decade, opposition to gay rights was a winning issue for the Religious Right. President George W. Bush’s advisors (including former RNC chairman Ken Mehlman,





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who later came out as gay) helped to get constitutional amendments banning marriage equality on the ballot in 11 states in 2004 an effort to boost conservative turnout.

But the tide turned quickly.

In 2010, Congress overturned the ban on military service for openly gay and lesbian Americans. In 2012, voters in four states either passed laws allowing marriage equality or defeated anti-equality measures at the ballot box. In 2013, the Supreme Court struck down the portion of the Defense of Marriage Act that had prohibited the federal government from recognizing legal same-sex marriages, leading federal courts to strike down same-sex marriage bans in several states. Marriage equality is now the law in 19 states and the District of Columbia, and marriage equality lawsuits are pending in dozens more states.

As the anti-gay movement found itself on the defensive, it began to increasingly embrace the “religious liberty” theme. While dire warnings about persecution of conservative Christians have been in the Religious Right’s vocabulary for

decades, the success of the gay rights movement has brought them to the center of the its strategy.

In 2006, as public opinion and laws were tilting ever more quickly toward LGBT rights, social conservatives at the annual Values Voter Summit painted a stark dichotomy between gay rights and religious liberty. Alan Sears of the Alliance Defense Fund, now called the Alliance Defending Freedom, one of the largest groups promoting the “Christian persecution” message, told the crowd of activists that “the homosexual agenda and [freedom of] religion are on a collision course.” Then-Rep. Marilyn Musgrove, Republican of Colorado, warned, “If we have gay marriage, our religious liberties are gone!”

Subsequent gay rights victories have launched a flurry of apocalyptic rhetoric about a coming crackdown on conservative Christians in America. Religious Right groups have claimed that efforts to include LGBT people in federal hate-crimes laws are an attempt to “target Christians” and “silence” opposition. (Of course, the fact that hate-crimes laws apply only to people who actually commit violent crimes is inevitably left out of this kind of criticism.)

The repeal of the military’s “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy and subsequent efforts to extend benefits to same-sex spouses of service members led to accusations of anti-Christian and even anti-straight discrimination. One Republican in Congress, Rep. Tim Huelskamp of Kansas, went so far as to introduce a bill that he claimed would protect “military religious freedom” by *banning* chaplains from using military facilities to perform same-sex wedding ceremonies. The bill would have done nothing to protect religious liberty among military clergy, who are not required to perform same-sex marriages. Instead, it would have hampered the free exercise rights of clergy whose beliefs allow or require them to perform same-sex ceremonies.

In 2012, the American Family Association published an article claiming that “those who are pushing for the institution of same sex marriage are ipso facto pushing for the elimination of the Christian religion.”

The next year, as the Supreme Court considered the constitutionality of DOMA and Proposition 8, California’s ban on same-sex marriage, Tea Party Unity and Vision America leader Rick Scarborough speculated that a decision in favor of marriage equality would cause the Obama administration to “round up” and imprison opponents of gay rights. Similarly, Liberty Counsel’s Matt Barber warned that an anti-DOMA ruling would lead to “the criminalization of Christianity.” Gary Bauer warned that people of faith would soon be “fined or jailed.”

Of course, when the Supreme Court struck down part of DOMA, none of these fears turned out to be founded, but American Family Association spokesman Bryan Fischer still declared that opponents of gay rights had become “second class citizens and victims of a new “Jim Crow.”

Advances in marriage equality have launched a new front in the anti-gay movement. As the effort to ban marriage equality becomes a losing battle for conservative activists, they’re turning their sights toward legalizing discrimination against LGBT people under the guise of preventing discrimination against Christians.

As National Organization for Marriage President Brian Brown advised activists on a conference call in April 2014, “When [gay-rights activists] bring up discrimination, we need to turn it on its head and say, this is about anti-religious, specifically in some cases, anti-Christian religious bigotry, and there’s no place for this in this country.” Brown called such “discrimination” against same-sex-marriage opponents Jim Crow “in reverse.”

Ironically, while many Religious Right activists falsely claim that marriage equality laws will require clergy to solemnize same-sex marriages against their will, in at least one state it is a ban on same-sex marriages that is stifling the liberty of pastors. In April 2014, a group of North Carolina pastors and the United Church of Christ sued North Carolina over its constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, citing a law that fines pastors for performing wedding ceremonies without a license from the state.







## The Religious Freedom Restoration Act and Religion in the Public Square

In 2009, a coalition of conservative evangelical and Catholic leaders convened to sign the Manhattan Declaration, a manifesto in which they vowed to defy any law that did not comply with their religious beliefs, specifically laws dealing with marriage and reproductive rights. “The freedom of religion and the rights of conscience are gravely jeopardized by those who would use the instruments of coercion to compel persons of faith to compromise their deepest convictions,” they wrote.

The declaration’s organizers hoped to gather one million signatures within a month; nearly five years later, they are still more than 400,000 signatures short. But despite the failure to live up to that goal, the declaration still marked an important turning point in the Religious Right’s strategy.

The Manhattan Declaration was an opportunity for grandstanding, but it was also an important sign of how the Religious Right planned to use the “religious persecution” narrative in policy debates. The declaration made clear that to these leaders, “religious liberty” meant the right to carve out broad exemptions to civil laws, not just for churches and houses of worship (which already enjoy such broad exemptions), but also for individuals and even for-profit businesses – even when those exemptions come at the expense of the rights of others.

This redefining of “religious liberty” has come to a head in the struggle over the interpretation of the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the passage of similar laws in the states.

In 1993, President Clinton signed the Religious Freedom Restoration Act (RFRA), a bipartisan bill drafted in response to a Supreme Court decision that eliminated the need for the government to show a “compelling state interest” in enforcing a law that restricted an individual’s religious freedom. *Employment Division v Smith* had involved two American Indians who were denied state unemployment benefits because they had been fired from their jobs for smoking peyote in a religious ceremony. RFRA garnered broad support from religious and civil liberties groups, including People For the American Way and the American Civil Liberties Union.

RFRA was intended to re-establish the legal standard that existed before the *Smith* ruling. It requires that if a law places a substantial burden on a person’s exercise of religion, the government must demonstrate that the law serves a

compelling government interest in the least restrictive way. The Supreme Court later ruled that Congress could only apply RFRA to the federal government, not to the states, leading several states to pass their own versions of the law, many written more broadly than the federal measure.

Since that time, conservative activists wielding religious persecution rhetoric have attempted to broaden the scope of RFRA to not just protect individuals from burdens on religious exercise but to allow individuals and even for-profit corporations to cite religious beliefs in order to discriminate against others. As PRA’s Michaelson puts it, “RFRA demonstrates the pattern of protections for minority religions being subsequently used by majorities.”

In a number of prominent recent cases, Religious Right activists have pushed state-level “religious freedom” laws for the explicit purpose of allowing businesses to bypass anti-discrimination laws. Although advocates of these laws have hinted that they are ways around anti-discrimination laws that protect LGBT people, many have been

written so broadly as to open the door for all manner of discrimination by businesses open to the public.

In 2012, a coalition of civil rights, religious, law enforcement and child welfare groups successfully urged voters in North Dakota to defeat a ballot measure that would have put overly broad RFRA language into the state constitution. Opponents worried that the measure could have caused chaos in the state’s courts and, in the words of the *Bismark Tribune*, “opened the door for people to use religious beliefs as a defense in breaking laws protecting against abuse, domestic violence and discrimination.”

The next year Kentucky’s legislature overrode the governor’s veto to put a similarly broad new state RFRA law on the books.

This year, intensive organizing and education helped stall similar bills in a number of states, including Kansas, Oklahoma, Tennessee and Georgia. Arizona Gov. Jan Brewer vetoed a bill after national attention focused on the state. Among those who had urged her to veto the measure were Arizona business leaders, GOP Sens. John McCain and Jeff Flake, and at least three Republican legislators who had initially voted for the bill.

By contrast, on April 3, Mississippi Gov. Phil Bryant signed a bill that was originally modeled on the extremely expansive Arizona legislation but was modified in the wake of the Arizona controversy. Mississippi’s new law mirrors the federal legislation in some ways, but activists note that Mississippi law defines “person” to include businesses, so the new state law will apply to corporations as well as private citizens. Last year, Bryant signed another “religious liberty” bill – one that could give religious cover for anti-gay bullying in public schools.

This new wave of legislation has come in response to a handful of high-profile cases in which businesses have faced penalties for refusing to provide services for same-sex weddings. But the case that could decide the direction of the





religious liberty argument is Hobby Lobby's challenge to the federal mandate that employer-funded insurance policies cover contraception.

The attack on the contraception mandate may be the Right's boldest attempt yet to use the rhetoric of religious liberty and religious persecution to limit the rights of other Americans. Its campaign has also taken advantage of the energy of the anti-government Tea Party, which has mobilized against the Affordable Care Act.

The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission has required businesses with more than 15 employees to provide coverage for contraception since 2000. Similar mandates are in place in 28 states; several were promoted or signed into law by Republicans. One such bill signed by Republican Gov. Mike Huckabee of Arkansas in 2005 provided no exemption for religious-affiliated organizations; yet Huckabee now cites the federal mandate to ask "whether religious liberty still exists in America."

What changed was the Affordable Care Act's requirement that insurance plans provide coverage for contraception without copays. When some Catholic groups that had supported the ACA balked, the Obama administration changed the rule to shift the burden of contraception costs onto insurance companies providing plans for religiously affiliated organizations. Then the administration made a

further concession, requiring women who work for religiously affiliated groups to buy a separate health care plan to cover contraception.

The Supreme Court is currently considering whether the Hobby Lobby chain is protected under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act from providing health insurance that includes contraception coverage to its employees. Hobby Lobby's backers not only want to redefine religious liberty to include employers' right to impose their own religious views on their employees; they want the court to establish a right to religious liberty for secular for-profit corporations.

A ruling in favor of Hobby Lobby could tip the balance in religious liberty cases in favor of giving individuals and businesses large latitude in bucking any number of popularly passed laws. As Peter Montgomery noted in *Right Wing Watch*:

David Barton, an influential conservative activist who helped write the Republican Party's 2012 platform, argues that the Bible opposes the minimum wage, unions and collective bargaining, estate taxes, capital gains taxes, and progressive taxation in general. Should a company whose owners share Barton's views be allowed to ignore laws that protect workers by claiming that those laws violate the company's religious beliefs?



## Religious Freedom For Me, But Not For You

The goal of the Religious Right's persecution narrative is not only to carve out broad exemptions to civil laws; many use it to promote policies that *suppress* the free exercise rights of those who do not share a specific set of conservative Christian values.

Republican presidential hopefuls flock to events organized by David Lane, a Christian Nationalist who declares "America was founded by Christians, as a Christian nation" and wants to see the Bible used as the "principal textbook" in public schools. In an op-ed announcing his 2014 election efforts, Lane wrote that activists must "engage the church in a culture war for religious liberty, to restore America to our Judeo-Christian heritage and to re-establish a Christian culture." It's no coincidence that Lane can utter a plea for "religious liberty" and assert conservative Christian dominance over other religions in the same sentence. For many in his movement, those two seemingly competing claims are one and the same.

Similarly, Alabama Supreme Court Justice Roy Moore, speaking in 2012 of the "Sharia law bans" that have been passed in seven states and introduced in many more on a wave of anti-Muslim sentiment, said, "Christians are being

persecuted while people of a religion foreign to our country are doing what they want." Moore, who once famously defied a court order to remove a statue of the Ten Commandments from a government building, said that when such establishment of Christianity is prevented, "false religions come in and that's what's happening in our country today."

Religious Right historian and activist David Barton has also made this connection, claiming that the United States' secular legal system is actually paving the way for the institution of Sharia law.

In 2012, Rev. Franklin Graham lamented that "political correctness demands tolerance of everything as it panders to the godless values of pluralism, marginalizing and even persecuting men and women of faith."

Republican Rep. Vicky Hartzler of Missouri put this into words when she said that the Air Force shouldn't accommodate "fringe religions" because "Christianity is the main religion in our country."

Family Research Council President Tony Perkins articulated this dissonance clearly in a recent discussion of the United Church of Christ's suit against North Carolina's same-sex marriage ban. "True religious freedom," he argued, applies only to views "based on orthodox religious

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viewpoints.” In his view, clergy who choose to perform same-sex marriages are not covered by religious liberty protections because they do not share Perkins’ view of the Christian faith.

Many of the same groups that warn that America’s Christian “minority” is on the verge of religious persecution have backed efforts to erect very real restrictions on the freedoms of actual religious minorities. Some, like the American Family Association’s Bryan Fischer, flatly claim that First Amendment religious liberty protections don’t apply to non-Christians.

The Religious Right’s “religious liberty” argument too often translates into an effort to suppress the liberties of people who don’t share their specific religious beliefs: people of other faiths, atheists, women seeking reproductive freedom, LGBT people and Christians who don’t share the Religious Right’s political agenda.



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### **Conclusion: Redefining Persecution, Redefining Liberty**

Religious liberty is a bedrock American value, cherished on both the right and the left. Courts, lawmakers and the public have struggled throughout our nation’s history to protect the right of every person to exercise his or her own religion without being unduly burdened by the religious expression of another. Laws such as the federal Religious Freedom Restoration Act have placed an appropriately strong emphasis on protecting individuals’ religious expression without placing undue burdens on society as a whole.

But using the resonant rhetoric of religious persecution, bolstered by often-bogus stories of purported anti-Christian activities, the Religious Right has attempted to tip this balance away from pluralism and accommodation to a legal system that allows individuals and businesses to broadly exempt themselves from policies they disagree with – even when that means trampling on the religious rights of others.

These are not fears to make light of. Religious freedom is a core constitutional value and a cornerstone of our liberty. But the Religious Right’s narrative of religious persecution is not only far from the truth; in many cases the narrative itself serves to undermine true religious liberty and individual freedom for all.

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- An Air Force sergeant is **fired because he opposes same-sex marriage**
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