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Religious Freedom and Presidential Politics

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Chelsea Maxwell

On June 26, 2015, social media seemed to light up with more activity than usual. When the *Obergefell v. Hodges* ruling was handed down, legalizing same-sex marriage across the United States, reactions were passionately divided. Living in the Washington, DC area at the time, I was witness to both extremes. Many rejoiced over the ruling, calling it a civil rights victory; many feared the decision was an attack on morality and identified it as a threat to religious freedom. The words of the First Amendment of the Constitution promise that “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof.” However, this is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that concerns are voiced regarding the status of religious freedom in the country. The conversation revolving around religious freedom issues is, without a doubt, imperative. These fundamental rights are being threatened, and therefore are highly relevant to current presidential politics. But, to wisely engage this issue in the upcoming presidential caucuses, primaries, and national election from a Christian perspective, this conversation is in need of reframing.

When discussing religious freedom, relatively recent news stories most likely have a tendency to jump to mind. Some people may recall a clerk refusing to sign a same-sex marriage certificate in Kentucky. Others may reflect on Hobby Lobby’s journey to the Supreme Court over providing certain contraceptives. Concerns about the actions and roles of wedding photographers and bakers, as well as pizzeria owners may penetrate the discussion. While all of these experiences are important to consider, they do not explore the entire scope of the issue. Religious freedom is not solely focused on protecting certain Christian traditions or beliefs. Religious freedom is not about us individually. It is about all of us.

In a country filled with diverse people holding to and living out different moral convictions and religious traditions, we must grapple with the reality that we are never all going to agree. But, regardless of our differences in religion and beliefs, how can we live well together, creating and maintaining a community where all can thrive? A truly free society is a pluralistic society. Within it exists diversity, and therefore a need for citizens to have mutual respect and tolerance for each other. Mutual respect for differences in practices and values is essential for mutual thriving. Within Christian circles, as well as other tightknit religious circles, the conversation around religious freedom rights has a tendency of utilizing a self-protection focus. People feel their beliefs and traditions are being attacked, and so they often call upon religious freedom protections for themselves. This is fair, of course, but perhaps not the most holistic approach to engaging such a broad issue.

The concept of religious freedom is rooted in a respect for human dignity. Human dignity, from a distinctly Christian perspective, is the inherent worth all people have. This worth is not founded in anything an individual does or does not do, but rather is derived from their Creator. Every person has inherent dignity and worth, and each individual should be respected as a whole person. People of all faiths and of no faith should all be free to live in accordance to their moral convictions in all parts of their lives. The implications of this statement resonate through civil society. People live out their faith in different ways. There are nonprofit agencies and closely held businesses that live out their beliefs through the work being done or the way in which the work is being done. Within the United States, the First Amendment does not protect some religions in this country. Instead, it protects people of all religions and of no religion. This includes all sects of Christianity, but is also includes members of Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, and atheism, as well as other faiths. The role of the First Amendment is to protect citizens from public policies and policymakers

favoring or disfavoring any type of faith.

Considering religious freedom within the context of politics is important because of its implications on individuals, organizations, and society overall. Religious freedom is not focused on us and those who share our particular doctrine and set of beliefs. As Christians, human dignity is a fundamental aspect of our worldview. God designed each person in his own image. Religious freedom is rooted in this human dignity value because it aims to honor and respect each person. These rights are founded in a respect for all people, all of our neighbors. Christians should continue to engage the dialogue regarding religious freedom, but not out of a sense of self-protection. We should defend these rights out of love for our neighbors, those of all faiths and those of none.

Participating in the choosing of political parties' presidential nominees is a critical step within the election process. If you live in Iowa, when casting a vote in the caucus, you are not just potentially choosing a nominee, but a future president. The pressing and divisive issues within the United States are numerous, and there many factors to consider. Religious freedom is one of those issues, and it must be seriously considered. Not only are churches, nonprofit organizations, and closely held businesses still wading through the aftereffects of the Affordable Care Act's contraceptive mandate and the Supreme Court's ruling legalizing same-sex marriage, but other religious issues are rising. For example, the debate of accepting refugees has been affected by religious freedom discussions. As the worldwide refugee crisis intersects with the broken immigration system of the United States, and rhetoric surrounding the treatment of others based on their religion is discussed, our voices are needed to defend our neighbors and challenge potential leaders. As Christian citizens, we must participate in politics and wisely engage the issue of religious freedom out of love and respect for all of our neighbors.