

OPINION

Opinion articles do not necessarily represent the views of the Portland Observer. We welcome reader essays, photos and story ideas. Submit to news@portlandobserver.com.

Rejecting a Religious Sanction for Bigotry

Turning back the clock on discrimination

BY MARC H. MORIAL

It was not so long ago when one of the most powerful justifications wielded in support of the American practice of segregation was religious belief. Segregation and discrimination against black citizens was enforced by state-sanctioned Jim Crow laws that legally separated blacks from whites and made it illegal for individuals from either group to associate with the other.

Schools were segregated. Restaurants were segregated. Blacks and whites could not legally marry. And even water foun-



tains were designated by race. Defenders of these race-based policies employed a variety of arguments to support the institution of discrimination by the books, including arguing that the fact that God “separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix,” as was written by a lower court justice in a landmark civil rights case that would later be overturned and end all state bans on interracial marriage.

Today, religious freedom bills are cropping up around the nation that would turn back the clock on American progress versus legal discrimination.

Cloaked under the mantle of religious liberty, there are those who want to invoke their constitutional right to freedom of association and religion to deny other citizens—those whose lives and lifestyles they say are at odds

with their religious beliefs—employment, professional or private services and the right to marry, among other things.

The free exercise of religion sits at the heart of our nation’s founding. But we live in a democracy, not a theocracy. We cannot allow religious liberty to be transformed into a tool of oppression against any class of individuals or citizens.

Following huge public outcry and the threat of millions in lost business in the state, Georgia Gov. Nathan Deal has announced that he will veto a religious freedom bill that was meant to protect faith-based groups and individuals from legal repercussions if they refused to provide services or employment to people on the grounds of avoiding the violation of their religious beliefs.

In Kansas City, lawmakers are looking at legislation that would

amend the Missouri constitution to prohibit the government from punishing individuals and businesses that refuse, on religious grounds, to provide goods or services for same-sex marriage ceremonies or celebrations of same-sex couples.

As Missouri lawmakers consider the law for a future vote, the NCAA is considering bids from other cities for their future sports events—potentially costing the city millions in revenue from lost sporting events. But these states are not outliers. Over 20 states have passed some form of a religious freedom bill or poised to put policies in place that violate our country’s core principals of inclusion and the freedom to live and work free from discrimination.

In a democracy as diverse in races, religions, ideologies and orientations, collisions between the rights of religion and the re-

sponsibilities of civil authority are inevitable. Our country was founded on the idea that people should not be persecuted because of their religious beliefs, but like any other right, there are reasonable limits to its free exercise.

As our nation’s first president articulated, those who live under the protection of the United States of America must also “demean themselves as good citizens.” You cannot invoke a special right to deny another their rights as citizens.

Religious liberty, as valuable and necessary as it is, cannot be used to break the law, should not be twisted to oppress a class of people, and cannot be tolerated as a means to freely discriminate in a nation whose goal, since its founding, has been to create a more perfect union and establish justice.

Marc H. Morial is president and chief executive officer of the National Urban League.

Strong Nonviolent Voices and Witnesses to Change

The moment we have waited for

BY MARIAN WRIGHT EDELMAN

Rev. C.T. Vivian, the legendary civil rights leader, believes young people today are inheriting the world at a unique crossroads in history, and that this is the moment humankind has waited for.



wars were fought, in terms of how men killed each other, because today, if we decide to live like we lived yesterday, none of us will live at all,” he said.

Instead, Rev. Vivian said, “we have to come with a different understanding of our relationships to the world around us, and that’s the most important thing of all . . . You can’t live

The task will be different than before. We all dreamed of it. We sat in church and talked about it. We made songs about it. We talked about a new world coming. We talked about all of that, right? Now that it’s here, we’ve got to make it real.”

1960s Civil Rights Movement laid a foundation for the new world as ordinary people tired of injustice seized the moral high ground and confronted the racial

young people can finish what his generation began.

His words have a special meaning and challenge today when violence as a conflict resolution strategy has become a daily threat internally and externally in this era of domestic and global terrorism; relentless gun violence in our nation driven by a powerful gun lobby that saps the lives of 30,000 human beings every year including thousands of innocent

fit and safe for all of our children and confront those who fuel racial and religious intolerance within and without our borders? And how many of us will stand up and say no to the violence of coarse and careless political, racial, gender, or any rhetoric intended to demean another human being and that teaches our children we cannot disagree without being disagreeable?

The Bulletin of Atomic Scientists publishes a “Doomsday Clock,” and earlier this year the clock was set at 3 minutes to midnight as tensions between the U.S., Russia, North Korea and other nations, particularly those involved in conflicts in the Middle East, remain high. In addition, a landmark climate change agreement has not yet evolved into the fundamental changes needed to ultimately arrest the problem and mitigate additional conflict and catastrophe.

Rather than be discouraged or paralyzed by these disturbing concerns, we need to get up, organize, and mount without ceasing our strong nonviolent voices and witnesses to change the narrative of what it means to be a good steward of God’s earth and all of God’s peoples – and be determined to pass on a safer and better nation and world order to our children and grandchildren.

Marian Wright Edelman is president of the Children’s Defense Fund.

1960s Civil Rights Movement laid a foundation for the new world as ordinary people tired of injustice seized the moral high ground and confronted the racial violence surrounding them with controlled, disciplined, nonviolent action which allowed America to see there was another way to create change.

in yesterday’s world. And I want you to be very thankful of that, because you are forming the new world to be and the old world has no place in it.”

Rev. Vivian believes “if we are wise, we will not allow any of us to treat the rest of us as though we were less than rather than more than.”

“The central task” he said, “will be to remove violence as a means of solving social problems. When we really think of it that way, then we are on our way.

violence surrounding them with controlled, disciplined, nonviolent action which allowed America to see there was another way to create change.

When C.T. Vivian was jailed and beaten, he never wavered.

“Gandhi and the world he lived in changed because he used a different method and a different means,” he said. “Dr. King changed America because he used a different understanding. He used a different way to move.”

Rev. Vivian believes today’s

children; and out of control demagogic political discourse which encourages violence at home and fuels anger around the world by demonizing people who believe and pray differently from many of us.

What is it going to take for enough of our political leaders and citizens to stand up and reject the old world view too often riddled with intolerance and hatred? When will a critical mass of citizens and leaders come together to build a new nation and world