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Robert P. George on Orlando Massacre, Richard Dawkins' Kids and Religious Freedom

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WASHINGTON — Princeton law professor and leading religious freedom advocate Robert George argued Tuesday that although religion is part of the inherent good of human beings, terrorist attacks like Sunday's massacre in Orlando show the need for limits on religious freedom.

George, the former chairman of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, participated in a panel discussion on the history of religious toleration and the importance of religious freedom in a free society at the Cato Institute.

The 60-year-old conservative professor explained that human rights, such as the right to religious freedom, are shaped only by the human goods they protect, arguing that the quest for religious truth is "a distinct aspect of human well-being and fulfillment as an esteemed human good."

"Religion is part of the good of human beings," George said. "In its fullest and most robust sense, religion is the human persons being in right relation to the divine."

Although different religions and sects within each religion have different traditions and requirements for what one must do to live in relation to the divine, the ability of all believers to live and act in accordance with what their religion and understanding of the world requires must be protected.

In order for faith to be authentic, however, George stated that faith must not be forced by any individual, government or organization.

George stated that "reason" plays a large part into why religious freedom is important, as it allows people to come to their own understandings of spiritual truths and truths about the world without being coerced.

"By reason here I mean not only our capacity for practical reasoning and moral judgement but also our capacities for understanding and evaluating claims of all sorts that are made by religions — logical, historical, scientific, and so forth," George said.

"This seems to me that even the most devout atheists, even my old Oxford pal Richard Dawkins, ought to be able to affirm that there is a good of the human person that consists in raising the great existential questions, reflecting on them in a serious way, making an effort to answer them in an honest way, not with wishful thinking or ideology, then living authentically with integrity as best we can in line with one's judgments, whether they are theistic or atheistic, whether they correspond with the view of this or that historic faith.

"The existential raising of religious questions and the honest identification of answers and the fulfilling of what one's sincerely believes to be one's duties in light of those answers are all parts of this complex good of religion," George continued.

George added that Dawkins, a prominent evolutionary biologist and author, wouldn't want to live his life without addressing the existential questions of religion, nor would Dawkins' want his daughter to overlook those questions.

"[Dawkins] would consider it a diminished life for someone to simply avoid them or to lead an inauthentic life where one professes beliefs [they don't really believe] just to get ahead or to get a job or keep a job," George opined. "He wouldn't want his children to live lives that ignored those questions and obligations."

Although George stressed that governments should not prohibit religious believers and non-believers from acting in accordance with their beliefs even if those beliefs stand against the ideology of the state, George agreed that religious liberty is not "unlimited."

In commenting on Sunday morning's massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, which was carried out by a Muslim man who reportedly pledged allegiance to the Islamic State, George stated that there is no hiding from the fact that atrocities are carried out in the name of religion.

George argued that it is wrong for some to "write off" violent acts of believers by saying, "Well, people act in the name of religion when they do these wicked things but they are actually not acting for the sake of religion."

"No. unspeakable [crimes] can be done and have been done by people seeking to sincerely do God's work, to get right with God or the gods or whatever their conception of reality is," George contended. "The presumption in favor of respecting religious liberty must for the sake of the human good and the dignity of the human person be strong, powerful, broad but it isn't and can't be unlimited."

"People who are trying to get right with God can't justify a morally bad means even if they are a sincere believer," he added.

George explained that it is not just radical Muslims who justify acts of violence in order to fulfill their religious convictions.

"I don't doubt the sincerity of the Aztecs in practicing human sacrifice and I don't doubt the sincerity of those in various traditions of faith, including my own [Catholic], who have used coercion and even torture in what they believe to be good causes," George said. "These things are deeply wrong and cannot be tolerated in the name of freedom of religion. To suppose otherwise is to back one's self into the awkward position to supposing that violations of religious freedom and other injustices of equal gravity must be respected for the sake of religious freedom and that can't possibly be."