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When it comes to standing up for gay rights, corporate outrage is rather selective. Large companies that have publicly denounced new laws in several southern U.S. states as “anti-gay” are quite happy to remain silent as they carry on business in countries that criminalize gay sex.

After North Carolina passed a law upholding separate male and female public washrooms, PayPal publicly cancelled its plans to build a new operations centre in that state, citing that law. Yet PayPal chooses to place its international headquarters in Singapore, where gay sex is punishable by two years in prison.

This kind of hypocrisy is widespread among major corporations. Netflix offers services in Mauritania, Yemen, Somalia and other countries where homosexuality may be punishable by death. General Electric does business in Saudi Arabia, where in 2014 a gay man was sentenced to three years in jail and 450 lashes for using Twitter to arrange to meet other men. Time Warner, Live Nation and Unilever operate in countries that outlaw gay sex, such as Tunisia and Algeria. The aforementioned companies have not made a public denunciation of the anti-gay laws of these countries, yet they all have publicly denounced new laws in U.S. states that are intended to protect religious freedom.

Hypocrisy aside, it’s worth considering what, exactly, these corporations are opposing. Since the U.S. Supreme Court imposed same-sex marriage on every state, several

states have now passed laws that, consistent with this same Supreme Court ruling, specifically protect the freedom of all citizens not to be compelled by government to participate in what they believe to be wrong. Hysteria aside, new laws in some states are simply implementing the U.S. Supreme Court’s recognition that freedom of religion protect people from being compelled by government to support, or to participate in, same-sex marriage. That includes florists, photographers and cake-bakers who do not want to play any role in same-sex wedding ceremonies. The suggestion that new state laws will allow businesses to post signs saying “We don’t serve gays” is simply untrue.

The U.S. and Canada share a commitment to maintaining a free society, including religious freedom. It is no coincidence that the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and the first “fundamental freedom” in our Charter of Rights and Freedoms guarantee people the freedom to hold, and act in accordance with, their sincere beliefs. A free society allows adherents of all religious and non-religious faiths (including agnostics, atheists, and people who believe in God without adhering to any particular religion) to proclaim what they believe to be true, and to put their beliefs into practice by acting on their conscience. No government, no matter how oppressive, can actually prevent people from believing what they wish. However, what distinguishes a free society from a tyranny is that the former allows people to actually practise their beliefs.

Both the U.S. Constitution and the Canadian charter protect minorities from being coerced, by government’s threat of penalty, into complying with majority opinion. As Canada’s Supreme Court once explained in *R. vs. Zundel*: “The view of the majority has no need of constitutional protection; it is tolerated in any event.” The U.S. Supreme Court applied this same principle when it declared that those who oppose same-sex marriage must be given “proper protection.” Disagreement and hurt feelings are the unavoidable result of life in a free society, which is not for the faint-hearted. Tolerating each other’s beliefs and lifestyles does not mean approving of each other’s beliefs and lifestyles. Legalizing the purchase of pork is one thing. Forcing Muslims and Jews to handle and sell pork is quite another.

A government that today violates one person’s freedom not to participate in, or approve of, a gay wedding can easily direct that same coercive power toward someone else who defies different majority sentiments tomorrow. That’s why protecting your unpopular neighbour’s freedoms today helps you to preserve your own freedom tomorrow.

Before jumping on populist bandwagons to support a vague notion of “gay rights,” corporations — as well as individuals — on both sides of the border would be well-served to consider the crucial role that freedom of conscience and religion plays in protecting the free society, for the benefit of everyone.

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