**Religious Liberty – Bestowed by God or Government**

John Stonestreet, Colson Center – Breakpoints, Nov. 2, 2016 <http://www.breakpoint.org/bpcommentaries/entry/13/30057>

Does anyone in politics really understand what religious liberty is all about? On the one hand, many on the left (including the head of the U. S. Civil Rights Commission) see it as a thin veneer to promote discrimination.

But many on the right don’t get it, either. For instance, I recently attended, along with some other religious leaders, a meeting with Donald Trump. It quickly became clear that to Trump and many of his staffers, religious liberty just boiled down to two things: The freedom to say “Merry Christmas” in public, and repealing the Johnson Amendment, which prohibits tax-exempt organizations like churches from endorsing political candidates.

But neither of those things addresses the real challenges to religious freedom today. The choice we face is whether we will be able to order our public lives according to deeply held convictions. Or if, in the name of public accommodation, everyone has the right to demand services, language, and agreement—even if providing them violates our conscience.

For example, how should we treat county clerks who do not wish to authorize so-called same-sex “marriages” based on sincerely-held religious beliefs? What about bakers, florists, and photographers, for whom facilitating homosexual “marriages” would involve them in sin? Sad to say, many local governments, even judges, think these people should be forced to provide services while violating their beliefs, First Amendment or no First Amendment, conscience or no conscience.

These conflicts raise age-old questions about the role of government, the value of religion, and the challenges of living in a diverse and free society.

In his important book, “Truth Overruled: The Future of Marriage and Religious Freedom,” Ryan Anderson notes that “part of the genius of the American system of government is its commitment to protecting the liberty of all citizens while respecting their equality before the law.” Among other things, the government protects our right to “live out [our] convictions in public life. Likewise, citizens are free to enter into contracts and to form associations according to their own values.”

In other words, we’re “free to make reasonable distinctions—including ones made on good-faith moral convictions—in [our] economic activities.” If government intends to “impose substantial burdens on sincere religious beliefs,” Ryan goes on to write, then it must prove that “the burden imposed on those beliefs is the least restrictive means of advancing a compelling interest.”

But that’s not what’s happening.

Christian pharmacists are being forced to dispense abortifacients. Christian therapists are told they must counsel same-sex couples preparing for “marriage,” and also affirm a patient’s gender confusion. Christians who run pregnancy care centers in California are forced to offer information about nearby abortion clinics, even though doing so would violate both their First Amendment freedoms of freedom of speech and freedom of religion.

The irony is, those who attempt to bully others on conscience grounds wouldn’t dream of allowing anyone to violate *their* conscience rights. For instance, when Indiana passed a religious liberty law last year, the CEO of SalesForce, Marc Benioff, announced that he was canceling all programs that required their customers/employees to travel to Indiana to face discrimination.”

Ironically, as Ryan Anderson observes, Benioff, “by threatening to boycott Indiana over its religious liberty law,” was exercising his right to run his business in accordance with *his* beliefs. And yet he failed “to recognize that the baker, the photographer, and the florist are simply asking for this same liberty.”

Religious liberty is not a gift of government; it’s an inherent natural right that pre-dates government; in fact, government is *limited* by that right.

To understand what’s at stake, please read Anderson’s book, “Truth Overruled.” Come to BreakPoint.org to learn more.

**Further Reading and Information**

**Religious Liberty Bestowed by God or Government: Understanding the First Freedom**

Get a copy of "Truth Overruled" by Ryan Anderson. It's available at the online bookstore. And click on the links below for clarifying details on defending First Amendment rights.