

## **Dr. Robert George, Civil Discourse and Rights of Conscience**

*Transcription By Grace Hemmeke*

**Robert George:** The theme we've been assigned is freedom of speech and thought and their necessity for truth seeking. We don't want to think that freedom of speech or other basic civil liberties simply fall down out of the heavens. We don't think that they are implications of pure logical propositions. They are to be affirmed as true because they protect a central goods. There is no way that the truth can be honestly and fruitfully sought without freedom of thought and freedom of expression and freedom of discussion. That's why it's essential that we honor and respect freedom of thought, freedom of speech, freedom of discussion, freedom of inquiry. There are many truths we don't know. And truths that we know are to be explored more deeply. Freedom is required to engage our students in ways that will make them truth. That doesn't presuppose relativism, moral or otherwise. In fact, it's incompatible with it. It's not because there is no truth to be attained that we need to honor freedom of thought and speech. It's precisely because the truth is so important that we must honor those things. The same considerations apply when we consider republican democracy and self government. Government, as Lincoln said, "of the people" which of course all government is, "for the people," which all good government is even if it's the government of a benign despot, but government also "by the people" that is, republican government. That same unsettling process by which we challenge, for the sake of truth, also needs to be in place and its conditions need to be in place if we are to conduct good government. We cannot make good decisions if we are not free to poke and prod and question and challenge in radical ways. If we do not as a republic make good decisions, then we will not succeed as a republic. It goes without saying that today, these conditions of truth seeking and of republican government are precarious. They're under assault from various sides and perspectives. We see it in the universities and the cancel culture. We see it in the streets. We see it in the unwillingness of people who have power, political economic, cultural, to stay their hands, to permit dissent, to permit challenges. If that continues to be the case, then the loss of civic friendship will continue. This is another thing that cannot be lost if we are to sustain republican government. Government by the people requires that the people treat each other as fellow citizens and civic friends, not as enemies. Yet we look around ourselves today and we see people regarding each other and treating each other not as fellow citizens with whom we disagree, but as people who are to be destroyed because they are impossible to maintain civil friendship with. Good examples need to be set by people of standing and influence across the culture, not just the politicians, but also in business, in law, in the health professions. Religious leaders could certainly do more than they are doing. We need people who will exemplify the virtues that are necessary to sustain the truth seeking process. And with that, Sam, I am delighted to hand it over to you.

**Sam Greg:** The first thing I'd like to ask you, concerns the whole way in which civility is perceived by so many significant segments of American opinion. Many people will say that since all language is a type of imposition of power, rules of civility simply restrains the weak. Therefore, the argument goes, those who are oppressed should effectively reject civility and embrace a type of activism that encapsulates what they often call absolute moral clarity. You

find this type of language used in groups ranging from philosophers like Herbert Marcuse to the Black Lives Matter movement. So how would you respond to that type of critique?

**Robert George:** I want to address the very question of what civility is. Civility is not merely politeness. Civility is not reducible to the idea that I will sit there quietly and not talk while you talk, and you sit there quietly and not talk when I talk. But that's not civility. You're only engaged in a civil discussion and civil discourse when you engage on the basis of having considered the strength of the argument put forwards by your interlocutor with a willingness to be persuaded if the truth is on the other side. Civility begins with a genuine recognition of our own fallibility. In practice we tend to treat ourselves as infallible. When it comes to our deepest, most cherished identity forming beliefs, it's emotionally difficult to allow yourself to be challenged in a way that you are open to the possibility of being wrong. But it seems to me that's what we have to do if we're to have genuine civility. The underlying problem here is that we human beings tend to wrap our emotions tightly around our convictions. That's in itself not bad. If we were not emotionally committed to our beliefs, we wouldn't effectively act on them. The problem comes when we wrap our emotions so tightly around our convictions that we become dogmatists. When we wrap our emotions that tightly around our convictions and become dogmatic, we're not open to learning.

So civil conversation requires virtues like intellectual humility. I'll conclude in answering this question by saying that even if critical theorists are committed to their ideology which is incompatible with free speech, those of us that are not must nevertheless recognize their free speech and their right to make their case even as we resolutely oppose it.

**Sam Greg:** You mentioned in your opening remarks that you think religious leaders need to do more in terms of prospering civility. Could you elaborate on what you mean by that?

**Robert George:** I'll give you a very good example: Rabbi Jonathan Sacks is a religious leader of a very small community in England. But he has set such a good example of civility, of learning and teaching by getting together and laying aside points of difference to see how we can cooperate together. He doesn't pretend that the things that make us different don't matter. He's a committed Jew. He draws on the resources of his tradition to go outward and engage with others and I think set a very good example. I'd like to see more of that amongst our religious leaders.

**Sam Greg:** Why do you think there are religious leaders who don't seem to be stepping into the role of modelling this type of behavior as much as you or I would like?

**Robert George:** One problem that I find in religious leaders generally is fear. Often if they are to be authentic witnesses for their faith, they will have to speak on issues where their faith differs from the established religions of the culture. The prospect of speaking out especially when it comes to those issues, is scary. It's hard to stand up and take the heat, especially from those who have cultural power. Religious leaders have very little cultural power. But Hollywood's got plenty of it. Journalism's got plenty of it. Corporate America has a ton of it.

Academia's got its share of it. For my own tradition of faith, for Catholics, the scandals in the priesthood have damaged the moral capital of the church. Those scandals weaken the witness. The saddest thing to me is that just at this moment of cultural crisis when the moral witness of the Catholic church is needed the most, the Catholic church is off the battlefield due to self-inflicted wounds.

**Sam Greg:** Where do you see signs of hope for a recovery of genuine civility in the United States?

**Robert George:** I am hugely impressed with young conservative intellectuals. These are extraordinary young men and women who have genuinely open minds. They've got commitments, they've got convictions, but they're genuine independent thinkers who are profoundly learned, committed to civility, truth seeking, maintenance of republican order. But they've also got one thing above all that gives me hope: courage. They stand up and speak out and they don't fear the slings and arrows that will come.

**Sam Greg:** Where are the limits to civility? When do we say, "OK now a person has moved beyond the pale?" and a different type of response is required?

**Robert George:** I don't have any limits. I think that the proper currency of intellectual discourse consists of reasons, evidence, and arguments. I am prepared to engage anybody putting forward any point of view, including points of view that I believe are appalling, who's prepared to defend that perspective in the proper currency. I don't think that I have to argue with a lunatic or someone who has not given the issue any thought. But if you've got arguments and reasons and you're willing to do business in that currency, I'm willing to listen to you.

I have publicly defended my colleague at Princeton, Peter Singer's right to advocate infanticide or even sex between humans and animals. I don't share his views of those things. And yet, because Peter does business in the currency of intellectual discourse, he challenges me, he allows me to challenge him. Every few years disability rights groups protest Peter's being here because of his views about infanticide of cognitively disabled children. And I defend him. I'm not defending his views; I'm defending his rights. The proper understanding of rights is not as abstract rights but as goods. So what good is Peter Singer doing by advocating horrible things? In making his defense of infanticide, he challenges me to think more deeply and more clearly about what grounds we have for honoring equally the dignity of all human beings.

We have this in common. I cannot say for all the wickedness of his views, that Peter's not a truth seeker. I think he's got it all wrong, but he's trying to get at the truth. The evidence I have for that is his willingness to engage me and listen to me. If he wasn't a truth seeker, he wouldn't have to do that. And that's why I'm willing to let him challenge me. My answer to the question is I think we should be Socratic. Socrates wouldn't put anything out of bounds.

**Sam Greg:** In the end, the fundamental foundation for taking civility seriously, even with people that you would radically disagree about any number of questions, it's the good of truth and reason itself that's at stake.

**Robert George:** Even if what you believe is true, by engaging an intelligent critic, that process will result in your more deeply understanding the truth you hold. It's one thing to that something is the case. It's something deeper and more important to know why it's the case or how it could be the case.