

## How the media made the term 'religious freedom' a bad word

### RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

By **KENT COVINGTON**

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Intense media coverage fueled the public opinion firestorm over Indiana's Religious Freedom Protection Act and religious liberty legislation in other states. But was that coverage balanced? Tim Graham is the director of media analysis for the Media Research Center. I talked to him about what he saw in major news coverage of the religious freedom debate.

You tracked the coverage of the Indiana law and other similar proposals. In general, what did you observe? The media coverage on television was very intense. What we found was that the liberal view got twice as much airtime as the conservative view. But the conservative view was mostly clips of Indiana Gov. Mike Pence trying to defend himself from George Stephanopoulos and not really making an argument except denying that he had signed a bill that was discriminatory. We also noticed that the networks were more interested in the Indiana controversy, as they were making it, than they were in things like Hillary Clinton's email stories that were coming up and the latest developments in the IRS scandal. These are things they don't consider scandals. They consider this law a scandal.

I noticed a headline on CBSNews.com that said, "Business leaders leading the way for LGBT rights against 'religious freedom laws.'" Doesn't that headline—and plenty others like it—make it clear who the supposed victims and perpetrators are? We have seen a lot of [instances of] the words "religious freedom" in quotes. The coverage seems designed to engineer a result. In Indiana, it ended up leading to them signing a revised law. In Arkansas, it caused the governor to hold up and wait for a revised law. They love this story that Gov. Asa Hutchinson was convinced by his son because one of the real story lines the media sees in here is the millennials are leading this. They also love that the businesses are leading this. It is kind of humorous on some level that liberals, who generally despise corporations and despise the idea that corporations can have viewpoints when it comes to campaign finances, suddenly love the social responsibility

of corporations. It just shows you that liberal journalists often decide they like someone based on whether they agree with them or not.

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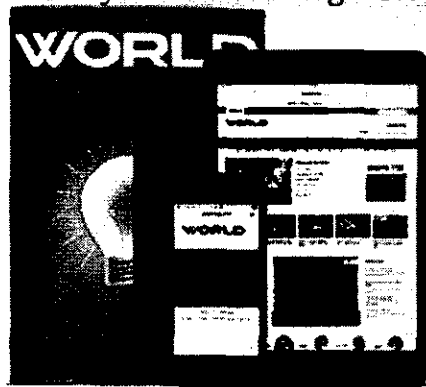
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Do you believe the lopsided nature of the media coverage has had some impact on the public stances these companies are taking? I do believe that businesses are trying to be pragmatic instead of principled. I think that they're looking at this as marketing. Again, there is that assumption in politics and in business that if you're under 40, you are completely pro-gay, and so to be perceived as anti-gay is like being perceived to be a Nazi or a Klansman. These are the sorts of language that people use in the media to describe orthodox Christians.

How uniform is it? Have you seen much of anything in the mainstream media in terms of reporting on the plight of small businesses that have been forced to close simply for declining to cater a gay wedding? Have any mainstream outlets reported their perspectives? I think there's a complete lack of sympathy for anyone who says, "I would like to, as a matter of principle, not cater a gay wedding," [or] "I would wish not to make a cake for a gay wedding, I would prefer not to host a gay wedding at my bed and breakfast." These are the people who are not just expected in our media to be punished somehow ... even to lose their businesses until they surrender.

The term "anti-gay" has appeared in many media reports. It suggests more about a person or a business than the simple fact that they don't support gay marriage. Is that

the new standard? It's a crude term, but I think there is a notion here you can't go to the media and say, we're going to show compassion for someone because we want them to get to heaven. Reporters in media today, they're secular. They think you're talking nonsense. That doesn't make any sense to them whatsoever. They think anytime you pick up a Bible and read from it to someone, you're bullying. That's their mentality. They have an atheistic mentality when it comes to these issues.

*Listen to Kent Covington's interview with Tim Graham on The World and Everything in It.*