

Faith Digest: Religious liberty worries

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Poll shows concern about on religious liberty. Half of adult respondents told the [Barna Group](#) they worry religious freedom in the United States is at risk, and many say activist groups—particularly gays and lesbians—are trying to remove “traditional Christian values” from the public square. The poll of 1,008 adults showed 29 percent of respondents were “very” concerned religious liberties are under threat, and 22 percent “somewhat” concerned. Evangelicals were the religious group most likely to be concerned, at 71 percent. Asked for their opinion as to why religious freedom is threatened, 97 percent of evangelicals agreed “some groups have actively tried to move society away from traditional Christian values.” And 72 percent of evangelicals also agreed gays and lesbians were the group “most active in trying to remove Christian values from the country.” That compares to 31 percent of all adults who held this belief. The results are somewhat at odds with a March 2012 poll sponsored by Religion News Service and the Public Religion Research Institute. That poll found a majority of Americans—56 percent—did not feel religious freedom was under attack in this nation. But results between the two polls align in that the PRRI survey concluded white evangelical Protestants were the most worried about religious liberty. It found them to be the only religious group in which a majority (61 percent) considered it under threat. The Barna poll, conducted in November 2012, has a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points.

Arkansas Senate OKs guns in churches. The Arkansas Senate passed a bill that lifts a ban on carrying concealed weapons in church. The proposal,

which goes to the Arkansas House for consideration, would allow churches to decide which, if any, worshippers with concealed carry permits can bring their firearms inside.

Pope seeks review of rules for marriage annulments. Pope Benedict XVI has asked the Vatican's highest appeals court to consider reviewing church rules on marriage annulments—a statement that may signal a change in tone more than a change in substance. Speaking to the members of the tribunal of the Roman Rota, Benedict said “lack of faith” on the part of the spouses can affect the validity of a marriage. While the Catholic Church forbids remarried divorcees from taking communion, church tribunals can declare a marriage void if it can be demonstrated that some key elements—such as a commitment to have children—were missing in the first place. Catholics who obtain an annulment for their first marriage can then remarry without facing church sanctions. In his speech to Rota judges, Benedict stressed he wasn't suggesting an automatic link “between the lack of faith and the invalidity of marriage” but seemed to equate a “lack of faith” with other justifications for an annulment.

Churches agree to mutual recognition of baptism. Leaders of Catholic and Reformed churches have signed an agreement to recognize each other's sacraments of baptism, a public step toward unity among groups often divided by doctrine. Signers of the “Common Agreement on Mutual Recognition of Baptism” represented the Christian Reformed Church in North America, Presbyterian Church (USA), Reformed Church in America, Roman Catholic Church and United Church of Christ. While most of the Reformed denominations already recognized Catholic baptisms, the statement puts an official stamp on mutual recognition of baptisms by each of the church groups. The document calls for extending invitations to each

other's baptism ceremonies and attesting to individuals' baptisms when a church requests documentation.

Vatican signals options for protecting gay couples. A high-ranking Vatican official voiced support for giving unmarried couples some kind of legal protection even as he reaffirmed the Catholic Church's opposition to same-sex marriage. Archbishop Vincenzo Paglia, head of the Pontifical Council for the Family, also said the church should do more to protect gays and lesbians from discrimination in countries where homosexuality is illegal. Paglia suggested nations could find "private law solutions" to help individuals who live in nonmatrimonial relations, "to prevent injustice and make their life easier." Nevertheless, Paglia adamantly reaffirmed society's duty to preserve the unique value of marriage, saying, "The church must defend the truth, and the truth is that a marriage is only between a man and a woman." Other kinds of "affections" cannot be the foundation for a "public structure" such as marriage, he added.