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OPINION **MAIN STREET**

What Real Diversity Looks Like

The Becket Fund defends religious liberty for people of disparate faiths.



By William McGurn

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The Becket Fund's 2026 Canterbury Medal Gala in Philadelphia, June 11. BECKET

Philadelphia

Thomas Jefferson was wrong about religion in America. Yes, Jefferson drafted the Declaration of Independence, which we celebrate on the Fourth of July. He correctly regarded freedom of religion as a right given by God, not government. But he also believed most Americans would exercise their religious liberty by eventually becoming Unitarians.

No better evidence is there of how wrong Jefferson was than the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty and its annual Canterbury Medal dinner, which recalls the infamous 12th-century clash between King Henry II and Archbishop Thomas Becket. Their feud ended with Becket murdered by four

knights of the king in Canterbury Cathedral. Becket thus became a martyr for the idea that you don't render unto Caesar the things that are God's.

"The constitutional order that Jefferson helped create has sustained a deeper and more diverse religious life than even the Founders themselves anticipated," says Mark Rienzi, a law professor at Catholic University who serves as president and CEO of Becket.

As galas go, Becket's is a doozy, with guests sporting kippahs, turbans and zucchetos. As the nation marks the 250th anniversary of Jefferson's Declaration, this year's gala was held in Philadelphia's National Constitution Center, a short walk from Independence Hall, where both the Declaration and the Constitution were debated and adopted.

The attendees proved as compelling as the setting. Pastor Robert Soto was decked out in full garb as a feather dancer and member of the Lipan Apache Tribe of Texas. Becket successfully defended his right, and the rights of his congregation, to use eagle feathers in Native American religious ceremonies.

Or you might have been at the table of the Little Sisters of the Poor, a religious order of Roman Catholic sisters. President Barack Obama and a couple of state governments tried to force them and other religious organizations to provide contraceptives in their health plans. But the Little Sisters prevailed three times at the Supreme Court, and Becket will be at their side if they are forced to go back.

Becket also handles more familiar bigotries such as antisemitism. On Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas launched mass atrocities from Gaza on southern Israel. Not long after, the harassment of Jews at UCLA began—which the university administration did little to stop. Last July Becket won a huge victory when UCLA accepted a court judgment and settlement forbidding it from allowing such things as a "Jew Exclusion Zone" on campus.

In short, Becket is where men and women representing a variety of strong religious beliefs find common ground without compromising their principles. The cause that unites them remains vital. On Friday, President

Trump's Religious Liberty Commission delivered him a report highlighting the many ways in which the free exercise of religion continues to be threatened in America.

It was for this reason Kevin "Seamus" Hasson, a Notre Dame alumnus and attorney with Williams & Connolly, founded Becket in 1994. Mr. Hasson saw a hole in America: No group akin to the Legal Aid Society or the NAACP was devoted to religious liberty. Thus was born the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty—which Viet Dinh, a former assistant attorney general, calls "God's ACLU."

At one Canterbury Dinner, Mr. Hasson said Becket's legal strategy was based on "prudence," which he defined as "the wisdom to know when to throw the first punch."

In 2011 Mr. Hasson stepped down, handing the reins to New York-based Bill Mumma. A 30-year veteran of Wall Street, Mr. Mumma stepped down as Becket's CEO in 2021 but remains its board chairman.

Perhaps Becket's greatest victory was defeating the Obama administration's contraceptive mandate. Other triumphs include *Agudath Israel v. Cuomo* (2020), in which the Supreme Court ruled against New York state's Covid zones that singled out Orthodox Jews for harsh treatment compared with comparable secular entities. In *Holt v. Hobbs* (2015), Becket successfully defended a Muslim prison inmate's right to grow a half-inch beard.

When Becket was founded, among its challenges was persuading donors and defenders of religious liberty that as a movement they had to defend more than the rights of their own respective groups. Defending religious liberty meant recognizing that they are all in it together. At Becket they say they represent "Anglicans to Zoroastrians."

Manifestly they have the better argument. Becket is undefeated at the Supreme Court, with 13 victories, six of them unanimous. And it's something to watch faiths whose adherents are at war with each other elsewhere in the world come together here in bonhomie to toast the Constitution.

“If our first 250 years have taught us anything, it is that our strength comes from our freedom,” Mr. Rienzi says. “Nothing is more American than fighting for religious liberty—even when we disagree.”

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About this article

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