The bill clerk read as follows:

The Senator from Nevada [Mr. REID], for Mr. JOHNSON and Mr. SHELBY, proposes an amendment numbered 1515.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that the reading of the amendment be dispensed with.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Without objection, it is so ordered.

(The amendment is printed in today's RECORD under ''Text of Amendments.'')

MORNING BUSINESS

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Under the previous order, the Senate will proceed to a period of morning business, with Senators permitted to speak therein for up to 10 minutes each.

The Senator from Missouri.

AMENDMENT NO. 1520

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I ask unanimous consent that it be in order at this time to offer amendment No. 1520 to the underlying bill, S. 1813.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Is there objection?

The Senator from Nevada.

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I, of course, reserve the right to object and do object.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. Objection is heard.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Republican leader is recognized.

RELIGIOUS LIBERTY

Mr. MCCONNELL. Mr. President, our country is unique in the world because it was established on the basis of an idea, an idea that we were all endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable rights—in other words, rights that were conferred not by a king or a President or a Congress, but by the Creator himself. The State protects these rights but it does not grant them. What the State does not grant the State cannot take away. That is what this week's debate on a particularly odious outcome from the President's health care law has been about.

Our Founders believed so strongly that the government should neither establish a religion nor prevent its free exercise that they listed it as the very first item in the Bill of Rights, and Republicans are trying today to reaffirm that basic right. But apparently our friends on the other side do not want to have this amendment or debate. They will not allow those of us who were sworn to uphold the U.S. Constitution to even offer an amendment that says we believe in our first amendment right to religious freedom.

Frankly, this is a day I was not inclined to think I would ever see. I have spent a lot of time in my life defending the first amendment but I never thought I would see the day when the elected representatives of the people of this country would be blocked by a majority party in Congress to even express their support for it, regardless of the ultimate outcome.

I yield the floor.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The majority leader is recognized.

MAP–21

Mr. REID. Mr. President, I appreciate the comments of my distinguished Republican colleague. The Senate just voted 85 to 11 to invoke cloture on a motion to proceed to the surface transportation bill, a bipartisan bill the sponsors of which, Senator BOXER and Senator INHOFE—an unlikely pair—have joined together to move forward on, a piece of legislation that is extremely important to this country, a bill that will save or create 2 million jobs.

There are four parts of this bill within the jurisdiction of four Senate committees. The Environment and Public Works Committee is what we are on now. I have sought to amend that with a provision that is coming from the Banking Committee. We have one coming from the Finance Committee—that has been approved on a bipartisan basis, and we will move after we do those two to the Commerce section. We have not dealt with the Finance Committee provision or the Commerce Committee.

I appreciate that the Republicans never lose an opportunity to mess up a good piece of legislation. We have had that happen now for the last 3 years. We saw it in spades last year. Here is a bipartisan bill to create and save jobs. No one disputes the importance of this legislation. Every State in the Union is desperate for these dollars. We are not borrowing money to do it; it is all paid for. Whether it is the State of West Virginia, the State of Missouri, or the State of Nevada, all the departments of transportation are waiting to find out what is going to happen at the end of March. That is fast approaching. We need to get this done.

Then I hope we can deal with other matters and not get bogged down on this legislation. Let's do the Banking part of this bill. Let's do the Finance part of this bill. Let's do the Commerce part of this bill.

But to show how the Republicans never lose an opportunity to mess up a good piece of legislation, listen to this: They are talking about first amendment rights, the Constitution. I appreciate that. But that is so senseless. This debate that is going on dealing with this issue, dealing with contraception, is a rule that has not been made final yet. There is no final rule. Let's wait until there is at least a rule we can talk about. There is not a final rule. That is all you read about in the newspapers, why there are discussions going on as we speak. There is not a rule. Everybody should calm down. Let's see what transpires.

Until there is a final rule on this, let's deal with the issue before us. That is saving jobs for our country. People can come and talk about the Constitution, the first amendment—I have never seen anything like this before, but I have never seen anything like this before, either. There is no final rule. Why don't we calm down and see what the final rule is.

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Missouri.

Mr. BLUNT. Mr. President, I am, of course disappointed not being able to offer this amendment today, but it is an amendment we talked about for some time. It was a bipartisan amendment. It was a bipartisan piece of legislation. Senator NELSON from Nebraska and I wish to offer it and wish to offer it as soon as possible.

I have the highest regard for both of our leaders, both the majority leader and minority leader, and understand they have a job to do, but this highway bill is clearly going to take some time. This is a 4-page amendment that I would be glad to see voted on on Monday. It has been widely studied all week, this week. I would have been glad to see it voted on when I filed the bill in August. There was not a rule then either, but both Mr. NELSON and I, Senator RUBIO, Senator AYOTTE, and others were anticipating that we were going to begin to see exactly the kinds of things this discussion this week has brought about.

This is about the first amendment. It is about religious beliefs. It is not about any one issue. In fact, this amendment specifically does not mention a specific issue. It refers to the issue of conscience. In the amendment itself the reference is made to the letter that in 1809 Thomas Jefferson sent to the New London Methodist, where he says: of all the principles in the Constitution, the one that we perhaps hold most dear, if I could paraphrase it a little bit, is the right of conscience and that no government should be able to come in and impose itself between the people and their faith-based principles.

In health care we have never had this before. Why didn't we need this amendment or why didn't we need the bill that was filed in August 5 years ago or 1 year ago or 2 years ago or 3 years ago? Because only with the passage of the Affordable Health Care Act did we have the government in a position, for the first time ever, to begin to give specific mandates to health care providers.

This bill would simply say those health care providers do not have to follow that mandate if it violates their faith principles, faith principles that are part of a health care delivery system. That could be through any number of different faith groups, and I have talked to a lot of them. Frankly, some of those faith group views of health care do not agree with my views or my faith's views of health care. But that is not the point here. This is not about whether I agree with what that faith group wants to do. It is whether they are allowed to do it; whether the representative of that view of health care