

April 10, 2015

When Core Values Clash – Start with Civility

If you just celebrated a religious holiday this weekend, and even if you didn't, chances are that you were discussing what the Indiana, Arkansas and other Religious Freedom Restorations Acts (RFRA) across the country really mean.

Depending on who was with you, they probably had an opinion. Some are certain that the laws protect religious freedom. Others believe they have nothing to do with religion and are really about enabling discrimination against the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender community. Still others are now troubled by the amendments to the Indiana and Arkansas bills and question whether they diminish a necessary statute that protects religious liberty or, alternatively, whether they fail to go far enough to stop discrimination.

What is clear is that there are two sides to this national conversation. And unfortunately for our nation, as the debate escalates, both sides are glossing over the complexities involved. The result is that important issues have been oversimplified, and the divide in this country has been exacerbated.

For those who believe that the nation's founding principles still matter, freedom of religion stands as a core principle to be protected. Yet, even before the First Amendment was enshrined in our Constitution, there was another founding document on which it rested; the Declaration of Independence, which states: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

For many, those guiding principles -- the equal right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness -- are manifestations of faith and, in particular, the Golden Rule. Found in every religious tradition and among those who define themselves as secular and non-believers, the Golden Rule speaks to the value of all people. It calls on us to honor and to act honorably toward all.

For me, these core values, central to so many, provide at least one explanation why, in the years since the U.S.'s original principles became part of our ethos, they have been interpreted inclusively to expand those unalienable Rights. We now recognize that those protected by our founding documents are not the only human beings entitled to the full benefits of equality. So are women, people of color, people with disabilities, the elderly and other minority groups.

Likewise, while religious freedom rightfully remains a core tenet of our national psyche, some of the activities that were once practiced by people citing their faith are no longer legally allowed. Polygamy, for example, is no longer legal, even though it is still a practice of some religious groups. Neither is slavery, which was enshrined in our Constitution.

Why is this important? Because it shows how the laws in the U.S. have expanded rights to people of multiple identities. It also demonstrates how our nation seeks to balance personal beliefs with how we conduct ourselves. The reality is, there are many people in this country who hold as their truth that homosexuality is a sin. Their right to this belief is sacrosanct. How we act in public settings and in state-licensed businesses

(that provide tax revenue and receive other advantages) then becomes the question.

That's why the RFRA laws don't raise a simple question of whether one should protect religious freedom or stop discrimination. Rather, they pose hard questions about competing core values.

Consider, when there are two competing national core values, do we choose one over the other? Or do we try to balance conflicting beliefs with how we treat one another?

What are the rights of a gay couple, whose religion holds that their marriage is sacred and to be entered into with celebration? What happens when that couple seeks the services of a person for their wedding, who comes from a different religious persuasion and believes it is wrong to serve them because they are sinners? Whose beliefs do we privilege?

If the state has a law that allows a service provider to refuse services to this religious gay couple, is the state violating the other half of the First Amendment? By supporting business owners of a particular religious belief, is the state giving more rights to some religious beliefs over others?

And finally, what are the options for religious believers and how do those who believe differently acknowledge them? How can their deeply held convictions align with our nation's founding principle that all are created equal?

The Indiana and Arkansas laws and those around the country that raise similar issues reflect a strong movement to protect religious freedom, while those who oppose it as discrimination are relying on their right to free speech and to demonstrate with their pocketbooks. A moment of division quickly become a movement as state RFRA's around the country gain exposure.

Collectively, we have an obligation to avoid the over-simplification and heated division, by addressing our differences with civility in all their complexity. Perhaps then, we will be better able to move forward on an issue that means so much to so many.

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