

# CITY

## NEWSPAPER

## Religious freedom and our other rights

by [Mary Anna Towler](#)

Americans may not be massacring one another because of religion, but we sure can use it to do plenty of harm.

Many of us held our breath last week while Arizona Governor Jan Brewer tried to decide whether to veto a "free exercise of religion" bill. The bill's critics charged that it would legalize discrimination against LGBTQ people. Supporters insisted that it was no big deal: that it simply clarified existing state law.

But the bill *was* a big deal. In Arizona, individuals already have the right to discriminate against other people if they're acting out of religious beliefs (except in Phoenix, Tucson, and Flagstaff). The new bill would have broadened that protection to cover businesses, associations, and other organizations.

And clearly, LGBTQ people were the target. Writing recently on the Cato Institute website, Cato Fellow Ilya Shapiro noted that the law's purpose was to protect businesses from being sued or fined if they denied service to someone based on religious belief. Shapiro mentioned two cases, one in New Mexico and one in Oregon, in which businesses refused to provide services or goods for a same-sex marriage or commitment ceremony. Other articles by conservative writers have also cited cases involving same-sex ceremonies.

Arizona's not the only state that's been considering that kind of bill. And coincidentally or not, the push has been taking place as same-sex marriage has become more accepted nationally.

In the end, Brewer vetoed the bill. But Arizona came close to having it on the books. Both houses of the state legislature had approved it.

This is serious business. Bills like Arizona's tell the public that the objects of the discrimination are lesser beings, not worthy of service – or protection.

Brewer managed to pull her state back from that disaster, but her veto won't have changed anybody's mind. Prejudice will live on, in Arizona and elsewhere.

Religious freedom is also at the heart of *Sibelius v. Hobby Lobby*, a case being heard this month by the Supreme Court. This time, the religious belief of a business owner is pitted against the needs of his women employees. Hobby Lobby provides health insurance for its employees, but it doesn't cover contraceptives. The Affordable Care Act requires that coverage, and Hobby Lobby owner David Green, who is a Catholic, says that forces him to violate his religious beliefs.

(Green's employees are free to buy contraceptives on their own, obviously, but even the least expensive contraceptives can be a financial burden for low-income women.)

Link anything to religious rights, and the issue becomes very complicated. Many of us are forced to do things that are against our religious beliefs. When the death penalty was legal in New York State, my taxes helped pay for executions, which I oppose based on religious grounds. My taxes helped pay for the Vietnam and Iraq wars, which I opposed.

When public-school teachers teach about evolution and climate change, or about contraception, they are teaching things that violate some taxpayers' religious beliefs, and yet those taxpayers are forced to contribute to their salaries.

Are all religious beliefs important enough to be protected? Whose beliefs are valid? How can government decide? Why are the beliefs of "established religions" more worthy of protection than those of highly ethical atheists?

And is an individual's religious belief more important than the provision of quality, affordable health care?

Religious faith is important to many of us, and the Constitution provides great protection for us to practice it. But the Constitution doesn't give us the right to impose our religious beliefs on other people. And it shouldn't give us the right to cause very real harm to others.

Given the conservatism of this court's majority, though – and its pro-business tilt – a pro-religion ruling wouldn't be a surprise. And it won't be a surprise if Arizona legislators find another way to legalize discrimination.